

The Novelist at Work : an address given by WG in 1937

In the spring of 1936, WG's closest friend Fred Harris invited the author (then with three published novels to his name) to address the Camborne Literary Society on the subject of THE NOVELIST AT WORK. Despite the diffident WG's reservations, the talk was enough of a success that he was persuaded to reprise it to audiences in Penzance and at least one other venue in February and March of 1937 (by which time he had published four novels and was about to publish a fifth).

The draft he wrote for the first speech was re-used, after revision, for the second and third with the result that the document which survives in Truro's RIC archive is a fascinating amalgam of all three. Rather than try to disentangle earlier and later thoughts, I have attempted below to present a coherent reconstruction of the whole – although certain marginalia which would have meant something to the speaker but convey little to me (e.g. "Frank Swinnerton, recent autobiography"; "Galsworthy and swaddling clothes"; "E. Phillips Oppenheim, 1887"; "Flaubert and the cabbage field" etc) have been ignored.

Since WG wrote the draft in abbreviated fashion – Shall always look back to that time certain pleasure – I have fleshed his words out into the kind of sentences – I shall always look back to that time with a certain pleasure – he might have spoken.

What follows is not a verbatim record of those long-ago nights, but does hopefully catch some trace of their faint echo...

I think I might begin with something in the nature of an explanation, and an apology. When Mr Harris originally asked me to give a talk to the Camborne Literary Society on my novels with particular reference to *John Rowe*, I reluctantly agreed, knowing that most of the people I was to talk to would have had time to make some acquaintance with the book in question. My reluctance stemmed from the fact that, although by now reasonably used to writing about novels, I am not at all used to talking about them, or how they are written, which is a very different thing.

Indeed, I have made it my practice not to inquire too closely into the machinery of writing. Self-consciousness is good in an author in some degree but if overdone is liable to prove a serious check on the fluidity of his work. With a few notable exceptions, self-consciousness of this kind has been notably and happily lacking in English authors.

The title of this talk is *The Novelist at Work*. I feel that in order to justify this I should be able to produce a scale model of myself complete with buttons A and B. I don't propose to do that, but do suggest that the principal merit of a talk like this – if it has any at all – will lie in the fact that such observations on my own work as I may offer will be straight from the horse's mouth and, as such, have the same merit as all reliable stable information.

One could consider the subject of novel writing academically; there are books on the subject, notably Lubbock's *Craft of Fiction*, Forster's *Aspects of the Novel* and C. Henry Warren's *The Writer's Art*, all of which – certainly the first two – deal more exhaustively and completely with that side than I could hope to do in the time at my disposal. But, so far as other novelists are concerned, except for the occasional reminiscences of a few writers I have met, you are on an equal footing with me. Many of you may have read Henry James's big book on the subject, Arnold Bennett's diaries, Somerset Maugham's prefaces, Rudyard Kipling's witty but all too brief comments in his recently-published autobiography *Something of Myself*. Those and a hundred other such books are available. Only so far as my own writing is concerned can I offer you something which is not at the moment retailed at the bookshop priced 3/6 and, if I have anything to do with it, never will be.

So, how does a novelist come to graduate into the profession of writing? Does he say majestically "Let there be a novel" as who would say "Let there be light" and there was light? Or does he have some secret, fixed plan to act upon, some infallible formula for their production, as two parts of hydrogen and one of oxygen invariably produce water? Or is it something of a cross between the two, a product of impulse and rule and precept in varying degree?

From my own experience in writing a number of stories, certain broad principles have evolved, but it would be a mistake to regard them as hard and fast rules – indeed, no two of my novels were hatched, planned or written in precisely the same way. That notwithstanding, no novel can be regarded as a distinct and separate accomplishment without threads of

thought connecting it to those preceding it and following. Thus to give an account solely of the planning and writing of *John Rowe* would be to show only one side of a many-sided figure. Perhaps the best approach, therefore, is to give an account of my writing in general, leading up to and then including *John Rowe*. So, now – with apologies – the story of my life.

