PHILOSOPHICAL GAS 87

Done for FAPA and ANZAPA by John Bangsund, PO Box 1096, Thornbury, Victoria 3071, Australia **SPRING 1993**

THE MARCH OF MIND

One of the things I like about WordPerfect is that you start with a blank screen, like a fresh sheet of paper. As I type, the words appear in a soft white on a matt black background. When I bought this computer I swapped the color monitor that went with it for a monochrome monitor, a bigger hard disk and a second floppy drive. I did not buy the computer to play games or for any purpose that requires color, but to work with words. Working with words is my business. My business is not doing well, but if I am not in much demand for what I am good at I can't think what else I might be in demand for.

From time to time people have suggested that I should write for a living. I appreciate the implied compliment, but I don't have the right temperament for the kinds of writing for a living that might seem open to me. As I have said before, I am an undisciplined writer: I start with inspiration, and continue with improvisation and digression. Today's inspiration comes by turning on the computer; I note the blank screen, its appearance reminds me why I have a computer, I realize from my improvising that I am about to write about writing, I digress from this to note how I started writing today.

Why I don't write

I am a creative writer, but only on a small scale — an anecdotalist, not a story-teller. I am a careful writer: I want my writing to be accurate, and am disappointed when it isn't; I want it to be clear, but clear writing demands clear thinking, and I have never been good at that. In a sense, I lack what one of Ursula Le Guin's characters in *Searoad* calls 'the necessary indifference and passion of the scholar', qualities that I suspect may be necessary also to the poet and the writer of fiction. In a sense, I have too much of what John Mortimer had in mind when he wrote, in *Clinging to the Wreckage*, 'The only rule I have found to have any validity in writing is not to bore yourself.' He may say that, but in all his writing he shows a keen sense of writing appropriately for his intended audience, of trying not to bore *them*, a discipline I rarely practise.

In the late 1960s I worked for a time as a journalist, and I was no good at it: my attitude was all wrong. In journalism you need some general skill at writing, but in particular you need a great deal of skill at writing to order. At the *Age* in 1970 I had to write little pieces about caravans and hi-fi equipment and display houses (homes, sorry: they were houses, but the advertisers called them homes). My pieces weren't needed urgently — their main purpose was to fill the spaces between the advertisements and product lists in little books of dubious usefulness — and for a while I enjoyed writing them, but I enjoyed much more visiting the people who sold these things. The salesmen (I can't recall a saleswoman) were invariably knowledgeable and enthusiastic about their product, and usually anxious to impress a journalist. I was offered discounts on amplifiers, free use of caravans, free advice if I wanted to buy a house. I would return to the office feeling I had made a friend for life, or at least a useful contact, then wonder what I could write about this salesman's product that I hadn't already written about another's. Once, I remember, when I should have been writing about installing something or other in your caravan, the third or tenth such piece, I spent the day writing about installing a trampoline. It was mildly amusing.

I knew the editor well enough not to mention the trampoline to him. He was a frustrated motoring writer, who felt he had been sidelined (demoted would be an accurate but infelicitous word) by being taken away from his beloved motor cars and put in charge of these books. The *Age* had acquired a string of publications from another publisher, only one of which, *Motor Manual*, was a good money-spinner. One of my boss's colleagues had been appointed editor of *Motor Manual*; my boss had got the rest. As editor he did even less writing than I did, but he eased his frustration by moonlighting, doing road tests for other publishers. I knew a number of moonlighters at the *Age*. I worked in a large office that was almost empty much of the time, and many journalists used it to make private phone calls. One was a politics writer, who came in most afternoons to dictate stories to other publishers. What fascinated me about these journalists was their apparent devotion to one subject. One of them was a real-estate writer; he had been writing articles about houses for years, and was writing some for the 'Ideal Homes' book that I was working on. Don't you ever get sick of it? I asked. No, he said, and seemed surprised at the suggestion. I haven't noticed his byline lately, but he was still writing about houses in the *Age* in the mid-1980s.

One day the *Age* decided sensibly to give the caravan book to the *Motor Manual* people and close our section. That's it then, my boss said, clearing his desk. He had lined up a job with someone else, probably a publisher he had been moonlighting for. What happens to me? I asked. He advised me to find another job in the building quickly, before Personnel confirmed my redundancy in writing. Try radio, he said.

