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### GERALD BRENAN AND THE GENRES

Gerald Brenan is well known, particularly in Spain, for his books on Spain as well as for his two autobiographies *A Life of One's Own* and *Personal Record 1920-1972*. However his dream at first was to be a poet, which was followed by the conviction that his vocation was to be a novelist. As for being a poet, he soon realized that this was not possible. Brenan, in his *Personal Record*, says that when he asked Arthur Waley if his poetry showed any promise the blunt response was: "No, none that I can see" (98). Brenan explains that he realized that he could only write poetry when inspired, which was very rarely, so he decided he would give up poetry and concentrate on his novels.

His novel writing was to cause him perhaps even greater frustration. He would spend a great deal of time working on and re-working his novels but to no avail. The four that were finally published were hardly a success. In his *Personal Record* he admits that his novels have certain defects but over all he defends them. Nevertheless, after years of struggling with the novel he turned to writing books on Spain and then to his autobiographies. After all, as he confesses in his first autobiography, *A Life of One's Own*: "I lacked a subject for a novel and found my own life ready to hand. The plot was given, the characters and the incidents were there — all I had to do was to remember and arrange" (vii).

In this paper I would like to delineate Brenan's relationship with the genres: his youthful first love, which was poetry, his "responsible" though unrealistic choice of the novel as his principal concern in his middle years and his final coming to terms with his true vocation as writer of autobiographies — books of a personal nature, including travel books (*The Face of Spain* and *South From Granada*) and his impressionistic panorama of Spanish Literature (*The Literature of the Spanish People*).

#### ***Poetry: Brenan's First passionate Love***

In *A Life of Gerald Brenan: The Interior Castle*, Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy notes that although in Brenan's autobiographies Brenan hardly

mentions his poetry written before his thirties, there is, in fact, proof that "he wrote a great deal of poetry long before 1920" (46). Gathorne-Hardy affirms that "there was enough pre-1914 poetry...to fill two volumes" and that the fact that he was actually writing poetry at an early age better explains why Brenan considered himself a poet: "The tenacity of his idea of himself as a poet is the easier explained the earlier it began" (16).

Although Brenan himself admits that what he really wanted to be is a poet: "But what I had really wanted was to be not a prose writer but a poet" (1974: 71); he was to be separated constantly from poetry, which would be for him the "love that could never be." In 1913, when Gerald was 19 years old and his father expected him to prepare himself for a serious profession the reason for Gerald's protest was clear. Gathorne-Hardy tells us that Gerald's father "knew the real cause of the trouble —and of course he was quite right— poetry. Gerald must promise to give up reading poetry until after his exams. Gerald promised" (85).

In fact, in his autobiographies, Brenan on different occasions gives different reasons for trying to give up writing poetry, which at times required even giving up reading poetry as a way of controlling his urge to write his own verse. According to *A Life of One's Own* still in 1913, when reading Rimbaud, Brenan was overcome by the feeling that he would never become a great poet. Comparing himself to Rimbaud, with whom he identified for the similar life and interest that they shared, he felt that his own poetry was bad. If Rimbaud had written such great poetry by the time he was nineteen the only thing that Brenan could do was to give up poetry considering the poor quality of his own poetry and the fact that he was "*almost 20 years old*":

The poems came, but even to my uncritical eye they were bad. I reflected that I was now nearly twenty, whereas Rimbaud had written all that he was ever to write by the time that he was nineteen. I had better give up the idea of being a poet (180).

It should be noted he did not give up poetry yet and, as Gathorne-Hardy notes, Gerald Brenan would often console himself with the thought that Shelley's first poems were bad too (81).

Brenan gives us another reason for abandoning poetry, namely his idea that a writer should be able to write consistently, which contrasted with his own sudden fits of poetry-writing that had little duration and that were widely spaced:

For a poet the proper management of his talent is everyting. But when at length I decided that I wished to become a writer I felt that to submit

myself to the mercies of such irregular and uncontrollable impulses would be unendurable (*A Life*, 177).

He goes on to make a curious comparison of poetry writing which is to passionate love as prose writing is to marriage:

I wanted to cure myself of the poetry disease —waiting upon the moment— by disciplined prose writing just as I have heard some people say that they wished to cure themselves of the vagaries of violent infatuations by marrying. I like the monotony of regular life and hate the spasmodic (*A Life*, 177).

