THE CULTURAL OLYMPIAD: ***Carrying the Torch for Art?***

The Olympic ceremonies restate the primacy of 'being there' as intrinsic to the sense of their occasion. In the case of London 2012, the rich mix of 'sounds and sweet airs that delight and hurt not', the harmonious confusion of images in 'Isle of Wonders' advertised a national/popular culture determined to give a positive account of itself, under difficult circumstances not of its own choosing. It offered us a mirror of collective self regard, a paradigm of British identity, that in its very mode of enchantment remained a beautifying lie, even and especially as it moved us to tears of gratification; for it celebrated a world in which there were no Prosperos, even though the Olympic stadium on the opening night was packed full of them, and indeed without them the Games could not have taken place.

At the same time, its upbeat mode of address reflected the response of quite large sections of Britain's creative class, to the economic recession and to the advent of the Cultural Olympiad. The scale of the 2012 Cultural Olympiad is not in doubt. It was the single largest, and most costly cultural programme ever launched by any British government. Its website boasted that 'more than 16 million people across the UK took part in or attended performances; over 169,000 people attended more than 8,300 workshops; more than 3.7 million people took part in nearly 3,700 Open Weekend events and some 2,500 cultural projects had been given financial support'. The rhetorical use of 'more than' 'over' and 'nearly' indicated the hyperbole behind the statistics, but it was the scope of the project, not its scale, that was important[i].

The Cultural Olympiad was about showcasing heritage, providing a platform for displaying existing cultural capital whilst also increasing it[ii]. There were two strategies for doing this. The first we might describe as neo-liberal, in that its priority was to increase competitive advantage in the global cultural economy through the curation cum branding of carefully selected artefacts with unique selling points, representing the jewels in the crown of the nation's artistic life. Blockbuster exhibitions of work by David Hockney, Lucien Freud, and Damien Hirst answered to this need, cementing their place as stars in the firmament of international contemporary art, together with the attraction of the crowds. This is traditional Culture, with a capital C, given a populist twist by its temporary 'Olympification'.

The second approach might be called post modern, in that it is about inventing cultural traditions, whether historicist or ethnicist, and imagining communities whose contribution to national life is thereby valorised, while remaining embedded in popular idioms. The Isle of

Wonders drew on both strategies and proposed a new creative synthesis: rhyming the visionary images of William Blake's Jerusalem and Milton's High Anglicanism with the local street credibility of Dizzee Rascals and his slightly bonkers, tongue in cheek version of gangster rap.

The Cultural Olympiad provided a platform for arts organisations, museums, and the other cultural industries to 'do their Olympic thing' in both these modes. In doing so, its strategy of creative procurement, had a significant effect. Artists are normally part of the awkward squad, but those who went into serious training for the Olympics had, on the whole, adopted its inspirational 'can do' agenda. Their work stressed the power of creativity and self inventiveness to overcome adversity and heal the hidden wounds of social disappointment. So, as in wartime, art puts its 'shoulder to the wheel' to help improve national morale at a time of crisis.

This represented quite a shift in the cultural zeitgeist. During the long boom years, protected by the safety net of affluence, the art going – and more importantly – art buying, public were in the mood to take aesthetic risks and only too willing to be shocked; and Young British Artists such as Damien Hirst, Tracy Emin, Martin Creed, and the Chapman Brothers obliged[iii]. Now, however, we are in uncertain times, the same public wants art that comforts and reassures and once again the Young British Artists, now middle aged and members of the cultural establishment, are on hand to offer their services. Tracy Emin has got out of her famously unmade bed by the right side and taken to exhibiting neon signs reading 'Trust me' and 'I keep believing in you'. Martin Creed's neon sign 'Don't Worry' may be tongue in cheek, or it may not. It is an undecidable statement which undermines confidence in its language game without providing any clues as to how to get out of its double bind. Like the sign which reads 'ignore this sign'. You begin to worry that you haven't been worrying enough, and like all such double takes, you are left feeling that the artist is playing a game of one-up-manship.

So artists, who in an earlier conjuncture would have explored the political or personal dynamics of the anger and frustration experienced by those living at the 'sharp end' of the recession, were now concerned to communicate gentler and more positive structures of feeling. The argument goes that people who are having a difficult time, do not want to be upset or shocked, but supported. So a new kind of cognitive art therapy emerged, in which the public were encouraged to engage in positive thinking. It is a 'care-full 'art that is meant

to work like an anti-depressant, but is not escapist in the traditional sense of offering an illusory solution. Rather its deliberative strategy involves addressing a challenge to the spectator whose terms pre-empt any response that is not already defined within its frame.

A good example of this new 'feel good' public art was Bus-Tops, a Cultural Olympiad initiative which turned the roofs of London bus shelters into a 'unique network of digital canvasses'. Mark Titchener, the artist who led the project, installed a series of 'graphically embedded messages and motivational challenges', such as 'Act or be acted upon' or 'If you don't like your life, you can change it' and 'If you can dream'. He spelt out his rationale as follows:

> 'Throughout our daily lives, we constantly absorb images and texts that tell us we can be more than we are. This project is an attempt to present this phenomenon in its most blunt form, as a series of inspirational, potentially unobtainable commands. It is a disembodied voice, both nurturing and humbling.[iv]'

The intention may have been to get people to question the assumptions behind these paradoxical injunctions, but there is no clue about the artists' own stance towards them, and nothing within the frame of what is presented, that would enable the spectator to gain any critical purchase on what these statements imply about the kind of society we live in. What this disembodied voice does not nurture, is any sense of where it is coming from. What it humbles is the desire to find out.

