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The Literary Apprenticeship: When Does it End?

By
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WHEN I BEGAN teaching fiction writing, I emphasized the usual topics: story-line structure, characterization, point of view, imagery, etc. A few years later a student named Tom convinced me to broaden my focus to include a discussion of literary apprenticeship. Tom was a Lockheed engineer in Tennessee, a thirty-year-old former English major who had always wanted to write. He was also a workshop terror; his comments to his peers were frequently condescending. But even those offended by his gracelessness agreed on one thing--the guy could really write.

My first novel was published that year: it was not the first novel I wrote but it was the first one I rewrote for three years. That same year Tom completed his first book. Although it was as uneven as most early drafts of first novels, I was deeply impressed by its originality. Many years later Tom's novel remains

unpublished, and I often wonder if he is still writing. If he is not, the reason may lie in Tom's perception that writing is the art of *doing* rather than *learning*. Had he settled into a productive literary apprenticeship, he might have had a brilliant writing career.

What Tom taught me was something I already knew: that books are not wrought by talent alone. Books are wrought by talent, hard work, patience, and profound good luck. Tom worked hard but he assumed that he could already write well—which he could, but not consistently. He needed an apprenticeship in order to learn consistency. Tom was naturally gifted in several ways: He had a compelling voice and created unusual metaphors. But he was not gifted at everything and rather than learn what did not come to him naturally, he dismissed those areas of craft. When he was told in workshop that his characters were not believable and thus not engaging, he said they were allegorical and the reader wasn't supposed to like them. When his heavily narrative style was described as more reminiscent of the nineteenth-century novel, he said he wasn't interested in producing commercial novels.

A writer's success depends on accepting the necessity of learning to write, of understanding that a grammatically correct paragraph or piece of journalism does not a novel of vision make, and on figuring out what he or she should learn during an apprenticeship. When I encounter a beginning writer who has just begun his or her first book and expects to see it in print within two years, my advice is always the same: "Slow down, add several years to your timetable, figure out some things *about* your writing before you try to sell it." When I suggest to a classroom that a

literary apprenticeship can last for ten years--a lifetime, says a friend of mine--faces all around the room sag. But would these students expect to become lawyers within two years? Doctors? Learning to write is more difficult to learn than either, because the body of information about it is subjective and diffuse; MFA schools notwithstanding, writing is still largely self-taught. When my students appear deflated by the prospect of years of study, I ask: "What could possibly be more important than spending the next decade perfecting something you love?"

A CHIEF DIFFICULTY of the literary apprenticeship is learning where and how to train. There is no apprenticing system in place for writers; MFA programs may help, but they rarely complete the process. A dancer or musician knows what to do: In those fields, the beginner must find the right teacher, a master in the discipline, and study with that person for years. A writing apprenticeship is far more individualistic. You learn writing by writing and by noticing what you are doing in your writing, so a literary apprenticeship can be successfully completed on one's own, though not in isolation from contemporary literature and sound feedback. Beginning writers do not apprentice to another writer, at least not for long; they apprentice, bind themselves over, to the development of their own work, to studying alone the advancements and setbacks of their own artistry. If there is a teacher, he or she is never in charge; the responsibility always rests with the student. Because each writer's work is unique (unlike the hundreds of musicians who might perform the same Mozart piece), what

early-stage writers need from professional writers, from their teachers, is mentorship. The apprenticeship for writers, in my opinion, occurs between the writer as a human being and the writer as an artistic consciousness. Years after I began writing, I realized I needed a relationship with my art form that was as strong and complex as my relationships with other people. Writing occupies just as important a place in my life, and my relationship to my work sustains me—as friends do in a personal crisis—during artistic confusion. Like all relationships, this one is at times very successful and at other times weaker; it is one that works better in certain areas than in others. But it always provides a framework of support for my writing life.

No student has ever asked me when a literary apprenticeship *ends*, but I've wondered about that as my own work has matured. More specifically, I've wondered what changes during apprenticeship, what its stages are, what a writer truly learns during this process. Certainly a beginning artist in any field must master craft and technique and develop a voice; beyond that, the water gets murkier. It's easier to assess what apprenticeship is not. It certainly is not simply that long tundra before you win a literary grant or publish a book. When your work is permanently committed to paper and is read by someone other than your friends, in my opinion, you merely *begin* this life of communicating what you feel/think/ believe/see/ to other people. Having an audience is only the entryway to a career. I'm proud of my first novel, but I would do dozens of things in it differently were I writing it today; I often tell people it's like looking at an old photograph of myself. It was a momentous change in my life, but not

the *end* of anything. Publication is important for many reasons, but it does not signal graduation from the apprenticeship.

In fact, I think apprenticeship is nearing maturity only when a writer realizes that it may never end, perhaps should never end. A sign of its success, though, is when a writer's emphasis is on integrity and quality rather than on publication. A poet friend often says: I would rather publish two good books than six mediocre ones. That's a mature writer. In the beginning we all hunger for recognition, for reward. When we hunger more to be good at what we're doing, we are succeeding at apprenticeship. Doubleday edited out dozens of pages of my first book, turning it from my slowly meandering story into something faster paced. I stood up against cuts that really bothered me, but I was also aware that if I rocked the book-boat too fiercely, the company might cancel my contract before publication, which has happened to several writers I know. My publisher did not significantly alter my story, but my editor did recast my style. I would not let anyone do so now. After a certain point, a writer knows what is most important in her work, and that starts to matter more than the validation of publication.