My efforts at writing began at an early age, so the actual desire to write is not traceable back to any special date. At six I dictated a story: "*Oh look,*" said Tom to his sister, "*here is a dead man on the doorstep.*" And there were footsteps in the snow. It was a story of no great length, but looking back on my own childish efforts and those of other children, I am struck by the force of the writing, for all its crudeness. There is a certain starkness, a Biblical brevity and directness. At six it comes straight from the heart and, speaking from personal experience, compares favourably with mid-teen efforts cluttered with clichés, long words, general prolixity and attempts at so-called literary English. After all, with the possible exception of *Malice Aforethought*, I cannot think of any thriller with a more arresting opening than the childish example I've just quoted.

Soon after growing out of my teens I began to think out the plot of my first novel. Previous to that I had been somewhat unduly encouraged by my success in selling short articles and sketches. I had also started an abortive novel and written about half a dozen short stories, quite rightly returned by editors. But now I broke quite away from all that and began a fresh novel in real earnest – and a tremendous hurry. Why? Because of a youthful desire to make my name in a week; also, a powerful urge I could not control to begin a story.

The main framework of the plot of this novel (which became *The House with the Stained Glass Windows*, my first published) was only visible in parts and its characters were thin and nebulous; a few incidents stood out as landmarks towards which I ploughed my way through a sort of uncharted desert. After 75,000 words in five weeks, it petered out because, although mentally fresh enough, I was physically exhausted. I slept with the book, dreamt of it, didn't leave the house. It was the nearest approach to the blood and tears in which first novels are generally supposed to be written that you could imagine.

But despite the growing pains, I shall always look back to that time with a certain pleasure, because, as I wrote, the nebulous characters which had been just puppets moving shadow-like against the back-curtain of my mind gradually assumed individuality – and more, a life of their own, quite

independent of me. They even changed their individuality against my will, so that one or two began became quite unlike the characters I had intended them to be. I was like a man driving an unwieldy team of horses who suddenly finds his passengers one by one standing beside him and helping with the reins.

During those five weeks I never once read over what I had written, which as a principle proved so satisfactory that it is one – almost the only one related to writing – from which I have not since seriously departed. In not one of the four other novels completed since then have I read through what I have written until the work was either finished or at least a month old. I occasionally have to look back to verify a fact, but for no other reason. You may say that this involves very good memory if nothing else in the case of a novel which may take four months to draft. But what if the heroine should contradict herself once or twice? This is a small price to pay in revision for the insurance that one's dreaded critical faculty should not get to work too soon and choke the life out of one's text.

In writing this way, with one's mind very active and no thought of immediate revision, all sorts of things come out and, once jotted down, are almost instantly forgotten. Some are rubbish, but others definitely good – and unexpected. When, nine months later – and never let it be said I have no restraint – I read over for the first time what I had written during those five exhausting weeks, I was, I must confess, quite impressed – sufficiently so, at least, to go on and complete the book.

The whole took two years. From this it will be gathered that very little of the original impulsive burst survived in the finished script. But the scene was now set, incidents worked out and, most importantly, the characters now lived and breathed as surely as you or I.

In case it should be of interest to trace the history of this first novel further, I may say that I sent it to one publishing house who returned it after four months but asked to see more of my work. Whilst encouraging, this was a request of doubtful value to a young man anxious to justify his existence on earth. However, I sent the book to another publishing house who kept it for seven months and then agreed to accept it. So much for *The House*.

In order to understand the genesis of my next two books it is necessary to go back a little way. With all my books except the second there have been three distinguishable stages in the actual production of the story: (1) Idea, (2) Plot and (3) Incidents. Seeds are always falling on my mind and it

depends on its condition which – if any – germinate. Where an idea comes from I usually will not know, but once it has taken root, developing the plot is mainly a matter of hard work and many of the minor incidents arise during the writing process. Only in one case, after five novels written, can I identify the source of an idea. This concerns *John Rowe*.

Shortly after completing *The House* a man came to live in our district. He was unusual; roused curiosity. Casual inquiry elicited his story: he had held an educational position in India. On his way home during the war he was torpedoed in the Channel and, after being picked up, spent more than a year in a Cornish hospital with complete loss of memory. His family had believed him dead, but he was traced by accident and now reunited with them. Although his memory had not returned, he was otherwise normal, though quiet and reserved.

Such a story is not unique in fiction, but the discovery that it could happen in fact gave me both an idea in not-quite-usual form and the courage to use it.

In light of my traumatising first-novel experience I resolved this time to do things differently. Everything was to be planned. There would be no haphazard, impulsive plunging into unknown depths. Each chapter would be worked out systematically, every character carefully realised before I made a start on drafting.