Titchener's work is symptomatic. Inspired by William Burrough's 'cut ups' he used fragments of text from a variety of sources, including political manifestos, philosophy, advertising and pop song lyrics, and wove them into a visual tapestry made up of equally diverse material – heavy metal album sleeves, trade union banners and evangelical pamphlets, all of which suggested for him the popular quest for some kind of utopia. In a piece entitled *And, waiting, we plunged into dreams* (2012), designed as a comment on the Olympics, he merged William Morris wallpaper designs with contemporary wall hangings sold by ASDA and overlaid this rich mix with the words 'I WANT A BETTER WORLD I WANT A BETTER ME' in a large embossed typeface. This collapsing of the distance between 'high art' and consumer culture is a traditional strategy of 'Britpop art'; it appears to be part of a democratising impulse to overthrow class bound hierarchies of taste, but by reducing all cultural forms and practices to their lowest common denominator (ultimately their exchange value). It actually generalises the commodification of art and erects it into an aesthetic principle. In this case the statement of equivalence between handicraft and mass

production, socialist utopianism and the Samuel Smiles School of self improvement, has a more overt ideological function and effect. For the 'merger' is in fact a takeover bid that has been collapsed in and by this collage of quotes, is the critical space in which the tension between them could be addressed. The two incommensurable value systems are simply segued together, into a single seamless web of associations, as if they were nothing more than equivalent purchases in the market place of ideas (or items on eBay) to be traded at will. In contrast, when Peter Kennard's Haywain *with Cruise Missiles* (1980), juxtaposes the idyllic pastoral scene of Constable country with the weapons of mass destruction that are used to defend it, the shock effect of the montage is to make the spectator think critically about the relationship between the iconography of Englishness and the geo-politics through which the 'island nation' pursues its post Imperial role.

As we will see, in the cultural mash-up that was the Isle of Wonders, Danny Boyle adopted the Titchener, not the Kennard approach to bricolage and this is symptomatic of the shift in aesthetic and political sensibility that has occurred in Britain's creative class. The new Jerusalem is no longer to be painstaking built from the ruins of Babylon; rather Utopia is to be fashioned instantly out of whatever materials come to hand, and what is not immediately accessible for this purpose, is consigned to the rubbish bin of history.

If a lot of artists, and architects, signed up for the Olympic mission[v] , not everyone did. Street artists, smarting under the use or abuse of their shout for the 2012 logo were not well disposed to the overtures subsequently made by LOCOG to get some of them back on board. Banksy, whose knowing statements about contemporary cultural politics have become collectors' items, and now add substantial value to whatever bit of the urban fabric they are stencilled on, made a pre-emptive strike. In a letter to the Observer, he accused the Olympic authorities of double standards in bagging up London as a vibrant multi-cultured city, while doing their damnedest to make sure that London's graffiti artists were denied the urban canvas on which to add their contribution to the creative mix. In fact, in Hackney Wick, the Olympic Park's very own 'edge city', street artists busily set about doing just that. In the past five years 'The Wick', has established a local/global reputation as a counter- cultural quarter. Many East End artists driven out of the now fashionable areas of Whitechapel, Spitalfields and Bow by rising rents moved into studios in the industrial warehouses; hot on their heels came galleries, bookshops, cafés and the inevitable wine bars. Cue for estate agents and property developers to rebrand the area as 'des res' for the better heeled members of the creative class and The Wick was on its way to becoming another 'happening scene' like

Camden Market, Hoxton or Covent Garden. The development plan for the area envisaged it as 'a new creative and high-tech hub for east London with affordable and flexible workspace and residential apartments with supporting retail space and café/restaurants'. However the cycle of culture-led regeneration and its associated gentrification process was not yet complete by 2012; a critical mass of young and not so British artists had put down roots and turned the buildings abutting onto Olympic Park into a 2012 version of Democracy Wall. Their dramatic and often ironic visual statements about 'Olympification', drew crowds of spectators and 'Wicked' became the Cultural Olympiad's favourite, unsponsored, fringe festival. Never slow to seize an opportunity to tap into authentic grass roots creative energy, LOCOG then offered some of the better known 'graffers' commissions to produce a huge mural on the side of a local school, paid for by their biggest sponsor to promote their brand. The coca-colonisation of East London, the visual appropriation of public space by private companies, turning whole areas into giant advertising hoardings for their products, has been a focal point of creative dissent. This was not what the 'rebranding' of East London was supposed to be about; but the 'Cola wall' predictably divided the local community of artists. There were some who took a 'if you can't beat 'em, join 'em' approach, whilst others condemned it as selling out to the class enemy. Here is how one such described the situation on his weblog:

> 'Let's be honest, half of the Wicks residents are being shoehorned out and evicted left right and centre due to these Olympics. And this corporate giant of fizzy pop decides to hammer this out right now, the timing isn't great here. Who cuts these deals? Why is it I get arrested for writing my name on this wall, but Coke are allowed to paint a monstrous "piece" on it and hide behind cheesy pop marketing?'

It is a familiar enough case study in the cultural politics of recuperation, and one which highlights the kinds of negotiations that have taken place under the auspices of the Cultural Olympiad between visual artists and the Olympic authorities; but how were these Olympifying pressures negotiated within other communities of creative practice?

Poetry at the Olympics

An interesting test case is poetry, so central to the Olympic ideal and yet so marginal in our public life. Poetry was very much in place within the London 2012 Olympics. The Cultural Olympiad featured Poetry Parnassus, a five day festival to 'celebrate language, diversity and global togetherness', with one poet from each of the two hundred and four competing

nations reading from their work, which is to be published as a ‘World Record’ of the multicultural event.

It was not all good news. The public were invited to nominate their favourite poems as a source of inspiration for the Olympic athletes. The BBC sports broadcaster John Inverdale, one of the panel of judges, suggested ‘The Victor’ by C. W. Longenecker as an example of the kind of thing they were looking for. The poem includes the verse:

‘If you think you'll lose, you're lost.
For out in the world we find
Success begins with a fellow's will.
It's all in the state of mind.’

