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Revision 102: The “Last” Draft

BY LEX WILLIFORD

How do you know when you’ve written the “last” draft? Is it when, as Flaubert suggested, you find yourself replacing a period with a comma in the morning, then putting the period back in the same place that afternoon? Or, as Faulkner suggested, when you’ve slain all your darlings? Or is it only when you’re no longer around to revise, like Raymond Carver, who rewrote many stories, then published them in different magazines under different titles—“The Bath,” “A Small Good Thing”—then left it to critics to sort it all out in *Studies in Short Fiction*? Or is it, as Pound suggested, that you never really finish anything? You simply abandon it.

I’ve abandoned this essay four times already, only to return to it again and again with the conviction that it isn’t what I meant—not yet. I start again from scratch, cutting two pages of an introduction I’ve already rewritten from scratch twice—and then abandoned. Like many writers, I have to write enough beginnings to know where to begin, have to write enough to know what I have to write, have to get stuck to get moving. Especially when I’m writing fiction—a far more difficult enterprise, I believe, than writing essays like this—I’ve come to expect that what I write will (and often *must*) bear little resemblance to what I set out to write, and I’m never sure if I’m done. Caught in that delicate and sometimes frustrating negotiation between the freewheeling imagination and the critical, aesthetic (and too often perfectionist) demands of craft and structure, I’ve finally accepted that if I have to abandon work, for a short time or for good, I might as well be working on something else, as many projects as I can possibly keep up with. Sometimes, this activity feels a little like juggling five or six chainsaws—the constant fear that at any moment I’m going to lose an arm or my head—but for some reason this is how I work best, how I find joy in working even when the writing is difficult and, at times, downright depressing: a tragic adventure.

There’s a moment at the end of Hemingway’s “Big Two Hearted River: Part II,” when Nick Adams, just back from war in Europe, shell-shocked and trying to regain some balance and quiet by camping and fishing in the north woods wilderness of his youth, decides to stop fishing before he enters a swamp: “Nick did not want to go in there now. He felt a reaction against deep wading with the water deepening under his armpits, to hook big trout in places impossible to land them. In the swamp the banks were bare, the big cedars came together overhead, the sun did not come through, except in patches; in the fast deep water, in the half light, the fishing would be tragic. In the swamp fishing was a tragic adventure. Nick did not want it. He did not want to go down the stream any further today . . . There were plenty of days coming when he could fish the swamp.”

The singular discovery I’ve made about my writing process over the last 20 years is this: I get swamped, stuck, bogged down. A lot. Writing every day, for me, often means getting up the courage to enter a swamp of my own making and then to do what I know is next to impossible—to wade into muck up to my armpits and land a keeper on a flimsy fly rod—and sometimes I have to know when to quit, have to decide to fish the stream a few days more, where the fishing

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is easier, till my muse is ready to enter that swamp again and again. The writing's better there—deeper, darker, riskier, more unflinchingly honest and difficult—and it's almost impossible to land stories there, scenes, moments of recognition that earn emotion and resonate deeply on an unconscious level. Writing there *is* a tragic adventure, one I look forward to and often dread, something I must wait days, months or even years to return to before I can find the courage to begin, or to begin again.

Writer Ellen Gilchrist once told me she has on her computer hard drive an entire directory of stuck narratives called 'tar babies,' narratives she's gotten helplessly stuck in which she's abandoned then returned to occasionally, only to discover she's come unstuck and is ready to "finish" them. Like Gilchrist and others, I can find no end of ways to get stuck in a narrative: When I ask myself something as simple as, All right, *now* what happens? Or when a character does something utterly baffling and I realize that I don't know the character well enough yet to make that moment credible or inevitable. When I've made an easy move and stopped because I know I'm lying to myself about something important some essential part of me refuses to see. Or when I make a difficult, risky move and realize that I don't have the courage to go on, not yet.

As Annie Dillard writes in *The Writing Life*: "When you are well into writing, and know what comes next, and yet cannot go on; when every morning for a week or a month you enter [your] room and turn your back on [your work]; then the trouble is either of two things. Either the structure has forked, so the narrative, or the logic, has developed a hairline fracture that will shortly split it up the middle-or you are approaching a fatal mistake. What you had planned will not do. If you pursue your present course, the book will explode or collapse, and you do not know about it yet, quite."

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Many times, I've written toward the ending of a story and, the moment I've gotten there, realized that's not what happened, and no amount of pushing is going to change that fact. One December at Yaddo, the artist colony in Saratoga Springs, New York, I wrote a long story about a Wal-Mart clerk and a chiropractor. I wanted to finish the story, but I was stuck three pages short of the ending. The whole time I struggled with it, there were three feet of pristine snow on the ground outside my studio and a pair of cross country skis leaning against the front porch. I'd never cross-country skied in my life, and I wanted to learn how, wanted to ski in the shadows of giant spruces along the road circling the Trasks' ponds and the turret of Tennessee Williams' famous stone studio, past the Saratoga Race Track, where Carver and Plath and Cheever had all walked, working through some line or scene that had them stuck. But I stayed in my study and suffered through an ending, even when I knew it was a lie. About the time I "finished" and realized this fact, it started to rain, a real downpour, and the next day all the snow was gone.

No matter how much I wanted that ending to come it didn't come until more than eight months later when I sat up in my bed in the middle of the night and realized I'd planted a single needle in the haystack of the story—the sharp pin of a Wal-Mart pocket ID tag—which ended the story as it must. The ending was handed to me. A gift.

