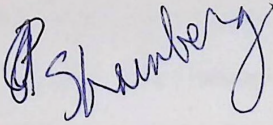


2. GIANTS AND COLLEAGUES



TOLSTOY

Somewhere around the turn of the century, we have Chekhov visiting Tolstoy. He takes the train to the nearest station--in range of Yasnya Polyana--I don't know if it was 6 versts or 20 versts—let's say it was about 10 miles. And it's winter time. 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 drove back to the railroad station through the snow. In his journal he would write: "I whipped the horses. To the moon I shouted, 'I am even worse than Shakespeare!'"

It's a fine story but I wondered: why did Tolstoy dislike Shakespeare 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 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 first great movie writer who ever existed—yes, existed long before movies were ever conceived. For

Shakespeare was not interested in making careful connections with his people.

Shakespeare was looking to get his most dynamic characters together under any remote circumstances available, no matter how wacky or contrived, (King Lear can be the first example). He was looking for superb exchanges of dialogue and fantastic moments.

Shakespeare searches for vertiginous possibilities in the English language. Tolstoy lived for sobriety of moral judgment. So he considered Shakespeare a monster who paid no attention to causality except when it was useful to him. His people did incredible things, fell in love and/or murdered, usually with a minimum of preparation—Hamlet—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 on advertising campaigns that are stuffed with manipulation and little else. Filled with catchy ingredients for the sole purpose of leading people astray.

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

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. Chekhov's people were simply not doing what they ought to be doing. What had to irritate Tolstoy immensely was that they sat in their own spiritual excrement and made vapid sweet speeches and moaned a little and sighed and groaned and never got out of their situation. To Tolstoy, that was a cardinal sin. One should not live with the given when it is vapid and vaguely immoral. This was one of Tolstoy's most basic notions. You may have to live with a dreary given as a discipline but you do not accept that

condition as eternal, as the meaning of life. He could not permit that. Could not accept how Chekhov made so much of the essential inanity of the Russian middle class.

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HUCKLEBERRY FINN—ALIVE AT 100

Is there a sweeter tonic for the doldrums than old reviews of great novels? In nineteenth-century Russia, Anna Karenina was received with the following: "Vronsky's passion for his horse runs parallel to his passion for Anna" . . . "Sentimental rubbish" . . . "Show me one page," says The Odessa Courier, "that contains an idea." Moby Dick was incinerated: "Graphic descriptions of a dreariness such as we do not remember to have met before in marine literature" . . . "Sheer moonstruck lunacy" . . . "Sad stuff. Mr. Melville's Quakers are wretched dolts and scrivellers and his mad captain is a monstrous bore."

By this measure, Huckleberry Finn gets off lightly. The Springfield Republican judged it to be no worse than "a gross trifling with every fine feeling. . . Mr. Clemens has no reliable sense of propriety," and the public library in Concord, Massachusetts was confident enough to ban it: "the veriest trash." The Boston Transcript reported that "other members of the Library Committee characterize the work as rough, coarse, and inelegant, the whole book being more suited to the slums than to intelligent, respectable people."

All the same, the novel was not too unpleasantly regarded. There were no large critical hurrahs, but the reviews were, on the whole, friendly. A good tale, went the consensus. There was no sense that a great novel had landed on the literary world of 1885. The critical climate could hardly anticipate T.S. Eliot and Ernest Hemingway's encomiums fifty years later. In the preface to the English edition, Eliot would speak of "a masterpiece . . . Twain's genius is

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completely realized," and Ernest went further. In *Green Hills of Africa*, after disposing of Emerson, Hawthorne, and Thoreau, and paying off Henry James and Stephen Crane with a friendly nod, he proceeded to declare, "All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*. . . . It's the best book we've had. All American writing comes from that. There was nothing before. There has been nothing as good since."

Hemingway, with his nonpareil gift for nosing out the perfect *vin du pays* for an ineluctable afternoon, was more like other novelists in one dire respect: He was never at a loss to advance himself with his literary judgments. Assessing the writing of others, he used the working author's rule of thumb: If I give this book a good mark, does it help appreciation of my work? Obviously, *Huckleberry Finn* has passed the test.

A suspicion immediately arises. Mark Twain is doing the kind of writing only Hemingway can do better. Evidently, we must take a look. May I say it helps to have read *Huckleberry Finn* so long ago that it feels brand-new on picking it up again. Perhaps I was eleven when I saw it last, maybe thirteen, but now I only remember that I came to it after *Tom Sawyer* and was disappointed. I couldn't really follow *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The character of Tom Sawyer whom I had liked so much in the first book was altered, and did not seem nice anymore. *Huckleberry Finn* was altogether beyond me. Later, I recollect being surprised by the high regard nearly everyone who taught American Lit. lavished upon the text, but that didn't bring me back to it. Obviously, I was waiting for an assignment from *The New York Times*.

Let me offer assurances. It may have been worth the wait. I suppose I am the ten millionth reader to say that *Huckleberry Finn* is an extraordinary work. Indeed, for all I know, it is a great novel. Flawed, quirky, uneven, not above taking cheap shots and cashing far too many checks (it is rarely above milking its humor)—all the same, what a book we have here! I had the most curious sense of excitement. After a while, I understood my peculiar frame of attention. The book was so up-to-date! I was not reading a classic author so much as looking at a new work sent to me in galleys by a publisher. It was as if it had arrived with one of those rare letters that says, "We won't make this claim often, but do think we have an extraordinary first novel to send out." So it was like reading *from Here to Eternity* in galleys, back in 1950, or *Lie Down in Darkness*, *Catch-22*, or *The World According to Garp* (which reads like a fabulous first novel). You kept being alternately delighted, surprised, annoyed, competitive, critical, and, finally, excited. A new

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HUCKLEBERRY FINN—ALIVE AT 100 1055

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That was how it felt to read *Huckleberry Finn* a second time. I kept resisting the context until I finally surrendered. One always does surrender sooner or later to a book with a strong magnetic field. I felt as if I held the work of a young writer about thirty or thirty-five, a prodigiously talented fellow from the Midwest, from Missouri probably, who had had the audacity to write a historical novel about the Mississippi as it might have been a century and a half ago, and this young writer had managed to give us a circus of fictional virtuositities. In nearly every chapter new and remarkable characters bounded out from the printed page as if it were a tarmac on which they could perform their leaps. The author's confidence seemed so complete that he could deal with every kind of man or woman God ever gave to the middle of America. Jail-house drunks like Huck Finn's father take their bow, full of the raunchy violence that even gets into the smell of clothing. Gentlemen and river rats, young, attractive girls full of grit and "sand," and strong old ladies with aphorisms clicking like knitting needles, fools and confidence men—what a cornucopia of rabble and gentry inhabit the author's river banks.

It would be superb stuff if only the writer did not keep giving away the fact that he was a modern young American working in 1984. His anachronisms were not so much in the historical facts—those seemed accurate enough—but the point of view was too contemporary. The scenes might succeed—say it again, this young writer was talented!—but he kept betraying his literary influences. The author of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* had obviously been taught a lot by such major writers as Sinclair Lewis, John Dos Passos, and John Steinbeck; he had certainly lifted from Faulkner and the mad tone Faulkner could achieve when writing about maniacal men feuding in deep swamps; he had also absorbed much of what Vonnegut and Heller could teach about the resilience of irony. If he had a surer feel for the picaresque than Saul Bellow in *Augie March*, still he felt derivative of that work. In places one could swear he had memorized *The Catcher in the Rye*, and he probably dipped into *Deliverance* and *Why Are We in Vietnam?* He might even have studied the mannerisms of movie stars. You could feel traces of John Wayne, Victor McLaglen, and Burt Reynolds in his pages. The author had doubtless digested many a Hollywood comedy on small-town life. His instinct for life in hamlets on the Mississippi before the Civil War was as sharp as it was farcical, and couldn't be more commercial.

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No matter. With a talent as large as this, one could forgive the obvious eye for success. Many a large talent has to go through large borrowings in order to find his own style, and a lust for popular success while dangerous to serious writing is not necessarily fatal. Yes, one could accept the pilferings from other writers, given the scope of his work, the brilliance of the concept—to catch rural America by a trip on a raft down a great river! One could even marvel uneasily at the depth of the instinct for fiction in the author. With the boy Huckleberry Finn, this new novelist had managed to give us a character of no comfortable, measurable dimension. It is easy for characters in modern novels to seem more vivid than figures in the classics but, even so, Huckleberry Finn appeared to be more alive than Don Quixote and Julian Sorel, as naturally near to his own mind as we are to ours. But how often does a hero who is so absolutely natural on the page also succeed in acquiring convincing moral stature as his adventures develop?

It is to be repeated. In the attractive grip of this talent, one is ready to forgive the author of *Huckleberry Finn* for every influence he has so promiscuously absorbed. He has made such fertile use of his borrowings. One could even cheer his appearance on our jaded literary scene if not for the single transgression that goes too far. These are passages that do more than borrow an author's style—they copy it! Influence is mental, but theft is physical. Who can declare to a certainty that a large part of the prose in *Huckleberry Finn* is not lifted directly from Hemingway? We know that we are not reading Ernest only because the author, obviously fearful that his tone is getting too near, is careful to sprinkle his text with "a-clutterings" and "warn'ts" and "anywheres" and "t'others." But we have read Hemingway—and so we see through it—we know we are reading pure Hemingway disguised:

We cut young cottonwoods and willows, and hid the raft with them. Then we set out the lines. Next we slid into the river and had a swim . . . then we set down on the sandy bottom where the river was knee-deep and watched the daylight come. Not a sound anywheres . . . the first thing to see, looking away over the water, was a kind of dull line—that was the woods on t'other side; you couldn't make nothing else out; then a pale place in the sky; then more paleness spreading around; then the river softened up away off, and warn't black any more . . . by and by you could see a streak on the water which you know by the look of the streak

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HUCKLEBERRY FINN—ALIVE AT 100 1057

that there's a snag there in a swift current which breaks on it and makes that streak look that way; and you see the mist curl up off the water and the east reddens up and the river.

Up to now I have conveyed, I expect, the pleasure of reading this book today. It is the finest compliment I can offer. We use an unspoken standard of relative judgment on picking up a classic. Secretly, we expect less reward from it than from a good contemporary novel. The average intelligent modern reader would probably, under torture, admit that *Heartburn* was more fun to read, minute for minute, than *Madame Bovary*, and maybe one even learned more. That is not to say that the first will be superior to the second a hundred years from now but that a classic novel is like a fine horse carrying an exorbitant impost. Classics suffer by their distance from our day-to-day gossip. The mark of how good *Huckleberry Finn* has to be is that one can compare it to a number of our best modern American novels and it stands up page for page, awkward here, sensational there—absolutely the equal of one of those rare incredible first novels that come along once or twice in a decade. So I have spoken of it as kin to a first novel because it is so young and so fresh and so all-out silly in some of the chances it takes and even wins. A wiser older novelist would never play that far out when the work was already well along and so neatly in hand, but Twain does.

For the sake of literary propriety, let me not, however, lose sight of the actual context. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a novel of the nineteenth century and its grand claims to literary magnitude are also to be remarked upon. So I will say that the first measure of a great novel may be that it presents—like a human of palpable charisma—an all but visible aura. Few works of literature can be so luminous without the presence of some majestic symbol. In *Huckleberry Finn* we are presented (given the possible exception of Anna Livia Plurabelle) with the best river ever to flow through a novel, our own Mississippi, and in the voyage down those waters of Huck Finn and a runaway slave on their raft, we are held in the thrall of the river. Larger than a character, the river is a manifest presence, a demiurge to support the man and the boy, a deity to betray them, feed them, all but drown them, fling them apart, float them back together. The river winds like a fugue through the marrow of the true narrative, which is nothing less than the ongoing relation between Huck and the runaway slave, this Nigger Jim whose name embodies the very stuff of the slave system itself—his name is not Jim but Nigger Jim. The growth of love and

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knowledge between the runaway white and the runaway black is a relation equal to the relation of the men to the river, for it is also full of betrayal and nourishment, separation and return. So it manages to touch that last fine nerve of the heart where compassion and irony speak to one another and thereby give a good turn to our most protected emotions.

Reading *Huckleberry Finn*, one comes to realize all over again that the near burned-out, throttled, hate-filled dying affair between whites and blacks is still our great national love affair, and woe to us if it ends in detestation and mutual misery. Riding the current of this novel, we are back in the happy time when the love affair was new and all seemed possible. How rich is the recollection of that emotion! What else is greatness but the indestructible wealth it leaves in the mind's recollection after hope has soured and passions are spent? It is always the hope of democracy that our wealth will be there to spend again, and the ongoing treasure of *Huckleberry Finn* is that it frees us to think of democracy and its sublime, terrifying premise: Let the passions and cupidities and dreams and kinks and ideals and greed and hopes and foul corruptions of all men and women have their day and the world will still be better off, for there is more good than bad in the sum of us and our workings. Mark Twain, whole embodiment of that democratic human, understood the premise in every turn of his pen, and how he tested it, how he twisted and tantalized and tested it until we are weak all over again with our love for the idea.

[From *The New York Times Book Review* (December 9, 1984)]

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ODDMENTS ON HEMINGWAY

LENNON: I don't think anyone can deny the brilliance of Hemingway in terms of style. But Hemingway could never write a book like The Naked and the Dead in which you're talking about fascism coming to America, technology, and the kinds of themes you have dealt with over the past thirty years.

MAILER: I didn't say Hemingway was brighter than I was. I just said he writes better.

LENNON: But that's not the same as saying his talent is better.

MAILER: Well, I think it is. You can have marvelous character actors like Charles Laughton who can play just about any part. Then you get someone like Marilyn Monroe who, in the technical sense, has a small talent. But she can come out and hold a mandolin and play a little ditty and wonderful things happen. Let's take an example we would argue about less. In the technical sense, there were limitations, I suppose, to Charlie Chaplin. Any number of actors can do a credible imitation of Charlie Chaplin, and, in addition, play fifty roles Chaplin would never go near. Yet we could never argue that they were greater than Chaplin. Even though they might achieve ninety-five percent of him in an imitation, Chaplin plucked a nerve in us that very few artists reach. What great artists do is so profound, you don't debate with it.

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Hemingway's style affected whole generations of us, the way a roomful of men are affected when beautiful woman walks through—their night is turned for better or for worse. His style had the ability to hit young writers in the gut and they weren't the same after that.

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81.6 ~~Attansio~~

I guess I would say that he occupies the very center of American writing. No matter how serious or superficial a reader you are, you quickly sense that you are in the hands of someone who writes so well that your wits are keyed afterward to the flaws in the bad writing of others, and, worse, in yourself.

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0 Reface to ~~Portrait~~ *Portrait* *of Hemingway*

What characterizes every book about Hemingway I have read is the way his character remains out of focus. Even a writer with an edge as hard as Lillian Ross did not seem able to catch him properly in her famous New Yorker piece. Hemingway was there, but much too precise in his portrait as if he had sat for one of those neo-realistic paintings where the pride of the artist is to make the subject look as if he has been photographed, not painted.

For contrast, there is Carlos Baker's monumental biography and it gives us an immense amount of day-to-day material somewhat modestly undigested. It is nonetheless an invaluable book which every ambitious biography to come will evaluate detail by detail, a necessary task, for Baker's book was written with a determinedly soft focus as if the author felt his literary mission was not so much to present the man as to cover every year of Hemingway's existence in the recollections of his friends.

There is also A.E. Hotchner's book which gives us a portrait, and most readable it is, but askew. Hotchner is using a wide-angle

lens, the very matrix of the great man are distorted. Godly we learn there is reason to believe the materials are transparent. A long and marvellously articulated speech which Hemingway makes once to Hotchner turns out in fact to have been taken from a letter. It is a literary parody of the sort professional magazine writers commit often, since their skills mature in a school which demands you tell your story fast and make it true (and a quotation from a letter comes off slower than a man talking), but such methods breed distortion with their speed.

Now, we have here a book written by a son about his father, written by a son who is not a professional writer as he is quick to tell you (although he can write interestingly enough — it may even be a book which will be read at one sitting by more than half the readers who pick it up). That is because it is unlike most books written by sons about great fathers. There is nothing devilish here. The son lies to the father, and the father pays him back, mainly; the son loves the father and the father loves him back, but in his own style, and it is remote enough for the son to hate him a little as well. If it is a portrait written in love, it is with all the sweets and sour of love. What characterizes love when not wholly blissful is how damnable sweet and sour it gets. It kills any man or woman if they have the bad luck to be deeply in love with a veritable son of a bitch, and every bad thing we have ever heard about Hemingway can find its echo in this book. You do not have to wonder when you are done why any number of men and women could know Hemingway well and hate him. Yet everything fine, noble, attractive, and splendid in the man comes in with its echo as well. For once, you can read a book about Hemingway and not have to decide whether you like him or not. He is there. By God, he exists. He is a father, good and

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PREFACE

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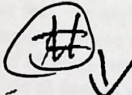
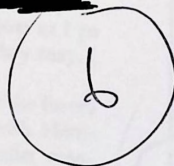
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lens; the very nostrils of the great man are distorted. Sadly we learn there is reason to believe the materials are transposed. A long and marvelously articulated speech which Hemingway makes once to Hotchner turns out in fact to have been taken from a letter. It is a minor literary peccadillo of the sort professional magazine writers commit often, since their skills mature in a school which demands you tell your story fast and make it track (and a quotation from a letter comes off slower than a man talking), but such methods breed distortion with their speed.

