

Most theatrical when most personal

A consideration of Hal Porter's three volumes of autobiography: *The Watcher on the Cast-Iron Balcony* (Faber & Faber, London, 1963); *The Paper Chase* (Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1966); and *The Extra* (Nelson, West Melbourne, 1975).

In his third volume of autobiography Hal Porter says this:

T. S. Eliot says a writer's progress is an ever-increasing 'extinction of personality'. You take it he means that, as a writer ages, he's progressively less curious about himself, more and more interested in clues to other natures: their possessions, fads, frenzies, accents.

A little later, he adds:

Let this be made clear: the main reason for writing outright autobiography wasn't exhibitionism. An account of anyone's life to the age of eighteen is hardly attractive or thought-provoking. The young are like uncooked scones, unset jellies. I wrote autobiographically because it seemed the most convenient way to record 'my generation'. In this I'm no Robinson Crusoe ...

He goes on to list a dozen Australians who wrote autobiographies within a decade of his first attempt on the genre, but reveals more a couple of pages further on, when he says:

It's the Past, distilled, bottled (literature doesn't exist without artifice), which is eau de vie, the cognac of existence.

Literature doesn't exist without artifice, and to think about Hal Porter's writing requires one to watch carefully for his tricks, many of them tricks of the theatre, so timeworn, and so deeply embedded in his personality that he's not entirely aware of them himself, because his eyes, most of the time, are on, not his own devices, which he uses unselfconsciously, but his audience. Are they laughing as required? Are they still with him, moving when and as they need to? It's not easy to watch out for Hal's tricks, because if you go with him, if you read him as you're intended to do, he's vastly entertaining, and he really doesn't repay analysis of an objective, stylistic sort. I should say at this point that one of Hal's most successful tricks was that everyone who ever met him called him 'Hal': the word was shorthand for all the tales told about him as well as those told by him, so that in using the name you invoked the totality of both his own production and his reputation. Anyone who ever knew him would tell you that you couldn't pick and choose aspects of him you'd prefer to engage with, and disregard the rest. The man was complete, even in his shortcomings, and wouldn't let himself be taken in any other way.

When he had the accident which led, some fourteen months later, to his death, a Melbourne journalist described him as having said, 'Posterity will probably see me, I'd say, as a passable novelist, a fair playwright, but a pretty good short story writer.' The public don't seem to have bothered themselves with these categories;

Hal is mainly remembered for his masterpiece, *The Watcher on the Cast-Iron Balcony*, in my view the most perfect book ever written in this country. This book caused him, very briefly, before the vast and disruptive front known as Patrick White blew across the landscape, to be seen as the country's leading writer, and it will be the project of this essay to discern, if possible, why *The Watcher* is so good and why the two volumes that followed it don't quite reach the same level. Let us begin at the beginning:

In a half-century of living I have seen two corpses, two only. I do not know if this total is conventional or unconventional for an Australian of my age.

The first corpse is that of a woman of forty. I see its locked and denying face through a lens of tears, and hear, beyond the useless hullabaloo of my debut in grief, its unbelievable silence prophesying unbelievable silence for me. It is not until twenty-eight years later that I see, through eyes this time dry and polished as glass, my second corpse, which is that of a seventy-three-year-old man. Tears? No tears, not any, none at all ...

The woman of forty is his mother; the second corpse his father.

Once upon a time, it seems, but in reality on or about the day King Edward VII died, these two corpses have been young, agile and lustful enough to mortise themselves together to make me. Since the dead wear no ears that hear and have no tongues to inform, there can now be no answer, should the question be asked, as to where the mating takes place, how zestfully or grotesquely, under which ceiling, on which kapok mattress – no answer, anywhere, ever.

Mother's and Father's first child is born.

I am exactly one week old when the first aeroplane ever to do so flies over my birthplace. On aesthetic grounds or for superstitious reasons I am unvaccinated; I am superstitiously and fashionably uncircumcised, plump, blue-eyed and white-haired. I have a silver rattle, Hindu, in the shape of a rococo elephant hung on a bone ring. I crawl. The *Titanic* sinks. I stand. The Archduke is assassinated at Sarajevo, and I walk at last into my own memories.

