‘Writing was more beneficial than attending a psychiatric clinic’

As far as I know, Beryl did not paint a portrait of her father. There is, however, an ink drawing from 1975 of her mother, Winifred (known to the family as Winnie), which Beryl did when living in Albert Street, north London. By then I had known Beryl for twelve years. We first met in the summer of 1963, when she moved into the flat above mine in a big old-fashioned Edwardian house in Arkwright Road near Hampstead Heath, north London. She arrived with her children and an assortment of luggage, including paintings, unpublished manuscripts and pieces of furniture (memories of her Liverpool home, which feature in her work). We were both divorcees, each with two children, although mine were older than hers and I was about to marry Philip Hughes whereas Beryl was single. We found we had a lot to talk about: the children, our love lives (past and present), and gossip. She told me she had recently moved to London from Liverpool, mainly motivated by concerns for her children’s education: ‘Quite wrongly, I thought schooling would be better in London.’[1] But she remained very attached to her home city: ‘I am so tied to it by the past, by memories of family and beginnings, that I still think of it as home…. If an uprising broke out in Liverpool…I should rush to the barricades.’[2] She may have exaggerated, but it is true that Liverpool held a firm place in her memory and she returned from time to time. We went there together for the opening of the New Tate in 1988 and stayed in the Adelphi Hotel, which she fondly remembered for its Roman baths in the basement and posh teas served on the ground floor.

The title for the portrait of Winnie – *My Mum when younger, singing*

with a proper orchestra and a conductor with lovely white hair. So distinguished. – illustrates the subject's flirtatious nature and innocent vanity. She was very sociable and loved to shine in company. Perhaps she was like the main character in *Mum and Mr Armitage* (1985): 'Not that she was motherly – far from it. True, she was well built, but they all agreed that the twinkle in her coquettish eyes was neither matronly nor maternal.'[3] In the painting Beryl captures the essential features of her mother – her ambition and desire to be admired – created with an ironic smile, certainly, but also with tenderness.

Beryl once told me that not a day went by when she did not think of her mother. Yet, whenever Winnie came to London Beryl viewed the visit with dread and found her presence irritating. Theirs was a strange relationship, based on disapproval from one side and rebellion on the other. These antagonisms dated back to childhood when her mother wanted everything to be proper (and Beryl was far from proper); so much so that she even insisted on her daughter having curls and gave her a perm against her will. Beryl also had to have elocution lessons, but she remained grateful for these, advocating that everyone should have them.

Winnie looked down on her husband, especially after his business failed and the family became short of money. She refused intimacy with him, Beryl once revealed: he was only allowed to scrub her back on Saturday afternoons during her weekly bath. In an interview with Lynn Barber, she was more explicit, recalling how her father had shouted angrily at her mother, and how she and her brother had been terrified by his fits of rage: 'He was never physical, he never hit her, it was just these voices downstairs…'.[4] These scenes of domestic disharmony form the backdrop to *A Quiet Life* (1976), and also constitute a theme that runs through some of her other books. After she wrote *According to Queeney* (2001), which describes relations between literary figure Doctor Johnson and his friend and admirer Mrs Thrale, she said that her original inspiration came from a letter in which Queeney, Mrs Thrale's eldest daughter, declares that their mother's 'original and persevering dislike of her children arose from hatred of our father'.[5] This novel is as much about the stresses of married life as it is about the historic relationship.

To escape the atmosphere between her parents at home, Beryl Bainbridge took to writing at the early age of eight. In the introduction to

Beryl Bainbridge, *My Mum when younger, singing with a proper orchestra and a conductor with lovely white hair. So distinguished*. 1970s

Beryl with her mother, late 1930s

Beryl with a perm, early 1940s

Filthy Lucre (her first attempt at a full-length novel, which was eventually published by Duckworth in 1986) she describes writing short stories such as the tale of an old sea dog, Cherry Blossom Bill, 'who kept his rum supply in his wooden leg'.[6] It was in 1946, at the age of thirteen, that she started writing *Filthy Lucre*, a highly moralistic adventure story. 'Writing was more beneficial…than attending a psychiatric clinic,' she explains, adding that it 'helped to get rid of anxieties nurtured by the particularly restricted sort of upbringing common to lower-class girls in wartime England.'[7] And her mother encouraged her: she believed Beryl should become famous, whether on the stage, as a writer or in society.

