

THE PANAMA REACHES

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INTRODUCTION

These writings are a mix of biography, *apercu* and opinion, or, variously, concerning people, place and perception. They are an attempt to mix what might be interesting to others with what is essential to me. I use essential here as the adjective deriving from essence.

As I age life seems to be a series of images and discrete quanta of time. I am aware that everything is temporary so I hold on to feelings aroused by the images before me. I need the memory of such things. Experiences become an investment for the future. Mindfulness should not be an exercise in examining one's own momentary feelings. The ego should absent itself while the image before one is allowed to seep in. Time has become Bergsonian.

Sometimes memories come back to me unbidden like islands in the silting up waters of my mind. I welcome them too. And I am intrigued by other worlds that seem to reside within me. They come to me not only in bed as I drift down the slipway of dreamy night but also when my eyes involuntarily close when I relax by day.

I am living increasingly in the isthmus. Sleep and wakefulness are two vast oceans separated by that thin strip that seems to partake of both- worlds where different rules and logic and perspective apply. And I like those Panama reaches as I call them. I have written much in my life; writing and history are my favourite outlets. And yet again I have written nothing, for the conscious creature that is known to the world as "me" can only scratch at the surface of creative writing.

Somehow that "me" has to access the Panama reaches without losing wakefulness, without losing the ability to communicate the story I am telling. This is not I think something a person can learn; it happens naturally. I transfer to another level of the mind, where the stories of my tribe reside. I do not know what tribe that is. It may be the whole of *homo sapiens* or it may just be myself. I'm not sure I believe or should believe in intermediate groupings.

Our lives are each one of them stories and history. And history, as the *Annales* school realised, is part geography, part mentality and part time. And so really is creative writing, the foreground that is the writer's characters, the background that is place and the passing of time. The "me" I refer to has one group of tales given credence by the confirmations of others who have partaken in some of them. But credence is not the same as significance, and there are other tales we share though few have lived them literally.

Who cannot identify with Don Quixote the sorrowful knight who did not need to dream in sleep since his waking life was itself but a dream. Who did not see something primal, beyond the meaning of the moment, when An Inspector Calls on a riven family and, one by one, lays bare their souls. Me, I cannot read books or watch plays and films without wanting to participate in the process myself. That is not to say that I believe I can do better, a foolish thought. I am fascinated both by the mythmakers and the masters of deconstruction, Dumesnil and the power of the three, and Jung who resurrected the decayed gods of the

Greeks, and let open the rusted gates of Olympus whence they tottered into the worlds of analysis and cubism.

So I created my own suffering heroes, displaced from their world, having to change things in their new surroundings and within themselves. A soldier left behind when his defeated regiment crossed a river into a foreign realm. A girl seeking fame and fortune in a golden land in order to save her father's ranch in a dustbowl far to the east. Another girl looking for her lost love who came ashore one night from a shipwreck and just as mysteriously vanished again. A forgotten Dark Age chieftain who, from a writer's error, became King Arthur. And a boy from the East who conquered two new continents not by fire and sword and brimstone, but with his tongue.

These mythic tales are internalised in bare outline, but told and re-told they still have to partake of the world they are next born into- the me world of the here and now, the world of confirmed reality, with its own preoccupations and way of telling things. So I had to live first, to encounter, to visit, to read widely (Borges I recall said we are one half ourselves and one half what we have read) before I could write, and this is the story of where I went doing that.

THE VIVID SENSES OF CHILDHOOD

Vision is the principal sense, and that holds true also for memory and for dream. But the others play out their roles too. Childhood is observant, and the adult will maintain a small library of those observations. Smells are encountered early and connections made. The smell of fresh black bubbly tar on newly repaired roads- I wanted to stand there and breathe in the unhealthy essence. The grassy whiff of fresh-mown lawns, that tumbled down to their retaining walls from the houses raised above the main road, brought joy too.

Every walk down the side road from our corner house was a pleasure, the beginning of a romance of immense promise as I hit the main drag and then the bridge over the railway to Liverpool, the straight lines of the track seemingly converging in the illusory, heat-wobbling distance. Then I walked past the bland car dealerships to the city centre with its shops and smoky coffee bars.

Taste was in the mix too, sitting in a deckchair in the side garden in the company of butterflies and buttercups eating my mother's tomato sandwiches made with white bread, so simple a snack and so lovely too. In the hedge by another rusting gate a blackbird lay its blue tinted eggs in the same place every year.