Hal has performed the miracle of bringing himself into the world, but note how much more has been set in place: the mother he loves, the father in whom he has no interest, a first few details, out of the many that will follow, about the aesthetics of the world he's entered, and hints, also – the *Titanic*, the Archduke, King Edward – about the trough of history in which he will swim. Hal's opening sets a standard which few writers could maintain, but he does it easily enough; he is a Thursday's child with far to go ...

... brought forth under the sign of Aquarius, and with a cleft palate. This is skilfully sewn up. In which hospital? When I am a few months old? By whom now dead or nearing death? No one, I think, no one living now knows. Thus secretly mended, and secretly carrying, as it were, my first lie tattooed on the roof of the mouth that is to sound out so many later lies, I grow. I am exactly one week old when the first aeroplane ...

Hal is shaping his stage as he talks to us, getting ready for the performance of his life. He's versatile enough to share and he

knows he'd be mad not to when he has, ready to play opposite, or even a little closer to the footlights of his prose, his mother.

Mother! His mother is the love of his life, and when she dies, leaving only Hal, Matron, Father and a distasteful clergyman on stage, Hal's greatness is behind him. It's as simple as that. He needed her as he needed no other, and the whole book resonates with their complementarity. Hal always knows what she's saying with her artful use of song.

Mother, who is boiling Christmas Pudding threepences and sixpences to sterilize them, suddenly places her hands in an attitude of prayer, rolls her eyes piously ceiling-wards and, at the same time crossing them, sings in a burlesque choir voice, very *tremolo*:

'Hark, the herald angels sing,

Beecham's Pills are just the thing,

Peace on earth and mercy mild,

Two for a man, and one for a child.'

Mother is ever-so-closely observed by her eldest, Harold, later to become Hal.

... she does not give the same sort of love to each of us any more than she gives the varying plants in her garden the same kinds of care. When I am three and four and five and six Mother points out the constellations to me: Orion, The Whale, The Hare, The Scorpion, The Cup, The Southern Cross. I look up and up, so earnestly and for so long, at her finger stirring the broth of gems, that I become dazzled and giddy enough to conceive myself staring downwards into bottomless beauty. I know by name the stars and planets she

knows by name, and have since learned no more than what she teaches me when I am a child.

The Watcher has magic like this on almost every page. I find myself wanting to quote great stretches because the inspiration is so continuous, but Dick Verco will have to suffice. Dick takes the part of King Bunyip in a stage presentation by the children of State School 754, a building still to be seen in Main Street, Bairnsdale. King Bunyip's court includes ten wombats, of whom the First, because most articulate, is Hal. Some creak in the plot causes the monarch to ask his courtiers, 'Ow, Wom-bats, heark-en! ... Say, moi subjects, is ower roil decision roight?' The wombats, through their stage-crazy spokesman, reply: 'Ai pray that your august majes-tee will permit mai brothah wombats to confer on this mattah.' This, King Bunyip, Dick Verco, fourteen and the biggest boy in grade six, allows. The young Hal and his nine fellows 'nudge and bump our cardboard heads together, acting like a bunch of Garricks. We chatter, 'Rhubarb, rhubarb, rhubarb, rhubarb!' and stop as abruptly as though decapitated', before applauding the King's decision.

My moment is over, a moment too petty for anyone but me to remember; it is of the past; it is gone; the petty moment is now for others: 'Hurray! Hurray! Hurray!' raggedly shout my brother wombats in voices unlike wombats, boys, or anything. To our dismay King Bunyip's mask slides from his face to reveal the sweating, the glistening, the suddenly wrinkled face of Dick Verco with its faint moustache.

Thirty years pass before King Bunyip and the First Wombat meet again. Hal has returned to Bairnsdale 'to scout and spy on the setting of my childhood, and to walk, in hand-made shoes costing eighteen guineas, with a sense of walking through an old dream, the streets I once ran through barefoot.'

