

# The Business of Making and the Matter of Genre: A Soliloquy

## Walter Nash

Do I contradict myself?

Very well then I contradict myself. — Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself*

It was the brusque, no-nonsense editor of a vanguard poetry magazine who sent me a curt menu of reasons for rejecting two or three poems. (This was nearly twenty years ago and that particular vanguard has by now taken up the rearguard or dwindled to a forlorn hope.) ‘We do not publish,’ the editor wrote, ‘doggerel, light verse, or confessional verse’ – a comprehensive exclusion which, I thought at the time, would have discounted nearly the entire production of W.H. Auden, had that deeply gifted poet been around and willing to take notice of any such impertinence. What particularly invited my attention was the word ‘confessional’. It seemed a delicately chosen word, almost genteel; but I read it, as I am sure I was meant to, as a sardonic synonym for *religious*, or worse, *Christian*. I knew the tone. I had the regular impression, over some years, that Britain’s ‘cutting edge’ editors kept their longest bargepoles for fending off religious vessels. At the present time, however, I am not about to quarrel with sturdy and valiant atheists. Other circumstances now prompt me to have a quiet word with myself, in effect a soliloquy, on the subject of ‘making’ – that is, my practices and assumptions in the composition of verse; and consequently on the subject of ‘genre’, the classification of poetic types.

## Taking God as given

I will confess, then, to having written a number of what might be appropriately called ‘confessional poems’, though in many cases I would prefer to call them ‘devotional’. This preference, one of the themes of my soliloquy, requires a preliminary note. Let us then say, roughly, that the ‘devotional’ stance takes God as given, views man as a suitable case for treatment, and above all celebrates the presence of the third trinitarian person, the Holy Spirit. Taking God ‘as given’ is a state of spiritual equilibrium easily affected but not so readily granted. The Almighty has a sharp elbow for doubters. I have had my own poetic history of doing my best to get away from him and being foiled by his apparent refusal to let me be my own man. This was the predicament I once lamented in a piece of ‘light verse’ called *For a Change*:

A change of direction – something new –  
    ‘not dragging *God* into it’,  
new angle of vision, askance, askew,  
with a colour of fantasy, a few  
spangles of wit, so a tune with a true  
    *secular* spin to it –

dancing quick-footed, walking roughshod –  
    or something akin to it –

flaunting the rhymes and discounting the rod  
in original measures – yes, but what’s odd  
is the sense, whatever I try, that God  
keeps dragging *me* into it.

By ‘discounting the rod’ I meant ignoring the strict beat, ‘the rod’ suggesting, perhaps, a conductor’s baton. The first strophe pretty well follows the beat. My intention was then to ‘open’ the rhythm in the second strophe, suggesting a much freer measure and movement, but at last returning to the closure implied in the span of rhyme across two stanzas: ‘into it’, ‘spin to it’ – ‘akin to it’, ‘into it’.

I must admit that this piece, which I once liked (and could even come back to *quite* liking), has gone a little sour on me. In Robert Graves’ apt phrase it has ‘faded on the page’.<sup>1</sup> Now as I read it, the spry verse sounds a little too glib, turning round on its own spindle and getting nowhere, like an advertiser’s jingle (‘Bloggs’ chocolate delights – made for your delight only by Bloggs’) or the figure of *zeugma*, a.k.a. *antimetabole*, which George Puttenham names, if I remember correctly, ‘the gain-giver’. Of late – meaning, in my dotage – I have come to suspect epigrams, aphorisms and all such worldly-wise maxims as the least reliable support of a careful maker. When in doubt, yes, a poet may be driven to finish his poem pat on a proverb, or a ‘wisdom’, or a smart punch line. It happens often enough. In some types of composition, e.g. comedy or satire, it is a common resort; the ‘punch line’ clinches the joke or rubber-stamps the judicial charge. I would be foolish to claim that I have never tried to use it. But for devotions this is a false position. In their case, a ‘wisdom’ should be the talking point that opens the way for wider reflection on the way to conclusions in which nothing is quite concluded. Instead the effect is often to prohibit anything more being said on the matter. ‘That’s my position’, confident poets allow themselves to boast, ‘that’s exactly where I stand’ (i.e. just where there is no room for anything or anybody else).<sup>2</sup>

### **The routine of making**

Where I stand is on a low eminence with no particular leverage. I try to produce truthful poems, the best that I can manage to make, in any kind, except perhaps hymns, which I have never attempted to write. I can hardly hope for successful making on every day of the week, or any day of the month, nor can I know how the making will begin. It is well if I am sitting at home, browsing and drowsing, when the summons comes. There are also what seem like arbitrary visitations and insights which in my younger, outdoor days, might have caught me at random, whether stranded on a traffic island, lounging on a park bench, or just waiting for my wife to

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<sup>1</sup> I think ‘fade on the page’ may occur in more than one place in Graves’ writings. I have it from the Introduction to his *Poems & Satires 1951*. Poems that fade on the page in effect ‘disappear’ themselves. But my intuition is that a ‘faded’ poem may be ‘reappeared’ through fresh patterns of association.

