

2. CRAFT

Reference to pg AD

STYLE

Style, of course, is what every good young author looks to acquire. In lovemaking, its equivalent is grace. Everybody wants it, but who can find it by working directly toward the goal?

In my case, Advertisements was the first work I wrote with a style that I could call "my own, but I didn't begin it until 1958, ten years after The Naked and the Dead was published. In between had come Barbary Shore and The Deer Park and I never want to have two novels as hard again to write.

I did not know what I was doing. Apart from the psychological vertigo that will attack any athlete, performer, or young entrepreneur who has huge early success, I had my own particular problem, a beauty—I did not know my metier. The Naked and the Dead had been written out of what I could learn from reading James T. Farrell and John Dos Passos with good doses of Thomas Wolfe and Tolstoy, plus homeopathic tinctures from Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Faulkner, Melville, and Dostoyevsky. With such help, it was a book that wrote itself.

I knew however it was no literary achievement. I had done a book in a general style borrowed from many people and did not know what I had of my own to say. I had not had enough of my own life yet. The idea could even be advanced that style comes to young authors about the time they recognize that life is out there ready to injure them, kill them slowly or quickly, but something out there is not fooling. It would explain why authors who were ill in their childhood almost always arrive early in their career as developed stylists: Proust, Capote, and Alberto Moravia give three examples, Gide offers another. This notion would certainly account for the early and complete development of Hemingway's style. He had, before he was twenty, the unmistakable sensation of being wounded so near to death that he felt his soul slide out of him, then slip back.

The average young author is not that ill in childhood nor that harshly used by early life. His little social deaths are overcome by his small social conquests. So he writes in the style of others looking for his own, and tends to look for words more than rhythms. In his haste to dominate the world (rare is the young writer who is not a consummate prick) he tends to use his words for their precision, their ability to define, their acrobatic action. His style often changes from scene to scene, from paragraph to paragraph. He may know a little about creating mood but the essence of good writing is that it sets a mood as intense as a theatrical piece, and then alters that mood, enlarges it, conducts it over to another mood. Every sentence, precise or imprecise, vaulting or modest, is careful not to poke a hyperactive finger through the tissue of the mood, nor do the sentences ever become so empty of personal quality that the prose sinks to the ground of the page. It is an achievement which comes from having thought about one's life right

to the point where one is living it. Everything that happens seems capable of offering its own addition to one's knowledge. One has arrived at a personal philosophy or has even reached that rare plateau where one is attached to one's philosophy. At that juncture, everything one writes comes out of one's own fundamental mood.

Some such development may have gone on in me over the ten years from the publication of The Naked and the Dead to the commencement of work on Advertisements for Myself. In any event, it became the book in which I tried to separate my legitimate spiritual bile from my self-pity and maybe it was the hardest continuing task I had yet set myself. What aggravated every problem was that I was also trying to give up smoking, and as a corollary of kicking nicotine, I was thrust into the problem of style itself. In those days, my psyche felt as different without cigarettes as my body felt in moving from air to water. It was as if I perceived with different senses and clear reactions were blunted. Writing without cigarettes, the word I looked for almost never came, not in quick time. In compensation, I was granted a sensitivity to the rhythm of what I wrote and that helped to turn my nose in the direction of better prose. I began to learn how difficult it is to move from the hegemony of the word to the resonance of the rhythm. This can be a jump greater than a leap into poetry. So, Advertisements for Myself was a book whose writing changed my life.

~~42~~ (1)

61.12

In The Deer Park I had been trying to find a style, but it was elusive. I went through three drafts. The first had been Proustian —not first-rate Proust, of course.

Attempted Proust. Failed Proust. The second draft was located somewhere between the English novel of manners and Scott Fitzgerald—not good, but in that general direction. Then I found a tone that was not like the others. It fit the essential material. So I learned how style literally repels certain kinds of experience and can be equal to a dominating wife who is even ready to select your suits. If a writer insists on a specific tone, despite all inner warnings, it can even limit the varieties of experience that will enter the book.

(97) (2)

London

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

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On the other hand, it takes so long to find your own manner. It comes down to a set of decisions on which word is valuable and what is not in every sentence you write. That's one element. Another is the overall consistency. You have writers who are exceptionally talented but are still what I would call amateurs. The most notable example would be a writer as highly gifted as Toni Morrison. Her style can shift from chapter to chapter—her strength is not in protecting the tone. She can write beautifully for pages, and then in a following chapter dawdle along in pedestrian mode. It violates what she is at her best, her distinctive voice, her distinctive insights.

Marcus Jett.