I turn a corner. It amazes me that, instantly, without hesitation or the faintest doubt, I recognize the man loping towards me, down-at-heel but lusty, deeply wrinkled, large-bellied, going bald, grey at the temples – it is King Bunyip.

Hal's mind fills with questions. Will he be recognised by his monarch of thirty years before? Will Dick be able to recognize Hal's fame? Hal decides: 'He will not know me. The two middle-aged men draw level, are passing.'

'Ullo, 'Arold,' says Dick Verco, King Bunyip, whom I have not seen for thirty years.

'Hullo, Dick,' I say, as though I have seen him every day for thirty years. No more than that. We go our ways. I am, as it were, home again. I am with those who knew me when I was to be known. I am with those who knew me as a boy: to them my scandals and hand-made shoes and foreign travel and footloose life and miniature fame and addition of years are no more than a form of fancy-dress, to be admired or not admired, but making little difference to me, and none – none at all – to them.

'Ullo 'Arold!' is perhaps what I ultimately use up my eyes and ears and hours for.

On my first reading of that incident, in 1963 when the book came out, I noticed the sentence 'I am with those who knew me when I was to be known.' What did it mean? I thought then and I think now that the Hal who wrote *The Watcher* saw himself as an actor, costumed in his clothes of the day, and speaking, in a well-trained voice, the lines he allowed himself to speak. Hal performed, and the performer will always adjust what he says and the way he delivers his lines for the audience, and the auditorium, where he is on stage. Truth is never absolute, only situational. Nothing is ever fixed because you can't yet know what tonight's audience – let alone tomorrow's – will be like. The performance is the thing, and a good performance will offer an illusion of truth, so convincing, perhaps, that nobody is inclined to doubt it ... except the performer himself, who knows very well what he's doing.

Hal disliked academics, people with trained minds, because he feared that they'd catch him out. He learned all he'd ever learn about life's verities from his mother and from the Bairnsdale of his childhood. He described later influences, anything trying to make him contemporary, as 'contrumpery'. If it wasn't part of his formation it couldn't be true and if it was true it didn't matter. Hal was an exasperating man. He saw more clearly, more pointedly, more sharply, than most, but anything that didn't suit his performance was swept aside. As we wander up and down his autobiographical books we notice his suspicion of other performers – the Russian poet Yevtushenko is a prominent example, snatching people's attention when he has no right to be stealing attention from ...

... H, A, L, Mr Centre-Stage himself.

Yet, as I have already said, Hal needed a foil to show himself at his best, and Mother was the dominant half of a classy act; Father almost beyond noticing. The depth of Hal's contempt for his father is shown in *The Extra*, when he describes Father's efforts, via gifts of produce from his garden, to strike some form of accord with his son. Hal won't yield. Even after Father's death, when Hal opens a drawer filled with mementos of himself, collected down the years, he's scornful of the collector's sincerity. Father's sin was that he never admired his son, and it was never forgiven.

This brings us to *The Paper Chase*, covering the years after Mother's death, and Hal's relegation of Father to the years left behind. Hal must have known, as he started the second volume, that he had a hard act to follow, and I think the name he gave this book, appropriate as it may be, is an attempt to explain to himself why it is so episodic, so strung together, so lacking in the wholeness, the richness, brought to the first book by his irreplaceable Mother.

It's hardly possible to exemplify this criticism by quotations, because, give or take a page or two, you can open the book anywhere and find Hal in form. Take Audrey. Audrey. You've never heard of her outside Hal's pages, and you never will. When she was fourteen she was in Grade 8 at Williamstown State School, where Hal taught – Hal, aged seventeen. Audrey is fourteen, and she's keen on Hal. Audrey is in the choir, singing:

*Little Mr Baggy Breeches, I love you.
If you'll be my Sunday fellow,*

I'll patch'em in purple, in pink and in yellow ...