<sup>2</sup> A notorious instance of an ending that prohibits further discourse is the close of Keats’ *Ode to a Grecian Urn*: ‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty – that is all /Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know’. If you say so, Mr Keats – but in fairness, the words are not Keats’ own, but a sentiment projected by a superb work of art.

get through her shopping list, and usually having on my person never a pencil or a pocket book to jot down a phrase or a blurred mnemonic prompter. But, as Horace precisely puts it, *tu nihil invita dices faciesve Minerva*, ‘you’ll say nothing, make nothing, if Minerva’s away’,<sup>3</sup> Minerva being the Muse, a useful fiction whose ways are kindly but capricious, and whose classic shadow foreshadows the godly visitations of the Creator Spiritus, a present shape, whose ways are comradely and unfathomable. In either version I recognize something in the shape of a patron. In days when the making of a poem has all my attention, thanks to Minerva or the Paraclete, I pass the time in spells of moodless trance and spasms of scribbling, not to be interrupted by casual callers or tradesmen, or any who might figure under the general heading of *persons from Porlock*. (See S.T. Coleridge’s excuses for not completing *Kubla Khan*). My wife patiently answers the phone and runs interference on casual visitors. All this pertains to the routine business of making. There is more to it than just so much, but to say any more gets us into the mystical realm of ‘inspiration’, on which I claim no authority to speak. I speak of work, which can sometimes be hard labour, though it is never less than engrossing.

### **The vanity of collecting**

I make poems whenever they strike me and discard them with equal speed, but some stay with me and begin to take on the shine of the fool’s gold called ‘a collection’. Then I fuss over drafts and revisions, the tenor and tendency of which changes all the time, as and when new poems drop in. My hope is, that the assembled poems will ‘speak to each other’, in moments of confirmation, contradiction, demurral, comment, the anticipated collection thus becoming a *cline* (to borrow a term from biology and linguistics) of varied aspects and intensities of perception and feeling. As a ‘collection’ grows beyond a dozen poems or more, this sense of an ongoing dialogue generally becomes clear, or at least cohesive, the coherent voicing, as I hope, of a cast of mind. That is, until the awkward incursion of some poem that seems to have no relation to anything else in the assumed pattern. It often comes, in the baseball metaphor, from ‘somewhere out in left field’, that quiet zone where generally nothing significant occurs. *Webster’s New World Dictionary, Second College Edition*, helpfully glosses *out in left field* as ‘not reasonable, sensible, or probable’. Why should a poem, in theme, form and language, be reasonable or sensible or probable? Yet I am indeed so prone to the sensible and reasonable that I will hunt through dictionaries and glossaries, weighing up words, word-formations, collocations etc., to determine whether I can reasonably use them in poems. Thomas Hardy, of all people, suffered from a similar constraint. In a conversation with Robert Graves in 1920, he told how he had on one occasion wanted to use a ‘rustic’ word in a poem, and had gone to the OED to confirm that the word had authority in general usage. He found the word, but the only authority cited was his own *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872); so he felt obliged to find something else, and no doubt had to make do with something

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<sup>3</sup> Horace, *Ars Poetica*, line 385. Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1995.

not nearly as pertinent as his original choice.<sup>4</sup> Fastidious poets can be skilled in making rods for their own aching backs; but a good poet, surely, can be no less than fastidious if he *invent* a word? Anyone can invent a word. Understanding the word, together with every other word in a poem, is something for the ambitious reader to be gladly getting on with; unless he is a deconstructionist, in which case he will consider ‘understanding’ as something ‘deferred’, perhaps indefinitely.

### The problem of genre

I speak perhaps too confidently of ‘the coherent voicing of a cast of mind’. There are times when the mind casts up something semi-coherently voicing a something else that impudently comes ‘out of left field’. Thus I have kept by me a poem called *The Innocent*, which I do not think I have ever tried to publish. I find it a little puzzling, not verbally, because I know what the words mean, not as argument, because I know what the sense is and what the implications are, but because, briefly, I am not sure what *kind* of poem it is meant to be. It stands as a token of some unidentified type; or as a *species* I might understand better if I could confidently identify its *genus*, or, better said, perhaps, find its place among verses of a clearly recognisable *genre*.

#### *The Innocent*

(‘Heaven lies about us in our infancy’ – Wordsworth)

Children are not born innocent, I guess,  
whatever their indignant mothers say;  
even at birth their attitudes suggest  
the little beggars weren’t born yesterday.