This over a period of three weeks I largely achieved but, when at last the time came to begin to write, I found the impulse to do so had evaporated. I felt no interest in the plot, incidents or characters. The effort of working everything out beforehand had consumed the original impulse entirely.

What to do? Though no believer in pandering too abjectly to one's inspiration, quite frankly I couldn't have started then whatever had depended on it. After a period of brooding, I abruptly had the idea for another story. This time, on a flood of reaction, I took a diametrically opposite tack. With this germ of an idea, few incidents worked out except the first ones and scarcely any plot, I decided to write coldly and systematically while allowing my characters all the play they needed. Considering everything, *Into the Fog*, my second published novel, didn't work out so badly. But we're concerned here principally with my third, *John Rowe*.

For thirteen months it lay neglected while *Fog* was completed. Then, after a brief holiday, I came back to it on a flood of reaction as strong as the one on which I had left it. Having finished *Into the Fog* and tired of that

style temporarily, I returned with real pleasure to the mood of my first novel – but with the big difference this time that the whole story was ready planned; worked out in every detail.

I set to and wrote it, beginning to end, 100,000 words in two months, and this time found the effort less exhausting. That, of course, didn't yield a finished book, which took another five months, but still, for me, seven months all told is easily a record – and there is no question that *John Rowe* was written more easily and with less conscious effort than any other of my novels.

The only reasons I have to offer for this are connected more with externals than with the actual writing: first, I was helped by the gratifying reception given to my first novel and, second, my publisher's expressed willingness to take two books a year was a spur. The only other explanation I can offer is that I think a condition of successful novel writing is that the author must have an affection for his characters and this was particularly so with me in respect of *John Rowe*.

You will see, so far as my own case is concerned, that the manner of writing has differed with each book attempted – the first was hot-blooded, the second almost as cold-blooded as the first was hot (though I am pretty sure it is not detectable in the finished article) and the third a mixture of each method, with an inclination towards the first. And what may we conclude from this? That the actual manner of writing depends as much as anything upon circumstances exterior to the novel – although the success or failure of a particular novel does not depend upon the manner of its writing at all.

Having made that much clear, let us turn now to consider the plot of *John Rowe*. I said that the evolution of a story could be divided into three main categories, the first two of which were the Idea, the source of which is usually quite untraceable, but in *John Rowe* happens to be marked, and the Plot which, once given the idea, is mainly – *mainly* – a matter of hard work. No doubt you will ask what exactly is meant by hard work? How does one tackle the challenge of nurturing a single seed into a complicated harvest?

By thinking. By exercising one's imagination, it goes without saying. Not uncontrolled imagination, though, but imagination in the close care of one's literary conscience. For example, my imagination might conceive of a woman falling into a river and being rescued by a complete stranger walking along the bank. One's literary conscience would pass this without

qualm. But imagination might conceive that the stranger should turn out to be the woman's brother from America whom she had not seen for twenty years and who had no idea of her presence in the vicinity. One's literary conscience would balk at this; would in fact probably reject it because of the undue use of coincidence, even though such a thing could conceivably happen in life.

Very well, but sometimes – too often – it's all literary conscience and no imagination, particularly after potatoes for lunch. The mind, in a rut, throws out feeble suggestions which are pounced upon by a heavily sarcastic literary conscience and torn limb from limb. "Cheap and nasty!" "Melodrama!" "As old as what Mr Gladstone said!"

The only way of dealing with such trouble is to work the mind on paper; to put a question down and set yourself to answer it. Having done that, follow with another which arises from the first. This, frankly, is the only way to work one's mind efficiently, even when it is energetic. In a moment I'll give a detailed illustration of what I mean.

Of course, it involves a lot more fag. It is much harder work to reach a conclusion on the back of ten pages of scribble than doing so by majestic inspiration. But if you decide to do no more than wait for inspiration, nine times out of ten it won't come.

I don't want you to think I'm underestimating the value of inspiration, but the man who spoke of 2% inspiration and 98% perspiration wasn't far wrong so far as novel writing is concerned – nor, for that matter, so far as any other creative work is concerned, except, possibly, music – and even Beethoven spent months over revision.