This is almost as bad as Jeffrey Archer's nomination from ‘The Ladder of St. Augustine’ by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow:

‘The heights by great men reached and kept
Were not attained by sudden flight,
But they, while their companions slept,
Were toiling upward in the night.'

The winner, Tennyson’s Ulysses, put a similar sentiment much more concisely and as a result has had its lines ‘to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield’ suitably inscribed on a memorial at the centre of the Olympic Village. Meanwhile up and down the country, poetry competitions were staged taking the Olympics as their theme. The Greater London Authority organised a competition on ‘One hundred things I like about the Olympics’, while the Guardian commissioned twenty leading poets to write verse on sporting or Olympic themes. All this activity raised some interesting questions about the status of poetry within our public culture, and also its relationship to sport.

As a domain within the republic of letters, Poetry is an appropriately ‘auto-poetic ‘activity. It has its own institutions, its diverse schools and cultural traditions, its hierarchies of esteem, its rituals of peer recognition. As a community of practice it is both self organising and largely self referential. Poets learn their craft by reading other poets, and nowadays by attending creative writing courses taught by them. In the typical public reading, the audience is almost entirely made up of other poets, whether amateur or professional. Yet Poetry has always had its wider arenas, occasions when it emerges from the literary margins and takes centre stage in the nation’s cultural life. Sometimes- rarely- this occurs spontaneously. The death of Lady Diana was probably the last time this happened in Britain when professional poets joined thousands of amateurs up and down the country in writing verse to express their

sorrow. More usually, of course, it is a matter of commission from some public body or branch of government.

Poetry is supposed to be memorable speech, so it not surprising that poets should be called upon when some important event or circumstance has to be officially celebrated or memorialised. Until quite recently the Poet Laureate had a virtual monopoly on the job, not that having to write verse to commemorate the Queen's Coronation and Birthday, the births, marriages and deaths of other members of the Royal household, visits from heads of state or other dignitaries and famous victories in war, was regarded by most of the post holders as more than an irksome task.

Today, the practice of commissioning poems to mark some special event has widened considerably in scope as the calendar of official celebrations and commemorations has enlarged, and many more poets are called upon. The bi-centenary of the founding of the Post Office, the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the publication of Darwin's Origins of the Species, the fiftieth anniversary of the ending of the Second World War, have all been occasions for the commissioning of work. Now there are suggestions that poems might be commissioned in connection with special weeks or days designed to publicise and raise money for Good Causes such as Famine Relief or War on Want.

And then, of course, in a more celebratory mode, there are the Olympics. Mark O'Connor, the Sydney laureate received 80,000 dollars for penning the following unforgettably regrettable lines:

'Never has so much jog and slog
gone into maintaining a metaphor.
Something you pass on, don't keep for long,
but make sure someone else has got it, sort of.'

Followed by the 'immortal'

'Ah SOCOG, you conclave of poets,
you've made the invisible
visible. Ideals shine and burn.
No matter how often the flame goes out.'

If William McGonagall had got to translate Pindar's *Ode to Asopichus*, the result would surely be better than this?

If commissioned poetry, verse 'made to order', has a bad reputation amongst the poetry community, this is mainly because, with a few honourable exceptions, so much of it has been so bad. The desire to find 'memorable speech' has resulted in distinctly unmemorable verse. Who can remember a line of the poem commissioned to mark the inauguration of President Obama?

Part of the suspicion about commissioned work is the widely held belief that the occasions of poetry should be spontaneous, not contrived, freely chosen not commanded. There is an element of bad faith in this. Many poetry competitions dictate topic, verse form and even length, and poets enter them in great numbers for the sake of the challenge they represent. But there are also justified fears that extending the practice of commissioning could lead to poetry becoming just another arm of the advertising industry or political spin machine. Poets embedded by the Ministry of Defence with our troops in Afghanistan, may no longer have to face direct censorship in what they write, but they are under more subtle pressures to shift their angle of vision to that of a British soldier looking down a gun sight at 'the enemy'. It is difficult to see how poems commissioned to launch a new line of beauty treatments, open a corporate HQ or publicise a casino, not to mention poems featuring 'product placement', could be said to be advancing the cause of putting truth back into words. 'Procurement' begins to sound all too much like a form of prostitution.

The strenuous attempt to reinstate poetry in the public sphere has to be seen against the background of its atrophy in popular culture and private life. There was a time when poetry had a strong talk-on part in everyday life. Amongst the English educated elite, the ability to turn out a half decent sonnet, translate Tennyson into Greek iambic hexameters, or introduce an appropriate quotation from Shakespeare, Milton or Keats into the conversation, was regarded as an important part of a young gentleman's social equipment. At least in Jane Austen's novels, young ladies could match or even outdo these poetic accomplishments.

At the same time the capacity to recite or quote quite long passages of verse was a widely disseminated skill amongst broad sections of the literate population in both town and countryside. In Elisabeth Gaskell's novel *Cranford,* a yeoman farmer is described as having his cottage crammed with books of verse, and quoting at length from them as he walked his woods. Artisans could also quote chapter and verse, and not only from the Bible. Much of this was down to the school room where the memorisation and the recital of verse was often an important part of the curriculum. With the arrival of first the music hall and then the steam

radio, the recitation of light verse in the form of comic or dramatic monologues became a regular feature of light entertainment. Stanley Holloway did the rounds with his famous rendition of Albert and the Lion and would have the audience reciting along with him as he tells the cautionary tale of Mr and Mrs Ramsbottom's visit to the zoo in Blackpool and their son's unfortunate encounter with a lion called Wallace.