Style is character. A good one will not come from a bad, undisciplined character. Now, a man may be evil, but I believe that people can be evil in their essential natures and still have good characters. Good in the sense of being well-tuned, flexible, supple, adaptable, principled in relation to their own good or evil—even an evil man can have principles—he can be true to his own evil, which is not so easy, either. And then I think one has to develop one's physical grace. Writers who are possessed of some, may tend to write better than writers who are physically clumsy. It's my impression this is so. I certainly couldn't prove it.

London

Style is also a reflection of identity. Given a firm sense of oneself, you can write in a consistent vein. But should your identity shift, so will your presence change in your prose. Needless to say, illness, tragedy, huge frustration, age itself are bound to alter every firm notion of yourself.

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

~~46~~ 5

71.6

You know, a good skier rarely worries about a route. He just goes, confident that he'll react to changes in the trail as they come upon him. It's the same thing in writing; you have to have confidence in your technique. That is the beauty of mustering the right tone at the right time—it enables you to feel like a good skier, nice and relaxed for the next unexpected turn.

~~47~~ 6

95.12

There are two kinds of writers. Faulkner, Fitzgerald, and Hemingway, Melville and James write with an air that is inimitable. There are other writers, usually less famous, who go along in a variety of modes. I'm in the latter camp. The same can be said of painters. Matisse painted in one recognizable vein, while Picasso entered a hundred before he was done. Style was the cutting tool by which he could delineate a reality. He saw it as a tool rather than as an extension of his identity. I've found his attitude to be useful for myself. It's better if one's writing is close to the material one is working with-- I'll look for a fairly formal prose on one occasion and be casual in another.

82.16

Metaphors? You ask 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 forty-year-old Irishman who was living full-time in the small rooming house where I took a cubicle (four dollars a week) to finish The Naked and the Dead. We used to have long literary conversations. At a certain point I showed him the manuscript. 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 writer's true grasp of life. To the degree that you have no metaphor, you have not yet

lived much of a life." I never forgot this lecture and began to work with might and main on my life and my metaphors. I would claim they have improved with age.

Shamberg

~~44~~ 8

On the other hand, good dialogue depends on your good ear. There has to be something in each speech that relies on the previous one. But I don't even want to talk about dialogue. Some people have marvelous stuff, some don't, but that's only one aspect of writing, it is not the aspect, and besides, I don't think you can teach it. Most kids who have talent start off with good dialogue. They're happy it's there, and they have fun—that can start you as a writer. Those who are not gifted at dialogue will, hopefully, be endowed with philosophy or good language.

If one wants an example of superb dialogue where the bar is set about as high as it can go, then read William Kennedy or Joan Didion. But make no attempt to imitate either. Great dialogue is inimitable.

Shamberg

INT: You used a wonderful phrase I want you to elaborate on: "the tensile strength of a sentence."

NM: Yes. That you can learn from a writing course.

INT: Tell me what you mean by the tensile strength.

NM: You can't change a single word. What is tensile strength? It is that all the components are working together, so you can't change a single word.

~~50~~ (9)

43.57

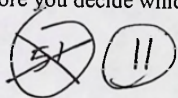
While Dwight Macdonald gave us no great body of books, he did spend his talents in writing some of the better political and literary criticism of our time. More important than his oeuvre, however, was his influence. He was one of the best teachers of writing in the world. He gave no classes, but if one had learned a little about writing already, there were so many avenues to follow in the felicities of his style. Dwight had something fabulous to offer. It was to look to the feel of the intellectual 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 intellectual that the clue to new discovery rests not so much on the idea with which you begin as in the closeness of your attack on the problem, and your readiness to depart from preconceived intentions by the insight provided in an unexpected and happy turn of phrase.

~~50~~ (10)

FIRST PERSON VERSUS THIRD PERSON

Koval / 2000

Third person and first person are at least as different as major and minor keys in music. Before you decide which to employ, you do well to have a sense of the event and of yourself.



London

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

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

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

When your prime character is a man, the key choice is not how bright he is, because however bright, he can't be smarter than you are. That's easy. You dumb him down to taste, or bring him up to your level. The real question is how tough is he? Do

you have the inner sanction to create a man who's braver and tougher than yourself? The answer is yes. You can do that by exercising your critical imagination—it must not be wish-fulfillment—on how you might act if you were that much more of a hero.

I don't know, however, how to pose the question for an author who's female. Can she, for example, write about a woman who is more sensitive than herself? Probably not. She could write about a woman who uses her sensitivity and sensibility more than herself, because she, the author, can then use all the frustrated times in her existence when the sensitivity and sensibility she possessed were not appropriate to a harsh occasion. Following question: Can a woman write about another woman more passionate than herself? Probably. Or a woman who's colder than herself? Without doubt.

