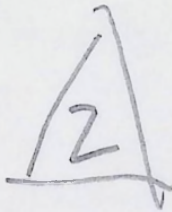


PART II

1. GENRE
2. GIANTS AND COLLEAGUES



APPENDIX

Chips, it must be, it is not much, and a few of the old things available for the reader's reference are given in the appendix. Of the old things, good ones, it is not so much to his or her taste—certainly that is a very strong word—but it is not so much to be a good one, and without doing any of the things in the appendix, education, working of the system, and the like of it, there are no more.

1. GENRE

12.14 Certain human relations are comparable to literary stories. The husband, the wife, and the child, a poem, good or bad. The father that does not go to the point is a story, a story, by this logic, marriage is a story. It is a story, we are married to the point that is made. In a novel we usually follow the way people move from drama to drama back to drama, and, of course, marriage is the point, the end. The end is not so much in the given point that is made, it is a given right, but in the way the end is understood, or understood over the weeks or months that follow. The end of the first of weeks is, in that sense, good days and bad ones. And most people seem to prefer to spend the first. Just as there are people who prefer to live in the first of the story. The end, in their eyes, have lives that consist of poems, simply because.

GENRE

Genre, as used here, is an excursion into a few of the art forms available to the novelist other than non-fiction or literary criticism. Where the average good novelist is content to stick to his or her last—certainly that is tricky enough—still it is hard by now to be a good novelist without feeling attracted to such other venues as journalism, television, studies of the occult, and, for a few of us, forays into art criticism.

82.16 Certain human relations are comparable to literary forms. For instance, the one-stand is like a poem, good or bad. The affair that does not go on forever is equal to a short story. By this logic, marriage is a novel. In a short story, we're interested in the point that's made. In a novel we usually follow the way people move from drama to boredom back to drama again, and, of course, marriage is the paradigm for that. Our interest is not so much in the given point that is made in a given night, but in the way the new understanding is confirmed or eroded over the weeks or months that follow. The narrative line of wedlock is, in that sense, good days and bad ones. And most people seem to prefer to live in this form. Just as there are people who prefer to live in the form of the short story. Psychopaths, in their turn, have lives that consist of poems, mostly bummers.

Journalism is another matter. For that, we will need other metaphors.

Preface, Some Honorable Men

Centuries from now, the moral intelligence of another time may look in horror on the history implanted into Twentieth Century people by way of newsprint. A deadening of the collective brain has been one consequence. Another is the active warping of consciousness in any leader whose actions are consistently in the papers, for he has been obliged to learn how to speak only in quotable and self-protective remarks. He has also had to learn not to be too interesting since his ideas would then be garbled and his manner criticized. Some men never could learn, Eugene McCarthy for one, and so their careers did not prosper in proportion to their courage and their wit. Of course, those stalwarts who learned how to respect the limitations of the reporter may never have had a serious thought again. In order to communicate with the communicators, they gave up any hint of private philosophy.

I began these forays into journalism with prejudices for how the materials of history were gathered. I also possessed the large advantage that I had weeks to ponder over what I had seen and nearly enough days in which to do the writing. I also had a

literary heritage to remind me that the world is not supposed to be reassembled by panels of prefabricated words. Rather, I was a novelist. It was expected of me to see the world with my own eyes and my own words. See it by the warp or stance of my character. Which if it could collect some integrity might be called a style. I enlisted then on my side of an undeclared war between those modes of perception called journalism and fiction. When it came to accuracy, I was on the side of fiction. I thought fiction could bring us closer to the truth than journalism, which is not to say one should make up facts when writing a story about real people. I would endeavor to get my facts as scrupulously as a reporter. (At the least!) The difference would be found elsewhere. Journalism assumes the truth of an event can be found by the use of principles which go back to Descartes. (A political reporter has a fixed view of the world; you may plot it on axes which run right to left on the horizontal and down from honesty to corruption on the vertical.) Indeed, the real premise of journalism is that the best instrument for measuring history is a faceless, even a mindless recorder. Whereas the writer of fiction is closer to the moving world of Einstein. There the velocity of the observer is as crucial to the measurement as any object observed. For fiction probably makes the secret assumption that we learn the truth through a comparison of the lies, since we are obliged to receive the majority of our experience at second hand through parents, friends, mates, lovers, enemies, and the journalists who report it to us. So our best chance of improving those private charts of our own most complicated lives, our unadmitted maps of reality, our very comprehension, if you will, of the way existence works—seems to profit us most if we can have some little idea, at least, of the warp of the observer who passes on the

experience. Fiction, as I use the word, is then that reality which does not cohere to anonymous axes of fact but is breathed in through the swarm of our male and female movements about one another, a novelistic assumption, for don't we perceive the truth of a novel as its events pass through the personality of the writer? We tend to know, in our unconscious at least, by the time we have finished a story where we think the author is most to be trusted, and where in secret we suspect he is more ignorant than ourselves. That is the flavor of fiction. We observe the observer. Maybe that is why there is less dead air in fiction and usually more light. It is because we have the advantage of seeing around a corner, and that is aesthetically analogous to a photography of a range of hills when the sunset offers its back-lighting to the contours. Be certain the journalistic flashbulb is better for recording the carnage of an auto crash. But little else.

The excerpt that follows is part of a piece written for Esquire in 1961 and so, of course, is out of date, but, I will avow—interestingly so. The surface details have gone through a metamorphosis. The noise in one press room of a hundred working typewriters is no longer present since computers and laptops are silent. Large events no longer have long banks of telephones for the assembled journalists—cell phones substitute. The hotels no longer smell like cigars, or armpits, or feet. They are usually new and glitzy. Las Vegas set the new tone. And the reporters are much better dressed. The deadlines are now in many a case more extended and the writing in the pieces has improved. Yet in

one fundamental way, nothing has changed in the profession. The inner death of the soul is still there.

11th Presidential paper

Remember the old joke about the three kinds of intelligence: human, animal, and military? Well, if there are three kinds of writers, novelists, poets and reporters, there is certainly a gulf between the poet and the novelist; quite apart from the kind of living they make, poets invariably seem to be aristocrats, usually spoiled beyond repair; and novelists—even if they make a million or have large talent—look to have something of the working class about them. Maybe it is the drudgery, the long, obsessive inner life, the day-to-day monotony of applying themselves to the middle of the same continuing job, or perhaps it is the business of being unappreciated at home—has anyone met a novelist who is happy with the rugged care provided by his wife?

Now, of course, I am tempted to round the image out and say reporters belong to the middle class. Only I do not know if I can push the analogy: Taken one by one, it is true that reporters tend to be hardheaded, objective, and unimaginative. Their intelligence is sound but unexceptional, and they have the middle-class penchant for collecting tales, stories, legends, accounts of practical jokes, details of negotiation, bits of memoir—all those capsules of fiction which serve the middle class as a substitute for ethics and/or culture. Reporters, like shopkeepers, tend to be worshipful of the fact which wins and so covers over the other facts. In the middle class, the remark, "He made a lot

of money," ends the conversation. If you persist, if you try to point out that the money was made by digging through his grandmother's grave to look for oil, you are met with a middle-class shrug. "It's a question of taste whether one should get into the past," is the winning reply.

In his own person there is nobody more practical than a reporter. He exhibits the same avidity for news which a businessman will show for money. No bourgeois will hesitate to pick up a dollar, even if he is not fond of the man with whom he deals: so, a reporter will do a nice story about a type he dislikes, or a bad story about a figure he is fond of. It has nothing to do with his feelings. There is a logic to news—on a given day, with a certain meteorological drift to the winds in the mass media, a story can only ride along certain vectors. To expect a reporter to be true to the precise detail of the event is kin to the sentimentality which asks a fast revolving investor to be faithful to a particular stock in his portfolio when it is going down and his others are going up.

But here we come to the end of our image. When the middle class gather for a club meeting or social function, the atmosphere is dependably dull, whereas ten reporters come together in a room for a story are slightly hysterical, and two hundred reporters and photographers congregated for a press conference are as void of dignity, even stuffed-up, stodgy, middle-class dignity, as a slew of monkeys tearing through the brush. There is reason for this, much reason; there is always urgency to get some quotation which is usable for their story, and afterward, find a telephone: the habitat of a reporter, at its worst, is identical to spending one's morning and evening transferring from the rush hour of one subway train to the rush hour of another. In time, even the best come to remind

one of the rush hour. An old fight reporter is a sad sight, he looks like an old prizefight manager, which is to say, he looks like an old cigar butt.

Nor is this true only of sports reporters. They are gifted with charm compared to political reporter who give off an effluvium which is unadulterated cancer gulch. I do not think I exaggerate. There is an odor to any Press Headquarters which is unmistakable. One may begin by saying it is like the odor in small left-wing meeting halls, except it is worse, far worse, for there is no poverty to put a guilt-free iron into the nose; on the contrary, everybody is getting free drinks, free sandwiches, free news releases. Yet there is the unavoidable smell of flesh burning quietly and slowly in the service of a machine. Have any of you ever been through the smoking car of an old coach early in the morning when the smokers sleep and the stale air settles into congelations of gloom? Well, that is a little like the scent of Press Headquarters. Yet the difference is vast, because Press Headquarters for any big American event is invariably a large room in a large hotel, usually the largest room in the largest hotel in town. Thus it is a commercial room in a commercial hotel. The walls must be pale green or pale pink, dirty by now, subtly dirty like the toe of a silk stocking. (Which is incidentally the smell of the plaster.) One could be meeting bureaucrats from Tashkent in the Palace of the Soviets. One enormous barefaced meeting room, a twenty-foot banner up, a proscenium arch at one end, with high Gothic windows painted within the arch—almost never does a window look out on the open air. (Hotels build banquet rooms on the inside of their buildings—it is the best way to fill internal space with revenue.)

The room is in fever. Two hundred, three hundred, I suppose even five hundred reporters get into some of these rooms, there to talk, there to drink, there to bang away on any one of fifty standard typewriters, provided by the people on Public Relations who have set up this Press Headquarters. It is like being at a vast party in Limbo—there is tremendous excitement, much movement and no sex at all. Just talk. Talk fed by cigarettes. One thousand to two thousand cigarettes are smoked every hour. The mind must keep functioning fast enough to offer up stories. (Reporters meet as in a marketplace to trade their stories—they barter an anecdote they cannot use about one of the people in the event in order to pick up a different piece which is usable by their paper. It does not matter if the story is true or altogether not true, it must merely be suitable and not too mechanically libelous.) So they char the inside of their bodies in order to scrape up news which can go out to the machine, that enormous machine, that intellectual leviathan which is obliged to eat each day, tidbits, gristle, gravel, garbage cans, charlotte russe, old rubber tires, T-bone steaks, wet cardboard, dry leaves, apple pie, broken bottles, dog food, shells, roach powder, dry ball-point pens, grapefruit juice. All the trash, all the garbage, all the slop and a little of the wealth go out each day and night into the belly of that old American goat, our newspapers.

So the reporters smell also of this work, they smell of the dishwasher and the pots, they are flesh burning themselves very quietly and slowly in the service of a machine which feeds goats, which feeds The Goat. One smells this collective odor on the instant one enters their meeting room. It is not a corrupt smell, it does not have enough of the meats, the savory, and the vitality of flesh to smell corrupt and fearful when it is bad, no,

it is more the smell of excessive respect for power, the odor of flesh gutted by avidities which are electric and empty. I suppose it is the bleak smell one could find on the inside of one's head during a bad cold, full of fever, badly used, burned out of mood. The physical sensation of a cold often is one of power trapped corrosively inside, coils of strength being liquidated in some center of the self. The reporter hangs in a power-less power—his voice directly or via the rewrite desk indirectly, reaches out to millions of readers; the more readers he owns, the less he can say. He is forbidden by a hundred censors, most of them inside himself, to communicate notions, which are not conformistically simple, simple like plastic is simple, that is to say, monotonous.

