

CRAIG NOVA

Sculling and the Writing Life

The sculling boat I row was made by Graeme King, who has a shop in the Vermont town where I live. He is a friend and a man I admire, not only because of the beauty of his boats, but because he is at once exceedingly precise and yet oddly mysterious, which is a quality that he shares with his boats. He was born in Australia and for awhile he worked on boats at Harvard, but now in his own shop he makes eights, fours, doubles and singles. Recently, a company (Elite Rowing) has been formed to make composite, or plastic versions of King's designs. In his own shop he works alone, surrounded by the smell of sawdust, epoxy and polyurethane. He is a careful, restrained man, but when he says something, people tend to listen. Once, when I asked him how he learned to make racing singles, he said, "Trial and error."

My boat is about twenty nine feet long, ten inches wide at the waterline, and is made of ash covered with a tropical hardwood. It weighs thirty-five pounds when rigged and is known as a "racing single." It has a sliding or rolling seat, which is on wheels that go back and forth in a track. You propel the boat through the water with your legs, back, and arms. Frankly, it is much more like rowing a violin than anything else, and part of the skill of sculling is knowing that since you are much heavier than the boat, you have to be careful about how you throw your weight around. If you rush up the slide to try to go faster by rowing more strokes a minute, you will stop the boat in the water. You must remember the counter-intuitive truth that the way to make the boat go faster is to slow down part of the stroke. It sounds simple, of course, but it is hard to do. Still, as you learn how to slow down to go faster, you begin to see how the mystery of sculling can get mixed up with other things, such as, in my case, writing novels and being a father.

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At first, when I considered what I got out of rowing I thought that I enjoyed it as a physical correlative to writing novels. I liked to think that the technical things one did in a racing single, such as breaking the stroke down into discreet segments and then working on each one, could be useful in my work. After all, in the third or fourth or tenth draft of a book, you need a tool to go about fixing what is wrong. Breaking it down into segments and attending to each one is as good a way as any and better than most. And then there are other similarities, too, in that rowing is a repetitive act (each stroke requiring concentration) that is a lot like putting words on paper. Each sentence is a matter of assembling words, and every time you do it, you recognize that it is a lot like other times, although a little different.

The critical similarity is that in rowing, as in writing novels, the best work seems to come out of a state of keen relaxation, to use an oxymoronic phrase to describe an essentially contradictory state of mind, which is to say at once relaxed and yet alert to possibilities. Or, as King once said, "You've got to get dreamy." Now, this is hard to do when you are in a boat that is only ten inches wide at the water line, and which, if you make a mistake, will simply dump you into the water. As the years have gone by I have realized that there are other similarities, too. Anyone who has spent thirty years publishing books can tell you that the writing life is an up and down proposition, and after enough difficult moments you recognize the sudden beginning of trouble with a kind of horror (bad reviews, editors quitting or getting fired, movie deals that while looking good turn out to be miseries, etc.) And part of this horror is the arrival of that moment when you don't know what to do. It is the instant when chaos seems about to run into your life with all the devious and insidious qualities that it can so perfectly muster.

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Of course, you can have some terrifying moments in a racing single, and these will usually have to do with the weather. A sculling boat is best rowed in flat, mirror-like water, and often the river I row on is that way when you leave the dock, but after you have rowed three miles up the river, the wind starts to blow. At first it is just a ripple, but soon it is blowing harder, and when you turn towards home, it is like a hand pushing against your back. Next, the waves start breaking over the deck (which is just two inches above the water) and then you notice that some of the waves, which have a dark, almost black quality, are now topped with white caps. It is much harder to row. The oars slap the water and the boat has a tendency to lurch from side to side, which movement brings a little jolt of adrenaline, since it usually doesn't feel that way, and any unusual feeling in a racing single suggests that something is wrong. The impulse to panic is strong.

However, you learn that the only way to get back to the dock is to relax, to get "dreamy" even when things are bad, and you learn pretty fast that as the conditions get worse, you have to relax that much more. It takes a while to believe this, not in theory, but in action. Theory and action, I've found, while being intimately related in most aspects are often quite separate when you get down to practical cases.

When it looks as though the literary weather is going to take a turn for the worst, what is needed, more than anything else, is the ability to calm down. There is nothing to do but to row back to the dock, no matter how tough the weather is or no matter how inconceivable the bad news is. The kind of bad news a novelist can have is something like this: you put up your house to raise the money to finish a book, and your publisher decides at sales conference, when it is too late to take the book any place else, that they are going to let the book die.

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But the lower layer, as Melville once said, is not so much sculling and writing, but sculling and fatherhood. When my daughters were in high school, they saw me rowing and in the way that these things naturally work, they wanted to do it, too. I was happy to teach them. It is one of the great pleasures of fatherhood to be able to convey something that you like to do to your children.

