

## Chapter Five

### Writing for audience: From Myth to Word Count

#### Authenticity

*I am only prepared to act through my core beliefs, rather than through desire for power, status, recognition, or fashion. I regard my own authenticity as acting always in congruence with (my core) beliefs.*

Chapter Four explored the process of ‘transforming’ life experience and researched knowledge into literary form. The journey to do so involved, crucially, the search for a poetic self/voice, and in this case, the search offered me total freedom, both in terms of plot and theme, and in terms of my creative play with language. This chapter considers another challenge: commissioned writing for educational contexts, in which the reader is a language learner with a threshold level of understanding precisely defined by editors and publisher. How does such a project transform into something that is ‘authentic’ in the way stated above, and central to my core values? It will explore these questions with references to two projects:

- collections of creation myths for language learners: *Place of the Lotus, The Twin Chariot* (Spiro: 1990)
- stories for two collections of commissioned stories for language learners, collected under the themes *London Tales* (2003) and *A Twist in the Tale* (2004).

#### 5.1 Writing and the notion of authenticity

As a language teacher in the 1980’s, ‘authenticity’ referred to ‘real world’ texts written without conscious adaptation to reader level: “in other words, materials which have not been designed especially for language learners and which therefore do not have contrived or simplified language.” (Hedge 2000: 67). There was a culture of respect for these ‘real-world’ texts, as essential ingredients of the communicative classroom; texts written precisely with language level in mind were viewed as giving learners inadequate exposure to the ‘language in use’ that they needed. Hedge (2000) goes on to say, “the argument is quite simply that if the goal of teaching is to equip students to deal ultimately with the authentic language of the real world, they should be given opportunities to cope with this in the classroom.” (ibid: 67). In its worst

case, it meant that writing for learners involved “rejecting anything interesting in favour of anything dull on the assumption that learners of English come to reading as blank and unlitrary and inhuman as computers. For example, *she was coming to the evening of her life* becomes *she was very ill*.” (Brumfit cited in Day and Bamford 1998: 75).

Notions of authenticity have moved forward significantly since then. It is now understood that all texts are honed and fine-tuned to communicate to an audience, so to shape a text for the language learner is no different to any other modification; nor need it involve ‘contrived’ language any more than any other context-sensitive writing. ‘Authenticity’ as a notion became more generous and inclusive: “An authentic text is one whose primary intent is to communicate meaning. The relevant consideration here is not for whom it is written but that there has been an authentic communicative objective in mind.” (Day and Bamford 1998: 60). It is also now understood that language learners carry into second language reading all the skills and enthusiasms of first language reading. Modern reading schemes such as the Cambridge Readers Library do “not fall into the trap of treating the learner as a child and equating a low language level with a low intellectual level or limited experience of life”. (Prowse 2001: 1). This shift in understanding has been good for writers. It means that publishers now commission ‘authentic’ stories rather than “watered-down versions of the classics” (ibid: 1) and allow writers to make natural and intuitive adaptations to his/her audience. In my own experience of writing for language learners, the following changes have taken place over a 10-year period:

**1990 Edward Arnold Readers series:** metaphors and similes were not ‘allowed’. The vocabulary list permitted, for example: superordinates (eg. trees, flowers), but not hyponyms (eg. oak, ash and elm, rose, violet and bougainvillea); primary colours such as red and black, but not intermediary colours such as pink or grey. At the first stages, there were to be no subordinate clauses, and only simple tenses – present and past, but no future forms. There were to be no passive forms or reported speech, and only a limited set of synonyms for *he/she said*. For example, *asked* is allowed, but not *replied, told, retorted, explained, remarked*.

**2002 English Language International series:** as an author, I was invited simply to modify my language intuitively for the selected level. However, there were constraints on the story development. There were to be no sub-plots, and at the earlier

levels no more than three main characters. The stories had to be set in the present day with a linear timescale; there were to be no flashbacks or ‘flash-forwards’. Within these constraints I was permitted to write freely and ‘naturally’, designing my stories for my specific audience.

There was, however, a further difference in my experience of the two projects. In the 1992 project, the publishers’ list of rules was my ‘other’ reader, monitoring my language and pruning back my excesses. Some examples of figurative language were allowed to sneak their way into the story, on the grounds that they made sense within the context; but otherwise, I could measure myself objectively beside the publisher guidelines. In the second 2002 project I had no such structural list; instead an editor acted as my ‘other’ reader, working in detail with the text on a line by line basis.

This chapter will look at these two very different processes, and will ask the question: given the different meanings of ‘authentic’ in the language teaching community, what about my own authenticity as a writer? Was I still engaging with that ‘metaphorical confrontation with self’ (Cox and Thielgard 1987: 45) I had met in writing the novel? Was I still using language to “let down a shaft into real life” as Heaney had done (1980: 41) when finding his poetic self? (Chapter 3). Or had I simply given in to dullness, in the way Brumfit described above, turning the poetic “she had come to the evening of her life”, to the functional “she was very ill” (Brumfit 1998)?

## **5.2 Language as rune: *The Place of the Lotus and The Twin Chariot***

The task of writing within strict linguistic parameters might appear to be a debilitating imposition for a writer; yet everything explored in Chapters Three and Four suggest that ‘creativity’ often thrives through an interweaving of discipline/order/constraint and freedom/chaos. In these earlier chapters, I suggested a process in which the two evolved together, the idea shaped by its ‘rules’ and vice versa. My novel, for example, evolved its own ‘rule’ of alternate granddaughter/grandmother chapters, in order to fulfil its concept; my childhood language, Niassur, developed a system whereby living things were differentiated from the non-living by different articles – concept again leading to rule, and made manifest through it.

