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The Explorers of Inner Space

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WHY do writers write? To inform, to persuade, to entertain, to explain, but most of all to discover what they have to say.

The layman believes—and often writes badly himself because of it—that the writer has a complete thought or vision he merely copies down, acting as a stenographer for the muse. A few writers on rare occasions have reported such an experience—but only after years of thinking, reading, and craftsmanlike writing. For most writers the act of putting words on paper is not the recording of a discovery but the very act of exploration itself.

John Updike says, "Writing and re-writing are a constant search for what one is saying." Robert Frost speaks of ". . . the surprise of remembering something I didn't know I knew." "It begins with a character, usually, and once he stands up on his feet and begins to move," according to William Faulkner, "all I do is trot along behind him with a paper and pencil trying to keep up long enough to put down what he says and does."

We read these writers and see their words rigid, right, frozen on the page, but they found their own writing always moving, ever changing. "Writing to me

is a voyage, an odyssey, a discovery, because I'm never certain of precisely what I will find," says Gabriel Fielding. Robert Bolt declares, "Writing a play is thinking, not thinking about thinking . . ." E. M. Forster adds, "How do I know what I think until I see what I say?" And Alberto Moravia testifies that, "One writes a novel in order to know why one writes it."

There is a mystery in this process, for as Nancy Hale says, "Many an author will speak of writing, in his best work, more than he actually knows." C. Day-Lewis concludes, "I do not sit down at my desk to put into verse something that is already clear in my mind. If it were clear in my mind, I should have no incentive or need to write about it, for I am an explorer. . . . We do not write in order to be understood, we write in order to understand."

FOR the writer, writing is a process, a way of seeing, of hearing what he has to say to himself, a means of discovering meaning. Most writers are compulsive about their methods of work—the writing hours, the special lapboard, the texture of the paper, the blackness of the ink, the grip of the pen. I believe this is, in part, because they feel a prim-

itive awe before their tools. Something happens as the pen point scratches against the paper that they cannot quite explain. Words, scenes, ideas, phrases, characters, concepts, appear unbidden when the writing is going well, and the writer, surprised, must rationalize these accidents, accept them or reject them, control them and use them.

There are moments of inspiration even in quite ordinary writing. The first two sentences of this article came to me weeks after I was invited by a student of mine, English teacher Carol Hovland, to write for Concord *Dial*, the student literary magazine at Concord-Carlisle, Massachusetts, High School. Subconsciously I had thought about the assignment, turning it over, putting it aside, consciously forgetting and unconsciously remembering.

Guilt itched my conscience and finally, as I was drifting into sleep one night, these lead sentences came to me and I carefully etched them into my memory. When morning came I woke slowly and untypically read a while in bed, reluctantly accepted a telephone call, glanced at the *Today* show with detachment, and was curt with my family. I tried to protect myself in a way they cannot completely understand, allowing my subconscious to work, avoiding involvement, waiting for the moment when the line tightens and I must draw in my catch. (All metaphors are dangerous or I would describe the feeling of the growing idea as intellectual indigestion, a strange, rumbling, eruptive discomfort.)

I started to make notes on my clipboard, to play with ideas and words, the symbols of ideas, in order to discover their structure. Then I quickly committed myself to a first draft, letting myself go, dictating as fast as my wife can type on the IBM, angry when she asks about a pronoun reference or a comma—damn commas—because the words are coming fast, and I'm trying

to see where they are going. This is no time for syntax. Dictating, writing with a pen, typing—there is little difference for me at this stage of the writing process. I'm trying to keep up with the flow of ideas, with the chain reaction which results from one word striking another word. I let the writing run, trying to discover its dimensions, its limits, its natural form. For more than a week I kept picking the article up, fiddling with it, and putting it aside, until this morning when, in spite of other priorities, I had to dictate it again, from the beginning.

It changed as I wrote it. For example, I put the insert in here which I had planned for the first page but was shut out somehow by the rush of the writing. I still ask myself, should this fit here, or does it need to be said earlier that the writer does, of course, usually start out thinking he knows where he is going? The professional writer spends hours, days, even years prewriting, taking careful aim, getting ready, and he is often a compulsive outliner. But he has learned to accept the mercurial conditions of discovery once he begins to write. On the page he experiences happy accidents: the unexpected word gives the poet insight, the character acts independent of the novelist and reveals the story to the writer, the historical trend comes clear under the historian's pen.

Naturally the writer is irritated, made impatient, even frightened by these mutinous sentences. He hurls crumpled pages across the room, slashes ink through words, amputates and transplants paragraphs as he tries to capture and control his own words so that he will discover his own ideas.