Therefore a reporter forms a habit equivalent to lacerating the flesh: he learns to write what he does not naturally believe. Since he did not start presumably with the desire to be a bad writer or a dishonest writer, he ends by bludgeoning his brain into believing that something which is half true is in fact—since he creates a fact each time he puts something into a newspaper—nine-tenths true. A psyche is debauched—his own; a false fact is created. For which fact, sooner or later, inevitably, inexorably, the public will pay. A nation which forms details opinions on the basis of detailed fact which is askew from the subtle reality becomes a nation of citizens whose psyches are skewed, item by detailed item, away from any reality.

So great guilt clings to reporters. They know they help to keep America slightly insane. As a result perhaps they are a shabby-looking crew. The best of them are the shabbiest, which is natural if one thinks about it—a sensitive man suffers from the prosperous life of lies more than a dull man. In fact the few dudes one finds among

reporters tend to be semi-illiterates, or hatchet men, or cynics on two or three payrolls who do restrained public relations in the form of news stories. But this is to make too much of the extremes. Reporters along the middle of the spectrum are shabby, worried, guilty, and suffer each day from the damnable anxiety that they know all sorts of powerful information a half hour to twenty-four hours before anyone else in America knows it, not to mention the time clock ticking away in the vault of all those stories which cannot be printed or will not be printed. It makes for a livid view of existence. It is like an injunction to become hysterical once a day. Then they must write at lightning speed. It may be heavy-fisted but true, it may be slick as a barnyard slide, it may be great, it may be fill—what does it matter? The matter rides out like oats on a conveyor belt, and the unconscious takes a ferocious pounding. Writing is of use to the psyche only if the writer discovers something he did not know he knew in the act itself of writing. That is why a few men will go through hell in order to keep writing—Joyce and Proust for example. Being a writer can save one from insanity or cancer; being a bad writer can drive one smack into the center of the plague. Think of the poor reporter who does not have the leisure of the novelist or the poet to discover what he thinks. The unconscious gives us, buries itself, leaves the writer to his cliché and saves the truth, or the part of it the reporter is yet privileged to find, for his colleagues and his friends. A good reporter is a man who must tell you the truth privately; he has bright harsh eyes and can relate ten good stories in a row standing at a bar.

Still, they do not quit. The charge of adrenalin once a day, that hysteria, that sense of powerless-power close to the engines of history—they can do without powerless-

power no more than a gentleman junkie on the main line can do without his heroin, doctor. You see, a reporter is close to the action. He is not of the action, but he is close to it, as close as a crab louse to the begetting of a child. One may never be President, but the photographer working for his paper has the power to cock a flashbulb and make the eyes of JFK go blink!

However, it is not just this lead-encased seat near the radiations of power which keeps the reporter hooked on a drug of new news to start new adrenalin; it is also the ride. It is the free ride. When we were children, there were those movies about reporters; they were heroes. While chasing a lead, they used to leap across empty elevator shafts, they would wrestle automatics out of mobsters' hands, and if they were Cary Grant, they would pick up a chair and stick it in the lion's face, since the lion had the peculiar sense to walk into the editor's office. Next to being a cowboy or a private eye, the most heroic activity in America was to be a reporter. Now journalism has become an offshoot of the welfare state. Every last cigar-smoking fraud of a middle-aged reporter, pale with prison pallor, deep lines in his cheeks, writing daily pietisms for the sheet back home about free enterprise, is himself the first captive. It is the best free ride anyone will find since he left his family's chest. Your room is paid for by the newspaper, your trips to the particular spots attached to the event—in this case, the training camp at Elgin, Illinois, for Patterson, and the empty racetrack at Aurora Downs for Liston—are by chartered limousine. Who but a Soviet bureaucrat, a British businessman, a movie star, or an American reporter would ride in a chartered limousine? (They smell like funeral parlors.) Your typing paper is free if you want it; your seat at the fight, or your ticket to the

convention is right there, under the ropes; your meals if you get around to eating them are free, free sandwiches only, but then a reporter has a stomach like shaving mug and a throat like a hog's trough: he couldn't tell steak tartare from guacamole. And the drinks—if you are at a big fight—are without charge. If you are at a political convention, there is no free liquor. But you do have a choice between free Pepsi-Cola and free Coca-Cola. The principle seems to be that the reporting of mildly psychotic actions—such as those performed by politicians—should be made in sobriety; whereas a sane estimate of an athlete's chances are neatest on booze. At a fight Press Headquarters, the drinks are very free, and the mood can even be half convivial. It's like being in an Army outfit everyone's forgotten. You get your food, you get your beer, you get your pay, the work is easy, and leave to town is routine. You never had it so good—you're an infant again: you can grow up a second time and improve the job.

That's the half and half of being a reporter. One half id addiction, adrenalin, anecdote-shopping, deadlines, dread, cigar smoke, lung cancer, vomit, feeding The Goat; the other is Aloha, Tahiti, old friends, and the free ride to the eleventh floor of the Sheraton-Chicago, Patterson-Liston Press Headquarters, everything free. Even your news free. If you haven't done your homework, if you drank too late last night and missed the last limousine out to Elgin or Aurora this morning, if there's no poop of your own on Floyd's speed or Sonny's bad mood, you can turn to the handouts given you in the Press Kit. No need to do your own research. The Kit is part of the free list, an offering of facts with a little love from the Welfare State.

It is so easy, so much is done for you, that you remember those days with nostalgia. When you do get around to paying for yourself, it is a joy to buy your own food, an odd smacking sensation to spring for a drink. It is the Welfare State which makes the pleasure possible. When one buys all one's own drinks, the sensation of paying cash is without much joy, but to pay for a drink occasionally—that's near bliss. Ah, journalism!

PONT (McElroy)

The problem of going out and searching for experience, I think, is true for very young writers who just don't have enough to write about. There comes a point where you say, "I want to be a writer, I feel all the equipment of a writer. I feel the livid intelligence of a writer but I don't really know enough." This is where journalism rears its ugly head. It's very hard to enter strange places and learn a lot about them unless you have clout. Kids get into journalism because the moment they flash a card that says they're a bona fide reporter, people often start talking to them. Of course it's a false experience. Hopefully, you develop a sense of how to filter this experience and correct it, refract it into what experience might have been like if you hadn't had the peculiar advantage of being a reporter.

I discovered this at the beginning of the Sixties when I started doing journalism and realized it was a marvelous way for me to work. It was vastly easier than trying to write novels, and I was discouraged with the difficulty of writing fiction at that point. I

had run into the business of trying to tell a good story and yet say exceptional things about the nature of the world and society, touch all the ultimates, and still have it read like speed. I always had a terrible time finding my story in the novel. My stories were always ending up begrounded. There I'd be in the middle of the dunes, no gas in the tank. I loved journalism for a little while because it gave me what I'd always been weakest in, exactly that, the story. Then I discovered that this was the horror of it. Audiences liked it better. They'd all been following the same events you'd been seeing up close, and they wanted interpretation. It was those critical faculties that were being called for, rather than one's novelistic gifts. I must say I succumbed, and spent a good many years working at the edge of journalism because it was so much easier.

During sports events and political conventions, reporters get together in the evening to exchange stories. In effect, the average reporter gives away the stories that his paper is not likely to print and gets other stories that other newspapers or magazines are not interested in. In this media marketplace, everybody winds up using everybody else's stuff to some degree. What is worse, however, is that everybody usually arrives at the same general interpretation. To wit, Jack Kennedy is a lightweight, Nelson Rockefeller is a wonderful guy. Whatever the interpretation is for that week—count on it—it will come out as gospel. So much political wisdom is a consensus of this journalistic marketplace. At my end, possessing the confidence of a novelist, it was easy

to take the larger step of thinking that, yes, the way in which I see this event is likely to be closer to the real story than the way they are seeing it. You can go a long way on that confidence. It's banal to make the remark that all you have to do is look at what is going on, but the trick is to be able to look. That is not easy for the average journalist whose vision is curtailed by the unrelenting impositions, limitations, and urgencies of his job.

73.43 Almost always a reporter must give a false impression of an event. That is because journalists cannot afford to have too much interest in the mood of an occasion, particularly if it is a political meeting. Invariably, there is an a priori decision that certain elements of the event must be recorded as literally as possible. If a man is giving a speech, his topic is of cardinal importance, and whatever quotations are taken from the speech had best be given accurately—although if you don't know the tone of the speaker—peremptory, fumbling, thundering, hesitant, forthright, uneasy, etc.—you really know very little. The journalistic assumption is that the additional stuff—all those nuances!—are not as crucial as the pre-ordained tenets one is programmed to obey. The long-term tendency is to deaden future history into a gargantuan fact machine. One reason why it would be dreadful if the novel died is that it is one of the few forms of Western civilization that attempts to deal with the notion of whole experience.

81.16 One of the elements I knew was wrong is that all events had to be boiled down to, let's say, three thousand words. I thought the trick was to expand, use 20,000 words, capture the human wealth of the event. I also began to feel that the personality of the narrator was probably as important as the event. Not that the narrator would be important in his own person; it was not that I, Norman Mailer, could be a balance-weight to the Democratic Convention of 1960, but rather that I did come in with a set of prejudices. You, as the reader, couldn't begin to understand this event unless you knew enough about me to reflect upon my bias. Then the reader could say, "Oh, well, Mailer is impossibly romantic," or "Norman is outrageously nihilistic," or, "He sure is a fool"—with that sense of superiority, the reader could thus relax sufficiently to enjoy his interpretations of what I reported. It also occurred to me that that is the way we read. We are always saying to ourselves, "Well, John Irving or Updike or Vonnegut"—or whoever it is—"is very good here, but not so good on that." It brought me to a large but obvious conclusion—objective reporting was a myth. The reader was entitled to be aware of the bent of the man or woman pretending to be that quintessential oxymoron, the fair and accurate journalist.

81.6 On the other hand, journalism is easier to live with than a novel. Give me the events that history put in order for me, and I'm content—all I've got to do then is tell the tale. The difficulty of bringing off a truly impressive novel is equal to asking a singer of

the stature of Pavarotti to compose his own music. Journalism makes opera singers of novelists. We've got the story, now all we've got to do is go in and show our vocal cords.

75.13 In a novel you've got to decide whether your character turns left or right on a given street. And you have to keep making those decisions through the book. One major decision gone wrong can ruin the job. What makes journalism easy is, I repeat, that you are given the story. If I'd written The Fight as a novel, I'd have had to decide does Foreman win or Ali? I'd lose six months deciding. So, you know, there it is; Ali won. A marvelous story.

JOURNALISTIC RESEARCH

HARLOT HIGH (Pieces)

It is painful to admit that study of the CIA may not lead to exposure of facts so much as to the epistemology of facts. We will not get the goods so quickly as we will learn how to construct a model which will tell us why we cannot get the goods.

Epistemological Model I:

If half the pieces in a jigsaw puzzle are missing, the likelihood is that something can still be put together. Despite its gaps, the picture may be more or less visible. Even if most of the pieces are gone, a loose mosaic can be arranged of isolated elements. The possibility of the real picture being glimpsed under such circumstances is small but not altogether lost. It is just that one would like to know if the few pieces left belong to the same set.

Epistemological Model II

Maybe it is the splinters of a mirror rather than the scattered pieces of a jigsaw that provide a superior ground for the model. We are dealing not with reality, after all,

but that image of reality which reaches the surface through the cracked looking glass of the media.

Suffolk

A novelist ought to be able to pick up a good bit about a subject just by going into a room. If, for example, you visit an auto sales showroom with the idea you might buy a car, you might end by deciding to write about the people in it. One difficulty—you don't know a great deal about this milieu. All the same, you have an insight that feels as if it is your private insight, no one else's. In this good state, it is not that hard to pick up collateral material. Everything you are seeing seems to be illumined by this private perception.

Sometimes, however, you really have to do the research—if it's a large subject, you can spend ages reading related books.

