



## Bill: An Attempt at Sense-Making

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### INTRODUCTION

This is the first completed section of an intended project to present and discuss materials from the lives of myself and of people I know, using a range of approaches to reflect the variety of personalities and lives.

I wrote it in the two years that followed my friend's death. If you had asked me during its composition 'Why are you writing this?', I would probably have said 'To make sense of him'. I don't think I ever really believed that I would succeed: I saw him as essentially a man of contradictions and disjunctions. I now find the contradictions and disjunctions fewer and less significant than I did at the start, so perhaps I have made some sense of him. By this I mean that I now see how those contradictions and disjunctions contribute to a coherent picture, whereas before they seemed to prevent coherence. But I still use the dialogue form in order to dramatise how I continue to question my own impressions of him.

Having written it, why publish it? I think that friendship is not given enough attention in biography and literature, and disseminating this is a way of affirming that belief.

Jim (pseudonym for myself) has written a dialogue in which he is questioned about his old friend Bill (pseudonym for a real person), now dead, by John (imaginary, supposed to have known Bill a little).

*John.* You knew him for about forty years. What was he like?

*Jim.* Complicated.

*John.* That's not very informative...

*Jim.* Do you disagree?

*John.* No. But I might have said other things first.

Jim. I might have done too, there are many things to say about him. What would you have said first?

John. *I might have said that he had a strong social conscience and worked hard for social justice. Or I might have talked of his enthusiasm, his ebullience, how loud he was.*

Jim. Yes, I agree. And those latter qualities were very endearing. And yes, he was certainly loud. But on the other hand, he could be calm, and his voice could be quietly beautiful. When we were both students and I was casting a play, I chose him to say these lines, because of that gravity.

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*I shall report,  
For most it caught me, the celestial habits,  
Methinks I so should term them, and the reverence  
Of the grave wearers. O, the sacrifice!  
How ceremonious, solemn and unearthly  
It was i' the offering!* (Shakespeare: *The Winter's Tale*, Act 3, Scene 1)

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No other student who auditioned could have said the lines so reverently. And sometimes conversation with him was similarly calm, serious and humble.

But of course you are right, he was often loud, very loud, loud and emphatic; talking in italics and at the top of his voice. And he talked a lot, certainly when I was around. He loved an argument: friendly wrangles could go on a long time. He had so much aggressive energy, and he could be very belligerent. And his impatience and his anger could be sudden and intense—alarming, even. And often ridiculous.

John. *But wrapped up in his belligerence, I think there was a bid for involvement, maybe?*

Jim. Yes, I agree. But it was an insistent, boisterous, oppositional and often infuriating bid for involvement. He teased and shouted and demanded. But no, he wasn't offhand or cool. And although all the noise could sometimes be hectoring, it was often celebratory. He expressed delight, when he felt it, with such gusto that it was a tonic to be with him. We laughed a lot together, we shouted a lot, and we sang a lot.

John: *You sang together?*

Jim: Yes, songs from the shows, songs of celebration: 'I could have danced all night'; 'The sound of music'; 'Manhattan.' At the tops of our voices, sometimes until we were hoarse.

But all the noise—it may have been because we didn't see each other very often. At home, as I understand it, even when he was not feeling depressed, he would often be in his study, avoiding involvement with his

wife and children. I wonder now how tiring he found it to be with me, he responded with so much energy to my presence. I didn't ask him to, and sometimes I found it overwhelming. But it was a gift, just the same, a gift of attention, and appreciation.

*John. He was depressive? I didn't know that.*

Jim. He had long, debilitating depressions, but I don't know much about them. He would mention them to me afterwards, but never describe them or discuss them. Dark gaps in his experience, and in my knowledge.

*John. How do you think this links with his belligerence?*

Jim. Anxiety. He was very anxious; so he was always armed, always awaiting threat, ready to attack first. (Except when he was depressed, of course, when he hid from attack, from everything.) Belligerence is a means of defence, after all.

