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Krim in his odd honest garish sober grim surface is a child of our time. I think sometimes, as a matter of style, he is *the* child of our time, he is New York in the middle of the 20th Century, a city man, his prose as brilliant upon occasion as the electronic beauty of our lights, his shifts and shatterings of mood as searching and true as the grinding of wheels in a subway train. He has the guts of New York, old Krim, and it is not so impossible that when the digital computer in the mind of new historians begins to tick over the psychic ash heaps and spiritual dumps of this insane, cruel, rapacious, avid, cancerous and alas—in the end—cowardly city, they will say if they have a sense of the past that yes, in the work of Seymour Krim lives one of the truest beats of how horrible, how jarring, how livid and how exciting was this city where the best of us burned and burned without a war, a cause, an underground, or a passion for the blood.

NORMAN MAILER
New York, September 1960

Views of a Nearsighted
Cannoneer
by Seymour Krim
(1960)

(1980)

Soon to Be a Major Motion
Picture
by Abbie Hoffman

Introduction
by Norman Mailer

suggest?
has to be
revised

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Abbie is one of the smartest—let us say, one of the quickest—people I've ever met, and he's probably one of the bravest. In the land from which he originates, Worcester, Mass., they call it moxie. He has tons of moxie. He is also one of the funniest people I ever met. He is also one of the most appealing if you ask for little order in personality. Abbie has a charisma that must have come out of an immaculate conception between Fidel Castro and Groucho Marx. They went into his soul and he came out looking (or at least he used to look) like an ethnic milkshake—Jewish revolutionary, Puerto Rican lord, Italian street kid, Black Panther with the old Afro haircut, even a glint of Irish gunman in the mad, green eyes. I remember them as yellow-green, like Joe Namath's gypsy green eyes. Abbie was one of the most incredible-looking people I ever met. In fact, he wasn't Twentieth century, but Nineteenth. Might just as well have emerged out of *Oliver Twist*. You could say he used to look like a chimney sweep. In fact, I don't know what chimney sweeps looked like, but I always imagined them as having a manic integrity that glared out of their eyes through all the soot and darked-up skin. It was the knowledge that they were doing an essential job that no one else would do. Without them, everybody in the house would slowly, over the years, suffocate from the smoke.

If Abbie is a reincarnation—and after you read this book you will ask: how could he not be?—then chimney sweep is one of his past lives. It stands out in his karma. It helps to account for why he is a crazy maniac of a revolutionary, and why, therefore, we can say that this book is a document, is, indeed, the autobiography of a bona fide American revolutionary. In fact, as I went through it, large parts of the sixties lit up like areas of a stage grand enough to hold an opera company. Of course, we all think we know the sixties. To people of my generation, and the generation after us,

the sixties is a private decade, a good relative of a decade, the one we believe we know the way we believe we know Humphrey Bogart. I always feel as if I can speak with authority on the sixties, and I never knew anybody my age who didn't feel the same way (whereas try to find someone who gets a light in their eye when they speak of the seventies). Yet reading this work, I came to decide that my piece of the sixties wasn't as large as I thought. If we were going to get into comparisons, Abbie lived it, I observed it; Abbie committed his life, I merely loved the sixties because they gave life to my work.

So I enjoyed reading these pages. I learned from them, as a great many readers will. It filled empty spaces in what I thought was solid knowledge. And it left me with more respect for Abbie than I began with. I had tended to think of him as a clown. A tragic clown after the cocaine bust, and something like a ballsy wonder of a clown in the days when he was making raids on the media, but I never gave him whole credit for being serious. Reading this book lets you in on it. I began to think of Dustin Hoffman's brilliant portrait of Lenny Bruce where, at the end, broken by the courts, we realize that Lenny is enough of a closet believer in the system to throw himself on the fundamental charity of the court—he will try to make the judge believe that under it all, Lenny, too, is a good American, he, too, is doing it for patriotic reasons. So, too, goes the tone of this unique autobiography. Comrades, Abbie is saying, “under my hustle beats a hot Socialist heart. I am really not a nihilist. I am one of you—a believer in progress.”

He is serious. Abbie is serious. His thousand jokes are to conceal how serious he is. It makes us uneasy. The literary merits of his book are circumscribed by a lack of ultimate irony. Under his satire beats a somewhat hysterical heart. It could not be otherwise. Given his life, given his immersion in a profound lack of security, in a set of identity crises that would splat most of us like cantaloupes thrown off a truck, it is prodigious that he is now neither dead or demented. He has to have a monumental will. Yet it is part of the civilized trap of literature that an incredible life is not enough. The survivor must rise to heights of irony as well. This is not Abbie's forte. His heart beats too fiercely. He cares too much. He still loves himself too much. All the same, we need not

quibble. We have here a document of a remarkable man. In an age of contracting horizons, we do well to count our blessings. How odd that by now, Abbie is one of them. Our own holy ghost of the Left. Salud!

(1989) cut

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Introduction
Message: New and Selected Poems by
Luke Breit

After months of working a lot, I had to work very hard for the last few weeks, and my body landed finally in the same place as my spirit-gridlock. My legs cramped when I stood up to walk. This stint came to an end about five days ago, and I have been trying to relax ever since. I've been drinking and going out with good people, but it's not been coming around all that well. After a day of catching up with correspondence (which, after months of writing, feels like ditch-digging), I picked up this collection by my old friend Luke Breit, started pretty much on page one, and read most of the poems. Now a couple of hours later, my inner traffic is beginning to move forward again. Luke Breit is Doctor Breit, Traffic Consultant for locked-up synapses and totally fucked-up grace. Reading his poems proved one hell of an unexpected benefit. While I knew he was good, nay, very good, since he has surprised me before by how good he is, nonetheless I had never read so many of his poems at once, and to my surprise, I think they've done what poetry is supposed to do, and even used to do until the last forty or fifty years of Western Civ began to ruin everything that curved or sagged or dripped or blew or offered you subtle shadow. Poetry used to put a little wine in your lungs with a fresh breath, and just so, I felt a little bit alive once more after reading *Messages*.

Years ago, I wrote a blurb for *Words The Air Speaks* which went like this:

I think Luke Breit succeeds in writing with a fine edge right into the tendrils of natural change. No one does more with a mist, or the quiet desperation of a root, no young poet I know is so successfully and consistently tender without ever embarrassing the

reader. Luke Breit celebrates emergence from gloom—what a nice feat. What skill in the simplicity.

If Breit knows how to take us out of gloom, it is because he understands sorrow, particularly a lover's sorrow. He catches that place where paranoia is so sensuous it can ameliorate anguish before it has to increase it. Listen to these lines from "Things to Believe In":

*Evenings she doesn't come are few but empty.
The furniture of the house belongs to her,
comes alive when she calls it
by name. Nights when her life
is lost in other forests, fires here
go out, blankets are tossed by no one
to the floor. The dogs believe all night
the river is her car and rip the dark with howls.*

I don't want to curse him with too much praise, but I think he is in the act of becoming one of the best romantic poets we've got. Which may not be as large a compliment as one suspects. How many yuppies, still worming their way along the neon floor of cancer gulch, are still romantic? Or is the compliment larger than one suspects? Perhaps. His metaphors dance and take you through turns you were not prepared for, and to your conservative consternation enjoy, because change, for once, is liberation:

*In the darkness before dawn,
with the trees shaking their drenched leaves
above the roof in an erratic splatter
of sound, I move, transparent and ghostly,
through the house. Half asleep,
I am still thin with dreaming.
Light has not yet come to fill out this form,*

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to soak it pound by pound in the visible world,
to cover it with leaves of the real.

In boxing, there are subterranean dreams of being
knocked down by blows so artfully delivered that they
pound nothing out of you. The fall is free. You wake
up refreshed. Breit can put three or four perceptions
together in a row that have something like that effect.
Some crusty old dead-ass sorrow in oneself is rejuve-
nated. Luke is a rainmaker. Put him in a desert, get
him to recite, and clouds will gather.

*In your bed, you feel
how death has plumped the pillow
and made the light bulb flutter
as if it was a candle.
You will not die tonight,
but it is closer than before.
And it is good to listen many times
to the world. It has sounds you can take
into the long silence.*

If I could be a poet, I wouldn't mind at all being as
good as Luke Breit.

— Norman Mailer
Brooklyn, NY
July, 1989

Norman Mailer

GENRE

68.26 Writing is a very *odd, spooky* activity, and when you get to filmmaking, you realize that the spookiness is tripled, especially in improvisational filmmaking, which can't be formalized. It's luck. What you have in your favor is all the lifetimes of the people working with you. What you have against you is the fact that you don't have a script, so you need all sorts of skilled practitioners of your art besides yourself.

69.43 In the novel, you start with a bag of words, and the way you put the words together has meaning. In movies, you get another kind of vocabulary. You have little bits of film strip, each the equivalent of words—five words or five thousand. But the strips are put together as individual words. Constructing a movie out of a field of experience that you have recorded gets to be wholly fascinating because you are working with a brand new vocabulary. You are putting things together in a way that nobody has ever put them together before.

80.10 A painter may find something on the street that he thinks is incredible. Sometimes he'll glue it right into the painting. It becomes part of the work. In *The Executioner's Song*, newspaper stories become part of the painting and part of the transcript of the trial—a lot of found objects. I felt acted upon, in a funny way, while doing this book, by painting terms. It was as if I'd shifted away from being an expressionist, not an abstract expressionist, but an expressionist like Munch, or Max Beckmann—those kinds of painters who worked with large exaggeration and murkiness and passionate power—into now being a photographic realist, even a photographic realist with found objects. The reason, I think, is that a painter like a writer sometimes gets to a point where he can no longer interpret what he sees. Then the act of painting what he literally sees becomes the aesthetic act. Because what he sees is incredible. It may or may not be possessed of meaning. Reality, itself, closely studied is mysterious, and it's elusive.

70.15 Dealing with words is a mysterious matter. It's very insubstantial because they're just little pieces of dark curly pigment on a white page. Well, working with movies, on "Wild 90," I think I got back to the freshness of it when I was a kid. I felt the same sort of interest when I was 18 and starting to write stories. It was wonderful when I was 18 and writing. To be corny about it, it was first love. And that's gone. It's been gone for a long time. I'm a professional writer now. I can do a job. And I'm very much like a prizefighter who packs a suitcase and gets on a train or a plane and goes out to fight an opponent in some town. It doesn't matter what the conditions are particularly. I still have reverence for writing. But you can have reverence for something and not necessarily get much immediate pleasure out of it. I still get pleasure out of writing. But the *act* is not pleasurable. It's hard work. But making a film is a cross between a circus, a military campaign, a nightmare, an orgy, and a high.

AUD

70.15 Novels are supposed to hit people where they live. You're supposed to read a novel and change your life. A movie is supposed to keep you living. That's why one serious critic said of my film, "Beyond the Law," "Norman, you don't understand the movies. The movies are there to keep people alive." You go to a movie and you pay your money and you're supposed to have a good time. The horror of life should be alleviated for a little while. That's what the critics feel movies are supposed to do. But what I'm saying is that the horror of life has become so completely pervasive that movies no longer enable sensible and sensitive people to survive. It sickens them. The most beautiful movie in the world will sicken you, if you can conceive of a better movie than the one that was there.

WORK

88.1 I like making movies more than writing now. I'm tired of writing. I've been doing it for forty years, and there's not much fun left. I get a hold of myself in the morning and go into that room and dig more stuff out of that old gut. The gut rebels. It's tired of being called on to perform these yeoman duties. Whereas in making a movie you're really not an artist, more an aesthetic engineer. You've got a lot of talented people working under you and they come up to you and you've got to make instantaneous decisions about matters you know very little about. Like hairdo, costume. And so it's kind of fun. You're using everything you've learned to the best of your ability. It kept reminding me of being at war but in a good way. It was like the ideal war. Nobody got killed, but you ate in a different place every day, usually standing up. There were vehicles. The biggest problem, just as in the army was where do you put the vehicles. You know when you pick a location shot, you pick it by availability to a road. You could be in the deepest forest you ever saw, but it's got to be 100 yards from the road because that's where the trucks are parked. So there's a reverse logic in filmmaking. You start with the costs and work toward the art.

COLL

87.17 Movies go deeper into the psyche than literature; they're more primitive. Years ago I said that if you were to set up a spectrum of sex, memory, dream and death, you could put film between memory and dream and have no trouble at all. Whereas literature calls on many other factors. Literature is really much more social than film. Film is tribal. When you read a book, it involves the room you're sitting in, whether you're happy in that room, whether your social situation is appealed to by this book. If we read Hemingway, we're depressed by the fact that we're sedentary in relation to his heroes, that they're having more exciting lives than we're having, and that depresses us. If we read Henry James, we're wistful that we don't know the nuances of society the way his people do. But when we're in a movie, if the movie's good enough, we don't know whether we're perceiving something about life or entering something deeper, in the nature of dreams—those mysterious transactions that go on in dreams.

WORK

87.17 What I love about movie-directing is that it has *nothing* to do with writing. On a day-to-day basis it's the exact opposite. When you direct you use every part of your experience that you can't put into writing, all the little things that you've learned over the

GENRE/3

years that you can't use when you're writing a book. Particularly when you're writing a novel, you tend to focus on what belongs to that novel, and all sorts of things that you're also interested in never get into that novel. They really have no occupational life for a couple of years. They hang around in you, collecting psychic fat.

87.17 Time is your money in a film—literally, it's your money. If you don't get done with this scene by lunch, then your going to come back in that stupor after lunch, and you're going to lose not half an hour or an hour, but *two* hours. So you're gambling. And that's exiting. And not only are you gambling, you're getting immediate results. Because you learn in the next hour or two whether your gamble won or lost. And then the next day in the dailies you see if it *really* came out. Making movies, you're absolutely *in the world*, in the existential sense. Whereas in literature, you withdraw from the world in order to perceive the world. So they really use opposite sides of your self. I think you get closer to your soul in a book, but you get closer to the functioning of your psyche with a movie. Let me see if I can amplify that a little. I think when you are writing a book there are moments when you feel as if you're beaming a torch down into the abyss, and you see the lineaments of your soul down there. You don't travel down there in your soul, but you do perceive it. Because in the course of writing a book you get out to some very astonishing places, and you do have the light of your intuition, and it does throw a long light. When you are making a film, particularly after you've shot it and you start editing it, you look at the same scene over and over to take all the little dead spots out. Makes you feel like a surgeon. What it also does is it involves your taste, and your concentration. Seeing it over and over and over again you have to keep your taste alive; you have to exercise your ability to concentrate upon the same material over and over and over. And I'm the guy who wrote, "Repetition kills the soul," which I thought of many times when I was editing. But it doesn't kill it in this case, because it's not *absolute* repetition; you're chasing down repetition in order to alter it slightly. And as you do that you're tuning your psyche.

WORLD

81.16 I tend to think of all journalism as being fiction, most of it dreadful fiction. There is the general assumption that journalism limits itself to what actually happened--faithful or at least accurate record of the event—and that novels are made up, that they are about events that never took place. Granted there is a tremendous amount of overlapping. People are familiar with the ways in which novels are close to reality. A novel often is straight journalism if you know the characters' real names. There are funny conventions about this; I've said several times, of *The Executioner's Song*, that if I changed the names, no one would argue that it was not a novel. They would have said it's not a terribly imaginative novel; it's awfully close to real events. But they wouldn't have said how dare Mailer call it a novel.

WORLD

GENRE/4

81.16 The journalistic writing that I did started with "Superman Goes to the Supermarket," a piece about Kennedy and the Democratic Convention in 1960. If there was a style that followed, it began there. What happened was that I didn't know how to write about political conventions—at least not in conventional terms. I wasn't really interested in politics; I thought they were boring. The politics were the same I had been suffering through in the fifties. But what seemed fascinating to me was that Kennedy was a protagonist rather than a candidate and that he offered something new to American lives—this daring and romantic and surrealistic and cockeyed idea that the president could be a young man and have an attractive wife. The only thing I will take credit for is that I had enough sense to see that this was more important than all the politics. In other words, the shifts in public opinion came out of many elements that are not available to the historians. One of them is whether the President of the United States gives people energy in their inner lives, their dream lives, their unspoken lives. Or whether he takes it away from them. Carter was detested by everyone precisely because he took energy away from everyone. It was like having to listen to a dull minister or to a high school principal, always talking to you. Reagan is liked even by people who can't stand his politics because in some odd fashion, he seems to give us energy. Just by his presence. Because he is interesting to think about. Problems that are interesting to think about give us energy. So we tend to hate those politicians who take our energy away. Like Carter. And tend to love those politicians who offer us energy because they are intriguing. Out of this vague perception, I blundered into a way of writing about that convention—which was writing about it as though it was a great novelistic event.

81.16 Until *The Armies of the Night* I was very much in the background of my non-fiction narratives. You could feel that there was somebody looking in all these events, and presumably it's the author, but I wasn't a formal narrator as such. However, one of the things I began to feel was wrong with journalism is that immense events were boiled down to 300 words. There's no way to write about an immense event in 300 words or 3,000 words unless you're a poet. So the trick was not to boil it down but to expand it, to blow it up and to use 30,000 words or 20,000 words to write about events usually described in 2,000 or 3,000 words. What I began to feel is that the character of the narrator or the personality of the narrator was probably more important, or as important, as the event. Not that the narrator is important in his own person; it was not that I Norman Mailer, was equal to the Democratic Convention, but that I had a set of prejudices. These prejudices were terribly important, and you as the reader couldn't begin to understand this event unless you understood me enough to reflect upon my perceptions. By being able to take account of me as a narrator, the reader could say, "Oh well, Mailer is impossibly romantic," or "Mailer is outrageously nihilistic," or "Mailer is a fool"—the reader could make his own interpretations of the events. It occurred to me that that's the way we always read. When I read my contemporaries, I'll say to myself, "Well, Vidal or Updike"—or whoever it is—"is good on this and not very good on that." I thought that's the least we can do in journalism: let the reader be aware of the bent of the writer. That is objective reporting.

work

81.2 I have professional respect for the novel. It's the most difficult of all the forms I've tried. I've always been fond of journalism, but I don't respect it in the same way because I think it's easier. Artists always have a kind of regard for virtuosity, and although the fact that something is easier doesn't therefore mean it's a lesser form, deep down I think most artists feel that if it's hard you respect it more.

work

81.2 These days everyone is laying claim to having started the New Journalism. Tom Wolfe has been writing manifestos for the last ten years. But I think if I started any aspect of that New Journalism—and I did—it was an enormously personalized journalism where the character of the narrator was one of the elements not only in telling the story but in the way the reader would assess the experience. I had some dim instinctive feeling that what was wrong with all journalism was that the reporter pretended to be objective and that was one of the great lies of all time. What this really was, was an all-out assault on *New Yorker* writing, and at the same time I had—as all of us did—a vast respect for the *New Yorker*. So I was a little scared at what I was doing. I thought I was either all right or all wrong. The stakes were high, but by now it's more comfortable to write that way. At the same time, I wasn't taking journalism that seriously. I never felt that I was doing something more important than the novel. Wolfe feels it's more important, but I've never laid that claim. The thing that makes the novel so hellishly difficult is that you have to elucidate a story from the material. If you make a mistake then you may not discover it until the book is done and your looking back on it ten years later. It's very much like chess in a funny way. Good chess players always speak of the best line of continuation. They can analyze a game afterward and really replay the points of no return and see whether a knight should have been moved to another box. In the novel, you're left wondering.

coll

81.6 If a novelist can take someone who's a legendary figure and invent episodes for them that seem believable, then they've done something wonderful. There's that meeting between J. P. Morgan and Henry Ford in Doctorow's *Ragtime*—I think it's one of the best chapters in American literature. It told me an awful lot about Morgan and an awful lot about Henry Ford, and the fact that it obviously never took place made it even more delicious. When you know the kind of bias and warp with which historians write their history—they're dealing with 10,000 facts and they select 300 very careful ones to make their case, and call that stuff history when we all know its fiction. The mark of a great historian is that he's a great fiction writer. Very few novels are ever true works of the imagination. I mean, how many Kafkas have there been? I'm not trying to avoid the fact/fiction debate to protect myself. There's one thing that did worry me in my second book about Marilyn, *Of Women and Their Elegance*. I invented an episode for her that was possibly more extreme than anything in her life. And that gave me pause; I worried about it, I'm still worried about it. I'd feel less bad about it if I'd done it with a man. I start thinking, "Well, my God, what if after I'm dead somebody writes

GENRE/6

about me and they put me in a homosexual orgy, which I've never been in, I'd detest that, wherever I'd be." And I wrote it—this'll sound incredibly demented—but I wrote it with the idea that Marilyn, wherever she is, would accept this treatment of her. But it's a large assumption. So I do have a continuing uneasiness about that part of the book. On the other hand I do feel that there's no portrait without it.

WORK

81.6 Journalism is easier than novel writing because you know the story. I mean, give me a good story that history wrote for me, and I'm content—all I've got to do then is write it. The difficulty of writing 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.

WORK

82.16 Movies are more likely than literature to reach deep feelings in people. Movies are more primitive, I would argue. Film directs itself to more primitive states of consciousness. People who can't read get profound reactions out of movies. I would also say that to the degree that film reaches us in a precise way, it's no good. Film is best when ambiguous. A truly good film will affect two people profoundly, but they'll argue for hours over the message. One might say it's a satire, the other, a tragedy. That's as it should be. Film should reach way inside the psyche and prove truly disturbing. One person can go through horror watching a film, another person laugh their head off. That's good film. Bad film is when everybody laughs on cue. Then they are being manipulated. They have merely entered the engines of manipulation of the great institutions.

WORLD

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WORK

82.16 Ever since the late sixties I've wanted my nonfiction to read like a novel rather than the digested contents of the first stomach of a cow—which is what most nonfiction is to me. Someone spends a lot of time studying a body of material, they digest it, and write books. They skip the confusions. That's not interesting. We never know the living origins of the conclusions. What is fascinating to me in another writer is how his mind works. If I can obtain clues that way, I can improve my own mind. But to suppose an author can digest a subject so well that there is no need to think about the subject independently is disagreeable. So I don't like the way most nonfiction is done. Whereas the novel changes our lives to some extent. Marriages have broken up, for instance, because someone read a novel and decided the life of the character in the book was more interesting than their own. Good novels are painful to read. I guess it is possible, however, for nonfiction to be somewhat existential. An historian could say, "I start this project with two opposed hypotheses. I'm not sure which one is correct. As we explore the material, let me show the arguments for one, and then the other. In the course of it, maybe we'll arrive at more of an answer than I have now." Although, to bring that off in truly sustained form is so dangerous, and would so violate the canons of the profession of history, which insist that you go for one stance, not two, that it doesn't often happen.

GENRE/7

It would tend to agitate exactly what disturbs most people about history in the first place, which is that they learn somewhere between high school and college—or is it between graduate school and life?—that history is not history, but a series of immensely sober novels written by men who often don't have large literary talents, and have less to say about the real world than novelists. That's a disturbing discovery. That historians are not dealing with fact, but with the hypothesis they developed in relation to a series of isolated data. The desire to make these facts glow as facets in a mosaic that will enable us to perceive the past is not often done. Once we come to realize that no historians do it more closely than novelists, then all history becomes a novel. Just as any novel is the history of the working of one man's imagination, and so is a real historical artifact to illumine a period for us.

WORLD

or

WORK

79.32 I think of nonfiction as living on two stomachs, like the cow. The material is eaten; it's partially digested; it's regurgitated and then it's digested again. In other words, in a book of nonfiction, there is a tendency to present the author's conclusions to the reader, and while this is not true for all works of nonfiction I think it's true for most of them—most serious works of nonfiction. You read it because you want to know what the author thinks definitively about a subject, and the author will present his thinking process to you sometimes—sometimes he doesn't. But he literally digests the material, and when he does present a scene, it's as illustrative material to make a difficult passage more simple. The one thing that nonfiction calls for is understanding—clear understanding of what's being said. It's hard to think of a good book of nonfiction whose waters are not clear. In *The Executioner's Song* I wanted to give the readers the feeling that they are participating in the life of the characters they're reading about. And to the degree that they're participating in it, they shouldn't understand everything that's going on any more than we do in life. Maybe they should understand somewhat more than we do in life, but not everything. The moment we understand everything in a book, it can't possibly be fiction, not the way I define it.

WORLD

73.43 I'm a great believer in the gestalt, and one of the things I would say is that journalism gives, or almost always gives, a false impression of the event, because journalists have no interest in the gestalt. There have been a priori decisions made in journalism that certain elements of experience have to be recorded as carefully as possible. If a man is giving a speech, his topic is of cardinal importance; the title of the lecture is indispensable; the name of the lecturer is crucial; and whatever quotations taken from the speech are best given accurately—although if you don't know the *tone* of the speaker you know nothing. The assumption goes that all the other stuff, which is marvelous, is really not as crucial as these few tenets that these journalists cling to. The difficulty is that these journalistic tenets, these psychic stances, get over to other fields of inquiry. History, for instance, from what I gather from graduate students, has become an almost intolerable fact machine. To go back to the novel, one reason why it would be dreadful if the novel died is that the novel is one the more formidable attempts of

GENRE/8

Western civilization to deal with the notion of whole experience. A really good novel is a whole experience. A really great novel—*War and Peace*—is much more than that. Finally, it's everything. When a novelist says he's working on something ambitious, if it's really ambitious, his answer is going to be that he is writing about everything.

WORK 75.13 I don't take journalism as seriously as the novel, for one reason: I've always found journalism easy. And I have terrible trouble with a novel's story. Characters come to me, situations, descriptions, but the story kills. In a novel you've got to decide whether your character gets out of the bed and turns left or turns right. And you have to keep making those decisions all through the book. If you make a wrong decision, you can ruin your novel. What I love about journalism, what makes it easy for me, is that I have the story. If I'd written *The Fight* as a novel, I'd have to decide does Foreman win or Ali. I'd lose six months deciding who wins. So, you know, there it is; Ali won. It's a marvelous story told that way.

coll 75.13 Every good novel is a failure. Not mine but everyone's. Dostoevsky's career is a failure. He didn't write the book he had in mind. He died with a sense of frustration. He had this absolutely great book in which he was going to write about a saint. He did write about people who had visions of being saints but lived in evil. Alyosha in *The Brothers Karamazov*, for example, is the least convincing of his characters. Dostoevsky died with a profound sense of failure in his mission because he wanted to educate the Russian people to the nature of saintliness, which he felt was absolutely crucial to their survival as a nation. If you try hard enough to create something great, set your sights very high, you're bound to fail by the very stretch of the imagination. But in the more limited technical sense, I don't know, maybe my own novels are failures. I don't think in these terms because I'm on the inside writing them. We're all professionals; we all do the best we can on a given day. So if it isn't as good as we wanted it to be, maybe we didn't make the best run with the energies we had. That's too bad, but there's today's work to do.

WORLD 68.1 No, I don't agree with critics who say the novel is dead. I believe the novel has its own particular resource, which is almost 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 for hours, weeks, years. When the novel is dead, then the technological society will be totally upon us.

WORLD 82.16 Certain human relations are comparable to literary forms. For instance, the one-night stand is like a poem, good or bad; an affair of reasonable duration, a short story. By this logic a marriage is a novel. In a short story we're interested in the point. In a novel we usually follow the way people move from drama to boredom back to drama again. And we often judge a novelist by his skill in moving people in and out of these

GENRE/9

high and low areas of existence. Of course, marriage is exactly like that. In marriage, our interest is not that a given point is made in a given night, but the way that recognition is confirmed or eroded over the weeks or months to follow. The narrative line of all marriage, in that sense, is good days and bad days. And most people like to live in the form of a novel. Just as there are people who like to live in the form of a short story. Psychopaths have lives that consist of poems, mostly bummers.

Grobel/1983 Why are good novels painful to read? Excellent question. Name me any great novel you've ever read that didn't bore you in part while reading it the first time. A great novel has a consciousness that's new first. And any time we undergo that, we get bored because we have to withdraw and digest this new consciousness before we can go back to it. I've been bored in part by *Moby-Dick*, *The Red and the Black*, *Anna Karenina*, *The Scarlet Letter*.

COLL
B
WORK
Lennon/1999 Back in 1967 when I wrote *The Armies of the Night*, I divided the book into fiction and nonfiction. I was saying, in effect, that they're equal. When you write history, you're writing a species of fiction. What one's doing, ultimately, is giving one's version of life. And how one arrives at one's vision of life is somewhat different in a history than in a fiction, but they are much more alike than people recognize. So that's why I called the two subdivisions of *The Armies of the Night*, "History as a Novel," and "The Novel as History." I've always felt they're very much related. Let me give you an example. There's something like 30 pages in my new collection, *The Time of Our Time*, on Marilyn Monroe and Arthur Miller taken from my biography of Monroe. It's as factual as my sources could permit, but to me it reads like fiction. That is, it's a narrative of a movie star and a talented playwright, who are having a very happy marriage, and if it appeared in the pages of a novel and you changed the names, it would still read. And my 1979 book, *The Executioner's Song*, absolutely defies category, because I use the real names of the people. I gave it a terrible subtitle. I called it *A True Life Novel*. I regret that very much. I think it's slightly better than Truman Capote's equally awful subtitle to *In Cold Blood: A Nonfiction Novel*. I could have made it a novel by changing all the names. Call Gary Gilmore, Harry Killmore, and so forth, and, it would have been a "key" novel. People would have said, "Oh, so-and-so is so-and-so in that book." But by keeping the same names I pushed the envelope forward on what a novel is and what it isn't. I would say that what makes a novel is not whether the facts occurred or not. What is important is the way you present these facts. I would argue, then, that since I wrote it in the form of a novel, it is a novel. The form, the medium, determines the message. And the message you receive from a novel is different from the message—usually less interesting—that comes to you from nonfiction. Therefore, I like my nonfiction to read like a novel. By which I don't mean that I fudge the facts. On the contrary, since I'm already out on a limb, I'm careful about the facts.

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WORK

83.46 *The Executioner's Song* is one of my best books. *Ancient Evenings* is my best book. There are two tendencies in my writing, the realist tendency and the symbolic tendency. And what you have to remember is that *The Naked and the Dead* is in a sense an anomaly. Before I became a soldier I wrote a long novel about a mental hospital called *Transit to Narcissus*, a murky, romantic, highly overcharged, symbolic novel; and had the war not come along I probably would have gone on in that direction, writing novels very much in the manner of a writer I very much admire, Iris Murdoch. Since then, however, I've lived with these two possibilities in my writing, and while *The Executioner's Song* is the flowering of one of those tendencies, *Ancient Evenings* is the flowering of the other.

WORLD

95.22 Most people think the line between fiction and nonfiction is a Berlin Wall. I think, on the contrary, that it's a barely marked boundary. I like working back and forth on that boundary, being a range rider on that line.

WORK

95.7 I'm all for journalists using a literary style. I just wish they didn't have to write their stories the same day in the daily newspapers. If you can take a day or two or three to write a story, it will be a much better story, and better still if journalists have more space. You know, I was one of the people who founded the *Village Voice*. It has changed enormously, but what it does now is give a writer a lot of space. The daily news is a delusion. It's a dream. The idea that you're getting something as it's happening and you know what's happening is absurd. Analyze a news story. Do you really know what happened as you read it? If you got it two or three days later, you still won't be at the event, but you might have a richer picture of what happened if the reporter had more time.

Short
Versions

ECONOMICS

AUD 65.6A I think I suffered more over the reviews of *The Naked and the Dead*, even the good ones, than over the reviews for any other book. I wanted to sit down and write a letter to every critic—they had misinterpreted something I said even though they liked the book. It's only after 20 years that you begin to see it as a primitive rite. At it's best, reading reviews (and this is true for bad reviews as for good ones if they are well-written) is as nourishing as a wild game dinner. I'd never dream of not reading reviews. It'd like not looking at a naked woman if she happens to be standing in front of her open window.

WR 82.14 I think for anyone who's become an author early and has had a great deal of success, as Capote did and Vidal did and Styron did and I did, it's not automatic or easy afterwards to look upon other people with a simple interest because generally speaking they're more interested in us than we are in them. This has nothing to do with character, but with the social situation—I am more interested in Marlon Brando than he is interested in me—and it has an immense impact when you're young. You become a mirror and the only way you can perceive events is through the mirror of your self.

AUD 82.14 Buying a hardcover book is a sacramental act, and when people have to pay that much money for something they have to have a certain respect, even a touch of awe, for the author. And if you're unsavory in public life and everyone knows your name, you're not going to sell lots of hardcover books. The people who sell lots of hardcover books are usually not in the public eye—Saul Bellow, John Updike, John Cheever—and very few people can break that law. Capote's broken it successfully. But I certainly haven't.

