Self-Interview

Roger Zelazny

574 W. University Pkwy.

Baltimore, Md. 21210

March 10, 1972

Dear Mr. Walker,

Just received your second letter. I guess I should have dropped you a line to let you know I had received the earlier one and was unable to reply at that time, as I was pushing hard to complete a novel. However, when I reach a certain point in a book I simply stop writing letters until I’ve finished.

At any rate, I completed the book this past weekend and have been catching up on my correspondence this week. Things are somewhat under control now, so I will see what I can tell you concerning myself and my feelings with respect to language, writing and suchlike...

I was born in Ohio, and for reasons never completely clear to me decided to be a writer at about the same time I came to enjoy reading and began to realize where books came from. So I started writing. I was around 11 or 12 years old when I collected my first rejection slips...

[You have asked me to step outside myself, then turn around and interview me. Okay. I’m outside me now. I’ll stop right there and start questioning him.]

“Wait a minute, Z. We just passed a whole generation of psychoanalytic critics and biographers awhile back. What about childhood trama and all that crap?”

“I believe a piece of writing should be considered of, in, by and for itself, a thing independent of the person who wrote it.”

“But you are talking to me. I know where you got that. You wrote nothing but poetry for years⁠—after you got out of high school and started college⁠—and you got hung up on the New Criticism: close textual analysis, and the hell with the guy who wrote it. A touch of end-of-century decadence, too. The Symbolists, Firbank... But you were also a Psychology major until your final year. You know that writing is a form of behavior, and as such it invariably bears the mark of its executor.”

“Of course.”

“So tell us about your childhood hangups.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m a bug on privacy.”

“Shyness?”

“Some, I suppose. I like to keep my writing apart from the rest of my life. I make my living displaying pieces of my soul in some distorted form or other. The rest of it is my own.”

“Then you are saying you find the New Criticism bit a convenient defense.”

“Only partly. I still see considerable merit there. I am, by and large, against biographical criticism. Schiller used to keep rotting apples in his writing table. As he was working, he would open it every now and then and take a whiff. What does this tell you about Schiller?”

“That he liked smells? I forget whether there were lots of smells in Wilhelm Tell...”

“So do I, obviously. It tells me something about Schiller, that’s all. It tells me nothing about his writing.”

“Does this relate to the distinction you like to make between self-expression and communication?”

“I’m glad you asked that question right then. I like the way your mind works. ⁠—Yes, it does. Communication is generally a form of self-expression, but the opposite does not necessarily apply. I consider myself in the communication business, not the self-expression business. They are necessarily bound up together in any piece of fiction, but I put in only as much of myself as I deem appropriate, no more, no less. If the story is a failure, it is not worth much consideration; if it is successful, then everything is in place, and it should not be necessary to ask for more.”

“All right. But if certain themes tend to persist in the work of a particular writer, people cannot help but wonder why. You seem to have a thing for mythology, immortality and protagonists who are not always completely admirable people. Would you care to say why?”

“No.”

“Well, I’ll swing around then. You worked for the government for seven years. Three of those years you spent interviewing people⁠—thousands of them, I guess⁠—and then for four years you wrote memos, letters, reports, sections of manuals. I imagine you like to think you picked up something about dialogue from all those conversations; and maybe something of people’s quirks, mannerisms and such.”

“I would like to think so.”

“How about all that garbage you used to grind out in officialese? Did you feel any abrasion on your own style, your way of telling stories?”

“No. I never regarded it as real writing. It was just a chore. It was pure, specialized communication. Not a drop of myself in it.”

“You were writing fiction, in the evenings, for the whole seven years?”

“Yes. I began that job and my first adult attempts at fiction in the same month, back in 1962. I kept the two sections of my life compartmentalized from the beginning.”

“Why didn’t you mind talking about that?”

“Because it is one of those So what? facts.”

“All right. You did your grad work in dramatic lit, your thesis on a minor Jacobean dramatist. Would you care to say whether you feel influenced by the theater in general, the Elizabethan theater in particular?”

“Yes, I do. The language, the violence... I cannot deny it.”

“More than, say, modern poetry?”

“Very difficult to answer. Probably, though.”

“ ‘What does “language” mean to you as a writer?’ Paul Walker asked me to ask you that.”

“Finding the right word to cover a situation at the moment the need for it arises, I’d say.”

“What governs your choice?”

“My feelings. I see what he’s getting at, though. I feel that I did my formative reading, style-wise, many years ago. I feel incapable as well as disinclined to pulling apart my way of telling things now and looking for influences. Somewhere along the line, my own style grew a protective pelt and set out scratching along its own line of development, as most writers do. You are pretty much immune to direct influence once this point is passed.”

“Would you care to comment on your particular style?”

“No.”

“Is there anything else you would care to say, about yourself, about writing, about science fiction?”

“No, I don’t think so. That about covers it. You can step back inside now.”

Further deponent sayeth not.

Sorry again for not informing you of the delay that was to follow your earlier letter. By the way, in answer to your unofficial question, I did have a strong Catholic background, but I am not a Catholic. Somewhere in the past, I believe I once answered that in the affirmative for strange and complicated reasons. But I am not a member of any organized religion.

Best wishes,



Notes

An excerpt of this letter from Zelazny to Paul Walker, dated March 10, 1972, was published as an interview “by Paul Walker.” However, Zelazny himself wrote this unusual essay. Walker sparked its creation in a letter to Zelazny, “Rather than simply tell you to ‘tell me about yourself,’ let me appeal to the novelist in you. Let us suppose that you are in my place: you have been assigned to interview Roger Zelazny. You arrive and are invited in. You see yourself⁠—but what do you see? You ask yourself to tell you about Roger Zelazny: where am I and how did I get here? What does he say?”[[1]](#footnote-1) Zelazny complied and produced this amusing result.

The novel mentioned is Today We Choose Faces, which Zelazny completed on March 5, 1972[[2]](#footnote-2). Ronald Firbank’s novels are notable for their symbolism, camp, and wit. Friedrich Schiller was a German playwright and poet; Wilhelm Tell was one of his best known plays. The minor Jacobean dramatist was Cyril Tourneur, whose play The Revenger’s Tragedy was the focus of Zelazny’s Master’s thesis. Further deponent sayeth not is legalese for “the person signing this affidavit has nothing more to say.”

1. Letter from Paul Walker to Roger Zelazny, dated January 19, 1972. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Letter from Roger Zelazny to Victor, dated March 6, 1972. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)