Today the ability to quote, let alone recite whole poems, is increasingly confined to graduates of English departments and professional poets – and quite a few of them have a surprising inability to remember any poems, other than their own. The idea that poetry should be part of every well stocked mind, does of course, survive; it is a continual refrain of poetry's public evangelists. For example the Poetry Aloud Group recently launched a national recitation project in an attempt to revive the practice, but if such initiatives seem to be falling on so many deaf ears, it is largely because they are listening - and chanting aloud - to the deafening lyrics of pop songs or rap. Moreover the Internet offers an instant collective memory with sites listing quotations from poets on any subject under the sun, ready to be cut and pasted into your latest essay or talk.

In a secularised society, the occasions for poetry are increasingly few and far between. Outside the poetry scene itself, poems are mostly recited to mark rites and sites of passage – births and birthdays, marriages and deaths, coming of age, falling in love, Christmas and other special events. These are special moments that are still deemed to require, if not a spiritual, then at least a less profane language to mark them. The 'poetry' that is produced, whether on cards or in speeches, usually consists of sugary sentiments expressed in clumsy clichés; in other words, 'kitsch'. For want of a proper praise song or epithalamion, how many happy events are consummated with the utterance of banalities? For the lack of someone trying their hand at an In Memoriam stanza, how many sanctimonious couplets are inscribed on tombstones of the dearly departed?

In a culture so dominated by various kind of verbal tricksterism, where we are daily bombarded by clever slogans, catchphrases, and buzz words, designed to make us feel good about ourselves and the world, there is a large sense within Poetry's various communities of practice, that it has a special mission to expose this counterfeit currency and offer truer metal. Ezra Pound in/famously said that when the language goes rotten the rest goes rotten, a principle upheld today most belligerently by Geoffrey Hill. In *Speech, Speech* (2001) he surveys the calamitous effect of political rhetoric and media hype, on the idioms of public

language and explores the extent to which his or any poetics might provide a spark of resistance: 'Erudition. Pain. Light imagine it great/ Unavoidable work; although: heroic verse a non starter says PEOPLE.' Hill criticises the empty triumphalism of the sporting spectacle and its rhetorics: 'Stunned words of victory less memorable / than those urged from defeat', yet he nonetheless found something to praise, and even emulate, as he watched the Boston Marathon:

'how amazing it still is, the awaited name
hailed through our streets, under the pale leafage,
springing from the hierarchies of splendour
and salutation, prodigious messengers
with their own heralds and outriders—
yes, look! the Kenyan runners, look, there they go!
stippled with silver, shaking off the light
garlands of sweat—.'

It is hard to imagine a poem by Geoffrey Hill gracing the Olympic Stadium, but we perhaps still need his insistence that Poetry does not just look on the bright side of life. As well as being a medium of delight, its mission is to explore the hidden depths, and what Freud called life's 'other scenes'. It is acquainted with the night[vi]. As Pablo Neruda put it, poetry has to be impure 'consistent with shameful, disgraceful deeds; with dreams, observations, sleepless nights, presentiments, eruptions of hatred and love; animals, idylls, shocks; negotiations, ideologies, assertions, doubts, tax demands.'

It is in these impurities and the struggle to overcome them, that the real epic of sport resides and sometimes failure can be heroic as well as tragic. There is certainly a poem waiting to be written about Jim Peters, Britain's marathon hope in the 1952 Helsinki Games, running into the stadium well ahead of the field, but on his last legs, staggering towards the finishing line and then falling exhausted within yards of a Gold medal, as the other athletes surged past.

The Athlete and the Aesthete: running between two cultures

2012 offered an unparalleled opportunity to bring the worlds of poetry and sport into closer conversation. It may well be the case that European poetry came into existence with the Olympics and Pindar's odes in praise of its athletes, but in modern times they have existed on different planets. C.P. Snow talked about the two cultures of the humanities and the sciences, but the arts and sports have also gone their separate ways. Brain and brawn, Bohemian and body builder, aesthete and athlete, Wimp and Jock, until very recently, these binaries and the stereotypes they underwrote, prevailed.

The association of athleticism with muscular Christianity, and of organised team games with the Public School ethos, not to mention the values of Nation and Empire, is summed up in Sir Henry Newbolt's famous poetic injunction in 'Vitai Lampada' to "Play up! play up! and play the game!"[vii]. For a long time this made a rejection of sport almost mandatory for left wing intellectuals and budding artists, yet those committed to the life of the mind often secretly admired, and even envied, those who pursued the life of the body. Some of the Bloomsberries were keen supporters of the 'noble art' and used to make surreptitious trips to the East End to watch their heroes in action in the ring. The reinvention of the Olympics by Baron de Coubertin as a modern day version of the 'Hellenic Ideal', provided a rationale for many an erstwhile 'weed', educated in the Classics, to come out of the closet and declare their passion for sport. A.E. Houseman was a classical scholar and admirer of athletes and in his famous poem 'To an Athlete Dying Young' (1896), makes a local boy's recent sporting triumph an occasion to remind us of our mortality. In the 1930's Henri de Montherlant wrote a lyrical evocation of Olympic athleticism which scarcely concealed the nature of its desire, although his example was not followed in the more cloistered world of English letters, except for John Betjeman's 'Ode to a Subaltern' with its mischievous lines: 'What strenuous singles we played after tea, / We in the tournament – you against me! / Love-thirty, love-forty, oh! Weakness of joy / The speed of a swallow, the grace of a boy'[viii].