*John. A very masculine defence.*

Jim. Yes, and he could appear very macho at times. But that was just appearance: he was uneasy in his masculinity. He once told me that, except for his gentle and eccentric father, he hadn't known any men until he went to secondary school. Then, when he did, he was scared of them. So he'd identify with the aggressor: he'd shout and rant, rant and shout, like a bad actor playing Coriolanus or Jimmy Porter.

For example, in both his marriages (one lasted a few years, one three decades), he often performed the role of a shouting, blaming, critical husband. I think he was just trying to reassure himself that he was not hen-pecked, not emasculated, as he thought his father had been. He wasn't like that all the time (and in his second marriage, underneath the performance, he was a committed, loving and supportive husband); but still, the performances saddened me. They weren't wholly plausible: but, even though I didn't quite believe in them, they were embarrassing and very painful to watch.

They would have affected me much worse if his second wife hadn't understood them for what they were, and refused to be hurt. They both knew how dependent he was on her, and at heart he accepted that dependence calmly and with pleasure; but still he had to rant and rave as if he hated it and feared it. Which perhaps he did as well. I don't know. It was as though intimacy meant emasculation. As though it was an arena for resistance and attack, but not somewhere to relax.

*John. He used to tease a lot, I remember that.*

Jim. Yes, and it was often very funny. But on the other hand, under cover of 'teasing', he could be very aggressive. As perhaps teasing always is. For example, he would ridicule me to strangers because I had once mispronounced a place name 25 years earlier. When I asked him to stop it, he thought I was being over-sensitive; but eventually, with much effort,

he did stop. Which I appreciated. I asked him to stop because it was boring, and because I didn't want my closest friend to be so persecutory. Of course, he didn't think that he was. It was also very competitive, his teasing: he didn't want to let us forget my mistake.

He enjoyed embarrassing people: his wife, his children, his friends. And he enjoyed provocation. Some of his provocations were stupid, or shocking. Like waving shitty underpants in his first wife's face. Or, even though I have no doubt whatsoever that he was genuinely committed to anti-racism, in theory and in practice, yet on buses and trains in multi-cultural areas, he would talk of 'jungle bunnies.' These were occasions when he was visiting me: I don't know that he did this in his own community. Perhaps he gave himself a fool's licence—or a knave's—when he was away.

*John.* Did he say it to embarrass you? To provoke you?

*Jim.* Both of those, I daresay. But most of all, I think he was telling himself something about who he wanted to be. He enjoyed playing the provocateur, he enjoyed playing the naughty boy. He had a need to appear to transgress. For example, when he married for the first time, he insisted on a church wedding, which was pretty non-conformist in the early 1970s among the people he knew (middle-class intelligentsia). Having won that battle, he then insisted on breaking the dress code (by wearing plimsolls and no tie). You can see that he transgressed only so far and no further.

*John.* Being naughty—like a toddler.

*Jim.* He could be just like a toddler. Like a toddler, he had a frank need for attention. 'Look at me. Listen to me.' There was nothing inner about his 'inner child': he liked to show it off. It was another of his roles: obviously a performance, and obviously sincere at the same time.

I often saw him on a weekend morning, appearing in front of his visitors wearing only underpants, sticking out his belly just like a toddler. Alas, there is no picture of him doing it. I have a picture of him, 50 or older, squatting at the side of a country lane, looking like a baby on the potty.

He was simultaneously a baby and a toddler, an adolescent and an adult. It seemed as if he didn't move *through* the stages of development like the rest of us, but stacked them up in a pile. Or kept them like trophies. Or like comfort objects that he couldn't let go. And he seemed to have to claim and assert each of his identities over and over again, as if he was displaying his insignia, which he had assimilated as an act of deliberate will.

His enthusiasms, which were legion, also felt like willful assimilation. He repeated over and over again his loyalty to his football team, to his political party, to his favourite music. His loyalties were identifications he could feel safe and happy in, apparently. He relished them, reiterated them.

On the other hand, given how constantly he had to assert and display them, perhaps he was not as safe and happy in them as all that. Perhaps he was never safe or happy at all. I don't know.