However, in the case of the invitation to write for the Edward Arnold Readers Library, two very different projects – almost ‘left’ and ‘right’ brain projects – came together to fulfil my brief.

The first project was a long-term interest in myth/story/history/religion and the overlap between them. For several years, I had been collecting examples of myths that answered questions about the world: How did light and day separate from night? why are there so many languages in the world? The answers offered by different world cultures, their differences and similarities, seemed to me perennially haunting. Countries of intense heat such as the African continent and Latin America, had early creation stories of the earth and sky being on top of one another and needing to be forcibly separated. An African myth tells of earth and sky being separated by women winnowing the maize and beating the sky higher and higher. The Egyptian myth tells of the sky as a huge goddess laid across the universe. Many cultures had myths that helped explain the seasonal dying and rebirth of nature: gods that were beheaded annually such as the green man, the Indian goddess Kali with the angry red face who was the goddess of both destruction and rebirth, Osiris the Egyptian god who was strewn and scattered annually. Many cultures perceived water as the source of life (such as the Joshua tribe of North America), the birthplace of goddesses (such as Venus), or the source of mystic separation from life (as in the Arthurian myth, or the Irish myths of sea travellers). It is the gateway between life and death, between the world and the otherworld.

Now, in a different and parallel universe, I find myself grappling with the publishers’ rules listed above, experimenting with the rhythms and sounds it generates.

- superordinates (eg. trees, flowers), but not hyponyms (eg. oak, ash and elm, rose, violet and bougainvillea);
- primary colours such as red and black, but not intermediary colours such as pink or grey.
- no subordinate clauses
- Level 2: only simple tenses – present and past, but no future forms. Level 4: sparing and careful introduction of past progressive and present perfect forms.
- no passive forms or reported speech,
- a limited set of synonyms for *he/she said*. For example, *asked* is allowed, but not *replied, told, retorted, explained, remarked*.
- Sparing and careful introduction of figurative language, particularly at Level 4
- No abstract nouns.

- Clear cohesion between sentences: minimal substitution of nouns for pronouns, or ‘empty’ subjects such as ‘**There** was’ ‘**It**’s a nice day’.

Thus, I experiment, these sentences are feasible:

*I saw the black tree. It spread its leaves.*

but not this:

*It’s a willow I see, reflected in the water, grey-black and velvety like a bat’s wing spreading over the lake.*

On reviewing my choices, I came to see that the ‘limited’ language had another beauty: it read like a translation from a mystic proto-language, with an almost runic simplicity, like a Norse saga or a set of hieroglyphs carved on rock. In this realisation came the ‘alchemic moment’, in which I understood that my new ‘learner’ stories were to be these myths, retold as if translated from their ancient sources.

### **The simple past and simple pastness**

In this runic world, there is no sub-divided notion of the past. For example, these are disallowed:

*The man with the black eyes used to smoke tobacco every day.*

*The man with the black eyes was smoking tobacco.*

*The man with the black eyes had smoked tobacco every day for a century.*

Instead, my first story, *In the Beginning there was Water: a myth of the Joshua people* (Level 4) starts with:

*The man with the black eyes smoked tobacco.*

Everything that happens to ‘the man’ is pure past tense; what happened a moment ago is as equally ‘past’ as the beginning of the universe, grammatically and perhaps philosophically too.

The man with the black eyes smoked tobacco.

The house sat on the water like a bird. And all around there was cloud. The man with the black eyes smoked. He smoked, and sat, and worked.

And then something strange happened. The clouds moved.

First Man stood and watched. The land moved towards him. The trees became clearer and clearer. Their lines were sharp and black. And the land moved like a fall of snow. Nearer and

nearer.

The Giver moved to the door. He blew rings of smoke across the land.

(Spiro 1990a: 12 – 14 **Please see Appendix 1 Reading 2 for the complete story**)

The story is also deliberately punctuated with the refrain: *The man with the black eyes smoked tobacco*. From a language learning point of view, there is opportunity to internalize the rhythm and structure of the phrase: the man with ----- . From the ‘mythical’ point of view, it underlines the importance of both ‘the man’ and the act of smoking. In fact, he is the Giver and Maker himself, Xowalaci (who is eventually named); and in the act of blowing rings of tobacco, mystic weed of the Joshua people, he creates the world.

Yet the story is not so simple. Its final stages are explored through a pared-down dialogue, a sequence of ‘*said*’s and simple sentences, between the Giver/Maker and the First Man, his companion in the hut on the water. As the land lifts out of the water for the first time in creation, something unexpected is found there:

The two of them stood by the door of the hut. They looked silently.  
“Wait, there is something here I don’t like,” said the Giver.  
There was a line in the sand: a deep line burned from north to south of the endless beach. They looked, silently. The clouds moved across the sand. Then the Giver said, sick at heart,  
“They are footprints.”  
“That’s not possible” said First Man.  
“It is not possible. But that is what they are.” -----  
“Someone else is here,” said the First Man.  
“Someone walked on the bed of the sea, before I gave the sea a bed,” said the First Giver. -----  
“There is something about this I don’t like,” said Xowalaci, the Giver. And the waves washed over the land.

(Spiro 1990a: 17- 18)

In this ‘runic’ language, the dialogue must truly ‘go somewhere’ in terms of plot movement. The words between the two first creatures on earth need to be without clutter, unambiguous and without nuance. There is also a sense of a new ‘rule’: to say something once is serious: to say something twice is very serious. The two ‘first creatures’ are ‘inventing’ language through these first pared down linguistic steps.

