

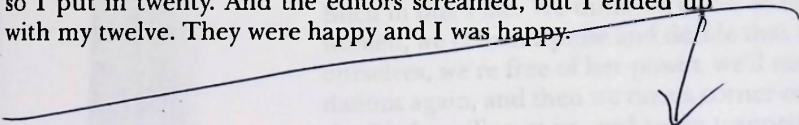
then Two now has a real edge. Conceivably—if the stakes have been high—he or she might someday be in a position to take over One's job. On the other hand, if One was right in going ahead with you and your property does well for the company, then Two may never forgive One for exhibiting superior acumen.

On the other hand, if One turns to Two and says, "Okay, we won't take it on," and the film that is made by others from your book or script does not do well, then Two can feel genial enough to say, "I'm working for a pretty good guy. He pays attention to me; he respects me. That is because he knows I'm usually right." Of course, if the company who picks it up makes real money, Two is left at a whole disadvantage.

Ergo, the rule suggests: Get to the number-two man and hope he likes your work.

On the other hand, if you've written your best, forget about these matters. It's taken me fifty years to learn this sort of thing. In that sense, it's not worth learning. After all, I still have to find out how to get to Number Two.

On this practical note, let me add another tip: *An American Dream* was originally published in *Esquire* in 1964 and had a scene where a black man said *shit* about twenty times. Now, I didn't really need all twenty. Twelve would have been better, but I also knew that if I put in twelve, the editors would take out five, so I put in twenty. And the editors screamed, but I ended up with my twelve. They were happy and I was happy.



THE BITCH

I remember, years ago, talking about the novel with Gore Vidal. We were reminiscing in mutually sour fashion over the various pirates, cutthroats, racketeers, assassins, pimps, rape artists, and general finks we had encountered on our separate travels through the literary world, and we went on at length, commenting—Gore with a certain bitter joy, I with some uneasiness—upon the decline of our *métier* in recent years. We were speaking as trade unionists. It was not that the American novel was necessarily less good than it had been immediately after the war so

much as that the people we knew seemed to care much less about novels. The working conditions were not as good. One rarely heard one's friends talking about a good new novel anymore; it was always an essay in some magazine or a new play which seemed to occupy the five minutes in a dinner party when writers are discussed rather than actors, politicians, friends, society, or, elevate us, foreign affairs. One could not make one's living writing good novels anymore. With an exception here and there, it had always been impossible, but not altogether—there used to be the long chance of having a best-seller. Now with paperback books, even a serious novel with extraordinarily good reviews was lucky to sell thirty or forty thousand copies—most people preferred to wait a year and read the book later in its cheap edition.

So we went on about that, and the professional mediocrity of book reviewers and the indifference of publishers, the lack of community among novelists themselves, the backbiting, the glee with which most of us listened to unhappy news about other novelists, the general distaste of the occupation—its lonely hours, its jealous practitioners, its demands on one's character, its assaults on one's ego, its faithlessness as inspiration, its ambushes as fashion. Since we had both begun again to work on a novel after some years of taking on other kinds of writing, there was a pleasant irony to all we said. We were not really as bitter as we pretended.

Finally, I laughed. "Gore, admit it. The novel is like the Great Bitch in one's life. We think we're rid of her, we go on to other women, we take our pulse and decide that finally we're enjoying ourselves, we're free of her power, we'll never suffer her deprecations again, and then we turn a corner on a street, and there's the Bitch smiling at us, and we're trapped. We know the Bitch has still got us."

Vidal gave that twisted grin of admiration which is extracted from him when someone else has coined an image that could fit his style. "Indeed," he said, "the novel is the Great Bitch."

Every novelist who has slept with the Bitch (only poets and writers of short stories have a *Muse*) comes away bragging afterward like a G.I. tumbling out of a whorehouse spree—"Man, I made her moan" goes the cry of the young writer. But the Bitch laughs afterward in her empty bed. "He was so sweet in the beginning," she declares, "but by the end he just went, 'Peep, peep, peep.'"

A man lays his character on the line when he writes a novel. Anything in him which is lazy, or meretricious, or unthought-out, complacent, fearful, overambitious, or terrified by the ultimate logic of his exploration will be revealed in his book. Some writers are skillful at concealing their weaknesses; some have a genius for converting a weakness into an acceptable mannerism of style. Nonetheless, no novelist can escape his or her own character altogether. That is, perhaps, the worst news any young writer can hear.

One more note on the Bitch. A friend, after reading the above paragraphs, said, "There's the title for your book—*I Made Her Moan*." I assured him that I never had a day so brave as to be ready to use that title.

84-88
~~4-12~~
4 1/2

FIRST PERSON VERSUS THIRD PERSON

1st minor

Third person and first person are at least as different as major and minor keys in music.

In the first person, you gain immediacy but lose insight, because you can hardly move into other people's heads without using a few devices, usually dubious.

The Deer Park underlined the difficulty. At one point, the young man who was telling the story stated that he was shifting from first person to third. He was now old enough, went his claim, to understand people he had not understood before. Because he now had more of an idea of how they think, he would write about them in third person. I believe it worked, but I would not swear to it.

In first person, the style has to be altogether tuned to the man who's telling the story. (Only once did I have a woman as the narrator. And that was Marilyn Monroe in *Of Women and Their Elegance*.)

When your prime character is a man, the key choice is not how bright he is, because however smart, he can't be more intelligent than you are. That's easy. You dumb him down to taste or bring him up to your level. The real question is, How tough is

he? I
and t
way-
tion.
how
I d
male
sensi
wom
self,
exist
not a
wom
self?
doul

In
W
cour
into
an e
main
nist
thir
cons
that
cons
piar
cont
be c
achi
writ
adje
dur
But
to d

Firs
get
can
edg
use

he? Do you have the inner sanction to create a man who's braver and tougher than yourself? The answer is yes. Contra Hemingway—yes! You can do that by exercising your *critical* imagination. It must not be wish fulfillment! You are entitled to guess how you might act if you were that much more of a hero.

I don't know how to pose the question for an author who's female. Can she, for example, write about a woman who is more sensitive than herself? Probably not. She could write about a woman who uses her sensitivity and sensibility more than herself, because she can then key on all the frustrated times in her existence when the sensitivity and sensibility she possessed were not appropriate to a harsh occasion. Following question: Can a woman write about another woman more passionate than herself? Probably. Or a woman who's colder than herself? Without doubt.

In the third person, there's a different set of difficulties.

With a full use of the third person, you are God—well, of course, not quite, but, one way or another, you are ready to see into everyone's mind. That is never routine. There is, of course, an easier approach—point-of-view third person, where you remain in one character's mind but are still viewing your protagonist from outside, and usually from above. In the classic vein of third person, however, where you enter each and every one's consciousness, it is not routine to get over the embarrassment that you are able to accommodate certain characters' minds with considerably more skill than you can with others'. This Olympian third person, this Tolstoyan presence, needs experience, confidence, irony, insight, and lordly detachment. When it can be done, hurrah. Most of the great nineteenth-century novels achieve just that tone. Today, it's usually up to the novelists who write best-sellers. In their case, God is always ready to offer an adjective adequate to their means. Teeming excitement, unendurable suspense, delightful joy, grim misery, dogged courage. But let me not froth at the mouth. There was a time when I used to do that myself.

First person point of view, however, remains a fine tool. You can get to places you don't arrive at any other way. Of course, you can also injure your writing hand. As an instrument, it's double-edged. Hemingway had a marvelous sense of its limitations and used it to create his style. He dramatized its first edict: Do not

talk about things that could prove embarrassing. They don't feel right in the telling, not when the "I" stands at the head of the sentence. So there's a tendency, most marked in Hemingway, to keep most of his revelations at arm's length. As, for example, the famous last sentences of *A Farewell to Arms*.

We live in a time that is astonishingly more open, but the edict, adjusted, still remains. First person cannot be as free as the separation between author and protagonist offered by the third person.

It was not until I struggled with *Advertisements for Myself* that I began to recognize how curious it was to be working in the first person. Now, many writers good and bad have been employing that mode for centuries, but I had to come to this remarkable conclusion on my own. The first person was not all that available a way to write. It proved to be a very interesting and exciting mode of literary presence, with large limitations, and you really do have to understand it as such—especially if you're dealing with your own presence. Nothing is more difficult than to become comfortable writing about yourself in the first person. It's highly unnatural, because "I" makes up only about a third of the consciousness of any human being. "I" may be the prow of the ego, but you do get into all sorts of other places where you want "one" to talk about different aspects of yourself. And then there is even second person, *you*, employed as if it is first person: "You get up, you brush your teeth, you feel lousy this morning." (In the first period of awakening, you can indeed feel like a vague entity slightly outside yourself.) And there is also the third person when used as a substitute for "I"—for one, the character named Norman Mailer in *The Armies of the Night*. Using the third person in this manner may be a special condition of first person, but it is legitimate. There is a part of the ego that is superior to ourselves—that person who observes us carefully even as we're doing bizarre things, that special persona, possessed of immaculate detachment, who is always saying, "Oh, are we really doing well right now?" A wonderful voice. Because it enables you to treat yourself as one more character in a field of characters.

Nonetheless, I have considerable regard for the first person. Once I even dared to cross the line with it. That began on a given night, in a small Paris hotel room, when I couldn't sleep.

The
and
want
a Gid
readi
years
over
Now,
this n
inabl
thy o
descr
thoug
who
Th
ocrite
with
mic
Why
narr
is ob
Son
about
To fa
cake
rema
is th
I t
high
I
an e
Son
is re
com
have
M
thir
niac
infla
can
caus

The room was tiny, the double bed took up almost all the floor, and you could break your toe trying to walk around. I didn't want to go rummaging in my suitcase for a book, so I picked up a Gideon Bible (in English!) on my bedside table and started reading. I hadn't looked at the New Testament for thirty or forty years, but I recalled that a man named Fulton Oursler once sold over a million copies of a book called *The Greatest Story Ever Told*. Now, with the bona fide Gospels in my hand, I thought, Well, this may be the greatest story, but it is certainly being told abominably. Sayings popped out of the New Testament that were worthy of Shakespeare, but much in the double columns was poorly described. An ungainly prose pronged with golden nuggets. I thought, There have got to be a hundred novelists in the world who can do a better job. I'm one of them.

The notion was intriguing. When I thought of all the hypocrites and corruptibles and power seekers who had been living with the Gospel for centuries, standing foursquare on any gnomic chunk of text they could use to abet their aims, I decided, Why not just tell the *story*? It is, in fact, a fascinating one. The narrative keel is mind-boggling. We are dealing with a man who is obliged to recognize through the evidence itself that he is the Son of God. The difficulty of such a book would be to write about a man considerably nicer than myself. That is never easy. To fashion a character who is meaner than yourself—a piece of cake. But to do someone who is better? Jean Malaquais once remarked that you can write about any character but one. "Who is that?" "A novelist more talented than yourself."

I thought, This is analogous. A finer sense of morality is also a higher talent. Yes, the problems were interesting.

I decided my character had to be more of a man than a god, an existential man, dominated by the huge cloud that he is the Son of God. Jesus, as the protagonist, doesn't feel worthy, but he is ready nonetheless to do his best every step of the way. Not in command of every situation, but will do his best. And he does have his startling successes.

Moreover, I had to decide whether to travel in first person or third. First person would have everyone saying: "That egomaniac. Does Mailer now think he's Jesus Christ? What an over-inflamed vanity!" That's the bad side, I thought, but at least I can avoid the larger mistake of doing it in the third person. Because that would soon get mixed up with the actual text of the

Gospels, and the reader would wonder, Is this sentence from the New Testament or was it added? That can only make for a squirrely experience as one reads. All right, then. First person. Damn the torpedoes, first person. Play the Ace.

It became interesting. If it was too biblical in the beginning, I did have an editor who is totally irreligious, Jason Epstein. He was appalled that I was writing this book. We're friends, but he's one tough editor. And he's most often all too right or altogether wrong. So, you have to make a quick decision. Yes, the style was too biblical.

After which, it was relatively easy. The book was short enough for me to work up seven variations on the style. I had to find the balance between a biblical rhythm and a contemporary one—something that would not inflict a biblical grip on one's mind yet would keep the echo. Before I was done, it all took a year from that night in that much-too-small hotel room on the Ile St.-Louis.

STAMINA

4/5

$\frac{1}{4}$

1
9/10

1

4 pages

10 min

delete page

I'm now eighty, but some people still regard me as a wild man. Even at my peak, that was only five to ten percent of my nature. The rest was work. I like work. I remember Elia Kazan saying one day at Actors Studio, "Here, we're always talking about the work. We talk about it piously. We say *the work. The work.* Well, we do work here, and get it straight: Work is a *blessing*." He said this, glaring at every one of us. And I thought, He's right. That's what it is. A blessing.

Of course, if you ask what work is dependent upon, the key word, an unhappy one, is *stamina*. It's as difficult to become a professional writer as a professional athlete. It often depends on the ability to keep faith in yourself. One must be willing to take risks and try again. And it does need an enormous amount of ongoing working practice to be good at it. Since you are affected by what you read as a child and adolescent, it also takes a while to unlearn all sorts of reading reflexes that have led you into bad prose.

I remember in the summer before my Junior year, working on my very first novel, *No Percentage* (which will remain forever unpublished), I ran into a phrase by Henry James. He spoke of "the keeping up." That can be the first horror to face when

~~The Spooky Art~~
 you're young, ^{is that} your novel tends to change all too quickly. It may even be the cardinal reason why people in college tend to stay away from longer fiction. Young short-story writers, no matter how good, often blow up when they attempt a longer work. They'll have a good beginning, but the second chapter goes off and they never get it back. The sad truth is that a would-be novelist possibly has to start a few books that do give out, or even crash, before a sense of the difficulties is acquired. If the same likelihood of early failure applied to young race-car drivers, there would not be speedways.

A large part of writing a novel is to keep your tone. I love starting a book; I usually like finishing one. It's the long middle stretches that call on your character—all that in-between!—those months or years when you have to report to work almost every day. You don't write novels by putting in two brilliant hours a week. You don't write novels if you lose too many mornings and afternoons to a hangover.

Sometimes, when you're in a bad period, you must in effect contract yourself for weeks running. "I'm going in to write tomorrow," you have to declare, and, indeed, show up at your desk, even though there's nothing in you, and sit there for hours, whatever number of hours you told yourself you were going to put in. Then, if nothing happens, you still show up the next day and the next and the next, until that recalcitrant presence, the unconscious, comes to decide you can finally be trusted. Such acceptance is crucial. The unconscious expects, that what it has prepared for you in your sleep should be expressed, ideally, the next day. We live, you see, in an arm's-length relationship to our unconscious. It has to be convinced over and over again to believe in you. Sometimes when you're writing a novel, you have to live as responsibly as a good monk. That does get easier as you grow older.

Writing is wonderful when you talk about it. It's fun to contemplate. But writing as a daily physical activity is not agreeable. You put on weight, you strain your gut, you get gout and chilblains. You're alone, and every day you have to face a blank piece of paper.

There's nothing glorious about being a professional. You become more dogged. You probably relinquish the upper reaches

of the
That
ery. E
dition
work

I u
from
ever c
with a
televis
an old
If that
So, no
a penc
type it
you be
I had
else ha
procee
term n

When
want to
where I
up too
into it.
the wor
to be la
reading
peruse I
to write

Now,
Naked an
I didn't
and the
The ton
Dead. A
scription
gle, I ha

I never I
Sometim

of the mind in order to be able to do your stint of work each day: That means you are ready to endure a certain amount of drudgery. But your mind is, obviously, not enthralled by such dull conditions. Professionalism probably comes down to being able to work on a bad day.

I used to have a little studio in Brooklyn, a couple of blocks from my house—no telephone, not much else. The only thing I ever did there was work. It was perfect. I was like a draft horse with a conditioned reflex. I came in ready to sit at my desk. No television, no way to call out. Didn't want to be tempted. There's an old Talmudic belief that you build a fence around an impulse. If that's not good enough, you build a fence around the fence. So, no amenities. (But for a refrigerator!) I wrote longhand with a pencil and I gave it to my assistant, Judith McNally. She would type it for me and next day I would go over it. Since at my age you begin to forget all too much, I would hardly remember what I had written the day before. It read, therefore, as if someone else had done it. The critic in me was delighted. I could now proceed to fix the prose. The sole virtue of losing your short-term memory is that it does free you to be your own editor.

When I read something good, I want to do a critical piece. I want to expand on where I think the author is terrific and where he or she is lacking—especially if reviewers are blowing it up too high. I may feel, It's good but not that good—let's get into it. So it can be immensely distracting. Your mind settles on the work you are reading rather than the one you're supposed to be laboring on. A tendency grows to protect yourself by not reading anything that's too good. Stendhal, for instance, used to peruse the Code Napoléon every day in the loo before he'd start to write.

Now, I didn't always follow that rule. When I was doing *The Naked and the Dead*, I used to pick up Thomas Wolfe and Tolstoy. I didn't read them every day, but they were on my writing desk and they were perfect for what I needed, Tolstoy particularly. The tone of *Anna Karenina* was wonderful for *The Naked and the Dead*. And then there was Thomas Wolfe to steam up the descriptions. If I needed a tropical sunset or the smell of the jungle, I had Wolfe. For the characters, Tolstoy.

I never know what the style of a book will be until I get into it. Sometimes you aim high and don't get it—you have to settle for

a more functional tone. After all, style is very much like the pace a serious jogger sets for himself. You have to be able to maintain it. In that sense, style is an offshoot of character. With all else, character is the wise or foolish estimate of your resources.

I think it's important for a writer to keep in shape. But it's hard to talk about. Harry Greb, for example, was a fighter who used to keep in shape. He was completely a fighter, the way one might wish to be completely a writer. He always did the things that were necessary to him as a fighter. Now, some of these things were extremely irrational from a prize-fight manager's point of view. That is, before he had a fight he would go to a brothel and he would have two prostitutes, not one, taking the two of them into the same bed. And this apparently left him feeling like a wild animal. Don't ask me why. Perhaps he picked the two meanest whores in the joint and so absorbed into his system all the small, nasty, concentrated evils that had accumulated from carloads of men. Greb was known as the dirtiest fighter of his time. He didn't have much of a punch, but he could spoil other fighters and punish them; he knew more dirty tricks than anyone around, and the two whores were an essential part of his training methods. He did it over and over again until he died at a relatively early age of a heart attack on an operating table. I think he died before he was thirty-eight. They operated on him, and bang, he went.

The point I want to make is that he stayed in training by the way he lived his life. The paramount element was to keep in shape. If he was drinking, you see, the point was to keep in shape *while* drinking. I'm being a touch imprecise. . . . Put it this way: He would not drink just to release his tension. Rather, what went on was that there was tension in him which was insupportable, so he had to booze. But reasoning as a professional, he felt that if he was going to drink, he might as well use that too. In the sense that the actor uses everything which happens to him, so Greb as a fighter used everything. As he drank, he would notice the way his body moved. One of the best reasons one drinks is to become aware of the way your mind and body move. Now, let me try to apply this.

Craft is a grab bag of procedures, tricks, lore, formal gymnastics, symbolic superstructures—methodology, in short. It's the compendium of what you've acquired from others. And since

great
ally t
sion.
medi
out w
else.
for y
can b
writir
few y
men-
I tho
act un
able t
essari
me th
specti
a dru
the so
words
have
ness. I
will ta
contin
rating
itself,
you fi
writer
you gr
fect, a
consci
though
ment y
to sho
own c
ing. O
ever w
(it's ob
imate
rather
Ind

great writers communicate a vision of experience, one can't usually borrow their methods. Their method is married to the vision. Therefore, one acquires craft more from good writers and mediocre writers with a flair. Craft, after all, is what you can take out whole from their work. But keeping in shape is something else. For example, you can do journalism and it can be terrible for your style. Or it can temper your style. In other words, you can become a better writer by doing a lot of different kinds of writing. Or you can deteriorate. There's a book that came out a few years ago which was a sociological study of some Princeton men—I forget the name of it. One of them said something which I thought was extraordinary. He wanted to perform the sexual act under every variety of condition, emotion, and mood available to him. I was struck with this not because I ever wanted necessarily to have that kind of sexual life but because it seemed to me that was what I was trying to do with my writing. I edit on a spectrum which runs from the high, clear manic impressions of a drunk that has made one electrically alert all the way down to the soberest reaches of a low mood where I can hardly bear my words. By the time I'm done with writing I care about, I usually have worked on it through the full spectrum of my consciousness. If you keep yourself in this peculiar kind of shape, the craft will take care of itself. Craft is very little, finally. But if you're continually worrying about whether you're growing or deteriorating as a man, whether your integrity is turning soft or firming itself, why, then, it is in that slow war, that slow rearguard battle you fight against diminishing talent, that you stay in shape as a writer and have a consciousness. You develop a consciousness as you grow older which enables you to write about anything, in effect, and write about it well. That is, provided you keep your consciousness in shape and don't relax into flabby styles of thought. They, after all, surround one everywhere. The moment you borrow other writers' styles of thought, you need craft to shore up the walls. But if what you write is a reflection of your own consciousness, then even journalism can become interesting. One wouldn't want to spend one's life at it, and I wouldn't ever want to be caught justifying journalism as a major activity (it's obviously less interesting than to write a novel), but it's legitimate to see it as a venture of one's ability to keep in shape rather than as an essential betrayal of the chalice of your art.

Indeed, many good writers get smashed en route. In that

sense, they are like race-car drivers, and the punishment they take stops them eventually. They write less well, or they take a tremendously long time to write, or they lose the desire to write.

Of course, it's virtually as if writers are there to be ruined. Look at the list: booze, pot, too much sex, too little, too much failure in one's private life, too much attrition, too much recognition, too little recognition, frustration. Nearly everything in the scheme of things works to dull a first-rate talent. But the worst probably is cowardice—as one gets older, one becomes aware of one's cowardice. The desire to be bold, which once was a joy, gets heavy with caution and duty. And finally there's apathy. About the time it doesn't seem too important anymore to be a major writer, you know you've slipped far enough to be doing your work on the comeback trail.