Ancient Evenings, a novel about ancient Egypt in the Second and Twentieth Dynasties, took me eleven years to finish. In the beginning, all I knew was that I had certain instincts about death—these intimations had curious similarities to Egyptian notions. The ideas of the ancient Egyptians were certainly not identical with mine, but one element was near. In death, believed the Egyptians (and so did I), you entered upon a second set of adventures which brought you to a better place or a worse one. That was stimulating. I spent eleven years writing the book because I had to learn just about everything else on the subject. It's a hell of a way to spend the working part of eleven

years. In fact, I was unfaithful, because, believe me, if you become a serious novelist--- dare I say it?---it's almost easier to steal a march on your beloved than on your manuscript. The real question is who or which is more unforgiving, the book or the lady? It can well be the book. In the case of Ancient Evenings, and I do speak of that work as a creature--she ended up being immensely forgiving. I deserted her for two years to write The Executioner's Song. And it's as if when I came back, the manuscript might as well have said, "Hmmm, you look tired. Do your feet hurt? Here, I'll wash them." And there I was right back in the book. But often, if you desert a big project, that's the end. It does not come back to you.

There's an enormous commitment to writing a long novel. If you take on something that's larger than yourself, you can end up seriously beached. It's more agreeable to find a subject about which other authors write well. Part of the difficulty of doing my opus was that most Egyptologists had just the sort of style you would expect, and so you not only had to absorb reams of fact, but also delouse your literary synapses from the style of the worst and heaviest Egyptologists.

That's the worst, this cleaning-out. It is kin to the problem young writers face after they have grown up with bad prose in books and in newspapers. They, too, have to delouse themselves of second-rate texts.

Shainberg

Larry Schiller, who I justly famous for getting people to agree, despite all objections, to interviews, was with me in Russia when I was doing the book on Lee Harvey Oswald. We spent quite a bit of time in Minsk because there were still about thirty people living there who had known Oswald well. And they had never spoken to any reporter about him, and for good cause. Right after the assassination, the primal reaction of the KGB had been that President Kennedy was probably assassinated by American powers on high, and Oswald had been framed because the U.S. wanted to start a war with Russia. Oswald was, indeed, the perfect patsy. He had been in the Soviet from 1959 to 1962, and had gone over as a self-declared Communist. So the KGB spread the word to people in Minsk who had known him: Don't say a word about Oswald. And for thirty years, no one had spoken. Schiller and I, there in '92, '93, discovered that the Russians who had known him in 1960, '61 and '62 made wonderful witnesses to what Oswald had been like. Not having opened their mouths all that time, he was minted in their memory.

The point I'm working toward, however, is that Schiller would sometimes, for a variety of reasons—mostly old reflexes of fear—have trouble obtaining an interview. Then he would pull out all the stops. He would say to someone who did not wish to meet with us, "You must be interviewed by Norman Mailer! He is our American Tolstoy!" And, astonishingly, that worked. When all else failed, that would get them. As a good Russian, one cannot refuse to speak to Tolstoy—even when he is a pale American reflection.

One time, a very nice middle-class woman, a teacher, was being interviewed by us. But when two interrogators are doing an interview, and each has a strong and impatient mind, then each gets infuriated with the other. The fool is taking the interview in the wrong direction. We'd interrupt each other at critical moments, even come close to blows. While this woman was there, we started arguing and before long, were roaring at one another, "You're full of shit." "Go screw!" So forth. The poor woman had to be sitting there saying to herself, "This is the American Tolstoy?"

TELEVISION

Already there have been any number of remarks made in this book (nearly all derogatory) about television, but there was a time in the early Fifties when I watched it religiously and the piece that follows underlines the intensity of the adverb attached to "watched." In any event, the piece sets up a nice contrast between the black-and-white TV of that period and the big color palette of the present. TV has changed so much. Intrinsically, it remains the same. In fact, the piece from which this extract is taken is titled Of a Small and Modest Malignancy, Wicked and Bristling with Dots.

FILM

68.26 The making of my first underground movie probably had a good bit to do with the decision to treat myself as the third person protagonist of *The Armies of the Night*. When I sat down to write the book, I had already edited "Wild 90," in which I was the leading character. Since there had been way too much of me in the rushes, I had come to see myself as a piece of yard goods about which one could ask, "Where can I cut this?" The habit of looking at myself as if I were someone other than myself—a character ready to be described in the third person, had already been established. Parenthetically, I think it's also a way of getting your psychiatry on the cheap. I've never gone to an analyst—I always felt it was not wise to look for the taproot—but I have certainly been more balanced after the years it took in the editing room to extract one hundred minutes of underground movie film from forty-five hours of sound-on-film—Maidstone!—my failed cinematic masterpiece!

81.16 Movies are more likely than literature to reach deep feelings in people. Movies are more primitive, or so I would argue. Film reaches into deeper states of consciousness. People who can't read are quite able to reach profound reactions in the dark of a theatre.

I would also say that to the degree film reaches us in a precise way, it's not very good. Film is best when ambiguous. A truly good film will affect two people profoundly, but, often, they will argue for hours over the message. For one, it's a satire, to the other, a tragedy. That's as it should be. Film should reach so far inside the psyche that one person will react in horror even as another is laughing his head off. That's good film. Bad film is when everybody laughs on cue for then they are being manipulated. They have merely entered the engines of manipulation of the power-trip institutions.

87.17 Time is your money in a film—literally, it's your money. If you, as the director, don't finish a scene scheduled to be done by lunch, then you are going to come back after lunch, and possibly lose not half an hour or an hour, but two hours. So you're gambling to finish the scene before the break, even if you're not wholly satisfied with the result. Then, you find out in the dailies if your gamble was too costly. The scene brought in before lunch needed one more set-up. Making movies, you're absolutely in the world. You're a gambler. Whereas in literature, you withdraw from the world in order to perceive it. So movie directing uses another even opposite side of yourself from writing. I think you can get closer to your soul in a book, but you come to appreciate the effective or ineffective working of your psyche with a movie. Let me amplify this if I can. In writing a book there are exceptional moments when you feel as if you're beaming a flood-lamp down into the abyss of your soul. By the light of your intuition, you do, in the course of writing a novel, get out to some astonishing places. But when you are

making a film, particularly after you've shot it and start editing it, you have to look at the same scene over and over in order to clean out little dead spots. Makes you feel like a surgeon. What it also involves is your taste, and your concentration. Seeing one piece of film over and over, you must still keep your taste alive, even as you exercise your ability to concentrate again and again upon the same material. Since I am the one who wrote, "Repetition kills the soul," I thought that remark more than once while working with the movie editor. Of course, I would tell myself it was not absolute repetition. Rather, I was altering the given a little each time.

All this is easy. Much too easy. What is more to the point is that you can lose your mind looking for the point. When it comes to understanding film, we can feel with some justice that we are still at the edge of an aesthetic continent all-but-uncharted.

The piece that follows, taken from an exposition of my motives in trying to make Maidstone, is, I believe, as good as anything I've done in criticism. If your reaction on reading it comes down to, "Why is he making it so complicated? I just want to enjoy movies," then let us salute each other and part on mutual terms since I am obviously not the writer for you.

Perhaps a thousand actors and two thousand films can be cited where the movie frame comes alive and there is no dip at the foot of consciousness because something is

false at the root. Nonetheless any such appearance of talent was close to magic. The conventional way of making most films usually guaranteed its absence. For there was an element which interfered with motion pictures as much as the blurring of print would hinder the reading of a book, and this flaw derived from the peculiar misapprehension with which the silent film gave way to sound, the supposition that sound-and-film was but an extension of the theatre, even as the theatre was but an extension of literature. It was assumed that movies were there to tell a story. The story might derive from the stage, or from the pages of a book, or even from an idea for a story, but the film was asked to issue from a detailed plan which would have lines of dialogue. The making of the movie would be a fulfillment of that script, that literary plan; so, each scene would be shaped like a construction unit to build the architecture of the story. It was one of those profoundly false assumptions which seem at the time absolute common sense, yet it was no more natural than to have insisted that a movie was a river and one should

PONT (Medwick)

The first time one has a profound sexual act, when it's all over, there's this shocked, stunned, incredible recognition: "Why God, God exists." That usually happens in sex rather than in love because it's got to happen quickly, a sudden revelation. So there are certain advantages to one-night stands. One brings none of one's baggage to a one-night stand and that makes it possible to have, once in a while, extraordinary emotions. The average one-night stand is, after all, not necessarily a small disaster, but unless it's very good indeed, it can leave very little. All the same, one-night stands can be exceptional; and when that happens one often has a sense of wonder that is not unlike religious sentiment. For the experience is separate from the person—you don't know the person—it comes from something in sex itself. Sex may be something that's outside of people—something out there.

Last Tango in Paris is, of course, built on this premise.

Tango, Last Tango

To pay one's \$5.00 and join the full house at the Translux for the evening show of Last Tango in Paris is to be reminded once again that the planet is in a state of pullulation. The seasons accelerate. The snow which was falling in November had left

by the first of March. Would our summer arrive at Easter and end with July? It is all that nuclear radiation, says every aficionado of the occult. And we pullulate. Like an ant-hive beginning to feel the heat.

We know that the century required for a minor art to move from commencement to decadence is off the board. Whole fashions in film are born, thrive, and die in twenty-four months. Still! It is only a half year since Pauline Kael declared to the readers of The New Yorker that the presentation of Last Tango in Paris at the New York Film Festival on October 14, 1972, was a date that "should become a landmark in movie history—comparable to May 29, 1913—the night Le Sacre de Printemps was first performed—in music history," and then went on to explain that the newer work had "the same kind of hypnotic excitement as the Sacre, the same primitive force, and the same jabbing, thrusting eroticism. . . Bertolucci and Brando have altered the face of an art form." Whatever could have been shown on screen to make Kael pop open for a film? "This must be the most powerfully erotic movie ever made, and it could turn out to be the most liberating movie ever made. . ." Could this be our own Lady Vinegar, our quintessential cruet? The first frigid of the film critics was treating

THE OCCULT

Many a fiction writer lives with at least one sense cocked to the possibility that some events are magical, and if so, how do you write about it?

This preface to the book Unholy Alliance by Peter Levenda, will not answer the question, but it does give a quick tour of the territory. In corollary, I can add that on very good days when writing is at its best and keeps revealing to the you insights that you never knew were in you, it is not difficult to recognize that writing itself may be a species of magic.

Unholy Alliance is a stimulating work to read for anyone interested in Nazism, magic, the penetralia of history, the cults of the occult, and the present agonizing anxiety of our lives. It is as if something larger than our educations, our sense of good and evil, our lives themselves, seems to be threatening our existence, and this anxiety illumines Unholy Alliance like a night light in some recess of the wall down a very long corridor.

If magic is composed of a good many of those out-of-category forces that press against established religions, so magic can also be seen, in relation to technology at least,

as the dark side of the moon. If a Creator exists in company with an opposite Presence (to be called Satan, for short), there is also the most lively possibility of a variety of major and minor angels, devils and demons, good spirits and evil, working away more or less invisibly in our lives.

For some, it is virtually a comfortable notion that magic is a presence and a practice that can exist, can even, to a small degree, be used, be manipulated (if often with real danger for the practitioner). For such men and women, the proposition is assured--magic most certainly does exist as a feasible process--even if the affirmative is obliged to appear in determinedly small letters when posed against technology: (How often can a curse be as effective as a bomb?)

Nonetheless, given the many centuries of anecdotal and much-skewed evidence on the subject, it is still not irrational to assume--even if one has never felt its effects oneself--to assume, yes--phenomena of a certain kind can be regarded as magical in those particular situations where magic offers the only rational explanation for events that are otherwise inexplicable. Indeed, this is probably the common view. One explanation for the aggravated awe and misery that inhabited America in the days after the destruction of the Twin Towers was that the event was not only monstrous, but brilliantly effected in the face of all the factors that could have gone wrong for the conspirators. The uneasy and not-to-be-voiced hypothesis that now lived as a possibility in many a mind was that the success of the venture had been fortified by the collateral assistance of magic. Few happenings can be more terrifying to the modern psyche than the suggestion that magic is

cooperating with technology. It is equal to saying that machines have a private psychology and large events, therefore, may be subject to Divine or Satanic intervention.