### The simple present and the universal present

While the past simple tense has a specificity about it: *he smoked tobacco on the day the world was created* – the simple present is the form that describes all time, and events which are universally true: *the sun also rises*.

So, for the telling of stories about the creation, the simple present proved a perfect vehicle.

The Level 2 collection of stories, *The Twin Chariot*, starts with the following introduction – both to universal stories and to the present simple.

The moon becomes bigger and then smaller. The sun is sometimes weak, sometimes strong. The sun travels across the sky, and usually when it finishes the journey, the moon takes its place.

Because of this continuous journey, many peoples see the sun as a traveller.

The sun and moon are both travellers of the sky. To most peoples, they are relations: brother and sister, husband and wife. One story explains the journey of the sun in this way: that all day the sun travels to visit the moon. Their meeting is always very short. So always the sun must continue its journey.

(Spiro 1990b: 3 -4 **Please see Appendix Reading 3 for the complete introduction**)

Through the present simple, I am permitted to introduce figurative language, restricted to concrete nouns which supply me with all the images I need.

The moon is like a mirror of life on earth. People see themselves in the moon. They see a human face. They see a person who changes like they do. Stories tell us this in two ways.

Firstly, they tell us that the moon itself is a person. The moon is the wife or sister of the sun. For the Barotse, the moon is Nasilele, wife of the Maker Nyambi. For the Greeks and Romans the moon was a young girl, Diana or Artemis. -----

Secondly, they tell us that a person lives on the moon. --- The British tell of a man who carried sticks on Sunday. Sunday was a day of rest; no-one should work on a Sunday. ----- The people of Tahiti tell of a woman called Hina. She used to beat flour at night. -----The aborigines of Australia tell us of two men. They had a terrible fight and both died. ----- The story in this book is from China. It tells us about a woman who escapes her angry husband. She hides in the moon.

(Spiro 1990b: 6 – 7 and **Appendix Reading 3**)

Through the present simple, it is also possible to suggest the currency of ideas for the reader.

Grammatically, the form suggests both all time, and current time. To carry that through philosophically, it is a vehicle for the universality of questioning, searching for answers and responding to mystery. Whilst all cultures do this, and continue to do so, their answers are remarkable both for the shared themes, and for the specificity of the differences; for example, the Greek moon goddess Diana is chaste and a huntress, other moon goddesses are loving wives, or fickle wives, or lovelorn wives: yet interestingly, most are female.

### **People, gods and emus talking**

Concerns were mentioned above that ‘simplified language’ could be “contrived” (Hedge 2000) or just simply “dull” (Brumfit in Day and Bamford 1998). More serious even than strained and dull *written* texts, were those which purported to mimic natural conversation. Textbook dialogues, in their worst incarnation, were no more than a parody of how ‘real’ people actually spoke. For me, it was an important challenge to make the dialogue of these stories alive and meaningful whilst still linguistically controlled.

In the creation story of the Joshua tribe described above, I illustrate the dialogue between two archetypal characters – Xowalaci the Maker, and the First Man. In their case, there is a runic simplicity about their words, each one measured and careful as befits their roles in the creation story. An aboriginal creation story tells of two emus who have a fight at night, before daylight had come to earth. One emu throws her egg up into the sky. It explodes and the yolk spreads across the sky and becomes daylight. This interesting scenario offered scope for another kind of dialogue: a squabble between two mother emus. I became fascinated to imagine what it was the emus had fought about, and turned them into two Jewish mothers boasting about their children.

Two birds sat on their eggs in the midday moon. They had long tails like brushes. They had combs standing high and bright on their heads. The day was dark as usual.

“Rather dark, as usual,” said the bird with the long legs.

“Yes. Dark for the time of year,” said the other.

The wind moved in the trees. They could hear the cry of laughing birds, of animals running in the grass. But they could see only dark.

“How many eggs is it this time?” said the first bird, Emu.

“Three, this time,” said Brolga, the second bird. “They were big this time.

Not like my last two. They were easy eggs.”

“Oh, my two eggs were very easy last time,” said Emu. “Lovely chicks they were. So hungry, so strong. In no time, they were away, finding their own food.”

“My two chicks found their own food after three days,” said Brolga proudly.

“With mine, it was after two days,” said Emu. She pulled herself up tall. Her throat stood high, like a tower. Her wings opened wide over the eggs.

“My two chicks are so clever, “ said Emu. “They understand sounds in the trees better than I do,”

“Mine know the language of every bird that flies,” said Brolga.

“Well, at least your chicks are clever, because they aren’t very beautiful, “ said Emu.

“Well, your chicks are so strange, with their terrible long throats and long legs. It must be a worry for you, poor dear.”

### **Spiro 1990b: 10 – 12 See Appendix Reading 3**

The argument continues in this vein, with the emu eggs on which they are sitting becoming hotter and hotter, until one of the emus, in fury lifts one round brown egg in her long foot and shouts: “*Take this, Emu! See if your chicks are better than mine!*” and throws the egg into the sky.

It was a great delight, in this sequence, to echo the idioms and phraseology of everyday language: the ‘phatic’ exchanges about the weather – “*Rather dull/wet/sunny for the time of year!*” becomes the myth-specific “*Rather dark, as usual*”, “*Dark for the time of year*”. In the same way as the English are stoically resigned to it always being dull for the time of year, so are the emus resigned to the midday darkness of their pre-creation world.

