My short story, “Once More Time Around,” is a simple and, in outline, familiar story: a man walks into a bar, has too much to drink, listens to some music, experiences a drunken moment of community with the other patrons. Finally, he either disappears or leaves. Partly I was playing with cliché and genre: I have a long-standing interest in *noire* writing (associated with Hammett and Chandler). I wanted to achieve some “*noire* notes”– the bar setting and prominence of whiskey are typical tropes – without following the familiar moves.

I am interested in the literary treatment of social relationships and contact. Inspirations here are W.G. Sebald – though my work is less politically and historically motivated than his – and the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, both concerned with what I would call the ethical texture of life. Sebald always tried to approach his subject-matter “tangentially,” while for Levinas questions such as “how should I live?” are to do with our obligations to others. These themes are not obvious in my story (I am trying to approach things indirectly, as Sebald did), though I hope that by its end questions about who the man is (or was), what kind of life he led, and the significance of the bar scene are beginning to be felt by the reader.

Revisions were made in order to achieve a sense of rhythmic compression. Often, this was a matter of removing conjunctions, resulting in an angularity or bluntness to the sentences. Throughout my piece (though see the second paragraph for an example), I use minor and asyndetic constructions, a technique that became more pronounced the more I edited and revised. Amy Hempel, whose work is journalistic in its concision, was an influence here. Consider the following opening sentences from two of her stories, “Weekend” and “Church Cancels Cow”:

The game was called on account of dogs – Hunter in the infield, Tucker in the infield, Bosco and Boone at first base.

Pheasant feathers in a plastic jack-o’-lantern – this is the way people decorate graves in October across from my house.

Though Hempel’s language is incredibly simple, the sentences seem so compressed, and have such a strange rhythm, that one can almost lose the reference point or “centre.” There are several moments in my story where I attempt something similar:

Ground-floor house conversion, the owner-manager living upstairs – a small bar.

Two too-drunk friends whose play spilled over, and was ended by an open-palm across a nose, a spray of blood over one gold-purple wall and a woman.

The first example originally read: “It was a small bar, converted from the ground-floor of a house, the owner-manager living upstairs.” Though my use of minor and asyndetic constructions is more pronounced than Hempel’s, I have tried to emulate her rhythm; I have also used such constructions – coupled with relatively simple, often monosyllabic language – to try and achieve a sense of poetic compression, much as I believe Hempel does in her work. My second example exemplifies this: the rhythm of the sentence is a little “off-beat” because of the lack of a conjunction between the second and third clauses; and though the sentence is longer than the first example, in just twenty-seven words a great deal of action – an untold story – takes place.

There are moments where I attempt something syntactically rather different. The minor sentence “Grant Green’s ‘My Favourite Things’ followed by the Julie Andrews’ version” is disrupted by several far more complicated parenthetical clauses, placed between en-dashes. Here, I was experimenting with sentence structure – aiming to build something rather complex from a simple base. I was also aiming for something suggestive of the rolling rhythms of Grant Green’s recording. In doing so, I was responding to Jeff Dyer’s *But Beautiful*, a collection of fictionalized essays on jazz. The technical challenge of trying to “write music” interested me, particularly because Dyer, though impressive in many ways, risks falling into repetitious stock phrases, even as he means to present us with supposedly unique figures from jazz history.

Narrative voice and perspective were a particular challenge with this piece, which is told by a third-person omniscient narrator – the omniscience is signalled by the shift to a truly third-person, though speculative, voice in the penultimate section – but focalized for the most part through the man. I was aiming for the restraint that Elmore Leonard favours, and which he associates with Hemingway. There are details about the bar’s decor and wall-colour, brands of drinks; yet what does the man look like, how old is he, what is his? There is, I hope, a sense of distance, even though the narrator can tell us about the man’s reminiscences: we know what he experienced, but not how he felt or feels. This was a matter of careful refinement: I had to refrain from any interventive narratorial comment; the dialogue had to be made increasingly sparse. Though the narrative perspective is always third-person, there is a necessary shift of focalization in the final section – necessary, because the man is gone, and yet the story is not quite done. This shift is potentially jarring, as it may make the story feel less coherent overall; however, I hope that the effect is to make us feel more keenly the man’s disappearance – did he leave, evaporate? Who knows? – and thus to ask questions about the significance of his evening, his memories, his few discarded possessions, his unanswered phone-call.