Hal can't believe the girl's winking at him, but she winks again. At the teacher. Hal tries to make himself look older. He's turning the pages for whoever's playing the piano. 'Am I blushing?' he wonders.

Nine years later Audrey approaches Mr Porter, as she calls him, in Collins Street. It's ten o'clock at night. She's a street walker, and Hal's ready to turn her away, nicely enough, but she makes him remember who she is, or was, and she asks him if he's doing anything tonight, then, when she sees 'indefinable doubts' running across his face, she assures him: 'I don't mean that.' She means a drink. Hal goes with her, they talk, they become friends. Hal gets to know Audrey's friends – 'women who spend lives like street corners, petty criminals dressed to the nines, people with the tender pale hands of those who despise labour.'

Audrey tells me on that first session ... that she has been a prostitute for six years, since she was seventeen. She tells it dazedly as though of someone else, some semi-transparent girl from a ballad. Days pass before I realize I've placidly listened to a sordid story, a crime ...

Her mother dies when Audrey is twelve. At thirteen she is seduced by her father, the widower, carpenter, and a forty-five-year-old lay preacher ...

Hal mixes with Audrey and her circle for a time, then the contact's lost.

I see, ten years later, in the newspaper *Truth*, the photograph of a woman being charged for the twentieth time with

vagrancy. It shows a face from which sensitivity has been trodden out, a face bestial and defiant as an orchid. It is Audrey's. It is one of Audrey's. For me she still sits at the grey marble table, singing a schoolgirl's song into the steam of the tea-with, still undeflowered by time. The lead-light poppies of dirty glass still flourish behind her on the door of the Broadway Café, torn down these many years.

The doors of 1937, when one had the keys of time!

Hal is very good at this sort of thing. He sees that life, or shall I write it as Life, is the only currency that matters, each of us has one purse of coins to spend, and every getting rid of what we've been given is a story. Stories make us equal. Each and any of us, any and each, can tell our story, and if it's interesting, people will listen. Laugh. Cry. Wipe their eyes, knowing they've been changed by the knowledge, the experiences, of someone else. This is life as theatre, and the cast is huge, the audience too. For Hal, every one of us is an actor, and being in the audience for others' stories can't be escaped either. It's the world we live in and Shakespeare said it was a stage.

Well ...

The most puzzling, because inadequately revealed, character in *The Paper Chase* is Olivia, Hal's first and only wife. She enters on page 134 and he says goodbye to her on page 153, with half the book's pages still to be turned. Before going on to discuss Olivia in *The Paper Chase* I remind the reader of Hal's mother's importance in *The Watcher*: the book couldn't exist without her. Olivia?

Olivia isn't allowed to come to life in Hal's pages. We meet, briefly, her father, mother and sisters. The sisters are there when Olivia farewells Hal who is taking up a teaching appointment in Adelaide:

I talk over with Olivia the wisdom of my testing the status of the Adelaide school, and of investigating accommodation for us, before she comes to me. She falls in with this apparently level-headed idea. After the months of entertaining, coddling, and supporting me through hospital tantrums and selfishnesses, a temperamental convalescence, and my snowballing anxiety to move on, move on, move on, she is badly in need of a period of coddling and convalescence herself. I shall move on. She will rest, wait, and follow in time.

Time! That is the lie. What has time to do with it?

Hal may accuse himself of a lie, but it's a lie reported as he sees fit to report; he must have known he was leaving as he put to Olivia his proposal for going on ahead. Hal's standards in *The Watcher* have been so high that any slippage, any move in a downward direction, causes us to question this performer who claims our total attention. We not only feel tremors of disbelief breaking into the certainty with which we have been reading, we start to ask questions and realise that there are no answers there, and none in Hal's mind either, because he doesn't allow himself to see a good deal that would be in the front of an average person's observations. Let us go back to his departure for Adelaide, his lifelong separation from his wife.

I am on Spencer Street station, the interstate platform.