And then there was hearing- lying in bed to the sounds of the goods trains grinding and squealing their way through the hollow night. Metallic octaves of cacophony. Cows bellowed in long gone distant fields and sometimes the lion in the garage roared.

Everything stood out in childhood, stamping its discreet presence on my nascent awareness. The green leaves of the trees in the garden etched against blue skies, and on the television the Westerns added the yellow sands of pine scrubland.

DREAM MEMORIES

Dreams are remembered too but they are remembered in different ways even from each other. Some are recognised early as recurring dreams, but others creep up on the woken sleeper who then recognises the dream as an ancient night visitor never previously logged by the conscious mind. So a dream can be its own memory.

Dreams do not foretell the future nor replicate the past. They re-sort people and places, maybe those already lost- parents, houses, school friends- to create a playlet that answers to some need in the dreamer- some recognition of anxiety or guilt, the things that gnaw at the subconscious. There are trains travelling at an angle to the intended destination and moving ever further from it. There are vast hotels, and keys with no room number. There are lions roaring in garages.

But the ones that gripped me most, the ones that had me caught in their headlights were the dreams of home. Some were of switches that turned on nothing, or perhaps one small light up numberless dark stairs. But the really important dreams I felt were those that took my house or flat and went to work enlarging it. If I climbed the stairs I would invariably find a passageway that led to unvisited (except in countless prior dreams) sections of the house- new rooms, new staircases, enlarged halls. And if I ventured outside, the street too had partaken of this resizing, this magic embellishment.

I came to realise what the dream meant. I also was pretty sure that the dream would follow me unto death given the story of my life. Unless....

SOUL

We all feel, probably at some relatively early point in life, that we are more than just our bodies. There is something else operating, that allows us not only to be aware of our bodies, and ourselves generally, but also other people and the whole wonder of the world around us.

We have consciousness, and with that come feelings and moral codes and conscience. From where does all this originate? Immediately it comes from the brain of course, but that is a physical organ of the body like any other, so humanity has evolved a sort of parallel vocabulary to deal with the intangibles that this kind of reflection produces. We talk of mind and spirit but neither seems quite deep enough to represent the essence we search for. What we are really talking about is soul.

Is soul separate from body or is it coterminous? Why am I me, and not my friends like Brian or Louise? That me is inside the me others know but is definitely outside them. At this level of being soul is discrete. There are other questions too, questions bigger, more universal, than this, in particular why is there anything? Anything rather than nothing. I remain to be convinced that this question can ever be answered. Scientists sometimes claim they are getting nearer to an answer, but it seems to me their deliberations still take place within the given of something. Priests will claim that God made the world which just defers or displaces rather than answering the question.

Neither belief through faith nor atheistical certainty seems fully satisfactory. Behind it all comes the niggling realisation of soul. It is there inside us, apart it would seem from evolution's constant practical mutations. Body separates us from each other- does soul perhaps do the reverse? Religious belief is a form of philosophy, and Plotinus, with something of a foot in both camps, interests me more than most. Is there a world soul where we all come together? I have felt that once in my life, admittedly under the influence of a small green tablet, but is one form of consciousness more valid than another?

Plotinus believed (I think) that there was a world because there had to be one, that levels of being created ever lower ones like cups of liquid overflowing into larger ones. Or is everything ultimately image and metaphor, and an attempt to align perceptions?

PRE-BEATLES FASHION

The world where I grew up was a very different place. The Beatles emerged when I was about fourteen, old enough to have formed basic views of the world and my place in it. Fashions started to change. The lean look of the 50s began to give way. It was a gradual process, but by the hippie late 60s and early 70s people seemed to be in permanent fancy dress.

The late 50s were an interesting period. Politics seemed more important than in the druggily vacuous late 60s. CND and the Aldermaston Marches were in their heyday. But I want to keep this piece about fashion. The demonstrators were beginning to show rebellion there too. This was the age of the beatnik, essential precursors to the hippies. Some of them grew small beards, corduroy jackets were popular, but many still went out in collar and tie- nothing wrong with that. When the hippies were kicked into touch by the punks in 1975 the tie came back, neat and narrow, as ties should be, and to maintain the alliteration maybe knitted as well.

I hate big floppy collars on shirts. In my youth there were tab collars which seem to have gone on the missing list at least for the moment, and button down ones which fortunately survive. Pullovers were still mainly V-neck (a pleasing shape under a jacket) and dark of colour, brown or black. Now I favour them blue. Even better were the cardigans. Trousers were dark, still sometimes creased but also in denim and cord.