There was yet another reason for trying to give up being a poet. In April of 1924, just as Gerald had turned 30, he got a letter from his father that coldly stated that he was no longer willing to help him financially unless he took on some kind of work. Gerald agreed and decided that what he would do is to be a writer:

Although the tone of my father's letter was not exactly cordial, I agreed in the main with what he said. My period of self-education and of trying things out was over and it was time that I settled down to write a book. But what sort of a book? (*Personal Record*, 70)

Seeing that as a poet he could only hope to write sporadically and that he felt that he had to work at least four or five hours a day to consider himself actually working he would have to turn to prose. In *Personal Record* he states that at this time he had the firm conviction not to write any more poetry and to stop reading poetry in English. Not until 1944, then again shortly after this and once again in the summer of 1957 did he write any more poetry: "I was tired of being an amateur and of writing only what came into my head at moments of excitement" (72).

His resolution may have been the easier to keep because of the already quoted Arthur Waley's "short but sweet" dissuasion (1974:98). An example of Brenan's poetry helps us understand such an apparently curt remark. This is his first recorded poem (1912), quoted by Gathorne-Hardy:

I stand before the open door  
Of my new life, and yet I long  
To be that happy child once more  
And leave these hours of grief and wrong (75).

Unfortunately, Brenan's later poetry is little better and at times simply "appalling" as Gathorne-Hardy qualifies the following written in the late fifties:

She's the most amazing girl in all this town.  
 As she goes walking by the men fall flat down.  
 But she isn't my girl. No, she isn't my girl (452).

Or little better:

Out in the street the lovers talk  
 Exchanging bouquets of themselves.  
 Among their shapes my sad thoughts walk,  
 phoenixes looking for their doves.  
 Phoenixes torn and scratched and grey  
 yet raging with an angry life.  
 The fire that burns their veins all day  
 leaves both new blood and ash at night (442).

It can be seen that despite Brenan's immense love for poetry his own poetry leaves much to be desired. His love for and appreciation of poetry written by others was so great that it led him not only to recognize the value of poets such as Corbière, Laforgue, Rimbaud and new poets such as T. S. Eliot but also led him to find beauty in minor poetry that any other would find 'boring'. Gathorne-Hardy writes in his *The Interior Castle*:

Not only is his enthusiasm infectious, illuminating many authors now unread; it is an end itself. We can be fairly sure [and, questioned, Professor Juan Antonio Díaz López of Granada University was sure] that if we read these ancient writers they would bore us and reveal that their obscurity, if sad, was perfectly justified. Gerald's ability to appreciate their poetry (rare enough in itself)...is enough (620).

As for Brenan's own sonnets, he explains his objective to unite the musicality of the Elizabethans with the baroque style of Góngora without losing a modern touch and says he achieved this to a certain extent: "in Seville I wrote some sonnets that seemed to show an advance in that direction. No doubt they could not by any standard be described as good for they flowed awkwardly, yet I felt that they contained the promise of something better" (1974:71). Gathorne-Hardy, however, does not share Brenan's appreciation of the sonnets: "[They are] often sentimental and abound...in archaisms, in thous and thines, in 'th' ephemeral beauties' or, on lust...'" and show that Brenan was 'obsessed with rhyme, which he couldn't manage' and for which he required a rhyming dictionary!" (162).

In any case Gerald did not completely give up poetry and in 1950 wrote a three-act poetic drama entitled *The Lord of the Castle*. Gathorne-Hardy analyses a short exchange between two Morality type characters —Reason and Emanation in the play: "In Gerald's interior

castle, where his youthful poetry has now been permanently imprisoned, Reason, the father in him, had been made to reign — the scholar had won over the poet" (386). In fact, reason was only to be overcome at times when he fell passionately in love with one girl or another throughout his long life and it would be then that he would be unfaithful to his marriage of convenience to prose.

### *The Novel: Married to Prose but still in Love with Poetry*

Brenan, at the age of 30, was obliged to settle down and do serious work. He turned to prose but his first attempt was not the novel but a biography of Santa Teresa that he would work on, get stuck on and get bored with for decades before finally abandoning it completely. However, it was not just the biography that was causing him problems. He started on a novel in 1925, *Mr. Fisher*, that would take 35 years to finish and that would finally be published in 1961 as *a Holiday by the Sea*. In fact, he was earning quite a reputation for being a writer who actually never published any books:

Gerald had so far finished nothing, "except a great many letters" as Carington noted caustically. "Do you think Gerald will ever finish anything?" Arthur Waley said to her at a party in May 1928. "I ask because one would like to read his books, as he is by far the most interesting writer I know" (Gathorne-Hardy, 226).

Brenan, too, was a bit worried. "I had a feeling in my bones that I was a real writer, yet when I looked at what I had written I could see no evidence for it" (1974: 122). In fact, not even his mother had faith in his ability as a writer:

The real writers, she thought, were either people of mature years who had acquired experience of life by following some other profession or they were geniuses like Dickens who threw off while still young a book which was an immediate popular success. She did not understand the long apprenticeship that might be needed for writers whose talents were of a modest kind and who had to be given time in which to develop (*A Personal Record*, 131).

The belief that imagination and creativity are qualities that require nothing more than practice to develop rather than being the product of certain kinds of intelligence and thus essentially innate is seen in a discussion he had with Bertrand Russell in 1935 when Brenan was already forty-one years old. Brenan asked Russell why he did not apply his talent to writing a novel similar to *Candide*. Bertrand's re-

sponse was that he had neither imagination nor the ability to create, to which Gerald protested that these came with practice:

But he replied that he could not write a story of any sort as he had no imagination or powers of invention. I said that these came by trying since one always had resources that one was not aware of, but he refused to be persuaded. I still think that had he set himself to do as I suggested he might have written a masterpiece even greater than *Animal Farm*. (*A Personal Record*, 264)

Brenan had plenty of time to practise writing novels but time does not reveal the secrets of narrative technique to those who will have no eyes but for poetry. Gerald was in fact, hopelessly in love with poetry. In a letter to his friend Ralph he writes:

The qualities I most appreciate in writers: the lyrical gift, the warmth in human matters, the sense of the beauty of the world, of the delight in being alive (Gathorne-Hardy, 428).

Gathorne-Hardy cites a part of a letter (1947) in which Gerald praises Pío Baroja for his “lyrical feeling” and because it “is not character or action that interest him, or the difference between characters — but that half-felt thing that lies underneath things and is present in everyone” (364). Ten years earlier he was already underestimating the importance of character and action. Gathorne-Hardy points out that in a letter to Ralph in 1936 Brenan speaks of plot and character as the easiest parts of writing novels and that they, for him, were the least important and least interesting (280). Needless to say one of the major reasons Brenan’s novels were to fail was because of the lack of plot with the result that his readers would lose interest in his protagonists.

Poetry was so important to Brenan that, in fact, the first novel he started writing is thought to have possibly originated as a group of ‘sea similes and metaphors’ (Gathorne-Hardy, 280). One example of these is the sea “thumping monotonously on the beach a French laundry woman on her wooden pank” (Gathorne-Hardy, 463). As Brenan was having problems in making any headway with this novel, taking his friends advice, he decided to try something easier. In 1926 in the space of two days and two nights he wrote all but seven pages of the novel *Dr. Partridge’s Almanack* which was published in 1934 (Gathorne-Hardy, 220). Then, a couple of months later, he began a novel, *Jack Robinson*, that had a different kind of style (Brenan, 1974: 165). It would be a picaresque novel.

This would appear to be the perfect solution for Brenan: to write a novel where the protagonist meets one bizarre person after another so that plot and development and interaction of characters is unnecessary.

However not only does he let himself get completely influenced by Proust in the last part of the novel resulting in a "spiritual autobiography": "I had not yet learned how to separate the needs of a novel from spiritual autobiography" (*Personal Record*, 200) but once again poetry becomes of prime importance so that the book is converted into a means to, as Gathorne-Hardy notes, pour out 'years of pent-up poetic lyricism'. The abundant similes and metaphors are back along with other excesses that Gathorne-Hardy points out:

In fact, in the end the reader is swamped by similes and metaphors. The lyricism is undisciplined. And Gerald's fascination, intoxication even, with language leads him into absurdities, and words like vaticination, immundicity and asseveration start to clog the sentences (280).

