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Autobiography: Theory and Practice

Joe Smith MA (Hons.)

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Crichton Campus

Faculty of Arts
University of Glasgow

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Abstract

The thesis consists of two related parts. The first section, *Theory*, is a consideration of autobiographical reliability. It investigates the nature and usages of memory in the context of memoir, with particular reference to definitions and expectations of ‘authenticity’ in narrative self-portrayal. It addresses conflicting notions of autonomy and reliability in present, past, perceived and actual subject identities, followed by considerations of narrative continuity, inclusions and omissions, and the insidious nature of the nostalgic impulse. A range of post-sixties autobiographical texts are considered, in the light of a variety of twentieth century critical theory, as well as in that of personal experience during the compilation of part two, entitled *Practice*, an extract from a memoir in progress, *The Artilleryman*.

I argue throughout the first section that there are limitations to first person autonomy that set autobiography apart from other entirely fictional genres, even in work that is not a record of public life and service. Perceptions of personal identity and experience, within an extended time frame, are highly subjective, and yet remain contingent and provisional within a shared existence. Reader assent for memoir is gained by an unspoken will towards what is defined as both a ‘narrative’, and a consciously subjective sense of truth: the imaginative therefore becomes more appropriate than the imaginary. Scope for the memoirist lies in the linguistic and traditional flexibility of the narrative process, together with a necessarily internalised, but professedly uncategorical impression of experience, rather than in any re-shaping of character, or history. I have expressed this sense of keeping faith, as compared with examples of spurious memoir, or a proposed unconditional liberty of the first person, as autobiographical reliability, and an expressed and imaginative awareness of the strengths and failings of the remembering process as acceptable *unreliability*. The two together, within the context of my argument, form a sense of ‘reliable unreliability’,

or autobiographical authenticity.

The second section, *Practice*, consists of nine selected chapters that will come to form a longer memoir. It is descriptive of the influence exerted by my father on the formation of my own and sibling's identities. *The Artilleryman* is a series of recollections on the time we spent together. I have written principally from memory but with my recall assisted by talks with my younger sisters, Mary, Kate and Jane and by having access to a few terse computerised notes compiled by my brother Peter. I have also had recourse to a couple of year's worth of extremely intermittent, cryptic and mould damaged diaries, written in a near illegible hand by my father. He was intelligent and articulate; he was an artist, a philosopher, a guide, a naturalist and a generous host. Also a drunkard, a bully and, occasionally a brute, he gave us a childhood that was wondrous in its proximity to nature, that was rich in its variety, and that was often terrifying in its daily reality. 'You may not like me when you are older,' he once told us, 'but you will not forget me'.

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Theory

First Person Indefinite

Memoir is many things. On one level, it is the compilation of disparate and fragmentary episodic memories into a coherent linear narrative. It is also an indeterminately proportioned compound of remembered experience as individually felt or perceived, combined with externally verifiable historical events. Memory itself, as a constructive mechanism, is unreliable: authenticity, or truth, rigorously defined, is therefore elusive. I am suggesting, therefore, a particular notion of authenticity that I see as being quite specific to the autobiographical genre.

Truth is founded on impartiality, therefore less objective observations must necessarily be less reliable, particularly where the self is subject. Cockshut (1984), declares ‘the last thing any person, however truthful, learns to treat with perfect fairness is the self’.¹ Temperament and circumstance have a bearing during both the observational or experiential phase, and during the acts of recalling and writing: the autobiographical voice is inevitably going to be uncertain. I am searching therefore for a sense of what I will term the ‘reliably unreliable’, where a conscious awareness and imaginative portrayal of uncertainty is as important as any documentary intent. A degree of subjectivity and uncertainty will become synonymous with, rather than opposed to, autobiographical ‘authenticity’.

My choice of memoirs to consider as primary texts is somewhat eclectic but not without consideration. P. J. Eakin (1985) chooses, for part of his work, to write on the psychologically fragile memories of Mary McCarthy, on an exceptionally insecure and introspective work by Henry James and on a Sartre whose struggle to achieve a written and writing self-identity verges, by Sartre’s own admission, on neurosis.² By comparison, I have not selected memoirs that would most obviously lend themselves

¹ A.O.J. Cockshut, *The Art of Autobiography* (London: Yale University Press, 1984), p.12.

² Paul John Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self Invention* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), pp.11-167.

to an investigation of unreliability. Instead, I shall inquire of a variety of works as to whether a declared consciousness of a *potential* for instability, together with a necessarily individualistic response to that consciousness, is part of a non-deceiving bargain tacitly established between life-writer and reader, where the nature of truth is established more by good faith than by proof. The following are three initial and diverse examples of memoir, tending towards an Historical, a Romantic, and a Rationalist approach.

Alistair Moffat's *Homing* (2003), is essentially a historical quest in which he confesses 'the truth turned up in heavy disguise'. He states early on that he wanted to write of his childhood before it 'became the burnished jewel of selective memory ... enhanced by comparison with a dull geriatric present ... impossibly gilded, bent out of shape by the need to console'.³ The grave of his grandmother is unmarked, and his father has 'refused all questions about the past', so the version of family history that he received as a child was suspect (Moffat, p. 199). His work is a particularly good example of an honest handling of conscious doubt. He makes a number of primary admissions of personal memory failure: 'how I came to understand this has vanished from memory'; 'sadly I have forgotten the details', or 'from forgotten sources we acquired...' (Moffat, pp. 22,62,117). The memoir is particularly circumscribed when recalling memories of childhood. He has a violent and unsupportive father, by whom he feels betrayed, and a mother who is determined that he should not be disadvantaged by this paternal negativity. He is aware from the start that actual childhood memory, springing from what Eva Hoffman (1989), calls 'that first potent furnace, the uncomparing, ignorant love, the original heat and hunger for the forms of the world', cannot be the same thing as adult memories of childhood.⁴ Moffat is aware that his own youthful memories were formed in the absence of any mature understanding of the exact milieu in which they were being accumulated. Later on, a proper investigation of his genealogical descent throws some light on why his father could express no love for him, or why there seemed to be no cousins on the father's side of the family. Two generations of forbears have tried to write out the perceived stigma of illegitimacy from their history: 'there was a remote region of the past that

³ Alistair Moffat, *Homing* (London: John Murray 2003), p.3.

⁴ Eva Hoffman, *Lost in Translation: Life in a new Language* (London: Minerva, 1989), p. 75. See also Richard Wollheim, *Germes* (London Black Swan, 2005) for specifically childhood memoir.

Bina would never explain... perhaps it was the beginning of forgetting' (Moffat, p.31). Moffat's father is Bina's First World War love-child, and Bina herself was born out of wedlock. Some of the characters on family photographs were always described as 'just friends'. Moffat's mother believed that his grandmother's stories were all lies, but Moffat comes to realise that Bina 'hadn't made it all up, she just missed out bits' (Moffat, p. 197). Although well-intentioned, childhood memory was being undermined and insidiously manipulated even as it formed. The first person was not always what it believed itself to be. Moffat is always aware that 'retrospective rationalism can be highly coloured', giving a sense that he is aware of his imagination striving for ascendancy (Moffat, p.197). Although Moffat's historical research achieves a thoroughgoing external authenticity, the expression of interiorised uncertainties adds to, rather than detracts from its reliability in the context of an autobiographical narrative.

In *Speak, Memory* (1999), despite his more Romantic style Nabokov is generally fairly assured in his powers of recollection and therefore of his identity at any given time. He makes fewer, and more lyrical, veiled or humorous references to his doubt. The memoir was first published in 1951 as *Conclusive Evidence*. The fact that it was reworked suggests an easing-off of that confidence but still he is able to assert: 'the act of recalling a patch of the past is something that I seem to have been performing with the utmost zest all my life, and I have reason to believe that this almost pathological keenness of the retrospective faculty is a hereditary trait'.⁵ Nevertheless, he also freely admits, 'houses have crumbled in my memory as soullessly as they did in the mute films of yore' (Nabokov, p.128). In his introduction he speaks of having revised 'blank spots', 'blurry areas', 'amnesic defects' and 'domains of dimness' (Nabokov, p.9). As a measure of his integrity and professionalism, where 'through want of specific documentation' he has been unable to substantiate accounts in earlier writings, he has, for *Speak, Memory* 'preferred to delete for the sake of overall truth' (Nabokov, p.11). He is also in a fortunate position of being able to claim that 'it seldom happens that I do not quite know whether recollection is my own or has come to me second-hand' (Nabokov, p.122). He later beautifully evokes what he sees as the true power of memory, be it fallible or otherwise, when he says: 'I witness with

⁵ Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*. (London: Penguin, 1999), p.60.

pleasure the supreme achievement of memory which is the masterly use it makes of innate harmonies when gathering to its fold the suspended and wandering tonalities of the past' (Nabokov, p.134). Here, it is the multi-sensory notion of 'tonality' that matters, allowing the occasional misplaced or lost datum to become wholly secondary in importance to this sensitivity to the wider, less quantifiable human, imaginative perspective. He speaks of 'memory's luminous disc', and of 'a certain intricate watermark whose unique design becomes visible when the lamp of art is made to shine through life's foolscap' (Nabokov, pp120-22). 'Imagination' and 'memory' remain distinct but mutually supportive in the narrative process. Nabokov's 'innate harmonies' suggest the often unexpected associations between fixed events and changing perceptions that exist as a seemingly natural component of memory. His 'lamps of art' not only enhance these harmonies, but also illuminate the plainer historical substance of factual recall. He speaks of a 'luminous disc': Hoffman too speaks of 'a pinpoint of pulsar light', emitting an 'intermittent glow' (Hoffman, p.238). Like distant signals, each is at once insistent and yet unreliable: there is a sense of some kind of underlying stability beneath the creative imagery.

Edward Said (2000) aspires to an imaginative Western-cum-Levantine identity that is extremely sophisticated. He is of Coptic (early Egyptian Christian) origin, with roots in Cairo, Jerusalem and Lebanon. He is trans-culturally, religiously and politically open minded and imaginative.⁶ Nevertheless he is heavily indoctrinated with his father's rationalism, and much of his own approach to memoir and his confidence in his own memory is based on reason. His assurance is grounded in an almost photographic, analytic type of memory, working in partnership with (apart from a deep if anxious love for his mother), an inherited stance of *unsentimentality*. Cockshut cites Victor Gollancz and J.S.Mill as writers whose 'analytical powers are as strong as [their] emotions, and as clear as [their] memories' (Cockshut, p.82). Said is perhaps comparable: he assures us that the more his memoir became important to him, 'the more also [his] memory – unaided by anything except concentrated reflection and an archaeological prying into a very distant and unrecoverable past seemed hospitable and generous to [his] often importunate forays' (Said, p.216). He prefaces his work with a simple,

⁶ Edward Said: *Out of Place: A Memoir* (London: Granta, 2000).

characteristically unsentimental statement with the personal integrity of which it would be difficult to quarrel: ‘Much as I have no wish to hurt anyone’s feelings my first obligation has not been to be nice but to be true to my perhaps peculiar memories, experiences and feelings. I, and only I, am responsible for what I recall and see, not individuals in the past who could not have known what effect they might have on me’ (Said, p.xvi)

This represents a personally generous attitude, but in the final sentence shoulders perhaps an excessive responsibility. The process of parenting will be a powerful influence on memories, and at best should therefore be fully conscious of its likely effects. Moffat is a good example of how these early influences could become virtually inescapable. Cockshut deals comprehensively with the subject (which is too wide to here cover comprehensively), in his chapters on childhood.⁷ ‘All children are trained’, he claims, ‘in innumerable beliefs, attitudes, judgements and customs; the training may be formally given or only implied; but in most cases both methods are used’ (Cockshut, p.43). In addition he quotes Priscilla Napier on the daily process of inculcation:

A mingling of folk-lore, impatience, platitude, affection; a jumble of eternal verity and country precept and temporary slang pours out daily over minds half hearing, half differentiating, alternately open as a sieve or retentive as clay.⁸

Ray also quotes professional psychologists who have no doubt about the influence of parents and society on memory formation:

Other people greatly effect what we remember: memories are constructed in conjunction with narrative conventions for the *telling* of them. In short, we remember what others teach us to remember, and we report on these memories

⁷ A.O.J. Cockshut: See Ch. 3, *Childhood*, (pp. 37- 51), and Ch. 4, *The Child Alone* (pp. 54-79).

⁸ Priscilla Napier, cited in Cockshut, *The Art of Autobiography*, p.46.

using the scripts that family and culture provide for us. Parents also help construct the form by which their children's memories are reported.⁹

Clearly, although the responses from Historian, Romantic and Rationalist are different, they share common themes of recollective complexity. Their attitudes to narrative commitment and nostalgia are discussed later, but here, each seeks in his own way to be true to himself, and to the fulfilment of reader expectations of 'authenticity' within the tacitly accepted parameters of the genre.

My own theory, as regards parameters, is that although there might be as many ways of tackling memoirs as there are reasons and individuals to write them, most writers will seek, implicitly at least, to establish a sense of trust between themselves and their readership. Martin Amis (2001), thinks of life writing as 'more of a communion than a communication'.¹⁰ Within this communion (and possibly outwith representations of public life where a clear communication of documented evidence might be paramount), it is a uniquely individual expression of sense and sensibility on a person-to-person, empathy seeking level that seems to constitute 'autobiographical authenticity'. Such a 'communion' would be tested by seeking 'interior inconsistencies, or falsity of tone' as opposed to a more formal method that would expect to 'criticise in the light of available evidence from all sources' (Cockshut, p.12). It is the validity of this interiorised interpretation of authenticity that I wish to assess: whether or not it implies a sort of 'ownership' of a life story, which is possibly what Said is asserting when he says 'I, and only I am responsible'. John Burnside, in *A Lie About my Father* (2007), strives also to take personal responsibility for his memories: fully conscious of parental and outside influences he is determined that right or wrong, his memories will be his own. Even though he informs us, 'growing up I was always anxious about memory ... I asked myself what memory was, and why my own memories were always so vague', he believes:

⁹ D. Edwards and D. Middleton, 'Conversational Remembering and Family Relationships: How Children Learn to Remember', in Ruth E. Ray, *Beyond Nostalgia* (London, Virginia University Press 2000), p111.

¹⁰ Martin Amis, *Experience* (London:Vintage, 2001), p.268.

What we remember when we truly remember, rather than when we recall the memories that are planted in our minds by others is the only testament that can be trusted; not because it is precise, but because it is our own'.¹¹

It seems certain that difficulty in making the above distinctions will impose limitations not only on 'precision' but also on proprietorship. There is a powerful sense of Burnside attempting to be true to himself, but his professed vagueness and anxiety suggest that his confidence in his own testimony may be flawed. Ruth E. Ray (2000) speaks of 'taking ownership of one's life story' as being more important than 'being true to some inner self' (Ray, p.28). My own argument suggests that 'being true' to self is a major part of authenticity, and would precede and dictate the extent to which 'ownership' might be taken. There is a double sense to being true to oneself: one is the relatively modern sense that Burnside to some extent represents, of a self that is amoral and autonomous, the other is a more historically embedded sense of self, independently thinking but a part of some larger thinking, moral, spiritual, order of being. The first assumes full ownership, the second does so with less assurance. It is difficult to speak of morality without moralising, but while the first sense is a courageous one, its individuality is possibly too isolating to be life sustaining. I see the second sense therefore as preferable: it has a lengthy series of historical antecedents, as explored by Charles Taylor (1989).

He notes internalised Aristotelian modifications to our Platonic inheritance of self-determination, before addressing the Cartesian notion of being 'certain that I can have no knowledge of what is outside me except by means of the ideas I have within me'.¹² He delineates a comprehensive historical progression towards a post- post-modernist sense of a self that takes full care and responsibility for its own well-being, and is suspicious of any sense of established orthodoxy. I draw attention to this progression to illustrate the attenuated lineage of the philosophical concern with self-realisation, but also to suggest a developing sense that the authentic status of a fully achieved self is worthless without, and therefore dependent upon, some kind of

¹¹ John Burnside, *A Lie About My father* (Vintage, London, 2007), pp.36, 30

¹² Letter to Gibeuf, 19th January 1642, in Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998) p.144.

recognition, and interaction with others. As Pascal (1960), asserts, the development of the individual is ‘part of a general social process’; ‘he is a focal point of historical forces’.¹³

Historically, the philosophical notion of ‘being true’ has *not* been one of full autonomy, but has led the individual towards making imaginative distinctions between his own doubts, beliefs and knowledge, within a context of the shared or contested doubts, beliefs and knowledge of others. Being true could, via ideas such as those of say, Nietzsche, Dostoyevsky or Kafka, logically be extended to an existential, or even nihilist ‘ownership’ of a life, but such an individualist declaration might cut the memoirist adrift from any history or social order that he claims to be a part of, and possibly ultimately from his prospective readership.

A modern view of the self conceived, or of ‘being true’ is here expressed by Taylor:

There is a crucial difference between the way I experience my activity, thought, and feeling, and the way that you or anyone else does. This is what makes me a being that can speak of itself in the first person (Taylor, p.131).

This would seem entirely to justify the prioritisation of individual sensibility over collective experience. Eakin suggests further that ‘all experience is subjective; what “really happened” autobiographically is what the self perceived’ (Eakin, p.115). This may be so, but the reliability with which the perceptions are recounted is not a constant. Eakin later asks, ‘is the self autonomous and transcendent, or is it contingent and provisional, dependent on language and others for its very existence?’ (Eakin, p.181). My own life writing experience very much suggests the latter, but before any sense of ownership can be conferred the identity of that self must be further determined.

The memoirist will, as Ray clearly identifies, be contending with at least four possible versions of the same ‘I’. There is the ‘I’ that undergoes the original

¹³ Roy Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1960), p.56

experience, and the one that is perceived at the time as undergoing it; then there is the endlessly importunate 'I' who narrates the story, and the one he creates as the subject of his writing (Ray, pp. 25,144). The 'I' he would like to be or to have been, and the one he thinks or thought he ought to be or to have been will constantly try to intrude. The distance, in terms of time, place and temperament between narrator and protagonist is infinitely variable. The memoirist may, by way of conclusion feel the need to somehow fully homologate these differing viewpoints or he may identify it as a part of his art, or his truth, that they remain disjunctive. Most importantly, there must be no confusions *in the writing-time mind* between the writer's position as artist and the positions he originally inhabited as model. He must at all times make it absolutely clear which voice it is that is active. Eakin speaks of 'the constantly changing requirements of the self in each successive present' (Eakin, p.36). He further asserts that 'the 'I' of autobiographical discourse, with its double reference to the self of the present and the self from any moment from the past is by definition a split or discontinuous personality' (Eakin, p.151).

The problems of achieving an identity in memoir are not dissimilar to those experienced in fictional novels of the *bildungsroman* type, exploring a particular character progression from childhood to maturity. The fundamental difference that I seek to emphasise is one of the distinction between novel and memoir. The *bildungsroman* could be seen as a stage in the development of this distinction, which was yet to be established when the novel form was first conceived, as in the early first person novel-cum memoirs, ostensibly written by Crusoe, Flanders, or Gulliver. Based however, on the critical expectations of the modern reader and the aforementioned sense of 'trust', the memoirist, even more than the German Romantic, needs to take a considered responsibility for all of Eakin's subject positions, discontinuous or not. They represent, in the end and paradoxically, a single, continuous and (crucially for the distinction), real existence.

In *Lying Down with Dogs* (2001), Mark Zygadlo gets into difficulties with the autobiographical subject position in a different way.¹⁴ His structure is an unusual one in that he shares the 'I' of the narrative voice with his principal subject, his father, Broniek. He attempts to increase authenticity by placing the reader directly into two different historical periods, with two distinct first person voices. There is, however, always a doubt in the mind of the reader that the second voice (his father's) is not the voice, or entirely the memory, that it purports to be. It was undoubtedly Zygadlo's intention to confer rightful ownership to his father of his own memories. His integrity is without question, but there is a vague sense that ownership has instead been appropriated. The idea of a shared voice is perhaps too nearly a fictive device: if the licence of the novelist at times comes under scrutiny, it follows that there are greater implications for the memoirist.

With regard to fiction, Martin Amis, for example, speaks of what he sees as a twentieth century development, the 'great modernist convention of the unreliable author' or 'fiction's supposedly fully autonomous "I"' (Amis, p.380). Kim L. Worthington (2001), also writes on the fictional 'I' at liberty:

There persists in some contemporary theory the idealistic dream for, or deceptive invocation of, the unconditional liberty of an autonomous 'I', an 'I' whose authenticity is unlimited by expectations of narrative continuity and the constraints of identity realised through time. What theorists in this mould are keen to discover (or encourage) in the contemporary fiction they analyse is a move towards the release of the previously bound 'identities' of traditional narrative (the identities of characters, readers, authors, and texts) into a state of existential emancipation which is uncircumscribed by expectations of continuity or referentiality. In their wishful insistence on the possibility of escape from conventional narrative restraints, these theorists appear to avoid (or evade) the consequences for notions of morality and

¹⁴ Mark Zygadlo, *Lying Down With Dogs : A Personal Portrait of a Polish Exile* (Aberdour, Fife: Inyx, 2001).

agency which are encouraged by the provocation of unlicensed interpretive liberty.¹⁵

Her criticism, no doubt arguable for fiction, seems all the more pertinent to memoir. Characters within a personal history may well have no wish to be 'existentially emancipated'. Although there will always be scope for a subjective interpretation in line with the timbre of a particular memoir, unlike their fictional counterparts such characters are not fully available for re-invention. They have the ability to read their own portrayal, so there can be no 'unconditional liberty'. They warrant, and have a right to expect, a greater consistency of treatment. Although the uncertainty of memory might tend to weaken the memoirist's position, his position is nevertheless a powerful one and power demands discretion. It is not that he must pull punches, or cover for those who might have been at fault, but since, according, for example, to Loftus (1994) we have no real means of 'distinguishing true memories about the guilty from false memories about the innocent,' he needs to aim at some kind of consistency, maintaining a reliable, and to some extent 'circumscribed' position as narrator by way of a form of deference to both subject and reader.¹⁶ He might have quite terrible things to disclose that in honesty he feels have to be said, but needs in such cases to be as sure as possible of his position and of his evidence. At the same time, he will always be conscious of, and frank about, the imperfections of memory. There are two possible responses to Loftus' problem of 'distinguishing': one of them is to write independently of all external expectations, with fact and fiction mixed with impunity in any chosen proportions. The other, and to my mind the superior one, is a belief that total freedom imposes a greater sense of personal responsibility than might be felt under reasonable external constraints: the writer needs consciously to decide upon his own moral and literary parameters. I suggest then that the compound 'I' of the memoir cannot possibly be entirely unconstrained, but that the constraints are flexible in that they will need to be self-imposed. In any account of the past that focuses on the real lives of others (which will generally to a considerable degree be the essence of memoir), the only real autonomy resides in a

¹⁵ Kim L. Worthington: 'Speaking (for) Oneself: J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*', in *Self as Narrative, Subjectivity and Community in Contemporary Fiction* (Oxford: O.U.P., 2001), p.236.

¹⁶ Elizabeth F. Loftus, 'When a Memory May Not be a Memory' (March 1994), in *Memory, an Anthology*, ed. Harriet Harvey Wood and A.S. Byatt (London: Chatto and Windus, 2008) pp.351-55 (p. 355).

good degree of imaginative reflexivity in the telling, rather than in the substance of the tale.