Given that sport and poetry have occupied such different universes of discourse, it is not surprising that those who are good at pentameters and those who shine in the pentathlon don't often find much common ground. Sometimes writers and athletes have admired each other from a distance, but they have rarely ventured into each other's territory. James Dickey was America's poets laureate but before that he was a famous quarterback and a number of professional footballers, swimmers, and mountaineers have also gone on to become elegant wordsmiths, but they are the exception. On the other side of the tracks, A. J. Ayer was a keen Spurs supporter and James Joyce loved – and played- cricket but I doubt anyone would see this as key to understanding logical positivism or Finnegan's Wake. Camus played in goal for Algiers but the Myth of Sisyphus is not usually interpreted as being about his team's struggle for promotion to the first division. Equally, when asked about their performance, few modern sprinters are likely to reply: 'Well, John, I think reading Derrida during training really helped me get my head in the right space, and gave me the edge coming off the bend', but they may, nevertheless, be studying for a degree in Sports Science at Loughborough University. Some of the stereotypes have thus begun to crumble. Sport, for intellectuals and artists, is no longer

the love that dare not speak its name. It is routine for academics in search of street credibility to boast of their devotion to the beautiful game. Many novelists have used particular sports as the incidental social setting for their stories, and some have used sport as a way of exploring general aspects of the human condition (in other words competitiveness or, masculinity), although few have succeeded in bringing together metaphor and mise en scene, so that participation or spectatorship is the main topos of the narrative.[ix] Poets play football and cricket, and a few even write about it. All appearances to the contrary, Mike Horovitz, the daddy of the English beat poets, and presiding genius of the 'Poetry Olympics' is by his own account a dedicated 'midsummer morning jogger' as well as a keen follower of Wolverhampton Wanderers Football Club – the title of his epic poem about Britannia.

Horovitz may have pioneered the idiom but the baton has been handed on to a new generation. Today's poetry slammers with their high energy verbal athleticism are closer to bridging the gap, as are those Olympic sports like gymnastics, ice skating, synchronised diving and swimming where the aesthetic dimension, the gracefulness displayed, is as important as technique in judging performance[x]. Calisthenics, with its mix of gymnastics, marching, singing, ballet, folk music and modern dance, pioneered the hybridising of sport and art and this trend is set to continue.

This raises the thorny issue of the relation between poetry and sport as forms of aesthetic experience and performance. They perhaps have more in common than either athletes or artists often recognise. The iambic, whose 'te tum te tum' is still the pulse of so much (usually bad) English verse, is only a heartbeat away from the poetics of athletic endeavour. In his 'projective' approach to poetry, Charles Olson wanted to literally breathe life back into verse by making it dance not to metre, but to a more embodied rhythm as in his famous dictum "the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE / the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE."[xi] The critic, Don Johnson, has argued, following Pindar, that each sport has its own specific poetic form, although with few exceptions (including a poem about Steve Ovett that takes as long as to read he did to break the world record for the mile and some concrete poems), this challenge has not been be taken up. Sport may be poetry in motion, but contemporary poets have found it difficult to capture it in the cadences of their verse. Yet equally if sport *is* poetry in motion, then perhaps it does not need poetry to complete itself, rather athletes should concentrate on developing their body language as a medium of gracefulness.

There are certainly some similarities in techniques of performance. There are performers who concentrate on mastering strategies for dominating the field of action. Whether as athletes or artists they set out to mesmerise the opposition and dazzle the audience by giving a virtuoso solo display of their talent, treating the event itself as a platform for exhibiting a range of expressive skills, sometimes only tangentially related to the matter in hand. Performance poetry as the name suggests, gives them the greatest scope, and so do extreme sports. In contrast there are performers who focus their efforts on mastering the immediate instruments of the discipline – versification techniques, the canvas, the voice, the football, the tennis racket, and the vaulting pole - and hold onto this at all costs; bonding with the chosen medium is also a means of bonding with other practitioners. Such performers make good team players, they can be found in the Chorus and Corps de ballet, they play well in string quartets and orchestras, and of course they flourish in team sports where they key their individual moves in to the flow of play.

Different sports and arts forms (and the same forms at different times) tend to privilege one mode over the other. For example fashions in violin playing swing between innovative attack (virtuosic brio) and strict interpretations of the score based on sticking closely to marked tempi. Poetry similarly moves between charismatic performance and formal textual control. The 20/20 version of Cricket privileges the slogger, while the test match allows the all rounder, the innings builder and the team player to shine. There is however, a general trend in both sports and art away from team effort and towards more highly individualised and spectacular styles of performance associated with solo risk taking. Poetry slams and music marathons test individual courage and stamina as much as extreme sports like quad biking kite surfing, or skydiving.

There is a further point of correspondence between the experience of doing art and sport. Many accounts by athletes of being 'in the zone' of peak performance, where they feel 'lost in focused intensity', approximate closely to the states of mind recorded by artists and writers when they are at work and which can also be summoned up when reading poetry or listening to music. In his book '*In Praise of Athletic Beauty'* (2006) Hans Gumbrecht has made a cogent plea for recognising sport, both in its performance and spectatorship, as a primarily aesthetic experience.[xii] He chides academics for feeling obliged to interpret sports culture as symptomatic of wider - and usually negative - social forces, rather than

understanding them in their own autotelic terms for the forms of excitement, pleasure, and entertainment they yield.

Gumbrecht's phenomenology of playing and watching sport certainly does articulate much that is normally ignored or taken for granted by sports writers, fans and athletes themselves. Nevertheless there is something about the visceral aesthetics of sport which makes it difficult for both participants and spectators to translate into words and images that do justice to its complexity and emotional depth. As psychoanalyst and keen sports fan Michael Balint put it:

> ' it is a difficult task to explain to a sceptic the immanent values of having won the 220 yards hurdles, holding the world record for the high jump, having ascended the highest peak in the world or made the deepest descent into a cave or the depths of the ocean. This is a sad state of affairs because in a way it is true of all sublimated activities including the arts and the pure sciences. It seems to be the case that even our highest and purest achievements cannot be fully divested of infantile propensities'.