The hardest thing for an ~~older~~ writer to decide is whether he's burned-out or merely lying fallow. I was ready to think I was burned-out before I even started *The Naked and the Dead*. I had written a few good things in college and now had to wonder whether my time in the Army had blunted that talent. That is exactly how little sense a young writer can have of his or her own literary future.

If you can, I think it's a good idea to rotate your crops. Once you've written a novel that's factual and realistic and big, awfully close to what happened, then it's probably a good idea that your next novel be as fanciful as possible. Yes—if you can, rotate those crops.

Once you are committed to earning your living from your pen, you discover that you can push yourself. It's analogous to what athletes do when they take steroids to gain more strength. Ultimately damaging, but they set records. We do the same thing. You can force yourself to write much more than you want to. And the writing will not necessarily deteriorate. Not necessarily. But you can end up with a bad nervous system or a shortened life. Of course, one can always hope for transcendence. Sometimes working much harder than one wants to work can liberate energy. Sometimes.

I've often felt that those times when you can work or make love with great energy occur when your best and worst motives are working in cooperation for once.

The literary life is not all about envy. There is a corollary. Good writers are as competitive as good athletes. When I come across an interesting novel, I don't go at it as other people do. I read critically, the way one athlete will watch another's performance. Not watch it with venom—quite the contrary. You might say to yourself, "His spiral is tighter than mine and he's got five more yards on me at least, but I scramble better." The ideal is to give a good novel its credit and never overlook its power by deciding too quickly that the work is overrated, which is exactly the dreadful tendency underwritten by the envy chronic to the writer's occupation. Is this because we are obliged to work alone so much of the time?

A few words on rewriting and research.

Rewriting is where your working experience over the years has its day. There comes a time when you know how to get the maximum out of what you've done. The only way to accelerate this skill when you are young is to have the courage to look at it when you're about ready to destroy it. If something still comes through, then it may well have the merit to be worked upon further. It is also not bad to read things at the top of your feelings in order to get a sense of what the maximum might be. If nothing else, all this will give you a tolerance for the extraordinary range of reaction you can receive in the classroom. You realize that the people who don't like your work aren't necessarily evil and the people who love your stuff don't have to be altogether illustrious.

Research is another matter. The trick in doing a historical novel, for example, is to digest the research. You have to avoid that awful stance where you say, in effect, "Hello, I'm Saint-Simon and I'm at the court of Louis XIV. Madame de Maintenon is very angry this morning." Better to remind yourself that Madame de Maintenon does not necessarily feel that she is the Madame de Maintenon we know through Saint-Simon.

In addition, one must always be on guard against anachronisms. You learn how hard it is to separate what belongs only to your time from the era you are trying to re-create.

would be read

LEGEND AND IDENTITY

If I place a large emphasis on the word, it is because our identity on a given day or year is the seat from which we speak to the world. Any shifts of identity, any sense that the seat is not fast on its foundations but is sliding away, will play hell with the modicum of stability that one needs to write at a given moment.

So this discussion of psychology as it refers to writing can begin with some thoughts about identity and its huge overgrown sibling—legend.

Having, at the age of twenty-five, broken away from the pack, I lived with a swollen sense of importance. At the same time, I wasn't ready. Much too much well-founded modesty. One part of you shoots up, another lags behind. It's like having a prima donna of a hard-on. You just can't depend on it. The stamina you look to develop comes later, as does your new identity.

Some artists have, however, a powerful, consistent sense of themselves. I think the best American examples might be Henry Miller, Hemingway, Faulkner, Thomas Wolfe, Henry James, Sinclair Lewis. In contrast, a writer like Steinbeck kept changing his persona with every book he did. As other examples, one could add Ed Doctorow or myself. Picasso, however, comes more to

mind than any of us. His many changes of style are generally seen as a reaction to the different women in his life. I might have to say the same about myself. Up to a point. You can become a different man in each marriage. On the other hand, Henry Miller married a number of times and that did not change his personality. I expect that Miller had to fight to establish his identity very early in life. This is probably the case for people who grow up in unsympathetic families—they must arrive at an inner presence sooner, a hard, often hostile identity that the family cannot mess with too easily.

My case was different. My family was sympathetic; it was the world outside that proved hard. For seven or eight years after the success of *The Naked and the Dead*, I kept saying nobody treats me as if I'm real; nobody wants me for my five feet eight inches and my medium good looks. I am only wanted for my celebrity. Therefore my experience is not real to me. The sense of how to perceive life and new material that I had formed up to that point was as an observer on the sidelines. Now, willy-nilly, I was the center of many a room, and so, regardless of how I carried myself, everything I did was noted. To myself, I complained about the unfairness of it, until the day I realized that it was fair, that that was now going to be my experience. It's the simplest remark to make, but it took years to get to that point. Then I began to realize that the kind of writing I was now going to do would be on new and unfamiliar themes. After *The Naked and the Dead*, I had assumed I would work on large, collective novels about American life, books that required venturing out to get experience, but my celebrity took away much of the necessary anonymity I needed personally for that. There was, however, something else I might express. I was, after all, having a form of twentieth-century experience that might become more and more prevalent—I was separated from my roots. People who suffer such an identity crisis generally have to take all sorts of curious steps to locate who they are. They succeed here, they fail there, and the process gives them points of reference. So I began to have a public life even though I was eccentrically shy in those years—that is, half-shy and half-arrogant. Like most young writers. I discovered, however, that I had gregarious gifts and started to employ them. Before long, I began to enjoy them. I also wasted a lot. You gain, you lose, and it makes for a new kind

of lit
alier
for c
after
me n

Let 1
Dead
cess
startl
best-s
prepa
man l
It too
so unl
As the
than t
want t
tated
and u
came i
of peo
with th
person
yet vul
edged.

Mor
A surp
tisement
career l
person:
arriving
yourself
task—a
himself
own mo

One 1
you beg
you are
it's false
Twenty

of life. Eventually, you have a new identity. I was successful and alienated, and this was becoming a twentieth-century condition for others as well. Slowly this understanding went into my work after that, and by now I can say that kind of protagonist interests me more than characters who are firmly rooted.

Let me see if I can take this further: Before *The Naked and the Dead* was published, I didn't know whether I could make a success of writing. Maybe I couldn't. Time would tell. Then came startling success. *The Naked and the Dead* was number one on the best-seller list for several months and, to repeat, I was totally unprepared. I felt as if I were secretary to someone named Norman Mailer, and to meet him, people had to say hello to me first. It took a long time to realize that this same celebrity, which had so unhorsed me in the beginning, was now an acquired appetite. As the Marquis de Sade once said, "There is no pleasure greater than that obtained from a conquered repugnance." I began to want more. Fame not only makes you realize that you are amputated from normal life, but also offers a sense of how delicate and unstable is identity. And so my new experience finally became interesting to me. I could now write about the interior life of people who had gained power and had to put up, therefore, with the new person they had become. Be it noted that this new person can be full of surprises: bold where one was once timid yet vulnerable in places that once seemed secure, even hard-edged.

Moreover, there's an irony to fabricating an alternate self. A surprising amount of choice is involved. When I wrote *Advertisements for Myself*, I realized that one could literally forge one's career by the idea you instilled of yourself in others. That is, impersonate the person you might have some reasonable chance of arriving at in a couple of years and soon enough you are lifting yourself by your bootstraps. It is an unbelievably demanding task—as profound a game as a criminal lawyer plays by cutting himself off forever, perhaps, from any clear notion of what his own morality might be.

One unhappy aspect is that people who have never even met you begin to tell exaggerated stories about your person. Soon you are the inheritor of a legend as long as a dinosaur's tail, and it's *false* legend—it never existed even on the day it was created. Twenty years later, you're still using your best efforts to drag the

tail around. One relief to getting older is that I no longer have to square my shoulders every time I go into a bar.

On the other hand, others can even aid and abet your legend. Here is my recollection of a dialogue that took place something like fifty years ago:

A CASUAL FRIEND: Norman, I have a confession to make. I was at an Upper East Side party last night, and I didn't know anyone. So I told this good-looking girl that I was you. (pause) Then, I took her home. We got into the sack. I hope you're not mad that I used your name.

MAILER: Were you good with her?

FRIEND: Yeah. It was a good one. Real good.

MAILER: Then I'm not mad.

James Jones was also shot out of a cannon. But Jones had gone through more than I had before he wrote *From Here to Eternity*. By the time he'd arrived, he was ready to enjoy his success. I was a dependable pain in the ass to a great many people, because all through the first year I'd keep saying, "Oh, now I will never know the experience of other people." Jones didn't give a damn. He knew he had brought home the game, and he wanted to eat it. But I kept wanting to go back to what seemed like a sweet past when only a few people knew that I had talent. A young writer, if he is unknown, can be at a party and watch what everyone is doing. If he has a marvelous ear for dialogue, he can wake up the next morning and remember all that was said and how it was said. He is a bird on a branch. Sees like a bird and writes books that can be extraordinarily well observed. But once you are successful, especially if it happens quickly, it's as if the bird is now an emu. It cannot fly. It's big and grows haunches and fore shoulders and a mane: Lo and behold, it is a lion. And everyone is looking at the lion, including the birds. But it is a lion with the heart of a bird and the mind of a bird. So there is a terrible period when the transmogrified emu is trying to live like a lion and has small gifts for it. Then the beast begins to experiment. When it runs, it now sees other animals scamper. It takes a while—often years—to get to appreciate your effect on others and even longer to begin to understand human beings again. In the old days, you could write about friends, enemies,

and stu
course
ductio

I've alw
ates—
spies, b
for the
become
acted,
person
spy fee
friends
spy.

and strangers by intuition, by induction; now, by deduction. Of course, you do have more material on which to work your deductions.

I've always been fascinated with spies and their spiritual associates—actors. The latter can, of course, not be wholly equated to spies, but they do have the experience of embodying a false life for the duration of a given role, and that characterization can become more real than their own identity. The few times I've acted, I've been struck by how alive you can feel during the impersonation, sometimes more real than in your own life. When a spy feels friendship for someone he is going to betray, the friendship is still real. The average journalist is, in that sense, a spy.

BEING AND NOTHINGNESS

The reader will be aware by now that I have some obsession with how God exists. Is He an essential or an existential God? Is He all-powerful or is He, like us, an embattled existential presence who may succeed or fail in His vision? I think this obsession began to show itself while I was doing the last draft of *The Deer Park*. Then it continued to grow as a private theme during all the years I was smoking marijuana. One's condition on marijuana is always existential. One can feel the importance of each moment and how it is changing one. One feels one's being. One becomes aware of the enormous apparatus of nothingness—the hum of a hi-fi set, the emptiness of a pointless interruption. One becomes aware of the war between each of us, how the nothingness in each of us seeks to attack the being of others, how our being in turn is attacked by the nothingness of others.

I'm not speaking now of violence or the active conflict between one being and another. That still belongs to drama. But the war between being and nothingness is the underlying illness of the twentieth century. Boredom slays more of existence than war. I'd hardly read anything by Sartre at this time and nothing by Heidegger. I've read a bit since and I have to admire their formidable powers, but I suspect they are no closer to the buried

cont
near
on o
cove

I've
Frien
howe
Endg
some
prese
is hal
on th
word:
agree

Not
for gr
ceptin
posite
throug
after a
siniste
to the
ness in

Yet
these :
such st
exister
was di
ties—a
surd.

I det
given tl
the dra
art of t
merit o
schools
they ch
cult anc
kids to
lose, be

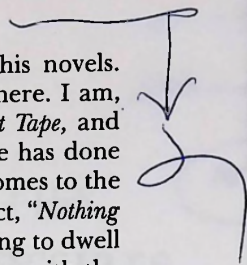
continent of existentialism than were medieval cartographers near to a useful map of the world. The new continent that shows on our psychic maps as intimations of eternity is still to be discovered.

I've never felt close to Beckett and haven't read his novels. Friends tell me the best of his literary substance is there. I am, however, familiar with *Waiting for Godot*, *Krapp's Last Tape*, and *Endgame*, and I've always been fascinated by how he has done something that no writer ever did before. When it comes to the presence of *being* and *nothingness*, Beckett said in effect, "*Nothing* is half of life and it is the half I know about. I am going to dwell on that." The trouble, however, is that we have to live with the words in English, where the reverberation on the ear is not as agreeable as *être* or *néant* can be to the ear in French.

Nothingness is, after all, anathema to most writers. We take it for granted that we will have to spend a good part of our lives accepting *nothing* as the price to pay in order to feel a resonant opposite: *being*. On days when one's mind is not alive, one goes through hours where boredom itself can be close to dread. It is, after all, a state that offers no sensual affect and so feels vaguely sinister in ways you cannot name. It's as if in boredom you come to the wrong kind of rest, a pause that does not restore. *Nothingness* invariably suggests *endless* nothingness.

Yet here we have Beckett, lively and witty as he travels into these subtly fetid caves of virtual non-existence. I always saw such states as the price you pay in order to command a grasp of existence, of being. So in advance, my initial reaction to Beckett was disapproval. I was bothered in those years—the late Fifties—at how people were so ready to welcome the art of the absurd.

I detest this art. When, for instance, I see a college play (and, given the number of my children, I've seen my share), invariably the drama department has opted for a play that celebrates the art of the absurd. Their reason is clear: You cannot judge the merit of the production too closely. Professors of drama at these schools do not rush to be measured. It's unfailing how often they choose García Lorca, Ionesco, Artaud—name twenty difficult and talented playwrights of the absurd and then set college kids to try to do something with it. They can't win and they can't lose, because the actors are going to get laughs. Whenever an



on
ial
n-
is
of
r-
on
of
g-
g-
r-
w
s,
.
e-
it
ss
n
g
ir
d

?

24 11'
Bair 14 min

15 min

~~SOCIAL LIFE,~~
~~LITERARY DESIRES,~~
~~LITERARY CORRUPTION~~

A-

One of the cruelest remarks in the language is: Those who can, do; those who can't, teach. The parallel must be: Those who meet experience, learn to live; those who don't, write.

The second remark has as much truth as the first—which is to say, some truth. Of course, many a young man has put himself in danger in order to pick up material for his writing, but as a matter to make one wistful, not one major American athlete, CEO, politician, engineer, trade-union official, surgeon, airline pilot, chess master, call girl, sea captain, teacher, bureaucrat, Mafia, pimp, recidivist, physicist, rabbi, movie star, clergyman, or priest or nun has also emerged as a major novelist since the Second World War.

Fashion model

What with ghostwriters, collaborators, and editors hand-cranking the tongues of the famous long enough to get their memoirs into tape recorders, it could be said that some dim reflection can be found in literature of the long aisles and huge machines of that social mill which is the world of endeavor—yes, just about as much as comes back to us from a photograph insufficiently exposed in the picture-taking, a ghost image substituted for the original lights and deep shadows of the object. So,

for every good novel about a trade union that has been written from the inside, we have ~~ten~~ ^a thousand better novels to read about authors and the social activities of their friends. Writers tend to live with writers just as automotive engineers congregate in the same country clubs of the same suburbs around Detroit.

But even as we pay for the social insularity of Detroit engineers by having to look at the repetitive hump of their design until finally what is most amazing about the automobile is how little it has been improved in the last fifty years, so literature suffers from its own endemic hollow: We are overfamiliar with the sensitivity of the sensitive and relatively ignorant of the cunning of the strong and the stupid, one—it may be fatal—step removed from good and intimate perception of the inside procedures of the corporate, financial, governmental, Mafia, and working-class establishments. Investigative journalism has taken us into the guts of the machine, only not really, not enough. We still do not have much idea of the soul of any inside operator; ~~we do not, for instance, yet have a clue to what makes a quarterback ready for a good day or a bad one.~~ In addition, the best investigative reporting of new journalism tends to rest on too narrow an ideological base—the rational, ironic, fact-oriented world of the media liberal. So we have a situation, call it a cultural malady, of the most basic sort: a failure of sufficient information (that is, good *literary* information) to put into those centers of our mind we use for assessment. No matter how much we read, we tend to know too little of how the world works. The men who do the real work offer us no real writing, and the writers who explore the minds of such men approach from an intellectual stance that distorts their vision. You would not necessarily want a saint to try to write about a computer engineer, but you certainly would not search for the reverse. All too many saints, monsters, maniacs, mystics, and rock performers are being written about these days, however, by practitioners of journalism whose inner vision is usually graphed by routine parameters. Our continuing inability to comprehend the world is likely to continue.

~~Being a novelist, I want to know every world. I would never close myself off to a subject unless it's truly repulsive to me. While one can never take one's imperviousness to corruption for granted, it is still important to have some idea of how the~~

~~1950s~~
~~Chicago from 1940s~~
~~was analogous to a plumbing system. People were accustomed~~
~~to living under high pressure and finding ways, no matter how~~
~~bizarre, to open the steam valve. That's not what we have now.~~
~~Today we know a world in which people not only act out many~~
~~of their anxieties but work to find reassuring explanations of~~
~~their conduct, which is often overtly contradictory rather than~~
~~repressed.~~

Marx, for vastly more complex reasons, is also not adequate any longer. First imperialism, then corporate capitalism, made their end runs around him. So I don't try to create a bridge in my mind from Marx to Freud, not anymore. But when I wrote "The White Negro" back in the Fifties, I was ready to see that everything in society—from the largest institutions to private and intimate personal moments—might yet be connected as parts of a new and vast social vision. In a limited sense, I'm still trying. Of course, I grew up under the shadow of both men. I was nothing if not intellectually ambitious when I was young, and wanted to present a comprehensive vision of existence. By now I've come to realize that I have neither the intellectual discipline nor the scholarly retentiveness to begin to do any of that sort. Still, it is important to connect the dots.

Until we understand how we are obliged to lead our lives in ways we don't particularly enjoy ("The mass of men enter into social and productive relations independent of their will."—Marx), until we understand more of those reasons why so many of us feel dead inside so much of the time, yes, until we recognize how much of that is not due solely to our lack of imagination or the grinding confines of a responsible life, but is also the product of vast institutional systems of greed, injustice, and manipulation that we are schooled to perceive as relatively benign manifestations, we have arrived nowhere. The only way I can tell something terrible is going on is that I feel a little duller than I ought to. Very often that's at the end of a long chain, you might say, of social processes designed to keep us malleable, amenable, and short on such powerful emotions as outrage at injustice. In that sense, I still try to find the ultimate indictment against all that's awful and, yes, evil in society—all the awfuls: plastic, high-rises, mall architecture, static, interruptions for commercials, making money out of money, and—certainly not least—the highly developed structures of injustice. They're all there if one can find the grid on which to locate them. A devil's grid.

18 1/2
 18 1/2
 15
 104

9.11
 15 12.20

Social
 and
 Moral
 Vision

3 pages
 10 min

question of the twentieth century, which is not Communism but Nazism. Liberalism can't come near to understanding this incredible phenomenon that took over a country of the most decent, hardworking, and *clean* people in the world, this incredible phenomenon of a fascism that went far beyond the bounds of totalitarianism into the most despicable and extraordinary extermination of vast numbers of people. And this, coming out of a nation that had always been exceptionally—even comically—law-abiding, suggested that the unconscious was truly a place of hideous ambushes and horrors. Liberals, unable to weave that thought into their philosophy, were happy to welcome Hannah Arendt's phrase. But I think to speak of the banality of evil is precisely to point us further in the wrong direction. Evil has dimensions. Evil is mysterious. It can be palpable or invisible. It can appear to be banal or, equally, can show itself as intensely dramatic. September 11 does come to mind.

Xerox
3
pages

Back to Kierkegaard. ~~He~~ ^{She} was ready to suggest that at the moment we're feeling most saintly, we may in fact be evil. And that moment when we think we're most evil and finally corrupt, we might, by the startling judgments of God, be considered saintly. The value of this notion is that it strips us of the fundamental arrogance of assuming that at any given moment any of us has enough centrality—that is, possesses a *seat* from which we can expound our dogma or determine our own moral value. I may have a fairly well formed *cloud* of intuitions about the nature of the good, and, like a cloud, it has, to a certain degree, its structure; yet the form is capable of altering quickly. A cloud changes shape over a few moments, but it remains a cloud. It's not just simply an unformed chaos. That, I would propose, is as close as we get to any moral truth. This is why I love the novel. It is, I would repeat, the form best suited for developing our moral sensitivity—which is to say our depth of understanding rather than our rush to judgment. Given the complexity of the last century and the surrealistic knockdowns of the first ~~two~~ years of this century, quick judgment has become a need analogous to the kind of all-consuming hunger ^{or need for conscience} that is ready to eat grass and dirt to fill the void. ~~Oh~~ go to McDonald's.

~~For a moment you think: "this novel, your book is no longer moral. It has become pious. Piety not only corrodes morality but~~

[REDACTED]

Back in 1950, Ralph Ellison and I were out at the University of Iowa on a literary symposium gotten together by *Esquire*. We had a lively audience, and the show went on for several intense days. At the end, it seemed a little strange to me that we had really worked that hard, gotten into so many discussions with students and attendant academics, and even argued with each other as lively as hell. When it was over, there was even a bit of sadness. Something that had become just a bit exceptional was done. So I said to Ellison, "Why the hell do we do it? Why did we work so hard?" He said, "Man, we're expendable." I've always liked that remark.

One's work is ~~not~~ expendable. If any of my ideas can succeed in changing the mind of someone who's more intelligent than myself, fine. If you advance a thought as far as you can and it's overtaken and improved by someone who will argue on the opposite side, then in effect you have improved your adversary's mind. We can, however, feel the confidence that someone will come along who will take your opponent's improvement of your idea and lift it higher on your side. Democracy is the throbbing embodiment of the dialectic—thesis, antithesis, and synthesis ready to become the new thesis.

You cannot have a great democracy without great writers. If

great novels disappear, as they are in danger of doing, and our storytelling is co-opted by television and journalism, then I think we will be that much farther away from a free society. Novels that reinvigorate our view of the subtlety of moral judgments are essential to a democracy.

