

No Middle Ground: Baxter's Writing of the Self

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In a very real sense all of Baxter's writing, verse, prose and drama, is autobiographical, for, as has been noted, the impulse to record his life experience in all kinds of writing, and particularly in verse form, was with him from the time he started composing poetry ('Notes on the Education of a New Zealand Poet', *Collected Prose 2*. 217-19; McKay 26). Keeping a prose record in note or diary form alongside the drafts of poems was a habit that he acquired in childhood, and the working and reworking of subjective impressions drawing upon observation, memory, dream and fantasy was part of his education as a poet. This intuitive reach for words to articulate his life experiences suggests he recognised that prose could give voice to his inner world in ways that differed from those of poetry or drama.

Prose narrative as a medium reflects the realities of life in a mundane way, as well as dramatically, and Baxter's early narrative fragments show him in everyday situations and settings grappling with sensations of fear, anxiety, guilt, registering pain and wounding, and using impressionistic modes—dreams, images and reflection—from which to construct textual images of wholeness and self-agency. This indicates that writing was an essential coordinate of the drama of his life. As Vincent O'Sullivan comments, 'he saw himself as *naturally* at the centre of forces which **made any** movement of his own feelings or **thought** of more than passing significance' (5), and he aimed to recreate these reactions both in verse and prose. Baxter himself read the need to tell stories, or the will-to-narrative, as creating meaning out of the chaos or disorder of life, which is how experience manifested itself to him, by mythologising it: 'What happens is either meaningless to me or else it is mythology' (2. 217; see also McKay 203). In the terms of Paul Ricoeur (28-29), his

narrative understanding was anchored in his actual experience of human acting and suffering, and he formulated this understanding as a crux of his poetic identity: that is, suffering was essential for writing poems, and to turn away from human suffering was to be involved in self-betrayal. This was dramatised as a dialogue between his two sides: the one that writes, and the one that does the suffering and reminds the writing self, ‘you can’t do without me’ (2. 137).

That narrativisation was an irreducible element of his self-understanding appears in the way Baxter entered wholeheartedly into mythological constructions of himself, and his determination to create and live out his own biographical legend. The many versions of his early life suggest that his creative acts came from these involuntary drives to tell and record. Ricoeur claims that there is a ‘*pre-narrative quality of human experience*’, namely that ‘life [is] a story in its nascent state, and ... an activity and a passion in search of a narrative’ (29; italics in original), and this passion can be traced in the discovery of narratives. But Baxter went further in narrativisation in the application of narratives or mythologies for self-projection, locating himself at the centre of his work so as to act out new identities and roles of his poetic self. This unusually complex relationship between identity, life and art meant that his narrative self-inscriptions, whether in verse or prose, not only projected a public identity but helped sustain his life. For just as life produced narratives, Baxter’s compulsive self-mythologising meant that narrative was a source of his life, as his textual inscriptions helped him move from one stage to the next.

Baxter’s ongoing drama of life was defined by crises or high points marked as ‘conversions’ to new life structures—marriage, Alcoholics Anonymous, Anglicanism, Roman Catholicism—often gaining visibility because of his public status as a poet and speaker. His self-mythologising as poet and prophet, his anti-authoritarianism and

crusading ambition to reform, culminated in the desire to live a life that blended Franciscan poverty with *aroha*, inspired by the ‘missionary’ call to Jerusalem. Here a new configuring of life and art was made possible by a retreat from the social spheres of domesticity and institutionalisation through his self-transformation from the poet James into the prophet Hemi (Newton, *Rainbow* 1-3). This messianic destiny was delivered in a vision in 1968—in another narrative form, a message *from his unconscious in sleep* that he believed to have come from God.^{1 2} Baxter developed his social vision into the reality of founding of communes, first at Boyle Crescent in Auckland and then at Hiruhurama (*Rainbow* 23). With the inflation of his public life into a rapidly growing legend, feeling about Baxter became more adulatory, causing what John Newton calls the ‘Baxter effect’: the problem of disentangling the mediating presence of the public persona from the poems themselves (‘Baxter Effect’ 4, 6).

This essay examines selected ‘autobiographical’³ prose writings by Baxter, which belong to two different stages of his life and serve different purposes, to show how self-writing practices functioned in relation to *his* poetry and to discuss the role they play in *his* life trajectory, to the point where he seemingly exhausts the attempt to construct an account of his life in prose. It will begin with his earliest writing, which

¹ The account was written in a letter to his friend Noel Hilliard (*Rainbow* 23).

