The Practice of Writing

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Those questions about creative process which deal with the mechanics of writing have always bored me. Whether I use a pencil, pen, or typewriter is not determined by what is objectively effective but by left-handedness, a bad back, lack of funds, and anyway, who really cares? A far more interesting mechanical question than how each of us gets words onto the page might be why so many writers refuse to drive cars, but that investigation would lead away from the point, which is what aspects of the creative process might be usefully shared with other people.

Two of the most important problems for any writer are locating material and conceiving form. As a very young writer my passion for form served my need to learn the rudiments of my craft and also distracted me from what I felt – wrongly it now seems to me – was my lack of experience. What I really lacked was simply enough distance from my experience to know how to use it. Instead I invented material of a sort that can still make me blush. I wrote about ironically wise talking Minah birds who broke up marriages, black men with yellow hair and green eyes who raped sheep (after that particular story was read aloud to a writing class, my fellow students burst into 'We are little black sheep who have gone astray' every time they saw me). The only way I can explain those choices is to suppose I was grafting my new sexual edginess onto such reading as *Lassie, Come Home* and *Black Beauty.*

At sixteen I simply had no taste. But my appetite for every literary device, every theory of language was enormous. Questions about point of view, symbolism and time occupied me at my desk and away from it. The more complex the form of anything, the more I admired it whether in my own work or in Faulkner's, Joyce's, Virginia Woolf's. In fact, philosophy and aesthetics were more interesting than fiction because principles could be isolated, the human clutter evident in even the purist fiction done away with. There are very young writers who come to their own material guilelessly and learn their craft by simply serving more and more accurately what they have to say. Many more of us, influenced by the academy or not, practise ablative absolutes, archaic synonyms, periodic sentences, points of view entirely beyond us, symbolic structures to rival Dante before we make any attempt to come to terms with what is ours to say. In what can sometimes seem a discouragingly pretentious process, technique is learned.

Writing is, more than is often acknowledged, a craft that has to be practised, like tennis or the flute. Just as an athlete or musician works long hours in solitary repetition of the hardest techniques of the craft before performing them in game or concert, so a writer needs to concentrate, particularly at first, on what is most difficult. The skill is so complex that a great many of its requirements must become, through dogged repetition, nearly automatic. Otherwise writing a novel would be impossible. In much the same way that any speaker of the language knows how to make subject and verb agree without thinking about it, a writer must develop higher and higher automatic skills so that a choice of sentence structure is rarely mistaken even the first time, so that the dozens of minor technical choices involved in each scene can be made almost without thought. The questions for the beginning writer are often ones too mundane for any teacher of literature ever to raise: how do I stop my characters talking and get into the narrative voice again? How do I get through three months in a paragraph? How do I find words for a sexual experience which will illuminate rather than offend? How do I stop this skateboard of a story going down hill except by crashing into a light pole? These are questions answered not by fine theories but by practice, by being there over and over again until the solution occurs as simply as the familiar way home.

Because we all use language every day, there is an illusion that anyone with adequate intelligence and something to say ought to be able to sit down and write a book about it. But speakers of the language do not practise language as a writer must in order to be prepared to solve the problems that arise. That is why even a second rate writer can, disappointingly, write a more engaging book than someone with a great deal more to say. That is also why a writer deprived of time to practise the craft continually will rarely emerge as a major voice late in life. We are not as bound to childhood opportunity as ballet dancers, nor as limited by our bodies as any of the performing artists, but we still share with all of them the need to be *practising* artists. The creative process in any art takes time.

Time is, however, not enough. No matter how many hours of the day, years of a life, one practises language, there is still the question of what to write about. Though books can be a source of all kinds of technical help, they are rarely a place for discovering subject matter or insight. Those who find their subject matter early are usually autobiographical writers. Both the inventors of fantasy and the realists for whom social, political and moral questions are paramount may take longer. Whatever the choice, a certain detachment, aesthetic distance is necessary. Without it, the courage and ruthlessness of the autobiographical writer can become nothing more than vengeful self-indulgence. The clever inventions of fantasy must serve a deeper insight or be found empty tricks. The social realist can turn shallow propagandist. No matter is safe from mean use. None is beneath wonder. All choices are personal and justified only after they have been proven.

As a writer, I have discovered my subject matter in the world we share in common, that is, what we all may experience as distinct from what I experience either in my unique life (autobiography) or my unique imagination (fantasy), though there are certainly elements of both in my work. When I present a character, I neither take a real person I know nor invent a being out of an ideal concept; rather I take half a dozen people I've known who similarly have faced circumstances I want to write about – the loss of a parent, rivalry among siblings, political defeat – and draw even more widely than that on physical attributes, inheritance, social circumstances to make up the character I need for the experience I have designed. If that character slips easily into the slot I have made, I am suspicious, wonder if I have been superficial or glib. A character should, like a real human being, resist categorizing, resist simple-minded solutions. The characters I trust I have usually the hardest time with, for they are often conceived in enough complexity to foil my less interesting plots. I have fairly often written about characters I don't much like but never about characters I don't care about. A subjective quirk of mine is to give each of my characters something of my own. It may be a habit or a fear, a cough or a favorite word, an old jacket or a childhood landscape. Whatever it is, however small, it is a kind of talisman against any petty or vindictive treatment. I don't like killing characters even when the structure of a story obviously requires it. I refuse to belittle them.

A circumstance and its resolution are harder for me to come upon than characters to inhabit the experience. Plot often seems to me over-judgmental. It caters to the righteous indignation in us to see characters punished by fate if not by law. I am more interested in insight than in judgment; therefore, I tend to work on circumstances with modest resolutions, which must not be as morally or psychologically simple as they might seem at first glance. I write a fiction of reversed or at least reserved judgment. More and more I have found myself working with novels because I am interested in writing about groups of people and need that much room. The long tradition of fiction with a central character around whom all others must find their secondary place supports hierarchies I don't find interesting; it promotes an egotism that is positively boring. Though it is a common enough fantasy, it is simply not true that any one of us is centre of the world. Why should novels perpetuate a false view? In choosing the world we share as my subject matter, my authenticity is more exposed and my compassion more required than either would be in autobiography or fantasy. Those are safeguards important to me as a writer.

Where I live seems to me a question like how I get words on paper, not really relevant to the question of creative process. We live as we can, hoping for that balance of nourishment and peace which will sustain us in our work. I live where I can be sure I am free to practise writing rather than being a writer.

I Could Have Loved the World

This town's no castle and I'm no maiden,
but he'd call me "Princess"; there's men fool enough
to make magic out of anything, even me.

Only it cut me like a lie,
so I says, "Call me Prin,"
I wouldn't have them laughin' at me.

Understand, even a none-too-bright fat lady
lives in a world of pageants and passions,
though hers may be different from others.

For some it's sleeping around,
booze and fancy men who come to town,
but for me it's a baker's dozen,

jelly-filled dough-blobs, sugar-crusted,
the only thing that can cure me
surely makes me worse.

But the ache of this house of flesh,
of my hips and tired legs,
is nothing like the prison of the soul.

I'm a shut-in like Rapunzel
without lovely gold hair to let down;
only got things to hide inside.

Mustn't let the fat lady
go on display. Oh, Lord, if I'd been thin
I could have loved the world

as much as anyone. I could have really
had my man, close to me
as anything, as much as anyone else.

Rosalind Eve Conway

Imaginary monologue of a character in Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners.*