Albion, or Teaching at Liberty

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you today. I'm delighted to be giving the Sandra Armstrong Lecture in the University that so generously honoured me last year. I'm glad, too, of the connection with education; I was a teacher myself for several years, and although I'm no longer professionally connected with schools and colleges, I do feel I have the right to act as honorary gadfly every so often.

But my main business these days consists of making up things that don't exist, and then persuading people to read about them. It's a congenial way of life, on the whole. And one of the interesting variations in the usual routine comes with invitations like this. When this happens, they ask you a long way ahead of time for a title for your talk, and in my case it's a matter of pure chance whether the title you think of then happens to fit what you eventually find yourself talking about. In this case, I think the fit is looser than usual. What I was thinking of at that point was William Blake's famous comment on Milton and *Paradise Lost*. He said "The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of angels and god, and at liberty when he wrote of devils and hell, is because he was a true poet, and of the devil's party without knowing it."

Writing at liberty, you see; and I thought it would be interesting to speculate about teaching at liberty, and what party one might find oneself of in that case. But then I thought of something else instead. I thought that presumably I was asked to come and speak because I'm known as a writer of fiction; and as I was sitting there drumming my fingers on the table and staring blankly at the wall, which is how you write fiction, I found myself making something up – an alternative world, if you like. An alternative England, anyway, one that doesn't actually exist. It's a sort of thought experiment, as many imagined worlds are. We'll call this country in this imagined world by the old name of Albion, as a tribute to William Blake. It's very like this country of ours in most respects, except that in Albion they do education rather differently. So I want to tell you about teaching, and schools, and all that sort of thing, as it happens in Albion.

In the first place, no teaching can happen in a vacuum. We need a context. Since education is a matter of national policy, the business

of the state, the context we need to start from is the nation as a whole. In Albion, they take it that education *is* the business of the state, by the way. In some countries, they say that it's the business of the religions; and in others, people think that private enterprise should be able to set up schools for profit, without any subsidised competition.

But in Albion, they think – and there's a large measure of agreement here – that a wise state should take it upon itself to raise and spend the money necessary to educate all the children as well as that can be done. Their guiding light, surprisingly enough, is Sherlock Holmes. There was an Arthur Conan Doyle in Albion, and he wrote stories that are word-for-word the same as the ones in our world. Anyway, at one point Sherlock Holmes was in a train with Dr Watson, who describes it like this:

> Holmes was sunk in profound thought and hardly opened his mouth until we had passed Clapham Junction.
>
> "It's a very cheery thing to come into London by any of these lines which run high and allow you to look down upon the houses like this."
>
> I thought he was joking, for the view was sordid enough, but he soon explained himself.
>
> "Look at those big, isolated clumps of buildings rising above the slates, like brick islands in a lead-coloured sea."
>
> "The board-schools."
>
> "Light-houses, my boy! Beacons of the future! Capsules with hundreds of bright little seeds in each, out of which will spring the wiser, better Albion of the future."

You'll find that in a story called *The Naval Treaty*.

Holmes wasn't talking about Eton and Harrow and Winchester, even supposing you could see any of those delightful places from Clapham Junction. Holmes is referring to the schools set up under the supervision of locally elected school boards by the Act of 1870 – local state primary schools, in effect.

In Albion, they take it that that was a wise thing to do, and that Sherlock Holmes's reaction is one that's worth recalling. A state that sees education merely as a drain on funds, which must be kept as low as possible, is one, they think, that's got it wrong; and so is a state that sees putting money into education as the equivalent of investing it in the stock market, with a view to financial return. So a good state would put money, and plenty of it, into education at all stages, from nursery to post-graduate. And it wouldn't base its judgement on a financial audit of the results, either, because in Albion, they understand that money doesn't exist simply in order to grow more money. That's not the purpose of money. The purpose of money is to change into other things. Money can change into art, for example, and into science, and into what Matthew Arnold – there was a Matthew Arnold in Albion too – called in a borrowed phrase *sweetness and light*, namely "a fuller harmonious development of our humanity, a free play of thought upon our routine notions, spontaneity of consciousness."