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~~341~~ 341~~INTRODUCTION~~

bad by turns, even sensational and godawful on different days of the year, and his contradictions are now his unity, his dirty fighting and his love of craft come out of the same blood. We can feel the man present before us, and his complexes have now become no more than his moods. His pride and his evasions have become one man, his innocence and sophistication, his honesty and outsize snobbery, his romantic madness and inconceivably practical sense of how to be outrageously romantic, it all comes through as in no other book about Hemingway, and for the simplest reason — the father was real to the son. Whereas those of us who approach Hemingway from without have been in the position of trying to find the reality behind the legend, and that is an especially contemporary form of analysis which tends to come out wrong. Hemingway, when all is said, was a Midwestern boy seized by success and ripped out of every root, and he spent the rest of his life in trying to relocate some of his old sense of terra firma by following each movement of the wind (and there were many) through his talent and his dread. What a remarkable achievement, that the sense of that talent and dread, while hardly ever referred to in these pages, is nonetheless in every paragraph of this unassuming and affective memoir.


~~NORMAN MAILER~~

The Turd Test

Miller bounces in it. We read *Tropic of Cancer*, that book of horrors, and feel happy. It is because there is honor in the horror, and metaphor in the hideous. How, we cannot even begin to say. Maybe, mood is vastly more various, self-regenerative, hearty and sly than Hemingway ever guessed. Maybe mood is not a lavender

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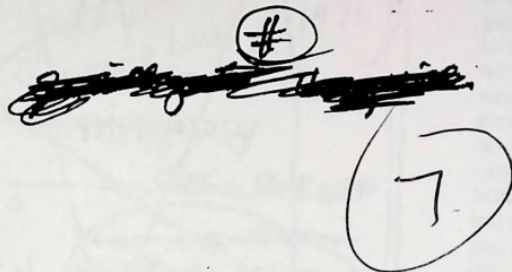
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lady, but a barmaid. Without stoicism or good taste, or even a nose for the nicety of good guts under terrible pressure, Miller is still living closer to death than Hemingway, certainly he is closer if the sewer is nearer to our end than the wound.

History proved to be on Miller's side. Twentieth-century life was leaving the world of individual effort, liquor, and tragic wounds, for the big-city garbage can of bruises, migraines, static, mood chemicals, amnesia, absurd relations, and cancer. Down in the sewers of existence where the cancer was being cooked, Miller was cavorting. Look, he was forever saying, you do not have to die of this crud. You can breathe it, eat it, suck it, fuck it, and still bounce up for the next day. There is something inestimable in us if we can stand the smell. Considering where the world was going — right into the world wide sewer of the concentration camps — Miller may have had a message that gave more life than Hemingway.



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~~Conflicting Visions~~~~from
Pleasure & Profit
Adapted from
Sams & Lust (1976)~~

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~~Miller and Hemingway~~~~Coll.~~~~COLLAPSE~~~~Miller & Hem
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see p 92 (top)~~

Henry Miller, his work embraced, which is to say swallowed in four or five weeks, and then re-read over another month or two, can sit in one's mind with all the palpability of a huge elm lying in your back yard. The nobility of the trunk is on the ground for you to examine, not to speak of the rich nightmare of the roots and crawlers. To read Miller in that short a period reopens the old question which is always too large: What is a man? Just as our uprooted elm would take on constellations of meaning as it lay in the yard, until finally it could be reminiscent of a battleship, or a host of caverns in Hieronymus Bosch, so might you be forced to ask: What the devil is a tree? Just so does Miller return us to the first question of humanism. What, finally, is a Man? Nothing is settled after all. We have been given the illusion that we know Miller, know every one of his vices, peccadilloes, hustles, horrors, cadges, gifts, flaws, and transcendent generousities, arc, yes, familiar with that man who is by his own description "confused, negligent, reckless, lusty, obscene, boisterous, thoughtful, scrupulous, lying, diabolically truthful . . . filled with wisdom and nonsense." Nonetheless, when we are done reading, we wonder if we know anything. It is not that he bears no relation to the Henry Miller who is the protagonist of his books. (That Henry Miller is, indeed, the ultimate definition of the word protagonist.) No, the real Henry Miller, which is to say, the corporeal protean Miller a few writers knew intimately and wrote about well, Anaïs Nin being the first, is not very different from his work, but more

like a transparency laid in degree. He is just a little more is all the mystery great artist. And the faist without speaking of do not fulfill their own write The Life of a Gri gious metamorphosis to on the one subject wh subject — what is to be Miller saw that Lawrer but none of the sewer gas, and set off literary e the other side of the div Miller about fornication might as well be pumpi engagements he has pla some disembodied but d appreciation equal to th still cannot write about ask, who can?) Miller nc giant phallus trying to ei simple question: How th

Miller has not lacked i of the literary world has can writer for the last fo writers died, and Hemir and Fitzgerald, not Wolf clair Lewis long gone. Dr who else could one speal over, Miller provided his back to Melville to find a full sail. Miller at his bes Faulkner's — the good re; words heavy as velvet, bri the page. You could be i holocausts where the sun s there is nothing like Henr literary styles as full as Ha of their rich language; one

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like a transparency laid over a drawing, copied, and then skewed a degree. He is just a little different from his work. But in that difference is all the mystery of his own personality, and the paradoxes of a great artist. And the failure. For it is impossible to talk of a great artist without speaking of failure. The greater they are, the more they do not fulfill their own idea of themselves. ~~Dostoyevsky failed to write The Life of a Great Sinner, and Tolstoy never brought a religious metamorphosis to man.~~ Miller was never able to come to focus on the one subject which cried out to him: D. H. Lawrence's old subject — what is to be said of love between a man and a woman? Miller saw that Lawrence had come to grips with the poetry of sex but none of the sewer gas. Miller would strike matches to the sewer gas, and set off literary explosions, but he never blew himself over to the other side of the divide. While nobody can be more poetic than Miller about fornication itself — two hundred beer-hall accordions might as well be pumping away as he describes the more heavenly engagements he has played — the writing becomes an evocation of some disembodied but divine cunt and what it is doing to him — his appreciation equal to the enjoyment of a great symphony, yet he still cannot write about fucking with love. (Of course, it is fair to ask, who can?) Miller nonetheless pounds away on the subject like a giant phallus trying to enter a tiny vagina — in the pounding is one simple question: How the hell do you get in?

Miller has not lacked for adulation. A small but accountable part of the literary world has regarded him as the greatest living American writer for the last four decades and indeed, as other American writers died, and Hemingway was there no longer, nor Faulkner and Fitzgerald, not Wolfe, not Steinbeck, nor Dos Passos, and Sinclair Lewis long gone, Dreiser dead and Farrell in partial obscurity, who else could one speak of as the great American author? Moreover, Miller provided his considerable qualifications. One had to go back to Melville to find a rhetoric that could prove as noble under full sail. Miller at his best wrote a prose more overpowering than Faulkner's — the good reader is revolved in a farrago of light with words heavy as velvet, brilliant as gems; eruptions of thought cover the page. You could be in the vortex of one of Turner's oceanic holocausts where the sun shines in the very center of the storm. No, there is nothing like Henry Miller when he gets rolling. Men with literary styles as full as Hawthorne's appear by comparison stripped of their rich language; one has to take the English language back to

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Marlowe and Shakespeare before encountering a wealth of imagery equal in intensity.

Yet it can hardly be said that the American Establishment walks around today thinking of Henry Miller as our literary genius, or one of the symbols of human wealth in America. Born in 1891, he will be eighty-five by December 26 of 1976, an artist of incomparably larger dimensions than Robert Frost, yet who can conceive of a President inviting him to read from his work on Inauguration Day, no, the irony is that a number of good and intelligent politicians might even have a slight hesitation over whether it is Arthur Miller or Henry Miller being talked about. "Oh, yes, *Henry Miller*," they might say at last, "the guy who writes the dirty books."

Even in the literary world, however, Miller's reputation survives in a vacuum. It is not that he lacks influence. It is not even excessive to say that Henry Miller had influenced the style of half the good American poets and writers alive today: Would books as different as *Naked Lunch*, *Portnoy's Complaint*, *Fear of Flying*, and *Why Are We in Vietnam?* have been as well received (or as free in language) without the irrigation Henry Miller gave to American prose? Even a writer so removed in purpose from Miller as Saul Bellow shows a debt in *Augie March*. Miller has had his effect. Thirty years ago, young writers learned to write by reading him along with Hemingway and Faulkner, Wolfe and Fitzgerald. With the exception of Hemingway, he has had perhaps the largest stylistic influence of them all. Yet there is still that critical space. Miller has only been written about in terms of adulation or dismissal. One does not pick up literary reviews with articles entitled "Ernest Hemingway and Henry Miller — Their Paris Years," or "The Social Worlds of F. Scott Fitzgerald and Henry Miller," no comments on "The Apocalyptic Vision of Henry Miller and Thomas Wolfe as Reflected in Their Rhetoric." Nor is there bound to be a work titled "Henry Miller and the Beat Generation," or "Henry Miller and the Revolution of the Sixties." Young men do not feel they are dying inside because they cannot live the way Henry Miller once lived. Yet no American writer, not even Hemingway, necessarily came closer to the crazy bliss of being alone in a strange city with no money in your pocket, not much food in your stomach, and a hard-on beginning to stir, a "personal" hard-on (as one of Miller's characters nicely describes it).

The paradox therefore persists. It is a wonder. To read *Tropic of*

Cancer today is to take in his one thought. It is one of the tury, a revolution in style and *Rises*. You cannot pass through knowing that a literary won written in just this way before so well again. A time and a voice. It is like encountering such novels, the history of would be enough points of

It is close therefore to inco career has been with us over novel that may yet be considered and probably produced more was better word for word, a writer finally like a phenomenon acceptance, and every respect discarded.

We must assume there was which went beyond his id comfortable to us today, yet are in harmony with our own have been outrageous pieces haunt us. Faulkner inspires thoughts for literary genius: keep of our reading of their films. But Miller does not. Yet in the most peculiar sense with time — he is no better forty years ago — it is as if nobody could be more American. He does not become self as an enigma.

The authors who live to comprehend like movie stars on our psyche with the clarity and tend them at once. Faulkner literary Southerner as *Olivin* and cultivated presence is everybody wishes to hear

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Cancer today is to take in his dimension. He is a greater writer than one thought. It is one of the few great novels of our American century, a revolution in style and consciousness equal to *The Sun Also Rises*. You cannot pass through the first twenty pages without knowing that a literary wonder is taking place — nobody has ever written in just this way before, nobody may ever write by this style so well again. A time and a place have come to focus in a writer's voice. It is like encountering an archaeological relic. Given enough such novels, the history of our century could never be lost: there would be enough points of reference.

It is close therefore to incomprehensible that a man whose literary career has been with us over forty years, an author who wrote one novel that may yet be considered equal to the best of Hemingway, and probably produced more than Thomas Wolfe day by day, and was better word for word, and purple passage for purple passage, a writer finally like a phenomenon, has somehow, with every large acceptance, and every respect, been nonetheless ignored and near to discarded.

We must assume there was something indigestible about Miller which went beyond his ideas. His condemnations are virtually comfortable to us today, yet he is not an author whose complexities are in harmony with our own. Hemingway and Fitzgerald may each have been outrageous pieces of psychic work, yet their personalities haunt us. Faulkner inspires our reverence and Wolfe our tenderest thoughts for literary genius. They are good to the memories we keep of our reading of them — they live with the security of old films. But Miller does not. He is a force, a value, a literary sage, and yet in the most peculiar sense he does not become more compatible with time — he is no better beloved today than twenty, thirty, or forty years ago — it is as if he is almost not an American author; yet nobody could be more American. So he evades our sense of classification. He does not become a personality, rather he maintains himself as an enigma.

The authors who live best in legend offer personalities we can comprehend like movie stars. Hemingway and Fitzgerald impinge on our psyche with the clarity of Bogart and Cagney. We comprehend them at once. Faulkner bears the same privileged relation to a literary Southerner as Olivier to the London theatregoer. A grand and cultivated presence is enriching the marrow of your life. Nobody wishes to hear a bad story about Olivier or Faulkner.

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Henry Miller, however, exists in the same relation to legend that anti-matter shows to matter. His life is antipathetic to the idea of legend itself. Where he is complex, he is too complex — we do not feel the resonance of slowly dissolving mystery but the madness of too many knots; where he is simple, he is not attractive — his air is harsh. If he had remained the protagonist by which he first presented himself in *Tropic of Cancer* — the man with iron in his phallus, acid in his mind, and some kind of incomparable relentless freedom in his heart, that paradox of tough misery and keen happiness, that connoisseur of the spectrum of odors between good sewers and bad sewers, a noble rat gnawing on existence and impossible to kill, then he could indeed have been a legend, a species of Parisian Bogart or American Belmondo. Everybody would have wanted to meet this post-gangster, barbarian-genius. He would have been the American and heterosexual equivalent of Jean Genet. But that was not his desire. Paradoxically, he was too separate from his work.

In fact, he could never have been too near to the character he made of himself in *Tropic of Cancer*. One part never fits. It is obvious he must have been more charming than he pretends — how else account for all the free dinners he was invited to, the people he lived on, the whores who loved him? There had to be something angelic about him. Anaïs Nin when describing the apartment in Clichy that Miller kept with Alfred Perles made the point that Miller was the one tidying the joint. "Henry keeps house like a Dutch housekeeper. He is very neat and clean. No dirty dishes about. It is all monastic, really, with no trimmings, no decoration."* Where in all of *Tropic of Cancer* is this neat and charming man?

The novel must be more a fiction than a fact. Which, of course, is not to take away a particle of its worth. Perhaps it becomes even more valuable. After all, we do not write to recapture an experience, we write to come as close to it as we can. Sometimes we are not very close, and yet, paradoxically, are nearer than if we had a photograph. Not nearer necessarily to the verisimilitude of what happened, but to the mysterious reality of what can happen on a page. Oil paints do not create clouds but the image of clouds; a page of manuscript can only evoke that special kind of reality which lives on the skin of the writing paper, a rainbow on a soap bubble. Miller is

* *The Diary of Anaïs Nin* (Vol. 1) (New York: The Swallow Press and Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1966), p. 62.

forever accused of caricature and any good reader knows enough he must be leaving out reality they give us. His character paving stones until a real French writer, no matter how De Maupassant, Hugo, Flaubert, Céline, has made Paris more foreigner described a country *Tropic of Cancer* Miller succeed: he created a tone in prose a place. If that main character Miller never existed in life, it spirit which existed at the time nearest we come to historical

For that matter, the great of their authors. Augustine recollects the pieties. Stendhal is not a duccer. *On the Road* is close to Kerouac than the one who did narrator, even as homosexual land, and if we take *The Sun* book whose protagonist created even there we come to the reality he wrote it could not have created a consciousness wise sophisticated and more graceful relation to his creation.

The difference between Henry way set out thereafter to grow for better and worse, for coming into that character who embracing, had only to keep writing, refining his own personality to book, and he could have even Henry, eight years older than fiction eight years later, and so Henryway was in 1926, chose to proceed to move away from that did not wish to be a character was.

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forever accused of caricature by people who knew his characters,
and any good reader knows enough about personality to sense how
much he must be leaving out of his people. Yet, what a cumulative
reality they give us. His characters make up a Paris more real than
its paving stones until a reluctant wonder bursts upon us — no
French writer, no matter how great, not Rabelais, nor Proust, not
De Maupassant, Hugo, Huysmans, Zola or even Balzac, not even
Céline, has made Paris more vivid to us. Whenever before has a
foreigner described a country better than its native writers? For in
Tropic of Cancer Miller succeeded in performing one high literary
act: he created a tone in prose which caught the tone of a period and
a place. If that main character in *Tropic of Cancer* named Henry
Miller never existed in life, it hardly matters — he is the voice and
spirit which existed at the time. The spirits of literature may be the
nearest we come to historical truth.

For that matter, the great confessions of literature are apart from
their authors. Augustine recollecting his sins is not the sinner but
the pieties. Stendhal is not Julian Sorel, nor Kierkegaard the se-
ducer. *On the Road* is close to Jack Kerouac, yet he gives a happier
Kerouac than the one who died too soon. Proust was not his own
narrator, even as homosexuality is not heterosexuality but another
land, and if we take *The Sun Also Rises* as the purest example of a
book whose protagonist created the precise air of a time and a place,
even there we come to the realization that Hemingway at the time
he wrote it could not have been equal to Jake Barnes — he had
created a consciousness wiser, drier, purer, more classic, more so-
phisticated and more graceful than his own. He was still gauche in
relation to his creation.

The difference between Hemingway and Miller is that Heming-
way set out thereafter to grow into Jake Barnes and locked himself
for better and worse, for enormous fame and eventual destruction,
into that character who embodied the spirit of an age. Miller, follow-
ing, had only to keep writing *Tropic of Cancer* over and over, re-
fining his own personality to become less and less separate from his
book, and he could have entered the American life of legend. But
Henry, eight years older than Hemingway, yet arriving at publica-
tion eight years later, and so sixteen years older in 1934 than Hem-
ingway was in 1926, chose to go in the opposite direction. He pro-
ceeded to move away from the first Henry Miller he had created. He
did not wish to be a character but a soul — he would be various. He
was.

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8

Miller and Hemingway

D. H. LAWRENCE

That new force in life that would ask men and women to become more and more alike, gave him a species of aesthetic nausea as subtle and complete as the sense of displacement that comes upon one in an airplane when it is learned that the sweet and gentle soul in the next seat is the product of surgical virtuositities which have extended his life.

