Writing Home

Alan Bennett

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ALAN BENNETT

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The drawing here showing the removal of Miss Shepherd’s van is by David Gentleman.

Introduction

In a Manner of Speaking

This book brings together the talks, diaries and occasional journalism that I have written over the last twenty years or so, mostly for the BBC or the *London Review of Books*. I have called the book *Writing Home*, though there is plenty here that has nothing to do with home and some of it, looked back on, that seems not to have much to do with me.

Most of the journalism was grudgingly undertaken, in particular the book reviews, which were teased out of me (in both senses) by my friend Mary-Kay Wilmers, the present editor of the *London Review of Books*. There are writers, I'm told, who dash off these occasional pieces with ease and pleasure before turning back, reinvigorated, to the job in hand. Not me, I'm afraid. Book reviewing is not my element, demanding a breadth of reading and reference that I generally do not have and which writing plays seldom requires; the result is I find myself either covering up or showing off, while at the same time opting to write in what I imagine to be a metropolitan mode.

That I should admit to having a choice in the way I write isn't an advertisement for versatility so much as an anxiety about sincerity, and it takes me back to a not quite primal scene of my youth.

I was born and brought up in Leeds, where my father was a butcher. As a boy, I sometimes went out on the bike delivering orders to customers, one of whom was a Mrs Fletcher. Mrs Fletcher had a daughter, Valerie, who went away to school then to London, where she got a job with a publishing firm. She did well in the firm, becoming assistant to one of the directors, whom, though he was much older than she was, she eventually married. The firm was Faber and Faber, and the director was T. S. Eliot. So there was a time when I thought my only connection with the literary world would be that I had once delivered meat to T. S. Eliot's mother-in-law.

A few years later, when my dad had sold the shop but we were still living in Leeds, my mother came in one day and said, 'I ran into Mrs Fletcher down the road. She wasn't with Mr Fletcher; she was with another feller – tall, elderly, very refined-looking. She introduced me, and we passed the time of day.' And it wasn't until some time later that I realized that, without it being one of the most momentous encounters in western literature, my mother had met T. S. Eliot. I tried to explain to her the significance of the great poet, but without much success, *The Waste Land* not figuring very largely in Mam's scheme of things.

'The thing is,' I said finally, 'he won the Nobel Prize.'

'Well,' she said, with that unerring grasp of inessentials which is the prerogative of

mothers, ‘I’m not surprised. It was a beautiful overcoat.’

I can imagine that meeting: Mam smiling desperately, as she and Dad always did when they were out of their depth; nodding a good deal, too, so as not to have to speak; and, if she has to contribute, trying to ‘speak properly’, though without ‘putting it on’ – ‘putting it on’ being one of the (several) charges Dad had against my mother’s sisters, Auntie Kathleen and Auntie Myra, both of whom nursed pretensions to refinement and who never knew, in Dad’s words, ‘when to keep their traps shut’. It would have taken more than T. S. Eliot to silence them.

Having said goodbye to Mrs Fletcher and the refined gentleman (whoever he was), Mam would have come away wishing she ‘had a bit more off’ – i.e. more confidence – and regretting that she and Dad hadn’t been educated, believing as they always did that education was a passport to social ease and that had they been able to ‘stop on at school’ everything would have been different.

It wouldn’t, of course: it was class and temperament, not want of education, that held their tongues; ‘stopping on at school’ might have loosened them a little but it never entirely loosened mine, and I stopped on at school one way or another until I was twenty-eight. Thirty years on, this book still shows traces of speech difficulties they passed on to me. What am I doing in book reviews, for instance, but trying to ‘speak properly’? What is writing sketches if not ‘putting it on’? ‘Just be yourself,’ my parents would say, ignoring the fact that this was something they themselves seldom managed to be, at any rate in company. Funny and voluble on their own, the slightest social pressure sent them into smiling, nodding silence. But it was different for me, they thought. I was educated; I could be myself; I had a self it was not embarrassing to be.

So I see this awkward encounter with Mr Eliot as a kind of parable, a prefiguring of how, when I did eventually start to write, it should be in two different voices, metropolitan (‘speaking properly’) and provincial (‘being yourself’), and that if one takes T. S. Eliot to represent Art, Culture and Literature (all of them very much in the upper case) and my mother to represent life (resolutely in the lower case), then what happened at the end of Shire Oak Street that morning nearly forty years ago went on happening when I started to write plays and is still happening between the covers of this book.

It wasn’t that I had any particular affection for the works of T. S. Eliot. I had seen, though not entirely understood, *The Cocktail Party* when it came to the Leeds Grand Theatre on its provincial tour, and also *Murder in the Cathedral* done at a local church. I had even read *Notes Towards a Definition of Culture*, but only because I was soon to try for a Cambridge scholarship and it seemed the kind of thing one was expected to read. And just as one read what one was expected to read, so, when I started very haltingly to write, I wrote what one was expected to write: not, that is, about life, in my case the life of a northern town – provincial, dull and at that time, the late 1950s, largely unwritten about – but the life that I had read about in books or seen at Saturday matinées at the Grand Theatre – metropolitan, literary and middle-class. Admittedly these first efforts only took the form of sketches and parodies which I performed at concerts in my college at Oxford, but they led in 1960 to my collaboration in the revue *Beyond the Fringe*.