Both *Jack Robinson* and *Dr. Partridge's Almanack* were published in the early thirties. It was not until the sixties that his last two novels would be published: *A Holiday by the Sea* and *The Lighthouse Always Says Yes*. Brenan, in his autobiography *Personal Record* admits that *A Holiday* has many defects among others that it is "It is too rich, too choked with ideas and images" (117), but he does maintain that certain aspects of his novel are good. Once again poetry is high on the list: "But I would claim that it is intelligent and well written and shot through with a queer kind of self-awareness and poetry" (117). As for *The Lighthouse* Gathorne-Hardy says "the writing is never less than excellent and sometimes reaches heights" (482). He does however also list the numerous faults: "it is technically clumsy: he can't get people in or out of rooms"; the dialogue is stilted; the "failure of narrative" results in a "lack of that current, that tension between events" (483). He names one other fault that Brenan would consider an asset — the almost exclusive use of real people: "Real people are used not just as jumping-off points; they are painstakingly transferred" (483).

Gerald Brenan explains that he came to the conclusion that the reason that his novels failed was that they lacked the unifying element of a common society to bring the characters together:

I said to myself that I had never become a novelist because I had not had a fixed society to draw on. The people I had known in England had come from all over the place. But the Costa del Sol, where I now lived, was a mixing bowl (*A Personal Record*, 366).

Brenan's idea was to show a broad spectrum of characters and situations and the theme of his unified mass would be (paradoxically) disintegration. Once again Brenan says he agrees with the critics that the novel was bad but again insists that it had parts which were well written. However as an added positive point he argues that the majority of



the characters were taken from real life: "but I would claim that some of the scenes in it, especially that of the flamenco show at Seville, were vivid and well written. Incidentally most of the characters in it were drawn from real people" (1974: 367). Brenan insists on poetry and reality. His prose would have to be non-fiction.

### *Autobiography: Settling in his Marriage to Prose*

In *Interior Castle*, Gathorne-Hardy discusses the reasons for the failure of Brenan's novels. He believes that attributing it to "a lack of creative imagination" is too simple a view. He insists that there are other factors at play. He begins with the novels' "lack of anything sufficiently compelling to carry one on" but notes that when Brenan talks about this that "it is exactly the narrative drive and skill one notices" (484). Secondly, he cites the weakness in the portrayal of characters but again counter-argues that "the portraits in all his other writing, including his letters, are one of the chief delights: vivid, penetrating, moving, humorous, alive (and in *South From Granada* sometimes invented)." Gathorne-Hardy then proposes that Brenan's failure as a novelist is another "echo from the interior castle" (484). It should be noted that the central thesis of the biography is that Brenan, as a result of experiences in his childhood years, 'withdrew deeply into himself' into an "interior castle". Gathorne-Hardy argues that this withdrawal has affected him as a writer:

But this created difficulties. He longed to write, yet shrank from revealing himself. That is why he could never get started, and when he did, either hid under mountains of similes and metaphors or wrote pastiche (436).

According to Gathorne-Hardy, Gerald could not use "himself or his deep feelings" in his novels. He could write about his feelings only as long as they were real but not use them as a basis for fiction, as his decision to be writer was the result of his desire to escape from "the conventionality, the hypocrisy, the wealth, the snobbery and boredom into a life that was more real — one of poverty, intensity, pain and poetry" (484). The result is that to use his own deep experiences for fiction would be to make them less "real" and thus go against "an absolutely fundamental structure in his character" (485). Gathorne-Hardy goes on to argue that this "unconscious desire to stay as close as possible to reality" made poetry more appealing to Brenan, but that the fact that poetry "has on the whole ceased to be a vehicle for narrative fiction" excluded the novel.



This account of the reasons for Gerald's inability to make his novels come alive certainly rings true if we take into account both what Brenan had written about himself in his autobiographies and the material that Gathorne-Hardy incorporates in his splendid biography. However, Brenan's inability to create may just as well be due to his love of synthesizing — reducing all to a neat formula not only intentionally as in his last work, a collection of aphorisms entitled *Thoughts in a Dry Season*, but also in all that he has written. Brenan's works abound in brief portraits of people, concise analyses summarizing the underlying causes that drive history and even human behaviour and comparisons that illustrate the essence of a culture. It is this that made his works on Spain and his "other" autobiographies so popular, but it also blocked his ability to create, as the ability to relate clearly and concisely requires reduction while creation requires the opposite. It requires depiction involving elaboration.

Despite Brenan's almost obsession with becoming a creative writer, he recognises defeat in the introduction to *A Life of One's Own*. He openly declares that the reason he was writing this autobiography was that he could not think of a theme for a novel. An autobiography, for Brenan, is little more than a novel where the characters and action have already been given, and so the material need only be arranged (vii).