But for this to happen, you need politicians who can understand that idea, and who are wise enough to see that agreeing on this is more important than stressing the party differences between themselves. In Albion, the leading politicians, the general political consensus, agrees that the purpose of education, the whole reason we do it, is to make it possible for every single child to achieve the full harmonious development of their humanity. In this world, by contrast, we are often told that the purpose of education is to equip children with the skills and qualifications needed to meet the challenges of the market and compete successfully in the new global economic environment. I think there is a difference.

One of the results of the way they've done things in Albion is that there are no longer any institutions like Eton and Winchester and Harrow. They simply withered away. There *are* independent schools, because Albion is a free country, but they're not very well resourced, and they're a bit shabby and run-down, and the staff are pretty second-rate; but if you're determined to send your child to a school like that, no-one's going to stop you. Then there are the hard-line religious schools, where you can learn that the world was created in six days, but they tend to do rather badly in the science exams. Other than people who sacrifice their children to those principles, everyone in Albion from the heir to the throne to the

poorest labourer is happy to send their children to the neighbourhood school, because all the schools are so good.

The government department that deals with education in Albion is called the Department of Education. It's not the Department for Education and Skills, or the Department for Education and Employment, or the Department for Education and Training: just the Department of Education. Not 'for' education, either: every government in Albion is for education. You don't have to shout in order to show your good intentions. I don't know who is the current Education Secretary in Albion, but I can tell you that this post typically goes to a man or woman of great culture. Who reads widely and deeply, and who has a genuine and not a feigned interest in art, in theatre, in music, in science, in technology and engineering, in history. When you talk to such a person you feel that they are both by instinct and by intellectual persuasion on the side of sweetness and light. For them, important as it is, politics is not the whole of life; they have some kind of life outside Parliament and the government, and they could, if they chose, make a distinguished contribution in the field of letters, or philosophy, or medicine. And it's often the case that this person sees the position of Education Secretary as the culmination, the desired highest point, of their political career, rather than as an irritating stepping-stone on the way to the bigger and more glamorous prizes of Foreign Secretary, Chancellor of the Exchequer, Prime Minister.

As you'll have guessed, taxes are rather higher there than here; money is always found for matters of public good. But you see, in Albion they don't begrudge spending money on important things. They have never quite understood the rather odd idea that public spending is always bad, and only private spending is good. There was a minor politician some years ago who tried to persuade them of that, and campaigned under the slogan "There is no such thing as society"; but since she was a candidate for the Raving Loony Party, she was never actually elected. I sometimes wonder what would have happened if she had been.

So much for the political setting in Albion. I want to go on and tell you about the social and cultural setting.

For a start, it's a society in which the word 'underclass' has no meaning. There are no beggars; everyone has a home to live in. There are differences in wealth, by all means, but the differences are

modest, not flagrant and shocking. In Albion, every man and woman can hope for a job, and a job, what's more, that's interesting and fulfilling and that gives them scope for individual variation: people can find out what they're good at, and then earn a living doing it. Consequently, there are no children who can see nothing ahead of them but poverty and squalor relieved only by drugs; who resent and resist, sometimes with violence, every attempt to get them to behave kindly and courteously, and to take a constructive interest in their own future. Children, families, whole communities who treat schools and teachers and every aspect of education with hostility and contempt are unknown in Albion.

You can see this in the hospitals too. Everyone who works there feels they *belong.* Every single person who works there feels happy in what they're doing, and they do it as well as they can, surgeons and consultants, cleaners and cooks alike, because they're all proud of being part of a great organisation. They have heard of other countries, in which different systems apply; there is a nation not far away, for example, in whose health service the cleaners and the cooks are employed at scandalously exploitative wages on short fixed-term contracts by external private companies whose only interest is in doing the job as quickly and cheaply as possible, and to hell with the patients. In that other country, an elderly woman I know, who was in hospital after she collapsed when a young thug robbed her of her savings, was lying there thirsty on a very hot day, and unable to reach the drink that a hasty nurse had put down out of her reach. She asked a cleaner for a bit of help in reaching it, and got the scornful reply, "That's not *my* job."