"Stuckness," for me, almost always lies at the heart of what stories are *about*, some fear I have to face, some blind spot I have to check and check again, some change I have to make in myself before my character can change and move on (or not change and be fated to repeat the same story again and again). For me, writing stories is about change, stripping away layers of lies till a character is exposed and stunned and utterly changed, and I can only hope that a reader, a bystander of this process, might see and be changed, too. It's damned hard work.

But the process has become less frustrating for me even as my stories have become riskier and more difficult to write. When I was a younger writer, I usually stayed with one project till the end because my critical sensibilities were mostly undeveloped and my capacity for lying to myself and writing from the ego were massive. If writing does anything over many years, it teaches patience and humility. Usually I would push forward until I got to the end and only occasionally got stuck. Then I'd revise the story five or ten times, with several complete overhauls. Many writers I know work this way, and rarely ever get stuck—an ability I both admire and envy since such writers seem to have so much more confidence and faith than I that they can keep up their forward momentum without having to look back and "fix" anything.

Novelist Valerie Miner once described her writing process to me, and I was fascinated by how differently we wrote: She writes an entire novel draft long hand on a legal pad, then types it into her word processor, and prints up the manuscript. Then she erases her only disk, marks up the typescript, then retypes the entire novel into her word processor again, repeating the process, she says, about seven times. For her, writing a novel is a physical act, a matter of running the words through her fingers until she's reach the "last" draft.

This writing-till-the-end process worked fine for me until I started graduate school, where the demands of craft-consciousness and structure can too often eclipse everything else. For my entire first year in an MFA program, I was blocked (a standard condition if the graduate students I've taught are any indication) until I started revising as I wrote, and even then the writing was slow. Almost glacial.

Several years ago, writer John Keeble described his own writing process to a group of graduate students at the University of Alabama. The diagram he drew on the board described the circular nature of daily writing and revision, each arrow and circle representing an hour's work, a day's, a month's, even a year's, the writer returning to read what she's written the day or month before, then revising and pushing forward through another line or stanza, paragraph, scene, or chapter. Keeble's lucid explanation came to me as a revelation, describing a process I'd struggled with for years, and gave me a kind of permission to write the way I'd been writing all along, but with less frustration. Unfortunately, though, at the time I was also stuck on a long project and realized Keeble had left out the blocks that many writers encounter. When I asked Keeble, "What do you do when you get stuck?" he smiled and said, "Just keep on pushing."

I'd experienced that feeling many times before, when I'd push like Sisyphus shouldering a boulder up a hill, only to watch it roll back down again and again. And I remembered those moments when I'd pushed till, nearing the top, the boulder had gotten lighter and lighter, then lifted me and carried me off: the elation of the breakthrough writers so often work for. Even so, I wasn't being productive and, as I often do when I get stuck, I returned to Rilke's advice to a young poet in 1903: "No one can counsel and help you, no one . . . There is only one single way. Go into yourself . . . Then try, like some first human being, to say what you see and experience and love and lose . . . Leave to your opinions their own quiet undisturbed development, which, like all progress, must come from deep within and cannot be pressed or hurried by anything. *Everything* is gestation and then bringing forth."

Pushing too hard often turns writing—something to do for its own sake alone, for its own

intrinsic rewards—into a thankless, depressing chore. Though I write mostly linear stories, I realized, my process is mostly *nonlinear*. Part of the problem, I knew, from reading about left- and right-brain research and generative heuristics, was the controlling nature of rational linearity itself, having to put one word after another, and how that process was in direct conflict with the spatial and randomly intuitive nature of the imagination. When I worked on just one project, I realized, I often got stuck in obsessive rewriting, like a diamond needle scratching through the looping groove of a vinyl record, then skipping, skipping, skipping, till I'd nudged the needle enough times to get unstuck. But that just wasn't working for me anymore.

Unlike reading, writing is not inherently stuck in its own linearity. Writing is more analogous to a digital process like computer multitasking or a CD set on shuffle so that when one gets stuck one simply moves on to something else, just leaps over to the next track to keep up momentum. To become unstuck, I decided to work on several projects at once: a book of stories, two novels, a screenplay, several essays and an anthology of contemporary short fiction. Not being stuck in the linear groove of working on a single project anymore helped me to stay productive while letting things that had me stuck cook in the unconscious awhile. The point was simply to move beyond stuckness to another project, to let the writing come when it was ready, in its own quiet time.

Since then, for me, writing has become a little like working in a room full of toasters. Whereas before I'd stand around waiting by a single toaster for toast to pop up, my job now is simply to show up every day and feed slices into the slots and, when something pops up, go over and butter it. The problem with such a process is that one may end up stuck with slices of cold, stale bread or charred, inedible toast crumbing the counter everywhere without finishing anything at all, without ever getting fed. But it's a risk I'm willing to take everyday, a hard-won faith that lets things cook in the unconscious longer until they produce more nourishing fare.

In no way would I prescribe this process to anyone. I didn't choose it; it chose me. I'm simply admitting that, because I get stuck a lot, I'm stuck with it. If I could write another way, I would, but accepting this process as a kind of gift rather than a curse, I've increased my productivity and confidence about whether drafts are finished or close to finished, even if I'm never sure I've written the "last" draft.

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