Outside, in an early night already fulfilling its preconceptions, the fag-end of the city does nothing but wait for nothing. Olivia and her three sisters are there on the platform, and could – for my eyes are filmed with tears of champagne – be visitant goddesses with pure voices and shadowed eyes.

Now I am in the carriage with the scent and warmth of Olivia's kiss on my lips.

Now, as the train begins slowly to glide away like a swan, I see that the goddesses are no more than four stately women, tall, soigné, with lit smiles, and eyes that contain their own secret and dark sadness.

Olivia stands a little in front of the others.

Good-bye, darling! And good-bye.

It is nearly ten years before I see her again ...

Perhaps the most irritating thing about this description of what is clearly a deliberate separation – deliberate on Hal's side: Olivia's awareness is never presented, anywhere – is that it moves straight on to a description of the South Australian landscape as Hal sees it through his sleeping compartment window the following morning. It's Hal at his best, a worthy partner for his description, forty pages later, of Tasmania:

I first see South Australia, just after sunrise, as a landscape pagan, bronze and violet, Polynesian ...

I first see Tasmania, just after sunset, as a landscape desperate, assailed, and sinister ...

In both cases, having brilliantly painted a backdrop for himself, he's ready to give you, the reader, activities and actions to suit. Hal the dramatist has no trouble with South Australia, and positively revels in Tasmania which remembers only too well the darkness of its past. Both of these states possess an emptiness needing to be filled, and Hal the narrator, the noser-out of opportunities, is just the man for that. Why isn't Olivia the life of the book? Why isn't she alive on every page, as Mother was, playing opposite Hal as lead? We never know, and we're not given the slightest chance to find out. Let's go back ...

After the months of entertaining, coddling, and supporting me through hospital tantrums and selfishnesses, a temperamental convalescence, and my snowballing anxiety to move on, move on, move on, she is badly in need of a period of coddling and convalescence herself. I shall move on. She will rest, wait, and follow in time.

Hal was hit by a car, two days before World War 2 broke out; he describes it in *The Paper Chase*, and he even lets Olivia say a couple of lines, lines I don't believe she said: the words have been scripted for her by the writer, lying on the road with a broken pelvis. The damage caused by this accident gets him out of being a soldier, which he says he regrets, and it gets him out of the marriage, though he may not know that as he lies on the road, because it allows him to be the ever-complaining patient, the horizontally-disposed, suffering man who can push his claims in front of the woman's. Hal's treatment of Olivia, as a man, first, and as a writer, second, fills me with revulsion. Let me not be too hypocritical here. Every last one of us is fallible, and

the closer we get to our strongest and deepest feelings the more treacherous and self-propelled we are. Writers are not exempt! What writers can do is, first, realise, and second, express, what they know's inside them. Honesty, self-examination, and the urge to express even the most uncomfortable parts of our beings are what makes writers writers. Somewhere in *The Paper Chase* I feel Hal's exposition of what he knows is slipping, in that downward direction mentioned before, towards empty rhetoric. Setting our minds ablaze with new understandings is not his purpose any more; it's enough if he occupies our thinking with well-chosen diversions.

The Extra is better, though there are many pages where Hal is chatting in a subdued sort of way, an almost-weary raconteur with quite a bit to interest us and plenty of tricks to keep us reading. *The Extra* works best when Hal's identity is simply presented as the writer, reflecting, and best of all, when he's reflecting on other writers. Hal himself is still journeying, endlessly, but forever returning: going away and coming home are the two sides of him now. Journeying is a habit, not a search for himself, hardly, even, a search for things to write about because he's confident enough to know that things to write about are everywhere. Even the sauce on John Shaw Neilson's chin gives Hal an ending for his piece about the poet, and it is a measure of Hal's skill, and his honesty, this time, that he shows himself as an intrusive young pain in the neck, hectoring a man whose strand of genius has next to no defence, and certainly not against the youngster who wants him to say something immortal, unforgettable, when he's already done

so. Every chapter of *The Extra* is headed by quotations from other writers, so appositely chosen that one feels that Hal, at last and for once, is listening. Here's how he starts Chapter Three.

