

WHY AND HOW AND WHY NOT AND WHAT IS THIS, ABOUT STARTING ANOTHER NOVEL . . .

Marian Engel

WHAT BEGAN AS AN IDEA many years ago, and must be written because it has not been forgotten, has begun to be a pain. The paper is in the typewriter, all the thinking — in the bath, at the jigsaw puzzles, walking along the street, in restaurants while pretending to read the *TLS* — has gone as far as it can. The characters have characters. The events are in place. The writing has to begin.

I have again to become an omnipotent two-year-old, capable of anything, especially flying. Not, of course, all the time. Just here and now, so I can begin. I'm lucky I have an ideal first line.

Old Superego doesn't like this: a first line isn't a book, you schmo. Old Super-ego doesn't like anything. Do I have to battle him to the ground before I can continue? And is he a him? He's probably a rotten old woman with iron-grey hair, like mine. I wouldn't have noticed that my hair was grey if old Superego hadn't said, "You think you're still a tiny blonde, you're a fat middle-aged woman with an iron-grey bob, the kind they won't wait on in the store, you can't write."

It always begins this way, but every time the voice is more vicious, it has more past to chew up and spit at me. You won't make any money (so, does Kroetsch?), you're not as good as Alice (I'm just as good for me, said she . . .), they'll come to the house to interview you and spend all their time asking you questions about Atwood (I won't answer them, they'll have to ask about me or go away; better still, not come). I shall have them take me to restaurants with extravagant views. In order for this to happen I shall have to buy a skirt, and I shall WEAR it. "I'm sorry, but I can't open my mouth except in Stop 33 . . ." so that in moments of humiliation, I, the flyer, shall have the sky.

First, write your book. It's been nagging for years, if it lasts for you, it will last for a reader.

But is it post-modernist? No. Is it post-post-modernist? No. My brain is addled, I mix up Foukine and Foucault and Fouquet (we shall all have a lovely time at

Stop 33, the sky will be full of us), I shall soon be 50 years, one is one's age, and this story demands craft, time, incident. Above all, it's a story.

It will get you in wrong with the feminists.

I was born to be in wrong with the feminists, who don't realize I invented them: but in narrative it is important to remember that *what is* is a subject; *what should be* is for fantasists and essayists. *What might be* is romance: we can play with that, too. But my primary excuse is that people who were frightened out of their skins by female relatives at an early age don't invent feminist empires. Why set up a government that will behead you?

If you are intending to write a serious novel, define what a serious novel is.

A novel that attempts to be serious attempts to describe a hypothetical situation in terms of its own hypothetical society, and in believable ways. I have to believe in the characters and they have to believe in me enough to give me the energy to describe their context.

But thirty years, child, you're taking 30 years to do it, and popping from town to town. . . .

It's a bummer, but there it is: look, I've been long-sighted all my life, even before I got bifocals and if I didn't have a sense of history before I studied with Hugh MacLennan and fought his (Cape Breton is not the thought-control centre for everyone), I have one now. If you take 30 years, you have to select very carefully, fill in with broad brushstrokes, and above all separate real time from fictional time in a way a reader anywhere can understand. Over that period of time things changed, particularly for women: the feminist point that this book will make, if it succeeds, is that liberation and responsibility are still all mixed up and my generation has been punished at both ends of the scale; first for wanting to marry or not wanting to marry; then for wanting to divorce or not wanting to divorce. And they've been punished economically as women always are. But this is getting ahead of myself because it's a novel about rivalry, not punishment.

THE LENGTH OF TIME I'm handling is going to require characters and scenes in the old-fashioned Dickensian way. It's easier to write a novel that covers only a short time-span: then you can use flashbacks and dreams. This one, which could also be written as a historical novel set in the nineteenth century though that would involve a tedious amount of description that already exists in Mrs. Moodie, will have to make use of the historical method; but there is no harm in that provided one is aware that one is working in the twentieth century and technical tools of another sort exist. It springs into my mind this moment, for instance, that I could read "La Jalousie" again with profit, make the narrative more abstract. Call them He, She-one, She-two, She-it.

But you can't do it, can you, your sensibility isn't really modern, you hark back?

I don't think I'll bother with that question, I'm going to have to try to make it go away: I want readers. I've had readers before and I like it; I have to write a narrative they can read. But you're right, in that my sensibility's always a bit behind, and my theory's rocky. I'm not as conservative as the *TLS* but I read less French than I used to, and I'm told that Lacan is a shinningly bad example to novelists. Besides I think the video-artists are filling that territory.

Excuses, excuses; this is an imitative novel; you're taking your history from Hugh MacLennan and your technique from Margaret Laurence.

It's my geography I'm taking from Hugh MacLennan: that theory of his that in Canada we have to map the country. I'm dealing with the difference in cultural sensibility — or maybe even garbage collection — in the two places. Laurence worries me more: my sub-plot scheme is like hers in *The Diviners*, and so are my songs: but utterly different in content. Perhaps at this middle-aged point in one's life a simple narrative line isn't enough to include all one has to say, and one opts for extras. Anyhow my main narrative line is about a search for Father or Fathering, and the sub-line deals with mother and the Pythoness: jeepers, there was a Python in *The Diviners*, wasn't there? but not a Pythoness. Maybe I'll cut the Pythoness.