AUD 83.40 I treat bad reviews like a politician running for office treats a loss of support. A couple of friends called up after the bad review of *Ancient Evenings* appeared in the Sunday *New York Times* and asked, "Are you all right?" I'd seen it a week before, so any unhappiness I'd had about it was now digested. I said that it was like realizing that the county chairman in Schenectady is deciding against your candidacy. But to lose Schenectady doesn't mean that you stop running. It isn't my ego that's hurt, it's my damn pocketbook. Getting a bad review in the *Times* hurts you as much as any single review can. When I was younger I used to consider a bad review a personal insult and would consider a guy who wrote it evil. In fact, I have never actually punched out a reviewer, which I say with a certain amount of wistfulness. I once sat next to Philip Rahv after he had written an atrocious review of *An American Dream*. Philip Rahv had his virtues, bless him, but physical courage was not one of them. So I made a point of sitting next to him at a party, and while I smiled at him, I kept my body firmly pressed into his, leaning into him, while we had a long 30-minute conversation about something else altogether. I was perfectly pleasant the entire time and everything seemed all right except we were both titled alarmingly from my leaning into him. He was in an absolute panic, waiting for me to strike. It must have seemed an odd sight from the other side of the table: He was a heavy man, and the two of us must have looked like two doughnuts crushed together in a box.

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If I had no economic pressures on me I would have written books that were more literary and more well-rubbed, and I would have spent more time on them. I would have polished them and would have sighed over them and I probably would have taken them more seriously than I take my books, although I do take them very seriously. But I would have been truly solemn about them. And I probably would not have gotten into journalism, but I'm speculating. I probably would have gotten into journalism anyway, particularly with the history we had in the sixties. I'd never come up with a story of my own that was as good as the things that were happening all through the sixties.

WR 81.2 Early success changed my life. For a long time after the success of *The Naked and the Dead*, for seven or eight years, I kept walking around saying nobody treats me as if I'm real; nobody wants me for myself, for my five-feet eight inches, everybody wants me for my celebrity. Therefore my experience wasn't real. All the habits I'd formed up to that point of being an observer on the sidelines were shattered. Suddenly, if I went into a room I was the center of the room, and so regardless of how I carried myself, everything I did was taken seriously and critically. I complained bitterly to myself about the unfairness of it until the day I realized that it was fair, that that was my experience. It's the simplest remark to make to yourself, but it took me ten years to get to that point. Then I began to realize the kind of writing I was going to do would be altogether different from the kind of writing I had thought I would do. After *The Naked and the Dead* I thought I would write huge collective novels about American life, something that required going out and getting experience, and my celebrity made it impossible. I then began to realize that there was something else that I was going to get which hopefully would be equally valuable, and that was that I was having a form of twentieth-century experience which would become more and more prevalent: I was utterly separated from my roots. I was successful and alienated and that was a twentieth-century condition. This went into all my work after that in one way or another and will go on forever because by now I suppose I can say that kind of personality interests me more than someone who is rooted.

AUD 81.2 I used to have a much clearer idea of who I was writing for—certain friends, certain intellectuals, certain critics, a certain sense of the kind of audience I wanted out there and who they might be. That was in the sixties, but in the seventies there was a stretch where I really didn't know who I was writing for. You go in and out of fashion and your sense of who you're writing for goes in and out of focus. With my Egyptian book I've gotten to the point where I don't care who I'm writing for. I wouldn't have a clue who's going to like it. You get old enough and realize there are gods in the cosmos but there are no literary gods left. That's not bad; there's something demeaning about being in awe of a critic.

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AUD 73.14 Yes, it did help that I was paid a lot of money to write *Of a Fire on the Moon*. That made it better. It would have been a harder book to write if I'd been paid less. I'm sort of a frank and shameless professional. I enjoy my work more if I get paid well for it. It makes it somehow sexier. It's awful to put it that way, but it's as simple as that. You take yourself just a little more seriously, and that's a great help when you are writing. Because the hardest thing I've found in writing is to take yourself with enough importance so that you dare finally to start defining some piece of that existence out there. There's an extraordinary arrogance in writing.

AUD 81.6 Every time I appear in a newspaper I injure myself professionally. But I don't think there's anything I can do about it. One of the reasons I'm in the papers all the time is that they just keep using the same people, over and over again. It's a game, and there's something like 40 players on the board. If I were in a Tarot deck, I'd be the Fool. I used to keep a stern separation between the public legend and myself, but you know, you get older, and after a while, you start to feel like some old slob in Miami, with slits in his sneakers so his feet won't hurt so much. At that point it's hard to fight the legend.

WORLD 81.6 I'm a novelist and I want to know every world. And I would never close myself off to a world unless it's truly repulsive to me. I don't think it means anything if I go to certain kinds of parties, because society is nothing if not fashion. There've been a few homes that invite me for dinner from time to time. If it comes to the point where there's something to fight for and I'm not fighting for it because I don't want to lose my position in society, then there's something to be concerned about. What's very important to me is knowing how the world works. I think what ruins most writers of talent is that they don't get enough experience to learn, so their novels always tend to have a certain paranoid perfection which isn't as good as the rough edge of reality. If *The Executioner's Song* had a big effect on people, it was because it wasn't a paranoid work. It had all the rough edges of reality. If I had conceived that book in my imagination, it would have been much more perfect and much less good. If there's a theme that obsesses me, it's how much of the history that's made around us is conspiracy and how much of it is simple stupid fuckups. And you have to know the world to get some idea of it. You know, how much does the Mafia control, how much do they luck into? How much does the Jewish community affect the mentality of government, and how much are they accused of? On the other hand, it's very dangerous to live in society too much, because it's a world of very rigid rules. You cannot be yourself completely. There's a marvelous game in society, which is: If you are completely of society, then you're totally uninteresting. If you have any entrée at all it's because society is always fascinated with mavericks. Till the point where they'll become bored with me, and then, boom, I'm out. But on the other hand, even as a maverick there are certain rules that I have to obey. If you start obeying those rules past the point where you want to go along with them as part of the game, then you are injuring yourself.

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73.43 Right now the smart money would bet against the novel. The publishing houses are getting gloomier and gloomier about its future, and they are the ones who will, in a large sense, determine its future. It really comes down to the young editors. I mean, when a novel gets published these days it's usually because some young editor has decided that this is finally a *good* novel, and he makes an issue of it. And the publisher generally goes along with it. In effect, it's the benevolent or charitable side of publishing. Now this will continue so long as publishers have faith in the novel—until they conclude that novels can really be written by computers. You know, there is a certain sort of obvious best-selling novel that you can almost predict will be successful if you find the right writers. Just give them the right theme. For example, I hear Leon Uris is writing a book about Ireland; we can name the sales, can't we? We can name the reviews. Imagine Joe Flaherty, Wilfred Sheed and Garry Wills on Uris's book. But back to the question: I think it's harder and harder to write a good novel. The character of experience in the twentieth century is so fragmented that it is hard to conceive of one being written that would re-invigorate the whole idea of the novel as a form. How do you move from one fragment of experience to another? That's the problem. Nothing is, for instance, now more difficult than the picaresque novel, where you move from *milieu* to *milieu*. Your characters tend to destroy one another as you move from *milieu* to *milieu*. Problems that could be solved on, let's say, the nineteenth-century level can't be solved in the twentieth.

Underlying it all is the fact that the culture is fragmented; existence is fragmented. It's gotten to the point that those of us who skip from fragment to fragment are the ones who thrive, at least in a limited way. So all this makes for enormous difficulty is writing major novels. Whereas in the thirties, you had any number of major writers around. You had Dos Passos writing *USA*; you had Faulkner writing a major novel just about every other year. Hemingway's books were still coming out; you had Thomas Wolfe writing, James T. Farrell doing his work. And except for Wolfe, all that moved into the forties. And there were any number of minor writers and half-major writers who were awfully good. The novel was flourishing then. Now the novel is up against ferocious competition: television and the movies. So I'm not at all sanguine about the future of the novel; it may disappear as a major form. To me, the most interesting thing is to write a major novel. But every time I think of it, I get a little worried. Awfully tough!

68.1 Hemingway had a clear image, if you will: the work and the man bore a certain resemblance to each other. But my relation to my public personality is more surrealistic than that. People are in an incredible state of confusion about me. So my public personality probably hurts my sales, because Americans like answers, not enigmas. It's precisely the middle-class conservative authors who sell in huge quantities: Herman Wouk, Louis Auchincloss, James Michener. Make your own list.

Grobstein/1983 I wasn't prolific as a young writer. My powers to be prolific are in direct response to needing money. Balzac was immensely prolific. Zola was. Dickens. They earned their living. It helps if you have to earn your living from your pen; you discover that you can push yourself. It's analogous to what athletes do very often, where they'll

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go through hideous procedures. They'll eat steroids in order to get more strength in their muscles; they're into all sorts of things that are, ultimately damaging, not only to their bodies but to their souls. But they'll do it in order to set records, because they've gotten into a set where they truly want to break that old record, whether it's theirs or someone else's. We do the same thing as writers. You can force yourself to write much more than you want to write. And yet the writing will not necessarily deteriorate. People think you're going to end up a bad writer if you do that. You won't end up a bad writer, but you may end up with a bad liver, or with a shortened life, but you go for transcendence too. Sometimes working much harder than one wants to work can liberate energy. It doesn't always defeat it.

AUD 83.55 Almost everybody wants to write. The writer's life seems so free—no boss to face, no rush to work, and if you receive any renown for it, you have all the pleasures, the curious pleasures of celebrity. Writing for many people is the only way for them to tell the story of their lives. Experience, when it cannot be communicated to another, must wither within and be worst than lost. People believe that writers have this opportunity and all the other rewards, but all the same, another part of me is ready to laugh at the naivete about how long it takes writers to learn the rudiments, which is akin to the discipline and dull punishment that, in boxing, go into the ability to throw a commanding punch at will. I never encourage people to write for too little. It is a splendid life if you think only of the emoluments. But it is death to the soul if you are not good at it. And to have a durable career, you have to build a personality that can withstand criticism. Published work is fair game; writers don't have to publish; they can leave their work in a desk drawer. Why should it not be open season, then, when the work comes out?

AUD 83.20 Editing now makes best sellers more and more like each other. After all, editors write well and very much like each other. So few bestsellers don't suffer from a spate of adjectives. When a writer can't present the manifest of an experience, he often substitutes by supplying adjectives. That tells the reader what to think. There's a tendency in publishing houses to simplify books, gussy them up, too much emphasis on entertainment at all costs. My hope lies in one fact. A terrible weariness is coming into us because of the rate we are being entertained.

AUD 95.22 Everywhere I go, booksellers ask me, 'Why don't you write a short book? Short books take up less space on our shelves.' Marketing has taken over writing now. The hell with what the book *is*, can we market it? Not for me; I was convinced at an early age by Thomas Mann that only the exhaustive is truly interesting.

AUD 95.7 You always want to reach the maximum number of people, and you want to reach the young people. If I start thinking about it, it would be "Why don't they read me?" or "How wonderful that they are reading me," but it would have nothing to do with writing. When you write you can't be thinking of how it's going to turn out. You can't say, "I'm going to put this in because it's going to help it sell copies." That never works. Even in

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in a bad bestseller there's a certain sort of internal integrity that makes it a best seller, which is the best book that person is capable of writing at that time. The author believes in the book and that's why it's a best seller. There's an aura of integrity.

WORLD 91.3 I've written a lot of books. The number—it depends how you count, because a couple of those books are a reshuffling of the cards—but I could give you a list that runs up to 30. I wonder if I hadn't had to earn a living, I wonder if I would have written as many. There's something marvelous about having to meet your bills. The condition that is most disagreeable in your life becomes the most useful one. You know, I feel the same about the U.S. Army. It was absolutely the worst experience of my life, and it was probably the single most valuable experience. Without it, I wouldn't have known half of what I know today about Americans.

WR Lee/2001 Ever since *The Naked and the Dead* came out I've not had to work for a living. I've worked as a writer and not had to do other jobs over that time. And jobs undercut your energy. Even the best of jobs has a lot of sludge in it. I've never known a young writer who didn't have that bitterness that creeps in at the way they can't use their time properly. A lot of one's style can get chewed up going through the daily grind and stone of daily work.

AUG Lee/2001 It doesn't matter if your book's good or bad, you're going to get the same number of good and bad reviews, within reason. In other words, a dreadful book will probably get three good reviews in ten, and a very good book may get six good ones in ten. It's just amazing how they tend to push to the middle in reviewing. Until you know that, and know it in your bones, it's very hard to keep writing year after year, book after book, and get over those insane desires to kill a critic. You have to be able to adjust to that, otherwise you'll walk around tired all the time.

AUD Hughes/2001 When I started, we were under the umbrella of Maxwell Perkins—so anyone who became an editor wanted to be great like him. There was a loyalty that they felt toward their writers. They were spiritual marriages, if you will. It's true to a degree today, but the odds against being able to sustain it are much higher. The situation in publishing today dictates that an editor has to bring in money books, and that has got to get into the intricacies of an editor's thinking. I imagine it would be very hard not to start pushing certain authors just a little bit in the direction of being more popular, and that, of course, breaks a bond.

AUD 84.2 *Ancient Evenings* is a very difficult book to understand. For whatever it's worth, I think it is far and away my most difficult. It's a book written out of the principles and canons of literature I picked up in my youth, when you were supposed to write difficult books; it was honorable to do that. Now it's considered obscene, like, "How dare you write a book I can't understand immediately?" Television, it seems, has really hit deeper than anyone knows. The bad reviews *Ancient Evenings* received irritated me, of course,

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they always do. But they didn't disturb me in the sense that I started thinking, "Well, I'm not the writer I thought I was." If the book is as good as I think it is, the bad reviews will eventually be to its credit. And if it's not as good as I think it is, they've saved me a lot of years walking around being a *grand dame*. There's no fate worse than to walk around immensely admired in your own time and then absolutely die two years after your own death.

AUD 84.2 There's a funny mechanism in the literary world, where to varying degrees we are all terribly jealous of one another. There's a certain glee when any one of us comes up with a major book, and the first impression you get is one of great relief: "Oh, good, it isn't as good as I thought it was going to be." But then the second wave comes, and people start to say, "It's really a very good book." There's a feeling of guilt: "Are we murdering a child of promise?" And I think all this will go on with *Ancient Evenings*.

AUD Vitka/1984 Everybody was waiting for the big war novel, so called, to arrive, and mine happened to be first. The timing of *The Naked and the Dead* was extraordinary. If it had come out a year earlier or a year later, it wouldn't have done as well. In mid-1948, people were ready. You see, immediately after the war, nobody wanted a war novel. You would go to publishing houses and say you were working on a war novel and they would say, "Oh, God, don't write that. You'll never get it published." Of course, there had been a spate of bad war novels published during the Second World War and publishers were tired, skittish. Publishers have fashions. They decide that certain book should or should not be written in a certain year. But by the time *The Naked and the Dead* came out, everyone was ready. The war was three years past; people were beginning to think about it again.

AUD 84.21 The more publicity you get, the worse your reviews are going to be. Most reviewers make a priesthood of literature and they don't like authors who are flamboyant or pushy or anything like that. You're caught in a curious trap because there's no way to withdraw: If you withdraw completely you're doomed. If you earn your money from writing, then you have to stay out there because you also learn that a book can do quite well with less-than-superlative reviews. After a while readers get to enjoy your book—your books sell *to spite* the reviews.

AUD 84.24 I get into bad situations and I've got to get out of them. I was truly in debt in the early 80s and I owed my publisher a great deal of money. And then the day of reckoning came and I realized I damn well had to write a book. It had been a book I had been trying to start all year and I hadn't been able to get near it. Then suddenly my mind cleared. It was one of those joke situations where they give Popeye the can of spinach. *Tough Guys Don't Dance* took 61 days. I've often felt that the only time you do anything with great energy is when you're doing it for your best and worst moments at once. My best motive was to create a little art, and my worst was to make some money. They don't always go together, but in this instance they did.

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84.12 I like prizes. I don't mind winning them at all. I have a little theory: if you think the way everyone else does, then dress differently. But if your mind is not really in the mainstream, then dress like other people and you'll be listened to more carefully. If your mind is different from other people's, then you don't have much of a chance except with a few souls. My writing is not "establishment" writing, in that I'm not fortifying the central given at a given moment. I'm usually opposing it. It is a matter of dissidence, if you will; I'm an American dissident, but I like getting prizes because I think people may listen to you more. I always thought Jean-Paul Sartre made a big mistake turning down the Nobel Prize. The French hated him; they thought he was disruptive, a nihilist, a freak. But they would have had to say: "Jean-Paul Sartre, nihilist, freak, Nobel Prize winner." If nothing else, prizes makes your opposition think.

CRAFT

68.26 My moviemaking had absolutely no effect on my writing style, except that it affected my decision to treat myself as the third person hero of *The Armies of the Night*. When I sat down to write it, I had already edited my film, "Wild 90," with me as the leading character, and had come to see myself as a piece of material, as a piece of yard goods. I'd say: "Where am I going to cut myself?" It's a way of getting a psychoanalysis, I think.

WR

71.24 There's no such thing as a real writer who doesn't employ the dialectic. Joyce, in *Finnegans Wake* used the dialectic as an intellectual structure. Proust—Baron de Charlus is conceived dialectically in opposition to the narrator in *Remembrance of Things Past*. Henry James never wrote a sentence that wasn't imbued with the dialectic. He is always reacting to the sentence he wrote before. That's what good writing is. The beginning of bad writing is when a writer forgets what he's just written. That's what I'd tell kids if I ever had a writing class. I'd bang that home.

WORK

75.11 In writing my nonfiction books of the late sixties and early seventies, the question for me was how to verify the observer. What are my passions, prejudices, and particularly my infirmities? It's terribly important who the observer is. That's why I always try to put myself into these works of journalism so the reader can have his sense of me. It's important to be able to decide whether I'm perceiving well or where I'm perceiving badly. Whereas, if I attempt to present to readers what I consider the end-product of objective truth, it's likely to be nothing more than the harshly digested conclusions I came up with in my somewhat unbalanced soul. (What else is most journalism?) Whereas I believe the fun in reading comes from observing the observer. After all I did have that happy streak with *The Armies of the Night*. There was fun in that book, but the fun was to observe the observer. An ideal example of the technique. It doesn't always work that well. Still, there's that lovely remark of Trotsky's I go back to over and over again. He said sometimes the only way you can tell the truth is by a comparison of the lies. If you're listening to two liars telling tales, you may never be able to find out who is lying the most. But you can come closer to a sense of reality by the relations between those two mysteries. You see, we may never know, for instance, what the truth of one human is, or another, but we can know a lot about the relations between them. We may be confused by two terribly complicated people but we are able to say with greater certainty, "They hate each other," or "Isn't it extraordinary how they love each other?" because we can feel the relation between mysteries where I am that relation as the writing voice.

WORK

80.10 I think Capote's book and mine are formally similar, but vastly different. Obviously, I'll be the first to state that if he hadn't done *In Cold Blood*, it's possible that I wouldn't have thought of doing *The Executioner's Song*. It's perfectly possible. It's also perfectly possible that there's something about *The Executioner's Song* that called for doing it this way. I might have gone the same route in any case. Besides, its total flavor is considerably different from *In Cold Blood*. Truman retained his style for *In Cold Blood*, not the pure style—he simplified it—but it was still very much of a book

COLL

CRAFT/2

written by Truman Capote. You felt it every step of the way. He novelizes more, where I was determined to keep the factual narrative. I wanted my book to read like a novel, and it does, but I didn't want ever to sacrifice what literally happened in a scene for what I would like to see happen. Of course, I could afford to feel that way. I had advantages Truman didn't. His killers were not the most interesting guys in the world, so it took Truman's exquisite skills to make his work a classic. I was in the more promising position of dealing with a man who was quintessentially American yet worthy of Dostoevsky. If this were not enough, he was also in love with a girl who—I'll go so far as to say—is a bona fide American heroine. I didn't want, therefore, to novelize a bit. Dedicated accuracy is not usually the first claim you wish to make for books like this, but here it became a matter of literary self-preservation. I wanted people to believe me. What I had was gold, if I had enough sense not to gild it.

WR 82.14 That particular insensitivity you have to build about yourself in relation to reviews doesn't do you much good as a writer. So anyone who has kept working has found ways of renewing his desire to write. And we no more question it than we question our sexual desire. You don't say, "Why do I have sexual desire?" You're quite content to have it. What gets easier is, because one's been through that literary mill so many times, the fears are less and one's professionalism increases over the years. By professionalism I mean the ability to work on a bad day. There's nothing glorious about being a professional. As you become a professional, you become more dogged. You almost have to relinquish the upper reaches of the mind to do your stint of work each day, because being a professional means being able to endure a certain amount of drudgery and the higher reaches of the mind are not enthralled by dull work.

AUD 82.14 My ambition would not be any longer to try to reach Americans with a book the way Hemingway could reach them with a book, because I believe that's beyond my powers. Hemingway's style affected whole generations of us, the way a roomful of men is affected when a beautiful woman walks through—their night is turned for better or for worse. Hemingway's style had an ability to hit young writers in the gut, and they just weren't the same after that. That would not be my ambition—I don't have that kind of talent. But to give up the ambition entirely is another matter. No, I won't give it up entirely.

COLL 83.40 What are my major weaknesses as a writer? I could list about six or seven, but I don't think I will. They'll be thrown at me in later years—"Mailer admits that he's no good at..." But mind you, authors tend to make a weakness a virtue. For example, I doubt that Hemingway was capable of writing a long complex sentence with a lot of architecture in the syntax. So he turned that inability into the virtue of writing short declarative sentences and long run-on sentences connected by conjunctions. Faulkner was not capable of writing simply without personal pain. He turned that into a virtue and as a result you get this extraordinary mood out of his writing. Henry Miller couldn't

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really tell a story with any pleasure. He preferred his excursions away from the story, and these excursions are what make him a great writer. I'd say I have most of my problems with plot. The moment I think of a good plot, I find that the book is almost impossible to write because I know I won't believe in it. Life consists of people plotting all the time, and the plots never coming through. We always say, I'll make this or that out of my life, and then life confounds us. I like a plot that develops during the writing. I don't like one that moves ahead of my characters, because then my characters don't live. You can do the same thing to characters by allying them to plot that we do to our children if we very carefully picked out their colleges, their spouses, installed them in the proper job—well, you know what happens to kids like that. The same thing weighs on characters in a novel if they never get to fulfill their capabilities; they never come alive. The development slowly comes into focus as I work. Bill Buckley is wonderful at plots—his mind works that way—but nobody lives and breathes in his books with any more three-dimensionality than some passing movie star who can't act.

COLL
81.16 The influence of Henry Adams on *The Armies of the Night* was a most peculiar one. To the best of my recollection, I never read much Adams. I know for certain that I read one long chapter of *The Education of Henry Adams* in my freshman year at Harvard. I remember thinking at the time what an odd thing to do, to write about yourself in the third person. Who is this fellow, Henry Adams, talking about himself as Adams—and being struck with it in that mildly irritable way freshmen have of passing over extraordinary works of literature. It's possible that I then read more of *The Education of Henry Adams* sometime in my freshman or sophomore year, although I have no clear recollection and wouldn't claim that I have. I never wrote about Adams, never thought about him particularly, would never have mentioned his name as one of the writers that were important to me; and yet in *The Armies of the Night*—one starts reading it, and immediately one says—even I said—"My God, this is pure Henry Adams." What the hell is going on here? It's an absolute takeoff, as if I were the great-grandson of Henry Adams. As if Adams was all of my literary life. So look how peculiar is influence: Adams was stuck in my consciousness as a possibility, the way painters do much more often than writers. A painter can look at a particular Picasso, or Cezanne, and say to himself, "That's the way to do it." But the work might not pop out for 20 or 30 years. When it does, they say, "Of yes, that was a Picasso I saw at MOMA 25 years ago, and I've always wanted to try a palette of such and such, and I decided to use it here." In effect, that's what happened to me with Adams.

WORLD
or
COLL
81.16 It's hard to write well on a large subject. Most large subjects are handled by best-selling novelists. Best-selling novelists will have a cast of 40 or 50 characters. They'll have stories that go over 50 to 100 years. They'll have several world wars. They'll have startling changes in the lives of several families. The reason they do all that in a hurry is because they can keep their book moving. What characterizes a best-selling novel is that there's nothing in it that you haven't come across before. At least if you're a reader of

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some experience. Most writers tend to fix smaller and smaller canvases and expatiate upon them with more and more clarity because at least you have the confidence that what you're doing is accurate. And that's terribly important. At least you're contributing to knowledge rather than adding to the general sludge, cultural sludge that lies over everything. So it's hard to take a large topic. At the moment the only great writer I can think of who can handle what I've described, 40 or 50 characters and 100 years is Garcia Marquez. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is an amazing work. Garcia Marquez succeeds in doing it, but how, I don't know. In my Egyptian novel [*Ancient Evenings*]
—although it's very, very long—not that much happens in it. As I said before, it takes me ten pages to go around a bend in the Nile.

WORK

81.2 The watershed book for me was *Advertisements for Myself*. That was the first to be written in what became my style. I never felt as if I had one until that book, and once I developed that style—for better or for worse—a lot of other forms opened to it. It's an adaptable style, and of course when I finally discovered in *The Armies of the Night* that I could put myself into a book and thereby paint all sorts of splendid effects, I began to enjoy going in many directions.

WORK

81.2 I usually write in the morning, sometimes in the afternoon. I start around ten and work till one, break for lunch, and then sometimes start again in the afternoon and sometimes not. I don't like to write twice in the day. It's somehow more nervous in the afternoon than it is in the morning. I typed my first novel and part of my second, but now write in longhand.

WORK

81.2 I'm not happy if I feel what I've written, what's behind me, is wrong or needs work. I tend to build my books on the basis of what I have already. I never have a master plan for the entire book. Every time I have—and when I was younger I used to sit down and write out a master plan for a book—I never wrote the book. Even with *The Executioner's Song* where, after all, I knew the story in great detail, I was very careful not to be too versed in too many details of the story way ahead. In other words, I tended to do my research let's say 100 pages ahead of where I was because I wanted the feeling that I didn't know how it was all going to turn out. I wanted to have the illusion that I was inventing each little detail as if I were writing a conventional novel. I might take a few notes, but usually if it's a powerful enough idea about the continuation of the book I don't need to take a note. If I can't remember it, then what kind of an idea could it have been. Once in a great while I'll put together a note on something that should happen 200 pages ahead, just a thought the character might have, and I sort of know the place where it will come in, but I like the idea of a book not being too pragmatic. I find that some of the best ideas I get I receive because I haven't fixed other ideas in concrete and have to obey them. When you know your end, it's disastrous to get a good idea which takes you away from that end.

WORK

81.2 I rarely show off a work-in-progress. But when I do it's the way I box: I pick my sparring partners carefully. Usually I'll box with people who are so good that I'm in no danger of being hurt because they consider it obscene to damage me. Or I'll box with friends where we understand each other and are trying to bring out the best in each other as boxers. The same thing with the early stage of a manuscript. I'd no more dream of showing it to someone like John Simon than I would of carrying a kite to the Brooklyn Bridge and jumping off. But I'll show it to Norris or to Bob Lucid, who is a great friend of mine, or to my agent.

WR

81.2 It was so difficult for me to arrive at my own style—I didn't start with an identity. I forged an identity through my experience. Because of that, I think it was easier to give up my autobiographical style when the time came. I didn't feel as if I were giving myself away. And then I've always felt as if the way people react to me is not to me but to the latest photograph they've seen of me. So I can change the photograph and have the fun of observing the reactions. The devil in me loves the idea of being just that much of a changeling. You can never understand a writer until you find his private little vanity and mine has always been that I will frustrate expectations. People think they've found a way of dismissing me, but like the mad butler—I'll be back serving the meal.

WORK

83.30 I never know what the style of a book is until I get into it. Sometimes you aim for a style and you don't get that, you get a lower style. You know, the style you set in a novel is very much like the pace a serious jogger sets for himself, herself. When you set yourself a literary style, you have to be able to maintain it. And, of course, as you get older you have much more experience in that. You can start on a given day and have a marvelous style but you say, "Oh yeah, but I won't be able to maintain that for long, there isn't enough of me to speak in that style." In that sense, style is character. If character is resources, then style is certainly character. Character may be the wise or foolish estimate of one's resources. You know, that's as good a working motto as any from which to approach the peculiar mysteries of human formation that we call character.

WORK

97.26 I write in my studio. I've got a little studio in Brooklyn a couple of blocks from my house—no telephone, nothing there. When I go there, the only thing I ever do is work, so it's wonderful. I'm like a dog with a conditioned reflex. There is no television, no telephone, nothing. My wife wants me to get a portable telephone. I refuse. I don't want to be tempted. There's an old Jewish belief that you build a fence around an impulse. That's not good enough, you build a fence around the fence, so no telephone. I write longhand with a pencil, and I've got a marvelous assistant named Judith McNally, and she will type it next day, and then I go over it. Since at my age you begin to forget things very easily, it's marvelous because I hardly remember what I wrote the day before. Now it's typed as if someone else wrote it. I'll go through it, and I'll say, "Who is the idiot who wrote that stupid sentence." And I'll fix it up, and I'll edit it, and as I edit it I

give it back to her, and she sends it back each day. I don't work with a word processor, but I do have the benefits of one. Generally, I'll start writing late in the morning. If we're not going out that evening, I won't finish till nine o'clock at night, so it plays hell with our social life.

97.26 During my six months in Moscow and Minsk researching *Oswald's Tale*, I must have interviewed 50 or 60 people, and many of the interviews were in depth. It was different than with my earlier books. During the research for *The Executioner's Song*, my 1979 book about Gary Gilmore, a convicted murderer who asked to be executed and was given the death penalty, we must have interviewed 300 people, but with the Oswald book, the number of people were limited. You really had to work slowly and carefully. There were certain people we saw ten times, and interviewed them each time. When I came home I had all the information about Russia that I needed, or 95 percent of it. I started writing about Oswald in Minsk and when I had finished I thought I'd add 100 pages about Oswald in America. That 100 pages became 400 or 500 pages because I began doing new research. I'd stop writing for long periods and do the new research, and so the second half of the book took as long as the first half, easily. When I finished it, I went over it and started to shape it more and more. Once you know what you have with a book, then you really sculpt it. Overall, the writing of this book, I'd say, was easier than the writing of other books I've done. But I got more out of it. I had this extraordinary experience of living in Minsk and I had my seventieth birthday in Moscow, and I thought, I'm not dead yet. This is not so bad. I can live in a strange place and get a lot out of it, and work hard. It was fun.

82.16 I can tell you a story about metaphors. I had a dear friend, Charlie Devlin, who helped me greatly with *The Naked and the Dead*, and in fact was the model, considerably removed, for the character named McLeod in *Barbary Shore*. Charlie was a quiet saturnine Irishman who was living in a small rooming house where I took a cubicle to finish *The Naked and the Dead*. We used to have long literary conversations. At a certain point I showed him *The Naked and the Dead*. He tore it apart. He could be a severe critic. He said, "It's a better book than I thought it would be, but you have no gift for metaphor." Then he said, "Metaphor reveals a man's character, and his true grasp of life. To the degree that you have no metaphor, you are an impoverished writer, and have lived no life." I never forgot this lecture and began to work with might and main on my metaphors. But I can't tell you how they've changed.

82.16 A writer has to be ready when he enters someone's mind. So long as you stay outside, your characters retain a certain integrity, novelistically speaking. There is a mystery about them, a resonance. We can walk around such characters with the same respect we offer people who have a presence in a room. Part of the meaning of charisma is that we don't know the intimate nature of the human force we're dealing with. So, sometimes characters in novels radiate more energy when we don't enter their mind. It is one of the techniques a novelist acquires instinctively—don't enter your protagonist's

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mind until you have something to say about the interior that's more interesting than the reader's suppositions. The fatal error is to jump in too quickly and then offer banal material. That's the worst of best-sellerdom. Second-rate readers enjoying the insights of second-rate writers.

WORK

73.14 I think it is very bad to talk about your work-in-progress with another writer. Most writers I know who have been writing many years avoid it, which is why Faulkner was always so impossible in an interview. You need an enormous amount of oral tension before you go in there to write and if you're naturally talkative, as you can see I am, and you don't talk in the morning, it helps a little; it builds up. It's a strictly controlled explosion and it goes on for hours.