The view that the autobiography is a kind of novel is further demonstrated in the description he gives of his autobiography. It is no different from the description of the *Bildungsroman*:

Gradually therefore the book grew into an account of the development of the sensibility and character of the child, the boy, the adolescent who, under the pressures and stimulations of his environment, has evolved into my present self (vii).

It should also be noted that Brenan, in *A Life of One's Own*, cites Goethe's definition of the autobiography as being a literary genre that is situated between the biography and the novel as "It is controlled by actuality, but is seen from within through memory" (viii).

Brenan's official autobiographies are *A Life of One's Own* and *Personal Record*. However we may argue that all his books on Spain are to one degree or another autobiographical, including *The Spanish Labyrinth*, his book on Spanish Literature, *The Literature of the Spanish People*, and his biography of St. John of the Cross. Gathorne-Hardy tells us that Gerald, in a letter, says he "is making *South From Granada* more autobiographical" (416). In fact, Gathorne-Hardy describes *South From Granada* as "the autobiographical account of Gerald's period in Yegen between 1919 and 1924" (429). As for *The Litera-*

ture of the Spanish People Hardy explains that the technique that Brenan used was the same as in *The Spanish Labyrinth* which involved giving short vivid "biographical sketches," but he explains that often "the analyses are shot through with autobiographical echoes" (392). In *Personal Record*, Gerald explains that his use of portraits—these same "biographical sketches"—are an essential part of an autobiography: "Every autobiography must take the form of a sequence of events and situations with interruptions to draw the portraits of friends" (12).

Perhaps it should be mentioned that in the autobiographies, particularly *Personal Record*, there are elements that actually do belong to the novel. In particular we may mention his use of dialogue, which is not from a taped conversation but rather based on notes. In *A Life of One's Own* there is, for example, the chapter on the journey in France which contains about ten pages of dialogue and in *Personal Record* there are many dialogues all of which are at best stilted: the exchange between Gerald and the prostitute, Lily; his talk with Bertrand Russell; the discussion about Spain with the Catalan engineer, and the exchanges between a number of people on the first days of the Civil War. An interesting aspect of these "war dialogues" is the manner in which Brenan moves from one conversation to another in a way that is clearly reminiscent of a picaresque novel:

It was not the moment to start an argument on Bible texts so I said good-bye to them. But before I had gone more than a hundred yards I heard a shout and a bullet whistled close to my ear. Two men with rifles came up with their barrels covering me and I explained that I was English (290).

A little over a page of dialogue follows:

I left him ruminating over the differences between foreigners and Old Harrovians and went up the street to call on Jay Allen (290).

Another manifestation of Brenan's relationship with autobiography is his love of writing letters. When Gathorne-Hardy was doing the research for his biography on Gerald Brenan he found himself with between three and four million words of correspondence, (xi) that is, between 10,000 and 14,000 pages like those of this paper. In letters only to Ralph and Carrington alone there were what he estimated to be four novels worth. In fact, Gathorne-Hardy, in the epilogue of his biography, says that "there is sometimes almost a feeling that Gerald lived in order to write a letter to someone about it" (609) and concludes that it is possible that the "enormous correspondence will eventually prove Gerald's most lasting memorial" (610).

### Conclusion

Although one of the greatest problems in dealing with the genres is deciding where one genre ends and another begins, we may say that Gerald Brenan shows a clear preference for the autobiography regardless of the genre he is actually trying to employ. Though Brenan had hoped that poetry would be the ideal medium to express his feelings this did not prove to be the case. The novel did not serve his purpose better. Struggling to express his vision of the world in an over-worked lyrical style he overlooked the fact that the novel required certain narrative technique. Brenan's need was to express 'the beauty of the world' and 'the delight in being alive.' He was in love with reality as he perceived it and thus found it difficult to modify it. It is not surprising then that when he attempted to write novels 'autobiography' came to weigh so heavily on him that it prevented him from entering in the creative mode. Though Brenan considered his non-fiction works a waste of his literary talent it would be autobiography that he would be most comfortable with and it would be this very tendency to autobiography that would give his works that special personal touch whether he would be giving us his first-hand account of the Spanish Civil War or explaining the social and political background of it, or whether he be giving us a guided tour of the Alpujarra or guiding us through the literary production of the Spanish people. Brenan did not fail in his chief objective to express that joy of living and the beauty of life. His only mistake was not realizing that autobiography was the genre best suited to his needs.

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