### **Joining and transforming**

This section began by asking: *How does such a project transform into something that is ‘authentic’ in the way stated above, and central to my core values?*

I have aimed to show that the process of joining ‘the universal story’ and the idea of a ‘runic’ language that begins to evolve its own rules, transformed this project into something that was authentic in several senses.

Firstly it was authentic to the notion of language with “communicative intent” – designed for its readers and thus “appropriately simple in language and concept.” (Day and Bamford 1998: 61).

Secondly, it was authentic to my search for a poetic voice, in that it explored stories central to my core belief of **connectivity**: in this case, the connection between cultures and their questions and interpretations of the world. It also allowed me, through this, to experiment with language – to echo natural conversation, to play with characterization, to sharpen

language through simplification processes, so that ‘voice’ connected with my intended meanings.

Thirdly, it was authentic to the value I attach to *knowledge transformation*, in that my researched knowledge was newly shaped into character, settings, language and events that gave them narrative and philosophical life.

### **5.3 Finding the heart in themes: *Travelling Light* and *The Man***

#### ***Upstairs***

The section above described a project in which language guidelines were prescribed, but subject/content was unrestricted. This second project, with English Language International (2003 – 2004) was the reverse. The writer was invited to modify language ‘intuitively’, whilst the theme was broadly defined and certain restrictions placed on plot development.

#### **2002 English Language International series:**

- no sub-plots, and at the earlier levels no more than three main characters.
- The stories had to be set in the present day with a linear timescale; there were to be no flashbacks or ‘flash-forwards’.

#### **Dual selves and *Travelling Light***

The broad theme was ‘a story about London’, for the first collection of three commissioned stories, *London Tales* (Spiro 2003). Within this broad remit, I began to search for my core characters and their situation, *something that mattered*, as a starting point for *making something new*. I started with my own feelings about London. Having been born, grown up, and gone to school and University in London, I had mixed feelings. It was a city that could become a whole world, and a city one needed to escape in case it should do so. It was a city that made one both insular and cosmopolitan, and one I needed to move away from physically as well as metaphysically in order to become a ‘citizen of the world’ and find my own place. Through this duality I arrived at the story of two main characters: George Trubshaw, who had always lived in the same suburb of London, married his first girlfriend, and ran a taxi business around the streets where he grew up; and his long-lost schoolfriend, Len Eccles, who had left school early and become a long-distance truck driver, travelling round the world, never settling in one place, but carrying his world

in the back of his truck. They bump into one another unexpectedly, on one of Len's deliveries in London.

(The section that follows is the text of an email interview between myself and the editor, published alongside the story: Spiro 2003: 80 - 83. **See Appendix Reading 7 for full text of interview, activities and story**).

***What inspired you to write this story?***

There were several sources of inspiration for this story. The first was the experience of moving house, which I have done many times. Each time, a removals man has come in, brisk and unemotional, and emptied out the house. I would often wonder what he thought, seeing where I was going from and where to the other end. It seemed to be one of those jobs, like an estate agent or a lawyer, where you are meeting people on the cusp of change. I've often thought what a rich source of stories they must be: for every journey they make: who is moving, and why? Where to, and where from?.

Another source of inspiration for the story were holidays I had in my early twenties, hitch-hiking around Europe and driving in a van right through to Istanbul. It made me aware of the magic of the road, the late-night and early-morning hours when you have a single purpose, to reach a destination: and yet the road itself is quite hypnotic, and seems to be almost an alternative universe.

Another source of inspiration for the story, was a school reunion, about ten years after we all left school. What amazed me about that reunion, was how instantly and intensely the old feelings were evoked; the girls (it was an all-girls school), who made me feel second-rate and dowdy, still made me feel that. The girls who had a brightness and excitement about them, still did. Just the same feelings of envy and inferiority were there, even though now I have fulfilled many of my dreams and am very happy with my choice of lifestyle. This too made me think about the time warps of our emotions: that something quite unexpected can catapult our feelings right back in time, to a state we thought was long forgotten.

***Have you, yourself, travelled much?***

Yes, the student holidays gave me a taste for travel that I have never recovered from. After exploring Europe on no money, always on the edge of everyday life there,

staying in hostels and meeting other travellers, I became determined to travel for a purpose, and in a way that allowed me to meet local people, enter their homes and understand their language. Since then, the profession of English language teaching has taken me to five continents, including Mexico, Kenya and Egypt, India and Sri Lanka and Japan. It has also given me the opportunity to live and work in parts of Europe that had been unknown to me, such as Hungary, Poland, Romania, Czech Republic and Russia. I have spent days on the road, just like Len in the story. In 1991 I packed up all my household and drove from Nottingham to southern Hungary, all night along the frighteningly fast German motorways, and narrow potholed Hungarian back streets. For years, too, I had a fascination with India, and worked and travelled wherever I could go safely, from Tamil Nadu in the tip, to the foothills of the Himalayas. I have been to most of the places Len talks about, and share with him the sense of privilege at being there.

***Which of the two main characters do you most identify with?***

The two men, George and Len, are both aspects of myself. In fact, in developing the story, I was really exploring this dilemma in myself: between the pleasure of having a home, and the urge to explore and be an adventurer. Always, choosing one and not the other is a sacrifice: having a home is the most marvellous sense of calm and rootedness. I have understood only recently what it is like to plant roses, and see them grow from a sprig and wind themselves around the trellis. And yet that means giving up the idea of ‘travelling light’: being able to just uproot and go. And of course the reverse is true: the eternal traveller will never see the sprigs growing into yellow roses.

