

SELF-EVALUATION 2021 (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, *Push to Appomattox*; (3) remarks on the style employed in *Push to Appomattox*; (4) remarks on other features of *Push to Appomattox*; (5) my own critique of *Push to Appomattox*; (6) my plan for promotion of *Push to Appomattox*; (7) remarks on my next project, *Vessel of God*; (8) remarks on other projects after *Vessel of God*; and (9) remarks on my vocation as a writer.

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

(a) About six months ago, I completed my novel, *Push to Appomattox*. I am presently involved in promoting the novel for publication.

(b) I regard myself as having a vocation as a writer. This is something I defined in a formal manner in my 30's (40 years ago). In writing this self-evaluation, I am continuing in the related course that I set out for myself as a writer, which involves proceeding through discrete projects with a self-evaluation after each project.

(c) This is my fifth self-evaluation. My last was in August of 2013, following completion of my previous project, *Against the War*. I took a leave from literary writing for the past four months, though I have continued to edit *Push to Appomattox* and have done 68 editorial iterations that I have saved as "versions" using nomenclature derived from technical writing. (For example, my present version is *Push_to_Appomattox_rA068*).

(d) At 77 years of age, I am still employed full-time as a technical writer and illustrator, so I am not able to work full time as a literary writer. This is an important

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feature of my overall situation affecting what I am able to complete and the attendant timeframe.

(2) Description of my just completed project, *Push to Appomattox*:

(a) *Push to Appomattox* is a historical novel in what I would call a classical realistic style. It consists of 161,213 words divided into 90 chapters, which are, in turn, divided into three parts of 30 chapters each. The chapters are each 1754 words long. In addition to the parts and chapters just described, the novel contains a title page, a copyright statement, a dedication (to Jeanne), an epigraph, a table of contents, an acknowledgements section, and a family tree diagram showing the fictional extended family of the novel (the “Derr and Stone Family Tree”). In PDF form, the novel contains 402 pages in printed book format.

(b) In its basic plot, *Push to Appomattox* follows the course, from conception to completion, and the widespread societal effects, of the “national push to end the war” of Ulysses S. Grant. “National push to end the war” is not his term but mine and it is used throughout the novel to refer to Grant’s plan to have all of the Union forces advance at the same time and keep pushing until victory is achieved.

(c) Although I describe *Push to Appomattox* as written in a “classical realistic style,” it differs in having the documentary purpose of “presenting the case,” which is somewhat my own conception. Such was true, also, of *Against the War*. The case presented in *Push to Appomattox* is what existed in America in the last year of the Civil War in six areas prophetic of issues in our current American society. The six thematic “threads” associated with these six areas will be described in more detail later in this self-evaluation.

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(d) *Push to Appomattox* is set in a precise historical timeframe from Thursday, March 3, 1864, to Sunday, April 16, 1865 (one year, one month, and 13 days), with accurate descriptions of 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 extensive research summarized in the Acknowledgements section at the end of the book.

(3) Remarks on the style employed in *Push to Appomattox*:

(a) For years I have gravitated toward a particular narrative style, which has, most centrally, the characteristic, that it provides “room.” By room I mean the verbal space in which to explore and refine nuances in descriptions of places, people, and events. In addition to this, I want to be specific and to call everything by the simplest exact word; I want to use as many words as are required to give a true sense of what I am describing.

(b) Another key feature of the style I have aimed for is “flow.” I want the narrative to flow in a continuous, unimpeded stream. This was something I was trying hard at as far back as the *Seven City Stories*, when I sometimes typed the same single-spaced page more than 20 times until I achieved the fluency I was trying to obtain. That was when I was disciplining myself to completing one entire page each time I sat down at the desk, and recording each page in a notebook when I completed the page.

(c) As for syntax, after early attempts to write in a “street language” style with short and sometimes broken sentences, I decided, during the course of writing *Against the War*, that the best approach,—or, at least, the approach that seemed most natural to me,—was to write in complex, grammatically correct, classical sentences, employing all of the

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traditional standards and devices and the full range of syntactical structures. In *Against the War*, I did this in certain chapters (the more essayistic ones) only; however, in *Push to Appomattox*, I used the complex classical style throughout.