WORLD

73.14 I believe narrative exists in our everyday lives, but I believe it exists as a discrete phenomena—in other words, narrative stops and starts. We all live with narrative every moment of our lives, but we're always cutting it off and picking it up again; it isn't necessarily a continuation. It's almost impossible to move without some hypothesis, and hypothesis is narrative, if you stop and think about it. But of course what happens is that the hypothesis runs into evidence that confutes it, so that the narrative stops and then it picks up again. One characterizes our days as opposed to Victorian days. Today narrative is like jangled wires that are all turned in other directions. Nonetheless, I think there are extraordinary overall narratives going on in these years. It's just that now the phenomena are so complex, and the problems of being certain of what you know are enormous. But that doesn't mean that we're going to abandon narrative. Quite the contrary. We may see some new, extraordinary kinds.

WORK

61.12 In *The Deer Park* I was trying to find a style for the story and it was very elusive. I went through four drafts. The first draft was Proustian in style—not first-rate Proust of course. The second draft was somewhere between the English novel of manners and Fitzgerald—I'm not saying as good, but in that direction. The third draft was more Hemingway. Then I found my own style, which was nothing like these. Part of finding your style is losing your excessive admiration for the styles of other writers. The thing that always fascinated me about style is the way in which it literally repels certain kinds of experience. The more powerful style becomes, the more complex the subjects you can write about with equal authority. The style begins to select the material. I think that's happened with my last few books. If a person keeps a certain style, it determines the experience that comes to him. But my style is constantly changing by twists and starts. So's my experience. Is it a conscious search for experience? Oh, don't get misled by the headlines of my life. Very often a reputation develops from very little. It doesn't take much to make a legend. Your experience more or less selects itself.

WR 71.6 You know, a good skier never worries about a route: he just goes, confident truly that he'll react to changes in the trail as they happen. It's the same thing in writing; you have to have confidence in your technique. But you also have to assume that you're going to grow in the writing of a piece of work, so you've always got to take on more than you are able to do at the moment. If you take on something you know you can do, all your contempt for yourself will get into it very quickly.

WR 84.34 With *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, the nearer I came to an approaching chapter, the more outline I'd get in my head. But I never try to tap my head, so to speak, which I think is crucial. I respect my unconscious. I walk around it. I don't try to get into it too often. If you know what the story is, you start bleeding too much and it takes away a certain air—that air you need in a mystery—of uneasiness and not knowing who did it.

WORLD 84.34 Some of my characters come from real people. One character might come out of five people, another character might come out of one person but greatly altered. Another might come out of my imagination. There's an exciting moment when a character becomes, in a sense, independent of yourself. If the characters don't seem real, I'm in a lot of trouble with them. Graham Greene once said that there were certain characters that took care of themselves, and there were others that he had a great deal of trouble with, and he worked very hard on them. And then, when he'd read a review and it would mention a character he had a lot of trouble with and speak of that character as well-drawn, he used to think to himself, "Well-dragged."

WORLD 75.13 The characters in a novel become real in your mind as you write. And you live with them and sleep with them, and even talk to them at a certain point, for they exist within you. So they take on the same kind of funny life that movie stars take on for us when we think about them. There are a lot of people for whom Humphrey Bogart is the equivalent of an uncle, in terms of the psychic importance of their unconscious mind.

WORK 73.44 It is my profoundest idea, at least me profoundest idea tonight, that if we cannot perceive an idea for ourselves, we should know the observer through whom we perceive it second-hand.

COLL 82.16 We're all vastly more complex in our preoccupations than Hemingway. But I have to tell you that after I wrote *The Executioner's Song*, I went back and looked at Hemingway again. Because now I was writing in a simple style. And his style is remarkable. The more I know about writing, the more an achievement Hemingway's style becomes to me. I know his flaws inside out. I've loved and hated him as if he were my own father for years. There is so much he did for one, so much he didn't do. Truly the relationship you have to him is as a father. But he is a remarkable writer. His sense of the English language, I'd say, is virtually primitive in its power to evoke mood and stir the senses.

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WORLD

Schroeder/1992 For every historian who writes well, there must be twenty novelists who write better. And that's important because though there are people who can read, sometimes the only way that you can perceive reality is through a good style; a bad style is incapable of conveying reality. Even the dullest and most oppressive reality needs to be conveyed through a style that's superior to that reality. A style that's merely equal to that reality very often won't do it, and a style that's inferior to the reality is hopeless.

WORLD

Schroeder/1992 I don't ever think of my characters in terms of victims or victimizers because that sort of narrow classification tends to narrow them down too much. Anytime someone is writing a novel and he says, "I'm writing about a victim," that character's not going to be very interesting because in reality very few victims ever see themselves simply as victims. Whenever someone comes up to me and says, "I am a victim," I'm repelled because I figure that either they're pulling a con job on me, they want to manipulate my sympathies; or they're the world's worst sort of victim because they've begun to think of themselves in a totally limited fashion.

COLL

Lennon/1999 The first person point of view is an amazing tool. You can get to places with the first person you can't arrive at any other way. Of course, you can also injure your writing hand, so to speak. It's a double-edged instrument. Hemingway had a marvelous sense of the limitations of the first person. It virtually created his style. If you are doing a book in the first person, there are certain things you should not talk about because they're embarrassing when you have the "I" going before it. So there's a tendency, most marked in Hemingway, to keep everything at arm's length.

WORLD

Lennon/1999 When you're making things up, it's scary; the decisions you have to make are frightening. So there's always a dread when you do an imaginative narrative. If your characters come alive, that's fine; they carry you a part of the way. But, finally, you have to make what might be termed career decisions for your characters. Does your protagonist want to go into the foreign service, or does he want to work in New York? These are large decisions but they are also opportunities. Certain writers have the book completely in their mind before they begin and then they write it. I'm not one of them. I find my book as I go along. My plot comes last. What I look for are the characters. I want a conception of my characters that's deep enough so that they will get me to places where I have to live by my wits. That means they have to keep on developing for me. When my characters come alive, the plot, I feel, will take care of itself. I cannot write a book where I figure out the plot first. When you do that you spend the rest of your time filling holes in rotten teeth.

WR

83.35 Writing is wonderful when you talk about it. It's fun to contemplate. But writing as a daily physical activity is not altogether agreeable. You get fat, if you're like me, and you strain your gut; you're always squeezing your intestines (I don't know why) in order to make a few words appear. I know that various ailments visit writers, gout being one,

and chilblains and writer's cramp. You're alone and every day you've got to go in and face that piece of paper. And that means you've got to reconstitute your soul and give yourself a passing mark. It gets very difficult. You get lonely. You spend most of your day alone.

WORLD

91.41 In *Harlot's Ghost* you blunder forward with a series of potentialities. It's a kind of inner debate. This is not for amusement; this is not a spy novel—those things are just clocks that are put together. They have nothing to do with life. I regard this book as a novel with a legitimate architecture—but one with an excluded middle. That's good because it gives the reader some scope. The missing part shapes up in the reader's mind. Life is like that. We're always filling in intervals. I was trying to create an environment that was life-like in this book, one with more questions than answers. We live in a world of fiction—what we think things are, plus a few bits of hard fact.

WR

86.31 It's as difficult to learn to become a professional writer as it is to become a professional athlete. Stamina is the key, and the ability to keep faith in yourself. One must be willing to take risks and try again. It takes an enormous amount of practice to be good at it. Also, you're affected by what you read as a child, and have preconceived ideas about how it should be done. It takes a while to unlearn these things and discover your own style. But it can be death to the soul if you're not good at it. Often writers say after completing a work, "This nearly killed me." It's true, and it gets more true with each work. But it has its good points. We're creating a world and the characters to go in it. But I've never understood the process of writing altogether. It's like love: one always searches for more.

WORK

83.13 I never was certain I would finish *Ancient Evenings* until I did. It was so difficult, the most difficult book I ever tackled. The choices were so many. That's why I never take Tom Wolfe seriously when he talks about the New Journalism as a higher form than the novel, because finally in the New Journalism your plot is handed to you, and once it is, you can concentrate on the writing. Plot is what drives me up the wall. The choices your characters have, the wrong choices they can make. I had that experience in *The Deer Park* and in *Barbary Shore*, and it frightened me for life.

COLL

83.57 Dwight Macdonald gave us no great body of books, and spent his talents in writing some of the better political and literary criticism of our time, but more important than his oeuvre was his influence. He was one of the best teachers of writing in the world. He gave no classes, but if one had learned a little about writing already, well, then there was all the world of self-expression to pick up in the felicities of his style. Dwight had something fabulous to teach. It was to look to the feel of the phenomenon. Describe what you see as it impinges on the sum of your passions and your intellectual attainments. Bring to the act of writing all of your craft, care devotion, lack of humbug and honesty of sentiment. And then write without looking over your shoulder for the

literary police. Write as if your life depended on saying what you felt as clearly as you could while never losing sight of the phenomenon to be described. If something feels bad to you, it is bad. Others received the same message from Hemingway, but it took Dwight Macdonald to give the hint to many a young writer and intellectual that the clue to new discovery rests not so much on the idea with which you begin as in the style of your attack on the problem.

91.17 *Harlot's Ghost* is an epistemological novel. Henry James frightened me forever with his dictum that one must never put information into a novel unless it is digested through the lens of a protagonist's perceptions. So in this novel my protagonist is connected umbilically to the reader. If everything flows from one character to the reader, then there isn't that need for an intermediary, a narrator. Now in *The Executioner's Song*, I felt I was entitled to a narrator because the information about Gary Gilmore and other characters is received information; I wasn't making it up.

91.17 One of the things I learned from *The Executioner's Song*—there would be these extraordinary people we met while interviewing for the book, and I'd say, "Why the hell didn't God permit these two fascinating people to meet?" With all my novelist's training, I wanted certain people to meet. Well, when they sometimes did meet, the meeting would be disappointing as hell. I finally realized that this does not diminish the drama, it increases it. Most of our lives are spent getting ready for dramatic moments that don't take place, or if they do they're disappointing as hell. Or we say, "Well, nothing really big ever happens to me." Then, *bam*, you get knocked down with something so much bigger than you expected.

Random House Publicity Flyer/2/91 The worst kind of writing results when some extraordinarily exciting things have happened to your friends and then you decide you're going to do a novel about them. Because even though your friends are very alive to you, they don't come alive in the book. So I almost never write about anyone who's close to me. It's just too dangerous. I much prefer to write about people for whom I feel a special understanding, but who, on the other hand, I have to get to know. You tend to dream and fantasize an enormous amount about your characters, and you develop your sense of them as you go along. And you know a book is good when your characters begin to make moves that you hadn't foreseen for them.

91.3 I don't read other writers much because I'm writing all the time. It's too disturbing to read a writer with a good style when you're in the middle of putting your work together. I've used this image before: It's very much like taking your car apart and having all the pieces on the floor when somebody rides by in a Ferrari. Now you may hear a note in the Ferrari that isn't good and say, "That motor needs a little tuning." But nonetheless that car is there and yours is on the floor. So while I'm working on a book I rarely read anything more than *The New York Times*—which may have the long-term effect of flattening my style.

97.13 This business of influence is curious in the extreme. I happened to pick up *Moby-Dick*, and I hadn't thought about Melville ten times in the last thirty years. Picked up the first page of *Moby-Dick* and read it, and I realized my style was formed by Melville. I'm not saying I write as well as Melville, but my style was absolutely shaped by his love of long, rolling sentences that contain inversions and reverses and paradoxes and ironies and exclamation points and dashes.

97.24 Capote wrote the best sentences of anyone of our generation. He had a lovely poetic ear. He did not have a good mind. I don't know if there was a large idea that bothered him for one minute. While he wrote poetically, he did not think like a poet. He didn't have that concentrated sense of metaphor that a poet works toward. But he had a sense of time and place. *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, for example, is one the one hand a slight book. Looking at it with a hard Marxist eye, it's a charlotte russe. On the other hand, if you want to capture a period in New York, no other book has done it so well. So in that sense he's a bit like Fitzgerald. If I were to mount them all up on a wall, I'd put Truman somewhat below Fitzgerald, but of that ilk. He could capture period and place like few others. I had a lot of respect for him as a writer and I was very competitive with him. I was competitive with all of them. The question "Are they better than me?" was all I ever lived with in those days. But with Truman I had a different feeling—mainly because I felt that what we were interested in and the way we wrote were so different.

Rice/2000 The hardest part of writing is to sequester your mind. You have to push all sorts of interesting things away, endure loneliness. Many talented young writers don't succeed for just that reason. They start doing other things and just never write their book.

Lee/2001 I had one job for two years that was like 15 years and that was the Army. It gave me a hell of a lot of real experiences as opposed to the experiences you search for. That's one of the problems for young writers. If they don't have enough experience they search for it, and that always has a lifeline to it—you can get out of it if need be. It's the situations you can't get out of that really give you the kind of knowledge you want as a writer.

Lee/2001 I used to be able to put in long, long days. Now about two hours in the morning and two hours in the afternoon are about it. And a lot of time is wasted getting into those two-hour blocks. But you don't have to be able to write more than a couple of hours a day in order to get a book done in a year. A short book; my trouble is I don't write short books.

Lee/2001 One thing I've said over and over, but it's worth saying again is that what's not understood about good writers is that they're as competitive as athletes. And so when I read a good book, I don't read it the way other people do. I don't read it to go through a profound experience. I read it critically, the way one athlete will watch another's

performance. Not watch it with venom, quite the contrary. You might say to yourself, "His spiral is tighter than mine and he's got five yards on me at least, maybe ten on a long pass, but he's more lead-footed than I am." The whole thing when you're reading a good novel is to give it its credit and not try to smudge over its good parts by saying the guy's overrated. I think if I had my druthers, I could end up as a critic because I know so much about novel writing by now. I can always tell when someone is writing out of their best vein and when they're faking it.

coll Lee/2001 Hemingway. He was perhaps the narrowest literary genius who ever lived. After I had finished *The Executioner's Song*—which after all is a pretty good book written in a simple style—after I finished I thought, "Let me take a look at Hemingway because there's nothing to writing simply." I read him and I realized, no, no, no, the style of my book didn't begin to compare to his. I think I was reading *A Moveable Feast*, where his style was more sophisticated than anywhere else. He's a great writer, absolutely great, and he has done more with a simple sentence than anyone who ever lived. Anyone. I don't care what nationality.

world Lee/2001 A novel begins for me with character. I'm never happy with place or plot as the core of a novel. My abilities probably lie in the direction of characters. I can write about place and enjoy it, but it's not the predominate element. But any book that's decent is going to have a sense of place. You could say *The Naked and the Dead* has a sense of place even though that wasn't what it was intending to do. All my books have a sense of place, but place worries me as a starting point. Let place come into it as it will.

AUD Koval/2000 Third person and first person are at least as different in writing as major and minor keys in music; I won't attempt to say which is which. Before you decide, you have to have a sense of the reader, of the event, of yourself and what will form the best triangulation. When I was doing *The Gospel according to the Son*, people said to me, "How did you have the nerve to write about Jesus in the first person?" I answered that it was absolutely a practical decision because I wanted Jesus the man to be predominant in the book, not Jesus the Son of God. I have always felt that Jesus was the first example of a truly powerful divided personality, so though I'm not equipped to write about the Son of God, maybe I can do something about the man. To do that you need immediacy and this is the first strength of the first person. Now you can get bored with the "I," because it's constraining, but it gives you easy access, in the beginning at least. If I had put it in the third person, it would have gotten mixed up with the Gospels, and people would be very irritated: what was from me and what from the Gospels? Whereas in the first person readers either accept it or reject it. And I always work on the assumption that if only 50 percent of the people reject one of my books, then I've got a good book. I wrote in the third person in my journalism because I wanted to attack that notion that the reporter is an objective eye. It's just not true. Every one sees through their warp, through their biases, through their pretensions, their needs. It seemed to me when I was beginning *The Armies of the Night* that if I presented myself, wrote about myself in the third person, the reader

CRAFT/14

would perceive a character who was viewing an event and that is the way we perceive all the time—through casual talk and chatter and gossip with friends. If a friend tells us a story about another friend, since we know the friend who's telling the story very well, we can say to ourselves that he or she doesn't know a damn thing about this or that. On the other hand, we'll listen very carefully when we feel the friend has authority, credibility on a topic.

COLL 95.12 There are two kinds of writers. There are those who are very great, like Faulkner and Hemingway and, I'd say, Melville—in fact, most of our best writers write with a style, and that style is inimitable, it's theirs. There are other writers, who are usually less famous, who write in a variety of styles, which are determined by the book they are doing. I'm in the latter camp. The same is true of painters. Matisse painted in one recognizable style, while Picasso painted in a hundred styles before he was done. He was always painting in such a way that the nature of what he was painting revealed the appropriate style to him. It was as if style was a cutting tool, through which he delineated a reality. I'm never going to compare myself to Picasso, but, in a way, I've found that to be true for myself. Style for me has to be close to the material I'm working with—so that I will write with a fairly formal prose on one occasion, and I'll write with a casual or journalistic prose on another.

COLL 92.12 William Burroughs has extraordinary style. He catches the beauty and, at the same time, the viciousness and the meanness and the excitement, of ordinary talk—the talk of criminals, of soldiers, athletes, junkies. There is a kind of speech, gutter talk, that often has a fine, incisive, dramatic line to it; and Burroughs captures that speech like no other American writer I know. He has an exquisite poetic sense. His poetic images are intense. They are often disgusting; but at the same time there is a sense of collision in them, of montage, that is quite unusual. The artistry in *Naked Lunch* is very deliberate and profound. Burroughs may be the most profound writer in America. I say that although I don't like to go around bestowing credit on other writers. *Naked Lunch* drew me to read it further and further, the way *Ulysses* did when I read it in college; as if there were mysteries to be uncovered as you read it. The structure of the novel is imperfect. One reason we cannot call it a great book like *Remembrance of Things Past* or *Ulysses* is the imperfection of the structure. There is no doubt as to Burroughs's talent; while that talent was, perhaps, excited and inflamed by drug addiction, it was also hurt. He might have been one of the greatest geniuses of the English language if he had never been an addict.

WORK 92.12 In *An American Dream*, which was originally published in *Esquire* in 1964, and as a book in 1965, I had a scene where somebody was talking, a black man was talking, and he said "shit" about twenty times. Now, I didn't really need twenty. I knew approximately twelve would be fine, but I knew if I put in twelve they'd take out some, so I put in twenty. And they screamed and I had my twelve, and they were happy and I

was happy. That was when it was being printed in *Esquire*. Magazines always censored more.

WORLD

91.37 The way the CIA works is absolutely counter to a spy novel, which has a perfect clock that ticks to its conclusion. In *Harlot's Ghost*, several characters say at different times that they came into the CIA because they love spy novels. But once they're inside, they do the work only in pieces. If they see themselves inside a spy novel, they're only in chapters five and six. They don't know the beginning of a case, can't see the whole picture, and then they're shifted to another assignment and never see the denouement. It struck me that that's exactly what life is like: The most interesting people really don't meet each other and don't have dramatic confrontations. They have daily frustrations; the gun over the mantle piece in the first act doesn't ever get fired; they go through years without anything truly dramatic happening. But when that big thing happens, because they did not have sufficient drama in their lives before, it intensifies everything and makes life extraordinary.

WR

91.24 If you tell yourself you're going to write the next day, write the next day. No matter what comes up, write. I think what happens is that you set up a contract with your unconscious. Your unconscious prepares the words. When you don't do that, all the material sits around in your brain and starts to smolder. We're the manager of the artist in ourselves.

WORK

91.12 It takes great skill to come up with a wonderful plot, but once you do that your characters are stillborn. The moment they're alive they disturb the clockwork. I like novels to be organic, to grow out of themselves.

COLL

84.18 James T. Farrell was an immense influence on me. *The Naked and the Dead* owes much to him, as does *The Executioner's Song*. Debts to authors is a notion difficult to explain. It resembles the way in which one painter can show another painter a direction, as Picasso did, showing other artists ways they might pursue even if he himself did not. Farrell showed me what you could do with the ordinary simple conditions of people's lives. I wondered if I could write *The Executioner's Song* in a simple flat style. And because Farrell had done that already, I felt relieved about doing it.

WORLD

84.18 City life produces—I believe it is a phenomenon of the modern city—caustic wit. It is one of the essences of a city. If you lived in the country, this kind of wit would kill you. In New York and Chicago, it is a tonic. The wit serves as a bridge. It is a reaction to all these people around us. Once you've expressed the bottom line in caustic wit, you are able to like your fellow citizens and get along in their midst.

AUD

83.40 One's editor is there to be a great and noble blocking back and keep people from wrecking your mood when you're at work. But to name one's peers—Vonnegut, Pynchon, Updike, John Irving, Bellow and so on—if I were their editor, I'd hate like hell to tell them: "Hey, I think you're too long here." That would be an enormous responsibility to take. When you get to the place where we all are as writers, you're supposed to be able to do your own editing.

delivered out of his own flesh, not and
 destroyed by the process, but able to turn to his art and craft, his accumulated know-
 ledge, *How the Day After Tomorrow* came through like a storm, writing itself. I enjoyed
 the work, I was full of energy when I was done, but the work was by the same token
 repulsive. So I do not know if I have *How the Day After Tomorrow* or am indifferent to it.

W. The writers who write better novels, who write better, more really dramatic the
 less it becomes the more intellectual machine, people who are better at dramatic life
 than their minds. I grew up in that tradition. And I had a mind when I was young,
 when I was like an intellectual machine. It wasn't the good machine. In comparison
 with private other machines, it was second rate. But it was a machine. It had the habit of
 dominating every experience I encountered. This went on for years. And I remember
 that there were certain experiences I had—I mean just if the moment I've always loved, in
 the view of the critic, changed with me in that sense an experience you can never
 dominate. You have to approach it with reverence. Nothing like when I was young I
 could dominate with my mind. It took me about three or four years to get to this
 realization. I'd get to like it, it was a passion. I lived with this fight for a year.
 And the reason was, I encountered an experience that was bigger than my mind.
 Something was going on that I couldn't dominate. I couldn't get down and write a piece,
 which, as far as I was concerned was a delirious notion about it. And I had to live with it
 and it was that feeling that I'd never be able to dominate it. During it was to
 dominate by way of the machine. During your own dominate in a degree with your
 mind, whereas a great fight you can never do, live with your mind. The greatest
 professional fight in the world is probably not so great a spectacle as the greatest street
 fight in the world because of the terror. The terror of the audience. When do you do if
 the thing gets out of control.

82.14 Writing is a way of taking up anything that's good and bad in you as a subject. It's
 supposed to be liberally known. For instance, this pornography and up there. It's
 usually a myth that has a certain amount of practical application. If you read a terrible
 book, it tends to develop, but if you overlook it, it can break down. I think something of
 this sort is a type of the psychic. If you force an aspect of the inner person, it can come
 to the point where it comes to refuse anything at all. And I think I probably got to that
 point by the time I wrote *Q & A*, *Live on the Moon*. I hated the book, in a lot of ways, but I
 didn't like my own person in it—I felt I was highly unnecessary. And in *The Structure of
 Sex*, I felt my attempt to do something with my own personal relation to change was the
 least thought-out aspect of the book. I felt I had made up my mind to write something, though I
 had been there in 1975 with *The Fights* and that was wholly terrible. What actually

W.F.

PSYCHOLOGY

67.16 Some books come to you. As *The Naked and the Dead* came to me. They are bonuses, gifts. You do not have to kill some little part of your flesh to dredge them up. This is a fatal shade mystical, but it is almost as if you are serving as agent for a book which wants to get itself written. So the author never knows what to think of such books when he is done. His real fondness—since writing books is the closest men ever get to childbearing—is more for those books which he delivered out of his own flesh, torn and deadened by the process, but able at least to use all art and craft, all accumulated lore. Whereas *Why Are We in Vietnam?* came through like a storm, writing itself—I enjoyed the work, I was full of energy when I was done, but the work was by the same token impersonal. So I do not know if I love *Vietnam* or am indifferent to it.

WORK

70.1 The reason why every farmer alive, why every redneck, instinctively distrusts the Jew is because the Jews are intellectual machines, people who are born to dominate life with their minds. I grew up in that tradition. And I had a mind, when I was younger, which was like an intellectual machine. It wasn't that *good* a machine. In comparison with certain other machines, it as second rate. But it was a machine. It had the habit of dominating every experience it encountered. This went on for years. And I remember that there were certain experiences I had—I mean one of the reasons I've always been, in the view of the critics, obsessed with sex is that sex is an experience you can never dominate. You have to approach it with veneration. Bullfighting was something I couldn't dominate with my mind. It took me about three or four fights to get to like bullfighting. Once I got to like it, it was a passion. I lived with bullfights for a year. And the reason was, I encountered an experience that was larger than my mind. Something was going on that I *couldn't* dominate. I couldn't sit down and write a piece, which, as far as I was concerned was a definitive piece about it. And I had to live with it and learn and recognize that I'd never be able to dominate it. Boxing is easier to dominate because of its limitations. Boxing you can dominate to a degree with your mind, whereas a street fight you can never dominate with your mind. The greatest professional fight in the world is probably not as great a spectacle as the greatest street fight in the world because of the terror. The terror of the audience. What do you do if the thing gets out of control.

WORK 17

82.14 Writing is a way of using up anything that's good and bad in you as a subject. It's supposed to be famously known, for instance, that pornographers end up impotent. It's probably a myth that has a certain amount of practical application. If you work a muscle hard, it tends to develop; but if you overwork it, it can break down. I think something of the same sort is true of the psyche. If you force an aspect of the imagination, it can come to the point where it ceases to return anything at all, and I think I probably got to that point by the time I wrote *Of a Fire on the Moon*. I liked the book in a lot of ways, but I didn't like my own person in it—I felt I was highly unnecessary. And in *The Prisoner of Sex*, I felt my attempt to do something with my own personal relation to things was the least thought-out aspect of the book. I felt I had used up myself as a reference, though I tried once more in 1975 with *The Fight*, and that was wholly feeble. What actually

WR

PSYCHOLOGY/2

happened is that I began to get interested in other people, and this sounds like an extraordinary remark for a novelist to make, but in truth we really write novels out of two impulses. One is to understand ourselves better as we write, and the other is to present what we know about others. And more often it's impossible to truly comprehend others until one's plumbed the bottom of certain obsessions about oneself.

WORLD 82.14 Most of my ideas today are less an exploration and more an occupation of territories I reconnoitered years ago. What happens is you become the hat on your own head. You're not having the pleasure of enjoying your own mind the way you used to when you were young, but you have the product of your mind to work with. You know, I ran into Henry Kissinger years ago and I asked him if he enjoyed the intellectual stimulation of the work, and he said in effect, "I am working with the ideas that I formed at Harvard years ago. I haven't had a real idea since I've been on this; I just work with the old ideas." I certainly know what he means now—I think there are just so many ideas you can have in your life and once you have them, you have to develop them."

WORLD 83.10 I've always had the feeling that it doesn't make much sense to write about something when you know that others can write about it as least as well as you can or maybe better. I never felt that I had that much to say about my childhood that was so special it was worth recording. It may mean that writers do play games with themselves—it may mean that there is something I'm concealing from myself. I find over and over that I hide what I can write about because it's risky to know that you can write about something. You can plunge into it before you're ready to give it proper commitment. This sounds very odd to people who never write, to see the unconscious as a vast area where military campaigns go on. I think it's the only metaphor that works because I discover over and over again that the unconscious will disclose to me what it chooses and when it chooses to. When I am working on a long book, for instance, I almost never have a thought about it when I'm not working. And I've come to recognize every year that it's highly impractical to think about it because you can lose it. I happen to have one of those memories that's psychopathic in its half-life. I forget half of everything I think unless instantly, in about four seconds, I write it down. It's overspecialization for about thirty or forty years.

WR 83.10 It may be that part of remaining a writer is to learn how to expose yourself less and less over the years and ring yourself around more and more with various protections. The price of that, of course, is that inspiration enters the door much less often. But at the same time you can carry out your projects. It seems to me that if there is any lesson I can draw from my working, it is that it has taken me close to forty years to learn how to write long books. *The Naked and the Dead* came early and that was to some extent a gift. I was a simple young man and I didn't understand the difficulties. If I had known the difficulties, I wouldn't have gotten into it. It would have taken me ten years.

PSYCHOLOGY/3

WR 83.10 There is always fear in writing a book. If I had tried to write *Ancient Evenings* in a year, the fear would have been so great it couldn't have been written. But over ten years, you can carry the fear. *Writing* a book is the fear. That's why there are many more people who can write well than who do. And there are other reasons for it. Some people can't take the meanness of the occupation. There's nothing very attractive about going into a room by yourself every day and looking at a piece of paper and making scratch marks on it. Doing that day after day, year after year, decade after decade, is punishing through the very monotony of the physical process. Just the act of writing as a physical act is less interesting than painting. I never felt sorry for painters. I feel sorry for writers. I would say that writing is like all occupations that have some real element of risk. In the case of the writer the risk is to his ego. You really don't want to write a book in which you are not taking some risk, especially a long book. You can write a book quickly in two months, six months, or a year in which the risks are minimal. But to do a long book, you would want to take risks. Why not? How dignify it if large risks aren't being taken? And I will say I've taken more risks with the Egyptian novel than any book I've ever written. It's the most, dare I say it, audacious of the books I've done.

WR 88.1 I think nobody knows how much damage a book does to you except another writer. It's hell writing a novel; you really poison your body doing it. It's an unnatural physical activity to sit at a desk and squeeze words out of yourself. It means that you secrete various kinds of fatigues and poisons through your system that you don't get rid of easily. As you get older, it's worse. The other reason why I've been so obsessed with prize fighters is the idea of the aging prize fighter who has to get into shape for one more fight and knows the damage that fight is going to do to his body, which is already beginning to worsen; it puts him in a gloom. One of the things that characterizes almost every older fighter I've seen training for a fight is the depression that hangs over him and his camp because the only good thing that can come out of it is money. The rest is all a foregone conclusion. Even if he wins the fight—even if he wins it well—he's not going to get a new purchase on life out of the fight the way a young fighter can by a decisive victory. And that's true in writing. Writers will often make grave decisions—am I going to write this book or not? And at a certain point you have to believe that the book can be enormously important or you won't suffer that kind of self-destruction, civilized self-destruction. Let's say in writing a novel over two or three years of the hardest work, that the damage it does to the body is equal to someone who has never smoked before taking on two or three packs a day for a few years. And I think if you could weigh those things you'd find it's accurate. I think one reason I've always been such an amateur about medicine and so interested in it at a great remove is because when you are a writer, in a certain sense you are a doctor to yourself. You're always feeling these various tensions and ailments creep into you. From an early age writers become hypochondriacs. It goes with the territory. Your factory is yourself. You're always examining the factory for potential breakdowns, anticipating troubles, and so you get to be awfully alert to the relation not only between yourself and the world but the relationship between yourself and your body. And writing impinges on your body.

PSYCHOLOGY/4

81.16 The thing that liberated me as a writer in the late 60s is that I had no respect for the people who were telling me what the world was like. On the one hand, the people I felt closest to when I was younger, the Marxists, were caught in the insoluble knot of trying to explain every deviation from Marxist prediction, and it had got to a point where it was getting to be high comedy. Interpretations within interpretations. And the psychoanalysts I considered a bunch of plumbers. They were fairly good at dealing with psyches badly in need of a certain relief of pressure here, or fixing the leak in this joint, but they were absolutely hopeless when it came to understanding the demands of a personality, the larger demands. They were inadequate when it came to a place where the psyche met the spirit in some of us. The average psychoanalyst secretly believes that there is something obscene about religion. Anyone who is religious is a dubious case and probably psychotic. Now, they won't admit it, but those are their deepest sentiments in the case of nine out of ten of the psychoanalysts I've known over the years. The Marxists were useless, the psychoanalysts were useless, the imperialists in my own country were certainly useless. The political writers were mediocrities, had very little to say; and then on top of that, as I very quickly learned, one of the most dreadful things that goes on in conventional reportage is that the reporters all get together afterward, exchange stories with other writers. In other words, you give them the stories that you know your paper can't print and in return they give you the stories they know you can use, that their newspaper or magazine won't print or is not interested in. So what happens is everybody winds up using everybody else's stories—even worse—everybody arrives at the same interpretation. To wit, Jack Kennedy is a lightweight, Nelson Rockefeller is a wonderful guy---whatever the interpretation is for that week comes out as gospel. So you soon realize that their political wisdom is nil, a consensus of the marketplace, of the journalistic marketplace. Since you have the confidence of being a novelist, it's very easy to take the large step. Just say, yes, the way in which I see this event is likely to be as right as the way anyone else sees it. You proceed on that basis. I think if there was one thing that separates me from the others is confidence.