So let us at least assume that magic is often present as a salient element in the very scheme of things. Anyone who is offended by this, need read no further. They will not be interested in Unholy Alliance. Its first virtue, after all, is in its assiduous detail, its close description of the events and ideas of the occultists who gathered around the Nazis as practitioners, fellow travelers, and in the case of Himmler and the SS, as dedicated acolytes, fortified cultists.

What augments the value of this work is the cold but understanding eye of the author. Since his knowledge of magic and magicians is intimate, one never questions whether he knows what he is writing about. Since he is also considerably disenchanted by the life practices of most of the magic workers, he is never taken in by assumptions of grandiosity or over-sweet New Age sentiments. He knows the fundamental flaw found in many occultists—it is the vice that brought them to magic in the first place—precisely their desire to obtain power over others without paying the price. The majority of occultists in these pages appear to be posted on the particular human spectrum that runs from impotence to greed. All too often, they are prone, as a crew, to sectarian war, all-out cheating, gluttony, slovenliness, ill will and betrayal. Exactly. They are at whatever level they find themselves, invariably looking for that gift of the gods—power that comes without the virtue of having been earned.

The irony, of course, is that most of them, in consequence, pay large prices in ill health, failure, isolation, addiction, deterioration of their larger possibilities, even personal doom. Goethe did not conceive of Faust for too little.

Peter Levenda captures this paradox. What he also gives us is a suggestion that cannot be ignored: The occultists on both sides in the Second World War (although most particularly Himmler and the Nazis) did have some real effect on its history, most certainly not enough to have changed the outcome, but enough to have altered motives and details we have been taking for granted. What comes through the pages of Unholy Alliance is the canny political sense Hitler possessed in relation to the separate uses of magic and magicians. Levenda's dispassionate treatment of charged evidence is managed (no small feat) in a way to enable us to recognize that Hitler almost certainly believed in magic, and also knew that such belief had to be concealed in the subtext of his speeches and endeavors. Open avowal could be equal to political suicide.

Hitler was hell, therefore, on astrologers--and packed off many to concentration camps especially after Rudolf Hess' flight to England in 1941, did his best (and was successful) in decimating the gypsy population of Europe, sneered publicly at seers, psychic gurus, fortune tellers, all the small fry of the occult movement. He saw them clearly as impediments to his own fortunes, negative baggage to his reputation. Yet he also gave his support to the man he made into the second most important Nazi in existence, Heinrich Himmler, an occultist of no small dimension.

It was as if Hitler lived within a particular Marxist notion. It was Engels' dictum that "Quantity changes quality." A little magic practiced by a small magician can prove

a folly or a personal enhancement, a larger involvement brings on the cannibalistic practices to be expected of a magicians' society, and a huge but camouflaged involvement, the Nazi movement itself, with its black-shirted Knight Templars of SS men, becomes an immense vehicle that will do its best to drive the world into a new religion, a new geography, a new mastery of the future.

Are We in Vietnam?

Why Are We in Vietnam is the only novel I ever finished under the mistaken belief I was writing another. Living in Provincetown on the edge of those rare, towering and windy dunes which give the tip of Cape Cod a fair resemblance to the desert of the Sahara, I had begun to think of a novel so odd and so horrible that I hesitated for years to begin it. I imagined a group of seven or eight bikers, hippies and studs plus a girl or two, living in the scrub thickets that sat in some of the valleys between the dunes. Only six feet high, those thickets were nonetheless forests, and if one could find a path through the thorns and cat briars, nobody could track you, not in a hurry. So I peopled the thickets with characters: my characters were as wild as anyone who ever came to Provincetown. It is not a tame place. Years ago, a First Lady was once told it was "the Wild West of the East," and that is not a bad description. The tip of Cape Cod curls in on itself like a spiral—the long line of the dunes comes around like the curve of one's palm and fingers as they close into a fist—it is one of the very few places in America where one comes to

the end of the road for a more profound reason than real estate ceasing to be profitable.

In Provincetown, geography runs out, and you are surrounded by the sea.

So it is a strange place. The Pilgrims landed there before they went on to Plymouth—American began here. The Pilgrims lost interest in scrub pine, mournful winds, and sand all over the land. They moved on, left ghosts. Whaling captains settled in later, left ghosts. In winter, the town is filled with spirits. One can go mad in that rainy climate waiting for March to end. It is a place for murderers and suicides. If decades went by without a single recorded homicide, that record ended abruptly with a crime of true carnage. A few years ago, a young Portuguese from a family of fishermen killed four girls, dismembered their bodies, and buried the pieces in twenty small and scattered graves.

That catastrophe was not a good deal worse than anything I had already contemplated for my gang, since I conceived of them making nocturnal trips from the dunes into town where out of the sheer boredom of an existence not nearly intense enough to satisfy their health, they would commit murders of massive brutality and then slip back to the dunes. Motiveless crimes. I saw a string of such crimes.

I was, as I say, in fear of the book. I loved Provincetown and did not think that was a good way to write about it. The town is so naturally eerie in mid-winter and provides such sense of omens waiting to be magnetized into lines of force that the novel in my mind seemed more a magical object than a fiction, a black magic.

Nonetheless, I began the book in the spring of '66. It attracted me too much not to begin. Yet because I could not thrust Provincetown into such literary horrors without

preparation, I thought I would start with a chapter about hunting bear in Alaska. A prelude. I would have two tough rich boys, each as separated from social convention as any two rich boys could be—Texans I would make them out of reserve memories of Texans I had served with in the 112th Cavalry out of San Antonio. The boys would be still young, still mean rather than uncontrollably murderous—the hunting might serve as a bridge to get them ready for more. They would come back from the Alaskan hunting trip ready to travel—Provincetown would eventually receive them.

Now, anyone who reads the book which this preface serves will see that nobody ever gets to Provincetown. The chapter on hunting becomes half-a-dozen chapters, it ends up being all of the book. If I wrote those chapters wondering how long it would take to extricate myself with novelistic integrity from all the elaborations of the hunt I seemed more and more bound to get into, it was not until those boys were back in Dallas and I was getting ready to move them East that I realized two things:

(1) I had nothing further to say about them.

(2) Even if I did, I could no longer believe that Tex and D.J. could still be characters in the Provincetown novel. They had another quality by now.

So I lived with my manuscript for a few months and ended by recognizing that I hadn't been too bright. I had written a novel, not a prelude. The book was done. Later, a number of readers would think Why Are We in Vietnam? was far and away my best book. I thought I had never written a funnier one.

In retrospect, I was less certain, however, of the humor. For Sharon Tate was murdered in the summer of '69, and the world heard of Charles Manson, I could wonder

what state of guilt I might have been in if I had written that novel of desert murderers. How then could I ever have been certain Manson had not been sensitive to its message in the tribal air?

But then writing has its own occult force. At best, we never know where our writing comes from nor who gives it to us. If Jack Kennedy's name is invoked in the first sentence of An American Dream, nine lines farther down that page a man named Kelly is mentioned. Later in the same chapter we learn Kelly's middle name is Oswald—Barney Oswald Kelly. That chapter appeared in Esquire about a month after the assassination, but it had been written three months earlier, a coincidence to force one to contemplate the very design of coincidence.

So, too, had I written in Barbary Shore about a secret agent named McLeod who had been, in his time, a particularly important Soviet agent. He lived in a cheap room on the top floor of a cheap rooming house just across the hall from the narrator. Writing that book, I always found it hard to believe that such a man would be found in such a place, and the simple difficulty of not quite believing what I wrote did not help to speed the writing of the book. A year after it was published, I rented a room in a dank old building with high ceilings called Ovington Studios on Fulton Street in Brooklyn not half a mile from the rooming house in Barbary Shore, and on the floor below during those ten years I kept the studio was Colonel Rudolph Abel, the most important Soviet spy in America—or, at least, so he was described by the FBI when the arrest was finally made.

We will never know if primitive artists painted their caves to show a representation, or whether the moving hand was looking the placate the forces above and

the forces below. Sometimes I think the novelist fashions a totem just as much as an aesthetic, and his real aim, not even known necessarily to himself, is to create a diversion in the fields of dread, a sanctuary in some of the arenas of magic. The flaws of his work can even be a part of his magical strength, as if his real intent in writing is to alter the determinations of that invisible finger which has written and moved on. By such logic, the book before you is a totem, not empty of amulets for the author against curses, static, and the pervasive malignity of our electronic air.

83.20 The unconscious can lead one to startling conclusions. In Ancient Evenings, I named my protagonist Menenhetet and occasionally made it Meni for short. A couple of years later I came across the translated text of an inscription on an ancient Egyptian temple wall which described the battle of Kadesh, a key event in the novel. In this inscription was mentioned one Menni, Ramses the Second's equerry, which was exactly Menenhetet's role in that part of the book. Somehow, I did not think of the coincidence as eerie. Confirmative, rather, as if it proved that there was some very good reason I was devoting so many years to the tome.

HAZARDS & SOURCES

The story is that Robert Rauschenberg was once given the gift of a pastel from Willem de Kooning. Rauschenberg, with de Kooning's permission, erased the pastel and

then signed it Pastel by de Kooning Erased by Robert Rauschenberg, after which he sold it. The story bothered me. There was something profound there but how to get ahold of it? Then it came to me. Rauschenberg was saying that the artist has the same right to print money as the financier. Money is nothing but authority imprinted upon emptiness.

I laid the story to rest and was content until the day I thought: Maybe the person who bought the pastel was neither a gambler nor an investor so aware of chic in painting that he knew he could make a profit from reselling it. Maybe if a truly talented painter erases the work of another truly talented painter, there's a resonance, an echo, in the lost work. If, let's say, Fidel Castro had executed Charles de Gaulle, and buried him himself, that would not be ordinary burial ground. Students of the occult would pay great attention to the aura about the place. So I thought maybe that's what's transpiring here—some echo of de Kooning's original work might be illuminating the person who purchased it. Therefore, I am obsessed with the story again. One of two possibilities exists: Either the act was an outrage, or it advances our comprehension of the occult.

Graffiti (Pieces)

Famous plant-man Backster, attaching the electrodes of his polygraph to a philodendron one night, wonders in the wake of this passing impulse how to test the plant for some emotional reaction. Abruptly, a current courses through the philodendron at the horror of this thought. When Backster cuts or burns the leaf, however, the polygraph registers little: The plant is numb. (Its sensitivity seems to be its life; its suffering, an

abstention from life.) The experiment suggests plants may be a natural species of wireless. (What, indeed, did Picasso teach us if not that every form offers up its own scream?) Radio is then no more than a prosthetic leg of communication whereas plants speak to plants, and are aware of the death of animals on the other side of the hill. Some artists might even swear they have known this from the beginning, for they would see themselves as stimulants who inject perception into the blind vision of the century. (And, like a junkie, does the century move into apathy from the superbrilliance of its injections?)

The act of writing is a mystery and the more you labor at it, the more you become aware after a lifetime of such activity that it is not answers which are being offered so much as a greater appreciation of the literary mysteries. The primal enigma of the profession—where do those words come from?—not only arouses fear at the thought of such powers disappearing, but also inspires the happiness that one may be in contact with some embodiment of literature itself. Now, of course, we cannot talk directly of such matters; it is enough to amuse ourselves with our variety of approaches to the problem. In my college years, many of us used to have a certainty. It was that environment was all: One was the product of one's milieu, one's parents, one's food, one's conversations, one's dearest and/or most odious human relations. One was the sum of one's own history as it was cradled in the larger history of one's time. One was a product, and if you wrote novels, they were merely a product of the product. With this working philosophy, I wrote

a book—it happened to be The Naked and the Dead—which was wholly comfortable to me. I would not have known then what an author meant by speaking of any of his works as uncomfortable, or worse, unnatural. The Naked and the Dead seemed a sure result of all I had learned up to the age of twenty-five, all I had experienced and all I had read. My characters had already been conceived and put in file boxes before they were ever on the page. I had hundreds of filled-out file cards before I ever began to write. The novel itself seemed merely the end of a long active assembly line and I felt able to account for each part of it.