On this basis of self-censorship, the memoirist will not wish to deceive in any way that might prove hurtful to others. The boundaries of permissibility are nowhere specifically prescribed, nor should they be; but readership assent will ultimately be a governing factor in determining the scale of readership uptake. In an investigation of fictional and pseudonymous authorship, considering works by Hale White, Edmund Gosse, George Gissing, and others, Swann (2001), seeks moral and literary clarification of genre definitions but suggests that the degree and nature of readership assent, in terms of balancing moral and historical truth with literary freedom, is highly variable.¹⁷ Eakin, however, in line with my own position, asserts that if a work is not duly proclaimed as fiction, then the reader ‘may feel cheated of the promised encounter with biographical truth’ if what is presented to him as memoir turns out to be fictitious (Eakin, p.10). It is possible that specific cases of wholly or largely fictitious autobiography, for example James Frey’s *A Million Little Pieces* (2004) and Margaret Seltzer’s (aka. Margaret B Jones) *Love and Consequences* (2008), (both spurious tales of deprivation and ultimate survival), are damaging to the perception of autobiography.¹⁸ I suggest Benjamin Wilkomirski’s holocaust memoir, *Fragments*, (2004) as another example.¹⁹ Crucially, the writers claimed their works to have been conceived in order to give a voice to those who are not heard but Eastwood suggests that this type of fictionalisation may be having the reverse effect. A readership that is tolerant in many respects balks at this kind of deception. Spurious autobiographical accounts of gross, real-world inhumanity are somehow unacceptable. The tacit compact between reader and a reliable narrator is perceived as having been broken; the *ad misericordiam* or ‘appeal to pity’ fallacy has been used to attract misplaced sympathy. If conscious doubt, candidly expressed, is very much a part of this unspoken trust, conscious deceit of this nature and magnitude, it seems, is unacceptable.

¹⁷ Charles Swann, ‘Autobiografiction: Problems with Autobiographical Fictions and Fictional Autobiographies. Mark Rutherford’s ‘Autobiography’ and ‘Deliverance’ and Others’, *The Modern Language Review*, 96, 1 (Jan 2001), pp. 21-37 (p.37).

¹⁸ Jane Eastwood, *Arts Hub*, BBC Radio Scotland, 17th November 2008.

¹⁹ See Mark Weber, *The Journal of Historical Review*, Sept.-Oct. 1998 (Vol. 17, No. 5), pp. 15-16.

Perhaps the ultimate form of unreliability is self-deception. It is beyond the scope of my work to explore claims of the cognitive and possibly clinical psychological causes of delusion and self-deception. Although plainly pertinent to perceptions of the self, false consciousness is an enormous and controversial subject. Since it may involve individuals in 'importantly false beliefs' about their own characters and histories, it would sit uneasily in the context of authentic memoir, unless clearly defined as subject material.²⁰

²⁰ See Ian Hacking, 'Rewriting the Soul' (1995), in *Memory, an Anthology*, pp.356-64, (p. 356).

Narrative Truths

A form of acceptable deception is that applied in the achievement of narrative continuity. Proust, in his great work on memory, refers to this as ‘joining fragments together – abolishing the intervals between them’.²¹ Eakin speaks of the ‘inescapable narrativity of the process of self definition’ (Eakin p.160). Zygodlo, when listening to his father, will ‘sink into a creative state and embellish the very sparse account’: ‘review and repetition seem to encourage variation, modification for the sake of a good story, or to make better sense of the present’. He worries, ‘as with everything he told me, my imagination has been there first, reshaping the landscape’ (Zygodlo, pp.22,188). He is plagued by:

the most dreadful feeling of not being sure. I know I have made such leaping assumptions about the story ... under my concentration the whole thing evaporates; I think I must have made it all up. I have rehearsed and repeated it so many times it no longer feels like his story but mine (Zygodlo, p.244).

Even those writers who resist ‘reshaping the landscape’ and making ‘leaping assumptions’ at times identify what must be a great temptation to do so: ‘I never had enough information; there were never the right number of well-functioning connectives between the parts I knew about or was somehow able to excavate’, says the analytical Said (Said, p. 6). Alasdair MacLean in *Night Falls on Ardnamurchan* (1986), tells us ‘dwelling so much on the past in an area already reeking of it, I sometimes found past and present ... blending uncontrollably in my mind. No doubt I did not always manage to separate them on paper’.²² He is also plagued by doubts as to both his justification and his ability properly to represent his father from the viewpoints both of an incomplete image and of narrative intervention, reminding us that ‘the reader will do well to remember the relative values to be attached to concise

²¹ Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, Vol. 1, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrief and Terence Kilmartin (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1987), p. 342.

²² Alasdair MacLean, *Night falls on Ardnamurchan: The Twilight of a Crofting Family* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), p. 47,

prophet and prosy commentator' (MacLean, p.47). Zygadlo, who is never under any illusions as to the way his own memory will be inclined to overlay and extemporise, speaks on one occasion, where there is a muddle with a tape recorder, of having only 'half a sentence to fill a whole gap' (Zygadlo, p.240). It is a good image: memory seems so often to comprise half a sentence only, from the sense of which we extrapolate to complete our narrative.

Ironically, since I am postulating a sense of trust between reader and writer, continuity is assisted by certain narrative conventions that Kupfer (1996) terms 'acceptable lies'.²³ These she classifies in three categories. Firstly are 'white lies', pertaining to clothes and small personal characteristics, or habits. Secondly, and encompassing rather a lot, are compression of time, composite character and omission of elements of detail. Thirdly, and the case that she considers the most creative is what she terms the 'gift of perhaps', or the nearest imaginative approach to determining what happened where there is insufficient evidence. 'Perhaps' and 'probably' become a kind of safety net. They are a common qualification for example, in Moffat's work, most particularly where he consciously superimposes his later self on the earlier. Retrospectively placing a series of imaginings in his own boyhood head, and the heads of friends, he follows it with a single word sentence, 'Perhaps' (Moffat, p. 40). Similarly for John Burnside, the fog of unspoken history impedes both his knowledge and his portrayal of a father whose life was blighted by his 'foundling' status. 'Perhaps' and 'what if' loom heavily over both of their personalities.

In relation to this sense of 'perhaps', if we can agree that one of the main purposes of autobiography is that we should, by whatever means we are offered, get to 'know' the writer, we need to embrace the probability that a disputable minor fact, error in chronology or timescale, or a partisan or uncertain view of a character or an event (as opposed to a deliberately dishonest one) may be more than compensated for by the imaginative manner of its articulation: the writer's interpretation of an event, or what he uses as intuitive, or as Ray terms them 'narrative truths' to *connect* events

²³ Fern Kupfer, 'Everything but the Truth', *The Women's Review of Books*, 13, 10/11 (July 1996), p.22.

may tell us a deal more about him than if he had attempted a purely historical account (Ray, p.110).

Eavan Boland (1996) worries about her factual recall when representing her mother, confessing to a weakness of memory and to creatively constructing a narrative. She asks herself, 'what was her story? The worst of it is I am not sure'.²⁴ She speaks of a handed-down story, building a 'legend' out of 'rumour, fossil fact, half memories' (Boland, p.10). She half laments a narrative 'pieced together', 'distorted' by her desire to create an orderly work from a collection of fragments (Boland, p. 32). 'Memory is treacherous' she reminds us, 'it confers meanings which are not apparent at the time; I am carrying forward an image now as I never would have then'; or she informs us, 'I am making my ideas more sophisticated in retrospect than they could have been at the time' (Boland, pp.125,109,108). But, if this uncertainty is a weakness she turns it to her own advantage to assert her ownership, as far as is possible, of the memoir. This, she says, is the way I shall do it. During the physical process of writing she recalls a journey taken with her grandmother, 'the child with the hoop who never existed, the woman with the red hat which I am now inventing' [...] 'This is the way we make our past. This is the way I will make it here, listening for the hooves. Glimpsing the red hat which was never there in the first place, giving eyesight and evidence to a woman we never knew and cannot now recover' (Boland, p. 4-5).

Although Boland here takes command, the demands of narrative structure in a more general sense are forever contesting the primary authority of the narrator. The writer is led by convention, as much as by will, imaginatively to elaborate areas of evidential uncertainty, in the interest of an anticipated fully fleshed narrative.

What is more, and importantly, there is a narrative compliance not only in the act of writing, but during that of both experiencing and remembering. Eakin stresses this further point:

²⁴ Eavan Boland, *Object Lessons* (London: Vintage, 1996), p.32.

The content and form of experience are mediated by the prevailing symbolic systems in a culture and narrative forms are prominent among them (Eakin, p.132).

In other words, experience is narratively interpolated as it is undergone, as well as at the point of narration. Eakin continues, ‘experiential consciousness could be said to be narratively and discursively constituted’ (Eakin, p.134). It is at the very point of cognition, in a subject position far previous to the one in which we act as writer, that we begin to put experience into story form, and the process continues as we recall. For example, we learn a lot about the resourcefulness, humour, imagination and intelligent life-philosophy of Maurice O’ Sullivan as he recounts the hand-me-down fables and dreams of others contained in his tales of Blasket life.²⁵ It is not his own imagination alone but his rich inheritance of a part-dreamt, part-inhabited collective consciousness that make him what he is. Like his boyhood dream, his tale is partially a white butterfly issuing from the mouth of his friend (O’Sullivan, p.14-15). The whole cohesion of society on the island is rooted in its storytelling traditions – the way that language mediates between experience and cognition, between memory and recall, belief and knowledge, writer and writing. It is as if a series of not necessarily related memories cannot properly be comprehended in any other than narrative form. In the Blasket theatre of timeless land and sea-scape the minutiae of factual and chronological truth cease to be a major concern. Like a sentence taking its place in a paragraph and a paragraph a page, one human day, though particular in itself, flows very much into and becomes a part of the wider experience. O’Sullivan’s memoir is undoubtedly an imaginatively woven story, superstition, dream and fable intertwine with reality in order to satisfy reader expectations, not just of continuity, but also of preconceived (also narratively constituted) beliefs concerning such an island existence. Nevertheless, as an expression of the man and his society, *Twenty Years a’ Growing* has an unmistakable ring of ‘reliable unreliability’, or acceptable truth.

²⁵ Maurice O’Sullivan, *Twenty Years a’ Growing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

Historian and rationalist might be critical of the memoirist who, in pleasing the reader or listener, is tempted to give language priority over lived experience.²⁶ Conversely, from the viewpoint of language and art, there is a greater danger that imagination be stifled by historical truths.²⁷ Again, there can be no firm guidelines as to just how far the narrative process can be taken in any specific instance. Bruner (1990) suggests that the story form is one of the most ‘ubiquitous and powerful symbolic activities’ and that the self ‘exists in a transactional relationship with others’ and is ‘dialogue dependent’.²⁸ It is in the very nature of story-telling, it would seem, that where historical associations are lacking, imaginative ones will be coined to make the necessary adjustments and narrative connections. Whether we call them artistic licence or ‘acceptable lies’, these are conscious and attainable narrative techniques aimed at linear and entertaining progression. For O’Sullivan, necessary adjustments are a not wholly conscious part of the oral, story-telling tradition. Where memories are constructed around quite specific episodes and because they are representative of a clearly defined social continuum we somehow accept that this is the way it was between, as well as during, the moments of recall. Virginia Woolf describes these episodes of heightened awareness and sensitivity that stamp themselves on the memory and carry the story, as moments of ‘Being’ and sees them as being randomly embedded in lengthy, unremarkable periods of ‘Non-Being’: ‘a great part of every day’ she says, ‘is not lived consciously’.²⁹ She advocates therefore the creation of ‘scenes’, admitting that this is not altogether a literary device, implying that it has its roots elsewhere; theatre possibly, but also in a story telling tradition of which men like O’Sullivan are so much a part. ‘Scenes’ are ‘a means of summing up and making innumerable details visible in one concrete picture’ (Woolf, p. 122). Disparate remembered images are herded together in the memory; language and imagination shepherd them into linear historical semblances. Although the hard edges of fact will have been eroded by countless nights of song and recitation, or intermittent spells of ‘non-being’, there can be no doubting the intensity of O’Sullivan’s projected images or that they fairly reflect the essence of his island

²⁶ See Ray, pp.117 -120.

²⁷ See Pascal, pp.76-77 for a consideration of this point.

²⁸ Jerome Bruner, *Acts of Meaning* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), in Ray, p.21.

²⁹ Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being, Unpublished Autobiographical Writings*, ed. by Jeane Schulkind (London: Sussex University Press, 1976), p.70.

existence. The fact that that existence was in terminal decline is a major justification for the narrative, making the memoir all the more poignant. O'Sullivan himself expresses no doubts concerning his recall, and would quite possibly not be fully conscious of the complex layering, or predispositional element of his remembering. If, however, as Zygodlo claims, 'memory is a wounded animal', representing it will not always be so straight-forward (Zygodlo, p.163).

Pascal reminds us 'Memory is not only inaccurate, it is treacherous and may profoundly mislead' (Pascal, p.19). Both expansive and reductive, on the one hand it indiscriminately accumulates and confers new interpretations on jumbled images of unrelated events, and on the other suppresses, represses, or loses images altogether. Nabokov calls it making 'retrospective manoeuvres to compensate for fate' (Nabokov, p.114). How different, since it is subject to precisely the same influences, will a single autobiographical narrative be from the general telling of the collective historical experience? A similar process of shedding and accumulating is taking place. An accord is being reached. The story is changing imperceptibly with every successive recalling or re-telling. 'What is history but a fable agreed upon?' asked Napoleon?³⁰ Dependent on the current overview of the narrator (s), it might later metamorphose once again during the very act of transcribing to paper. The individuality of memoir gives it a particular, imaginative licence, but ultimately among the writer, his conscience and his current consciousness, there remains a 'fable' to be agreed. Pascal states, 'on the one side are the truths of fact, on the other the truth of the writer's feeling, and where the two coincide cannot be decided by any outside authority in advance' (Pascal, p.67). Where the two coincide is where the fable emerges. Virginia Woolf asserts, 'what I write today I should not write in a year's time', which, given the imaginative vein of her writing suggests a continuous process of revision.³¹ Wordsworth's *Prelude* underwent much internal revision and appeared externally reconstituted in two complete versions. Pascal considers such 'tampering with the past' as autobiographically legitimate and cites the *Memoirs*

³⁰ (Napoleon) in Eavan Boland, *Object Lessons*, p.44.

³¹ Virginia Woolf, quoted in Julia Briggs: *Virginia Woolf an Inner Life* (London: Allen Lane, 2005) p. 351.

(1809) of Chateaubriand and Arthur Koestler's *The Invisible Writing* (1954), as similarly modified (Pascal, p.75). *Speak, Memory* is another example.

Revision, internal and external, will lead to new information, new interpretations, but also to what I have earlier referred to as 'omissions'. Certain of these are inevitably the result of forgetfulness but others are more complex in origin. Again, psychology is a major factor in any conscious or sub-conscious desire not to tell. Certain 'facts' may have been deliberately withheld from a child, or adult; others may have been distorted by false information; and another set may be too painful or disturbing to relate. Psychology notwithstanding, the memoirist will find himself making fully conscious omissions, even if not fully conscious of his underlying causes for doing so. They will be determined by a number of conflicting demands in the real as well as the written world. There are conflicts of modesty and conceit, shame and pride; and pressure to balance respect for perceived familial, social or cultural obligation with any attempt at full honesty. Uncertainty again raises its head. It will be impossible to fully establish his own identity without encroaching on or drawing from the identities of others, the authenticity of which he cannot fully know.

He cannot, for example, undertake any kind of expiation or confession without drawing in those close to him who may wish to participate in neither. Additionally, any consideration he feels or feels he ought to feel for others, as narrator, will not be the same as consideration he felt or did not feel when the action took place. The recounting of sibling experience is an example. A sibling child may have in some serious way been mistreated, but as an adult not wish to speak of it. The situation is worsened if the writing is for profit. The issue becomes a moral one in that the production of a marketable work may not be compatible with obligations of due consideration: in speaking of individual characters, their sexual, private, criminal proclivities for example, or their affliction on the writer or others of possibly uncorroborated injustices. Writing of the deceased, who have no recourse to counter-claim, also has its moral implications: speaking ill might seem a betrayal, speaking well a eulogy. When writing of personal success the writer's own good fortune may well have been predicated on the unhappiness or ill thriving of others. All of these social and

literary pressures influence both memory and its exposition. Stephen Spender claimed his autobiography *World Within World* (1953), which was remarkably frank for its period, was written ‘within the limits of certain inevitable reticences’.³² Leonard Woolf warned the Bloomsbury group’s internal ‘Memoir Club’, that ‘absolute frankness, even among the most intimate, tends to be relative frankness’ (Woolf, p.157). Relative frankness has more to do with conscious omission than imperfect memory and so is a contributory factor in the act of creative remembering. Ultimately, it is the writing- time self who makes each decision as the need arises, establishing balances between the acts of relating, withholding, and interpreting events, and between regard for his subjects and for his reader. The memoirist’s first obligations to honesty are to himself, but if what he seeks to create is in some way a legacy then others might justly expect a fair hearing. He becomes a steward, rather than an owner of much of his material. Again, the sense of autonomy will be restricted.

Zygodlo, for example, is both inheriting and compiling a complicated legacy. He is acutely conscious of the difficulties his father experiences in the process of remembering; Poland’s ever shifting frontiers (to the extent that at one time ‘Poland existed only as an idea in the minds of the romantics’), confuse the national identity; the wounds of Russian and German hostilities are still smarting; the cultural and territorial rivalries of Pole, Jew, and Ukranian are perennial (Zygodlo, p. 96). His father has been mistreated as a prisoner: ‘it is impossible to think now what we thought then. All we can do is judge it, and think what we think now’ (Zygodlo, p.238). Broniek has little rational cause for sentimentality and Zygodlo sees him as ‘never sentimental intentionally’; his father’s nephew disagrees: he ‘was a great romantic, like all exiles’ (Zygodlo, pp.83, 117). Zygodlo replies that ‘he wouldn’t say he was sentimental; he hated sentimentality’ but is assured that ‘He was Polish, and an exile, Poles are romantic, it’s in their blood’ (Zygodlo, p.117). This is a good indication of the insidious, sometimes indefinable nature of sentimentality, and how the act of being sentimental infers different meanings to different people. Zygodlo in fact looks, fairly unsuccessfully, for a good distinction between sentiment and

³² Stephen Spender, *World Within World* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1953), p. x.

romance: 'both are probably unrealistic. When you are away from something you only remember the good things; it's natural' (Zygodlo, p.117).

Sentiment and romance are the essence of nostalgia, which accommodates a recurrently inexplicable yearning for the places and memories of childhood in a great proportion of the memoirs here considered. During the actual childhood there may never have been any overall impression, happy or otherwise: at best it was happiness one day, unhappiness another. Any overall gloss is therefore being provided by the retrospective overview. When Zygodlo speaks of nostalgia, he too considers the 'happiness' factor as most often being a later embellishment:

When I think of my childhood, when I remember my own youth I make certain my memories are happy, though I can recall times when I was not. Usually the question of happiness is only posed in hindsight, and now, whether it was or was not happy, the person my past has made me into freely applies a happy label to it (Zygodlo, p.157).

Here we are back to the point concerning parental and external influence: 'the person his past has made him' dictates what he writes: his past predisposes him to write as he does. How he writes his past is not entirely an act of free will: part of the way his memory is programmed makes him 'remember well'. But is nostalgia always going to be happy?

Not necessarily. It finds no place at all in certain types of memoir, or is specifically denied. There is no Ersatz celebration of 'the way things were' in Burnside's existentialist *A Lie About My Father* - a total negation of the idea of nostalgia as sweet. He sees us all as 'walking libraries of the unspeakable' (Burnside, p.274). A tale of the grimly parallel lives of Burnside and his Father, the text is certainly a triumph of imagination over circumstance, but the drunken shallowness of his father's life and the drug-fuelled aimlessness and alienation of his own can be seen as in no way glorified. If he speaks of nostalgia at all it is in the 'nostalgia of the gutter' and of the 'blackness' that pervades the life of his father and grandfather (Burnside, pp.279, 307). And yet, there are times that the superimposition of the

‘writing time’ imagination over the ‘living time’ experience does approach, if not a celebration of the *‘fleures du mal’*, at least a celebration of the power of the will simply to prevail. It is almost as if Burnside could not have achieved his imaginative potential if he had not experienced the combined liberation and negation of his earlier days. There are moments when in the text, at least, he becomes not lost and paranoid as he undoubtedly was, but a celebrant of the flashes of awful creativity within his shabby existence. At times during his institutionalisation he felt ‘privileged’, and that his madness was ‘beautiful’ (Burnside, p.257). Though he does not affirm the notion of fall and redemption, it can potentially be seen in the fact that he has survived: he has his own son; and he has created a credible if disturbing memoir.

The term, nostalgia, is from the Greek: *‘nostos’* - to return home, and *‘algos’* - pain. It is therefore a ‘painful yearning for a return home’. Its seventeenth century interpretation was that as a condition, it was physical rather than mental.³³ It is a condition that possibly strengthens with age when ‘memory, after life’s meridian, becomes life’s purpose’.³⁴ It is the one sentiment that Said was so deliberately conditioned to reject and one that Coetzee (1997), who in an over-generalisation of a particular colonial type with which he was familiar, thought the ‘English’ wary of: they ‘live behind walls and guard their hearts well’.³⁵ Wary or not, nostalgia is both pervasive and persuasive, allowing imagination priority over experience, sensibility over sense and making us apt to ‘write the poem that [is] in the air rather than in experience’ (Boland, p. 131). It has long infiltrated the literary canon; reaching perhaps its apogee through Cobbett, Goldsmith, Grey, and the Lakeland Romantics, it stirred debate as long ago as Homer and the ensuing Greek Enlightenment. Gary S. Meltzer writes on nostalgia in the classics, considering Homer’s Odysseus the ‘archetypal nostalgic hero in Western culture,’ ‘weeping and lamenting’ and ‘looking out over the barren sea’.³⁶ The ancients were trying to reconcile, just as we have been in modern times, a progressive and enquiring present with a naïve or unquestioning faith in a part traditional part mythological past. The locus of yearning changes historically, from ancient Classicism, to oral culture, to pastoral idyll. It is clear

³³ Renato Resaldo, *Imperialist Nostalgia* in *Representations* No.26 (Spring 1989) pp.107-122 (p109).

³⁴ Lyndall Gordon, quoting Virginia Woolf , (p 213).

³⁵ J.M. Coetzee, *Boyhood Scenes from Provincial Life* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1997), p.73.

³⁶ Gary S. Meltzer, *Eurypides and the Poetics of Nostalgia* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006) p.33.

throughout that ‘painful yearning for a return home’ is more than a sense of physical exile: it pertains to the spiritual and ideological, includes post-colonial, ethnic, gender and other social dislocations and is present in various forms of familial, linguistic, cultural and emotional estrangement. The ‘home’ is as much a state of mind and memory as a time and place.