81.16 I don't know why I started writing about Egypt. I've been working on that book [*Ancient Evenings*] off and on for ten years. I feel only now as if I'm slowly beginning to understand Egypt, the Egypt of antiquity. You can very often write well about matters that you don't understand too well. Most of my life I've written about matters in advance of my understanding of them. Often, years later, I would come to understand the subject as well as I'd written about it years before and would be amazed that I could have done it at all when I did. Oddly enough, now that I have the knowledge, I probably couldn't write about it. There's some potentiality in all of us that we tap when we write. The best writing comes out of that. I don't know what I'm writing about Egypt now is better than the stuff eight to ten years ago when I knew very little about Egypt. I sometimes think that the only way you can be sure that you are attracted to a subject that's valuable to you for literary purposes is that you know so little about it. It's almost as if you have

PSYCHOLOGY/5

to have one deep instinct into the subject but really not be too familiar with it. Let me give you an example of what I'm talking about. It's more fun to pick up a mystery novel and read it if, early in that book, you decide you have a clue that the average reader is not going to have. If you and the author share something that no one else does, then you are going to get more out of this book than anyone else, you are going to come up with the answers even though you know nothing about the material or the crime. I think something of that sort works in historical research. You have to feel that you do know more than the average historian about one aspect of the subject. In Egypt I think I felt I knew more about burial customs than the average Egyptologist. Not more about the details of them, which I hadn't learned them, but more about the reason for them.

WR

81.2 I've found that I can't do serious writing without getting into a depression. The depression is almost a vital part of the process because, to begin with, it's dangerous beyond measure to fall in love with what you're doing it. You lose your judgment and you lose it for the simplest reason—that the words, as you're reading them, are stirring you too much. The odds are, if they're stirring you too much, they are going to stir no one else. You are also depressed for reasons that are impossible to explain. I think we sometimes get depressed when we're writing because we're destroying other possibilities. The deeper your theme, the more you're making it impossible to approach other themes that are collateral to it. So there's the gloom that certain things are probably not going to get written about.

WR

81.2 If I tell myself the night before that I'm going to work the next day, I invariably do write the next day and it doesn't matter what kind of mood I'm in. When I was younger I used to shatter work all the time and could not finish things because I'd do some good writing and go out and celebrate and then, unconsciously, I'd be working on the continuation of what I'd been writing while I was celebrating. I was shattering my brain and I'd wake up the next morning and have to reconstruct it. Eventually the brain just rebels. I found I began to have blocks and the best way to get around a block is to tell yourself that you're going to write. If you obey the promise you make to yourself—even if it takes 45 days—the unconscious will trust you and begin to deliver the material.

AUD

81.2 I think the literary world is a dangerous place to be in if you want to do an awful lot of writing because it's almost necessary to take on airs in order to protect yourself in that world. In a way you can't handle yourself skillfully unless your airs are finely tuned. Capote has a wonderful set and walks around like a little fortress—at least until lately. Hemingway committed suicide working on those airs. He took the literary world much too seriously and he's almost there as a lesson to the rest of us: Don't get involved in that world at too deep a level or it will kill you and it will kill you for the silliest reasons: for vanity and because feuds are beginning to etch your liver with the aids of frustration.

PSYCHOLOGY/6

AUD 81.2 The energy I put into my public, performing self probably helped my mind and hurt my work. I think I've had the kind of experience that made me equipped to deal with certain kinds of problems that a writer who's more serious about keeping to his study and not venturing out too much—or certainly not venturing out on quixotic ventures—would not have had. I think I have an understanding of the complexity of the world that I wouldn't have if I'd stayed at home. I would have ~~tended to have a much more paranoid~~ vision of how sinister things are. Things are sinister, but not in the way I used to think.

COLL 81.26 Hemingway occupies the very center of writing itself. Anyone who's ever read a newspaper can feel how good a writer he is—he uses a vocabulary that if anything is smaller than the average newspaperman's vocabulary. And he does wonderful things with it. So no matter how serious or superficial a reader you are you sense very quickly that you are in the hands of someone who truly can write well. Then, of course, he wrote about things that are very, very interesting to men. There aren't very many women going around saying Hemingway is a great writer. I'm willing to bet more American women who are good writers have been influenced by Proust than by Hemingway. But for men he's central: the anxieties he feels about being a man cover all our anxieties; it's almost impossible *not* to identify with his work. I just think that nobody has come along who occupies as much terrain as he does. There were stages in my life when I had something remotely resembling his ambition, but the man had it from the time he was 20 to the time he died. I think he packed it in because he wasn't going to sit around and be the Shah of Iran of American letters.

WR 97.26 I don't usually have writer's block, but I think I may have had a certain sense of how to avoid it. I'm keeping my fingers crossed. It's a foolish writer who brags about never having writer's block. When I was younger I had years when I used to wonder whether I'd ever write another book, and I wouldn't write for six months at a time, but since I wasn't trying to work on anything, I didn't see it as writer's block. I also had a couple of books I started and didn't know how to go on and I dropped them, but I never called it writer's block because it didn't feel that way. I think what happens is there's something deep in the unconscious that says to you, "You can go ahead with this. This book can be written." On the other hand, there's certain books you can't write. If you're writing about terribly charged, emotional material that you're not ready to live with, I think you're not writing anymore. You're engaged in a transaction with yourself that probably is analogous to a patient with a psychoanalyst—psychoanalysts are always talking about how they can't get patients to deliver certain sorts of obvious material because they can't face it. Writer's block is probably related to that situation. But all writers have certain strengths and weaknesses. I think one of my strengths has been that I've been able to avoid writer's block; it isn't a preoccupation of mine. What I'm concerned with is: how good is it going to be?

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COLL
82.16 Some writers have a powerful sense of identity. I think the best American example might be Henry Miller. Hemingway too. Faulkner, Thomas Wolfe. Then you get to people like Steinbeck who kept changing his identity with every book he did. I could add myself or Ed Doctorow as other good examples of this second category. I suppose our personality becomes an index to us of how the world is changing. So the act of writing serves us differently than it does Hemingway or Miller. Picasso also comes to mind. He went through many styles and it's been attributed by some to his several marriages. I could say the same about myself up to a point. I suppose I've written a different book with every wife but then I think you become a different man in each marriage. On the other hand, Miller was married many times and that did not change his identity. I suppose that the crucial difference is that some people are born with clear roots. They know exactly where they came from and who they are and what they are, but the world is mysterious to them. I've always been the opposite—sensitive to the world and forever in the course of discovering who I am and what I am. Someone like Miller had to establish his identity very early in life. I expect this is true for people who grow up in hostile families—they must establish their identities early. So there is often a rock-hard quality to the personality. Hemingway may have had subtler problems in his family, but he also had to establish his identity. Whereas my mother and my father treated my sister and myself as important people. At home, we were the center of their universe. So I was always terribly alert to the street and took the family hearth for granted. I was free to indulge myself there.

WR
82.16 I'm always a little uneasy when writing does not come hard. It's better for me when I have to forge the will to do it on a given day. I find looking back, and I can't even tell you why, that on the days it was very hard, but I did finally succeed, and the same occurred the next day and the next and the next, each day writing against great resistance in myself and finishing in great depression, that those became the best things I did. *The Armies of the Night* was written in a towering depression. I did it in two months and those were some of the worst weeks of my life. I would come home each night and think it was terrible. Add to that that I was writing about myself in the third person. On the one hand, it seemed interesting to speak of a protagonist named Norman Mailer; on the other, it was quite odd. I remained uncomfortable with it for quite a period. I'd say I was halfway into the book before I got used to it. It took me longer than any reader. It's a very funny way to look at oneself. But by the time I was done I missed it so much I kept going back in book after book. It never worked as well again. And I got less interested in myself. In *The Armies of the Night* I was a true protagonist of the best sort, which is half-heroic and three-quarters comic.

WR
73.14 To use the metaphor of motherhood, *Why Are We in Vietnam?* was the easiest child I ever had. It was a gift. When you're a writer who does a lot of writing, when you try to keep up to your level, the key thing in writing very day is that you've got to

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Go through a peculiar hour or two, each day, where you get yourself in shape to do that writing. I mean, your personal life can be in good shape or in bad shape, but you've got to face yourself each morning, which everyone has to do one way or another, but the difference for a writer is that you do it alone, day after day after day. It's really a form of self-analysis—but I don't want to dignify it that way. I don't want to calumniate it that way, either. It's a matter of just brooding and drifting, and getting into what's bothering you, or just unwinding a little, being alone for a while, or just cussing at yourself for a while, or really looking into everything in yourself that's really weak and second rate.

work 73.14 What I write is more important than myself. I think Hemingway got into trouble because he never got that clear in his head. Finally, he had to be as important as the work. Well, he was trying the hardest thing you can do; he was making an enormous demand on himself: he could ever have a character in his books who was braver than he was. Well, that's an extraordinary demand to make upon oneself. It's a beautiful demand. I think there's a beautiful rigor in forcing oneself to submit to such a code. But I'm sure it cuts down on the amount of work you can do. It seems to me legitimate to write about a man who's braver than you, if you only recognize him as braver than you as you're writing, and if you can conceive of yourself as being that brave under wholly different circumstances. Well, I would like to feel I could write about a heavyweight champion of the world, and put him in a novel, and enter his mind without being the best fifty-year old fighter-writer around.

WR 65.6 I think very often a book is prepared in one's unconscious and in the act of writing various sorts of truth start marching through the body. If you're out and get drunk and the next morning you're bombed—you've betrayed your unconscious. It won't create for you. If you're working steadily it does work for you. I've been working enough years to know when I'm working *with* myself. I've learned to recognize the curious little signals, the little stubbornnesses from the unconscious.

WR 71.7 When I'm writing, I never have a good day, a good mood. A part of me just get turned off and I work in a flat depression, day after day. I don't see hardly anyone, don't drink much. I'll put in eight or ten hours, of which only three or four will be actual writing. The literal details of writing involve one's own physiology or metabolism. You begin from a standing start and have to accelerate yourself to the point of cerebration where the words are coming—well, and in order. All writing is generated by a certain minimum of ego: you must assume a position of authority in saying that the way I'm writing is the only way it happened. Writer's block, for example, is simply a failure of ego. Like a prizefighter, you've got to win, to organize your body and your mind to be able to produce. This takes a minimum of ego. A fighter has to feel that he has the right to do physical damage to another man. When you think about it, a writer has to be ready to take chances with his readers' lives. If you're trying for something at all interesting or difficult then you cannot predict what the results of your work will be. And if you're writing something that's deep enough, people will literally fall apart reading it.

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68.1 Moving from one activity to another makes sense if you do it with a hint of wit or a touch of grace—which I don't say I've always done, far from it—but I think moving from one activity to another can give momentum. If you do it well, you can increase the energy you bring to the next piece of work. Growth, in some curious way, I expect, depends on always being in motion just a little bit, one way or another. Growth is not simply going forward; it's going forward until you have to make a delicate decision either to continue in a difficult situation or to retreat and look for another way to go forward. Now an expert, by definition, is opposed to growth. Why? Because an expert is someone who moved forward in one direction until he reaches that point where he has to use all his energy to maintain his advance; he cannot allow himself to look in other directions. In other words, he's become nearsighted.

But this is the point I want to make: I had some instinctive sense—right or wrong—that the best way to grow was not to write one novel after another but to move from activity to activity, a notion that began with Renaissance man; it's not my idea after all.

68.1 I learned how to accept and live with my legend. It became my friend, the beard, a front man, a pimp, a procurer of new situations. You live with a ghost who is more real to people than yourself; every single action you take with another person is part of a triangle. Every woman you talk to is not only in love with you or disappointed in you but is also in love with or your legend—who, incidentally, is more real to her than you. There are times, therefore, when you beef up your legend, perform some action to support it; times when you draw credit back from your legend, like cashing in the desire of somebody else to do something nice for you. Either way, you don't pretend—as I did for years—that the legend ain't there; it *is*. By the same token, when you're dealing with a man, there are two of you against him; you're two linemen having to take out one other guy.

85.15 There are very few writers that come out of prison. I think the scheme of things destroys a man's ability to write. The noise, which is tremendous in prison. The paranoia—you literally do have to be afraid of just about everybody around you; there's few people you can trust, if anyone. The tension—you threatened someone three weeks ago, when you were feeling strong, and now you're feeling weak. That guy is working out with weights every day in the yard and giving you bad looks. All that tension, and the daily injustice, which is inevitable. Most convicts may not have a very good sense of the rights due others, but they sure have a sense of what's due them, and they're not getting it most of the time. So they walk around with a burning sense of injustice. Injustice breeds obsession. Obsession blots out the power to write, because, after all, obsession is like a magnetic field. Every time you start to say something or write something, you're pulled back to your preoccupation. All this militates against writing makes it almost impossible. When you think about it, there have been so few good writers that have come out of jail in all these years. Given that incredible experience you'd think that writers would ferment like a yeast, but they don't.

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WR Schroeder/1992 It's very hard to write good books out of an act of will. They are written from time to time but depend on other factors—will alone, no. But I think that the main source of energy for writing a good book is preoccupation with the subject. And anger is a very good motive for writing a book. If you're really angry or upset about something but at the same time haven't lost your power to think paradoxically about it, then you've got all you need to write a book.

WR or COLL Lennon/1999 Because I had put so much emphasis on myself as the observer through these last fifty years, I felt that the reader didn't need any more of me. So in this collection, *The Time of Our Time*, I wanted to show that I had also done a good deal of objective writing. The prevailing notion about me is, "He may be a good writer, but he is such an egomaniac." There are a lot of people who never read me for that reason. That's not entirely without justice. When people have a large driving ego, as I certainly did have for many, many years, it takes them over, it's a fever. They begin to see everything in terms of their own status. If they're rejected, they fight back. Muhammad Ali is the foremost example of that. He began as the leading American egomaniac, and people couldn't bear him because there is, indeed, something heartless and cold about someone who's all ego. The remarkable thing is that with Ali is that through all the years, and through his deeds, and those deeds were heroic, the public has come to love him. In the phenomenological sense, he has changed from an egomaniac to a saint. Now I'm no saint, but I will say that once you've worked through this huge fever of the galloping ego, and you've lived with it, and you've worked with it, and worked through it, what you develop afterward, and it's one of the virtues of living through your vices, and not repressing your vices, after you live through it, you tend to have a larger objectivity and also a greater versatility than when you started. What ego gave me was the desire to write about a great many things. So when it came to putting together this book, the last thing I looked for was to bring the reader too deeply into my life. As public lives go, it has been picayune. If I stand for anything, I'm going to be there for my work, not my presence on the public scene.

COLL Lennon/1999 Most writers go through a long, arduous preparation before they arrive. William Kennedy, for example, worked in the boondocks for 20 years before it was recognized what a talented writer he is. By the time he arrived at his successes, he could enjoy it. He had earned it. He knew the man he was when his success arrived. There were no shocks and surprises. For me it was exactly the opposite. It took me 20 years to come to terms with who I was and to recognize that my experience was the only experience that I was ever going to have. There are other people like me that have had a similar experience, who were also shot out of a cannon—James Jones, for example. But Jones suffered more than I did before he wrote his first novel, *From Here to Eternity*. By the time he'd arrived he was much more ready to enjoy the success. I was a great pain in the ass to a great many people because I'd keep saying, "Of, woe is me. Now I will never

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have the experience of other people. I will never have anything to write about." Jones didn't give a damn. You know, he had killed the lion and now he wanted to eat it.

WR 83.35 Writers must write almost every day, at regular times and places, in order to encourage the unconscious to tap the proper associations. If you fail to show up, you'll walk around with ants in your brain, and the next day it'll be much harder to get to work. Once, when something I was working on was going well, I celebrated by getting drunk—and then I forgot how I planned to finish the piece. The point is find ways to keep on writing. Most of the ways you discover will be private and personal and useful. And when you find them, don't tell others about them. The reason is not that you're going to give away some valuable secret to someone who will become a better writer than you, but because you'll spoil the sanctity of the secret. Even if the secret is something like sharpening pencils with your left hand, don't tell people what it is.

WR 83.20 What a writer must do is follow the sometimes murky light of the unconscious. The unconscious seeks an orderly use of one's own resources. Our personal style is reflective of our internal economy in drawing on them. I have to be careful that I don't overthink a subject. There is a certain fragility to this process. It's not the ideas of talking a story away, in the fashion of some of the Irish I know. When you have an idea you have to avoid treating it like, "Let's get these troops out of the rain." Don't do that to your unconscious or the creative process will turn into an evacuation. The unconscious can lead one to interesting places. In *Ancient Evenings* I named my narrator Menenhetet, and made it Meni for short. A couple of years later I came across a 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 is exactly Meni's role in the book.

WORLD 83.13 I put everything I knew about life into *The Naked and the Dead*. I had to start over for the next. Each of my early books was a brickbat in the face of the enemy, whoever the enemy was at the time. It's only been in recent years that I've begun to think of pacing myself and having a literary career. I've been thinking a lot about John Updike in the past few months because his history is the exact opposite of mine. If ever there was a career where a man knew he had a fine talent and he had to protect it and work at it carefully, his is it. I think one of the reasons for his vast popularity now is because he's a lonely example of someone who had a fine talent and nurtured it. In this time of immense distraction, anyone who can truly exercise craft is to be admired. But Updike doesn't make me feel that I've lived the wrong life, that I should have stayed married to one woman, so to speak. That would be like saying I should have been a Wasp.

WORLD 92.1 Certain novelists want to keep within the boundaries of their life's experiences. I see the process quite differently. What intrigues me are matters most guarded, most secret, most kept from me. For me, my own key experiences are exactly what I will not use directly. They can instead form crystals in the mind and the heart so that

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metaphorically I can shine a light through them. I can get one story if the light points in one direction, and yet another for the opposite. That is why I have always wanted to do books that take me out to distant, alien landscapes, places where I have an insight and where the event can have a life, a psychological life within my imagination.

91.3 John Cheever was far and away our finest short-story writer—for a long time. Better even, I'd say, than O'Hara. But I never knew him except casually. We didn't get along. We saw each other as belonging to the enemy camp, whatever that is. We never quite defined the enemy camp. After he died, I happened to read his collected stories and I thought they were wonderful. Reading them together is impressive. So I felt this sense of woe: "There's one more writer gone that I never really did talk to." And the reason is that I've always had a feeling that it's *dangerous* to be friends with a writer. Because you can end up talking away your books. And you can get into these awful relationships where, indeed, a little part of you dies when the other has success. Part of living, part of becoming a wise man or a wise woman, is to get to that point where you can have a friend for whom you are genuinely happy when he or she has a success. That's tough. Very few people get to that point. With writers it's next to impossible. You can't really bless a writer who's as good as yourself.

91.3 Truman Capote was wonderful when all was said. When you think of that tiny man with everyone laughing at him. And then growing up as this pampered little darling with a few friends who just catered to him, and nonetheless having the balls, the enormous *balls*, to decide he was going to be a major figure in American life. The hell with writing. He was going to give up writing in order to be a major figure, and in doing this I think he sacrificed ten or twenty years of his talent.

91.10 I've been obsessed with questions of identity all my life. I had my identity forcibly changed at the age of 25, when I went from being an unknown writer to a public writer in a month, and I've been living with it ever since. So I've always been fascinated with spies and actors and people who take on roles that are not their own and then take on that role more than they might like to. I wouldn't say actors equal spooks, but they each have experience of entering a role that could become more real than their life. The few times I've acted, I've been amazed at how real you can feel. Sometimes more real than you can feel in your own life. When a spy feels friendship for someone they're going to betray, that friendship is awfully real. The average journalist is in that way a spy.

97.22 I've never been able to write about my life directly because I feel that there are things that happened to me—good and bad—and they are there; I can always go back to them. And if my imagination comes into that stuff at this angle, I get one sort of a book; if I come through the crystal at another angle, I get another book. Once you know that, you can work on a flicker. In *Harlot's Ghost* I knew I had made my CIA. It's not *the* CIA, but it's mine; just as good.

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WR 98.11 When writing *The Executioner's Song* I used to work eight and ten hours a day, six days a week. But on other books, when I'm doing something that's more delicate and that is coming entirely from my imagination, such as it is, I will only work a couple of hours a day. It uses you up much harder. The one rule I have that I try never to break is if I tell myself I am going to work the next day, no matter how I feel in the morning I will get up and go to my desk, because what I have learned over the years is you've got to respect your own unconscious, which lives a virtually separate existence from you. It does all the work in your sleep. And then if you have made a date with it, then you are going to be there in the morning, and if you are not, the unconscious gets very unruly, like troops left in the rain. So whenever I am talking to a writing class, and they ask for advice, I say this.

WR 98.17 If you get to a novel before you're ready, it's exactly as if you're a young athlete and you get into a game with professionals who are far beyond you and you're not ready for it; you get clobbered, you get ruined. So, one really builds up to the novel.

WR McKay/2000 It started with *The Naked and the Dead*. I was 25. On the one hand I'd written the book, but on the other I had absolutely no idea what it was like to be a success. I always thought I would be working away. Maybe I could make a success of writing, maybe I couldn't. And it was a huge success. It was number one on the bestseller list for a long time and I was a celebrity. It was absolutely unthinkable. I made the remark that I felt as if I was secretary to someone named Norman Mailer, and to meet him they had to meet me first. It took a long time to realize that fame and celebrity, which I had shunned and disliked in the beginning, got to be an acquired appetite. As the Marquis De Sade said once, "There's no pleasure greater than that obtained from a conquered repugnance." So then I began to want more and more of it. Fame makes you realize that you are cut off from normal life—people don't look at you in the same way. But it has also given me a sense of how—not tenuous, not fragile—but how delicate, perhaps, is identity. And so my experience was now of interest, because I could now write about the identity of people who had a certain amount of power.

WR Foreman/2001 After *The Naked and the Dead* I was suffering an identity crisis, although the phrase didn't exist then. And when people suffer one they generally have to take all sorts of steps in order to locate who they are. They succeed here and they fail there and that gives them points of reference. So I had to have a public life., although I was particularly shy in those years. Half shy and half arrogant, like most young writers. If I had chosen a reflective life I would have just gone in circles. I had gregarious gifts and I started to employ them. I also lost a lot living that way. You gain, you lose it and it makes for one kind of life. Faulkner, for example, had a totally different kind of life. He wouldn't even admit he was a writer when he came to New York.

WR Lee/2001 In the few times in my life I've been associated with violence in a real way—these times stay with me forever and are a source for writing. I have a theory on writing

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that I've expressed from time to time, but it might be worth stating it again. I think that we have certain experiences that I speak of as crystals, and they're the ones you shouldn't write about. For instance, I've never written about my childhood mainly because my feeling is that too many crystals are there. The value of a crystal is that you can beam your imagination through it in one direction and end up with one or another scenario. From another direction, you get another scenario from the same crystal. So you don't want to write about the material that's in the crystal. Preserve it because it's endlessly fruitful for you.

COLL Hughes/2001 At one point Salinger received two hideous reviews, one from Mary McCarthy and one from me. I think, perhaps, that one-two punch took a lot out of him. Salinger's an example of someone who's immensely spoiled, tremendously received. Adored. I think there were hordes of the young who would have walked off a cliff for him. He was needed. It was a bad time; he could have served. It was as tough on the young as Hemingway's suicide was tough on a lot of us. We revered Hemingway, and there Papa had gone and blown his brains out. The truth is, if you get an awful lot of recognition it can wreck you, especially if you are *the* established writer. It can cut down on the amount and quality of work you do. Certain writers have been able to avoid that. Saul Bellow, for instance, is very hard to approach. He doesn't try to wear the mantle, although, God knows, they'd love to give it to him. But he keeps everyone at a certain remove. John Updike works all the time. Joyce Carol Oates. She's always putting a wedge between her and an audience. Philip Roth? Well, Roth is Roth. A lot of people are scared to go near him. As for me? I'm known as being very difficult, much more difficult than I really am, as you can see. The thing is, you do whatever you need to do to keep working.

COLL Fisk/1997 Allan Ginsberg may have been the greatest American poet since World War II. Once he said to me, "Norman, I don't like your work, but I think you're very attractive." And I said, "the reverse for me."

COLL 95.47 When James Jones was writing *Some Came Running*, we were all waiting for that book. "What if it's fabulous? Two great novels in a row, and what have we got?" When it came out and it wasn't all that good (at any rate, it wasn't better than *From Here to Eternity*), we all felt a great relief on the one hand. But I remember writing about it and saying I was also angry at myself for feeling that kind of relief. Because I also knew that if Jones could do something incredible, it would have pushed me to try to do more. And Jones and I used to feel, for a certain period in the early fifties, that we were the two best writers around, the gold-dust twins. Unspoken was the feeling that there was room for only one of us. I remember that Jones inscribed a copy of *From Here to Eternity* to me: "For Norman, my dearest enemy, my most feared friend." Picasso and Matisse had something of that sort. A lot of people were saying that Matisse was the best painter in Paris—this was around 1906. Then there were those who said Picasso was the best. So I

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do think that when there are several good artists around, whatever they're doing, it tends to produce more good work, yes.

95.47 Picasso had a very bleak, dark ugly view of woman. But on the other hand, he had a bleak, dark view of himself. If you can pass though Picasso and still have a little love left for humanity, then you're there. He's like a doctor and he's cleaning out a very ugly wound. But you've got to go to the bottom of all that crud and scrape it off before you can begin to think there is something in human nature to build on. Picasso never answered that question. At the end, nothing was overly affirmative in his work.

Frost/1992 Henry Miller was just wonderful. He'd always tell you the truth. And he told you in the gentlest possible way he could. He'd say, "Yes, Norman, you really shouldn't have said that"—talking about something that happened the night before. Look at his writing. It's the guys who write these wonderfully sweet books who are absolute monsters. You know, they are the ones who kick the wife and cuff the kids, and have the dog shrinking in horror and so forth.

91.37 During the seven years I worked on *Harlot's Ghost* I imagined the CIA and its agents as people of high morals and deceit, loyalty and duplicity, passion and ice-cold detachment. So many writers, including myself, have much of that in their makeup. It's what makes us novelists.

91.23 My body never prospered when I was writing. It puts stress and tension through all your systems. What's easier now is that there are fewer distractions. One of the hardest things about being a young writer is every day you spend writing is the day you don't meet this fabulous woman who will be the best heroine in American fiction. I'm happily removed from all that. Work used to be the great stone you carried on your back. Now it's the opposite.

91.18 During the six years it took to write *Harlot's Ghost*, I often felt as if I was going through a cave, following a thread, and I wasn't certain who put the thread there. In other words, your consciousness put the thread there—which doesn't mean it's going to be a good thread. You keep following it, because it's all you've got. But I never got into a panic as such on this book, when I felt, "I can't go on."

Vitka/1984 When you are a young writer, if you are unknown, you can be at a party and watch what everyone is doing. Very often if you are a talented young writer you have a marvelous ear for dialogue. You can wake up the next morning and remember everything that was said and how it was said. You are a bird on a branch, in the jungle sense, and you see like a bird and write books that are extraordinarily well-observed. Once you are successful, especially if it's happened quickly, it's as if the bird has suddenly lost it's wings and generated haunches and fore-shoulders and has a mane: Lo

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and behold, it is a lion, and it is walking around on the ground. And everything is looking at the lion, including the birds. But it is a lion with the heart of a bird and the mind of a bird. So there is a terrible period where the lion is trying to live as a lion and has no gifts for it. Then the lion begins to experiment: it can start to run in a certain direction and see how the various beasts scamper. It is the prime mover—I'm speaking in hyperbole. It takes quite a while—five, ten years—for you to appreciate your effect on others, and to begin to understand what makes them tick. In the old days, you tried to figure people out by induction; now you do it by deduction.

WR Vitka/1984 I really run my literary life as if I'm sort of a drill sergeant. When I am writing, I am terribly regular in my habits. I have the same routine day after day because I believe the solution is going to be in the unconscious. I've never gotten to the point where I was in the middle of writing something and just couldn't continue—I've had books give up on me, but I knew it at the time. On some books—*Ancient Evenings* comes to mind—I knew I had to stop for a while because I didn't know enough to continue. When you do have to make a real push, what it means is that you have to go deeper into your unconscious. So then the unconscious has to decide whether it is willing to go on with this project, or that it is going to cost too much. That means you've got to go to your room and try to write every day, day after day after day. And then, if nothing happens after a period, finally, there will come a message from your unconscious: "Give it up; it isn't happening."

coll 84.12 I don't have the natural talent of Hemingway and Fitzgerald. But you can make the best out of what you've got. I think maybe I've gotten more out of what I have than they did. On the other hand, if you have less talent, it's easier to get more out of what you've got. The hardest workers in the world are those of mediocre talent. I think I have my share of talent, but I've also been a pretty good curator of that talent. I've willed myself to be disciplined because I'm not disciplined at all. Left to myself, I tend to thicken around the middle, as you can see. What I put into my work I do not put into my waistline. We are all lopsided creatures at best.

WR 84.29 A good novelist has got to be very brave on the one hand, very prudent on the other. If he or she has a talent, they can't throw it away. Writers are a perishable species, highly perishable, terribly delicate. On the one hand, writers have to be sensitive to be good. On the other hand, they have to have the will, the stamina, the determination, and the insensitivity to take a lot of critical abuse. So a good writer is an oxymoron by definition. He's a strong, weak person, full of brave timidity, sensitive, insensitive. Novelists have to have an exceptional ear for how people speak, and know how they think, but you must also be absolutely impervious to people or you will never get the work done.

PSYCHOLOGY/17

83.22 There's a marvelous irony that's in the very warp and woof of fabricating an alternate self. When I wrote *Advertisements for Myself*, I realized at that point that one could literally forge one's career by the idea you gave people of yourself. That is, you impersonate the person you'd like to be and have some reasonable chance of becoming in a couple of years, and in that sense you are lifting yourself by your bootstraps and accelerating your career. It was an unbelievably delicate and demanding game—not just a gimmick but as profound a game as a criminal lawyer plays by becoming one, because he cuts himself off forever, perhaps, from any clear notion of what morality might be. But the negative side is that you then end up with this incredible dinosaur's tail of legend, and it's *false* legend—it never worked even on the day it was created. And 20 years later, you're using your best efforts to drag the tail around.

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51.2 A great writer always goes to the root; he is always coming up with the contradictions, the impasses, the insoluble dilemmas of the particular time he lives in. The result is not to cement society but to question it and destroy it. Faulkner may profess all sorts of things; he may even be off on a white-supremacy binge, but actually the total of his work has caught the horror at the same time that it has caught the fact that he loves it. A great writer has to be capable of knowing the rot, and he has to be able to strip it down to the stink, but he also has to love that rot. A writer has to have a tough mind, the toughest mind of his time. And he has to have a great heart.

WR

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 is at its best the moral of art forms because it's the most immediate, the most overbearing, if you will. It is the most inescapable. One could argue much more easily about the meaning of a non-objective painting or of music, or whatever. But in the novel the meaning is there. It's much closer; one could argue about ambiguities, but, because one is using words, it's much closer to the sense of moral commandments, moral strictures. And one gets into a particular thing which is terribly interesting, you begin to explore the interstices of moral reaction—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 terrible complexities of moral experience.

WORK

75.11 Coming back to novel-writing after all these years, the difficulty is as fresh on me now as it was when I started writing. I mean, when you get down to it, 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, and know the responsibility of being a writer, the God-like assumption of writing a novel is almost impossible to surmount. To become the prime mover or your own little world.

WORLD

79.26 Why do I think fiction is so important? Oh, because I think it's the place where art and philosophy and adventure come together. For me there's nothing more beautiful than a marvelous novel. I love the idea of a novel; to me a novel is better than reality. I mean, as good as *The Executioner's Song* may become—and I hope it becomes a very, very good book—it can never be as good as a novel, to my mind. It could be better than a novel in a lot of ways but it could never be as good. I mean there's something so beautiful about one being able to come up with a vision that's not Godlike but close enough to Godlike to give us a vision of how marvelous the Lord's mind might be. You know, when we read Proust or the best of Maugham or Stendhal or Joyce or any of the great novelists. We could name 20 of them, say, who give us this idea of God's mind being something like that. Don't you get that feeling when you read Proust—that one side of God's mind is like Proust's? And that's the challenge.

COLL

PHILOSOPHY/2

WR 82.14 As you get older, you realize that what's important is to do one's work and do one's best work and be serious about it. It's not that you're retreating completely—you're just saying, "It's too much, I abdicate, I resign, I will cultivate my own garden." You say, "I will work on that garden on the assumption I will produce an herb that will challenge all that is before us." In other words, instead of seeing yourself as the embattled artist, you begin to see yourself as the alchemical artist. Art as magic rather than art as war.

