

NOTES ON A LONG, LONG JOURNEY

By Michael Ventura

January 11, 2013

The Dragon is a novel almost five years in the works. It may take another five. I keep a *Dragon* journal. Here are entries from this year.

May 4. I cling, as a novelist, to what Orson Welles said: “Who needs plot? But who can live without a story?” And I cling to what John [Cassavetes] told me: “In replacing narrative, you need an idea.”

I’ve always believed that, if you’re good enough, you can dispense with a plot (life has no plot) if you focus on behavior. The page-turning tension of plot is replaced by the page-turning *interest* in behavior: You turn the pages because you’re interested in what’s going on. Behavior- leads-to-behavior-leads-to-behavior, as in how we live our days, and that is interesting and takes a reader from where you begin to where you end. For a story never really ends. The storyteller picks a place to begin and a place to end, but, unlike a plot, story is alive before the beginning and after the end. In our days, we live plotless stories – inherently interesting, because we’re alive. I’ve always thought, believed, and wrote within this conviction.

I don’t know how to write a novel any other way, and I’m not interested in writing a novel any other way, but is it working?

I don’t know and can’t know. And it’s my job to live with that. Live with that, and keep on. But, damn, I’m scared.

May 6. You are responsible for your characters. You’ve taken responsibility for Willie and the others. The deeper you get into the novel, the larger that responsibility grows. Your characters depend on you for life. They depend on you to tell the truth – their truth as characters – in the same way that actors are responsible for the truth of their characters. James Cagney said it: “You walk in, plant yourself, look the other fellow in the eye, and tell the truth.” The story is your own, but the characters are not – they belong to themselves, and it’s your job to be true to how they belong to themselves.

May 18. Every time I begin to compose again, I’m nery as hell – terrified, is what. After all this time, a lifetime, it never goes away. Actors, the real ones, say the same: stage fright every time.

Got to 400 words, thought that was all I had, and there was a tug – two tugs. One said, “Best stop here and sleep on it” – t’other one said, “Something you didn’t plan on happens here.” And then it happened: a change in the scene’s structure, small but it counts. Maybe not so small.

It is a privilege to have such work. It calls to you: “Write me, write me.” Something unformed, but which nevertheless exists, calls on you to give it form. The artist is a servant of that call.

May 19. Tonight I really had to push past the fear. So goddamn nervous at what the novel tries to do, wants to do. Me, I’m saying, “I know what *you* want, but can I do it? You sure you got the right guy?” “You’re the only one in the room,” says the novel.

May 20. There are times when you are unable. Then you just sit, feeling useless. You sit and wait for the novel to tell you what to do.

I waited at least an hour. Finally, the novel spoke up and told me what to do: Retype/refine the raw pages I've written since the 18th. Have all that ready and done for when I return. So I began that.

June 24. Composition, finally, composition, after more than a month, I got almost sick with it, with the excitement of facing it, I became nauseous. I didn't try for too much. Just to get the thing going again. Stopped where Hemingway said to stop – best advice he ever gave, to stop when you know what happens next so you can pick it up again with that momentum. I might have pushed on, but my body said, “STOP, lest we get dizzy and fall from the chair.”

I wish I could express the thrill of doing this. To be in the midst of what I write, to feel and scent and hear it all, to BE Willie, to be all of them, and how deeply I want it to be true, true, true, and to put the reader in the midst of it, for the reader to be as excited as I am.

June 29. As I retyped the new pages, the novel showed me the BIG thing I'd been missing, the BIG thing that must happen in this chapter. It's so obvious, but I didn't see it with my eyes, didn't think it with my mind; not 'til I retyped did my hands feel and know it. What my hands knew threw the chapter open like a window you're about to jump out of.

July 14. Said to Jaz after work was done: “This novel, it really doesn't care about the logic of story. It cares about the illogic of experience.”

August 5. Fun is hard to write. Anyone can write misery, but you've got to be really good to write fun and make it work.

August 7. Don't tell no one, but we're getting at the meaning of life in this here novel. As Margie (of blessed memory) would say, “Fun's fun, fellas, but who shit on my head?”

November 27. In the apartment in the Bronx, when my family had gone to bed (sister and Ma in the bedroom, Vin and Al and me on sofa and floor in the living room), I'd be at the table in the oh-so-narrow kitchen, and I would grow aware of a kind of sinking down, as though my chair-and-table might be an elevator that had to descend many floors down to where the poetry was, where the poetry lived. Always, since, there's the sense of sinking down and down to the place where the writing is, where it waits.

November 28. Just over two hours of work – not much of a work night – but even with that, the novel is *working its way*, taking a further step from where it was yesterday. This is immensely, deeply satisfying.

November 30. What S. said, winter of '72, before I went west: “Long, long periods of indecision and suffering, when you don't know which life is your own.”

He was in the small poetry class I taught in Boston. For several sessions I failed to realize that S. was *not* a girl. He was about 16 when he said that sentence. Reading George Seferis, I asked what might make a man write such poems. S. said, “Long, long periods of indecision and suffering, when you don't know which life is your own.” And I didn't know yet he was a boy. A very brave boy.

December 2. Vincent van Gogh wrote to his brother Theo: “An artist is a man with his work to do.” Aside from the gendercentric nature of his sentence, it is a great statement, and it is what sets artists apart, especially as we age: Artists wake every day with our work to do, work we've chosen, work that gives us life and passes life on to others. It is not *our* lives we pass on, it is the *life* that flows through us and that we do not own or possess in any way. We are but translators of that which flows through us and uses us,

uses us to manifest, to become tangible and inhabit the world of others, those others we work for. “For the others!” was the anarchist battle cry in the Spanish Civil War. Artists work for themselves, yes, but the work we do is for the others.

December 12. Something I have always loved and appreciated about the craft of writing: All that’s needed is the will to work, some paper, a pencil or pen, and a little light. Daylight or lamplight. A little light.

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