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³ Baxter made no attempt to write autobiography in the accepted sense, and this generic term is used here only to refer generally to writing about himself and his life (*autos* ‘self’, *bio* ‘life’ and *graphe* ‘writing’), and the self-reflection and comment that often infiltrates his lectures, reviews, *and so on*. Terms like life-writing or self-narrative are more appropriate for describing these prose texts (Smith and Watson 1, 4).

can be defined as ‘life narrative’, that is ‘acts of self-presentation’ or ‘autobiographical acts’ (Smith and Watson 4-5) in which he constructs and projects an image of selfhood, usually as a basis for his self-fashioning in verse. It will then turn to the autobiographical writing of the late 1950s and 1960s after Baxter had become an established literary voice and respected poet, in particular the collection titled ‘Notes on the Education of a New Zealand Poet’⁴ and then the posthumously published, semi-autobiographical novel *Horse*, which includes a reworking and adaptation of sections 3-5 of ‘Notes on the Education of a New Zealand Poet’. Although vastly different in tone and genre, both these works can be categorised as ‘life writing’ because Baxter’s own life is their subject, and they are a combination of the ‘biographical, novelistic, historical, or explicitly self-referential and therefore autobiographical’ (Smith and Watson 4).⁵

In consciously mythologising his life, Baxter was often motivated by feelings of violence and violation, and indeed the imagery of pain, wounds, scars, battles and wars recurs in all his accounts of his life. This might be formulated in terms of the ‘originary violence of language’ where the inscription of difference, the very act of naming, of turning something into a linguistic sign, what Derrida calls the violence of the letter, splits the subject by introducing a gap between the thing and its representation (Derrida 112, cited by Slaughter 9). For Baxter such a split might have

⁴ This consists of previously published lectures and articles including his ‘Beginnings’ account in *Landfall* (1965), and three sketches published in the late 1940s and the 1950s.

⁵ Smith and Watson introduce these terms as more inclusive of the heterogeneity of self-referential practices (4), and to encompass the expanded meanings of ‘autobiography’ (or ‘self life writing’, which they shorten to life writing) and ‘memoir’, which they consider to be types of life writing. See also Schwalm 7.

been explained in biblical, mythological terms of man's fate due to Adam's Fall. But he also perceived his deep psychological discord, and in all his writing represented these internal divisions as symbiotically linked, sometimes warring selves, whose conflict is necessary for creation to occur. Moments of such recognition are recorded in prose when he perceives himself as another external self, articulated in his work in the language of uncanny doubles (twins, mirrors, *doppelgängers*, ghosts, illusions).⁶ There was also what he perceived as injustice and discrimination, such as the persecution of his socialist pacifist family members for their anti-war ideology during the Second World War, his feelings of a gap between himself and others due to a sense of being different, the plight of social outcasts.

A perception of the inherent violence in life led Baxter to claim that his poetry was partly inspired by 'a sense of grief—even at times a sense of grievance' *with* life which is in part 'a quarrel with the status quo' (2. 217). Given the interlinking of the poems with notes and sketches in the notebooks, it is likely that his life writing was catalysed from similar sensations. He describes himself as experiencing 'the sense of having been pounded all over with a club by invisible adversaries which has been with me as long as I can remember' (2. 217). The drama of a violent and bruising encounter with society also appears in later life through sexual misadventure, being scarred by the 'wars of Venus' or social dysfunction, the sickness of the heart caused by social malady (McKay 197, 199, citing 'Pig Island Letter' 2). It is fictionalised in *Horse*, in his hero's antisocial behaviour, drunkenness and non-conformity, his vulnerability in sexual affairs, and his social and political moralising. The sense of

⁶ Folkenflik 234 points out that autobiography is like the mirror stage (Lacan's symbolic) in that it allows one to reflect on the self by presenting imagery of the exterior self for contemplation, as in a mirror.

being damaged and wounded by life, therefore, of being a social irritant, or of perpetrating violence, gave Baxter the writer powerful roles within his inherited moral structure which he learned to project in both verse and prose.

The violence that triangulates the relationship between narrative and life often takes the form of law and is subject to its commands,⁷ for ‘Narrative in general’, according to historian Hayden White, ‘has to do with the topics of law, legality, legitimacy, or, more generally, *authority*’ (17, italics in original). In all Baxter’s work, attempts to legitimate his voice in different roles that often mask his psychological conflicts and ‘quarrel with the status quo’ hint at a thematics of violence as well as a violence of representation. Attempts at meaning-making from this **pre-narrative** perception were also negotiated though his strong moral awareness, concern for justice, and dedication to social reform. These were central to his poetic creed. In 1951, in his speech to the New Zealand Writers’ Conference, he pronounced the view that the artist should aim for the moral reform of society, and assumed the role of prophet with the **declaration** ‘**that** poetry should contain moral truth and **that** every poet should be a prophet’, a visionary perception of his future political activism. Justice has a defining role in this vision, for it ‘demands ... something more difficult’ of the artist than living in romantic isolation or departing into the wilderness. Baxter famously declared that the artist should ‘**remain as** a cell of good living in a corrupt society and in this situation by writing and example attempt to change it’ (1. 75).⁸

⁷ Slaughter 2, 4. He refers mainly to testimonial memoir and the prose of counterinsurgency, but this may be said of all kinds of life writing. Slaughter argues that the originary, generative role that violence plays in narrative is generally underestimated.