Why at this point did he think then of Kate Millet? Why, then, of sturdy Kate Millet next to such an invalid and such an aversion if not for her political genius in perceiving that any technologizing of the sexes into twin-unit living teams with detachable sub-units (kids) might yet have to contend with the work of D.H. Lawrence. Not, of course, for any love of children; it would not be until his last book that one of Lawrence's romances would end with the heroine pregnant, tranquil, and fulfilled, no, Lawrence's love affairs were more likely to come in like winds off Wuthering Heights—but never had a male novelist written more intimately about women—heart, contradiction, and soul; never had a novelist loved them more, been so comfortable in the tides of their sentiment, and so ready to see them murdered. His work held, on the consequence, huge fascination for women. Since by the end he was also the sacramental poet of the sacramental act, for he believed nothing human had such significance as the tender majes-

~~Walter P. Carter~~
~~THE ADVOCATE~~

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ties of a man and woman fucking with love, he was also the most appalling subversive to the single permissive sexual standard, the orgy, homosexuality, and the inevitable promiscuity attached to a sexual search repelled him, and might yet repel many of the young as they become bored with the similarity of the sexes.

Indeed, which case-hardened guerrilla of Women's Liberation might not shed a private tear at the following passage:

And if you're in Scotland and I'm in the Midlands, and I can't put my arms round you, and wrap my legs round you, yet I've got something of you. My soul softly flaps in the little pentecost flame with you, like the peace of fucking. We fucked a flame into being. Even the flowers are fucked into being between the sun and the earth. But it's a delicate thing, and takes patience and the long pause.

*"So I love chastity now, because it is the peace that comes of fucking. I love being chaste now. I love it as snowdrops love the snow. I love this chastity, which is the pause of peace of our fucking, between us now like a snowdrop of forked white fire. And when the real spring comes, when the drawing together comes, then we can fuck the little flame brilliant and yellow . . ."*¹⁰

Yes, which stout partisan of the Liberation would shed such words and not go soft for the memory of the bitter bridge of love they had burned behind. Lawrence was dangerous. So delicate and indestructi-

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 little
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ble an enemy to the cause of Liberation that to expunge him one would have to look for Millett herself. If she is more careful with Lawrence than with Miller, acting less like some literary Molotov, if her disrespect for quotation is in this place more guarded, if she even functions as a critic and so gives us a clue to the meaning of Lawrence's life and work, she has become twice adroit at hiding the real evidence. So she rises from abuse to ~~high~~ high-school legal briefs — it is crucial to her case that Lawrence be the "counterrevolutionary sexual politician" she terms him, but since women love his work, and remember it, she is obliged to bring in the evidence more or less fairly, and only distort it by small moves, brief elisions in the quotation, the suppression of passing contradictions, in short bring in all the evidence on one side of the case and harangue the jury but a little further. Since she has a great deal of evidence, only a careful defense can overthrow her case. For Lawrence can be hung as a counterrevolutionary sexual politician out of his own words and speeches. There is a plethora of evidence — in his worst books. And in all his books there are unmistakable tendencies toward the absolute domination of women by men, mystical worship of the male will, detestation of democracy. There is a stretch in the middle of his work, out in such unread tracts as Aaron's

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Rod and Kangaroo, when the uneasy feeling arrives that perhaps it was just as well Lawrence died when he did, for he could have been the literary adviser to Oswald Mosley about the time Hitler came in, one can even ingest a comprehension of the appeal of fascism to Pound and Wyndham Lewis, ~~for~~ the death of nature lived already in the air of the contract between corporate democracy and technology, and who was then to know that the marriage of fascism and technology would be even worse, would accelerate that death. Still, such fear for the end of Lawrence is superficial. He was perhaps a great writer, certainly ~~flawed~~, and abominably pedestrian in his language when the ducts of experience burned dry, he was unendurably didactic then, he was a pill, and at his worst, a humorless nag; he is pathetic in all those places he suggests that men should follow the will of a stronger man, a purer man, a man conceivably not unlike himself, for one senses in his petulance and in the spoiled airs of his impatient disdain at what he could not intellectually dominate that he was a momma's boy, spoiled rotten, and could not have commanded two infantrymen to follow him, yet he was still a great writer, for he contained a cauldron of boiling opposites — he was on the one hand a Hitler in a teapot, on the other he was the blessed breast of tender love, he knew what it was to love a

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woman from her hair to her toes, he lived with all the sensibility of a female burning with tender love — and these incompatibles, enough to break a less extraordinary man, were squared in their difficulty by the fact that he had intellectual ambition sufficient to desire the overthrow of European civilization, his themes were nothing if not immense — in *The Plumed Serpent* he would even look to the founding of a new religion based on the virtues of the phallus and the submission of women to the wisdom of that principle. But he was also the son of a miner, he came from hard practical small-minded people, stock descended conceivably from the Druids, but how many centuries had hammered the reductive wisdom of pounds and pennies into the genes? So a part of Lawrence was like a little tobacconist from the English Midlands who would sniff the smoke of his wildest ideas — notions we may be certain, which ran completely off the end of anybody's word system — and hack out an irritable cough at the intimate intricate knobby knotty contradictions of his ideas when they were embodied in people. For if we can feel how consumed he was by the dictatorial pressure to ram his sentiments into each idiot throat, he never forgets that he is writing novels and so his ideas cannot simply triumph, they have to be tried and heated and forged, and finally be beaten

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into shapelessness against the anvil of his profound British skepticism which would not buy his ideas, not outright, for even his own characters seem to wear out in them. Kate Leslie, the heroine of *The Plumed Serpent*, a proud sophisticated Irish lady, falls in love with one of the Mexican leaders of a new party, a new faith, a new ritual, gives herself to the new religion, believes in her submission — but not entirely! At the end she is still attached to the ambivalence of the European mind. Lilly, the hero of *Aaron's Rod*, finally preaches "deep fathomless submission to the heroic soul in a greater man" and the greater man is Lilly, but he is a slim small somewhat ridiculous figure, a bigger man for example strikes him in front of his wife and he is reduced to regaining his breath without showing he is hurt, he is a small hard-shelled man full of contradictions, much like Lawrence himself, but the grandeur of the ideas sound ridiculous in the little cracked shell. Of course, Lawrence was not only trying to sell dictatorial theorems, he was also trying to avoid himself of them. We can see by the literary line of his life that he moves from the adoration of his mother in *Sons and Lovers* and from close to literal adoration of the womb in *The Rainbow* to worship of the phallus and the male will in his later books. In fact, Millett can be quoted to good effect, for her criti-

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~~THE PRISONER OF SEX~~

cism is here close to objective, which is to say not totally at odds with the defense:

Aaron's Rod, Kangaroo, and The Plumed Serpent are rather neglected novels, and perhaps justly so. They are unquestionably strident, and unpleasant for a number of reasons, principally a rasping protofascist tone, an increasing fondness of force, a personal arrogance, and innumerable racial, class, and religious bigotries. In these novels one sees how terribly Lawrence strained after triumph in the "man's world" of formal politics, war, priestcraft, art and finance. Thinking of Lady Chatterley or the early novels, readers often equate Lawrence with the personal life which generally concerns the novelist, the relations of men and women — for whether he played a woman's man or a man's man, Lawrence was generally doing so before an audience of women, who found it difficult to associate him with the public life of male authority. After Women in Love, having solved, or failed to solve, the problem of mastering the female, Lawrence became more ambitious. Yet he never failed to take his sexual politics with him, and with an astonishing consistency of motive, made it the foundation of all his other social and political beliefs.

It is fair analysis as far as it goes, but it fails to underline the heroism of his achievement, which is that he was able finally to leave off his quest for power in the male world and go back to what he started with, back after every bitterness and frustration to his first knowledge that the physical love of men and women

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insofar as it was untainted by civilization, was the salvation of us all, there was no other. And in fact he had never ceased believing that, he had merely lost hope it could be achieved.

Millett's critical misdemeanor is to conceal the pilgrimage, hide the life, cover over that emotional odyssey which took him from adoration of the woman to outright lust for her murder, then took him back to worship her beauty, even her procreative beauty. Millett avoids the sympathy this might arouse in her female readers (which dead lover is more to be cherished after all than the one who returned at the end?), yes, avoids such huge potential sympathy by two simple critical stratagems; she writes about his last book first, which enables her to end her very long chapter on Lawrence with an analysis of his story, "The Woman Who Rode Away." Since it may be the most savage of his stories and concludes with the ritual sacrifice of a white woman by natives, Millett can close on Lawrence with the comment, "Probably it is the perversion of sexuality into slaughter, indeed, the story's very travesty and denial of sexuality, which accounts for its monstrous, even demented air." Not every female reader will remind herself that Lawrence, having charged his blood of murder, would now go on to write *Lady Chatterley*. But then Millett is not interested in

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the dialectic by which writers deliver their themes to themselves; she is more interested in hiding the process, and so her second way of concealing how much Lawrence has still to tell us about men and women is simply to distort the complexity of his brain into snarling maxims, take him at his worst and make him even worse, take him at his best and bring pinking shears to his context. Like a true species of literary Mafia, Millett works always for points and the shading of points. If she can't steal a full point, she'll cop a half.

Examples abound, but it is necessary to quote Lawrence in some fullness, a defense of his works rests naturally on presenting him in uninterrupted lines, which indeed will be no hardship to read. Besides, the clearest exposure of the malignant literary habits of the prosecutor is to quote her first and thereby give everyone an opportunity to see how little she shows, how much she ignores, in her desire to steal the verdict.

"You lie there," he orders. She accedes with a "queer obedience" — Lawrence never uses the word female in the novel without prefacing it with the adjectives "weird" or "queer": this is presumably done to persuade the reader that woman is a dim prehistoric creature operating out of primeval impulse. Mellors concedes one kiss on the navel and then gets to business:

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"And he had to come into her at once, to enter the peace on earth of that soft quiescent body. It was the moment of pure peace for him, the entry into the body of a woman. She lay still, in a kind of sleep, always in a kind of sleep. The activity, the orgasm was all his, all his; she could strive for herself no more."

This is the passage from which she has drawn her quotation:

"You lie there," he said softly, and he shut the door, so that it was dark, quite dark.

With a queer obedience, she lay down on the blanket. Then she felt the soft, groping, helplessly destrous hand touching her body, feeling for her face. The hand stroked her face softly, softly, with infinite soothing and assurance, and at last there was the soft touch of a kiss on her cheek.

She lay quite still, in a sort of sleep, in a sort of dream. Then she quivered as she felt his hand groping softly, yet with queer thwarted clumsiness among her clothing. Yet the hand knew, too, how to unclothe her where it wanted. He drew down the thin silk sheath, slowly, carefully, right down and over her feet. Then with a quiver of exquisite pleasure he touched the warm soft body, and touched her navel for a moment in a kiss. And he had to come into her at once, to enter the peace on earth of her soft, quiescent body. It was the moment of pure peace for him, the entry into the body of a woman.

She lay still, in a kind of sleep, always in a kind of sleep. The activity, the orgasm was his, all his; she could strive for herself no more. Even the tightness of his arms

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round her, even the intense movement of his body, and the springing seed in her, was a kind of sleep, from which she did not begin to rouse till he had finished and lay softly panting against her breast.

It is a modest example, but then it is a modest act and Constance Chatterley is exhausted with the deaths of the world she is carrying within — since they will make other kinds of love later, the prosecutor will have cause enough to be further enraged, but the example can show how the tone of Lawrence's prose is poisoned by the acids of inappropriate comment. "Mellors concedes one kiss on the navel and then gets to business." Indeed! Take off your business suit, Comrade Millett.

But it is hardly the time for a recess. We will want to look at another exhibit. The quoted lines up for indictment are from *Women in Love*:

Having begun by informing Ursula he will not love her, as he is interested in going beyond love to "something much more impersonal and harder," he goes on to state his terms: "I've seen plenty of women, I'm sick of seeing them. I want a woman I don't see . . . I don't want your good looks, and I don't want your womanly feelings, and I don't want your thoughts nor opinions nor your ideas." The "new" relationship, while posing as an affirmation of the primal unconscious sexual being, to adopt Lawrence's jargon, is in effect a denial of personality in the woman.

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Or is it a denial of personality in Lawrence? Witness how our literary commissar will void the strength of Lawrence's style by cutting off our acquaintance with the marrow of his sensibility, the air of his senses. For Lawrence is always alert to the quiet ringing of the ether, the quick retreat of a mood, the awe of the thought about to be said, then left unsaid, then said after all. But his remarks cannot be chopped out of their setting. A bruised apple at the foot of a tree is another reality from a bruised apple in the frigidaire.

There was silence for some moments.

"No," he said. "It isn't that. Only — if we are going to make a relationship, even of friendship, there must be something final and irrevocable about it."

There was a clang of mistrust and almost anger in his voice. She did not answer. Her heart was too much contracted. She could not have spoken.

Seeing she was not going to reply, he continued, almost bitterly, giving himself away:

"I can't say it is love I have to offer — and it isn't love I want. It is something much more impersonal and harder — and rarer."

There was a silence, out of which she said:

"You mean you don't love me?"

She suffered furiously, saying that.

"Yes, if you like to put it like that. Though perhaps that isn't true. I don't know. At any rate, I don't feel the emotion of love for you — no, and I don't want to. Because it gives out in the last issues . . ."

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How different is all this from "going beyond love to 'something much more impersonal and harder,'" how much in fact we have the feeling they are in love.

"If there is no love, what is there?" she cried, almost jeering.

"Something," he said, looking at her, battling with his soul, with all his might.

"What?"

He was silent for a long time, unable to be in communication with her while she was in this state of opposition.

"There is," he said, in a voice of pure abstraction, "a final me which is stark and impersonal and beyond responsibility. So there is a final you, and it is there I would want to meet you — not in the emotional, loving plane — but there beyond, where there is no speech and no terms of agreement. There we are two stark, unknown beings, two utterly strange creatures, I would want to approach you, and you me. And there could be no obligation, because there is no standard for action there, because no understanding has been reaped from that plane. It is quite inhuman — so there can be no calling to book, in any form whatsoever — because one is outside the pale of all that is accepted, and nothing known applies. One can only follow the impulse, taking that which lies in front, and responsible for nothing, asking for nothing, giving nothing, only each taking according to the primal desire."

Ursula listened to this speech, her mind dumb and almost senseless, what he said was so unexpected and so untoward.

"It is just purely selfish," she said.

"If it is pure, yes. But it isn't selfish at all. Because I

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don't know what I want of you. I deliver myself over to the unknown, in coming to you, I am without reserves or defenses, stripped entirely, into the unknown. Only there needs the pledge between us, that we will both cast off everything, cast off ourselves even, and cease to be, so that that which is perfectly ourselves can take place in us."

As we shall soon see, Lawrence will go further than this, he will come to believe that a woman must submit — a most blood-enriching submission, bet on it. ~~+~~ Yet in that book where such submission takes place, in *The Plumed Serpent* where Kate Leslie has her most profound sex with a man who insists on remaining a stranger and an Indian, the moral emerges that he wants her by the end, wants Kate Leslie just so deeply as she desires him. Lawrence's point, which he refines over and over, is that the deepest messages of sex cannot be heard by taking a stance on the side of the bank, announcing one is in love, and then proceeding to fish in the waters of love with a breadbasket full of ego. No, he is saying again and again, people can win at love only when they are ready to lose everything they bring to it of ego, position, or identity — love is more stern than war — and men and women can survive only if they reach the depths of their own sex down within themselves. They have to deliver themselves "over to the unknown." No more existential

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statement of love exists, for it is a way of saying we do not know how the love will turn out. What message more odious to the technologist? So Millett will accuse him endlessly of patriarchal male-dominated sex. But the domination of men over women was only a way station on the line of Lawrence's ideas — what he started to say early and ended saying late was that sex could heal, sex was the only nostrum which could heal, all other medicines were part of the lung-scarring smoke of factories and healed nothing, were poison, but sex could heal only when one was without "reserves or defenses." And so men and women received what they deserved of one another. Since Women's Lib has presented itself with the clear difficulty of giving modern woman a full hard efficient ego, Lawrence's ideas could not be more directly in the way. Still, it is painful to think that, quickly as men are losing any sense of fair play, women — if Millett can model for her sex — are utterly without it. Maybe Millett is not so much Molotov as Vishinsky. What a foul exhibit must now be displayed!

Passive as she is, Connie fares better than the heroine of The Plumed Serpent, from whom Lawrentian man, Don Cipriano, deliberately withdraws as she nears orgasm, in a calculated and sadistic denial of her pleasure:

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"By a swift dark instinct, Cipriano drew away from this in her. When, in their love, it came back on her, the seething electric female ecstasy, which knows such spasms of delirium, he recoiled from her. . . . By a dark and powerful instinct he drew away from her as soon as this desire rose again in her, for the white ecstasy of frictional satisfaction, the throes of Aphrodite of the foam. She could see that to him, it was repulsive. He just removed himself, dark and unchangeable, away from her."

The passage restored will be of interest to any jury looking for further evidence on the virtues or deterrents of the clitoral come:

She realised, almost with wonder, the death in her of the Aphrodite of the foam: the seething, frictional, ecstatic Aphrodite. By a swift dark instinct, Cipriano drew away from this in her. When, in their love, it came back on her, the seething electric female ecstasy, which knows such spasms of delirium, he recoiled from her. It was what she used to call her "satisfaction." She had loved Joachim for this, that again, and again, and again he could give her this orgiastic "satisfaction," in spasms that made her cry aloud.

