

John Welch

Also by John Welch:

Poetry

A Place Like Here (Katabasis, London 1968)

Six of Five (The Many Press, London 1975)

Wanting To Be Here (The X Press, London 1976)

The Fish God Problem (The Many Press, London 1977)

Braiding the Squadron (The Many Press, London 1977)

And Ada Ann, A Book of Narratives

(Great Works Press, Bishops Stortford 1978)

Performance (The Many Press, London 1979)

Grieving Signal (The Many Press, London 1980)

The Storms / Lip Service (The Many Press, London 1980)

Out Walking (Anvil, London 1984)

Erasures (The Many Press, London 1991)

Blood and Dreams (Reality Street Editions, London 1991)

Its Radiance (Poetical Histories, Cambridge 1993)

Glyph (Grille, London 1995)

Greeting Want (infernial methods, Cambridge 1997)

The Eastern Boroughs (Shearsman Books, Exeter 2004)

British Estate (AARK Arts, London & Delhi 2004)

On Orkney (infernial methods. Stromness 2005)

Collected Poems (Shearsman Books, Exeter, 2008)

As editor:

Stories from South Asia (Oxford University Press, 1984)

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Dreaming Arrival

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DREAMING ARRIVAL

Introductory Note

What follows makes extensive reference to time I spent in therapy. I went for nine years, twice a week to start with, towards the end increasing this to three times. The boundary between ‘therapy’ and ‘analysis’ is not clear. There is an issue of status—there are those who would say that nothing less than five times a week qualifies as a proper analysis. B, as I refer to him, described himself as a ‘psychoanalytic psychotherapist’ and told me when we first met that he had had a Jungian and subsequently a Freudian analysis. He had an interest in Winnicott and the English object-relations school. I was forty-five years old when I started seeing him, had been married for fourteen years. We had three children aged seven, nine and eleven and lived in London. Amanda was a painter and illustrator, I worked as a teacher. Each week for those nine years I carried this self across North London—my ‘self’, like taking the dog for a walk, or carrying something in a cup and holding it up as an offering? What was I playing at? Sometimes I felt as if I had been ‘sent away’, and I have to say it often felt like drudgery.

Freud wrote case histories—they are probably the most widely read of his writings and have received attention from literary critics. But trying to read them I have found a disturbing experience. There’s a point where the intellectual excitement, the thrill of the chase, seems to outrun the caring, the therapeutic function. You can sense the excitement—but meanwhile what is happening to the patient? As someone on the receiving end trying to write about it, there is the problem of how to contain so much material which proliferates in so many directions without making it conform too much to a simplistic interpretation. The French writer Marie Cardinal describes *The Words To Say It*, her account of breakdown and recovery through an analysis, as ‘an autobiographical novel’, which is one solution. In fact the cover of the original French version simply has the word ‘roman’—‘novel’, although the book reads as a straightforward autobiography. The therapist as Great Detective uncovering the buried secret, the ‘something nasty in the woodshed’, at which point everything falls satisfyingly into place, is a commonplace and may reflect a need to impose a comprehensive narrative structure. The ‘child abuse’ scenario of course provides an ideal narrative framework. There is the foreshadowing, through hints and suggestions, of a dreadful secret, serving to propel the narrative

along, and then the revelation which provides the satisfaction not only of a dramatic dénouement but also the sense of an ancient wrong being righted.

This account is what I made of the experience and I can't honestly say what would have happened if I hadn't gone. When I started seeing him things were certainly not so bad that I was unable to carry on with my life. Amanda says it made a big difference. What I have written is not intended as an evaluation of, or judgement on the process and the theory that underpins it. Giving someone the licence to interpret is never anything less than problematic and I have more reservations about Freud than B appeared to have. The connection between theory and therapeutic outcome is unclear to me anyway. A therapist friend suggested to me the other day that what mattered was empathy on the part of the practitioner and 'a strong cognitive structure'—the detail of the theory may be all but irrelevant. B did provide a strong sense of structure and consistency (in all the years I went he was only ever to cancel a session once so far as I can recall) and there was always a sense of warmth and empathy. He was far from being the 'silent practitioner' one reads about. At the same time by highlighting his comments and interpretations and sometimes telescoping them together I have made him out to be significantly more interventionist than he actually was. Maybe this is simply how I experienced the process. And I'm tempted to say that there was always only one other person in the room beside myself—and that was me.