The next book, however, after The Naked and the Dead was such a mystery to me that to this day I do not comprehend it. I can tell you what it is about, what I was trying to say, but do not ask me where Barbary Shore came from. I used to feel as if this second novel was being written by someone else. Where The Naked and the Dead had been put together with the solid agreeable effort of a young carpenter constructing a decent house while full of the practices, techniques, and wisdom of those who built houses before him, Barbary Shore might as well have been dictated to me by a ghost in the middle of a forest. Each morning I would sit down to work with no notion at all of how to continue. My characters were strangers to me and each day after a few hours of blind work (because I never seemed to get more than a sentence or two ahead of myself) I would push my plot and people three manuscript pages forward into their eventual denouement, but I never knew what I was doing nor where it came from. It's fortunate that I had heard of Freud and the unconscious; if not, I would have had to postulate such a condition myself. An unconscious was the only explanation for what was going on. Now I was left

aware of two presences cooperating in the production of a literary work, and the second had the capacity to take over the act of authorship from the first.

Sometimes, when I am feeling tolerant to the idea of karma, demiurges, spirits of the age, and the intervention of angels, saint, and demons, I also wonder if being a writer over a long career does not leave you open to more than one origin for your work. In a long career one may come forth with many books that are products of one's skill and education, of one's dedication, but I also wonder if once in a while the gods do not look about and have their own novels to propose and peer down among us and say, "Here's a good one for Bellow," or "That would have been a saucy dish for Cheever, too bad he's gone," or in my own case, "Look at poor old Mailer worrying about his job again. Let's make him the agent for this absolutely wicked little thing about Vietnam." Who knows? We may be sturdy literary engineers full of sound literary practice, or, as equally, unwitting agents for forces beyond our comprehension. It matters less than the knowledge that our books can come from more than one wondrous place. After all, it is not so depressing to think that with all our hungers we can also have the fortune to be handed in passing a few gifts we do not deserve. How agreeable to feel kin to the force that put paintings on the walls of caves, set stonecutters to exactitudes that would permit gothic arches, gave the calculus to Newton's age and space travel to ours. No, it is not so ill to sense that we are also heir to emanations from some unaccountable and fabulous source. Nothing lifts our horizons like a piece of unexpected luck or the generosity of the gods.

75.13 Every good novelist is a failure to himself. Every one of us. Dostoyevsky had to see his career as a failure. He didn't write the last best book he had in mind. He died with a sense of frustration. He had this great work in his being. He was going to create a saint. He had already written about people who had visions of saintly existence but lived in evil, Ivan Karamazov, for one. Now, Dostoyevsky wanted more. He looked to do more. He wanted to illumine the Russian people. He wished to introduce them to a more profound grasp of saintliness. This, he felt, was altogether crucial to their survival as a nation. He died with a sense of failure. He had not done the book he had been born to do.

68.1 The novel has its own particular resource, which is close to magical. If you write purely enough and your style's good enough, you can establish a communion between yourself and the reader that can be found in no other art, and this communion can continue not only for hours, but for weeks, years. When the novel is dead, then the technological society will be totally upon us.

Graffiti (Pieces)

For six and a half centuries, we have been moving from the discovery of our humanity, good and evil, into the circulation of the name. By extension, the name is

equal to money. Over the millenia, we have been extricating ourselves out of some primitive obeisance to dread so complete that painting once lay inert on the field of two dimensions (as if the medieval eye, like the primitive eye, did not feel ready to wander). Then art dared to rise into that Renaissance venture to liberate ourselves from much of the weight of our anxiety. Painters entered the space-perspective of volume and depth. Now, with graffiti, we are back in the prison of two dimensions once more. Or is it the one dimension of the name—the artform screaming through space on a unilinear subway line?

PONT (Graf)

At night, in the yards, the walls of the subway cars sit there possessed of soul—you are not just writing your name but trafficking with the iron spirit of the vehicle standing before you in the yard. What a set of inert iron beasts. There they stand in all the corrals of the yard! The graffiti-writers, stealthy as the near-to-silent sound of their movement, work up and down the line of cars, some darting in to squiggle a little toy of a name on twenty cars—their nerve has no larger surge—others embark on their first or their hundred-and-first masterpiece, daring the full enterprise of an hour of painting one masterpiece while they carry all the tension of waiting for the disturbance of their entrance to settle, waiting for the guards patrolling the lines of track to grow somnolent and descend into the early morning pall of the watchman. Sometimes the graffiti-writers

would set out from their own turf at dark, yet not begin to paint until two in the morning, hiding for hours in the surest corners of the yard or in and under the trains. What a quintessential marriage of cool and style to write your name in giant separate living letters, large as animals, lithe as snakes, mysterious as Arabic or Chinese curls of alphabet, and do it in the heart of a winter night when the hands are frozen and only the heart is hot with fear. No wonder the best of the graffiti writers, those mountains of heavy-masterpiece production, STAY HIGH, PHASE 2, STAR III, get the respect, call it the glory, that they are as famous and luminous to their people as a rock star. It is their year. Nothing automatic about writing a masterpiece on a subway car. "I was scared," said Japan, "all the time I did it." And sitting in the station at 158th an St. Nicholas Avenue, watching the trains go by, talking between each wave of subway sound, he is tiny in size, his dark eyes as alert as any small and hungry animal who eats in a garden at night and does not know where the householder may be waiting with his varmint gun.

Now, as Japan speaks, his eyes never failing to miss the collection of names, hieroglyphs, symbols, stars, crowns, ribbons, masterpieces and toys on every passing car, there is a sadness in his mood. The city has mounted a massive campaign. There was a period in the middle when it looked as if graffiti would take over the city, when a movement that began as an expression of tropical peoples living in a monotonous iron-gray and dull brown brick environment, surrounded by asphalt, concrete, and clangor, had erupted to save the sensuous flesh of their inheritance from the macadamization of the psyche, save the blank city wall of their united brain by painting the wall over with the giant trees and petty plants of a tropical rain forest. Like such a jungle, every plant, large

and small, spoke to one another, lived in the profusion and harmony of a forest. No one wrote over another name, no one was obscene—for that would have smashed the harmony. A communion took place over the city in this plant growth of names until every institutional wall, fixed or moving, every modern new school which looked like a brand-new factory, every old slum warehouse, every standing billboard, every huckstering poster, and the halls of every high-rise low-rent housing project which looked like a prison (and all did) were covered by a foliage of graffiti that grew seven or eight feet tall, even twelve feet high in those choice places worth the effort for one to stand on another, ah, if it had gone on, the entire city of blank architectural high-rise horrors would have been covered with paint. Graffiti writers might have become mountaineers with pitons for the ascent of high-rise high-cost swinger-single apartments in the East Sixties and Seventies. The look of New York, and then the world, might have been transformed, and the interlapping of names and colors, those wavelets of ego forever reverberating upon one another, could have risen like a flood to cover the monstrosities of abstract empty techno-architectural twentieth-century walls where no design ever predominated over the most profitable (and ergo most monotonous) construction ratio implicit in a twenty-million-dollar bill.

The kids painted with less than this in view. Sufficient in the graffiti-proliferating years of the early Seventies to cover the front door of every subway car they could find. The ecstasy of the roller coaster would dive down into their chest if they were ever waiting in a station and a twelve-car train came stampeding in and their name, HONDO, WILDCAT, SABU, or LOLLIPOP, was on the front! Yes, the graffiti had not only the

feel and all the super-powered whoosh and impact of all the bubble-letters in all the mad comic strips, but the zoom, the aghr, and the ahhr of screeching rails, the fast motion of subways roaring into stations, the comic strips come to life. So it was probably not a movement designed to cover the world so much as the excrescence of an excrescence. Slum populations chilled on one side by the bleakness of modern design, and brain-cooked on the other by comic strips and TV ads with zooming letters, even brain-cooked by the whip of the capital capital letters in the names of the products, and gut-picked by the sound of rock and soul screaming up into the voodoo of the firmament with the shriek of the performer's electronic strings coiling like neon letters in the blue satanic light, yes, all the excrescence of the highways and the fluorescent wonderlands of every Las Vegas sign frying through the Iowa and New Jersey night, all the stomach-tightening nitty-gritty of trying to learn to spell was in the writing, every assault on the psyche as the trains came slamming in. Maybe it was no more than a movement which looked to take some of the excrescence left within and paint it out upon the world, no more than a species of collective therapy, of grace exhibited under pressure in which they never dreamed of going on to paint all of the blank and empty modern world, but the authority of the city reacted as if the city itself might be in greater peril from graffiti than from drugs, and a war had gone on, more and more implacable on the side of the authority with every legal and psychological weedkiller on full employ until the graffiti of New York was defoliated, cicatrized, Vietnamized. Now, as I sat in the station with John Naar and Japan and we watched the trains go by, aesthetic blight was on the cars. Few masterpieces remained. The windows were gray and smeared. The cars looked dull red or tarnished

aluminum—their recent coat of paint remover having stripped all polish from the manufacturer's surface. New subway cars looked like old cars. Only the ghost-outline of former masterpieces remained. The kids were broken. The movement seemed over. Even cans of paint-spray could no longer be stolen. Now the ones set out for store display were empty, the misdemeanors were being upped to felony, the fines were severe, the mood was vindictive. Two hideous accidents had occurred. One boy had been killed beneath a subway car, and another had been close to fatally burned by an inflammable spray can catching a spark, yes, a horror was on the movement and transit patrols moved through the yards and plugged the entrances. The white monoliths of the high-rise were safe. And the subways were dingier than they had ever been. The impulse of the jungle to cover the walled tombs of technology had been broken. Was there a clue to graffiti in the opposite passion to look upon monotony and call it health? As I walked the streets with John Naar, we passed a sign: DON'T POLLUTE—KEEP THE CITY CLEAN. "That sign," the photographer murmured, "is a form of pollution itself."

Years ago, back in the early Fifties, he conceived of a story he was finally not to write, for he lost his comprehension of it. A rich young artist in New York in the early fifties, bursting to go beyond Abstract Expressionism, began to rent billboards on which he sketched huge, ill-defined (never say they were sloppy) works in paint chosen to run easily and flake quickly. The rains distorted the

PHILOSOPHY

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not in master

PRIMITIVE MANART AND SCIENCEEVIL AND JUDGMENT

Abbott Primitive man had to see himself surrounded by a circle of forces—demons, gods, friendly forces, impersonal forces. If I think of a primitive walking through a forest, I expect his movement to be different from ours. If we pass through the woods on an easy trail, we walk; if it's not open, we bushwhack. But the primitive may have stopped before a certain tree and bowed. Before another, he may have lain prostrate on the ground. Where there was familiarity with a relatively modest divine force, just a nod of the head as he passed by. That was no more than was required unless the tree gave an indication that it was annoyed. How did it speak? By many shades of distinction in the rustling of its leaves.

 If we accept these suppositions, then consciousness had to be more intense for the primitive. He was always a protagonist. His day was heroic or ghastly. For what does it mean to be a hero? It requires you to be prepared to deal with forces larger than yourself. Terrified and heroic, it is no wonder that the lifespan of primitive man was shorter than ours.

By pagan times, of course, societies as developed as the Romans were ready to rely instead on rituals and special relation to their gods. Earlier, among the Egyptians, certain amulets were the equal in value of estate holdings. If you are trying to form and maintain a society, you can't have people going off every moment to propitiate forces on their own. You do well to get them believing there is a central force, society itself, which offers the best approach of propitiation of the gods. Can one go so far as to suggest that there is a buried element in many talented writers that unconsciously expects their work to serve not only literature but as acts of conjuration or propitiation? What, when you get down to it, was Joyce, as one mighty example, trying to show us in Finnegan's Wake?

74.5 The artist seeks to create a spell. Today, of course, the artist is no primitive man; he is all but completely insulated from the senses primitive man once had. By now, the artist usually acts as a mediator between magic and technology. But no matter how technologized he becomes, his central impulse is to create a spell equivalent to the spell a primitive felt when he passed a great oak and knew something deeper than his normal comprehension was reaching him. Perhaps the primitive felt close to what we feel when we see a great work of painting on a museum wall. We are near then to something we can't even quite call knowledge. It's larger, less definable, and certainly more resonant.