THE process of discovery is hard work. I see best not looking out the window, nor living life, but suffering what one writer called "the inspiration of the writing desk." Freedom and discipline, spontaneity and practice, craft

and art—how can we describe this never stable process? The writer's steps are never steps; they do not occur simultaneously or separately; they do not always occur in the same order. The writer, fearing change but accepting it, exists in a creative turbulence, tossed between the opposite tensions of creativity and control. And yet there are some stages of this chaotic evolution which can be identified and understood.

First, the writer has a hint of a subject. The writer knows he can't write what ought to be written, but only what can be written. He has to have a feeling of completeness, a hunch of a direction, or a hint of a conclusion before he begins to write. And so he allows ideas to grow in his subconscious, nurturing them, feeding them, examining them, but not harvesting them until they are ripe.

The writer usually has an audience in mind. It may be a well-calculated audience, for he may recognize he has something to say which other people need or want to know, but his sense of audience may also come from a gut faith that by writing what he is discovering about life he will expose himself to others who will recognize what he feels as truth. The writer has faith in himself, in the exploration of what is him, finding objectivity through subjectivity. As Robert Motherwell has said of art, "The more anonymous a work, the less universal, because in some paradoxical way we understand the universal through the personal."

Trying to capture abstractions, the writer hungers for the concrete. He continually seeks the specific revealing act, quotation, statistic which will enable him to nail down and therefore communicate an idea or feeling. The helicopter pilot in Vietnam jams Vicks in his nostrils to shut out the smell of death, and the writer hoards specifics which spark in his readers the "shock of recognition" and complete the arc of communication.

Knowing that form is meaning, the writer seeks a design for his writing. Ernest Hemingway said, "Prose is architecture, not interior decoration." And the writer, obsessed with chaos, has a psychological need to tell himself stories, to find an order in the universe symbolized through the artist's form. The writer's belief in form—the scientific theory, the sonnet, the history, the novel—is testimony of his faith that there can be order in the world, and the form which evolves in the process of writing in itself stands as meaning. Composer Anton Webern stated, "To live is to defend a form." That dark New England poet, Robert Frost, said, "When in doubt there is always form for us to go on with. . . . The background is hugeness and confusion shading away from where we stand into black and utter chaos. . . . To me any little form I assert upon it is . . . to be considered for how much more it is than nothing." He also called the poem "a momentary stay against confusion." The writer, first, is a seeker of forms.

The writer, however, not only has to find a subject, an audience, specifics, a form, he has to commit himself to the blank page. He writes to discover, with surprise, disappointment and pride, what he has written. How little he knows of what he thought he knew; how much he knows that he didn't know he knew.

He begins to discover what he has said and, therefore, what he has to say by subjecting himself to his own critical eye, and perhaps the eyes of others who are not blinded by maternity. Now deeply involved in the process of writing he redefines his subject, seeks better specifics, perfects his form—researching, restructuring, rethinking, rewriting—seeking through these perpetual reconsiderations his own meaning.

AT last he edits, engaged in a personal struggle with language. Mark Twain reportedly said that "The dif-

ference between the right word and the wrong word is the difference between lightning and a lightning bug." Hemingway admitted, "I rewrote the ending to *Farewell to Arms*, the last page of it, thirty-nine times before I was satisfied." The *Paris Review* interviewer asked, "Was there some technical problem there? What was it that had you stumped?" And Hemingway answered, "Getting the words right." The writer is a cold executive, making a thousand decisions in a paragraph, hiring one word, firing another. He is a craftsman who hones a phrase, reads a sentence aloud, moves a word, fits in an idea, shapes a paragraph, scene, or chapter. I have polished, shaped, cut down, and built up this article during a dozen readings and rereadings. I don't always enjoy this process for I am lazy, but it is necessary. It comes with the territory. The writer knows he has to make the stubborn personal effort by sweat to discover his meaning so that he will find out precisely what he has said.

There are rewards and excitement, however, for when we discover what we have said we discover who we are. In finding your voice you discover your identity. Style is not a fashionable garment you put on; style is what you are; what you have to say as well as how you say it. We admire people who are natural, who are themselves, and the best way to know yourself and your own world may be to try and write it down.

Your world is the universe you can describe by using your own eyes, listening to your own voice—finding your

own style. We write to explore the constellations and galaxies which lie unseen within us waiting to be mapped with our own words.

Now, as I come to the end of this article, still another private experiment with the process of writing, I begin to see, like a photograph slowly evolving in the developer—shadow turning into line—what I have to say because I have dared to try to say it. I have learned about the process of discovery in writing, by writing. But once said, the job is never done, for writing is never final. The writer goes on writing to discover, explore, and map the evolution of his personal worlds of inner space.

Lookin' In

by Floyd L. Bergman



The class told me they were making an underground film, but this is ridiculous!