⁸ Baxter’s argument that the artist should be politically committed to the social good anticipates Salman Rushdie’s stance of 1984 that writers should act ‘outside the whale’, in critiquing George

Self writing, therefore, enabled Baxter to deal with guilt as the fallen son of Adam, to rebel against the status quo, to unleash the unruly forces of chaos and disorder that lurked in the unconscious, and to construct his identity in diverse mythological or archetypal forms. It helped him to define new freedoms for writing poetry as appears, for example, in the relationship between the more demotic narrative style of *Horse* and the vernacular idiom that distinguishes the poems of *Pig Island Letters* (1966) which followed *Horse*, and the loss of distinction between verse and prose in *Jerusalem Sonnets* and *Autumn Testament* (Oliver 146). Hayden White points out that meaning in narrative may come from an ‘impulse to moralize reality, that is, to identify it with the social system that is the source of any morality that we can imagine’ (18). Baxter’s life trajectory in prose ended precisely because his opposition to the social system’s morality, to which he had committed himself with his marriage, made continuation seemingly impossible; he abandoned the attempt to write his life in the search for a deeper meaning which he found in turning to Maori language and culture, as the fusion of Māori aroha and Catholic spirituality in *Jerusalem Sonnets* and *Autumn Testament* testifies.

Early narrative fragments: ‘Before Sunrise’ and ‘The White Gull’

An apprehension of the violence inherent in rural life, where death—whether arbitrary or deliberate—is often casualised, emerges from Baxter’s earliest prose fragments.

Written in the early 1940s when he was between sixteen and twenty years of age, the three versions of the sequence titled ‘Before Sunrise’ record his subjective processes

Orwell’s assertion, made in an essay of 1940, that they should remain ‘inside the whale’. Rushdie (1991) denounced Orwell’s political quietism whereby the writer was ‘allowing himself to be swallowed, remaining passive, *accepting*’ (95).

of understanding victimhood and vulnerability, guilt and expiation, pain and wounding and his own death. These essential blocks of his moral and theological framework, forged from his childhood in the township of Brighton and its rural hinterland, would recur throughout his work. They all display the animism that Baxter valued: the narrator's identification with creatures and birds—e.g. 'I am the animal **unsad** and **blood-aware**' (1. 1, 5)—and they draw upon images from nature and the Otago landscape, reflecting this use in his early poetry for the expression of mood and subjectivity.

The sketches begin with **his** awakening from sleep and dream in early morning, **and** leaving the family tent in the camping ground for a walk and ocean plunge. The short first version, subtitled 'A description', only hints at the swim by referring to the waves as either 'death or longing' (1. 1, 5). In versions 2 and 3 **the narrator's** immersion in the sea is followed by **his** reflection on the killing of a rabbit, **his** return to the camping ground and an exchange with his father. Version 3 is the most developed, with a more resolved tone and mood: swimming underwater, the narrator finds mussels on the sea floor and brings them up, grazing his ankle, and in the recollection that follows he converts his earlier guilt at killing the rabbit into a sense of accomplishment.

The manipulation of narrative technique suggests that Baxter was already developing an understanding of events as if defining two separate lives: according to Stephen Spender,

one of these lives is himself as others see him—his social or historic personality—the sum of his achievements, his appearances, his personal relationships. ... But there is also himself known only to himself, himself **seen** from the inside of his own existence. (116).

He uses the third person predominantly (as if writing biographically), and reserves the **first-person**, autobiographical narrative voice for representing inner thought, memory and subjective comment, moving between outward projection and interiorisation.

Version 2 registers his pain and anguish at the animal's suffering—'It shrieks, it is agony, the sound cuts my **eyes**'—**but** switches back to the third person in associating rain with 'purification', possibly of sin (1. 6).