It is sadder to find the past again and find it inadequate to the present than to have it elude you.

Zelda Fitzgerald

It is so many years before one can believe enough in what one feels even to know what the feeling is.

W.B. Yeats

But I became a writer all the same, and shall remain one to the end of the chapter just as a cow goes on giving milk all her life, even though what appears to be her self-interest urges her to give gin.

H.L. Mencken

Hal, like Mencken, has given us liberal doses of gin. Now, and at last, he opens up other writers, starting, naturally enough for Hal, with Kenneth Slessor. When, pages later, he quotes Slessor in order to say farewell to him, you realise that it has been a portrait both merciless and accepting. Slessor welcomes Porter whenever he's in Sydney, Hal is flattered to be liked by the poet; he's more respectful of poets, it seems, than we might have thought. But poets, if Slessor is any example, are fallible as most, and the Slessor Hal shows us, grinding a piece of ham into the carpet with his heel, and ignoring his former wife, the mother of his son, even though both are in the room, is placed outside our sympathies. He's a brilliant poet, but what a bastard! How can Hal spend hours drinking with this man? We'll never know because Hal can't remember what they talked about. One feels

they talked about nothing in particular, they simply liked each other, and that's hardly a line of inquiry we can follow.

There's little to do, today, here and now writing of him, except paraphrase what he wrote about the tiresomeness of a dead friend. Let the précis be as deadpan as the poem itself:

His commercial value is nix. To his irrelevant and incongruous shards nothing can count. His death pares my biography, and is therefore a double theft – his life, and something of mine.

As he wrote of another, I write of him:

'Farewell, thou pilferer!'

Hal, with amazing skill, manages to repeat this line of Slessor's a few pages later, doubling its effect in a way that honours the poet, and reminds us that to be a writer of his quality quite outweighs our reaction to things about him that we may not care for. Poets are rare, and they perceive what others can't. Hal shows us Frances Webb in the offices of Angus & Robertson, where he's cared for by the famous – in literary circles – staff. They bring him coffee, éclairs, and sandwiches. What is he recovering from? Why is he there? Hal doesn't know, but he feels awe for the troubled, unshaven man, and one feels that this time the courtesies are more than the play-acting he offers others.

'Others', however, can include writers who lie outside the tradition of Australian courtesy. Hal's account of famous attention-seekers at an Edinburgh Festival is both amusing and full of a wish to distance himself from their antics. One feels that

he feels that they're allowed to get away with too much because they've never been forced to withstand the scepticism, the demands for decency and usefulness which any Australian writer can be expected to have felt from his people.

Enter 'Gerald'. I had not even begun reading *The Extra* before I was rung by someone grieving for the brutality of Hal's 'attack' on 'Gerald', a man we both knew. Hal had gone 'too far' this time, I was told. I read the book, and was surprised by the virulence of the attack, but began to realise, slowly, that I didn't necessarily have to attribute malice to its writer; that is, I could ignore his description of 'Gerald' as a description of a man I knew, and take it simply as a manifesto of his views on what writers shouldn't be. They shouldn't be like Norman Mailer either, or William Burroughs, or any number of others, and they shouldn't resemble 'Gerald' because getting women other than one's wife pregnant, drinking drinks which Hal didn't drink, listening to lieder that Hal didn't listen to, and above all living in what Hal and his Mother before him would have condemned as squalor ... none of these things fitted with Hal's view of a writer as a master of his craft, someone, woman or man, who accepted that to be a writer meant marrying a discipline early on, then attending to what it had to teach for the length of a lifetime. The distaste Hal expresses for Gerald is, for me, only the obverse of his acceptance that if you want to be an actor, a singer, dancer or writer, you must live within the requirements of your craft, and to try to live outside them, to get away with what other people can't get away

with – unless they're fabulously, and probably miserably, rich – is to invite condemnation for being the fool that you are.