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

In third person, you are God--well, of course, not God, but at least, a demi-urge. One way or another, you are ready to see into everyone's mind. Of course, it's not routine. There are two kinds of third person. There is point-of-view third person where you remain in one character's mind, but are still seeing your protagonist from above, and then there is the classic vein of third person where you enter each and everyone's consciousness. That's hard. Hard to get over the embarrassment that you are able to enter some certain character's minds with considerably more skill than you can with others. This kind of pervasive and Olympian third person, this Tolstoyan presence, needs experience, confidence, irony, and lordly detachment. When it can be done, however, hurrah. Most of the great novels achieve that tone. Just about all the great novels of the 19th century.

~~52~~ 12

Lennon / 1999

First person point of view, however, is a fine tool. You can get to places you don't arrive at any other way. Of course, you can also injure your writing hand. As an instrument, it's double-edged. Hemingway had a marvelous sense of its limitations and used it like no one else to create his style. He dramatized its first edict: Do not talk about things which could prove embarrassing. They don't feel right in the telling, not when the "I" stands at the head of the sentence. So there's a tendency, most marked in Hemingway, to keep most of his revelations at arm's length. As, for example, the last few sentences of A Farewell to Arms.

We live in a time that is astonishingly more open, but the edict, now adjusted, still remains. First person cannot be as free as the separation between author and protagonist offered by the third person.

55 13

Abbott

It was not until I struggled with Advertisements for Myself that I began to recognize how curious it was to write in the first person. Now, many writers good and bad have been working in the first person for centuries but I had to come to this remarkable conclusion on my own. The first person was not a routine nor automatic way to write. It's a very interesting and exciting mode of literary being, with large limitations and you really do have to understand it as such. Especially if you're dealing with your own presence. Nothing is more difficult than to become comfortable writing about

yourself in the first person. It's highly unnatural. Because "I" makes up only about a third of the consciousness of any human being. "I" may be the prow of the ego, but you do get into all sorts of other places where you want "one" to talk about different aspects of yourself. And then there is even second person, you, employed as if it is first person: "You get up, you brush your teeth, you feel lousy this morning." (In the first period of awakening, you can indeed feel like a vague entity slightly outside yourself.) And there is also the third person when used as a substitute for "I" —for one, the character named Norman Mailer in The Armies of the Night. Using the third person in this manner may be a special condition of first person, but it is legitimate. There is a part of the ego that is superior to ourselves—that person who observes us carefully even as we're doing things. This is the presence with immaculate detachment who is always saying, "Oh, is this person doing well right now?" A wonderful voice. Because it enables you to treat yourself as one more character in a field of characters.

(54) (14)

London

Nonetheless, I have a special feeling for the first person. Once I even dared to cross the line with it. That began on a given night, in a small Paris hotel room when I couldn't sleep. The room was tiny, the double bed took up almost all the floor, and you could break your toe trying to walk around. I didn't want to go rummaging in my suitcase for a book, so I picked up a Gideon Bible (in English!) on my bedside table and started reading. I hadn't looked at the New Testament for thirty or forty years, but I remembered a man named Fulton Oursler who once did a book called The Greatest Story Ever Told.

He sold a million-plus copies as I recall. Now, perusing the Gospels, I thought, well, this may be the greatest story, but it is certainly told abominably. Sayings popped out of the text that were worthy of Shakespeare, but much in the double columns was badly, insufficiently, and baldly described. An ungainly prose pronged with golden nuggets. I thought, there have got to be a hundred novelists in the world who can do a better job. I'm one of them.

The notion was intriguing. When I thought of all the hypocrites and corruptibles and power-seekers who had been living with the Gospel for centuries, using it for their own high-octane purposes, standing foursquare on any gnomic chunk of text they could use to abet their aims, I decided why not just tell the story? It is, in fact, a fascinating one. The narrative keel is mind-boggling. We are dealing with a man who is obliged to recognize through the evidence itself that he is the son of God. The difficulty of such a book would be to write about a man who was considerably nicer than myself. That is never easy. To fashion a character who is meaner than yourself—a piece of cake. But to do someone who is better? Jean Malaquais once remarked that you can write about any character but one, who, I asked? "A novelist who is more talented than yourself."

I thought, this is analogous. Jesus certainly possessed a nobler nature than mine! Yes, the problems were interesting.

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

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

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

After which, it was relatively easy. The book was short enough for me to go through seven variations on the style. I had to find the balance between a Biblical rhythm and a contemporary one. Something that would not inflict a Biblical grip on you, yet keep the echo. Before I was done, it all took a year from that night in that much-too-small hotel room on the Ile St. Louis.