You wouldn't hear those words in Albion. The culture is different. A sense of courtesy and care extends in all directions; and especially from those in power to those without it. Those in power, sometimes, means those who are young and strong, in comparison to those who are old and weak. In Albion, they understand that it's hard to be courteous to other people if you feel threatened or insecure; it's hard to be kind, if you have the feeling that the world is a jungle, and it's dog eat dog, and you have to do unto others before they do you. That cast of mind suits a state in which money is the measure of all things. But it doesn't suit a country like Albion, in which real human beings know how to live with each other and get along. They know that we can't live like that.

Visitors to Albion often notice that something is missing in the newspapers. There's news, there's comment, there's gossip, there's everything that we have – but the tone of angry, frightened, paranoid, hate-filled, jeering contempt that characterises so much of our public discourse just never seems to have caught on. For example, on the whole, the Albion press admires teachers, and takes a genuine interest in education, and a pride in their schools, and doesn't think that the whole thing is a conspiracy to do away with grammar and impose political correctness on everyone. A curious thing happened a year or so ago: the foreign proprietor of several powerful newspapers tried to tell the Prime Minister of Albion what to do. He sent a high-ranking executive to Downing Street to say "Unless you behave as we want you to behave, we'll tell the people to vote against you. And remember – it was us wot won the last election, not you."

The Prime Minister of Albion, luckily, was made of stern stuff, and he sent this impertinent wretch away with a flea in his ear. They're looking at the law now, I understand; and politicians are beginning to wonder whether it wouldn't be a good idea to restrict ownership of large media organisations to citizens of Albion, rather than allowing very rich, very right-wing Australian Americans to manipulate the politics of other countries to their own advantage. People like that naturally seek to appeal to the coarsest, nastiest, most selfish instincts of the public in order to make themselves even richer, and the citizens of Albion are just like us, they have these base feelings; it's just that the government of Albion is sensible enough not to give people like that newspaper proprietor every possible kind of tax break, and fawn over them, and roll over and wag their tails on command.

We're looking at the cultural environment, and here's another aspect of it. The people of Albion have a respect for the past of their nation, and they cherish its cultural history, whether in literature or drama or music or the visual arts. They regard these things with pride, as the treasures they are. I remember reading a report recently of some international exchange where teenagers from other European countries, and from Britain, were brought together in some cultural setting, and where they were invited – on the spur of the moment – to recite something in their own language. The children from other countries, without any difficulty, could think of

speeches from great drama, or poems, which they could recite; the best the British teenagers could manage was pop songs.

Now this is *abject*. It's shameful. If that happened in Albion, it would cause a national scandal. The country I'm imagining today would have a great and justified pride in its literature; it would take it for granted that *of course* every child who came through its schools would know by heart several poems and speeches from great plays. There are various reasons why we in Britain have got into this state: one is a nervous feeling that to be proud of our culture is to denigrate others, and to be racist, in effect. This is rubbish. Another is a feeling that probably comes from a dim understanding of literary theory, the feeling that there isn't a canon of great literature anyway, and that everything is on the same level, and that pop songs are just as good as Keats. This is rubbish too. Another is the vague sense that learning things by heart is old-fashioned and repressive, and it crushes children's individuality. More rubbish: in fact, learning things by heart is very good for you. The more things you have in your mind, the more things you can do with them. Another pernicious lie that we've allowed to get around is the one about élitism: the idea that high culture, great art, is something that only snobbish people want, and they only want it so they can look down their noses at the rest of us. That's the biggest lie of all. Great art and great literature and great music belong to everyone, without any distinctions of class or background.

In Albion, they understand that. They take a pride and a joy in the arts, they are in love with the greatest works of literature and poetry and painting and music, they have a culture in which children and adults alike are able to stand up and recite something of beauty and value, and feel proud that they speak the language it belongs to.