Beryl says that *Filthy Lucre* 'owes a lot to Dickens and Stevenson',[8] whose work she was reading at the time. She illustrated the original text with drawings, which became too frail to reproduce, but she did create up-to-date versions of the originals for the publication. These drawings confirm that from the start she coupled the written word with the visual image, and reveal her budding artistic talent, which grew with the years alongside her career as a writer. The drawings share imagery with paintings completed in her maturity. For example, **'**Old Andrew took up his favourite stance' shows a man standing on top of a pile of books underneath a beaded chandelier, just like the one she had in her London home in Albert Street (and possibly added when she reworked the drawings). The rickety three-legged table is another feature common to her later paintings, as is a view from a window; she liked to frame scenes around a window, like Vermeer. '"Shut the window," said Fanny sharply, and he did' also shows an upholstered armchair, a table with a lamp, an open window crossed by a tree branch and the moon shining out of the dark.

A macabre humour, which pervades this book and is a foretaste of her later blackly comic novels, is apparent in the cemetery scene captioned 'He feverishly turned the old man over', showing tombstones, winged angels and a startled-looking man in a check suit lifting a corpse from its coffin. The same humour can be seen in the drawing that accompanies the story of Trevelian and his men sinking into a bog as they chase after Richard, the hero of the story.

Beryl's style at that age shows a mixture of naive, almost Blakean, grandiosity: '…people of England and Wales this does happen in these satanic years when justice is set upon by the strong body of Gold',[9] and

Beryl Bainbridge,
Old Andrew took up his favourite stance, 1986

Beryl Bainbridge,
'Shut the window,' said Fanny sharply and he did, 1986

Beryl Bainbridge,
He feverishly turned the old man over, 1986

attempts a personal version of an avant-garde language: 'Ernest got to his polished feet. Facing him was a ballistic young man in a brilliant red check coat and tails,'[10] and '…fiery demons with sharp-pointed darts of hate attacked…'.[11] Beryl's love for words and concern for rhythm in each phrase is already in practice.

Once we'd become firm friends, Beryl talked often about her early influences and developing work, letting me into the secret world of her imagination. She was clear that when writing she refused to read fiction on principle, so as to avoid influences of style and subject matter. But she enjoyed our literary discussions and even shared insights into the process of writing her novels, occasionally honouring me by asking my opinion on a particular detail in an embryonic plot. These were unforgettable conversations that normally took place in the car as we were driving to have our hair 'done' by our regular hairdresser Mr Howard – a six-weekly ritual that continued even after his salon relocated to Bishop's Stortford in Hertfordshire. Beryl never missed an opportunity to comment on my bad driving.

On one or two occasions, if I failed to make an appointment on time, she would send desperate messages about the state of her hair, urging me to do something: 'I keep putting on 'Hint of a Tint' and chopping my fringe. I tried to ring you but you must have been away….'[12]

Her reading list was unsurprisingly idiosyncratic. As a child she devoured the nineteenth-century classics. She talked of Trollope and especially Dickens, whom she considered the great master. She shared this passion with her friend and fellow writer A. N. Wilson, who recalls mutual walks 'in Bayham Street, imagining the child Dickens walking down from there to his humiliating work in the boot-blacking factory in the Strand when he was a child of 10'.[13] She loved historical novels, including those by Walter Scott, and they possibly inspired her in later work to dramatize epic events such as the 1910–12 Antarctic expedition and the sinking of the *Titanic*.

Beryl's anti-hero was the figure of Long John Silver and she referred to Louis Stevenson as the inspiration of her very early writings. Later in life, she was fascinated by the language of *Our Lady of the Flowers* (1943) by Jean Genet. She also loved *Therese* (1927) by François Mauriac (the complex religious questioning and Catholic philosophy appealed to her) and Dostoyevsky's dark fatalism. On this score, I was surprised to hear her saying that for some time she had thought that these authors were writing in English. I later lent her a copy of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) by the Colombian writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez; she read it with evident pleasure and commented: 'What a lovely foreign book!' She also gave me a quote about it for the benefit of my students: 'The English are notoriously insular; and I started to read this book with reluctance only to be won over by its combination of zany humour and sexual and political insight.' Among the modern English classics she was very fond of J. B. Priestley and admired his play *Time and the Conways* (1937).