~~55~~ 15

REAL LIFE VERSUS PLOT LIFE

91.37

The CIA, in its actual workings, is the antithesis to the average spy novel, which, best-seller oriented, tends to present a perfect clock that ticks to its conclusion. In Harlot's Ghost one of my characters remarks that she came into the CIA because she loved spy novels. Now, her complaint was that she could never—precisely because she was inside—experience the full run of a scenario. On occasion, her work put her into the equivalent of a spy novel, but only, let us say, for chapters five and six. She hadn't been there at the beginning, and was soon shifted to another assignment. Often, one did not learn how it all turned out. That struck me as being about what life is like: The gun over the mantelpiece does not often get fired. We live in and out of ongoing plots every day of our lives, but they are discontinuous. Nothing can be more difficult to encounter than a life story that accompanies us through a beginning, middle and end. There is only our own that is not missing many pages, yet how discontinuous it seems all the same! One could make the case that our love of plot—until it gets very cheap indeed—comes out of our need to find the chain of cause and effect that so often is missing in our own existence.

~~5k~~ (16)

Lennon/1999

The decisions you make while writing fiction can leave you uneasy. If your characters come alive, that's fine; they will carry you a part of the way. But, finally, your people have to make what might be termed career decisions. Does your protagonist want to go abroad in the foreign service, or does he decide to stay in New York with the amazing young model he has just met? Needless to say, such choices are non-operative for writers who have the story complete in their mind before they begin. So I repeat: I look to find my book as I go along. Plot comes last. I want a conception of my characters that's deep enough so that they will get me to places where I, as the author, have to live by my wits. That means my characters must keep developing. So long as they stay alive, the plot will take care of itself. Working on a book where the plot is already fully developed is like spending the rest of your life filling holes in rotten teeth.

~~91.17~~

~~52~~ 17

Working on The Executioner's Song, I came to the realization that God is a better novelist than the novelists. The story was not only incredible, but it most certainly had happened. If I had conceived it, the work would have been more dramatic, but less true. I learned all over again that the way things happen in life is not the way they work in novels. (Unless you are Theodore Dreiser!) It would have seemed wasteful to me to have a novel with two really fascinating characters who didn't come together for a scene. Whereas, what I discovered in The Executioner's Song was that the characters I was most interested in, didn't always meet, and when they did, the results were often disappointing.

~~15~~ ~~48~~

9.1.17

It took some time to learn that this did not necessarily diminish the drama. It could increase it. Most of our lives are spent getting ready for dramatic moments that don't take place. Or if they do, they are less than we expected. About the time we say, "Well, nothing really big ever happens to me," you can get knocked down with something bigger than you expected. All the frustrations of all the little narratives in your life that never had a real climax can be present in the rare denouement that life also offers once in a great while.

(51) (18)

8.1.2

I no longer work up a master plan before I begin a novel. When I was younger I used to sit down and write out such plans, but I never finished. Even with The Executioner's Song where, after all, I knew the story in great detail, I was careful not to be too versed in too many details ahead. I preferred to do my research up to no more than 100 pages ahead of where I was. I wanted to keep the feeling that I didn't know how it was all going to turn out. I needed something like the illusion that I was inventing each detail. Obviously, I prefer doing a book that is not too carefully laid out. Some of my best ideas come because I haven't fixed my novel's future in concrete. Once you know your end, it's disastrous to get a new idea. That can only take you away from your pre-arranged conclusion. Yet the new idea that you didn't follow may be worth more than the denouement you planned in advance.

(62) (20) (19)

8.3.40

For that matter, the moment I think of a good plot, I find that the book becomes almost impossible to write because I know I won't believe it. Life may consist of people

plotting all the time, but the plots never develop all the way. We decide: I'll make this move in my life, and that should result in the following--then, life confounds us. So I prefer a story that develops out of the writing. I don't like one that moves ahead of my characters, because then my people won't live. Already, I've ordered them to be obedient to my will. Tie your characters to a pre-arranged plot, and you are doing to them what we would do to our children if we carefully selected their colleges, their spouses, and their jobs without ever consulting them. The same unspoken despondency weighs on characters who are treated that way in a novel—they never get to fulfill their own perverse (that is, surprising to the novelist) capabilities; they never come alive. 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.

(6) (21) (20)

Suffolk

Many young novelists tend to draw for their material on family, or the near world of friends. How, goes the question, do you manage that without making these near and dear people too recognizable? Can you treat the familiar in such a way as not to incur the rage and tears of those who are close to you?