Whether *Beyond the Fringe* was satire was much debated at the time. It scarcely

mattered, as there was no debate about how funny it was, though I had a sneaking feeling that some of my contributions were less so and more earnest than the rest. After a spell in the West End the show went to America in 1962, where, despite opening in New York during the week of the Cuban Missile Crisis, it was a great success. Towards the end of 1963 it was decided to revamp it, and, with the addition of some new sketches, the show went into a second edition. It was perhaps the earnestness coming out, and also because I had been away from home for more than a year, that made me decide for the first time to try to speak and write in a voice that was my own, rather than putting one on. I was going to be myself.

What I chose to do was a monologue about death, and in particular death and its supposedly comic aspects in the North of England. Now in 1963 death was not the subject of lively interest it has since become, and even today it's hardly big on Broadway. This was also death as met with in Morecambe and Blackpool, neither of them settings which an American audience could be expected to know about or want to. I performed the sketch nightly for six months to the embarrassment of my colleagues and the stunned silence of the audience, and when the revue ended it was nearly ten years before I ventured to write about the North of England again. So much for 'being myself. The first round had gone to T. S. Eliot.

And he won the second round too, because when I wrote my first stage play, *Forty Years On* (1968), it had much more to do with art than life, wasn't life at all in fact but the product (and it's not to disparage it to say it's also the waste product) of years of reading memoirs of literary life, tales of novelists' schooldays and the period between the wars. Or, as a character in a later play puts it, somewhat over-elaborately, as he describes a bookshelf:

> *Horizon*, the parish magazine, *Scrutiny*, the school chronicle, all the nice distinctions, careful cross-bearings and distances on the pedometer. Relief maps of anxiety, the contours of small depressions. Get Well cards and invites to funerals. Notes under the general heading of amelioration. Deaths in vicarages and (Little) Venice. Bottles of Jordan water and basinfuls of the warm South. School and the trenches, good talk and good wine and the never-ending siege of the country house. Messages from an unvisited island.
>
> (*The Old Country*)

Set in a public school, part play and part revue, *Forty Years On* had nothing to do with any world that I'd known outside books, let alone with 'being myself. An elegy for the passing of a traditional England, the play is constructed round a series of literary parodies, which in retrospect I can see were a form of apprenticeship, as indeed had been some of the sketches in *Beyond the Fringe*. Art comes out of art; it begins with imitation, often in the form of parody, and it's in the process of imitating the voices of others that one comes to learn the sound of one's own. This is the theory anyway. With me it hasn't quite worked out like that, the fissure between provincial and metropolitan persisting, T. S. Eliot and my mother shaking but never joining hands.

For a while after *Forty Years On* I kept the voice I had acquired for the stage and the voice I had been born with for television; my first TV plays, *A Day Out* (1972) and

Sunset Across the Bay (1974), were both set in the North, as have been many others since. This neat division didn't persist all that long, but though I've written several TV plays 'speaking properly' (e.g. *An Englishman Abroad* and *102 Boulevard Haussmann*) I've still only managed one Northern play for the stage (*Enjoy*) and that was hardly a success, as mystifying to a West End audience as the northern way of death had been on Broadway. Sometimes I envy the power of my contemporary, the poet Tony Harrison, who has one defiant Leeds voice to which he subjugates everything he writes. But he had to suffer for his voice at school as I never did, and so sets more store by it (nor, I imagine, did his mother ever meet T. S. Eliot). Not that having two voices is much of a problem, more a worry about consistency – and even that seldom surfaces nowadays, except on occasions like this when I try to make sense of what I have written.

It could all, I suppose, be less ponderously put in terms of wearing this hat or that, except that hats are supposed to give you confidence, not make you uneasy. Speaking is more of a trial than writing, particularly speaking on the radio, and several of the pieces printed here began as radio talks. I tried to lose my northern accent at one period, then reacquired it, and now don't know where I am, sometimes saying my 'a's long, sometimes short, and 'u's a continuing threat, words like 'butcher' and names like 'Cutbush' always lying in ambush. Anyone who ventures south of the Trent is likely to contract an incurable disease of the vowels; it's a disease to which for some reason weather forecasters are particularly prone, and lecturers in sociology.

Some of these pieces have been hard to classify. *Dinner at Noon* is as much reminiscence as it is record, so that puts it among the recollections. Pm sure the address to the Prayer Book Society belongs under 'Books', but what does one call 'Tit for Tatti' or 'Going Round'? Skits, I suppose, though I don't like the word; humour, though I don't like that very much either – too close to the BBC's 'light-hearted look at'. These are the pieces I'm most unsure about and the ones most likely to have dated but for completeness's sake I've included them under 'Stocking Fillers', just glad that I don't feel tempted to write like that any more. I know there are repetitions, but I've made no attempt to eradicate them lest I be left with a literary doily. I think it was Kenneth (not the Chancellor of the Exchequer) Clark who said that most of us have only a few pennies to rattle about in our tins (though he had more, in every sense, than most).

I would like to thank Jean McNicol of the *London Review of Books*, who has edited much of this material. As I've said, many of the pieces would not have been written but for the persistence of Mary-Kay Wilmers and the staff of the *London Review*. The LRB has been in existence now for fifteen years, and it seems to me (and not just because I occasionally contribute to it) the liveliest, most serious and also the most radical literary periodical we have. I would have liked the LRB to have published this volume, as it did the original version of *The Lady in the Van*. That proved not to be possible, but I hope this book will at least bring the paper to the notice of a wider readership.

This revised edition of *Writing Home* includes some additional material: extracts from my diaries for 1993, 1994 and 1995 and some previously overlooked entries from 1986, all again from the *London Review of Books*; there is also an account of the