But some proportion of that 2% is vitally necessary – indeed, indispensable – to any work. In my case it comes mainly in the conception of the idea – for which, you notice, I have no formula – then figures very little in working out the plot, only to re-emerge unexpectedly now and then in writing, in such a manner as to turn any dull day sunny.

It will probably occur to some of you who have read *John Rowe* to wonder whether I have been to Portugal, where the book's later chapters are set. The answer is no. This is not an unheard-of practice among authors – consider, for instance, the case of E. Arnot Robertson, whose 1931 tour de force *Four Frightened People* is one among many examples. [\[The book is set in Malaya, which Robertson never visited; rather, she researched her setting in the library of the British Museum.\]](#) As a matter of fact, people are always asking me if I have done some particular thing or been to a

particular place I have described. No doubt what they would really like to ask is whether I have been in all the situations I have pictured in my books, and that because they fail to disconnect the personality of the author from that of his characters.

The more I write, the more I become aware that successful novel writing depends not on the quantity of your experience but on the quality of your imagination (which does *not* mean that incidents closely related to one's own experience don't provide the best copy). But what you ought to be asking now is, *why* did I set *John Rowe's* closing scenes in Portugal? Was it arbitrarily, for no good reason, and, if so, why go to all the trouble – and it *was* a great deal of trouble – to get everything scrupulously accurate and convincing when it wasn't necessary?

In order to answer that question I'm going to read you a considerably abbreviated copy of some pages from the book in which I worked out *John Rowe's* plot. This will not merely explain why it was so arranged, but will give you as good an example as I possess of the manner in which plot problems are best resolved.

For the benefit of those who have not read the book, it concerns a dozen people taking a pleasure cruise on a private yacht. In the Bay of Biscay the vessel's owner, Sir Arnold Gresham, is murdered, after which the yacht puts into Lisbon, where the murderer eventually discloses himself. Joyce Gresham is the owner's daughter and Michael Stratton the First Officer.

The relationship between Joyce and Michael cannot be allowed to end inconclusively – yet that, it seems, is how it must do, for they have only known each other a few days and have quarrelled violently most of the time.

Q: What does their relationship need?

A: Some sort of violent impetus.

Q: What sort of impetus is desirable?

A: Possible danger to one or the other, forcing their relationship. (N.B. Danger to the girl is always more interesting although the least unusual. Additionally, as the murderer is in love with her, the danger cannot come through any attempt on his part on her life.)

Q: Suppose when the ship returns to England the murderer, feeling his own discovery to be imminent, attempts to kidnap her?

A: Disadvantage – melodramatic; advantage – would give just the right impetus if Michael Stratton were to save her.

Q: Can this be done convincingly?

A: Very much doubt it. The murderer could only kidnap her by taking her out of England again, and is it likely that in the law-abiding ports of this country – Falmouth, for example – he would chance at random upon a captain prepared to run such obvious risks of abetting him for money? Conclusion: it could be made possible but not, perhaps, entirely convincing. The alternatives are now to abandon this project in favour of another, or to make the yacht put into some foreign port instead of returning to England.

Q: What foreign port?

A: From their position, clearly a French or Portuguese one.

Q: What French port on that coast has a big foreign trade with tramp steamers of doubtful origin plying to all parts of the world?

A: None.

Q: What Portuguese?

A: Lisbon.

But with the owner murdered and questions of maritime law involved, the natural course of the owner's wife would be to order the yacht to return to England, even if it took a day longer. So,

Q: What could change her intention?

A: A breakdown of machinery.

Q: Would this be likely to happen on a new yacht?

A: Yes, although readers might not think so.

Q: *What other alternative?*

A: *Damage through storm.*

I hope it is now clear that Lisbon was not chosen haphazardly or empirically; also that the storm was not put in just to lend colour and excitement – though it was, of course, just right for doing exactly that.

The above process may strike you, at first hearing, as artificial and rather laboured; as logical but mechanical, but I don't think such objections are really valid, for it merely commits to paper what happens in everyone's mind every hour of every day. We all weigh up the pros and cons of a situation before reaching a decision. If I go out without a coat I may get wet, but if I take one it will be heavy and a nuisance to carry. Therefore I will take a mackintosh. The process I described is only taking the same simple logic a step further and putting it down on paper. It must happen in every author's head for him to be able to reason at all; I suggest that if he doesn't work his thoughts out on paper in this way it's either because the issues are too simple or his methods too slipshod.