The *nostos* of nostalgia seems most often to affirm a belief that the past, and in particular the period of childhood, was not simply a personal paradise, but universally a more bright and utopian time than any period that has existed thereafter, and this often when by any rational or impartial standard the childhood would be seen to have been in some way impoverished. Moffat’s father was crude and insensitive, so Moffat was in search of ‘the real past, as opposed to the fantasy past’, and yet, from June 1953 to August 1955, a part of his childhood that he calls ‘Summer Country,’ he assures us ‘no rain fell on the World’ (Moffat, pp.155, 7). A further chapter title ‘In the Dream Time’ substantiates the imagery. As a legacy of a school trip, a certain corner of the Highlands is for him ‘unquestionably the most beautiful place in the world’ (Moffat, p.135). This *nostos* influence often leads to beautiful and heartfelt expression, as in the ‘*tesknota*’³⁷ of Eva Hoffman: ‘and at night, as I fall asleep, I sometimes hear the peasants coming back from the fields and meadows, singing fierce, pure, modal songs that sound like no other music and then I am filled with *tesknota*’, and she continues, critically aware of the equivocations of nostalgia, ‘though I don’t know for what’ (Hoffman, p.20). The ‘under-sea ding-donging’ of Louis MacNiece’s poem ‘*Nostalgia*’ (First Published 1943), captures its essence and Nabokov’s ‘hypertrophied sense of lost childhood’ evokes the mixed pain and pleasure of reminiscence (Nabokov, p.59).

Hoffman’s elegiac work gives the impression of her emotional and linguistic dislocation outweighing the physical trauma of translocation. Physically and intellectually she is moving towards becoming an American, but Polish is her first language and Poland is deeply ingrained on her introspections. Her longings have not yet become ‘nostalgia’: they remain ‘*tesknota*’. They ‘come upon me like a visitation from a whole new geography of emotions’(Hoffman, p.4). ‘When the sun comes out’

³⁷ ‘Nostalgia’(Polish).

she tells us, ‘I turn toward the sea hypnotically, full of a discomfiting longing feeling’ – feelings that she later compares to her experience of music: ‘the rises and falls of our own inner life and perhaps the drama of yearning of all organic forms’ (Hoffman, pp.91, 55). It may be a long way from certain that there is any sense of yearning in organic forms but it is certainly a beautiful idea. There may be a link in terms of animal migration or ‘homing’, to the yearning for a particular place that is expressed by Nabokov: ‘Give me anything on any continent resembling the St. Petersburg countryside and my heart melts’ and ‘I reserve the right to yearn after an ecological niche’ (Nabokov, pp.193, 59). Moffat speaks of the ‘insistent tugging of a homing instinct’ (Moffat, p.212). MacLean admits that ‘when mood and light and season blend in just the right proportions I feel the numen of the place almost more strongly than I can bear’ (MacLean, p.172).

In connection with its pain or *algos* element nostalgia comes close to melancholia but it is not the same thing. Gaurav Dessai (2004) makes a good distinction: nostalgia ‘remains optimistic about the possible future recovery of a fragile dream’ while melancholia is ‘resigned to mourning its irrecoverable loss’.³⁸ ‘Melancholia cripples while nostalgia redeems’ he asserts (Desai, p. 141). He applauds his subject, Indian writer Amitav Ghosh’s special breed of nostalgia, which demonstrates, he says, a ‘powerful optimism even as it recognises the encroachment of an inevitable melancholia’ (Desai, p.141). Hoffman does not explicitly make this clear distinction, but, aware of her ambivalence, acknowledges nostalgia as not only a ‘source of poetry, and a form of fidelity’, but also ‘a species of melancholy’ (Hoffman, p.115). She at times equates it with a type of pain, ‘that I therefore try to numb or extract from myself like some gnawing scruple, or splinter lodged in a thumb’ or ‘an annunciation of how much an absence can hurt’ (Hoffman, pp.23-4). Said, briefly nostalgic when visiting the Lebanese mountain village of Dhour, tells us ‘the train journey was indescribably romantic and pleasurable’. Then, reverting to the rational, speaks of ‘a combination of mournfulness and impending dread’; ‘scenes remembered with unhappy clarity’; and Dhour’s ‘appalling limitations’ (Said, pp.149,150,155, 164). MacLean offers a good example of a crippling melancholia. His mode of reflection is incompatible with any sense of regeneration: while his

³⁸Gaurav Desai, ‘Old World Orders, Amitav Ghosh and the Writing of Nostalgia’, in *Representations*, 85 (Winter, 2004) pp.125-148 (p.140).

‘fancies of childhood are persistent, straining upwards through the layers of the years, tenacious of essence and purpose if not always of form’ there is an insistent sense of foredoom; he can find no continuing consolation in what he sees as a shabby present filled with ‘spurious and random energies’ (MacLean, pp.170, 26). He is not ‘in the business of creating glamour where none exists’ (MacLean, p.46).

Nabokov is fully aware of his own nostalgic susceptibility, particularly in relation to place, but more often he is inclined to acknowledge its incipient or conspicuous presence and then in some way flag up its rational or intellectual frailty, ‘how you danced with joy! she exclaimed, ten years later in the course of inventing a brand new past’, he says of his former governess (Nabokov, p.101). Of retired servants retiring to their native Switzerland he tells us: ‘one is always at home in one’s past, which partly explains those pathetic ladies’ posthumous love for a remote and, to be perfectly frank, rather appalling country, which they never had really known and in which none of them had been very content’ (Nabokov, p.91). ‘Whenever possible’ he goes on ‘the scenery of our infancy is used by an economically minded producer as a ready-made setting for our adult dreams’ (Nabokov, p.102). As children during a period of sham decadence (1918), when Russian establishment forces had briefly pushed back the Red army, his sister and he presciently play-acted with ‘reminiscent fervour’, ‘a specious present into a kind of paralysed past as perceived by a doddering memoirist’ (Nabokov, p.192).

He is not alone in this parodic ability: other writers are quite prepared to identify the weaknesses of the nostalgic impulse even when at times they simultaneously depend upon it for generating romantic and imaginative energy. Zygodlo, when visiting a modern, post-division Berlin, sees the irony of what he aptly describes as ‘nostalgia for the bad old days’, where ‘the military and the secret police have become part of the mythology’ and people happily buy T shirts that say ‘The KGB is Still Watching You’ (Zygodlo, p.32). Coetzee gives us an example of his extended family sitting on the *stoep* at the family farm in South Africa: ‘yes, those were the days they say and sigh. They like to be nostalgic about the past but none of them want to go back to it’ (Coetzee, p.82). Hoffman, despite her susceptibility, speaks of ‘the haze of nostalgia, which is an ineffectual relationship to the past’, and of its introspection as ‘a process of dwelling on what one has experienced, rather than a means of systematic

analysis or self-reform' (Hoffman, pp.20, 263). For MacLean, the night is falling hard both on Ardnamurchan and his ambivalent dreams, 'the heavenly jest at the heart of all earthly paradises [is] you have to leave them to recognise them' (MacLean, p 122).

The nostalgic propensity is easier to demonstrate than to justify. Burnside's writing exemplifies this. It is a similar case for the rationalist: Edward Said's father would attest, 'what is past is past and irrecoverable; the wise man has enough to do with what is present and to come' (Said, p.115). It is also the case that for many there should rationally be no 'painful yearning: if oppressed or alienated from birth then logically speaking there *is* no happy past. If a generation living in unfortunate times has to look backwards for comfort, the gaze of the next generation, born into those difficult circumstances has rationally no cause for happy reflection. Is there therefore any defence for Nostalgia? Possibly, in terms of cultural, or popular interest through history, tourism and the Arts it has economic 'utility'. At the very least it serves as an extensive form of gratification. It is intensely anodyne: if pleasure in looking backwards ameliorates fear of an uncertain future, then it also beneficial. If for the rationalist there is to be no promise of afterlife then remembering happily and being happily remembered may be his nearest reasonable prospect of immortality. If we further argue from a position that affirms some degree of innate benevolence then the nostalgic impulse to remember others well becomes a logical extension of that; the immortal memory will err by preference to the good. Forgiveness too, is a part of remembering well: some may wish to look to New Testament scripture³⁹ or The Lord's Prayer, where they would be asked to 'forgive those that trespass against them'; again, they would be 'remembering well'. In the popular notion of an association between 'forgiving and forgetting', for 'time healing' and for 'absence making the heart grow fonder', the possibility is raised of gently obliterating past unhappiness. In times of present discontent this reconstituted past provides a form of solace.⁴⁰ In both a personal real-life and a story telling capacity nostalgia could be interpreted as beneficial, enhancing rather than diminishing the lived experience and by logical extension, the shared author/reader experience of memoir. If it makes the narrative unreliable in the sense of an objective historical record, it better informs us,

³⁹ See for example, Mathew 6:14, or Ephesians 4:32.

⁴⁰ See Jonathan Steinwand, 'The Future of Nostalgia in Friedrich Schegel's Gender Theory: Casting German Aesthetics Beyond Ancient Greece and Modern Europe' in *Narratives of Nostalgia, Gender and Nationalism*, ed. by Jean Pickering and Suzanne Kehde, pp. 9-29.

through the special sense of communion as to certain individual subjectivities of the memoirist. His work is a ‘narrative’ review, with all that that implies, rather than an historical one. It helps make the writer, in one sense at least, ‘reliably unreliable’: we come to know and understand the origins of a particular unreliability.

We realise that O’Sullivan, in *Twenty Years a’Growing*, absolutely knows and desires that he must take up the challenge of a new life on the mainland, in spite of and in no way diminishing his sense of loss at the abandonment of his previous existence. Hoffman too, fully embraces the pressures of life as an American academic while emotionally agonising over the linguistic, temporal and spatial separation from her earlier homeland, almost to the point of paranoia. Moffat makes a fully rational analysis of his family history but maintains his subjective affinity with an ‘Edenic’ childhood. Boland never dissembles – she clearly states that her memories are imaginatively embellished and that she will stand by them but they in no way impede her awareness of their contradictions when contemplating her present condition within the current literary sphere. Nabokov, exiled in Paris, London, America and finally Switzerland, is deeply sentimental about Mother Russia but perfectly sanguine over the loss of fabulous estates. He is a highly adaptable multi lingual writer/lecturer at home in western society, adaptable to each of his new circumstances, and always alive to the nostalgic ambivalence of his memories.

I have argued in favour of this reflective, questioning form of nostalgia. This is in no way to endorse a systematically induced version that might expect us to forget past wars, political, social or economic calamities, or to detach them from their historical causes to enable us un-critically and vicariously to re-live the ‘way things were’. Nor is the portrait a fair one where history is re-defined as ‘yester-year’ or ‘heritage’, and freed of institutionalised injustice, poverty and hardship. If, however, happy reflections can potentially be combined with realistic visions of a hopeful future, then nostalgia has an authentic place in the autobiographical consciousness.

Autobiography is beset with difficulties. An indeterminate ‘I’; a narrative tendency; treacherous memory and a nostalgic impulse, all of which might be expected to undermine reliability, and all of which must imaginatively be turned to

advantage. It is by sharing their conscious handling of these issues that the texts considered achieve a sense of authenticity.

Edward Said struggles with his father's difficult legacy of Middle Eastern repression and Western liberation and his own intense sense of a divided self. Moffat and Burnside wrestle with the 'stigma' of illegitimacy or 'non-personhood' in their family histories and Nabokov, O'Sullivan, Zygadlo (on behalf of his father), Hoffman (and Said), with degrees of exile or 'statelessness'. O'Sullivan's train journey to Dublin sees him in a state of equipoise between two existences; poles apart, they are to become one. Boland fights to reconcile her Irish womanhood with her Irish poetry, pitting her own framework of enlightened progressivism against traditionalist pressures. Hoffman is extravagantly informed by an American friend, 'this is a society in which you are who you think you are. Nobody gives you your identity here; you have to re-invent yourself every day' (Hoffman, p. 155).

More in a sense of rediscovery than reinvention, the texts discussed display a consistent sense of an authorial 'will to narrative truth'. This is part threatened, part consolidated in the case of Burnside, who questions the very nature of truth, and while searching for his own definition leaves the reader uncertain as to his conclusions. His suggestion, however, that an imagined identity, be it imposed or self-created, can become a lie as easily as it might become anything better, is in keeping with my questioning of a too insistent autonomy. The margin between the imaginative and the imaginary is a narrow one, and its observance is a large part of what I have regarded overall as giving a sense of reliability. This has not been to suggest a curb on the imagination in the story-telling and linguistic process of narration, but rather to seek an awareness of distinctions between history as it affects the changing status of the self, and the way that our telling of it might both effect and affect others. The varied internalised and imaginative perceptions and expressions of self, through time and changing location, consistent with a professed awareness of this transience and uncertainty, I have considered as the acceptably *unreliable* quotient of the autobiographical endeavour. A provisional and modified sense of autonomy, in conjunction with an imaginative portrayal constitute, in their particular relation to memoir, I suggest, a 'reliably unreliable' sense of authenticity.

Practice

Threshing Time

It was fifty years ago, but I close my eyes and I am a boy again, senses alert, sensibilities in turmoil. A curlew passes effortlessly above, soaring over the shallow valley on near motionless wings, its joyous music cascading around me. From high over the rushy slope, beyond the garden boundary of scrubby elders, pours the sweetly insistent song of a skylark. Close in, there is a crack in the flagged floor in front of my feet along which a wood louse is shuffling; the crack widens and the louse turns vertically downwards and disappears into the blackness beneath. A shrew scuttles along the wall bottom, unaware that it is being observed.

My thoughts flit disjointedly. The sound of birdsong floating in and out of my consciousness is at odds with the lead- like lump making boisterous objections in my stomach.

I imagine Robert Parker and Alan Marsden watching ‘Bonanza’ or something else on the telly. Wish we had a telly. Wonder what ‘Bonanza’ means. Maybe they are playing on the wreck. Wish I were.

The ‘wreck’ is the recreation ground, and since, on the rare occasions I have seen it, it seems a marvellous place, with children shouting and laughing, swings, climbing frames, roundabouts and cast iron rocking horses, all in decent enough working order, I wonder why it is considered a wreck.

I’m sitting in the little open fronted shed that faces the gable end of the old farmhouse, looking at the traces of green paint around the doorway and the remnants of wooden plugs that once held the door- frame in place. There’s never been a door within the time of my memory. Father says fresh air is good for us – but doesn’t want us spending too much time here in the mornings. He calls it dodging. A fly buzzes in, drawn by the stink of fresh shit, flies a couple of

inquisitive circles before disappearing again into the open. Normally I'd take a swipe at it with a piece of the torn up newspaper that sits beside me with a little stone on top to stop it from blowing away. I might point an index and middle finger at it, gun-like, and say 'pchow!' or something similar, but it is not in me to do so today.

The adjoining farmhouse, the gable of which is facing me, is a big old millstone grit combination of living accommodation, mistalls for cattle and a barn, or laithe as we call it. The barn is big. That's where Dad thrashes us. It has double, in-swinging doors and a high traditionally arched doorway beside which, on the outside, is a carved date stone that says 'This Barn was Rebuilt by T. and J. Whitely in 1811'. The central space of the barn interior goes the full height of a double storey; clear all the way to the underside of the slate roof, where the deal pegs that hold the stone slates against the supporting laths can be seen. On either side of this clear central space, above the flanking cattle standings is a hay-loft, or 'baulks', part filled with the fusty old hay left from summers long past and before we lived here. On top of the ridge beam of the central space, in the little gap between it and the ridge-stone, the swallows nest each year after returning from their flight across the ocean. The arrival of the first swallow is always exciting; they return to our old barn in preference to all of the other barns of the world and we love to welcome them each spring. Once they are hatched and raised, the young ones perch in a row of three or four with their neat white bibs and yellow gapes, sitting on the beam edge preening and trying to pluck up the courage to fly.

Wish I could fly too. Wish we had never done it. Wish we had never been caught. Wish I could fly...wish I could fly.

There is no means by which I might avoid the impending punishment, although a year or two ago my brother Peter, when in similar circumstances, crawled through a gap in the elderberry perimeter and made his escape for a while by galloping off up the valley. He circled back home and so evaded our

long and widening search in the ensuing darkness, climbing through the big glassless window opening in the single storey north gable, inside which is our bedroom, and creeping into bed where none of us had thought of looking for him. I was sent down the valley calling at most of the farmhouses to ask if anyone had seen him, drinking cups of tea and being probed as to the circumstances of his disappearance before eventually arriving home late at night having found no trace. Father said I should go to bed while he decided what next to do and when I got to the bedroom Peter was there, curled up trying unsuccessfully to sleep. I persuaded him to go and face the music. It was winter; the barn doors were closed, but Father sent him to open them up and await punishment. In the end, for once, he had not the heart to thrash him.

Events today will proceed with fearful predictability; we have no say in what is to happen, we are bound to play our parts in this predetermined cycle of crime and punishment. 'Less than the dust beneath his chariot wheels,' Father says we are, sometimes in anger and sometimes ostensibly in fun, but too much a reality to be funny.

I have emptied my bowels. It didn't take long. My stomach keeps churning and my muscles keep retching and straining. I think my insides are coming out. There's that shrew scuttling across the path again, afraid of everything and nothing. Dad'll soon shout me now. Maybe he will change his mind. He won't though; maybe some visitor has arrived.

He has taken to sending us to the privy before thrashing us. It suits him better not to have us shit ourselves during the process. It has happened before. It is the fear rather than the pain; and since on those occasions he called us dirty little buggers, and in his anger increased his punishment, it also suits us better that he should send us 'round the building end' first. It saves us a deal of indignity and the misery of cleaning up afterwards.

There's a cock blackbird bustling noisily at the base of the elders. He's leaning back, struggling to pull up a stretchy worm. Peter arrives: "You've to go

now,” he says, coming into the hut and starting to drop his trousers so that he can take my place.

“Come on Joe,” shouts father from round the corner, in a voice of irresistible authority, “you’ve had long enough.”

I am troubled by the usual and ridiculous dilemma as to whether to try and shamle round to the barn with my trousers round my ankles, or whether to pull them up properly, with my gallusses over my shoulders. It seems silly to pull them up just to have to drop them and if I arrive with them up he might think me insufficiently servile. In the end I feel like a complete fool, holding my half raised trousers and shuffling round to the barn. I drop them, and bend over the five-gallon Essolube oil drum that he has placed just inside the barn doors. He takes up his position behind me, and to my left. I clench my teeth. We are not allowed to squeal. It’s threshing time again.

I count slowly, seven... eight... nine, as he paints me with his purple stripes.

An ancient governess cart stands beside me in the central space of the barn with its shafts raised almost protectively above me. There’s a box on the front of it where father keeps the belt. A cart is a fairly useless thing without a horse, but this one was procured from Alf o’th Clough in the hope that we might one day be the owners of such a beast. Its principal function now seems to be belt storage. It was only ever used on two occasions; the first was for a family picnic. We borrowed Fred Feather’s ‘Prince’ - an amiably ageing chestnut Shire gelding to pull it. Father hitched him up and led us off down the valley, proudly holding court as we progressed, showing off his ‘tribe’. People popped out of their doors to be sociable, Old ‘Bondella’, as we knew her (for some reason inserting a letter ‘d’ into her name), she was always in black, Ely Standeven, with his rattling lungs and the New Lady who ‘talked funny’ from the house beside the shop. We had a long and enjoyable day of it, but towards the end of the trip, in order to get home before dark, we needed to take a short cut across a remote section of moorland through a gate belonging to the Corporation Water Board. It had been locked because a section of road on the other side had been excavated,

leaving no room for access. Unable to burst the chain and padlock Father burst the gate from its hinges, cursing the lock and then those who had put it there in equal measures. Once through the gate he took the horse off the road and round the obstacle but in doing so had to cross a wide and overgrown ditch. Old Prince was not as brave as he might have been in his younger days and might have thought, like the rest of us as we looked on, that Father was a lunatic for asking him to leap ditches while still shackled to a cart. However, he gave it a good try, fairly rattling the chains of his harness as well as the contents of the cart – in the process some crockery was smashed and the shaft was partially broken. Once over, Prince, with one ear forward and one back and droplets of sweat glistening on the ends of the whiskers beneath his pink and quivering bottom lip, shuffled his feet a bit, shifted his weight from one back leg to the other and shook his collar with relief and embarrassment. Father rooted about for some parcel string and jury-rigged the shaft to get us home. The cart was then abandoned in the barn.

In its earlier days it had been a smart grey colour with red and white coach lining but the faded livery is now flaking, bedecked with dust and cobwebs and half covered over with an accumulation of household junk. Atop the cart on the now horizontal front-board lives an old wooden tray filled with sundry garden tools: balls of twine; a trowel and some slug pellets falling out of their packet; there is a single gig-lamp bracket; a worn out clog shod; the missing ear from Pluto the wooden dog...and the place where the belt is kept.

It is an old strap from some long redundant harness, one end neatly tapered, the better to fit through the buckle that is fixed to the other end and has rusted through lack of any legitimate use. He says he never strikes us with the buckle, but the other end leaves little 'V' shaped cuts that can be slow to heal. We have thought oft-times of hiding the belt but doing so would serve no purpose. He used a stick in earlier days, so if it were somehow to become lost he would revert to a search for some likely stick in the woodpile. He once broke his chosen stick on me and since I had already received a fair number of strokes I had thought with relief that that would be the end of it. However he told me to go with him to the stick pile– an assortment of short odd-jobbing timbers of

small cross-section judged to be of too good quality for burning – and help him to pick another suitable stick with which to continue the thrashing.

“How’s this?”

“Hmm, a bit short maybe.”

“How about this one, it’s not too heavy,” I said, optimistically.

“No, I think not. This one’s just the ticket though, come wi’ me,” he said, noisily slicing the surrounding air.

The thrashing is over, I gingerly pull up my trousers. Peter must now take his turn riding the oil drum and I am sent to carry Molehill soil. We lift it with a small fire shovel, carry it back to the garden in galvanised ex-army latrine buckets and place it in a heap ready for general mulching or for seed-bed preparation. The nearest soil has already been carted so now, carrying the soil a greater distance, we will change the heavy buckets from hand to hand to save having to rest. This is a punishment and idling is not permitted. We are to report at the living room window on emptying each bucket to make sure there is no dodging; we’ll cart until an order to stop is received which depends very much on Father’s mood. When we start after tea we are generally expected to carry on until bedtime or darkening, after which we are sent straight to bed. This is fairly heavy work but since a life in the hills is often one of heavy carrying we find it little hardship. We wear no underpants and our trousers chafe our bruised backsides.

Dominant and Passive

We did not have to do a great deal wrong to earn a thrashing. Peter and I had been in this instance equally culpable so received equal treatment. A substantial part of our diet consisted of a brawn made from sheep's heads - a nutritious enough concoction but often roughly made with unpalatable bits included that would have been better cast aside: some of the mouthparts, for example, would go strangely black when boiled. Overall, we grew to detest the stuff. We wore old adult waist- coats around the house to keep our school shirts from becoming too dirty and had taken to putting some of the less appetising parts of the brawn in one or two of the numerous pockets- a bit in the fob, or another in the larger side pockets, for later disposal up the fields or down the closet. The combination of body heat and warm weather had made the grease from the meat permeate the fabric and show on the outside of the pockets so that Father had been able to discover what we were doing.