This is also true of the people around you. For years while I was travelling I was developing friendships that were pulled apart, that came and went. Here you are in a world where no-one has known you more than about five minutes. That’s exciting, in a way, because you can always reinvent yourself, like Len does. But George is really telling the opposite story: just how deeply nourishing it is to be with people with whom you have a past, and people who won’t just disappear.

George and Len are of course, extreme examples of each case, and I think my own resolution has been to be a little bit of both George and Len most of the time and as far as that’s physically possible!

***You've recently published a novel. What do you think is the main difference in writing a short story and a novel?***

This short story might be one episode in a novel. The key drive I had in writing the novel was the overall drive of the characters: and the characters in turn drove the plot. I wanted to show, not only how a character changed over time, but how two characters in two different times, mirrored and echoed one another. This entailed a whole cluster of episodes, insights, interactions. The short story in a way telescopes all these together. One episode serves to do everything – to reveal character, to demonstrate change – even tiny and subtle change, and to say something about characters echoing and mirroring one another. I suppose short story is like a haiku: it reveals a subtle moment of change, which may be symbolic of something bigger – but in itself is delicate, almost imperceptible: whilst the novel is an epic – the moment of change is contextualised. You show all the hundred and one factors which led up to it, and which lead away from it.

The story starts with Len's journey in his truck into London, on a routine delivery job.

4.30 in November and the lights are on in London.

It had grown darker and darker as Len travelled north through Europe. Crete was all white rooftops and the smell of crushed figs. Hungary was dark red, with cherry trees and ripe vines. Then the grey and silver of German motorways. On the German motorways you moved fast, acted fast, and the rain was silver.

Now in November there was England and sky like mud, and he was stuck. The London cars were going nowhere.

"London. November. What can you expect?" he thought. He wasn't irritated in Crete when the police searched every inch of his lorry. He wasn't irritated in Hungary when another lorry pushed him off the road. But in London he was irritated because this is where he was born. If you are born somewhere you expect it to behave. And London didn't. It was muddy and dark and crowded and confusing, and it made him angry.

(Spiro 2003: 84. Original version before edits)

He gradually focuses on his surroundings enough to realise he is going back into the streets where he grew up, and then, inexorably, past his school, the garage his father had run, and the café where he had spent most evenings in his childhood. Curious, he pulls in to the garage, and walks back into the café - the same except that it has

changed its name from *Smokey Joe* to *Saucy Sally*. As he sits at a table, the door opens and a man comes in. The man

had a kind, slightly creased face with marks round the eyes that made him look as if he was permanently smiling, and his hair was thick and black as a horse's tail. Amazing, if he hadn't known George would be nearly forty now, it could almost have been George. But this man looked almost ten years younger.

George Trubshaw sat in *Saucy Sally's* in his usual place. There was a man at the opposite table, with a face that looked as if all the dust and diesel of the world had worked its way into the creases. There were purple bags of exhaustion under each eye, and his hair was folded over his forehead in grey stripes. Amazing, if he hadn't known Len would be nearly forty now, it could almost have been Len Eccles. But this man looked almost ten years older.

(Spiro 2003: 95).

The story leads up to the final, subtle turning point. Both characters have changed, slightly destabilised, slightly envious of the 'other' they could have been:

Len wound back through the tunnel that had lead him here the night before, back onto the North Circular. He was in good time to drop off his load in Watford. Then he was on to pick up the next load, in Middlesborough. He knew a motel there where he could stay for the night. But now it sent cold chills around his heart, thinking of it. Thinking of it --- yes, compared to last night's bedroom. With the child's stringy blanket and the Mickey Mouse bed cover. With the smell of toast in the pine kitchen, With Sal who he had known with long brown plaits. And with George who liked baked beans after all. George who had stood beside him for the school photo. When he was with them, his dad came alive again. They knew more about his dad than he did. And then he remembered that troubled look they had given him. Why should they look at him like that? How could they even begin to know the excitement of the road, of the unknown, of travelling light?

I've been all round the world, and what's he done? Nothing! Just run cabs up and down the high street. I've loved a woman with black eyes from the Black Sea, and another from the Spanish Steps. But what about him? Just the first girl he saw!

And yet...

\* \* \*

George Trubshaw was on the way to the doctor's with the neighbour. The cab and the neighbour and the High Street didn't feel the same. He didn't feel pleased to see them, as usual. The shops looked tatty and cheap, the neighbour's chatter seemed tedious and provincial. The slow morning traffic pushed him on automatic round the one

way system, and sent cold chills round his heart, just a little. Thinking of it... yes, compared to Len Eccles. The pyramids, the Blue Mosque, the Arizona Desert, the Black Sea, Table Mountain. The nearest George had ever come to these, was the window of the travel agency in Brent High Street. But I've got Sal and the kids, all three of them beautiful, and my parents still strong and in good health. I've done very well for myself. My home is nice, my marriage is happy. And yet ...

George Trubshaw held tight to his steering wheel. 'Maybe I should try long-distance cab driving? Just for a change...' he said to himself.

Len held tight to his steering wheel. 'I suppose this is what being homesick feels like,' he said to himself.

(Spiro 2003: 108)

### The inner and the outer reader: working with an editor

The chart below traces the process of close collaboration with an editor. The example is the opening paragraph of the story, but forms a snapshot of the process which took place line by line, paragraph by paragraph throughout the story.

