

Class, London 2/5/02, 4th revision 4/15

MASTER 4/20/95
with NM's
group up to date
MLA

A'

I keep thinking of all the major American novels that never got written. The ones that should have been. There's never been a really good novel about major league baseball. Ditto professional football. Certainly never a great novel about any huge corporation. It's as if those activities eat you up and any young writer who works in those leagues ends up losing it.

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Craft
Crystals

B

It's a mistake to be too autobiographical in fiction. Key experiences, the ones which are very much yours, form crystals in your creative memory. You can shine the light of your imagination into a crystal and get one kind of story. Shine it through in another direction and you find another story. But if you write the crystal up directly, that is, put the experience itself into your fiction, then you dissolve it. You don't have the source any more. Thomas Wolfe certainly violated that principle to vast effect, but then he was gone before he turned forty.

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3

C

Let's separate autobiography and memoir. One ^{is} the high form, the other is usually there to settle scores. No surprise if the memoir is for people who don't have much memory left. Invariably, what they are saying is, "I don't remember too well, but here is a record anyway of my spleen and pique and occasional generosity of spirit."

~~Craft~~
→ Blur
↑
gnd

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Psych

D

I look at my contemporaries in the way an athlete looks at rival athletes. You try to have a state of mind where you can see everything they do that's better than what you bring off, and also know where you're better. That's how good athletes look at one another. After all, they have to face each other.

Of course, this is not true for authors. But we do act as if it is. That's because, if we are good enough, our ^{contests} ~~games~~ ^{as much as} have their conclusions a hundred years after we are gone.

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Lit Biz

E

If there's one word that characterizes the literary world, it's envy. A lot of people have remarked on it. Gore Vidal explained it beautifully. I paraphrase what he said: the secret happiness that overtakes you when one of your best friends has gotten a bad review. An unpleasant truth lives in that remark. It's hard to have an open heart and congratulate a good friend in the literary world for getting a wonderful review. It excites envy. We're all envious of one another. And having broken away from the pack early when I was 25, that gave me a swollen sense of self-importance. ^{Of course, I wasn't} ~~At the same time, I~~ ready to feel all that important, much too modest still. So, one wasn't ready for it. ~~Much too much modesty.~~ One part of you shoots up, another lags behind. It's like having a prima donna of a hardon.

compare
to
other
Vidal story -
pick
feat

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Lit Big

F

Barbary Shore taught me one thing: I could get up off the floor. The reviews were unbelievably bad. After all, I'd taken myself most seriously after The Naked and the Dead. Well, do that, and the book review world will lie in wait for you. There are a lot of petty killers in the business. So there it was. My God. Time magazine's review ended by saying "Paceless, tasteless, graceless. He is beached on a point of no intellectual return." When you realize that that didn't succeed in draining all your blood, you think, "I'm stronger than I thought." It's the way a young prize fighter with a promising start can get knocked out early in his career, and come back from that to have a good record. The time he was knocked out has become part of his strength. You start writing a novel and think, "This could end up badly," but then you shrug: "All right. I've been knocked down before. It won't be the end of the world." That's important. I'm fond of Barbary Shore for that reason—not its merits.

cf.
Schumacher interview
Winter's Digest
concerning reviews

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Lit Bug

G

Large literary success is so often a matter of fortuitous publication. The Naked and the Dead had the luckiest time of my career. People were not that interested in the war immediately after the war. But The Naked and the Dead came out in 1948, and by then, people were ready for a good war novel. If it had appeared a couple of years earlier or later, I don't think it would have had the same impact.

On the other hand, when I wrote Ancient Evenings, (and that novel took eleven years), I ended up wishing I had been a bit more productive on a few of those working days and so could have come out twelve months earlier. That would have offered me a following breeze. There was large interest in the Egyptian dynasties the year before since New York had a massive museum exhibit that went all over the country. By the time Ancient Evenings came out in the wake, everyone had had it with Egypt. Bad timing.

These things affect the reception of your book. When Harlot's Ghost was published in 1992, the Cold War was essentially over. Much interest was lost. When I'd started seven years earlier, people were still fascinated (as I certainly was) by the CIA. My point is, don't write a book with the idea people are going to be interested, and therefore you are going to score. The situation is bound to be different when the work is ready to show itself. No need to calculate. It's a crapshoot.

The ideal, and as you get older you tend to get closer to the ideal, is to write only what interests you. It will be of interest to others or it won't, but if you try to steer your way into success, you shouldn't be a serious writer. Study best-sellers.

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Craft

H

Finding one's own style is usually elusive in the beginning. If you want to become a really good writer, it helps at a certain point to develop a unique style, but first you have to learn how to write. I remember one time when Nelson Algren was giving his writing class in Chicago, and invited me to sit in. He read a story by one of the kids while I was there. Pure third-rate Hemingway. The guy didn't have much talent to begin with, but after all, this was a writing class. So, afterward, I said to Nelson, "Why did you pay that much attention? He was just copying Hemingway." And Algren who was about ten years older than me and knew that much more about such things, said, "You know, these kids are better off if they attach themselves to a writer and start imitating him because they learn a lot doing that. If they're any good at all, sooner or later they'll get rid of the other style and begin to have their own. But first, they have to get attached to somebody." That was useful.

Over the years I found that, yes, I absolutely wanted have my own style. All the writers I respected had one, particularly Hemingway, Faulkner, and Fitzgerald

On the other hand, it takes years. Style is finally a set of decisions on which word is valuable and what is not in every sentence you write. That's an element. Another is the overall consistency of the style. You have writers who are exceptionally talented but are still what I would call amateurs. The most notable example would be a writer as gifted as Toni Morrison. Her style can shift from chapter to chapter—her strength is not

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there. She can write beautifully, and by the next chapter dawdle along in a pedestrian mode. It violates what she is at her best, her distinctive voice, her distinctive insights.

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Craft

1

Being a novelist is an odd human state. You can't write if you're in too deep a depression. And you can't if you're too exuberant.

One example I always give to a writing class. A young writer goes out. He's 17 years old and on a park bench with his girl. He kisses her. He's never had such a kiss before. That evening he writes, "I love you," he said, "I love you," she said." He stops, and says, "I'm a great writer!"

When you're in a good mood, your immediate experience can be too real, too alive, to be put directly into language. You have to wait. When you're in a bad mood, none of it can seem worth doing.