Responsibility for the death of an innocent creature is something that Baxter the artist cannot leave unmarked without a dramatic projection of self-immolation, and in versions 2 and 3 the narrator imagines, commensurate with this act of destruction, his own solitary death by drowning. **In version 2 he thinks**, 'If I had been drowned ... they would not have known: pity of his parents, not self pity' (1. 6), and **this thought** is followed by a change of heart over killing the rabbit: 'Why worry over a rabbit?' (1. 7). In version 3 speculation on his death is now represented in italics: '*If I had drowned, he thought, no one would have known*' (1. 38). This sentiment precedes his reflections about killing the rabbit, dramatising himself as catching it by the hind legs and delivering the 'rabbit punch' (1. 38). Version 3 also differs from the other two in that the first-person voice appears only once—in considering his own death; all else is recounted as if the narrator is looking at himself from the **outside**—a public image. 'He saw his drowned body floating ...' (1. 38). This version is also stylistically closest to narrative proper, **in** contrast to discourse through 'the use of the third person and of such forms as the preterit and the pluperfect' (White 7, citing Genette 11). In place of the anxiety and troubled conscience of the narrator of version 2 is dispassionate observation: 'The eyes were sad with the terrible remoteness of all dead things' (1. 38).

Version 3 presents a new self-image marked by a triumphant confidence: ‘He had walked proudly through the plantation with the rabbit hanging heavily’ (1. 38). In his poem about the same incident, ‘The Killing of a Rabbit’, dated c. 1943/44, the self-doubts of version 2 of ‘Before Sunrise’ are hinted at but put to rest in the final line: ‘shall I be blamed? / I walk back unashamed’ (*CPoems* 20). In another prose sequence about shooting a bird, ‘The White Gull’, written about this time, he unhesitatingly embraces the new identity: ‘More than the desire to kill, it was the myth of the hunter that gripped him’ (1. 35).

The three versions of this episode offer insight into Baxter’s processes of revision and rewriting, as he reworks his memories and preoccupations with guilt and death. He uses observation to relate one experience to another ‘until the subjective is objectified’ (Spender, 117. Incorporating the fantasy of his own death enabled him to come to terms with his role as huntsman and killer through what James Olney calls the ‘processual memory model’ (19-20); that is, with each revision a slightly new self was created until he arrived at an image of self-empowerment. These apprenticeship pieces show Baxter as less interested in narrative credibility than in developing a mythic dimension that can be related to Christian theology, and in striking the right pose, as ‘The White Gull’ confirms: ‘His luck was out today, He would not be able to pose as the experienced hunter’ (1. 36).

The rich imagery of these early pieces provides a seminal Christian metaphysics that reappears in Baxter’s subsequent writing and especially his poetry about the South Island. Not only does Baxter transform the phenomena of water, wounding and death that constitute this initiation rite into sacramental images familiar in religious symbolism, but the graze on his ankle in Version 3 evokes the image of

the wound that he later associated with the writing of poetry.⁹ His narrator's descent into the sea, source of the wound, analogous to the movement through the unconsciousness and the activating of creative energies in writing poetry, and at a more archetypal level of the descent into hell, has affinities with the poetry and lyrical drama of the Martinican francophone poet and critic, Aimé Césaire. For Césaire, the 'secret wound' of the sea is associated with the trauma of the Middle Passage, the Atlantic slave crossing, and the descent into the sea is also a quest to give birth to poetry (Allen).

In reconciling his feelings to present an image of wholeness and psychic unity, the narrator 'authorises' his presence: for the reader, the text converges with the world, the life with the narrative. Version 3 confirms that writing about himself in prose narrative enabled Baxter to gain textual **self-agency: self-exculpation** from the stain of sin **in** killing the rabbit requires the ritual enactment of his own metaphorical death, including the witnessing of his corpse through the eyes of his parents; and this enables him to celebrate the dead rabbit in the poem 'The Killing of a Rabbit' in semi-religious terms for its 'miraculous life of the soul' (*CPoems 20*).

Life Writing: 'Notes on the Education of a New Zealand Poet' and *Horse*

If the early prose fragments show Baxter authorising his text with positive self-inscriptions and developing his poetic persona through the mythopoic imagination, the later self-writing shows the impact on that reflective and creative imagination of his role as public commentator, poet and critic. By the late 1950s, now famed as 'the

⁹ For example he comments of George Barker that his 'poetry flows like a jet of blood from a wound' (1, 319). The wound is also associated with the later, important concept of the gap which required 'an act of trust in . . . something, someone quite unknown whose image is the wound and the darkness itself' (Baxter, Letter to Maurice Shadbolt, 22 September 1963, cited in McKay, 196).