But Cipriano would not. By a dark and powerful instinct he drew away from her as soon as this desire rose again in her, for the white ecstasy of frictional satisfaction, the throes of Aphrodite of the foam. She could see that to him, it was repulsive. He just removed himself, dark and unchangeable, away from her.

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And she, as she lay, would realise the worthlessness of this foam-effervescence, its strange externality to her. It seemed to come upon her from without, not from within. And succeeding the first moment of disappointment, when this sort of "satisfaction" was denied her, came the knowledge that she did not really want it, that it was really nauseous to her.

And he, in his dark, hot silence, would bring her back to the new, soft, heavy, hot flow, when she was like a fountain gushing noiseless and with urgent softness from the volcanic deeps. Then she was open to him soft and hot, yet gushing with a noiseless soft power. And there was no such thing as conscious "satisfaction." What happened was dark and untellable. So different from the friction which flares out in circles of phosphorescent ecstasy, to the last wild spasm which utters the involuntary cry, like a death-cry, the final love-cry. This she had known, and known to the end, with Joachim. And now this too was removed from her. What she had with Cipriano was curiously beyond her knowing: so deep and hot and flowing, as it were subterranean. She had to yield before it. She could not grip it into one final spasm of white ecstasy which was like sheer knowing.

And as it was in the love-act, so it was with him. She could not know him. When she tried to know him, something went slack in her, and she had to leave off. She had to let be. She had to leave him, dark and hot and potent, along with the things that are, but are not known. The presence. And the stranger. This he was always to her.

Yes, sex was the presence of grace and the introduction of the stranger into oneself. That was the only

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medicine for the lividities of the will. So Lawrence would preach, but he was a man in torture. If Millett had wished to get around Lawrence in the easiest way for the advance of the Liberation, she would have done better to have built a monument to him, and a bridge over his work, rather than making the mean calculation she could bury him by meretricious quotation. For Lawrence is an inspiration, but few can do more than respect him on the fly (the way a Soviet official might duck into an Orthodox church to smell the incense). The world has been technologized and technologized twice again in the forty years since his death, the citizens are technologized as well. Who will go looking for the "new, soft, heavy, hot flow," or the "urgent softness from the volcanic deeps" when the air of cities smells of lava, and the mood of the streets is like the bowels turned inside out? What he was asking for had been too hard for him, it is more than hard for us; his life was, yes, a torture, and we draw back in fear, for we would not know how to try to burn by such a light.

Yet, he was a man more beautiful perhaps than we can guess, and it is worth the attempt to try to perceive the logic of his life, for he illumines the passion to be masculine as no other writer, he reminds us of the beauty of desiring to be a man, for he was not much of

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a man himself, a son despised by his father, beloved of his mother, a boy and young man and prematurely aging writer with the soul of a beautiful woman. It is not only that no other man writes so well about women, but indeed is there a woman who can? Useless for Millett to answer that here is a case of one man commending another man for his ability to understand women — what a vain and pompous assumption, she will hasten to jeer, but such words will be the ground meat of a dull cow. The confidence is that some of Lawrence's passages have a ring — perhaps it is an echo of that great bell which may toll whenever the literary miracle occurs and a writer sets down words to resonate with that sense of peace and proportion it is tempting to call truth. Yet whoever believes that such a leap is not possible across the gap, that a man cannot write of a woman's soul, or a white man of a black man, does not believe in literature itself. So, yes, Lawrence understood women as they had never been understood before, understood them with all the tortured fever of a man who had the soul of a beautiful, imperious, and passionate woman, yet he was locked into the body of a middling male physique, not physically strong, of reasonable good looks, a pleasant to somewhat seedy-looking man, no stud. What a nightmare to balance that soul! to take the man in himself, locked

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from youth into every need for profound female companionship, a man almost wholly oriented toward the company of women, and attempt to go out into the world of men, indeed even dominate the world of men so that he might find balance. For his mind was possessed of that intolerable masculine pressure to command which develops in sons outrageously beloved by their mothers — to be the equal of a woman at twelve or six or any early age which reaches equilibrium between the will of the son and the will of the mother, strong love to strong love, is all but to guarantee the making of a future tyrant, for the sense of where to find one's inner health has been generated by the early years of that equilibrium — its substitute will not be easy to create in maturity. What can then be large enough to serve as proper balance to a man who was equal to a strong woman in emotional confidence at the age of eight? Hitlers develop out of such balance derived from imbalance, and great generals and great novelists (for what is a novelist but a general who lends his troops across fields of paper?).

So we must conceive then of Lawrence arrogant with mother love and therefore possessed of a mind which did not believe any man on earth had a mind more important than his own. What a responsibility then to bring his message to the world, unique mes-

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sage which might yet save the world! We must conceive of that ego equal already to the will of a strong woman while he was still a child — what long steps had it taken since within the skull! He needed an extraordinary woman for a mate, and he had the luck to find his Frieda. She was an aristocrat and he was a miner's son, she was large and beautiful, she was passionate, and he stole her away from her husband and children — they could set out together to win the world and educate it into ways to live, do that, do all of that out of the exuberance of finding one another.

But she was a strong woman, she was individual, she loved him but she did not worship him. She was independent. If he had been a stronger man, he could perhaps have enjoyed such personal force, but he had become a man by an act of will, he was bone and blood of the classic family stuff out of which homosexuals are made, he had lifted himself out of his natural destiny which was probably to have the sexual life of a woman, had diverted the virility of his brain down into some indispensable minimum of phallic force — no wonder he worshiped the phallus, he above all men knew what an achievement was its rise from the root, its assertion to stand proud on a delicate base. His mother had adored him. Since his first sense of himself

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as a male had been in the tender air of her total concern — now, and always, his strength would depend upon just such outsize admiration. Dominance over women was not tyranny to him but equality, for dominance was the indispensable elevator which would raise his phallus to that height from which it might seek transcendence. And sexual transcendence, some ecstasy where he could lose his ego for a moment, and his sense of self and his will, was life to him — he could not live without sexual transcendence. If he had had an outrageously unequal development — all fury to be a man and all the senses of a woman — there was a direct price to pay: he was not healthy. His lungs were poor, and he lived with the knowledge that he would likely have an early death. Each time he failed to reach a woman, each time he failed particularly to reach his own woman, he was dying a little. It is hopeless to read his books and try to understand the quirky changeable fury-ridden relationships of his men and women without comprehending that Lawrence saw every serious love affair as fundamental do-or-die: he knew he literally died a little more each time he missed transcendence in the act. It was why he saw lust as hopeless. Lust was meaningless fucking and that was the privilege of the healthy. He was ill, and his wife

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was literally killing him each time she failed to worship his most proud and delicate cock. Which may be why he invariably wrote on the edge of cliché — we speak in simples as experience approaches the enormous, and Lawrence lived with the monumental gloom that his death was already in him, and sex — some transcendental variety of sex — was his only hope, and his wife was too robust to recognize such tragic facts.

By the time of writing *Women in Love*, his view of women would not be far from the sinister. One of the two heroines would succeed in driving her man to his death. His rage against the will of women turns immense, and his bile explodes on the human race, or is it the majority of the races? — these are the years when he will have a character in *Aaron's Rod*, Lilly, his mouthpiece, say:

I can't do with folk who teem by the billion, like the Chinese and Japs and Orientals altogether. Only vermin teem by the billion. Higher types breed slower. I would have loved the Aztecs and the Red Indians. I know they hold the element in life which I am looking for — they had living pride. Not like the flea-bitten Asiatics. Even niggers are better than Asiatics, though they are wallowers. The American races — and the South Sea Islanders — the Marquesans, the Maori blood. That was true blood. It wasn't frightened. All the rest are craven . . .

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It is the spleen of a man whose organs are rotting in parts and so, owner of a world-ego, he will see the world rotting in parts.

These are the years when he flirts with homosexuality, but is secretly, we may assume, obsessed with it. For he is still in need of that restorative sex he can no longer find, and since his psyche was originally shaped to be homosexual, homosexuality could yet be his peace. Except it could not, not likely, for his mind could hardly give up the lust to dominate. Homosexuality becomes a double irony — he must now seek to dominate men physically more powerful than himself. The paradoxes of this position result in the book *Aaron's Rod* which is about a male love affair (which never quite takes place) between a big man and a little man. The little man does the housework, plays nursemaid to the big man when he is ill, and ends by dominating him, enough to offer the last speech in the book.

All men say, they want a leader. Then let them in their souls submit to some greater soul than theirs . . . You, Aaron, you too have the need to submit. You, too, have the need livingly to yield to a more heroic soul, to give yourself. You know you have [but] . . . perhaps you'd rather die than yield. And so, die you must. It is your affair.

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He has separated the theme from himself and reversed the roles, but he will die rather than yield, even though earlier in the book he was ready to demonstrate that platonic homosexuality saves. It is the clear suggestion that Aaron recovers only because Lilly anoints his naked body, lays on hands after doctors and medicines had failed.

Quickly he uncovered the blond lower body of his patient, and began to rub the abdomen with oil, using a slow, rhythmic, circulating motion, a sort of massage. For a long time he rubbed finely and steadily, then went over the whole of the lower body, mindless, as if in a sort of incantation. He rubbed every speck of the man's lower body — the abdomen, the buttocks, the thighs and knees, down to his feet, rubbed it all warm and glowing with camphorated oil, every bit of it, chafing the toes swiftly, till he was almost exhausted. Then Aaron was covered up again, and Lilly sat down in fatigue to look at his patient.

He saw a change. The spark had come back into the sick eyes, and the faint trace of a smile, faintly luminous, into the face. Aaron was regaining himself. But Lilly said nothing. He watched his patient fall into a proper sleep.

Another of his heroes, Birkin, weeps in strangled tones before the coffin of Gerald. It is an earlier period in Lawrence's years of homosexual temptation; the pain is sharper, the passion is stronger. "He should have loved me," he said. "I offered him." And his wife

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is repelled, "recoiled aghast from him as he sat . . . making a strange, horrible sound of tears." They are the sickly sounds of a man who feels ready to die in some part of himself because the other man would never yield.

But homosexuality would have been the abdication of Lawrence as a philosopher-king. Conceive how he must have struggled against it! In all those middle years he moves slowly from the man who is sickened because the other did not yield, to the man who will die because he, himself, will not yield. But he is bitter, and with a rage which could burn half the world. It is burning his lungs.

Then it is too late. He is into his last years. He is into the five last years of his dying. He has been a victim of love, and will die for lack of the full depth of a woman's love for him — what a near to infinite love he had needed. So he has never gotten to that place where he could deliver himself to the unknown, be "without reserves or defenses . . . cast off everything . . . and cease to be, so that that which is perfectly ourselves can take place in us," no, he was never able to go that far. By the time he began *Lady Chatterley*, he must have known the fight was done; he had never been able to break out of the trap of his lungs, nor out of the cage of his fashioning. He had burned

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too many holes in too many organs trying to reach into more manhood than the course of his nerves could carry, he was done; but he was a lover, he wrote *Lady Chatterley*, he forgave, he wrote his way a little further toward death, and sang of the wonders of creation and the glory of men and women in the rut and lovely of a loving fuck.

"When a woman gets absolutely possessed by her own will, her own will set against everything, then it's fearful, and she should be shot at last."

"And shouldn't men be shot at last, if they get possessed by their own will?"

"Ay! — the same!"

The remark is muttered, the gamekeeper rushes on immediately to talk of other matters, but it has been made, Lawrence has closed the circle, the man and the woman are joined, separate and joined.

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7

A LAGNIAPPE FOR THE READER

Name any great novel that didn't bore you in part on reading it for the first time.

A great novel has a consciousness that is new to us. We have to become imbued with this new consciousness before we can enjoy the work. First time through, I've been bored in part by Moby-Dick, The Red and the Black, Anna Karenina, The Scarlet Letter, Remembrance of Things Past, Ulysses, The Magic Mountain. Hell, even The Sun Also Rises. Of course, I was a Freshman then.

(10) Gratch / 1983

95.47

When James Jones was writing Some Came Running, we were all waiting for that book. "What if it's fabulous? Two major novels in a row! Then, where are we?" When it came out and it wasn't all that good (at any rate, it was not nearly so good as From Here to Eternity), we all felt a great relief. But I was also angry at myself for feeling such glee. I knew that if Jones had done something incredible, it would have pushed me to try for more. Jones and I used to feel, along a certain period in the early Fifties, that we were the two best writers around. Unspoken was the feeling that there was room for only one of us. I remember that Jones inscribed a copy of From Here to Eternity: "For Norman, my dearest enemy, my most feared friend."

(11) McInerney

97.24

Capote wrote the best sentences of anyone of our generation. He had a lovely ear. He did not have a good mind. I don't know if a large idea ever bothered him. While he wrote poetically, he did not think like a poet. But he did have a sense of time and place. Breakfast at Tiffany's, for example, is a slight book. Looking at it with a hard eye, it's a Charlotte Russe. On the other hand, if you are looking to capture a particular period in the Fifties in New York, no other book may have done it so well. In that sense, Capote is a bit like Fitzgerald. If I were to mount them on one wall, however, I'd certainly put Truman under Scott.

(12)

Capote / Plimpton p. 238-240

91.3

All the same, Truman Capote was wonderful when all was said. I think of that tiny man who lived through his early years with the public laughing at him. To go from being a pampered little darling with a few friends who catered to him egregiously, on to mustering the balls, the enormous balls, to decide he was going to be a major figure in American life—that was his achievement. To hell with writing. He was going to give up writing in order to be a major social figure, and in doing this, I think he sacrificed the last ten or twenty years of his talent.

(13)

Maflory

① Legends + Sources

Kurt Vonnegut and I are friendly with one another, but wary. There was a period when we used to go out together a great deal because our wives liked each other and Kurt and I would sit there like bookends. We would be terribly careful with one another; we both knew the huge cost of a literary feud so we certainly didn't want to argue. On the other hand, neither of us would be caught dead saying to the other, "Gee, I liked your last book," and then be met with silence because the party of the second part could not reciprocate. So we would talk about anything else, we would talk about Las Vegas or the Galapagos Islands. We only had one literary conversation and that was one night in New York. Kurt looked up and sighed, "Well, I finished my novel today and it like to killed me." When Kurt is feeling heartfelt, he speaks in an old Indiana accent which I will do my best to reproduce. His wife said, "Oh, Kurt, you always say that whenever you finish a book," and he replied, "Well, whenever I finish a book I do say it and it is always true and it gets more true and this last one like to killed me more than any."

14

① London

Reading Toni Morrison, I say to myself: "I know so little of black women who don't have a voice, and after all, I should know more. Toni certainly has a deep sense of such women, no question. But how good is she on black men? I feel less certain of those portraits." Finally I decide that what she does with black women is an education and I respect her for that. I've only read one or two of her novels, by the way, so I may be reacting on too narrow a base.

15

95.47

Picasso had his bleak, dark, ugly view of women. On the other hand, he had the same hard view of other men and of himself. If you can pass through Picasso and still have a little love left for humanity, then you have arrived at some kind of peace. Picasso is like a doctor who's cleaning out a very ugly wound, the filth embedded in humanity.

11/06/1992

It's the guys who pen wonderfully sweet books who are monsters. You know, they kick the wife, cuff the kids, and have the dog shrinking in horror. Then their books come out: "X once again delights the reader with his sense of joy."

@ London

I haven't looked at Jonathan Franzen's work yet but by all reports, The Corrections is the first big, good novel that's come along in quite a while. Obviously, it has to be read if one wants any sense at all of what's going on in American letters. And I noticed when looking at the blurbs on the back, that something like twenty writers all gave their salute, and all of them were of Franzen's generation. Updike wasn't there, not Bellow, not Roth, I wasn't there--the oldest was Don De Lillo who gave the smallest praise. The others were new, respected names like David Foster Wallace, Michael Cunningham, and a host of others, all contemporary. Apparently, The Corrections is the book of a generation that wants to wipe the slate clean and offer a new literary movement.

I think the younger writers are sick of Roth, Bellow, Updike and myself the way we were sick of Hemingway and Faulkner. When I was a young writer we never talked about anyone but them, and that feeling grew into resentment. Since they had no interest

move to very end last item

in us, we began to think, "Yeah, they're great--now get off the stage! We want the lights on us!"

(18)

A REVIEW OF THE GROUP

NO 373 7
NO

The Group is a collective novel about a near (or let us say quasi-) revolutionary period in American life, the nineteen-thirties; its heroines are eight nice girls, all or conceivably all of them Episcopalian at some time or another, all of them Upper Middle Class and all of them civilized to a point of Christless High Church rectitude. So it is no easy task Mary McCarthy has set herself. She has eight well-to-do young ladies moving through the thirties on the very outer fringe of events, and none of them has an inner passion large enough to take over the book and make it run away. Indeed, the only character one would not likely flee at a cocktail party, a rich arrogant green-eyed beauty named Eastlake, decides to separate from the book herself. She takes off for Europe after the first few chapters and does not get around to coming back until the book is almost done. She has in the interim become an open lesbian. Which encourages the single medical prescription one can elucidate from the book: It tacitly states that a mixture of passionless goodness and squashed mendacity, precisely that lot of average nice rich bright young Protestant girls, is so regurgitative a violation of their nature that cancer or psychosis are now house percentage against any decent woman. No wonder Miss Eastlake left—she would have been unconvincing if she had remained.

So, here, let's refine the problem a little further. A collective novel in which the most interesting character is missing, a collective novel in which none of the characters have sufficient passion to be interesting in themselves, none have the power or dedication to wish to force events. Nor does any one of the characters move critically out of her class by marrying drastically up, or savagely down. Not one of her girls even exhibits an engaging bitchery. Correlatively, no one of the girls falls deeply and tragically in love.

