

Paragraph numbers in brackets, and underlined, bold words for section B given.

If you can't make a table...

By Allan Massie

(Para i) Why do you write?

The question is sometimes posed by interviewers or by members of the audience at book festivals.

My answer is usually rather **feeble**. 'Well,' I say, 'I can't sing or play a musical instrument or dance, and I can't draw. So what else is left to me but writing?'

This is true enough. My art lessons ended at the age of nine, when the headmaster's wife led me to her husband's office with my latest artwork in hand. 'Look at this', she said. 'This boy is wasting his time. He should be learning Greek.' So in the art hour the following week, I was at work on the Greek alphabet and preparing to conjugate λύω. This is all true, but sounds inadequate.

(Para ii) Some writers will tell you they write because they have something to say. Perhaps so, though one does well to remember Housman's **dictum**: 'Poetry is not the thing said, but a way of saying it'. This also is

true. Much fine and memorable poetry would, if **rendered** as a prose paraphrase, seem **scarcely** worth saying, the sentiment and thought being obvious and jejune. Orwell, though not always insensitive to poetry, nevertheless dismissed some of Housman's own most lovely lines with a brisk 'Hard cheese, old chap', as if the poet would have done better to take a cold bath or go for a cross-country run.

(Para iii) Some poets and novelists do undoubtedly write in the **conviction** that they have an important message to deliver. D. H. Lawrence and H. G. Wells are, sadly, two examples; sadly because the message really belonged to the op-ed page of a popular newspaper, and **obscures**, even drives out, what is alive and beautiful in their work. Of course, when we engage in journalism, we do write because we have something to say (or because we are being paid to say something), but the question: why do you write? is rarely addressed to a journalist. It is taken for granted that the reasons for writing for

the newspapers are obvious and quite sensible.

(Para iv) A novel may certainly say something, but the novelist may not know what that is. John Carey's absorbing biography of William Golding, for instance, makes it clear as a mountain stream that Golding rarely had much idea of where he was going or what he was saying while at work on a novel. This is quite common. Only afterwards, perhaps reading your novel again, you may mutter, 'so that's what it was all about'. Golding indeed always refused to discuss his most remarkable and perhaps finest novel, *Darkness Visible*, possibly because he could think of nothing intelligent to say about it.

(Para v) Novel-writing is a craft which may sometimes become a work of art. It is the craftsmanship required that is of immediate interest to the writer, and it is the mastery of the craft, however fleeting this mastery may be, which offers satisfaction. Evelyn Waugh, who in his youth wanted to make beautiful furniture, spoke sometimes of novel-writing as a

sort of carpentry and the novel as a pleasing object he had made. I like this attitude to one's work. If you are no good with your hands and can't make a table, or indeed a garden, then making a poem, a short story, a play or a novel is a happy alternative. Dramatists are also called playwrights, like shipwrights and wheelwrights — and in Renaissance Scotland poets were called 'makars'. 'Making' is more pleasing, and seems more worthwhile, than saying.

(Para vi) Kingsley Amis, who was both more honest and more modest than most writers, gave the best answer to the question.

In his Paris Review interview he said he wrote novels to entertain himself. Some admittedly affirm that writing is a terrible labour, a burden they would be rid of, even hell. I never quite believe them. Even the most low-spirited and lugubrious must have moments when they delight in their work. Asked when he had been happiest in his life, Eric Linklater replied, 'When I have been working on a novel and it was going well'. This surely is the true answer to the question: why do you write? Because on the good days at least there is nothing better, nothing more

satisfying, nothing more rewarding.

(Para vii) Finally, there is another less creditable reason, which Amis, quoting Orwell, admitted to: and this is vanity, the desire to impress people, to be well thought of in the world, and even famous. Most of us don't achieve this. Nevertheless, the desire for fame is a sharp spur pricking the writer on. It is not however sensible to say this in answer to the question at book festivals, still less if it is put by a journalist. It makes you look a bit of an ass, and a conceited one at that.