

REFLECTIONS

Robert Silverberg

THE GARDEN OF DELETED WORDS

Like most writers, I have vivid dreams. Some of them are gone by morning; others remain, and I tell them to my wife, Karen, when she awakens—she listens politely, but she isn't entirely awake yet and therefore isn't entirely impressed—and some are so bizarre that I share them with a few friends. I don't write fiction any more, but in the days when I did, some of my best dreams found themselves into short stories or novels, and I was always grateful for those gifts that my sleeping mind had given me.

Last night I had a lulu of a dream—or so it seems to me, though one's own dreams are always more interesting to oneself than to other people. But I can't resist sharing it with readers of this column.

I've been writing these columns for more than forty years now, starting with a long-defunct magazine called *Galileo* in 1978, going on a few years later to *Amazing Stories*, and then, after the death of Isaac Asimov, taking over Isaac's slot in the front pages of *Asimov's Science Fiction* in 1994. That's about four hundred columns, and in all that time I've developed an almost automatic skill of writing them to the proper length, magazines having an inflexible number of pages and just a certain number of pages being allotted to my column.

So it happened last night that as I lay sleeping I wrote a column, subject no longer remembered, and read it over to edit it for typographical errors, and e-mailed it off to the magazine in New York. And then, as I lay sleeping, came a puzzled reply from New York, to the effect that it was an interesting column, but it wasn't quite up to the standard word length. A substantial chunk of it seemed to be missing, leaving a big hole in my train of thought.

I hastened to bring the column up on my screen, and, yes, four hundred words were not there, right in the middle of the piece. I had somehow inadvertently deleted them.

What I would actually have done, if I were awake and behaving in normal fashion, would be to bring up the backup text that I would have on my computer's external drive, find the deleted paragraph from the original version of the column before I had accidentally removed about a quarter of the text, paste it in where it belonged, and email it off to New York. But this was a dream. I didn't have any backup text. All that existed was the mutilated version that I had submitted.

In waking life I am a rational person, or so I like to believe, and what I would have done at that point if I were in my right mind would be simply to write a new four-hundred-word section to replace the missing text. But, please recall, I wasn't in my right mind. I was asleep, and some ferociously autonomous segment of my brain was in charge of things. So instead of rewriting the missing stuff, I found myself heading off to the Garden of Deleted Words to recover the section I had trashed.

The Garden of Deleted Words isn't really a garden, mind you. It's more like a forest, a dark and mysterious forest somewhat like the one that the Jabberwock haunts in *Through the Looking Glass*, with intermittent open spaces where writers bury sections of their work that they deem unworthy of publication. It's not open to the public, of course. It's surrounded by a wall and patrolled by guards. And, I hardly need point out, it doesn't exist at all except in my slumbering mind.

And off I went last night to the Garden of Deleted Words to find my lost paragraphs.

I had a companion with me. I don't recall who he was—he was merely some shadowy figure in the dream, probably based on one of my friends. He boosted me over the wall, and climbed over himself, and we went in search of my vanished prose.

The Garden turned out to be divided into sections. We came first to one with a lot of big-time writers: here was a mound that covered the deletions of James Joyce, here was one for Thomas Mann, for Faulkner, for Hemingway, and so on through the front rank of letters. I would gladly have paused to excavate the passages that Joyce had cut from "The Dead," or Mann from "Death in Venice," but there was no time to waste: the guards might find us at any moment and throw us out, and I had come here with a purpose in mind.

So we wandered on and on through the district of the romance writers and the one for the mystery folk and the place of best-selling thrillers, and eventually we found the science fiction section. There was, unsurprisingly, just a very small area for Robert A. Heinlein, who didn't believe in rewriting except to editorial order, and rarely did (or needed to do) a second draft. There was a relatively small area for Isaac Asimov, who early in his career had let an editor bully him into doing five drafts of a story, and vowed never to let that happen again. There was a considerable amount of territory devoted to the prolific Henry Kuttner, who evidently had been willing to give his stories a good working-over before sending them off to the magazines. And the huge mound of discarded Ray Bradbury material told me how much effort had gone into the stories of that unique and remarkable writer.