~~American people are often told to go by the shapes of what some good and bad people have developed a sense of the right by reading Faulkner.~~

I don't like to say to myself, "I want to get this idea across." Rather, I try to arouse a state of consciousness in the reader that will accommodate the material I am presenting. My hope is that my work will change their minds. Be it understood! I don't want to change everybody's mind in one direction—that's equal to propaganda. Rather than move all my readers ten degrees to the left, I would be happier if I nudged some there while others were swinging to the right. My fundamental belief about a good society is that the cops get better and so do the crooks.

I feel that the final purpose of art is to intensify—even, if necessary, to exacerbate—the moral consciousness of people. In particular, I think the novel at its best is the most moral of the art forms. You are exploring the interstices of human behavior—which is the first approach to religious experience for many of us, especially since the organized religions don't begin to offer sufficient account of the terrible complexities of moral experience and its dark sibling, moral ambiguity. The wisest rule of thumb for the would-be moralists: There are no answers. There are only questions.

The logic of reincarnation, it seems to me, is that it may enable God to go back to certain projects, just as an artist sometimes wishes to improve his or her first attempt, work it further, go to the point where he can do better, or, if not, know at least that he has failed and can abandon a particular notion. Some human souls may represent some of the more poignant notions of God. You see, there's an extraordinary beauty in the potential of most human relations if we're willing to assume that under all the absurdities, the spleen, the waste, the brutality, there was, indeed, a blocked aesthetic conception.

Speaking at the MacDowell Colony, 1963, I found myself saying, "There is no reason to believe the novelist is not better equipped

start

save
2

1-5-64

that novels disappear, as they are in danger of doing, and storytelling is co-opted by television and journalism, then I think we will be that much farther away from a free society. Novels that reinvigorate our view of the subtlety of moral judgments are essential to a democracy. Americans were affected for decades by *The Grapes of Wrath*. Some good Southerners even developed a sense of the tragic by reading Faulkner.

I don't like to say to myself, "I want to get this idea across." Rather, I try to arouse a state of consciousness in the reader that will accommodate the material I am presenting. My hope is that my work will change their minds. Be it understood! I don't want to change everybody's mind in one direction—that's equal to propaganda. Rather than move all my readers ten degrees to the left, I would be happier if I nudged some there while others were swinging to the right. My fundamental belief about a good society is that the cops get better and so do the crooks.

I feel that the final purpose of art is to intensify—even, if necessary, to exacerbate—the moral consciousness of people. In particular, I think the novel at its best is the most moral of the art forms. You are exploring the interstices of human behavior—which is the first approach to religious experience for many of us, especially since the organized religions don't begin to offer sufficient account of the terrible complexities of moral experience and its dark sibling, moral ambiguity. The wisest rule of thumb for the would-be moralist is: There are no answers. There are only questions.

3/20/68

Yours
R.F.K.

The logic of this is that it may enable God to go back to certain projects, just as an artist sometimes wishes to improve his or her first attempt, work it further, go to the point where he can do better, or, if not, know at least that he has failed and can abandon a particular notion. Some human souls may represent some of the more poignant notions of God. You see, there's an extraordinary beauty in the potential of most human relations if we're willing to assume that under all the absurdities, the spleen, the waste, the brutality, there was, indeed, a blocked aesthetic conception.

Speaking at the MacDowell Colony once, I found myself saying, "There is no reason to believe the novelist is not better equipped

X-ray 2 pages

The novelist may be better equipped
to deal with the possibilities of a mysterious and difficult situation than anyone else, since he or she is always trying to discover what the nature of reality might be. It's as if the novelist is out there, sprung early, with something most people never contemplate—which is 'How and what is the nature of this little reality before me?' The novelist is the first to ask, 'Do I love my wife? Does she love me? What is the nature of love? Do we love our child? How do we love? Would we die for our child? Or do we let the child die for us?' The novelist has to deal with these questions because living with them is the only way to improve his or her brain. Without improving that brain, without refining the edge of one's perception, it's almost impossible to continue to work as a writer. Because if there is one fell rule in art, it is that uninspired repetition kills the soul. So the novelist is out there early with a particular necessity that may become the necessity of us all. It is to deal with life not as something given us as eternal and immutable but rather as half-worked, because it is our human destiny to enlarge what we were given, to forge (I might have said to *clarify*) a world which was always before us in a manner different from the way we had seen it the day before."

~~I'm right and I'm wrong to offer that I have no interest in convincing others to think the way I do. I'm interested, rather, that we all get better at thinking. If a book is good enough, you cannot predict how your readers are going to react. You shouldn't be able to. If it is that good, it is not manipulative, and everyone, therefore, can voyage off in a different direction.~~

~~Yes, it is no ordinary human business to say you are going to write a novel. You are planning to create a world. This God-like presumption may be intoxicating, but it can never be comfortable. Nor should it be. To come up with a vision that can give us some notion of the Lord's mind—that partakes of beauty. When we read Proust or Stendhal or Joyce, any, indeed, of the great novelists, Tolstoy, Mann, or Faulkner, or on occasion Hemingway, they do give us the idea that one special side of God's mind is not alien to the *style* of their mind.~~

~~I go back again and again to Dostoyevsky dying in despair because he could not write the novel about the great saint he envisioned.~~

ab

X-ray 2 pages

~~The novelist may be better equipped to deal with the possibilities of a mysterious and difficult situation than anyone else, since he or she is always trying to discover what the nature of reality might be. It's as if the novelist is out there, sprung early, with something most people never contemplate—which is 'How and what is the nature of this little reality before me?' The novelist is the first to ask, 'Do I love my wife? Does she love me? What is the nature of love? Do we love our child? How do we love? Would we die for our child? Or do we let the child die for us?' The novelist has to deal with these questions because living with them is the only way to improve his or her brain. Without improving that brain, without refining the edge of one's perception, it's almost impossible to continue to work as a writer. Because if there is one fell rule in art, it is that uninspired repetition kills the soul. So the novelist is out there early with a particular necessity that may become the necessity of us all. It is to deal with life not as something given us as eternal and immutable but rather as half-worked, because it is our human destiny to enlarge what we were given, to forge (I might have said to *clarify*) a world which was always before us in a manner different from the way we had seen it the day before.'~~

~~I'm right and I'm wrong so often that I have no interest in convincing others to think the way I do. I'm interested, rather, that we all get better at thinking. If a book is good enough, you cannot predict how your readers are going to react. You shouldn't be able to. If it is that good, it is not manipulative, and everyone, therefore, can voyage on in a different direction.~~

Yes, it is no ordinary human business to say you are going to write a novel. You are planning to create a world. This God-like presumption may be intoxicating, but it can never be comfortable. Nor should it be. To come up with a vision that can give us some notion of the Lord's mind—that partakes of beauty. When we read Proust or Stendhal or Joyce, any, indeed, of the great novelists, Tolstoy, Mann, or Faulkner, or on occasion Hemingway, they do give us the idea that one special side of God's mind is not alien to the *style* of their mind.

I go back again and again to Dostoyevsky dying in despair because he could not write the novel about the great saint he envisioned.

To us, now, it seems, "Why despair? Look at the great books you did write." But Dostoyevsky, given his unique intuitions, may have sensed that Russia was heading toward a prodigious catastrophe that he could not quite name. Nonetheless, he felt he could help avert this oncoming disaster if he could create in his pages a saint who would be believable enough to the Russian people to inspire them.

This is not as impossible a mission as it seems today. In Russia, in that time, a few novelists were revered like gods—or, if not a god, Tolstoy certainly was regarded by his readers as a major, virile, powerful saint. In turn, Dostoyevsky may have been looked upon as a mad genius, but absolutely a genius. It was taken for granted that you could learn more about life by reading their novels than from your own personal experience. The Russians paid just this exceptional attention to their novelists. So from Dostoyevsky's point of view, if he could only make that marvelous saint in his mind come to life in a book, then he could help to save Russia. All right, slightly demented, as was so much of Dostoyevsky, but it was not wholly unbalanced. He had one chance in a hundred, one real chance in a hundred. That's all a genius ever looks for—one live chance in that hundred. Geniuses, we do well to remind ourselves, are people who take those hundred-to-one shots because they see how strange is the luminescence in the flicker of the solitary candle.

~~Writers aren't taken seriously anymore, and a large part of the blame must go to the writers of my generation, most certainly including myself. We haven't written the books that should have been written. We've spent too much time exploring ourselves. We haven't done the imaginative work that could have helped define America, and as a result, our average citizen does not grow in self-understanding. We just expand all over the place and this spread is about as attractive as collapsed and flabby dough on a stainless steel table.~~

~~If I could give one maxim to a young writer, I'd say live with your cowardice. Live with it every day. Hate it or defend it, but don't try to slough it off. Cowardice is a prime cause; literary anarchy or overt writer's block is all too often the effect.~~

*The English
+
the
French*

TOLSTOY*

Grim

Somewhere around the turn of the century, we have Chekhov visiting Tolstoy. He takes the train to the nearest station. Let's say it's wintertime. He rents two horses and a sled, and drives out through the snow to Yasnaya Polyana. Tolstoy's pretty old by now, big, strong, severe, of course, and sits him right down and they talk. They drink tea and they talk. Tolstoy says: "Chekhov, you are a very good writer. You are excellent. Some of your short stories are so good I would have been pleased to have written them myself. But, Chekhov, I must tell you: You are a *terrible* playwright! You are awful! You are even worse than Shakespeare!"

Afterward, Chekhov drives back to the railroad station through the snow. In his journal he will write: "I whipped the horses. To the moon I shouted, 'I am even *worse* than Shakespeare!'"

It's a fine story, but if it's true, why did Tolstoy dislike Shake-

*In John Ford Noonan's very funny play *Talking Things Over with Chekhov*, a story is told. It lived for me with such intensity that I came to decide it was true. Whether or not it actually happened was beside the point. It was just too good a story not to believe it took place.

spere so? I expect the answer is that Tolstoy was always searching for subtle but precise moral judgment. That required a detailed sense of any sequence of events which had produced a dramatic or tragic event. You had to know how to assess the blame. For that, you needed to know exactly when and why things happened.

But there, very much in the way, was Shakespeare, the greatest movie writer who ever existed—centuries before cinema had a silver screen. For Shakespeare was not interested in making careful connections with his characters. Shakespeare was looking to get the most dynamic actors together under any circumstance available, no matter how contrived (*King Lear* can be the first example). He was looking for superb exchanges of dialogue and fantastic moments, vertiginous possibilities for the English language, whereas Tolstoy looked for sobriety of moral judgment. So he considered Shakespeare a monster who paid no attention to causality except when it was useful to him. Will's people did incredible things, fell in love or murdered, the latter with a minimum of preparation—*Macbeth*—and then had exceptional speeches that seared an audience's consciousness. To Tolstoy, this was monstrous, and must have been equal to the way some of us look these days upon advertising campaigns that are stuffed with manipulation and little else.

But why Tolstoy would compare Chekhov to Shakespeare is another question. I don't know that anyone is prepared to answer.

If there is a reason, I suspect it was for a different set of faults. Tolstoy may have felt that Chekhov was a prelude to someone yet to arrive, someone like Beckett. In his plays, Chekhov's people were simply not doing what they ought to be doing. What had to irritate Tolstoy immensely was that Anton's play-actors sat in their own spiritual excrement and made sweet speeches and moaned a little and sighed and groaned and never got out of their situation. To Tolstoy, this was a cardinal sin. One should not live with the given when it is vapid and vaguely immoral. That was one of Tolstoy's most basic notions. You may have to endure a dreary given as a discipline, but you do not accept your condition as eternal, as the meaning of life. He could not permit that. Could not accept how Chekhov made so much of the essential inanition of the Russian middle class.

The moment you moralize in a novel, your book is less moral. It has become bland. Piety not only corrodes morality (but

consorts with corruption. Piety and corruption go together like hot dogs and mustard. They have to. No one can fulfill the demands of piety; as a daily demand, it is inhuman. So it inspires its opposite—just for the sheer health of the body, if not the soul. Whereas morality, when subtle, brings proportion to human affairs. Tolstoy is a great writer—maybe he is our greatest novelist—because no other can match his sense of human proportion. We feel awe supported by compassion when we read Tolstoy. A remarkable achievement. We are in the rare presence of moral evaluations that are severe yet ultimately tender.

I've used this example before, but it bears repeating: Anyone who worries about whether he is going to hurt somebody's feelings by his work is no more a writer than a surgeon who says to himself, "In making this incision, I am going to give this young woman a scar on her belly that could injure her love life for the next thirty years." The surgeon just makes the cut. He may be right or wrong in the need for the operation, but he keeps a necessary insensitivity to the rest of the context. Writers also have their own kind of restricted vision. They cannot afford to say to themselves, "This portrait is going to scar my good friend." Or my father. Or my sister. If they feel such sentiments, they can't write. Indeed, a great many young writers think of all the people they're going to hurt or, worse, those they're going to make enemies of, and, full of funk, begin to brood on the retribution that will ensue. So there has to be something a bit maniacal about a young man or woman who would be an exciting writer. He or she has to be willing to get that book out no matter how many psychic casualties are left in its passage. On the other hand, a good young writer does well not to take an immediate advantage over people he dislikes by dumping on them in his pages. It's a bad habit to cash such easy checks. Ergo, the moral vision of the young writer is on a tightrope.

I may not be a good intellectual, but my avocation is, nonetheless, to create intellections. I put them on like adhesive plasters. In the case of Gary Gilmore, however, I had to pull them off. As I explored deeper into what Gilmore's nature might be, I decided that every concept I had about him was inadequate. So I wanted the reader of *The Executioner's Song* to confront the true complexity of one human. That state of perception will always

FIRST HOUR

Intro - lay out what we will cover

10 min. ~~trig~~ intro - INSTRUCT, STYLE, CHARACTER,
IDENTITY + FORM

6 FIRST PERSON VS. THIRD PERSON

5 min. REAL LIFE VS. PLOT LIFE
+ COMPETITION

Optional
Best-Seller
+ Review
5 min

24
50pt.

SECOND HOUR

~~Intro remarks - 1.~~

5 min. LEGEND + IDENTITY

5 min. STAMINA

10 min. UNCONSCIOUS
talk.

12 The vision of the novel

5 POLAROID

140

Third Year

Psychology of the novel

Identity and living with legend

Ego

Gender

Moral Judgment + Social Values

Final Year

Topic

FIRST HOUR

Spooky Ant

Small explanation
of interview
over the last
40 years.

Our focus will
be on the writing
of novels.

Note: The
last question
will probe and
push at me
to carry the
discussion
further.

INSTINCT AND INFLUENCE

~~Style?~~
INSTINCT
STYLE

CHARACTER, IDENTITY + FORM.

4 min

Intro
Remarks

Instinct
style
Character
Form

1 page

2 page

29 8 lines
8 min

10 MINUTES

INSTINCT

I am not sure it is possible to describe how it feels to write a novel. It may be that it is not an experience. It may be more like a continuing relation between a man and his wife. You can't necessarily speak of that as an experience, since it may consist of several experiences braided together; or of many experiences all more or less similar; or indeed it may consist of two kinds of experiences that are antagonistic to one another.

In large part, writing may be an instinctive process, but it's not always clear what the instinct is saying. Sometimes you feel no more than a dull pressure to go in a certain direction for the oncoming chapter. You have to be able to hear the faint voice which prods you toward an honest continuation of the work. That can be hard to hear. A writer is also open to the temptation to take the immediate advantage, even if it doesn't feel quite right. And we all do that in various ways. And pay for it with falsities that burrow directly into our intent.

One example I always give to a writing class: A very young writer sits on a park bench with his girl. He kisses her. He's seventeen. He's never had such a kiss before. Later that night, he tries to capture the event. He writes:

A

~~very 2 pages~~

~~INSTINCT AND~~ ~~INFLUENCE~~

~~14 min~~

I am not sure it is possible to describe how it feels to write a novel. It may be that it is not an experience. It may be more like a continuing relation between a man and his wife. You can't necessarily speak of that as an experience, since it may consist of several experiences braided together; or of many experiences all more or less similar; or indeed it may consist of two kinds of experiences that are antagonistic to one another.

In large part, writing may be an instinctive process, but it's not always clear what the instinct is saying. Sometimes you feel no more than a dull pressure to go in a certain direction for the oncoming chapter. You have to be able to hear the faint voice which prods you toward an honest continuation of the work. That can be hard to hear. A writer is also open to the temptation to take the immediate advantage, even if it doesn't feel quite right. And we all do that in various ways. And pay for it with falsities that burrow directly into our intent.

One example I always give to a writing class: A very young writer sits on a park bench with his girl. He kisses her. He's seventeen. He's never had such a kiss before. Later that night, he tries to capture the event. He writes:

A
INSTINCT

STYLE

2 pages
for Xerox

STYLE

*I love you, he said.**I love you, she said.*He stops, throws down his pen, and says, "I'm a great writer!"
Sometimes you have to wait.

I think *Capote's* look and mine are formally similar, but very different. Obviously, I'll be the first to say that I have done *In Cold Blood*. It's conceivable that I wouldn't have thought of taking on *The Executioner's Song*. Nonetheless, it's also possible that something about *The Executioner's Song* called for doing it in the way I chose. In any event, its flavor is different from *In Cold Blood*. Truman retained his style. Not the pure style—he simplified it—but it was still very much a book written by Truman Capote. You felt in every step of the way. The difference is that he tweaked it more, where I was determined to keep the factual narrative. I wanted my book to read like a novel, and it does, but I didn't want to sacrifice what literally happened in a scene for what I would like to see happen. Of course, I could afford to feel that way. I had advantages Truman didn't. His killers were not the most interesting guys in the world, so it took Truman's exquisite skills to make his work a classic. I was in the more promising position of dealing with a man who was quintessentially American yet worthy of Dostoyevsky. If this were not enough, he was also in love with a girl who—I'll go so far as to say—is a bona fide American heroine. I didn't want, therefore, to improve anything. Dedicated accuracy is not usually the first claim a novelist wishes to make, but here it became a matter of literary value. What I had was gold, if I had enough sense not to gild it.

If you find some theme that keeps you working, don't question it. Let that theme be sufficient to fuel your work. If you start using the value judgments of others, you're never going to get much done. If I find something is stimulating to me and arousing my energy, that's fine; I'll trust it. If you're a serious young writer and find that you're writing a lot, then don't listen to what anyone else says—do your book. There is probably a deeper truth than you'll ever know in the fact that you're able to work so well. Of course, you could be writing in absolutely the wrong direction. You could be doing a dreadful book.

No matter what you find yourself writing about, if it's giving you enough energy to continue, then the work bears a profound relationship to you at that point and you don't question it.

I think that style comes

to young authors about the time they recognize that life is also ready to injure them. Something out there is not necessarily fooling. It would explain why authors who were ill in their childhood almost always arrive early in their career as developed styl-ists: Proust, Capote, and Alberto Moravia give three examples; Gide offers another. This notion would certainly account for the early and complete development of Hemingway's style. He had, before he was twenty, the unmistakable sensation of being wounded so near to death that he felt his soul slide out of him, then slip back.

The average young author is not that ill in childhood, ^{nor} that harshly used by early life. His little social deaths are sometimes balanced by his small social conquests. So he writes in the style of others while searching for his own, and tends to look for words more than rhythms. In his haste to dominate the ~~3rd~~ (rare is the young writer who is not a consummate prick), ~~he does not~~ ~~to those his words for their precision, their ability to define, their evocative action.~~ His style often changes from scene to scene, from paragraph to paragraph. He may know a little about creating mood, but the essence of good writing is that it sets a mood as intense as a theatrical piece and then alters that mood, enlarges it, conducts it over to another mood. Every sentence, precise or imprecise, vaulting or modest, is careful not to poke a hyperactive finger through the tissue of the mood. Nor do the sentences ever become so empty of personal quality that the prose sinks to the ground of the page. It is an achievement that comes from having thought about ~~one's~~ life right to the point where one is living it. Everything that happens seems capable of offering its own addition to one's knowledge. One has arrived at a personal philosophy, ~~or has even reached that rare plateau where one is attached to one's philosophy.~~ At that juncture, everything one writes comes out of one's own fundamental mood.

~~Some such development may have gone on in me over the ten years from the publication of *The Naked and the Dead* to the commencement of work on *Advertisements for Myself*. In any event, it became the book in which I tried to separate my legitimate spir-itual bile from my self-pity, and maybe it was the hardest contin-uing task I had yet set myself. What aggravated every problem was that I was also trying to give up smoking, and as a corollary of kicking nicotine, I was thrust into the problem of style itself.~~

A
style is all of one piece

and can be read straight through

2 pages

~~6 minutes~~

STYLE

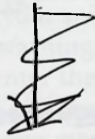


25

A man lays his character on the line when he writes a novel. Anything in him which is lazy, or meretricious, or unthought-out, complacent, fearful, overambitious, or terrified by the ultimate logic of his exploration will be revealed in his book. Some writers are skillful at concealing their weaknesses; some have a genius for converting a weakness into an acceptable mannerism of style. Nonetheless, no novelist can escape his or her own character altogether. That is, perhaps, the worst news any young writer can hear.

One more note on the Bitch. A friend, after reading the above paragraphs, said, "There's the title for your book—*I Made Her Moan*." I assured him that I never had a day so brave as to be ready to use that title.

CHARACTER, IDENTITY
AND FORM



A
CHARACTER

64 lines

In those days, my psyche felt as different without cigarettes as my body felt in moving from air to water. It was as if I perceived with different senses, and clear reactions were blunted. Writing without cigarettes, the word I looked for almost never came, not in quick time. In compensation, I was granted a sensitivity to the rhythm of what I wrote and that helped to turn my hand in the direction of better prose. I began to learn how difficult it is to move from the hegemony of the word to the resonance of the rhythm. This can be a jump greater than a leap into poetry. So, *Advertisements for Myself* was a book whose writing changed my life.