I tried radio. I spent my first few days monitoring television news and other people's radio news. I wasn't required to write anything. One day it was suggested that I might like to spend the next morning on police rounds, go on to the Premier's press conference if I wanted to, or come back to the office, whatever I liked. This, I suddenly realized, wasn't offhandedness but simply the kind of courtesy due to a B-grade journalist. I knew I didn't deserve it, but they didn't. So next morning, about 6, I was in a bare cold room at D24 in Russell Street, listening to police radio. I picked up two interesting stories. Someone had stolen a millionaire's yacht the day before — I had heard that on the evening news — and it was gradually emerging that his son had taken it, that the millionaire had been informed and was now insisting that his son had merely borrowed it, that the police knew there was ill feeling between the men and wanted charges pressed, and so on. The other story was about a man who had just been picked up for speeding. The police who had stopped him noticed a lot of sports gear on the back seat of his car, and found a lot more when they made him open his boot. He had robbed a sporting goods shop at Benalla. And he would have got away with it, I thought, if he'd stuck to the speed limit when he got back to Melbourne. I decided to write an ironic little story about that. About 7.30 I was joined by an untalkative, bored-looking cadet. I told him I was new to police rounds and radio, told him what I'd been doing at the *Age*, told him about the millionaire's yacht. He didn't comment. I told him about the story I had written. He read the story and said it was written the wrong way. I invited him to rewrite it. He did. 'Police early this morning arrested a Brunswick man on suspicion of breaking and entering . . .' Something like that. The sort of story you read or hear every day. No irony, nothing unusual: shop robbed, thief caught, full stop. I will never learn to write like this, I said. It's easy, he said, suddenly earnest and looking embarrassed, as if I'd complimented him: radio is different, but you'll pick it up. I thanked him, then rang the office and said I wouldn't be back.

For a few months in 1971 I worked for a public relations firm. The people who made aluminium cans were rapidly increasing their share of a market once dominated by the steel industry. The aluminium industry was running an apparently successful PR campaign based on the fairly new public awareness of conservation and recycling: they were good corporate citizens because their cans were being recycled. The firm I worked for had been engaged by the steel industry to counter this image with the 'Steel Can Plan for Conservation'. Aluminium cans were much more easily recycled than steel cans, but it seemed to me that the resources used to produce aluminium and steel were at least as important in any discussion of conservation as those used in recycling. This was none of my business. I was not involved in a discussion. PR is about advocacy and persuasion; facts are only useful if they support your case; image is everything.

One day I went to a school where young children had spent months collecting steel cans, stripping the paper from them, cleaning them, flattening them. They had collected a truckload. I gave a little speech, congratulated them on their terrific work, then took photos of them as they loaded their cans on the truck. I headed back to the office to write a story about it. The truck headed for a rubbish tip, where the cans were dumped. I learnt that some time later. My employers didn't know about it. But does it matter? The answer depends a little on the facts, more on your viewpoint. In general terms it was either a cynical fraud or an unfortunate misunderstanding, depending on who made the decision to dump the cans. In PR terms it was potentially disastrous, depending on whether the story got out. From the viewpoint of someone employed to write PR material, the question 'Does it matter?' has no relevance. If the PR writer *is* asked to answer the question, then it becomes a matter of professional relevance, and the answer depends on the client's requirements.

In 1984 I was employed briefly in the Victorian Public Service. The job wasn't advertised: my boss was a member of the Society of Editors, she liked my writing in the society's newsletter, and she wanted me on her staff. I told her I was a useless journalist. She said she wanted an editor, especially an editor who could write, and offered me a salary that was five times as much as I was earning as a freelance. It turned out that there was very little editing involved in the job, and not much writing — except press releases. In my third week or thereabouts I was asked to write a press release. I said I had never written one. It's easy, she said: every press release is the same, except for the facts. The facts, it seemed, were not only interchangeable but virtually irrelevant. The main function of the press release was not to convey facts; it was not even to get the Minister's name mentioned in the news media, though that was of course useful and in some respects the mark of a good press-release writer. No, the main function of the press release was to show the Minister that he or she had a thoroughly professional press-release writer. The professionalism consisted in writing quickly and never straying from the formula. The formula, once you learnt it, allowed you to write quickly. The formula allowed busy journalists who read the press release to grasp the main points quickly and translate them into *their* formula. If you were thoroughly professional, you could be asked to write a press release at 10 and hear the gist of what you wrote on the midday news. I never got the hang of it. I never really wanted to.