leading poet of his generation' (McKay 114), and 'our profoundest critic' (McKay 132), Baxter embarked on a major autobiographical project, catalysed by commissioned pieces such as his 'Beginnings' piece for *Landfall*, and the lectures given in the mid 1960s when he was Robert Burns Fellow at Otago University. Speaking and writing about himself flowed from Baxter's reputation as a major poet and critic and his compulsive urge to reach a wider audience in communicating his understanding of his early life. Yet such self-referential writing failed to gain narrative momentum and remained sporadic, reflective and anecdotal, and was often interspersed with other discourses, such as lectures, comment, and reviews. John Weir commented that for Baxter poetry became a substitute for autobiography (*Poetry* 40-41; cited by McKay 203), that verse rather than prose had the role of shaping the meaning of his life. It is also true that Baxter's public orientation as an oppositional, **anti-authoritarian** voice, and his **internal** conflict between being both a poet and a domestic family man, made for a confusing and contradictory narrative, un conducive to a full-blown biography. He does not incorporate into accounts of his life any reference to his marriage, family life, alcoholism, the AA, conversion to Catholicism or his various occupations, although these topics are mentioned in his poetry, public addresses and comment, such as the essays he wrote for the *Tablet* in 1967 and 1968 (Oliver 119). **Similarly**, problems with sexuality, such as feelings of sexual loss and betrayal, though **they inspire** some powerful mythological and symbolic female figures in his verse, are only treated episodically in prose (Oliver 94-96). Finally, his mystical revelation of a higher destiny through the call to Jerusalem, emerging as a form of political activism, undermined the need for self-writing to shape his life's meaning: instead it led to a new departure in his poetry. Nevertheless Baxter's self-writing of the 60s does demonstrate an urge to shape his life in prose, using his poetry

for added insight—even though the attempts are often meandering, fictionalised and incomplete, possibly affected by the limiting factors of time and freedom to write at length, as much as by his own lack of enthusiasm to bring the projects up to the present day.

‘Notes on the Education of a New Zealand Poet’ can be described as a ‘spiritual autobiography’ an inner pilgrimage and peregrination to the present day, although the metaphor of a journey and the outlines of a chronology are only visible in the first two sections, focused on schooling and education. Baxter’s poetics of self-fashioning blend dream, fantasy and reflection with critical comment and poetry. His self-education as a poet through his early love of classical mythology and Norse and Irish legend, his interest in Jungian psychoanalysis and archetypes of the unconscious, his identification with socially marginal figures and Māori ways of knowing, provide him with anecdotes, symbolic forms and mythological archetypes with which to counter the western system of learning. They also confirm he was unable to ‘demythologise’ his life (2. 217). Writing his life is associated with fragmentation and incompleteness. Of ‘Notes on the Education of a New Zealand Poet’ he says that they constitute ‘the *corpus* of an unfinished autobiography, which I have no intention whatever of finishing’ (2. 130)—with a possible pun on *corpus*/corpse. Indeed, he intends that they be merely a ‘counterpoint’ to the lectures from which they originally derived.

Baxter’s oppositional education in poetry begins with the ‘exact mythological record’ of his genesis and birth, described in a poem which concludes with the private joke that ‘poets are born with three balls’ (2. 218; see also 2. 195).¹⁰ It continues with

¹⁰ Besides the obvious implications of poets having powerful sexual drives and/or enhanced sex-driven perceptions, Baxter may also allude to the three balls symbol of pawnshops and the joke that ‘two to one you won’t get your money back’.

another poem that mythologises his childhood self as Prometheus (2. 220-21), resistant to social and parental pressures, the ‘Calvinist ethos’ that ‘*work is good, sex is evil, Do what you’re told, and you’ll be all right*’ (2. 220), waiting for his true destiny to present itself. There is no middle ground for Baxter:

As soon as [the education process] came near me, I instinctively slipped my mind into neutral, became passive, inert, allowed myself to be pushed around mentally or physically, and ... came as near as I could to a state of suspended animation. (2. 223)

Becoming ‘de-educated’ by reading A. S. Neill, Jung and other ‘alternative’ writers convinced him of the need to trust in ‘a kind of subconscious wisdom’ (2. 223-24), and this anti-education myth culminates in the image of the suffering poet whose duty is to explain to himself this state: ‘A writer cannot avoid the task of exploring and understanding the private hell which lies just below the threshold of his own mind’ (2. 222).

The autobiographical impulse is never far from the surface in the restless voice of these monologues, but Baxter continues within his oppositional binary structure rather than finding a temporal momentum through narrative. Yet various substitutions and self-displacements suggest that he also seeks to identify alternative points of reference. The second section addresses his sense of a gap between himself and others by finding a compensatory ethnic identification with ‘the mythical Maori’, a phrase that refers to an old Maori in a joke he has just told¹¹ (2. 223) (having already seen himself as like a ‘Jewish boy in an anti-Semitic neighbourhood’ in the first section). Anecdotes about Māori ancient wisdom, and praise of indigenous