74.5 While the physicist is stirred, if uncomfortably, by feeling the presence of magic in his experiment, and the artist is often drenched in statistical detail (since he has to deal with a world that grows more and more technical and difficult to comprehend), at bottom their interests are opposed. Finally, the physicist is trying to destroy the fundament of magic, and the artist is trying to undermine the base of technology. The artist believes (and this is the greatest generalization I can make) that all cosmic achievement is attainable within the human frame, that is, if we lead lives witty enough and skillful enough, bold enough and, finally, illumined enough, we can accomplish every communication, and reach every vault within the cosmos that technology would attempt to take by force. Telepathy rather than telephony.

74.5 An equation sign can also be seen as a statement of metaphor. When you say: "y equals x to the 2nd power," you are in effect establishing a metaphor. Or, the obverse: An artist in a gallery, looking at a painting, says, "I see God in the yellow." All right, that can be stated mathematically. The Yellow of this painting is a function of God. Either way, artist or physicist is trying to penetrate into the substance of things. In that sense, the physicist and the artist are closer to one another than the artist and the gallery owner, or the physicist and the engineer.

73.46 I've long had the notion that when highly charged people have a confrontation—Shakespearean characters, for example—coincidences will occur. Indeed, if there is any order in the cosmos, it should not be so exceptional that this is so. If a general, let us say, is getting ready for battle, and there are gods and devils surrounding him, they are certainly involved in the outcome. Whether the general wins or loses the contest on that day will have an effect on the fortunes of these gods. So they're going to be paying attention, are they not? In turn, the general is going to be aware of them—at least insofar as he has sensitivity to their presence. Such a man is not necessarily foolish or psychotic if he spends his last ten minutes in bed debating whether he should put his left foot down on the floor first, or should he choose the right? Perhaps he is calling on the left or right echelon of his gods. We can also assume that these gods will be doing their best to create startling coincidences. A coincidence, after all, excites us with the vivid sense that there's a superstructure about us, and in this superstructure are the agents of a presence (or a spiritual machine) larger than our imagination. When a warlike general bends his knee in prayer, it is as likely that he is calling upon a demon as invoking Jesus Christ. Of course, he may be thinking that he calls on the Lord. Doubtless, he has never encountered Kierkegaard's dictum that when we feel most saintly we could be working for the devil.

PONT/LENNON

LENNON: Many of your characters over the years have carried on negotiations with evil—Marion Faye, D.J. Rojak—I take it that you would not agree with Hannah Arendt on the essential banality of evil?

MAILER: I wouldn't agree with Hannah Arendt at all, not at all. Of course, she can make a case. There are any number of prodigiously evil people who have, from the novelist's point of view, disappointing exteriors. Eichmann, superficially speaking, was a little man, an ordinary man in appearance and vulgar and dull, but to assume therefore that evil itself is banal, strikes me as exhibiting a prodigious poverty of imagination. You know, one of the paradoxes I always found in the liberal temperament is that they are immensely worshipful of Freud—even though most of his ideas are antipathetic to the notion of liberalism itself. But liberals do go to Freud as if he is their umbilical cord for cerebral nourishment. The reason is simple. Freud's stance is reductive and liberals don't like to believe in the vast power of the unconscious or the evil of true murderousness residing in the most ordinary people. To accept the surface for the reality is to perform the fundamental liberal reflex. In effect, liberals are always saying, "I don't see God, so why do you assume God exists?" Talk of the devil is off the charts. Out of that has come, I think, their present bankruptcy. Liberalism has no exciting ideas to offer. I think this enervation comes because it has not been able to deal with the most haunting question of the twentieth century, which is not communism but nazism. Liberalism can't come near to understanding this incredible phenomenon that took over a country of the most decent, hardworking and clean people in the world, this incredible phenomenon of a fascism that went far beyond the bounds of totalitarianism into the most despicable and extraordinary

extermination of vast numbers of peoples. And this, coming out of a nation that had always been exceptionally—even comically—law-abiding, suggested that the unconscious was truly a place of hideous ambushes and horrors. Liberals, unable to weave that thought into their philosophy, were happy to welcome Hannah Arendt's phrase. But I think to speak of the banality of evil is precisely to point us further in the wrong direction. Evil has dimensions. Evil is mysterious. It can be palpable or invisible. It can appear to be banal, or, equally, show itself as intensely dramatic. September 11th does come to mind.

PONT/Adams

Back to Kierkegaard. He was ready to suggest that at the moment we're feeling most saintly, we may in fact be evil. And that moment when we think we're most evil and finally corrupt, we may, by the startling judgments of God, be saintly. The value of this notion is that it strips us of the fundamental arrogance of assuming that at any given moment any of us have enough centrality, that is, possess a seat from which we can expound our dogma or determine our own moral value. I may have a fairly well-formed cloud of intuitions about the nature of the good, and like a cloud, it has, to a certain degree, its structure, yet the form is capable of altering quickly. A cloud changes shape quickly, but it remains a cloud. It's not just simply an unformed chaos. That, I would propose, is as close as we get to any moral truth. This is why I love the novel. It is, I would repeat, the form best suited for developing our moral sensitivity—which is to say

our depth of understanding rather than our rush to judgment. Given the complexity of the last century and the surrealistic knockdowns of the first two years of this century, quick judgment has become a need analogous to the kind of all-consuming hunger that is ready to eat grass and dirt to fill the void.

83.30 The moment you moralize in your novel, your book is no longer moral. It has become pious. Piety not only corrodes morality, but consorts intimately and comfortably with corruption. Piety and corruption get together like hot dogs and mustard. They have to. No one can fulfill the demands of piety; as a daily demand, it is too inhuman. So, it inspires its opposite--just for the sheer health of the body, if not the soul. Whereas morality, when subtle, brings proportion to human affairs. Tolstoy is a great writer, maybe he is our greatest novelist, because no other can match his sense of human proportion. We feel awe supported by compassion when we read Tolstoy. A remarkable achievement. We are in the rare presence of moral evaluations that are severe yet ultimately tender.

82.16 Anyone who worries about whether they are going to hurt somebody's feelings by their work is no more a writer than a surgeon who says to himself, "In making this incision, I am going to give this young woman a scar on her belly that could injure her love life for the next thirty years." The surgeon says, "Scalpel, nurse," and makes the cut.

He may be right or wrong in the need for the operation, but he keeps a necessary insensitivity to the rest of the context. Writers also have their own kind of restricted vision. They cannot afford to say to themselves, "This portrait is going to scar my good friend." Or my father Or my sister. If they feel such sentiments, they can't write. Indeed, a great many young writers think of all the people they're going to hurt, or, worse, those they're going to make enemies of, and, full of funk, begin to brood on the retribution that will ensue. So, there has to be something a bit maniacal about a young man or woman who would be an exciting writer. He or she has to be willing to get that book out no matter how many psychic casualties are left in its passage. On the other hand, a good young writer does well not to take an immediate advantage over people he dislikes by dumping on them in his pages. It's a bad habit to cash such easy checks. Ergo, the moral vision of the young writer must walk a tightrope.

81.26 I may not be a good intellectual, but my avocation is, nonetheless, to create intellections. I put them on like adhesive plasters. In the case of Gary Gilmore, however, I had to pull them off. As I explored deeper into what Gilmore's nature might be, I decided that every concept I had about him was inadequate. So I wanted the reader of The Executioner's Song to confront the true complexity of one human. That state of perception will always arise by studying any person close enough. That he was a murderer made my task simpler because we are all fascinated by killers. But any person studied in depth will prove fascinating. Take any soul alive, including that simple servant girl

Flaubert wrote about, and they will prove exceptional provided you get to know them well enough. It is certainly the yeast in any good marriage.

ATTACKS ON REALITY

Suffolk

Readers often have a problem when an author mixes real and fictional characters. I've never been bothered by that. As far as I'm concerned, it's all fiction. I can't conceive of a history that is not finally a creative and not wholly factual narrative. Let's say for the purpose of argument there are 1000 large and small details necessary for a particular historian to capture a given moment in time—Napoleon's return from Elba, the death of Robespierre, or John F. Kennedy on the night before he was assassinated—whatever is chosen, the historian has to decide which of a large number of facts are most relevant. He can't use them all. More important, he can't obtain them all. Let's say he chooses a thousand pieces of information which adhere in varying degree to various bodies of assumption on what actually happened. These pieces of detail are usually called facts.

Should the novelist come in, also ready to write about Kennedy's last night, he or she is not nearly as good, doubtless, at research and comes up with only 40 or 50 details that seem vital. Nonetheless, I would argue that the historian and the novelist are both engaged in writing fiction. The difference is that the historian uses more facts, although they can never be numerous enough to enclose the reality. Moreover, the historian usually writes in a style that's more pedestrian. But, there they are, both doing fiction. One is

sometimes sprightly, the other, often dull. The real point is that each, the novelist and the historian, are making an attack on the possible nature of reality. Such attacks are the fundamental element in good fiction whether the form chosen is history or the novel.

81.16 Yes, Borges is a conservative but I detest having to think of a writer by his politics first. It's like studying people by way of their anus. Borges has a magical ability to turn plots inside out. A magician's magician. I sometimes think he does in five pages what Pynchon does in 500. By his literary deeds, Borges poses the difficulty of comprehending reality. He shows us that every time we think our mind is approaching reality, we have only been writing a scenario to comprehend it. The scenario is the equivalent of an hypothesis which seems correct until new evidence subverts it. In the course of this subversion, however, we learn a good deal. The revised hypothesis, ideally, should be superior. Reading Borges, you live in this highly diverting and not always agreeable business of seeing elaborate hypotheses destroyed by the one event that is able to turn the hypothesis inside-out. Borges is always teaching us that it is not enough to live with Aquinas' dictum: Trust the evidence of your senses. Rather, trust them until they are dramatically revealed as inadequate, tricked or downright betrayed—then develop new senses. Borges is not the least bit easy.

74.3 Superstition? It's either the center of one's sanity or the edge of one's psychosis.

Paranoia is the most useful or the most destructive faculty of the human spirit. One never knows when it's devoted to your safety or to your ultimate breakdown.

Suffolk

I've always been drawn more toward realism than fantasy because it seems to me realism is endlessly interesting and finally indeterminable. Realism is a species of fantasy that's much more integrated and hard-core than fantasy itself. If you are ready to come to grips with the inevitable slipperiness of most available facts, you come to recognize that realism is not a direct approach to the truth so much as it is the most concentrated form of fantasy.

Pont/Lennon

MAILER: There is a famous story that Shelley rushed up to a mother, seized her infant, held it aloft and cried out: "Babe, speak! Reveal your immortal truth!" Like Plato—he was a great Platonist at that point, was Shelley—he believed the education you begin to receive when young obfuscates the instinctive knowledge with which you're born. Then, you spend the rest of your life trying to unmake that education.

Well, I too am able to believe we're born with a profound appreciation of the universe and do lose it in the first few years of our life, (not to mention the first few

weeks!) and then spend the rest of our time trying to gain it back. By the age of six, the school system makes certain we lose it. I don't think this is so awful. It is rather in the nature of things. It was intended that way. We're supposed to lose it and regain it. I think it is impossible to conceive of any real achievements in knowledge without that fall. Because if knowledge is something we receive merely by opening ourselves to it, well—in the West, we can't conceive of that. Most of us find something a hint repellent about Hindu philosophy. It's the idea that you receive wisdom without a Faustian effort. We react against the assumption that the more you give yourself to the universe, and the more passive, therefore, you become, the nearer you will be to the secrets of existence. This thought is, of course, antipathetic to the Western mind. We feel you only get to the kernel of real secrets by smashing the shell. That's the way we want it. It's what we were built to do. If this doesn't have to do with novel-writing, then I don't know what this book is about.