Who else? Which other writers does Hal present to us, remarkable selves to put beside his own? Eve Langley. Katherine Susannah Prichard. Henrietta Drake-Brockmann. Frank Dalby Davison, and others, listed every once in a while. The writers who influenced him? These are listed too – 'Olive Schreiner, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Thackeray, George Moore, D'Annunzio, Henry James, Turgenev, Harold Nicolson. V.S. Pritchett, and dozens more.' From writers he moves on to publishers, whose weird and wonderful structures 'soar up (used to soar up?) above prayer-wheels and sodomies. Through currents of incense and the stink of yak-butter, in the gloomy magnificence and filth of Tibetan lamaseries.' 'Publishing is a gamble,' he goes on. 'Readers are fickle, unpredictable, given to treacherous volte-faces no computer can deal with. Taste perpetually changes. Who reads Ouida or Mary Webb now?'

Not me. In his quirky way, Hal wins one over by the unexpected way he has of putting thoughts, ever so crisply, in bowls or on side plates rather than serving them up as main dishes, winning you to his viewpoint by inviting you to accept what he places in a half-way position – Hal offers ideas which may come to dominate your thinking as a simple little something which he's come to accept, and places no pressure – no easily discernible pressure, that is, on you as reader to accept or even argue. What you're offered are no more than the thoughts of Hal, more or less casually unloaded, and it's only when you

open them up, and let them run around indoors, as it were, that you realise their strength, and realise also how little can be built on them except a life resembling that of Hal, three times an autobiographer, and that's excluding any number of the stories which draw on characters and incidents who and which reappear in the three books under discussion.

So we have a masterpiece, a collection with only one thread to hold it together, and a third vol, quieter, more certain of its movements because it's written in a mood of acceptance. Hal has done what he decided long ago to do. He's lived as a writer. Somewhere in *The Extra* he describes his younger self living a divided life: nine to four, he's a teacher; and after that, he's a Bohemian, while it's fashionable. The fashion abates, and he's found himself as a writer.

To write about your own writing critically is like taking out your own appendix, almost impossible to do. To answer the sort of questions asked by journalists, or television and wireless interviewers, is easy enough, although the bleak answers, all you're capable of, must disappoint an interviewer in search of Delphic utterances.

Why do you write?

Can't help it. A kink.

What's your aim?

Not high-flown. To record, lucidly as possible, some of the things I seem to experience, or think I see others seeming to experience.

How do you select the experience you write about?

Mostly, rather than select, I blunder on ...

Is this what he's been doing for three vols of autobiography? No no no, certainly not. Hal answering an interviewer is the least trustworthy of Hals. Go back to *The Watcher*, read him, listen to him, imagine him as he takes us through the preparation, and the staging, of the little play he wrote when he first knew he was an actor, back in the days of Dick Verco as King Bunyip, and Hal, aged ten, as the first of his subjects; the play was called *Briar Rosebud* or *The Sleeping Beauty*, and he tells us that he wrote it in violet ink in his drawing book. The children act, the children sing, and other children gather to watch. When they disperse, it's to find suicide, marriage, death in war, stomach cancer, or whatever else the future has been holding for them. They sing, not knowing what's in store:

Briar Rosebud was a fair princess,
 a fair princess, a fair princess,
Briar Rosebud was a fair princess,
Long, long ago ...

She dwelt up in a lonely tower,
 a lonely tower, a lonely tower,
She dwelt up in a lonely tower,
Long, long ago ...

As we sing, the Adams audience, still on its hunkers in the frizzled grass, joins us. The reiterated 'Long, long ago ...' becomes sweeter and sadder, verse by verse.

Time past is made available to us, and we walk through, we re-live, its events transfigured by Hal's art. This is a magic which any reminiscence, any moment of recall, may bring to us, but Hal's powerful recall, a power somehow reinforced by his unwillingness to deal openly and honestly with those parts of his present which he doesn't like, and causes him to tell us volubly that he dislikes, Hal's art makes the past more palatable than it ever was, because we can have it served with all the beguilement of a master.