Beryl held a fascination for the workings of the body and its various afflictions and was keen on medical textbooks. She enjoyed books like *The Man Who Mistook His Wife For a Hat* (1985) by Oliver Sacks and the fantasies of Baron Corvo, who was a painter and controversial figure. But the biography of Maria Callas by Arianna Stassinopoulos won the prize for Beryl's best read: she reread our copy every time she stayed with us in Provence and was always moved by the romance and tragedy of the singer's life-story.

*

When Beryl was thrown out of Merchant Taylors' Girls' School for being found in possession of some lines from a naughty limerick, which she claims a friend gave to her, the family made sacrifices to afford to send her to Cone-Ripman School in Tring (now Tring Park School for the Performing Arts) in 1947. But the money didn't last long – Beryl had to return to Liverpool, and it was here that her theatrical career began. Her mother had always wanted her to be an actress, and had pushed Beryl into appearing on the Northern Children's Hour radio show when she was eleven. Then her father managed to get her into the Liverpool Playhouse through a business contact, and at the age of fifteen she became an assistant stage manager and 'character juvenile'. Working backstage at the theatre, she was introduced to a new world of experience and lived vicariously through other actors:

In the Green Room I heard tales of hardship, of conversion

Beryl dressed as a young boy, late 1940s,
to play the role of Ptolemy in George Bernard Shaw's
Caesar and Cleopatra

> to Catholicism, of sexual despair. At second hand I trod the pavements looking for work, was discarded by brutal lovers, dazzled by the ritual of the Mass. In the prop-room, huddled over the smoking fire, I listened to stories of escape and heroism and immersion. I went down in submarines, stole through frontiers disguised as a postman, limped home across the Channel on a wing and a prayer.[14]

As a result of hearing about conversion and 'the ritual of the Mass' she did, for a time at least, become a Catholic: soon after working at the Playhouse she went to Scotland (as a member of the Dundee Repertory Theatre Company) and took her opportunity to convert. 'In England,' she explains, 'in those days turning to Rome required parental consent.'[15]

As a small-part actress Beryl was given the role of Ptolemy, the boy-king, in Bernard Shaw's *Caesar and Cleopatra,* a play that she says she didn't like, explaining that she 'had no idea of where Egypt was and why Caesar was wandering about in the desert'. In contrast, she claims that Shakespeare's *Richard II* had brought her 'to the edge of tears'.[16] Obviously Shaw's dry, ironic version of the Egyptian tragedy did not rouse much emotion in the heart of a teenage girl.

While working at the Playhouse, Beryl fell hopelessly in love with the stage designer. She wasn't prepared for what she called 'the peculiar sensations provoked by love'.[17] When she tried to speak to the object of her passion all she could hear was the thumping of her heart and the nervous chattering of her teeth, and, despite all her efforts to hang around backstage where he might see her, he never gave her a second glance. This youthful, unrequited passion characterizes the naive and equally futile love that Rose feels for Potter, the stage manager in *An Awfully Big Adventure* (1989), who turns out to be homosexual.

Beryl's acting career continued sporadically after leaving the Playhouse as she worked with repertory companies. She even appeared in the television soap *Coronation Street* in 1961. There is a series of photographs from that period, taken for publicity: in one she appears against the setting of her living room in Liverpool with an old samovar behind her, which she brought to London and which features in her work.

*

In 1954 Beryl married Austin Davies whom, ironically, she had first met during one of her abortive attempts to engineer a romantic encounter with the stage designer at the Playhouse. (Austin was an art student at the time, trying to make some money by painting scenery in the theatre.) He had become an art teacher at the Liverpool College of Art and, assuming his professional role, he would look at her paintings and criticize them because they lacked perspective. He failed to recognize her style as fundamental to the attraction and individuality of her work, but, fortunately, he did not succeed in changing her approach to painting (nor did he manage to put off their daughter, Jojo, when she started to paint). Beryl did not suffer from negative feelings about her paintings, which grew in number and variety: she never agonized over them; she just did them without pretension, expectation or arrogance.