*That is
one of
many
reasons why
we can't
write at the
best of us.*

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11

J

delete

~~delete~~

A large part of writing a novel is to keep your tone. I love starting a book, I usually like finishing one. It's the long middle stretches that call on your character—all that in between! Those months or years when you have to report to work every day. You don't write novels by getting in two brilliant hours on Sunday. You don't write novels if you ~~lose too many days to a hangover~~ miss away your time by recovering from. There's a sequence of novelistic events going on in the unconscious. What you prepare on a given night in your sleep has to be expressed, ideally, the next day. We live, you see, in an arm's length relationship to our unconscious. It has to be convinced to trust you. Conceivably, it is equal in its independence to a servant who will not work for you unless there is respect.

Sometimes, when you're in a bad period and it's hard to work, you must, in effect, contract yourself for weeks running. "I'm going in to write tomorrow," you must declare, and, indeed, you do show up at your desk, even though there's nothing in you, and you have to sit there for 3 or 4 hours, whatever stint of time you told yourself that you were going to put in. Then, if nothing happens, you still show up the next day and the next and the next, until that recalcitrant presence, the unconscious, comes to decide, "This overseer can be, at least, trusted provisionally." Sometimes you have to live as responsibly as a good monk when you're writing a novel. That does get easier as you grow older.

this is
one of
many in
relation with
unconscious
and not the
best one

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K

*attach to the
preface by JTD*

I won't read a good novel while I'm writing a book. It's equal to working on a car, with all the parts out on the garage floor, when some bastard goes by in a Ferrari. Besides, when I read something good, I want to ^{do a critical piece,} ~~write criticism.~~ I want to tell where I think the author is terrific and where he or she is lacking. If readers are blowing it up too high, I may feel, "It's good but not ^{that} very good—lets get into ^{it.} ~~that~~ So it can be ^{highly stimulates you.} ~~immensely~~ distracting to read something good. Your mind settles on that book, rather than the one you're supposed to be working on. So your tendency is to protect yourself. Stendahl, for instance, used to peruse the Code Napoleon on the loo every day before he'd start to write. I read the New York Times.

Now I didn't always follow that rule. When I was doing The Naked and the Dead, I used to read Thomas Wolfe and Tolstoy. I didn't read them every day but they were on my writing desk and they were perfect for what I needed. Tolstoy, particularly, is compassionate but secrete. A wonderful combination. Not many people have it, which is why he is such a great writer. That tone was wonderful for The Naked and the Dead. It gave me a sense of how to treat my characters. And then there was Thomas Wolfe to steam up the book. If I wanted to describe a tropical sunset or how the jungle smelled, there was Wolfe. For the characters, Tolstoy.

The Naked and the Dead had a good, workmanlike prose and wonderful material. You don't always need a style. Just for certain kinds of books. Henry James, without style, is hopeless. But if The Naked and the Dead had had more style, it might have been less of a novel.

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Cont
from 12 13

It's a book written by an amateur, and so it has all the virtues of such a book. It's daring; it hardly knows what it's getting into. If I were to write it today, it would take me three to five times as long because I'd suffer at the number of novelistic taboos I was violating. You can transgress any taboo but you have to contemplate the possible price. You don't, for instance, violate point of view without pondering the loss of your novelistic integrity.

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Colleagues

L

Writing in anger void of irony is as bad as writing when horny. It's a species of pornography. You're just venting your rage. Pornography is usually empty because the people who are copulating are ^{generally} usually without character. So it's manipulative, exploitive.

Anger, void of irony, is of that ilk. But irony mixed with anger can be a heady

combination. One of the best examples of controlled, sustained rage, full of irony, is

Catch-22.

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Craft

M

Style is a reflection of identity. Given a firm sense of oneself, you can create a consistent style. But should your identity change, so will the style go through a shift.

Illness, tragedy, huge frustration, age itself are bound to alter your identity.

And, of course, one's subject matter will affect your style. A journalistic voice certainly can get into the style of a good many topical novels. But then, you wouldn't want Henry James to describe the life of Gary Gilmore. There is such a vice as too much style. For what Henry James wanted to do, his mode of writing was ideal. He had learned before anyone else knew, that polite social life, despite its ridiculous and/or its exaggerated aspects, also presented a spectrum of small options present at every moment. In social life, a person often chooses among three or four equally agreeable alternatives, even to making the choice of being a little warmer or a little cooler than he or she originally expected to be toward a given person. James had an extraordinary sense of that unforeseen vibration in the almost wholly expected, and he created a fictional world out of such insight, a world that depended altogether on his command of his style.

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Craft

N

I was in a small Paris hotel room on a given night when I couldn't sleep. The room was tiny, the double bed took up almost all the floor, and you could break your toe trying to walk around it, the room was that small. At a given moment I woke up and thought, "Oh, hell, I don't want to go rummaging in my suitcase for a book," and picked up a Gideon bible (in English!) on my bedside table. So I started reading. I hadn't looked at the New Testament for 30 or 40 years, but I remembered a man named Fulton Oursler who once wrote a book called The Greatest Story Ever Told. He sold a million copies as I recall. Now, perusing the Gospels themselves, I thought, well, this may be the greatest story ever told, but it is certainly told abominably. Sayings popped out of the text that were worthy of Shakespeare, but much in the double columns was baldly, badly, insufficiently described. A limp, often ungainly prose with a number of golden nuggets of language. I thought, there have got to be a hundred novelists in the world who can do a better job. I'm one of them.

I became intrigued with the notion. When I thought of all the hypocrites and corruptibles and power-seekers who had been living with the Gospel for centuries, using it for their own immediate purposes, standing foursquare on one gnomic chunk of text they could use to abet their aims, I decided why not just tell the story? It is, in fact, a fascinating one. The narrative notion is mind-boggling. We are dealing with a man who begins to realize through the evidence itself that he is the son of God. The difficulty of such a book would be, and I saw this in advance, that I would have to write about a man who was considerably nicer than myself. That's tough. To fashion a character who's

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meaner than yourself, easy. But to do someone who is better? Well, Jean Malaquais once said you can write about any character but one. I asked who, and he said, "You can't create a novelist who's more talented than yourself."

I thought, this is the test—not that Jesus was a novelist, far from it. But he's certainly possessed of a nobler nature than mine. Still, I thought, OK, I will take a whack at it. The problems are so interesting.

I decided he had to be more of a man than a god, an existential man, dominated by a huge cloud that hangs over him. It is precisely that he is the son of God. He doesn't feel worthy of that, but he's ready to do his best every step of the way. Not in command of every situation, but doing his best all the way. And he does have some startling successes.

In the beginning, the style was too Biblical. Moreover, I had to decide whether to travel in first person or third. First person would have everyone saying: "There's Mailer, world class egomaniac. Does he now think he's Jesus Christ? What a pompous ass! What a totally unpleasant human being!" I thought that's the bad side of it, but at least I can avoid the larger mistake of doing it in the third person. Because that would have to get mixed up with the Gospels, and the reader would wonder, "Is this sentence from the New Testament or has it been added?" That's going to make for a disagreeable experience. All right, then. First person. Damn the torpedoes, first person.