In *The Deer Park* I had been trying to find a style through three drafts. The first had been Proustian—not first-rate Proust, of course. Attempted Proust. Failed Proust. The second draft was located somewhere between the English novel of manners and Scott Fitzgerald—not good, but in that general direction. Then I found a tone that was not like anything I had read in the essence

material. So I learned how style literally repels certain kinds of experience and can be equal to a dominating wife who is ever ready to select your suits. If a writer insists on a specific tone, despite all inner warnings, it can even limit the varieties of experience that will enter the book.

Later,
I would
learn
that

Finding one's own manner is elusive. While it certainly helps to develop a unique style, first you have to learn how to write. Back in the Fifties, Nelson Algren was giving a writing class in Chicago and invited me to sit in. He read a story by one of the kids. Third-rate Papa. Afterward, I said to Nelson, "Why did you pay that much attention? He was just copying Hemingway." And Algren, who was about ten years older than me and knew that much more, said, "You know, those kids are better off if they attach themselves to a writer and start imitating him, because they learn a lot doing that. If they're any good at all, sooner or later they'll get rid of the influence. But first, they have to get attached to somebody." That was useful.

On the other hand, it takes so long to find your own manner. It comes down to a set of decisions on which word is valuable and what is not, in every sentence you write. That's one element. Another is the overall consistency. You have writers who are exceptionally talented but are still what I would call great and

STYLIC

was not capable of writing a long, complex sentence with good architecture in the syntax. But he turned that inability into his personal skill at writing short declarative sentences or long run-on sentences connected by conjunctions. Faulkner, to the contrary, was not capable of writing simply, but his over-rich congested sentences produced an extraordinary mood. In turn, Henry Miller could rarely tell a full story well. He preferred his excursions away from the story, and those asides are what make him exceptional.

You know, a good skier rarely worries about a route. He just goes, confident that he'll react to changes in the trail as they come upon him. It's the same thing in writing: You have to have confidence in your technique. That is the beauty of mustering the right tone at the right time—it enables you to feel like a good skier, at ease and relaxed for the next unexpected turn.

There are two kinds of writers. Faulkner, Fitzgerald, and Hemingway, Melville and James, write with an air that is inimitable. There are other writers, usually less famous, who go along in a variety of modes. ~~There is the latter camp.~~ The same can be said of some painters. Matisse painted in one recognizable vein, while Picasso entered a hundred before he was done. Style was the cutting tool by which he ^{looked to} ~~could~~ delineate a reality. He saw it as a tool rather than as an extension of his identity. I've found his attitude to be useful ^{for myself}. It's better if one's writing is close to the material one is working with—a fairly formal prose for one occasion, casual for another. can stay

Metaphors? You ask about metaphors. I had a dear friend, Charlie Devlin, who helped me greatly with *The Naked and the Dead*, and in fact was the model, considerably removed, for the character named McLeod in *Barbary Shore*. Charlie was a quiet, saturnine forty-year-old Irishman who was living full-time in the small rooming house where I took a cubicle (four dollars a week) to finish *The Naked and the Dead*. We used to have long literary conversations. At a certain point I showed him the manuscript. He tore it apart. He could be a severe critic. He said, "It's a better book than I thought it would be, but you have no gift for metaphor." Then he said, "Metaphor reveals a writer's true grasp of life. To the degree that you have no metaphor, you have not yet lived much of a life." I never forgot this lecture, and

teurs. The most notable example would be a writer as significantly gifted as Toni Morrison. Her style can shift from chapter to chapter—her strength is not in protecting the tone. She can write beautifully for pages, and then in a following chapter dawdle along in pedestrian mode. It violates what she is at her best: her distinctive voice, her insights.

~~It is a great genre, style, therefore, are~~
 Style is character. A good one will not come from a bad, undisciplined character. Now, a man may be evil, but I believe that people can be evil in their essential nature and still have good character. Good in the sense of being well tuned, flexible, supple, adaptable, principled. Even an evil man can have principles; he can be true to his own evil, which is not so easy either. ~~A bad Indian on horseback, with physical grace. With the grace of some may tend to write better than writers who are physically clumsy. In my impression this is so. I couldn't prove~~

Style is also a reflection of identity. Given a firm sense of yourself, you can write in a consistent vein. But should your identity shift, so will your presence change in your prose. Needless to say, illness, tragedy, huge frustration, age itself are bound to alter every firm notion of yourself.

~~words. A journalistic voice can get into the workings of a good many topical novels. But then you wouldn't want Henry James to describe the life of Gary Gilmore. There is such a vice as too much splendid writing. For what Henry James wanted to do, however, his language was ideal. He recognized before anyone else that polite social life, despite its ridiculous or affected aspects, also presents a spectrum of small options present at every moment. In social life, a person often chooses among three or four equally agreeable alternatives, even to making the choice of being a little warmer or a little cooler than he or she originally expected to be toward a given person. James had an extraordinary sense of that unforeseen vibration in the almost wholly expected, and he created a fictional world out of such insight, a world that depended altogether on his unique voice.~~

~~It is comforting to argue that some major writers develop a style out of the very avoidance of their major weakness. Hemingway~~

of
 Pleats

CHARACTER

IDENTITY

began to work with might and main on my life and my neighbors. I would claim they have improved with age.

On the other hand, good dialogue depends on your ear. There has to be something in each speech that relies on the previous one. But I don't even want to talk about dialogue. Some people have marvelous stuff, some don't, but that's only one aspect of writing, it is not *the* aspect, and besides, I don't think you can teach it. Most kids who have talent start off with good dialogue. They're happy it's there, and they have fun—that can start you as a writer. Those who are not gifted at dialogue will, hopefully, be endowed with philosophy or good language.

If one wants an example of superb dialogue where the bar is set about as high as it can go, then read William Kennedy or Joan Didion. But make no attempt to imitate either. Superb dialogue is inimitable. It is the indispensable aid, however, to most short stories.

A small thought on structure,

A short fictional piece has a tendency to look for climates of permanence—^{or woman} an event occurs, a man is hurt by it in some small way forever. ^{By the character} The novel moves as naturally toward flux. An event occurs, a man is injured, and a month later is working on something else. The short story likes to be classic. It is most acceptable when one fatal point is made. Whereas the novel is dialectical. It is most alive when one can trace the disasters which follow victory or the subtle turns that sometimes come from a defeat. A

FORM

never can be so good as a short story, if the point in each story is consecutively more interesting and incisive than the point before it, when the author in effect is drilling for oil.

LARRY SHAINBERG: You used a phrase I want you to elaborate on: "the tensile strength of a sentence."

NORMAN MAILER: Yes. That you can learn from a writing course.

LS: Tell me what you mean by the tensile strength.

NM: You can't change a single word. What is tensile strength? It is that all the components are working together. I repeat: You can't change a single word. The best short stories are built on this premise.

While Dwight Macdonald gave us no great body of books, he did spend his talents in writing some of the better political and literary criticism of our time. More important than his oeuvre, how-

74 lines

AA

84

Half an hour for A A

1-2
3-4

FIRST PERSON VERSUS THIRD PERSON

74 lines
6 minutes

6 min

Third person and first person are at least as different as major and minor keys in music.

In the first person, you gain immediacy but lose insight, because you can hardly move into other people's heads without using a few devices, usually dubious.

~~The book underlined the difficulty. At one point, the young man who was telling the story stated that he was shifting from first person to third. He was now old enough, went his claim, to understand people he had not understood before. Because he now had more of an idea of how they think, he would write about them in third person. I believe it worked, but I~~

In first person, the style has to be altogether tuned to the man who's telling the story.

~~and he did it in~~

~~the book underlined the difficulty. At one point, the young man who was telling the story stated that he was shifting from first person to third. He was now old enough, went his claim, to understand people he had not understood before. Because he now had more of an idea of how they think, he would write about them in third person. I believe it worked, but I~~

~~and your primary character is a man~~ the key choice is not how bright he is, because however smart, he can't be more intelligent than you are. That's easy. You dumb him down to taste or bring him up to your level. The real question is, How tough is

he? Do you have the inner sanction to create a man who's braver and tougher than yourself? The answer is yes. ~~Yes, you can do that by exercising your critical imagination. It must not be wish fulfillment! You are entitled to guess how you might act if you were that much more of a hero.~~

I don't know how to pose the question for an author who's female. Can she, for example, write about a woman who is more sensitive than herself? Probably not. She could write about a woman who uses her sensitivity and sensibility more than herself, because she can then key on all the frustrated times in her existence when the sensitivity and sensibility she possessed were not appropriate to a harsh occasion. Following question: Can a woman write about another woman more passionate than herself? Probably. Or a woman who's colder than herself? Without doubt.

In the third person, there's a different set of difficulties.

With a full use of the third person, you are God—well, ~~you are ready to see into everyone's mind. That is never routine.~~

~~Each point of view, third person, where you remain in one character's mind but are still viewing your protagonist from outside, and usually from above. In the classic vein of third person, however, where you enter each and every one's consciousness, it is not routine to get over the embarrassment that you are able to accommodate certain characters' minds with considerably more skill than you can with others'. This Olympian third person, this Tolstoyan presence, needs experience, confidence, irony, insight, and lordly detachment. When it can be done, hurrah. Most of the great nineteenth-century novels achieve just that tone. Today, it's usually up to the novelists who write best-sellers.~~

~~Adjective, adverb, and the like. For excitement, for veritable suspense, delightful joy, grim misery, dogged courage, let me not put that in the mouth. There was a time, then, I used to do this.~~

First person point of view, however, remains a fine tool. You can get to places you don't arrive at any other way. Of course, you can also injure your writing hand. As an instrument, it's double-edged. Hemingway had a marvelous sense of its limitations and used it to create his style. He said, "In this first edition, I want

the in
Adjectives
do it all
for their
characters
are full
of trembling
excitement
unbearable
suspense,
delightful
joy,
grim misery,
dogged
courage

§ they write like the reviewers
who will give them good reviews

~~Here is on this page~~

854

REAL LIFE VERSUS PLOT LIFE . 95

scheme. It's better if this larger scheme unfolds at a rate that is compatible with your characters.

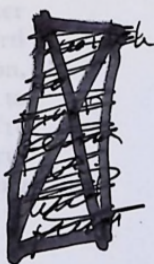
When it comes to entering a man or woman's mind, a writer has to be good, even brilliant. So long as you stay outside that head, your character can retain a certain mystery. We walk around such figures with the same respect we offer strangers who come into a room with force. Part of the meaning of charisma is that we don't know the intimate nature of the human presence we're facing. Characters in novels sometimes radiate more energy, therefore, when we don't enter their mind. It is one of the techniques a novelist acquires instinctively—don't go into your protagonist's thoughts until you have something to say about his or her inner life that is more interesting than the reader's suppositions. To jump in only to offer banal material is a fatal error. It is the worst of best-sellerdom. Second-rate readers enjoying the insights of second-rate writers.

I'd say try not to think of your characters as victims. That sort of classification narrows them. In reality, very few victims ever see themselves exclusively as victims, and when they do, their spirit turns stale. There is a certain sort of self-pitying victim one wishes to walk away from, and they can be even worse in a book.

...as Dickens. (Scrooge, Scrooge, Scrooge.)

for example

Hemingway suffered from the honorable need to be the equal of his male characters, particularly since he used the first person so much. It is not easy to write in the first person about a man who's stronger or braver than yourself. It's too close to self-serving. All the same, you have to be able to do it. Because if every one of your characters is kept down to your own level, you do not take on large subjects. You need people more heroic than yourself, more enterprising, less timid, sexier, more romantic, more tragic. You've got to be able to create people greater than yourself and not be ashamed of the damnable fact that the "I" who is being promoted is offering a false picture of himself to all those readers, who will predictably assume that the author is the man they are now encountering in the first person.



end

I've been asked when the idea of using a hornet's nest to thwart the climbers in *The Naked and the Dead* came to me. In truth, the

talk about things that could prove embarrassing. They don't feel right in the telling, not when the "I" stands at the head of the sentence. So there's a tendency, most marked in Hemingway, to keep most of his revelations at arm's length. As, for example, the famous last sentences of *A Farewell to Arms*:

We live in a time that is astomishingly more open, but the edict, adjusted, still remains. First person cannot be as free as the separation between author and protagonist offered by the third person.

It was not until I struggled with *Advertisements for Myself* that I began to recognize how curious it was to be working in the first person. Now, many writers good and bad have been employing that mode for centuries, but I had to come to this remarkable conclusion on my own. The first person was not all that available a way to write. It proved to be a very interesting and exciting mode of literary presence, with large limitations, and you really do have to understand it as such—especially if you're dealing with your own presence. Nothing is more difficult than to become comfortable writing about yourself in the first person. It's highly unnatural, because "I" makes up only about a third of the consciousness of any human being. "I" may be the prow of the ego, but you do get into all sorts of other places where you want "one" to talk about different aspects of yourself. And then there is even second person, *you*, employed as if it is first person: "You get up, you brush your teeth, you feel lousy this morning." (In the first period of awakening, you can indeed feel like a vague entity slightly outside yourself.) And there is also the third person when used as a substitute for "I"—for one, the character named Norman Mailer in *The Armies of the Night*. Using the third person in this manner may be a special condition of first person, but it is legitimate. There is a part of the ego that is superior to ourselves—that person who observes us carefully even as we're doing bizarre things, that special persona, possessed of immaculate detachment, who is always saying, "Oh, are we really doing well right now?" A wonderful voice. Because it enables you to treat yourself as one more character in a field of characters.

Nonetheless, I have considerable regard for the first person. Once I even dared to cross the line with it. That began on a five-night in a small Paris hotel room, when I couldn't sleep.

END

105 lines
89
4 pages
10 min
10 min
2+ pages
8 min
10 min
11 min

REAL LIFE VERSUS PLOT LIFE

↓ CRYSTALS

The CIA, in its actual workings, is the antithesis of the average spy novel, which, best-seller-oriented, tends to present a perfect clock that ticks to its conclusion. In *Harlot's Ghost*, one of my characters remarks that she came into the CIA because she loved spy novels. Now, her complaint was that she could never—precisely because she was inside—experience the full run of a scenario. On occasion, her work put her into the equivalent of a spy novel, but only, let us say, for Chapters Five and Six. She hadn't been there at the beginning, and was soon shifted to another assignment. Often, one did not learn how it all turned out. That struck me as being about what life is like: ~~There is no beginning, middle, and end to our lives. We live in and out of ongoing plots every day of our lives, but they are discontinuous. Nothing can be more difficult to encounter than a life story that accompanies us through a beginning, middle, and end. There is only our own that is not missing most of the pages, yet how discontinuous it seems all the same! One could make the case that our love of plot—until it gets very cheap indeed—comes out of our need to find the chain of cause and effect that so often is missing in our own existence.~~

The decisions you make while writing fiction can leave you uneasy. If your characters come alive, that's fine; they will carry you a part of the way. But finally, your people have to make what might be termed career decisions. Does your protagonist want to go abroad in the foreign service, or does he decide to stay in New York with the amazing young model he has just met? Needless to say, such choices are non-operative for writers who have the story complete in their mind before they begin. So I repeat: I look to find my book as I go along. Plot comes last. I want a conception of my characters that's deep enough so that they will get me to places where I, as the author, have to live by my wits. That means my characters must keep developing. So long as they stay alive, the plot will take care of itself. Working on a book where the plot is already fully developed is like spending the rest of your life filling holes in rotten teeth when you have no skill as a dentist.

Working on *The Executioner's Song* I had the realization that God is a better novelist than the novelists. The story was not only incredible, but it most certainly had happened. If I had conceived it, the work would have been more dramatic but less true. I learned all over again that the way things come about in life is not the way they work in novels. (Unless you are Theodore Dreiser!) It would have seemed wasteful to me to have a novel with two really fascinating characters who didn't get together for a scene. Whereas, what I discovered in *The Executioner's Song* was that the characters I was most interested in didn't always meet, and when they did, the results were often disappointing.

It took some time to learn that this did not necessarily diminish the drama. It could increase it. Most of our lives are spent getting ready for dramatic moments that don't take place. Or if they do, are less than we expected. About the time we say, "Well, nothing really big ever happens to me," you can get knocked down with something larger by far than you expected. All the frustrations of all the little narratives in your life that never had a real climax can be present in the rare denouement that life also offers once in a great while.

I no longer work up a master plan before I begin a novel. When I was younger I used to sit down and write out such plans, but I

~~never finished such projects. Even with *The Executioner's Song* where, after all, I knew the end of the story, I was careful not to be too far ahead in too many details ahead. I preferred to do my research up to no more than a hundred pages ahead of where I was. I wanted to keep the feeling that I didn't know how it was all going to turn out. I needed something like the illusion that I was inventing each detail. Obviously, I prefer doing a book that is not too carefully prepared. Some of my best ideas come because I haven't fixed my novel's future in concrete. Once you know your end, it's disastrous to get a new idea. That can only take you away from your prearranged conclusion. Yet the new idea that you didn't follow may be worth more than the denouement you planned in advance.~~

~~For the moment I think of a good plot, I find that the book becomes almost impossible to write, because I know I won't believe it. Life may consist of people plotting all the time, but the plots rarely develop. ~~What I do is make the plot~~ my life, and that's the only way to make a plot in life confounds us. So I prefer a story that develops out of the writing. I don't like a story that is prearranged. I don't like a story that is prearranged. I don't like a story that is prearranged. Tie your characters to a prearranged plot, and you are doing to them what we would do to our children if we carefully selected their colleges, their spouses, and their jobs without ever consulting them. The same unspoken despondency weighs on characters who are treated that way in a novel: They never get to fulfill their own perverse (that is, surprising to the novelist) capabilities; they never come alive. Bill Buckley is wonderful at plots—his mind may work that way—but nobody lives and breathes in ^{such} novels with any more three dimensionality than some passing movie star who can't act.~~

don't want
the story
to be
in place
before
my
characters
can
develop

~~Many young novelists tend to draw for their material on family or the near world of friends. How, goes the question, do you manage that without making these near and dear people too recognizable? Can you treat the familiar in such a way as not to incur the rage and tears of those who are close to you?~~

~~It is next to impossible. You cannot write about people you care about and not hurt them or, to the contrary, even worse, allow too little to be wrong with them. They then come through as boring. That is the first mark of bottom-level amateur writing. I've always stayed away from such close material, have never~~

~~50 of 7 copies~~

Today, large literary canvases are usually left to best-selling novelists. They will have a cast of forty or fifty characters, and stories that traverse fifty to a hundred years. They'll have several world wars, plus startling changes in the lives of several families. They do all that to keep their book moving. What usually characterizes these novels is that nothing is in them that you haven't come across before. Most good writers these days tend to work on smaller canvases. Then, at least, you have the confidence that what you're doing has some fictional truth. That's reasonable. At least you're contributing to knowledge rather than adding to the sludge of the culture. Of course, that can make it more difficult to take on a large topic. At the moment the only great writer who can handle forty or fifty characters and three or four decades is García Márquez. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is an amazing work. He succeeds in doing it, but how, I don't know. In my Egyptian novel, it took me ten pages to go around a bend in the Nile.

It's counterproductive to think, I'm going to put this in because it will sell copies. Usually, that doesn't work. There is an integrity to best-sellerdom—it is the best book that the author is capable of writing at that time. He or she believes in the book. That's one reason it's a best-seller. Stephen King was a desperately clumsy and repetitive writer when he started, but best-seller book readers responded to his sincerity. That was present on every badly written page. The popularity of bad writing is analogous to the enjoyment of fast food.

I must say King has improved in style since he started. Hopefully, his readers also have, but that is not as certain.

Plot

A best-seller strategy is to keep cooking up new ingredients for the story. But beware! Plot is equal to a drug. It can stimulate a novelist into hordes of narrative energy, and will certainly keep a reader on the page, but sooner or later, plot presents its bill, and dire exigencies come down upon the writer. The author who is over-burdened with plot is sometimes obliged to enter the character's mind in order to keep things clear.

Right here is where it all bogs down. A reader's confidence in what he is reading will be subtly betrayed or even squandered should a novelist choose to enter the mind of a character but fail to bequeath the indispensable gift that the reader can now

know more about the character than before. The internal monologues are usually routine and insist on telling us what we know already. There is almost no signature quality of mind.

Plot

Of course, the damage is limited, since the internal ruminations of the characters in most mega-best-sellers are about what you would expect. Mega-best-seller readers want to be able to read and read and read—they do not want to ponder any truly unexpected revelations. Reality might lie out there, but that is not why they are reading.

Editing tends to make best-sellers read more like each other. As an instance, few best-sellers don't suffer from a spate of adjectives. For when a writer can't find the nuance of an experience, he usually loads up with adjectives. That tells the reader what to think. This goes along with a tendency in publishing houses to get the emphasis on entertainment at all costs. Of course, a pervasive weariness could come into us because of the rate at which we are being entertained.

My literary generation was under the umbrella of Maxwell Perkins—anyone who became an editor wanted to be like him. Young editors felt a loyalty toward their writers. There were spiritual marriages, if you will. It's still true to a degree, but the odds against sustaining such loyalty are now much higher. Today's publishing dictates that an editor has to bring in books which make money. This near-absolute has to enter the interstices of a young editor's thinking. (And his or her intestines.) I imagine it would be hard for most young editors not to start pushing their authors just a bit in the direction of trying to be more popular. That, of course, strains the bond.

Right now the smart money would bet against the serious novel. The publishing houses are getting depressed about the future of good fiction, and the publishers are obviously the ones who most determine that future. Survival probably comes down to the young editors. When a serious novel by an unknown gets published these days, it's usually because some young editor has made an issue of it. The publisher generally goes along. In effect, it's the charitable side of publishing, and it will continue so long as publishers keep a little faith in their young editors, who, in turn, manage to hold on to their nerve.