Muscular, five foot eleven, and currently in his mid forties, Father had spent much of the war in North Africa where the climate had permanently darkened his already swarthy skin. His bearing was upright and military, his dress was rustic; his appearance was something between redundant warrior and active peasant. He wore a half buttoned collarless shirt with a faint blue line woven into the white cotton, of a type known as 'union', with the sleeves most often rolled up above his biceps, accentuating a strikingly powerful pair of arms. His trousers, of moleskin or corduroy, were supported by both belt and braces and often well patched around the knee and crutch. He always sported a red and white spotted handkerchief, either round his neck or half hanging from his breeches pocket, and an old cap that he wore slightly askew, partially covering his black hair that was receding at the temples and combed straight back with a little water each morning. He trimmed it himself now and then around the neckline, and cut it more comprehensively two or three times a year. Although black haired his beard, which was not all that strong, was of medium length and, like his conspicuous chest hair, brindled with a mixture of gingery brown and

grey. Facially, there was a slight asymmetry to the mouth when he smiled and the hint of a droop to one eyelid as a result of earlier Bell's palsy, which had permanently affected the facial nerves.

Most striking of all was a pair of fearful eyes. They were hazel green with differing brown flecks and had a peculiarly penetrating character, especially when they were fired by anger. Like a cat mesmerising a bird or a mouse, they could root us like prey to the floor. They could also flash with fire and enthusiasm as well as wit and humour; Mother must have thought she had seen in them a deep and manly love but she may have been misled by what was no more than an irresistible passion. Either way she and Father were six times parents. We all became familiar with his eyes twinkling one moment with humour or drunkenness, then changing, seemingly unprovoked, flashing darkly like damascened steel and he poised ready to lunge in anger at whomsoever had the misfortune to be the closest.

He had assured us once when we were a little older, on indirectly receiving a suggestion from one of us that if we were so often to be chastised it must surely mean that he did not love us, that this was not necessarily the case. We thought it ridiculous at the time, and an inversion merely of what was plainly true, when he expanded on this by saying that thrashings hurt him more than they hurt us. Rot it was, we thought, to say that, when he was sitting there on the old wooden bench as he did, before the fire with his half supped blue-ringed pint pot of home brewed ale in his fist while we were able hardly to put one foot before the other without our moleskin breeches reminding us of our smarting arses. It didn't seem to hurt him a great deal when he cracked us on the head with whatever was in his hand at the time, be it a poker or a galvanised watering can, or kicked us with his steel shod clog toe that could send a flame of pain leaping from the coccyx that smouldered for a while and generally died down nicely in time for the rekindling. The same applied when he picked us up by our ears and flung us to the ground, or Mary by her pigtails, or 'noped us on the napper' with the knobkerrie with the copper ferrule that the old gamekeeper had given him – little thinking of how it would be employed. When he snapped the accidentally cracked handle of a digging fork over my head and smote me

again for causing it to break, demanding that I then ‘walk straight and stop that ridiculous staggering’: nonsense then surely, we thought, to talk of his greater pain.

Mother, gentle and passive, was herself a subject rather than an imposer of discipline. She was lean and asthmatic and seemed totally dominated by father. At one time she was smitten with near fatal pneumonia, and afterwards would have attacks of what we called ‘wheezing’. The Pneumonia was the cause of a long and difficult rescue during a blizzard that had developed on top of an existing heavy layer of snow. The doctor was led on foot to visit her, after which she was carried on a stretcher across the fields by Father, the doctor and ambulance men. Then, the snow being too deep for a trailer, she was transported aboard an old lime sledge and tractor to the ambulance that was some miles distant. We existed without her for some time and when she eventually returned home from hospital after the worst of the snow was gone, she lay for a time abed in her upstairs room where we waited on her every need, glad to have her back. The room had never looked so comfortable with a fire lit each day in the little cast iron grate and Mother sitting up, benign, and doing her best to smile.

After this she was often short of breath in a mild but nevertheless debilitating way, and there would be times when her asthma attacks seemed terrifyingly close to disastrous. She would sit on the wooden bench in the living room leaning forward with her chin cupped in her hands, utterly distraught, brow glistening, fighting for every breath. We provided towels and cold water to cool her and a bucket for comfort if she should need it. Father would show very real concern for her but there was little he could do.

He was a generous carer of those he believed to be genuinely sick, but would ruthlessly dismiss those he saw as malingering. If any of us had, for example, bouts of earache or croup he would happily get up in the middle of the night to light a fire and prepare a hot water bottle and woollen scarf or a warm drink for the afflicted. If we had stepped on a thorn or cut a foot, and there was any tendency towards sepsis he would sterilize a needle in the flame of a candle, perforate the infected area a time or two and see that we bathed it in salty water.

When, some time after a thrashing a wound on my thigh became infected he seemed almost surprised that such a thing should have been the result of his own earlier actions, from which he somehow now dissociated himself while acting as healer. He was very respectful and hospitable towards two ageing and gentle nurses, Colgan and Collumbell, who visited us more socially than professionally. They would have been more than happy to help if they should have been needed but over and above post-natal care, he saw to it that they were not. Collumbell was tall and thin, Cogan was short and rounded, both wore dark blue uniforms and were extremely kindly towards us. They brought me a book, *Joey and the Squib* for perhaps my sixth birthday: the 'squib' was a little boy with poor prospects whom Joey befriended. I was never just sure why he should have been thought of as a 'squib' but was proud to have a book of my own and to be a near namesake of the befriender.

It was for some reason Peter whom Father regarded as chief malingerer. When he started taking severe pains in his neck and shoulder Father was extremely reluctant to involve a doctor, and when one was finally summoned informed him that he suspected the pains were all a sham and that Peter was conniving to get a holiday in hospital. It was Father, rather than Peter to whom the doctor seemed to listen; so the doctor left and Peter tholled the pain. It eventually subsided of its own accord. If Father was poorly himself he generally made the most of it. He had contracted a mild form of malaria on his wartime travels; the fever would lay him low for a day or two, during which time he was never a joy to live with. He took the chicken pox and made out that he was dying, and when he got some kind of a boil inside his nose he at first liberally distributed unpleasantness around the house, and then sloped off to bed perhaps fearing that if his nose were to shine any more brightly he would become a figure of fun rather than one of authority.

Mother wore her prematurely greying hair scraped back and pinned into a bun – a style that owed nothing to vanity and everything to plain practicality. At home she would usually wear a wrap around Paisley patterned pinafore for the same reasons, perhaps removing it in the evening or if there were visitors. We liked to see her without her pinney, since this would be associated with

leisure, or the entertaining of visitors, when Father would so moderate his behaviour that there was little sign of the harsh regime of which he was both architect and master.

Except in the very early years, we were allowed little access to her unless he was there too; he seemed to fear that it might lead to an undermining of his militarised command and that boys particularly would be made soft or 'mard' by maternal contact. He believed too that she might offer us comfort against some hardship that he had imposed and that this too would weaken his discipline, threatening the little Sparta over which he was at all costs determined to preside. We were breastfed and therefore cuddled as infants, but have no memories of any physical display of affection from either parent. There was no serious doubt in our minds that Mother cared, but she was never at all physically expressive with us and we had to accept the reserved nature of her love.

She would bring us a packet of 'Polos' or 'Fruit Gums' to share when we met her off the bus to help carry the shopping, which were bigger tokens than they might have appeared: she had to account for every penny earned and spent, during Sunday morning financial 'conferences' with Father, so she was having to fiddle the books even to do this.

We would tag along behind her with the shopping, sucking a mint:

"What's for tea tonight Mum?"

"Wait and see".

"We had that last night, why don't you tell us?"

"Your Dad'll probably have made some stew."

"Sheep's head again?"

"Plenty of good vegetables too."

"Can we have a rest mum, these bags are heavy?"

"Once we get to 'Moonlight Wall.'"

'Moonlight Wall' was a section of exceptionally well-built dry-stone wall, about half way along the lane; according to local lore it had been built by someone working only by night. Perfectly straight and thirty yards long, it was six feet high with four courses of evenly projecting throughstones. We thought

of a man so busy, shy or modest that he could not work by day, and yet so skilled at his craft that his workmanship far outshone all the surrounding examples. The wall had a romantic, almost mystical association for me, as if it should somehow be emitting its own moonlight.

Mostly, Mother was herself too much afraid of Father to take any chance of provoking further calumny by appearing to be over motherly. She was always aware that he expected her to present her half of a united parental front, and consequently, although a cuddle would at times have worked wonders, we made do with the Polos. Although she never herself struck us she sometimes seemed to report our misdemeanours to him when we thought she could have taken the risk of concealing them: she would fear that discovery of any such deceit would further endanger us all. We loved her dearly, she was our own, and our mum; we knew that she loved us in return but we nevertheless sometimes longed for tactile reassurance. She was so seldom accessible: the times when our walkings coincided were the only times we were together without Father but her breathing difficulties when walking often prevented much conversation.

If in my own spare time I found a little grassy hollow among the moorland rocks, or some particularly inviting little nook, I would curl myself up in it for a few moments, it felt almost as if I was being nursed by nature, as if it were a maternal bosom, or a womb. I once spotted such a place close to the home of some other lad I was with at the time, and said to him, "I'll bet you've often snuggled in there."

He seemed to think me daft as he replied, "No, why should I?"

Feeling somehow short of attention, the year prior to starting school Peter and I went through a short spell of deliberately cutting our fingers with the bread knife. We would lay a left forefinger on the bread-board and give it a quick saw with the toothed knife, cutting not too deeply but then squeezing it so there was plenty of blood, before appealing for a plaster in which to wrap it.

"I've cut meself Mum."

"Not again, how?"

"It was the bread knife that did it."

“ How did it do it?”

“ It just slipped.”

Not without her suspicions she would wrap a makeshift bandage around it fairly dispassionately and go about her business. We gave up doing it when we realised that each time it happened Father was getting angry with her, calling her irresponsible and some other things, for allowing us access to the knife.

Soon after we started school Mother became almost the sole breadwinner since Father had drunk himself out of his final serious employment. Except when she was unwell, her work in Burnley, ironically in child welfare, gave her three or four days a week in which at least physically to escape him. The household economy was entirely dependent on her earnings but he never missed a chance to demean or ridicule her choice of work, and harangued her endlessly over ‘trick cyclists’ and ‘witch doctors’. For a long time we thought that Mother’s job literally involved trick cycling, which we thought was in some way associated with our Sunday ‘circuses’ on the lawn, which I shall come to shortly. We imagined her mono- cycling along the streets of Burnley, and it seemed strange that she never showed any such inclination or performed any acrobatic tricks at home. While she was away working he was responsible for most of the parenting, making life the more onerous to us, particularly during school holidays.

There was a period at age seven and eight when Peter and I and some village lads had, in the manner of some dark fairy tale, plotted an assassination. It was sunny weather at the time, and the plot took up every playtime at school for a number of days. There was Robert Parker, John Greenwood and Alan Marsden and some others – conspirators all. We huddled in the corner of the playground, full of ideas and enthusiasm. Various schemes were mooted, it had always seemed as if it would be so easy to do when Father was nowhere near, but of course the others were not to be in at the death: that was to be purely our responsibility. There were proposals to have him pushed into the beck whilst drunk or have his throat slit with the bread knife, and there was another to have him trampled over by a horse and cart with one of us as the charioteer. The most

favoured had been to club him with the rolling pin from behind, while he sat on his customary bench end seat drinking his evening ale. There was a blind corner behind him where the piano was later to go, and where the dresser stood against the back wall. The rolling pin could be acquired from the drawer of the dresser and the assassin could approach unseen. Looking back I am not sure whether it was intended that he should die instantly from the blow, fall forward and drown in his beer or tumble off the bench and be consumed by the fire but it all seemed perfectly feasible at the time – it would be done in a jiffy.

Of course it never was. As we left school in the afternoon and started for home, firstly with the half mile walk to the bus and the bus ride, followed by another two and a half miles of walking, our courage seemed to seep away with every step till by the time we were home the job seemed both Herculean and unconscionable. We would arrive back at school to whispers of ‘av you dunnit’ and have to reply in the negative. After a few days the village boys realised that it was never going to happen. There was never again any seriously considered threat of insurrection.

When mother *was* brave, the statutory response was always totally crushing. When she threw a jug of water over him he grabbed her by the hair whilst ordering us to bring buckets of water from the well. These he tipped over her before finally slamming an upturned metal bucket over her head, banging it on the side a few times with the flat of his hand and calling her ‘damned well incorrigible’. We wondered what that might mean and felt wretched helping him to punish her. Another time, when I was considerably older she was being beaten in an upstairs room when in a desperate appeal she had called my name. Heading for the stairs – though I could have done nothing – I met him clattering down them. He warned me against ever ‘interfering’, and made promises that if ever I did, I should be instantly destroyed. I returned meekly to the ranks of the unbrave. She was at times compelled to regale the outside world with tales of yet another tumble on the stair as an explanation for bruises. While she largely settled for a policy of appeasement, we children accepted one of unquestioning subservience.

We Receive an Orange

First day at primary school is one of those days that most of us remember. That severance from the maternal apron; that being abruptly left *in loco parentis* with adults you have never seen, among great numbers of strange children. Mother walked with us the first week, after which Peter and I, aged five and four respectively, walked the two and a half miles unchaperoned. Two years later Mary would also come with us after first receiving rigorous preparatory commando style walking training from Father. She would report excitedly to us at night,

‘I went over the bridge today Peter and Joe,’ or

‘I climbed three stiles today all by myself, di’n’tadad?’

She was also pretty well on with her reading by the time she went to school, partly as a result of a little slip up on her behalf. One day she proudly read aloud a long passage about a King organising a mighty feast and, Father not paying much attention to the relation twixt tale and text, praised her. When the rest of us arrived home in the evening she wanted to repeat the performance for us but when she read out the list of dishes for the feast Father realised that there was a completely new menu and that she had been making up most of the reading. He resolved to take her in hand.

That first day at school we were delivered up at the enormous Victorian gothic arched doorway and beheld within, two rows of children queuing to go into their classrooms. One or two were crying and a number were snotty nosed, both conditions absolutely forbidden at Hoarside. It did not look good. Next we were hustled into lines where a strange poem was being chanted by all those who knew it, which seemed at the time to be everyone. It was about ‘hallowed be thy name’, ‘kingdom come’ and ‘forgiving trespassers’ and made no sense at all. It was years before I solved the metaphoric notion of trespass. There was a woman who lived on a hill over the moors who used to accuse us of ‘trespassing’ if she caught us picking bilberries on her moorland; having no notion of what

constituted physical trespass either, we decided that the morning prayer might have something to do with bilberrying. It was the first we had heard of God, and 'Hallowed' (we would not be the first to consider), seemed a strange name for him. However, our first schoolmistress, Miss Wilcox, was a firm but fair spinster, and it was not long before we realised that what she posed as discipline was far less severe than the variety imposed by Father, so school became quite enjoyable. The main difficulty was time-keeping at each end of the day, both in getting to school and in getting home. We were given a small booklet that was to be signed each day by our class teacher to say we had arrived punctually. There were times when we had not done so when we begged the teacher to file a false report, which was done on very rare occasions after exacting a promise of improvement. Another ruse we tried was smudging a negative entry, or even tearing it out and saying that we had 'dropped' the booklet, or that it had fallen into a puddle.

Miss Wilcox was replaced after the first year or so by Miss Kirkman, who was straight from university and with whom we were to fall very much in love. In return she gave us a special place in her affections that, were they ever to do so, had not yet had time to become hardened by experience. Her teaching methods were more modern and interactive, with creativity and individuality considered as important. The three 'Rs' were interspersed with periods in which we slapped lots of bright water-colour onto large sheets of cheap paper. She would let us run little errands and we were generally desperate to please her. It was a marvellous pleasure just to be close to her, as if she were a substitute for the motherly contact that Father made sure we were denied at home.

We must have been fairly unwashed at times, and on summer days she would on occasion put hot water in a tub in the playground and clean us up with a bar of scented soap and a facecloth while other children were having their playtime. Of course we loved it, and strangely Father did not object, although he sent her a letter demanding that she could wash us as much as she liked but that she was not to wash our feet, which would become softened and less tough for walking the roads barefoot. In an exchange of letters Father had been so impressed by her clear Italic hand and possibly charmed by something that he read that he wrote his diary for about a month afterwards in an experimentally

similar style. She travelled to school on a scooter, which, as a result of its number plate and a certain singer who was popular at the time, was called Elvis. She was at one time passing the 'New Delight' quite late after school and saw the three of us standing outside. "What on earth are you doing here?" she asked, at which moment Father appeared saying, 'They are minding their own businesses and perhaps you might like to do the same'. Meanwhile, since he liked neither scooters nor pop stars, he gave Elvis a good kicking. We were once invited to tea by this teacher, which was a marvellous experience, once also by a later headmaster, and once or twice by an even later and caring secondary school form mistress who was from Scotland. The headmaster sent a note home saying we were nice lads but were plainly new to cream buns since, when his wife had given us them we had set about eating them complete with papers.

At times Father too decided that we were insufficiently clean. On identifying tide marks around our necks and ears he would take the stiff kitchen scrubbing brush from the scullery with a vessel of cold water. Holding us so firmly by the top of the head that the rest of it seemed to move around within a stationary and pinioned scalp, he would scrub us until we were sure he was through the flesh and getting down to the bone. His methodology was quite a contrast with that of our dear teacher and though it certainly cleaned us at the time, it did not one bit of good as a lesson: we were soon as dirty as ever, which seemed to us to be a happier and more natural condition.

We filled in a daily diary at school as part of our writing lessons and at one time almost a whole jotter was filled with entries like 'Got home late, got dry bread for tea and sent straight to bed'. Even Father was slightly embarrassed by this when the completed diary was brought home, although he made a good impression of laughing it off. It certainly gave the teachers an idea of our severe lives at home. Travelling barefoot was becoming very uncommon in the mid-fifties and shoes were replacing clogs. We were to travel barefoot for much of our childhood and to wear clogs at school all our schooldays, except very near the end when Mother secretly provided me with a pair of black shoes that I kept at school and of which I was extremely proud. They gave me a little belated 'classroom cred'. We were the butt of much peer teasing concerning our clogs,

and jeeringly called 'cloggyboots'. At primary school the other boys never allowed us to join in at football in the playground because they believed our clogs would burst the football. We were allowed to play as goalies, but only to throw the ball rather than taking goal kicks.

Going barefoot was a hardship for the first few weeks of spring when our feet were still soft from winter clog-wearing but the skin would soon thicken and give our feet some protection, although stubbed toes were a common enough affliction. The road up the valley was of a mixture of yellowy earth and roundish stones worn smooth by the passage of tractors, horses and carts and feed wagons. In wet periods there were huge water-filled potholes in which we delighted in sloshing about. Overall it was not a bad surface on which to walk and should we come to a sharply stoned patch it was possible to go on to the verge, finding softer and more grassy ways, while avoiding the thistles and nettles.

On returning to school after our second summer holiday we found that all this was changed. The farmers had by a co-operative effort, clubbed together and resurfaced the road. It was now desperately hard to walk upon, being surfaced with, sharp, coarsely crushed limestone from a roadstone quarry. Also it had been somewhat widened, reducing the areas of verge available for escape. The result of this was that we had gingerly to pick the most bearable route, and were even more often late for school and in getting home at night. Explanations fell on deaf ears at home, where they were heard rather as weak excuses, but with kinder concern at school. There was some correspondence between the head mistress and Father: she suggesting that perhaps the road being as it was bare feet were no longer appropriate, and he, in his customary fashion asking her please to attend to her own affairs. The fact was our feet were now sometimes bleeding when we arrived at school so she had some justification in feeling that perhaps it *was* now her concern. She knew too that we were being beaten at times and was placed in something of a quandary. Social workers were almost unheard of and school interference would almost be unprecedented; families had virtually inalienable rights to manage, well or badly, their own affairs.

However, she found in her own school a precedent for taking limited action. Another little girl had been being badly treated by her Father and the

headmistress had had a strictly unofficial word in the ear of P.C. Hartley, the local policeman, a physically big, well respected character in the community. He had visited the Father and no doubt told him that if he didn't toe the line things would not go well with him. This had seemingly worked wonders, with the little girl perking up almost immediately. The mistress had therefore felt that it might be worth applying the same procedure in our case, although under little illusion as to whether Father might prove rather less tractable.

She could not contact him at home and so rang the station and asked if the local officer could pop in and see her some time, it being nothing serious and that she did not want anything on record. The desk policeman saw a procedural malfeasance here and politely but firmly insisted that if she had something to report then she should do so through the proper channels. Thus the complaint unwittingly became official and any hope of Father receiving a quiet word in private melted away. In no time at all, the whole episode was escalating. Charges of cruelty were to be brought and the headmistress and Father (or rather Mother whom he sent as his emissary) were to sit at opposite sides of a court hearing. We children were first taken to the police station where we were seated on some old paraphernalia in a store- room while the press took photographs of our six bare feet. We were then taken to a children's home at Mirfield and there remained whilst the court proceedings were instituted.

In the grounds was a kind of gang hut-cum hideaway and although I was never to become a part of any fraternity at the home I would wander down there in the evening to be alone and have a look around. It was secluded amongst rhododendrons and felt safe and comforting inside, where it was strewn with the contents of a 'dressing up box': fabric and old clothes and material in which I would wrap myself and curl up. I was approached by one of the larger boys who seemed suddenly to have decided to be friendly, inviting me to leave the hut and go down to their building to meet and be friends with his friends. He turned out to be a double agent. I was beaten up and warned against dressing up in their clothes or playing in their hut. Tough guys these, but we shared kindred hurts.

We were told very little of what went on at court but the NSPCC officer, who was regarded there as over zealous and the headmistress who moved away shortly afterwards from the school, were the losers in the case. Mother had rightly or wrongly defended Father in his absence. Medical reports said that we were well muscled, intelligent, and healthy, which we were. That this rather missed the point had somehow escaped the gentlemen of the press who thought the headmistress in the wrong, dismissing suggestions of ill treatment. A number of journalists made the walk to Hoarside: one female carrying her court shoes under her arm as if to get a feel for this bare foot business, or alternatively because she had found herself unable to walk in them. Some offered financial inducements for a story, but Father turned them all away; they were to keep their money, get no stories and receive varying degrees of angry dismissal.

After arriving home again from Mirfield Father made us walk barefoot to the head mistress's house before she moved away, to apologise to her for deliberately causing so much trouble with our 'lying stories'. We were pretty well convinced that we had been the wrongdoers. She gave us a cuddle on the doorstep and sent us each away with an orange. For a period after this publicity, adults unknown to us, as well as children from school would occasionally make the long walk to Hoarside with toys, or baking, or to make some other well-meaning gesture, thinking that poverty was the sole reason that we had been going barefoot. If these new visitors could be prevented from doing so they were never allowed to see us but sent immediately home, with little in the way of thanks. The press continued to make occasional sallies in search of any further bits of news but seldom got within the palisades before being cursed and told to bugger off.