It is next to impossible. You cannot write about people you care about and not hurt them or, to the contrary, even worse, allow too little to be wrong with them. They then come through as boring. That is the first mark of bottom-level amateur writing.

I've always stayed away from such close material, never written directly about my parents or my sister. Those experiences are so basic that I encircle them with a favorite word--I characterize these fundamental and primary experiences as crystals. The crystals can be simple, or extraordinarily developed. But provided you don't use them directly, you can sometimes send a ray of your imagination through the latticework in one direction or another and find altogether different scenarios. If you've got a fellow in mind who's, let's say, a pretty tough kid, you can, if you don't write about him head-on, make the boy a bullfighter, or put him in Special Forces, even turn him into a bank robber or an honest cop. So long as you don't use the core of your experience, you will be in command of many possibilities. But if you are bound to get it all accurately on paper, then at a given moment, you will have to face the fact that you are going to hurt people who are close to you.

I've used this example before: When a surgeon operates on a young girl, he isn't saying, "I'm going to make an incision on this young lady's stomach that is not only going to scar her but will affect her future sex life for the next 30 years." He just says, "Scalpel, nurse," and does it. The reason is that the surgeon is focused on the act, not its reverberations.

As a novelist, one is engaged in something analogous. Novelists are oxymorons. They are sensitive and most insensitive. Full of heart and heartless. You have to be full of heart to feel what many people are feeling. On the other hand, a novelist has to be relatively cold. If he or she starts thinking of all the damage they are going to do, they can't write the book--not if they're reasonably decent. Of course, a malicious person

might kick up the traces, and feel young and happy again at being so mean, even feel a spark--dare I say Muriel Spark?--because they are going to hurt so many people.

The point is that one is facing a true problem in writing about your nearest and dearest. Either you produce a book that doesn't approach what really interests you, or, if you go to the root with all you've got, there is no way you won't injure your family. Hardly anyone is happy with the portrait of themselves in a good novel.

84.34
Some of my characters do come from real people. One might emerge out of five individuals, another from one person, greatly altered. Still another is imagined. No matter by which route, there's pleasure when a character becomes, in a sense, independent of yourself.

84.34
Graham Greene once said that there were certain characters who took care of themselves. He never had to bother about them in the writing. Others he had to go to great pains with. He would work very hard on them. Later, when he'd read a review and it would mention one of his resistant characters as "well-drawn," he used to think, "Well-dragged."

Manus

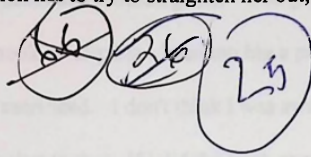
Up to now, I've not liked writing about people who are close to me because they're too difficult to do. Their private reality obviously interferes with the reality one is trying to create. They become alive not as creatures in your imagination but as actors in your life. And so they seem real while you write, but you're not developing their novelistic reality into your book. For example, it's not a good idea to try to put your wife into your novel. Not your latest wife, anyway. In practice, I prefer to draw a character from someone I hardly know who excites my novelist's instinct. I sense that I will be able to add a great deal to the portrait by what I've learned from other people.

(65) (25) (24)

Manus

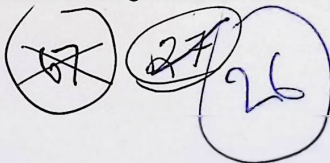
The question remains: how do you turn a real person into a fictional one? If I have an answer, it is that I try to put the model in situations which have very little to do with his or her real situations in life. Very quickly, the real form disappears. The private reality can't hold up. For instance, I might take somebody who is a professional football player, a man, let's say, whom I know slightly, and turn him into a movie star. In a transposition of this sort, everything which relates particularly to the professional football player quickly disappears, and what is left, curiously, is what is exportable in his character. But this process while interesting in the early stages is not as exciting as the more creative act of allowing your characters to grow once you've separated them from the model. It's when they become as complex as real people that the fine excitement begins. Because now they're not really characters any longer—they're beings, which is a

distinction I like to make. A character is someone you can grasp as a whole, you can have a clear idea of him, but a being is someone whose nature keeps shifting. In The Deer Park, Lulu Meyers is a being rather than a character, If you study her closely, you will see that she is a different person in every scene. Just a little different. I don't know whether initially I did this by accident or purposefully, but at a certain point I made the conscious decision not to try to straighten her out, she seemed right in her changeableness.