*John.* And to return to the depressions...

*Jim.* I think of them as, in part, the obverse side of his hubris.

*John.* Hubris?

*Jim.* Yes, like many young adults in the '60s and '70s, he thought he had to change the world; unlike others, though, he seemed to think he had to do it all himself.

*John.* Alone?

*Jim.* So it seemed. Others might share the labour, but his was the sole responsibility. In his 60s, having believed in community empowerment for decades, he started praising feudalism, and saying that he aspired to be a medieval king. Or so he said. As if he meant it. Another bit of play-acting? Maybe. But he did seem to need it to be 'lonely at the top' (a Randy Newman song that he sang throughout the time I knew him).

He had to 'hold it all together'. And he worried inordinately about it all, of course. As it was the whole world that he had to hold together, what else could he do but worry inordinately? That's what I mean by hubris.

I thought of reading this poem at his funeral, because he liked it, and because its themes were important to him: history; ambition; failure; despair.

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*I met a traveller from an antique land  
Who said: "Two vast and trunkless legs of stone  
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,  
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies...  
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare  
The lone and level sands stretch far away. (Shelley: "Ozymandias")*

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And I thought of reading this one, too, as a reference to his idealism.

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*Neither to change, nor falter, nor repent;  
This, like thy glory, Titan, is to be  
Good, great and joyous, beautiful and free;  
This is alone Life, Joy, Empire, and Victory. (Shelley: Prometheus Unbound)*

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Grandiose, yes. But he did have courage, and he did want to make the world a better place. He didn't have the Titan's stamina, alas—hence the depressions. But he did his darnedest.

*John.* He was a practising Christian. Did that soothe him?

*Jim.* I don't know. We did discuss religion, quite often. They were very enjoyable conversations, very thoughtful. But necessarily intellectual (historical, theological) rather than devotional, as I am not a believer, and he didn't discuss his religious feelings. He was respectful of my unbelief, but he never led me to understand the basis of his own faith.

He was on the evangelical wing of the Church of England. As a young adolescent, he was converted by a Billy Graham crusade. Much later, he was plunged into psychosis after hearing glossolalia from visiting evangelists. This melodramatic style of religion had lost its appeal by the end of his life. He had always been attracted to things contemplative as well: Thomas Merton, for example. So perhaps there was some peace.

*John:* Did his religion help him with his fears?

*Jim.* Perhaps. But then, he often seemed to me to use religion as a stick to beat himself with: always challenge, never solace, it seemed. Hubris again, perhaps, applying ridiculously high standards to himself. Of course, he always fell short. 'Call me Mr. Guilty' (Loudon Wainwright III), as he often sang.

Fear lay behind everything. He tried to meet his fears head-on: he thought he had to face them out. But at a high cost: depression, psychosis. He appeared to think that any sort of deflection, any idea of discretion being the better part of valour, was cowardice. His courage was very ill-advised; but it was also something, somehow, to celebrate, despite the cost. It's so contradictory: why would I want to celebrate what often made him seriously ill?

*John:* When did you meet?

We first met in 1972, as students. It was an instant bonding and, I suspect, a strong mutual identification, though we didn't realise it at the time. The recognition was between young men who, as boys, had felt responsible for Mother, and probably still did; and who by extension felt responsible for everyone else too; and who were ill at ease with masculinity, wearing it more as a fancy-dress costume than as a second skin, feeling it more of an aspiration than an achievement. Outwardly, he was more convincingly masculine than I was: he liked sport, he liked rock music, he was actively heterosexual, and so on, and I think for me (who was arty and intellectual and, at that point, effectively sexless), he was a sort of guest ticket to the club of men. Here was someone who was my friend and whose masculinity no-one would doubt, yet who was (as we both intuited) very like me.

That instant identification was sustained all our lives. However dissimilar we could be (and it was the dissimilarities that were evident in our numerous debates and discussions), it was our similarities that bound us happily together for forty years.

*John:* Tell me about his death and its effect on you.