(d) Along with the use of the complex classical style comes the issue of “compression.” By this I mean that though the narrative seemingly provides room to explore every germane detail, yet it is so packed with relevant information that it seems as if it could not be packed any more densely. This creates the effect of “pushing against the form” that I have noted in previous notes and self-evaluations. I felt that I had achieved this to some extent in *Against the War* (again in the more essayistic chapters), but in *Push to Appomattox* I sought for the compression to never be absent from the first word to the last word of the novel.

(e) Finally, though packed with information, the narrative cannot seem turgid or dry. How can this be done? This is the importance of the “loose threads” of Dostoyevsky, which I notice Dickens also has (after having read *Great Expectations* just in the past few months). The complexity and correctness of syntax must be absolutely there but the narrative must yet be so fluent and unobvious that the structure is almost unnoticed (or so persistent and relentless, as in Faulkner’s *The Bear*, that the mind of the reader is worn down seeking to follow it, allowing the meaning of the sentences to come forward in a kind of verbal fog, though the exactness proves to be there whenever the syntax is checked for correctness).

(4) Remarks on other features of *Push to Appomattox*:

There are other important features of *Push to Appomattox* which played a definitive role in how the novel was structured and in how other aspects of the novel such

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as names of military battles and units were conveyed. These important features are listed here.

(a) I endeavored for this novel to “tell the cross-societal story of the national push” and not that of any individual character or event.

To sustain this story line, I used structures such as narrative lead-in’s to key chapters re-sounding the central theme of the unfolding national push

For example, at the start of Chapter 54, the narrative states:

As for his own part in the national push, the western prong, Maj. Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman understood, in early August of 1864, that he was on the verge of achieving two of his most important strategic goals: defeat of the Army of Tennessee and capture of the city of Atlanta with its foundries, arsenals, machine shops, and symbolic value.

Then at the start of Chapter 55, the narrative states:

Maj. Gen. Philip Henry Sheridan had not forgotten the clear, two-part mission given to him by his general-in-chief, Lt. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant: first, destroy the Confederate Army of the Valley (currently under the command of Lt. Gen. Jubal Early); second, destroy the valley itself in whatever features it held that could provide support and sustenance to future Confederate armies.

In addition to such narrative lead-in’s, I used other in-chapter narrative passages in which the awareness of key military and political leaders to the importance and current state of the national push was explicitly stated or described inexplicitly as a collective understanding of the larger strategic nature of Grant’s national campaign.

(b) Though the central story of the novel is the national push, as just stated, yet

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each of the major characters does, also, have an individual story. These single-character stories are in the form of sub-plots, each with an exposition, complication, and denouement threaded through the larger narrative; and each sub-plot is often associated with one or more other sub-plots. This is the case, for example, with the Josiah Derr sub-plot, which is associated with the Louisa Derr and Hiram Derr sub-plots.

(c) Related to the novel's central task of telling the story of the national push, since the national push is a military campaign, is the requirement for the novel to be concise and consistent in all references to military actions, units of command, and personnel. All military movements and engagements are based on historical accounts, as are all military commanders for whom were available historical or contemporary descriptions. All battles are described with reference to the true orders of battle found in references such as Wikipedia or in the after battle reports or biographical remarks of battle participants. Names and ranks of commanders are just as precise and are consistently presented following the rule, within the novel, that the full rank and Wikipedia name of a commander (for example, Lt. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant) is given in a particular chapter the first time that commander is mentioned (with the last name being used thereafter, or sometimes a less specific rank and name (for example, General Grant). Likewise, military units are also named fully and formally the first instance of their appearance in a particular chapter, using the standard reference format in Civil War literature. For example: "Josiah was at this time a regimental commander in the 2nd Brigade of the Second Division of the Cavalry Corps of Sheridan's Army of the Shenandoah." Another example: "the Second Corps of the Army of Northern Virginia" (note that by convention Southern units are referred to differently to distinguish them

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from Northern units).

(5) My own critique of *Push to Appomattox*:

(a) To begin, I think the novel accomplished the central task I defined for it structurally, which was to sustain throughout a narrative voice that told the story of the national push, and to do this in an explicit manner that identified the story of the national push as the basic story of the novel. This was extremely important to me in my own definition, prior to composition, of what the novel should be. I wanted the novel to be efficient and focused in telling this story.