The formal heroine

NO 383 ?
 NO

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Kay Strong Petersen, ~~enters as evidence previously by~~ ~~Barrister Barratt,~~ does indeed fall literally out of a twenty-story window in the Vassar Club; clearly, she is a suicide-by-accident before the failure of her love, but she is somehow too horsey, and all-but-dyke, to buy a single ~~novelistic~~ ~~tear—she receives instead the impression that she might smell like~~ a locker room of dedicated baseball players—gloom, determination, and the void ooze from her persona. The nicest of the heroines by sentimental measure is Polly, but she and her husband are too nice, ~~one cannot even~~ ~~crack an allusion to the Ladies' Home Journal—some checks should not be~~ ~~spent.~~ There is of course a second nice heroine named Dottie. She is clean, Boston clean; her conscience moves with the drilled but never unimpressive grace of a fine ballerina. Indeed she has the grace to come to orgasm on the night she gives her first flower to still another in the endless gallery of Mary McCarthy's feverish, loud-talking, drunken, neurotic, ~~crippled,~~ and jargon-compensated louts. Did our First Lady of Letters never meet a gentleman on the flying trapeze? No, McCarthy's lout smells like fertilizer and he ploughs Dottie under—there is a good novelistic harvest for the next twenty pages. We are given Dottie's purchase of a diaphragm at her lover's demand; her subsequent repudiation—he is not at home when she calls; her act of renunciation—she quits her purchase beneath a bonch in Washington Square Park; and her moment of final suspense when chapters later she confesses to her mother (who has a first-rate sense of modest conscience) that she is still in love with the lout. Her mother's conscience takes the inner journey from Boston to a villago garret and she begs her daughter not to marry the new man she has taken in compensation (a nice rancher who is never in appear in evidence), but instead advises Dottie to go back to her lover of one night and find out what is finally in her love. It is the voice of a most refined moral instinct, and Dottie says no. Dottie ducks. She is our second-best nice heroine, but one crack on the mouth and she's out.

Thus it goes. There's Helena with the finest mind in the book, a quiet girl who rides her considerable culture like a consummate horseman. But she is a eunuch for others, void of relation. There's Pokey Prothoro, rich, society, dumb, sexy, potentially interesting, but never given attention; there's Priss, a young New Dealer who has no breasts but breast-feeds her baby—one can hardly remember more about her. Finally there's a real duncey broad who becomes a literary agent. One can't even recall her name.

Now, this sparse gallery offers a flaccid springboard from which to jump into a major novel of the thirties. But Mary McCarthy is too much of an old pro not to see the odds. Her characters will come from one class and make no heroic journeys to other classes, they will not look to

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participate in the center of the history which is being made, and they will be the victim of no outsize passion. Nor will they be made sufficiently eccentric to separate clearly from one another. They will be called Lakey and Kay, Pokey and Polly, Dottie, Helena, Norine, and Priss. (And Dunneey.) Nor will there be an attempt to avoid the proportions which are consequent. She will take these women, nearly all finally dull, because they have neither the interest to break out of the cage of their character, nor even the necessity—the cage is not that cruel, the girls are merely premature suburbanites—and she will obey the logic of the intricately educated and dull, she will follow them through their furniture and their recipes, she will give us lists of categories that no sociologist would ever dare. This is the most dangerous hurdle of them all, this is the one any professional knows to avoid unless he is willing to dare a real fall. Because lists and categories in novels must be consummately perfect, each detail quivering with the illumination of a touch of true love, or a hint of the deep, or indeed you are dead. Lists and categories are always the predictable refuge of the passionless, the mediocre, the timid, and the bowel-bound who will not make another move until they have exhausted the last.

These are real odds, what! These piss-out characters with their cultivated banalities, their lack of variety or ambition, perversion, simple greed, or depth of feeling, their indifference to the bedrock of a collective novel—the large social events of the season or decade which gave impetus to conceiving the book in such a way. Yes, our Mary's a sneak. Like any First Lady she disapproves of unseemly ambition, and yet she is trying a novel which is all but impossible to bring off in a big way. No ordinary ambition here. Megalomania indeed. Her little boutique on the Avenue is going to open in competition to Proust's Tiffany.

Well, the Court would not certify her as mad. The odds are a hundred to one or a thousand to one against bringing off the book, but it is possible. At least it is existentially possible. For until some great new realist arises, some modern Zola, we will not know. The work of realism was done for the nineteenth century, but whether it can be done for the middle of the twentieth century we shall indeed not know unless the attempt is made. So may have reasoned McCarthy. If one takes a little stillwater of society and captures it in its proportions, its style, its affairs, its moods, *its very relation to reality* (which is to say the mode by which it attempts to perceive reality) if one brings it to life ~~in such a way as to transcend the journeyman novelist's little spill of life (his verisimilitude and occasional good moments) and instead creates a work which is true in its very relation to the perception of reality (one repeats the notion)~~ then a magic is worked. The little book of realistic details has of a sudden its resonance, ~~it has come to life~~, it is a

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~~Being~~ a psychological reality which lives afterward in our brain, touches our motives, affects the history we in turn will make. Any book can do this if it is pure enough and true enough to create a turn of being in the mind of the reader. So goes the ~~existential~~ premise.

Say, then, did Lady M. bring it off? And the answer is that she came just far enough to irritate the life out of us, because it was just far enough to reinvigorate the premise—it is the grand premise of the novel—but she did not climb high enough nor cleanly enough in the deep councils of her sleep to get up over the first ridge and start a base camp from which one could decide if the mountain is to be negotiated from this direction. ~~She got just so far symbolically as the episode in one of her scenes where the butler comes in to whisper to his mistress that the child of the visiting lady has had an unfortunate accident in his pants. Yes, Mary deposited a load on the premise and it has to be washed all over again, this little long-lived existential premise.~~

All right, but why did she fail? ~~Where did she sink the job?~~ And this is how ten thousand more words are demanded and one thousand must suffice. But first let credit be given to her formal virtues. Because her sense of detail, while suffering from a fatal if tiny taint of the monotonous and overindulgent, is still her single most impressive achievement. Her book fails as a novel by being good but not nearly good enough, it fails for a variety of temperamental and characterological reasons soon to be listed, but it is enormously successful as sociology. It will continue to exist as a classic in sociology long after it is dim and dull as a novel, it will survive in Soc Sci I at every university and junior college: the specific details are to be mined by the next twenty-five classes of PhD's.

And at its best, *The Group* is far better than that. It is skillful, intricately knitted as a novel, its characters while not always distinguishable from one another are true in their reactions, or at least are true in the severe field of limitation she puts on their comings and goings, their paltry passions, their lack of grasp, their lack of a desire to grasp. It is all true what she does, it is just not true enough. Her eye sees with a knife's edge, but her hand, overwary of drama and surprise, blunts the stroke. The book like a person in depression is dull in its basic condition—it comes to life only by a stirring, a moment of inspiration, then it lapses into dullness again. And details sweep in and sweep away the possibilities for each little scene to become sufficiently alive to wake up the others. She is to be given respect for conceiving a novel such as this and laying out the ground plan, she is an engineer *manqué* in literature, but her failure diverts judgment away from her technique and over to her character. She is simply not a good enough woman to write a major novel;

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not yet; she has failed, she has failed from the center out, she failed out of vanity, the accumulated vanity of being overpraised through the years for too little and so being pleased with herself for too little; she failed out of profound timidity—like any good Catholic-born she is afraid to unloose the demons; she failed out of snobbery—if compassion for her characters is beginning to stir at last in this book, she can still not approve of anyone who is incapable of performing the small act exquisitely well; she failed by an act of the imagination, ~~she is, when all is said, a bit of a duncey broad herself~~, there is something cockeyed in her vision and self-satisfied in her demands and this contributes to the failure of her style. The long unbroken paragraphs settle in like bricks. They are all too equal to one another—it is the wrong book in which to lose one's place; there is even mild physical boredom in the act of reading as if one were watching a wall being stacked up rather than seeing the metamorphosis of a creature.

Finally she suffers from a lack of reach. She chooses to be not close enough to the horror in the closet. Her nice girls are refugees from the schisms, the wrinklins, and the crater mold of the Upper Middle Class, that radiation belt of well-to-do Protestants full of Church, rectitude, exclusion, guilt, and insanity. Is there a nice rich Episcopalian family or fine Presbyterian clan in our American world which does not have its important secret member raving mad? Nice girls live on the thin juiceless crust of the horror beneath, the screaming incest, the buried diabolisms of the grand and the would-be grand. One does not have to have that in one's novel, but one has to have a sense of that madness if the book is to be resonant. Yet Mary is too weak to push through the crowd and so cannot achieve a view of the world which has root.

Ultimately, novelists must believe that the people who run the world are essentially good, are an expression of God's work (a conservative view), or in antithesis must decide that the Devil is at the shoulder of every ruler (~~which is where the Bolsheviks and the Black Muslims come together~~). One can presumably write a great novel from either point of view or some conciliation of the two (Proust, Henry James, James Joyce, André Malraux come to mind) but one cannot make a Being of a realistic novel if it has no root. Then there are merely sniffings, snippings and clippings, codicils of taste, and quick exits for bad taste. Mary's vice is her terror of being ridiculous, and so she is in danger of ending up absurd, an old-maid collector of Manx cats, no tails and six toes, an anomaly of God. It even invades her vision. One called her cockeyed for a cause. There is an atrocious anachronism in the book. Her characters while engaged in the activities of the thirties have a consciousness whose style derives directly from the fifties. One has to keep reminding oneself

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that these events did not take place ten years ago, but thirty years ago, and this is unforgivable. It is like wrapping a tuning fork in velvet. Her little book so full of promise and quiver ends up soggy and damp. What rings true does not please the ear, what pleases is not quite true. So the book seems stuffed with cotton and catalogues as Podhoretz was quick to accuse.

Yet when all is said, *The Group* has one fresh virtue. It has something new in it; it has a conception of the novel which is Mary's own, a tool by which to cut an ascent into some of the sheer ice faces of the social world. And that is her method. Her Method. For she has divined the first law of our social world, which is that we learn by what we can glean from a hundred alienations of context, from a thousand suffocations of our emotions. ~~So we are deep in an affair, close to growing nearer or being spoiled for love another year, and then our context is ripped. A commercial is on the air. A recipe is to be discussed at dinner. Ten years later we hear of the beloved at a cocktail party. Was it this girl or that? The names have slid around into one another or have divided. Memory is in mitosis.~~ Mary may be the first American to try this in a thoroughgoing way. Everything in the profound materiality of women is given its full stop until the Eggs Benedict and the dress with the white fichu, the pessary and the whatnot, sit on the line of the narrative like commas and periods, semicolons, italics, and accents. The real interplay of the novel exists between the characters and the objects which surround them until the faces are swimming in a cold lava of anality, which becomes the truest part of her group, her glop, her impacted mass.

If, at the highest level, she has failed and even failed miserably to do more than write the best novel the editors of the women's magazines ever conceived in *their* secret ambitions, it is nonetheless possible now to conceive that McCarthy may finally get tough enough to go with the boys. She has been a very bad girl these years, mean and silly, postured and overpetted, petty in the extreme, but now there's a hint she may be capable some day of taking a real step, a suggestion that the Saints will preserve our Mary-Joan and bless her with a book which can comprehend a man. Does anyone know where society will end if the heroine of *The Company She Keeps* should encounter Julien Sorel?

But that drama of conjecture is moot. For the present, a decision: Mary McCarthy is judged Guilty of Meretriciousness and equally: Guilty of conspiring not to give the goose away, which means thus, Guilty of refusing to reveal that the genteel lords and ladies who manage America are the psychic descendants of Conrad's Kurtz. "Ah, the horror, the horror," and she will not take a burning look.

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THE ARGUMENT REINVIGORATED

Assume I am a lecturer in the fields of Fellowship surrounding American Literature and am trying to draw some grand design on a twenty-minute 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. 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 a 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, however, back at the cusp of the century, by a counter-literature whose roots were found in poverty, industrial society, and the emergence of a 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

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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

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the top. They were able to describe society—Wolfe like the greatest ~~five~~ ^{eighteen} 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~~ ^{learn} 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.

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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 lifes 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*

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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

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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

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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-

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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

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PREFACE TO SOME CHILDREN OF THE GODDESS

I've decided to end this book with a critical roundup of a good many novelists who were working ^{forty}~~thirty~~ ¹⁹⁶³~~seventy~~ years ago back in 1963. Some of the assessments show literary acumen, some—particularly of Roth and Updike and Styron—have much too small a sense of their impressive development. But that is to be expected. The best definition of an expert is that he or she will be right fifty percent of the time. (One should be as good as heads or tails!)

I decided to offer this piece as my conclusion because I was struck with how consistent my literary values have been. If most people, including myself, see me as exceptionally changeable, that has not been true of my approach to the art of the novel. Indeed, my sentiments today are virtually the same as my literary tenets, credos, biases, and imperatives ^{forty}~~thirty~~ ^{seventy} years ago. It is nice to know that something in oneself is constant over a period nearly equal to half your life and so reads to me now as if I had written it in this last year.

~~Discuss Confidential~~ 398

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~~SOME CHILDREN OF THE GODDESS~~

~~A night with the Bitch~~

~~Dealing with the Confidential~~

The last time I remember talking about the novel was a year ago, last June or July, and it was in a conversation 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 the novel 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 any more; 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 politicians, friends, society or, elevate us, foreign affairs. One could not make one's living writing good novels any more. With an exception here and there, it had always been impossible, but not altogether—there had 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 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 many years of working at every other kind of writing, there was a pleasant irony to all we said. We were not really as bitter as we sounded.

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 depredations again, and then we turn a corner on a street, and there's the Bitch smiling at us, and we're trapped. We're still trapped. We know the Bitch has still got us."

~~get the human + the animal in~~
~~Antichrist's simile~~

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

We've all had a piece of her, Nelson Algren, Jack Kerouac, myself, Ross Lockridge, Thomas Heggen, Truman Capote, John Horne Burns, Calder Willingham, Gore Vidal, Chandler Brossard, Walter van Tilburg Clark, Vance Bourjaily, William Humphrey, Willard Motley, Wright Morris, William Gaddis, Alex Trocchi—as well as the writers I'm going to talk about here, specifically James Jones, William Styron, Joseph Heller, John Updike, Philip Roth, Jimmy Baldwin, William Burroughs, Saul Bellow, J. D. Salinger—and all the writers there's not been time to read or write about this trip: James Purdy, Walker Percy, J. F. Powers, Ken Kesey, John Hawkes, Mark Harris, Louis Auchincloss, John Hersey, Clancy Sigal, J. P. Donleavy, Bernard Malamud, and how many others I've missed, and all the women, ~~all the lady writers, bless them~~. But one cannot speak of a woman having a piece of the Bitch.

Let me list the novels I wish to discuss. They are *The Thin Red Line*; *Set This House on Fire*; *Naked Lunch*; *Catch-22*; *Rabbit, Run*; *Letting Go*; *Another Country*; *Henderson the Rain King*; *Franny and Zooey*; and *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters*. They are not necessarily the best novels to have been written in America in the last few years, although if one could pick the best ten books of fiction which have been done in this country for the period, four or five of the titles on my list might have to be included. I chose these particular volumes by a particular test which might as well be explained.

It is impossible to read ~~each~~ ^{writing} good novel as it comes out. If you're trying to do your own work, it's distracting. Generally you stay away from the work of contemporaries for a year or two at a time: it saves a good deal of reading. It is amazing how many much-touted novels disappear in eighteen months. The underlying force in book reviewing is journalism. The editor of a book review has a section which he hopes to make as interesting to the owner of the newspaper as any other department. If, for two or three days, a newspaper is filled with news about a murder, one can be certain it is treated implicitly as the most exciting murder in the last twenty years. So with war novels, first novels, novels about homosexuality, politics, novels by authors of the Establishment, and historical novels. If I had a chapter of a novel for each review I've read of a new war novel which was said to be as good as *The Naked and the Dead* or *From Here to Eternity*, I would have fifty chapters. One never knows, of course. Maybe a few of these books are as good as they're said to be, and even if they've since disappeared, they will emerge again in ten or twenty years or in a century, but it is easier and much more logical to ignore

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what is said about a book when it first appears. There is too much direct and personal interest in the initial opinions, and much too much logrolling. The editor of a large book review is of course not owned by the Book-of-the-Month Club, but on the other hand the editor would just as soon not give more than two or three bad reviews in a year to book-club choices. Nor is his attitude dissimilar when it comes to choosing a reviewer for the novel which a big publishing house has chosen for its big book of the season. Robert Ruark, James Michener, Allen Drury will pick up their occasional roasts and slams, but considering how bad their books can be, it's impressive what attention they get. The slack (since a book review, depending on local tradition, can have just a certain proportion of good reviews) is taken up by misassigning small, determined literary types onto most of the really good novels, which then receive snide treatment and/or dismissal. *Catch-22*, for example, was reviewed on page fifty of *The New York Times Book Review*. Since this causes a vague uneasiness afterward in the book-review editor, there are always good young writers like Updike and Roth who get on the approved list and get many too many good reviews from bad reviewers. The point is that any serious novelist knows enough to stay out of the flurry which hits a new book. Every year whether the books deserve it or not, four or five first novelists will be provided a brilliant debut and four or five respectable young novelists will receive the kind of review which "enhances their reputation as one of the most serious and dedicated voices in the vineyard of literature."