*Italics:* editor's comments

Underlined text: editor's suggested rewriting

Original Version	Editorial comment
<p>4.30 in November and the lights are on in London.</p> <p>It had grown darker and darker as Len travelled north through Europe. Crete was all white rooftops and the smell of crushed figs. Hungary was dark red, with cherry trees and ripe vines. Then the grey and silver of German motorways.</p> <p>On the German motorways you moved fast, acted fast, and the rain was silver.</p> <p>Now in November there was England and sky like mud, and</p>	<p>4.30 in November and the lights are on in London.</p> <p><i>2 things here – odd to start with a number and it could be 4.30 in the morning...how about:</i></p> <p><u>An afternoon in November: 4.30 and the lights are on in London.</u></p> <p>Or:</p> <p><u>Four thirty on a November afternoon, and in London the lights are already on.</u></p> <p>On the German motorways you moved fast, acted fast, and the rain was silver.</p> <p><i>We really like the silver rain and think you should mirror it below</i></p> <p>Now in November <del>there</del> it was England and sky like mud, and he was</p>

<p>he was stuck. The London cars were going nowhere.</p> <p>“London. November. What can you expect?” he thought.</p> <p>He wasn’t irritated in Crete when the police searched every inch of his lorry. He wasn’t irritated in Hungary when another lorry pushed him off the road. But in London he was irritated because this is where he was born. If you are born somewhere you expect it to behave.</p> <p>And London didn’t. It was muddy and dark and crowded and confusing, and it made him angry.</p> <p>‘Glad I left,’ he thought. ‘Glad I’m on the move.’</p>	<p>stuck. The London cars were going nowhere.</p> <p><i>Why just cars? Why not: <u>The London traffic was...</u></i></p> <p>‘London. November. What can you expect?’ he thought.</p> <p><i>This doesn’t sound like an expression of irritation. And you’ve already said twice it was London and November, so you don’t need to repeat it here. But you need him to show his irritation.</i></p> <p>He wasn’t irritated in Crete when the police searched every inch of his lorry. He wasn’t irritated in Hungary when another lorry pushed him off the road. But in London he was irritated because this is where he was born. If you are born somewhere you expect it to behave.</p> <p><i>We can see what you’re trying to say here but it sounds a bit odd. You can’t say “if you are born somewhere” ...because you have to be born somewhere. How about something along the lines of: <u>Somehow you expect the place where you’re born to be well-behaved. And London wasn’t.</u></i></p> <p>And London didn’t. It was muddy and dark <i>This is where you could mirror the silver rain. And London is rarely muddy, it’s wet and cold and it isn’t dark because the lights are on, as you’ve said. and crowded and confusing, to an old Londoner it shouldn’t be that confusing, not if he’s experienced in navigating foreign cities...and it made him angry. Think more about why he’s angry. Is it the change perhaps from what he remembers – expectations...?</i></p> <p>‘Glad I left,’ he thought. ‘Glad I’m <u>always</u> on the move.’</p>
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**Final version**

*An afternoon in November: 4.30 and the lights are on in London.*

\* \* \*

It had grown darker and darker as Len travelled north through Europe. Crete was all white rooftops and the smell of crushed figs. Hungary was dark red, with cherry trees and ripe vines. Then the grey and silver of German motorways. On the German motorways you moved fast, acted fast, and the rain was silver....

*Now in November it was England and sky like mud, and he was stuck. The London traffic was going nowhere. Rain, smudging under the windscreen wipers: smudging the windscreen brown.*

*“Only London rain is this colour,” Len thought. “Dirtiest rain in Europe.”* He wasn’t irritated in Crete when the police searched every inch of his lorry. He wasn’t irritated in Hungary when another lorry pushed him off the road. But in London he was irritated because this is where he was born. *Somehow you expect the place where you’re born to be well-behaved. And London wasn’t. It was messy. Perfectly nice streets had developed road bumps and bollards that narrowed them Roads you could once go up and down had changed direction and developed No Entry signs. When you needed a garage there were only furniture warehouses: when you needed a layby, there were only expensive car parks or Park and Ride bus yards.*

*‘Glad I left,’ he thought. ‘Glad I’m always on the move.’*

**Table 2: The editing process: from first to published version (Spiro 2003)**

*Italicised sections in the final paragraph represent changes from the first version, as a result of editorial comment.*

In other words, my own ‘inner reader’ was being checked and monitored by an ‘outer reader’. The main changes suggested involved:

- ***Making language and the feelings behind them congruent:*** does Len’s first utterance really sound like irritation? To an ‘other’ reader, it did not.
- ***Unpacking assumptions about mood and meaning:*** why was London more irritating than other cities? Why was the rain and the traffic more irritating? From my knowledge of London, I knew the answer: but my reader did not.
- ***Resolving ambiguities:*** 4.30 could be either in the morning or in the evening, with very different connotations to darkness at each time. I am clear about which one this is, but why should my reader be?
- ***Being accurate:*** is London rain really muddy? Of course, on reflection I acknowledged I had only included this for poetic effect. Riverbanks and parks might be muddy, but not the London streets.
- ***Being consistent:*** I wanted the lights to be on, and I also wanted it to be dark. To make sense of this I needed to make a clear choice, or to explain what I meant. I resolved this with the phrase “the sky like mud” .
- ***Use language precisely and responsibly.*** The editors pointed out odd phrasing such as “if you are born somewhere you like it to behave”, which I had rather liked on first conception. Of course, on rereading I accepted the editor’s caution to say what I mean, and this became: *Somehow you expect the place where you’re born to be well-behaved.*

The editing process, then, became my training ground for more finely tuned modification for audience. I came to appreciate that the process of honing text needed to be precise and conscious of its audience at every level. Relying on a broad, unschooled intuition would not work. This was rather the ‘intuition’ of a precisely tuned thousand-part instrument, and the evaluation of its effectiveness needed to take place on a word for word, idea by idea basis.