Sports' writing, at its best, captures some of the momentary excitement, but the deeper structures of feelings escape it, and we are mostly left with the tired clichés of triumphalism. This is where poets come in. The moves and the balletic agility of footballers, the timing and elegant stroke play of true batsmanship (as opposed to 20/20 slogging) in cricket, are surely worthy subjects for lyric. Cricket, at least, for so long a pastoral metaphor the English lived by, has inspired poetic appreciation: Wordsworth, Tennyson, Betjeman, Housman and Ted Hughes being of the number, while, today, Kit Wright has reinvented the game as a way writing more reflexively about what its heritage now represents[xiii].

One of the difficulties here is that sport is such an all pervasive metaphor for life's vicissitudes. Cricket, football, sailing, horse racing have furnished some of the most familiar tropes for describing conflict, competition, adversity, triumph and despair. 'Play a straight bat'; 'She had a good innings'; 'Sailing too close to the wind', and so on, but poetry, by definition, is about the search for what lies beyond and behind such banalities. One solution is to extrapolate from particular games or sports, an imaginative sense of what play universally represents about the human condition. This is the path followed by Seamus Heaney, for example in his poem 'Markings' which explores the meta-physical dimensions of a game of soccer in the park:

'Youngsters shouting their heads off in a field
As the light died and they kept on playing
Because by then they were playing in their heads
And the actual kicked ball came to them

Like a dream heaviness, and their own hard
Breathing in the dark and skids on grass
Sounded like effort in another world . . .
It was quick and constant, a game that never need
Be played out. Some limit had been passed,
There was fleetness, furtherance, untiredness
In time that was extra, unforeseen and free.'

Because Sport – and especially Olympic sport, is so closely associated with the boundless energy of youth, the aging athlete cuts a poignant figure, representing the transience of human life and the vulnerability of the body, however well endowed or cared for, to the ravages of time. Paul Petrie's *Old Pro's Lament* explores this terrain with some subtlety:

'Each year the court expands,
the net moves back, the ball
hums by—with more spin . . .
But nightly in dreams I see
an old man
playing in an empty court
under the dim floodlights of the moon
with a racket gone in the strings -
no net, no ball, no game -
and still playing to win!'

No-one who saw the frail, bewildered figure of Muhammad Ali sitting in a wheelchair alongside other past Olympic champions in the London stadium on opening night, and remembered his fights with Frazier, could fail to be struck by the pathos of the moment.

Winning Words? Poetry on location

. Poetry is, by definition, the enemy of kitsch and that is why its engagement with the Olympics was both so necessary and so problematic. The difficulty of the challenge is illustrated by the Winning Words project which commissioned work to be installed in the Olympic Park. The poems had to be short, 'punchy' and accessible, as well as site specific and this brief inevitably limited the field to poets who could work in a condensed and popular idiom. 'Winning Words' not only echoed the London 2012 strap line but suggested something both inspirational and beguiling. This might have been a good enough description for advertising copy, but as a definition of poetry's mode of address, it left a lot to be desired. In the event, the poems fully justified their choice. All the chosen poets were concerned to dig beneath the scrubbed surface of the Park, and like true archaeologists they found buried

treasures amidst what to other eyes was just another heavily polluted brown field site. Each poem took us on a journey across a narrative landscape where traces of this hidden geography and the stink of history emerged, at times surprisingly. Jo Shapcott's 'Wild Swimmer', perhaps inspired by Roger Deakin's *Waterlog*, headed off across the country and discovered a whole network of 'lost' rivers, canals and waterworks. Some of it was tough going: 'all swamp/and sewage until the Northern Outfall drain', but the wild swimmer was enjoined to persist and 'backstroke through the past/and remember how Alfred the Great/dug the Channelsea to keep out Danes'. Some of the familiar features of our 'island story' surfaced, albeit in unlikely places. Unlike Roger Deakin's book, the poem did not explore the sensuous delights of swimming and turned into a bit of a travelogue: Count off the rivers as you swim: Bow Creek, the Waterworks/the Channelsea, the City Mill, Henniker's Ditch; it ended up, predictably enough, back in the Aquatics Centre, where, mindful of her commission, Jo Shapcott urged her swimmer to 'swim your heart out, for you are all gold.' Such 'winning words' summed up the poem's rather winsome quality.

'Wild Swimmer' invites comparison with U. A. Fanthorpe' s poem about London's lost rivers, but 'Rising Damp' occupies a much darker, more troubled terrain. Her rivers are 'disfigured, frayed, and effaced':

'They have gone under.
Boxed, like the magician's assistant.
Buried alive in earth.
Forgotten, like the dead.'

Fanthorpe's waterways are underground presences that continue to haunt the city; they 'infiltrate chronic bronchitis statistics', and 'will deluge cellars, detonate manholes/plant effluent on our faces, /sink the city'. There is no way such an apocalyptic vision could have been allowed to contaminate the clean green environment that is Olympic Park and Jo Shapcott steers well clear of exploring the darker underside of her poetic landscape.

In contrast Lemn Sissay's poem was inspired by the 'danger of death' signs that are fixed to the electricity transformer enclosures dotted around the Park; this lethal aspect of 'sparks flying ' led him to the old Bryant and May factory on the edge of the Park, where in 1888 Annie Besant organised a famous strike of the 'match girls.' Never mind its somewhat obvious word play as the different meanings of strike are permutated, 'Spark catchers' is a poem with attitude; with its jagged rhythms and angry assonances, its 'sulphurous spite filled spit', it is made to be performed, chanted, or shouted aloud. Despite its incantatory style, the poem has its odd lyrical moments: 'Beneath stars by the bending bridge of Bow/In the silver

sheen of a phosphorous moon/they practised Spark catching'. The dominant mood, and diction is militant and 'in your face' quoting words from Besant's article on 'White Slavery in London': *'The fist the earth the spark it's core/the fist the body the spark it's heart / The Matchmakers march. Strike.'*

John Burnside's poem, 'Bicycling for Ladies' took its inspiration from another famous socialist and feminist, Sylvia Pankhurst, who worked in Bow for some years and was also a keen cyclist. There are two sections, each with epigraphs which pointed to his sources; these including sayings from some of the working class women who collaborated with Pankhurst, Yardley advertising material and an early text on women's emancipation through cycling which gave the poem its title. From this disparate set of co-ordinates Burnside conjured up a multi-layered landscape which moved effortlessly between the personal and political dimensions of its subject. He portrayed the aspirations of the cyclists in terms of a social geography which laid claim to a national heritage from which they have historically been excluded:

'not for them the solitude of some
far crossroads, with its litany of names
from ancient times,

they want to ride for hours, on country lanes
through Saxon woods and miles of ripening grain
and end up at some point of no return,

like changelings, in some faded picture book
from childhood, going headlong through the dark
to some new realm, where no mere man is king.'