educational values for a unity of imagination and the use of symbols to explain the invisible world, anticipate his later conversion to the Māori way of life and spirituality.¹² This affinity with deep wells of intuition also includes the natural world, valued because of its revelatory powers: ‘Waves, rocks, beaches, flax bushes, rivers, cattle flats, hawks, rabbits, eels, old man manuka trees’ (2. 226). Being out of touch with ‘the natural contemplative faculty’ that guarantees such appreciation and that ‘involves an entirely primitive movement of the intellect’ (2. 225) is the basis of Baxter’s critique of the four schools he attended (two of which were Quaker, including a boarding school in the Cotswolds in England when he was nine). In honing his argument with a poetic prose style, Baxter returns to his opening theme of gestation and birth—‘the school days were mainly a blank period, a time of waiting—waiting for what?’ (2. 223)—and introduces the alternative birth metaphor of the dinosaur’s egg, the hatching of which is associated with the writing of poems. A cohesive device that links the two opening sections of ‘Notes on the Education of a New Zealand Poet’, this metaphor identifies his anarchic self with the unconscious sources of creativity: ‘I was already unconsciously erecting my defences around that core of primitive experience, that ineducable self which I like to call a dinosaur’s egg’ (2. 225; see also 223, 229).

The techniques of using poetic devices in prose used in these two sections resemble the genre of ‘autobiography as poetry’, described as ‘symbolic studies of the psyche’, and as uncertain and tentative portraits which articulate a degree of anxiety

¹² Newton points out that Baxter often wished for a Māori guide, a tuakana, when he first decided to enter the Maori world in 1968 (*Rainbow* 13).

and dislocation (Howarth 104).¹³ This text also shows ‘the poetic act of continuing self study’, the puzzlement over identity, the return to the past in order to explain present uncertainty, the lack of clear answers; for example, the question of what would have been a better education yields these speculations: ‘Perhaps—till ten years old, on a farm in the South Island mountains or the Urewera country ...; then, for a year or two, during puberty, in a Maori pa; then perhaps on the coastal boats’ (2. 229). Baxter openly confesses his limits to working in this genre: his memory is unreliable, and life-writing has an element of provisionality or invention, undermining any claims to objectivity and ‘factual truth’:

All mental reconstructions of those early events seem likely to be false—not deliberate lies, but an improvised and artificial childhood tidied up for others to look at. I am one of these people who can’t give a clear account of what happened the day before yesterday ... and while this is usually a great blessing, it cramps my style in autobiography. (2. 217)

When Baxter moves away from his schooldays and the mythological constructions in his poetry, he makes no attempt to sustain narrative coherence, and the image of the ineducable self is carried through in a more Rabelaisian way in the following four sections which cover the next phase of his life. In any event the informal, anecdotal style of sections 3-5 of ‘Notes on the Education of a New Zealand Poet’ can be traced to their origin as separate sketches published in 1949 and 1955. These recreations of adventures in late adolescence, and new freedoms as an ex-university student, dominated by conflict such as fighting in ‘the wars of Venus’ (2. 241), drinking bouts,

¹³ Writers who write this kind of autobiography include Yeats, Goethe, Wordsworth, Henry James, Rousseau, Thoreau and Whitman (Howarth 104).

and rootlessness, are presented episodically: indeed, the themes of sexual betrayal, alcoholism, unemployment, the fleeting temptation to go to sea, the unregenerate poet, are all incorporated into *Horse*.

***Horse*: an unpublishable novel**

Horse, Baxter's only novel, began as a series of prose sketches written in 1962, for he wrote to John Weir that he was writing a tragi-comic novel with a certain element of 'self-portrait' (McKay 191). Considered at first **to be** unpublishable, *Horse* appeared in print posthumously in 1985 with an Afterword adapted from comments Baxter made in **the** lecture 'Conversation with an Ancestor' (2. 135-37). Baxter returns to the image of the ineducable protagonist represented in the birth metaphors of 'Notes on the Education of a New Zealand Poet', the opposite of his outwardly respectable self, holder of the Robert Burns Fellowship in 1966 and 1967 (when he delivered this lecture) and a 'teetotal, moderately pious' family man (2. 135). His premise, that 'Art ... is not bred by culture but **by** its opposite—that level of hardship **or** awareness of moral chaos **where the soul is too destitute to be able to lie to itself**' (2. 135), suggests that rather than continue his semi-poetic, mythological account of the poet's education, he now aims to celebrate the untamed, 'unredeemed self' (Oliver 97). This is dramatically represented as a conflict between bourgeois and Bohemian values (2. 138).

