

Willingness: A Philosophy of Revising Fiction

A novel manuscript represents a dynamic convergence of the author's will, the will of the work itself, and the will of the reader.

The Reader wishes for fiction

- to generate comprehensible and ineffable human mysteries;
- to welcome the inward and outward journeys that are resolvable (comic) and irreconcilable (tragic);
- to sound language's clear root notes, its chords, and its engaging, estranging silences.

The Work Itself wishes

- to present the spectacles of becoming and the dramas of being;
- to reveal the selves, the illusions of self, and the true self of the characters and the world of the characters;
- to be a living organism that invites physical responses (prehensions), as well as cerebral reactions (comprehensions);
- to assume flexible structures and patterns that reflect literature as an invitation to lose and to recover innocence.

The Author wishes

- to relent to the generous will of the work and to the generous will of the reader for whom the work itself exists.

The Editor has no other wish than to be at the service of the willing work, the willing artist, and, by implication, the willing reader.

The Terms of Engagement Between Author and Editor

Good novels are manipulative, intentional, designed – and they are self-liberating. As in life, we readers experience the novel's greatest rewards in witnessing the undoing of our own willful expectations. In great novels, the convergence of the author's will, the will of the work itself, and the will of the reader is a *dynamic* convergence. In great novels we do not feel balance: the limited stance of certainty. Instead, in every chapter, page, passage, and particle of language, we feel that verging-into-balance and falling-from-balance are occurring at the very same moment: the generous "stance of wonder" (John Berryman).

When the willful author offers static balance in her/his uses of narrative voice and language, story structure, character development and viewpoint, scene treatment and presentation of temporal and spatial condition, the editor must insist upon the dynamic balance sought by the self-liberating work. If all elements of the author's manuscript completely resist such dynamic balance, the editor must reject it, asking the author to resubmit it when it is ready.

The editor must not be willful, rejecting work or suggesting changes in it according to personal preference. Each book he edits presents an opportunity for him to dismiss his own and the author's rigid allegiances to received wisdom about "bad" and "good" fiction. In subtle and in quite significant recommendations, the editor must take into account the context of that particular moment and the spirit of the whole. He must be sensitive to the possibilities for natural adherence to convention as well as natural departure from it.

Through full engagement with the body and mind of the author's work, with its individual traits and the habits characteristic of its kind, and with the unique music of its language, the editor assists the author in processes of revision that are, after all, processes of unlearning willfulness, of learning willingness.