~~of course on the page~~

~~It's better if this larger scheme unfolds at a rate that's compatible with your characters.~~

When it comes to entering a man or woman's mind, a writer has to be good, even brilliant. So long as you stay outside that head, your character can retain a certain mystery. We walk around such figures with the same respect we offer strangers who come into a room with force. Part of the meaning of charisma is that we don't know the intimate nature of the human presence we're facing. Characters in novels sometimes radiate more energy, therefore, when we don't enter their mind. It is one of the techniques a novelist acquires instinctively—don't go into your protagonist's thoughts until you have something to say about his or her inner life that is more interesting than the reader's suppositions. To jump in ^{secretly} to offer banal material is a fatal error. It is the worst of best-sellerdom. Second-rate readers enjoying the insights of second-rate writers.

~~I'd say try not to think of your characters as victims. That sort of classification narrows them. In reality, very few victims ever see themselves exclusively as victims, and when they do, their spirit turns stale. There is a certain sort of self-pitying victim one wishes to walk away from, and they can be even worse in a book. Unless one is Dickens. (Scrooge, Scrooge, Scrooge.)~~

Hemingway suffered from the honorable need to be the equal of his male characters, particularly since he used the first person so much. It is not easy to write in the first person about a man who's stronger or braver than yourself. It's too close to self-serving. All the same, you have to be able to do it. Because if every one of your characters is kept down to your own level, you do not take on large subjects. You need people more heroic than yourself, more enterprising, less timid, sexier, more romantic, more tragic. You've got to be able to create people greater than yourself and not be ashamed of the damnable fact that the "I" who is being promoted is offering a false picture of himself to all those readers who will predictably assume that the author is the man they are now encountering in the first person.

~~with
the
first
person
point
of
view~~

~~I've been asked when the idea of using a hornet's nest to thwart the climbers in *The Naked and the Dead* came to me. In truth, the~~

end

→ Real novelistic life
versus reporting ←

CRYSTALS

~~is that so often it is our fear of living with an inner world that makes us ambitious in the first place.~~

Part of the art of being a novelist is to play that delicate game of obtaining experience without falsifying it by the act of observation. Generally speaking, it's easier to take in such knowledge when you are part of an event that is much larger than yourself—like the fall of the Twin Towers.

There must be five hundred young writers in New York who had a day of experience that was incomparable—nothing remotely like that had ever happened before in their lives. And it's likely that some extraordinary work will come out of it. Hopefully, not all of it about 9/11. If you never write about 9/11 but were in the vicinity that day, you could conceivably, in time to come, describe a battle in a medieval war and provide a real sense of such a lost event. You could do a horror tale or an account of a plague. Or write about the sudden death of a beloved. Or a march of refugees. All kinds of scenes and situations can derive ultimately from 9/11. What won't always work is to go at it directly. That kind of writing can be exhausted quickly. And the temptation to drive in head-on is, of course, immense. ~~the event was traumatic to so many. One wishes to get rid of the trauma.~~

Unhappily, a large part of writing serves this eliminatory process. The worst thing that can be said about literary work is that it can reduce itself all too easily to self-expression that is ~~all too close~~ to psychic excretion. Ideally, you are there to bring wealth to others. Wealth of observation, of perception, the riches of a philosophical attitude that is to a degree new, insights into psychology the reader hasn't had before—all these are on the selfless side of writing. On the other hand, there is ego, vanity, and need—the desire, finally, to advance oneself as a writer. People don't become authors solely to benefit humanity. They're in the same position as priests. Part of them wants to be good to others; the other self wants, one way or the other, to have some acquaintance with power. Which is often hugely at odds with the first notion. Generosity vies with acquisition; compassion is besieged with greed. Not surprising, then, if such tension pushes one toward ~~accomplishing neither, but~~ converting it all into reduction of stress, therapy through the act of writing and more writing until such logorrhea exhausts one's unrest to some degree. In such cases, it is the loss of good writing that pays for the draining of all that unrest.

more than possible

Talk about Crystals

Go on about Crystals

26 min
2 min.

LIVING IN THE WORLD

COMPETITION

~~FINDING TRUTH /~~
~~PRISON~~
~~LITERARY~~
~~WORLD~~

51 min.
14 min.

16
26
22
13
18
19
40
31
208
116
3128.00
13
70

Since good novelists have to be brave on the one hand but sprudent on the other, we make up a delicate species. More sensitive than others in the beginning, we have to develop the will, the stamina, the determination, and the insensitivity to take critical abuse. A good writer, therefore, does well to see himself as a strong, weak person, full of brave timidity, sensitive and insensitive. In effect, we have to learn how to live in the world with its bumps and falls and occasionally startling rewards while protecting the core of what once seemed a frightfully perishable sensitivity.

If you start a novel before you're ready, it's exactly as if you are a young athlete out in a contest with professionals who are far beyond you. Not ready, you get clobbered. You receive a painful lesson in identity. One does well to build up a little literary experience before trying a long piece of work. On the other hand, if you can accept in advance the likelihood of ending in failure, a young writer can learn a good deal by daring to embark on the long voyage that is a novel.

~~I've virtually said as much before but it's not the same~~

I tend to look at my contemporaries in the way an athlete looks at

rival athletes. You try to have a state of mind where you see everything they do that's better than what you can bring off, yet you certainly look to remain aware of those of your skills that are superior to theirs. Good athletes look at their peers in that manner. After all, they have to face each other.

Of course, this is not often true for authors. But we act as if it is. That's because if we are good enough, our games can have their conclusions a hundred years after we are gone.

~~It helped my mind and hurt my work. I believe it gave me an understanding of the complexity of the world that I would not have had if I'd stayed at home. I would have tended then to have a much more paranoid vision of how sinister things are. They can be, but not in the way I used to think. That is one of the better tests of the acumen of the writer. How subtle, how full of nuance, how original, is his or her sense of the sinister?~~

~~City life produces caustic wit. In New York and Chicago, it serves as a tonic. It even functions as a bridge to others, one of the essences of a city. But if you live in the country, such readiness for confrontation can get you hurt. People who live in the country have one similarity to convicts. All too often they have nothing to think about but the occasional insult they have received. That's one good reason city and country people do tend to make each other nervous.~~

~~Trotsky once made the incisive remark that the only way you can tell the truth is by a comparison of the lies. While you may never be able to find out who is lying more, you can come close to the relations between two liars. Especially if they are married. We may even be able to say with some certainty, "They hate each other," or, "Isn't it extraordinary how they love each other despite all?"~~

~~You also have to learn to live with the possibility of violence. The few times in my life I've been associated with real danger stay with me and remain a source for writing. I have a theory concerning crucial experiences that I've expressed from time to time but it might be worth stating again. Certain events, if they are dramatic and fundamental to us, remain afterward like crystal in our psyche. Those experiences should be preserved~~

~~hero of 2 copies~~

Today, large literary canvases are usually left to best-selling novelists. They will have a cast of forty or fifty characters, and stories that traverse fifty to a hundred years. They'll have several world wars, plus startling changes in the lives of several families. They do all that to keep their book moving. What usually characterizes these novels is that nothing is in them that you haven't come across before. Most good writers tend these days to work on smaller canvases. Then, at least, you have the confidence that what you're doing has some fictional truth. That's reasonable. At least you're contributing to knowledge rather than adding to the sludge of the culture. Of course, that can make it more difficult to take on a large topic. At the moment the only great writer who can handle forty or fifty characters and three or four decades is García Márquez. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is an amazing work. He succeeds in doing it, but how, I don't know. In my Egyptian novel, it took me ten pages to go around a bend in the Nile.

I know

It's counterproductive to think, I'm going to put this in because it will sell copies. Usually, that doesn't work. There is an integrity to best-sellerdom—it is the best book that the author is capable of writing at that time. He or she believes in the book. That's one reason it's a best-seller. Stephen King was a desperately clumsy and repetitive writer when he started, but best-seller book readers responded to his sincerity. That was present on every badly written page. The popularity of bad writing is analogous to the enjoyment of fast food.

I must say King has improved in style since he started. Hopefully, his readers also have, but that is not as certain.

A best-selling strategy is to keep cooking up new ingredients for

Plot the story. But beware! Plot is equal to a drug. It can stimulate a novelist into hordes of narrative energy, and will certainly keep a reader on the page, but sooner or later, plot presents its bill, and dire exigencies come down upon the writer. The author who is over-burdened with plot is sometimes obliged to enter the character's mind in order to keep things clear.

Right here is where it all bogs down. A reader's confidence in what he is reading will be subtly betrayed or even squandered should a novelist choose to enter the mind of a character but fail to bequeath the indispensable gift that the reader can now

?

~~41~~
~~13~~

~~REVIEWS, PUBLICITY,~~ ~~AND SUCCESS~~

#

Now, for dealing with reviews

I treat bad ^{ones} reviews in the manner that a politician running for office treats a loss of support. A couple of friends called up after a very bad review of *Ancient Evenings* appeared in *The New York Times Book Review* and asked, "Are you all right?" I'd seen it a week before, so my unhappiness was now digested. I told them that it was like realizing the county chairman in Schenectady had decided against your candidacy. But to lose a primary in Schenectady doesn't mean you stop running for governor. It isn't my ego that's hurt, ~~it's~~ ^{it} my ~~same~~ pocketbook. Getting a bad review these days in the *Sunday Times* affects my wallet. My ego, however, remains relatively intact. Whereas, when I was younger, I used to consider a bad review a personal insult. The guy who wrote it was evil. ~~In fact,~~ ^{in fact} however, I have never actually punched out a reviewer, which I say with a certain wistfulness. I did sit next to Philip Rahv after he had written an atrocious review of *An American Dream*. Rahv had his virtues, ~~press him~~ but physical courage was not one of them. So I made a point of installing myself beside him on a couch at a party, and while I smiled at him, I kept my body firmly pressed into his, leaning into him all the while that we had a long thirty-minute conversation about something else altogether. I was perfectly pleasant the entire time and

(✓)

everything seemed all right, except we were both tilted alarmingly from my leaning into him. He was in an absolute panic, waiting for me to strike. It must have seemed an odd sight from across the room: He was a heavy man, and the two of us probably looked like two doughnuts crushed together at one end of the box.

HAEL SCHUMACHER: Should a writer be concerned about looking foolish when taking risks?

NORMAN MAILER: You want to stay above that fear but once in a great while, I'll still think, "This is going to get the world's worst reviews. I'm diving into something that's going to make no one happy and will leave certain people very unhappy." On the other hand, the good side of such risk is that it is exciting. You feel like a free man.

Sometimes, you can tell in advance you're headed for trouble. Obviously, with a book about ancient Egypt, even if one would have been happier if some unknown author had written it. There might have been then a lively curiosity about the author. Who is this unknown and most curious talent? One hurdle I had to overcome with *Ancient Evenings* was knowing in advance that a lot of people would pick it up and spend the first fifty pages saying, "What is Norman Mailer up to?" It makes them uncomfortable, because these days we all pride ourselves on our acumen. We want to think we're in control of the scene. When someone refutes our expectations, it does us the hell out of us.

MS: How do you deal with *in bad reviews*?

NM: Professional confidence. Not arrogance—professional confidence. If I'm not, in the literary sense, smarter than the reviewer, I'm in a lot of trouble. After all, I should know more about my book than he or she does. So, I can read a very bad review and shrug it off. That works until it *doesn't* work. If all the reviews are bad, it could feel like a catastrophe.

It usually doesn't matter if your book is good or bad. Across the country, you're going to get more or less the same number of good and bad reviews. A dreadful book will probably get three good reviews in ten, and a very good book may get six. Occasionally, a work will receive all good or all bad reviews across the board and this happens because something in its pages outrages or soothes some part of the national temper to which the media is sensitive. crude example—

is insensitive to 9/11

410 lines
27 lines
122 lines
80 min

~~THIRD NOX~~

? weak
get?

LEGEND AND IDENTITY

Psychology

total 30 minutes

identity 4 minutes

31 8 min

If I place a large emphasis on the word, it is because our identity on a given day or year is the seat from which we speak to the world. Any shifts of identity, any sense that the seat is not fast on its foundations ~~but is sliding away~~, will play hell with the modicum of stability that one needs to write at a given moment.

secure

So ~~this~~ ^{any} discussion of psychology ^{a few} as it refers to writing can begin with some thoughts about identity and its huge overgrown sibling—legend.

Having, at the age of twenty-five, broken away from the pack, I lived with a swollen sense of importance. At the same time, I wasn't ready. Much too much well-founded modesty. One part of you shoots up, another lags behind. It's like having a prima donna of a hard-on. You just can't depend on it. The stamina you look to develop comes later, as does your new identity.

from the start

Some artists have, however, a powerful, consistent sense of themselves. I think the best American examples might be Henry Miller, Hemingway, Faulkner, Thomas Wolfe, Henry James, Sinclair Lewis. In contrast, a writer like Steinbeck kept changing his persona with every book he did. As other examples, one could add Ed Doctorow or myself. Picasso, however, comes more to

mind than any of us. His many changes of style are generally seen as a reaction to the different women in his life. I might have to say the same about myself. Up to a point. You can become a different man in each marriage. On the other hand, Henry Miller married a number of times and that did not change his personality. I expect that Miller had to fight to establish his identity very early in life. This is probably the case for people who grow up in unsympathetic families—they must arrive at an inner presence sooner, a hard, often hostile identity that the family cannot mess with too easily.

My case was different. My family was sympathetic; it was the world outside that proved hard. For seven or eight years after the success of *The Naked and the Dead*, I kept saying nobody treats me as if I'm real; nobody wants me for my five feet eight inches and my medium good looks. I am only wanted for my celebrity. Therefore my experience is not real to me. The sense of how to perceive life and new material that I had formed up to that point was as an observer on the sidelines. Now, willy-nilly, I was the center of many a room, and so, regardless of how I carried myself, everything I did was noted. To myself, I complained about the unfairness of it, until the day I realized that it was fair, that that was now going to be my experience. It's the simplest remark to make, but it took years to get to that point. Then I began to realize that the kind of writing I was now going to do would be on new and unfamiliar themes. After *The Naked and the Dead*, I had assumed I would work on large, collective novels about American life, books that required venturing out to get experience, but my celebrity took away much of the ~~necessary~~ anonymity I needed ~~personally~~ for that. There was, however, something else I might express. I was, after all, having a form of twentieth-century experience that might become more and more prevalent—I was separated from my roots. People who suffer such an identity crisis generally have to take all sorts of curious ~~steps~~ ^{tastes} to locate who they are. They succeed here, they fail there, and the process gives them points of reference. So I began to have a public life even though I was eccentrically shy in those years—that is, half-shy and half-arrogant. Like most young writers. I discovered, however, that I had gregarious gifts and started to employ them. Before long, I began to enjoy them. I also wasted a lot. You gain, you lose, and it makes for a new kind

of life. Eventually, you have a new identity. I was successful and alienated, and this was becoming a twentieth-century condition for others as well. Slowly this understanding went into my work, ~~after that~~, and by now I can say that kind of protagonist interests me more than characters who are firmly rooted.

Let me see if I can take this further: Before *The Naked and the Dead* was published, I didn't know whether I could make a success of writing. Maybe I couldn't. Time would tell. Then came startling success. ~~*The Naked and the Dead* was number one on the best seller list for several months and, to repeat, I was totally un-~~prepared. I felt as if I were secretary to someone named Norman Mailer, and to meet him, people had to say hello to me first. It took a long time to realize that this same celebrity, which had so unhorsed me in the beginning, was now an acquired appetite. ~~As the Marquis de Sade once said, "There is no pleasure greater than that obtained from a conquered repugnance."~~ I began to want more. Fame not only makes you realize that you are amputated from normal life, but also offers a sense of ~~how delicate and unstable is identity. And so my new experience finally be-~~came interesting to me. I could now write about the interior life of people who ~~had~~ gained power and ~~had~~ to put up, therefore, with the new person they ~~had~~ become. Be it noted that this new person can be full of surprises: bold where one was once timid yet vulnerable in places that once seemed secure, even hard-edged.

Moreover, there's an irony to fabricating an alternate self. A surprising amount of choice is involved. When I wrote ~~*Advertisements for Myself*~~, I realized that one could literally forge one's career by the idea you instilled of yourself in others. That is, im-
personate the person you might have some reasonable chance of arriving at in a couple of years and soon enough you are lifting yourself by your ~~bootstraps~~. ~~(It is an unbelievably demanding task—as profound a game as a criminal lawyer plays by cutting himself off forever, perhaps, from any clear notion of what his own morality might be.)~~

One unhappy aspect is that people who have never even met you begin to tell exaggerated stories about your person. Soon you are the inheritor of a legend as long as a dinosaur's tail, and it's *false* legend—it never existed even on the day it was created. Twenty years later, you're still using your best efforts to drag the

tail around. One relief to getting older is that I no longer have to square my shoulders every time I go into a bar.

On the other hand, others can even aid and abet your legend. Here is my recollection of a dialogue that took place something like fifty years ago:

A CASUAL FRIEND: Norman, I have a confession to make. I was at an Upper East Side party last night, and I didn't know anyone. So I told this good-looking girl that I was you. (pause) Then, I took her home. We got into the sack. I hope you're not mad that I used your name.

MAILER: Were you good with her?

FRIEND: Yeah. It was a good one. Real good.

MAILER: Then I'm not mad.

~~James Jones was also shot out of a cannon. But Jones had gone through more than I had before he wrote *From Here to Eternity*. By the time he'd arrived, he was ready to enjoy his success. I was a dependable pain in the ass to a great many people, because all through the first year I'd keep saying, "Oh, now I will never know the experience of other people." Jones didn't give a damn. He knew he had brought home the game, and he wanted to eat it. But I kept wanting to go back to what seemed like a sweet past when only a few people knew that I had talent. A~~

A young writer, if he is unknown, can be at a party and watch what everyone is doing. If he has a marvelous ear for dialogue, he can wake up the next morning and remember all that was said and how it was said. He is a bird on a branch. Sees like a bird and writes books that can be extraordinarily well observed. But once you are successful, especially if it happens quickly, it's as if the bird is now an emu. It cannot fly. It's big and grows haunches and fore shoulders and a mane: Lo and behold, it is a lion. And everyone is looking at the lion, including the birds. But it is a lion with the heart of a bird and the mind of a bird. So there is a terrible period when the transmogrified emu is trying to live like a lion and has small gifts for it. Then the beast begins to experiment. When it runs, it now sees other animals scamper. It takes a while—often years—to get to appreciate your effect on others and even longer to begin to understand human beings again. In the old days, you could write about friends, enemies,

and strangers by intuition, by induction; now, by deduction. Of course, you do have more material on which to work your deductions.

I have always been fascinated with spies and their spiritual associates—actors. The latter can, of course, not be wholly equated to spies, but they do have the experience of embodying a false life for the duration of a given role, and that characterization can become more real than their own identity. The few times I've acted, I've been struck by how alive you can feel during the impersonation, sometimes more real than in your own life. When a spy feels friendship for someone he is going to betray, the friendship is still real. The average journalist is, in that sense, a spy.

7/14/14

AA lol

~~Stamina~~

5 min

STAMINA

~~3/1/14~~

~~I'm now eighty, but some people still regard me as a wild man.~~

~~I remember Elia Kazan saying one day at Actors Studio, "Here, we're always talking about the work. We talk about it piously. We say the work. The work. Well, we do work here, and get it straight: Work is a blessing." He said this, glaring at every one of us. And I thought, He's right. That's what it is. A blessing.~~

Of course, if you ask what work is dependent upon, the key word, an unhappy one, is *stamina*. It's as difficult to become a professional writer as a professional athlete. It often depends on the ability to keep faith in yourself. ~~One must be willing to take risks and try again. And it does need an enormous amount of ongoing working practice to be good at it. Since you are affected by what you read as a child and adolescent, it also takes a while to unlearn all the bad writing habits that have led you into bad prose.~~

Even when it all seems to be going wrong

~~I remember in the summer before my Junior year, working on my very first novel, *No Penetration* which will remain forever unpublished, I ran into a phrase by Henry James. He spoke of the "keeping up." That can be the first horror to face when~~

The first horror to face as a young writer

your novel tends to change all too quickly. It may even be the cardinal reason why people in college tend to stay away from longer fiction. Young short-story writers, no matter how good, often blow up when they attempt a longer work. They'll have a good beginning, but the second chapter goes off and they never get it back. The sad truth is that a would-be novelist possibly has to start a few books that do give out, or even crash, before a sense of the difficulties is acquired. If the same likelihood of early failure applied to young race-car drivers, there would not be speedways.

is that your

Go to the end of the stream

A large part of writing a novel is to keep your tone. I love starting a book; I usually like finishing one. It's the long middle stretches that call on your character—all that in-between!—those months or years when you have to report to work almost every day. You don't write novels by putting in two brilliant hours a week. You don't write novels if you lose too many mornings and afternoons to a hangover.

Sometimes, when you're in a bad period, you must in effect contract yourself for weeks running. "I'm going in to write tomorrow," you have to declare, and, indeed, show up at your desk, even though there's nothing in you, and sit there for hours, whatever number of hours you told yourself you were going to put in. Then, if nothing happens, you still show up the next day and the next and the next, until that recalcitrant presence, the unconscious, comes to decide you can finally be trusted. Such acceptance is crucial. ~~The unconscious~~

~~that what has happened to you in your sleep should be expressed, ideally, the next day. We live, you see, in an arm's length relationship to our unconscious. It has to be convinced over and over again to believe in you. Sometimes when you're writing a novel, you have to live as responsibly as a good monk. That does get easier as you grow older.~~

Writing is wonderful when you talk about it. It's fun to contemplate. But writing as a daily physical activity is not agreeable. You put on weight, you strain your gut, you get gout and chilblains. You're alone, and every day you have to face a blank piece of paper.

There's nothing glorious about being a professional. You become more dogged. You probably relinquish the upper reaches

of the mind in order to be able to do your stint of work each day: That means you are ready to endure a certain amount of drudgery. But your mind is, obviously, not enthralled by such dull conditions. Professionalism probably comes down to being able to work on a bad day.