Suffolk

The 20th century artist who conceivably had the most influence on my work was not a writer but an artist—Picasso. He kept changing the nature of his attack on reality. It's as if he felt there is a reality to be found out there, but it's not a graspable object like a rock. Rather it is a creature who keeps changing shape. And if I, Picasso, have been trying to delineate this creature by means of a particular aesthetic style and have come only this far, then I am going to look for another style altogether. And off Picasso goes

into a new mode of attack on reality. It's as if you have to work your way up the north face of the mountain, come back and do the south face, the southwest face, so forth.

85.15 In line with Picasso, what I find most interesting in writing at this point is to keep making a new attack on the nature of reality. It's as if reality has some subtle desire to protect itself. If we keep pushing forward in the same direction, reality is able to handle us, or evade us, and may even do it in much the same way organisms become resistant to various antibiotics, pesticides and herbicides.

85.3 So, we tell ourselves stories in order to make sense of life. Narrative is reassuring. There are days when life is so absurd, it's crippling—nothing makes sense, but stories bring order to the absurdity. Relief is provided by the narrative's beginning, middle, and end. Without an end, you have an obsession, a constant circling around a fact or situation that cannot be put in place. The danger, therefore, is recognizing the insubstantiality of fact is that one is all too ready to welcome the art of the absurd. That is one good reason why so many are obsessive (and endlessly boring) in their recitation of supposedly well-seated facts.

SOCIAL VISION

84.29 The greatest writer I ever read was Karl Marx. He taught me to begin to think about social matters. He was analogous to a great football coach who would know how to get you to get the most out of your body before you even tried to learn the moves.

83.55 The great economists pondered the interchanges of human energy. They looked for those means and ways that such energy could be augmented institutionally or dissipated or even destroyed. In that sense, Das Kapital is a phenomenological novel with commodities serving (and experiencing an extraordinarily vital life) as protagonists. The commodities gain and lose energy just as humans do in novels. Perhaps in future years we will yet find some magnificent writer, probably not yet born, who will transcend the categories and write a work to marry those visions of society that have to do with how we offer human energy to each other, and steal it from one another, develop it, divert it.

81.26 Obviously, Freud brought off a revolution in our consciousness of the human psyche. But it may be wise to restrict his insights to the nineteenth century. I expect that

his final importance in intellectual history will be that he gave us more insight into the underside of that century than anyone but Marx. Freud is the key to understanding how people put up with the psychic weight of the kinds of lives they led in the 1880s, 1890s and early 1900s, locked up, terribly overstuffed, yet still engaged in lives with a considerable amount of power, energy, and pressure. In those days the psyche was analogous to a plumbing system. People were accustomed to living under high pressure, and finding ways, no matter how bizarre, to open the steam valve. That's not what we have now. Today we know a world in which people not only act out many of their anxieties and but work to find reassuring explanations of their conduct. Marx, for vastly more complex reasons, is also not adequate any longer. Corporate capitalism made their end run around him. So, I don't try to create a bridge in my mind from Marx to Freud, not any more. But when I wrote "The White Negro," back in the Fifties, I was ready to see that everything in society from the largest institutions to private and intimate personal moments might yet be connected as parts of a new and vast social vision. In a limited sense, I'm still trying. Of course, I grew up under the shadow of both men. I was nothing if not intellectually ambitious when I was young and wanted to come up with a comprehensive vision of existence. By now I've come to realize that I have neither the intellectual discipline nor the scholarly retentiveness to begin to do anything of that sort. Still, it is important to connect up what one can. Until we understand how we are obliged to lead our lives in ways we don't particularly enjoy, ("The mass of men enter into social and productive relations independent of their will." -Marx) until we understand more of those reasons why so many of us feel dead inside so much of the time, yes, until we

recognize how much of that is not due solely to our lack of imagination but is also the product of vast institutional systems of greed, injustice, and manipulation that we are schooled to perceive as relatively benign manifestations, we have arrived nowhere. The only way I can tell that something terrible is going on is that I feel a little duller than I ought to. Very often that's at the end of a long chain, you might say, of social processes designed to keep us malleable, amenable, and short on such powerful emotions as outrage at injustice. In that sense, I still try to find the ultimate indictment against all that's awful and, yes, evil in society--all the awfals--plastic, high-rise, mall architecture, static, interruptions for commercials, making money out of money. It's all there if one can find the grid on which to locate them. A devil's grid.

MORAL VISION

83.10 Back in 1959, Ralph Ellison and I were out in Iowa together on a literary symposium at the University of Iowa gotten together by Esquire. We had a lively audience, and the show went on for several intense days. At the end, it seemed a little strange to me that we had really worked that hard, gotten in so many discussions with students and attendant academics, and even argued with each other as lively as hell. When it was over, there was even a bit of sadness. Something which had become just a bit exceptional, was done. So I said to Ellison, "Why the hell do we do it? Why did we work so hard?" He said, "Man, we're expendable." I've always liked that remark. One's work is just that, expendable. If any of my ideas can succeed in changing the mind of someone who's more intelligent than myself, fine. If you advance a thought as far as you can and it's overtaken and improved by someone who will argue on the opposite side, then in effect you have improved your adversary's mind. We can, however, feel the confidence that someone will come along on your side who will take your opponent's improvement of your idea and lift it higher on your side. Democracy is the living throbbing social embodiment of the dialectic—thesis, antithesis, synthesis and new thesis.

Vitka/1984 You cannot have a great democracy without great writers. I believe that if great novels disappear, as they are in danger of doing, and our story-telling culture becomes television, then I think we will be that much nearer to fascism, benign, of course, at the outset if television is the prime mover. One of the remaining correctives in a democracy is novels, not just great novels but novels that at least reinvigorate our view of the subtlety of moral judgments.

Schroeder/1992 I don't like to say to myself, "I want to get this idea across to readers." Rather, I try to arouse a state of consciousness in the reader that will accommodate the material I am presenting. My hope is that my work will change their minds. Be it understood! I don't want to change everybody's mind in one direction—that's propaganda. Rather than move all my readers ten degrees to the left; I would be happier if I nudged some to the left, while others were swinging to the right. My fundamental belief about a good society is that the cops get better and so do the crooks.

59.2 I feel that the final purpose of art is to intensify, even, if necessary, to exacerbate, the moral consciousness of people. In particular, I think the novel at its best is the most moral of the art forms. Words are the gravamen of the Commandments, after all, and of moral strictures, and, more important, moral ambiguities. You are exploring the interstices of human behavior—which is the first approach to religious experience for many of us,

especially since the organized religions don't begin to cover the enormous and often terrible complexities of moral experience. The wisest rule of thumb for the would-be moralist is there are no answers. There are only questions.

Pont/Farbar

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

Some Am Man
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Speaking at the MacDowell Colony a while ago, I found myself saying, "There is no reason to believe the novelist is not better equipped to deal with the possibilities of a mysterious and difficult situation than anyone else, since he or she is always trying to discover what the nature of reality might be. It's as if the novelist is out there, sprung

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

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

75.11 Yes, it is no ordinary human business to say you are going to write a novel. You are planning to create a world. This God-like presumption may be intoxicating but it can never be comfortable. Nor should it be. To come up with a vision that can give us some notion of the Lord's mind—that partakes of beauty. [79.26] When we read Proust or Stendhal or Joyce, any, indeed, of the great novelists, Tolstoy, Mann, or Faulkner, or, on occasion, Hemingway, they do give us the idea that one special side of God's mind is not alien to the style of their mind.

SHAINBERG

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

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

This is not as impossible a mission as it seems today. In Russia then, a few novelists were revered like gods—or, if not gods, Tolstoy certainly was regarded by his readers as a major, virile, powerful saint. In turn, Dostoyevsky may have been looked upon as a mad genius but absolutely a genius. It was taken for granted that you could learn more about life by reading their novels than from your own personal experience.

The Russians paid just this exceptional attention to their novelists. So from Dostoyevsky's point of view, if he could only make that marvelous saint in his mind come to life in a book, then he could help to save Russia. All right, slightly demented, as was so much of Dostoyevsky, but it was not wholly unbalanced. He had one chance in a hundred, one real chance in a hundred. That's all a genius ever looks for, one live chance in that hundred. Geniuses, we do well to remind ourselves, are people who take those hundred-to-one shots because they see the luminescence in the flicker of the solitary candle.

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

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

BEING AND NOTHINGNESS

PONT/ MARCUS

The reader will be aware by now that I have some obsession with how God exists. Is He an essential God or an existential God; is He all-powerful or is He, like us, an embattled existential presence who may succeed or fail in His vision? This theme may become more apparent as the novels go on. I think this obsession began to show itself while I was doing the last draft of The Deer Park. Then it continued to grow as a private theme during all the years I was smoking marijuana. One's condition on marijuana is always existential. One can feel the importance of each moment and how it is changing one. One feels one's being, one becomes aware of the enormous apparatus of nothingness—the hum of a hi-fi set, the emptiness of a pointless interruption, one becomes aware of the war between each of us, how the nothingness in each of us seeks to attack the being of others, how our being in turn is attacked by the nothingness of others. I'm not speaking now of violence or the active conflict between one being and another. That still belongs to drama. But the war between being and nothingness is the underlying illness of the twentieth century. Boredom slays more of existence than war. I'd hardly read anything by Sartre at this time, and nothing by Heidegger. I've read a bit since and I have to admire their formidable powers, but I suspect they are no closer to the buried continent of existentialism than were medieval cartographers near to a useful map of the world. The new continent which shows on our psychic maps as intimations of eternity is still to be discovered.

Shainberg

I've never felt close to Beckett and haven't read his novels. Friends tell me the best of his literary substance is there. I am, however, familiar with Waiting for Godot, Krapp's Last Tape, and End Game, and I've always been fascinated with him—as if he were a Martian. He has done something, after all, that no writer ever did before. (Here I must give a passing comment on the concept of L'etre et Le Neant—Being and Nothingness. The trouble, however, is that we have to live with the words in English where the reverberation on the ear is not agreeable as it is in French.) When it comes to being or nothingness, Beckett has said in effect, "Nothing is half of life and it is the half I know about. I am going to dwell on that."

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

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

To this day, I detest it. When, for instance, I see a college play (and, given the number of my children, I've seen my share), invariably the college's dramatic department has opted for an absurd play. The reason is clear. You cannot judge the merit of the production too closely. Professors of drama at these schools do not wish to be so measured. It's unfailing how often they choose Lorca, Ionesco, Artaud—name twenty difficult and talented playwrights of the absurd and then set college kids to try to do something with it. They can't win and they can't lose. Can't lose because they are going to get laughs. Whenever an audience is not able to follow a non sequitur, an automatic laugh comes up. Especially from parents, roommates, relatives and friends. If you have an actor say, "The situation is getting downright boborigynmous," the audience will roar at the cacophony of the sounds and also to cover over their near-to-complete ignorance of the meaning of boborigynmous. A horde of such fail-safes are always available in absurdist plays.

About the time Beckett arrived on Broadway, therefore, I was certain, given the advance publicity, that he would be the worst of all. Seeing Godot, I had to recognize that something profound was going on, but I didn't like it. I was all too familiar with those states of existence. Marriage, after all, is filled with such situations. The rigamarole of marriage, the routine, the dreadful repetitions—the husband and wife can have the skill to press each other's buttons. Nothingness pitted against nothingness.

Put a husband and wife on opposite sides of the stage. Hardly a word need be said but occasionally one of them can flick a switch and a light will go on. The other person will rise up in a rage. Title the skit "Marriage." Except that Beckett added to all that an

acute sense of despair. Godot had dimension, resonance, vibrancy. Beckett's despair was sinister and joyful at once, as if he was saying, "once you feel this kind of woe, nothing will ever be that bad again." Never as bad again.

There was, inarguably, this remarkably quality in Beckett. Nonetheless, I was much opposed—because he was putting the emphasis upon nothingness. My simple outrage came to sententiousness: what if being is in trouble? We don't have a clue any longer to what it might be—there is such mis-use of being. For a daily example, every time you become interested in a narrative on television, a commercial comes on, and you are jacked over abruptly from pleasure to nothingness. The impact is there even though the commercial may be lively, noisy, even, on occasion, amusing. But your concentration has been broken at an instant when you weren't prepared for that.