A few days before sending a final version of this off to the publisher I ran into B. It was ten years since we'd last met. I'd gone to the Courtauld to see an exhibition of Sickert's paintings. These were the nudes some of them associated with the 'Camden Town Murders.' Much is made of the fact that the models were prostitutes, and the 'sordidness' of the rooms. But artists' models almost always were prostitutes and as for the rooms all you see is bedrooms that are quite small, maybe some patterned wallpaper, a washstand, a chair—simply the sort of rooms most people lived in at the time. Sickert appears to be playing with narrative in these pictures. Take this painting actually titled 'Camden Town Murder'—a woman lies naked on a bed half-covered by a blanket while in the foreground, right up against the frame of the picture, is a 'sinister' figure, dark against the light. But Sickert gave the picture

an alternative title 'A Summer Afternoon'. Look at it again and it's merely two people having a friendly conversation. She's lying in bed; he's dressed as if about to go out. Anyway there B was—he saw me first—looking quite elderly; surrounded by these naked bodies and amid so much ambiguity and narrative confusion we shook hands, had a friendly conversation and said goodbye.

There was my friend Paul's story. One day Paul phoned his analyst to say he'd be ten minutes late. The phone was answered by a weeping woman, who told him the analyst was dead. He'd died the day before in a car crash and she told Paul to leave his number if he wanted details of the funeral. The funeral took place in a big church in central London. This analyst was quite elderly, a man of some eminence in his profession and those present fell into three very distinct groups and in the church they were seated separately from one another. There were fellow-analysts, members of the family, and a third group consisting mainly of former patients. Paul leant forward and asked the man in front of him exactly what had happened when the analyst was killed. The man, who was there with his parents, gave Paul some more details of the accident and then burst into tears. The other ex-patients all seemed to be on their own and kept giving each other covert glances. All through the service Paul was preoccupied with a fantasy which he couldn't let go of. It went like this; the analyst wasn't really dead at all, he'd simply had enough and wanted to give it all up and he thought this would be a less painful way for his patients than simply to tell them not to come any more, and so he had set up this enormous conspiracy with grave, suited colleagues, weeping family members, and in the middle of it all an empty coffin. The service proceeded, various colleagues and some family members got up and said their pieces. The priest, who all too clearly had not known anything much about the dead man, went through his routine, and it was all over. But, as they were leaving the church, Paul felt like shouting out "What about us?"—meaning the group of ex-patients gathered there. "Why has no one asked any of us to say anything?"

But I've thought more than once that it might have been better if I had never set out to write about it. This endless going over and over it, instead of just walking away; "Take up thy bed and walk". It was as if I felt I could be 'born' in the book. All this trying to find the answer, but maybe there isn't an answer. It was as if I had walked into a trap, a trap that I had set, and I had baited the trap with myself. At times I had a sense I was being 'warned off' writing about it by members of the profession with whom I had briefly discussed it. Can such writing be anything other than an offering at the shrine of therapy? Another

offering would be to train as one oneself. I think of all those years he and I were locked together like hostage and captor, and I'm not sure which is which. What I have written is not the book that I first set out to write. I had imagined myself producing a straightforward narrative of my experience, but I was plagued by a sense that what I was having to do was write a report as if seeking my promotion to the ranks of the 'successfully analysed' and I had to show what a good boy I'd been—and that was one of my problems anyway. Actually I have no idea what would constitute a successful analysis, or whether what I experienced was 'an analysis' at all. And Freud himself famously said the most he could do was convert a neurosis into 'an ordinary unhappiness'.