March

I've spoken of characters emerging. Quite often they don't emerge; they fail to. And one's left with the dull compromise which derives from two kinds of experience warring with one another within oneself. A character who should have been brilliant is dull. Or even if a character does prove to be first-rate, it's possible you could have done twice as much with him. A novel has its own laws. After a while, it becomes a creature to you. One can feel a bit like a rider who's got a fine horse. Very often, I'll suffer shame for what I've done with a novel. I won't say it's the novel that's bad; I'll say it's I who was bad, as if the novel was a child raised by me, but improperly. I know what's potentially beautiful in my novel, you see. Very often after I'm done, I realize that the beauty I recognize in it is not going to be perceived by the reader. I didn't succeed in bringing it out. It's very odd—it's as though I had let the novel down, owed it a duty which I didn't fulfill.



McElroy

Hearn's death in The Naked and the Dead was supposed to be shocking. I haven't thought of Hearn's death in years. I stole the way of doing it directly from E.M. Forster. In The Longest Journey, he created a character who was most alive for the reader, then destroyed him on the next page. As I recall the line, it went: "Gerald died next day. He was kicked to death in a football game." You get an idea what a rifle shot is like at that point. In my book, it may have been too big a price to pay, because the denouement of the novel was sacrificed. I don't think I was aware of the size of the problem. Today I'd be much more alert to that. If I did the book over again today, I might have kept Hearn alive until the very end, and it would probably have been a phonier book as a result. One of the things you always have trouble with when you talk about "true" or "not true," is, of course, the relative truth of the novel. In a way, if you get a fairly good novel going, then you have a small universe functioning, and this universe lives or does not live in relation to its own scheme of cause and effect. In Kafka's writing, he creates worlds that are absolutely true. You can say practically every sentence in a Kafka story is true to the story.

Looking back on it, I can give you a good and bad motive that I had for killing Hearn where I did. The good motive is that it was a powerful way to show what death is like in war. The shoddy motive was that I wasn't altogether sure in my heart that I knew what to do with him, or how to bring him off.

I think that I truly work on impulse in all of my writing. That's why I don't like to plan too far ahead. It makes it almost impossible for one of your characters to go through a dramatic shift of heart because it's going to violate your larger scheme. It's better if this larger scheme comes into focus at the very last moment.

18 28
27

82.16

When it comes to entering a character's mind, a writer has to be ready to be good, even brilliant. So long as you stay outside that head, your character can retain a certain mystery. We walk around such figures with the same respect we offer strange people who come into a room with force. Part of the meaning of charisma is that we don't know the intimate nature of the human presence we're facing. Characters in novels sometimes radiate more energy, therefore, when we don't enter their mind. It is one of the techniques a novelist acquires instinctively—don't go into your protagonist's thoughts until you have something to say about his inner life that is more interesting than the reader's suppositions. To jump in only to offer banal material is a fatal error. It is the worst of best-sellerdom. Second-rate readers enjoying the insights of second-rate writers.

69 27 28

Schneider/1992

I'd say try not to think of your characters as victims. That sort of classification narrows them. In reality, very few victims ever see themselves exclusively as victims, and when they do, their spirit turns stale. There is a certain sort of self-pitying victim

... can be even worse in a book. (Unless one is
Dickens. Scrooge, Scrooge, Scrooge.)

Shanberg

Hemingway suffered from the honorable need to be the equal of his male characters, particularly since he used the first person so much. It's not easy then to write about a man who's stronger or braver than yourself because it's too close to the self-serving. All the same, you have to be able to do it. Because if every one of your characters is kept down to your own level, you do not take on large subjects. You need people more heroic than yourself, more enterprising, less timid, sexier, more romantic, more tragic. You've got to be able to create people greater than yourself and not be ashamed of the damnable fact that the "I" who is being promoted is offering a false picture of yourself to all those readers who will predictably assume that the author is the man they are now encountering in the first person.

83.40

If you ask about major weaknesses in a major writer, I would say that Hemingway was not capable of writing a long complex sentence with good architecture in the syntax. But he turned that inability into his personal skill at writing short declarative sentences or long run-on sentences connected by conjunctions. Faulkner, to the contrary, was not capable of writing simply, but his over-rich, congested sentences produced an extraordinary mood. In turn, Henry Miller could rarely tell a full story well.

He preferred his excursions away from the story, and those asides are what make him exceptional.

72 32 31

Macrus

I've been asked when the idea of using a hornet's nest to thwart the climbers in The Naked and the Dead came to me. In truth, the idea was there before I wrote the first sentence of the book. The incident happened to my reconnaissance platoon on the most ambitious patrol we ever took. They sent out thirty of us to locate and destroy one hundred Japanese marines, but we did get stuck climbing one hell of an enormous hill with a mean slimy trail, and when we were almost up to the ridge, somebody kicked over a hornet's nest. Half of us went tearing up the hill, but the machine gun squad was behind us and went flying down to the valley. We never did find each other again that day. We just slunk back to our bivouac.