The novel's basis in the life story means that *Horse* can be read at one level autobiographically, according to current theories of autobiography which stress the fluidity of the boundaries between the genres of life writing and fiction. **Such theories see both as** narrative arrangements of reality; autobiography or life writing is a 'deliberate fictional construction of the self for public purposes' (Ang 24) and

‘inevitably constructive and imaginative in nature, and as a form of textual “self-fashioning” ultimately resists a clear distinction from its fictional relatives ... leaving the generic borderlines blurred’ (Schwalm 1).¹⁴ Interpreting autobiography as closely aligned to fiction¹⁵ dispenses with the need for truth claims based on facts, dates and chronology, and stresses the unreliability of memory, the links between emotions and subjectivity, so that certain events assume more importance than others, often of a symbolic nature. Such broader interpretations of the genre thus make it possible to attribute some autobiographical status to Baxter’s fictions of himself in *Horse*.

Resemblances between episodes in *Horse* and the sketches in sections 3-5 of ‘Notes on the Education of a New Zealand Poet’ suggest that the novel may have been planned as a revision and extension of those sketches and an attempt to bind them together through developing the figure of the ineducable self into a full-blown fictional character, ‘my collaborator, my schizophrenic twin, who has always provided me with poems’ (2. 135). This divided figure is a ‘natural man’, that is, the everyman, fallen Adam (2. 138); his public name is Timothy Harold Glass, while his alias ‘Horse’ refers to the fact he is constantly ‘ridden’ by others (2. 135).¹⁶ In Jungian terms Horse is the ‘shadow’, represented as an archetype, the ‘unconscious side of the human psyche’, and “‘the lower part of the body and the animal drives that take their rise from there’” (McKay 191, citing Jung 29).

A fictionalised account of the year after Baxter left university in 1945, the novel deals with his sorrow at the loss of his first love, a medical student at Otago University, Jane Aylward (McKay 95-97), his rejection of his parents’ ambitions for

¹⁴ For a fuller discussion that distinguishes between the two genres see Smith and Watson 9-12.

him in leaving university, his departure from the family home and work in an iron foundry, his bohemian life style of drinking binges and gambling bouts with friends and **workmates**. This corresponds to one of the most turbulent periods of his life: about the time his first book of poems, *Beyond the Palisade*, was published in 1945. The novel is influenced in style and composition by Dylan Thomas's ribald *Adventures in the Skin Trade* (**written** 1938, published 1955), a flamboyant, semi-autobiographical story about a young man's leaving home for the city, alcoholic excess and unexpected sexual adventures.¹⁷ **As in** Thomas's novel, continuity of action, reminiscent of the picaresque novel, is provided by the deeds and thoughts of the protagonist as he plunges further into social outrage and inner chaos.

The novel's mix of narrative, dialogue and poetry gave Baxter scope for linguistic invention and play with the demotic idioms of the **Kiwi** vernacular, suggesting his continuing engagement with the sounds and inflections of the human voice, **a concern** that first emerged in the plays for radio and stage he wrote in the late 50s: *Jack Winter's Dream* (1958) and the *Wide Open Cage* (1959). He introduces narrative techniques, including self-reflection and mockery, **doubling**, and criticism of his protagonist **through** the voices of those he has **offended**, **in** telling of the profligate years before he gained acceptance as a poet and settled down to married life. The raw unfettered account of living rough can also be seen to anticipate the 'new realism' (McKay 191, 196) of the poems of *Pig Island Letters*, as appears in the conversational, epistolary style of address to his friend and recipient of the letters, the writer Maurice Shadbolt.

¹⁷ Baxter reviewed *Adventures in the Skin Trade* for the *New Zealand Listener* in 1956, praising its 'strong wind of rebellious laughter' (1. 269).

Framing the crisis with which *Horse* opens is the representation of a split personality through the device of the double or doppelgänger, now linked to the disturbing forces of the imagination and the protagonist's precarious psychic balance (vulnerable to alcohol and distress over sexual betrayal).¹⁸ The dualism of Timothy Glass is reflected in his semi-conscious state, waking with a hangover, then dreaming of losing Fern (his beloved) to a rival. The mention of his **nickname 'Horse'** marks the self-division and the novel's conceit: that the unruly Horse will run amok, allowing Baxter to imagine a chaotic but creative universe in which poets and poetry are idolised for their determination to *épater la bourgeoisie*. **The story climaxes in the budding poet Horse's encounter with a caricatured older version of himself, the dead drunk poet Grummet, whose scandalous performance at a literary society gathering run by a couple mockingly called the Virtues, and success in apparently seducing Fern, blends dissolution with charm in a way that enchants Horse.**¹⁹

The novel's entry into its fictional world hinges on the imagined death and burial of the protagonist. The narrator overcomes the psychological fear of defying family expectation by first staging the drama of his own death, witnessed as if outside himself. Upon seeing his public, respectable face reflected in the mirror as the meek, self-effacing Timothy Glass, Horse triggers the crisis, symbolised by a hail of bullets which fell Timothy, leading to his burial: 'Six feet underground a young man's bones

¹⁸ Baxter's alcoholism led him to associate with poets like Dylan Thomas, while his grandfather, John Baxter, also an alcoholic, was 'my looking glass twin'. His self-analysis while a member of the AA explains this inner division as Jamie 2, 'a pathological deadbeat', and Jamie 1 (without booze), 'no beauty but functionally sound' (McKay 145).