WORLD 83.10 I'm right and I'm wrong so often, so many times of the day, that I have no interest in having people think the way I think. I'm truly misunderstood on this. What I'm interested in is that however people think they get better at it. That's what important about one's work. In the work of good authors, if a book is good enough, you cannot predict how people are going to react to it. You shouldn't be able to. If it's good enough, it means it's not manipulative. If it's not manipulative, everybody sort of goes off in a different direction. One of my own favorite remarks is that it's not that I'm for the cops and not that I'm for the crooks, but I'm for the cops getting better and the crooks getting better. I have a notion of society as an oven where some fabulous dishes are being cooked, and in order for the banquet to take place, every ingredient has to be in it. I don't think it's an accident that I'm a novelist. Novelists have a wicked point of view—wicked as opposed to evil. They are interested in upping the ante. They're interested in more happening, not less. One of the reasons that I detest television is that it reduces our possibilities. Television was welcomed as something that would help us understand the world. But I think, quite the contrary, it takes away from us any possibility of ever comprehending the world because it deadens our senses and because it gives us false notions, periodically, systematically, and intensively.

GOLL 83.10 Once Ralph Ellison and I were out in Iowa together many years ago, back in 1959, and we worked like crazy. We had a lively audience, and the symposium went on for three or four days, for *Esquire*. At the end of it, it suddenly seemed a little absurd to me that we really worked that hard, got in so many arguments with students, talked back and forth, and even argued with each other as lively as hell. But then when it was over, there was a little bit of sadness that something that had been truly exceptional was over. So I said to him, "Why the hell did we do it?" He said, "Ah, shit, man, we're expendable." I've always loved that remark. Because in a certain sense one's ideas are expendable. If the best of my ideas succeeds in changing the mind of someone who's more intelligent than myself, then that's fine. I'm a great believer in the idea that if you advance an idea as far as you can and it's overtaken by someone who argues the opposite of you, in effect you've improved your enemy's mind. Then someone will come along on your side who will take your enemy's improvement of your idea and convert it back again. I'm nothing if not a believer in the dialectic. And to that extent one does the best one can. And that's the end of it. The thought of everyone thinking the way I do is as bad as any other form of totalitarianism.

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COLL 81.16 Hemingway's life was cautionary to me. Several times in my life I think I stopped doing different things or veered away from doing certain things because of the example of Hemingway. Hemingway's suicide stood over us all like the suicide of our own father. He's the father of modern American literature, at least for me, and to commit suicide... John Gardner has that marvelous remark that when a father commits suicide he condemns his son to suicide. Well, of course, you can suicide in more ways than killing yourself. You can destroy yourself with too much drink, too many cigarettes, too many failures, too many wild and unachieved alliances—and so Hemingway was a great cautioning influence on us.

COLL 81.16 Borges poses to us, I think, the nature of the difficulty of comprehending reality, because he shows us how every time we approach reality we are writing a scenario and these very scenarios are the equivalent of propositions and hypotheses in physics. That is, they are correct until the evidence subverts them. But in the course of the evidence subverting them we have learned a great deal because the next hypothesis, ideally, should be superior. So in Borges you have this wonderful business of immensely elaborate hypotheses destroyed by the one fact that turns the hypothesis inside-out, into its opposite. There is this marvelously sinewy dialectical vision of the interplay between culture and history, the two almost being...not artifacts, but separate organisms. Borges gives us an immensely vivid inner life which I think all one finally cares about in writing. It is what I look for in other writers, what I expect I should be able to give to others in my own writing. It is to make that inner life not only more vivid—but by making it more alive and stronger it becomes more able to stand as proof against the attacks of the world upon it. The attacks of the world now upon our psyche are not so much aggressive as subtle, insidious—we're leached out. We're not destroyed from without, we are sucked out. Our spiritual souls, our social souls, are sucked out of us by the mass media, by information retrievable. I think Borges is best when it comes to fighting that. Try putting Borges in a computer.

COLL 81.6 If a great war novel's to be written again—and it may be that the great war novel is a form that's now past—it could come 50 years after the war in Vietnam as *War and Peace* came after the Napoleonic Wars. Because I don't think that war will finally be comprehended until we have that perspective. The Second World War accelerated America into a direction it was trying to get into anyway—America was trying to move from one form of capitalism into another; and the government was trying to get into the act. Vietnam, however, either injured America permanently, so that we may never be the most important nation in the world again, or it may have been an incredible crucible in which the national character shifted and changed. That perspective awaits us yet. But when it comes, I think there may be some incredible stuff done about it, and we may have great novels about Vietnam. And they may be great the way *War and Peace* was great, because the Napoleonic Wars changed Russia forever.

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83.30 Piety is piety. That's why in *Ancient Evenings* I write about people who were seen in "the best temples." Piety is five thousand years old and it hasn't advanced one step. And the same can be said for snobbery. I wrote this novel as, in the most exalted sense of the word, escapist literature. I think there are two great pleasures in literature, and they're polar. One of them is escapism and it's been absolutely corrupted. It's become a money machine. The horrors of "E. T." extend from here to Armageddon. And, of course, the other joy of literature is intimacy. It is to enter material one knows very well and find that it's been done so powerfully by the author that you transcend your own intimate knowledge and know even more. You can point to books of both examples. I think *Anna Karenina* at the time it came out was an example of intimate literature. *Moby-Dick* is an example of great escapist literature. Doesn't have to be agreeable escapist literature, it just has to take you out of yourself."

83.30 The moment you moralize, it's no longer moral literature, it's pious literature. There's a dialectical relation between morality and piety. Piety destroys morality. You know, piety and corruption get together like hot dogs and mustard. They have to. No one can fulfill the demands of piety. Piety is an inhuman demand, and because it is so obsessive it inspires its opposite, just for the sheer health of the body, if not the soul. But I think morality is finally in human affairs a sense of proportion. Tolstoy is a great writer, maybe our greatest novelist, because nobody has his sense of proportion, of the importance of events against the great screen of the cosmos. And that inspires us with the rarest combination of sentiments. We feel a compassionate awe, or an awe that's supported by compassion, when we read Tolstoy. It's a remarkable achievement. To be in the presence of something so serious, yet ultimately so tender because he's full of judgment, but—so ready, finally, to forgive.

82.16 Anyone who worries about whether they are going to hurt somebody's feeling by their work is no more a writer than a surgeon who would say to himself, "In making this incision I'm 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 certain insensitivity to other parts of the context. Writers also have their own kinds of blindness. They can't say to themselves, "This portrait of my good friend is going to scar him terribly." If they feel that, they can't write. Indeed, a great many young writers can't. They think of all the people they're going to hurt, or those they're going to make enemies of, and the retribution that will come, and it doesn't seem worth it to them. There has to be something a bit maniacal about a young man or woman who wants to write. He has to be willing to get that book out no matter how many psychic corpses are left en route, or who is coming after him later. Still, he must not take the immediate advantage, never cash those easy checks. It's very dangerous when you are writing to milk it, to say

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to oneself, I have a prize cow and the price of milk is high now. I'm going to get every last bit of milk out. You have to be careful of that. Writing may be an instinctive process, but it's not always clear. You often feel no more than a dull pressure from your instinct to go here or go there. You have to try to listen to the faint voice that tells you how to stay true to the work. Very hard to do. A writer's open to every pressure to take the immediate advantage, whatever it is. We all do in various ways.

82.16 Yes, Borges is a conservative but... I detest having to think of a writer having to think of a writer by his politics first. It's like thinking of people by way of their anus. Borges has this magical ability to take plots and turn them inside out. I sometimes think Borges may do in five pages what Pynchon does in 500. He's a magician's magician. In that sense I love his work. Marquez is also wonderful. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude* he created not one world but a hundred. I don't know how Marquez does it. People come into his book.... In ten pages he'll create a family, and you know every one of the children, and all the events that occur in their life.

81.26 I may not be a good intellectual, but my tendency is to create intellections. I put them on like adhesive plasters. In the case of Gary Gilmore, I was pulling off the plasters. As I got deeper and deeper into what his nature might be, I decided that every concept I had about Gilmore proved inadequate. So I wanted the reader of *The Executioner's Song* to confront the true complexity of a human personality that can come from studying one man close enough. The fact that he was a murderer made my task more easy because we're all fascinated with killers. But any person studied in that depth would prove fascinating. It's Flaubert's old idea. You can take any soul alive, including that simple servant girl he wrote about, and make them incredible if you get to know them well enough.

81.26 Freud had a great deal to say about the nature of the psyche in the nineteenth century. I believe his final importance in intellectual history will be that he gave us more insight into the late nineteenth century than anyone but Marx. Freud is the key to understanding how people put up with the particular kind of lives that they led in the 1880s, 1890s and early 1900s, very much locked up, terribly overstuffed, terrible formal lives. Yet, those lives had a considerable amount of power and energy. In those days the psyche was used like a plumbing system. People were accustomed to living under high pressure. That's not what we have now. Today we know a world in which people act out their anxieties and look to explanations for their conduct all the time. Freud is not really adequate any longer. Marx, for vastly more complex reasons, is also not adequate any longer, not wholly adequate, because corporate capitalism adapted to Marx via Keynes. So I don't try to create bridge from Marx to Freud anymore. I'm not certain I could have. But when I write "The White Negro," back in the fifties, I was coming to realize that everything in society from the largest social institution to those private and intimate personal moments such as the onset of death, might all be seen in their

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connections if one had the courage to begin. In that sense, I'm still trying. But I've come to realize that the task is enormous. Of course, I grew up under the shadow of Marx and Freud. Both men, independently, created an entire world system. They had a vision of all existence. That impressed me immensely. I was nothing if not intellectually ambitious when I was young and wanted to come up with a similar vision that would comprehend everything. By now I've come to realize that it is not only enormously difficult but that I don't have the intellectual discipline to begin to do anything remotely of that sort. But one tries to do one's best with what one's got. I'm still attempting to connect up what I can. Because I do think it's important. Until we understand the ways in which we are obliged to lead our lives in ways we don't particularly enjoy, until we understand all those reasons why so many of use feel dead inside so much of the time, and recognize how much of that is not our lack of imagination but the product of vast institutional systems of greed and injustice that we are schooled to perceive as rather benign manifestations, we are 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 the end of a long chain, you might say, of socially intended processes that keeps us malleable, amenable, and short on such powerful emotions as outrage at injustice. In that sense, I'm still trying to find the roots, trace it out, bring in the ultimate indictment against all that's awful and evil in society.

WR

95.35 Writers aren't taken seriously any more, and a large part of the blame must go to writers of my generation, including me. 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 we're not a nation that has characteristics or form. We just expand all over the place and we're about as attractive as yeast.

WR

74.3 If I could give one moral maxim to a young writer, I'd say live with your cowardice every day. Don't bullshit yourself about your cowardice. Recognize it, live with it, hate it or defend it, but don't put it someplace where it is not. Cowardice is a prime cause; apathy is a product, rather than a cause.

WR

74.3 Superstition? Bifurcation again. 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 you or to your destruction.

74.3 You can tell about every stage of sex—before, during and after—by odor. One even knows what kind of sex it is by the odor. One knows one's own spiritual condition by one's scent. One knows the happiness or the misery of the house by the odor as one walks in. The sense of smell is therefore unendurable at times, because 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.

WopID

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73.46 I've long had the thought that when you have highly charged dramatic people in a confrontation—Shakespearean characters, for example—coincidences tend to occur. But then if there's any order in the cosmos it's not so exceptional that coincidences occur. If you have, let's say, a general getting ready for battle, and there are gods and devils surrounding this general, whether this general wins or loses the war will have an effect on the fortunes of these gods. They're going to be paying a great deal of attention to this general, aren't they? And the general's going to be paying a great deal of attention to them, insofar as he has any sensitivity to their presence. Such a man is not necessarily psychotic if he spends ten minutes in bed—he won't have the opportunity usually—debating whether to put the left foot down first or the right, because maybe he's calling on whole echelons of gods. And what we can also assume is that these gods are going to be up to their tricks. They're going to be doing their best to present coincidences, because a coincidence always inspires us with a terror that there's a superstructure about us, and in this superstructure are all sorts of agents of a machine larger than our imagination.

74.5 If you stop to analyze it, an equation sign is nothing but a statement of metaphor. When you say: "y equals x to the 2nd," you are in effect establishing a metaphor. Or, the obverse: Some kid in a gallery, looking at a painting, says, "I see God in the yellow." All right, that's a metaphor which can be stated mathematically. The yellow in the painting is a function of God. A simple mathematical statement. Either way, artist or physicist has penetrated into the substance of things. In that sense, I'd say that the physicist and the artist are closer to one another than the artist and the gallery owner, or the physicist and the engineer.

74.5 While the physicist is titillated, even thrilled, by the experience of magic in his work, and while 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 and they're enemies. Because the physicist is finally trying to destroy the fundament of magic, and the artist is trying to blow up 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 make every vault within the cosmos that technology would attempt to make.

74.5 The artist always 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 had, and he usually acts as a mediator between magic and technology. But no matter how technologized the artist becomes, his central impulse is to create a spell equivalent to the spell the primitive felt when he passed the great oak and knew something deeper than his comprehension

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of things was reaching him. It's possible the primitive felt something analogous to what we feel when we encounter a great work of art which tunes us into some comprehension of something we can't even quite call our knowledge. It's larger and less definable, more resonant. For the spell can't be measured.

85.15 The artist I feel the greatest kinship with is Picasso. I understand one thing about him very well, which is he wasn't interested in his own identity. He was interested in various attacks on the nature of reality, and he preferred to make each attack from a separate base so that he'd move his techniques and his psyche and his wit and assorted spiritual equipment over to the other side of the mountain. What I find most interesting in writing at this point is always making a new attack on the nature of reality. Reality has some subtle desire to protect itself, and if we keep going in the same direction, reality is able to handle us, just in the same way organisms become resistant to various pesticides and herbicides and start thriving among them. Reality will do that if you keep taking the same approach to it. So I have no idea what the next book I'll do will really be like. I have an idea, but all I know is, it'll be different from the last one.

Schroeder/1992 I'm never intentionally didactic. I never say to myself, "I want to get this idea across to readers." What I try to do is create a state of consciousness that is a fair one, and my hope is that other people will read it and it will change their minds. But I don't have this idea that I want to change everybody's mind in one direction—I hate that; that's propaganda. I don't want to move everybody ten degrees to the left; I would be happier if as I was moving some people to the left, some people were swinging to the right. My fundamental belief about a good society is one in which the cops get better and the crooks also get better. You see, I am really an entrepreneur at heart.

83.55 The great economists were always working to find a vision of human society. They pondered the interchange of human energy and looked for those means and ways, institutionally, that human energy would be augmented or would be dissipated or even destroyed. *Das Kapital* is a sort of phenomenological novel with commodity experiencing an extraordinarily vital life as a protagonist, gaining and losing energy just as humans do in novels. Perhaps in future years we will yet find the now virtually moribund or, at least, not well-functioning theories of economics revived by some magnificent writer, perhaps not yet born, who will transcend the categories and write some work that will marry all those visions of society that have to do with how we offer each other human energy and steal it from one another, augment it, and divert it. And we will be face to face again with a vision that will make our existence perhaps seem to us a touch closer to the viable.

91.3 I've always felt that there was a good deal of compatibility between La Rochefoucauld and Gore Vidal. I say this critically because 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. Vidal's remarks, I think, stand up in

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brilliance line for line with his. For example, Vidal's line, "Whenever a friend succeeds, a little something in me dies." No one can accuse him of not being able to turn a good line, but what I argue is that *that* particular tradition has become inadequate for our intellectual needs now. The world is getting so perplexed that it's almost hopeless to contain it with aphorisms, no matter how brilliant—and Vidal's aphorisms are often, indeed, brilliant.

91.3 There's enormous freedom today to write anything you want. We have the chisels finely honed now, but there's nothing to cut up anymore. One used to feel one was breaking into the very integument of society. One was changing society. It was a heady period. Most of all in the fifties, when we were living in the time of the Eisenhower repression. I mean, *Time* magazine in those days was hideous. You couldn't write anything that was opposed to the American Century without being slammed in a book review. It was automatic. You wrote a certain book and you'd go through and you'd get hit [Mailer claps his hands]. Like that. Automatically. And we'd do it. We did it because we had a feeling that we were making a difference.

91.10 People ask me why I don't write a book about my childhood in Brooklyn. The reason is that I know it too well, and there's no interest in writing about a subject where you're not going to discover much that's new.

91.10 I'll never be completely part of the establishment because the establishment will never be completely comfortable with me. The establishment is not comfortable with anyone whose dimensions have not been calibrated. They know I'm not a terrorist or a raving madman. I'm congenial. I can go to dinner parties and not cause anybody pain. No, I never worry about being part of the establishment. Although I'd love to be. It would mean that we had a different society.

97.24 Capote misjudged his own resources. He did not have the stuff left to say "A plague on your house" and write the book he could write. That book had probably died in him ten years earlier. One of the things we do in our lives as writers is to keep saving certain books, but when we get to the point where we think we are ready to write them, we no longer can. The material has crumbled into powder. You could write a collective biographical work about all the writers of our 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.

98.11 I think James T. Farrell's *Studs Lonigan* is wonderful. It's not very popular with Chicagoans because it's a grim portrait. And then the later Chicago novels he wrote, about Danny O'Neill, were very good. Before I ever saw Chicago I was in love with the city, and one of the reasons was Farrell. I grew up in Brooklyn, and Farrell opened the idea of writing for me. Because, as I was reading *Studs Lonigan* I was thinking, "This

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"This is a lot like the Brooklyn I grew up in." His people were a little tougher, a little meaner, but still I felt you could write about what you grew up with. Up to that point I thought that novels had to be romances. I didn't understand you could write close to your own marrow.

Goodale/2000 Cynicism has a limited value; it's okay for quick results. Good, available writing almost always is funny and sharp and biting and cynicism is perfect for that. But cynicism is really a roadblock to becoming a bit of a philosopher. It's impossible to become a really good novelist without, in a sense, developing a philosophical search in the course of your life. Once you have that philosophical attitude, you have more and more and more to say, usually better, not directly, about what you think is the nature of the universe, the nature of life, the nature of human effort. Cynicism can corrode that ability; it can poison your highest faculties. I delight in cynicism that's sharp, but it's not what I'm really interested in writing about. It's too easy and gets in the way of doing more.

95.28 I don't think it's possible anymore to write the great American novel, I mean a huge, panoramic novel about American life like Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* That was written at a time when there was still an illusion that you could encompass the country; I don't think you can anymore. Each particular section of the pie has gotten so specialized, and novels are much more detailed today than when I was young. You can't fake it anymore, which is terribly important in writing a broad, panoramic novel. You can't accumulate that much knowledge. Maybe one writer with enormous knowledge 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, and something grand might have come in. He had enormous talent; he was the greatest painter since Michelangelo. Maybe he would have been something nobler, but the odds are equal that he would have been something less, because very often the selfishness of the artist is there to protect the part that is generous. To the degree that they give of themselves to all people in one way, they don't want to give anything in other ways. There's an economy of generosity. And very often, the people who the most generous are not the people who are the most talented. I think the sanction that the artist gives himself or herself is that they've got to be selfish or nothing will get done. I would be happier if Picasso had been a little braver at certain moments of his life. But that doesn't get in the way of his art.

95.38 A great many artists are narcissists—certainly writers—because they're always consulting themselves. The basic joke about a writer is that no matter how much they're suffering, a small part of them is always taking notes. Even as the love of their life is walking out the door, a side of them is saying, "It's interesting, my left foot is colder than my right foot." In Picasso's case, narcissism is too small a word. In one sense, he had a

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PHILOSOPHY/12

complete relationship with the universe. You can see it in his love of form and the similarities of form. 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.

WORLD
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. There's an extraordinary period that goes from there until 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 were ready to become a martyr, you had a sense of importance, you could take yourself seriously, and you were fighting the good fight. Now, you eventually get to the point where people don't even know what these freedoms are worth, are using them and abusing them. You've gotten older. You've gotten more conservative. You're not using your freedoms. And there's comedy in it, in the long swing of the pendulum.

WORLD
92.12 There are fairly deep moral questions about whether people should be free to create hard-core pornography. I'd say yes, but let's not assume that there's no damage going on. There might be serious damage going on. But I'm perfectly prepared to write a novel about a girl who goes into hard-core pornography and ends up committing suicide. This is the place where I no longer feel certainty about matters of censorship. But I still do lean to the side that people have the right, if they want to, to commit suicide. In my mind, people have the right to do hard-core pornography. For some people it would be a curse, for others it might be a blessing. But you're playing with your soul when you start being photographed in the sexual act. At the same time I don't think it's up to the government to forbid it.

COLL
Vitka/1984 The last great American novel was *U.S.A.* by John Dos Passos. It is an heroic work, but you couldn't come close to doing that now. No one else did, not even Faulkner. He wrote great novels, but not *the* great American novel. He wrote a number of very important novels and the body of his work establishes him as a great writer. But the great American novel has a specific meaning. It isn't that you just write a book that is 800 pages long and great, it has to illumine American society, what it has been, what it is now, where it is going. There are very few books that even come close to that. *Moby-Dick*—of that century—is one, of course.

~~ADD~~
ADD
Vitka/1984 You cannot have a great democracy without great writers. One makes the other. I believe that if great books disappear, as they are in danger of doing, and our story-telling culture is television, then I think we will be that much nearer to real 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 life can be as well as how good.

PHILOSOPHY/18

84.29 The greatest writer I ever read was Karl Marx. He absolutely changed the way in which I perceived almost everything. It doesn't mean that I'm literally, in every sense of the word, a Marxist, but my thinking was colored by him to a vast extent. He taught me how to think better. He was like a great football coach who taught you how to get the most out of your body. Marx teaches you how to get a great deal out of your mind. In a small way, maybe I'm doing the same with my work.

85.3 We tell ourselves stories in order to make sense of life. Narrative is immensely 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 for the relief provided by the narrative's beginning, middle and end. Without an end, you have an obsession, a constant circling around a fact or situation.

83.39 I grew up at a time when writers were enormously important. For my generation, they were what rock stars are for my kids. When I was in college, if I had heard that Ernest Hemingway was speaking in Worcester, Mass., I would have gladly walked the 40 miles from Cambridge. That was how we felt about writers then. In my view, maintaining the sacred chalice at all costs was what the writer of talent was committed to. The shock came when I realized that that view of the writer didn't hold any longer. I first recognized it when my novel *The Deer Park* was turned down by several publishers. I felt that my book not being published was like being extinguished. Worse, they really didn't care.

PSYCHOLOGY

67.16 Some books come to you. As *The Naked and the Dead* came to me. They are bonuses, gifts. You do not have to kill some little part of your flesh to dredge them up. This is a fatal shade mystical, but it is almost as if you are serving as agent for a book which wants to get itself written. So the author never knows what to think of such books when he is done. His real fondness—since writing books is the closest men ever get to childbearing—is more for those books which he delivered out of his own flesh, torn and deadened by the process, but able at least to use all art and craft, all accumulated lore. Whereas *Why Are We in Vietnam?* came through like a storm, writing itself—I enjoyed the work, I was full of energy when I was done, but the work was by the same token impersonal. So I do not know if I love *Vietnam* or am indifferent to it.

70.1 The reason why every farmer alive, why every redneck, instinctively distrusts the Jew is because the Jews are intellectual machines, people who are born to dominate life with their minds. I grew up in that tradition. And I had a mind, when I was younger, which was like an intellectual machine. It wasn't that *good* a machine. In comparison with certain other machines, it as second rate. But it was a machine. It had the habit of dominating every experience it encountered. This went on for years. And I remember that there were certain experiences I had—I mean one of the reasons I've always been, in the view of the critics, obsessed with sex is that sex is an experience you can never dominate. You have to approach it with veneration. Bullfighting was something I couldn't dominate with my mind. It took me about three or four fights to get to like bullfighting. Once I got to like it, it was a passion. I lived with bullfights for a year. And the reason was, I encountered an experience that was larger than my mind. Something was going on that I *couldn't* dominate. I couldn't sit down and write a piece, which, as far as I was concerned was a definitive piece about it. And I had to live with it and learn and recognize that I'd never be able to dominate it. Boxing is easier to dominate because of its limitations. Boxing you can dominate to a degree with your mind, whereas a street fight you can never dominate with your mind. The greatest professional fight in the world is probably not as great a spectacle as the greatest street fight in the world because of the terror. The terror of the audience. What do you do if the thing gets out of control.

82.14 Writing is a way of using up anything that's good and bad in you as a subject. It's supposed to be famously known, for instance, that pornographers end up impotent. It's probably a myth that has a certain amount of practical application. If you work a muscle hard, it tends to develop; but if you overwork it, it can break down. I think something of the same sort is true of the psyche. If you force an aspect of the imagination, it can come to the point where it ceases to return anything at all, and I think I probably got to that point by the time I wrote *Of a Fire on the Moon*. I liked the book in a lot of ways, but I didn't like my own person in it—I felt I was highly unnecessary. And in *The Prisoner of Sex*, I felt my attempt to do something with my own personal relation to things was the least thought-out aspect of the book. I felt I had used up myself as a reference, though I tried once more in 1975 with *The Fight*, and that was wholly feeble. What actually

PSYCHOLOGY/2

happened is that I began to get interested in other people, and this sounds like an extraordinary remark for a novelist to make, but in truth we really write novels out of two impulses. One is to understand ourselves better as we write, and the other is to present what we know about others. And more often it's impossible to truly comprehend others until one's plumbed the bottom of certain obsessions about oneself.

82.14 Most of my ideas today are less an exploration and more an occupation of territories I reconnoitered years ago. What happens is you become the hat on your own head. You're not having the pleasure of enjoying your own mind the way you used to when you were young, but you have the product of your mind to work with. You know, I ran into Henry Kissinger years ago and I asked him if he enjoyed the intellectual stimulation of the work, and he said in effect, "I am working with the ideas that I formed at Harvard years ago. I haven't had a real idea since I've been on this; I just work with the old ideas." I certainly know what he means now—I think there are just so many ideas you can have in your life and once you have them, you have to develop them."

83.10 I've always had the feeling that it doesn't make much sense to write about something when you know that others can write about it as least as well as you can or maybe better. I never felt that I had that much to say about my childhood that was so special it was worth recording. It may mean that writers do play games with themselves—it may mean that there is something I'm concealing from myself. I find over and over that I hide what I can write about because it's risky to know that you can write about something. You can plunge into it before you're ready to give it proper commitment. This sounds very odd to people who never write, to see the unconscious as a vast area where military campaigns go on. I think it's the only metaphor that works because I discover over and over again that the unconscious will disclose to me what it chooses and when it chooses to. When I am working on a long book, for instance, I almost never have a thought about it when I'm not working. And I've come to recognize every year that it's highly impractical to think about it because you can lose it. I happen to have one of those memories that's psychopathic in its halflife. I forget half of everything I think unless instantly, in about four seconds, I write it down. It's overspecialization for about thirty or forty years.

83.10 It may be that part of remaining a writer is to learn how to expose yourself less and less over the years and ring yourself around more and more with various protections. The price of that, of course, is that inspiration enters the door much less often. But at the same time you can carry out your projects. It seems to me that if there is any lesson I can draw from my working, it is that it has taken me close to forty years to learn how to write long books. *The Naked and the Dead* came early and that was to some extent a gift. I was a simple young man and I didn't understand the difficulties. If I had known the difficulties, I wouldn't have gotten into it. It would have taken me ten years.

PSYCHOLOGY/3

83.10 There is always fear in writing a book. If I had tried to write *Ancient Evenings* in a year, the fear would have been so great it couldn't have been written. But over ten years, you can carry the fear. *Writing* a book is the fear. That's why there are many more people who can write well than who do. And there are other reasons for it. Some people can't take the meanness of the occupation. There's nothing very attractive about going into a room by yourself every day and looking at a piece of paper and making scratch marks on it. Doing that day after day, year after year, decade after decade, is punishing through the very monotony of the physical process. Just the act of writing as a physical act is less interesting than painting. I never felt sorry for painters. I feel sorry for writers. I would say that writing is like all occupations that have some real element of risk. In the case of the writer the risk is to his ego. You really don't want to write a book in which you are not taking some risk, especially a long book. You can write a book quickly in two months, six months, or a year in which the risks are minimal. But to do a long book, you would want to take risks. Why not? How dignify it if large risks aren't being taken? And I will say I've taken more risks with the Egyptian novel than any book I've ever written. It's the most, dare I say it, audacious of the books I've done.

88.1 I think nobody knows how much damage a book does to you except another writer. It's hell writing a novel; you really poison your body doing it. It's an unnatural physical activity to sit at a desk and squeeze words out of yourself. It means that you secrete various kinds of fatigues and poisons through your system that you don't get rid of easily. As you get older, it's worse. The other reason why I've been so obsessed with prize fighters is the idea of the aging prize fighter who has to get into shape for one more fight and knows the damage that fight is going to do to his body, which is already beginning to worsen; it puts him in a gloom. One of the things that characterizes almost every older fighter I've seen training for a fight is the depression that hangs over him and his camp because the only good thing that can come out of it is money. The rest is all a foregone conclusion. Even if he wins the fight—even if he wins it well—he's not going to get a new purchase on life out of the fight the way a young fighter can by a decisive victory. And that's true in writing. Writers will often make grave decisions—am I going to write this book or not? And at a certain point you have to believe that the book can be enormously important or you won't suffer that kind of self-destruction, civilized self-destruction. Let's say in writing a novel over two or three years of the hardest work, that the damage it does to the body is equal to someone who has never smoked before taking on two or three packs a day for a few years. And I think if you could weigh those things you'd find it's accurate. I think one reason I've always been such an amateur about medicine and so interested in it at a great remove is because when you are a writer, in a certain sense you are a doctor to yourself. You're always feeling these various tensions and ailments creep into you. From an early age writers become hypochondriacs. It goes with the territory. Your factory is yourself. You're always examining the factory for potential breakdowns, anticipating troubles, and so you get to be awfully alert to the relation not only between yourself and the world but the relationship between yourself and your body. And writing impinges on your body.

PSYCHOLOGY/4

81.16 The thing that liberated me as a writer in the late 60s is that I had no respect for the people who were telling me what the world was like. On the one hand, the people I felt closest to when I was younger, the Marxists, were caught in the insoluble knot of trying to explain every deviation from Marxist prediction, and it had got to a point where it was getting to be high comedy. Interpretations within interpretations. And the psychoanalysts I considered a bunch of plumbers. They were fairly good at dealing with psyches badly in need of a certain relief of pressure here, or fixing the leak in this joint, but they were absolutely hopeless when it came to understanding the demands of a personality, the larger demands. They were inadequate when it came to a place where the psyche met the spirit in some of us. The average psychoanalyst secretly believes that there is something obscene about religion. Anyone who is religious is a dubious case and probably psychotic. Now, they won't admit it, but those are the their deepest sentiments in the case of nine out of ten of the psychoanalysts I've known over the years. The Marxists were useless, the psychoanalysts were useless, the imperialists in my own country were certainly useless. The political writers were mediocrities, had very little to say; and then on top of that, as I very quickly learned, one of the most dreadful things that goes on in conventional reportage is that the reporters all get together afterward, exchange stories with other writers. In other words, you give them the stories that you know your paper can't print and in return they give you the stories they know you can use, that their newspaper or magazine won't print or is not interested in. So what happens is everybody winds up using everybody else's stories—even worse—everybody arrives at the same interpretation. To wit, Jack Kennedy is a lightweight, Nelson Rockefeller is a wonderful guy---whatever the interpretation is for that week comes out as gospel. So you soon realize that their political wisdom is nil, a consensus of the marketplace, of the journalistic marketplace. Since you have the confidence of being a novelist, it's very easy to take the large step. Just say, yes, the way in which I see this event is likely to be as right as the way anyone else sees it. You proceed on that basis. I think if there was one thing that separates me from the others is confidence.

81.16 I don't know why I started writing about Egypt. I've been working on that book [*Ancient Evenings*] off and on for ten years. I feel only now as if I'm slowly beginning to understand Egypt, the Egypt of antiquity. You can very often write well about matters that you don't understand too well. Most of my life I've written about matters in advance of my understanding of them. Often, years later, I would come to understand the subject as well as I'd written about it years before and would be amazed that I could have done it at all when I did. Oddly enough, now that I have the knowledge, I probably couldn't write about it. There's some potentiality in all of us that we tap when we write. The best writing comes out of that. I don't know what I'm writing about Egypt now is better than the stuff eight to ten years ago when I knew very little about Egypt. I sometimes think that the only way you can be sure that you are attracted to a subject that's valuable to you for literary purposes is that you know so little about it. It's almost as if you have

PSYCHOLOGY/5

to have one deep instinct into the subject but really not be too familiar with it. Let me give you an example of what I'm talking about. It's more fun to pick up a mystery novel and read it if, early in that book, you decide you have a clue that the average reader is not going to have. If you and the author share something that no one else does, then you are going to get more out of this book than anyone else, you are going to come up with the answers even though you know nothing about the material or the crime. I think something of that sort works in historical research. You have to feel that you do know more than the average historian about one aspect of the subject. In Egypt I think I felt I knew more about burial customs than the average Egyptologist. Not more about the details of them, which I hadn't learned them, but more about the reason for them.