Discipline

Father had an agreement with Herbert the Butcher that at the end of his butchering week, which was a Thursday, he would provide us with twelve-and sixpence worth of what ever was remaining, which was always to include a pound or two of sausages. Sheep's heads were plainly not big sellers so were generally well represented among our final selection. We developed a scheme to try and reduce their number. A simpler expedient of taking a couple out of the bag and hiding them on the way home was becoming too troublesome. We would open the sack and there would be two or three black and white lifeless faces huddled in the darkness inside, eyes sometimes closed but more often opened, glazed and unseeing. We pitied them with their bloody noses and the mess where their necks had been and would lift out one or two and lay them respectfully at the back of the wall, covering them with grass: two less to carry, two less to eat. The new plan involved stealing a half crown from the meat money each week and saying to Herbert, with no ingenious preamble; 'Dad says to give us just ten shillings worth of meat - perhaps a few less sheep's heads'. We spent the half -crown at the village co-op on such things as we seldom otherwise saw, sherbet fountains, fruit and nut chocolate and orange squash which was of the diluting variety but which, in ignorance of the fact, we drank neat and thought a peculiar concoction. We once bought a tin of sweetened condensed milk, forgetting that we had no tin opener. It took us two nights on the walk home, hiding it the first night, to get into it with a series of sharp stones, but it was nectar once we were in!

The thieving worked well enough for a while, but things went finally to pot. The two or three sheep heads by which the quota was being reduced simply were not worth the half crown shortfall in Herbert's income. To be losing money in this way each week therefore represented poor business for him. He then started leaving out the sausages instead. There were few

telephones in the area and Father did not normally see Herbert at all, so if we had realised that the lack of sausages was soon going to give cause for inquiry and reverted to the full twelve and sixpence we might never have been discovered. We were though by then hooked on our weekly sugary delights, and somehow believed that the paucity of sausage would be seen as an act of God, like a poor potato crop, or the hens going off the lay.

We were playing Russian roulette and the odds were shortening. The thing began to unravel at about the same time as a tale had reached Father's ear that the lads were having a rare time at the Co-op these days: 'such fine lads, always polite and cheerful, often with chocolate up to th' een'. CHOCOLATE UP TO TH' EEN??!! A not particularly clever premonition, largely deduced from the way that the supplier of meat had been behaving, had told me that this would be the evening on which our nefarious activities would come to light, saying on the way home "Dad knows." He did. We had by now devised a code, a kind of Richter scale, for letting each other know what his mood was when we were unable to speak of it near his presence. It was important to know, so that we could especially avoid any unnecessary provocation: standing on the edge of the crater and poking the contents, as it were, before an eruption. The visual version was fingers held up, one for good, two for poor, three for bad, up to a maximum of five. If an audio system were appropriate, if we were too far apart for instance, or for some other reason could not see each other then a similar scale of single willow warblerish whistles was used.

We were hailed at the garden gate on the fateful night and there was neither time nor need for coded messages. The cauldron was already boiling.

"You've started serious stealing, have you? Well now you are forrit." 'Forrit' we certainly were. There followed a long process of verbal and physical truth extraction. We were reluctant to divulge the full extent of our thieving, and released the facts in small pieces, about six pen' worth at a time. The truth was, we had been running a similar scam with the milk money that had been even less well conceived, and so there were a good number of sixpences to the confession. He would stand us in a line on the lawn and knock us over by hitting

us round the head. We would then be ordered to stand up, questioned, and knocked over again. The more frightened we got, the less inclined we felt to make further admissions, which would be reduced to protestations of innocence of any further wrongdoing when the going got too rough. This went on intermittently for most of the next day, whilst Mother was sent off down the valley to try and ascertain the facts, and, what he called in his diary, 'the full extent of our criminal activities'. Once these were known Father felt free to give us a proper thrashing. I was given thirty- nine strokes which, given Father's tidy mind were probably meant to be forty. Peter was given something similar and Mary rather less; perhaps by then he was weary, like a 'devil sick of sin', or thought, probably quite rightly, she had been less to blame. Afterwards we were sent carting peat and turf for the fire; there was pain; but also a kind of release, a shedding of guilt, a knowing that we had transgressed. We made a little hidey-hole on the moor and hid what we called a 'memoriam': an old conker and a bobbin as a reminder of an awful day, and of getting over it. Healing.

This was the evening that we found the baby peewits. The rain had come on with the cloud bustling over the meadow and close- hugging the moors. Water from a previous storm had found its way into a mole run and scoured out a large molehill leaving it in the shape of a small crater. Cowering in there from the cold were a family of four chicks, their speckly down wet and clinging to their tiny bodies. We handled them; they were warm enough, and thinly cheeping. Their parents were wheeling overhead, frantically concerned, crying and diving. We thought the chicks were maybe not so wretched as they had first appeared and in leaving them felt more cheerful ourselves. We seldom saw young peewits, they were so well camouflaged and generally kept well hidden. We never knowingly saw these chicks again, but assumed they had been safely reared.

Father's system of justice was both arbitrary and absolute. There was never any recourse to a defence, no appeal, no room for doubt. The child who dared to speak in his own defence would have been a braver one than we were. It was generally confined to his own family, but not always. There was a time when we were being bullied on the way to school. He waited behind a wall one

evening and captured the culprit as he came past, giving him a severe beating with the hawthorn knobkerrie. While we thoroughly enjoyed the occasion, the boy decidedly did not. On reporting to his own Father, the two of them came over to Hoarside one evening shortly afterwards to protest the lad's innocence. To prove that he had been bullying us, rather than us simply being soft, Father made the boy and me have a fistfight on the lawn, expecting that I would lose. He was right, as a gladiator I was a failure. Perhaps aware of the dangers of arming his own troops – train them too well and you will have a *coup* on your hands or somebody coming at you from behind with a rolling pin – father gave us 'toughening up' training - timed runs, rope climbs, weight lifting and cricket ball catching – but no schooling in martial art or self defence.

Before the fight degenerated into a clinch, which had seemed the best way of avoiding further damage I was given a well bloodied nose and bruises around the face, without having inflicted any reciprocal hurts. My heart was never in it, but Father was happy that I had not given way. When he stopped the fight the lad produced a fine clean white handkerchief such as I had seldom seen, with a properly stitched hem and border, and helped me to wipe away the blood. Although Father said, "That'll be quite enough of that nonsense," I was quite touched by this unexpected kindness. The handkerchief served as a symbolic flag of enduring truce and from then on we bore one another no further malice. The boy's father was peaceable by nature and had refused to watch, saying it was no way to sort things out. In the end he mildly accepted the verdict that his lad had indeed been a bully, and they both promised that it would happen no more. They were as good as their word, for while the boy never became a friend, he did cease to be an adversary and I could eat breakfast of a morning without fearing to meet him on the road to school.

Breakfasts could be difficult for us anyway, an early morning ordeal where discipline regularly seemed to outstrip reason. An inability to eat heartily first thing in the morning was treated as insubordination, rather than simply a physical incapacity. This was particularly the case during a period of our early primary school days, when breakfast consisted of bread and dripping. The bread was homemade and brown, a lot denser than modern bread. It did not have the

universal child- appeal of a nice, spongy, soft white loaf. The dripping would be salvaged from the roasting of a piece of meat, usually mutton. There is something intrinsically unswallowable about mutton fat, it seems happy to stick to the roof of the mouth but not to precede any further.

So, on dark, winter mornings, when we had been rooted out of bed in what seemed like the middle of the night to parade and do our bits of household jobs and get ready for school, Father would sit us in a row at the big kitchen table and place before us his rough hewn lumps of bread, splattered with mutton dripping. At the sight of it your uvula and tonsils seemed to swell instantly in your throat, whilst your gullet in turn constricted and all traces of saliva disappeared from your mouth. It would take a weary half hour of being shouted at and slapped, being accused of being deliberately disobedient, and being variously threatened, before we would make any inroads into it. It is a popular old threat to say to children that they will get uneaten food for their next meal, but that was often exactly the way of it. Peter and I could just about cope; Mary, being the youngest, but expected to be equally capable, could not seem to manage to eat at all. On more than one occasion Father would bend her head roughly backwards and prod the bread down her throat with the pointed end of the fireside poker. It seemed to go an awful long way inside her and we used to think he was killing her. He would try the round, brass, handle end, all but choking her and then giving up, cursing her for making such a 'damned fuss', and calling her, once again, 'incorrigible'. He later tried us all with porridge, but for a time the results were little better. It was easier to swallow but we could not get it to stay swallowed. We would vomit in our plates and he would make us eat it again. More than once (though possibly not deliberately, since we did our best to conceal what was happening), he put a regurgitated plateful in the cupboard and brought it out for a later meal.

When we were older, breakfast for a number of years was beans. They were bought twice yearly in hundredweight sacks, along with other bulk groceries like flour which came in 144 pound sacks, a weight then known as a 'pack'. Dates too came in one hundredweight boxes. Sugar came in hundredweight paper bags; syrup in gallon tins; and Price's 'Snuffless Dip'

candles in bundles, linked by their wicks, like slender prisoners in off-white uniforms shackled at the neck. There were boxes of bars of hard Mother Shipton's soap that seemed equally unwilling to lather whether taken to the beck for personal ablutions, or steeped with boiling water in a tub of clothes. The 'Fairy' in green and yellow boxes was rather better. All this was brought by van from a grocer in Hebden Bridge and left at a farm a couple of miles away. From there we would pick it up with a borrowed horse and cart, or later on, with a tractor and trailer.

These haricot beans would be stewed with some stout and a ham pestle in a big brown pot in the fireside oven, in quantities sufficient for a week. Each morning a few dollops were ladled out into the frying pan and warmed up. Generally, by towards the end of the week the stout was going vinegary, so the beans had an offensive rancid taste about them. Father did not take breakfast so possibly never knew of this and certain it was that none of us were going to be the one to tell him. Beans, rancid or otherwise, are full of protein and highly nourishing and as he would doubtless kindly have reminded us, a long way from being anything to complain about.

In addition to the arbitrary nature of father's justice, it was not always equably distributed. He went through phases of picking incessantly on one or other of us and Peter was less tough than I was, less interested in the physical, pastoral, natural things in which Father wanted us to be interested. One of his most persistent demands of us all was that we should 'pull up our socks', and it seemed somehow that it was Peter's that he most often considered to be down. Attracted as Peter was to the scientific and the technical Father seemed to be peeved that he did not have the proper makings of a countryman. He took him twice from the breakfast table one morning and thrashed him in the barn for nominal misdemeanours, one of which was forgetting to fill the kettle, and the other failing to put the latch on the garden gate. When Peter returned the second time he was suffering as if from shock. I wanted to cry for him, struggling to halt the welling tears. He was not crying himself and it would not have been allowed. When Peter appears briefly in Father's diary he is 'in disgrace as usual' or 'Banished', which was to be sent to bed, or to 'molehilling', or to the naughty

corner, instead of joining in with whatever was going on. In another entry he is kept from school for a whole day of stone carting as punishment for being late home the night before.

There were times too when father was cruel to Mary. Peter and I shared a bed in a head to tail fashion, each in a flour or proven sack as a kind of sleeping bag. These had 'Allinson's Flour', or the initials of the British Oil and Cake Mills, 'B.O.C.M'. printed on them in black letters; we were aged five and six at the time, and wondered what 'bocm' meant. Mary, who was just four, had found some matches and been counting them out on our bed, where she liked to crawl into the bags or play during the day. Father had discovered a spilled match. A bullying inquiry concluded that she had been 'playing with matches', which was naturally forbidden as it presented a fire risk, and was as naughty as anything on the statute book. We were all sent downstairs except Mary, who was to be shown how dangerous it was, and how wicked to pick up matches that happened to be left within her reach. We had a deep sense of foreboding, but could not at first hear the shouting that we would have expected. After a few moments there came fearful screams from Mary that seemed to last interminably, followed by some shouting, interspersed with her pitiable sobbing. The whole drama was then almost exactly repeated, after which she was sent to her bed, Father coming downstairs - the rest of us being expected to carry on as normal.

Mary told us next day what had happened. He had held first her index and then her middle finger on each hand individually in a burning match, not extinguishing it until his own fingers were at the point of being burned. 'Aww, you cruel shit Dad, should have burned your own'. She had big, watery blisters that were subsequently given dressings and eventually healed, although one finger would never again bend properly at the central joint. I could never quite forget the sound of her screaming, any more than she could forget the burning. Strange it is, if such drastic punishment were to be considered a deterrent, that in later years we boys got up to all kinds of illicit tricks with matches. We often had little controlled fires on the moors, or would set fire to a clump of rushes even closer to home if we thought that Father was too drunk to notice, or preoccupied in entertaining visitors. We had occasional potato boiling sessions

on the moors, and fooled around with fireworks in the dark secrecy of many an October or November evening, and even in broad daylight on the way to school. Any one of these was a serious thrashing offence, but most of them, with the exception of the fireworks on at least three occasions, went undiscovered. In a seeming absence of any awareness of probabilities this kind of high stakes roulette was a perfectly acceptable condition of existence. Within our child-gambler's rose tinted world of present safety there was insufficient rational fear of future detection and the associated consequences. Either we heartily believed we should not be caught or else physical deterrents simply became an acceptable risk. Either way it seemed that the threat of violence was ineffective as a means of keeping order.

There were other times when it did seem as though it was me that he was about to eliminate. There was one particular day when my hands had gone numb with cold. We got milk from down the valley three times a week, which was put for us into a gallon syrup tin that we picked up from its hiding place behind a wall and carried the two and a half miles home. When we had been smaller we had carried it strapped to our backs but the lid would leak and the milk would soak our shirts, or in the warm weather the shaking action of walking would result in the cream element of the milk turning to pellets of butter, so we now carried it at our sides. We carried all sorts of things, indeed with no transport everything had to be carried, much of it in hessian sacks and often much heavier than a mere gallon of milk. It was not the weight of the milk that caused trouble on this occasion but the fact that the metal handle had made my hands cold. This in itself was no problem either. The house was over eleven hundred feet above sea level so the winters could be pretty cold and we were well used to it. Father did not allow us to wear gloves or hats as he said they would make us soft. We had a glove or two that we shared clandestinely with the most needy being given priority, including one particularly warm fleece lined mitten that we kept hidden in a nearby wall for a year or two and of which he never had any knowledge; but for the most part, and certainly within a fair radius of home we went gloveless.

I had carried home the milk: it was during a school holiday and about mid-day when I arrived. It being a coldish day my right hand particularly, was

quite 'numb'. This was not normally a problem: I could soon get the circulation going again with a session of arm flapping or 'cabman's fling'.

As I came through the garden gate Father was working just below the path digging over a new patch of potato ground. The ground was not his to cultivate; it was the neighbouring farmer's, who was also our landlord, but he had enclosed it anyway. He took in a piece from time to time as the family increased in size, moving back the perimeter fence to accommodate the new ground. It had been a great source of hilarity (albeit stifled) when he had fenced in this particular piece of ground. The sheep netting had been rolled out flat on the sloping ground ready for standing up and stapling to the posts. Netting is always more eager to be rolled up than laid flat so he had posted one of us to each end as an anchor. Somehow the end at the top of the hill broke free when Father went to move it and the tension with which the end sprang up knocked him off balance so that he fell on top of it. The netting then proceeded to roll back down the hill, forming a big loosely rolled coil with Father in the centre. He did not go so far as to see the funny side of it - after all, one of us was surely to blame - but while we struggled to suppress our giggles he managed to suppress his anger and on clambering out recovered his cap and set about rolling out the wire a second time.

Today, Father was digging this new enclosure. He took a countryman's pleasure in the act of ploughing, or digging as it was for him: deep burying of turf; conversion from sward to friable soil; the promise of fertility and productivity for the coming season. I was always impressed by the depth of the trench that he dug in which to lay the turf face downwards and by the volume and depth of soil that he then seemed able to find with which to cover that turf, meanwhile leaving another tidy trench for the next furrow.

He called me over to speak and after sharing comments on the coldness of the weather suggested that I should button up my jacket. I was going about this in my usual fashion, with both hands, when he decided that manly men, or gentlemen, or whatever it was that he aspired that we should be, fastened their buttons with the one hand only and told me thus to do it. Being right handed this was the hand I used but it being for the moment numbly reduced to a left, with

fingers that felt as though they were disconnected from the palm, and far too big and numerous, I could no more have buttoned my jacket with it than I could have flapped it in the air and flown. He resorted to his well- tried solution to most such matters and started slapping me on the side of the head, which soon warmed my ears, but did not help my hand. The blows got harder and started knocking me over. He would tell me to get up again and button my jacket until finally I was pitched full length into his trench. I was looking up from the dark of the hole, cocooned almost, with the newly turned earth above and beside me. High above was what seemed like a fearfully magnified black silhouette of Father against a bright winter sky. He was poised with his hand on his spade like a Grim Reaper on a digging day. I was convinced for a moment that he would take the spade, chop me up, and cover me over as he did so well with the turf. When I again clambered up onto my feet he seemed to have cooled down, suddenly grasping that my ineptitude was due to my numb hand, and was genuinely apologetic. Again, as when he tended the septic belt wound, it was almost as if it was an aberrant ‘someone else’ for whom he bore no responsibility who spent so much time administering discipline, and here, now, having welled to the surface once again, was the real, if more usually inaccessible Nick, telling me to go inside and get warmed up.

Another time he had me rock climbing in Hardcastle Crag. He was standing back at the base of the rock commanding me to continue upwards even though it was becoming more difficult. Discipline, he believed, should extend beyond reason to blind obedience, as if life were some permanent ‘over the top lads!’ trench warfare and here was a chance to put the theory to practice. I had reached a stage where the rock was unclimbable. Above my head was simply a rounded boulder with no hint of a handhold. In addition it was wet and covered with a slimy growth. Despite my saying that this was the case he ordered me to pull myself up. As a result I fell quite a distance, bouncing on my way with my neck and shoulders from a grassy tussock. This broke my fall but injured my neck, which was stiff and painful for weeks afterwards. He laughingly called me ‘wryneck’ and his concerned diary reads ‘Joe learned to fly. Downwards’. Then, since he now produced his own weekly supply of beer: a higher priority *non-secitur*, ‘Brewed.’

Dusty, our little terrier was not exempt from his disciplinary expectations. We were half way round one of our longer walks, and again down in the woods one day when Dusty, who was getting old, found that her back legs had suddenly started to cease to function properly. Father kicked her along a couple of times until it was plain she was not going to walk any further. He called her an idle little hound, or something similar, telling her that if she thought we were going to carry her she had 'another think coming'. We were not sure what exactly she did think but he tied some twine to her collar, laid her on her back and dragged her the whole way home. We couldn't really believe he would do this but she had a thick coat and since most of the ground was soft he told us it was more undignified than painful for her. We remained unconvinced. She seemed glad to be home and did not seem to offer him any reproach. If he was sorry for her he never let it show. She did not die immediately, but lay around listlessly in her kennel for a while, eating very little and quietly fading away.

Peat Cutting

Mother and father came to Hoarside from a place a mile and a half down the valley, Lower Fold, which they had rented previously but which had not proved satisfactory. Father always maintained that one of their chief reasons for moving had been that a close neighbour, Gasgoigne by name, 'Gasbag' by repute, had taken to roaring around at night trying to chase in his hens with an ex-army three tonner, of which there were plenty available for farm use at the time. Leaving for posterity their initials carved in bold and tidy upper case lettering on the stone chimney- breast Nick borrowed an ancient Clydesdale to haul an equally ancient cart, loaded all of us and our few possessions and moved to Hoarside, further up the valley. We first of the children were two, three and four years old at the time, and have no memories of the removal. He had undertaken a good deal of preparatory work at Hoarside, which had been uninhabited since before the war, during which a Lancaster bomber had crash-landed on the moor close by. The surviving crew had stumbled in the darkness towards Hoarside, and then smashed up some of the shelves and doors to make a fire. Father often cursed them through the years for this: as an Army man he might not have been so upset if they had been soldiers, but he had little time for the R.A.F.

Once we were installed in the new house peat cutting became an early and important part of our way of life. Between the farmhouse and the moorland was a large area of old pasture that had at one time been fenced and grazed and cut for hay but had now reverted to course grazing. There were large areas of rushes, and the mixed grasses were interspersed with upland flowers, sorrel, bedstraw and tormentil. A little path was worn across this pasture, making its way to an old five bar gate that opened on to the moorland proper, and then on

through the tussocky grass to the peat bed. Peat was a seemingly limitless resource, the moors stretched for miles and the amount that could be cut was restricted only by a man's capacity to do the necessary work and by the length of summer and fair weather in which to get it dry enough for burning. Father and Mother both loved these beautiful peatlands and as a family in those early days we spent long summer days among them. The horizons would quiver in the heat haze; where one hill met another the semi-horizon would shimmer and dance, sometimes blue and hazy, sometimes as an almost translucent mirage, indistinct and liquid. When we were small we thought the hills were literally melting. Only in cooler air would they solidify and resume their fixed positions.

The cotton grasses, or mosscrops as we called them, delighted us throughout our childhood. We would nestle amongst them, or feel their softness against our faces; we made nests and beds with them and we picked bunches – sweaty hands clasped full. I recall one of my sisters (there were three more children later on) lying amongst them and smiling happily as she innocently showed me her rose-red girlhood for no greater reason than that I had asked her – perhaps marginally less innocently – what it might look like. We took mosscrops down to the house, putting them lovingly in jam-jars of water as presents for Mother and they would keep almost indefinitely, if growing a little grey with smoke and household dust. In season the whole moor was a waving mass of white silk, concealed beneath which golden plovers held piping conversations, plaintively breaking the silence. Pewit and curlew called too, and there was the occasional tweetling of mountain linnets flying overhead on their way to nest sites on the higher ground.

We found fresh peat a wonderfully dirty substance: rich and buttery, squelching between our fingers and toes. Smearred on our skins, either in the course of work, or in fun, it baked and cracked with our body heat, or with the heat of the sun. It would work its way down behind finger and toenails from whence it was almost impossible to remove, particularly where Mother Shipton's soap was the only cleansing agent available. Handling it was an equal and opposite delight to the clean and silky pleasure of the cotton grass.

At first we stacked the wet, newly cut peat into cairns or little stacks near-hand but they were slow to dry and the sheep rubbed them down. Later it was wheeled to the walls and laid along the wall top where it dried much more quickly and was out of reach of the sheep. When the crashed bomber had been salvaged by the government, a hole was made in the wall to allow the fuselage to be towed through from the moor onto firmer ground. The wings were not high enough to clear the wall so on each side of the central gap the top half of the wall was pushed over for the length of a wing. This rumble-jumble of stones we called the 'low wall.' It was the first to be covered with peat as it was nearest to the bed. After this all the nearby walls came to be divided up into 'sections': each section, on being well covered, representing a day's work. This was useful to Father in working out how much fuel he would have for the winter since he knew how much peat was on a section. It was also useful when he later delegated the work and would know exactly how much we were doing.

To start with he and Mother carried the peat on a simple stretcher but he began to turn his mind to the development of a lightweight wheelbarrow, so that peat cutting and leading could become a one-man job. It was based on a bicycle wheel with its axle set into two simple holes at the front end of the chassis legs. The two 'chassis' timbers did not run parallel from where the wheel bearings were located, but splayed out sufficiently for the other ends to form the shafts. A platform body was attached to the top of the chassis, and two sturdy legs sprouted from beneath. There was undoubtedly a hint of Heath Robinson to the finished product, but despite this it was surprisingly sturdy and eminently functional. When we were small, a ride on it up to the moors was a real treat.