### **The Man Upstairs: finding the central message**

With this newly tuned ‘intuition’ I moved in 2004 to the second commissioned story, This was to write a story for the title *A Twist in the Tale* – a story with an unexpected ending. In my ‘story notebook’ I had several ideas which had natural ‘twists’. My ‘story notebook’ is a record of anecdotes picked up from the newspaper, from friends, from life experience: short ‘sketches’ that seem to have an interesting natural story shape to them, that have the potential to grow, to ‘expand one’s humanity’ in some way. *Travelling Light* began partly as an anecdote in this way – a conversation between a friend and a truck driver in a roadside cafe. Parts of my novel began, too as anecdotes: driving home with a stuffed boar’s head in the back seat became the comic opening of *Nothing I Touch Stands Still*. Sometimes, the anecdote would fictionalise itself in between the telling/overhearing and the writing down, but often this process would not happen until the anecdote ‘became’ story.

The following three were the ones which might fit my new commission.

- an old lady is sitting quietly in the corner of a party arranged for a new and young prizewinning writer/film star, who has portrayed the life of a woman explorer. She is being entirely ignored, while the buzz of excitement and flashing lights carries on around the glamorous celebrity. Yet the old lady *is* the woman explorer.
- A film crew come to a seaside town to do a documentary about holiday resorts in and out of season. While they are there, the young female journalist begins to notice that she is being followed. It doesn’t worry her at first, but then she starts receiving notes begging for a meeting, strange phone messages, and then small gifts appear for her. The crew suggest it is a local who has fallen in love with her, and advise her to confront the stalker. One day after work, with the cameraman following her at a distance as a support, she manages to trap the stalker. It isn’t a man at all, but a young girl who has identified with the journalist, longs like her to travel and become part of the big media world, is

desperately bored with her seaside town, has become anorexic in her desire to look like a film star. The journalist talks to her about what the media world is really like, and admits that her own job is a six month contract and as soon as the film is made, she will be on the dole.

- a foreign visitor stays in an English village. After he arrives, there is a series of crimes. Everyone in the village assumes it must be the foreign visitor and he is ostracised. Eventually, his stay ends and he leaves the village: yet the crimes continue. It is discovered they were all committed by someone local.

All these stories had twists which interested me, because they involved the process of ‘learning’, seeing beyond surfaces, deconstructing and questioning the apparent. They also seemed to share something about prejudice, media hype, the culture of celebrity and celebrity-worship. Any one of them might ‘work’. However, when focusing on each one in turn, none of them seemed to me in the end to have something I could carry forward passionately. Instead, they began to converge with one another into something both edgier and subtler than any of the three:

- What if the celebrity was the foreign visitor, despised and accused of crimes? In fact, what if the celebrity was the one accused of stalking?
- Taking it even further, what if it was the processes of being an artist itself, which made the celebrity appear to be a criminal? Wouldn’t this show just how obsessed media is with the surfaces and outcomes of fame, rather than with the processes? Yes- we hear and read about the diets and love affairs of great actresses, but nothing about the stages, struggles, learning strategies and life lessons in becoming a great actress. Could this story, then, be the place where I defend the artist’s struggle against a surface-obsessed world?

Now I had a central message that I cared about, and because of this, a story I knew I could ‘grow’ with a sense of my authentic self at the centre.

The English landlady is suspicious of her foreign visitor from the very first contact.

Gloria opened the letter with the foreign postmark. It was written in careful handwriting, with letters joined from the top so they looked like sparrows hanging off a tree.

*Dear Mrs. Carlyle,*

I am writing to you about the rooms which you have advertised.

These rooms seem to me perfect for my needs. I have private work I must do and for this I will need peace and quiet. I am sure in your village, and in your quiet street, this will be possible.

My wish is to stay for 3 months from 1<sup>st</sup> June, and I am able to pay the rent in full in advance.

Please contact me at the above address, to confirm the arrangement.

I will be very pleased to meet you and am

Yours truly, Zoltan Veraly

It was not Gloria's business to know what his work was, and she supposed it was fair enough that he wanted peace and quiet. As long as he paid the rent, it didn't matter what he was doing with his peace and quiet.

(Spiro 2004: 46. See **Appendix Reading 8 for complete text**).

The man does very little when he actually arrives in the village. All he does is stay quietly in his room, hardly appearing at all during the day. Yet this quiet is deeply disturbing to the surrounding community: they cannot equate it with anything in their experience, apart from the sinister and the suspicious. Whilst 'the man' spends his time silently writing, the mythology around him grows into hysteria.

Gloria felt funny, working in the post office all day, hearing someone moving about upstairs. But it felt even funnier, when she could not hear him moving about upstairs. Sometimes, there was no movement or sound upstairs for hours on end. What on earth could he be doing?

"We don't see much of your lodger about town," Flora said to her as she picked up her pension.

"Yea, he keeps himself busy. "

"Oh yes, doing what? What's he busy doing?"

"Goodness knows. It goes quiet up there for hours at a time."

"What could he be up to? What is there to be up to down here, anyway?" Flora replied disgustedly.

"Oh, you know..." Gloria said. "Though I sometimes wonder..."

"Sounds like he's the quiet type. They're the ones to watch, you know, the quiet types."