ECONOMICS

65.6A I think I suffered more over the reviews of *The Naked and the Dead*, even the good ones, than over the reviews for any other book. I wanted to sit down and write a letter to every critic—they had misinterpreted something I said even though they liked the book. It's only after 20 years that you begin to see it as a primitive rite. At it's best, reading reviews (and this is true for bad reviews as for good ones if they are well-written) is as nourishing as a wild game dinner. I'd never dream of not reading reviews. It'd like not looking at a naked woman if she happens to be standing in front of her open window.

82.14 I think for anyone who's become an author early and has had a great deal of success, as Capote did and Vidal did and Styron did and I did, it's not automatic or easy afterwards to look upon other people with a simple interest because generally speaking they're more interested in us than we are in them. This has nothing to do with character, but with the social situation—I am more interested in Marlon Brando than he is interested in me—and it has an immense impact when you're young. You become a mirror and the only way you can perceive events is through the mirror of your self.

82.14 Buying a hardcover book is a sacramental act, and when people have to pay that much money for something they have to have a certain respect, even a touch of awe, for the author. And if you're unsavory in public life and everyone knows your name, you're not going to sell lots of hardcover books. The people who sell lots of hardcover books are usually not in the public eye—Saul Bellow, John Updike, John Cheever—and very few people can break that law. Capote's broken it successfully. But I certainly haven't.

83.40 I treat bad reviews like a politician running for office treats a loss of support. A couple of friends called up after the bad review of *Ancient Evenings* appeared in the Sunday *New York Times* and asked, "Are you all right?" I'd seen it a week before, so any unhappiness I'd had about it was now digested. I said that it was like realizing that the county chairman in Schenectady is deciding against your candidacy. But to lose Schenectady doesn't mean that you stop running. It isn't my ego that's hurt, it's my damn pocketbook. Getting a bad review in the *Times* hurts you as much as any single review can. When I was younger I used to consider a bad review a personal insult and would consider a guy who wrote it evil. In fact, I have never actually punched out a reviewer, which I say with a certain amount of wistfulness. I once sat next to Philip Rahv after he had written an atrocious review of *An American Dream*. Philip Rahv had his virtues, bless him, but physical courage was not one of them. So I made a point of sitting next to him at a party, and while I smiled at him, I kept my body firmly pressed into his, leaning into him, while we had a long 30-minute conversation about something else altogether. I was perfectly pleasant the entire time and everything seemed all right except we were both titled alarmingly from my leaning into him. He was in an absolute panic, waiting for me to strike. It must have seemed an odd sight from the other side of the table: He was a heavy man, and the two of us must have looked like two doughnuts crushed together in a box.

GENRE

68.26 Writing is a very *odd, spooky* activity, and when you get to filmmaking, you realize that the spookiness is tripled, especially in improvisational filmmaking, which can't be formalized. It's luck. What you have in your favor is all the lifetimes of the people working with you. What you have against you is the fact that you don't have a script, so you need all sorts of skilled practitioners of your art besides yourself.

69.43 In the novel, you start with a bag of words, and the way you put the words together has meaning. In movies, you get another kind of vocabulary. You have little bits of film strip, each the equivalent of words—five words or five thousand. But the strips are put together as individual words. Constructing a movie out of a field of experience that you have recorded gets to be wholly fascinating because you are working with a brand new vocabulary. You are putting things together in a way that nobody has ever put them together before.

80.10 You know, a painter may find something on the street that he thinks is incredible. Sometimes he'll glue it right into the painting. It becomes part of the work. In *The Executioner's Song*, newspaper stories become part of the painting and part of the transcript of the trial—a lot of found objects. I felt acted upon, in a funny way, while doing this book, by painting terms. It was as if I'd shifted away from being an expressionist, not an abstract expressionist, but an expressionist like Munch, or Max Beckmann—those kinds of painters who worked with large exaggeration and murkiness and passionate power—into now being a photographic realist, even a photographic realist with found objects. The reason, I think, is that a painter like a writer sometimes gets to a point where he can no longer interpret what he sees. Then the act of painting what he literally sees becomes the aesthetic act. Because what he sees is incredible. It may or may not be possessed of meaning. Reality, itself, closely studied is mysterious, and it's elusive.

70.15 Dealing with words is a mysterious matter. It's very insubstantial because they're just little pieces of dark curly pigment on a white page. Well, working with movies, on "Wild 90," I think I got back to the freshness of it when I was a kid. I felt the same sort of interest when I was 18 and starting to write stories. It was wonderful when I was 18 and writing. To be corny about it, it was first love. And that's gone. It's been gone for a long time. I'm a professional writer now. I can do a job. And I'm very much like a prizefighter who packs a suitcase and gets on a train or a plane and goes out to fight an opponent in some town. It doesn't matter what the conditions are particularly. I still have reverence for writing. But you can have reverence for something and not necessarily get much immediate pleasure out of it. I still get pleasure out of writing. But the *act* is not pleasurable. It's hard work. But making a film is a cross between a circus, a military campaign, a nightmare, an orgy, and a high.

GENRE/2

70.15 Novels are supposed to hit people where they live. You're supposed to read a novel and change your life. A movie is supposed to keep you living. That's why one serious critic said of my film, "Beyond the Law," "Norman, you don't understand the movies. The movies are there to keep people alive." You go to a movie and you pay your money and you're supposed to have a good time. The horror of life should be alleviated for a little while. That's what the critics feel movies are supposed to do. But what I'm saying is that the horror of life has become so completely pervasive that movies no longer enable sensible and sensitive people to survive. It sickens them. The most beautiful movie in the world will sicken you, if you can conceive of a better movie than the one that was there.

88.1 I like making movies more than writing now. I'm tired of writing. I've been doing it for forty years, and there's not much fun left. I get a hold of myself in the morning and go into that room and dig more stuff out of that old gut. The gut rebels. It's tired of being called on to perform these yeoman duties. Whereas in making a movie you're really not an artist, more an aesthetic engineer. You've got a lot of talented people working under you and they come up to you and you've got to make instantaneous decisions about matters you know very little about. Like hairdo, costume. And so it's kind of fun. You're using everything you've learned to the best of your ability. It kept reminding me of being at war but in a good way. It was like the ideal war. Nobody got killed, but you ate in a different place every day, usually standing up. There were vehicles. The biggest problem, just as in the army was where do you put the vehicles. You know when you pick a location shot, you pick it by availability to a road. You could be in the deepest forest you ever saw, but it's got to be 100 yards from the road because that's where the trucks are parked. So there's a reverse logic in filmmaking. You start with the costs and work toward the art.

87.17 I think movies go deeper into the psyche than literature; they're more primitive. Years ago I said that if you were to set up a spectrum of sex, memory, dream and death, you could put film between memory and dream and have no trouble at all. Whereas literature calls on many other factors. Literature is really much more social than film. Film is tribal. When you read a book, it involves the room you're sitting in, whether you're happy in that room, whether your social situation is appealed to by this book. If we read Hemingway, we're depressed by the fact that we're sedentary in relation to his heroes, that They're having more exciting lives than we're having, and that depresses us. If we read Henry James, we're wistful that we don't know the nuances of society the way his people do. But when we're in a movie, if the movie's good enough, we don't know whether we're perceiving something about life or entering something deeper, in the nature of dreams—those mysterious transactions that go on in dreams.

87.17 What I love about movie-directing is that it has *nothing* to do with writing. On a day-to-day basis it's the exact opposite. When you direct you use every part of your experience that you can't put into writing, all the little things that you've learned over the

years that you can't use when you're writing a book. Particularly when you're writing a novel, you tend to focus on what belongs to that novel, and all sorts of things that you're also interested in never get into that novel. They really have no occupational life for a couple of years. They hang around in you, collecting psychic fat.

87.17 Time is your money in a film—literally, it's your money. If you don't get done with this scene by lunch, then your going to come back in that stupor after lunch, and you're going to lose not half an hour or an hour, but *two* hours. So you're gambling. And that's exiting. And not only are you gambling, you're getting immediate results. Because you learn in the next hour or two whether your gamble won or lost. And then the next day in the dailies you see if it *really* came out. Making movies, you're absolutely *in the world*, in the existential sense. Whereas in literature, you withdraw from the world in order to perceive the world. So they really use opposite sides of your self. I think you get closer to your soul in a book, but you get closer to the functioning of your psyche with a movie. Let me see if I can amplify that a little. I think when you are writing a book there are moments when you feel as if you're beaming a torch down into the abyss, and you see the lineaments of your soul down there. You don't travel down there in your soul, but you do perceive it. Because in the course of writing a book you get out to some very astonishing places, and you do have the light of your intuition, and it does through a long light. When you are making a film, particularly after you've shot it and you start editing it, you look at the same scene over and over to take all the little dead spots out. Makes you feel like a surgeon. What it also does is it involves your taste, and your concentration. Seeing it over and over and over again you have to keep your taste alive; you have to exercise your ability to concentrate upon the same material over and over and over. And I'm the guy who wrote, "Repetition kills the soul," which I thought of many times when I was editing. But it doesn't kill it in this case, because it's not *absolute* repetition; you're chasing down repetition in order to alter it slightly. And as you do that you're tuning your psyche.

81.16 I tend to think of all journalism as being fiction, most of it dreadful fiction. There is the general assumption that journalism limits itself to what actually happened—faithful or at least accurate record of the event—and that novels are made up, that they are about events that never took place. Granted there is a tremendous amount of overlapping. People are familiar with the ways in which novels are close to reality. A novel often is straight journalism if you know the characters' real names. There are funny conventions about this; I've said several times, of *The Executioner's Song*, that if I changed the names, no one would argue that it was not a novel. They would have said it's not a terribly imaginative novel; it's awfully close to real events. But they wouldn't have said how dare Mailer call it a novel.

81.16 The journalist writing that I did started with "Superman Goes to the Supermarket," a piece about Kennedy and the Democratic Convention in 1960. If there was a style that followed, it began there. I think what happened was I saw that I didn't know how to write about political conventions—at least not in conventional terms. I wasn't really interested in politics; I thought they were boring. The politics were the same I had been suffering through in the fifties. But what seemed fascinating to me was that Kennedy was a protagonist rather than a candidate and that he offered something new to American lives—this daring and romantic and surrealistic and cockeyed idea that the president could be a young man and have an attractive wife. The only thing I will take credit for is that I had enough sense to see that this was more important than all the politics. In other words, the shifts in public opinion came out of many elements that are not available to the historians. One of them is whether the President of the United States gives people energy in their inner lives, their dream lives, their unspoken lives. R whether he takes it away from them. Carter was detested by everyone precisely because he took energy away from everyone. It was like having to listen to a dull minister or to a high school principal, always talking t you. Reagan is liked even by people who can't stand his politics because in some odd fashion, he seems to give us energy. Just by his presence. Because he is interesting to think about. Problems that are interesting o think about give us energy. So we ten to hate those politicians who take our energy away. Like Carter. And tend to love those politicians who offer us energy because they are intriguing. Out of this vague perception, I blundered into a way of writing bout that convention—which was writing about them as though they were a great novelistic event.

81.16 Until *The Armies of the Night* I was very much in the background of my non-fiction narratives. You could feel that there was somebody looking in all these events, and presumably it's the author, but I wasn't a formal narrator as such. However, one of the things I began to feel was wrong with journalism is that immense events were boiled down to 300 words. There's no way to write about an immense event in 300 words or 3,000 words unless you're a poet. So the trick was not to boil it down but to expand it, to blow it up and to use 30,000 words or 20,000 words to write about events usually described in 2,000 or 3,000 words. What I began to feel is that the character of the narrator or the personality of the narrator was probably more important, or as important, as the event. Not that the narrator is important in his own person; it was not that I Norman Mailer, was equal to the Democratic Convention, but that I had a set a set of prejudices. These prejudices were terribly important, and you as the reader couldn't begin to understand this event unless you understood me enough to reflect upon my perceptions. By being able to take account of me as a narrator, the reader could say, "Oh well, Mailer is impossibly romantic," or "Mailer is outrageously nihilistic," or "Mailer is a fool"—the reader could make his own interpretations of the events. It occurred to me that that's the way we always read. When I read my contemporaries, I'll say to myself, "Well, Vidal or Updike"—or whoever it is—"is good on this and not very good on that." I thought that's the least we can do in journalism: let the reader be aware of the bent of the writer. That is objective reporting.

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71.24 There's no such thing as a real writer who doesn't employ the dialectic. Joyce, in *Finnegans Wake* used the dialectic as an intellectual structure. Proust—Baron de Charlus is conceived dialectically in opposition to the narrator in *Remembrance of Things Past*. Henry James never wrote a sentence that wasn't imbued with the dialectic. He is always reacting to the sentence he wrote before. That's what good writing is. The beginning of bad writing is when a writer forgets what he's just written. That's what I'd tell kids if I ever had a writing class. I'd bang that home.

75.11 In writing my nonfiction books of the late sixties and early seventies, the question for me was how to verify the observer. What are my passions, prejudices, and particularly my infirmities? It's terribly important who the observer is. That's why I always try to put myself into these works of journalism so the reader can have his sense of me. It's important to be able to decide whether I'm perceiving well or where I'm perceiving badly. Whereas, if I attempt to present to readers what I consider the end-product of objective truth, it's likely to be nothing more than the harshly digested conclusions I came up with in my somewhat unbalanced soul. (What else is most journalism?) Whereas I believe the fun in reading comes from observing the observer. After all I did have that happy streak with *The Armies of the Night*. There was fun in that book, but the fun was to observe the observer. An ideal example of the technique. It doesn't always work that well. Still, there's that lovely remark of Trotsky's I go back to over and over again. He said sometimes the only way you can tell the truth is by a comparison of the lies. If you're listening to two liars telling tales, you may never be able to find out who is lying the most. But you can come closer to a sense of reality by the relations between those two mysteries. You see, we may never know, for instance, what the truth of one human is, or another, but we can know a lot about the relations between them. We may be confused by two terribly complicated people but we are able to say with greater certainty, "They hate each other," or "Isn't it extraordinary how they love each other?" because we can feel the relation between mysteries where I am that relation as the writing voice.

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82.14 That particular insensitivity you have to build about yourself in relation to reviews doesn't do you much good as a writer. So anyone who has kept working has found ways of renewing his desire to write. And we no more question it than we question our sexual desire. You don't say, "Why do I have sexual desire?" You're quite content to have it. What gets easier is, because one's been through that literary mill so many times, the fears are less and one's professionalism increases over the years. By professionalism I mean the ability to work on a bad day. There's nothing glorious about being a professional. As you become a professional, you become more dogged. You almost have to relinquish the upper reaches of the mind to do your stint of work each day, because being a professional means being able to endure a certain amount of drudgery and the higher reaches of the mind are not enthralled by dull work.

82.14 My ambition would not be any longer to try to reach Americans with a book the way Hemingway could reach them with a book, because I believe that's beyond my powers. Hemingway's style affected whole generations of us, the way a roomful of men is affected when a beautiful woman walks through—their night is turned for better or for worse. Hemingway's style had an ability to hit young writers in the gut, and they just weren't the same after that. That would not be my ambition—I don't have that kind of talent. But to give up the ambition entirely is another matter. No, I won't give it up entirely.

83.40 What are my major weaknesses as a writer? I could list about six or seven, but I don't think I will. They'll be thrown at me in later years—"Mailer admits that he's no good at..." But mind you, authors tend to make a weakness a virtue. For example, I doubt that Hemingway was capable of writing a long complex sentence with a lot of architecture in the syntax. So he turned that inability into the virtue of writing short declarative sentences and long run-on sentences connected by conjunctions. Faulkner was not capable of writing simply without personal pain. He turned that into a virtue and as a result you get this extraordinary mood out of his writing. Henry Miller couldn't

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really tell a story with any pleasure. He preferred his excursions away from the story, and these excursions are what make him a great writer. I'd say I have most of my problems with plot. The moment I think of a good plot, I find that the book is almost impossible to write because I know I won't believe in it. Life consists of people plotting all the time, and the plots never coming through. We always say, I'll make this or that out of my life, and then life confounds us. I like a plot that develops during the writing. I don't like one that moves ahead of my characters, because then my characters don't live. You can do the same thing to characters by allying them to plot that we do to our children if we very carefully picked out their colleges, their spouses, installed them in the proper job—well, you know what happens to kids like that. The same thing weighs on characters in a novel if they never get to fulfill their capabilities; they never come alive. The development slowly comes into focus as I work. Bill Buckley is wonderful at plots—his mind works that way—but nobody lives and breathes in his books with any more three-dimensionality than some passing movie star who can't act.

81.16 The influence of Henry Adams on *The Armies of the Night* was a most peculiar one. To the best of my recollection, I never read much Adams. I know for certain that I read one long chapter of *The Education of Henry Adams* in my freshman year at Harvard. I remember thinking at the time what an odd thing to do, to write about yourself in the third person. Who is this fellow, Henry Adams, talking about himself as Adams—and being struck with it in that mildly irritable way freshmen have of passing over extraordinary works of literature. It's possible that I then read more of *The Education of Henry Adams* sometime in my freshman or sophomore year, although I have no clear recollection and wouldn't claim that I have. I never wrote about Adams, never thought about him particularly, would never have mentioned his name as one of the writers that were important to me; and yet in *The Armies of the Night*—one starts reading it, and immediately one says—even I said—"My God, this is pure Henry Adams." What the hell is going on here? It's an absolute takeoff, as if I were the great-grandson of Henry Adams. As if Adams was all of my literary life. So look how peculiar is influence: Adams was stuck in my consciousness as a possibility, the way painters do much more often than writers. A painter can look at a particular Picasso, or Cezanne, and say to himself, "That's the way to do it." But the work might not pop out for 20 or 30 years. When it does, they say, "Of yes, that was a Picasso I saw at MOMA 25 years ago, and I've always wanted to try a palette of such and such, and I decided to use it here." In effect, that's what happened to me with Adams.

81.16 It's hard to write well on a large subject. Most large subjects are handled by best-selling novelists. Best-selling novelists will have a cast of 40 or 50 characters. They'll have stories that go over 50 to 100 years. They'll have several world wars. They'll have startling changes in the lives of several families. The reason they do all that in a hurry is because they can keep their book moving. What characterizes a best-selling novel is that there's nothing in it that you haven't come across before. At least if you're a reader of

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some experience. Most writers tend to fix smaller and smaller canvases and expatiate upon them with more and more clarity because at least you have the confidence that what you're doing is accurate. And that's terribly important. At least you're contributing to knowledge rather than adding to the general sludge, cultural sludge that lies over everything. So it's hard to take a large topic. At the moment the only great writer I can think of who can handle what I've described, 40 or 50 characters and 100 years is Garcia Marquez. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is an amazing work. Garcia Marquez succeeds in doing it, but how, I don't know. In my Egyptian novel [*Ancient Evenings*]¹—although it's very, very long—not that much happens in it. As I said before, it takes me ten pages to go around a bend in the Nile.

Philosophy

51.2 A great writer always goes to the root; he is always coming up with the contradictions, the impasses, the insoluble dilemmas of the particular time he lives in. The result is not to cement society but to question it and destroy it. Faulkner may profess all sorts of things; he may even be off on a white-supremacy binge, but actually the total of his work has caught the horror at the same time that it has caught the fact that he loves it. A great writer has to be capable of knowing the rot, and he has to be able to strip it down to the stink, but he also has to love that rot. A writer has to have a tough mind, the toughest mind of his time. And he has to have a great heart.

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 is at its best the moral of art forms because it's the most immediate, the most overbearing, if you will. It is the most inescapable. One could argue much more easily about the meaning of a non-objective painting or of music, or whatever. But in the novel the meaning is there. It's much closer; one could argue about ambiguities, but, because one is using words, it's much closer to the sense of moral commandments, moral strictures. And one gets into a particular thing which is terribly interesting, you begin to explore the interstices of moral reaction—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 terrible complexities of moral experience.

75.11 Coming back to the novel after all these years, the difficulty is as fresh on me now as it was when I started writing. I mean, when you get down to it, 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, and know the responsibility of being a writer, the God-like assumption of writing a novel is almost impossible to surmount. To become the prime mover or your own little world.

79.26 Why do I think fiction is so important? Oh, because I think it's the place where art and philosophy and adventure come together. For me there's nothing more beautiful than a marvelous novel. I love the idea of a novel; to me a novel is better than reality. I mean, as good as *The Executioner's Song* may become—and I hope it becomes a very, very good book—it can never be as good as a novel, to my mind. It could be better than a novel in a lot of ways but it could never be as good. I mean there's something so beautiful about one being able to come up with a vision that's not Godlike but close enough to Godlike to give us a vision of how marvelous the Lord's mind might be. You know, when we read Proust or the best of Maugham or Stendhal or Joyce or any of the great novelists. We could name 20 of them, say, who give us this idea of God's mind being something like that. Don't you get that feeling when you read Proust—that one side of God's mind is like Proust's? And that's the challenge.

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82.14 As you get older, you realize that what's important is to do one's work and do one's best work and be serious about it. It's not that you're retreating completely—you're just saying, "It's too much, I abdicate, I resign, I will cultivate my own garden." You say, "I will work on that garden on the assumption I will produce an herb that will challenge all that is before us." In other words, instead of seeing yourself as the embattled artist, you begin to see yourself as the alchemical artist. Art as magic rather than art as war.

83.10 I'm right and I'm wrong so often, so many times of the day, that I have no interest in having people think the way I think. I'm truly misunderstood on this. What I'm interested in is that however people think they get better at it. That's what important about one's work. In the work of good authors, if a book is good enough, you cannot predict how people are going to react to it. You shouldn't be able to. If it's good enough, it means it's not manipulative. If it's not manipulative, everybody sort of goes off in a different direction. One of my own favorite remarks is that it's not that I'm for the cops and not that I'm for the crooks, but I'm for the cops getting better and the crooks getting better. I have a notion of society as an oven where some fabulous dishes are being cooked, and in order for the banquet to take place, every ingredient has to be in it. I don't think it's an accident that I'm a novelist. Novelists have a wicked point of view—wicked as opposed to evil. They are interested in upping the ante. They're interested in more happening, not less. One of the reasons that I detest television is that it reduces our possibilities. Television was welcomed as something that would help us understand the world. But I think, quite the contrary, it takes away from us any possibility of ever comprehending the world because it deadens our senses and because it gives us false notions, periodically, systematically, and intensively.

83.10 Once Ralph Ellison and I were out in Iowa together many years ago, back in 1959, and we worked like crazy. We had a lively audience, and the symposium went on for three or four days, for *Esquire*. At the end of it, it suddenly seemed a little absurd to me that we really worked that hard, got in so many arguments with students, talked back and forth, and even argued with each other as lively as hell. But then when it was over, there was a little bit of sadness that something that had been truly exceptional was over. So I said to him, "Why the hell did we do it?" He said, "Ah, shit, man, we're expendable." I've always loved that remark. Because in a certain sense one's ideas are expendable. If the best of my ideas succeeds in changing the mind of someone who's more intelligent than myself, then that's fine. I'm a great believer in the idea that if you advance an idea as far as you can and it's overtaken by someone who argues the opposite of you, in effect you've improved your enemy's mind. Then someone will come along on your side who will take your enemy's improvement of your idea and convert it back again. I'm nothing if not a believer in the dialectic. And to that extent one does the best one can. And that's the end of it. The thought of everyone thinking the way I do is as bad as any other form of totalitarianism.

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81.16 Hemingway's life was cautionary to me. Several times in my life I think I stopped doing different things or veered away from doing certain things because of the example of Hemingway. Hemingway's suicide stood over us all like the suicide of our own father. He's the father of modern American literature, at least for me, and to commit suicide... John Gardner has that marvelous remark that when a father commits suicide he condemns his son to suicide. Well, of course, you can suicide in more ways than killing yourself. You can destroy yourself with too much drink, too many cigarettes, too many failures, too many wild and unachieved alliances—and so Hemingway was a great cautioning influence on us.

81.16 Borges poses to us, I think, the nature of the difficulty of comprehending reality, because he shows us how every time we approach reality we are writing a scenario and these very scenarios are the equivalent of propositions and hypotheses in physics. That is, they are correct until the evidence subverts them. But in the course of the evidence subverting them we have learned a great deal because the next hypothesis, ideally, should be superior. So in Borges you have this wonderful business of immensely elaborate hypotheses destroyed by the one fact that turns the hypothesis inside-out, into its opposite. There is this marvelously sinewy dialectical vision of the interplay between culture and history, the two almost being...not artifacts, but separate organisms. Borges gives us an immensely vivid inner life which I think all one finally cares about in writing. It is what I look for in other writers, what I expect I should be able to give to others in my own writing. It is to make that inner life not only more vivid—but by making it more alive and stronger it becomes more able to stand as proof against the attacks of the world upon it. The attacks of the world now upon our psyche are not so much aggressive as subtle, insidious—we're leached out. We're not destroyed from without, we are sucked out. Our spiritual souls, our social souls, are sucked out of us by the mass media, by information retrievable. I think Borges is best when it comes to fighting that. Try putting Borges in a computer.

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really tell a story with any pleasure. He preferred his excursions away from the story, and these excursions are what make him a great writer. I'd say I have most of my problems with plot. The moment I think of a good plot, I find that the book is almost impossible to write because I know I won't believe in it. Life consists of people plotting all the time, and the plots never coming through. We always say, I'll make this or that out of my life, and then life confounds us. I like a plot that develops during the writing. I don't like one that moves ahead of my characters, because then my characters don't live. You can do the same thing to characters by allying them to plot that we do to our children if we very carefully picked out their colleges, their spouses, installed them in the proper job—well, you know what happens to kids like that. The same thing weighs on characters in a novel if they never get to fulfill their capabilities; they never come alive. The development slowly comes into focus as I work. Bill Buckley is wonderful at plots—his mind works that way—but nobody lives and breathes in his books with any more three-dimensionality than some passing movie star who can't act.

81.16 The influence of Henry Adams on *The Armies of the Night* was a most peculiar one. To the best of my recollection, I never read much Adams. I know for certain that I read one long chapter of *The Education of Henry Adams* in my freshman year at Harvard. I remember thinking at the time what an odd thing to do, to write about yourself in the third person. Who is this fellow, Henry Adams, talking about himself as Adams—and being struck with it in that mildly irritable way freshmen have of passing over extraordinary works of literature. It's possible that I then read more of *The Education of Henry Adams* sometime in my freshman or sophomore year, although I have no clear recollection and wouldn't claim that I have. I never wrote about Adams, never thought about him particularly, would never have mentioned his name as one of the writers that were important to me; and yet in *The Armies of the Night*—one starts reading it, and immediately one says—even I said—"My God, this is pure Henry Adams." What the hell is going on here? It's an absolute takeoff, as if I were the great-grandson of Henry Adams. As if Adams was all of my literary life. So look how peculiar is influence: Adams was stuck in my consciousness as a possibility, the way painters do much more often than writers. A painter can look at a particular Picasso, or Cezanne, and say to himself, "That's the way to do it." But the work might not pop out for 20 or 30 years. When it does, they say, "Of yes, that was a Picasso I saw at MOMA 25 years ago, and I've always wanted to try a palette of such and such, and I decided to use it here." In effect, that's what happened to me with Adams.

81.16 It's hard to write well on a large subject. Most large subjects are handled by best-selling novelists. Best-selling novelists will have a cast of 40 or 50 characters. They'll have stories that go over 50 to 100 years. They'll have several world wars. They'll have startling changes in the lives of several families. The reason they do all that in a hurry is because they can keep their book moving. What characterizes a best-selling novel is that there's nothing in it that you haven't come across before. At least if you're a reader of

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some experience. Most writers tend to fix smaller and smaller canvases and expatiate upon them with more and more clarity because at least you have the confidence that what you're doing is accurate. And that's terribly important. At least you're contributing to knowledge rather than adding to the general sludge, cultural sludge that lies over everything. So it's hard to take a large topic. At the moment the only great writer I can think of who can handle what I've described, 40 or 50 characters and 100 years is Garcia Marquez. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is an amazing work. Garcia Marquez succeeds in doing it, but how, I don't know. In my Egyptian novel [*Ancient Evenings*]¹—although it's very, very long—not that much happens in it. As I said before, it takes me ten pages to go around a bend in the Nile.

81.2 The watershed book for me was *Advertisements for Myself*. That was the first to be written in what became my style. I never felt as if I had one until that book, and once I developed that style—for better or for worse—a lot of other forms opened to it. It's an adaptable style, and of course when I finally discovered in *The Armies of the Night* that I could put myself into a book and thereby paint all sorts of splendid effects, I began to enjoy going in many directions.

81.2 I usually write in the morning, sometimes in the afternoon. I start around ten and work till one, break for lunch, and then sometimes start again in the afternoon and sometimes not. I don't like to write twice in the day. It's somehow more nervous in the afternoon than it is in the morning. I typed my first novel and part of my second, but now write in longhand.

81.2 I'm not happy if I feel what I've written, what's behind me, is wrong or needs work. I tend to build my books on the basis of what I have already. I never have a master plan for the entire book. Every time I have—and when I was younger I used to sit down and write out a master plan for a book—I never wrote the book. Even with *The Executioner's Song* where, after all, I knew the story in great detail, I was very careful not to be too versed in too many details of the story way ahead. In other words, I tended to do my research let's say 100 pages ahead of where I was because I wanted the feeling that I didn't know how it was all going to turn out. I wanted to have the illusion that I was inventing each little detail as if I were writing a conventional novel. I might take a few notes, but usually if it's a powerful enough idea about the continuation of the book I don't need to take a note. If I can't remember it, then what kind of an idea could it have been. Once in a great while I'll put together a note on something that should happen 200 pages ahead, just a thought the character might have, and I sort of know the place where it will come in, but I like the idea of a book not being too pragmatic. I find that some of the best ideas I get I receive because I haven't fixed other ideas in concrete and have to obey them. When you know your end, it's disastrous to get a good idea which takes you away from that end.

81.2 I rarely show off a work-in-progress. But when I do it's the way I box: I pick my sparring partners carefully. Usually I'll box with people who are so good that I'm in no danger of being hurt because they consider it obscene to damage me. Or I'll box with friends where we understand each other and are trying to bring out the best in each other as boxers. The same thing with the early stage of a manuscript. I'd no more dream of showing it to someone like John Simon than I would of carrying a kite to the Brooklyn Bridge and jumping off. But I'll show it to Norris or to Bob Lucid, who is a great friend of mine, or to my agent.

81.2 It was so difficult for me to arrive at my own style—I didn't start with an identity. I forged an identity through my experience. Because of that, I think it was easier to give up my autobiographical style when the time came. I didn't feel as if I were giving myself away. And then I've always felt as if the way people react to me is not to me but to the latest photograph they've seen of me. So I can change the photograph and have the fun of observing the reactions. The devil in me loves the idea of being just that much of a changeling. You can never understand a writer until you find his private little vanity and mine has always been that I will frustrate expectations. People think they've found a way of dismissing me, but like the mad butler—I'll be back serving the meal.

83.30 I never know what the style of a book is until I get into it. Sometimes you aim for a style and you don't get that, you get a lower style. You know, the style you set in a novel is very much like the pace a serious jogger sets for himself, herself. When you set yourself a literary style, you have to be able to maintain it. And, of course, as you get older you have much more experience in that. You can start on a given day and have a marvelous style but you say, "Oh yeah, but I won't be able to maintain that for long, there isn't enough of me to speak in that style." In that sense, style is character. If character is resources, then style is certainly character. Character may be the wise or foolish estimate of one's resources. You know, that's as good a working motto as any from which to approach the peculiar mysteries of human formation that we call character.

