

*Below, author John Passfield explores some of the ramifications of his novel-writing project. In the first section are passages from the novel; in the second, passages from Passfield's planning notebook showing the evolution of his thinking about the structure and content of the novel; and in the third, passages from Passfield's Journal show his reflections on the meaning of the novel.*

Novel: *Bethune: The Only Person Alive in the World*

1.

The porch light is yellow. It shines on an anguished face. He pulls the door open and a man flinches as if he expects to be met with anger. He holds his hand up – with a wrinkled dollar – in front of his chest. “My wife is going into labour. I didn’t know where to take her. She’s in a boxcar with two of our kids. Someone said you might help.” He takes the dollar out of the man’s hand, folds it and stuffs it in the pocket of the man’s shirt. “Put your dollar away. Your money’s no good here. How far along is she now?” He steps aside and holds the door open. “Come in. It’s cold out there. Come in while I get my things. She’s in a boxcar? That means there’s no heat. No running water either. If there’s time, we’ll take her to the hospital in my car. At any rate, we’ll do the best we can.”

2.

How can I look a patient in the eye and ask for money? It goes against the Hippocratic oath. Family of five. Holes in the shoes. Patches on the pants. Faded dresses. Children shy. Clutching the skirts of the mother and holding the father’s hand. Is the dime on the table theirs or is it mine? They need food; they need shelter; some crumbs on the plate and some coals in the stove. I need paintings, fine wines and a roadster. Each of us eyeing the table and wondering who gets the dime.

3.

The doctor leans over his patient. The body of a child. Stretched out on the operating table. Rescued from the ruins of a bombed-out building. How beautiful the body; how perfect its parts; with what precision it moves. This boy must be five or six. Was it a house or was it a store? Was anyone brought in with him? How obedient, proud and strong. Wonder if his parents are still alive. People get buried in the ruins. You can hear their cries, sometimes, but they can’t be reached. How terrible when torn; the little flame of life sinks lower, flickering quietly and gently. Check the anaesthetic, another scalpel, we’ll need more blood in a minute. He’s not lost yet. It makes its protest against extinction, a candle clinging to the last of life, and then goes out. Between air-raids the other day, I saw a mother buying a tricycle in a shop.

4.

They are lying on scraps of straw on a cold, stone floor. Crawling with lice; bloodied uniforms; covered in dirt. Washed-out bandages of faded rags. One blanket to cover three. Boiled millet once a day while they wait to die. The family is kind, but they are almost starving themselves. A lantern in the darkness. One of them stirs and opens his eyes. A man is stooping and bathing my wounds. The warm water on my legs is almost heavenly. “A doctor from Canada”, someone says. There are so many of us to

care for. Hundreds of wounded lie sick in this village. Only miles from the Japanese. What good can a doctor from Canada possibly do?

5.

They meet in a room in a cave, and they talk for most of the night. He tells the leader of his plans to build a model hospital for the training of medical personnel. Of his wish to develop a mobile operating-unit which could follow the shifting front and operate on the wounded as the battle rages, saving hundreds and thousands of lives to fight for the cause. At every sentence of translation, the leader nods. They talk far into the night. They both have practical plans. Each forgets, as their ideas ebb and flow, to take an occasional sip at his cup of rice tea.

6.

Riding on a litter, somewhere in the hills. Blotting out the pain by tightly squeezing my eyes. Dreaming of coffee, of rare roast beef, of apple pie and ice cream. Of mirages of heavenly food. Dreaming that books are still being written; dreaming that music is still being played. Dreaming of dancing, drinking beer and looking at pictures. Dreaming of clean white sheets in soft beds. Dreaming of women who love and are willing, in turn, to be loved.

Notebook: *Planning The Only Person Alive in the World*

1.

Back porch. Perfect weather. Reading about Bethune. – Canada – Outer-frames – 5 sharp scenes of extreme action. Realistic but almost hallucinatory. Bethune in action. – Montreal. St Lawrence Boulevard. Caught in demonstration. Police attack demonstrators. Bethune helping the wounded. – Sanatorium. Trudeau Hospital. Bethune draws air from own lung. 3 more. No explanation for these. Simply the scene & the action. En medias res. 5 sharp scenes & off to Spain. Same for all 16 chapters of outer-frames. – Operating on a child. Removing a lung. Is this history or fiction? Would I be plagiarizing? As I mentioned before, the 5 Canada-chapter outer-frames will be the hardest to plan, but once I get that right, I'll be okay. – Outer-frames – a dramatic, intense experience in the life of Bethune – Inner-thoughts – all of the experience of that time in Bethune's life (in this case, the Canadian experience). No hurry on this one. It will develop on its own.

