

Vanity of vanities; all is vanity.

Greg Michaelson

*YEAR that trembled and reel'd beneath me!
Your summer wind was warm enough—yet the air I breathed froze me;
A thick gloom fell through the sunshine and darken'd me;
Must I change my triumphant songs? said I to myself;
Must I indeed learn to chant the cold dirges of the baffled? 5
And sullen hymns of defeat?
Walt Whitman¹*

Why are we so hung up on *how* something is published, provided it *is* published? If we can't hook a publisher, what are the alternatives?

Year that trembled and reel'd beneath me is one of the poems in Whitman's *Drum-Taps*. His first collection, *Leaves of Grass* (1855), had caused considerable controversy for its unashamed celebrations of sensuality, and barely disguised homo-eroticism. The poems in *Drum-Taps* were written during the American Civil War, when Whitman worked as a Unionist medical orderly. Exhausted by his experiences, and worried that he wouldn't find a publisher, he paid a printer to produce the collection.

Would we say that Whitman was self-published or vanity published? The term "privately published" seems inappropriate, as that suggests books as gifts, rather than for sale, as was the impecunious Whitman's intent.

In contrast, Virginia Woolf really did self-publish, in the modern sense of doing it all one's self: the Woolfs produced the first *Hogarth Press* books on a hand press in their Richmond dining room. And, today, like the Woolfs, many publishing houses also print their proprietors' books. Is that so disreputable?

What about contributing to publication costs? This is really not uncommon. Many literary magazines and journals keep going by charging an entry fee for competitions, where the prize is to be published. Fair enough, no? But what about submitting a collection to a publisher and having it accepted, subject to a fee? Is that more like vanity publishing?

In his sardonic takedown, Umberto Eco² called the Italian vanity publishing industry the Fourth Dimension (FD). The first three dimensions are the manuscript, legitimate publication, and success. Eco hazards that 99.9% of manuscripts are never published. To meet this demand, FD publishers produce books for a fee, review them for their own in-house magazines, and sell the unsold copies back to the writer. We might ask: what's the harm? The writer has become an author, the publisher has made a living, and the FD world is self sustaining.

George Orwell gave four reasons for writing: sheer egoism, aesthetic enthusiasm, historical impulse and political purpose. He was engagingly candid about his first reason, characterising it as:

"Desire to seem clever, to be talked about, to be remembered after death, to get your own back on the grown-ups who snubbed you in childhood, etc., etc. It is humbug to pretend this is not a motive, and a strong one.."³

¹ *Drum-Taps*, 1865.

² U. Eco, *The Italian Genius Industry, Apocalypse Postponed*, Flamingo, 1995.

³ G. Orwell, *Why I Write, Gangrel*, Summer 1946.

These all boil down to wanting to be well regarded by other people. Clearly, to be well regarded, one must be visible, and that means to be published, that is, to be an author, not just a writer.

Nonetheless, an important point of regard is that it's deserved. This gives the strongest of reasons for decrying vanity publishing: having the means to pay someone to publish your work is clearly not the same as being selected, ostensibly on merit, to be published. We may not agree with publishers' decisions about our work, but, no matter how opaque the judgement, a rejection suggests that someone else has read at least some of it and thought about it.

If vanity publishing deserves a body swerve, self publishing is now open to anyone with access to the Internet, and time. It's hard work, for sure; writers don't necessarily have the skills to produce a volume that they feel does justice to their writing. And it's not straightforward making something that works both as an eBook and as print on demand. There are lots of small businesses that offer help with self-publishing, but, again, for a fee.

Self-publishing needn't involve any upfront payment if the platform takes a cut from sales. The big barriers are then publicity and distribution. Posting on social media reaches a closed circle of potential purchasers, which gets smaller with every free copy. And buying multiple copies and hawking them round local bookshops is dispiriting, as is being asked to collect the unsold. Platforms may also offer publicity, commonly through offers to their browsers, but, again, for a fee.

So many pitfalls. So much cost.

Writing, like reading, is a supremely social as well as solitary pursuit. We write for others, and we're immersed in the written. If we want others to read what we write, then it has to be out there, and that's really hard to achieve without help from publishers, who themselves need to eat.

To return to Eco, to become authors from writers, we really do have to somehow traverse the first three dimensions: manuscript, published, success. And to get to the second dimension, maybe all we're left with is:

*Dear Sir or Madam, will you read my book?
It took me years to write, will you take a look?⁴*

while not giving in to Whitman's "sullen songs of defeat".

⁴ J. Lennon & P. McCartney, *Paperback Writer*, 1966, lyrics © Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC