

THE ART OF FICTION NO. 31

S. J. PERELMAN

S. J. Perelman has an eighty-acre farm in Bucks County, Pennsylvania (where the house is “shingled with second-hand wattles”), a Greenwich Village apartment, and a no-nonsense, one-room office, also in the Village. It was there that the interview took place. The office is furnished like a slightly luxuriant monk’s cell: a few simple chairs, a desk, a cot. On the walls are a Stuart Davis watercolor and photographs of James Joyce, Somerset Maugham, and the late Gus Lobrano, a *New Yorker* editor and close friend of the author. The only bizarre touch is David Niven’s hat from *Around the World in Eighty Days*, mounted on a pedestal.

Mr. Perelman, trim and well-tailored, is of medium build. His hair is gently receding, and graying at the temples. He wears old-fashioned steel-rimmed spectacles, bought in Paris many years ago. He is soft-spoken and reserved, sometimes chilling, and gives the impression that he does not suffer “nudnicks” gladly. He cares about words in their proper places; in his speech each sentence emerges whole and well-balanced, and each generally contains one or two typically Perelmanesque words. He is impatient with obvious questions—those that he has been asked over and over again in hundreds of interviews—but lights up when talking about

his days in Hollywood, or telling anecdotes about his friend Robert Benchley. As *The Listener* put it, reporting on a television interview, “Mr. Perelman knew all the answers and gave such as he chose.”

— William Cole & George Plimpton, 1963

INTERVIEWER

We’ve always been intrigued that when your first book, *Dawn Ginsbergh’s Revenge*, appeared in ’29, there was no author’s name on the title page. Why?

S. J. PERELMAN

Well, it was really an oversight of my own. I was so exalted at being collected for the first time that, in correcting the galleys, I completely overlooked the fact that there was no author’s name on the title page. Unless one happened to look at the spine of the book, there would be every implication that it was written by its publisher, Horace Liveright.

INTERVIEWER

Do you look back on your work with pleasure? How long is it since you’ve reexamined *Dawn Ginsbergh’s Revenge*?

PERELMAN

I haven’t actually looked on it for some time. As far as deriving any pleasure, it would be quite the reverse.

INTERVIEWER

Is that true of all your pieces?

PERELMAN

Well, there are a couple of them I consider verbal zircons if not

gems. In *Raymond Chandler Speaking*, a recently published collection of his letters, I ran across a very flattering reference he made to a parody of his work I had done, “Farewell, My Lovely Appetizer.” So I reread a few pages of that to see whether the praise was merited. I prefer not to say whether I think so or not. Otherwise, let me assure you I don’t sit in the chimney corner cackling over what I’ve written.

INTERVIEWER

Is that because of the effort you put into each piece?

PERELMAN

Possibly. I very much doubt whether I work harder than any other writer, but this particular kind of sludge is droned over while working so that it becomes incantatory and quite sickening for me, at least, to reread.

INTERVIEWER

So much of it is pure art and skill, I should think one would say, “My God, how did I make that association, that connection?”

PERELMAN

I don’t know whether I approve of the picture you suggest of me, lounging about admiring myself in a hand mirror.

INTERVIEWER

Well, in those rare instances when you reread something after a few years, do you get the feeling you should have done something else to a sentence, to a phrase?

PERELMAN

No, I generally feel astonished at whatever I put down in the first place. The effort of writing seems more arduous all the time. Unlike technicians who are supposed to become more proficient with practice, I find I’ve grown considerably less articulate.

INTERVIEWER

Is that because you are increasingly more selective?

PERELMAN

Could be. Also the variety of subjects is restricted the longer I stay at this dodge.

INTERVIEWER

Why?

PERELMAN

Well, principally through sheer ennui on my part. I've sought material, for example, in the novels I read in my youth, the movies I saw, my Hollywood years, and in advertising. Ultimately, I began to regard these matters as boring. I always grieve for the poor souls who have to grind out a daily humorous column or a weekly piece—people like H. I. Phillips who are obligated to be comical on whatever topic. I remember Benchley did a column three times a week at one time and ran into deep trouble. It's just not possible, in my view.

INTERVIEWER

There were more of those columns back in the '20s and '30s when Don Marquis was working that way, and F.P.A.

PERELMAN

Well, Marquis fortunately had Archy, his cockroach, and the Old Soak. When you create character it's much easier because you can keep that spinning. In Frank Adams's case, let's not overlook the extensive help he got from contributors—Ira Gershwin, Sam Hoffenstein, Arthur Kober, Yip Harburg—a pretty respectable roster of names.