It became interesting. If it was too Biblical in the beginning, I did have a very tough editor who was totally irreligious, Jason Epstein. A rationalist if ever there was one. He was appalled that I was writing this book. We're friends, but he's one tough editor. And he's always either absolutely right or absolutely wrong, which is rare for

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editors. With him, you have to make a quick decision. Is he wrong or right? I concluded on this occasion, that, yes, the style was too Biblical.

After which, it was relatively easy. The book was short enough for me to go through seven variations on style. I had to find the balance between a Biblical rhythm and a contemporary one. Something that would not inflict a Biblical grip on you, yet keep the echo. Before I was done, it took a year.

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Craft
first person
or third

O

If you write in the first person, you gain much in terms of immediacy but lose insight because you can't move into other peoples' heads. Not without twisting the form.

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

In first person, the style has to be altogether tuned to the man who's telling the story. (Only once did I try having a woman tell the story. And that was Marilyn Monroe in "Of Women and their Elegance.")

When your narrator is a man, the key choice is not how bright he is, because however bright, he can't be smarter than you are. That's easy. You dumb him down to taste, or bring him up to your level. The real question is how tough is he? Do you have the inner sanction to create a man who's braver and tougher than yourself? The answer is yes. You can do that by exercising your imagination on how you might act if you were that much more of a man. I don't know, however, if I can answer the question for an author who's female. Can she, for example, write about a woman who is more sensitive than herself? Probably not. She could write about a woman who uses her sensitivity and sensibility more than herself, because she, the author, can then use all the frustrated times in her existence when the sensitivity and sensibility she possessed were not easily available. Following question: Can a woman write about another woman more

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passionate than herself? Probably. Or a woman who's colder than herself? Without doubt.

These are the sorts of questions you get into when writing in the first person.

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

In third person you are God—well, of course, not God, but one of the angels or demigods of God. Nonetheless, there you are, ready to see into everyone's mind. Of course, there are two kinds of third person—point-of-view third person where you remain in one character's mind, but are still writing from above.

Then there's the other kind of third person. You enter everyone's head. That's hard to do. Hard to get over the embarrassment of obviously being able to enter certain people's minds with more skill than others. That kind of Olympian third person, that Tolstoyan presence, needs experience, confidence, irony, and lordly detachment—but when you can do it, hurrah. Most of the great novels achieve that tone. Just about all the great novels of the 19th century.

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? delete ? yes Jmz 21
Psych-

P

Some talented people feel they haven't read enough to sit down and write. That is so dangerous! My great friend Malaquais had a terrible time working because he read more than anyone I knew. Like many another self-educated man, he had complete opinions on everything, a powerful mind. But he couldn't write quickly because he could see everything that was wrong in what he did. He'd realize so-and-so—Stendahl, Racine, Molicre—had done it better. This even extended into the narrowest corners of writing—some small Polish novelist who was known for one small ability—he'd read him or her too. Malaquais despised himself that he couldn't write a book as large as his vision of society. So he was terribly constipated as a writer.

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Q

*Craft
Plot vs. Character*

You have to be very careful how you move your characters in a book. You have, let us say, a really interesting protagonist, some young, talented athlete, and he's got a real chance to become a professional football player, but he is, by temperament, a warrior so he thinks maybe he should join Special Forces. All right, either possibility is open to him—he can do either one. So what do you decide? If, for example, you send him off to Afghanistan, you've got to learn a lot before you can go near the subject—sounds too difficult. On the other hand, what do you know about professional football? Probably not enough—but maybe you can fake that to a good degree. How did you ever get into this? The idea of the character seemed so terrific in the beginning.

These are the sorts of strategic problems the unconscious has to deal with. It has to feel pampered enough to be ready to explore down into the depths of what you know and what you are ready to learn about potential subjects.

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R

Colleagues

To compare Toni Morrison and Phillip Roth is not simple. The reading experience is different. With Roth there's an intimacy. I know his characters, I grew up with people like that. I'll say, "Well, I've got to hand it to Roth. He saw something in this guy who makes shoes, that I never would have bothered with. Roth had more of a human sense of the man than I had and I tip my hat to him--grudgingly I have to tip my hat. Because he really did it right whereas I just ignored that possibility." But then the combative ~~Latin~~ side of my brain says, "Yes, I did ignore that possibility. But surely there are other possibilities which are more interesting. The real argument should not be who knows more about this man, Roth obviously does, but is it finally worth spending time with that fellow?"

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

There is, however, more of an awakening about character when you read Toni Morrison. Roth is more agreeable to read because you can see all the skillful things he's doing and enjoy them. With Morrison it's like entering a strange country.

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Colleagues

S

I haven't looked at Jonathan Frantzen's work yet but by all reports, The Corrections is the first big, good novel that's come along in quite a while. Obviously, it has to be read if one wants any sense at all of what's going on in American letters. And I noticed when looking at the blurbs on the back, that something like 20 writers all gave their salute, and all of them were of Jonathan Frantzen's generation. Updike wasn't there, not Bellow, not Roth, I wasn't there--the oldest was Don De Lillo who gave the smallest praise. The others were new, respected names like David Foster Wallace, Michael Cunningham, and a host of others, all contemporary. Apparently, The Corrections is the book of a generation that really wants to wipe the slate clean and have a new literary movement.

I think the younger writers are sick of Roth, Bellow, Updike and myself the way we were sick of Hemingway and Faulkner. We never ^{hardly} talked about anyone ^{else} but them when I was a young writer and that feeling grew into resentment. Since they had no interest in us, we began to think, "Yeah, they're great--now get off the stage! We want the lights on us!"

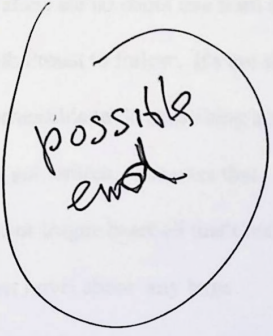
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[[possible end to On Writing]]

T

Here's a sad confession. I feel like I haven't done enough. So I've still got to work. The few times I take off a ^{week} ~~month~~, I hardly know what to do with myself. Can't retire because I have no resources. It's true. No athletic resources are left; I can't ski any longer nor box, I can't even walk a mile without paying for it. Mind you, I'm not feeling sorry for myself, it's kind of easy that I don't box any more. But, for an intellectual existence, what am I going to do? Play better solitaire? Try to ratchet up my chess game ^{no longer} again when my head is ~~not~~ there for that? No, writing is the one thing I can still do, and I keep doing it. I enjoy it more now than I ever did which means the product is probably less good. It's foolhardy to enjoy your own efforts too much. The ability to do literary work is a blessing, but blessings are best received without doing cartwheels. Although at my age, a cartwheel would be one fuck of a blessing.



possible
end

PF: One of the things I know British people, particularly writers, shy away from is engagements in creative writing and in fiction with contemporary Britain. The Second World War is now fair game--fifty, sixty years old. It seems--and it's partly true of you specifically--that America is much readier to do that. Writers in America are more ready to do that.

