

SELF-EVALUATION 2013 (Roland Menge)

This self-evaluation is arranged as follows: (1) remarks on my current status as a writer; (2) description of my just completed major project, *Against the War*; (3) remarks on idiosyncracies of structure in *Against the War*; (4) remarks on composition of *Against the War*; (5) remarks received from Jonathan Galassi of Farrar, Straus & Giroux; (6) my own critique of *Against the War*; (7) attitude to editorial changes in *Against the War*; (8) my present plan for promotion of *Against the War*; (9) remarks on my next project, *Push to Appomattox*; (10) overview of anticipated future projects (after *Push to Appomattox*) and remarks on my vocation as a writer.

(1) Remarks on my current status as a writer:

My current status as a writer is as follows:

(a) About two months ago I completed my long novel, *Against the War*. I am presently involved in promoting the novel for publication.

(b) I regard myself as having a vocation as a writer. In writing this self-evaluation I am continuing in the related course I have set out for myself, of proceeding through discrete projects with a self-evaluation after each project.

(c) This is my fourth self-evaluation. My last was in December of 1983, following completion of my previous major project, *Seven City Stories*. (After *Seven City Stories*, and before writing that self-evaluation, I wrote another set of stories called *Common Lives*, which I submitted to a publishing house in St. Paul, but the manuscript was not accepted. I destroyed it and no longer have a copy.)

(2) Description of my just completed project:

(a) *Against the War* is a documentary novel in a classical realistic form. It consists of 750,000 words divided into 331 chapters. The individual chapters range in size from 2200 to 2800 words. The novel also contains a title page, a dedication, an epigraph, and a 48-page bibliography. In manuscript form, it consists of 2997 pages of double-spaced text in 10-point Courier New font.

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(Although I describe *Against the War* above as being written in a “classical realistic” style, it differs in being what I have called in my notes a “thematic construct.” This will be discussed later in this self-evaluation.)

(b) In its basic plot, *Against the War* follows the intertwined lives of four young men, rowing team mates, who graduate from college at the height of the Vietnam War and whose subsequent lives are shaped by their reaction to the war. Two of these young men, James Morris and William O’Rourke become involved in the war,—O’Rourke as a combat medic, and Morris as a fighter pilot and then prisoner of war in Laos.—The other two, Thomas Steward and Matthew Brandt, in seeking to avoid military service, become involved in the antiwar movement and the counterculture that arises from the antiwar movement.

(c) Thematically, *Against the War* has a purpose which I defined prior to beginning on it. This purpose is to examine the effect of the Vietnam War on American society. *Against the War* examines the war from the juxtaposed perspectives of inside and outside the war, pro-war and antiwar. Morris and O’Rourke provide the inside, pro-war perspective. Steward and Brandt provide the outside, antiwar perspective. Also, as the counterculture arises out of the antiwar movement, the novel describes the origin and transmutation of the counterculture in its seminal years. As I see it, this is an important part of the documentary task of the novel.

(d) *Against the War* is set in a precise historical timeframe of four and a half years (April 7, 1967 to October 15, 1971) with accurate descriptions of the cultural, political, and military events that the characters take part in, or take an interest in, as they react to the war. All historical facts presented in the novel are based on sources such as articles in the *New York Times*, “after action reports” for military events, and U.S. declassified documents for covert operations. The novel includes a 50-page bibliography in M.L.A format, in which these sources are cited by date and author. Also included is a

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per-chapter summary of sources.

In this respect, the novel “presents the case” for the “effect of the war on American society,”—not in any polemical sense, but merely in the sense of saying, “here is what really happened.”—In writing the novel, therefore, I had always in mind the importance of presenting the true case, not falsified or exaggerated in any manner. This is why the bibliography is so important; it states the factual bases of the events described in the novel.

(e) As a “classical realistic” novel (terms that are extremely important to me), *Against the War* is modeled on a Tolstoyan structure (similar to that of *War and Peace*) consisting of interwoven sub-plots. The novel has four sub-plots, built around the four main characters of the novel: Thomas Steward, Matthew Brandt, James Morris, and William O’Rourke. There is also a secondary sub-plot built around Mary (Kass) Brandt.