It also became the cause of considerable frustration when, having grown to the worthy ages of six or seven we were to learn to wheel it. It was far too big for us. The shafts were at elbow height and much wider apart than the width of our bodies. To lift the barrow at all off the ground our arms needed to be almost horizontally out from our sides, a position where human arms have remarkably little strength. Wheeling it up hill the quarter mile to the peat bed was a feat that took both of us a whole summer of practise before achieving. It would fall over first to the left then to the right, with one of us tangled in the shafts. It liked to

run into walls or tumble down bankings, stubbornly refuse to lift its legs off the ground or deliberately dig one of them in unexpectedly and tip us onto its platform or over its shaft. If it was possessed merely of a high degree of dumb obstinacy it had a way of making it look like malice; at its meanest it would run us over or otherwise come to rest on top of or upside down beside us, with its wheel spinning airily to a standstill: tic... tic... tic... ha... ha... ha! Perhaps its main aim in life was simply to remain where it was, yet it never had the courage to argue with Father; when he pulled it empty behind him it would follow him docilely wherever it was led, and when he pushed it before him it obligingly led the way.

Father refused to see that it was the scale and geometry of things that were getting the better of us rather than that we were being 'gormless'. There was endless scope for humour in our efforts, but for the most part he refused to see it, managing to make a protracted discipline of the barrow pushing lessons. When we finally mastered the job, as much by growing a little (an achievement wholly outwith our own or even Father's control), as by learning any new skills, the pleasure of making the barrow go where and when we wanted it was enormous. It was akin to the delight in staying upright on a bicycle for the first time, but doubled as it also gave us the satisfaction and pleasure of pleasing Father, which was in our hearts always what we wanted most to do.

We continued to carry home the dried peat as well as un-dried surface turf, or fleight, in sacks. Dry peat was knobbly and uncomfortable but fleights moulded nicely to our backs. They could be collected for most of the year, and brought straight home to the fire. We would often each be sent for a single sack-full before breakfast as a constructive alternative to the morning run to the 'iron gate'. In the early winter, before the end of the bare-foot season had been pronounced we would run up to the moors trying to stand only on the rushes where the frost was not so thick. Nevertheless our feet would be so cold that they were painful. When we got to the moor and out of sight we would each piss on the ground, keeping it in a small patch then standing in the frothy pool. The sudden voluptuous warmth would come searing into our soles. Once our sacks

were filled it was the quick dash home, downhill this time but loaded, warm and breathless, feet down there somewhere, frozen again and not fully a part of us.

A second barrow arrived one day as a gift from a drinking friend of Father's who had generously pulled it some three miles over the hill. It was quite a superior cart, with twin motor-cycle wheels, a much bigger platform and a cross piece tied with string across its steel shafts so that two people could pull it. It increased our output tremendously. Peter and I often suspected one another of slacking when we were using it, and had fearful rows. "Come on Pete, I've pulled this right across the field on my own"

"I was testing you back there, and when I stopped pulling how come the cart stopped?" he would reply.

"You're a liar, you're always dodging."

"No I'm not, you're always bullying." And so it would go on, sometimes coming to blows, sometimes blowing over - a thump on the shoulder from me, a reciprocal one in the ribs from him. Most punches would be pulled, partly for fear of leaving a mark and partly through having no serious wish to hurt one another; work would petulantly be resumed.

The main fault with the cart was the cross piece on the shafts. It was made of wood and the shafts were of iron. We had no metal drill to make holes in the shafts for a proper fixing so the crossbar, tied on with string, endlessly came loose. If we were heavily loaded and the wheels sank in a patch of wet ground our extra exertion would pull off the crossbar and we would land on our backsides each roundly blaming the other.

One hot summer's day the cart was sitting idle for once while we were having a 'circus' on the lawn when there was the loud bang of an explosion for which all investigations at the time could find no explanation. Upon the sudden noise the circus had been totally disrupted whilst we scoured the garden and fields for an armed intruder. We were disappointed at drawing a blank, thinking that there might be more shots, or that we would see Dad throttling the suspect or, less likely, the suspect throttling Dad. However, when a day or two later we came to use the cart we found one of the perished tyres had exploded in the heat

of the sun. No attempt was ever made to provide us with a new one, and the cart became considerably harder to pull with its flat tyre. We would argue over which of us was to pull the more difficult side until further hot weather later settled the issue by bursting the other one.

Circuses, like the one halted by the explosion, would occur on summer Sunday afternoons on the central lawn. The weather needed to be fine and Father in good fettle. Around the lawn, and quite separate from the vegetable plots he had created a beautiful garden, full of lupins, cat mint and tall blue delphiniums. All had their place amongst a host of other herbaceous flowers and were complemented in season by spring bulbs and summer bedding. There were specially designated wet corners with lily- of -the- valley and forget-me-nots, semi-wild areas of bramble and loganberry and patches of mint, strawberry and rhubarb. Shelter was created by birch, rowan, larch and sycamore culled as saplings from distant woodlands. There were flowering currants grown from cuttings, and round much of the perimeter was the enclosing ring of elder. There were grassy paths that in spring meandered through patches of bluebells or daffodils and in summer long grasses with variously pendulous and upright seedheads. In the centre of it all was the main lawn that on these occasions doubled as a circus arena.

A family friend, whom we never knew as anything but 'Mr Cornholme', after his place of origin, and who was an accomplished acrobat, would arrive, as would other visitors whose accomplishments lay more in the drinking, spectating and conversational departments. Rocking chairs and benches would be brought out onto the lawn, along with a jug or two of ale. We would gallop around giving the younger children piggy-backs and doing somersaults; Mary and some visiting girls would have fits of giggles as they leaped in turns from the slate roof of the lean-to scullery into father's arms. Mr Cornholme had left a set of Indian juggling clubs with us, which were brought out when he arrived. He would stand on a board on top of a roller and while thus balancing, rather like we had imagined Mother to do on her monocycle, performed a variety of tricks. Handsprings, walking on his hands and single handstands were also a part of his repertoire. We thought he was wonderful but he always modestly said the

things he did required no particular skills and that we would soon be doing them ourselves. We learned to balance on the roller but could never juggle.

There was a heavy piece of welsh slate that had once been a mantle piece, about a foot wide and four feet long, that we would carry out onto the lawn to put the roller on so that it ran smoothly. As a result of a bit of foolery one Sunday evening Peter and I dropped this on the cobbled yard, breaking it into three pieces. We did not tell Father who was by that time quite drunk and continued to drink into the evening, to the extent that, when he got up next morning he swore he could remember nothing of the previous afternoon. This was too good an opportunity to miss, so we got the conversation round to the broken slate. "Do you remember how good Mr Cornholme was?"

"Vaguely".

"Do you remember tumbling in the Yard?"

"No, not at all."

"Don't you remember breaking the slate when you fell?"

"Did I? ...No, not at all. Well I never."

We used an old plank for the roller after that; it seemed to do just as well, was lighter to carry and was less likely to break should Father fall with it again.

Circus naturally at times escaped the formal confines of its designated arena on the central lawn and transformed itself into a carnivalesque riot-cum-circus that chose its own time and location and created its own set of rules. In one such departure on a fine day during a summer holiday period Peter and I were performing a feat of athleticism to which father was not a party. Running along the wall- top we were clearing the delphiniums in a single leap on to the lawn when down rumbled a substantial section of the drystone wall beneath us on to the yard in front of the house. Father was being visited by a gentleman from the Inland Revenue at the time, who fortunately for us, having completed the business of the day in an admission of defeat, had partaken of a mug or two of beer and wandered into the garden alone for what was euphemistically known as 'a breath of air', immediately after the collapse of the wall. We told him an alarming tale of how we would be skinned within an inch of our lives and deprived of food for a week, not to mention other direr than dire and heavily

larded consequences. "What about," we suggested, "you going in and telling dad that as a result of your stumbling onto the wall a part of it has collapsed?"

"That's a great idea boys," says he, entering fully into the spirit of things. Straight into Father he went, asking forgiveness for his clumsiness - which was immediately granted. Then he offered to reimburse father for any expense incurred in the rebuilding, which generous offer was appreciated but declined. "Nay, bother none," says father, in good humour at the earlier demise of any suspicion of anything resembling a tax liability, "the lads and I will soon build it up again." We, by now sidling into the company and incredulous at this man's generosity and our own good fortune, were pleased to have the opportunity of giving him an assurance that, far from being any trouble it would indeed be a pleasure to repair the wall. We never got the opportunity to thank him privately for his kindness.

On another occasion after a circus, Father had been standing on his big flat stone at the corner between the yard and gable end doing a bit of surveying when, seriously drunk, he had fallen into the elder bushes below him on the sloping ground. We found him lying in sylvan oblivion with his head considerably lower than his feet. We spent a happy evening trying to winch him from the undergrowth with ropes and timbers, enthusiastically snapping branches from his beloved trees when we saw fit. He was like a wet mattress, - kept flopping and bending just when we needed him to be rigid. He would grunt or groan now and then, contentedly, and his cap kept falling off. We had fun putting it back on him at all kinds of silly angles. We did not want to admit defeat but Mother called us away, telling us to leave him to his own devices. In the morning we furnished him with no explanation for all the broken trees, but did remind him that he had fallen there the night before. "Along with a herd of bullocks by the look of it," he said, surveying the damaged trees and looking suspiciously for signs of guilt, but seeing apparently none. He had again lost his cap, which turned up snagged on one of the few remaining branches, so he reluctantly accepted responsibility.

Sundays were in an informal sense, a day of semi-rest; set aside, apart from circuses, for drinking, leisure or odd jobs, one of which in the morning was

riddling the ashes collected in the shippen from the week's fires. These were shovelled a little at a time into a hand riddle and shaken vigorously. The ash went through the mesh, but any small cinders were saved, recycled and burned again during the following week. While we children did this, our parents would have what became known as a Sunday morning 'conference', in which Mother had to account for every penny of her weekly budget. They were often bullying bad tempered affairs from which she would generally emerge browbeaten and exasperated, and he dissatisfied in general and most particularly with her accountancy. Conferences were best for everyone if curtailed by the arrival of visitors, upon which Father's demeanour would instantly change.

"Let the long contention cease!" he would cheerfully announce in mock defeat, or tell her with generous irony,

"You are one in a million," or "Your like would be bad to find," as he transferred his attention to the guests.

On weekdays while we were at school, Father cut much of the peat alone on the moor where he was visited on occasion, in a seemingly platonic sort of way, by a beautiful and enigmatic lady by the name of Marjorie, with black hair and lovely smiling eyes. Such creatures were spread thinly on the ground and though we saw little of her we thought her lovely. As youngsters we were remarkably susceptible to physical beauty: we believed it was associated with sweetness of nature and thought Dad lucky to have such a visitor. She was however a rare and fragile summer migrant; for most of the time peat cutting was just plain peat cutting, and after the famous second barrow arrived Peter and I and sometimes Mary would be expected to be up on the moor during the holidays, helping to cart the peat to the walls.

It was on one of these days that Father decided he would teach Peter and me the points of the compass but we proved too slow for his liking on the uptake. One direction seemed indiscernible from another: endlessly bobbing mosscrops set against shimmering semi-horizons. These in turn melted into distant hills or a great arc of sky with its own shifting confusion of cumulus. Not being all that tall, standing in the sunken bed placed the moor almost at our eye level: we just could not seem to fix a point of reference. He would stand behind

one of us with the palm of his hands on the sides of our faces, just as he did on frosty winter nights when he was teaching us the heavenly constellations, turning our heads and saying “There is North” or “There is South-East”. These compass points met with the same limited comprehension as the stellar configurations: we knew he was going to turn unpleasant and this somehow prevented the knowledge that he was trying to impart from sinking in. The hands on the side of the head became rougher, gradually changing to ear tweaking mode; the ‘clog toe’ would come into use; in the end he would be pulling one of us by one ear and throwing him bodily across the peat bed floor. “Over there,” he would say, “is North-West.”

We did eventually grasp the concept of the points as permanently fixed positions relative to sun and moon and peat bed. More intuitively, we began to understand the different characteristics of weather systems and cloud patterns associated with wind blowing from these differing directions. The arrival at any given time or place of fair weather, enveloping fogs, spells of drizzle, freezing rain, snow, hail, thunder floods and droughts, all were to a considerable extent determined by where the wind was coming from.

In winter it came searing from the north, burning the life and colour from the grasses that carpeted the valley, or burying the vegetation entirely in fine snow that blew and smoked across the landscape for days, piling up in fantastically sculptured edifices behind the walls, burying sheep and filling the lanes and hollows with drifts. This was a time to stoke up the fires and close up all external doors, laying old sacks at their thresholds to prevent the snow from blowing in. We might be housebound for a number of days, dependent entirely on stored supplies of fuel and food. When the wind eased we would venture out of doors to a white-burdened world and shovel the snow in big, light, randomly hewn cubes from the yard and path. We might be taken on a snow-clearing expedition further down the valley where the spin-drift blowing into our excavations would all but freeze our hands to the shovel and we would think it stupid that father forbade the use of gloves.

Nearer home, our first hope of a glimpse of any snow-free vegetation might be where the land, in some sheltered nook, lay directly to the south. There would be warmth on the coldest day in such a southerly facing corner. We might cower there for a while in the gleam of a winter sun, watching the heat bringing a watery shine to the knife-edge of a drifted cornice while we wiped the streaming snot from the cold little noses of our younger siblings.

“Have you got a hanky Pete?”

“No, have you Mary?”

“I’ve got sub paper of my own, it’s wet though.”

“We’ll just use it. You’ve been using your sleeve again, Dad’ll be mad.”

“Yes, I’ll hide it.”

“Here we are... Blow!”

“Aww, my doze is sore.”

“Sorry.”

In a hot sunny summer, the wind, for long periods settled in the West, might begin to back South – North’s polar opposite; thunder cloud would begin to build and the heat would become sultry and oppressive. Thinking back, I can feel the sense of expectancy. The light takes on a strangely yellow tinge and the valley turns eerily hushed. The birds stop singing and there is almost a tangible sense of suspense. I wait for that first flash of light and crack of thunder. I expect it, but it keeps me waiting as the clouds jostle for position and altitude, and the first big drops of water hit my bare arms and the hot earth. A great fork stabs across the sky and I count the seconds till the thunderclap. It is tremendous, a ripping, crashing tearing, cacophony, it rumbles across the black canopy, echoing, dwindling and finally dying. One half of me is disappointed that it was so long between the flash and the bang, hoping that next time there will be a lesser interval, bringing the storm closer, but my other half, with the self-preservation instinct taking over and safety in mind, wants the intervening period to be a longer one. The rain becomes torrential as I shelter under the arch of the barn doorway - never under a tree Father says - with frightening tales of riven oak and smoking pylon. The water is sloshing off the roof and running down the yard in rivulets but the next flash is further away. Then, Flash! Crash, almost simultaneous, and the rainfall increases, it is flattening the delphiniums

and the lupins and I know Father is going to be much displeased. The river is starting to rise in the valley bottom but the next strike is more distant again as the thunder moves away and seems to reverberate around the hills. The cloud begins to disperse and I see the sunlight on a distant hill reaching out slowly towards me. I can smell the lightning and the air, though still motionless, has cleared and freshened. It is passing: though the beck is running brown now and will rise a while yet, the gush from the eaves is slowing - disintegrating into a shower of glittering droplets. Black is giving way again to blue and the clouds are again edged with white; a first curlew tentatively pipes a few preliminary diminuendos just across the river.

The south was also associated for us with the clamour of urbanisation, faint sounds of which would reach us on a southerly airstream. Here lay the industrial valleys of Lancashire, with, instead of empty moorland, row upon row of back-to-back slate roofed mill workers homes and cobbled streets, coalfields, cotton spinning sheds, mills and railways. Sometimes in the early mornings while musing in the little house round the building end we could hear the steam engines in the railway sidings, shunting, whistling or letting off steam. When we were small we thought these were 'sky-trains': though not entirely sure how they worked we thought they were no less a reasonable notion than aeroplanes and ran on parabolic rails that spanned the clouds. We once considered the possibility of harnessing them to cart molehill soil and peat but it was an ebbing fantasy of childhood and the sky-trains soon went back to their station.

Real world peat meanwhile, was hauled manually and piled in tall square stacks in the barn beside the coal. It was a good feeling in the autumn to see the barn well filled in preparation for the long winter. Father had knocked a hole through the thick stone wall of the living room to allow passage into the shippen and beyond to the barn, which enabled us to get fuel to the fires without going outside when there was heavy snow. The doorway was very small and the door, being hinged on the shippen side, formed a recess in the wall of the living room that was just large enough to accommodate a standing child, which it did on a regular basis. This was long before such a notion was popularised by televised child psychologists but it came to be the designated 'naughty corner.' Small

misdemeanours were punished by banishment here: 'Naughty corner!' would come the clipped command, and a miscreant child would slink there, keeping out of reach of his clog toe, like a dog ordered to its kennel. A cold little place it was, as well as alarmingly dark. From here it was forbidden to make a sound, so we were sometimes sent there and then forgotten, not discovered perhaps until someone else was needful of passage, or a well disposed sibling drew Father's attention to our plight. There was a system of discipline where either Peter or I were on duty, alternating on a weekly rota. The one on duty was 'Duty Dog' and would be the one to run to attention when fuel was to be carted in, or one of any number of such jobs were needing attention. Father would shout "Dog!" and expect the Dog to appear immediately. If not it was "Where's that damned Dog!"

"He's in the naughty corner."

"He's no damned business being in the naughty corner."

"You sent him there Dad," the non-Dog would pipe up, bravely, at great risk to himself, but better than the risk of being given the Dog's work to do.

He would reply in a volatile mix of anger and humour: "Hmm, I suppose I did, come out of there at once Dog, and don't let me catch you hiding in there again! Let's have some coals and peats fetched in, sharpish."

One of the few perks of being Dog therefore was that he was seldom in the naughty corner for too long. Duty could be mild or onerous, depending on such things as the prevailing state of the Richter scale but also on whether we had visitors, how long and how late the roistering would go on and how far up the chimney the Mad Stoker was piling the peats. An errant Dog could be sentenced to an extra week on duty, which would be doubly galling as it gave the Non-Dog who could seldom conceal a grin as sentence was passed, an extra week of comparative freedom.

Serious work, like carting in the peat and turf from the hill was outside the scope of the Dog and a shared responsibility. One particular July day, with peat carting in full swing we decided that we would have, like Richmel Crompton's 'William' before us, a little 'furtive feasting'. We had done this

before and it had been a great success: we would take the 'stove' that Peter had made us from an old food tin and filch matches and a jam jar full of paraffin from the lamp department. Then, after secretly digging up some potatoes by scraping into the side of the drill without disturbing the foliage, and stealing some butter from the big cupboard in the kitchen we would set off on a turf gathering trip. Once on the moor we would set the potatoes to boil in an old panikin that we kept hidden in a wall and by the time we had the cart with the flat tyres filled, having duly argued about who was working the least hard, the potatoes would be soft enough to eat. Since there was not a fruit tree for miles around, they always made a good substitute for the peculiar pleasure over and above the everyday eating of apples that could be derived from the consumption of stolen ones.

On this occasion, things went awry. The 'blow' grass, a long leafy grass that dries out in the winter and either blows away and hangs on fences, clings in the chinks in walls or lies at the base of the tuft when the new grass comes in the summer, had caught fire beside the stove. By the time we got to it the surrounding grass was well alight and the hot summer wind was fanning the flames onto a rapidly widening area. Try as we might we could not stamp out the fire; it is not an easy job in bare feet and it was rapidly getting out of control. This looked like a disaster for us, but there were one or two things in our favour. Firstly, there were quite often grass fires in the Summer, occasionally started inadvertently or deliberately by persons unknown or mischief makers, or by the shepherds in order to rejuvenate the grazing and gamekeepers in the early spring, bent on heather improvement. When we were younger Father would set off, sometimes alone and sometimes assisted by local farmers, to put out the accidental fires with wetted hessian sacks. He would seem like a soldier, marching off to war; he would be away for hours, working like a demon and would return looking like one, with blackened face, reddened eyes, and a raging thirst. Nowadays, being less fond of work, and particularly unnecessary work, he was more inclined to ignore them and let them run their course.

Also, Hoarside was close to a right of way and hikers and walkers coming along the moor-edge were not uncommon. With the fire now raising

goodly clouds of white smoke we dragged our cart along behind the wall so that if we were observed we could be seen approaching the house from a direction further round the moor edge where we had, according to the story we were to tell, been working. We found Father deeply engrossed in the *Daily Telegraph*, perhaps Peter Simple was particularly good that day; he had a Dornford Yates novel laid open on the couch beside him (maybe 'Berry' and he had been spiritually sharing a quart) and Angela Thirkell (or at least one of her books), was awaiting his attention on the end of the table. Whatever the reason he seemed totally unconcerned when we anxiously informed him that we had seen, from where we were collecting turf, two hikers come, a fire start, and the hikers make quickly off down the valley. He had taken a cursory look towards the hill and said,

“ Damned Hikers, careless lot of buggers, it’s lucky the smoke is blowing away from us,” before returning to his *Telegraph* and near empty blue-ringed pot. He was inclined to think hikers a ‘Bolshy lot of trouble makers’ and had much to say on the day he went out to survey one of his vegetable plots and saw that half a row of swedes were absent off parade, taken he concluded, by ‘hikers’. There was a little row of vacant craters where they had formerly stood in the drill and father was more than a little displeased. However, nothing was going to trouble him today.

“Carry on lads,” he said, “Finish that load and then your time’s your own for the rest of the day,” followed shortly and strangely absent- mindedly by “Dog! Put a couple of peats on the fire while you are here- it’s too warm for a big fire.” There was a pan steaming above the flames, and he added “Just enough to boil them potatoes.”

Two Go Absent

The new primary school to which we were sent, after the barefoot business, was about six miles from home if we walked down the valley, meeting the bus at about the half way point. There was always something fascinating to watch which caused a deal of unpunctuality. At one time, the foot bridge by which means the path crossed the stream was being repaired by the Local Council: it had been decided after much deliberation that it was their responsibility to see that we were able to get safely to school when the river was in spate. The crossing was a pretty little spot, sheltered and sunny, rich with bilberry and heather, hawksbit and delicate, sky-blue hare bells. The reduced summer flow glistened over the slabby gravel-sculpted rocks, and trinkled melodically into the series of pools below. The men plainly enjoyed working there with minimal supervision - it was a good distance from headquarters - so the job seemed to go on interminably. They would ask us each morning what colour we would like the metalwork to be painted and sure enough by the time we were crossing on the homeward journey our wish would have been fulfilled. It went through brown, red and silver, then, like Rafferty's motorcar, a number of shades of green before our kaleidoscopic bridge was completed.

Our hair was always completely shorn. Father cut it with scissors at that time, though later with a pair of proper shears that he had been given. We hoped these would mean an end to the lines and furrows and snip marks that we got so teased about at school. 'Ave the rats been at you again?' people would say on post-haircut days. We pretended we did not know what they meant, but we had heard it often enough to know fine. By the time the shears arrived Father had

perfected his technique of producing these little imperfections, so the shears in which we pinned our hopes were no impediment to his creativity. The shears did mean that he could now cut our hair when drunk without nicking our ears with the scissors and sending us off with bits of paper stuck to them to staunch the bleeding. The bridge men would tell us, on account of our near baldness, that we looked like Yul Brinners.

“What’s one of them?” we would ask

“D’unt ta know?”

“No.”

“He’s on’t telly, and he’s at t’pictures,” was the reply, which it seemed was meant to explain everything, but somehow failed to do so.