Well, so much for the cultural background. I want to come in a bit closer now, and look at the way they organise their schools in Albion. One interesting thing is that they have never taken to the idea that one school can only prosper by competing with others and by being ranked in a league table. They've heard of the notion that you can only get people to do well by ranking them in order according to some artificial measure, and then shaming and penalising the ones at the bottom, but they think it's based on a degraded and squalid view of human nature. In Albion, they believe that people respond to a vision of better things as well as a fear of

worse ones. Competition between schools is kept to the playing fields, where it belongs, and league tables are firmly confined to the sports pages. There are no grotesque consequences of a morally flawed system such as we read about this week in the Guardian, about a London suburb where some children with developmental problems, who are functioning happily in the year below the one they should officially be in, are forced into the year above so that their GCSE results will show up in the right cohort, and not distort the school's position in the league tables. In Albion, they have the strange idea that the system is there to serve the child, and not the child to be sacrificed to the system.

But they do need to know how well the schools are doing – they're not so silly as to dispute that. There is a body in Albion called Her Majesty's Inspectorate. We used to have something of the sort in this country. I remember being inspected when I was a young teacher, and I remember feeling that all my work was being scrutinised closely by someone who was formidably intelligent, and profoundly knowledgeable, and widely experienced. It was chastening, alarming, encouraging, and inspiring at the same time. I realised the importance of being able to respect the person who was judging my work; how much more seriously and deeply you take advice when it's given you by someone who could obviously do the job better than you could.

Well, that's how they do it in Albion. They realise that the whole business of inspecting and being inspected needs to be an ongoing, mutually informative and reinforcing thing. They don't want inspectors who descend from on high, with no experience of education, but full of management jargon government guidelines and the conceit that business always knows better than anyone else. Instead, they have an inspectorate that enjoys a continuing and developing relationship with a local group of schools; one that passes on good examples of practice from one to another; one that runs courses to refresh and inform and excite; one whose members are closely in touch with developments in science, in technology, in the arts; one that remains in touch to help and encourage and advise. The emblem of the Albion Inspectorate is a golden bee, because of the way they behave, like bees, travelling from school to school carrying the pollen of knowledge and enthusiasm from one to another, and to adapt the words of Swift, "filling their hives with honey and wax, thus furnishing mankind with the two noblest of

things, which are sweetness and light." That's where Matthew Arnold, who was of course himself a school inspector, borrowed the phrase from.

What about the physical resources of the schools in Albion? What do they look like? What does it feel like to visit one?

Well, one thing that you'd notice, I think, is that the buildings fit the number of people in them. They're not crowded, and they're not empty and echoing. They're purposefully busy. And they're not all-purpose local community centres: they're schools. The education stuff doesn't have to be cleared out of the way every evening so that the judo club or the first-aid group can do their training: the education stuff, the children's work, the experiments going on, the pictures being painted in the art room, the instruments set out for the school orchestra, have absolute priority. These are buildings for children and their teachers. Other activities are very valuable, no doubt, but they take place somewhere else. The idea that a school would have to book the use of its own stage or gymnasium, and take its place in a queue of other people demanding to use it, and possibly even have to pay through some internal market system, would amaze the teachers and parents in Albion. Pupils and teachers come first.

There's a whole variety of different kinds of school buildings. Some of the older schools, such as the Board Schools that Sherlock Holmes noticed from the train, are gradually being replaced. Some of them are gleaming with glass and stainless steel; others are built of shabby old bricks and stone. But even in the oldest schools you'd notice that the paintwork was bright and clean, that the roof had been properly looked after, that the grounds were cared for properly, that the toilets were clean and fresh. And if you stayed a bit longer, you'd notice a few other things that you wouldn't necessarily pick up on a short visit. Someone has thought about the details that make the difference: if a classroom faces south, for example, you wouldn't find wall-to-wall windows with no blinds or curtains to shut out the glare. If it faces a noisy road, the windows are double-glazed. The classroom floors are carpeted to keep the noise level down, there is plenty of corkboard for displays of work, there seems to be a loan system in operation for putting interesting paintings and drawings and other works of art on the walls.

Outside, the playing fields are well cared for. There *are* playing fields.

And nothing is broken. The taps work, the toilets flush properly, all the electric sockets are in order, the floors are polished, the windows are clean, the doors shut quietly without having to be lifted or slammed. The furniture in the classrooms is sturdy and comfortable, and perhaps a little battered and worn, but it's not made of cheap plastic, so it might look old, but it never looks dirty or broken. It doesn't give you the sense that they couldn't afford to give you anything better; it just looks as if several generations of pupils have sat there before you, and they made furniture well in those days, they made it to last, to serve you as well as it served all those other children who had sat there in their time. So you have a connection with your parents and grandparents and earlier generations, embodied in the very material that the school is made of. All these details matter. Once again, the people in Albion, from the oldest pensioners sitting on a comfortable bench in the park to the youngest child in school, feel that they're part of something bigger than themselves, something lasting and important and valuable.