So you stay away. If your friends keep talking about certain books, and young writers, and girls at cocktail parties if the talk is intriguing because as the months go by, you begin to have less and less of a clear impression of the books, then they come to install themselves on your reading list. And every year, or two years, or three, you go off on a binge for a month and gorge on the novels of your contemporaries and see how they made out on their night with the Bitch. But of course there are many books which you know are good and yet never get around to reading. For example, I had a lot of respect for *The Violated* by Vance Bourjaily. It gave me the feeling Bourjaily was capable of writing a major novel before he was through. His next book was *Confessions of a Spent Youth*. I dipped into it, and it seemed good to me, but it was good in the way of *The Violated*; it did not seem to go further. What I heard about it did not contradict my impression. So although Bourjaily was a friend, I never got around to reading *Confessions of a Spent Youth*. ~~I still think that in ten years Bourjaily can be one of our four or five major novelists. He has great stamina and very decent insights which ride on a fine oil of humor, but the implicit logic of my method~~

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~~directed me away from Vance's last novel.~~ It was not that I didn't think it would be good, but rather that I didn't think it would be different from what I expected. And when you're a professional and a gentleman gangster, your taste is for new weapons, not improvements on the old ones.

Now this emphasis upon the personal method of the critic may have justification. ~~Trotsky once wrote that you can tell the truth by a comparison of the lies.~~ 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, or complacent, or fearful, or 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. ~~(One can even go so far as to say that Hemingway could never write a really good long sentence, and so cultivated the art of the short, whereas Faulkner could never express the simple very simply, and so flowered a great garden in the thicket of nonstop prose.)~~

The notion is that a writer, no matter how great, is never altogether great; a small part of him remains a liar. Tolstoy evaded the depths which Dostoevsky opened; in turn Dostoevsky, lacking Tolstoy's majestic sense of the proportions of things, fled proportion and explored hysteria. A writer is recognized as great when his work is done, but while he is writing, he rarely feels so great. He is more likely to live with the anxiety of "Can I do it? Should I let up here? Should I reconnoiter there? Will dread overwhelm me if I explore too far? or depression deaden me if I do not push on? Can I even do it?" As he writes, the writer is reshaping his character. He is a better man and he is worse, once he has finished a book. Potentialities in him have been developed, other talents have been sacrificed. He has made choices on his route and the choices have shaped him. By this understanding, a genius is a man of large talent who has made many good choices and a few astounding ones. He has had the wit to discipline his cowardice and he has had the courage to be bold where others might cry insanity. Yet no matter how large his genius, we can be certain of one thing—he could have been even greater. Dostoevsky was a very great writer, but if he had tried to be even greater he would either have cracked up or found impetus to write the *Confessions of a Great Sinner*. And if he had, the history of the world might have

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been different for it. It is even possible that Dostoevsky died in anguish, complimenting himself not at all for *The Brothers Karamazov* but hating himself for having so wasted a part of his talent that the greatest novel of them all was not written and he went with terror into death believing he had failed his Christ.

The example is extreme. Just so. There is a kind of critic who writes only about the dead. He sees the great writers of the past as simple men. They are born with a great talent, they exercise it, and they die. Such critics see the mastery in the work; they neglect the subtle failures of the most courageous intent, and the dramatic hours when the man took the leap to become a great writer. They do not understand that for every great writer, there are a hundred who could have been equally great but lacked the courage. For that reason it may be better to think of writers as pole vaulters than as artists. Pole vaulting is an act. The man who wins is the man who jumps the highest without knocking off the bar. And a man who clears the stick with precise form but eighteen inches below the record commands less of our attention. The writer, particularly the American writer, is not usually—if he is interesting—the quiet master of his craft; he is rather a being who ventured into the jungle of his unconscious to bring back a sense of order or a sense of chaos, he passes through ambushes in his sleep and, if he is ambitious, he must be ready to engage the congealed hostility of the world. If a writer is really good enough and bold enough he will, by the logic of society, write himself out onto the end of a limb which the world will saw off. He does not go necessarily to his death, but he must dare it. And some of us do go into death: Ross Lockridge, Thomas Heggen, Thomas Wolfe most especially, firing the passions which rotted his brain on those long paranoid nights in Brooklyn when he wrote in exaltation and terror on the top of a refrigerator. And Hemingway who dared death ten times over and would have had to dare it a hundred more in order to find more art, because each time he passed through death the sweet of new creativity was offered.

Well, few of us dare death. With the trinity of booze, coffee and cigarettes, most of us voyage out a part of the way into our jungle and come back filled with pride at what we dared, and shame at what we avoided, and because we are men of the middle and shame is an emotion no man of the middle can bear for too long without dying, we act like novelists, which is to say that we are full of spleen, small gossip, hatred for the success of our enemies, envy at the fortunes of our friends, ideologues of a style of fiction which is uniquely the best (and is invariably our own style), and so there is a tendency for us to approach

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the books of our contemporaries like a defense attorney walking up to a key witness for the prosecution. The average good novelist reads the work of his fellow racketeers with one underlying tension—find the flaw, find where the other guy cheated.

One cannot expect an objective performance therefore when one novelist criticizes the work of other novelists. It is better to realize that a group of men who are to a degree honest and to another extent deceitful (to the reader, or to themselves, or to both) are being judged by one of their peers who shares in the rough their proportions of integrity and pretense and is likely to have the most intense vested interest in advancing the reputation of certain writers while doing his best to diminish others. But the reader is at least given the opportunity to compare the lies, a gratuity he cannot always get from a good critic writing about a novelist, for critics implant into their style the fiction of disinterested passion when indeed *their* vested interest, while less obvious, is often more rabid, since they have usually fixed their aim into the direction they would like the novel to travel, whereas the novelist by the nature of his endeavor is more ready to change. One need not defend the procedure used here any further than to say it is preferable to warn a reader of one's prejudices than to believe the verdict of a review which is godly in its authority and psychologically unsigned.

I doubt if there is any book I read in the last few years which I approached with more unnatural passion than *Set This House on Fire*. Styron's first novel, *Lie Down in Darkness*, was published when he was twenty-six, and it was so good (one need today only compare it to *Rabbit, Run* to see how very good it was) that one felt a kind of awe about Styron. He gave promise of becoming a great writer, great not like Hemingway nor even like Faulkner, whom he resembled a bit, but great perhaps like Hawthorne. And there were minor echoes of Fitzgerald and Malcolm Lowry. Since his first novel had failed to make him a household word in America, he had a justifiable bitterness about the obscurity in which good young writers were kept. But it poisoned his reaction to everything. One of the traps for a writer of exceptional talent, recognized insufficiently, is the sort of excessive rage which washes out distinction. Styron was intensely competitive—all good young novelists are—but over the years envy began to eat into his character. Months before James Jones' *Some Came Running* was published (and it had the greatest advance publicity of any novel I remember—for publicity seemed to begin two years before publication), Styron obtained a copy of the galleys. There were long nights in Connecticut on "Styron's

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Acres" when he would entertain a group of us by reading absurd passages from Jones' worst prose. I would laugh along with the rest, but I was a touch sick with myself. I had love for Jones, as well as an oversized fear for the breadth of his talent, and I had enough envy in me to enjoy how very bad were the worst parts of *Some Came Running*. But there were long powerful chapters as well; some of the best writing Jones has ever done is found in that book. So I would laugh in paroxysms along with the others, but I was also realizing that a part of me had wanted *Some Came Running* to be a major book. I was in the doldrums, I needed a charge of dynamite. If *Some Came Running* had turned out to be the best novel any of us had written since the war, I would have had to get to work. It would have meant the Bitch was in love with someone else, and I would have had to try to win her back. But the failure of *Some Came Running* left me holding onto a buttock of the lady—if she had many lovers, I was still one of them. And so everything in me which was slack and conservative could enjoy Styron's burlesque readings. Yet I also knew I had lost an opportunity.

A few months later, I ceased seeing Styron—it would take a chapter in a novel to tell you why. I liked the boy in Styron, disliked the man, and had vast admiration for his talent. I was hardly the one to read *Set This House on Fire* with a cool mind. Nine years had gone by since *Lie Down in Darkness* was published, and the anticipation of the second novel had taken on grandiloquent proportions among his friends and his closest enemies. One knew it would be close to unbearable if his book were extraordinary; yet a part of me felt again what I had known with *Some Came Running*—that it would be good for me and for my work if Styron's novel were better than anything any of us had done. So I read it with a hot sense of woe, delighted elation, and a fever of moral speculations. Because it was finally a bad novel. A bad maggoty novel. Four or five half-great short stories were buried like pullulating organs in a corpse of fecal matter, overblown unconceived philosophy, Technicolor melodramatics, and a staggering ignorance about the passions of murder, suicide and rape. It was the magnum opus of a fat spoiled rich boy who could write like an angel about landscape and like an adolescent about people. The minor characters were gargoyles, and badly drawn. Here and there quick portraits emerged, there was one excellent still life of an Italian police official who was Fascist, the set pieces were laid out nicely, but the vice of the talent insisted on dominating. Whenever Styron didn't know what to do with his men and women (which was often, for they repeated themselves as endlessly as a Southern belle) Styron went back to his landscape; more of the portentous Italian scenery blew up its midnight storm. But Styron was trying to

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write a book about good and evil, and his good was as vacuous as the spirit of an empty water bag:

I can only tell you this, that as for being and nothingness, the one thing I did know was that to choose between them was simply to choose being, not for the sake of being, or even the love of being, much less the desire to be forever—but in the hope of being what I could be for a time.

Which is a great help to all of us.

His evil character took on the fatal sin of an evil character: he was not dangerous but pathetic. A fink. Styron was crawling with all ten thumbs toward that ogre of mystery who guards the secrets of why we choose to kill others and quiver in dread at the urge to kill ourselves. But like a bad general who surrounds himself with a staff which daren't say no, Styron spent his time digging trenches for miles to the left and miles to the right, and never launched an attack on the hill before him. It was the book of a man whose soul had gotten fat.

And yet, much as I could be superior to myself for having taken him thus seriously, for having written predictions in *Advertisements for Myself* that he would write a very good book which the mass media would call great, much as I would grin each day after reading a hundred pages of hothouse beauty and butter bilge, much as I would think, "You don't catch the Bitch that way, buster, you got to bring more than a trombone to her boudoir," much so much as I was pleased at the moral justice which forbids a novelist who envied too much the life of others to capture much life in his own pages, I was still not altogether happy, because I knew his failure was making me complacent again, and so delaying once more the day when I would have to pay my respects to the lady.

And indeed I lost something by the failure of *Some Came Running* and *Set This House on Fire*. I never did get going far on my novel. I wrote a four-hour play and essays and articles, two hundred thousand words accumulated over the years since *Advertisements for Myself*, and I showed a talent for getting into stunts, and worse, much worse. Years went by. Now once again, in this season, ready to start my novel about the mysteries of murder and suicide,* I found by taking stock of psychic credit and debit that I had lost some of my competitive iron. I knew a bit of sadness about work. I did not feel sure I could do what I had now settled for doing, and to my surprise I was curious what others were up to. If I couldn't bring off the work by myself, it might be just as well if someone else could give a sign of being ready to make

* This novel was a continuation thematically of the long novel announced in *Advertisements for Myself*. It was put aside six months later to go to work on *An American Dream*.

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the attempt. In this sad dull mellow mood, feeling a little like a middle-aged mountaineer, I read at one stretch over three weeks the novels I want to write about here.

There was a time, I suspect, when James Jones wanted to be the greatest writer who ever lived. Now, if *The Thin Red Line* is evidence of his future, he has apparently decided to settle for being a very good writer among other good writers. The faults and barbarities of his style are gone. He is no longer the worst writer of prose ever to give intimations of greatness. The language has been filed down and the phrases no longer collide like trailer trucks at a hot intersection. Yet I found myself nostalgic for the old bad prose. I never used to think it was as bad as others did, it was eloquent and communicated Jones' force to the reader. It is not that *The Thin Red Line* is dishonest or narrow; on the contrary it is so broad and true a portrait of combat that it could be used as a textbook at the Infantry School if the Army is any less chicken than it used to be. But, sign of the times, there is now something almost too workmanlike about Jones. He gets almost everything in, horror, fear, fatigue, the sport of combat, the hang-ups, details, tactics; he takes an infantry company through its early days in combat on Guadalcanal and quits it a few weeks later as a veteran outfit, blooded, tough, up on morale despite the loss of half the original men, gone, dead, wounded, sick or transferred. So he performs the virtuoso feat of letting us know a little about a hundred men. One can even (while reading) remember their names. Jones' aim, after all, is not to create character but the feel of combat, the psychology of men. He is close to a master at this. Jones has a strong sense of a man's psychology and it carries quietly through his pages.

The Thin Red Line was of course compared to *The Naked and the Dead*, but apart from the fact that I am the next-to-last man to judge the respective merits of the two books, I didn't see them as similar. *The Naked and the Dead* is concerned more with characters than military action. By comparison it's a leisurely performance. *The Thin Red Line* is as crammed as a movie treatment. No, I think the real comparison is to *The Red Badge of Courage*, and I suspect *The Red Badge of Courage* will outlive *The Thin Red Line*. Yet I don't quite know why. *The Thin Red Line* is a more detailed book; it tells much more of combat, studies the variations in courage and fear of not one man but twenty men and gets something good about each one of them. Its knowledge of life is superior to *The Red Badge of Courage*. *The Thin Red Line* is less sentimental, its humor is dry to the finest taste, and yet . . . it is too technical. One needs ten topographical maps to trace the action. With

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all its variety, scrupulosity, respect for craft, one doesn't remember *The Thin Red Line* with that same nostalgia, that same sense of a fire on the horizon which comes back always from *The Red Badge of Courage*.

No, Jones' book is better remembered as satisfying, as if one had studied geology for a semester and now knew more. I suppose what was felt lacking is the curious sensuousness of combat, the soft lift of awe and pleasure that one was moving out onto the rim of the dead. If one was not too tired, there were times when a blade of grass coming out of the ground before one's nose was as significant as the finger of Jehovah in the Sistine Chapel. And this was not because a blade of grass was necessarily in itself so beautiful, or because hitting the dirt was so sweet, but because the blade seemed to be a living part of the crack of small-arms fire and the palpable flotation of all the other souls in the platoon full of turd and glory. Now, it's not that Jones is altogether ignorant of this state. The description he uses is "sexy," and one of the nicest things about Jim as a writer is his ease in moving from mystical to practical reactions with his characters. Few novelists can do this, it's the hint of greatness, but I think he steered *The Thin Red Line* away from its chance of becoming an American classic of the first rank when he kept the mystical side of his talents on bread and water, and gave his usual thoroughgoing company man's exhibition of how much he knows technically about his product. I think that is the mistake. War is as full of handbooks as engineering, but it is more of a mystery, and the mystery is what separates the great war novels from the good ones. It is an American activity to cover the ground quickly, but I guess this is one time Jones should have written two thousand pages, not four hundred ninety-five. But then the underlying passion in this book is not to go for broke, but to promise the vested idiots of the book reviews that he can write as good as anyone who writes a book review.

When you discuss eight or ten books, there is a dilemma. The choice is to write eight separate book reviews, or work to find a thesis which ties the books together. There is something lickspittle about the second method: "Ten Authors in Search of a Viable Theme," or "The Sense of Alienation in Eight American Novelists." A bed of Procrustes is brought in from the wings to stretch and shorten the separate qualities of the books. I would rather pick up each book by itself and make my connections on the fly. The thesis of the Bitch is thesis enough for me. Its application to Jones would say that *The Thin Red Line* is a holding action, a long-distance call to the Goddess to declare that one still has one's hand in, expect red roses for sure, but for the time, you know, like there're contacts to make on the road, and a few Johns to impress.

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Another Country, by James Baldwin, is as different from *The Thin Red Line* as two books by talented novelists published in the same year can turn out to be. It does not deal with a hundred characters, but eight, and they are very much related. In fact there is a chain of fornication which is all but complete. A Negro musician named Rufus Scott has an affair with a white Southern girl which ends in heatings, breakdown, and near-insanity. She goes to a mental hospital, he commits suicide. The connection is taken up by his sister who has an affair with a white writer, a friend of Rufus' named Vivaldo Moore, who in turn gets into bed with a friend named Eric who is homosexual but having an affair with a married woman named Cass Silenski, which affair wrecks her marriage with her husband, Richard, another writer, and leaves Eric waiting at the boat for his French lover Yves. A summary of this sort can do a book no good, but I make it to trace the links. With the exception of Rufus Scott, who does not go to bed with his sister, everybody else in the book is connected by their skin to another character who is connected to still another. So the principal in the book, the protagonist, is not an individual character, not society, not a milieu, not a social organism like an infantry company, but indeed is sex, sex very much in the act. And almost the only good writing in the book is about the act. And some of that is very good indeed. But *Another Country* is a shocker. For the most part it is an abominably written book. It is sluggish in its prose, lifeless for its first hundred pages, stilted to despair in its dialogue. There are roles in plays called actor-proof. They are so conceived that even the worst actor will do fairly well. So *Another Country* is writer-proof. Its peculiar virtue is that Baldwin commits every gaffe in the art of novel writing and yet has a powerful book. It gets better of course; after the first hundred pages it gets a lot better. Once Eric, the homosexual, enters, the work picks up considerably. But what saves the scene is that Baldwin has gotten his hands into the meat and won't let go. All the sex in the book is displaced, whites with blacks, men with men, women with homosexuals; the sex is funky to suffocation, rich but claustrophobic, sensual but airless. Baldwin understands the existential abyss of love. In a world of Negroes and whites, nuclear fallout, marijuana, bennies, inversion, insomnia, and tapering off with beer at four in the morning, one no longer just falls in love—one has to take a brave leap over the wall of one's impacted rage and cowardice. And nobody makes it, not quite. Each of the characters rides his sexual chariot, whip out, on a gallop over a solitary track, and each is smashed, more or less by his own hand. They cannot find the juice to break out of their hatred into the other country of love. Except for the homosexuals who can't break into heterosexual love. Of all the novels talked about here, An-

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other Country is the one which is closest to the mood of New York in our time, a way of saying it is close to the air of the Western world, it is at least a novel about matters which are important, but one can't let up on Baldwin for the way he wrote it. Years ago I termed him "minor" as a writer; I thought he was too smooth and too small. Now on his essays alone, on the long continuing line of poetic fire in his essays, one knows he has become one of the few writers of our time. But as a Negro novelist he could take lessons from a good journeyman like John Killens. Because *Another Country* is almost a major novel and yet it is far and away the weakest and worst near-major novel one has finished. It goes like the first draft of a first novelist who has such obvious stuff that one is ready, if an editor, to spend years guiding him into how to write, even as one winces at the sloppy company which must be kept. Nobody has more elegance than Baldwin as an essayist, not one of us hasn't learned something about the art of the essay from him, and yet he can't even find a good prose for his novel. Maybe the form is not for him. He knows what he wants to say, and that is not the best condition for writing a novel. Novels go happiest when you discover something you did not know you knew. Baldwin's experience has shaped his tongue toward directness, for urgency—the honorable defense may be that he has not time nor patience to create characters, milieu, and mood for the revelation of important complexities he has already classified in his mind.