NM: Well, you know, we have so much more to define. In America we don't have it all defined. America is not so much a complicated country so much as it's a country of enclaves. You've always got a new enclave you can pop into. Whereas here in England and particularly the French--I'd hate to be a young writer in Paris, for instance, because there's that huge tradition, and it's a wonderful tradition, but the country has been defined over and over again from the 19th century. I mean, Zola alone ate up about one third of the possibilities. Not to speak of Balzac and Hugo. With Proust to follow. It's not easy to be a French novelist. You almost have to be incomprehensible to do something new.

Whereas in America, it's all the novels that never got written. The ones that should have been. There's never been a novel about major league baseball that's really good. Ditto professional football. Certainly never a great novel about any huge corporation. It's as if those activities eat you up and anyone who goes in as a young writer ends up losing it.

PF: Did you use your life experience?

NM: I think it's a mistake to be too autobiographical in fiction. Because if you've had certain key experiences which are very much yours, it's almost as if they form crystals in your creative memory and you can shine the light of your imagination through at different angles and get one kind of story, shine it in another direction and get another story. But if you write up the crystal directly, that is, put the experience itself into your fiction, then you dissolve it. You don't have that source any more.

Woman: So, would you be anti- memoir?

NM: Well, I am. First of all, I separate autobiography and memoir. One's the high form, the other's usually low. The memoir all too often is only there to settle scores. It's for people who don't have much memory left.

[laughter]

Well, when you think of all the great autobiographies and put next to them all the marvelous memoirs, there's no balance on the see-saw. What you're saying in a memoir is, "I don't really remember things too well and here is a record of my spleen and pique and occasional generosity of behavior, 55, 65, 80 . . ." In an autobiography, you can't cut corners as much.

PF: Your novels are not really that much about a young man's experience, are they?

NM: No, no. The only bildungsroman I ever wrote, I'd say, is Harlot's Ghost. That's about a young man who learns through the course of his experiences, and is somewhat wiser at the end than at the beginning, and that's a perfectly good way to write a book.

PF: Do any of your contemporaries terrify you?

NM: The ones who are dead. Hemingway. Faulkner. Dos Passos. I respect James T. Farrell. But my contemporaries--I looked at them the way an athlete looks at other contemporary athletes. You try to have a state of mind where you can see everything they do that's better than what you bring off, and know where you're better than they are. That's how athletes look at one another because they have to face each other. But in writing you can pick up your particular coterie and have nothing to do with the others. Which is what most of us do.

NM: If there's one word that characterizes the literary world, it's envy. A lot of people have talked about it. Gore Vidal explained it beautifully. I paraphrase what he said: the secret happiness that overtakes you when one of your best friends has gotten a bad review. You know, there's an unpleasant element of truth in that remark. It's very hard to have an open heart and congratulate your best friend in the literary world for getting a wonderful review. It excites envy. We're all envious of one another. And having broken

away from the pack early when I was 25, that gave me a sense of self-importance that was swollen. There was much too much of that. At the same time, since I wasn't ready for it, much too much modesty. One part of you shoots up and another lags behind.

NM: I have to think it's better.

PF: But you wouldn't presumably think that The Gospel According to the Son is better.

NM: No, that's . . .

PF: But to have written to that height, and then surpassed it, it is remarkable. Do you now look back at Barbary Shore and think, "I would now like to re-form that"--the way a theatre director or dramatist can go back and rewrite their work.

NM: No. No. For one thing, I always knew even as I was writing it that the end of that book was not good. Not good because there's this huge speech by the main character about what's wrong with the world, and I knew even then that's not the way you end a novel. Novels are not servants. But I never had an idea since how to go ahead with it, how to change it, how to improve it. To me it's a flawed book, a seriously flawed book. It got terrible reviews when it came out--maybe of all my books that received bad reviews, it deserved it more than any of the others. Because it started off interestingly. I was writing under the influence of Christopher Isherwood at the time. I loved his Berlin stories and I wanted to do something like that. The Berlin Stories are marvelous. Marvelous short stories which give a great sense of place. But I wouldn't know today

how to rewrite Barbary Shore. So I've never wanted to go near it. I value that book, however, for it taught me I could get up off the floor. The reviews were unbelievably bad.

PF: Pretty unfair, I think.

NM: Well, they were excessive. You know, I'd been pretty cheeky. I'd come out and take myself very seriously after The Naked and the Dead, and you know, there are people who will lie in wait for you. There are a lot of petty killers in the business and they're out to get you. And there it was. My God, Time magazine's review ended by saying "Paceless, tasteless, graceless. He is marooned on a point of no return." Something like that. "Paceless, tasteless, graceless," I do remember. So when you realize that that doesn't kill you, you think, "Oh, boy, I'm really looking forward to meeting the guy." And you learn. It's the way a young prize fighter with a promising early career can get knocked out early in his career. And then come back from there and have quite a good career. And the knockout is part of his strength, the fact that he was knocked out. Because that gives the strength to know you can come off a bad defeat and still get going. That gives you the readiness to gamble. You start a book and think, "This could end up very badly," but you shrug and think, "All right. I've been knocked down before. It's not the end of the world." That's important. So I'm fond of Barbary Shore for that reason--not its merits.

PF: How do you see politics in fiction then as opposed to now? Because I don't think novelists want to write about politics.

[cross talk briefly]

NM: For one thing, politics was less depressing in those days. There was the feeling that politics could make a change. Something flowered in the '60s. People thought, "We've been writing about these things for years and look what's happened!" For a little while we could even feel we were influencing the world.

Now, America's become a money nation... I will say Marx and Jesus Christ can agree on one notion which is that money leaches out all other values. At that point they come together. America has dumbed down over the last twenty years and there's not necessarily an audience any more for politics the way there used to be.

PF: If you were going to do serious fiction, how would you go about it now, if you can't do politics because people aren't really interested?

NM: Well, you don't write on something because people are or aren't interested--for a variety of reasons.

