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The Loneliness of the Autodidact

Poetry Writing: The Expert Guide Fiona Sampson (Robert Hale, 2009)

When Robert Hale talked to me about this project, I knew that I wanted to produce the book I'd needed when I was first writing poetry. Access to poetry-writing is changing, of course. Not only has workshop culture become ubiquitous, but university writing programmes, from undergraduate to doctoral level, make a serious apprenticeship – with the Plan B of a qualification – available to everyone, not just the lucky recipients of circumstantial patronage.

I think it's foolish, though, to assume that no-one emerges by any other route. There will always be talented writers who haven't the money, or time, for formal institutional study. Even more to the point, at that first moment when people – often young, but not necessarily – think of writing, they're *outside* the community that understands how necessary practice – apprenticeship – is. As a reader of *Agenda*, you'll probably feel this is axiomatic: but the broadsheets, and other arts media, still pedal the fantasy that poets are born not made, and that when a new poet comes to the fore they're doing so with the first poems they ever wrote. I remember how guilty I felt when I worked at my own early poems, certain that to do so was self-delusional – that one couldn't *become* good, one must just *be* that way... I simply didn't have anyone to tell me otherwise. I read wonderful poetry, and wrote lousy poetry, and had no bridge between the two. I knew how to *read* a poem – at least at the level of meaning and imagery – but not how to *build* one. I didn't even get the basics of poetic 'grammar' at university, where I'd gone as a mature student in an attempt to find that bridge.

So, having wasted years stumbling about in the autodidactic dark, when Robert Hale said they were looking for a poetry book in their *Expert Guide* series, I knew straight away that I wanted to write a *vade mecum* for my past self. It was my own experience of having to develop without guide or mentor that I believed qualified me for this task. I wanted to encourage: because it seems to me that lack of confidence is a real barrier to good writing. But I didn't want to patronise: when you're eager to write you don't need prompts or games, but methods and knowledge. Formal knowledge isn't elitist: but it *is* elitist to withhold it. A poet can decide for herself whether and how she

uses a particular technique – but only once she has it in her armoury.

This kind of knowledge does build methodically: to take an obvious example, work with strict rhyming forms entails the various kinds of rhyme and they, in turn, entail metre. At the same time, to be continually useful a guide must also work as a reference book. So I tried to arrange topics chapter by chapter, *and* in practical order. I interspersed technical with non-technical, practical topics such as what to write about and whether to publish – because I remembered having these questions too. This extract, for example, is from *Chapter 2. Going in: finding and using your material*:

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Poetry looks both in and outward. My writing table is below a window: in fact, it's surrounded by windows, since I work in a garden shed. Shed and garden are surrounded in turn by fields. These are very much a workplace, just like my shed: agro-industrial plant roll up and down to a nearby drying hanger. The shed walls are thin, and on its flat roof birds' footsteps sound like hooves.

This seems to me a good position to be in. I'm enclosed by – and from – the landscape. I can observe it at some moments and ignore it at others. And that kind of selection is something poetry's particularly good at. In fact we could say that poetry *is* measure: both in the old sense of a musical phrase and in the wider sense that it juxtaposes and allocates, choosing to take so much of one element and a little more of another in order to create a distinctive mixture. To put it another way, poetry measures-out both form and content. This doesn't make it either systematic or predictable. But it does mean that, for the writer, pattern and proportion are part of the trick of it. [...]

So what *is* poetic material? It's the internal reality that produces poetry. This isn't simply the life of the emotions (and it's certainly not a set of symptoms: poetry isn't a form of therapy). Nor is it just the unconscious, which we might assume to be rich and incomprehensible but by definition out of reach. Poetic material *is* partly made up of these psychic elements; but it also includes themes and preoccupations, a world-view and cultural background – and beliefs about poetry. It's the *why* of writing: which produces the *which*.

The poet Peter Redgrove's 'formula' for a true poem asked the writer to use the whole quartet of senses, emotion, intellect and intuition, and is one of the most challenging, and at the same time accurate, definitions of poetry we have. [...] Poetry, since it looks both out and in, has to be *about* something in order to be fully present. That doesn't mean it must be intellectually-driven, or politically-engaged, or that its meaning is somewhere beyond the poem itself, in a cultural situation or emotional climate which verse helps us to

understand. But it does mean that the poem is *exploring something*: even if that ‘something’ is simply its own form, as is the case with such famous poetic games-players as Gertrude Stein or the automatic-writing Surrealists. Contrary to popular belief, poems very rarely do nothing except describe a ‘sweet, especial rural scene’, as Gerard Manley Hopkins’s ‘Binsey Poplars’ has it. William Wordsworth’s ‘Daffodils’, one of the most-translated poems in the English Romantic tradition, is in fact about the nature of experience: about *what it is like to remember* his ‘host of golden daffodils’, how ‘They flash upon the inward eye / That is the bliss of solitude’. And even descriptive poetry is always more than a mere record. A poem is never a holiday snap. Instead, poetic material is a mixture of emotion, observation, insight, preoccupation... It is, in short, a mixture of elements very much like the self who writes. [...]