*Jim:* I cried a lot when I first heard of his death, which was sudden and unexpected; and a few days later, I howled with grief for a while. But there has been little conscious or overt grief since. Which surprises me. I have thought about him a great deal ever since.

*John:* Do you have any explanations for feeling less grief than you expected?

*Jim:* Only one, which doesn't seem a sufficient reason. I think that he liked what we had as friends, what we did and how we talked, and he simply wanted to repeat it whenever we met. I think that he saw a favourite friendship in the same way as he saw a favourite opera, as part of his regular insignnia. (It was to preserve, perhaps, that he hung on to identifiers such as a mispronunciation more than twenty years old.) Having said that, I am quite sure that if my circumstances or needs had changed, he would have adjusted and been supportive, as he had been before.

I liked what we had, too. But I also like to feel that things are evolving, and I would have preferred that to have been true of our friendship. So perhaps my grieving was limited by the sense that it wasn't a fully living thing, or at any rate a fully satisfying thing, that I had lost.

*John:* You obviously loved him.

*Jim:* Oh yes, wholeheartedly. As many people did. He attracted great affection. Despite it all.

*John:* How did he manage to do that?

*Jim:* I don't really know. Perhaps it was the uninhibited frankness with which he acted out all his identities. Which made them very entertaining, they were so vivid. On the other hand, those identities were only one strand in him; the other strands being, first, his compassion and commitment, and second, his depressions. Each of the three had a tendency to sabotage the others: and the others fought back. Not peaceful. But the first two attracted people to him. And perhaps the fact of the three strands failing to live in peace with one another created a pathos that also drew people to him.

## REFLECTION BY JIM

The dialogue is brief because of my own aversion to long exhaustive life stories. I don't have an appetite for the detail of most biographies: who was at this party, what was the agenda of that meeting, who met whom in the south of France? Which suggests that I am not a historian.

What I am interested in is what people are like to be with; their character traits; what makes them tick? What do they think and feel? And I'm interested in intuitions and possible explanations, ideas about the

biographical facts rather than those facts for their own sake. But only emotions and intuitions that are grounded in reality, reality which the writer tries to represent truthfully. I don't want to make fiction, and every fact about Bill mentioned here I believe to be true. I realise of course that others who knew him may find some of what I 'know' unrecognisable, incompatible with their own experience. Still, what I have written is what I remember seeing and hearing (and quite a lot of it I wrote down at the time). Of course, as everyone does, I unwittingly made selections about what I saw and heard, and about what I remember. But also, he often said 'I'm excited because my friend is here,' which suggests that my presence may have changed his behaviour in some ways; in this case, 'my' Bill really would be different from others'.

What I am really writing about is my experience of being his friend. That experience was full of fractures. Laughter and delight; dismay at his unhappiness; anger at his bad behaviour; the stimulus of debate and discussion; insufficient understanding of his depressions, his faith, his fears. He himself felt fractured rather than whole, I think, so perhaps I'm also gesturing towards a sense of his experience of being himself. But that is a presumptuous claim. Particularly as he rarely talked about his feelings (which he nevertheless said that he was in touch with). And he even less often analysed them. So, to take a trivial example, if you asked him why he liked a particular rock group, he would say, 'Because they are brilliant', the assumption being that any sane person would agree. And if you didn't, he would simply say, 'You're wrong'. He wouldn't talk about how the music affected him, and why he valued that effect. So I'm left unsure about what he felt, apart from my own guesses and interpretations about what he said and did.

It is in dialogue form to try to represent the fact that I don't have a clear and settled view of him. It was a friendship that was animated by paradox and perplexity. It's an attempt at sense-making, of trying to make my conflicting feelings about him cohere. Which is why I've attempted to describe him as a whole rather than depict illustrative moments and events from his life. When he died, I noticed that many of the conversations I had about him with friends were similar: attempts to describe the range of his behaviour in such a way as to unify them. We couldn't settle into reminiscence: if we remembered this or that occasion, we immediately recalled another that was opposite yet equally characteristic. The paradoxes preoccupied us, and thwarted us: we couldn't reach a stable or a balanced view of him. And two years later, I still can't.