The alternation of the sub-plots take the form of alternation of what, in my notes, I have called “series.” (I don’t know if the term has a wider usage.) By a series, I mean a set of from three to six consecutive chapters within the same sub-plot. During composition of this novel, I kept track of total number of series and assigned series, using a notation such as “Series 32 (Steward 12),” which means the 32nd series in the novel, 12th series within the Steward sub-plot.

(3) Remarks on idiosyncracies of structure in *Against the War*:

Throughout composition of this novel (a period of more than 25 years), I have been aware of many aspects of structure that to many people might seem odd and overdone, but these have been integral to my method and elucidated in many notes, diagrams, outlines, and so on. I will set down here some of these idiosyncracies of structure in the order that they occur to me.

(a) The sub-plots of *Against the War* are not equivalent in the importance and amount of material assigned to each one. Rather, they are stepped down like bars of

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decreasing size.

More specifically, the series and assignments are as follows:

Steward	38 series
Brandt	29 series
Morris	21 series
O'Rourke	17 series
Mary Kass	8 series

(The numbers of series do not add up to 100 here because some of the series are shared by two or more of the characters, advancing each of the characters by one unit in the total count. In the first series, for example, all four of the main characters are present.)

(b) *Against the War* is also symmetrical in structure, with each of the sub-plots reaching a midpoint numerically and within its own plot at or near the middle chapter (Chapter 167) of the novel. Within the first half of the novel, the assignment of series is as follows:

Steward	18 series
Brandt	15 series
Morris	10 series
O'Rourke	9 series
Mary Kass	5 series

Again, the numbers do not add up here to exactly what they were supposed to be. For example, Steward has 18 series in the first half of the novel and 20 series in the second half. But this is not because I did not want the two halves of the novel to be exactly symmetrical. I did want them to be, and, in some cases, I moved the series around to try to balance them. But I was not able to achieve exact symmetry.

(c.) *Against the War* is set in strict linear time. Each chapter follows the previous chapter within the calendar of the reported years. Story action that follows the preceding

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action in linear time is told in simple past tense. (“Steward **decided**, soon after this, that he would proceed at once with his plan.”) Narrative information regarding events that occurred at a time previous to the time of the current chapter is told in pluperfect tense. (“Steward **had thought** this matter over the previous night.”)

For this reason, there is strict and numerous use of pluperfect tense in narrative paragraphs, with pluperfect being used in each sentence, not just in the lead sentence of a paragraph.

(d.) Use of strict linear time also applies to placement of the chapters on the four-and-a-half years time frame. The middle chapter numerically (Chapter 167) occurs two and one quarter years into the four-and-a-half-year plot. The first and last year of the story are each assigned 72 chapters. The middle two and a half years of the novel are assigned 78 chapters per year. The reason for lesser chapters in the first and last years is because the O’Rourke sub-plot is not fully present. The O’Rourke sub-plot begins in Chapter 86 and ends with his death in Chapter 281. The total number of chapters based on this timeframe allotment $((2 \times 72) + (2-1/2 \times 78))$ is 336, and the actual total number of chapters is 331, so again the exact fit escaped me. But I was trying the fit in the material exactly to place the story proportionally into the overall timeline.

(e.) The language used in *Against the War* is that which I have thought about and worked toward since my days of driving cab. It is, to the extent possible, the plainest possible language of the streets, but it rises to complexity when absolutely required by the subject matter being presented. I am writing in this language now.

This language in *Against the War* is never crude (as the voice of the teller of the story), though the words spoken by the characters may be crude. The language is, also, never precious. Again, it is the plainest possible, strongest possible language of the streets such as I heard when driving cab.

As compared against the language in my last major project, *Seven City Stories*,

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the language in *Against the War* differs in that it is less “phrasy.” The syntax is kept as simple and direct as possible, and repetition of structures is avoided whenever possible. There are times, however, when the subject matter requires complexity of syntax, and I have found that, when this is the case, the result is a lyrical sound. (There is some principle of prosody involved in this that I have not fully understood, but which I would like to understand so as to use it more deliberately in the more lyrical future projects that I envision; in particular, *Vessel of God* and *The Case for Social Democracy*.)