(b) I think, also,—as was pre-defined as another key objective,—the novel substantially and accurately documented the cross-societal effect of the war in the six areas of historical impact alluded to above that I identified as seminal for future issues in American society. These areas (called “threads” in earlier notes) were: (i) the acceptance of “total war;” (ii) the emerging new status of women; (iii) the emerging new status of blacks; (iv) the national experience of division with the related yearning for reconciliation; (v) the growing conflict between the federal and con-federal models of government; and (vi) the pacifist objection to war as manifested in Josiah Derr’s attempt “to make spiritual sense of the war.”

(c) Looking back at the novel now that it is completed, I think it could be claimed that there is nothing in this novel that does not pertain to the central story of the national push and its effect on the six areas of American society just listed. This novel is more compressed and focused than was *Against the War*; however, this focus and compression was achieved at the expense of the some of the explorativeness of *Against the War*. That novel had to be more explorative because I could not have gotten to the subject matter of *Against*

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the War with such a tight focus; much of the explorativeness of *Against the War* derives from my attempts to understand and portray the situations and people that had for me highly emotional associations arising from my personal experiences in the years described.

(d) Is *Push to Appomattox* readable? I would say it is for an intelligent reader interested in the case brought by the novel, while for many not interested in that case, the story may well proceed too slowly. This was true in *Against the War*, also. This problem is inherent in my entire approach, and yet there is no way, I think, that I could have “presented the case” as I wanted to in either novel. In *Push to Appomattox*, lacking the presentation of such a case, I could not have had the narrative voice of the novel tell the story of the national push as it does, explicitly; the story of the national push might have been there in the mere selection of events, but it would have been present implicitly only. I was keenly aware of the limitations of either an explicit or implicit narrative, and chose after much deliberation to go with the explicit approach, devoting to it the careful thought and execution evident in my notes.

(e) I felt, also, in *Push to Appomattox*, that I could not have gotten to the material I had in mind for the novel using the approach of a leaner story. An important part of this material was the historical facts of the era being described, facts that in a novel lacking a documentary purpose might have been left unpresented,—such as detailed orders of battle, accurate names of military units and commanders, and analogous facts for the political events occurring as a backdrop to the war;—but such facts were crucial to giving the complete historical picture required by the documentary purpose of this particular

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novel. This novel has not only a physical setting, as earlier stated, but also has a setting of ideas provided by the thematic matrix of the novel.

(6) My plan for promotion of *Push to Appomattox*:

(a) First let me say, this novel is done. It could not be other than it is while meeting the objectives I defined for it, as just noted. The same story could be told with other objectives, of course, and it may be eventually, but if I were the one to do this, it would best be done, I think, as a new project. I want to leave this project as it is, as a completed approach to placing the events in a narrative structure telling the explicit story of the national push and presenting the proportional thematic matrix of related information that I do in this novel.

(b) In a deliberate manner, I should now attempt to get this novel published, and as an intact entity, not to be edited by anyone else. I should present the novel to people of two types: those who could publish it, and those who could not, but who could promote it for publication by someone else. I should research potential publishers and promoters, and should focus on them one at a time, keeping track in a spreadsheet of all correspondence. Each submission or request for promotion should be a major effort on my part, accompanied with an intelligent and thorough letter aimed if possible at a particular person whose identity I have researched and whom I address in specific terms.

(c) The first submission of this deliberate kind that I have made was to Bruce Bortz of Bancroft Press. I have ready to send an email asking for the status of the novel and making a final pitch for it. I should send that letter, and, if no response is received by the end of this year, I should go on to the next promotion. (Later: I sent the letter on October 26, 2021.)

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(7) Remarks on my next project, *Vessel of God*:

(a) If any activity comes out of successful promotion of *Push to Appomattox*,—such as a screenplay based on the novel (as I suggested to Bruce Bortz), or a downsizing of *Against the War* to be published in the immediate wake of *Push to Appomattox* (as I also suggested to him),—I will give myself leave to attend to those activities when they seem most timely. I would like to make money, not for myself so much but to leave more money for Jeanne and my children after I die.