My oldest daughter was the first to learn, and she took to it with a speed and skill that I still find a little shocking. In fact, I learned that in teaching her (and in teaching other things, like writing) that all I really had to do was to be there with enough authority to say, “You’ve got it. That’s good.” In this case, my oldest daughter and I were rowing along the Connecticut River, and as I said these things, she became more comfortable, and the more comfortable she became, the better she rowed.

In high school, she did some racing, and one year she had an entry for the Head of the Charles, which is a serious race in Boston. My daughter was going to row a racing single, and when we arrived at the river the day of the race, it was raining, and the Charles was in full flood. She was ready to row in water that scared me to death, and to this day, I still remember with enormous gratitude that the people who were organizing the race decided to cancel it. What I remember is my daughter’s determination. She learned this, I think, when the two of us were on the river.

But how can you actually get your hooks into this impalpable sense of youthful determination and strength? Or how can you feel it and to be able to understand it, not abstractly, not as something as glib and meaningless as a phrase such as “the strength of another generation”, but more intimately than that? This is where the mystery comes in.

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This daughter rowed at Dartmouth college for the first year, but then other things began to occupy her. And, when she left home, my other, younger daughter started in, too. She took up rowing in high school with the same speed as her sister and she kept at it for four years and was given the school's award for the best Varsity rower. There is something essentially wonderful about seeing a child take something of yours. There is a whiff of immortality about it, or, at least, the sense that something of yours will outlast you. And yet, how can you get closer, beyond these words, these phrases?

The question never occurred to me until recently, when I had a very particular experience. What I had wanted to give my children, when they started sculling, was the discipline of it, the fact that they would have to learn to calm down and do the right thing under exceedingly trying circumstances, which is a good thing to learn not only as a novelist, but as an ordinary civilian who is going about an ordinary human life. And then, of course, it is a way of giving a child a method of being connected to the natural world. In a racing single one sees the river and the shore in a way that is impossible to see otherwise. In the morning, when the water is flat and covered with about six inches of mist, you see it swirl around in a wispy and exceedingly beautiful stream as you pass through it. In the evening I have rowed through a hatch of white may flies, which were so thick in the air as to be like snow flakes, and they, too, went by in that same streaming pattern as the mist. All of these things, in moments of difficulty, are nourishing and in an odd way reassuring, too.

But the really mysterious and unexpected aspect revealed itself the other day. My oldest daughter has finished school and is in that stage of being "on her own." Still, she comes home from time to time, and the other evening, when she was here, I asked her if she would like to go

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rowing, and, in particular, if she would like to row a double. She said yes. I woke her up at six thirty in the morning and we went down to the boat house.

The double we rowed was also made by Graeme King. A double is a boat with two sliding seats, one behind the other, and the skill of rowing it with someone else is to match your movements with the other person. My daughter got in the sternmost seat, where the “stroke” sits, and I got in the bow seat. We rowed with just our arms in the beginning, and then added the back, and slowly we started using the sliding seat and rowing with our legs, too. The water slid by with a hushing sound on the hull. There is nothing like getting going fast in a sculling boat, since it is the closest thing to flying that I can imagine. We began to breathe hard and to get the boat to run very fast. Every now and then I would say, “Slow it down,” by which I meant, let’s make the boat go faster by controlling the slide.

As we went, I began to feel how hard she was pushing the boat. This is one of the aspects of rowing with another person. You can feel how hard they are pulling, since the boat surges as they put their legs into it. So, there we were, going through the mist which rose from a flat, green gray surface, not saying much really, aside from a little talk about making turns in the river and the like. There, on the river, I could actually feel, as she made the boat surge, the vital, engaged strength of a new generation. It was right there in the boat. Everything that one wants in being a father was contained in this moment: the knowledge of a child’s vitality and strength, not to mention the beauty of having something that is impalpable made so obvious and definite. I could feel the strength of a new generation. The mystery here is that it was the boat that was conveying this knowledge, almost as though it really was a musical instrument, like a violin.

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When we turned around and started coming back to the dock, I was reminded of something I read in Joseph Conrad's autobiography. What I recall is the moment when he first touched an English ship. He felt the throb of the engine in the steel plates, and I have always thought that the thing that made this so wonderful was that he wasn't just touching the ship, but in some odd way, he was able to put his hand on the English language, too, and to feel the throbbing power of it, the unstoppable, engine-like potential of it. It was the moment when an abstraction became real. As my daughter and I swept along through the mist in that repeated and smooth surge which came through the wood of the boat, I could feel the power and certainty of a new generation, too. Just like touching that throbbing, black steel of the hull.

One of the great pleasures of rowing is the gentle way that a sculling boat comes up to the dock. You lift the dockside oar and it sweeps over the planks where you have left your shoes. My daughter reached out her hand and stopped us, and there we were, back in the ordinary world. We climbed out and put on our shoes and then looked up stream.

“ Well,” my daughter said, “That was nice.”

“ Yes,” I said. “It was.”

“ I'll come home again this summer and will go out then,” she said.

“Fine,” I said. “I'd like that.”