Success is a matter of fortuitous timing more than anything else. For example, with The Naked and the Dead, I had the luckiest timing of my career. There had been a few war novels before which had not been very good. Nor was the time good for them. People were not that interested in the war immediately after the war. By the time The

Naked and the Dead came out, three years later, people were ready for a good novel. If it had come out two years later, or a couple of years earlier, I don't think it would have had the same impact.

On the other hand, when I wrote Ancient Evenings, which took eleven years, if I had been slightly less lazy on a few of those working days and come out in ten years, not eleven, I would have been off with a following breeze. There was a huge interest in the Egyptians the year before in New York, a museum exhibit that went all over the country, but by the time Ancient Evenings came out, everyone had had it with Egypt. So, bad timing.

These are the sorts of things that have an effect on whether your book does well or not. When Harlot's Ghost came out in 1992, the Cold War was essentially over, and so much interest was lost. When I'd started seven years earlier, there was still a great deal of interest in the CIA. My point is, don't write a book with the idea people are interested, and you're going to score. Because the situation will invariably be different by the year it comes out. Often when you do score, it's a matter of luck.

The ideal, and as you get older you tend to get closer to the ideal, you set up your rails and you stay on them. There's less appetite for distraction. You write about something that interests you. Either it will be of interest to others or it won't, but if you try to steer into success, really, you shouldn't be a serious writer, you should study best-sellers.

PF Can we talk about style--the quest for style. I think in your career one could probably say you had four or five different styles.

NM: Absolutely fair.

PF: How important do you think it is for authors to find their own voice, to have their own style?

NM: It shouldn't be too important at the beginning. If you want to become a really good writer, then at a certain point it helps to develop a style, but once, I remember, Nelson Algren was giving his writing class in Chicago, and he invited me to sit in. He read one story by one of the kids while I was there. Pure Hemingway. Third-rate Hemingway. The guy didn't have much talent to begin with, but after all, this was a writing class. So afterward I said to Nelson, "Why did you pay that much attention? He was just copying Hemingway." And Algren who was about ten years older than me and knew that much more about these sorts of things, said, "You know, these kids are better off if they attach themselves to a writer and start imitating the style because they'll learn a lot doing that, and if they're any good at all, sooner or later they'll get rid of the style and begin to have their own. But they have to be attached to other styles first." That was truly useful.

Then, over the years I found that, yes, I absolutely wanted to develop a style. All the writers I respected had one, particularly Hemingway and Faulkner, Fitzgerald--we literary Americans had a few important authors who wrote in one style practically all the time and they were damned good. Then people like Farrell had his own rough style, but it was very good in its own way.

In that sense, you realized it would certainly be better to have a style than not. On the other hand, it takes years to develop a style. It helps if you go through a few deep experiences. That forms you. If someone you love dies, that could have a beneficent effect, ironically, on your style. A style is finally a set of decisions on what is valuable and what is not. What do you keep in a sentence, what do you not keep in? That's one element. The other is the overall presence of the style. It shouldn't alter too much. You have writers who are very talented but are still what I would call amateurs. Their style changes too much. The most notable example would be a writer as talented as Toni Morrison. Her style can shift from chapter to chapter--her strength is not in style. She can write beautifully, and in a pedestrian mode, you never know which will come next.

PF: She still has a distinctive voice.

NM: She has insights which are distinctive.

PF: Are you saying that's akin to a kind of artistic incoherence?

NM: When you use more than one style in a book, that's not--I don't recommend it. It's usually a sign of hysteria of one sort or another. Like, "How am I going to continue this damned book?" Being a novelist is a very funny human state. You know, you can't write if you're in too deep a depression. And you can't write if you're too exuberant. Empty phrases quiver on the page if you're in an overwrought state.

There is one example I always give to a writing class. A young writer goes out. He's 17 years old and he's sitting on a park bench with his girl. He kisses her. He's never had a kiss like that before; he comes back and writes, "'I love you,' he said, 'I love you,' she said." He thinks, "I'm a great writer!"

[laughter]

When you're in a good mood, too much of your experience is too real, too alive. When you're in a bad bad mood, none of it seems worth doing. When you write a novel, a large part of the art is to keep the tone going. I love starting a novel, I love finishing one, but the long middle stretches are where your character comes in. That's when you have to report to work every day. You don't write novels by doing two brilliant hours on Sunday. You don't write novels if you get stinking drunk after a good day and lose the next day to the hangover. I feel there's a train of events going on in the unconscious. What you prepare on a given night in your sleep has to be expressed, ideally, the next day. Otherwise you're keeping your troops out in the rain. You see, most people end up in an arm's length relationship to their unconscious. To wit, the unconscious has to trust you. The unconscious is conceivably equal in its independence to virtually another creature who will not work for you unless you respect it.

PF: So your advice is to write every day.

NM: Not necessarily every day but to know when you're going to write, really know it. In other words, if you tell yourself you're going to write tomorrow morning as you go to sleep, and you keep your word, then your unconscious can get to trust you. Sometimes

when you're having a bad period and it's hard to write, if you tell yourself for 2 weeks running, "I'm going in to write tomorrow," and you do show up at your desk, even though there's nothing in you, and you go in for 3 or 4 hours, whatever stint of time you told yourself you're going to put in, and nothing happens--but you still show up the next day and the next and the next, finally the unconscious if it's really got something to offer, is going to say, "the overseer can be trusted." The worst thing you can do if you decide you're going to write the next day is to go out when a pal calls and get drunk. Even worse, get laid. Awful. Because the next day you're not prepared to do the work; you're on the phone with the new girl. The thing is you have to live like a monk when you're writing a novel. That does get easier as you grow older.

PF: What about anger? I'm sure some of the stuff you wrote when you were younger. . .

NM: Yes, let's talk about anger. Because that's important. But let's stay with style for a moment.

Woman: About living like a monk . . .

NM: Living like a monk and style are separate topics. You can live like a monk and have no style at all. There's no royal road to developing your own style.

Woman: How much is your writing influenced by how much you've just read? Because I know writers who say that what they've just read influences their style a lot.

NM: It's true. A hazard. I won't even read a good novel while I'm working. I assume, for example, that The Corrections is a very good book but I'll have to wait to read it till I'm done with what I'm working on now. Because there you are, writing a book, there you are with all the parts of your car out on the garage floor. You're trying to reassemble the engine, and some bastard goes by in a Ferrari. And he's a competitor. Your reaction is, "I don't want to look!" In the distance I can hear a little sound and that's the roar of his motor. It's very distracting to read something good because then you want to write a piece of criticism on where this author is terrific and where he or she is not. Let's say people are blowing it up too high and your feeling is, "It's a good book but not that good--lets get into what's good what's not." It's can be immensely distracting to read something good. Stendahl, for instance, used to peruse the Code Napoleon on the loo every day before he'd start to write. Well, he didn't want his style affected by flights of fancy in one direction or another. Very sober. I don't know if that was for The Red and the Black or the Charterhouse of Parma. But, while doing one of those books, he did absolutely read the Code Napoleon every day. I read the New York Times.