I could have portrayed him as a 'loveable rogue', which would have been a unifying formulation. Indeed, he might have liked to think of himself as a 'lovable rogue,' perhaps, and as 'larger than life.' But portraits of



lovable rogues who are larger than life tend to glamourise their subjects: the rogues, and those who love them, take it as read that the lovability excuses the roguery, that you gladly take the rough with the smooth, and that all is forgiven.

Of course, such people may want very badly to be forgiven, and they may work hard to charm you to that end. And Bill did quite a lot of that, though I doubt he knew that he was doing it. (At a deeper level, more disturbed, he believed he was unforgivable.) I think he wanted to be loved for being naughty, whereas it was despite his bad behaviours that I loved him, not because of them. People can be so sentimental about bad behaviour: I suppose it allows them to forgive themselves equally readily.

I don't, incidentally, readily forgive myself for finding it impossible to write a eulogy, for finding it impossible to avoid critique. (And I'm embarrassed by that, and I think it explains a lack of buoyancy in what I've written: I'm not at ease with what I am saying.)

Thinking about brevity again: do I have a need to assert to him, or about him: 'You don't fool me'? Perhaps I wanted to be brief to spite him: 'you may have thought you were larger than life, but I intend to cut you down to size.' Who knows? One way or another, I feel I am being disloyal in attempting this sense-making. Disloyal and judgmental.

It sounds as if I can't forgive him. But that's not quite right, because I don't have much to forgive. He mostly treated me very well. It was what I saw him do to himself and to others that upset me, troubled me, angered me, and those things are not for me to forgive. But I'm very ready to criticise, and my affection for anyone, however great, is usually unaccompanied by admiration. Many people admired him a lot. I was very aware of this at his funeral, where much admiration was expressed for the work he had done. I felt rather excluded by the emphasis on the public man.

I notice that I don't write about his work much, because I don't know very much about it. What I know I only heard from him, and I never saw him at work. He was very committed to it, and I've no reason to doubt his effectiveness (though he often doubted it himself). Except, of course, that when very stressed, he became badly depressed and had to take weeks or months of sick leave.

Interestingly, when I search the web for him, I find much less than I expected, and I find myself feeling that he deserves something more. Oddly, perhaps, given that what I have written is so critical. But I know that I haven't done justice to all his good qualities.

There is another aspect of his life, normally at the core of biographies, about which I have written little: family. That is something about which I know quite a lot, from observation, from discussion with him,

and separately, from discussion with his wife. But I feel a reticence about writing of them at all. My perceptions, though true to what I remember, might seem to them offensive or mistaken. It is only part of the whole story, after all.

Re-reading the dialogue, I sense again and again my dissatisfaction and disappointment and exasperation. Too much about all that, perhaps, and not enough about our affection and care for each other. But the latter are unproblematic for me, whereas in writing this, I am trying to think about what caused the former. I wanted him to be better than he was. I didn't talk about this with him: I believed, as I still do, that he was too vulnerable and too defended to discuss his weaknesses with me. I would sometimes say something like: 'I can see that you make yourself suffer, and that upsets me', or, 'I can see that you make others suffer', and that upsets me.' Typically, he would defend his behaviour by explaining that it was an apt response to something or someone else: 'Of course I get angry, because she is so stubborn'; 'He *always* does this, and it's so stupid'; 'He just won't listen'; and so on. But that sort of justification wasn't what I wanted. I wanted openness, not defence: something we could share, not something to divide us, something to enable us to reflect together on his difficulties and distress. But he couldn't do it. I was open with him, and he treated my openness with sensitivity and understanding and generosity; but he couldn't reciprocate.

In other ways, though, our friendship was reciprocal. He was very perceptive and clear-sighted about me and my character, as I believe I am about his. We cared about each other's troubles and unhappinesses, and we loved to join together in humour and in happiness. But he was so complicated (as am I) that it won't do to end this on a simple note of affirmation. But as to what the final note should be—I don't know.