“Yeah, he’s a quiet type all right.”

“Well often they’re quiet because they have something to hide!”

Flora whispered.

She leaned forward and hissed, “I hope you’re keeping Tilla and Ellie out of his way. You never can be too sure, you know.”

Ellie noticed two strange things about Mr Veraly. Firstly, she never saw him go shopping. What exactly did he live on in there? He was there for a whole week, and neither Tilla, nor Ellie, nor Gloria saw him with so much as a pint of milk. The second strange thing was that sometimes Ellie saw him coming *in* early in the morning as they went to school, but she never saw him going *out*. It did not seem possible to arrive without leaving in the first place.

Ellie told the other girls at school.

“He doesn’t eat.”

“Don’t be daft, everyone eats.”

“I don’t think he does. He never goes shopping.”

“Maybe, you know, he eats other things,” said Ellie’s friend Georgia, who read lots of books. Georgia tapped her nose, as if she knew some secret but she wasn’t telling.

“What d’you mean, he eats other things?” Ellie asked, alarmed. Georgia knew a lot, because she read grown up books.

“Well, maybe he gets his food ...at night! You know...” Georgia said, mysteriously.

Ellie’s eyes grew huge and frightened.

“What do you mean, at night!” she almost shouted, because it was true – if he came in early in the morning – well maybe he was... going out at night to get his food!

“Well, where did you say he was from?”

“Mum said somewhere east. Rumminia or Hungry.”

“Oh yeah? Well, guess who comes from those places?”

“Well who? Who do you mean?”

Ellie was in a panic. She could feel the sweat on her forehead, and she shivered, though she had no idea what Georgia was talking

about. Georgia leaned forward, and whispered loudly right into her ear, “Dracula!” (Spiro 2004: 54 - 56. **See Appendix Reading 8 for the complete story**)

Here is the final scene of the story. By this time, the foreign visitor has been thoroughly demonized. He has been blamed for the disappearance of the landlady’s daughter, accused of stalking and voyeurism, and suspected of murdering a lady whose gentle voice had been heard daily through the wall. Meanwhile, he has in fact continued to do very little apart from write and go for early morning walks.

“Zoltan Veraly” the reporter was saying, except she pronounced it ‘Verai’, “has been called the greatest poet and visionary of his generation. He has today been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, and is currently living in Bergers Hill. And he is on the line.” She smiled

“How do you like rural England?”

“It is not quite as I expected,” said Zoltan’s voice, “and I miss my home and fellow poets. The voice of Akhmatova reading her poetry on tape has been my best friend--“

Gloria listened, stood in the hallway watching, caught between the strange inside world, the even stranger outside one. The reporter was waiting.

“Were you aware, at all, Mrs Carlyle, that you were living next door to a literary star?”

He paused and, at that moment the cameras turned to the red front door with GO HOME PERVERT sprayed in tall yellow letters. The front door opened and there was Zoltan Veraly. He looked very tall in the bright beams from the TV vans, very quiet in the cacophony of microphones and loudspeakers. As the lights flashed around him, he blinked a little, then brushed past them – all of them: Jake, Ellie, Gloria, Flora, the banners and broken glass and daubed doorway, the clamour of journalists, microphones and cameras.

“Mr Veraly”----- the journalists began,

“How do you feel -----“

But Mr. Veraly just tipped the brim of his hat to shade his eyes, leaned forward and said to the millions of viewers,

“I am going for my early morning walk”

Then he walked past as if they were not there. (Spiro 2004: 71 - 72)

Zoltan Veraly was no specific writer, for me, but simply the archetypal artist in an unsympathetic world; a writer who, like the Turkish Nobel Prizewinner Pamuk, “shuts himself up in a room for years on end” in order to hone his craft (Pamuk 2006: 17).

At a recent talk, a member of the audience asked: “Is this the way you have behaved, in

similar situations of being misunderstood?” This is how I remember answering: “The way my character behaves in this story is aspirational. It is a message to myself and others, about how one might survive revilement and misunderstanding. In a way, this character retains a central core of self-esteem that they simply cannot touch. They are simply too small for him. I would love to feel this at times of being tested, and those I most admire have certainly demonstrated this kind of behaviour, whatever they have felt inside.” (Tammi Conference, Helsinki, Finland: November 2004)

#### **5.4 Authenticity, transformation and finding a voice**

The stories described above all sprang out of the discipline of ‘house style’, publishers’ guidelines and editorial intervention; and yet they represent the ‘heart’ of themes that ‘mattered’ to me; the connection between cultures, the acknowledging of paradox and duality in oneself (Len and George), the isolation of the artist, the hysteria of the media, the honouring of the artistic process (Zoltan Veraly). In finding this ‘heart’ I remained true to my own principles and values as a writer, whilst learning to write with a more finely tuned voice. I also acted as a *creative* writer within my own understandings of what this meant: transforming knowledge-as-experience into something new, a belief in the value of what I am doing, a continued tuning of my message for audience, and a dedication to the process of perpetual self-improvement (Section 3.3 of this dissertation). The process of writing with these constraints represented genuine learning for me. I learnt what really responsible ‘intuitive’ modification meant. I learnt how my writing might read to an outsider on a word for word basis. I also learnt the importance of ‘triangulating’ the voice of the inner reader with other evidence, other reader response, to check the real impact of text. Writing under strict commission thus emerged, unexpectedly, as research into self, into language, and into the writing process; it became a process of professionalisation.

The next chapter continues with these two new dimensions to writing: writing as a response to constraint, and writing as a process of ‘professionalisation’.