Baldwin's characters maim themselves trying to smash through the wall of their imprisonment. Willian Burroughs gives what may be the finest record in our century of the complete psychic convict. *Naked Lunch* is a book of pieces and fragments, notes and nightmarish anecdotes, which he wrote—according to his preface—in various states of delirium, going in and out of a heroin addiction. It is not a novel in any conventional sense, but then there's a question whether it's a novel by any set of standards other than the dictum that prose about imaginary people put between book covers is a novel. At any rate, the distinction is not important except for the fact that *Naked Lunch* is next to impossible to read in consecutive fashion. I saw excerpts of it years ago, and thought enough of them to go on record that Burroughs "may conceivably be possessed by genius." I still believe that, but it is one thing to be possessed by genius, it is another to be a genius, and *Naked Lunch* read from cover to cover is not as exciting as in its separate pieces. ~~Quantity changes quality as you can once put it and fifty or sixty three-page bits about homosexual orgies, castration, surgeon-assassins, and junkie fuzz dissolving into a creeping green ooze leaves one feeling pretty~~

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tough. "Let's put some blue-purple blood in the next rape," says your jaded taste.

This is, however, quibbling. Some of the best prose in America is graffiti found on men's-room walls. It is prose written in bone, etched by acid, it is the prose of harsh truth, the virulence of the criminal who never found his stone walls and so settles down on the walls of the john, it is the language of hatred unencumbered by guilt, hesitation, scruple, or complexity. Burroughs must be the greatest writer of graffiti who ever lived. His style has the snap of a whip, and it never relents. Every paragraph is quotable. Here's a jewel among a thousand jewels:

Dr. Benway . . . looks around and picks up one of those rubber vacuum cups at the end of a stick they use to unstop toilets . . . "Make an incision, Doctor Limpf. . . I'm going to massage the heart." . . . Dr. Benway washes the suction cup by swishing it around in the toilet-bowl. . . .

Dr. Limpf: "The incision is ready, doctor."

Dr. Benway forces the cup into the incision and works it up and down. Blood spurts all over the doctors, the nurse and the wall. . . .

Nurse: "I think she's gone, doctor."

Dr. Benway: "Well, it's all in the day's work."

Punch and Judy. Mr. Interlocutor and Mr. Bones. One, two, three, bam! two, four, eight, bam! The drug addict lives with a charged wire so murderous he must hang his nervous system on a void. Burroughs' achievement, his great achievement, is that he has brought back snowflakes from this murderous void.

Once, years ago in Chicago, I was coming down with a bad cold. By accident, a friend took me to hear a jazz musician named Sun Ra who played "space music." The music was a little like the sound of Ornette Coleman, but further out, outer space music, close to the EEEE of an electric drill at the center of a harsh trumpet. My cold cleared up in five minutes. I swear it. The anger of the sound penetrated into some sprung-up rage which was burning fuel for the cold. Burroughs' pages have the same medicine. If a hundred patients on terminal cancer read *Naked Lunch*, one or two might find remission. Bet money on that. For Burroughs is the surgeon of the novel.

Yet he is something more. It is his last ability which entitles him to a purchase on genius. Through the fantasies runs a vision of a future world, a half demented welfare state, an abattoir of science fiction with surgeons, bureaucrats, perverts, diplomats, a world not describable short of getting into the book. The ideas have pushed into the frontier of an all-electronic universe. One holds onto a computer in some man-eating

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machine of the future which has learned to use language. The words come out in squeaks, spiced with static, sex coiled up with technology like a scream on the radar. Bombarded by his language, the sensation is like being in a room where three radios, two television sets, stereo hi-fi, a pornographic movie, and two automatic dishwashers are working at once while a mad scientist conducts the dials to squeeze out the maximum disturbance. If this is a true picture of the world to come, and it may be, then Burroughs is a great writer. Yet there is sadness in reading him, for one gets intimations of a mind which might have come within distance of Joyce, except that a catastrophe has been visited on it, a blow by a sledge hammer, a junkie's needle which left the crystalline brilliance crashed into bits.

Now beyond a doubt, of all the books discussed here, the one which most cheats evaluation is Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*. It was the book which took me longest to finish, and I almost gave it up. Yet I think that a year from now I may remember it more vividly than *The Thin Red Line*. Because it is an original. There's no book like it anyone has read. Yet it's maddening. It reminds one of a Jackson Pollock painting eight feet high, twenty feet long. Like yard goods, one could cut it anywhere. One could take out a hundred pages anywhere from the middle of *Catch-22*, and not even the author could be certain they were gone. Yet the length and similarity of one page to another gives a curious meat-and-potatoes to the madness; building upon itself the book becomes substantial until the last fifty pages grow suddenly and surprisingly powerful, only to be marred by an ending over the last five pages which is hysterical, sentimental and wall-eyed for Hollywood.

This is the skin of the reaction. If I were a major critic, it would be a virtuoso performance to write a definitive piece on *Catch-22*. It would take ten thousand words or more. Because Heller is carrying his reader on a more consistent voyage through Hell than any American writer before him (except Burroughs who has already made the trip and now sells choice seats in the auditorium), and so the analysis of Joseph H.'s Hell would require a discussion of other varieties of inferno and whether they do more than this author's tour.

Catch-22 is a nightmare about an American bomber squadron on a made-up island off Italy. Its hero is a bombardier named Yossarian who has flown fifty missions and wants out. On this premise is tattooed the events of the novel, fifty characters, two thousand frustrations (an average of four or five to the page), and one simple motif: more frustration. Yossarian's colonel wants to impress his general and so raises the number

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of missions to fifty-five. When the pilots have fifty-four, the figure is lifted to sixty. They are going for eighty by the time the book has been done. On the way every character goes through a routine on *every page* which is as formal as a little peasant figure in a folk dance. Back in school, we had a joke we used to repeat. It went:

"Whom are you talking about?"

"Herbert Hoover."

"Never heard of him."

"Never heard of whom?"

"Herbert Hoover."

"Who's he?"

"He's the man you mentioned."

"Never heard of Herbert Hoover."

So it went. So goes *Catch-22*. It's the rock and roll of novels. One finds its ancestor in Basic Training. We were ordered to have clean sheets for Saturday inspection. But one week we were given no clean sheets from the Post laundry so we slept on our mattress covers, which got dirty. After inspection, the platoon was restricted to quarters. "You didn't have clean sheets," our sergeant said.

"How could we have clean sheets if the clean sheets didn't come?"

"How do I know?" said the sergeant. "The regulations say you gotta have clean sheets."

"But we can't have clean sheets if there are no clean sheets."

"That," said the sergeant, "is tough shit."

Which is what *Catch-22* should have been called. The Army is a village of colliding bureaucracies whose colliding orders cook up impossibilities. Heller takes this one good joke and exploits it into two thousand variations of the same good joke, but in the act he somehow creates a rational vision of the modern world. Yet the crisis of reason is that it can no longer comprehend the modern world. Heller demonstrates that a rational man devoted to reason must arrive at the conclusion that either the world is mad and he is the only sane man in it, or (and this is the weakness of *Catch-22*—it never explores this possibility) the sane man is not really sane because his rational propositions are without existential reason.

On page 178, there is a discussion about God.

"... how much reverence can you have for a Supreme Being who finds it necessary to include such phenomena as phlegm and tooth decay in His divine system of creation. . . . Why in the world did He ever create pain?"

"Pain?" Lieutenant Scheisskopf's wife pounced upon the word victoriously.

"Pain is a useful symptom. Pain is a warning to us of bodily dangers."

"... 'Why couldn't he have used a doorbell instead to notify us, or one of His celestial choirs?'"

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Right there is planted the farthest advance of the flag of reason in his cosmology. Heller does not look for any answer, but there is an answer which might go that God gave us pain for the same reason the discovery of tranquilizers was undertaken by the Devil: if we have an immortal soul some of us come close to it only through pain. A season of sickness can be preferable to a flight from disease, for it discourages the onrush of a death which begins in the center of oneself.

Give talent its due. *Catch-22* is the debut of a writer with merry gifts. Heller may yet become Gogol. But what makes one hesitate to call his first novel great or even major is that he has only grasped the inferior aspect of Hell. What is most unendurable is not the military world of total frustration so much as the midnight frustration of the half world, Baldwin's other country, where a man may have time to hear his soul, and time to go deaf, even be forced to contemplate himself as he becomes deadened before his death. (Much as Hemingway may have been.) That is when one becomes aware of the anguish, the existential *angst*, which wars enable one to forget. It is that other death—without war—where one dies by a failure of nerve, which opens the bloodiest vents of Hell. And that is a novel none of us has yet come back alive to write.

With the exception of *Another Country*, the novels talked about up to now have been books written for men. *Catch-22* was liked, I believe, by almost every man who read it. Women were puzzled. The world of a man is a world of surface slick and rock knowledge. A man must live by daily acts where he goes to work and works on the world some incremental bit, using the tools, instruments, and the techniques of the world. Thus a man cannot afford to go too deeply into the underlying meaning of a single subject. He prefers to become interested in quick proportions and contradictions, in the practical surface of things. A book like *Catch-22* is written on the face of solemn events and their cockeyed contradictions. So it has a vast appeal: it relieves the frustration men feel at the idiocy of their work. *Naked Lunch* fries the surface in a witch's skillet; the joy in reading is equal to the kick of watching a television announcer go insane before your eyes and start to croon obscenely about the President, First Lady, Barry Goldwater, Cardinal Spellman, J. Edgar. Somewhere in America somebody would take out his pistol and shoot the set. Burroughs shatters the surface and blasts its shards into the madness beneath. He rips the reader free of suffocation. Jones wrote a book which a dedicated corporation executive or an ambitious foreman would read with professional avidity because they would learn a bit about the men who work for them. *The Thin Red Line* brings detail to the surprises on the toughest part of the skin. So these three books are, as I say, books for men.

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Whereas *Another Country*, obsessed with that transcendental divide keeping sex from love, is a book more for women, or for men and women. So too is *Set This House on Fire*. And much the same can be said of *Rabbit, Run* and *Letting Go*.

On record are the opinions of a partisan. So it is necessary to admit that John Updike's novel was approached with animus. His reputation has traveled in convoy up the Avenue of the Establishment, *The New York Times Book Review* blowing sirens like a motorcycle caravan, the professional muse of *The New Yorker* sitting in the Cadillac, membership cards to the right Fellowships in his pocket. The sort of critics who are rarely right about a book—Arthur Mizener and Granville Hicks, for example—ride on his flanks, literary bodyguards. *Life* magazine blew its kiss of death into the confetti. To my surprise, *Rabbit, Run* was therefore a better book than I thought it would be. The Literary Establishment was improving its taste. Updike was not simply a junior edition of James Gould Cozzens. But of course the Establishment cannot nominate a candidate coherently. Updike's merits and vices were turned inside out. The good girlish gentlemen of letters were shocked by the explicitness of the sex in *Rabbit, Run*, and slapped him gently for that with their fan, but his style they applauded. It is Updike's misfortune that he is invariably honored for his style (which is atrocious—and smells like stale garlic) and is insufficiently recognized for his gifts. He could become the best of our literary novelists if he could forget about style and go deeper into the literature of sex. *Rabbit, Run* moves in well-modulated spurts at precisely those places where the style subsides to a ladylike murmur and the characters take over. The trouble is that young John, like many a good young writer before him, does not know exactly what to do when action lapses, and so he cultivates his private vice, he writes. And there are long over-fingered descriptions in exacerbated syntax, airless crypts of four or five pages, huge inner exertion reminiscent of weight lifters, a stale sweet sweat clings to his phrases.

Example: *Redbook*, *Cosmopolitan*, *McCall's*.

Boys are playing basketball around a telephone pole with a backboard bolted to it. Legs, shouts. The scrape and snap of Keds on loose alley pebbles seems to catapult their voices high into the moist March air blue above the wires. *Rabbit* Angstrom, coming up the alley in a business suit, stops and watches, though he's twenty-six and six-three. So tall, he seems an unlikely rabbit, but the breadth of white face, the pallor of his blue irises, and a nervous flutter under his brief nose as he stabs a cigarette into his mouth partially explain the nickname.

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Example: *True Confessions*.

Outside in the air his fears condense. Globes of ether, pure nervousness, slide down his legs. The sense of outside space scoops at his chest.

Example: *Elements of Grammar*.

His hands lift of their own and he feels the wind on his ears even before, his heels hitting heavily on the pavement at first but with an effortless gathering out of a kind of sweet panic growing lighter and quicker and quieter, he runs. Ah: runs. Runs.

It's the rare writer who cannot have sentences lifted from his work, but the first quotation is taken from the first five sentences of the book, the second is on the next-to-last page, and the third is nothing less than the last three sentences of the novel. The beginning and end of a novel are usually worked over. They are the index to taste in the writer. Besides, trust your local gangster. In the run of Updike's pages are one thousand other imprecise, flatulent, wry-necked, precious, overpreened, self-indulgent, tortured sentences. It is the sort of prose which would be admired in a writing course overseen by a fussy old nance. And in Updike's new book, *The Centaur*, which was only sampled, the style has gotten worse. Pietisms are congregating, affirmations à la Archibald MacLeish.

The pity is that Updike has instincts for finding the heart of the conventional novel, that still-open no man's land between the surface and the deep, the soft machinery of the world and the subterranean rigors of the dream. His hero, Rabbit Angstrom, is sawed in two by the clear anguish of watching his private vision go at a gallop away from the dread real weight of his responsibility. A routine story of a man divided between a dull wife he cannot bear to live with and a blowsy tough tender whore he cannot make it with, the merit of the book is not in the simplicity of its problem, but in the dread Updike manages to convey, despite the literary commercials in the style, of a young man who is beginning to lose nothing less than his good American soul, and yet it is not quite his fault. The power of the novel comes from a sense, not absolutely unworthy of Thomas Hardy, that the universe hangs over our fates like a great sullen hopeless sky. There is real pain in the book, and a touch of awe. It is a novel which could have been important, it could have had a chance to stay alive despite its mud pies in prose, but at the very end the book drowns in slime. Updike does not know how to finish. Faced with the critical choice of picking one woman or another (and by the end, both women are in fearful need), his character bolts over a literal hill and runs away. Maybe he'll be back tomorrow, maybe he'll never be back, but a decision was necessary. The book ends as minor, a pop-out.

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One is left with the expectation that Updike will never be great; there is something too fatally calculated about his inspiration. But very good he can be, a good writer of the first rank with occasional echoes from the profound. First he must make an enemy or two of the commissioners on the Literary Mafia. Of course a man spends his life trying to get up his guts for such a caper.

Letting Go, by Philip Roth, has precisely the opposite merits and faults. As a novel, its strategy is silly, tiresome, and weak. But its style, while not noteworthy, is decent and sometimes, in dialogue, halfway nice. It is good time spent to read any ten pages in the book. The details are observed, the mood is calm, the point is always made. It is like having an affair with a pleasant attentive woman—the hours go by neatly. It is only at the end of a year that one may realize the preoccupations of the mistress are hollow, and the seasons have been wasted.

Letting Go is a scrupulous account in upper Jewish New Yorker genre of a few years in the lives of two English department college instructors, one married to that most coveted of creatures, a fragile dreary hang-up of a heroine, the other a bachelor and lover of worried proportions. Very little happens. The wife goes on being herself, the husband remains naturally frozen and stingy, and the instructor-lover has a small literary breakdown. One can say, well isn't this life? didn't Chekhov and de Maupassant write about such things? And the answer is yes they did, in five pages they did, and caught that mood which reminds us that there is sadness in attrition and grinding sorrows for decency. But Roth is not writing a book with a vision of life; on the contrary, one could bet a grand he is working out an obsession. His concentration is appropriated by something in his life which has been using him up in the past. Virtually every writer, come soon or late, has a cramped-up love affair which is all but hopeless. *Of Human Bondage* could be the case study of half the writers who ever lived. But the obsession is opposed to art in the same way a compulsive talker is opposed to good conversation. The choice is either to break the obsession or enter it. The compulsive talker must go through the herculean transformation of learning to quit or must become a great monologist. Roth tried to get into the obsession—he gave six hundred pages to wandering around in a ten-page story—but he did it without courage. He was too careful not to get hurt on his trip and so he does not reveal himself: he does not dig. The novel skitters like a water fly from pollen spread to pollen spread; a series of good short stories accumulate en route, but no novel. The iron law of the conventional novel, the garden novel, is that the meaning of the action must grow on every page or else the book will wither. It is Updike's respectable achievement

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in *Rabbit, Run* that he writes just such a book, or tries to until the last three pages when he vanishes like a sneak thief. Roth never gets into the game. One senses a determined fight to maintain *Letting Go* as a collection of intricately intercollected short stories.