On and on. Here was the Theodore Sturgeon section—another big one, for Ted was a conscientious and laborious craftsman. Here was that of Jack Vance, who had been smiting any paragraph that didn't live up to his sense of visual beauty. Here was the zone of Philip K. Dick, a fast and furious writer who tossed out as much as he deemed worthy of publication—and he published plenty. Here was the place occupied by the discarded words of one writer whom I will not name, because he was so much a perfectionist that he threw away more than he allowed to be published, and what a loss that was for his multitude of readers! And here was another section for a writer I'd rather not name, a very small section belonging to a dear departed friend who deleted almost nothing, and really should have scrapped a good deal more.

And finally I found the Silverberg section.

In my active days as a writer I took varying approaches to my work. If I intended a story for a cent-a-word market, I would do a single draft, whizzing through it at frantic velocity, often finishing one story before lunch and knocking out another in the afternoon. Nothing got deleted on those: I sent them in just as they came zooming out of my overheated typewriter, and almost always I got a check back by return mail, because the magazines for which they were written served up slam-bang formula fiction for their readers, and I had mastered the formulas very well.

For the top-level magazines, though, the ones that paid two or three times as much, I was far more careful, going over each manuscript and entering revisions by hand, then retyping, and sometimes doing that all over again. The editors of those top magazines were extremely demanding people, no formula fiction for them—legendary editors of yesteryear like Horace Gold, John W. Campbell, Anthony Boucher. They wanted top-drawer material, would settle for nothing less, and didn't need to, because the best science fiction writers of the day, Fritz Leiber and Jack Vance and Clifford D. Simak and Cordwainer Smith and Poul Anderson and Alfred Bester and half a dozen more, were contending for places in their magazine, and I knew, as a youthful beginner, that I had better produce careful work if I had any hope of inserting my stories amongst those of those titans. So I rewrote, and rewrote again, and many a paragraph went off for burial in the Garden of Deleted Words before those editors saw my stories.

There were no computers in those days, and therefore one couldn't simply cut and paste to replace offending passages; a lot of dreary retyping had to be done whenever revision was needed. No wonder that Heinlein said, "Never rewrite except to editorial order." He didn't like all that retyping any more than I did. But he was Heinlein, at the top of the field. I was twenty-something Bob Silverberg, still learning my craft. I remember one notable incident at the 1956 World Science Fiction Convention, when I had already sold plenty of stories, some of them pretty good, some of them barely acceptable. I was sitting next to Cyril Kornbluth, one of the best writers in the field, and he said to me, "Bob, do you ever do a second draft?"

"Sometimes," I said. "Do you?"

"Sometimes," said Cyril, a little sadly. "It does make the stuff better."

Plenty of my words lie entombed in the Garden of Deleted Words, although as the years went by and my skills developed, I was usually able to get the job done without a lot of revising. (But one editor, Damon Knight, made me rewrite a story called "Passengers" five times before he would buy it. I hated that, but "Passengers" went on to win a Nebula, has been anthologized any number of times, and has been under option in Hollywood without a break for the past twenty years. Another editor, Alice Turner of *Playboy*, often made me jump through similar hoops, but I did it, because Alice was a brilliant editor and I could see that she was right, and the stories I did for her after all those rewrites also brought me frequent anthology sales and Hollywood money.) As Cyril Kornbluth somewhat ruefully said, rewriting does tend to make the stuff better.

So there was plenty of wordage in the Silverberg mound, but my companion and I didn't have to work very hard to find the missing four hundred words from my column, since I had written them quite recently. We dug them out, and I looked through them and saw that their deletion had been a mere accident, a malicious trick of my computer, for they fit right in place in that newly written column and plugged a big hole in the logic of my narrative. Hastily we scampered out of that forbidden garden and clambered over the wall. And in the morning I pasted them in their proper place and emailed the repaired column off to New York, and within the hour came the reply from Emily Hockaday, our managing editor, who agreed that the column made much more sense with those words in it.

And then I woke up, and discovered that I had written this entire column in my sleep. Once more I must express my gratitude to my unconscious mind, which throughout a writing career of more than sixty years has done so much of the work for me.