I can't stress this enough, that all the details matter. Take the tools in the woodwork room. Now you can't learn to use a saw effectively if the only saw you have is blunt. If you're given a plane that isn't set properly, you won't ever feel the connection with the tool and the wood that you need to feel if you want to make the surface smooth and flat. You'll never learn to cut a mortise if the chisel you've got has been sharpened carelessly and had all the temper drawn from the steel, so that it goes blunt almost at once. These things are important: looking after the tools is not pointless fussing, like cutting the edge of the lawn with nail scissors and painting the coal white: it's the very essence of doing the job properly.

And it costs money, of course. You need to buy good tools in the first place, and then pay a craftsman to keep them in good shape. In Albion, this is one of the costs they bear cheerfully.

As is the library. One of the nicest tasks I sometimes have, in this world, is going to open a new school library. I did that recently in a primary school in Oxford. It wasn't very big, but they were very proud of it, and I'm sure it'll be well used. By contrast, it's been a melancholy thing to hear of the decline of the schools library

services since I was a teacher seventeen years ago. Little by little, one by one, as schools funding has devolved and central support has been cut, the schools library service in one authority after another has simply and silently vanished away. And with it, often, a great body of knowledge and expertise.

In Albion, they had the foresight to make it a statutory obligation in every local authority, as it never was in this country, to hold a stock of books centrally on behalf of all the schools, and have a team of qualified librarians to look after them and buy new stock and make them available. Not only that: they recognised that the knowledge of the librarians was a precious resource. They are in contact with books all the time; they know them widely and deeply; they read the new books, they judge awards and prizes, they go into the schools to talk about books and provide a well-chosen selection for this term's topic work and offer advice and help. No matter how well-read the teachers are, they haven't got the time to cover everything, and they rely on the professional expertise of the specialist children's librarians, and know how valuable it is. And they regard the library as the very heart of the school.

But now for the school management. What is a typical Head Teacher like in one of the schools in Albion? Well, in that country they take it for granted – they take it as a starting point – that he or she should be at the very least a good teacher. It's a question of respect, again; true respect, which is earned by merit and not demanded by arrogance. If the staff can see that the Head knows his or her subject very well, and knows how to present it clearly and memorably to pupils, and has a personality that commands the attention of a class – if they can see that, then they will be very much more inclined to listen to advice or guidance. It's like an orchestra, which is that much more inclined to respect a conductor if he or she can demonstrate publicly that they can play an instrument well, and not just wave a stick.

So knowing how to teach, and doing it well, is necessary for a Head. But it's not sufficient. There are other things that a good Head has to do – but in Albion, they don't include such things as the ability to engage in public relations, to sell the image of the school, to drum up support, to raise money, to find sponsorship. None of those activities, they believe in Albion, should form any part of a Head's duties. They look at the culture in some other countries, the culture

of having to bid for the funds that you need, and then getting it in dribs and drabs so that you get a bit of money to buy some computers but none to replace them, so you're locked into a cycle of needing to raise money over and over again; they look at that way of doing things, and they loathe it. They think it's demeaning. They want their Head Teachers to do more important things than that.

For example, they think that one very important quality for a Head is the ability to choose good teachers and to find ways of keeping them on the staff. The ability to get a well-balanced staff, and to make sure that there's a happy staffroom – and then keep out of it. A good Head, they think, is one who can attract a lively mix of teachers, and give them the sense that they are all part of one bigger thing. And a good head has no favourites, and allows no whispering in corners, no unspoken resentment to develop, no division in the staffroom. I once worked in a school where the staffroom was divided: the atmosphere was toxic. An organisation can become psychopathic just as an individual can, and it's fascinating to watch; but it's horrible to work in. All the emotional and psychic *energy* of a school can get caught up in a deadly vortex of hatred and bitterness, of plots and rumours and lies. Once that has caught hold, it's very difficult to put right.