(f) Thematically, this novel has a particular structure which I have thought of a great deal, and which I call, in my own notes, a “thematic construct.” The peculiar feature of this structure, as opposed to the structure of most novels, is that the thematic material is expanded to the maximum of what the story can hold, and this is done consistently throughout the entire novel.

For example, Gen. Lawrence Moynihan’s speech is given in entirety in Chapter 54. Likewise, the speeches of the Whitney-Pratt president, Tyler Moy, in Chapter 125, “the presenter” in Chapter 134, Maj. Xuan Than in Chapters 209, 210, and 211, and Gen. Jake Landers in Chapter 236, are given in entirety. The action in these chapters moves forward only conceptually.

Throughout the novel, as a result of my efforts to build this thematic structure, there is a calculation, on my part, as to how much thematic material the story can hold, as I try to pull the reader through the thematic material.

(g.) Related to this idea of thematic construct, in my mind, is the importance of readability and clarity. In writing this novel, I was concerned that anything I write should be readable and graspable at once by an intelligent person. For this reason, I was trying, always, to make the language plainer in vocabulary, simpler in syntax, and more straightforward in statement, so that there is absolutely no ambiguity anywhere of the point being presented. I am always telling myself, “Just state the case plainly,” “Just be

clear,” and so on.

(h.) I was also concerned that the thematic material of the novel should not be just information piled onto the action but should itself have a clear thread in revealing incrementally the historical evolution of the counterculture, on one hand, and, on the other, the war.

The thread of the counterculture shows the counterculture beginning in individual reactions to the war, building into widespread political cohesion through the activities forced upon these individuals as they avoid the draft, changing in emphasis from a call for “social change” to a call for “cultural change,” gathering into an instable union many conflicting elements (such as pacifism and a call for armed rebellion), and imploding finally because of these inner clashes. This is not an imagined evolution. It is the historical reality of what happened, as I experienced it myself, and as it can be gotten still by research of the many accounts of the era available in newspaper and magazine archives of the kind used in building the thematic material of the novel.

The thread of the war documents the evolution of the war, from the prism of the main characters, as the war transforms from being just an annoyance in their personal lives to a subject of intense analysis and, for some of the characters, to a real situation of personal involvement, comradery, and combat. Again, this is not an imagined transformation; rather, this is what actually occurred in the documented years.

(4) Remarks on composition:

By “composition,” I mean the formal process I employed during the writing of *Against the War*: to prepare for and complete my subunits of series and chapters; to advance the basic stories of the sub-plots; and to advance the thematic threads.

(a) After about five years of work on this novel, I had evolved into my basic structure of series and chapters, with a related process of composition that I repeated for each new series. The process was, I did a “series plan” for each series before starting each

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series and a “chapter plan” for each chapter before starting each chapter, while at the same time, conducting any research required for the series and combining any paper documents related with this into a single bundle that I stored in my files. A typical bundle was about a dozen pages; many were several times that.

As part of this compositional process, I grew into the practice of having a definite theme for each series with a related, subordinate theme for each chapter, and I tried to define these themes in my series and chapter plans. As a result, the entire structure of the novel is essayistic, with a series or chapter often beginning with a topical paragraph. There was no discovery here while writing; I knew, from the start of each series or chapter, what I intended for it to accomplish within the narrative of the novel.

(b) I was very aware, also, as I added each new series, of how the series added to a particular sub-plot. Though the novel is more than 700,000 words long, yet for each character there are a limited number of series, and these are like so many frames into which the story must be put. Steward has the most series, at 38. The stories associated with the sub-plots were not mysterious to me, in terms of how they involved; I knew from the start the basic story for each sub-plot. I had to divide the story into pieces each of which had a basic development and each of which ended at a point of irresolution to carry the story forward to the next series for that character. I thought a great deal about this; I made many diagrams and wrote many notes to figure out how to divide up the series into frames.

