A Writing Life

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Interlude

As curator of my gallery of writing memories, I closed Book I before it became (so I hoped) unwieldy, with the *Whistler* decade. By the close of the 1970s I had reached fifty and had little idea that I had almost four more decades of scribbling ahead—writing that would proceed from one-finger typing into the computer age.

Charles Dickens opens *David Copperfield* with his narrator wondering “whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life.” Inevitably there is a middle, perhaps more realistic, thrust—to illustrate how one’s times acted upon the direction of a life, rather than the hero motif of making a difference, or of reflecting, directly or indirectly, universal truths. By the time I had published *Whistler*, writing had become a necessary part of each day. I never worried, as a *Times Literary Supplement* critic Daniel Karlin would write (on November 11, 2014) of another author: “It is sometimes a surprise to discover that a writer had written quite so much, and how much of that was of little value.”

Producing a sentence I was proud of was a sufficient day’s achievement; a batch of unsatisfactory prose tempted a continuation—the next opportunity—to make it better. Yet a bad start was usually beyond improvement, for if it did not whet my appetite to go on, it was destined for the wastebasket. Still, in several cases, I went stubbornly on. Once, I confess, an entire book was consigned to the rubbish. A book requires a potential reading audience. Unhappily I knew that bundle of pages would have none.

Opening a graduate seminar, I cautioned the dozen students that a term paper calling for original research involving history and biography would be required by the close. And I proposed a list of possibilities which might emanate from our readings and discussions. From the expressions on their faces I realized that the challenge seemed to them
close to impossible. “If you don’t come up with anything like these,” I said, “I might adopt one for myself and write a book.” In the end, several students did submit papers which later turned into books. Challenging each seminar group, I abetted books on Arnold Bennett, G. K. Chesterton, Harold Frederic, T. E. Lawrence, T. S. Eliot and Bernard Shaw, and articles on Beethoven, Burgoyne, Anouilh, Wagner, and an eclectic range of others. And I wrote at least one book myself from the suggestions I had proposed.

I didn’t know then that my final book would be a similar assignment to myself about myself. Herewith, then, my final words, the work of many days, each of which yielded sentences of which I am proud.