(b) Except for those possible exceptions, I will proceed, along the long-established path of my main projects, to *Vessel of God*, which I years ago decided upon as my next project after *Push to Appomattox*.

(c) The contents of *Vessel of God*, in terms of the seven stories included in the set, has long been defined. The seven stories are: “Emma Flor,” “(Terrence?) the Giant,” “Faye and Ernest,” “Vessel of God,” “A Vow of Chastity,” “Uncle Lar,” and “Thanksgiving.” I should keep to this content.

(d) I have an intuition of the language of *Vessel of God* being in many respects a continuation of the complex, correct, fully syntactical language of *Push to Appomattox*, which was, in turn, built upon the intricate language of *Against the War*, only I think the language will need to be softer and more folksical, more the voice of someone from my own family, generally meant, someone like one of my uncles. The narrator here is a person who is part of the scenes he describes, in the sense of belonging to them and being sympathetic to them, and knowing them firsthand (even in “Terrence the Giant,” though it takes place in Francs); the narrator is a person with himself religious obsessive traits similar to those he describes, thus his inclination to dwell on the meaning of events. In

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other words, the language here cannot be restrained or made simple; it must be explorative; it must be given room to express the nuances of the situations described; while yet retaining the quality of being correct in language and syntax, as was the language in the previous two projects. The language must be free of breeziness, jauntiness, and irreverence; it must be straightforward, earnest, humble, and utterly serious, a voice like that of Thomas Merton. a contemplative voice lacking in self-importance.

(e) I have also had the intuition that rather than being forced into a proportional form, as was the case with the material in *Push to Appomattox*, this set of stories should expand naturally in several key places, as was the case to an extreme extent in the *Seven City Stories*, in “Ruby Ellington.” *Vessel of God*, formally, would then be somewhere between the *Seven City Stories* and *Push to Appomattox*. But my sense of proportionality is such at this time that I imagine the material burgeoning left and right of the linear center point of the story (half way through “Vessel of God”), and not uncontrollably, as was the case in “Ruby,” but rather in a proportional manner, or even having several expansion points of this kind, counterpoised through employment of a balance scheme of some kind. My sense of this is that structural dynamics of this sort, and the resulting emphasis on the thematic material being presented at such expansion points, should contribute to the overall, singular symbolic meaning of the stories. As previously mentioned in my earlier notes, (I think, though that remark was perhaps deleted as I grew wary of my tendency to mystification,) the seven stories should be like seven overlapping leaves of a single, centric flower representing the central concept of vessel of God.

(f) I must be careful not to be afraid to proceed into this new project, planning

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and planning it and never getting to the task. As soon as I am done with the truly necessary planning, such as this self-evaluation, I should begin, perhaps at the turn of the year, after the holiday season. Then my goal,—assuming no side activities such as mentioned above,—should be to complete the project within two years. The entire project, as I foresee it now, will be in verbal size only about 60.000 words.

(g) I have already begun one background preparation that I regard as essential to this project, and this is to read the entire King James bible from start to finish, to gain from it a sense of the spiritual, ritualistic, and moral-legalistic tradition that my seven stories will be unavoidably set against. This is not to say that the stories should be religious; rather, they should be stories about people who are religious; this is a behavioral study not a moral guide; and yet God, as the “idea of God” (akin to the “idea of order” of Wallace Stevens), is a constant presence in these stories.

(h) Though the above points say a great deal about the nature of the *Vessel of God* project, I should nevertheless begin the project with formal preliminary notes as I have done with every project in the past. This should be my next activity, taking me up to the end of the year approximately. Then I should begin on the stories themselves.

(8) Remarks on other projects following *Vessel of God*:

(a) There are about a half dozen projects I have thought of as following *Vessel of God*, including *Petal of the Rose* (stories), *Adam and Sara Wirth* (novel), *An American Family* (novel), *A Long Trail a-Winding* (novel), and *Defensus Fidei* (essay).