I needed a little studio in Brooklyn, a couple of blocks from my house, no telephone, not much else. The only thing I ever did there was work. It was perfect. I was like a draft horse with a wooden head reflex. I came in ready to sit at my desk. No television, no way to call out. Didn't want to be tempted. There's an old Talmudic belief that you build a fence around an impulse. If that's not good enough, you build a fence around the fence. So, no amusements. (But for a refrigerator.) I wrote longhand with a quill pen. I gave it to my assistant, Judith McNally. She would type it for me and next day I would go over it. Since at my age you begin to forget all too much, I would hardly remember what I had written the day before. It read, therefore, as if someone else had done it. The critic in me was delighted. I could now proceed to fix the prose. The sole virtue of losing your short-term memory is that it does free you to be your own editor.

When I read something good, I want to do a critical piece. I want to expand on where I think the author is terrific and where he or she is lacking—especially if reviewers are blowing it up too high. I may feel, It's good but not that good—let's get into it. So it can be immensely distracting. Your mind settles on the work you are reading rather than the one you're supposed to be laboring on. A tendency grows to protect yourself by not reading anything that's too good. Stendhal, for instance, used to peruse the Code Napoleon every day in the loo before he'd start to write.

Now, I didn't always follow that rule. When I was doing *The Naked and the Dead*, I used to pick up Thomas Wolfe and Tolstoy. I didn't read them every day, but they were on my writing desk and they were perfect for what I needed, Tolstoy particularly. The tone of *Anna Karenina* was wonderful for *The Naked and the Dead*. And then there was Thomas Wolfe to steam up the descriptions. If I needed a tropical sunset or the smell of the jungle, I had Wolfe. For the characters, Tolstoy.

I never know what the style of a book will be until I get into it. Sometimes you aim high and don't get it—you have to settle for

ster

a more functional tone. After all, style is very much like the pace a serious jogger sets for himself. You have to be able to maintain it. In that sense, style is an offshoot of character. With all else, character is the wise or foolish estimate of your resources.

I think it's important for a writer to keep in shape. But it's hard to talk about Harry Greb, for example, was a fighter who used to keep in shape. He was completely a fighter, the way one might wish to be completely a writer. He always did the things that were necessary to him as a fighter. Now, some of these things were extremely irrational from a prize-fight manager's point of view. That is, before he had a fight he would go to a brothel and he would have two prostitutes, not one, taking the two of them into the same bed. And this apparently left him feeling like a wild animal. Don't ask me why. Perhaps he picked the two meanest whores in the joint and so absorbed into his system all the small, nasty, concentrated evils that had accumulated from carloads of men. Greb was known as the dirtiest fighter of his time. He didn't have much of a punch, but he could spoil other fighters and punish them; he knew more dirty tricks than anyone around, and the two whores were an essential part of his training methods. He did it over and over again until he died at a relatively early age of a heart attack on an operating table. I think he died before he was thirty-eight. They operated on him, and bang, he went.

The point I want to make is that he stayed in training by the way he lived his life. The paramount element was to keep in shape. If he was drinking, you see, the point was to keep in shape *while* drinking. I'm being a touch imprecise. . . . Put it this way: He would not drink just to release his tension. Rather, what went on was that there was tension in him which was insupportable, so he had to booze. But reasoning as a professional, he felt that if he was going to drink, he might as well use that too. In the sense that the actor uses everything which happens to him, so Greb as a fighter used everything. As he drank, he would notice the way his body moved. One of the best reasons one drinks is to become aware of the way your mind and body move. Now let me try to apply this.

Craft is a grab bag of procedures, tricks, lore, formal gymnastics, symbolic superstructures—methodology, in short. It's the compendium of what you've acquired from others. And since

sense, they are like race-car drivers, and the punishment they take stops them eventually. They write less well, or they take a tremendously long time to write, or they lose the desire to write.

Of course, it's virtually as if writers are there to be ruined. Look at the list: booze, pot, too much sex, too little, too much failure in one's private life, too much attrition, too much recognition, too little recognition, frustration. Nearly everything in the scheme of things works to dull a first-rate talent. But the worst probably is cowardice—as one gets older, one becomes aware of one's cowardice. The desire to be bold, which once was a joy, gets heavy with caution and duty. And finally there's apathy. About the time it doesn't seem too important anymore to be a major writer, you know you've slipped far enough to be doing your work on the comeback trail.

The hardest thing for an older writer to decide is whether he's burned-out or merely lying fallow. I was ready to think I was burned-out before I even started *The Naked and the Dead*. I had written a few good things in college and now had to wonder whether my time in the Army had blunted that talent. That is exactly now little sense a young writer can have of his or her own literary future.

If you can, I think it's a good idea to rotate your crops. Once you've written a novel that's factual and realistic and big, awfully close to what happened, then it's probably a good idea that your next novel be as fanciful as possible. Yes—if you can, rotate those crops.

Once you are committed to earning your living from your pen, you discover that you can push yourself. It's analogous to what athletes do when they take steroids to gain more strength. Ultimately damaging, but they set records. We do the same thing. You can force yourself to write much more than you want to. And the writing will not necessarily deteriorate. Not necessarily. But you can end up with a bad nervous system or a shortened life. Of course, one can always hope for transcendence. Sometimes working much harder than one wants to work can liberate energy. Sometimes.

with
coffee

I've often felt that those times when you can work or make love with great energy occur when your best and worst motives are working in cooperation for once.

I love you, he said

I love you, she said.

He stops, throws down his pen, and says, "I'm a great writer!"
Sometimes you have to wait.

I think Capote's book and mine are formally similar, but vastly different. Obviously, I'll be the first to state that if he hadn't done *In Cold Blood*, it's conceivable that I wouldn't have thought of taking on *The Executioner's Song*. Nonetheless, it's also possible that something about *The Executioner's Song* called for doing it in the way I chose. In any event, its flavor is different from *In Cold Blood*. Truman retained his style. Not the pure style—he simplified it—but it was still very much a book written by Truman Capote. You felt it every step of the way. The difference is that he tweaked it more, where I was determined to keep the factual narrative. I wanted my book to read like a novel, and it does, but I didn't want to sacrifice what literally happened in a scene for what I would like to see happen. Of course, I could afford to feel that way. I had advantages Truman didn't. His killers were not the most interesting guys in the world, so it took Truman's exquisite skills to make his work a classic. I was in the more promising position of dealing with a man who was quintessentially American yet worthy of Dostoyevsky. If this were not enough, he was also in love with a girl who—I'll go so far as to say—is a bona fide American heroine. I didn't want, therefore, to improve anything. Dedicated accuracy is not usually the first claim a novelist wishes to make, but here it became a matter of literary value. What I had was gold, if I had enough sense not to gild it.

A Code to Stalling

If you find some theme that keeps you working, don't question it. Let that theme be sufficient to fuel your work. If you start using the value judgments of others, you're never going to get much done. ~~If I find something is stimulating to me and arousing my energy, that's fine; I'll trust it. If you're a serious young writer and find that you're writing a lot, then don't listen to what anyone else says—do your book. There is probably a deeper truth than you'll ever know in the fact that you're able to work so well. Of course, you could be writing in absolutely the wrong direction. You could be doing a dreadful book.~~

No matter what you find yourself writing about, if it's giving you enough energy to continue, then the work bears a profound relationship to you at that point and you don't question it.

~~the first horror to face as a young writer~~
 A novel tends to change all too quickly. It may even be the cardinal reason why people in college tend to stay away from longer fiction. Young short-story writers, no matter how good, often blow up when they attempt a longer work. They'll have a good beginning, but the second chapter goes off and they never get it back. The sad truth is that a would-be novelist possibly has to start a few books that do give out, or even crash, before a sense of the difficulties is acquired. If the same likelihood of early failure applied to young race-car drivers, there would not be speedways.

that
 good

A large part of writing a novel is to keep your tone. I love starting a book; I usually like finishing one. It's the long middle stretches that call on your character—all that in-between!—those months or years when you have to report to work almost every day. You don't write novels by putting in two brilliant hours a week. You don't write novels if you lose too many mornings and afternoons to a hangover.

Sometimes, when you're in a bad period, you must in effect contract yourself for weeks running. "I'm going in to write tomorrow," you have to declare, and, indeed, show up at your desk, even though there's nothing in you, and sit there for hours, whatever number of hours you told yourself you were going to put in. Then, if nothing happens, you still show up the next day and the next and the next, until that recalcitrant presence, the unconscious, comes to decide you can finally be trusted. Such acceptance is crucial.

~~expressed, ideally, the new day. We live, you see, in an arm's length relationship to our unconscious. It has to be convinced over and over again to believe in you. Sometimes when you're writing a novel, you have to live as responsibly as a good monk. That does get easier as you grow older.~~

~~Writing is wonderful when you talk about it. It's fun to contemplate. But writing as a daily physical activity is not agreeable. You put on weight, you strain your gut, you get gout and chilblains. You're alone, and every day you have to face a blank piece of paper.~~

~~There's nothing glorious about being a professional. You become more dogged. You probably relinquish the upper reaches~~

So to the
 end
 of
 the
 journey

127 (circled)
10 min (circled)
[scribbles]

AA

138 (circled)

~~10 min~~
~~3 pages~~
~~10 min~~
~~10 min~~

THE UNCONSCIOUS

In the course of fashioning a character, as you search into his or her existence, there invariably comes a point where you recognize that you don't know enough about the person you are trying to create. At such times, I take it for granted that my unconscious knows more than I do. As we go through life, we do, after all, observe everyone, wittingly and unwittingly. Perhaps, out of the corner of your eye, you glimpse someone in a restaurant who represents a particular inspiration or menace or possibility, potentially a friend or foe—and the unconscious goes to work on that. It needs very little evidence to put together a comprehensive portrait because, presumably, it has already done most of that labor. To use an unhappy analogy, it's as if the unconscious is a powerful computer that does not often need much in the way of new data to fashion a portrait, considering how much material has already been stored away.

On the other hand, the unconscious can often feel violated by what we demand, by what, indeed, we manage to extract from it. Perhaps a great deal of the material it is now supplying was originally filed away for its own purposes. Suppose the unconscious has a root in the hereafter that our conscious mind does not. If so, it will have deeper notions about death than we do. Let us

~~then~~ I dare to surmise that the unconscious is on close, even familial, terms with that most elusive presence ^{per} in the conscious mind—our soul. If that is the case, the unconscious can feel exploited by the push of the novelist to extract so much ~~of his~~ product from its resources.

Suppose the relation of the unconscious to the conscious is analogous to that of a cultivated Greek slave in service to an overbearing Roman master. If we use this notion as a working premise, we can assume that our unconscious is full of the trickiest kinds of resistance. All the writer receives is a sense of dull, edgy resentment. Perhaps the unconscious is not ready to plumb into the material requested. The acute form of this is writer's block. But, for that matter, there is a touch of writer's block in almost every working day. It is part of the experience of writing. At a certain point we are going well for a page or two, perhaps even as many as four or five. On happy days, one is writing as if it's all there, a gift. You don't even seem to have much to do with it. You're only around to transcribe what's coming up. Then comes the moment when our ambition orders us to keep going: "Three pages away from the end of the chapter. You can't stop now, not with this marvelous streak." At this point, so often, the sentences begin to strain, and you feel, no, we've got to pack it in for now—dammit, dammit—now tomorrow morning will be lost, but, no, don't try to finish now, you're going to wreck it. That's what you learn over time. Because in the early years of writing, you do force it, and what happens, of course, is equal to blowback. From its point of view, the unconscious has done its job. It's damned if it's going to give you any more right now. If you insist, flatness of affect will be your reward—*nothingness*, the dread antagonist. It's there. One of the most painful elements in the act of writing is to live so much of the day with little but that. It is why many talented men and women do a good book or two, then stop. To deal on a daily basis with *nothingness* is vitiating. Writers who have been at it for decades often do not keep as vital an inner life. They remain professional enough to take what is potentially exciting in their concept and put it on paper. But the inner landscape ~~shows its~~ flats. That may be due to our violation of the frustrated desire of the unconscious to be left alone on those occasions when we nonetheless insist on hard-working its vein. So our ambition ends by contributing to the *nothingness* that besets us.

doing those
three pages

now has its

#

I've found that I can't do serious writing without getting into a mild depression. (Note! I am not speaking of a clinical depression.) An ongoing bad mood can be, however, a vital part of the process, because to begin with, it's perilous to fall in love with what you're doing. You lose your judgment. And for the simplest reason—the words, as you are writing them, stir up your feelings too much. Odds are, if they excite you disproportionately, they may do much less to others. (This accounts for the bewilderment of novice writers when a story they have written that charged them up to the heights appears to have little impact.)

With veteran writers, a mild working depression is not always simple to explain. The deeper your theme and the more material you are bringing up from your unconscious to support it, the more you may be exhausting the possibilities of other themes-in-waiting. So gloom can descend. Certain large possibilities won't get written about after all. No book I wrote kept me in a more sustained bad mood (while doing it) than *The Armies of the Night*. I was putting so much in, and at so fast a rate—the first three-quarters of the book was written for *Harper's* magazine over a stretch of eight weeks—that I was probably uprooting all sorts of possibilities for future projects. Gloom descends when you have wounded too many psychic tissues in your determination to achieve one urgent goal.

Sometimes, the only way you can be certain you are attracted to a new subject is that you know so little about it and yet are drawn toward it. Perhaps you possess one deep insight into the subject—a special kind of purchase that will accelerate your comprehension as you proceed. It's more amusing, for instance, to read a mystery novel if early on you have an idea who did it, a feeling that you and the author share something. In such happy condition, you are going, right or wrong, to get more out of the book than others. I think something of the sort can also occur in historical research. Reading about ancient Egypt, I felt I knew something about burial customs that the average Egyptologist didn't—not more about the details, which I hadn't learned as yet, but more about the underlying reason for some of the practices. That was enough to fire up the wish to pursue it a long way.

I've always had the feeling that it doesn't make much sense to stake on a subject if others can do it as well. As an instance, I never felt my childhood was so unique to me that it was worth recording. On the other hand, I conceal, sometimes from myself, what there is to write about those years. It can be wasteful to plunge into what you have to say on a subject before you're

This may sound odd to people who do not write. They usually have not come in contact with the authority of the unconscious to resist one's conscious will. Over and over again, I discover that my unconscious is going to disclose to me what it chooses, when it chooses. You can, to a limited degree, force it to respond, but that rarely occasions much happiness on either side. Sometimes I think you have to groom the unconscious after you've used it, swab it down, treat it like a prize horse who's a finer animal than you.

Practically, how do you go about this? How do you groom the unconscious? I don't have a conscious clue. The trouble with relying on metaphors is that they too can desert you just as quickly as anyone or anything else.

Over the years, I've found one rule. It is the only one I give on those occasions when I talk about writing. It's a simple rule. If you tell yourself you are going to be at your desk tomorrow, you are by that declaration asking your unconscious to prepare the material. You are, in effect, contracting to pick up such valuables at a given time. Count on me, you are saying to a few forces below: I will be there to write. The point is that you have to maintain trustworthy relations. If you wake up in the morning with a hangover and cannot get to literary work, your unconscious, after a few such failures, will soon give up on you.

It is likely that your unconscious is never all that much in love with you. The battle between the ego and the unconscious is, I think, a war of some dimension. In many people it's equal to an unhappy marriage, and marriages depend, after all, upon trust. Unhappy marriages depend immensely on what little mutual trust there is. So, you have to establish decent relations with your working depths, and you might as well recognize that this procedure is possibly as difficult to achieve as any far-reaching union with someone outside your skin.

The unconscious presence within may have as many interests, aspects, principalities, chasms, terrors, underworlds, other-worlds, and ambitions as yourself. Your unconscious may even have ambitions that are not your own. For practical purposes, it may be worth thinking of it as a separate creature. If you are ready to look upon your unconscious as a curious and semi-alienated presence in yourself with whom you have to maintain decent relations—if you are able to see yourself as some sort of careless general (of the old aristocratic school) and picture the unconscious as your often unruly cohort of troops—then, obviously, you wouldn't dare to keep those troops out in the rain too long; certainly not at the commencement of any serious campaign. On the contrary, you make a pact: "Work for me, fight for me, and I will honor and respect you."

Russian *Caravist. troops*
 (To repeat) The rule is that if you say to yourself you are going to write tomorrow, then it doesn't matter how badly you're hungover or how promising is a sudden invitation in the morning to do something more enjoyable. No, you go in dutifully, slavishly, and you work. This injunction is wholly anti-romantic in spirit. But if you subject yourself to this impost upon yourself, this diktat to be dependable, then after a period of time—it can take weeks, or more—the unconscious, nursing its disappointments, may begin to trust you again.

This is a burden on young writers who are not only ambitious but wild enough to feel that their wildness is part of their talent. They hate to submit to the heavy hand (that awful, severe, unbending demand for moderation) and obey the rule that you have to show up.

On the other hand, you can sometimes say to yourself, "I'm not going to work tomorrow," and the unconscious may even by now be close enough in accord not to flood your mind with brilliant and all-too-perishable material. That is also important. Because in the course of going out and having the lively day and night you're entitled to, you don't want to keep having ideas about the book you're on. Indeed, if you are able on your day off to avoid the unpleasant condition of being swarmed with thoughts about a work-in-progress when there is no pen in your hand, then you've arrived at one of the disciplines of a real writer.

Cossacks

Greek

TOLSTOY*

Somewhere around the turn of the century, we have Chekhov visiting Tolstoy. He takes the train to the nearest station. Let's say it's wintertime. He rents two horses and a sled, and drives out through the snow to Yasnya Polyana. Tolstoy's pretty old by now, big, strong, severe, of course, and sits him right down and they talk. They drink tea and they talk. Tolstoy says: "Chekhov, you are a very good writer. You are excellent. Some of your short stories are so good I would have been pleased to have written them myself. But, Chekhov, I must tell you: You are a *terrible* playwright! You are awful! You are even worse than Shakespeare!"

Afterward, Chekhov drives back to the railroad station through the snow. In his journal he will write: "I whipped the horses. To the moon I shouted, 'I am even *worse* than Shakespeare!'"

It's a fine story, but if it's true, why did Tolstoy dislike Shake-

*In John Ford Noonan's very funny play *Talking Things Over with Chekhov*, a story is told. It lived for me with such intensity that I came to decide it was true. Whether or not it actually happened was beside the point. It was just too good a story not to believe it took place.

I'm now eighty, but some people still regard me as a wild man. Even at my peak, that was only five to ten percent of my nature. The rest was work. I like work. I remember Elia Kazan saying one day at Actors Studio, "Here, we're always talking about the work. We talk about it piously. We say *the work*. *The work*. Well, we do work here, and get it straight: Work is a *blessing*." He said this, glaring at every one of us. And I thought, He's right. That's what it is. A blessing.

Of course, if you ask what work is dependent upon, the key word, an unhappy one, is *stamina*. It's as difficult to become a professional writer as a professional athlete. It often depends on the ability to keep faith in yourself. One must be willing to take risks and try again. And it does need an enormous amount of ongoing working practice to be good at it. Since you are affected by what you read as a child and adolescent, it also takes a while to unlearn all sorts of reading reflexes that have led you into bad prose.

I remember in the summer before my Junior year, working on my very first novel, *No Percentage* (which will remain forever unpublished), I ran into a phrase by Henry James. He spoke of "the keeping up." That can be the first horror to face when

you're young. Your novel tends to change all too quickly. It may even be the cardinal reason why people in college tend to stay away from longer fiction. Young short-story writers, no matter how good, often blow up when they attempt a longer work. They'll have a good beginning, but the second chapter goes off and they never get it back. The sad truth is that a would-be novelist possibly has to start a few books that do give out, or even crash, before a sense of the difficulties is acquired. If the same likelihood of early failure applied to young race-car drivers, there would not be speedways.

A large part of writing a novel is to keep your tone. I love starting a book; I usually like finishing one. It's the long middle stretches that call on your character—all that in-between!—those months or years when you have to report to work almost every day. You don't write novels by putting in two brilliant hours a week. You don't write novels if you lose too many mornings and afternoons to a hangover.

Sometimes, when you're in a bad period, you must in effect contract yourself for weeks running. "I'm going in to write tomorrow," you have to declare, and, indeed, show up at your desk, even though there's nothing in you, and sit there for hours, whatever number of hours you told yourself you were going to put in. Then, if nothing happens, you still show up the next day and the next and the next, until that recalcitrant presence, the unconscious, comes to decide you can finally be trusted. Such acceptance is crucial. The unconscious expects that what it has prepared for you in your sleep should be expressed, ideally, the next day. We live, you see, in an arm's-length relationship to our unconscious. It has to be convinced over and over again to believe in you. Sometimes when you're writing a novel, you have to live as responsibly as a good monk. That does get easier as you grow older.

Writing is wonderful when you talk about it. It's fun to contemplate. But writing as a daily physical activity is not agreeable. You put on weight, you strain your gut, you get gout and chilblains. You're alone, and every day you have to face a blank piece of paper.

There's nothing glorious about being a professional. You become more dogged. You probably relinquish the upper reaches

of the mind in order to be able to do your stint of work each day: That means you are ready to endure a certain amount of drudgery. But your mind is, obviously, not enthralled by such dull conditions. Professionalism probably comes down to being able to work on a bad day.

I used to have a little studio in Brooklyn, a couple of blocks from my house—no telephone, not much else. The only thing I ever did there was work. It was perfect. I was like a draft horse with a conditioned reflex. I came in ready to sit at my desk. No television, no way to call out. Didn't want to be tempted. There's an old Talmudic belief that you build a fence around an impulse. If that's not good enough, you build a fence around the fence. So, no amenities. (But for a refrigerator!) I wrote longhand with a pencil and I gave it to my assistant, Judith McNally. She would type it for me and next day I would go over it. Since at my age you begin to forget all too much, I would hardly remember what I had written the day before. It read, therefore, as if someone else had done it. The critic in me was delighted. I could now proceed to fix the prose. The sole virtue of losing your short-term memory is that it does free you to be your own editor.