Let us turn now to the question of characters. Do authors take characters wholesale from life in the manner they are widely supposed to? I should say in respect of minor characters, yes, but in respect of major ones, no. I am frequently asked whether my own characters are found in this way or are they, rather, always purely creatures of my imagination? Contradictory as it may seem, my answer is yes to both. I seldom take major characters straight from life to insert into a story for the simple reason that they will seldom fit. I intended to do so with the clergyman in *Into the Fog* but got cold feet and changed him at the last minute. What I do do a great deal is observe characteristics of people around me, which then frequently attach themselves, either spontaneously or by design, to some character on whom I am working.

The only *John Rowe* character modelled on a living person is Prof. Crabtree, who is as good a reproduction as I could manage of the headmaster [Rev. A. F. Fryer] of my old school [Longsight Grammar]. But in that word *reproduction* I touch upon the fallacy of all portrayals from life.

It stands to reason that a character in a novel is convincing in proportion to the extent to which he comes to life and behaves naturally, and that must depend first upon the quality of the author's imagination and second upon the truth of the author's observation of the people around him. But to say that you have taken a living person and put him into

a book only means that you have taken the externals, the shell of some person you know and breathed into it the seed of your imagination whereby the character assumes individuality and a life of its own. But that that life and that character correspond in actual fact to the life and character of the person who has served as a model I don't believe the greatest insight can ensure.

I might perhaps conclude with some declaration of my policy – my general aim, shall we say. My first two novels, *The House with the Stained Glass Windows* and *Into The Fog*, were thrillers; my third and fourth, *The Riddle of John Rowe* and *Without Motive*, might be called mystery novels. The distinction, if it can be drawn, would be, I should say, that such crime as occurs in the latter two books results principally from the interaction of the characters one upon another; from them reacting to their circumstances rather than from any real criminal tendencies on the part of the characters themselves – in other words, it is crime as an expedient rather than crime as a profession.

My fifth novel, *The Dangerous Pawn*, which will be published next week, contains no murder and a mystery of only modest proportions. Whether that tendency away from the mystery novel and towards the straight novel is temporary or will become permanent is difficult as yet to say. But some of the reasons for it may be divined.

If plot-interest is the framework underpinning any story one may construct, then character-interest should be its bricks and mortar. Yet some mystery writers – of the type that specialises in a murder in chapter one followed by twenty-three chapters of police investigations – succeed in producing extraordinary structures as devoid of bricks and mortar as the Eiffel Tower.

Another obstacle in the way of the successful mystery novel is that in all except a few classical instances there must be at least one character who to a greater or lesser degree is unsatisfactory: the criminal himself. As a general rule, the bigger the surprise at the end, the less satisfactory as a complete character the criminal is. The more satisfactorily his character is drawn, the less should his eventual unmasking surprise.

Writers from very early days have come up against this difficulty. As a schoolboy, when I read Conan Doyle and [\[French author Émile\]](#) Gaboriau, I was puzzled and somewhat irritated by their habit of presenting a mystery in the first half of their novel and then harking back to long before its start to trace the criminal's history up to the moment of the crime. I did not

realise then that they were adopting this method with the sole idea of getting over this difficulty of making their criminal a more understandable creature.

Of course, in recent years there have been many attempts made to surmount this difficulty in other ways; most notable, perhaps, the fashion set or best exemplified by the classic murder story *Malice Aforethought*, in which the whole is seen from the murderer's angle. But that, admirable as it is, really evades the point at issue by ceasing to be a mystery story. It is just possible that eventually someone will hit on a formula for combining two methods such that the criminal is rendered wholly understandable whilst remaining masked until the end.

It's time I stopped now and you told me something for a change. I'll do my best – without promising – to answer any questions you care to put, but would like particularly to hear from those of you who have read *John Rowe*. What did you like about it and what dislike? I'm aware that I've only touched tonight on the fringe of a large subject which is contained in the title *The Novelist at Work*. The novelist at work finds all sorts of unexpected pleasures cropping up in the course of his job, and all sorts of unexpected trials. When I first thought of taking up writing seriously I tried to visualise all the possible trials which might come my way if I did so. But I certainly didn't contemplate the one which has come my way tonight.

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