(c) Related to this was the compositional task of moving forward the basic threads of the thematic material. Since the novel is designed to be a “thematic construct” (as noted above), the thematic material has an added importance (compared to less thematic novels). It provides a view and sense of the time, an inherent part of the basic documentary task of the novel, in order to “state the case” of what the era was as physical places, cultural situations, and ambience of ideas and events. Newspaper articles, radio

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reports, the backdrop of certain underlying cultural themes of the time, -- such as the societal goal of landing on the moon, the building of the interstate highway system, the back and forth's of the cultural war, and so on, -- move forward the thematic content of the novel.

(d) Motifs were also important in moving forward the thematic threads of the novel, and I was consciously aware of these motifs in the overall imaginal mosaic of the novel. (This, also, goes back to my earlier symbolical writings where I consciously used archetypal motifs, telling myself then in my notes that eventually, when my writing became more realistic, I would replace such symbolical motifs with realistic motifs.) The main motifs I was aware of in the novel, in order of importance, were the river, the moon, and the interstate freeway. Marcuse's idea of the post-technological society and the proper use of machines was also a motif (a kind of "machine motif" in general). Then, of course, there were many smaller motifs such as the images that plague Morris (the killed pig at Puerto Penasco, the faces of the women and children he inadvertently bombed, and so on).

(6) At this time (January, 2012), I have submitted the manuscript of *Against the War* to just one person, Jonathan Galassi, president and publisher for Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

(a) I had a previous contact with Galassi from *Seven City Stories*, which he also considered for publication, -- in May of 1983, more than 25 years ago. The connection at that time had been set up for me by Anne Devaney through her friend Lennart Anderson. In order to set up the second, I looked Galassi up on the internet and sent him a letter asking him to look at my manuscript.

(b) He agreed to look at the manuscript and sent the following letter a couple of weeks later:

"Dear Mr. Menge,

Thank you for the opportunity to read AGAINST THE WAR. Yours is a deeply ambitious, strongly political, and often movingly human story. I especially enjoyed your exploration of the tension between the characters' desire to live normal lives and their country's demand that they participate in the culture of war. Ultimately, however, I found the narrative took too long to take flight; excising some of the material, I feel, would truly allow your characters and their struggles to shine.

"I do wish you the best in finding a home for your work.

"All the best,

"J.G."

(c) I was greatly disappointed to receive this letter. I felt sure the manuscript would be accepted. The letter sent me into a state of confusion regarding the novel.

After gaining some distance from that, however, I came to the conclusion that Galassi did not read the novel completely or carefully. The comment "strongly political" betrays that, since the novel is, in the end, not political, in the sense of being polemical, but instead presents a balanced view of political reactions to the war.

I also felt that Galassi did not understand the basic structure of the novel, -- as thematic construct, as documentation; a closer look at the novel would have informed him of that. But he had no obligation to engage with the novel; it was generous of him to engage with it at all; and he remarked on it in a respectful manner. So my final feeling regarding him is mostly just disappointment.

(e) What the lesson of this interaction between him and me boils down to, though, is that I cannot go to anyone else for a verdict on the worth of this novel. I must come to my own conclusions about it, as I am doing here, and anyhow my next novel, *Push to Appomattox*,—by design,—will have less thematic material with a faster moving action. So I am proceeding in the direction Galassi suggests (and would have if I had never heard from him).

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(5) Now for my own critique of this novel on which I worked for more than 25 years.

(a) My original object for *Against the War* was to document the effect of the Vietnam War on American society, and to do this through the prism of the generation that came of age at the height of the war. As part of this, I wanted to document the coalescence of many members of this generation into the antiwar movement, the emergence of the counterculture from the antiwar movement, with the early emphasis on social change, and thereafter the evolution within the counterculture from emphasis on social change to emphasis on cultural change. I wanted to show, also, how the counterculture, in subsequent years, implodes when the disparate components of cultural change can no longer be held together. This is not something imagined for the sake of a story; this is my sense of what actually occurred, as I recall it, and as a purview of the cultural dialog at that time indicates. As another part of this, I wanted to document the experience of the war by this generation, --first, as something, because of the draft, forcing a decision for or against it, then as something, in some cases, requiring an involvement in the business of a war never fully endorsed by the society that had launched it. I think, looking back, I did accomplish this objective in *Against the War*, and I am proud of the historical accuracy that the book provides.