Mind you, teachers need something to grumble about, in Albion just as in England. A really wise Head will provide them with just enough provocation to induce eye-rolling and grumbling and heavy sighs, but no more than that.

A good Head also needs to inspire young minds and hearts – and I mean young teachers as well as young pupils – with the notion that that is what *they* would like to resemble, when they are really old. Say about fifty or so. In Albion, they don't use the phrase *role model,* and they don't even have the notion of it: they would think it sounded far too self-conscious and calculating. But they understand the importance of wisdom and experience, and they reward it. A great Head Teacher in Albion is an important figure not only in the local community but in the nation. People take notice of what they say, and act on it – not because they have to, but because it's wise and persuasive and convincing.

So to be a Head Teacher is a worthy aspiration. But setting out to be a Head is not the only career path that a teacher can follow. Teaching itself is widely seen as honourable and rewarding. One

reason it's so enjoyable is that class sizes in Albion are limited, by law, to 20. Many are smaller still. Every teacher has time to talk to the pupils, to mark their work properly, to tailor the work precisely to their abilities and interests.

And teachers are trusted, too. The extraordinary idea has taken hold in Albion that teachers are fully professional people, with the ability and integrity and imagination to work without endless sets of guidelines and targets and lesson plans imposed from Whitehall. They're expected to be able to get on with it. I mentioned the Department of Education a little earlier: I might have pointed out then that it's a very small department. Not many civil servants; hardly any paperwork being sent out to schools. When a communication arrives from the Education Secretary, it's opened with some surprise and read with interest. Imagine that.

Now I could go on in this vein, but I think you've got the gist of it now. And I could say a good deal about tests and literacy strategies and what have you, but I've done that elsewhere. I'm trying something different today. And just drawing a picture of something nice is all very well, but it's not enough. As I began by saying, I am a storyteller, and the way stories work – one of the ways stories work – is to show us a picture of something more or less like ourselves, but a moving picture, one that takes place in time as well as space, one in which events unfold, so that we can see both actions and their consequences. Last week I took part in a debate between scientists and literary theorists on the subject of human nature, and whether it existed or not. Well, I say I took part – I scuttled across the battlefield, ducking and weaving and crouching under the volleys of gunfire and the weapons of mass destruction that each side was hurling at the other. I wasn't even sure which side I was supposed to be fighting for. I think I discovered that there *was* such a thing as human nature, so I was on the side of the scientists, but that it's partly created by ourselves, so I was also on the side of the literary theorists. I think.

Anyway, thinking about human nature for that debate reinforced my sense that there is a moral dimension to fiction. As soon as you start dealing with human events and their consequences you are automatically dealing with moral questions. In a still picture, we can see what led up to it, perhaps, and guess what might happen next;

but it's when event succeeds event in time, when action leads to consequence, that we really see moral issues clearly. And that, for me, is where it begins to be interesting.

So providing just a nice picture of a happy place where they do education differently isn't enough, it doesn't satisfy me as a storyteller. So far, it's just a setting. I want to know more; I want to know how to get there from here, I want to know what would happen, for example, if some of our ideas were imported into this imaginary Albion. I'd like to see how it responds – whether it throws them off as a healthy body throws off infection, or whether it welcomes them eagerly, and is strengthened by them, like a vigorous hybrid. There's certainly a story in that.

Or it might work the other way round. We could imagine a teacher from Albion, a young Candide-like figure, wandering through an opening in his world and finding himself in ours. He might have an exact double, who goes the other way. Perhaps the worlds are superficially so similar that each of our characters actually teaches in a school with the same name, in the same location. Imagine the bewilderment as each of them arrives at work. There's another story in that.

The way it turns out could be comic or heroic or romantic or tragic or – anything, really. That depends on the temperament and the talent of the writer. But if it were going to be any good as a work of fiction, it shouldn't have overt designs on the reader: it shouldn't be propaganda. When I was describing Albion a few minutes ago, I was clearly being propagandistic: it's a better place than England, I was saying. It's what England could have been if we'd made better choices in the past.