You're just beginning. Maybe you'll cut everything.

I'll cut you, if you don't watch out: you're making me preachy. This matter of forebears is interesting, though. Interviewers always ask about influences and pick wrong. The early ones were, I think, the Brontë sisters, George Eliot, Conrad, and Woolf . . . superb examples I'm grateful to school and library for. But we mustn't forget that it all starts earlier than that. This morning I woke up thinking about two books called *The Far Distant Oxus* and *Oxus in Summer*, glosses on *Swallows and Amazons* written by Whitelock and Hull, I think. I don't suppose the books appealed to many children because they aren't on the shelves now, but the chapter heads were all from Sohrab and Rustum, and they took a familiar piece of the north of England, renamed its landmarks according to Arnold, and made magic by adding a Mysterious Boy. For THIS story, it could have been an influence.

You're breaking your oldest rule: you say you won't talk about anything you write because then it won't be any good.

You may be right. The notes for *The Glassy Sea* were better than the book, and I published them in *Queen's Quarterly*: that didn't kill the book. I overworked it, pushed it too hard. BE NEAT is a motto that gets in my way. I try too hard. I round off too much. I did there, anyway.

But it's important in the course of a book to remember why you started out; otherwise you forget where you're headed. It gets fat and complex and you begin to keep fancy ideas and false chapter-starts. You can see that in Laurence Durrell

who has become more baroque with age — now HE was a big influence, the post-war person who taught us that the English novel could be beautiful, and not dull. When I lived in Cyprus I became dissatisfied with his vision; *Monodromos* is a comment on *Bitter Lemons*. I wasn't right: it isn't a better book; but if we're talking about forebears, there is someone. In some way I share his isolation; in another, his love of decoration. I'm not sure though, that I would dare to do his set-pieces. Perhaps they're not necessary here in a country where the landscape is too much talked about, but in this book the cities become huge, busy backdrops to very private action.

I wish I could find a little more romance in Toronto. I should start bicycling. The most magic places I've found are the alleys around Christie Pits in the snow, which give a sense of secret life. They're a kind of Kasbah.

That's going too far. Toronto is a good city to live in because it's not romantic.

You're right. And romance feeds on ignorance. If I knew what was in those sheds! Romantics wind up without pensions, though they still exist.

You seem to know what you want more than you did six months ago. But will you get it there?

The proof of the pudding is in the typing. Weeks, months, days. The proof of the seriousness of the content is in the narrative voice, and that's the problem here. I am not sure I have got it right. It is too casual, too quick. I must stop using contractions and informalities. There must be an air of pavanne, of sarabande.

You're thinking in terms of music because Durrell has already erected the quincunx you wanted for the garden.

Only a passing thought; there are lots of devices; you find them in old books. I want a voice of dignity and wonder; that is why I was reading Browne. And to prove I was old enough to do so. Magic is the thin high sound you get when the celestial violin is tuned exactly to the music of the spheres. When your history, geography, psychology, and human feeling combine with exactitude, that magic is possible; it's what I always strive for. Others do too, you can feel it in the good ones. It's why sex is important in a novel, because we know in this century that that is what good sex is about: getting it right at the right time and loving, too. So it does not really matter whether you are modern or post-modern, your work is a march of words across the paper . . . they are soldier ants, they have to build a house; it is up to the writer to decide what kind of house, and what design will prevail. My usual choice is to emphasize the elements, the details, and let the reader decide on the wholeness of the structure. I am trying for more, now. In *Bear*, I think I found "Less is more" but this is a more complicated story. It will be less loved, but say more.

Lives. I'm putting lives on paper. That one was Red Riding Hood. This one is Snow White and Rose Red. It's modern, and very moral, and very pretty, I

think, because I like decoration. I can get the violin to play if I'm very smart, if I spend enough time on the ringing plains of windy Troy, if I find Africa and her prodigies inside myself, if I polish my verbal surfaces and eschew self-indulgence (no roses, not a one): it's a lot of work. I got tired and closed off *The Glassy Sea*. I wonder if I will be able to keep up the pace; or if the plan is too complicated; if the Father will take over.

You see, what the outsider doesn't comprehend is that it's an adventure; one is not the first narrator; one is walking on thousands of graves trying to make something new, knowing perfectly well that the Old Ones have said it all, but hoping against hope that if contemporaneity can bump against the big eternities, there will be something special.

I am getting older and more conservative. I have lost my proud claim to be an experimenter. If I went to find my Foucault now a pipe would burst and I would never get back to it; there would be some other demand, I wouldn't get to the master. In me, however, there is a different master now. Time has done some work. We shall see if it is good or ill that has been produced, if impatience has been replaced by wisdom, and lack of energy replaced by richness. Anything could happen. I write because I have always written. I try again because I don't know what else to do. It is both a trial and a joy.