INTERVIEWER

In the introduction to *The Most of S.J. Perelman* Dorothy

Parker referred to you as a “humorist writer.” Do you think of yourself as a humorist writer?

PERELMAN

I may be doing Mrs. Parker an injustice, but I think the linotyper had one drink too many, and that “humorous” was what was intended. In my more pompous moments I like to think of myself as a writer rather than a humorist, but I suppose that’s merely the vanity of advancing age.

INTERVIEWER

Mrs. Parker has said that there aren’t any humorists any more . . . except for Perelman. “Lonely he may be,” she went on to say, “but there he is.” Are there humorists? Is there a need for them, and are you lonely?

PERELMAN

Well, it must be thoroughly apparent how many more people wrote humor for the printed page in the ’20s. The form seems to be passing, and there aren’t many practitioners left. The only magazine nowadays that carries any humor worthy of the name, in my estimation, is *The New Yorker*. Thirty years ago, on the other hand, there were *Judge*, *Life*, *Vanity Fair*, *College Humor*, and one or two others. I think the explanation for the paucity of written humor is simply that very few fledgling writers deign to bother with it. If someone has a flair for comedy, he usually goes into television or what remains of motion pictures. There’s far more loot in those fields, and while it’s ignominious to be an anonymous gagman, perhaps, eleven hundred dollars a week can be very emollient to the ego. The life of the freelance writer of humor is highly speculative and not to be recommended as a vocation. In the technical sense, the comic writer is a cat on a hot tin roof. His invitation to perform is liable to wear out at any moment; he must quickly and constantly amuse in a short span, and the first smothered yawn is a signal to get lost. The fiction

writer, in contrast, has much more latitude. He's allowed to sideslip into exposition, to wander off into interminable byways and browse around endlessly in his characters' heads. The development of a comic idea has to be swift and economical; consequently, the pieces are shorter than conventional fiction and fetch a much smaller stipend.

INTERVIEWER

Is this the reason so few comic novels are written?

PERELMAN

Well, the comic novel, I feel, is perhaps the most difficult form a writer can attempt. I can think of only three or four successful ones—*Cakes and Ale*, *Count Bruga*, and *Lucky Jim*. *Zuleika Dobson* is often held forth, but the sad fact is that it falls apart two-thirds of the way through, ending rather lamely with the mass suicide at Oxford.

INTERVIEWER

Would you call *The Ginger Man* a comic novel?

PERELMAN

Rather terrifying. I think it's funny in spots, but many people boggle at certain scabrous passages early in the book. In a way, it's a pity the author should have retained them, because they add little and, on the whole, constrict the fun The name of F. Anstey, rarely heard nowadays, deserves honorable mention when comic novels are discussed. He edited *Punch* in the late '90s and was also a very successful playwright. He worked for the most part in the realm of fantasy and turned out some very diverting stories—*Vice Versa*, *The Brass Bottle*, and specifically *The Tinted Venus*, which Ogden Nash and I used as the basis for a musical we wrote called *One Touch of Venus*.

INTERVIEWER

Was Anstey an influence on you? Would you talk a little about your admirations?

PERELMAN

I stole from the very best sources. I was, and still remain, a great admirer of George Ade, who flourished in this country between 1905 and 1915, and who wrote a good many fables in slang that enjoyed a vogue in my youth. I was also a devotee of Stephen Leacock and, of course, Ring Lardner, who at his best was the nonpareil; nobody in America has ever equaled him. One day, I hope, some bearded Ph.D. will get around— belatedly—to tracing the indebtedness of John O’Hara and a couple other of my colleagues to Lardner. In addition to Ade, Leacock, and Lardner, I was also an earnest student of Benchley, Donald Ogden Stewart, and Frank Sullivan—and we mustn’t forget Mencken. At the time I was being forcefully educated, in the early ’20s, Mencken and Nathan had a considerable impact, and many of us undergraduates modeled our prose styles on theirs.

INTERVIEWER

How would you describe the form you work in? You’ve called it “the sportive essay” in a previous interview.

PERELMAN

I classify myself as a writer of what the French call *feuilletons*—that is, a writer of little leaves. They’re comic essays of a particular type.

INTERVIEWER

Are there any devices you use to get yourself going on them?