(b) As a second objective for *Against the War*, I wanted to present the real issues of the day in a substantial manner, and I wanted to do in the same earnest spirit in which these issues were discussed at the time. I believe that I accomplished this objective, also. The narration is earnest, the dialogues of the characters are earnest. Never is there a false note in the presentation of these issues, so far as I can detect, looking back on the entire effort at this time.

Mary's experience with Cuba is a good example. I think that I presented the issue of free speech in Cuba with the same seriousness as it would have been considered by

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someone like Mary in the documented years. And again, this is not an issue invented by me for the purpose of telling a good story; it was the actual, most intensely discussed issue of the time with respect to the Cuban Revolution and the desire of the American left to help it realize its potential.

(c) A third objective of *Against the War* that I set down at the start was for the characters to grow and change during the story in a believable way representative of the time; and I wanted the characters themselves to be representative of the time in the sense of not being superheroes or larger than life, but of being believable people (albeit all idealists) such as would have lived in these years. I believe that I accomplished this, also, in the four rowing team mates and in their primary female companions.

(d) A fourth objective, with respect to my previous major work, *Seven City Stories*, was for the language, in general, to be easier to read. The main flaw that needed to be corrected was that the language in *Seven City Stories* had been too phrasy. I was very careful always in writing *Against the War* to guard against phrasiness. This required, especially, not beginning a series of parallel phrases with the same word. I think I accomplished this objective in that *Against the War* is much cleaner and easier to read than *Seven City Stories*.

(e) Is there any way in which this novel failed, in relation to what I set out to do? The big question, I would say, is whether the balance is wrong between story action and thematic material. Is there too much thematic material, causing the story action to move too slowly and, as a result, losing the interest of the reader? At this point, I don't know. I'm inclined to think that I did right in building the thematic construct that I imagined.

In any case, I don't think I will ever again attempt a thematic construct of this kind; my future projects will not require it. *Vessel of God* will require essayistic organization, but it will not require such a complex thematic construct.

(7) Attitude toward editorial changes:

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(a) I feel that I did my very best on *Against the War*. I planned it carefully and executed the plan. I thought a great deal throughout my writing of it about the structure of the novel, as it developed, the amount of thematic material, and so on. I diligently researched every fact I presented. I rewrote many chapters multiple times. I employed the language and syntactic structure that I set out to use, including, for example, the strict use of pluperfect in narrating events prior to the main timeframe of the novel.

(b) So now I believe I should simply let this novel stand as something earnestly and carefully wrought by an intelligent person. Some other person would tell the story of these years in some other way, and I suppose, in many cases, with less documentation. But this is how I did it, and I should stand on it now, and go on to the other projects I have envisioned.

(c) To state this another way, more succinctly, *Against the War* is done. All that remains of this effort is promotion through a website and any other honest means I can devise.

(8) Plan for promotion:

(a) I have decided to promote *Against the War* myself using a website and email invitations. This is an idea that I obtained in part through my daughter, Rachel. The website will enable an interested person to download the novel as a single, secured PDF (such as I have already been compiling). Text on the website will say that the novel can be freely used and distributed but only printed with my permission. I will send the email invitations to college professors with a presumed interest in the history and culture of the Vietnam War era. I will find the professors' email addresses on college websites.

I feel that it is important to distribute the novel at once because at present, based on newspaper accounts I have read, there is currently a great deal of interest in the Vietnam War era.

Here is the schedule for website publication that I intend to put into place within

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the next six months:

(a) Set up a working website by February 1;

(This involves getting a domain, getting a host, and designing and publishing the website. I can do all of these using godaddy.com.)

(b) Send out 1000 emails invitations by April 23;

(c) Send out 5000 emails invitations by Thanksgiving;

(d) During this same time, reply to all messages;

(e) Look for a champion or for someone who will publish the novel exactly as I wrote it;

(f) In the meanwhile, complete this self-evaluation and go on to planning of my next project *Push to Appomattox*.