97.26 I write in my studio. I've got a little studio in Brooklyn a couple of blocks from my house—no telephone, nothing there. When I go there, the only thing I ever do is work, so it's wonderful. I'm like a dog with a conditioned reflex. There is no television, no telephone, nothing. My wife wants me to get a portable telephone. I refuse. I don't want to be tempted. There's an old Jewish belief that you build a fence around an impulse. That's not good enough, you build a fence around the fence, so no telephone. I write longhand with a pencil, and I've got a marvelous assistant named Judith McNally, and she will type it next day, and then I go over it. Since at my age you begin to forget things very easily, it's marvelous because I hardly remember what I wrote the day before. Now it's typed as if someone else wrote it. I'll go through it, and I'll say, "Who is the idiot who wrote that stupid sentence." And I'll fix it up, and I'll edit it, and as I edit it I

give it back to her, and she sends it back each day. I don't work with a word processor, but I do have the benefits of one. Generally, I'll start writing late in the morning. If we're not going out that evening, I won't finish till nine o'clock at night, so it plays hell with our social life.

World
x
97.26 During my six months in Moscow and Minsk researching *Oswald's Tale*, I must have interviewed 50 or 60 people, and many of the interviews were in depth. It was different than with my earlier books. During the research for *The Executioner's Song*, my 1979 book about Gary Gilmore, a convicted murderer who asked to be executed and was given the death penalty, we must have interviewed 300 people, but with the Oswald book, the number of people were limited. You really had to work slowly and carefully. There were certain people we saw ten times, and interviewed them each time. When I came home I had all the information about Russia that I needed, or 95 percent of it. I started writing about Oswald in Minsk and when I had finished I thought I'd add 100 pages about Oswald in America. That 100 pages became 400 or 500 pages because I began doing new research. I'd stop writing for long periods and do the new research, and so the second half of the book took as long as the first half, easily. When I finished it, I went over it and started to shape it more and more. Once you know what you have with a book, then you really sculpt it. Overall, the writing of this book, I'd say, was easier than the writing of other books I've done. But I got more out of it. I had this extraordinary experience of living in Minsk and I had my seventieth birthday in Moscow, and I thought, I'm not dead yet. This is not so bad. I can live in a strange place and get a lot out of it, and work hard. It was fun.

Work
82.16 I can tell you a story about metaphors. I had a dear friend, Charlie Devlin, who helped me greatly with *The Naked and the Dead*, and in fact was the model, considerably removed, for the character named McLeod in *Barbary Shore*. Charlie was a quiet saturnine Irishman who was living in a small rooming house where I took a cubicle to finish *The Naked and the Dead*. We used to have long literary conversations. At a certain point I showed him *The Naked and the Dead*. He tore it apart. He could be a severe critic. He said, "It's a better book than I thought it would be, but you have no gift for metaphor." Then he said, "Metaphor reveals a man's character, and his true grasp of life. To the degree that you have no metaphor, you are an impoverished writer, and have lived no life." I never forgot this lecture and began to work with might and main on my metaphors. But I can't tell you how they've changed.

World
82.16 A writer has to be ready when he enters someone's mind. So long as you stay outside, your characters retain a certain integrity, novelistically speaking. There is a mystery about them, a resonance. We can walk around such characters with the same respect we offer people who have a presence in a room. Part of the meaning of charisma is that we don't know the intimate nature of the human force we're dealing with. So, sometimes characters in novels radiate more energy when we don't enter their mind. It is one of the techniques a novelist acquires instinctively—don't enter your protagonist's

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mind until you have something to say about the interior that's more interesting than the reader's suppositions. The fatal error is to jump in too quickly and then offer banal material. That's the worst of best-sellerdom. Second-rate readers enjoying the insights of second-rate writers.

73.14 ~~I think~~ ^I It is very bad to talk about your work-in-progress with another writer. Most writers I know who have been writing many years avoid it, which is why Faulkner was always so impossible in an interview. You need an enormous amount of oral tension before you go in there to write and if you're naturally talkative, as you can see I am, and you don't talk in the morning, it helps a little; it builds up. It's a strictly controlled explosion and it goes on for hours.

73.14 I believe narrative exists in our everyday lives, but I believe it exists as a discrete phenomena—in other words, narrative stops and starts. We all live with narrative every moment of our lives, but we're always cutting it off and picking it up again; it isn't necessarily a continuation. It's almost impossible to move without some hypothesis, and hypothesis is narrative, if you stop and think about it. But of course what happens is that the hypothesis runs into evidence that confutes it, so that the narrative stops and then it picks up again. One characterizes our days as opposed to Victorian days. Today narrative is like jangled wires that are all turned in other directions. Nonetheless, I think there are extraordinary overall narratives going on in these years. It's just that now the phenomena are so complex, and the problems of being certain of what you know are enormous. But that doesn't mean that we're going to abandon narrative. Quite the contrary. We may see some new, extraordinary kinds.

61.12 In *The Deer Park* I was trying to find a style for the story and it was very elusive. I went through four drafts. The first draft was Proustian in style—not first-rate Proust of course. The second draft was somewhere between the English novel of manners and Fitzgerald—I'm not saying as good, but in that direction. The third draft was more Hemingway. Then I found my own style, which was nothing like these. Part of finding your style is losing your excessive admiration for the styles of other writers. The thing that always fascinated me about style is the way in which it literally repels certain kinds of experience. The more powerful style becomes, the more complex the subjects you can write about with equal authority. The style begins to select the material. I think that's happened with my last few books. If a person keeps a certain style, it determines the experience that comes to him. But my style is constantly changing by twists and starts. So's my experience. Is it a conscious search for experience? Oh, don't get misled by the headlines of my life. Very often a reputation develops from very little. It doesn't take much to make a legend. Your experience more or less selects itself.

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71.6 ~~You know~~ ^A good skier never worries about a route: he just goes, confident truly that he'll react to changes in the trail as they happen. It's the same thing in writing; you have to have confidence in your technique. But you also have to assume that you're going to grow in the writing of a piece of work, so you've always got to take on more than you are able to do at the moment. If you take on something you know you can do, all your contempt for yourself will get into it very quickly.

84.34 With *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, the nearer I came to an approaching chapter, the more outline I'd get in my head. But I never try to tap my head, so to speak, which I think is crucial. I respect my unconscious. I walk around it. I don't try to get into it too often. If you know what the story is, you start bleeding too much and it takes away a certain air—that air you need in a mystery—of uneasiness and not knowing who did it.

84.34 Some of my characters come from real people. One character might come out of five people, another character might come out of one person but greatly altered. Another might come out of my imagination. There's an exciting moment when a character becomes, in a sense, independent of yourself. If the characters don't seem real, I'm in a lot of trouble with them. Graham Greene once said that there were certain characters that took care of themselves, and there were others that he had a great deal of trouble with, and he worked very hard on them. And then, when he'd read a review and it would mention a character he had a lot of trouble with and speak of that character as well-drawn, he used to think to himself, "Well-dragged."

75.13 The characters in a novel become real in your mind as you write. And you live with them and sleep with them, and even talk to them at a certain point, for they exist within you. So they take on the same kind of funny life that movie stars take on for us when we think about them. There are a lot of people for whom Humphrey Bogart is the equivalent of an uncle, in terms of the psychic importance of their unconscious mind.

73.44 It is my profoundest idea, at least me profoundest idea tonight, that if we cannot perceive an idea for ourselves, we should know the observer through whom we perceive it second-hand.

82.16 We're all vastly more complex in our preoccupations than Hemingway. But I have to tell you that after I wrote *The Executioner's Song*, I went back and looked at Hemingway again. Because now I was writing in a simple style. And his style is remarkable. The more I know about writing, the more an achievement Hemingway's style becomes to me. I know his flaws inside out. I've loved and hated him as if he were my own father for years. There is so much he did for one, so much he didn't do. Truly the relationship you have to him is as a father. But he is a remarkable writer. His sense of the English language, I'd say, is virtually primitive in its power to evoke mood and stir the senses.

would
Schroeder/1992 For every historian who writes well, there must be twenty novelists who write better. And that's important because though there are people who can read, sometimes the only way that you can perceive reality is through a good style; a bad style is incapable of conveying reality. Even the dumbest and most oppressive reality needs to be conveyed through a style that's superior to that reality. A style that's merely equal to that reality very often won't do it, and a style that's inferior to the reality is hopeless.

would
Schroeder/1992 I don't ever think of my characters in terms of victims or victimizers because that sort of narrow classification tends to narrow them down too much. Anytime someone is writing a novel and he says, "I'm writing about a victim," that character's not going to be very interesting because in reality very few victims ever see themselves simply as victims. Whenever someone comes up to me and says, "I am a victim," I'm repelled because I figure that either they're pulling a con job on me, they want to manipulate my sympathies; or they're the world's worst sort of victim because they've begun to think of themselves in a totally limited fashion.

would
Lennon/1999 The first person point of view is an amazing tool. You can get to places with the first person you can't arrive at any other way. Of course, you can also injure your writing hand, so to speak. It's a double-edged instrument. Hemingway had a marvelous sense of the limitations of the first person. It virtually created his style. If you are doing a book in the first person, there are certain things you should not talk about because they're embarrassing when you have the "I" going before it. So there's a tendency, most marked in Hemingway, to keep everything at arm's length.

would
Lennon/1999 When you're making things up, it's scary; the decisions you have to make are frightening. So there's always a dread when you do an imaginative narrative. If your characters come alive, that's fine; they carry you a part of the way. But, finally, you have to make what might be termed career decisions for your characters. Does your protagonist want to go into the foreign service, or does he want to work in New York? These are large decisions but they are also opportunities. Certain writers have the book completely in their mind before they begin and then they write it. I'm not one of them. I find my book as I go along. My plot comes last. What I look for are the characters. I want a conception of my characters that's deep enough so that they will get me to places where I have to live by my wits. That means they have to keep on developing for me. When my characters come alive, the plot, I feel, will take care of itself. I cannot write a book where I figure out the plot first. When you do that you spend the rest of your time filling holes in rotten teeth.

As the
83.35 Writing is wonderful when you talk about it. It's fun to contemplate. But writing as a daily physical activity is not altogether agreeable. You get fat, if you're like me, and you strain your gut; you're always squeezing your intestines (I don't know why) in order to make a few words appear. I know that various ailments visit writers, gout being one,

and chilblains and writer's cramp. You're alone and every day you've got to go in and face that piece of paper. And that means you've got to reconstitute your soul and give yourself a passing mark. It gets very difficult. You get lonely. You spend most of your day alone.

91.41 In *Harlot's Ghost* you blunder forward with a series of potentialities. It's a kind of inner debate. This is not for amusement; this is not a spy novel—those things are just clocks that are put together. They have nothing to do with life. I regard this book as a novel with a legitimate architecture—but one with an excluded middle. That's good because it gives the reader some scope. The missing part shapes up in the reader's mind. Life is like that. We're always filling in intervals. I was trying to create an environment that was life-like in this book, one with more questions than answers. We live in a world of fiction—what we think things are, plus a few bits of hard fact.

86.31 It's as difficult to learn to become a professional writer as it is to become a professional athlete. Stamina is the key, and the ability to keep faith in yourself. One must be willing to take risks and try again. It takes an enormous amount of practice to be good at it. Also, you're affected by what you read as a child, and have preconceived ideas about how it should be done. It takes a while to unlearn these things and discover your own style. But it can be death to the soul if you're not good at it. Often writers say after completing a work, "This nearly killed me." It's true, and it gets more true with each work. But it has its good points. We're creating a world and the characters to go in it. But I've never understood the process of writing altogether. It's like love: one always searches for more.

83.13 I never was certain I would finish *Ancient Evenings* until I did. It was so difficult, the most difficult book I ever tackled. The choices were so many. That's why I never take Tom Wolfe seriously when he talks about the New Journalism as a higher form than the novel, because finally in the New Journalism your plot is handed to you, and once it is, you can concentrate on the writing. Plot is what drives me up the wall. The choices your characters have, the wrong choices they can make. I had that experience in *The Deer Park* and in *Barbary Shore*, and it frightened me for life.

83.57 Dwight Macdonald gave us no great body of books, and spent his talents in writing some of the better political and literary criticism of our time, but more important than his oeuvre was his influence. He was one of the best teachers of writing in the world. He gave no classes, but if one had learned a little about writing already, well, then there was all the world of self-expression to pick up in the felicities of his style. Dwight had something fabulous to teach. It was to look to the feel of the phenomenon. Describe what you see as it impinges on the sum of your passions and your intellectual attainments. Bring to the act of writing all of your craft, care devotion, lack of humbug and honesty of sentiment. And then write without looking over your shoulder for the

literary police. Write as if your life depended on saying what you felt as clearly as you could while never losing sight of the phenomenon to be described. If something feels bad to you, it is bad. Others received the same message from Hemingway, but it took Dwight Macdonald to give the hint to many a young writer and intellectual that the clue to new discovery rests not so much on the idea with which you begin as in the style of your attack on the problem.

coll 91.17 *Harlot's Ghost* is an epistemological novel. Henry James frightened me forever with his dictum that one must never put information into a novel unless it is digested through the lens of a protagonist's perceptions. So in this novel my protagonist is connected umbilically to the reader. If everything flows from one character to the reader, then there isn't that need for an intermediary, a narrator. Now in *The Executioner's Song*, I felt I was entitled to a narrator because the information about Gary Gilmore and other characters is received information; I wasn't making it up.

would 91.17 One of the things I learned from *The Executioner's Song*—there would be these extraordinary people we met while interviewing for the book, and I'd say, "Why the hell didn't God permit these two fascinating people to meet?" With all my novelist's training, I wanted certain people to meet. Well, when they sometimes did meet, the meeting would be disappointing as hell. I finally realized that this does not diminish the drama, it increases it. Most of our lives are spent getting ready for dramatic moments that don't take place, or if they do they're disappointing as hell. Or we say, "Well, nothing really big ever happens to me." Then, *bam*, you get knocked down with something so much bigger than you expected.

would Random House Publicity Flyer/2/91 The worst kind of writing results when some extraordinarily exciting things have happened to your friends and then you decide you're going to do a novel about them. Because even though your friends are very alive to you, they don't come alive in the book. So I almost never write about anyone who's close to me. It's just too dangerous. I much prefer to write about people for whom I feel a special understanding, but who, on the other hand, I have to get to know. You tend to dream and fantasize an enormous amount about your characters, and you develop your sense of them as you go along. And you know a book is good when your characters begin to make moves that you hadn't foreseen for them.

GENRE

Auth 68.26 Writing is a very *odd, spooky* activity, and when you get to filmmaking, you realize that the spookiness is tripled, especially in improvisational filmmaking, which can't be formalized. It's luck. What you have in your favor is all the lifetimes of the people working with you. What you have against you is the fact that you don't have a script, so you need all sorts of skilled practitioners of your art besides yourself.

Work 69.43 In the novel, you start with a bag of words, and the way you put the words together has meaning. In movies, you get another kind of vocabulary. You have little bits of film strip, each the equivalent of words—five words or five thousand. But the strips are put together as individual words. Constructing a movie out of a field of experience that you have recorded gets to be wholly fascinating because you are working with a brand new vocabulary. You are putting things together in a way that nobody has ever put them together before.

With 80.10 You know, a painter may find something on the street that he thinks is incredible. Sometimes he'll glue it right into the painting. It becomes part of the work. In *The Executioner's Song*, newspaper stories become part of the painting and part of the transcript of the trial—a lot of found objects. I felt acted upon, in a funny way, while doing this book, by painting terms. It was as if I'd shifted away from being an expressionist, not an abstract expressionist, but an expressionist like Munch, or Max Beckmann—those kinds of painters who worked with large exaggeration and murkiness and passionate power—into now being a photographic realist, even a photographic realist with found objects. The reason, I think, is that a painter like a writer sometimes gets to a point where he can no longer interpret what he sees. Then the act of painting what he literally sees becomes the aesthetic act. Because what he sees is incredible. It may or may not be possessed of meaning. Reality, itself, closely studied is mysterious, and it's elusive.

auth 70.15 Dealing with words is a mysterious matter. It's very insubstantial because they're just little pieces of dark curly pigment on a white page. Well, working with movies, on "Wild 90," I think I got back to the freshness of it when I was a kid. I felt the same sort of interest when I was 18 and starting to write stories. It was wonderful when I was 18 and writing. To be corny about it, it was first love. And that's gone. It's been gone for a long time. I'm a professional writer now, I can do a job. And I'm very much like a prizefighter who packs a suitcase and gets on a train or a plane and goes out to fight an opponent in some town. It doesn't matter what the conditions are particularly. I still have reverence for writing. But you can have reverence for something and not necessarily get much immediate pleasure out of it. I still get pleasure out of writing. But the *act* is not pleasurable. It's hard work. But making a film is a cross between a circus, a military campaign, a nightmare, an orgy, and a high.

GENRE/2

and
70.15 Novels are supposed to hit people where they live. You're supposed to read a novel and change your life. A movie is supposed to keep you living. That's why one serious critic said of my film, "Beyond the Law," "Norman, you don't understand the movies. The movies are there to keep people alive." You go to a movie and you pay your money and you're supposed to have a good time. The horror of life should be alleviated for a little while. That's what the critics feel movies are supposed to do. But what I'm saying is that the horror of life has become so completely pervasive that movies no longer enable sensible and sensitive people to survive. It sickens them. The most beautiful movie in the world will sicken you, if you can conceive of a better movie than the one that was there.

work
88.1 I like making movies more than writing now. I'm tired of writing. I've been doing it for forty years, and there's not much fun left. I get a hold of myself in the morning and go into that room and dig more stuff out of that old gut. The gut rebels. It's tired of being called on to perform these yeoman duties. Whereas in making a movie you're really not an artist, more an aesthetic engineer. You've got a lot of talented people working under you and they come up to you and you've got to make instantaneous decisions about matters you know very little about. Like hairdo, costume. And so it's kind of fun. You're using everything you've learned to the best of your ability. It kept reminding me of being at war but in a good way. It was like the ideal war. Nobody got killed, but you ate in a different place every day, usually standing up. There were vehicles. The biggest problem, just as in the army was where do you put the vehicles. You know when you pick a location shot, you pick it by availability to a road. You could be in the deepest forest you ever saw, but it's got to be 100 yards from the road because that's where the trucks are parked. So there's a reverse logic in filmmaking. You start with the costs and work toward the art.

work
87.17 ~~I think~~ movies go deeper into the psyche than literature; they're more primitive. Years ago I said that if you were to set up a spectrum of sex, memory, dream and death, you could put film between memory and dream and have no trouble at all. Whereas literature calls on many other factors. Literature is really much more social than film. Film is tribal. When you read a book, it involves the room you're sitting in, whether you're happy in that room, whether your social situation is appealed to by this book. If we read Hemingway, we're depressed by the fact that we're sedentary in relation to his heroes, that they're having more exciting lives than we're having, and that depresses us. If we read Henry James, we're wistful that we don't know the nuances of society the way his people do. But when we're in a movie, if the movie's good enough, we don't know whether we're perceiving something about life or entering something deeper, in the nature of dreams—those mysterious transactions that go on in dreams.

work
87.17 What I love about movie-directing is that it has *nothing* to do with writing. On a day-to-day basis it's the exact opposite. When you direct you use every part of your experience that you can't put into writing, all the little things that you've learned over the

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years that you can't use when you're writing a book. Particularly when you're writing a novel, you tend to focus on what belongs to that novel, and all sorts of things that you're also interested in never get into that novel. They really have no occupational life for a couple of years. They hang around in you, collecting psychic fat.

87.17 Time is your money in a film—literally, it's your money. If you don't get done with this scene by lunch, then your going to come back in that stupor after lunch, and you're going to lose not half an hour or an hour, but *two* hours. So you're gambling. And that's exiting. And not only are you gambling, you're getting immediate results. Because you learn in the next hour or two whether your gamble won or lost. And then the next day in the dailies you see if it *really* came out. Making movies, you're absolutely *in the world*, in the existential sense. Whereas in literature, you withdraw from the world in order to perceive the world. So they really use opposite sides of your self. I think you get closer to your soul in a book, but you get closer to the functioning of your psyche with a movie. Let me see if I can amplify that a little. I think when you are writing a book there are moments when you feel as if you're beaming a torch down into the abyss, and you see the lineaments of your soul down there. You don't travel down there in your soul, but you do perceive it. Because in the course of writing a book you get out to some very astonishing places, and you do have the light of your intuition, and it does ~~through~~ ^{like} a long light. When you are making a film, particularly after you've shot it and you start editing it, you look at the same scene over and over to take all the little dead spots out. Makes you feel like a surgeon. What it also does is it involves your taste, and your concentration. Seeing it over and over and over again you have to keep your taste alive; you have to exercise your ability to concentrate upon the same material over and over and over. And I'm the guy who wrote, "Repetition kills the soul," which I thought of many times when I was editing. But it doesn't kill it in this case, because it's not *absolute* repetition; you're chasing down repetition in order to alter it slightly. And as you do that you're tuning your psyche.

81.16 I tend to think of all journalism as being fiction, most of it dreadful fiction. There is the general assumption that journalism limits itself to what actually happened--faithful or at least accurate record of the event—and that novels are made up, that they are about events that never took place. Granted there is a tremendous amount of overlapping. People are familiar with the ways in which novels are close to reality. A novel often is straight journalism if you know the characters' real names. There are funny conventions about this; I've said several times, of *The Executioner's Song*, that if I changed the names, no one would argue that it was not a novel. They would have said it's not a terribly imaginative novel; it's awfully close to real events. But they wouldn't have said how dare Mailer call it a novel.

81.16 The journalist writing that I did started with "Superman Goes to the Supermarket," a piece about Kennedy and the Democratic Convention in 1960. If there was a style that followed, it began there. ~~I think what happened was, I saw that I didn't know how to write about political conventions—at least not in conventional terms.~~ I wasn't really interested in politics; I thought they were boring. The politics were the same I had been suffering through in the fifties. But what seemed fascinating to me was that Kennedy was a protagonist rather than a candidate and that he offered something new to American lives—this daring and romantic and surrealistic and cockeyed idea that the president could be a young man and have an attractive wife. The only thing I will take credit for is that I had enough sense to see that this was more important than all the politics. In other words, the shifts in public opinion came out of many elements that are not available to the historians. One of them is whether the President of the United States gives people energy in their inner lives, their dream lives, their unspoken lives. ~~Or whether he takes it away from them.~~ Carter was detested by everyone precisely because he took energy away from everyone. It was like having to listen to a dull minister or to a high school principal, always talking to you. Reagan is liked even by people who can't stand his politics because in some odd fashion, he seems to give us energy. Just by his presence. Because he is interesting to think about. Problems that are interesting to think about give us energy. So we tend to hate those politicians who take our energy away. Like Carter. And tend to love those politicians who offer us energy because they are intriguing. Out of this vague perception, I blundered into a way of writing about that convention—which was writing about them as though they were a great novelistic event.

81.16 Until *The Armies of the Night* I was very much in the background of my non-fiction narratives. You could feel that there was somebody looking in all these events, and presumably it's the author, but I wasn't a formal narrator as such. However, one of the things I began to feel was wrong with journalism is that immense events were boiled down to 300 words. There's no way to write about an immense event in 300 words or 3,000 words unless you're a poet. So the trick was not to boil it down but to expand it, to blow it up and to use 30,000 words or 20,000 words to write about events usually described in 2,000 or 3,000 words. What I began to feel is that the character of the narrator or the personality of the narrator was probably more important, or as important, as the event. Not that the narrator is important in his own person; it was not that I, Norman Mailer, was equal to the Democratic Convention, but that I had a set of prejudices. These prejudices were terribly important, and you as the reader couldn't begin to understand this event unless you understood me enough to reflect upon my perceptions. By being able to take account of me as a narrator, the reader could say, "Oh well, Mailer is impossibly romantic," or "Mailer is outrageously nihilistic," or "Mailer is a fool"—the reader could make his own interpretations of the events. It occurred to me that that's the way we always read. When I read my contemporaries, I'll say to myself, "Well, Vidal or Updike"—or whoever it is—"is good on this and not very good on that." I thought that's the least we can do in journalism: let the reader be aware of the bent of the writer. That is objective reporting.

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work 81.2 I have professional respect for the novel. I think ~~It~~ it's the most difficult of all the forms I've tried. I've always been fond of journalism, but I don't respect it in the same way because I think it's easier. Artists always have a kind of regard for virtuosity, and although the fact that something is easier doesn't therefore mean it's a lesser form, Deep down I think most artists feel that if it's hard you respect it more.

work 81.2 These days everyone is laying claim to having started the New Journalism. Tom Wolfe has been writing manifestos for the last ten years. But I think if I started any aspect of that New Journalism—and I did—it was an enormously personalized journalism where the character of the narrator was one of the elements not only in telling the story but in the way the reader would assess the experience. I had some dim instinctive feeling that what was wrong with all journalism was that the reporter pretended to be objective and that was one of the great lies of all time. What this really was, was an all-out assault on *New Yorker* writing, and at the same time I had—as all of us did—a vast respect for the *New Yorker*. So I was a little scared at what I was doing. I thought I was either all right or all wrong. The stakes were high, but by now it's more comfortable to write that way. At the same time, I wasn't taking journalism that seriously. I never felt that I was doing something more important than the novel. Wolfe feels it's more important, but I've never laid that claim since it's so much easier. The thing that makes the novel so hellishly difficult is that you have to elucidate a story from the material. If you make a mistake then you may not discover it until the book is done and your looking back on it ten years later. It's very much like chess in a funny way. Good chess players always speak of the best line of continuation. They can analyze a game afterward and really replay the points of no return and see whether a knight should have been moved to another box. In the novel, you're left wondering.

coll 81.6 If a novelist can take someone who's a legendary figure and invent episodes for them that seem believable, then they've done something wonderful. There's that meeting between J. P. Morgan and Henry Ford in Doctorow's *Ragtime*—I think it's one of the best chapters in American literature. It told me an awful lot about Morgan and an awful lot about Henry Ford, and the fact that it obviously never took place made it even more delicious. When you know the kind of bias and warp with which historians write their history—they're dealing with 10,000 facts and they select 300 very careful ones to make their case, and call that stuff history when we all know its fiction. The mark of a great historian is that he's a great fiction writer. Very few novels are ever true works of the imagination. I mean, how many Kafkas have there been? I'm not trying to avoid the fact/fiction debate to protect myself. There's one thing that did worry me in my second book about Marilyn, *Of Women and Their Elegance*. I invented an episode for her that was possibly more extreme than anything in her life. And that gave me pause; ~~But~~ I worried about it, I'm still worried about it, I think I'd feel less bad about it if I'd done it with a man. I start thinking, "Well, my God, what if after I'm dead somebody writes

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about me and they put me in a homosexual orgy, which I've never been in, I'd detest that, wherever I'd be." And I wrote it—this'll sound incredibly demented—but I wrote it with the idea that Marilyn, wherever she is, would accept this treatment of her. But it's a large assumption. So I do have a continuing uneasiness about that part of the book. On the other hand I do feel that there's no portrait without it.

work
81.6 ~~I think~~ Journalism is easier than novel writing because you know the story. I mean, give me a good story that history wrote for me, and I'm content—all I've got to do then is write it. The difficulty of writing 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.

and
82.16 Movies are more likely than literature to reach deep feelings in people. Movies are more primitive, I would argue. Film directs itself to more primitive states of consciousness. People who can't read get profound reactions out of movies. I would also say that to the degree that film reaches us in a precise way, it's no good. Film is best when ambiguous. A truly good film will affect two people profoundly, but they'll argue for hours over the message. One might say it's a satire, the other, a tragedy. That's as it should be. Film should reach way inside the psyche and prove truly disturbing. One person can go through horror watching a film, another person laugh their head off. That's good film. Bad film is when everybody laughs on cue. Then they are being manipulated. They have merely entered the engines of manipulation of the great institutions.

work
82.16 Ever since the late sixties I've wanted my nonfiction to read like a novel rather than the digested contents of the first stomach of a cow. ^{which} ~~latter~~ is what most nonfiction is to me. Someone spends a lot of time studying a body of material, they digest it, and write books. They skip the confusions. That's not interesting. We never know the living origins of the conclusions. What is fascinating to me in another writer is how his mind works. If I can obtain clues that way, I can improve my own mind. But to suppose an author can digest a subject so well that there is no need to think about the subject independently is disagreeable. So I don't like the way most nonfiction is done. Whereas the novel changes our lives to some extent. Marriages have broken up, for instance, because someone read a novel and decided the life of the character in the book was more interesting than their own. Good novels are painful to read. I guess it is possible, however, for nonfiction to be somewhat existential. An historian could say, "I start this project with two opposed hypotheses. I'm not sure which one is correct. As we explore the material, let me show the arguments for one, and then the other. In the course of it, maybe we'll arrive at more of an answer than I have now." Although, to bring that off in truly sustained form is so dangerous, and would so violate the canons of the profession of history, which insist that you go for one stance, not two, that it doesn't

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often happen. It would tend to agitate exactly what disturbs most people about history in the first place, which is that they learn somewhere between high school and college—or is it between graduate school and life?—that history is not history, but a series of immensely sober novels written by men who often don't have large literary talents, and have less to say about the real world than novelists. That's a disturbing discovery. That historians are not dealing with fact, but with the hypothesis they developed in relation to a series of isolated data. The desire to make these facts glow as facets in a mosaic that will enable us to perceive the past is not often done. Once we come to realize that no historians do it more closely than novelists, then all history becomes a novel. Just as any novel is the history of the working of one man's imagination, and so is a real historical artifact to illumine a period for us.

work 79.32 I think of nonfiction as living on two stomachs, like the cow. ~~In other words,~~ The material is eaten; it's partially digested; it's regurgitated and then it's digested again. In other words, in a book of nonfiction, there is a tendency to present the author's conclusions to the reader, and while this is not true for all works of nonfiction I think it's true for most of them—most serious works of nonfiction. You read it because you want to know what the author thinks definitively about a subject, and the author will present his thinking process to you sometimes—sometimes he doesn't. But he literally digests the material, and when he does present a scene, it's as illustrative material to make a difficult passage more simple. The one thing that nonfiction calls for is understanding—clear understanding of what's being said. It's hard to think of a good book of nonfiction whose waters are not clear. In *The Executioner's Song* I wanted to give the readers the feeling that they are participating in the life of the characters they're reading about. And to the degree that they're participating in it, they shouldn't understand everything that's going on any more than we do in life. Maybe they should understand somewhat more than we do in life, but not everything. The moment we understand everything in a book, it can't possibly be fiction, not the way I define it.

world 73.43 I'm a great believer in the gestalt, and one of the things I would say is that journalism gives, or almost always gives, a false impression of the event, because journalists have no interest in the gestalt. There have been a priori decisions made in journalism that certain elements of experience have to be recorded as carefully as possible. If a man is giving a speech, his topic is of cardinal importance; the title of the lecture is indispensable; the name of the lecturer is crucial; and whatever quotations taken from the speech are best given accurately—although if you don't know the *tone* of the speaker you know nothing. The assumption goes that all the other stuff, which is marvelous, is really not as crucial as these few tenets that these journalists cling to. The difficulty is that these journalistic tenets, these psychic stances, get over to other fields of inquiry. History, for instance, from what I gather from graduate students, has become an almost intolerable fact machine. To go back to the novel, one reason why it would be dreadful if the novel died is that the novel is one the more formidable attempts of

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Western civilization to deal with the notion of whole experience. A really good novel is a whole experience. A really great novel—*War and Peace*—is much more than that. Finally, it's everything. When a novelist says he's working on something ambitious, if it's really ambitious, his answer is going to be that he is writing about everything.

work
75.13 I don't take journalism as seriously as the novel, for one reason: I've always found journalism easy. And I have terrible trouble with a novel's story. Characters come to me, situations, descriptions, but the story kills. In a novel you've got to decide whether your character gets out of the bed and turns left or turns right. And you have to keep making those decisions all through the book. If you make a wrong decision, you can ruin your novel. What I love about journalism, what makes it easy for me, is that I have the story. If I'd written *The Fight* as a novel, I'd have to decide does Foreman win or Ali. I'd lose six months deciding who wins. So, you know, there it is; Ali won. It's a marvelous story told that way.

coll
75.13 Every good novel is a failure. Not mine but everyone's. Dostoevsky's career is a failure. He didn't write the book he had in mind. He died with a sense of frustration. He had this absolutely great book in which he was going to write about a saint. He did write about people who had visions of being saints but lived in evil. Alyosha in *The Brothers Karamazov*, for example, is the least convincing of his characters. Dostoevsky dies with a profound sense of failure in his mission because he wanted to educate the Russian people to the nature of saintliness, which he felt was absolutely crucial to their survival as a nation. If you try hard enough to create something great, set your sights very high, you're bound to fail by the very stretch of the imagination. But in the more limited technical sense, I don't know, maybe my own novels are failures. I don't think in these terms because I'm on the inside writing them. We're all professionals; we all do the best we can on a given day. So if it isn't as good as we wanted it to be, maybe we didn't make the best run with the energies we had. That's too bad, but there's today's work to do.

work
68.1 No, I don't agree with critics who say the novel is dead. I believe the novel has its own particular resource, which is almost 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 for hours, weeks, years. When the novel is dead, then the technological society will be totally upon us.

work
82.16 Certain human relations are comparable to literary forms. For instance, the one-night stand is like a poem, good or bad. An affair of reasonable duration, a short story. By this logic a marriage is a novel. In a short story we're interested in the point. In a novel we usually follow the way people move from drama to boredom back to drama again. And we often judge a novelist by his skill in moving people in and out of these

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high and low areas of existence. Of course, marriage is exactly like that. In marriage, our interest is not that a given point is made in a given night, but the way that recognition is confirmed or eroded over the weeks or months to follow. The narrative line of all marriage, in that sense, is good days and bad days. And most people like to live in the form of a novel. Just as there are people who like to live in the form of a short story. Psychopaths have lives that consist of poems, mostly bummers.

coll
Grobel/1983 Why are good novels painful to read? Excellent question. Name me any great novel you've ever read that didn't bore you in part while reading it the first time. A great novel has a consciousness that's new first. And any time we undergo that, we get bored because we have to withdraw and digest this new consciousness before we can go back to it. I've been bored in part by *Moby-Dick*, *The Red and the Black*, *Anna Karenina*, *The Scarlet Letter*.

work
Lennon/1999 Back in 1967 when I wrote *The Armies of the Night*, I divided the book into fiction and nonfiction. I was saying, in effect, that they're equal. When you write history, you're writing a species of fiction. What one's doing, ultimately, is giving one's version of life. And how one arrives at one's vision of life is somewhat different in a history than in a fiction, but they are much more alike than people recognize. So that's why I called the two subdivisions of *The Armies of the Night*, "History as a Novel," and "The Novel as History." I've always felt they're very much related. Let me give you an example. There's something like 30 pages in my new collection, *The Time of Our Time*, on Marilyn Monroe and Arthur Miller taken from my biography of Monroe. It's as factual as my sources could permit, but to me it reads like fiction. That is, it's a narrative of a movie star and a talented playwright, who are having a very happy marriage, and if it appeared in the pages of a novel and you changed the names, it would still read. And my 1979 book, *The Executioner's Song*, absolutely defies category, because I use the real names of the people. I gave it a terrible subtitle. I called it *A True Life Novel*. I regret that very much. I think it's slightly better than Truman Capote's equally awful subtitle to *In Cold Blood: A Nonfiction Novel*. I could have made it a novel by changing all the names. Call Gary Gilmore, Harry Killmore, and so forth, and, it would have been a "key" novel. People would have said, "Oh, so-and-so is so-and-so in that book." But by keeping the same names I pushed the envelope forward on what a novel is and what it isn't. I would say that what makes a novel is not whether the facts occurred or not. What is important is the way you present these facts. I would argue, then, that since I wrote it in the form of a novel, it is a novel. The form, the medium, determines the message. And the message you receive from a novel is different from the message—usually less interesting—that comes to you from nonfiction. Therefore, I like my nonfiction to read like a novel. By which I don't mean that I fudge the facts. On the contrary, since I'm already out on a limb, I'm careful about the facts.