The significant work of apprenticeship is to become less egocentric than most writers are when they begin. Whether they admit it or not, many writers begin writing to prove how smart or clever they are, sometimes to justify themselves to themselves and/or to the people who have not given them the emotional support they needed. It's not a bad reason to begin writing, but it can get in the way when the result is a first book that lacks a soul, in which

the writer has covered himself or herself with a veneer of self-consciousness. I laugh now at the first novel I wrote, years before my novel *Southern Exposure* was published; editor Jonathan Galassi embarrassingly pointed out that it contained far too much posturing about Art. Which of course resulted from my great fear that I might not be an artist, only a hack. This is the Masterpiece Syndrome: the writer is writing to bolster his or her image, rather than to communicate. Writing is an arrogant act, especially writing a book; to some of us, books are like buildings, seemingly permanent, part of history. That is why so many of us are kept awake at night with the age-old question: *Who am I--really--that someone should read 300 pages of what I think?* Without healthy arrogance, no writer will have the confidence to do his or her work, and do it well. But without humility, being able to sacrifice self for the greater good of story (get rid of that scene, you only want it because it happened to you), few writers succeed. This is what changes in a good apprenticeship. You begin to write for a larger purpose, one connected to you certainly, but more important than you.

Successful apprenticeship is also about finding a world view in your work. In the beginning phases of writing, it's enough to just master craftsmanship. How can I tell this story most effectively? If a writing teacher asks what your aesthetic is, your inclination is to hide in the closet. But an aesthetic does develop as you endlessly write and rewrite alone in the middle of the night: In those hours, you are developing an artistic sensibility. You may not even know what that sensibility is, but unconsciously you will begin to champion specific causes connected to

language. What are your stylistic endeavors, your contribution to the use of language? How are your stylistic and thematic goals related?

These constitute your aesthetic. I know for example that I usually write dense, lyrical, ornamented prose, and I know that I write this way because experience strikes me as circular, interconnected, swaying like moving river water, weaving in and out around stones. I believe that repeating rhythms are a basic need within people stratified by frenetic modern life, a belief connected to my lifelong love of contrapuntal music, which is probably why my first novel structurally resembles a concerto. Just when we listeners are almost dissolving in the chaos of ornament, of swirling sound, the base line reappears to anchor us to coherence. This is a small portion of my aesthetic; it is what I've learned from studying what I do on the page for years. Once you begin to have an aesthetic, you can then understand your work in a larger context; you know how it fits into classic and modern writing; you see it as part of a tradition or as departing from one. You don't become a literary critic, but you do become aware of your own work from both the inside and the outside, rather than just from inside.

Finally, the major steps made in apprenticeship are also concrete: you simply write better. You become good at everything, not just the few things that come naturally to you. In the beginning, what you are most proficient at makes what you are least proficient at look worse. So you identify your strengths and weaknesses, exploit your strengths and spend hours and days and years addressing your weaknesses. As you become a better writer, whatever rules you've been taught matter less. For

prose writers, this can lead to a relaxation of the "show/don't tell" dictum. Young writers are always exhorted to show via scene more than they narrate, given that our modern reading public has been weaned on television and film dramatization. But the other reason for this rule is because showing is an easier method by which to engage the reader. In the hands of a seasoned writer, telling can be just as compelling, however, and often more so (look at the fiction of Toni Morrison or Michael Ondaatje or the rise of the modern memoir). But this is true only when a writer learns to tell in a way that is unique and startling, when the writer has developed his or her narrative voice well enough that it can carry a story forward as effectively as dramatic action. This writer must be as skilled at writing connotatively as denotatively, must be able to suggest the nuances of a story through tone and language as much as by outright statement. That's when a work of fiction begins to feel like a complete artistic experience, not just a disparate series of incidents. To be able to produce such work is a hallmark of talent, and also one of experience.

When an apprenticeship nears its end, you also know there is no going back. You may still occasionally dream of getting into another line of work, or you play with the idea of beginning a new book rather than figuring out what's wrong with the one in progress, but when such thoughts occur you'll *know* you're in a major delusional state. You can't stop writing, it's who you are now. At this point a writer often surrenders the comforting myth of writer's block. When "blocked", you may be afraid, or you may be lazy, but you are not usually unable to sit at a keyboard. A seasoned writer won't overdramatize this intrinsic

part of process. Whatever it's called, every writer needs an occasional indulgence that allows you to goof off for a week. When you can goof off without worrying that you may never write again, and then come back to your work refreshed and renewed and work harder than ever, your apprenticeship is definitely working.

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WHEN I FIRST THOUGHT of writing an essay about literary apprenticeship, I imagined I might take a favorite scene from my first novel and rewrite it almost ten years later. When I looked at the scene, though, I realized I wouldn't change it at all. Apprenticeship is not about doing what you've already done in a better way; it's about finding new ground, about doing what you're meant to do tomorrow far better than you would have done it yesterday. Perhaps apprenticeship doesn't ever end any more than the act of learning ever should, but it does move in stages. A beginning writer does not truly know who he or she is as a writer. That comes from developing a long relationship with your writing. Your uniqueness as a creative artist can only be discovered slowly, painstakingly, with great patience and kindness toward yourself and your creative idiosyncrasies. All artistic people aspire to be known, to be seen in our complexity, in our contradictory entirety. But we cannot expect anyone else to perceive who we are until we have stared into that mirror for a very long time ourselves. This self-knowledge gives us the strength and the confidence to continually surpass ourselves.

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