2.

5:00 AM. Can't sleep. My parents' wedding anniversary (1940). Is the painting of the mural an outer-frame? Perhaps for Chapter 1? Or is it a Backbone, or perhaps a Coda? We will see. Perhaps it's a case of intensive cross-referencing as in Pompeii & Ospringe. Outer-frames – painting mural – collapsing lung – demonstration & repression – operating on a little girl – Frances ? (probably not as an outer-frame) – inventing the rib-shears ? (probably not) – the children doing art-work in his apartment (what world are we creating for them?) I'll get it eventually. Five, sharp, clean action outer-frames. A progression, but not stated explicitly. The idea-arc / idea-plot can be carried by the inner-imagery.

3.

A piece of literature is an idea-pattern which indicates the complexity of the world in which we, as humans, find ourselves living, and the complexity of our responses to that world. A serious piece of literature is always more complex than the conscious thoughts of any reader. The challenge which that novel or poem or play presents to the reader is to raise his or her idea-response to the highest possible level of complexity. Presumably, in challenging us to respond to literature with more complex thoughts [than we have heretofore responded to life], we are being challenged to respond to life itself with a more complex, and therefore more accurate / realistic understanding of whatever we are responding to and [we are being challenged to consider] what our most valid response should be.

4.

The Canadian major cycle will be the hardest to write, perhaps, but I feel confident in thinking that it will draw heavily on my Job-novel (The nightmare experience of everyday life. Five stark, everyday, surreal, Job Raskolnikov is-this-actually-happening experiences.). The same for Spain & China (from the sources).

The overcoming of the 3-novella threat will be the challenge & the enjoyment. I have a good idea of how to integrate the 3 major cycles. It is a matter of finding the imagery which will enable me to do so: – Canada, Spain, China = the barrel staves / – Single-Life / Single-Problem Imagery = the metal hoops around the barrel. All of this planning will allow me to read the sources, positively & actively, rather than passively.

5.

It just occurred to me that the novel will be about ebb & flow. The life of society on this earth during the time that Bethune is alive. Order & chaos. Peace & war. It could be said that he grew up in peaceful Canada. [However,] He was born in 1890. In the teens (1910-1920), the world was at war while he was in his 20s. In the 1920s, (1920-1930), his 30s, the world was at peace & prosperous. In the 1930s, his 40s, the world was plunged into Depression & war in Spain, China and many other places. The analogous & non-analogous imagery will be. – the ebb & flow of the seasons – the shifting of tectonic plates – the cycle of the years, the day, the seasons. The battle of the images will be between: – chaos, war, depression, poverty, inequality, tyranny, oppression and – peace, progress, equality, prosperity, good governance, hope. Between hope & futility. Why combat these evils if “the poor will always be with you”? Will poverty, inequality, dictatorship, displacement, oppression, torture, poverty “always be with you”?

6.

I think this unifies the paradox: – Bethune A: a tremendous egotist – he quits when he can't dominate his circumstances & other people (“I am the only person alive in the world.”) – Bethune B: one of the great servants of society – gave up a chance to be a rich, respected member of his profession to live in primitive conditions & to minister to the wounded in order to build a better society for the many. This is unified in the above note. Some of the Bethune books purport to analyse his psychology, but I don't know what they say. It will be interesting to read them. They might see a simple switch from – selfish to – unselfish (epiphany, change of heart etc.), but I see all tendencies in Bethune operating at all times.

The artworks, money & prestige were all images to Bethune when he wanted them. They were not desirable in themselves, but as images of something in himself that didn't change or disappear, but simply found itself another set of images.

Journal: *The Making of The Only Person Alive in the World*

1.

I want to write a novel which is a thematic unit. This means that the novel will be about one thing. It will be a 50,000 word thought – a 50,000 word idea-pattern in the mind of the main character which is taking place at one split-second during the living of his life. This thought will have a problem-solving purpose for the main character. The quest-question will be two-fold: what to do about the problem of the moment?, and what kind of person has my whole life – to this point – led me to become? In order to achieve unity-of-thought, I wish to plan the novel as having a unity-of-design. This is why I think of a novel as being structured as a series of envelopes, each one holding a number of sub-envelopes. If I define an envelope as a device which draws together a number of items underneath its cover, then I can say that a novel of mine is composed of a series of idea-envelopes, from a single unifying idea-envelope to a number of supporting idea-envelopes, each one fitting into a unified pattern.