The 'journal' I kept, all fifty one ring binders of it—I started it a year or so before I started seeing B—is still sitting in the basement. I have numbered the pages and put a sort of contents list at the beginning of each one. It's as if I were trying to tidy it all away. Dust sifts down from the ceiling and, when I take one of the binders out and start to read, the pages have a gritty feel. I now see how much the decision, made early on in the process, to write about my experience affected what happened there, distorted it. The analyst quoted in Janet Malcolm's book *An Impossible Profession* maintains that the sign of a successful analysis is that the analysand subsequently forgets all about it. This would make writing about it a kind of failure. I did not experience a sense of loss or abandonment when it ended and I think this was because of the writing. In my anxiety not to lose hold of it I embarked on writing my book the moment my therapy finished. I feel this writing, and the journal that preceded it, must have been in part a wish to stay in control, an attempt to both defend myself from the process and to prolong it and thus smooth over the final break. And I never once discussed this writing project with him. It was only after I had finished seeing him that I realised what an extraordinary omission this was. It was as if I carried this 'book' in front of me like a shield, as if it were a fortress from which to observe him, or something like a secret name which renders you invulnerable. But did this secrecy make it like a theft? In the sessions I found it hard to take openly, but 'stole' nourishment from him. This writing—was it something stolen from the father? There was an element of grandiosity about it and, once finished, I would wave it about like a flag, in triumph.

I think of the room I used to wait in downstairs in his comfortable North London house, with its books and paintings, one in particular, a self-portrait, looking down at me from the wall. I write a poem about the room. 'I want to come to you', I write, 'from the most enormous distance', and imagine the room in its daytime quiet and myself there like a 'travelling shaft of light'. There's the twitch of a curtain and from time to time that sound of a car pulling away outside. I imagine myself writing in there, sitting in a 'perfected circle's pool of light'. And then I end the poem comparing myself to Tantalus, Tantalus who reaches out for substance, substance that remains shadowy, a hologram of reality that he passes through. In the session, I would 'tantalise' the analyst, by not telling. Silence, keeping silent, can be very controlling. I would refuse to yield my meaning, while I implied that there was a great deal there.

In Portugal. A walking holiday. It's ten years since I stopped seeing him and I'm here on my own—Amanda, my wife, is travelling in Norway with a friend. We are fourteen, plus our Leader; some in couples and some, like myself, on their own. I've started to make notes on my companions and it has become a commentary running through my head. 'Audenesque' I thought I'd call it.

There's the one who attaches himself to the Leader I wrote, There's the woman from Canada, the one who takes picture of flowers, she who is excited by sphagnum. There's the one who points things out. There's the Maker of Weapons; a sad one, non-stop talker at mealtimes, befriender of the village dogs, one who sits on a rock all by himself to eat lunch. On our way again, and here is the Leader, slim and athletic, bouncing along. But why does he continually keep 'dropping back for a moment'?

Now here is the compulsive taker of notes, secretive but affable. He waits till the end of the walk, then twists his leg. "I was trying to save myself" he tells the Leader. The next two days he must hide indoors. (Note: 'Monument to the Falling Walker'—the 'Dying Gladiator' but now dressed in T Shirt, shorts and carrying a backpack.)

It's the tone of that early Auden, the prose sections in *The Orators* and it's catching, like a nervous tic. There's a 1930s feel to it that goes with a walking holiday, shorts, hiking—and the outfit we're with is called 'Ramblers Holidays.'

They have discovered I am a poet! I think it was the man who thought Ted Hughes was a Librarian from Hull. Nice Audrey has asked me to write an Ode to the Leader, to put on the card we shall all be signing. But are they getting suspicious of my note-taking? I imagine a gang of them, back from the bar down in the village, bursting into my room as if I were an unpopular 1920s undergraduate. What if they find my notes? Must be careful. Memo—always take two pens.

Our first base was a medium-sized town, called Vila Real. In Vila Real it was the weekend of the 'bombeiros', the firemen. The first sign we had of this was a band, children playing raggedly on their instruments

being led by a man beating an enormous drum. Then, walking round the town after dinner at the hotel, I passed the fire station. There was a lot of shouting and in the darkness you could make out the firemen washing and anointing their engines. Six young men emerged pushing an antique engine through the winding streets of the old part of town to the main square. In the centre of the square a temporary column had been erected and from the top emerged a flame that burned all through that weekend. It made me think of the altar in a Parsi temple. The next morning when I went out the firemen were all marching down to the square with their band. They were in uniform, their brass helmets brightly polished and with gleaming ceremonial axes over their shoulders as if they were rifles. The procession drew up in front of the Town Hall and out came various dignitaries, men in dark suits, men bloated with office. An inspection was carried out, the suits clapped one another on the shoulder and then everyone went up the steps and into the building. The thing is, there can be something quite relaxing about watching and not needing to understand. Like going to a poetry reading given entirely in a language you are unfamiliar with. It had the fascination of an empty or meaningless ritual, carried out with all due care. Vila Real—‘real town’?