But the short story has a tendency to look for climates of permanence—an event occurs, a man is hurt by it in some small way forever. 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 novel can be created out of short stories only 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. But Roth's short stories in *Letting Go* just dig little holes in many suburban lawns until finally the work of reading it becomes almost as depressing as must have been the work of writing it. Roth has to make a forced march in his next book, or at least like Updike get around to putting his foot in the whorehouse, ~~now, he doesn't a special Hell with his ambition, he will be called the Rich Man's Paddy Chayevsky, and Paddy without his grasp of poetry is nothing much at all.~~

It is necessary to say that the four stories about the Glass family by J. D. Salinger, published in two books called *Franny and Zooey* and *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters*, seem to have been written for high-school girls. The second piece in the second book, called *Seymour—An Introduction*, must be the most slovenly portion of prose ever put out by an important American writer. It is not even professional Salinger. Salinger at his customary worst, as here in the other three stories of the two books, is never bad—he is just disappointing. He stays too long on the light ice of his gift, writes exquisite dialogue and creates minor moods with sweetness and humor, and never gives the fish its hook. He disappoints because he is always practicing. But when he dips into Seymour, the Glass brother who committed suicide, when the cult comes to silence before the appearance of the star—the principal, to everyone's horror, has nausea on the stage. Salinger for the first time is engaged in run-off writing, free suffragette prose; his inhibitions (which once helped by their restraint to create his style) are now stripped. He is giving you himself as he is. No concealment. It feels like taking a bath in a grease trap.

Now, all of us have written as badly. There are nights when one comes home after a cancerously dull party, full of liquor but not drunk, leaden

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with boredom, somewhere out in Fitzgerald's long dark night. Writing at such a time is like making love at such a time. It is hopeless, it desecrates one's future, but one does it anyway because at least it is an act. Such writing is almost always unsprung. It is reminiscent of the wallflower who says, "To hell with inhibitions, I'm going to dance." The premise is that what comes out is valid because it is the record of a mood. So one records the mood. What a mood. Full of vomit, self-pity, panic, paranoia, megalomania, *merde*, whimpers, excuses, turns of the neck, flips of the wrist, transports. It is the bends of Hell. If you purge it, if you get sleep and tear it up in the morning, it can do no more harm than any other bad debauch. But Salinger went ahead and reread his stew, then sent it to *The New Yorker*, and they accepted it. Now, several years later, he reprints it in book covers.

There is social process at work here. Salinger was the most gifted minor writer in America. *The New Yorker's* ability is to produce such writers. The paradox comes from the social fact that *The New Yorker* is a major influence on American life. Hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions of people in the most established parts of the middle class kill their quickest impulses before they dare to act in such a way as to look ridiculous to the private eye of their taste whose style has been keyed by the eye of *The New Yorker*. Salinger was the finest writer *The New Yorker* ever produced, but profoundly minor. The major writer like James Jones, indeed James Jones, leads the kind of inner life which enables him to study victories as well as defeats; Salinger was catapulted by a study of excruciating small defeats into a position of major importance. The phenomenon in the nation was the same those years. Men of minor abilities engaged America in major brinkmanships.

But it is always dangerous when the Literary Mafia (*The New Yorker*, the *Saturday Review*, *The New York Times Book Review*, *Time* magazine's book reviews, and the genteel elements in publishing) promote a minor writer into a major writer. A vested interest attaches itself to keeping the corpse of the violated standards buried. Readers who might be average keen in their sense of literary value find their taste mucked up. The greatest damage in this case, however, seems to have been to Salinger himself. Because a writer, with aristocratic delicacy of intent and nerves so subtle that only isolation makes life bearable for him, has been allowed to let his talent fester in that corrupt isolation. Salinger has been the most important writer in America for a generation of adolescents and college students. He was their leader in exile. The least he owed them for his silence was a major performance.

But it's a rare man who can live like a hermit and produce a major performance unless he has critics who are near to him and hard on him.

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No friend who worried about Salinger's future should have let him publish *Seymour—An Introduction* in *The New Yorker* without daring to lose his friendship first by telling him how awful it was. Yet there was too much depending on Salinger's interregnum—he was so *inoffensive*, finally. So a suspension of the critical faculty must have gone on in the institutional wheels of *The New Yorker* which was close to psychotic in its evasions.

As for the other three stories in the two books, they are not as good as the stories in *Nine Stories*. Affectations which were part once of Salinger's charm are now faults. An excessive desire to please runs through his pages. There is too much sweetness. He is too pleased with himself, too nice, he lingers too much over the happy facility of his details in a way Fitzgerald never would. He is no longer a writer so much as he is an entertainer, a slim much-beloved version of Al Jolson or Sophie Tucker; the music hall is in the root of his impulse as much as the dungeons and mansions of literature. Does one desire the real irony? There is nothing in *Franny and Zooey* which would hinder it from becoming first-rate television. It is genre with all the limitations of genre: catalogs of items in the medicine chest, long intimate family conversations with life, snap with mother, crackle and pop. If I were a television producer I'd put on *Franny and Zooey* tomorrow. And indeed in ten years they will. America will have moved from *One Man's Family* to the *Glass Family*. Which is progress. I'd rather have the Glass family on the air. But don't confuse the issue. The Glass stories are not literature, but television. And Salinger's work since *The Catcher in the Rye* is part of his long retreat from what is substantial, agonizing, uproarious, or close to awe and terror. *The Catcher in the Rye* was able to change people's lives. The new books are not even likely to improve the conversation in college dormitories. It is time Salinger came back to the city and got his hands dirty with a rough corruption or two, because the very items which composed the honor of his reputation, his resolute avoidance of the mass media and society, have now begun to back up on him. There is a taste of something self-absorptive, narcissistic, even putrefactive in his long contemplation of a lintless navel.

The value of past predictions by this critic may be judged by the following about Saul Bellow. It is taken from page 467 in *Advertisements for Myself*.

When and if I come to read Henderson the Rain King, let me hope I do not feel the critic's vested interest to keep a banished writer in limbo, for I sense uneasily that without reading it, I have already the beginnings of a

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negative evaluation for it since I doubt that I would believe in Henderson as a hero.

Well, one might as well eat the crow right here. Henderson is an exceptional character, almost worthy of Gulliver or Huckleberry Finn, and it is possible that of all the books mentioned in this piece, *Henderson the Rain King* comes the closest to being a great novel. Taken even by its smallest dimension, and its final failure, it will still become a classic, a fine curiosity of a book quite out of the main stream of American letters but a classic in the way *The Innocents Abroad*, or *The Ox-Bow Incident*, *The Informer*, or *A High Wind in Jamaica* is classic.

Bellow's main character, Henderson, is a legendary giant American, an eccentric millionaire, six-four in height, with a huge battered face, an enormous chest, a prodigious potbelly, a wild crank's gusto for life, and a childlike impulse to say what he thinks. He is a magical hybrid of Jim Thorpe and Dwight Macdonald. And he is tormented by an inner voice which gives him no rest and poisons his marriages and pushes him to go forth. So he chooses to go to Africa (after first contemplating a visit to the Eskimos) and finds a native guide to take him deep into the interior.

The style galls like Henderson, full of excess, full of light, loaded with irritating effusions, but it is a style which moves along. *The Adventures of Augie March* was written in a way which could only be called all writing. That was one of the troubles with the book. Everything was mothered by the style. But Henderson talks in a free-swinging, easy bang-away monologue which puts your eye in the center of the action. I don't know if Bellow ever visited Africa, I would guess he didn't, but his imaginative faculty—which has always been his loot—pulls off a few prodigies. I don't know if any other American writer has done Africa so well. As for instance:

I was in tremendous shape those first long days, hot as they were. At night, after Romilayu had prayed, and we lay on the ground, the face of the air breathed back on us, breath for breath. And then there were the calm stars, turning around and singing, and the birds of the night with heavy bodies, fanning by. I couldn't have asked for anything better. When I laid my ear to the ground, I thought I could hear hoofs. It was like lying on the skin of a drum.

After a series of tragicomic adventures, Henderson reaches a royal almost Oriental tribe with a culture built upon magic and death. He is brought to the King, Dahfu, who lives in a wooden palace attended by a harem of beautiful Amazons. (One could be visiting the royalest pad in

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Harlem.) Dahfu is a philosopher-king, large in size, noble, possessed of grace, complex, dignified, elegant, educated, living suspended between life and death. The King, delighted with his new friend, takes him into the secrets of his mind and his palace, and one begins to read the book with a vast absorption because Bellow is now inching more close to the Beast of mystery than any American novelist before him. Dahfu is an exceptional creation, a profoundly sophisticated man with a deep acceptance of magic, an intellectual who believes that civilization can be saved only by a voyage back into the primitive, an expedition which he is of course uniquely suited to lead.

As the action explores its way down into an underworld of plot and magical omens, one ceases to know any longer whether Dahfu is potentially an emperor who can save the world, or a noble man lost in a Faustian endeavor. The book is on the threshold of a stupendous climax—for the first time in years I had the feeling I was going to learn something large from a novel—and then like a slow leak the air goes out of the book in the last fifty pages. Dahfu is killed in a meaningless action, Henderson goes home to his wife, and the mystery that Bellow has begun to penetrate closes over his book, still intact.

He is a curious writer. He has the warmest imagination, I think, of any writer in my generation, and this gift leads him to marvelous places—it is possible that Bellow succeeds in telling us more about the depths of the black man's psyche than either Baldwin or Ellison. He has a widely cultivated mind which nourishes his gift. He has a facility for happy surprises, and in Henderson, unlike Augie March, he has developed a nose for where the treasure is buried. Yet I still wonder if he is not too timid to become a great writer. A novelist like Jones could never have conceived *Henderson the Rain King* (no more could I), but I know that Jones or myself would have been ready to urinate blood before we would have been ready to cash our profit and give up as Bellow did on the possibilities of a demonically vast ending. The clue to this capitulation may be detected in Bellow's one major weakness, which is that he creates individuals and not relations between them, at least not yet. Augie March travels alone, the hero of *Setze the Day* is alone, Henderson forms passionate friendships but they tend to get fixed and the most annoying aspect of the novel is the constant repetition of the same sentiments, as if Bellow is knocking on a door of meaning which will not open for him. It is possible that the faculty of imagination is opposed to the gift of grasping relationships—in the act of coming to know somebody else well, the point of the imagination may be dulled by the roughness of the other's concrete desires and the attrition of living not only in one's own boredom but someone else's. Bellow has a lonely gift, but it is a gift. I would

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guess he is more likely to write classics than major novels, which is a way of saying that he will give intense pleasure to particular readers over the years, but is not too likely to seize the temper of our time and turn it.

For those who like the results of a horse race, it should be clear that the novels I liked the most in this round of reading were *Henderson*, *Naked Lunch*, and *Catch-22*. *The Thin Red Line* if not inspired was still impressive. *Another Country* suffered from too little style but compensated by its force. *Rabbit, Run* was better than expected but cloyed by too much writing. *Set This House on Fire* was rich in separate parts, and obese for the whole. *Letting Go* gave a demonstration of brilliant tactics and no novelistic strategy at all. *Franny and Zooey* and *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters* was a literary scandal which came in last.

It has been said more than once that Tolstoy and Dostoevsky divided the central terrain of the modern novel between them. Tolstoy's concern—even in the final pessimism of *The Kreutzer Sonata*—was with men-in-the-world, and indeed the panorama of his books carries to us an image of a huge landscape peopled with figures who changed that landscape, whereas the bulk of Dostoevsky's work could take place in ten closed rooms: it is not society but a series of individuals we remember, each illuminated by the terror of exploring the mystery of themselves. This distinction is not a final scheme for classifying the novel. If one can point to *Moby Dick* as a perfect example of a novel in the second category—a book whose action depends upon the voyage of Ahab into his obsession—and to *An American Tragedy* as a virile example of the first kind of novel, one must still come up short before the work of someone like Henry James, who straddles the categories, for he explores into society as if the world were a creature in a closed room and he could discover its heart. Yet the distinction is probably the most useful single guide we have to the novel and can even be given a modern application to Proust as a novelist of the developed, introspective, but still objective world, and Joyce as a royal, demented, most honorable traveler through the psyche. The serious novel begins from a fixed philosophical point—the desire to discover reality—and it goes to search for that reality in society, or else must embark on a trip up the upper Amazon of the inner eye.

It is this necessity to travel into one direction or the other up to the end which makes the writing of novels fatal for one's talent and finally for one's health, as the horns of a bull are final doom for the suit of lights. If one explores the world, one's talent must be blunted by punishment, one's artistic integrity by corruption: nobody can live in the world with-

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out shaking the hand of people he despises; so, an ultimate purity must be surrendered. Yet it is as dangerous to travel unguided into the mysteries of the Self, for insanity prepares an ambush. No man explores into his own nature without submitting to a curse from the root of biology since existence would cease if it were natural to turn upon oneself.

This difficulty has always existed for the novelist, but today it may demand more antithesis and more agony than before. The writer who would explore the world must encounter a society which is now conscious of itself, and so resistant (most secretly) to an objective eye. Detours exist everywhere. There was a time when a writer had to see just a little bit of a few different faces in the world and could know that the world was still essentially so simple and so phrased that he might use his imagination to fill in unknown colors in the landscape. Balzac could do that, and so could Zola. But the arts of the world suffered a curious inversion as man was turned by the twentieth century into mass man rather than democratic man. The heartland which was potential in everyone turned upon itself; people used their personal arts to conceal from themselves the nature of their work. They chose to become experts rather than artists. The working world was no longer a panorama of factories and banks so much as it was reminiscent of hospitals and plastic recreation centers. Society tended to collect in small stagnant pools. Now, any young man trying to explore that world is held up by pleasures which are not sufficiently intense to teach him and is dulled by injustices too elusive to fire his rage. The Tolstoyan novel begins to be impossible. Who can create a vast canvas when the imagination must submit itself to a plethora of detail in each joint of society? Who can travel to many places when the complexity of each pool sucks up one's attention like a carnivorous cess-fed flower? Of all the writers mentioned here, only Jones, Heller and Burroughs even try to give a picture of the world, and the last two have departed from conventional reality before financing the attempt. It may be that James Jones is indeed the single major American writer capable of returning with a realistic vision of the complex American reality. But by his method, because of the progressively increasing confusion and contradiction of each separate corner in American society, he will have to write twenty or thirty books before he will have sketched even a small design.

Yet a turn in the other direction, into the world of the Self, is not less difficult. An intellectual structure which is cancerous and debilitating to the instinct of the novelist inhabits the crossroads of the inner mind—Psychoanalysis. An artist must not explore into himself with language given by another. A vocabulary of experts is a vocabulary greased out and sweated in committee and so is inimical to a private eye. One loses

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what is new by confusing it with what may be common to others. The essential ideas of psychoanalysis are reductive and put a dead weight on the confidence of the venture. If guilt, for example, is neurotic, a clumsy part of the functioning in a graceful machine, then one does not feel like a hero studying his manacles, nor a tragic victim regarding his just sentence, but instead is a skilled mechanic trying to fix his tool. Brutally, simply, mass man cannot initiate an inner voyage unless it is conducted by an expert graduated by an institution.

Set This House on Fire, Another Country, Rabbit, Run, Letting Go, Henderson, and the Glass stories were all amateur expeditions into the privacy of the Self, but they are also a measure of the difficulty, because one could sense the exhaustion of talent in the fires on the way, as if a company of young untried men were charging a hill which was mined and laid across with fire lanes for automatic weapons.

Yet the difficulty goes beyond the country of psychoanalysis. There are hills beyond that hill. The highest faces an abyss. Man in the Middle Ages or the Renaissance, man even in the nineteenth century, explored deep into himself that he might come closer to a vision of a God or some dictate from eternity, but that exploration is suspect in itself today, and in the crucial climactic transcendental moments of one's life, there is revealed still another dilemma. God, is it God one finds, or madness?

The religious temper of these books is significant. Of them all, only *The Thin Red Line, Naked Lunch, Another Country,* and *Letting Go* have no overt religious preoccupation. Yet altogether one could make a kind of case that *Naked Lunch* and *Another Country* are not divorced from religious obsessions. The suggestion of still another frontier for the American novel is here. A war has been fought by some of us over the last fifteen years to open the sexual badlands to our writing, and that war is in the act of being won. Can one now begin to think of an attack on the stockade—those dead forts where the spirit of twentieth-century man, frozen in flop and panic before the montage of his annihilation, has collected, like castrated cattle behind the fence? Can the feet of those infantrymen of the arts, the novelists, take us through the mansions and the churches into the palace of the Bitch where the real secrets are stored? We are the last of the entrepreneurs, and one of us homeless guns had better make it, or the future will smell like the dead air of the men who captured our time during that huge collective cowardice which was the aftermath of the Second War.

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