PERELMAN

No, I don't think so. Just anguish. Just sitting and staring at the typewriter and avoiding the issue as long as possible. Raymond Chandler and I discussed this once, and he admitted to the most bitter reluctance to commit anything to paper. He evolved the following scheme: he had a tape recorder into which he spoke the utmost nonsense—a stream of consciousness which was then transcribed by a secretary and which he then used as a basis for his first rough draft. Very laborious. He strongly advised me to do the same . . . in fact became so excited that he kept plying me with information for months about the machine that helped him.

INTERVIEWER

Hervey Allen, the author of *Anthony Adverse*, apparently had the voices of his ancestors to help him. All he had to do was lie on a bed, close his eyes, and they went to work for him.

PERELMAN

I fully believe it, judging from my memory of his work.

INTERVIEWER

How many drafts of a story do you do?

PERELMAN

Thirty-seven. I once tried doing thirty-three, but something was lacking, a certain—how shall I say?—*je ne sais quoi*. On another occasion, I tried forty-two versions, but the final effect was too lapidary—you know what I mean, Jack? What the hell are you trying to extort—my trade secrets?

INTERVIEWER

. . . merely to get some clue to the way you work.

PERELMAN

With the grocer sitting on my shoulder. The only thing that

matters is the end product, which must have *brio*—or, as you Italians put it, vivacity.

INTERVIEWER

Speaking of vivacity, you have been quoted as saying that the Walpurgisnacht scene in *Ulysses* is the greatest single comic achievement in the language.

PERELMAN

I was quoted accurately. And here's something else to quote. Joyce was probably one of the most careful writers who ever lived. I have been studying the work you mentioned for nigh on thirty-five years, and I still choke up with respect.

INTERVIEWER

Your writing—like Joyce's, in fact—presupposes a great deal of arcane knowledge on the part of your reader. There are references to cultural figures and styles long past, obsolete words, architectural oddities—reverberations that not everybody will catch. Do you agree that you're writing for a particularly cultured audience?

PERELMAN

Well, I don't know if that grocer on my shoulder digs all the references, but other than him, I write pretty much for myself. If, at the close of business each evening, I myself can understand what I've written, I feel the day hasn't been totally wasted.

INTERVIEWER

Perhaps you would talk about the incongruity that turns up so often in your use of language.

PERELMAN

And then perhaps I would not. Writers who pontificate about their own use of language drive me right up the wall. I've discovered that this is an occupational disease of those ladies with

three-barreled names one meets at the Authors' League, the PEN Club, and so forth. In what spare time I have, I read the expert opinions of V.S. Pritchett and Edmund Wilson, who are to my mind the best-qualified authorities on the written English language. Vaporizing about one's own stylistic intricacies strikes me as being visceral, and, to be blunt, inexcusable.

INTERVIEWER

In your own writing, when you're at work, thinking hard, and a particularly felicitous expression or phrase comes to mind, do you laugh?

PERELMAN

When I was young I used to literally roll over and over on the floor with delight, marveling at the intricacy of the mind that had wrought such gems. I've become much less supple in late middle age.

INTERVIEWER

It's often said—or taught, anyway—that what seems at first blush funny is usually not. Would that be a good maxim in writing humor?

PERELMAN

In writing anything, sweetie. The old apothegm that easy writing makes hard reading is as succinct as ever. I used to know several eminent writers who were given to boasting of the speed with which they created. It's not a lovable attribute, to put it mildly, and I'm afraid our acquaintanceship has languished.

INTERVIEWER

The country's comics can't write a book or even a piece of any value at all. Why is that?

PERELMAN

You're confusing comedians—that is to say, performers—with

writers. The two have entirely different orientations. How many writers do you know who can run around a musical-comedy stage like Groucho Marx or, for that matter, talk collectedly into a microphone? Only a genius like David Susskind can do everything.

INTERVIEWER

I'd like to ask about the frequent use of Yiddish references and expressions throughout your writing. Words like "nudnick" and "schlep" and "tzimmes" come in frequently enough.

PERELMAN

Your pronunciation of "nudnick," by the way, is appalling. It's "nudnick," not "noodnick." As to why I occasionally use the words you indicate, I like them for their invective content. There are nineteen words in Yiddish that convey gradations of disparagement, from a mild, fluttery helplessness to a state of downright, irreconcilable brutishness. All of them can be usefully employed to pinpoint the kind of individuals I write about.

INTERVIEWER

Almost all the humorous writers of your period have worked in Hollywood. How do you look back on the time you served there?

PERELMAN

With revulsion. I worked there sporadically from 1931 to 1942, and I can say in all sincerity that I would have spent my time to better advantage on Tristan da Cunha.