Philosophically, Beckett seemed to be saying, "Nothingness is at least the half of existence, so let's study it, let's attempt to enjoy it." The assumption that it could be enjoyed was the irritant. If fiction depends on how life moves from being to nothingness, then back again, Beckett chooses to stay in nothingness. He's Mozartian, however, in the variations he can play on the theme. So I have to admire what I am bound to call the genius of his art. He is one of the very few writers of the second half of the twentieth century you can speak of as a genius. He took a deserted road and went far with it. But he never entered the dialectic between nothingness and being—let me try to exemplify what I am saying.

I have always felt that The Old Man and the Sea was one of Hemingway's failures. He wanted to bring off a short novel about a fine man who worked with his hands, a

fisherman. Hemingway was ready to write a novel of affirmation about just such a man. He had him row out to sea in his dinghy on a given day after many days of poor fishing. On this occasion, however, the old man hooks into the biggest fish he's ever had. He hangs on. The contest goes for hour after hour after hour after hour—the fish tows him for miles—but the old man wears the beast out and gaffs him. Since the catch is much too heavy to bring on board, he lashes it to the side of his dinghy, and starts to row back to shore. Then the sharks come and devour his catch. He's left with nothing. The critics all agreed this was Hemingway's view of the literary world—sharks out to destroy his beautiful catch.

Hemingway called it a novel of affirmation because the man never gave up. My critique is that there never came a moment in the telling when the man said to himself, "It isn't worth it. I'm suffering too much. I'm going to cut the rope." Because if the old fisherman had weakened for one moment, then Hemingway would have had to have a real affirmation. Which is why doesn't his fisherman cut the rope? What is there in him that fights the temptation? The critics also rushed for the most part to call The Old Man and the Sea Hemingway's great work of affirmation and they were wrong. It was not affirmative. The old Cuban was never tempted. So Hemingway never had to find a reason for the fisherman to say, "I won't cut it. I'll hold on." Not enough of a character had been create to answer such a question.

I think the same fault in considerably more elaborated form is present with Beckett. He never enters a situation where any of his people might try to break out of whatever trap they are in. They can be ensconced in garbage cans, or talking to a tape

recorder, which, speaking of traps, is no mean example. But there is never an arduous attempt to escape whatever trap they are in. Of course, one argues that Beckett dared something no one else had ever attempted and so was reaffirming being. Daring is, after all, a vital element in being. But we are not

PHILOSOPHY

59.2 I feel that the final purpose of art is to intensify, even, if necessary to exacerbate, the moral consciousness of people. In particular, I think the novel at its best is the most moral of art forms because it's the most immediate, the most overbearing, the most inescapable. One could argue about the meaning of a non-objective painting or of a musical piece, but in a novel, the brunt of the meaning is there. Because one is using words, the novel is much closer to the sense of commandments, moral strictures, and, most important, moral ambiguities. You are exploring the interstices of human behavior—which is the first

approach to religious experience for many of us, especially since the organized religions don't begin to cover the enormous and often terrible complexities of moral experience.

75.11 It is an extraordinary business to say you are going to write a novel. You are creating a world. When you have been writing for as many years as I have, you come to know that the God-like presumption of writing a novel may be intoxicating but it is never comfortable. You have become the prime mover of a world that you are fashioning.

79.26 Why do I think fiction is so important? For me there's nothing more beautiful than a marvelous novel. To be able to come up with a vision that is close enough to Godlike to give us a vision of how marvelous the Lord's mind might be--that partakes of beauty. When we read Proust or Stendhal or Joyce or any of the great novelists, name twenty, they give us this idea that God's mind might even be something like this. Don't you get the feeling when you read Tolstoy or Mann, or Faulkner, or, on occasion, Hemingway, that one special side of God's mind is close to theirs? That is the challenge.

82.14 As you get older, you realize that finally you must follow Voltaire and cultivate your own garden. You do it on the assumption that you can still produce an herb that will challenge much that is before us. Instead of seeing yourself as the embattled artist, you now pose in your heart as the alchemical artist. Art as magic rather than art as war.

83.10 I'm right and I'm wrong so often, that I have no interest in forcing people to think the way I do. I'm interested, rather, that people get better at thinking. If a book is good enough, you cannot predict how people are going to react. You shouldn't be able to. Provided it's good enough, it is not manipulative, and everyone, therefore, can go off in a different direction. I don't think it's an accident that I'm a novelist. We have a wicked point of view—wicked as opposed to evil. We are interested in upping the ante, so that more happens, not less. Evil is to know that the fruit of your efforts will be cruel but you proceed anyway. Wicked people do not know the results of their actions--they just know they are stimulating a change in the given. How it will turn out is anyone's guess.

81.16 Hemingway's life was cautionary to me. Several times in my life I think I veered away from doing certain things because of the final example he set. His suicide stood out as if our own father had taken his life, for Hemingway is the father of modern American literature, at least for me. I keep thinking of John Gardner's marvelous remark that when

a father commits suicide he condemns his son to the same end. Well, of course, you can go to suicide in more ways than killing yourself. You can rot yourself out with too much drink, too many cigarettes, too many failures, too much talk, too many wild and unachieved alliances—Hemingway was a great cautioning influence on us. One learned not to live on one's airs.

82.16 Writing may be an instinctive process, but it's not always clear what the instinct is saying. Sometimes you feel no more than a dull pressure to go in a certain direction for the oncoming chapter. You have to be able to hear the faint voice that prods you toward an honest continuation of the work. That can be hard to hear. A writer is also open to many a pressure to take the immediate advantage, even if it doesn't feel quite right. And

we all do that in various ways. And pay for it with endless falsities, flawed stimulants, or timid restrictions of our intent.

74.3 If I could give one moral maxim to a young writer, I'd say live with your cowardice.

Live with it every day. Recognize it, hate it or defend it, but don't try to slough it off.

Cowardice is a prime cause; apathy or writer's block is all too often the product.

74.3 You can tell a lot about every stage of sex—before, during and after—by odor. One knows one's own spiritual condition by one's scent. As one enters, one knows the happiness or the misery of the house by the smell one encounters. This faculty is therefore unendurable at times. You can walk in on old friends and realize that something's going to go bust with them, not yet, maybe, but it's there, maybe a month or two away, a year or two away. The odor speaks unmistakably of stale miseries.

85.15 The artist for whom I feel the greatest kinship is Picasso. He was interested in various attacks on the nature of reality, and he preferred to make each attack from a separate base. He'd move his techniques and his psyche and his wit and housekeeping and assorted spiritual equipment over to the other side of the mountain.

What I find most interesting in writing at this point is to keep making a new attack on the nature of reality. It's as if reality has some subtle desire to protect itself. If we keep pushing forward in the same direction, reality is able to handle us, or evade us, and may even do it in much the same way organisms become resistant to various antibiotics, pesticides and herbicides.

91.3 I've always felt that there was a good deal of compatibility between La Rochefoucauld and Gore Vidal. I say this critically. One of the largest arguments I have with Vidal and his mind and his work is that it represents the end of an intellectual tradition that began with La Rochefoucauld. Many of Vidal's remarks stand up, I think, in comparison. For example: "Whenever a friend succeeds, a little something in me dies." No one can accuse him of not being able to turn a good line. What I argue, however, is that that particular tradition has become inadequate for our present intellectual needs. The world is getting so genuinely complex (and perplexed) that it's almost hopeless to enclose it with aphorisms, no matter how brilliant.

For example: Not everything wilts when another novelist succeeds. There is also admiration, unwanted, it is true, but then, whoever insisted that we are absolutely without treachery to ourselves? Sometimes there is even an honest seed of congratulation burgeoning away in all that compost of envy.

91.3a While we are on aphorisms, there is that whole remark of Tolstoy's: "It is amazing how complete is the delusion that beauty is goodness." One can add: Yes, agreed. At the least, successful collaboration between good and evil, which is why Tolstoy distrusted it so.

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97.24 One of the things we do as writers is to keep postponing certain books we want to write. But when we get to the point where we think we are ready to do them, we no longer can. The relevant stuff has decomposed. You could write a collective biographical work about all the writers of my generation and how in our separate ways each of us got eaten out a little more than we expected, until we couldn't bring off all the things we thought we could.

Goodale/2000 Cynicism is okay for quick results. Topical writing is best when sharp and biting. Cynicism is perfect for that. But it's impossible to become a truly good novelist without undertaking some philosophical search somewhere in the course of your life. Cynicism can poison your highest faculties.

95.28 I don't think it's possible any more to write the great American novel. I speak of a huge, panoramic novel like Dos Passos's U.S.A. That was written at a time when there was still an illusion that you could encompass this country. I don't believe you can any more. Each section of the social pie has gotten specialized. Novels are much more detailed today than when I was young. You can't fake it anymore. Nor can you accumulate that much knowledge. Maybe one writer with enormous resources could write the great American novel if that was the only book he or she wrote.

95.37 One can say that if Picasso had been braver at certain points in his life, he might have been a more generous artist. Some of the cruelty might have gone out of his work. Something grand might have come in. He had enormous talent; he was, arguably, the greatest painter since Michelangelo. With generosity, maybe Picasso would have been nobler, but the odds are that he would have been less. Because the selfishness of the artist is often there to protect the part that is generous. To the degree that artists give of themselves to all people in a certain way, they don't want to give anything at all in other ways. There's an economy to generosity. And very often, the people who are the most

generous are not the most talented. I think the sanction that the artist gives himself or herself is that they've got to be selfish—absolutely!--or nothing will get done.

95.38 A great many artists are narcissists—certainly writers. That's because they're always consulting themselves. The basic joke about a writer is that no matter how much he is suffering, a small part of him is taking notes. Even as the love of his life is walking out the door, he takes notes on his condition. "How interesting, my left foot is now colder than my right foot." In Picasso's case, narcissism is too small a word. I think he saw himself as an intermediary between humankind and the forces that created the world and kept it in upheaval. I think he saw himself as a demiurge.

92.12 Every gain of freedom carries its price. There's wonderful moment when you go from oppression to freedom, there in the middle, when one's still oppressed but one's achieved the first freedoms. That's an extraordinary period. Then the freedoms begin to outweigh the oppression. By the time you get over to complete freedom, you begin to look back almost nostalgically on the days of oppression, because in those days you had a sense of importance, you could take yourself seriously, you were fighting the good fight, you were ready to become a martyr. Now, we are at the point where we don't even know what our freedoms are worth.

92.12 I can see some reasonably deep moral questions about whether people should be free to create hard-core pornography. I'd say yes, but let's not assume no damage is taking place. For some, it would be a curse, to others, a perverse blessing. But you're playing with your soul when you start being photographed in the sexual act. On the other hand, I don't think it's up to the government to forbid it. Let's say the moral shadings are analogous to men doing their best to knock each out in the ring while other men and women cheer them on. Note that I put it this way even though boxing is my favorite sport to watch.

Vitka/1984 You cannot have a great democracy without great writers. I believe that if great novels disappear, as they are in danger of doing, and our story-telling culture becomes television, then I think we will be that much nearer to benign fascism. One of the correctives in a democracy is novels, not just great novels, but trenchant novels that keep reinvigorating our view of how bad and corrupting a life can be as well as how good.

84.29 The greatest writer I ever read was Karl Marx. He changed the way I perceived society. It doesn't mean that I'm literally a Marxist, but he taught me how to think better. He was like a great football coach who enabled you to get the most out of your body.

85.3 We tell ourselves stories in order to make sense of life. Narrative is reassuring. There are days when life is so absurd it's crippling—nothing makes sense. So we tell stories to bring order to the absurdity. Relief is provided by the narrative's beginning, middle and end. Without an end, you have an obsession, a constant circling around a fact or situation that cannot be put in place.

83.39 I grew up at a time when writers were important. They were for my generation, what rock stars are to my kids today. When I was in college, if I had heard that Ernest Hemingway was going to speak in Worcester, Mass., I might have trudged the 40 miles from Cambridge. That was how we felt then about writers. In my view, maintaining the chalice of fiction at all costs was what the writer of talent was committed to. The shock came when I realized that this view of the writer doesn't hold any longer.