Our early schooldays were also a time of considerable technical and agricultural advancement. The government were administering post-war subsidies, leading to large areas of former moorland, or land that had been allowed to deteriorate through years of depression and labour shortages, being reclaimed. We saw them being ploughed with big brightly coloured tractors, then spread with lime and basic slag and re-seeded. Electricity came up the valley, stopping a mile short of our own resolutely candle and paraffin lit home. It advanced pole by huge pole, all smelling powerfully of creosote, with big galvanised cross-trees and bright new coarse threaded bolts. Huge spools of copper wire were moved up as the lines of poles extended and there were all sorts of fascinating machines such as cable winches, tractors and wagons. The electricity men were always cheerful and good to us, chatting and giving us sweets and the occasional tanner.

An exciting time was when the first farmer up the valley hired a contractor with a hay baler - we watched it on our way home, totally fascinated. There seemed to be a big mechanical arm that rose and fell in time to a crump, crump, crumping noise. The loose hay was swallowed up voraciously at the front of the machine, after which the big mechanical arm punched it into a compressed cube that eventually fell out of the back. If the crop was unevenly rowed, or contained uncured grass we would hear the tractor groaning, then see it puffing black smoke followed by a great bang as the machine came to a

sudden stop. Father told us that the bang was caused by ‘shear bolts’, designed to snap under excess load to protect the delicate twine knotters and other driven parts of the machine. It all sounded wonderfully complicated and we wondered how father knew such things. Neighbouring farmers and haymakers would nod knowingly if the bolt broke too often, thinking the hay was being baled too soon.

There were still plenty of horses working. We watched them being loaded up with high loads of loose hay where the baler had not been invited, or before it was introduced. There was Punch, a powerful seventeen hands black shire stallion with a reputation of being difficult to handle. Dorothy, was a hard working cross bred fell pony, with which I was leading dung one day when she had some kind of a seizure and fell down in the shafts. I thought I had killed her with overwork and was mortally relieved when on having the harness cut she quietly got up and wandered off, farting. Queenie, a bay Clydesdale once took a hold of my finger between her teeth instead of the tit-bit I was offering her and thinking that I was deliberately withholding the offering did her best to tug off the finger. The horse we borrowed most for carting coal and groceries was Prince, the gentle old shire gelding who hauled the milk churns daily from his home to the point where the milk lorry would pick them up. He had at some stage been caught by the breeching in a doorway and frightened; he could not go through his stable door without first having performed a hesitant shuffle, a kind of *pas de bas*, his big shods clattering and sparking on the cobbles. He it was that bravely crossed the ditch, when Father had broken open the padlocked gate.

Prince’s owners were Fred and Mary Feather; she it was who became almost an aunt to us. We had only one real aunt, and she by marriage rather than by blood, who was married to Mother’s only brother and whom we never saw. Father was an only child, although he had, a full generation younger, a half sister, but there were no aunts or uncles from his side of the family. At the time of day that we passed the farm, Mary would be carrying the milk from the shippen to the cooler in the dairy, and would always make time to talk to us. At other times, under the slightest pretext, such as that we were looking cold, or wet, or otherwise in need of sustenance, she would take us into the house, stand

us beside the Rayburn and ply us with white toast and butter. If that was not paradise we were convinced to the contrary. She had two daughters in their early twenties who bravely tackled Father on more than one occasion, openly and angrily charging him with cruelty. He would tell them please to go away, and kindly not to interfere in matters concerning which they knew nothing.

In addition to all this activity there were the simple pleasures available to most country children: messing about in wells and streams and all sorts of generally inquisitive investigations. We picked and ate bilberries when in season, and ate the sweet bilberry flowers when the berries were absent. We scraped at the yarrow's root for pignuts that we gave a token wipe on a sleeve to clean before eating. We would look for a bumble bee inside a foxglove floret, nip the floret off by pinching the end with thumb and forefinger, and listen to the furious buzzing from Mr Bee within, then make the same quick getaway as he did when we released him.

At one time we had a passion for knitting what we called 'worm's ganseys', which were formed on four nails partially hammered in to form a square on top of a cotton reel. The wool was stitched round and round the four nails with the resulting quarter inch diameter woollen tube being pulled continuously through the hole in the centre of the reel. In theory the tube could itself be used as a thick yarn to make scarves, bed-spreads or tea cosies, but in fact ours never were; our sole aim was to make the world's longest worm's gansey, so we would dawdle schoolwards trailing a tail of knitting along the ground behind us, totally oblivious to the passage of time. There is a brief entry in Father's diary: 'Peter in trouble again. Late for school: knitting!!!' At home we would make 'tanks' with a bobbin, a short candle end and a nail and an elastic band. When the contraption was wound up and set on the ground it would make its way ponderously forward, even over the roughest of terrain. With one apiece of these in our pockets we would stop at some out of sight spot along the lane and have slow, time-consuming tank races. They were never fast machines, the winner was the one that was least slow.

We would search the banks and field margins for the nests of meadow pipit, and skylark, and the rough hill grazings for those of peewits. Kestrels,

stock doves and barn owls nested from time to time in the ruins, and we would keep an eye open for nesting activity, and a chance to see the eggs. There were no trees left in the upper valley except those in our own garden but for a solitary sycamore at a ruined farmhouse on the far side in which magpies sometimes nested. They built a roofed nest while other crows did not and father called this, which intrigued us greatly, a 'sign of superior intelligence'. Peter said to me once that father might try showing some himself by putting some glass in our bedroom window. The tree blew over one year in a gale and we had a day off school with Father and a block and tackle hoisting it back onto its feet. We children spent most of the day carrying stones to pile around the base of its trunk to hold it upright, while Father directed operations, picking unfairly on Peter who he said always brought the smallest stones. The tree died anyway, standing stark and leafless for a year or two before finally blowing over again, eventually being honourably sawn up and finding its way to Hoarside for fuel.

We set snares for rabbits on the way to school for a short time but the only result was lost snares and the occasional sheep dangling a wire and peg from a foot, as it looked up at us from its contented grazing. We would also keep a careful lookout for dead sheep, as Harry Greenwood the farmer would give us half a crown to bury them at weekends. This was a good rate of pay if you could find a bit of soft ground in which to dig, but not so good in harder places. The sheep were always bloated by the time of their funerals and it took a remarkably big, deep hole to consume them. The gaseous pressure inside their numerous stomachs rendered them totally incompressible and they were impossible to puncture with a spade. When it seemed as if they were just about buried deeply enough, with a minimum of soil over them, out would pop one of the legs that you had struggled to fold. We would have to exhume them and dig a little deeper. When we asked him what he would give us to bury lambs that had died at birth, he said

“Nowt, tha can just leave ‘em.”

“Why?”

“Becos tha’ll ‘ave me ruined, that’s why. I’ve kept them ewes all winter and they’ve gi’n me nowt nought dead lambs.”

And so at lambing time the dead remained at the foot of the walls where the ewes had sheltered and lain to produce them, to be consumed by magpies, foxes and itinerant dogs, or just to rot away.

Many of these diversions caused regular lateness at both ends of our journeys so it was decreed that we should take a different route, over the moors to the bus, where we were less likely to be distracted. Here, there was only one other farmhouse, and it not immediately adjoining the road, with very little else besides wild grassland, heather, sheep and dilapidated walls. This was also the route that Mother took to work so there would be an additional element of supervision on coinciding journeys. Three days each week however, one of us was to continue to return home up the valley route in order to pick up the milk in its gallon syrup tin. Father would then be looking out for our return home, two of us from the hill and one from the valley.

On one particular day we had all three missed the bus home from school for some reason – pinching chocolate biscuits from the tuck shop cupboard, or squabbling in the playground. We decided, since we had once managed to do it before, to walk the bus route as fast as possible in addition to the usual walk, and still aim to be home in time. Peter and Mary that evening were expected to arrive home from the hill, while I alone was to bring the milk up the valley. Even cutting off much of the semi-circular loop of the bus route and heading obliquely up to the moors meant a very much longer walk for them than for me. We were not prepared all to go home with the milk, as this would necessitate disclosure of the fact that we had missed the bus. As it happened, when I arrived home with the milk marginally late, Father was not there to witness the fact, being not yet home from a day at the peat bed, so thus far things were going well. I was all the while anxiously scanning the hill for the other two who were, by the time Father came home, becoming well overdue.

Tension began to increase as time wore on. I was subjected to some concerted questioning. I believed that Peter and Mary would arrive home having concocted a tale of some kind, plausible or otherwise, and anything I said would merely confound their story. To inform my parents of the missed bus would not

only put them into trouble, but would most likely lead to Father knowing that I too had missed it. So it was that I at first played dumb and later took refuge in an increasingly unlikely web of lies, saying I knew of no reason for their lateness: the more parental concern grew, the more enmeshed I became. Having first resisted telling the truth I became quite unable to do so at all. I said that they had been talking on the bus to some couple that I chose entirely at random and who lived along the bus route, so Mother was dispatched to see if she could talk to them. Father meanwhile was striding back and forth in the living room, grim faced, his sleeves tightly rolled, biceps bulging, hands thrust into the front pockets of his moleskins, ale forsaken. ‘Fee fi fo fum’... He was building up a serious head of steam, and I lived in fear of Mother’s return, fear for the welfare of my brother and sister and in fair knowledge that I was soon to be getting a beating.

Although it was a summer’s evening, the sun was setting when Mother, exhausted and distraught, arrived home to say that it seemed as though my tale had been a total fabrication. I was moderately clouted. Father’s sleeves were rolled ever tighter above his biceps and his eyes were spouting fire, yet I refused still to say the simple truth. He seemed defeated as to the extent, or as to why I was lying but continued, to my relief, to be more threatening than violent. From his viewpoint, it might after all be the case that I really did not know anything about their movements. If I had got off the bus for the milk, and left them aboard to go to the hill route this would have been the case. Beginning wrongly to believe that I could not know what he needed me to know, he decided that the police should be informed.

Mother was again wearily dispatched, this time to walk to ‘Auntie’ Mary’s, whose home was the nearest one with a telephone. It was dark and late when she arrived back again with a sergeant of the local constabulary. They were both welcomed and being by this time extremely tired Mother was seated and made comfortable. The sergeant had a good way with children; he sat on the front edge of the old couch, speaking almost avuncularly. He seemed to pose no threat but simply explained that concern for the lost pair was now extremely grave. He said he understood that I did not in any way want to ‘peach’ on my

brother and sister but that it was now imperative that I tell the exact truth. The two might seriously be in danger. I knew that Father would behave himself when there was a policeman there, so out spilled the simple truth.

A large number of officers were called out and a wide search of the hills was instigated, though in the hours of darkness no trace was found. However, daybreak coming early in the summer months they were found at first light snuggled asleep behind a dry stone wall, part way along their circuitous detour. Even for Father, retributive justice was difficult to serve amidst such an atmosphere of relief. Peter and Mary briefly became local celebrities, with the press again pursuing potentially exciting copy. I was given undeserved credit for my solidarity towards the others, and largely forgiven.

Moonlight and Midwives

Jane was born at the beginning of February in 1957; Mother was confined at home for her birth. Her arrival was a time of great happiness for us all, which was a contrast with the arrival of the twins two and a half years previously when Mother had gone away to the home of her mother in Cambridge, and gone to the maternity hospital there to give birth. Her going away made Father extremely angry, although it was plainly a sensible thing to do.

Anticipation of a double confinement had awoken in Mother a sense of the remoteness of the dale and the unavailability of assistance and medical facilities if they should be required. Hoarside did not seem the place to be planning such a labour, so she had gone to her mother's. Father was restless while she was away and on the day of her return was in a black humour. It was a wet and miserable night in early November when he helped to carry the twins in their portable carrycot over the bridge with the handrail with the coat of many colours, and along the soggy path to Hoarside. We older ones were there to help, carrying some of the things that the babies would need, stealing our first look at them by the light of our hurricane lamp- two little wrinkly faces poking out of the blanket, Harry whispily red headed and Kate more distinctly black. Father, who was inevitably partially drunk set about outlining, as he saw it, the worst element of their having been born away from home. Harry, he said, would now never be able to play cricket for Yorkshire. Until then we had neither known of, nor had he ever much expressed, his partiality to the game. Our cricket ball catching sessions with him had been more about learning to catch missiles bare-handedly, about co-ordination of hand and eye and general toughening up than they had been about the game. Neither had there ever been any great likelihood that any of us would be County players. To relieve his exasperation he escaped down the valley the very next evening to the 'New Delight' with a one-pound note that he proceeded to convert into a substantial quantity of ale and temporary oblivion.

The arrival of Jane was altogether a different occasion, though it was preceded by a frightening little adventure on the hills. Mother and I had been walking home over the moors, she fairly heavily laden with the prospective Jane, and I with sacks of shopping. It was a dark November evening on which a fog had come down with the darkening. Afterwards it seemed as though there was no real excuse for it—possibly Mother's fecundity prevented her from seeing where her feet were going, like another pregnant lady that we knew, who, unable to see her feet, had gone around doing her shopping all one day, much to her later consternation, in shoes that were not a pair. Whatever the cause, we strayed from the path and became lost. After walking a while we began to realise that the tumbled walls and patches of marsh were somehow unfamiliar; the sheep track that had initially misled us had dwindled to nothing, so the further we walked the more uneasy we became, until we found that we were heading onto some very steep ground, at the foot of which we could hear the beck running. Mother could walk no further, so we settled down among the rushes and awaited rescue.

It was strange to be out there in the darkness. It was frightening to hear the vixen's howl that never ceased to alarm you no matter how often you were told what it was. After a few hours we heard distant shouts and it was then that Mother hit on the idea of making a beacon. She gathered what bags there were amongst her shopping, crumpled up the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Hebden Bridge Times* into a pile along with them and set the whole lot on fire. Before long, drawn to our flame, Father and Peter arrived on the scene. Mary had been left at home to look after the twins during the search, and was proud to have been given such responsibility. Father was much relieved when he found us, admiring Mother's initiative in making the fire, until he realised that she had used both of his newspapers before he had had the chance to read them. Although he teased her for a long time afterwards he finally seemed to consider that a pair of newspapers full of debatable or exaggerated truths was a justifiable loss when set against our safe return.

For this confinement a bed for Mother had been brought into the living room. It was snuggled into the corner from where the earlier assassination attempt was to have been made, where afterwards a timber and sheep netting play-pen would sit

and later still, the piano. At the back wall stood the old dresser that was filled with plates and crockery, onto the end of which was bolted the coffee grinder and in one of the drawers of which, amongst other things, was the potentially murderous rolling pin. Near the corner of the room at the other end of the dresser was the west-facing window through which, in the summer months, the late afternoon sunlight entered. It would be divided up by the quartered glazing into wide rectangular shafts, each illuminating a separate patch of airborne dust motes floating in a state of permanently suspended animation.

It was early February now and the sun barely got round to that side of the house so a makeshift curtain was drawn to shut out the winter darkness, adding to the homeliness and intimacy of the room. Mother was propped up in bed with cushions and a mug of stout, Father was making fair progress with his gallon and the fire was lending its flickering red light to the twin glow of the two candles, as its flames leapt joyously up the chimney. There was a fire burning in the other room, so that more of the house was warmed, complementing the general spirit of anticipation. In the scullery was a cast iron stove onto which Father had built a makeshift but highly effective hot water cistern, from another of his old oil drums. Though seldom used, it too was lit tonight. It was known as 'Pissing Jinny', due to its imperfect plumbing and habit of whistling and gurgling as it heated up: there was something just a bit diabolical in its nature. The cistern kept boiling and we had to go through to run off the sudden surfeit of hot water to save the stove from doing itself irreparable damage. Its rumbling pipes could be heard in the background adding to the air of expectancy.

We older children were rather mystified as to what would actually happen at the birth so we wanted to stay up all night in order not to miss any excitement. We knew the rudiments of parturition but there were considerations of blood and fluids that we had seen at lambings that were difficult to associate with your mum, and a prospect of pain and anguish that seemed as though they might be beyond human endurance. In contrast to that was to be the marvel of a new little life, another family member, a brother, or a sister. Ours would be the job when Mother felt it was time, of running down the valley to Mary Feather's to telephone for the midwife and doctor, in contemplation of which we were again worried that we

might miss something. The evening was wearing on and eventually we were told to go to bed and assured that we would be called if there were any developments. It now seemed, we were told, as though nothing would happen until the next day. Thus assured we had gone to sleep, but at half past two came the call. We arose quickly, there was no baby yet, but its arrival seemed imminent. We knew what we had to do, setting off, elated, down the valley.

It was the most wonderfully memorable moonlit night and almost as bright as day. On the ground was a good covering of snow, frozen hard enough to carry our weight and through the surface of which our footfalls were in no fear of breaking. As we walked we kicked up a fine powder of glistening frozen crystals that glinted in the moonlight, while the frost nipped at our earlobes and the end of our noses. Ahead stretched the snow-clad valley, with the white and pristine fields outlined as if with charcoal by the black tracery of dry-stone walls. In the thin layer of powdery snow that lay on the frozen surface were the imprints left by a wandering cat while deeper in the snow were the dark recesses of frozen human footprints, formed when the snow was still soft. Because it was the shortest route, we took the less safe path that ran along the side of the main river. We were not normally allowed to use this since, at the place where the tributary stream that was crossed higher up by the many coloured bridge flowed into the main stream, there were a set of slippery stepping stones that could be completely submerged after heavy rain.

It was here that the baby about to be born would almost be lost in floodwater some five years later, on a day that we were going down the valley instead of over the hill and should have used the footbridge - but didn't. It had been a very wet night and on reaching the stepping-stones we found that they had disappeared beneath the floodwater. Rather than make a long detour to the bridge we found a narrow place where, with a running jump, I could clear the stream. I was with Mary, the twins, and little Jane and once over myself, thought that they would be strong enough to jump too – so long as I reached out to catch them. The twins came successfully first, and then, on my instructions, Mary tried to give Jane a little extra propulsion towards me. Jane was frightened, tried to hang on at the last moment, and fell in.

“She’s drowned,” said Harry dolefully.

“She’s in, she’s in, ooh Joe Dad’ll be mad, she’s drownid,” squealed Kate.

“Joe, Joe, Get her, get her Joe, she’s sinking,” wailed Mary flapping her arms in panic and running alongside Jane as she was carried by the flood.

I ran downstream: we were not far from the confluence after which there would have been no possibility of saving her. I jumped in towards the far side at a place where the turbulence was reduced by a lump of projecting bank. Mary bravely hung onto my jacket. I reached out and caught the hem of Jane’s raincoat as she swept past. It was made of some kind of rubberised material that tore in my hand. I was left holding nothing but a neat square of green raincoat. We ran downstream for a second try, by now perilously close to the main stream. This time both Mary and I were in the water, and although Jane was by now wholly submerged, we successfully pulled her out.

“We’ve got her, we’ve got her, she’s full of water; ooh we’re so lucky; empty her out; slap her back, stand her up; lie her down, her coat’s torn’ Dad’ll be mad. Shake her, not so hard, she’s coughin, ooh she’s breathin’; are you all right Jane are you all right Jane? Slap her back, hold her upside down; get her the right way up; open her collar; keep her warm. What can we do now? She can’t go to school. Ooh I’m frightened, Dad’ll be mad,” came the flood of excited commentary from both sides of the stream. Jane spluttering but not crying, kept saying she was sorry but I said she was not to be sorry because the fault was mine. The girls generously said they thought it wasn’t but Harry said he thought it was. Jane continued to say she was sorry and Kate continued to remind us that ‘Dad’d be mad’, but after such a close confrontation with the unthinkable the atmosphere overall was one of wonderful relief.

We made our way on our separate sides of the river, upstream to the bridge, “We’ll take her and leave her for the day with Auntie Mary, she’ll dry her out - she’s got a Rayburn,” I said, and we all joined in the ‘don’t tell Dad’ conspiracy. Auntie Mary took Jane in and saved the day. The rest of us went on our way, some with clothes drying on our bodies. At school we somehow fabricated an excuse for Jane’s absence, picking her up on the way home. Father was never any the wiser.

Tonight though, the stepping-stones were dry and cast in an icy framework. The main beck was partially frozen over: the dark water gurgling and bubbling as it passed beneath patches of grey-white ice, before re-appearing in intensely black and swirling pools. We trotted along the stony beck-side path before leaving the burbling water behind and strode across the snow carpeted meadows through one field gate after another, then out on to the lane where the snow lay crushed by the passage of carts and other walkers. Following the wheel tracks we made our way swiftly down towards the telephone.

We had to rattle considerably on the door before a sleepy Mary appeared and let us in. She was soon on the telephone, as excited as we were, contacting the midwife and doctor. She seated us in her best room, where we had never before been, giving us each a cup of tea, and settling us down in the wondrous soft recesses of one of the first three- piece suites that we had ever seen, to begin what seemed an interminable wait.

It would be getting towards four o'clock when they arrived, picked us up in their car and proceeded another mile or so along the snowy lane that led back up the valley. Having motored as far as the lane was negotiable we all clambered out, gathered up the medical bags and supplies and set off to walk the final leg of the journey across the snow-encrusted pastures.

When we arrived back home all the hurry had apparently been un-necessary. The medical team were made welcome, the fire was stoked and we were told that we had done 'extremely well thank you, and would we now like to go back to bed and get some rest.' Of course we had no wish to do so, but went anyway. It seemed no time before we were up again, with the birth a *fait accompli*. Jane, who was to remain without a name for the greater part of the first week, being briefly cited in Father's diary as 'the child', was nestled in the crook of Mother's arm. With the light of early morning vying for superiority over the firelight they both looked lovely.

The doctor and nurse were breakfasted and left Hoarside later in the morning. Mother was resting and Father, who seemed to think he had had at least as hard a time as she had, went upstairs to bed. It was not many hours however until the first visitors arrived, at first unaware that the anticipated new arrival had arrived, but happy to join in the celebrations. These turned into an all night carouse, a long session of wine, beer and song, with some continuing to drink intermittently for a further twenty- four hours. The length of Father's convalescence was about equivalent to that of Mother, though it was somewhat less deserved and considerably less good-natured, before life returned to something like normality.

Education

Father developed a strangely ambiguous attitude to education. Himself the well-educated son of a hard drinking small businessman and his socially conscious first wife, he had come to see the world as divided between people who 'did' things and people who talked about them. Those in the teaching professions, he said, were in some way failed practitioners of their subject. His mother he regarded as a snob, completely falling out with her he told us, when she harangued him immediately after the war for parking a 'dirty old wagon' outside her 'nice clean house'. He had been studying medicine at Manchester University when war was declared and gave it up to be trained as an artillery officer, for which she had not been able to forgive him. He had thought himself in love with two Kathleens at the war's end, first marrying the other one, but the relationship soon foundered. He understandably never spoke at all of this in our presence and it was much later that I learned of it.

His mother apparently further declared that the war had irrevocably changed him for the worse. Certainly he never went back to his studies. He had done his stint as a soldier and had been disillusioned by young officers in the field with what he called 'white knees' and 'theoretical battle skills' that simply did not work in practice – a disillusionment that would eat away at him and finally turn him against all academics and proponents of theory. The theory of Medicine was plainly included, for it now seemed that all he desired was to live as close to the land as possible without the effort of farming it, and never to be too far away from a regular fount of strong ale. If he had ever wanted to be a doctor he certainly didn't now. In the same way that he had voluntarily marched in to the army at the outbreak of War, he had marched voluntarily out of it on the declaration of Peace, well before being officially 'demobbed' – a process to which he had anyway finally to submit himself – and this had not helped when it came to receipt of army pay during the interim.