‘Smart new boots. What a polish on them’ the New Zealander had said that first morning and now, three days later as we waited for the bus that was to transfer us to our next Centre, he looked at the plastic bag I was carrying. “Why do you go to an Independent Bookshop” he asked, referring to the wording on the bag. “O, they do a lot of travel books” I answered lamely. “Is it better to read about travel or to do it?” he snapped back. I was silent.

So here I sit talking to my wound.

I was thinking by now of my copy of Auden and MacNeice’s *Letters from Iceland*. The copy I have was my parents’ copy and after they were both dead I found an exchange of letters between them; he a curate in a London parish, she living in Oxford, and there was one letter where she writes to thank him for that ‘interesting book’ after he had been to visit her. Reading them now I think of them circling round one another, becoming engaged, relieved above all I daresay to have found one another, an eminently suitable arrangement.

From Vila Real we moved on to a village and the second night there I had a violent dream . . . I am trying to cross a main road, near where we live in London. The cars are packed tight, not moving. Can I slip through or will I get crushed when the traffic suddenly starts? I have the illusion they are parting for me. Now I've got across and have come some way along Brook Road towards home and there's a man lifting up a huge scythe. But it's jointed and the blade leans forward at an angle like a hook. He's approaching a sort of shack. Inside it I know there's a young woman. She's a reporter and she's going to interview him but he is going to do something terrible to her. I must do something about it. Now I'm trying to call the police. I'm trying to tell the woman on the other end of the phone where the police car should come, but I can't remember the address. I'm semi-paralysed, standing there in the road looking at this strange building, which has a patched appearance and appears to be made partly of cardboard and partly of corrugated iron. The building is shaking, and they are in there together and I am quite frantic.

Just after I woke up—maybe it was part of the dream—I was thinking 'parallel to Rectory Road.' Rectory Road crosses Brook Road. My father was a 'rector' and the house a 'rectory.' Well, strictly speaking a vicarage. Just now I am 'lamed'—unable to walk properly since I twisted my leg a few days ago. This scythe, born aloft, lifted in both hands—but *jointed*—it's like my father's cut throat razor, and I remember when I was small fascinatedly watching him use it, that rhythmic back and forth movement as he stropped it on the leather strap hanging by the basin, before applying this dangerous implement carefully to his face. He went on using a cut-throat long after most people had switched to safety razors.

Here where we were staying out in the countryside you saw them walking slowly along the roads, moving into and out of the small fields, stooping men and black-scarved women, with their scythes and other implements over their shoulders and a day or two after that dream looking across the valley I saw on the far side a man and a woman each wielding a scythe, harmoniously cutting the long grass in a little terraced field and that same day returning late to the hotel I saw one by the door. The owner had left it there while he went inside for a drink. Propped in the doorway it rested quietly there in the cooling

evening, a slice of shadow. On our final day in the village we walked to the chapel of St John. We could see it from the hotel, across the valley and a long way up on the crest, a tiny white square. We toiled up there in the heat—once a year there’s a pilgrimage, with stops on the way for eating and drinking and dancing. It was a little whitewashed building kept locked. You could peer in through two openings in the wall one on either side of the door, but you could see nothing. A thing of impenetrable darkness. But my flash photograph when developed revealed half a dozen vases containing dried up flowers and a small statue of the Virgin.

The *bombeiros* made me think of Ashbery’s comment on the French poet Raymond Roussel: “What he leaves us with is a work that is like the perfectly preserved temple of a cult which has disappeared without a trace, or a complicated set of tools whose use cannot be discovered. But even though we may never be able to ‘use’ his work in the way he hoped, we can still admire its inhuman beauty, and be stirred by a language that always seems on the point of revealing its secret, of pointing the way back to the ‘republic of dreams’ whose insignia blazed on his forehead.” Walking in the hills we saw wind farms—sails turning on the hill’s crest. I glimpsed part of a sail over the top of the hill out of the corner of my eye and thought for a moment that it was a bird’s wing and I started to fantasise that these objects too were part of a cult. ‘A complicated set of tools’—there was that beautifully made box lying around at home when I was small that I used to play with. It had lots of small irregularly shaped compartments in a tray that rested at the top and these compartments each contained a puzzling instrument. I liked the box, its polished wood and the way everything fitted together. I liked the fact that it was old. You could say I appropriated it—my parents didn’t seem concerned and no one ever suggested to me what these small spiky things might have been for. I found it vaguely frustrating. But my great grandfather Josiah was an architect and thinking about it now, long after the box and its contents have melted away in the mysterious way that such things do, I’m sure they must have been his drawing instruments.