When I read something good, I want to do a critical piece. I want to expand on where I think the author is terrific and where he or she is lacking—especially if reviewers are blowing it up too high. I may feel, It's good but not that good—let's get into it. So it can be immensely distracting. Your mind settles on the work you are reading rather than the one you're supposed to be laboring on. A tendency grows to protect yourself by not reading anything that's too good. Stendhal, for instance, used to peruse the Code Napoléon every day in the loo before he'd start to write.

Now, I didn't always follow that rule. When I was doing *The Naked and the Dead*, I used to pick up Thomas Wolfe and Tolstoy. I didn't read them every day, but they were on my writing desk and they were perfect for what I needed, Tolstoy particularly. The tone of *Anna Karenina* was wonderful for *The Naked and the Dead*. And then there was Thomas Wolfe to steam up the descriptions. If I needed a tropical sunset or the smell of the jungle, I had Wolfe. For the characters, Tolstoy.

I never know what the style of a book will be until I get into it. Sometimes you aim high and don't get it—you have to settle for

a more functional tone. After all, style is very much like the pace a serious jogger sets for himself. You have to be able to maintain it. In that sense, style is an offshoot of character. With all else, character is the wise or foolish estimate of your resources.

I think it's important for a writer to keep in shape. But it's hard to talk about. Harry Greb, for example, was a fighter who used to keep in shape. He was completely a fighter, the way one might wish to be completely a writer. He always did the things that were necessary to him as a fighter. Now, some of these things were extremely irrational from a prize-fight manager's point of view. That is, before he had a fight he would go to a brothel and he would have two prostitutes, not one, taking the two of them into the same bed. And this apparently left him feeling like a wild animal. Don't ask me why. Perhaps he picked the two meanest whores in the joint and so absorbed into his system all the small, nasty, concentrated evils that had accumulated from carloads of men. Greb was known as the dirtiest fighter of his time. He didn't have much of a punch, but he could spoil other fight-

ers and punish them; he knew more dirty tricks than anyone around, and the two whores were an essential part of his training methods. He did it over and over again until he died at a relatively early age of a heart attack on an operating table. I think he died before he was thirty-eight. They operated on him, and bang, he went.

The point I want to make is that he stayed in training by the way he lived his life. The paramount element was to keep in shape. If he was drinking, you see, the point was to keep in shape *while* drinking. I'm being a touch imprecise. . . . Put it this way: He would not drink just to release his tension. Rather, what went on was that there was tension in him which was insupportable, so he had to booze. But reasoning as a professional, he felt that if he was going to drink, he might as well use that too. In the sense that the actor uses everything which happens to him, so Greb as a fighter used everything. As he drank, he would notice the way his body moved. One of the best reasons one drinks is to become aware of the way your mind and body move. Now, let me try to apply this.

Craft is a grab bag of procedures, tricks, lore, formal gymnastics, symbolic superstructures—methodology, in short. It's the compendium of what you've acquired from others. And since

great writers communicate a vision of experience, one can't usually borrow their methods. Their method is married to the vision. Therefore, one acquires craft more from good writers and mediocre writers with a flair. Craft, after all, is what you can take out whole from their work. But keeping in shape is something else. For example, you can do journalism and it can be terrible for your style. Or it can temper your style. In other words, you can become a better writer by doing a lot of different kinds of writing. Or you can deteriorate. There's a book that came out a few years ago which was a sociological study of some Princeton men—I forget the name of it. One of them said something which I thought was extraordinary. He wanted to perform the sexual act under every variety of condition, emotion, and mood available to him. I was struck with this not because I ever wanted necessarily to have that kind of sexual life but because it seemed to me that was what I was trying to do with my writing. I edit on a spectrum which runs from the high, clear manic impressions of a drunk that has made one electrically alert all the way down to the soberest reaches of a low mood where I can hardly bear my words. By the time I'm done with writing I care about. I usually

have worked on it through the full spectrum of my consciousness. If you keep yourself in this peculiar kind of shape, the craft will take care of itself. Craft is very little, finally. But if you're continually worrying about whether you're growing or deteriorating as a man, whether your integrity is turning soft or firming itself, why, then, it is in that slow war, that slow rearguard battle you fight against diminishing talent, that you stay in shape as a writer and have a consciousness. You develop a consciousness as you grow older which enables you to write about anything, in effect, and write about it well. That is, provided you keep your consciousness in shape and don't relax into flabby styles of thought. They, after all, surround one everywhere. The moment you borrow other writers' styles of thought, you need craft to shore up the walls. But if what you write is a reflection of your own consciousness, then even journalism can become interesting. One wouldn't want to spend one's life at it, and I wouldn't ever want to be caught justifying journalism as a major activity (it's obviously less interesting than to write a novel), but it's legitimate to see it as a venture of one's ability to keep in shape rather than as an essential betrayal of the chalice of your art.

Indeed, many good writers get smashed en route. In that

sense, they are like race-car drivers, and the punishment they take stops them eventually. They write less well, or they take a tremendously long time to write, or they lose the desire to write.

Of course, it's virtually as if writers are there to be ruined. Look at the list: booze, pot, too much sex, too little, too much failure in one's private life, too much attrition, too much recognition, too little recognition, frustration. Nearly everything in the scheme of things works to dull a first-rate talent. But the worst probably is cowardice—as one gets older, one becomes aware of one's cowardice. The desire to be bold, which once was a joy, gets heavy with caution and duty. And finally there's apathy. About the time it doesn't seem too important anymore to be a major writer, you know you've slipped far enough to be doing your work on the comeback trail.

The hardest thing for an older writer to decide is whether he's burned-out or merely lying fallow. I was ready to think I was burned-out before I even started *The Naked and the Dead*. I had written a few good things in college and now had to wonder whether my time in the Army had blunted that talent. That is exactly how little sense a young writer can have of his or her own literary future.

If you can, I think it's a good idea to rotate your crops. Once you've written a novel that's factual and realistic and big, awfully close to what happened, then it's probably a good idea that your next novel be as fanciful as possible. Yes—if you can, rotate those crops.

Once you are committed to earning your living from your pen, you discover that you can push yourself. It's analogous to what athletes do when they take steroids to gain more strength. Ultimately damaging, but they set records. We do the same thing. You can force yourself to write much more than you want to. And the writing will not necessarily deteriorate. Not necessarily. But you can end up with a bad nervous system or a shortened life. Of course, one can always hope for transcendence. Sometimes working much harder than one wants to work can liberate energy. Sometimes.

I've often felt that those times when you can work or make love with great energy occur when your best and worst motives are working in cooperation for once.

The literary life is not all about envy. There is a corollary. Good writers are as competitive as good athletes. When I come across an interesting novel, I don't go at it as other people do. I read critically, the way one athlete will watch another's performance. Not watch it with venom—quite the contrary. You might say to yourself, "His spiral is tighter than mine and he's got five more yards on me at least, but I scramble better." The ideal is to give a good novel its credit and never overlook its power by deciding too quickly that the work is overrated, which is exactly the dreadful tendency underwritten by the envy chronic to the writer's occupation. Is this because we are obliged to work alone so much of the time?

By now, I'm a bit cynical about craft. I think there's a natural mystique in the novel that is more important. One is trying, after all, to capture reality, and that is extraordinarily and exceptionally difficult. Craft is merely a series of way stations. I think of it as being like a Saint Bernard with that little bottle of brandy under his neck. Whenever you get into trouble, craft can keep you warm long enough to be rescued. Of course, this is exactly what keeps good novelists from becoming great novelists. Robert Penn Warren might have written a major novel if he hadn't had just that extra little bit of craft to get him out of all the trouble in *All the King's Men*. If Penn Warren hadn't known anything about Elizabethan literature, the would-be Elizabethan in him might have brought off a fantastic novel. As it was, he knew enough about craft to use it as an escape hatch. And his plot degenerated into a slam-bang of exits and entrances, confrontations, tragedies, quick wails, and woe. But he was really forcing an escape from his literary problem, which was the terror of confronting a political reality that might open into more and more anxiety. Craft protects one from facing endless expanding realities—the terror, let us say, of losing your novel in the depths of philosophical insights you are not ready to live

with. I think this sort of terror so depresses us that we throw up evasions—such as craft. Indeed, I think this adoration of craft makes a church of literature for that vast number of writers who are somewhere on the bell-shaped curve between mediocrity and talent.

PART ONE: LAMBS

1 • INTRODUCING OUR ARGUMENT

In Provincetown, a friend brought a gift. She brought a big round metal GULF sign seven feet in diameter which another friend had discovered in the town dump and rescued. The hair of fashion came alert: we might make a coffee table. While we drank, we could look at the shading in the orange and blue letters. Poets in the room could contemplate the value of—GULF—even as a novice in Yoga will fix on the resonance of OM. Musicians could explore the tick of the cocktail glass against the metal. Intellectuals could . . .

What a deal intellectuals could do. There would be those to claim Pop art is the line where culture meets mass civilization, and so Pop art is the

vehicle for bringing taste to the masses; others to argue the debauch of Capitalism has come to the point where it crosses the doorstep and inhabits the place where you set your drink. And those to say fun; fun is the salvation of society.

It would go on: some might decide that putting a huge gasoline company's totem into one's private space helped to mock civilization and its hired man, the corporation; others would be certain the final victory of the corporation was near when we felt affection for the device by which a corporation advertised itself.

At last, nothing was done with the sign. I did not want to go through dialogue and the same dialogue about why it was there and whether it was good it was there, or bad it was there, and in truth I did not want the work of disposing of it when the fashion had passed. So I left the sign to rust on the beach, a mile from its burial ground on the dump.

2 Cannibals and Christians

List the symptoms. We live in a time which has created the art of the absurd. It is our art. It contains happenings, Pop art, camp, a theater of the absurd, a homosexual genius who spent thirty years as a thief; black humor is its wit; the dances are livid and solitary—they are also orgiastic: orgy or masturbation?—the first question posed by the art of the absurd. So the second: is the art rational or absurd? Do we have the art because the absurd is the patina of waste, and we are waiting in the pot for the big roar of waters when the world goes down the pipe? Or are we face to face with a desperate but most rational effort from the deepest resources of the unconscious of us all to rescue civilization from the pit and plague of its bedding, that gutted swinish foul old bedding on which two centuries of imperialism, high finance, moral hypocrisy and horror have lain. The skulls of black men and the bowels of the yellow race are in that bed, the death of the Bride of the Sabbath is in that bed with the ashes of the concentration camp and the ashes of the Kabbala, moonshots fly like flares across black dreams, and the Beatles—demons or saints?—give shape to a haircut which looks from the rear like nothing so much as an atomic cloud. Apocalypse or debauch is upon us. And we are close to dead. There are faces and

bodies like gorged maggots on the dance floor, on the highway, in the city, in the stadium; they are a host of chemical machines who swallow the product of chemical factories, aspirin, preservatives, stimulant, relaxant, and breathe out their chemical wastes into a polluted air. The sense of a long last night over civilization is back again; it has perhaps not been here so intensely in thirty years, not since the Nazis were prospering, but it is coming back.

Well, it has been the continuing obsession of this writer that the world is entering a time of plague. And the continuing metaphor for the obsession—a most disagreeable metaphor—has been cancer. The argument is old by now: its first assumption is that cancer is a disease different from other diseases, an ultimate disease against which all other diseases are in design to protect us.

The difficulty—for one can always convince the literary world to accept a metaphor if one remains loyal to it—is that my obsession is not merely an obsession, I fear, but insight into the nature of things, perhaps the deepest insight I have, and this said with no innocence of the knowledge that the plague can have its home within, and these condemnations come to no more than the grapplings of a man with a curse on his flesh, or even the probability that society partakes of the plague and its critic partakes, and

each wars against the other, the man and the society each grappling with his own piece of the plague, as if, indeed, we are each of us born not only with our life but with our death, with our variety of death, good death and bad, and it is the act of each separate man to look to free himself from that part of his existence which was born with the plague. Some succeed, some fail, and some of us succeed nobly for we clear our own plague and help to clear the plague upon the world, and others succeed, others—are we those?—you don't know—who clear their plague by visiting it upon friends, passing their disease into the flesh and mind of near bodies, and into the circuits of the world. And they poison the wells and get away free, some of them—they get away free if there is a devil and he has power, and that is something else we do not know. But the plague remains, that mysterious force which erects huge, ugly, and aesthetically emaciated buildings as the world ostensibly grows richer, and proliferates new diseases as medicine presumably grows wiser, nonspecific diseases, families of viruses, with new names and no particular location. And products deteriorate in workmanship as corporations improve their advertising, wars shift from carnage and patriotism to carnage and surrealism, sex shifts from whiskey to drugs. And all the food is poisoned. And the waters of the sea we are told. And

there is always the sound of some electric motor in the ear.

In a modern world which produces mediocrities at an accelerating rate, and keeps them alive by surgical gymnastics which go beyond anyone's patience but the victim, the doctor, and the people who expect soon to be on the operating tables themselves; in a civilization where compassion is of political use and is stratified in welfare programs which do not build a better society but shore up a worse; in a world whose ultimate logic is war, because in a world of war all overproduction and overpopulation is possible since peoples and commodities may be destroyed wholesale—in a breath, a world of such hypercivilization is a world not of adventurers, entrepreneurs, settlers, social arbiters, proletarians, agriculturists, and other ego-centric types of a dynamic society, but is instead a world of whirlpools and formlessness where two huge types begin to reemerge, types there at the beginning of it all: Cannibals and Christians.

We are martyrs all these days. All that Right Wing which believes there is too much on earth and too much of it is second-rate, all of that Right Wing which runs from staunch Republicanism to the extreme Right Wing, and then half around the world through the ghosts of the Nazis, all of that persecuted Right Wing which sees itself as martyr, knows that it knows how

to save the world: one can save the world by killing off what is second-rate. So they are the Cannibals—they believe that survival and health of the species comes from consuming one's own, not one's near-own, but one's own species. So the pure cannibal has only one taboo on food—he will not eat the meat of his own family. Other men he will of course consume. Their virtues he will conserve in his own flesh, their vices he will excrete, but to kill and to eliminate is his sense of human continuation.

Then come our Christians. They are the commercial. The commercial is the invention of a profoundly Christian nation—it proceeds to sell something in which it does not altogether believe, and it interrupts the mood. We are all of us Christians: Jews, liberals, Bolsheviks, anarchists, Socialists, Communists, Keynesians, Democrats, Civil Righters, beatniks, ministers, moderate Republicans, pacifists, Teach-inners, doctors, scientists, professors, Latin Americans, new African nations, Common Marketers, even Mao Tse-tung. Doubtless. From Lyndon Johnson to Mao Tse-tung, we are all Christians. We believe man is good if given a chance, we believe man is open to discussion, we believe science is the salvation of ill, we believe death is the end of discussion; ergo we believe nothing is so worthwhile as human life. We think no one should go hungry. So forth. What characterizes Chris-

tians is that most of them are not Christian and have no interest left in Christ. What characterizes the Cannibals is that most of them are born Christian, think of Jesus as Love, and get an erection from the thought of whippings, blood, burning crosses, burning bodies, and screams in mass graves. Whereas their counterpart, the Christians—the ones who are not Christian but whom we choose to call Christian—are utterly opposed to the destruction of human life and succeed within themselves in starting all the wars of our own time, since every war since the Second World War has been initiated by liberals or Communists; these Christians also succeed by their faith in science to poison the nourishment we eat and the waters of the sea, to alter the genetics of our beasts, and to break the food chains of nature.

Yet every year the girls are more beautiful, the athletes are better. So the dilemma remains. Is the curse on the world or on oneself? Does the world get better, no matter how, getting better and worse as part of the same process, or does the world get better in spite of the fact it is getting worse, and we are approaching the time when an apocalypse will pass through the night? We live after all in a time which interrupts the mood of everything alive.

Well, this is a book of writings on these themes. I will not pretend it is a book written with the clear cold intent to be always on one precise aim or another. I will not even pretend that all the targets are even necessarily on the same range or amenable to literary pieces. No, I would submit that everything here has been written in the years of the plague, and so I must see myself sometimes as physician more than rifleman, a physician half blind, not so far from drunk, his nerve to be recommended not at every occasion, nor his hand to hold at each last bed, but a noble physician nonetheless, noble at least in his ideal, for he is certain that there is a strange disease before him, an unknown illness, a phenomenon which partakes of mystery, nausea, and horror; if the nausea gives him pause and the horror fear, still the mystery summons, he is a physician, he must try to explore the mystery. So, he does, and by different methods too many a time. We will not go on to speak of the medicines and the treatment, of surgeon, bonesetter, lab analyst—no, the metaphor has come to the end of its way.

These writings are then attempts in a dozen different forms to deal with mysteries which offer the presumption that there is an answer to be found, or a clue. So I proceed, even as a writer when everything goes well, and perhaps a few matters are uncovered and more I know are left to chase.

There are times when I think it is a meaningless endeavor—that the only way to hunt these intimations is in the pages of a novel, that that is the only way this sort of mystery can ever be detected. Such a time is on me again, so it is possible this collection will be the last for a period. The wish to go back to that long novel, announced six years ago, and changed in the mind by all of seven years, may be here again, and if that is so, I will have yet to submit to the prescription laid down by the great physician Dr. James Joyce—"silence, exile, and cunning," he said. Well, one hopes not; the patient is too gregarious for the prescription. What follows, at any rate, are some explorations of the theme stated here, some talk of Cannibals and Christians, some writings on politics, on literary matters, on philosophy—save us all—on philosophy.

PART TWO: LIONS

6 · THE ARGUMENT REINVIGORATED

*Reader, a telegram: SHIFT MCNAMARA LAMBS FROM WARS OF
JEL.LIED FIRE TO LIONS IN BURNING BUSH.*

Everything in this book is attached to everything else. Trust me for a time. Indulge me:

Assume I am a lecturer in the fields of Fellowship surrounding Literature (American) and am trying to draw some grand design in twenty minutes on a talk devoted to "The Dynamic of American Letters." Knowing attention is iron for the blood of a Fellow, I will not be so foolish as to perish without a look at the topical and the interesting. No, I will use "The Dynamic of American Letters" as preparation for a lightning discussion of Herzog and Terry Southern, with a coda on the art of the absurd. Let me then have my first sentence as lecturer: "There has been a war at the center of American

letters for a long time." That is not so poor. The look of absolute comprehension on the face of the audience encourages the lecturer to go on.

The war began as a class war; an upper-middle class looked for a development of its taste, a definition of its manners, a refinement of itself to prepare a shift to the aristocratic; that was its private demand upon culture. That demand is still being made by a magazine called *The New Yorker*. This upper-class development of literature was invaded a long time ago, however, back at the cusp of the century, by a counter-literature whose roots were found in poverty, industrial society, and the emergence of new class. It was a literature which grappled with a peculiarly American phenomenon—a tendency of American society to alter more rapidly than the ability of its artists to record that change. Now, of course, one might go back two

thousand years into China to find a society which did not alter more rapidly than its culture, but the American phenomenon had to do with the very rate of acceleration. The order of magnitude in this rate had shifted. It was as if everything changed ten times as fast in America, and this made for extraordinary difficulty in creating a literature. The sound, sensible, morally stout delineation of society which one found in Tolstoy and Balzac and Zola, in Thackeray and in Trollope, had become impossible. The American novelist of manners had to content himself with manners—he could not put a convincing servant into his work, and certainly not a workingman, because they were moving themselves in one generation out from the pantry into the morning dress of the lady in the parlor and up from the foundry to the master of the factory. The novelist of manners could not go near these matters—they promised to take over all of his book. So the job was left to Howells, Stephen Crane, to Dreiser, and in lesser degree to such writers as Norris, Jack London, Upton Sinclair—let us say it was left to Dreiser. A fundamental irony of American letters had now presented itself. For in opposition to Dreiser was the imperfectly developed countertradition of the genteel. The class which wielded the power which ran America, and the class which most admired that class, banded instinctively together to approve a genteel

literature which had little to do with power or the secrets of power. They encouraged a literature about courtship and marriage and love and play and devotion and piety and style, a literature which had to do finally with the excellence of belonging to their own genteel tradition. Thus it was a literature which borrowed the forms of its conduct from European models. The people who were most American by birth, and who had the most to do with managing America, gave themselves a literature which had the least to say about the real phenomena of American life, most particularly the accelerated rate, the awful rate, of growth and anomaly through all of society. That sort of literature and that kind of attempt to explain America was left to the sons of immigrants who, if they were vigorous enough, and fortunate enough to be educated, now had the opportunity to see that America was a phenomenon never before described, indeed never before visible in the record of history. There was something going on in American life which was either grand or horrible or both, but it was going on—at a dizzy rate—and the future glory or doom of the world was not necessarily divorced from it. Dreiser labored like a titan to capture the phenomenon; he became a titan; Thomas Wolfe, his only peer as giant (as the novelist-as-giant), labored also like a titan, but for half as long and died in terror of the gargantuan proportions of the task. Yet each failed in one part of

the job. They were able to describe society—Wolfe like the greatest five-year-old who ever lived, an invaluable achievement, and Dreiser like some heroic tragic entrepreneur who has reasoned out through his own fatigue and travail very much how everything works in the iron mills of life, but is damned because he cannot pass on the knowledge to his children. Dreiser and Wolfe were up from the people, and Dreiser particularly came closer to understanding the social machine than any American writer who ever lived, but he paid an unendurable price—he was forced to alienate himself from manner in order to learn the vast amount he learned. Manner insists one learn at a modest rate, that one learn each step with grace before going on to the next. Dreiser was in a huge hurry, he had to learn everything—that was the way he must have felt his mission, so there is nothing of manner in his work; which is to say, nothing of tactics.*

If the upper-class quite naturally likes a literature which is good for them, a literature at the surface perhaps trivial, but underneath amusing, elucidative, fortifying, it is because this kind of literature elaborates and clarifies the details of their life, and thus adjusts their sense of power, their upper-class sense of power, which is invariably lubricated by a sense of detail. So too does that other class of readers in American literature, that huge, loose, all but unassociated congregation of readers—immigrant,

proletarian, entrepreneur—wish in turn for a literature which is equally good for them. That is where Dreiser had to fail. He was only half-good for such readers. He taught them strategy as Americans had never gotten it before in a novel. If they were adventurers, he was almost as useful to them as Stendhal was exceptionally useful to a century of French intellectuals who had come to Paris from the provinces. But not quite. Dreiser, finally, is not quite as useful, and the difference is crucial. Because a young adventurer reads a great novel in the unvoiced hope it is a grindstone which sharpens his axe sufficiently to smash down doors now locked to him. Dreiser merely located the doors and gave warnings about the secret padlocks and the traps. But he had no grindstone, no manner, no eye for the deadly important manners of the rich, he was obliged to call a rich girl "charming"; he could not make her charming when she spoke, as Fitzgerald could, and so he did not really prepare the army of his readers for what was ahead. His task was doubly difficult—it was required of him to

* This Argument was delivered, originally, as a talk to The American Studies Association and the M.L.A. This remark brought laughter from the audience. Since I did not wish to insult the memory of Wolfe, it would have been happier and perhaps more accurate to have said: like the greatest fifteen-year-old alive.

give every upstart fresh strategy and tactics. No less than the secret sociology of society is what is needed by the upstart and that strategy Dreiser gave him. But tactics—the manners of the drawing room, the deaths and lives of the drawing room, the cocktail party, the glorious tactics of the individual kill—that was all beyond him. Dreiser went blind climbing the mountains of society, so he could not help anyone to see what was directly before him—only what had happened and what was likely to come next.