83.46 *The Executioner's Song* is one of my best books. *Ancient Evenings* is my best book. There are two tendencies in my writing, the realist tendency and the symbolic tendency. And what you have to remember is that *The Naked and the Dead* is in a sense an anomaly. Before I became a soldier I wrote a long novel about a mental hospital called *Transit to Narcissus*, a murky, romantic, highly overcharged, symbolic novel; and had the war not come along I probably would have gone on in that direction, writing novels very much in the manner of a writer I very much admire, Iris Murdoch. Since then, however, I've lived with these two possibilities in my writing, and while *The Executioner's Song* is the flowering of one of those tendencies, *Ancient Evenings* is the flowering of the other.

95.22 Most people think the line between fiction and nonfiction is a Berlin Wall. I think, on the contrary, that it's a barely marked boundary. I like working back and forth on that boundary, being a range rider on that line.

95.7 I'm all for journalists using a literary style. I just wish they didn't have to write their stories the same day in the daily newspapers. If you can take a day or two or three to write a story, it will be a much better story, and better still if journalists have more space. You know, I was one of the people who founded the *Village Voice*. It has changed enormously, but what it does now is give a writer a lot of space. The daily news is a delusion. It's a dream. The idea that you're getting something as it's happening and you know what's happening is absurd. Analyze a news story. Do you really know what happened as you read it? If you got it two or three days later, you still won't be at the event, but you might have a richer picture of what happened if the reporter had more time.

ECONOMICS

65.6A ~~I think~~ I suffered more over the reviews of *The Naked and the Dead*, even the good ones, than over the reviews for any other book. I wanted to sit down and write a letter to every critic—they had misinterpreted something I said even though they liked the book. It's only after 20 years that you begin to see it as a primitive rite. At it's best, reading reviews (and this is true for bad reviews as for good ones if they are well-written) is as nourishing as a wild game dinner. I'd never dream of not reading reviews. ~~It's like~~ not looking at a naked woman if she happens to be standing in front of her open window.

82.14 ~~I think~~ ^F for anyone who's become an author early and has had a great deal of success, as Capote did and Vidal did and Styron did and I did, it's not automatic or easy afterwards to look upon other people with a simple interest because generally speaking they're more interested in us than we are in them. This has nothing to do with character, but with the social situation—I am more interested in Marlon Brando than he is interested in me—and it has an immense impact when you're young. You become a mirror and the only way you can perceive events is through the mirror of your self.

82.14 Buying a hardcover book is a sacramental act, and when people have to pay that much money for something they have to have a certain respect, even a touch of awe, for the author. And if you're unsavory in public life and everyone knows your name, you're not going to sell lots of hardcover books. The people who sell lots of hardcover books are usually not in the public eye—Saul Bellow, John Updike, John Cheever—and very few people can break that law. Capote's broken it successfully. But I certainly haven't.

83.40 I treat bad reviews like a politician running for office treats a loss of support. A couple of friends called up after the bad review of *Ancient Evenings* appeared in the Sunday *New York Times* and asked, "Are you all right?" I'd seen it a week before, so any unhappiness I'd had about it was now digested. I said that it was like realizing that the county chairman in Schenectady is deciding against your candidacy. But to lose Schenectady doesn't mean that you stop running. It isn't my ego that's hurt, it's my damn pocketbook. Getting a bad review in the *Times* hurts you as much as any single review can. When I was younger I used to consider a bad review a personal insult and would consider a guy who wrote it evil. In fact, I have never actually punched out a reviewer, which I say with a certain amount of wistfulness. I once sat next to Philip Rahv after he had written an atrocious review of *An American Dream*. Philip Rahv had his virtues, bless him, but physical courage was not one of them. So I made a point of sitting next to him at a party, and while I smiled at him, I kept my body firmly pressed into his, leaning into him, while we had a long 30-minute conversation about something else altogether. I was perfectly pleasant the entire time and everything seemed all right except we were both titled alarmingly from my leaning into him. He was in an absolute panic, waiting for me to strike. It must have seemed an odd sight from the other side of the table: He was a heavy man, and the two of us must have looked like two doughnuts crushed together in a box.

ECONOMICS/2

wrk
If I had no economic pressures on me I would have written books that were more literary and more well-rubbed, and I would have spent more time on them. I would have polished them and would have sighed over them and I probably would have taken them more seriously than I take my books, although I do take them very seriously. But I would have been truly solemn about them. And I probably would not have gotten into journalism, but I'm speculating. I probably would have gotten into journalism anyway, particularly with the history we had in the sixties. I'd never come up with a story of my own that was as good as the things that were happening all through the sixties.

wld
81.2 Early success changed my life. For a long time after the success of *The Naked and the Dead*, for seven or eight years, I kept walking around saying nobody treats me as if I'm real; nobody wants me for myself, for my five-feet eight inches, everybody wants me for my celebrity. Therefore my experience wasn't real. All the habits I'd formed up to that point of being an observer on the sidelines were shattered. Suddenly, if I went into a room I was the center of the room, and so regardless of how I carried myself, everything I did was taken seriously and critically. I complained bitterly to myself about the unfairness of it until the day I realized that it was fair, that that was my experience. It's the simplest remark to make to yourself, but it took me ten years to get to that point. Then I began to realize the kind of writing I was going to do would be altogether different from the kind of writing I had thought I would do. After *The Naked and the Dead* I thought I would write huge collective novels about American life, something that required going out and getting experience, and my celebrity made it impossible. I then began to realize that there was something else that I was going to get which hopefully would be equally valuable, and that was that I was having a form of twentieth-century experience which would become more and more prevalent: I was utterly separated from my roots. I was successful and alienated and that was a twentieth-century condition. This went into all my work after that in one way or another and will go on forever because by now I suppose I can say that kind of personality interests me more than someone who is rooted.

and
81.2 I used to have a much clearer idea of who I was writing for—certain friends, certain intellectuals, certain critics, a certain sense of the kind of audience I wanted out there and who they might be. That was in the sixties, but in the seventies there was a stretch where I really didn't know who I was writing for. You go in and out of fashion and your sense of who you're writing for goes in and out of focus. With my Egyptian book I've gotten to the point where I don't care who I'm writing for. I wouldn't have a clue who's going to like it. You get old enough and realize there are gods in the cosmos but there are no literary gods left. That's not bad; there's something demeaning about being in awe of a critic.

ECONOMICS/3

73.14 Yes, it did help that I was paid a lot of money to write *Of a Fire on the Moon*. That made it better. It would have been a harder book to write if I'd been paid less. I'm sort of a frank and shameless professional. I enjoy my work more if I get paid well for it. It makes it somehow sexier. It's awful to put it that way, but it's as simple as that. You take yourself just a little more seriously, and that's a great help when you are writing. Because the hardest thing I've found in writing is to take yourself with enough importance so that you dare finally to start defining some piece of that existence out there. There's an extraordinary arrogance in writing.

81.6 Every time I appear in a newspaper I injure myself professionally. But I don't think there's anything I can do about it. One of the reasons I'm in the papers all the time is that they just keep using the same people, over and over again. It's a game, and there's something like 40 players on the board. If I were in a Tarot deck, I'd be the Fool. I used to keep a stern separation between the public legend and myself, but you know, you get older, and after a while, you start to feel like some old slob in Miami, with slits in his sneakers so his feet won't hurt so much. At that point it's hard to fight the legend.

81.6 I'm a novelist and I want to know every world. And I would never close myself off to a world unless it's truly repulsive to me. I don't think it means anything if I go to certain kinds of parties, because society is nothing if not fashion. There've been a few homes that invite me for dinner from time to time. If it comes to the point where there's something to fight for and I'm not fighting for it because I don't want to lose my position in society, then there's something to be concerned about. What's very important to me is knowing how the world works. I think what ruins most writers of talent is that they don't get enough experience to learn, so their novels always tend to have a certain paranoid perfection which isn't as good as the rough edge of reality. If *The Executioner's Song* had a big effect on people, it was because it wasn't a paranoid work. It had all the rough edges of reality. If I had conceived that book in my imagination, it would have been much more perfect and much less good. If there's a theme that obsesses me, it's how much of the history that's made around us is conspiracy and how much of it is simple stupid fuckups. And you have to know the world to get some idea of it. You know, how much does the Mafia control, how much do they luck into? How much does the Jewish community affect the mentality of government, and how much are they accused of? On the other hand, it's very dangerous to live in society too much, because it's a world of very rigid rules. You cannot be yourself completely. There's a marvelous game in society, which is: If you are completely of society, then you're totally uninteresting. If you have any entrée at all it's because society is always fascinated with mavericks. Till the point where they'll become bored with me, and then, boom, I'm out. But on the other hand, even as a maverick there are certain rules that I have to obey. If you start obeying those rules past the point where you want to go along with them as part of the game, then you are injuring yourself.

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73.43 Right now the smart money would bet against the novel. The publishing houses are getting gloomier and gloomier about its future, and they are the ones who will, in a large sense, determine its future. It really comes down to the young editors. I mean, when a novel gets published these days it's usually because some young editor has decided that this is finally a *good* novel, and he makes an issue of it. And the publisher generally goes along with it. In effect, it's the benevolent or charitable side of publishing. Now this will continue so long as publishers have faith in the novel—until they conclude that novels can really be written by computers. You know, there is a certain sort of obvious best-selling novel that you can almost predict will be successful if you find the right writers. Just give them the right theme. For example, I hear Leon Uris is writing a book about Ireland; we can name the sales, can't we? We can name the reviews. Imagine Joe Flaherty, Wilfred Sheed and Garry Wills on Uris's book. But back to the question: I think it's harder and harder to write a good novel. The character of experience in the twentieth century is so fragmented that it is hard to conceive of one being written that would re-invigorate the whole idea of the novel as a form. How do you move from one fragment of experience to another? That's the problem. Nothing is, for instance, now more difficult than the picaresque novel, where you move from *milieu* to *milieu*. Your characters tend to destroy one another as you move from *milieu* to *milieu*. Problems that could be solved on, let's say, the nineteenth-century level can't be solved in the twentieth.

Underlying it all is the fact that the culture is fragmented; existence is fragmented. It's gotten to the point that those of us who skip from fragment to fragment are the ones who thrive, at least in a limited way. So all this makes for enormous difficulty is writing major novels. Whereas in the thirties, you had any number of major writers around. You had Dos Passos writing *USA*; you had Faulkner writing a major novel just about every other year. Hemingway's books were still coming out; you had Thomas Wolfe writing, James T. Farrell doing his work. And except for Wolfe, all that moved into the forties. And there were any number of minor writers and half-major writers who were awfully good. The novel was flourishing then. Now the novel is up against ferocious competition: television and the movies. So I'm not at all sanguine about the future of the novel; it may disappear as a major form. To me, the most interesting thing is to write a major novel. But every time I think of it, I get a little worried. Awfully tough!

68.1 Hemingway had a clear image, if you will: the work and the man bore a certain resemblance to each other. But my relation to my public personality is more surrealistic than that. People are in an incredible state of confusion about me. So my public personality probably hurts my sales, because Americans like answers, not enigmas. It's precisely the middle-class conservative authors who sell in huge quantities: Herman Wouk, Louis Auchincloss, James Michener. Make your own list.

Grobel/1983 I wasn't prolific as a young writer. My powers to be prolific are in direct response to needing money. Balzac was immensely prolific. Zola was. Dickens. They earned their living. It helps if you have to earn your living from your pen; you discover that you can push yourself. It's analogous to what athletes do very often, where they'll

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go through hideous procedures. They'll eat steroids in order to get more strength in their muscles; they're into all sorts of things that are, ultimately damaging, not only to their bodies but to their souls. But they'll do it in order to set records, because they've gotten into a set where they truly want to break that old record, whether it's theirs or someone else's. We do the same thing as writers. You can force yourself to write much more than you want to write. And yet the writing will not necessarily deteriorate. People think you're going to end up a bad writer if you do that. You won't end up a bad writer, but you may end up with a bad liver, or with a shortened life, but you go for transcendence too. Sometimes working much harder than one wants to work can liberate energy. It doesn't always defeat it.

and 83.55 Almost everybody wants to write. The writer's life seems so free—no boss to face, no rush to work, and if you receive any renown for it, you have all the pleasures, the curious pleasures of celebrity. Writing for many people is the only way for them to tell the story of their lives. Experience, when it cannot be communicated to another, must wither within and be worst than lost. People believe that writers have this opportunity and all the other rewards, but all the same, another part of me is ready to laugh at the naivete about how long it takes writers to learn the rudiments, which is akin to the discipline and dull punishment that, in boxing, go into the ability to throw a commanding punch at will. I never encourage people to write for too little. It is a splendid life if you think only of the emoluments. But it is death to the soul if you are not good at it. And to have a durable career, you have to build a personality that can withstand criticism. Published work is fair game; writers don't have to publish; they can leave their work in a desk drawer. Why should it not be open season, then, when the work comes out?

and 83.20 Editing now makes best sellers more and more like each other. After all, editors write well and very much like each other. So few bestsellers don't suffer from a spate of adjectives. When a writer can't present the manifest of an experience, he often substitutes by supplying adjectives. That tells the reader what to think. There's a tendency in publishing houses to simplify books, gussy them up, too much emphasis on entertainment at all costs. My hope lies in one fact. A terrible weariness is coming into us because of the rate we are being entertained.

And 95.22 Everywhere I go, booksellers ask me, 'Why don't you write a short book? Short books take up less space on our shelves.' Marketing has taken over writing now. The hell with what the book is, can we market it? Not for me; I was convinced at an early age by Thomas Mann that only the exhaustive is truly interesting.

And 95.7 You always want to reach the maximum number of people, and you want to reach the young people. If I start thinking about it, it would be "Why don't they read me?" or "How wonderful that they are reading me," but it would have nothing to do with writing. When you write you can't be thinking of how it's going to turn out. You can't say, "I'm going to put this in because it's going to help it sell copies." That never works. Even in

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in a bad bestseller there's a certain sort of internal integrity that makes it a best seller, which is the best book that person is capable of writing at that time. The author believes in the book and that's why it's a best seller. There's an aura of integrity.

TS10 I think that the great power of art is to reveal to you, if necessary to persuade, the moral consciousness of people. In particular, I think the novel is at its best the moral of art because it's the most immediate, the most overwhelming, if you will. It is the most transparent. One could argue that more easily about the meaning of a new subjective painting or of music, or whatever. But in the end, the meaning is there. It's much closer, one could argue about and gather but, for some one is using words, it is much closer to the point of moral consciousness, moral structure. And one gets into a particular thing which is terribly interesting, you begin to explore the interaction of moral structure — which is the first approach to religious experience for many of us, especially since the religious religions don't begin to cover the enormous and terrible complexity of moral experience.

TS11 Coming back to novel-writing after all these years, the difficulty was fresh on me now as it was when I started writing. I think when you get down to it, it is an extraordinary business to say you are going to write a novel. You are creating a world. When you have been waiting for so many years as I have, and have the responsibility of being a writer, the God-like assignment of writing a novel is almost responsible to yourself. To become the prime mover of your own little world.

TS12 Coming back to novel-writing after all these years, the difficulty was fresh on me now as it was when I started writing. I think when you get down to it, it is an extraordinary business to say you are going to write a novel. You are creating a world. When you have been waiting for so many years as I have, and have the responsibility of being a writer, the God-like assignment of writing a novel is almost responsible to yourself. To become the prime mover of your own little world.

TS13 Why do I think fiction is so important? Oh, because I think it's the place where art and philosophy and adventure come together. For me there's nothing more beautiful than a marvelous novel. I love the idea of a novel; to me a novel is better than reality. I wish as good as *The Popoluh* I long may become — and I hope it becomes a very, very good book — it can never be as good as a novel, in my mind. It would be better than a novel in a lot of ways but it could never be as good. I mean there's something so beautiful about not being able to come up with a vision that's not Godlike but close enough to Godlike to give us a vision of how man values the Lord's realm might be. You know what we read Proust or the book of Maugham or Steinbeck or Joyce or any of the great novelists. We would name 30 of them, say, who give us the idea of God's mind being something like that. Don't you get that feeling when you read Proust — that one side of God's mind is that Proust's? And that's the challenge.

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51.2 A great writer always goes to the root; he is always coming up with the contradictions, the impasses, the insoluble dilemmas of the particular time he lives in. The result is not to cement society but to question it and destroy it. Faulkner may profess all sorts of things; he may even be off on a white-supremacy binge, but actually the total of his work has caught the horror at the same time that it has caught the fact that he loves it. A great writer has to be capable of knowing the rot, and he has to be able to strip it down to the stink, but he also has to love that rot. A writer has to have a tough mind, the toughest mind of his time. And he has to have a great heart.

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 is at its best the moral of art forms because it's the most immediate, the most overbearing, if you will. It is the most inescapable. One could argue much more easily about the meaning of a non-objective painting or of music, or whatever. But in the novel the meaning is there. It's much closer; one could argue about ambiguities, but, because one is using words, it's much closer to the sense of moral commandments, moral strictures. And one gets into a particular thing which is terribly interesting, you begin to explore the interstices of moral reaction—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 terrible complexities of moral experience.

75.11 Coming back to novel-writing after all these years, the difficulty is as fresh on me now as it was when I started writing. I mean, when you get down to it, 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, and know the responsibility of being a writer, the God-like assumption of writing a novel is almost impossible to surmount. To become the prime mover or your own little world.

79.26 Why do I think fiction is so important? Oh, because I think it's the place where art and philosophy and adventure come together. For me there's nothing more beautiful than a marvelous novel. I love the idea of a novel; to me a novel is better than reality. I mean, as good as *The Executioner's Song* may become—and I hope it becomes a very, very good book—it can never be as good as a novel, to my mind. It could be better than a novel in a lot of ways but it could never be as good. I mean there's something so beautiful about one being able to come up with a vision that's not Godlike but close enough to Godlike to give us a vision of how marvelous the Lord's mind might be. You know, when we read Proust or the best of Maugham or Stendhal or Joyce or any of the great novelists. We could name 20 of them, say, who give us this idea of God's mind being something like that. Don't you get that feeling when you read Proust—that one side of God's mind is like Proust's? And that's the challenge.

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unk
82.14 As you get older, you realize that what's important is to do one's work and do one's best work and be serious about it. It's not that you're retreating completely—you're just saying, "It's too much, I abdicate, I resign, I will cultivate my own garden." You say, "I will work on that garden on the assumption I will produce an herb that will challenge all that is before us." In other words, instead of seeing yourself as the embattled artist, you begin to see yourself as the alchemical artist. Art as magic rather than art as war.

worl
83.10 I'm right and I'm wrong so often, so many times of the day, that I have no interest in having people think the way I think. I'm truly misunderstood on this. What I'm interested in is that however people think they get better at it. That's what important about one's work. In the work of good authors, if a book is good enough, you cannot predict how people are going to react to it. You shouldn't be able to. If it's good enough, it means it's not manipulative. If it's not manipulative, everybody sort of goes off in a different direction. One of my own favorite remarks is that it's not that I'm for the cops and not that I'm for the crooks, but I'm for the cops getting better and the crooks getting better. I have a notion of society as an oven where some fabulous dishes are being cooked, and in order for the banquet to take place, every ingredient has to be in it. I don't think it's an accident that I'm a novelist. Novelists have a wicked point of view—wicked as opposed to evil. They are interested in upping the ante. They're interested in more happening, not less. One of the reasons that I detest television is that it reduces our possibilities. Television was welcomed as something that would help us understand the world. But I think, quite the contrary, it takes away from us any possibility of ever comprehending the world because it deadens our senses and because it gives us false notions, periodically, systematically, and intensively.

colleges
83.10 Once Ralph Ellison and I were out in Iowa together many years ago, back in 1959, and we worked like crazy. We had a lively audience, and the symposium went on for three or four days, for *Esquire*. At the end of it, it suddenly seemed a little absurd to me that we really worked that hard, got in so many arguments with students, talked back and forth, and even argued with each other as lively as hell. But then when it was over, there was a little bit of sadness that something that had been truly exceptional was over. So I said to him, "Why the hell did we do it?" He said, "Ah, shit, man, we're expendable." I've always loved that remark. Because in a certain sense one's ideas are expendable. If the best of my ideas succeeds in changing the mind of someone who's more intelligent than myself, then that's fine. I'm a great believer in the idea that if you advance an idea as far as you can and it's overtaken by someone who argues the opposite of you, in effect you've improved your enemy's mind. Then someone will come along on your side who will take your enemy's improvement of your idea and convert it back again. I'm nothing if not a believer in the dialectic. And to that extent one does the best one can. And that's the end of it. The thought of everyone thinking the way I do is as bad as any other form of totalitarianism.

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coll 81.16 Hemingway's life was cautionary to me. Several times in my life I think I stopped doing different things or veered away from doing certain things because of the example of Hemingway. Hemingway's suicide stood over us all like the suicide of our own father. He's the father of modern American literature, at least for me, and to commit suicide.... John Gardner has that marvelous remark that when a father commits suicide he condemns his son to suicide. Well, of course, you can suicide in more ways than killing yourself. You can destroy yourself with too much drink, too many cigarettes, too many failures, too many wild and unachieved alliances—and so Hemingway was a great cautioning influence on us.

Coll 81.16 Borges poses to us, I think, the nature of the difficulty of comprehending reality, because he shows us how every time we approach reality we are writing a scenario and these very scenarios are the equivalent of propositions and hypotheses in physics. That is, they are correct until the evidence subverts them. But in the course of the evidence subverting them we have learned a great deal because the next hypothesis, ideally, should be superior. So in Borges you have this wonderful business of immensely elaborate hypotheses destroyed by the one fact that turns the hypothesis inside-out, into its opposite. There is this marvelously sinewy dialectical vision of the interplay between culture and history, the two almost being...not artifacts, but separate organisms. Borges gives us an immensely vivid inner life which I think all one finally cares about in writing. It is what I look for in other writers, what I expect I should be able to give to others in my own writing. It is to make that inner life not only more vivid—but by making it more alive and stronger it becomes more able to stand as proof against the attacks of the world upon it. The attacks of the world now upon our psyche are not so much aggressive as subtle, insidious—we're leached out. We're not destroyed from without, we are sucked out. Our spiritual souls, our social souls, are sucked out of us by the mass media, by information retrievable. I think Borges is best when it comes to fighting that. Try putting Borges in a computer.

wnd 81.6 If a great war novel's to be written again—and it may be that the great war novel is a form that's now past—it could come 50 years after the war in Vietnam as *War and Peace* came after the Napoleonic Wars. Because I don't think that war will finally be comprehended until we have that perspective. The Second World War accelerated America into a direction it was trying to get into anyway—America was trying to move from one form of capitalism into another; and the government was trying to get into the act. Vietnam, however, either injured America permanently, so that we may never be the most important nation in the world again, or it may have been an incredible crucible in which the national character shifted and changed. That perspective awaits us yet. But when it comes, I think there may be some incredible stuff done about it, and we may have great novels about Vietnam. And they may be great the way *War and Peace* was great, because the Napoleonic Wars changed Russia forever.

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83.30 Piety is piety. That's why in *Ancient Evenings* I write about people who were seen in "the best temples." Piety is five thousand years old and it hasn't advanced one step. And the same can be said for snobbery. I wrote this novel as, in the most exalted sense of the word, escapist literature. I think there are two great pleasures in literature, and they're polar. One of them is escapism and it's been absolutely corrupted. It's become a money machine. The horrors of "E. T." extend from here to Armageddon. And, of course, the other joy of literature is intimacy. It is to enter material one knows very well and find that it's been done so powerfully by the author that you transcend your own intimate knowledge and know even more. You can point to books of both examples. I think *Anna Karenina* at the time it came out was an example of intimate literature. *Moby-Dick* is an example of great escapist literature. Doesn't have to be agreeable escapist literature, it just has to take you out of yourself."

83.30 The moment you moralize, it's no longer moral literature, it's pious literature. There's a dialectical relation between morality and piety. Piety destroys morality. You know, piety and corruption get together like hot dogs and mustard. They have to. No one can fulfill the demands of piety. Piety is an inhuman demand, and because it is so obsessive it inspires its opposite, just for the sheer health of the body, if not the soul. But I think morality is finally in human affairs a sense of proportion. Tolstoy is a great writer, maybe our greatest novelist, because nobody has his sense of proportion, of the importance of events against the great screen of the cosmos. And that inspires us with the rarest combination of sentiments. We feel a compassionate awe, or an awe that's supported by compassion, when we read Tolstoy. It's a remarkable achievement. To be in the presence of something so serious, yet ultimately so tender because he's full of judgment, but—so ready, finally, to forgive.

82.16 Anyone who worries about whether they are going to hurt somebody's feeling by their work is no more a writer than a surgeon who would say to himself, "In making this incision I'm 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 certain insensitivity to other parts of the context. Writers also have their own kinds of blindness. They can't say to themselves, "This portrait of my good friend is going to scar him terribly." If they feel that, they can't write. Indeed, a great many young writers can't. They think of all the people they're going to hurt, or those they're going to make enemies of, and the retribution that will come, and it doesn't seem worth it to them. There has to be something a bit maniacal about a young man or woman who wants to write. He has to be willing to get that book out no matter how many psychic corpses are left en route, or who is coming after him later. Still, he must not take the immediate advantage, never cash those easy checks. It's very dangerous when you are writing to milk it, to say

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to oneself, I have a prize cow and the price of milk is high now. I'm going to get every last bit of milk out. You have to be careful of that. Writing may be an instinctive process, but it's not always clear. You often feel no more than a dull pressure from your instinct to go here or go there. You have to try to listen to the faint voice that tells you how to stay true to the work. Very hard to do. A writer's open to every pressure to take the immediate advantage, whatever it is. We all do in various ways.

coll 82.16 Yes, Borges is a conservative but...I detest having to think of a writer having to think of a writer by his politics first. It's like thinking of people by way of their anus. Borges has this magical ability to take plots and turn them inside out. I sometimes think Borges may do in five pages what Pynchon does in 500. He's a magician's magician. In that sense I love his work. Marquez is also wonderful. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude* he created not one world but a hundred. I don't know how Marquez does it. People come into his book....In ten pages he'll create a family, and you know every one of the children, and all the events that occur in their life.

coll 81.26 I may not be a good intellectual, but my tendency is to create intellections. I put them on like adhesive plasters. In the case of Gary Gilmore, I was pulling off the plasters. As I got deeper and deeper into what his nature might be, I decided that every concept I had about Gilmore proved inadequate. So I wanted the reader of *The Executioner's Song* to confront the true complexity of a human personality that can come from studying one man close enough. The fact that he was a murderer made my task more easy because we're all fascinated with killers. But any person studied in that depth would prove fascinating. It's Flaubert's old idea. You can take any soul alive, including that simple servant girl he wrote about, and make them incredible if you get to know them well enough.

coll 81.26 Freud had a great deal to say about the nature of the psyche in the nineteenth century. I believe his final importance in intellectual history will be that he gave us more insight into the late nineteenth century than anyone but Marx. Freud is the key to understanding how people put up with the particular kind of lives that they led in the 1880s, 1890s and early 1900s, very much locked up, terribly overstuffed, terrible formal lives. Yet, those lives had a considerable amount of power and energy. In those days the psyche was used like a plumbing system. People were accustomed to living under high pressure. That's not what we have now. Today we know a world in which people act out their anxieties and look to explanations for their conduct all the time. Freud is not really adequate any longer. Marx, for vastly more complex reasons, is also not adequate any longer, not wholly adequate, because corporate capitalism adapted to Marx via Keynes. So I don't try to create bridge from Marx to Freud anymore. I'm not certain I could have. But when I write "The White Negro," back in the fifties, I was coming to realize that everything in society from the largest social institution to those private and intimate personal moments such as the onset of death, might all be seen in their

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connections if one had the courage to begin. In that sense, I'm still trying. But I've come to realize that the task is enormous. Of course, I grew up under the shadow of Marx and Freud. Both men, independently, created an entire world system. They had a vision of all existence. That impressed me immensely. I was nothing if not intellectually ambitious when I was young and wanted to come up with a similar vision that would comprehend everything. By now I've come to realize that it is not only enormously difficult but that I don't have the intellectual discipline to begin to do anything remotely of that sort. But one tries to do one's best with what one's got. I'm still attempting to connect up what I can. Because I do think it's important. Until we understand the ways in which we are obliged to lead our lives in ways we don't particularly enjoy, until we understand all those reasons why so many of use feel dead inside so much of the time, and recognize how much of that is not our lack of imagination but the product of vast institutional systems of greed and injustice that we are schooled to perceive as rather benign manifestations, we are 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 the end of a long chain, you might say, of socially intended processes that keeps us malleable, amenable, and short on such powerful emotions as outrage at injustice. In that sense, I'm still trying to find the roots, trace it out, bring in the ultimate indictment against all that's awful and evil in society.

world 95.35 Writers aren't taken seriously any more, and a large part of the blame must go to writers of my generation, including me. 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 we're not a nation that has characteristics or form. We just expand all over the place and we're about as attractive as yeast.

author 74.3 If I could give one moral maxim to a young writer, I'd say live with your cowardice every day. Don't bullshit yourself about your cowardice. Recognize it, live with it, hate it or defend it, but don't put it someplace where it is not. Cowardice is a prime cause; apathy is a product, rather than a cause.

author 74.3 Superstition? Bifurcation again. 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 you or to your destruction.

world 74.3 You can tell about every stage of sex—before, during and after—by odor. One even knows what kind of sex it is by the odor. One knows one's own spiritual condition by one's scent. One knows the happiness or the misery of the house by the odor as one walks in. The sense of smell is therefore unendurable at times, because 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.