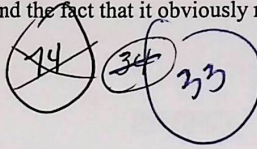
There are some who feel it was not a satisfactory device, but I think I'd do it the same way again. War is disproportions, and the hornet's nest seemed a perfect disproportion to me. We were ready to lose our lives that day but we weren't up to getting stung by a hornet.

73 33 32

81.6

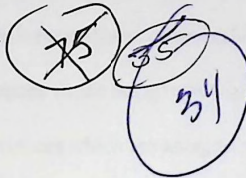
If a novelist can take someone who is a legendary figure and invent episodes for them that seem believable, then they've done something fine. There's that meeting between J.P. Morgan and Henry Ford in Ed Doctorow's Ragtime—I think it's one of the

best short 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 more delicious.



75.13

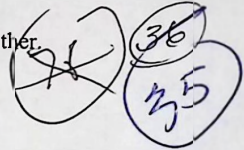
The characters you create in a novel become as real in your mind as movie stars. That is no small equation. To a lot of people, Humphrey Bogart might, for example, be the psychic equivalent of an influential uncle given the measure of importance he exerts on those who love his work.



INSTINCT

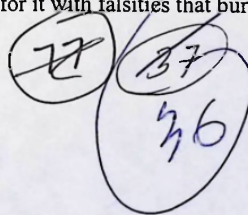
Memo

I am not sure it is possible to describe the experience of novel-writing authentically. It may be that it is not an experience. It may be more like a relation, if you will—a continuing relation between a man and his wife. You can't necessarily speak of that as an experience because it may consist of several experiences braided together; or it may consist of many experiences which are all more or less similar, or indeed it may consist of two kinds of experiences which are antagonistic to one another.



82.16

Writing may be an instinctive process, but it's not always clear what the instinct is saying. Sometimes you feel no more than a dull pressure to go in a certain direction for the oncoming chapter. You have to be able to hear the faint voice which prods you toward an honest continuation of the work. That can be hard to hear. A writer is also open to the temptation to take the immediate advantage, even if it doesn't feel quite right. And we all do that in various ways. And pay for it with falsities that burrow directly into our intent.



London.

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

Your immediate experience can be too alive to be put directly into language. Sometimes, you have to wait.

78 36 37

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 conceivable that I wouldn't have thought of taking on The Executioner's Song. Nonetheless, it's also possible that something about The Executioner's Song called for doing it in the way I chose. In any event, its flavor is different from In Cold Blood. Truman retained his style, not the pure style—he simplified it—but it was still very much a book written by Truman Capote. You felt it every step of the way. The difference is that he tweaked it 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 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 improve anything. Dedicated accuracy is not usually the first claim a novelist wishes to make, but here it became a matter of literary value. What I had was gold, if I had enough sense not to gild it.

~~79~~ ~~89~~
38

McElroy

If you find some theme that keeps you working, don't question it. Let that theme be sufficient to fuel your work. If you start using the value judgments of others, you're never going to get much done. If I find something is stimulating to me and arousing my energy, that's fine, I'll trust it. If you're a serious young writer and find that you're writing a lot, then don't listen to what anyone else says, do your book. There is probably a deeper truth than you'll ever know in the fact that you're able to work so well. Of course, you could be writing in absolutely the wrong direction. You could be doing a dreadful book.

No matter what you find yourself writing about, if it's giving you enough energy, however, to continue, then the work bears a profound relationship to you at that point and so you don't question it.

~~80~~ ~~40~~ 39

McElroy

Let me take this further. You can write a book with a powerful sense of inner conviction, and a year or two later, say, "How could I have so deluded myself? This is awful." Your instinct can betray you, but you still have to go with it. Very often the

instinct sees some light at the end of the tunnel, but that's because you've been trapped in a situation where your creative energies can't get together. Now, at last, you've found a way to work. You may be writing out some very bad tendencies in yourself, but this can be good, too. You might be feeling happy because soon you're going to be done with that malfunctioning side of yourself. That's what your enthusiasm can be about.

Only rarely is one's instinct analogous to a fast highway, but that's exactly when things get hairy. The slow twists and turns of one's creative impulse can be a form of protecting oneself from the driving force which sometimes is manic.