After that first failed relationship his immediate post war years were spent finding and refurbishing his and Kathleen-number-two's first house in the dales. You needed to have suffered war fully to appreciate peace he said. Though rationing became worse after the war than it had been throughout, making supplies difficult to obtain, he found freedom from the military and from the oppression of hostilities, along with the splendour of the dale combining for him to form a powerful opiate. He had developed a singular lack of ambition, or at least any that went beyond the sight of his next half-gallon, the prospect of which was often somewhat impinged upon by straitened financial circumstances. He nevertheless seemed to accomplish just sufficient in the way of freelance lime and muck spreading, or painting and thack pointing to keep himself, while not working, in a permanent state of drunkenness or its near prospect. He tried to find a market for some of his drawings, but let initial rejection dampen his already suspect determination. He handsomely decorated an ornamental signboard at a nearby Working men's institute but it closed immediately afterwards, as if further to discourage him. The two or three years before he started restoring Hoarside, in which labour he was to find a greater and renewed sense of purpose, he spent endlessly trailing to any number of watering holes and endlessly trailing home again. News of none of this could have greatly impressed his mother, who might well have thought him, in his own terminology 'incorrigible'; she and father continued to partake of a reciprocal rejection. On her death some years later his Father married again and quite late in life fathered Bessy, Father's half sister. He had no time for any of them and shut himself and all of us off from all contact with them until a couple of years before his Father died, when he took us all once or twice to meet and be introduced to them.

His detestation of intellectuals, particularly if they had any associations with the Jewish Diaspora, as Mother's Father did, also blighted our relations with that side of the family. Her Father, who had originally come from Russia, was Professor of Mathematics at Cambridge and her brother was to gain a professorship in engineering that he eventually took to Canada, becoming for a time Dean of McGill University in Montreal. The brother was also condemned on the even more serious grounds of past unwillingness to pay for a round of

drinks. When Father had asked him at some stage if he would like a drink and he had said “I don’t mind if I do.” Father had replied, “Well I don’t mind if you don’t.” Mother’s mother he condemned for being empty headed, calling her ‘the milkman’s daughter from Cambridge’, which she was – but he had a special way of saying it. By the time he and Kathleen had moved to Hoarside he had completely fallen out with them too and they were forbidden to visit us, although I can remember each of them coming once, in Father’s absence. Mother too was forbidden normal access to them, although she kept in touch from her work. The only times we visited them were on the two occasions she managed to spirit us away by train to their home in the south for a fortnight’s stay with them, and for which she faced the inevitable reprisals.

While we were there we were enraptured by all the modern comforts with which our grandparents were surrounded. There were carpets, radio and television and a Triumph Mayflower with a blue and green globe at the top of the radiator; hot running water, gas and electricity, a bath, a water closet, a cooker and real bed linen rather than the pair of ex-army blankets and the old great-coat with which we were familiar. Peter fixed a broken radio for them and I spent the best part of a week chewing through their overgrown lawn with a very inadequate lawnmower and loving every minute of it. There was no shouting or bullying and a distinct absence of thrashings. Granddad would listen to any stories that we told of home with his most common response being ‘Really?’ He took us punting on the Cam, working the pole like a professional, while we sat in the scuppers and watched other would-be punters falling in. He led us over green lawns, among ancient columns and ribbed and vaulted ceilings as he proudly showed us the magnificent environs of St. John’s. He had lost any battle of wills with Father over our proposed schooling, a state of cold war now existing between them. Nevertheless, as if to imprint educational possibilities upon our minds, he took us down a corridor and showed us the ornate mahogany doors to two separate rooms on which he had earlier placed printed plates of our Christian names, PETER and JOE (he seemed at the time to have no plans for Mary). He informed us that these were to be our rooms when we were older. They would be saved for us. This was a lasting and powerful image but since we

were with Father for ninety nine per cent of the time his would be the dominant ideology, and somebody else would get the rooms.

Father declared to us that there were only two fundamental occupations, neither of them dependent necessarily on learning. Though irreligious, he named them as the Biblical Cain the soldier, and Abel the farmer, and was interested in us either farming or joining the forces. He never seemed to consider the difference nor differentiate for us between farm workers and farmers, or explain how from being moneyless as one we were without an education, somehow to aspire to the affluence that might make us the other. It seemed therefore that he would have been perfectly content to have a family of soldiers, sailors, or farm labourers amongst the boys, whilst the girls – Mary always wanted to be a nurse – could go where they may but certainly required no particular qualifications to fulfil what he regarded essentially as the separate sphere of domestic and female roles.

Paradoxically, in the office that he had constructed at the back of the workshop with its broken legged cast iron prancing horse nailed to the door, he had three of the walls lined with shelves of books. They were a diverse collection; spending much time reading, he would re-read favourite authors again and again and contribute afterwards to a little appendix of notes at the end of his diary. Of Gerard's autobiography it said: 'most excellent, must read again'. Shaw's plays: 'very uneven, from silly to profound' but at a later reading: 'unique - food for ever - wit and profundity'. Stevenson's *Kidnapped*: 'enjoyable but less so than his *Master of Ballantrae*'. Sylvestre Board's *France* was simply 'charming', Conrad and Wilde were 'splendid' – particularly *Dorian Grey*. *Great Expectations*, meanwhile was 'perhaps Dickens at his best', while *The Old Curiosity Shop* was 'most enjoyable' and *Bleak House* was 'Good – didn't finish. Do so'. On reading *The Life of Byron* he found it interesting for its background but was unconvinced by what he considered a 'weary analysis of character'.

The fourth wall held a bunk on which he could rest should he become tired with the over exertion of supping ale and reading, or too 'druffen', as he called being drunk, to make his way to the connubial bedchamber. Angled across one corner amongst the books was a little cast iron fire grate above which

hung a framed print of an etching of Rembrandt's, '*The Studious Philosopher*'. Before the fireplace sat a comfortable old blue armchair upon which were always a couple of cushions and beside which was a wooden stool. There was a chair and writing desk at the window with drawers filled with his collection of his own pencil drawings of birds and palindromic faces, along with which was a little booklet of similarly reversible portraits, by the equally palindromic title of *Oho*. There were lampoons of modernist sculpture and his Eighth Army Desert Rat cartoons. There were little doodles of classical architectural features such as acanthus leaves and columns with their Ionic, Doric and Corinthian capitols. There was a more recent series of cartoons concerning a kitten by the name of Topaz that he had stolen from 'Wolf', who was landlord at the 'Packhorse'. There were pictures of Wolf striding over the moor with a pitchfork on a rescue mission, along with pictures of the kitten (she now had a new identity and answered to Moppit), lying on Father's window sill on a silk cushion surrounded by ashettes of trout and saucers of cream.

Pushed in one corner was a collection of sayings: colloquial or archaic Yorkshireisms, to which he added material as he heard it. Duly recorded were such characterisations as *natter cans* (gossips) and *witter pots* (complainers), the *white foal* (bastard), the *drowp-arsed* (pendulously uddered cow), and the *crate egg* (odd or comical person) and meteorological phenomena such as the *moor grime* (drizzle), and the *pash* (flood). In the cubby hole beneath the bunk his childhood collection of bird's eggs was kept, in his own meticulously made and labelled wooden cases, of which the fabrication was remarkably refined for this latter day builder of patent wheelbarrows and multi sided closet seats. These all had tiny brass hinges with even tinier brass screws, glass tops and compartmentalised and cotton wool clad interiors that in any reciprocal appraisal by an observational magpie would assuredly have been judged as signs of 'superior intelligence'.

One of the better periods at Hoarside was one in which Peter, Mary and I became welcome visitors in this office, or 'snug' as it was known. He would light the fire early in the evening and remove himself there with a gallon of beer and the *Daily Telegraph*. As bedtime approached we were invited to go via the

'naughty corner' doorway, through the 'workshop' and into the office for a bedtime tale. He would sit us on the arms of his chair, on the stool or on his knee and maybe give us a drink of beer from his pint pot, or even a quart tankard. If Mary had a drink and the tankard was fairly well emptied at the time her whole face would disappear inside it and there would be just a pair of pigtails sticking out. On a nightly rota system one of us had to name a subject, 'anything in the world' he would say, perhaps confident that our world was a fairly small one, and would promise to find us a reading on the chosen topic as well as an illustration where possible.

There was inevitably an element of repetition in terms of subject, Mary particularly always wanted fairies and cats, but nevertheless he was able generally to find something new and relevant. She was able to cut from some old women's magazines a series of carpet advertisements picturing cats and these were taken to her bedroom to cover the holes in the plasterwork on the walls. This special attention meant a lot to her for she had little opportunity to be a little girl, having no nearby playmates, and was expected to do most of the things we boys did. Her chores though, were directed towards what was considered to be more 'female' work around the house and she was excused the responsibility of ever being a 'Dog'. She did have her own modes of play with happy little tea parties in which she would be, as Father would have it, 'Lady Clare de Vere de Vere' and to which we would all be invited: she would pour imaginary tea, whispering 'Psssss'...from a tiny pink plastic tea-pot for her variously crippled dolls with their missing legs and wobbly eyes or at other times spend a lot of time 'decanting' water between an assortment of receptacles. She was very proud of her accumulated display of cat pictures- we were not to touch the middle of them in case a finger went through into the void behind. When she was given a doll with blue eyes that opened and shut without being touched we all thought it nearly an eighth wonder of the world.

Father's books were a lifelong collection among which some of the most interesting were a full set of the Children's Encyclopaedia; a pile of 'Picture Posts' and bird books with fine colour plate illustrations of what were, to us, exotic birds like pheasant, peregrine and bullfinch by artists including

C.F. Tunncliffe and A.W. Seaby. Such birds were not to be seen so high in the Pennines, and the pictures would conjure up fantastical images that were sometimes out of scale or otherwise bore little relation to reality. There were tales by the Brothers Grimm and Hans Anderson: *The Princess and the Pea*, bruised by a single pea in the bed no matter how many mattresses she was given, which proved that she was a real princess (we dreamed of mattresses); the clever little tailor who won a hurling contest by throwing a blackbird further than the giant could throw a stone, and who, when the giant boasted of killing three men with one blow, claimed to have killed seven - though in reality merely flies (we dreamed of such ingenious deceit). There were The Trojan Wars over the lovely Helen (we dreamed of the lovely Helen), fought by Agamemnon and Meneleus, as well as Hector and Achilles (whom his mother had made a bad job of dunking). Phidippides was quite a runner, and there was Heracles whom the Romans named Hercules and sent carrying molehill soil and set some other bits of jobs. When the Roman Horatius held the bridge we thought of our own little footbridge with the multi-coloured handrail painted by the District Council. There was Ulysses and his travails, and Jason and his Argonauts; there was the indomitable Perseus, Medusa with her head full of snakes and the three grey crones sharing a single eye and a single tooth (of which there was a fine pencil drawing amongst Father's collection). We wanted to know if one crone got the eye and the tooth at the same time, so that she would see what she was eating, or whether they just got one at a time and were dependent on a sense of taste or on information from the others.

Twins were of much interest to us since the arrival of siblings Harry and Kate, so Father would read of Romulus and Remus and Castor and Pollux whose heavenly constellation we could never find although we said we could. They were sons of Zeus, who had as many children if not more than Dad and at least equal, if not greater powers. He and Hera, his missus, could change themselves into anything they wanted. Roland and Oliver weren't twins but they were great friends, and they needed to be, for those Saracens were a harum-scarum lot. There was Alice; and William; and Christopher Robin, Wol, Tigger and Hefalump and Kipling's *Just So* stories; the poor old Rhino with his skin full of crumbs (he should have kept them in his waist coat pocket); the

indefatigable Toad of Toad Hall and Moley were regularly requested, along with Arthur Rackham's drawings of anthropomorphic trees. There was a fully illustrated section in the encyclopaedia on medieval weaponry that included instruments of torture and a wide variety of barbed catch-poles for collaring the enemy, with knobby maces for bludgeoning him once restrained. We heard tales of Da Gama and Columbus, Hudson, Shackleton and Magellan and searches for North-West and South-West passages. We were never just sure what exactly constituted a passage. I, particularly, became more intrigued by wonderful sounding words like isthmus, peninsular and archipelago than by the parallel wonders of the geographical features that they defined. In a similar way, marvellous bird names like avocets and phalaropes had me as much semantically as ornithologically seduced. We loved Edward Lear's *Nonsense*, with little drawings of flowers like '*Manypeoplia Upsidedownia*', a kind of dicentra on which the row of little bells was replaced by a row of little people, and his limericks like *The Old Man from the Border*-who lived, much to his disgrace, in the 'utmost disorder'. Though the aspirant correctly placed is little used in Yorkshire, Father, who could not abide disorder, would emphatically apply a misplaced 'h' on the first syllable of 'utmost'.

Cerberus at the gates of Hades made a particularly powerful impression on me. To go from our own bedchamber to the lavatory we must needs pass the door to which was nailed the broken legged replica of a prancing horse and which led through to Father's office. For some time I had the recurring nightmare of a fearful slaving and ravenous dog tied up beside this door that because of the length of its chain and the narrowness of the path could by no means be circumnavigated. Terror of this dream-dog was intensely realistic and in my early secondary school years I went through a period of bedwetting to which I never confessed. Since we slept in our school shirts and jumpers, with the pair of woollen army blankets – one beneath and one above us – that were washed each spring, with vests that were changed once a week, and since I was boyishly loath to take advantage of what were in any case scarce opportunities for any extra bodily washing, I suspect that I was during this period at school a pretty smelly character. In fact Mr Heinz, a metal work teacher whom we understood to have been tortured by the Japanese and who was not renowned for mincing his words, in class one day politely said:

“Smith, you stink, get out of here.” He was reputedly a sometime thrower of such missiles as mallets and chisels, but on this occasion threw nothing sharper than his brief imperative.

Uneducation

Up to the time that we were finishing at primary school Father was still supportive of our education, at least at home if not so much at school, encouraging our enquiries, referring us to books and answering our questions. We were singled out, at around the same time, by a rather less than supportive primary school teacher. His name was Mr Dobson and he took a serious and particular dislike to us. True, we were on the scruffy side, and true, we stole a few chocolate biscuits from the tuck shop, so perhaps he had good cause. He would stand us on a chair in the middle of the class and ridicule us for having dirty ears or necks, asking the rest of the class if anyone else still needed assistance with washing themselves while implying that of course they didn't, before dismissing us to go and wash with the threat that he would dry-clean us if we returned dirty. Despite claiming to be an enthusiastic local historian and traditionalist he would scorn us if we used vernacular or dialectic words in the classroom. Water 'seeps' from a spring on the hillside in the land of the Queen's English, but for me it 'siped' from the springs of my imagination into a piece of written prose in class one day, and this became for him a subject worthy of ridicule.

On another occasion he put me alone in a classroom for a large part of an afternoon when something exciting was going on elsewhere, trying to work out how to spell the 'T' in T-shirt. I kept reporting to him in the hall with the obvious possibilities and a few less obvious, but he would send me away again completely bamboozled, refusing to tell me that he just wanted a simple 'T'. The excitement that I was missing was a monthly poetry concert in which all had to recite something from memory. I had some minor talent for this at the time and so the fact that I enjoyed it was enough to make this man see that I did not participate. Missing my rendition of John Hartley's *'Billy Bumble's Bargain'* or *Th' Traitle Sop* was

doubtless no hardship for everyone else, but he knew it was a loss to me. We spent considerable time at home reading and reciting from *'Hartley's Yorkshire Ditties'* and though it could fairly be said that Hartley was no John Clare, Robert Burns, or William Barnes, his works had considerable schoolboy as well as provincial appeal.

Dobson cast me as 'Toss Pot' or the devil, in the annual Easter production of the *'Pace Egg'* play, a role not so sought after as that of the bold and sword-carrying Saint George, or the wicked and equally sword-carrying Black Morocco Prince, who went by the *nom de guerre* of 'Slasher'. I may have been meant to have been disappointed at being Toss-pot but rather made the role my own, with blackened face and raggedy clothes, singing "I've some eggs in my basket and a pipe in me snout, and an old tally wife that's better nor nowt."

Peter played the role of the doctor for a couple of years. He would carry in his doctor's bag a magical potion that would 'cure the hips, the pips, the palsy and the gout; and if a man had ninety nine devils in his skull it would cast a hundred of 'em out'.

After we finally sat our 'eleven plus' exams it was old Harry Greenwood who asked me why I was not now going to grammar school. I had no idea what he meant but got Mother to explain. Father, she said, thought grammar school would not be appropriate. It was from here on, as he became increasingly entrenched in his views against her academic family and enlightenment in general, that he began to discourage us from putting in any effort at school.

He promoted his Caine-and-Abel-cum-Socratic theory of soldiers and farmers and spoke disparagingly of Mother's degree and her father's position. He kept us from school on every possible pretext: potato planting and harvesting, peat cutting, grouse beating, snow shovelling, road mending, slug destruction, twite scaring and so on, as well as refusing to let us do any homework. Given the opportunity and excuse not to work at school perhaps a good majority of children would accept it; certainly I did. We all fell rapidly behind from term to term and I particularly sank to the lower echelons of the comprehensive system. Father wrote letters expressly asking that we boys be given lessons predominantly in woodwork and metalwork while Mary was to get the maximum 'domestic science', which he

called 'cookin' and mendin', and that was what we got. I was now amongst low academic achievers and taking a pride in doing very well at being the same.

When we did P.E. we were acutely embarrassed when it came to undressing and showering. Since we slept in our school shirts we were seldom fully naked even in private, so it was doubly unnatural for us to be so publicly exposed. Being bare-arsed was associated as much as anything with thrashings and therefore somehow shameful - and we would sometimes have the marks to try and conceal. While we were attempting to hide in a corner there would always be someone in a more advanced state of pubescence strutting about making us feel inferior; we would feel conspicuous both at having no underpants, and at needing a shower rather more than some of the others, while at the same time being unable to enjoy the act of showering. A year or two earlier, a certain likable primary teacher, by the name of Mr Binner, short, bespectacled and jolly, had shouted across the hall on one occasion:

“Smith, why are you doing P.E. in your socks?”

“I'm not sir.”

“Well go and wash your feet then.”

A small component of secondary school P.E. was dance: about twice a year we would have a mixed gender session where we danced *The Grand Old Duke of York*, or the *Military Two-step*. The girls would be lined up at one side of the gym and the boys were instructed to go and choose a partner in as genteel and gentlemanly manner as we could muster. This resulted in a mad stampede across the resounding hardwood floor and all the popular or precocious boys grabbing the popular or precocious girls while the odd-balls were left to share a mutual indifference, if not aversion, with their female counterparts. The ensuing dance would be a desperate embarrassment to both parties rather than the sharing of any nascent social grace. I do remember realising with pleasant surprise on proffering such words, as “I'm sorry you have been left with me,” that some of these left-behind girls were in fact very nice.

The Sixties were such a time of social upheaval that refusing or being made to refuse to show any sign of moving forward was the perfect way of becoming

conspicuous, which is not what we wanted to be. We dressed differently, ate differently, lived and learned differently. And yet, although we would, like little Faustuses, happily have sold our souls for a uniform jacket, a school dinner, and a decent haircut, for the most part, it seemed we had been irresistibly programmed to repeat the ideas that Father expressed. Fiercely establishmentarian and seeing a world going rapidly to pot he was incredulous and outraged at such phenomena as 'Beatlemania', 'Mods and Rockers' and Carnaby Street, so while other scholars were revelling in the newness of it all we further alienated ourselves by failing to be impressed. We were to learn woodwork and metalwork and avoid all these other excitements with the same determination that we were to avoid infection with influenza or the imposition of a Comprehensive education. Peter did, latterly, sit for a while in classes with his little green crystal set in his pocket and an earplug in his ear, which gained him some temporary kudos with his fellows but little sympathy when he was caught and it was confiscated. He went home and devised a new one.

Throughout our school years various deputations of school-masters and truant officers, or 'Kid-catchers' made the trip up the valley to try and persuade Father that we were capable of better things, if he would just give us the chance. Most of them were received perfectly civilly but he was at least as articulate and persuasive as they were and would ply them with his home brewed ales and wines, the unsuspected strength of which would seriously weaken their resolve. We would sing from an assortment of songs for them if he ordered us to do so - albeit poorly and in considerable embarrassment - *The Farmer's Boy*, or *The Noahdale Anthem* if the emphasis was to be on our moorland idyll or perhaps *All Things Bright and Beautiful* or *We Plough the Fields and Scatter* if we were to show that we had at least learned something from school, if only from the morning assemblies. We would play something on the piano, the recorder, or the trumpet, or recite a bit of poetry: something by Hartley, *To a Daisy* perhaps, or Tennyson's *The Eagle*. From the reverse side Father's hands were talon-like, brown, vein-lined and sinewy and I would imagine him clinging to some mountain escarpment, challenging the world beneath.

They would be charmed both by father and by our pastoral and seemingly harmonious existence, eventually retreating down the valley, utterly

beguiled. He once carried the, by then, exceedingly giggly wife of a very sedate and serious minded headmaster, with her skirts well hitched up in a highly undignified piggy-back fashion in a short cut across the beck while she squealed with delight. He laughed about it afterwards and said it had been a good exercise in pomposity reduction. I think in the end they all pretty much gave up on us, giving us school reports of which Father encouraged us to be misguidedly proud that said things like 'often sadly preoccupied' or 'capable of much better' or showing more days absent in a term than were shown present. There were some among them more resentful than resigned: I was told, when confronted by Mr Tomlinson, a tall and officious deputy headmaster, to whose office I had been called for sliding down the corridor in my steel shod outdoor clogs, that the school 'catered for the majority', not 'children like you'.

Perhaps I drove him to distraction; perhaps I was not fitted for the outside world; perhaps it was best that I neglected my brain in favour of practical instruction and yet as a dedicated educationalist he ought to have thought not. Father of course was resolute and with a mind becoming increasingly idle I saw little reason to disagree with him. I was not going to fatten many pigs on being a linguist. When some bright little girl had conjugated the first three persons of the present tense of the verb 'to fight', and the master had turned superciliously to me, as if to imply that as a duffer I might at least be good at fighting and said,

"Smith, what comes next?"

"Er, er, er,"

"Tell him, Bright Little Girl."

"Pugnamus, pugnatis, pignant, sir."

"Good girl, good girl."

"Smith, you can write it out for me twenty times before tomorrow."

Latin had indeed promised very little in the way of practical application, in a world where I was trying to work out how many eggs I would need to sell to break even on the purchase of a one-pound-six and fourpenny bag of provender, or how, without being seen by the landlord, I was going to transport enough heavy stone roofing slates from one of the ruins to roof the stone hen hut that I was building. Besides, if I was given six irregular verbs to learn for homework for class next day and Father did not allow homework, then when next day came round I would look

instantly foolish and soon be an outcast. The effect of missed homework was cumulative and after a while I gave up, was duly given up upon, and enthusiastically found my place among those less interested in receiving an education. The fact was, I now much preferred manual labour to schooling. If I had glimpsed the 'Quinquiremes of Ninevah' in Father's little library it looked as though I was now, like one of Masefield's grubby freighters, destined for a plainer trade.

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