2.

The main character will be a combination of the historical Dr Norman Bethune – as I understand him to have been – and myself as a thinking and acting human being. The result will not be a biographical rendering of the historical Dr. Norman Bethune, but of a fictional character, “Dr. Norman Bethune”, who will be an embodiment of a sensitive human being who encounters the world as he perceives it to be and responds to that perceived reality in a way that makes sense to him. The novel will seek to capture a double-perspective: that of a fictional character – who is engaged in the challenge of living his life, while attempting to organize the imagery of that life – as he perceives it to be – in order to seek an understanding of the life which he is living and of himself as a human being.

3.

I have decided that I want fifteen action-filled outer-frames for these chapters, as Bethune strikes me as a man of thought (such as compassion for the down-trodden), but more as a man of thought-as-action rather than as a contemplative theoretician. Accordingly, he will plunge into life in each chapter in order to try to right the wrongs of society as he sees them.

I want these outer-frame present-moments to be almost nightmare-like in intensity, as if Bethune is up to his nose – and at times to his eyebrows – in the element that he seeks to subdue. In all cases the main character will be thinking in imagery, so prose commentary on the reasons for the moves (from Canada to Spain to China) and the successes and failures in each locale will not be given by the main character. Of course, the novel will be without a narrator, so imagery will be the only activator of thought in the reader.

4.

The line – I am the only person alive in the world – which was written, as I mentioned, by the historical Dr. Norman Bethune, I saw, when I read it, as a key to an understanding of the myth of Dr. Bethune that I wished to write. The questioner seems to be as intrigued by this image as I am. I was struck, as I worked on this story, that the historical character had his best success among people whose language he didn't speak. I have him recalling, later in the novel, that he taught his assistant to cook his morning egg the way he liked it by using mime. And yet, the man is hardly a recluse. He is a very sociable man, who is able to charm other people, women in particular, and is a man who dominates a room in all the phases of his successive careers. All of the words of the novel are the images which the main character has chosen to arrange into a pattern. Presumably the main character is just as intrigued as I am by the seeming paradox of the solitary man and the social man which the imagery of his story seems to present.

5.

If one takes an x-ray of the letter in which Bethune claims to have failed to communicate his ideas, one will find that the multiplicity of imagery – a mixed-metaphor complex– is actually quite coherent, in that it keeps a constant and laser-like focus on the topic of the letter, which concerns the difficulty of turning one's deepest perceptions and comprehensions into the imagery of an artistic form which will allow communication with others. The historical Bethune's life of action – off to Spain / off to China – prevented him from developing his writing and his painting talents, but his mind was certainly one which worked in imagery, and his ability to strike a balance between his absorption in the surface minutiae of life (ordering bandages etc.) and his ability to penetrate to the issues and concepts below that surface – to thematic bedrock – was certainly one of his admirable qualities.

6.

Some commentators have said that it was just as well that the historical Bethune was forced to leave Spain when he did, as he was a creature of impulse with no staying power: that he was an instigator and an originator, but did not have a mind for organization which would have allowed him to run the blood-transfusion mission on a daily basis, once it was up and running. I had voices echo those sentiments in the Comment minor cycle, but I disagree with this conception of the historical Norman Bethune vehemently. If one examines the Bethune trajectory of organization – the conception of an idea, the anticipation of advantages and disadvantages, the structuring of an enterprise, the organizing of a procedure, the gathering of a competent staff, the recruiting of money, the organizing of the various aspects of an enterprise (collecting blood, stabilizing blood, delivering blood), the focussing on the end-product, and the fine-tuning of such an operation for maximum impact – it becomes apparent that he was good at all aspects of organizing an enterprise.

Conceptually, with his work towards socialized medicine in Canada, and in practice, with the implementation of the blood-transfusion unit in Spain, and with the designing and setting-up of model hospital and the mobile hospital in China, Dr. Norman Bethune was amazing in his ability to balance the minutia of the momentary need (teaching the peasants how to sew bedsheets into bandages) with the ability to conceive of a means to create a health system for a whole army. His penchant for fine-tuning indicates that he would have made an excellent administrator of an established health system in China if

he had lived longer. That he had no talent for organization, or fine-tuning, and no staying-power beyond his first enthusiasms is a very incorrect conclusion to draw about the historical Dr. Norman Bethune, as a reading of his personal letters and reports will show abundantly.