¹⁹ **Grummet's 'purple and gnome-like' face (1. 571)** suggests this may be a caricature of Denis Glover; I owe this insight to Kevin Ireland.

lay quiet until the ending of the world' (*Horse*, 1. 532). As in 'Before Sunrise', metaphorical death allows for a singular reincarnation that releases the protagonist from conforming to the moral principles of his upbringing. 'Horse, the redhot stovesitter, ... had hurled the grenade', that is, the decision to leave university, catalysing the dreaded quarrel with his mother, while Timothy Glass, 'the good son', puts his hands over his ears (1. 533); later, like a 'ghost in trousers', he had 'dissolved into thin air', leaving only Horse alive (1. 535).

The line of influence between *Horse* and 'Pig Island Letters' has been noted by Baxter's biographer, Frank McKay,²⁰ and the self-image as internally conflicted poet was one that Baxter clung to during these middle years and developed through growing intimations of his own mortality. 'The poet as family man' of Letter 9, whose true self is the 'undercover convict', 'incorrigible, scarred / With what the bottle and the sex games taught' (*CPoems* 282), recalls Timothy Glass who lives in the cellblock in the basement of my mind ... incorrigible, ineducable, unemployable' (1. 136). In the same way Baxter's confession to Shadbolt of a similar mid-life crisis, framed by considerations of his own death, burial and afterlife, now moves from his ritualistic death and burial in both *Horse* and 'Before Sunrise' into contemplation of death's presence in his everyday world, an essential component of the creative sphere. These reflections approach the topic of his mortality in personal and mythical ways. Not only is this perception evident in every poem in one form or another, but the collection is framed by two poems that together project death as a process infiltrating life: Letter 1 relates death to the 'little death' of the sex act, and hints that it is a going into the dark, 'the gap itself' (276), while Letter 13 is a semi-comic dialogue on the

²⁰ McKay 203 argues that Baxter needed to come close to the chaos of the unconscious in order to write with truth, referring to the image of the plank over the lion's den in *Pig Island Letters* 9.

afterlife between the poet and the 'Great Mother of God' (284). In between are pervasive hints of the imminence of death. Using these life/death tensions, as if a psychomachia, the collection proclaims the survival of the unregenerate Baxter of *Horse* and explores how to keep him alive (Oliver 97).

Baxter seems to have abandoned all further attempts at telling his life story in a discrete prose narrative form after 'Notes on the Education of a New Zealand Poet' and *Horse*. This is not just because he continued to shape his changing outlook on life predominantly in poetry, but because he also saw through the illusion of narrative self-determination, that the psychological losses it commemorated could not be brought back to life. In Ricoeur's terms, he had taken on authorship of his narrative by centring himself in it, but not authorship of his life (Ricoeur 32). The 'Pig Island Letters' sequence carries further the implication of *Horse*, that the anarchic, creative self still needed to rebel against the social constrictions of New Zealand's secular Calvinism. Baxter's departure from writing in prose about these endeavours appears in the confession in section 6 of 'Notes on the Education of a New Zealand Poet' that he is unable to account for his life beyond the age of about 20: 'As I grow older I cease to know who or what I am' (2. 241). The perception of being engulfed by the unfathomable sadness of the world that frames this admission points to a romantic view of life, which is partly explicable in terms of the Fall. Just as likely, though, is that Baxter, in seeking how to conclude his disconnected recollections, borrowed Dylan Thomas's subversive mode in *Adventures of the Skin Trade*. Thomas's novel terminates abruptly, as *Horse* does, and its severance from the fictional world is anticipated by the narrator's comic determination not to be in control of his narrative,

evident in comments such as ‘I don’t want to make anything happen’ (Thomas 47).²¹ Just as Thomas undermines the conventions of the narrator as artist or author of their self-narrative (as in the Bildungsroman), Baxter points to the fruitlessness of the autobiographical endeavour when self-identity is unknown, so subverting the generic expectations of self-writing and the assumption that identity becomes more definitive with age. If his confession about not knowing who he is, is read alongside the abrupt termination of *Horse*, it points to a more radical break from that image of himself as unredeemed poet at odds with society than the text alone suggests. His lack of conclusion might be read as evidence of his psychic self ‘signing off’ from that social milieu.

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²¹ Other such comments are ‘I don’t know what I expect to happen’ (44); ‘I’m not going to choose anything’ (49).

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