Man: I read somewhere that you and Tolstoy had a close relationship when you wrote The Naked and the Dear.

NM: That was different. That was different.

Man: Sorry about that.

NM: No, that was perfect. If I say something is a rule, you can always break it. I used to read Thomas Wolfe and Tolstoy. I didn't read them every day but they were on my writing desk and they were wonderful for what I was doing. Tolstoy was there because he's probably the best single guy I can think of for a writer who wants to do novels that work to penetrate into human emotions. Tolstoy is compassionate but severe. That's a wonderful combination. Not many people have it, which is why he's such a great writer. He truly understand what people can do at their worst and yet he can still be compassionate about them to quite a degree so you feel for them. Yet he certainly doesn't forgive them for too little. That tone was wonderful for The Naked and the Dead. It give me a sense of my characters. And then there was Thomas Wolfe to steam up the book when I needed a hot description. Wolfe probably did as much harm as good to the book. But there it was. If I wanted to describe a tropical sunset or what the jungle smelled like, there was Wolfe. And for the characters, Tolstoy.

So there, in a sense, I'm violating what I just said. Possibly it's when you get older that you have to avoid other influences. But as Algren said first, you have to absorb a few other influences. After all, I didn't really have a style yet for The Naked and the Dead. I had a good, workmanlike prose and wonderful material. You don't always need a style. Just for certain kinds of books. Henry James without style is hopeless. But if The Naked and the Dead had had more style, it might have been less of a novel in a funny way. It was so simple. It was there to read.

Man: You've been quite critical about it.

NM: It's a book written by an amateur, and so it has all the virtues of such a book. It's daring; it hardly knows what it's getting into. If I were to write it today, it would take me three to five times as long because I'd suffer at the number of novelistic taboos I was violating. You can transgress any taboo but you have to know what you're doing. ~~It's~~ best if you have some sense of the spirits out there that are going to punish you for violating the taboo. Like blurring the point of view.

Man: Could I just ask again about your relationship with your subconscious? I can picture it more like Epstein's Jacob and the Angel in the sculpture, than having a civilized conversation with yourself. Because this thing of anger--what I read, and maybe this is fanciful, what I read, and this is reflected in the energy of the prose--it's a real humdinger going on in there.

NM: The anger?

Man: Yes, and how much of that---

NM: Anger without irony is as bad as writing when you're horny. It's a species of pornography; you're just venting your rage. It's pornography because it does not have character involved with the people who are copulating and so is essentially empty. It's manipulative, exploitive. Anger written without irony is of that ilk. But irony mixed

with anger--that's a heady combination. I'm happy when I get that. One of the best examples of controlled, sustained rage, full of irony, is Catch-22.

Man: When you get to the desk in the morning and you're engaging with your dreams, in your monastic cell, how do then process that material and deal with it ironically? I'm asking you the alchemical question, how do you get to the art?

NM: I think you're making the process more interesting than it really is. I'm not thinking all that much when I'm working. I've been doing it for so many years, that really, I'm like an old plumber who's carrying his lunch pail to the job. I'll go in, sense from years of habit that it's going to take me about 45 minutes to begin writing, so I usually try to keep yesterday's writing in hand. I'll edit it before I start. That warms me up.

But you are asking, how does the unconscious deal with it in sleep? Well, I don't pretend to understand this process. I know when I'm in touch with myself and when not. I take a peek at the handwriting and if it's not too manic nor too constipated and there are not too many corrections--something good was probably going on. But you generally try to keep your reactions at a fairly low level in relation to what's going on. Much better to be excited about what you've written on this day six months later.

As the years go by, my first drafts get less finished, but my editing gets sharper. So I can end up with a piece of prose that's as good as something written twenty years ago but the way I get to it now is different.

Man: Do you think there's a reason for that?

NM: It's simple. My talent is less than it used to be, but my workmanship is improving. I know more. And I know a lot more about how things can go wrong in a piece of writing.

You know, I keep referring to prize fighters. Not that writers and prize fighters are that much alike, although they are in certain ways. With a prize fighter, it all usually takes place over ten years. They go from being young to old after ten years in the ring. But as they age, they develop other skills. Less speed, but more wisdom.

Man: I suppose if you carry on the analogy, what the old fighter does have is the knowledge to pass on. An ex-fighter is the best trainer--not always, but generally, an ex-fighter. . .

NM: Well, with what you can pass on. Because fighters are stubborn and most trainers despair of teaching anything to the lummo they've got who could be great if he'd just listen for a little while. Young writers, if they're at all good, often have a great confidence that they're terrific. It's pretty hard to write unless you think so because without that kind of ego it's almost impossible to take the subtle rejections that come when you're a young writer, and the not so subtle ones.

We were talking earlier about style. --I started to develop one after The Deer Park was turned down by seven publishing houses. The book was in galleys already, but the original publisher got nervous about an act of fellatio. The studio head brings in a young would-be star and she goes down on him. It was written in the kind of language you'd

use in the middle '50s, not graphic at all. None the less, the publisher kicked the book out. Said I had to delete the scene or he couldn't publish. It wasn't easy, but I finally realized there was no living with myself if I did take it out--no living comfortably for a long time. So I then sent the book around and all these other publishers were saying, "My God, Mailer wrote The Naked and the Dead. There must be something really wrong with this book!" It went through six of the best publishing houses in New York, they all turned it down. Finally, the seventh house took it. And the man who was the head of that publishing house, a guy named Walter Minton, was like a railroad executive. He was not interested in literature, but in selling books. He said to me afterward, "My attitude was simple. I said to myself, 'All right, he wrote one terrific best seller, he wrote another one that was a flop, then he wrote this. I don't even have to read it. After all, he may be good again and it's cheap at the price.'" I think the advance was ten thousand bucks. So he took it. He's the guy who later printed Lolita when everyone else was afraid of it. He said, "With The Deer Park, nothing bad happened, so I was willing to take a bigger chance." He had a lot of balls, ^h and not much literary sense. His father had founded the firm

Well, going through those six rejections gave me such a rage at publishers that I was going to print The Deer Park exactly the way it had been. Do it for the historical record. Then, I realized it was badly written. I had been trying too hard to write an elegant book but the style was wrong for the material. It was missing all over the place. The more I looked at it, the more I realized it was half phony. So I started roughing up the style to make it more believable to myself. It already was in its original galleys but I made so many changes that they had to reprint. Then I went through them, and again, at

least 3, possibly 4, maybe 5 times I went through that book and in the course of it I learned an awful lot about writing.