INTERVIEWER

Does that include your association with the Marx Brothers, for whom you worked on *Monkey Business* and *Horse Feathers*?

PERELMAN

I've dealt exhaustively with this particular phase of my life: to

such a degree, in fact, that the mere mention of Hollywood induces a condition in me like breakbone fever. It was a hideous and untenable place when I dwelt there, populated with few exceptions by Yahoos, and now that it has become the chief citadel of television, it's unspeakable. Could we segue into some other subject?

INTERVIEWER

Yes, but before we do, might we stimulate your memory of any colleagues of yours—writers humorous or otherwise—who functioned in Hollywood during the time you spent there?

PERELMAN

Well, of course everyone imaginable worked there at one time or another, and the closest analogy I can draw to describe the place is that it strikingly resembled the Sargasso Sea—an immense, turgidly revolving whirlpool in which literary hulks encrusted with verdigris moldered until they sank. It was really quite startling, at those buffet dinners in Beverly Hills, to encounter some dramatist or short-story writer out of your boyhood, or some one-shot lady novelist who'd had a flash success, who was now grinding out screenplays about the Cisco Kid for Sol Wurtzel. I remember, one day on the back lot at MGM, that a pallid wraith of a man erupted from a row of ramshackle dressing rooms and embraced me as though we had encountered each other in the Empty Quarter of Arabia. He was a geezer I'd known twelve years before on *Judge* magazine, a fellow who ran some inconsequential column full of Prohibition jokes. When I asked him what he was doing, he replied that he had been writing a screenplay of *Edwin Drood* for the past two years. He confessed quite candidly that he hadn't been able as yet to devise a finish, which, of course, wasn't too surprising inasmuch as Charles Dickens couldn't do so either.

INTERVIEWER

Surely you must have drawn some comfort from the presence

of writers like Robert Benchley, Dorothy Parker, and Donald Ogden Stewart?

PERELMAN

It goes without saying, but since you've said it, I can only agree most emphatically. You happen to have mentioned a remarkable trio, all of them people who had no more connection with the screenwriting fraternity than if they'd been Martians. Benchley and Mrs. Parker differed from Stewart in the sense that neither of them ever made an accommodation with Hollywood. Stewart did; he was a highly paid screenwriter for many years, made a great deal of loot there, and managed to get it out. The last is quite a trick because that fairy money they paid you had a way of evaporating as you headed east through the Cajon Pass. But whereas Stewart was a consecrated scenarist, Mrs. Parker and Benchley viewed Hollywood with utter accuracy, in my belief.

INTERVIEWER

Which was what?

PERELMAN

As a dreary industrial town controlled by hoodlums of enormous wealth, the ethical sense of a pack of jackals, and taste so degraded that it befouled everything it touched. I don't mean to sound like a boy Savonarola, but there were times, when I drove along the Sunset Strip and looked at those buildings, or when I watched the fashionable film colony arriving at some premiere at Grauman's Egyptian, that I fully expected God in his wrath to obliterate the whole shebang. It was—if you'll allow me to use a hopelessly inexpressive word—*dégoûtant*.

INTERVIEWER

Feeling as you assert Mrs. Parker and Mr. Benchley did, and as you plainly did, how could you manage to remain there for even limited periods?

PERELMAN

We used to ask each other that with great frequency. The answer, of course, was geetus—gelt—scratch. We all badly needed the universal lubricant, we all had dependents and insurance policies and medical bills, and the characters who ran the celluloid factories were willing to lay it on the line. After all, it was no worse than playing the piano in a whorehouse.

INTERVIEWER

Do you feel that Hollywood evolved any writers of consequence, men and women who did important and memorable work in the medium?

PERELMAN

Oh, certainly: Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett, Robert Riskin, and one or two others. But actually, it was a director's medium rather than a writer's. Men like W. S. Van Dyke, Frank Capra, George Cukor, Mitchell Leisen, William Wyler, and John Huston were the real filmmakers, just as their predecessors in the silent era had been. I always felt that the statement attributed to Irving Thalberg, the patron saint at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, beautifully summed up the situation: "The writer is a necessary evil." As a sometime employee of his, I consider that a misquotation. I suspect he said "weevil."

INTERVIEWER

Haven't there been writers who originated in films and then went on to make a contribution on Broadway?

PERELMAN

Well, after scratching my woolly poll for half an hour, I can think of three—Dore Schary, Norman Krasna, and Leonard Spigelgass—but I believe I am in my legal rights in refusing to assess their contribution. We shall have to leave that to the verdict

of history, and meanwhile permit me to soothe my agitated stomach with this Gelusil tablet.