The sudden shift into a mythopoeic space conveys, directly enough, the struggle to transcend the material constraints of working class life – the striving for another possible world. A similar metamorphosis occurs in the second verse, which focuses on Sylvia Pankhurst herself, and takes us from the detail of her day to day struggles to the vision of a shared epiphany, evoking Stanley Spencer's painting of the Resurrection in Cookham Churchyard :

'The marches are done with,
the hunger strikes, danger of death

Forgotten, as the sun cuts through the fog
and all the world cycles away, like risen souls

Made new and tender for the life to come
in some lost Resurrection of the Body.'

Cycling, as a metaphor of a better life to come, but in this world, rather than the next, offers us a vision of sport as a kind of meta-physical education, the body's own way of transcendence and one that is not the prerogative of privilege but open to anyone whenever the sun breaks through their personal fog.

Carol Ann Duffy's poem is also preoccupied with questions of aspiration, disadvantage and their long legacy, for, as she says in the opening line of her poem 'the past is all around us, in the air', and, she later reminds us 'still dedicates to us/its distant, present light'. Her approach to the East End's heritage as a source of Olympic inspiration is characteristically oblique. Anyone expecting a lyrical ode to the joys of paralympic tennis and the struggle to overcome physical disability is in for a disappointment. Instead she has written a poem about the Eton Manor Boys' Club whose sports premises once occupied the site that is now to be dedicated to tennis and hockey.

The club was founded by a group of Old Etonians in the 1880's as part of a broader civilising mission on the part of the upper classes to establish community settlements and youth clubs in the most deprived areas of the East End, where as one of the Club's founders put it:

> 'Boys are yearly turned loose, without aid, without sympathy, without exercise, without amusement, into the burning fiery furnace of the streets of our growing and densely-crowded cities. When they fall into sin and ruin, as so many of them do – when they pass from betting and gambling (a sin fearfully on the increase) into dishonesty and crime, or when they pass from levity and godlessness into the abyss of yet more misery and destruction, there is no-one to offer them help or social encouragement'.[xiv]

The founders saw themselves as pioneers entering an 'unknown country'. One of them recorded in his diary: 'Having searched diligently through "Mogg's Guide to London and the Suburbs" for the correct geographical position of Hackney Wick, and all the Metropolitan timetables for a suitable train to Victoria Park Station, I duly started off one evening in search of adventures in the Wild East….'

These new colonisers of the working class city quickly settled in and turned the area into 'their manor. As urban slummers with a social mission, their main charitable aim was to inculcate their public school ethos amongst the lower orders through various forms of rational recreation and self improvement, including sport; in particular they wanted to change the anarchic, clandestine street gang into a well-organised, highly visible and socially responsible presence in the community. To this end, members of the Eton Manor Club were organised into 'houses' to encourage team spirit and healthy competition; regular attendance was required and the highest standards of behaviour. The Club bought a large derelict site in Hackney Wick and transformed into the most lavishly equipped sports facility in London, which they called, without a trace of irony 'the Wilderness'. The Club excelled in boxing and athletics, producing a bevy of Olympic medallists and it certainly succeeded in tapping into the role which sport plays in deprived communities whose access to social mobility by other means is blocked. It offered other perks too - if you were unemployed the guvnors might find you a job.

Eton Manor closed its doors in 1967, although it still leads a vigorous afterlife in the form of an old boy's network of East Enders who remain loyal to its traditions. But that is not the end of its story. Eton Manor now has a very contemporary message since David Cameron and his Old Etonian chums came up with the jolly wheeze of reinventing upper class philanthropy and Tory paternalism under the populist rubric of the 'Big Society'[xv].

This then is the complicated history which our poet laureate chose to explore. How did she go about it? Largely, it has to be said, by ignoring or glossing over its more problematic aspects. The poem begins promisingly enough with an evocation of its chosen mise en scene. Hackney Wick is all: 'fleas, flies, bin-lids, Clarnico's Jam; the poor/enclosed by railway, marshland, factories, canal'.

We are in the City's edge lands, that in-between space where the planners writ no longer runs, and whose surreal ecology has been lyrically described by Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts in their recent book as 'England's true wilderness'[xvi]. But Duffy's Wilderness, for all that it is a landscape of exclusion, is going to be reclaimed for other purposes. Thanks to the Old Etonians she names, it becomes a 'glorious space', connecting 'the power of place to human hope'. The response of the locals is one of amazement and

gratitude, in the one line in the poem where their voice is directly heard: ‘Blimey, it's fit for a millionaire’.

I kept listening for a tinge of irony in the poem but it is all grace notes: ‘translated poverty to self-esteem/camaraderie, and optimism smiled in smiles’. Her definition of legacy is equally soft centred: ‘young lives respected, cherished, valued, helped/to sprint, swim, bowl, box, play, excel, belong/believe community is self in multitude ’. It reads more like a paraphrase of the Club’s mission statement or even a manifesto for the Big Society than an engagement with the complex poetics of working class aspiration described in John Burnside’s poem, while the re-definition of community in such individualistic terms is bound to cause controversy in certain circles. Perhaps it is not surprising then, that the ‘past all around us’ has melted into ‘air’ that rhymes in the next but one line with ‘million…..’.