Our third base was a hotel by a lake. My leg had started to play up again and one day instead of walking I got the bus to Braga, a city an hour or so away. Walking round a city can assume a dreamlike quality,

emphasised in this case not only by the heat but also by the fact that the streets had no names on them. This made it difficult to follow the map I had brought and most of the time I was more or less lost. In the cathedral there was a mummified archbishop lying in a glass case in all his robes, his face like a piece of dark wood. After leaving the cathedral I chanced upon an exhibition concerning the Portuguese wars in Africa in one of the university buildings. It was officially shut but the man let me in and I walked through a succession of deserted spaces till I came to it, a double line of black and white photographs mounted on screens. It was a long narrow room and at the far end was a chapel and down both sides of the screens were machine guns mounted on their stands and all pointing at the altar.

By now the Auden fantasy had been replaced by another, in which I had been instructed, or maybe challenged, to write a poem which was required to be as boring as I could possibly make it. This challenge had emanated from an eminent poet—a father figure? And actually it was an avant-garde exercise, as if such intense boredom might reveal a hidden meaning. The bits floating in my head were detailed descriptions of the lakeside resort in the north of the country where we were staying. There was the hotel and its multiple inconveniences. The nearby town at the far end of the lake was a sort of spa and I spent a whole afternoon in the park attached to it when the others were out walking. Its faded melancholy and disused air appealed to me. *Here at the resort a different fate awaits you* was how I thought my poem might have started, then *Pilgrims in flip-flops are traipsing up the hill*—I was thinking here of the line of people we met on the Sunday at the start of our walk going up the road to a shrine at the top. I was thinking too of a poem by the poet Anthony Howell which was a description of two women trying to get a horse into a horse box. That poem was written in impeccably rhyming quatrains and it went on and on and on, the cumulative effect being both frustrating and oddly fascinating. There was a persistent rocking rhythm going on and on in my head through great stretches of our walks as of a sense of narrative persisting, just that, nothing more. Watching a small group of young men and women, posed as if the point was to be just sitting there dressed in that particular way, sitting on the lakeside beach by our hotel, another line came to me, *Imagine them in Africa*.

The day after I'd pulled a muscle at the end of that walk, I'd spent the morning limping around Vila Real in the intense heat inspecting its few sites. There was a Museum with a collection of Roman coins, cases and cases of them, all found in the area by a priest. I stayed longest in the Igreja da Clerigos dawdling over details. There was no one else in there, the church was cool, the doors flung wide open onto the deserted square outside. The baroque altar was a sort of enormous heap of babies and infants with the virgin, a mother-goddess surely, perched at the very top. A bloodstained Jesus hung on the cross, almost life-size, down below and to the right of the altar. A particular feature of the church was the blue-painted tiles depicting the travels of Paul. One section depicted the encounter with 'the unknown god'. There was a man seated in front of an empty altar, the words 'Ignot.Deo' suspended in the air above it where you would expect a crucifix. The man was shrugging his shoulders at the group standing there striking startled and affronted attitudes, having clearly just landed after sailing down the river depicted behind them. So what is 'the unknown god'? The words floating above the altar make me think of text suspended on a screen. It's the way the words were hanging there in the church with nothing behind them. It emphasises the paradox of their insubstantiality, no more than arbitrary signs but the impression they make is of such substance. And the priest with his coins—antique coins fascinate me, their material weight and substance on the one hand and on the other the ephemeral, arbitrary and often enigmatic nature of the script that they carry. But the substance goes and we end up transfixed by text as if it is all that there is, words hanging there or moving across a screen like writing on the inside of a tomb, a place where dust will never move and you imagined you might leave your thumbprint in the language and even make yourself known there.