

## INTRODUCTION AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Warily looking back through these pieces, I glimpse a series of altered or vanished worlds, including those of my younger and much younger selves. Things change. Graham Greene is dead. Véra Nabokov is dead. Salman Rushdie is still alive, and still in hiding: if writing fiction is, among other things, an act of spiritual freedom, then Rushdie is a man who has been imprisoned for the crime of being free. Graham Taylor, one-time manager of Watford Football Club, is now manager of England: for the time being. Monica Seles, whose professional debut I witnessed (she was fourteen), has since won eight Slams; as I write, she is in hospital, recovering from a knife attack at a tournament in Hamburg (her East German assailant was a Steffi Graf fan, and his intention was to pave the way for Steffi's return to the number-one spot). Nuclear deterrence is dead. Or at least Mutually Assured Destruction is dead: this extraordinary edifice — at once massive and notional, and, it appeared, impregnably self-sufficient — was unseamed by three words of diplomacy, from Mikhail Gorbachev (the three words were: 'This isn't serious.') As a planetary arrangement, four tons of TNT per human being wasn't only uncomical. It wasn't serious. The nuclear age has survived its Deterrence period and is entering a new phase, one which we can confidently — though not safely — call Proliferation. John Braine is dead: as a writer, his dream was to make a great deal of money; but he died in penury. George Bush and Dan Quayle are dead, politically. The star interview is dead, as a form. Sent to New York to interview Madonna, I felt no significant disruption in my plans when Madonna refused to see me. The great postmodern celebrities are a part of their publicity machines, and that is all you are ever going to get to write about: their publicity machines. You review the publicity machine. Even the humble literary interview is dying, or growing old: 'It was with dread/detachment/high hopes that I approached X's townhouse/office/potting shed. The door opened. He is fatter/smaller/taller/balder than I expected. Pityingly/perfunctorily/politely he offered me instant coffee/a cigarette/dinner. Everyone told me how modest/craven/suave/vain/charming I would find him, so I was naturally unsurprised/taken aback by his obvious charm/vanity, etc., etc.' Darts is dead. Its decline followed an opposite course to that of nuclear deterrence. It tried to sanitise or detoxify itself (no alcohol, no tobacco, no obesity); but then it transpired that the prospect of messy self-destruction was the only thing anyone liked about it. Isaac Asimov is dead. Topless sunbathing is no longer remarkable. Roman Polanski no longer makes interesting films. V.S. Pritchett isn't ninety any more: he will soon be ninety-three. I have now been doing this sort of thing for more than twenty years. I don't get around as much as I used to.

Not long ago I saw a book of this kind described by a reviewer as 'a garage sale': the writer was selling off his literary junk, in informal surroundings. Certainly it is considered a nice gesture if, in introducing such a book, the writer abases himself for having assembled it. Actually the authorial motive — or vice or weakness — we are examining here is, I think, dully clerical: an attempt at order and completion. John Updike, an obvious hero of the genre, took this tendency too far, perhaps, when in *Picked-Up Pieces* he reprinted a sixty-word citation to Thornton Wilder, together with a fifty-word footnote doggedly justifying its inclusion. All I can safely promise the reader is that, though much has been left in, much has been left out.

After university I worked in an art gallery (for three months), then in advertising (for three weeks), then at the *Times Literary Supplement* (for three years), and then (for four more) at the *New Statesman*. In 1980 I quit going to an office and became a full-time writer. The main characteristic of this way of life, it seemed to me, was that nothing ever happened to you. Being a novelist, in those days, was not in itself a distraction, as it can be now. Now, if you're not careful, you can spend half your life being interviewed or photographed or answering questions posed by the press, on the telephone, about Fergie or Maastricht or your favourite colour. Nothing ever happened to you — except journalism: the kind of journalism that got you out of the house. Getting out of the house is the only thing that unites the pieces in the present book — an unrigorous arrangement, which I didn't quite stick to anyway. *Not* getting out of the house will be the controlling theme of a subsequent volume, one devoted to the lowest and noblest literary form: the book review. Novels, of course, are *all* about not getting out of the house.

And so, equipped with some kind of assignment, you get out of the house! This might mean a fifteen-hour flight or a ten-minute drive to the other side of Regents Park. Things can go well or they can go badly. When things go badly, you are simply an embarrassment to your destination. You return hours or weeks later with half a page of notes and the prospect of much cloistered contrivance. When things go well, the necessary elements come together with little or no encouragement. Writing journalism never feels like

writing in the proper sense. It is essentially collaborative:

both your subject and your audience are hopelessly specific.

But the excursion itself (the solitude, the preoccupation, the solving of successive difficulties) — *that* sometimes feels like writing.

I am grateful to all the journalists who commissioned, retrieved, subbed, improved, bowdlerised or fact-checked these pieces, but I am especially grateful to the late Terence Kilmartin, of the *Observer*. I think of him as my first and last editor. He started me off and made it easy for me to keep going. Now he too is dead, and I miss his guidance and his friendship; but I will never finish a piece without mentally sending it past his desk.

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