They come pre-packed with a survival kit,  
a mouth, two fists, a set of appetites;  
ruthless as all-get-out, they know no wrong,  
but this they know for sure, they know their rights.

In those bald heads one ancient notion rules:  
‘I am the I, and I must stay alive,  
all that is not-I must defer to Me.  
Orectic urge of I-ness to survive

allows no other I, except as Me;  
by Me I live, or I is not my own,  
through Me I understand how I am I,  
I feeding, I sufficing, I alone.’

Before the first tooth comes, the bite is on,  
before the first word, speaks the argument;  
the innocent, by appetite undone,  
guzzles its mother’s milk, and is content.

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<sup>4</sup> See Robert Graves’ essay ‘Best Man, Bore, Bamboozle, Etc’, in his *The Crowning Privilege*, Cassell, 1955.

This poem presents, I suppose, no problem of ‘about’. It is about infancy, but not the heaven-blest, prophetic infancy of the *Ode on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood*, the poem cited here in epigraph. My poem’s narrative is the darkness of a prior ‘infancy’, the business of getting born and mothered; its *topos* is the ruthless struggle for life, the kicking self-assertion of the foetus, the wailing of the cradle child. Its *lexis* (diction) is an admixture of items, playfully adapted to assertions of contrariness or the creating of confusions. The phrase ‘all-get-out’, for example is an innocent Americanism, signifying ‘to a considerable degree, greatly’; here it mimics an imperative ‘get out!’ (as though warning off all competitor babes and sucklings). A key word is ‘orectic’, from the Greek *orektikos*, defined in Webster as ‘stretched out’ from *oregein*, ‘to reach for, desire’. The wit of the poem, if wit is what it has, thus turns on the notion of *orexia*, ‘appetite’

I am not sure, however, whether the ‘wit’ is humorous or sardonic or sceptical or cynical. I cannot say for certain whether the poem’s ‘colouring’ is bright or dark, or whether its ‘texture’ is metallic/hard or elastic/soft. One might call it a ‘generically complex’ poem (if ‘one’ had the nerve). Finally, I think it might qualify as satire, as I recall the Latin phrase *satura lanx*, ‘a full platter’, (which might translate, very roughly, as ‘a mixed grill’). Then my poem is perhaps no more than a fry-up.

### **The genre of devotional verse**

There is nothing grilled, fried, or hashed about devotional poems. They are not ‘generically complex’. They have a clear, embracing structure, they present a coherent argument with a something like a calm intensity. It seems to me that in character the devotional poem is *enthymemic*: an ‘enthymeme’ being a conclusion drawn from an argument whose premises are left wholly or partly unstated. What the premises are, may possibly be inferred as some form of syllogism, but the greater likelihood is that the ‘premises’ have occurred mentally, in the drift of contemplation that precedes and reviews all forms of phrasing contingent upon what must be said, what could be said, what is tempting to say, and what should be suppressed

Among my makings is one I would be glad to cite as ‘devotional’, an essay in the genre. Yet even this is devotional with a difference:

#### *The Comforter*

I am assigned, wherever you may go,  
to be your servant and your enemy,  
the measure of your gifts for good or ill,  
your grief, your fear, your hopelessness, but still  
your comfort, though you may not care to know  
or honour me.

Men rack their lives for whispers of success,  
and in the consequence discover them  
false, broken promises that wound their peace.  
Prisoned in will, they fret for their release;

I visit them, and from their weariness  
deliver them.

‘Achievement’ is their faith – the word implies  
the toil of self to build a cave of air;  
leave that illusion in a midnight wood,  
repair to light, construct a quietude  
and listen, while I teach a way that lies  
out of despair.

Your time is short, under a cooling sun,  
to use the talent set aside for you;  
begin a betterment, invest your days  
in love’s increase, in wonderment and praise,  
and live for me, as I am sent by One  
who died for you.

This Comforter, otherwise known as the Paraclete (‘counsellor’, ‘advocate’), and by good folk called the Holy Ghost, is imagined in the act of admonitory speech, a teacher addressing his pupils, urging them to abandon false values and illusory hopes and find satisfaction in a better way. So much for paraphrase. But there is a ‘more’ that, as always, reaches beyond paraphrase. The poem is an *impersonation*, or dramatic act, which perhaps impairs, or skews, its generic position as a *devotion*, or personal commitment. Now what have you done, Muse? As ever, leading me round the labyrinth of making, or – so to speak – ‘dragging me into it’? I should stop talking to myself and think again, or simply get on with making poems. They are still waiting to be made, though I cannot boast, with Walt Whitman, ‘I am large, I contain multitudes.’ Some things are beyond my capacities.

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