

THOUGHTS ON WRITING

by Norman Mailer

Not. Book Review
Jenny
April 21
1976

Now the writer is in the abominable position that practice is something he can only perform for a few years. The happiness, I would suspect, of the musician is that no matter what else happens to him, he can always go back and have his four or five hours of practicing a day which can bring him back to that particular act at which he is excellent. But a writer does not have that particular kind of advantage. He may have others, but this does not belong to him. He cannot practice. In fact, he goes through something that is abominable every day of his life when he is writing, to wit, he goes into a room--existentially speaking--he goes into a room and secretes himself. He is alone there. He looks at that empty piece of paper. If he is engaged in a long continuing work, he's obliged each day to pick up that work at the point he

had left it off the day before. That means that he must take his moral nature with all the intimate flaws that have adhered to it, that have begun to adhere to it and that promise to adhere to it, which have accumulated over the last twenty-four hours since he finished his last stint of writing and he must begin to dissolve them. He must get back to that point of moral probity which enabled him to write the day before. Then he must begin to contemplate his own nature, if only to forget it, because in the act of writing, finally, if he is a serious writer, he must say to himself that what I write is true. Now we know enough about the truth to suspect that such an emotion is an illusion. Nonetheless, it is an illusion that the writer has to recreate for himself or herself every day of his writing life. And so the psychological act of intimate balancing that goes on each day that the writer writes is a peculiar and subtle act. It is the reason, finally, that there are so many less good writers than there are fine minds in any given world. Working at it, the writer has, on the one hand, to find his sanction to continue writing, that is, he has to find some reason to believe that

himself or herself has vis-a-vis whatever cosmic or intimate powers may exist. . . has some moral right to state his truth.

.

This search for the truth as one sees it, this cynical and tormented search for the truth, since one knows, after all, if one knows anything at all, that there is no philosophical notion more difficult to maintain in the twentieth century than that there be some residual entity or continuum which we can call the truth, but this search for the truth, given every codicil and criticism we would apply against it. . . is the only passion that can enable the writer, day after day, to go through his or her psychological demeanment, to pass through the humiliations of the previous twenty-four hours, to pass through the flaws, the guilts, the crimes that one has committed in the last twenty-four hours. And if I say crimes, I mean it in that subtle sense that I think we can all know, that sense that one has contributed a little further to the intimate corruption of some part of oneself that should not have descended quite so quickly these last

twenty-four hours into a continuing and depressing and doom-filled entropy. It is in this gloom, I would submit, that most writing gets done because it is, as we know, a profound and excruciating and torturesome activity. Given the difficulty of it, given the nightmare of the empty page, given that notion, accepting that notion that it is so difficult to write, why then do we do it? I think it comes out of some feeling almost impossible to articulate that if we are possessed of some part of a continuing vision that has value then perhaps, one chance in a hundred, one chance in a thousand or a million, this vision may be possessed of an unlimitable value.

I think that one of the ways in which we insist upon keeping ourselves in a condition to write is that we say to ourselves, "Yes, once there was a writer as great as Shakespeare and he was extraordinary, and what would the English people have been without him? What would have come into the English language if there had never been a Shakespeare?" But let me step out of the coils of trying to talk without a text before me and read a few sentences. "A writer. . . is living, after all, with his own secret plot. He knows that a writer of the

largest dimension can alter the nerves and marrow of a nation. No one, in fact, can measure what collective loss of inner life would have come to English people if Shakespeare had failed to write."

Of course the difference for the writer between performing that act of putting English words together in Shakespeare's time and in our time is immense because we live in a time in which a culture is not beginning to germinate with the inner excitement that every tendril of the culture has a subtle and as yet undisclosed relation to every other manifestation of the culture, but that on the contrary, we are living in a time where for every answer we encounter, we discover four new questions. And so the notion that there might be an inner vision that we can chase after or collect becomes progressively more difficult.

.....

In this somber vein, I now proceed to suggest that when you applaud these award winners, you applaud them with good heart and fine exercise of your palms, because they have each achieved something exceptional: they

have been able against all these spiritual odds to arrive at a concentration of their particular vision which was succinct enough, clever enough, glorious enough, surprising enough and developed enough to have allowed a consensus of their friends, judges and enemies to award them the palm.