The poem’s closing lines, celebrating the continuity of this tradition of sponsored aspiration, contains its most powerful but also, for me, most problematic imagery:

‘The same high sky,
same East End moon, above this reclaimed wilderness,
where relay boys are raced by running ghosts’.

The sudden appearance of a spectral geography does not disturb the elegiac sense of a wilderness reclaimed, nor does it point to another possible and better world where the poor would not have to depend on charitable handouts from the rich to get by. These ghosts are not about to haunt the Games with their uncanny presence, or spoil the Olympic dream with their message of lives unredeemed by private philanthropy. They have been recruited to run for Team GB and they are simply there to spur the athletes on.

Lyric poetry is made for celebration, but what is celebrated about the Olympics or East London’s rich political and cultural heritage is a matter of moral and political as well as aesthetic judgement. All the poems, in their different ways, attempted to interpret the aspirational agenda of 2012 in terms that are consistent with the poet’s own voice and vision and they will certainly make visitors to the Olympic Park reflect on what the place meant to now long vanished communities; they conjure up a memory scape whose legacy of struggle is only dimly recognised in the official rhetorics of London 2012. In doing so they honour to varying degrees poetry’s special vocation to unsettle the official discourse, and ask awkward questions, and yet their status and function remain somewhat problematic.

The poems were mostly written on wooden screens surrounding electricity generators dotted around the Park, thus blocking out unsightly but necessary machinery from view and raising the question of how far poetry should be used to conceal the uglier aspects of reality. With the exception of Lemn Sissay's poem, none of the commissioned work referred to the circumstances of its sitting. Their function in the landscaping of the Park itself remained obscure. Perhaps these poets should have taken a leaf out of Ian Hamilton Finlay's book, or rather his garden. In 'Stoneypath' he showed how to go about make a poem part of its environment. As visitors walk about the garden they 'live' the poems as well as reading them. Quite simply, if you step into Finlay's 'The Great Piece of Turf', a stone inscription by a small pond called 'Temple Pool' you will get your feet wet. Finlay was a pioneer in the art of concrete poetry, using typography to create special poetic effects and it is surprising, given its mode of public visual display, that work in this idiom was not commissioned for the Olympic Park. David Morley is another poet who has created a form of textual cartography that could have been deployed to great effect. Writing of his work in an inner city renewal project in Coventry, Morley urged that 'the poem(s) must map and plot the place you are working on, as though you are drawing a city on a page then splicing those pages into a book'. With the exception of Lemn Sissay's work, the commissioned poems did not explore the circumstances of their own siting and missed an opportunity as a result. The displacements and dislocations of meaning created by the building of the Park, the new edge lands which this created around the site, could well have been a focus of poetic exploration. This question of indexicality, of how properly 'Para-Olympic' art is to respond formally as well as thematically to its referential context, brings us back to the Olympic Ceremonies.

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[i] The official evaluation of the 2012 Cultural Olympiad is being undertaken by Beatrice Garcia at the University of Liverpool. See B. Garcia and A. Miah (eds) *Culture@the Olympics* (2003) for a discussion of some of the methodological issues involved in evaluating cultural programmes.

[ii] For a pioneering discussion of heritage as cultural capital see R. Hewison *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a climate of decline* Methuen Publishing Ltd: London (1987).

[iii] See M. Grenfell et al 'Field manoeuvres: Bourdieu and the Young British Artists ' in *Space and Culture* Vol 61 (2003).

[iv] Information from the Bus Stop Website www.busstop.com

[v] Architects also jumped on the Olympic bandwagon. Sir John Sorrell, chair of the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) called for urban design to lift the mood of the nation and enhance the employment prospects of a profession, a third of whose members were out of work. Public art should make

over municipal wastelands into places of delight, buildings should entertain the senses as well accommodate social needs, and defensible spaces that were fun to be in should be created as an antidote to the city of Panic. See O. Newman *Defensible Space* Macmillan: London (1972) and P. Virilio *City of Panic* Berg: London (2001).

[vi] See the contributions to H. Canham and C. Sayamurti (eds)., *Acquainted with the Night* Columbia University Press: New York (2003) for a discussion of the psycho-dynamic aspects of poetic creation.

[vii] See the contributions to J Macaloon (ed) *Muscular Christianity and the colonial and post colonial world* Cambridge University Press: Cambridge (2008) and the pioneering study of J. A. Mangan *The Games Ethic and Imperialism* MIT Press: New York (1998).

[viii] See Henri de Montherlant *Paysage des Olympiques* (1940)and John Betjeman *Collected Poems* Alan Lane: London (1958).

[ix] See the reading list in the Para-Olympics study section.

[x] On the aestheticising of sport see J. Bale and M. Christie *Post Olympism* Berg: London (2004) op cit.

[xi] See C. Olson *Projective Verse (*1962)

[xii] See H. Gumbrecht *In praise of Athletic Beauty* Harvard University Press: Cambridge MA (2005).

[xiii] See K. Wright *Hoping it might be so: Poems 1974-2008* Faber and Faber: London (2008).

[xiv] Quoted in M. Johansen 'Adventures in the Wild East- The early Years of the Eton Manor Boys Club' available online at www.villierspark.org.uk

[xv] For a discussion of the ideological provenance of 'the Big Society' see the contributions to J. Mackay (ed) *The age of voluntarism: how we got the 'Big Society' (* 2011). The book argues that one nation Toryism has always been connected to philanthropic endeavour and a 'politics of conscience' practiced by a wealthy elite.

[xvi] See P. Farley and M. Roberts *Edgelands: Journeys into England's true wilderness* Vintage: London (2011).