(9) Remarks on my next project, *Push to Appomattox*:

(a) *Push to Appomattox* is a story of the end of the American Civil War, encompassing in time about a one-year timeframe, leading from the beginning of Grant's promotion to lieutenant general to the surrender at the Appomattox court house in Virginia, and continuing beyond that to Lincoln's assassination.

(b) Comparing this novel to *Against the War*, the main action will move more swiftly and the amount of thematic material attached to the main action will be much less, so this plus the much shorter timeframe will result in *Push to Appomattox* being a much shorter novel, -- I would say, at most a sixth of the length of *Against the War*, and perhaps shorter than that, less than 100,000 words. This will be a conventional novel in structure and length, about the size of *Sister Carrie* or *Grapes of Wrath* or some similar novel.

(c) *Push to Appomattox* will be a historically exact novel, set upon the actual historical events of this period, including the involvement of Lincoln and Davis, the military strategies of Grant and Lincoln, the military situation of the South (its logistical

problems at the time, the need to break out of Virginia to secure supplies further west), and the actual military engagements that occur.

This novel will also accurately portray Lee's decision to offer a surrender, Grant's acceptance of it, the interactions of the troops following the initial agreement and prior to the laying down of arms, the final scene in the *Push to Appomattox* court house, and the march of the Confederate army to the town center to surrender their arms.

(d) This novel will, also, as an important thematic component, portray the issue of confederate versus federal government, but only to the extent that it existed at the time, and in the same vocabulary and degree of understanding as it existed at the time. Nothing from the politics of the present day in the current debate regarding the power and reach of the federal government (with respect to the states and individual citizens) should be superimposed on the story.

(e) The issue of slavery and abolition will also enter this story, but, again, only to the extent that they existed at the depicted time. *Push to Appomattox* is not a story about slavery and freeing the slaves, however; this issue will only enter the story as a secondary thematic component, to the extent that it is part of the historical context of the described events.

(f) Research for this novel will consist of visiting the actual site (*Push to Appomattox*), plus reading the newspapers, letters, biographies, and battle reports that are available. This novel must be as factually based as *Against the War* but not as thorough in presenting background information explicitly.

(g) *Push to Appomattox* will have one set of characters from the South and another, complementary set from the North. Part of each set will be known historical characters such as Lincoln and Grant on the Northern side and Davis and Lee on the Southern side. In addition, there will be wholly fictional characters on each side (perhaps characters who have known one another before the war).

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Also, on each side of the juxtaposed characters, there will be a love story. I have not thought out the details yet of how this part of the plot will be set up.

(h) I would like to begin on *Push to Appomattox* by my upcoming 69th birthday and complete it in three years, by my 72nd birthday.

(i) *Push to Appomattox* will be cinematic in presentation, meaning it will be set up like scenes for a movie (and perhaps I myself will write a screenplay following completion of the novel). For this reason, this novel will not contain any chapters that are primarily narration. All the chapters will be scenes.

(j) My initial sense of the structure of this novel is that there will be 21 chapters.

(k) Before beginning on *Push to Appomattox*, I will write a separate, more thorough plan. Writing this plan will be my next major task as a writer (aside from promotion of *Against the War*, which I do not regard as writing proper).

(10) Overview of future projects and remarks on my vocation as a writer:

(a) Looking out beyond *Push to Appomattox* (assuming continued life and health in those years), I imagine the same sequence of projects as I have contemplated for many years. They are:

Push to Appomattox

Four and a War, (added 11/9/2013))

Vessel of God and Other Stories

The Case for Social Democracy (ruled out 11/9/2013)

Adam and Sara With

Stories by the Wayside

Defensus Fidei

One item is in parentheses above (*The Case for Social Democracy*) because this is an essayistic book (similar to *The Rebel* by Camus), and I am not certain now whether I should take a detour from fiction for this effort in prose. Unlike the other items in my list,

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this item only occurred to me in the past year.

(b) In general, I feel that I must continue to be firm in my writing vocation, living by the ideals I have held to all along (for more than 30 years) of integrity and excellence in each project. Added to this is the need and obligation to make a literary life as real as possible through self-promotion of my work and through engaging in substantial interaction with other writers.

Roland Menge

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