The favourite shoe was the Chelsea boot much frowned upon by our Headmaster. But we had all sorts of ways to look that little bit different- boots instead of lace up shoes, cardigans for pullovers, grey shirts for white.

It was all a bit black and white compared to the riotous tie-dyed colours of the hippies, but what is wrong with that? Many of the best movies and the best photographs are also black and white.

A FEW PERSONAL SAWS

All things are unique even from themselves at different times. A view, a place, is never the same, the light will be different and so will be our mood and the knowledge that we have been there before.

There is one god and his name is Proteus, forever shifting, forever changing.

The world searches for balance. Once there was matter and there was antimatter but somehow matter prevailed. Minute amounts of matter escaped neutralisation by antimatter. And those specks are our world. Maybe there is a parallel anti-world in tandem with ours which contains antimass and antienergy and antipotential. And macassar.

History may repeat itself but the geography is variable.

Lightning can strike twice in the same place, indeed is more likely to. Lightning like all aggressors searches for weak points.

Human behaviour may begin as caprice but unchecked it will inevitably turn into carapace.

Human beings contain within them all possible attributes. But the proportions differ and thus we have unique personalities.

We especially dislike in others faults we recognise within ourselves.

Difference is crucial but also perceived as dangerous. The history of the universe began when difference appeared. It is I once read about ninety seconds younger than the universe. It came into being with the creation of helium.

Portland, Oregon and Portland, Maine, on different sides of a map of the United States, remind me of the boy who appeared on both ends of our school photo. While the big camera slowly panned he went round the back to re-emerge opposite his original position.

DORCHESTER AND ITS TWO BRAVE RIVERS

I watched Westerns as a child. I loved the ones that took place in Mexico across the Rio Grande. I grew up in Chester on another river the Dee, and another border, and to me Mexico and Wales were akin- the other beyond their big boastful neighbour. My first screenplay was called *Brave Rivers That Dream of the Sea* which I think we all are. So rivers matter to me. They signify.

Dorchester could have been the capital of England. Now it is a small town, very small. It's not even the biggest place in England called Dorchester. It was settled early by the incoming Saxons as they explored the upper reaches of the river we call the Thames. It grew in importance, strategic and locational. It lay on the borders of the later Saxon kingdoms of Mercia and Wessex and was at a confluence of two significant rivers. But by a stroke of historical happenstance and the growing dominance of Wessex, the capital of the fledgling England was instead sited at Winchester.

The Thames is probably the most esteemed river in England, though not quite the longest. In fact it could be a lot shorter than is generally believed. Upriver from Dorchester, in Oxford principally, it is known as the Isis. Some argue that above Oxford it reverts to its lower reach name. But this seems a little counterintuitive. The impression is strengthened by a further look at the delightful village (almost) of Dorchester with its teashops and abbey, the feeling that Miss Marple might appear at any moment fussing and clucking.

The confluence is a mile or so beyond the present town and is worth a visit. There won't be crowds there; the significance of the place has been overlooked. The maps tell us that the two rivers meeting there are the Thames and the Thame. Again one has to ask is it likely that two rivers in such close contact would acquire names so similar.

Mistakes in nomenclature occur quite often. The Romans called the river the Tamesis- and remember our town's name. Dorchester was also a Roman settlement, and the Romans would know the confluence. River names are often ancient and transferred from invader to invader. The Tamesis surely is Thame/Isis. The Thames does not flow through Dorchester. It only begins in a forgotten field outside it. Its dream of the sea starts afresh.

THE END OF A DREAM

That dream I had, of the house that was so much bigger than in reality. I had come to recognise its meaning, that I was not living life to the full, there were arenas of existence on which I had turned my back.

I nearly got married in my thirties but the relationship somehow fell away before we got to the church. My bride to be gained some towels, the gift of my mother who was not best pleased- by her keeping the towels not for my broken engagement.

I made an informal vow to myself that I would in future avoid emotional entanglement. For three decades I kept my promise and lived a perfectly satisfactory (for me) bachelor existence with enough “freedom” but also enough friends. Then on IMDb I started corresponding with a young woman from miles away, about films initially of course, but the subject-matter of our messaging and emails began to move on.

I was still hesitant but she wanted to find out what her by now old git was really like so she visited. I feared I would disappoint in the flesh. But things worked out rather differently and I am now married to her, and very very happy to be so.

I have never had that dream since.