Peter Redgrove’s cross-roads of forces reminds us how the full range of who you are must be brought to bear in poetry. After all, if a poem is, as T.S.Eliot says in ‘East Coker’, a ‘raid on the inarticulate’ – if it is at all mysterious, going further than what we think we know – it certainly can’t know *less* than its author. A good poem is more than the sum of its own parts: and must be more than the sum of the poet’s parts too. [...] Writing poetry is *not*, despite the way some opportunities for participation seem to have been put together, a competition. Instead, it means being in a particular relationship to your *own* capacities. [...] In his famous definition of Negative Capability, from a letter to his brothers in 1817, John Keats talks about the poet as ‘capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact & reason’. Yet he wasn’t advocating writerly indecision but, rather, a profound openness to possibilities that might occur within the writing process. To begin with – to create the habit – it may help to think of this in more active terms. The starting point for a poem must be a place where *everything* is thinkable. There can be no thought police at the source of writing. [...]

Poets devise many ways of accessing the full range of their own material. All are strategies for getting round the internal censors. [...] Seamus Heaney digs down *from where he is* to find his own layers of meaning and resonance. He aspires to be workmanlike, immediate, and concrete. ‘But I’ve no spade to follow men like them’, he says of his farming family, in ‘Digging’. These poems ask their speaker, *Who are you?* and, in starting from where he is, they are profoundly reflexive. [...] For Ted Hughes on the other hand, the great effort is to get beyond the self to the given world. [...] Hughes’s essay ‘The Burnt Fox’, tells us how the incidents in his famous poem ‘The Thought Fox’ really happened: the idea for the poem seemed to ‘enter’ the poet’s mind because he made himself open to it.

How to make yourself open like this? Poetry requires wool-gathering;

the kind of unfocused browsing and pottering which so irritates the people we live with. The poet doesn't know *what* she's looking for as she reads a couple of poems in a magazine, glances at the newspaper, wanders round the room picking things up and putting them down again. The metabolism of consciousness is mysterious. It is by nature prior to, and hidden from, the content of thought. Once you start to think, *I'm creatively wool-gathering*, your attention switches to yourself, you become self-conscious and the process stops. So this deliberate entry into a more spacious way of thinking has to get past self-consciousness [...] the censors who stand at the gates of your consciousness telling you, for example, *You've nothing interesting to say. No-one's going to read this. No thought but in rhyme. Watch your language*, or best of all, *So-and-so doesn't do it like this*. [...]

One way to stop self-sabotage is to write poems 'in dialogue with' work you admire. [...] It's a bit like wearing a mask. It's also a bit like avoiding shyness, in a room where you know no-one, by asking someone *else* about themselves. Some writers use music, when they're writing, to set the tone of what they want to write *and* to occupy part of their attention. Music, after all, is a human language and it's almost impossible not to 'follow' it. [...] Some people write in cafés or other public places, where the 'white noise' of outer life can be enough to prevent self-consciousness. [...] One of the most persuasive advocates of the café writing table is Natalie Goldberg, whose inspirational *Writing Down the Bones* is built on the importance of free writing – of 'going in' – as a *practice*, a repeated discipline. [...] Some writers go further still with the threshold of consciousness. They practice forms of self-hypnosis. The poet Herbert Lomas lies on a sofa and talks himself down seven flights of imaginary stairs, along a visualised corridor and into the furthest room, where he lies down on a sofa and writes a poem. It's a technique he developed while he was teaching full time and had so little time to write that he had to make what was available work. [...]

Going in to your poetic material is a way to get closer to your *own* self, rather than the self who has written so far, or a version of you constructed by the people around you. At the same time it's an adventure, in which you go beyond external aspects in order to catch up with another, less familiar, version of your own self. Poetry is always on the edge of stepping out into what you don't know: into a self you don't recognise, beyond the rational and comprehensible into more archaic forms of knowledge. Beyond this threshold are shapes that aren't yet recognisable: they might be encouraging or terrifying. Your job is to observe them without getting carried away from the lighted room you need to write in. Poets, like poetry, look both ways.