It had become a matter of finding a voice that would hold the book together. The final style of The Deer Park grew out of that. But over the years I discovered that one style is not enough if you want to write about all sorts of things. So, Picasso became my model. Picasso changed his style every time he took a new approach to reality, usually when he had a new marriage. A new marriage for him was a new sense of reality.

Style is a reflection of identity, you see. When you have a sense of your identity, you can end up with a style. But should your identity change, your style can go through a serious shift. So illness, tragedy, huge frustration, age itself can alter your identity. Accompanying that is often a change in style.

Man: Can your subject matter shift your style?

NM: Journalism certainly gets into the style of a good many books that are topical. But then, you wouldn't necessarily have wanted Henry James to describe the life of Gary Gilmore. There is such a thing as too much style. For what Henry James did, his style was ideal. What he learned before anyone else knew it, was that polite social life, despite its ridiculous and/or exaggerated aspects, also has its almost ineluctable spectrum of small possibilities present at every moment. In social life, people can often choose among three or four equally agreeable alternatives, even make a choice down to being a little warmer or a little colder than you originally thought you might be with a given

person. James had an extraordinary sense of that, and created a fictional world that rotated about these little momentary decisions.

NM: I was in a small Paris hotel room on a given night when I couldn't sleep. The room was tiny, the double bed took up almost all the floor, and you could break your toe walking around this raised mattress, the room was that tiny. At a given moment I woke up and thought, "Oh, hell, I don't want to go rummaging in my suitcase for a book," and there was the New Testament by my bedside table. So I opened it and started reading. I hadn't looked at it for 30 or 40 years and I thought, well, Fulton Oursler once wrote a book called it The Greatest Story Ever Told, sold a million copies, I think. I thought, well this may be the greatest story ever told, but it's told abominably. You had sayings that were worthy of Shakespeare, but much of the stuff was baldly, badly and insufficiently described. A limp, often ungainly text with a number of absolute nuggets of language. I thought, well, there've got to be a hundred novelists in the world who can do a better job, and I'm one of them.

I got intrigued with the idea. When I thought of all the hypocrites and bastards, all the corruptibles and power-seekers who've been living with the Gospel for centuries and using it for their own purposes, I thought why not just tell the story? It's a fascinating story. The notion is mind-boggling. We are dealing with a man who begins to realize through the evidence itself that he is the son of God. The difficulty of the book would be, and I saw this in advance, I would have to write about a man who was nicer than myself. That's tough. To write about someone who's meaner, that's easy. But to write with someone better? Well, parenthetically, quickly, Jean Malouin once said you

can write about any character but one. I asked who is the one, and he said, "You can't write about a novelist who's better than yourself."

I thought, this is the test--not that Jesus was a novelist, far from it. But he's got a nobler nature than I have. Still, I thought, OK, I'll take a whack at it.

And I decided he had to be a man, an existential man, dominated by the huge cloud that hangs over him, which is that he's the son of God. He doesn't feel worthy of it but he's doing his best every step of the way. Not in command of every situation, but doing his best all the way, and having some startling successes.

And the style became the problem. In the beginning it was too Biblical. Moreover, I had to decide whether to travel in first person or third person. First person would have everyone saying: "There's Mailer, the egomaniac. Now he thinks he's Jesus Christ--what a pompous ass! What a totally unpleasant human being!" I thought that's the bad side of it, but at least I can avoid the bigger mistake of doing it in the third person. Because that will get mixed up with the Gospels, and what part has been added? It's going to make for an impossible read. All right, then. First person. Damn the torpedoes, and first person.

It got interesting. If it was too Biblical in the beginning, I did have a very tough editor who's totally irreligious, Jason Epstein,. He was appalled that I was writing this book, hated the thought. We're friends, but he's one tough editor. And he's always either or wrong, which is rare for editors but with himm you have to make a quick decision. Is he wrong or right this time? I concluded on this occasion, yes, the style is too Biblical.

After that, it was easy. The book was short enough for me to go through seven variations of the style. Because I had to find the style.

Man: You had never written anything like that before.

NM: It was a matter of finding the tone between a Biblical rhythm and a contemporary style. Something that would not inflict a Biblical grip on you, yet keep the echo.

Man: It was still very biblical-like.

NM: I couldn't escape that. I didn't want to, but it did take me a year and seven versions to find a balance--the most I've worked on style ever--other than the re-write of The Deer Park.

Man: What would you say for younger writers like myself are the major things you've learned to write good fiction?

NM: I've been trying to answer that all afternoon. Obviously, there's something I didn't say that you're looking for, so could you point the question more?

Man: When you rewrote The Deer Park about ten times, what did you learn?

NM: OK, now we've got a purchase. To begin with, writing in first person or writing in third person, is a great divide. When you decide you're going to do a book--sometimes it just happens that way--you start writing and you're in the first person, or in the third

person. And it works. Sometimes, it's a true dilemma. Because if you write in the first person you gain much in terms of immediacy and lose as much because you can't move into other peoples' heads without twisting the form into a pretzel.

The Deer Park underlined the difficulty. At one point, the man who was telling the story states, at a given point, that he's going to go from first person to third. Because he's now old enough to understand people he didn't understand before. Now, he can write about them in third person because he has much more of an idea of how they think.

In first person, the style has to be altogether tuned to the man who's telling the story and the man. (Only once did I try having a woman tell the story.) When your narrator is a man, the key choice is not how bright the guy is, because you know, however bright, he can't be smarter than you are. So that's easy. You can dumb him down to taste or bring him up to your level. That's no problem. The question is how tough is he? Can you write about a man who's tougher than yourself? The answer is yes. You can do that by using your imagination of how you might act if you were that much tougher. But I don't know if I can answer the question for an author who's a woman. I obviously don't have as keen a sense of the problems they are in. Can she, for example, write about a woman who's more sensitive than herself? Just guessing, but probably not. She can write about a woman who uses her sensitivity and sensibility more than the author, because the latter can use all the frustrated times in her life when you couldn't use the sensitivity and sensibility she possessed. Can a woman write about another woman more passionate than herself? Probably. Or a woman who's colder than herself? Without any trouble at all.

These the sorts of questions you get into when writing in the first person.

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

In third person you are God--well, of course, what you are is one of the minor minions of God. Nonetheless, there you are seeing into everyone's mind. Of course, there are two kinds of third person--point of view third person where you stay in one person's mind, but are still writing it from above.