INTERVIEWER

Do you ever revisit Hollywood?

PERELMAN

Every few years, and never out of choice. The place has become pretty tawdry by now; there was a time, back in the early '30s, when all the stucco and the Georgian shop fronts were fresh, and, while the architecture was hair-raising, there was enough greenery to soften it. But they've let the place go down nowadays. Hollywood proper is cracked and crazed, the gilt's peeling, and the whole thing has a depressing bargain-basement air. Beverly Hills, except for a few streets, is a nightmare; the entrance to it, which used to be a field of poinsettias, now sports a bank that must be the single most horrendous structure in the world. Of course, I except the Guggenheim Museum on Fifth Avenue.

INTERVIEWER

In short, then, you experience almost no feelings of nostalgia when you return to southern California?

PERELMAN

Sir, you are a master of understatement.

INTERVIEWER

Nathanael West lived in Hollywood, and wrote a remarkable book about it, *The Day of the Locust*. He was your brother-in-law. And you are his literary executor?

PERELMAN

Whatever that implies. In my case it takes the form of being the recipient of a lot of slush mail from ambitious people working toward a degree, usually a doctorate. The curious thing is that

every single one of them nurses the delusion that he has discovered Nathanael West, and that with his thesis West will receive the recognition he's entitled to. It keeps the incinerator going full time.

INTERVIEWER

You knew F. Scott Fitzgerald in Hollywood?

PERELMAN

Yes—in a period of his life that must have been one of his most trying. The anxieties and pressures of his private life, combined with the decline of his reputation, had nearly overwhelmed him, and he was seeking to reestablish himself as a writer for films. He didn't succeed, and I don't believe he ever would have. He was pathetically innocent about the kind of hypocrisy and the infighting one had to practice to exist in the industry.

INTERVIEWER

Did you ever see Faulkner out there?

PERELMAN

Very infrequently. Sometimes, of a Sunday morning, he used to stroll by a house I occupied in Beverly Hills. I noticed him only because the sight of anybody walking in that environment stamped him as an eccentric, and indeed, it eventually got him into trouble. A prowler car picked him up and he had a rather sticky time of it. The police were convinced he was a finger man for some jewelry mob planning to knock over one of the fancy residences.

INTERVIEWER

Your reluctance to discuss Hollywood is so manifest that we will change the venue to a more metropolitan one. *The New Yorker* is known as the most closely edited magazine of all time. What can you tell us of its interior structure?

PERELMAN

No more than you would have gleaned from Thurber's disquisitions on the subject. Personally, I thought that in *The Years with Ross* he made the paper and its staff sound prankish, like a bunch of schoolboys playing at journalism. But one must remember that Thurber's entire life was bound up in *The New Yorker* and that on occasion he was inclined to deify it. At a gathering one evening during the mid-'30s, when he was extolling its glories and parenthetically his major share in creating them, I mildly suggested that a sense of moderation was indicated and that it was merely another fifteen-cent magazine. Thurber sprang on me and, had it not been for the intercession of several other contributors, unquestionably would have garroted me.

INTERVIEWER

How often did Ross or *The New Yorker* come up with an idea or a suggestion for a piece?

PERELMAN

Not too often. Most of the suggestions I get originate in mysterious quarters. They drift in from kindly readers, or I spot something—

INTERVIEWER

There are kindly readers?

PERELMAN

There are, and I'm continually heartened by the fact that people take the time to forward a clipping or a circular they feel might inspire me.

INTERVIEWER

Does it worry you, since you often pick very contemporary subjects to write about, that your work may become outdated?

PERELMAN

Sir, the answer to that is that I regard myself as a species of journalist, and that questions of imperishability are at best idle. At my most euphoric, I don't expect to outlast Mount Rushmore.

INTERVIEWER

Have you ever considered a serious book?

PERELMAN

It may surprise you to hear me say—and I'll thank you not to confuse me with masters of the paradox like Oscar Wilde and G.K. Chesterton—that I regard my comic writing as serious. For the past thirty-four years, I have been approached almost hourly by damp people with foreheads like Rocky Ford melons who urge me to knock off my frivolous career and get started on that novel I'm burning to write. I have no earthly intention of doing any such thing. I don't believe in the importance of scale; to me the muralist is no more valid than the miniature painter. In this very large country, where size is all and where Thomas Wolfe outranks Robert Benchley, I am content to stitch away at my embroidery hoop. I think the form I work can have its own distinction, and I would like to surpass what I have done in it.