(b) I think my best attitude toward these projects, at this point, is not to commit to any of them. Neither will I commit to the next project being one of those listed. After *Vessel of God*, I will claim the freedom to choose whatever direction seems fitting at that

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time. Of particular interest to me is a novel consisting of immediate action scenes with the narrative voice much reduced. *A Long Trail a-Winding* would be such a novel, but I will defer on a decision for the time being.

(8) Remarks on my vocation as a writer after *Vessel of God*:

I will continue to conduct myself in keeping with the New Paradigm. I will continue to keep trying. That is all I can foresee at this time.

Roland Menge

October 25, 2021

Addendums:

10/31/2021 I have decided that Dr. Harry Stout of Yale University will be the person I next focus on for promoting *Push to Appomattox*. He is a professor of Religion and History who has written a moral history of the Civil War. Also, he graduated from college in 1969 (three years after me) so he will likely understand the significance of *Against the War*, also. I will begin at once to write a letter to him, but I won't send it until after Thanksgiving.

11/03/2021 Having not yet sent the email to Dr. Stout, and having not yet heard from Bruce Bortz, with the indication ever more clear that he does not intend to reply, and has some formed reason for it, I have been considering an email I received from Amazon Kindle offering the option of publishing a hardback book through them on a per book basis. This all of a sudden has become of intense interest to me as I see the possibility of publishing *Push to Appomattox* with complete control of how it is presented including format, language, and whatever advertising I might do. I am thinking now I should delay the email to Dr. Stout (so as to not have an electronic version of the novel

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available anywhere), and should proceed with the Kindle hardcover version of my novel. Assuming I do that, that will be the only form and only sales platform on which I will offer the novel, as a top-quality hardback with a list price of about \$20. I already have everything I need except for a cover image (which I think should be a battlefield scene with many fallen soldiers, a National Archive image; the cover should be kept simple, I think). My new goal now is to have the book available on Kindle by about Thanksgiving. If this manner of presenting my books works out, I will use it to self-publish my earlier works such as *A Bad Relationship*, *Seven City Stories*, and *Symbolic Poems*. This manner of presenting my books would enable me to maintain complete intellectual integrity and independence in showcasing my work to the public.

11/7/2021

My decision today is I will submit the book to Amazon by next Sunday (11/15/2021). This means I must also the book copyrightd by that time.

11/9/202

I submitted the book to the U.S. Copyright Office and must now wait until I receive a confirmation that the copyright has been officially created. As soon as I receive that, I will submit the book to Amazon. The book is done and ready to be submitted. According to the U.S. Copyright website, it may be weeks before I receive notice of the copyright being created. I sent an email to Kindle Direct to verify that I can create a hardcover book without having to submit an electronic copy (Kindle) and softcover version.

01/03/2022

Push to Appomattox is now completed and for sale on amazon.com as a

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hardcover book. Also, I created an Authors page on amazon.com, listing *Push to Appomattox* and *Against the War*, with links to their purchase pages. My upcoming activities are now as follows: (1) initiate an ad campaign for *Push to Appomattox*; and, based on results, refine and expand the campaign in the succeeding months; (2) write a screenplay for *Push to Appomattox* and submit the screenplay to contacts not yet known; (3) complete the project plan for *Vessel of God*; (4) scan, digitize, and format *Seven City Stories* and *A Bad Relationship*, with the object to place them on amazon.com as hardcover books at the appropriate time; (5) begin writing *Vessel of God*. All this should be done in the upcoming year.

Perhaps, the screenplay and *Vessel of God* will be done in parallel rather than in sequence.

01/09/2022

By the end of February of this year, I must have set into place the tools and components of these tasks, which are: a digital scanner, screenplay software, the completed project plan of *Vessel of God*, and the version 0001 Word file with table of contents and the seven stories, to the extent completed, in the selected page format and font (similar to the Word file format used for *Push to Appomattox*).

There can be no path for me other than to complete the journey that I have intuitively followed my entire life. This journey has consisted of my sociological and spiritual inquiries,—so utterly self-contained,—since moving to San Francisco in 1973, or, even before that, since the day I left Air Force training in 1967, and,—following from those initial inquiries,—persisted as a writer through my more than a dozen disciplined, earnest, and thoroughly completed projects.

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I can't allow myself to lose faith. I must persist even if in the fulfillment of my vocation I am completely alone.