Beryl and Austin lived together in an old Georgian house in Huskisson Street, in Liverpool 8, on the edge of Toxteth. The street, which faces a church surrounded by a garden, is very smart now as the houses have been restored, but when Beryl revisited the area in the early 1980s (prior to the publication of *English Journey* in 1984) they were in a state of disrepair. 'I shouldn't have gone there,' she wrote. 'The balcony had toppled into the street and the pillars at the front door had collapsed.'[18]

Their first child Aaron was born in 1957, followed by Jojo a year later. When Beryl returned from hospital with baby Jojo she found evident signs of breakfast for two on the table. Unwilling to tolerate Austin's behaviour, she shouted just one word at him, 'OUT!', thus propelling herself into the role of single mother – a very brave act in those days. For years to come she boasted about this episode, feeling some contempt for women who are prepared to turn a blind eye to their husbands' peccadilloes. Even though the separation must have been sad and painful, she felt for many years that she had been spared the acrimony of a relationship turned sour. Austin continued to help and support his children until 1974, when he emigrated to New Zealand to become Director of The Suter Art Gallery in Nelson. Some years later he started painting seriously again, and would time visits to his family to coincide with exhibitions

Beryl as an actress with her iconic samovar in the background, early 1960s

22 Huskisson Street, Liverpool, where Beryl lived
with Austin Davies when they were married and after he left.
From the balcony she watched 'ladies of the night' go by.

Austin Davies,
The Season of Stifled Sorrow, late 1970s

Beryl's portrait of her friend Brenda Haddon, late 1950s. Brenda was taught by Austin Davies at Liverpool Art College.

in London. Philip and I have one of his paintings entitled *The Season of Stifled Sorrow*, which we bought in a London exhibition in 1980.

Despite the change in her circumstances, Beryl went on painting in the house on Huskisson Street. According to Brenda Haddon, she had a tenant upstairs, which must have helped with expenses. Brenda was one of Austin's students at the art college, who at the age of nineteen became friends with Beryl: 'We hit it off immediately and once Aaron was born I became the regular babysitter. Over the years we became firm friends, and hardly a day passed without me calling at 22 Huskisson Street.' Brenda remembers sitting at the window with Beryl, their legs hanging over the balcony, watching 'ladies of the night' as they walked by. She also remembers having her twenty-first birthday party at Beryl's home, and claims that John Lennon (who was one of Austin's students at the time) played the guitar for them. Later, Brenda read drafts of Beryl's first three novels. In fact they kept in touch until the end with visits as well as phone calls. The last time they spoke, Beryl pretended that her croaky voice was due to having given up the 'ciggies'. Brenda says, 'She was always trying to protect me from the nasties of life.'[19]

Beryl painted a portrait of Brenda at the age of twenty, depicting an intense, good-looking young woman in a harmony of blues: dark in the outline of the chair and the dress; pale on the potted flower. The delicately creamy background emphasizes the thick brown hair that surrounds the subject's face. 'It still hangs in my sitting-room,' continues Brenda, 'a daily reminder of our valuable friendship and her diversity of talents.' Brenda was there when Beryl's marriage to Austin broke down and offered comfort after a brief, disastrous love affair alluded to in *A Weekend with Claud*. She also fielded 'prying phone calls from Beryl's mother'.[20]

The city of Liverpool was an exciting place to be at the end of the 1950s. Young artists and poets – like Adrian Henri, Roger McGough, Brian Patten, Don McKinlay and Robert Evans – came together to form a lively cultural scene. As a single mother with two young children it is not surprising that Beryl was a little detached from her peer group; but this had as much to do with her fiercely independent character as with her circumstances. Beryl first met Don McKinlay in Liverpool but began a long, close relationship with him after she had moved to London. In a letter sent to me after her death, he recalls, 'Beryl was never interested in the fashionable art scene, so her work was hugely individual; she became more ambitious as her ideas developed.'[21]

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Beryl's artistic drive was not short of inspiration, and she continued painting family scenes and portraits of friends. Unfortunately, we were only able to find a few works from that period, which she took to London in 1963. To map Beryl's activities as a painter is an impossible task because she was so casual and unassuming about her work – she believed that anybody could paint. But painting was intrinsic to her family life, her writing and her fantasies. Jojo, who also became a painter, has an early memory of her mother (whom she refers to as 'Beb') at work:

> My first memory of Beb as a painter comes from the time when we had moved to London. I was about seven. I can

Triptych painted by Beryl's eldest daughter Jojo for her son Charlie's wedding, 2009. Jojo was taught to paint by her mother.

