



Places to Write

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THIS IS BEING WRITTEN at The Hurst, the former Shropshire home of John Osborne, now one of Arvon's residential centres. Despite a blazing summer, in mid-August 2022 the hills are still green and the view east between Sowdley and Radnor Woods is smudged into a drizzling sky that almost obscures Clunton Hill, a couple of miles off. All around me, books, sitting rooms large and small, imminent lunch at a refectory table with interesting people, comfortable gardens, near silence. If ever there were 'places to write', this is one.

As it happens, though, there aren't many places where I can't write. A beach in full sun is no good, nor is a fast-moving car, but trains are fine, and parks in fair weather, waiting rooms, anywhere with a seat, in fact. People don't distract me, nor does any but the loudest noise. Same with reading. As a child I would memorise the text on a Rice Krispies box rather than communicate with other people at breakfast.

Selfishness helps, then, as much as anything higher-minded. Obsession, too. But above all, the prospect of payment. (These very sentences have been commissioned at a rate of 40p per word. I write them in sixty minutes.)

The first pieces I was ever paid for were daily reviews for the *Birmingham Post* of productions at one of the annual National Student Drama Festivals. They had to be 'phoned through' (this part may need a glossary) by 11.00 pm. My maiden call was made at 11.10 from the 'telephone box' where I had been scribbling a final paragraph on top of the metal shelf holding directories of local phone numbers.



‘What time do you think this is?’

The copytaker sounded like my father. ‘The Night Sub wants a word.’

‘What time is it now, would you say?’, the Night Sub asked. ‘OK. Tomorrow you *finish* phoning through by eleven o’clock. Miss another deadline and you’re out.’

Easier to learn this lesson than apply it, but I wasn’t late again. The upside was that I now had a feeling for deadlines not dissimilar to the one V. S. Pritchett experienced with paperclips because of their association with cheques. A downside was having to reconcile oneself to simple phrasing, especially when I came to write for the *Guardian*, with its well-known hazards. A friend, complimenting me on a piece there, asked ‘But what are “lumpy exploratory features”?’ Eh? ‘You said the play got slowed down by lumpy exploratory features.’ I checked. Damn, what I had dictated was ‘clumsy expository speeches.’

A bit later, at a time when Irving Wardle, theatre critic of *The Times*, was periodically hospitalised I filled in for him, weeks at a time. After West End performances it was possible to finish the review in the darkened office at 200 Gray’s Inn Road, typing on dirty grey copy-paper while a couple of Night Subs shifted about at their desks. Out of the window, there might have been an Edward Hopperish view, if one had had time to look at it.