



The Writing-Life Balance

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THE WEIGHING OF WRITING seen as one half of an equation, with life in the opposite pan of the scale, is a well-established juxtaposition. It's attracted some memorable articulations, among them the two opening lines of the brief poem by Yeats, 'The Choice', where he asserts: 'The intellect of man is forced to choose/Perfection of the life, or of the work': or Cyril Connolly's ringing pronouncement, in *Enemies of Promise* that 'There is no more sombre enemy of good art than the pram in the hall'.

But all such statements risk being half-truths, or at best the fruit of hindsight. If only things were that simple! In the blue corner, life, in the red corner, work... Yet the issue is clearly an important one, given the risks latent in an overloading of the scale on either side. Art bereft of life must risk desiccation: on the other hand, where the sheer welter of life and its demands encroach too forcefully, the writer may fail to find a proper foothold and focus. And the need to earn a living may lead a writer away from her or his real gift, and consume much time and energy. Hence, of course, the practical value of commissions, prizes and grants for writers, in addition to the encouragement they give. In this context, for me the Arts Council of England has been an important source of support, as has the British Council, with readings and tours in a number of countries.

If there *is* a work-life balance, it may be achieved only intermittently, and perhaps only with time. But is such a balance always desirable? Maybe for some temperaments it is actually unhelpful. And how is it possible to generalise, given the rich variety of individual circumstances? It's a



question that can cover a lot of ground, from economics and solvency to individual habits and social responsibility. Add to this the human propensity for taking wrong turnings, on the journey in which meaning necessarily follows experience, and things can be far from straightforward.

For all writers, exploring and exploiting the nature of their particular talent must be the imperative. For some, doing so will have been a clear priority from early on. For others, amongst whom I count myself, it can take time to realise that writing is one of the crucial centres of their life. In an age which on the whole fosters the expectation of early achievement, I have been a relatively late starter. And on the Connolly scale there have been no fewer than four prams, in more than one hall. Now that I've reached the age of hindsight, I'm simply grateful for the sum of experience and the chance to write. Having been a teacher of languages for twenty-three years, then a freelance writer for another thirty, seems to have created its own equilibrium.