> see her surrounded by boards propped up on the living room floor, laying out sheets of newspaper, squeezing oil paints onto an old-fashioned plate. I remember her telling me how important it was to have a horizon line, and I watched as she drew them in, varying the height from picture to picture.… It was my mother who dug out a large canvas, gave me oil paints, a palette knife and newspapers, and told me to start work on a self-portrait.[22]

As to the subject of Beryl's paintings: 'She was primarily interested in the story that pictures could tell – events actual or imagined, populated by real people, altered by her imagination,' Jojo explains. Beryl's work features 'Figures surrounded and anchored by objects – often plants or lamps, stuffed animals in glass cases, doilies or tablecloths.'[23]

Perhaps one of the reasons Beryl did not always date her paintings is because she was more interested in the story than herself as an artist or the work as a piece of art. Although she liked to give the impression of being vague about time, she never missed an appointment or arrived late at a lecture. She must have looked in her diary almost every day; she couldn't have functioned as a public figure otherwise.

Although Beryl liked to discuss her novels and their plots with me, especially during the process of writing, she never talked about her paintings. Jojo describes her mother's uninhibited approach:

> She was a hugely original painter and painted with a surety and freedom that reminds me of her personality. She wasn't limited by rules or constrained by the opinion or fashion of the art world; she couldn't care less. Because of this and because of the person she was, there is an honesty in her work that comes from her intensely creative personality.[24]

Don McKinlay echoes Jojo's opinion of Beryl's individuality as a painter. As for her technique, he describes how:

> She progressed on to using scraps of hardboard primed with gloss paint. She used materials that came to hand and could be purchased from local shops. She had a refreshing disregard for the technical niceties of painting, incorporating other materials – fragments of photographs – into increasingly complex pieces. [25]

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By the time I got to know Beryl she showed no particular interest in other artists' work, or in visiting art galleries. As she once told the *Sunday Times*: 'I used to love going to art galleries; to the National, for instance, to see all those beautiful huge women and gods flying about. But now I'm fed up to the back teeth with them. I positively groan if I see one.'[26] She sometimes

spoke of the painter Frank Auerbach because he was a neighbour and she used to see him in the supermarket or whenever she popped out to buy some cigarettes. She attended the openings of my husband's exhibitions because he was a friend. On one occasion she even wrote a short piece for the invitation to one of his exhibitions (in July 1987), which gives a brief personal doctrine of painting: 'What one wants from art is a personal statement, a successful arrangement of colour and shape and a sense of place.' On another occasion, she commented on some of Philip's abstract paintings in these terms: 'I've never pretended I either like or understand abstract paintings.'[27] Otherwise she would not go out of her way to see exhibitions.

On a few occasions Beryl was invited as an honoured guest to dinners held for patrons and benefactors of the National Gallery. She would walk around and look at the exhibited work with evident pleasure. In 1997 the gallery bought George Stubbs's famous picture, *Whistlejacket*, and held a party to celebrate the unveiling. Colin Mackenzie, the gallery's Development Manager who had organized the whole event, personally escorted her in front of the painting. I was there with other guests who stood in awe, murmuring various comments. 'Oh,' Beryl exclaimed, 'My Little Pony!' Colin winced.

Chapter 1

'The self-creator of her own struggling'

1963–1967

Although Beryl and Austin Davies were divorced by 1959, he also moved from Liverpool to London and offered financial support and care to her and the children. Philip and I were living together and by the end of summer 1964 we were married. Beryl was writing at the time, but had not yet been published and was busy producing art because she found it easier than writing, especially as her two young children demanded attention. She painted their portrait, sitting at a wrought-iron table, with an oil lamp and a spray of flowers, a typical setting that can be seen in several of her paintings. Brushstrokes form aureoles around the two figures: Aaron, with his dark hair and a pensive look; Jojo, with golden hair and startled, inquisitive eyes. They stand out against a background that appears to be on fire. The portrait of Aaron sitting alone shows the same oil lamp, and even as a younger child he has that intense, quiet gaze.

Beryl painted mainly on boards leaning against the kitchen table, using oils at first, then changing to poster paint and gouache in later work. Sometimes, she would find an old painting in a junk shop, which she would paint over, saying that this practice added to the richness of the final colours. As for a choice of brushes, she was not fussy and even used her fingers: she was always resourceful. She gave me a picture of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, made from plasticine and decorated with edible silver balls and multi-coloured 'hundreds and thousands'. I had to hang it out of reach because I discovered that my children had been picking off the decorations to eat them.

Beryl’s portrait of Aaron and Jojo from the early 1960s.
The wrought-iron lamp and table provide a familiar setting.

Beryl’s portrait of Aaron from the early 1960s. Aaron cherishes this
portrait as intrinsic to his relationship with his mother.