Then there's the other kind of third person. You are God and enter everyone's head. That's very hard to do. Hard to get over the embarrassment of being able to enter certain people's heads with considerably more skill than others. That kind of Olympian person, that Tolstoyan third person, needs experience, confidence, irony, it needs distance--but if you can do it, well, hurrah. Most of the great novels are written in that tone.

Just about all the great novels of the 19th century.

Woman: What I hear from my friends who haven't actually written a book yet--they feel they haven't read enough to sit down and write.

NM: That is so dangerous! My great friend Malaquais had a terrible time writing because he read more than anyone I ever knew. Like many another self-educated man, he read omnivorously, and he had complete opinions on everything, a powerful mind. But he couldn't write quickly because he could see everything that was wrong in what he did. He'd realize so-and-so had done it better. And this extended into the narrowest corners of writing--some small novelist who was known for one small ability but really had it--he'd

read him or her too. And he despised himself that he couldn't write a book as large as his vision of society. So he was terribly constipated as a writer.

Man: Most people who read a lot become critics.

NM: Yeah. Very often good critics.

NM: For that matter, I enjoy doing criticism. It's so relaxed compared to novel writing with its huge responsibility--you're like a god and so you have treasure like a god and have to be very careful how you dispose of your characters. You have, let us say, a really interesting protagonist, some young, ambitious guy, say he's a fine athlete and he's got a chance to become a professional football player, but he's a warrior so he thinks maybe he should join Special Forces and see if he can get to Afghanistan. All right, either possibility is open to him--he's interesting, he can do either one. So what do you decide? If you send him off to Afghanistan, you've got to learn a lot before you can go near the subject--that sounds too difficult. But what do you know about professional football? Probably not enough--but maybe you can fake that at least.

These are the sorts of strategic problems the unconscious has to deal with.

So writing a novel in the third person omniscient demands more than the third person bound to a limited point of view. In the first person it's easier to fake things because of the immediacy. On the other hand, the first person tends to be shallower. More immediate, more lively, but finally you can end up in a cul-de-sac. There are many dead ends lying in wait in a first person book.

Man: In terms of women novelists, have you found female novelists who have opened female characters, or aspects of female culture? Do you ever recognize that there's a difference?

NM: Wait--- is there a great difference between female writers and male writers?

Man: No. What I was asking: do you as a competitive novelist recognize that Toni Morrison brings to female characters other things?

NM: She certainly has a deep sense of black women, no question. But does she bring more to it than other writers? I don't know how good she is on black men. I felt less certain of her portraits of black men. But what she does with black women is an education and I respect her very much for that. I've only read one or two of her novels, by the way, so I may be speaking on too narrow a base.

Man: I know more of black women from Toni Morrison than I do from any of the black women I know.

NM: That's what novelists are there for, to tell you the things your friends won't tell you, and that you can't perceive.

Man: But within the context of you being conscious of your competitors, do you get more from reading Toni Morrison because she is so radically different and her experience is so radically different than you would from another white, Jewish author?

NM: Roth...

Man: Yes.

NM: It's totally different. The experience is altogether different. With Roth there's a certain intimacy. I'll read it and I know his characters, I grew up with people like that. And I'll say, "Well, I've got to hand it to Roth. He sees something in this guy, for instance, this guy who makes shoes, that I never would have bothered with." Roth had more of a human sense of this man than I had and I have to tip my hat to him--grudgingly I have to tip my hat to him. Because he really did it right whereas I just ignored that possibility." But then it gets into a very complicated argument because the Jewish side of my brain is, "Yes, I ignored that possibility, but surely there are other possibilities that were more interesting. And, why, finally the real argument should be not who knows more about this man, he obviously does, but is it finally worth spending time with this man?"

With Toni Morrison, it's more on the order of: I really know so little of black women, particularly black women who don't have a voice, who are not educated, and after all, I should know more. In American you often grow up with black women being the nicest people you know, they're working in the house, have tough lives, their children

are in trouble, but they're there, they work for you most days, and they're good people, so you know them in certain ways, but you don't know them the way Toni Morrison does, obviously. So there's more of an awakening about character when you read Toni Morrison. Roth is more comfortable to read because you can see all the skillful things he's doing and enjoy them. But with Morrison it's more like entering a strange country.

PF: As a American, and where we started, with all those different constituencies, all that stuff left to record and discover and analyze--does the experience of others within your literary world thrill you now?

NM: Experience of others in my literary world?

PF: Now, it seems to me there's a very exciting plurality of American views. And they have inherited from you--

NM: I don't know how much they interited from me, really. I think there's been a huge movement among homosexual writers in America, a great many books on homosexuality now. That's almost been a new consciousness among American writers. Then you have the phenomenon of --I haven't read Jonathan Frantzen yet but it's the first truly big, good novel that's come along in a long time. Obviously. A novel that has to be read if you want any sense at all of what's going on in American letters. And I looked at the blurbs on the back of the book and it's received as many blurbs from writers as any book I've

ever seen. Writers don't usually go around giving blurbs to their equals--for one thing they're usually not approached.

Man: Looking at Roth, Bellow, Updike--they've gone beyond looking at America-- With you, they're the giants of American literature, really.

NM: Well, we're very unstable giants at this point. I think the younger writers are sick of us the way we were sick of Hemingway and Faulkner. We never talked about anyone but them when I was a young writer and our feeling grew into, "Let's get rid of those guys. Yeah, they're great--now get off the stage! We want to write!" What I noticed with Frantzen which was fascinating, there was something like 20 writers gave their salute to the book and they all were of his generation. Updike wasn't there, Bellow wasn't, I wasn't there--who was there? The oldest was Don De Lillo who gave the smallest praise. It was just fascinating. And the others were all people like David Foster Wallace, Michael Cunningham, some you would never have heard of, but they were all contemporary, and I had the feeling this book is the book of a generation that really wants to wipe the slate clean and start over again. Have a new literary movement. .

Man: How much do you read?

NM: I don't. That's a sad confession. ^The reason is that Ferrari roaring by outside. I can't read when I'm writing, and in recent years, for personal reasons, I'm writing all the time. Its like I feel I haven't done enough, haven't done enough. So I've got to work.

The few times that I take off a month or two, I don't know what to do with myself. I've become a typical example of the man who can't retire because he has no resources. It's true. I have no athletic resources left; I can't ski any longer nor box, I can't even walk half a mile without paying for it. I'm not feeling sorry for myself, it's kind of easy that I can't box any more. And as an intellectual existence, what am I going to do? Play better solitaire? Try to become a chess player again when half of my head for being a chess player is not there? No, writing is the one thing I can do and I keep doing it. I enjoy it more than I ever did which means the product is probably less good. It's riskier to enjoy your own work.