From a letter to a friend

[*23 May*] I have been doing a lot of reminiscing lately, or perhaps I should say even more than usual, since so much of my writing seems to be in that vein. It started when Bruce showed me the introduction he had written to his reprint of 'Sir William and I in Adelaide'. What he had said about my relationship with Lee Harding made me realize that I hadn't explained it properly to him, and this led to wondering whether I'd explained it at all to myself. The result of that was 'How I Became an Editor'. Around Christmas, having decided to rejoin ANZAPA, I wrote the piece about what was going on in 1968, when ANZAPA was founded. Just after I finished that I wrote about one of my hard disks crashing: 'RIP, drive D: expired 2 January from passive smoking.' On 8 January a cardiologist told me I was in imminent danger of expiring from active smoking, among other things. He didn't shock me when he said 'You won't see 60,' because that has been my view for some time, but I've taken his advice seriously: I've stopped drinking and lost a fair bit of weight, and the general plan is to attempt to stop smoking some time this year. (There are some good Quit courses around, and the nicotine patch will be available soon.) Since then I have been writing with Time's wingèd chariot more consciously in mind — but wondering why I do so. Do I just want to tell my side of the story before I go? For the moment, since I have space and time to fill, I fill them with things like 'Footballs in the Sands of Time' (which you will see again, annotated, in *Philosophical Gas*) and things I have never really attempted to write before, like the review for the *Age* and the film notes in PG 85. But why do I want to write at all?

30 May I didn't spend the whole week pondering that question, but I did give it a fair bit of thought. A few weeks ago I wrote two or three paragraphs on the subject, and this last week I have gone back to them, incorporated some things I wrote further on in the rambling first draft of this letter, told a few stories about my misadventures in the writing trade, and ended up little wiser. I still haven't decided why I want to write, or what I want to write, but I think I am well on the way to writing something that could be called '*Why* I became an editor'.

Why does Bruce write?

26 June When I raised the subject of 'Why write?' with Bruce Gillespie over dinner last week he reacted as a cyclist might if I asked 'How do you keep your balance on that thing?' He doesn't stop to think about it, perhaps dares not.

I got further with Elaine Cochrane yesterday when I outlined what I had written so far and said that I felt I had to make something positive out of those last two sentences: 'I never got the hang of it. I never really wanted to.' I couldn't help thinking of that as a confession of weakness. Elaine reckons it *is* a positive statement, not weak at all: who *would* want to learn to write that stuff?

Thoughts while reading about Michel Foucault

'More than one person, doubtless like me, writes in order to have no face,' says Foucault in his essay 'Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?' I think I do the opposite. It could be argued — maybe this is what he meant — that I hide behind my writing, use it as a mask to cover my true face. If so, I regard it more positively, as putting the best face on me.

For Foucault 'the work includes the whole life as well as the text'. I have no 'work', no *oeuvre*, no corpus of thought, no sustained creation. 'The private life of an individual, his sexual preference and his work are interrelated,' he says in the same sentence. I have no quarrel with that. I lead a quiet life, I enjoy quiet work, my sexual preference is unremarkable.

If the life *is* the 'work', then my writing is just one aspect of it, of course, as anything that anyone does is part of an individual, unique work. But I don't think Foucault means that. He speaks first of 'the text'. If he had created no text I would have no interest in him, would not have brought him into this ramble around the meaning of my text.

I am interested enough in Foucault to buy James Miller's book about him, *The Passion of Michel Foucault* (Simon & Schuster, New York, 1993). In the introduction I pause to think about this: 'It is wise to state explicitly what "game of truth", to borrow Foucault's phrase, I think I am playing.' By page 19 I have stopped completely, to think about 'writing in order to have no face', to apply that to the 'game of truth' I think I am playing in writing about why I write.

Before I return to the book I think I have an answer to the question 'Why do I write?' It has come from Foucault's suggestion of a mask. It could have come from anywhere. A little common sense might have suggested it. But it comes from the mask, and the mask's suggestion of theatre, of performance. It is simply this: I write because I need an audience.

For money I prefer to do something easier than write. Editing is not easy work, not if you do it properly, but it's easier than writing. You use much the same skills, but you adapt them, applying them to the needs of your author and your author's audience. An editor is not a performer, but a coach, a prompter, a groom.

To be a writer it is wise to repress any urge you may feel to 'get into publishing'. If reading gives you the urge to write, editing urges you to desist. For one thing, so much that is published is mediocre, or worse, and you don't want to add to that. For another, you don't want to be edited by someone else. And for yet another thing, you don't want to put philosophers and literature students to all the trouble of worrying about the meaning of your text, fretting about the life and sexual preference and imaginative universe of 'the one who says I', the performer behind the mask.

Most editors in fact find it hard to say I, just as most academics do, and get into terrible verbal tangles trying to avoid it. Even some fanzine editors have this problem. I learnt early to say I, to write in the first

person, and I do it a lot. It confuses some readers of the *Society of Editors Newsletter*, but it doesn't worry you, because however I may be deconstructed, whatever game I am playing, whatever the mask, you know me (or as much of me as can be known from what I write), and you know that when I stand in this little spotlight the performance is for you.