That was the initial shape of the war, Naturalism versus the Genteel Tradition it has been called, and one might pose Henry James against Dreiser, but James is sufficiently great a writer to violate the generalizations one must make about the novel of manners which must always—precisely because it deals with manners—eschew the overambitious, plus extremes of plot—which James of course did not. So let us say the war was between Dreiser and Edith Wharton, Dreiser all strategy, no tactics; and Wharton all tactics. Marvelous tactics they were—a jewel of a writer and stingy as a parson—she needed no strategy. The upper-class writer had all strategy provided him by the logic of his class. Maybe that is why the war never came to decision, or even to conclusion. No upper-class writer went down

into the pits to bring back the manner alive of the change going on down there, certainly not Edith Wharton, not James Branch Cabell, of course not, nor Hergesheimer nor even Cather or Glasgow, not Elinor Wylie, no, nor Carl Van Vechten, and no diamond in the rough was ever reshaped by the cutters of Newport. The gap in American letters continued. Upper-class writers like John Dos Passos made brave efforts to go down and get the stuff and never quite got it, mainly in Dos Passos's case because they lacked strategy for the depths—manners may be sufficient to delineate the rich but one needs a vision of society to comprehend the poor, and Dos Passos had only revulsion at injustice, which is ultimately a manner. Some upper-class writers like Fitzgerald turned delicately upon the suppositions of their class, lost all borrowed strategy and were rudderless, were forced therefore to become superb in tactics, but for this reason perhaps a kind of hysteria lived at the center of their work; lower-class writers like Farrell and Steinbeck described whole seas of the uncharted ocean but their characters did not push from one milieu into another, and so the results were more taxonomic than apocalyptic.

Since then the war has shifted. No writer succeeded in doing the single great work which would clarify a nation's vision of itself as Tolstoy had done perhaps with *War and Peace* or *Anna Karenina*, and *Stendhal* with *The Red*

and the Black, no one novel came along which was grand and daring and comprehensive and detailed, able to give sustenance to the adventurer and merriment to the rich, leave compassion in the icechambers of the upper class and energy as alms for the poor. (Not unless it was *Tropic of Cancer*.) Dreiser came as close as any, and never got close at all, for he could not capture the moment, and no country in history has lived perhaps so much for the moment as America. After his heroic failure, American literature was isolated—it was necessary to give courses in American literature to Americans, either because they would not otherwise read it, or because reading it, they could not understand it. It was not quite vital to them. It did not save their lives, make them more ambitious, more moral, more tormented, more audacious, more ready for love, more ready for war, for charity and for invention. No, it tended to puzzle them. The realistic literature had never caught up with the rate of change in American life, indeed it had fallen further and further behind, and the novel gave up any desire to be a creation equal to the phenomenon of the country itself; it settled for being a metaphor. Which is to say that each separate author made a separate peace. He would no longer try to capture America, he would merely try to give life to some microcosm in American life, some metaphor

—in the sense that a drop of water is a metaphor of the seas, or a hair of the beast is for some a metaphor of the beast—and in that metaphor he might—if he were very lucky—have it all, rich and poor, strategy and tactics, insight and manner, detail, authority, the works. He would have it all for a particular few. It was just that he was no longer writing about the beast but, as in the case of Hemingway (if we are to take the best of this), about the paw of the beast, or in Faulkner about the dreams of the beast. What a paw and what dreams! Perhaps they are the two greatest writers America ever had, but they had given up on trying to do it all. Their vision was partial, determinedly so, they saw that as the first condition for trying to be great—that one must not try to save. Not souls, and not the nation. The desire for majesty was the bitch which licked at the literary loins of Hemingway and Faulkner: the country could be damned. Let it take care of itself.

And of course the country did. Just that. It grew by itself. Like a weed and a monster and a beauty and a pig. And the task of explaining America was taken over by Luce magazines. Those few aristocratic novelistic sensibilities which had never seen the task of defining the country as one for them—it was finally most unamusing as a task—grew smaller and smaller and more and more superb. Edith Wharton reappeared as Truman

Capote, even more of a jewel, even stingier. Of writers up from the bottom there were numbers: Dreiser's nephews were as far apart as Saul Bellow and James Jones. But the difference between the two kinds of writers had shifted. It had begun to shift somewhere after the Second World War, and the shift had gone a distance. One could not speak at all now of aristocratic writers and novelists whose work was itself the protagonist to carry the writer and his readers through the locks of society; no, the work had long since retreated, the great ambition was gone, and then it was worse, even the metaphor was gone, the paw of the beast and the dreams of the beast, no, literature was down to the earnest novel and the perfect novel, to moral seriousness and Camp. Herzog and Candy had become the protagonists.

*Frank Cowperwood once amassed an empire. Herzog, his bastard great-nephew, diddled in the ruins of an intellectual warehouse. Where once the realistic novel cut a swath across the face of society, now its reality was concentrated into moral seriousness. Where the original heroes of naturalism had been active, bold, self-centered, close to tragic, and up to their nostrils in their exertions to advance their own life and force the webs of society, so the hero of moral earnestness, the hero Herzog and the hero Levin in Malamud's *A New Life*, are men who represent*

the contrary—passive, timid, other-directed, pathetic, up to the nostrils in anguish: the world is stronger than they are; suicide calls.

Malamud's hero is more active than Herzog, he is also more likeable, but these positive qualities keep the case from being so pure. There is a mystery about the reception of Herzog. For beneath its richness of texture and its wealth of detail, the fact remains: never has a novel been so successful when its hero was so dim. Not one of the critics who adored the book would ever have permitted Herzog to remain an hour in his house. For Herzog was defeated, Herzog was an unoriginal man, Herzog was a fool—not an attractive God-anointed fool like Gimpel the Fool, his direct progenitor, but a sodden fool, over-educated and inept, unable to fight, able to love only when love presented itself as a gift. Herzog was intellectual but not bright, his ideas not original, his style as it appeared in his letters unendurable—it had exactly the leaden-footed sense of phrase which men laden with anxiety and near to going mad put into their communications. Herzog was hopeless. We learned nothing about society from him, not even anything about his life. And he is the only figure in the book. His wives, his mistress, his family, his children, his friends, even the man who cuckolds him are seen on the periphery of a dimming vision. Like

all men near to being mad, his attention is within, but the inner attention is without genius. Herzog is dull, he is unendurably dull—he is like all those bright pedagogical types who have a cavity at the center of their brain.

Yet the novel succeeds. There is its mystery. One reads it with compassion. With rare compassion. Bored by Herzog, still there is a secret burning of the heart. One's heart turns over and produces a sorrow. Hardly any books are left to do that.

Of course, Herzog is alive on sufferance. He is a beggar, an extraordinary beggar who fixes you with his eye, his breath, his clothing, his dank near-corrupt presence; he haunts. Something goes on in Herzog's eye. It says: I am debased, I am failed, I am near to rotten, and yet something just as good and loving resides in me as the tenderest part of your childhood. If the prophet Elijah sent me, it is not to make you feel guilt but to weep. Suddenly, Herzog inspires sorrow—touch of alchemy to the book—Herzog is at the center of the modern dilemma. If we do not feel compassion for him, a forceful compassion which sends blood to warm the limbs and the heart, then we are going to be forced to shoot him. Because if Herzog does not arouse your compassion there is no other choice—he is too intolerable a luxury to keep alive in his mediocrity unless he arouses your love. The literary world chose to love him. We

were not ready to shoot Herzog. It all seemed too final if we did. Because then there would be nothing left but Camp, and Camp is the art of the cannibal, Camp is the art which evolved out of the bankruptcy of the novel of manners. It is the partial thesis of these twenty minutes that the pure novel of manners had watered down from *The House of Mirth* to the maudlin middle reaches of *The Rector of Justin*; had in fact gone all the way down the pike from *The Ambassadors* to *By Love Possessed*. So, one does not speak of the novel of manners any longer—one is obliged to look at the documentary, *In Cold Blood*—or one is obliged to look at satire. The aristocratic impulse turned upon itself produced one classic—Terry Southern's *The Magic Christian*. Never had distaste for the habits of a mass mob reached such precision, never did wit falter in its natural assumption that the idiocies of the mass were attached breath and kiss to the hypocrisies, the weltering grandeurs, and the low stupidities of the rich, the American rich. The aristocratic impulse to define society by evocations of manner now survived only in the grace of any cannibal sufficiently aristocratic to sup upon his own family. *The Magic Christian* was a classic of Camp.

Note then: The two impulses in American letters had failed, the realistic impulse never delivered the novel which would ignite a nation's conscious-

ness of itself, and the aristocratic impulse clawed at the remaining fabric of a wealthy society it despised and no longer wished to sustain. Like a Tinguely machine which destroys itself, Camp amused by the very act of its destruction. Since it was also sentimental, the artifacts were necrophiliac.

Literature then had failed. The work was done by the movies, by television. The consciousness of the masses and the culture of the land trudged through endless mud.

The American consciousness in the absence of a great tradition in the novel ended by being developed by the bootlicking pieties of small-town newspaper editors and small-town educators, by the worst of organized religion, a formless force filled with the terrors of all the Christians left to fill the spaces left by the initial bravery of the frontiersman, and these latterday Christians were simply not as brave. That was one component of the mud. The other was the sons of the immigrants. Many of them hated America, hated it for what it offered and did not provide, what it revealed of opportunity and what it excluded from real opportunity. The sons of these immigrants and the sons' sons took over the cities and began to run them, high up in the air and right down into the ground, they plucked and

they plundered and there was not an American city which did not grow more hideous in the last fifty years. Then they spread out—they put suburbs like blight on the land—and piped mass communications into every home. They were cannibals selling Christianity to Christians, and because they despised the message and mocked at it in their own heart, they succeeded in selling something else, a virus perhaps, an electronic nihilism went through the mass media of America and entered the Christians and they were like to being cannibals, they were a tense and livid people, swallowing their own hate with the tranquilizers and the sex in the commercials, whereas all the early cannibals at the knobs of the mass-media made the mistake of passing on their bleak disease and were left now too gentle, too liberal, too programmatic, filled with plans for social welfare, and they looked and talked in Show Biz styles which possessed no style and were generally as unhealthy as Christians who lived in cellars and caves.

Yes, the cannibal sons of the immigrants had become Christians, and the formless form they had evolved for their mass-media, the hypocritical empty and tasteless taste of the television arts they beamed across the land encountered the formless form and the all but tasteless taste of the small-town tit-eating cannibal mind at its worst, and the collision produced

schizophrenia in the land. Half of America went insane with head colds and medicaments and asthmas and allergies, hospitals and famous surgeons with knives to cut into the plague, welfares and plans and committees and cooperations and boredom, boredom plague deep upon the land; and the other part of America went ape, and the motorcycles began to roar like lions across the land and all the beasts of all the buried history of America turned in their circuit and prepared to slink toward the market place, there to burn the mother's hair and bite the baby to the heart. One thought of America and one thought of aspirin, kitchen-commercials, and blood. One thought of Vietnam. And the important art in America became the art of the absurd.

There will be talk before this book is done of the nature of the art of the absurd, there will be perhaps even an attempt to explain it, but for now we have come to another explanation. For a good deal follows about the writing of contemporaries; there is criticism, some of it very critical. But then, good writing is not an act to excite tolerance because it is good, but anguish because it is not better. Who can swear there has not been something catastrophic to America in the failure of her novelists? Maybe we are the last liberators in the land, and if we continue to thrive on much less than our best, then the being of all of us may be deadened before we are done.

That is a statement which sups on the essence of extravagance, and yet it is the distance of the bridge to be built. It may be necessary that a communication of human experience, of the deepest and most unrecoverable human experience, must yet take place if we are to survive. Such at least is the covert opinion beneath the criticism which now follows.

speare so? I expect the answer is that Tolstoy was always searching for subtle but precise moral judgment. That required a detailed sense of any sequence of events which had produced a dramatic or tragic event. You had to know how to assess the blame. For that, you needed to know exactly when and why things happened.

But there, very much in the way, was Shakespeare, the greatest movie writer who ever existed—centuries before cinema had a silver screen. For Shakespeare was not interested in making careful connections with his characters. Shakespeare was looking to get the most dynamic actors together under any circumstance available, no matter how contrived (*King Lear* can be the first example). He was looking for superb exchanges of dialogue and fantastic moments, vertiginous possibilities for the English language, whereas Tolstoy looked for sobriety of moral judgment. So he considered Shakespeare a monster who paid no attention to causality except when it was useful to him. Will's people did incredible things, fell in love or murdered, the latter

with a minimum of preparation—Macbeth—and then that exceptional speeches that seared an audience's consciousness. To Tolstoy, this was monstrous, and must have been equal to the way some of us look these days upon advertising campaigns that are stuffed with manipulation and little else.

But why Tolstoy would compare Chekhov to Shakespeare is another question. I don't know that anyone is prepared to answer.

If there is a reason, I suspect it was for a different set of faults. Tolstoy may have felt that Chekhov was a prelude to someone yet to arrive, someone like Beckett. In his plays, Chekhov's people were simply not doing what they ought to be doing. What had to irritate Tolstoy immensely was that Anton's play-actors sat in their own spiritual excrement and made sweet speeches and moaned a little and sighed and groaned and never got out of their situation. To Tolstoy, this was a cardinal sin. One should not live with the given when it is vapid and vaguely immoral. That was one of Tolstoy's most basic notions. You may have to endure a dreary given as a discipline, but you do not accept your condition as eternal, as the meaning of life. He could not permit that. Could not accept how Chekhov made so much of the essential inanition of the Russian middle class.

Third person and first person are at least as different as major and minor keys in music.

In the first person, you gain immediacy but lose insight, because you can hardly move into other people's heads without using a few devices, usually dubious.

The Deer Park underlined the difficulty. At one point, the young man who was telling the story stated that he was shifting from first person to third. He was now old enough, went his claim, to understand people he had not understood before. Because he now had more of an idea of how they think, he would write about them in third person. I believe it worked, but I would not swear to it.

In first person, the style has to be altogether tuned to the man who's telling the story. (Only once did I have a woman as the narrator. And that was Marilyn Monroe in *Of Women and Their Elegance*.)

When your prime character is a man, the key choice is not how bright he is, because however smart, he can't be more intelligent than you are. That's easy. You dumb him down to taste or bring him up to your level. The real question is, How tough is

he? Do you have the inner sanction to create a man who's braver and tougher than yourself? The answer is yes. Contra Hemingway—yes! You can do that by exercising your *critical* imagination. It must not be wish fulfillment! You are entitled to guess how you might act if you were that much more of a hero.

I don't know how to pose the question for an author who's female. Can she, for example, write about a woman who is more sensitive than herself? Probably not. She could write about a woman who uses her sensitivity and sensibility more than herself, because she can then key on all the frustrated times in her existence when the sensitivity and sensibility she possessed were not appropriate to a harsh occasion. Following question: Can a woman write about another woman more passionate than herself? Probably. Or a woman who's colder than herself? Without doubt.

In the third person, there's a different set of difficulties.

With a full use of the third person, you are God—well, of course, not quite, but, one way or another, you are ready to see into everyone's mind. That is never routine. There is, of course, an easier approach—point-of-view third person, where you remain in one character's mind but are still viewing your protago-

nist from outside, and usually from above. In the classic vein of third person, however, where you enter each and every one's consciousness, it is not routine to get over the embarrassment that you are able to accommodate certain characters' minds with considerably more skill than you can with others'. This Olympian third person, this Tolstoyan presence, needs experience, confidence, irony, insight, and lordly detachment. When it can be done, hurrah. Most of the great nineteenth-century novels achieve just that tone. Today, it's usually up to the novelists who write best-sellers. In their case, God is always ready to offer an adjective adequate to their means. Teeming excitement, unendurable suspense, delightful joy, grim misery, dogged courage. But let me not froth at the mouth. There was a time when I used to do that myself.

First person point of view, however, remains a fine tool. You can get to places you don't arrive at any other way. Of course, you can also injure your writing hand. As an instrument, it's double-edged. Hemingway had a marvelous sense of its limitations and used it to create his style. He dramatized its first edict: Do not

talk about things that could prove embarrassing. They don't feel right in the telling, not when the "I" stands at the head of the sentence. So there's a tendency, most marked in Hemingway, to keep most of his revelations at arm's length. As, for example, the famous last sentences of *A Farewell to Arms*.

We live in a time that is astonishingly more open, but the edict, adjusted, still remains. First person cannot be as free as the separation between author and protagonist offered by the third person.

It was not until I struggled with *Advertisements for Myself* that I began to recognize how curious it was to be working in the first person. Now, many writers good and bad have been employing that mode for centuries, but I had to come to this remarkable conclusion on my own. The first person was not all that available a way to write. It proved to be a very interesting and exciting mode of literary presence, with large limitations, and you really do have to understand it as such—especially if you're dealing with your own presence. Nothing is more difficult than to become comfortable writing about yourself in the first person. It's

highly unnatural, because "I" makes up only a part of the consciousness of any human being. "I" may be the prow of the ego, but you do get into all sorts of other places where you want "one" to talk about different aspects of yourself. And then there is even second person, *you*, employed as if it is first person: "You get up, you brush your teeth, you feel lousy this morning." (In the first period of awakening, you can indeed feel like a vague entity slightly outside yourself.) And there is also the third person when used as a substitute for "I"—for one, the character named Norman Mailer in *The Armies of the Night*. Using the third person in this manner may be a special condition of first person, but it is legitimate. There is a part of the ego that is superior to ourselves—that person who observes us carefully even as we're doing bizarre things, that special persona, possessed of immaculate detachment, who is always saying, "Oh, are we really doing well right now?" A wonderful voice. Because it enables you to treat yourself as one more character in a field of characters.

Nonetheless, I have considerable regard for the first person. Once I even dared to cross the line with it. That began on a given night, in a small Paris hotel room, when I couldn't sleep.

The room was tiny, the double bed took up almost all the floor, and you could break your toe trying to walk around. I didn't want to go rummaging in my suitcase for a book, so I picked up a Gideon Bible (in English!) on my bedside table and started reading. I hadn't looked at the New Testament for thirty or forty years, but I recalled that a man named Fulton Oursler once sold over a million copies of a book called *The Greatest Story Ever Told*. Now, with the bona fide Gospels in my hand, I thought, Well, this may be the greatest story, but it is certainly being told abominably. Sayings popped out of the New Testament that were worthy of Shakespeare, but much in the double columns was poorly described. An ungainly prose pronged with golden nuggets. I thought, There have got to be a hundred novelists in the world who can do a better job. I'm one of them.

The notion was intriguing. When I thought of all the hypocrites and corruptibles and power seekers who had been living with the Gospel for centuries, standing foursquare on any gnommic chunk of text they could use to abet their aims, I decided, Why not just tell the *story*? It is, in fact, a fascinating one. The narrative keel is mind-boggling. We are dealing with a man who

is obliged to recognize through the evidence itself that he is the Son of God. The difficulty of such a book would be to write about a man considerably nicer than myself. That is never easy. To fashion a character who is meaner than yourself—a piece of cake. But to do someone who is better? Jean Malaquais once remarked that you can write about any character but one. "Who is that?" "A novelist more talented than yourself."

I thought, This is analogous. A finer sense of morality is also a higher talent. Yes, the problems were interesting.

I decided my character had to be more of a man than a god, an existential man, dominated by the huge cloud that he is the Son of God. Jesus, as the protagonist, doesn't feel worthy, but he is ready nonetheless to do his best every step of the way. Not in command of every situation, but will do his best. And he does have his startling successes.

Moreover, I had to decide whether to travel in first person or third. First person would have everyone saying: "That egomaniac. Does Mailer now think he's Jesus Christ? What an over-inflamed vanity!" That's the bad side, I thought, but at least I can avoid the larger mistake of doing it in the third person. Because that would soon get mixed up with the actual text of the

Gospels, and the reader would wonder, Is this sentence from the New Testament or was it added? That can only make for a squirrely experience as one reads. All right, then. First person. Damn the torpedoes, first person. Play the Ace.

It became interesting. If it was too biblical in the beginning, I did have an editor who is totally irreligious, Jason Epstein. He was appalled that I was writing this book. We're friends, but he's one tough editor. And he's most often all too right or altogether wrong. So, you have to make a quick decision. Yes, the style was too biblical.

After which, it was relatively easy. The book was short enough for me to work up seven variations on the style. I had to find the balance between a biblical rhythm and a contemporary one—something that would not inflict a biblical grip on one's mind yet would keep the echo. Before I was done, it all took a year from that night in that much-too-small hotel room on the Ile St.-Louis.