The Process of Composing

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With my novels, I tend to think of the characters first. The story begins to develop as I try these characters in different situations. With shorter fiction I generally get the idea first, and then develop a character to fit whatever it is that I want to do.

As to the original addresses of the characters and ideas, I do not know. I simply encounter them mentally and proceed from there to extend our acquaintanceships. I believe that preparation has something, though not everything, to do with it. I attempt to cultivate a state of preparedness by reading widely⁠—sciences, history, biography, general literature, poetry. I am also very fond of the theatre and of travel.

For a long while I tended to agree with a statement of Malcolm Muggeridge’s to the effect that a writer’s mind best remembers those things which the writer is best able to write about. In recent years, though, I have come to embrace the corollary⁠—that the more things I can experience, even vicariously, the more things I am better able to remember and to write about. At least, I like to think that this is the case.

Generally, I do not like knowing beforehand how I will end a novel. My ideal method of composition is to begin writing once I know my major character and a few of the situations in which he or she will be functioning⁠—i.e., about thirty percent of the story⁠—if the feeling be present that the story does indeed exist somewhere in the basement of my mind. I enjoy relying upon a subconscious plotting mechanism and discovering its operation as I work. As I said, this is my ideal way of proceeding. It is also a luxury. And this is because it usually takes me half again as long to compose a novel in this fashion than it would if I had outlined the story first.

When speed is essential⁠—which it often is⁠—I will outline. This tightens and tidies, but I sometimes lose something as a result. There is a certain physical and aesthetic exhilaration which comes over me when I write in the first manner and suddenly reach what John Brunner once referred to as the “Aha!” point⁠—the place where everything falls together in my mind and I see the entire story spread out before me like a map or a tapestry, where I realize why I had been inserting some of the material which had been rushing to mind, where the world of the book takes on a life of its own and I need but observe and transcribe rather than continue composing.

Outlines, though, often turn themselves into points of departure for me, revising themselves as I go along, so that the other subconscious process often does come into play of its own accord. I have no fundamental objection to this, as it generally results in a better story than that which I had initially recorded.

I visualize everything in my stories in considerable detail. If I cannot see a person or place clearly I cannot write about them too well. I tend to hear the dialogue, also, when rehearsing it in my mind. I sometimes think that this has something to do with a childhood spent listening to radio dramas.

I try to read for two hours every day and write for two hours every day, on no set schedule. Mornings have been best of late, however.