Just now I choose to stand here. You'll be on next. That's how it is, isn't it? We take turns at being each other's audience. I don't know what Michel Foucault would have made of that, but it seems a pretty civil sort of practice.

FURTHER ADVENTURES IN ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

While we were discoursing away there like merry little Derridas this computer was marginalizing itself: drive D (the 44-megabyte hard disk) has deconstructed itself again. I had just written 'In PG 86A, which ANZAPA hasn't seen', and I think I know what I was going to say next, but PG 86A has meanwhile attained electronic nirvana, along with a stack of letters and a few other documents I hadn't backed-up on floppies.

WordPerfect let me look at drive D (XTree wouldn't) and I copied about thirty of its files onto drive C, thinking I was salvaging them. When I tried to retrieve PG 86A, WordPerfect said OK, hang on, I'll just format it for the default printer, which seemed odd, and it was odd. I got tired of hanging on, and rebooted. Then I looked at PG 86A in XTree: it had all gone, and in place of my deathless prose were repeated references to 'pelvis', 'rectum', 'coccyx' and the like. All but four of the files I thought I had saved were corrupted with this crude anatomical talk.

I report this for the wonderment of J. M. Foyster and anyone else interested in this arcane stuff.

DICEBAMUS . . .

And before Judge Speer and all the other lean Latinists among us rush to dispute the declension, allow me to say that 'dicebamus' is the way it is rendered in the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*.

LUIS DE LEÓN
c. 1528–1591

Dicebamus hesterna die.
We were saying yesterday.
On resuming a lecture at Salamanca University after five years' imprisonment.

The hell with it. I'll put PG 86A in ANZAPA. In *Les souris dansent* 1, which FAPA hasn't seen (it's two pages of ANZAPA mailing comments), I ventured answers to a few questions posed by Kim Huett, among them this:

Your question about the difference between *homoousian* and *homoiousian* takes a little more answering. For a start they are adjectives, occasionally used to describe opposing schools of thought in the Arian Controversy of the fourth century. The Christian concept of a Holy Trinity — God the Father, Son and Holy Ghost — raises some questions about the nature of Jesus, questions that theologians lump together under the heading Christology. What they come down to, roughly, is this. If Jesus was a human being, isn't it wrong to worship him as God? If he was God, who was minding the shop? Arius of Alexandria decided that Jesus was neither fully man nor fully God, but something in between, a *tertium quid*. The debate about this raged back and forth, with just about everyone agreeing that Arius had thrown out the baby with the baptismal font but not agreeing about much else. The Emperor Constantine organized a worldcon to sort the matter out and agree on a creed, and this was duly held at Nicaea in May 325. The Arians were thumped early in the business session. Eusebius of Caesarea put up a nice compromise creed, but some bush theologian (there's always one) managed to get an amendment passed that inserted the words 'of one essence [*homoousion*] with the Father', and Constantine decided OK, that's fixed, and everyone went home, except Arius and a couple of bishops who wouldn't sign, who were banished. Some people weren't happy with the wording of the amendment, especially Eusebius of Nicomedia, so Constantine appointed Athanasius of Alexandria to sort them out. As things settled down, Constantine thought it would be a nice gesture to reinstate Arius. No way! said Athanasius, so Constantine banished him. Soon afterwards, in 337, Constantine had himself baptized and died. The Empire was then divided among his three sons — you can read all that stuff in Gibbon. There are two important things going on here: first, theology had become a political matter, a matter of state, not something to be left to the fans; second, there was a tendency to decide these matters in Rome. For example, at a minicon in Sardica in 343 it was agreed that when bishops were deposed they could appeal to the bishop of Rome for reinstatement. This wasn't a big deal at the time, just good sense, but you can see things happening that were to become pretty important later. Meanwhile, the people who couldn't accept the *homoousion* provision were tending to mumble *homoiousion* at that point in the creed. The word strictly means 'like essence' or 'similar substance', but these people used it to mean 'equality of attributes', which is slightly different. By the time Emperor Julian (the so-called Apostate) died in 363 the whole matter was getting out of hand, because people were now arguing about the nature of the Holy Ghost — *homo* or *homoi*? — and it's so easy to lose the thread that I think I'll just drop it. The Trinity that Athanasius believed in was one God leading a threefold personal life; the Trinity adopted at the second worldcon, Constantinople 381, was a God made up of three personalities and an abstract, impersonal essence. The Nicene Creed was revised: the one you know, if you know it, is not the one adopted at the Council of Nicaea but the one approved at the Second General Council fifty-six years later. And what has all this to do with shamrocks? Blessed if I know.

Word count: 4200 Press any key to continue *No! Not that k*