But if I were writing a novel with that setting, I hope I'd be a little more subtle. There are more interesting things to say than that.

I might show some flaws in Albion, for example, which don't show up at first. Imagine our teacher from this world: after the first great shock of finding himself in a school where everything worked and classes were small and well-motivated, and where good behaviour was taken for granted, and where he had all the resources he had ever needed, and where he was well-paid and highly thought of, he'd probably think he'd died and gone to heaven. He wouldn't want to come home at all. It would be an idyll of bliss and fulfilment.

But after a while …

Well, I think after a while he might find the atmosphere just a little, I don't know, self-satisfied … a little smug … The Head Teacher, that wise figure of consequence and gravity: when you listen to him for the tenth time, you begin to catch something a little, well, pompous in his tone, perhaps, though you'd never say so, and after all he's got a great deal to be pompous about …

And they're so certain, in Albion, that they're right about things. Well, they *may* be right, of course. And certainly everything works very well and everyone's very happy. But to be *quite* so sure they've got nothing to learn from other countries, other ways of doing things? Our teacher is beginning to notice a sort of inflexibility, a sort of rigid complacency about his school, and about their society in general. It might become a little stifling, a little enclosed and airless. He might feel the need to say something shocking occasionally; he might yearn for a little saltiness, so to speak, in the taste of things; he might even miss the children he used to teach, who answered back and took no prisoners and kept him on his toes. There's a sort of placid docility in this place, he thinks, that could easily fall into an unthinking disapproval of anything new or strange, or anything foreign; and he begins to see how gently and insensibly it's possible for a society to pass from that to a full-blown totalitarianism, which is all the more effective for being internalised. Everyone wants things to be like this. They don't want anything to change. Different opinions come to seem not merely like different opinions; they begin to seem like treason, almost like blasphemy.

Well, there's a story in that too. Rebellion, perhaps …

And imagine the other teacher, the one from Albion, who had such a shock when he found himself teaching a class of 35 rude, noisy, ill-equipped, rebellious children in a school in this country. Imagine his dismay as he saw beggars in the streets, and such dirty streets, and people sleeping in doorways, and everywhere plastered with such ugly advertising slogans and logos, commerce everywhere, in every corner, every public human activity having to advertise its dependence on commercial sponsorship; and the venom and the hatred in the newspapers, and the sanctimonious self-deception of the government, and the blizzard of fatuous drivel about targets and tests and league tables that whirled around his head and then fell

like an avalanche into his path as a teacher; and the culture of greed and me-first and dog eat dog, and the lack of manners and civility, and the scornful contempt for every activity that didn't contribute directly and immediately to the making of money …

You can picture his unhappiness and puzzlement. How can any true education take place in this world, he thinks? How can people live fully human lives in all this noise and dirt and aggression, the flagrant wealth and the greed and the desperate poverty?

But part of him, he can't help denying, does feel *energised* in this world. There's an electricity in the air; there's a vividness, even a savagery, about things, which is new to him, and which he is secretly beginning to enjoy.

Is there a story in that, I wonder? What could happen to him?

Well, I can see all kinds of possibilities. I'm beginning to feel tempted by this. But I'm not going to speculate any more; I've been talking for long enough. To cut short the long story which I haven't even begun to write, I hope you can see the moral possibilities in these potential novels. There's no need for me to spell them out.

The value of imagined worlds is not that we can escape to them and live there for ever. The value of them is that they let our minds into a space where they can play for a while with the possibility that things might be done differently; we can relish the pleasures, and suffer the pains, and pay the costs, and enjoy the delights, and learn from living there in imagination just as we learn from living our real lives in the real world.

But in the end, we have to return. As my character Lyra learns in *The Amber Spyglass*, there ain't no elsewhere. We live in England, not in Albion. The only thing we can bring back is what we took with us when we went, namely our minds, our imaginations, our emotions, our memories, and the only place where we can act on what we've learned is right here.

So Albion, as I began by saying, doesn't exist. But I like to think about it from time to time. There are things we can learn from it, even if we wouldn't like to live there for ever; and maybe there are things they could learn from us, too. But that would be another story.

Lecture given at the University of Central England in Birmingham in 2004