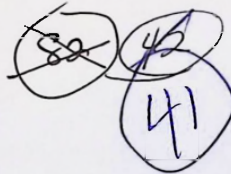
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INFLUENCE

81.16

The influence of Henry Adams on The Armies of the Night is peculiar. I had never read much Adams. In my freshman year at Harvard, we were assigned one long chapter of The Education of Henry Adams and I remember thinking at the time what an odd thing to write about yourself in the third person. Who is this fellow, Henry Adams, talking about himself as Henry Adams? I remember being annoyed in that mildly irritable way freshmen have of passing over extraordinary works of literature. To my conscious recollection, I hardly ever thought about him again. Yet, start reading The Armies of the Night, and immediately you say—even I said—“My God, this is pure Henry Adams.” It’s as if I were the great-grandson. Contemplate, therefore, how peculiar is influence: Adams must have remained in my mind as a possibility, the way a painter might look at a particular Picasso, or Cezanne, and say to himself, “That’s the way to do it.” Yet the influence might not pop forth for twenty or thirty years. When it does, the painter could say, “Oh, yes, that was a Picasso I saw at MOMA twenty-five years ago, and I’ve always wanted to try such a palette, and now I have.” In effect, that’s what happened with Henry Adams.



91.3

Literary influence remains endlessly curious. I happened to pick up Moby Dick.

I hadn't thought about Melville ten times in the last thirty years, but as soon as I read the first page, I realized my later style was formed by Melville, shaped by his love of long, rolling sentences full of inversions and reverses and paradoxes and ironies and exclamation points and dashes. Of course, to be as good as Melville--that's another matter.

~~8/25~~ 4/5 4/2

91.3

It's disturbing to read a novelist with a good style when you're in the middle of putting your work together. It's much like taking your car apart and having all the pieces on the floor just as somebody rides by in a Ferrari. Now, you may hear a note in the Ferrari that isn't good and say, "His motor needs a little tuning." But nonetheless the car and its roar are still there in your ear while your parts remain on the floor. So while I'm working on a book I rarely read more than The New York Times--which could have the long-term effect of flattening my style. I'd rather blame the Times than old age.

~~8/25~~ 4/5 4/3

STAMINA

Abbott

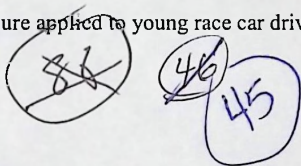
I'm now eighty, but some people still think of me as a wild man. They have no desire to believe that even at my peak that was only five to ten percent of my nature. The rest was work. I like work. I remember Elia Kazan saying one day at Actors' Studio, "Here, we're always talking about the work. We talk about it so piously. We say the work. The work. Well, we do work here, and get it straight: Work is a blessing." He said this, glaring at every one of us. And I thought, "He's right. That's what it is. A blessing."

Of course, if you ask what work is dependent upon, the key word, an unhappy one, is stamina. It's as difficult to become a professional writer as a professional athlete. It often depends on the ability to keep faith in yourself. One must be willing to take risks and try again. And it does need an enormous amount of practice to be good at it. Since you are affected by what you read as a child and adolescent, it also takes a while to unlearn all sorts of reading reflexes that have led you into bad prose.

McElroy

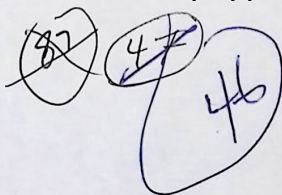
It is useful to become aware of the set of different psychological stances you get into in the course of working on a novel over a year or two. I remember in the summer

before my Junior year, working on a first novel (that will remain forever unpublished), I ran into a phrase by Henry James. He spoke of "the keeping up." That can be the first horror you face when you're young. The novel tends to change all too quickly. That may be the cardinal reason why people in college tend to stay away from longer fiction. Young short story writers, no matter how good, often blow up when they start a novel. They'll have a good beginning, but the second chapter goes off, and they never get it back. The sad truth is that a young would-be novelist possibly has to start a few books that do give out, or even crash, before a sense of the difficulties is acquired. If the same likelihood of early failure applied to young race car drivers, there would not be speedways.



83.35

Writing is wonderful when you talk about it. It's fun to contemplate. But writing as a daily physical activity is not agreeable. You put on weight, you strain your gut, you get gout and chilblains. You're alone and every day you have to face a blank piece of paper.



London

A large part of writing a novel is to keep your tone. I love starting a book, I usually like finishing one. It's the long middle stretches that call on your character--all that inbetween!—those months or years when you have to report to work almost every

day. You don't write novels by putting in two brilliant hours a week. You don't write novels if you lose too many mornings and afternoons to a hangover.

Sometimes, when you're in a bad period, you must, in effect, contract yourself for weeks running. "I'm going in to write tomorrow," you must declare, and, indeed, show up at your desk, even though there's nothing in you, and you have to sit there for hours, whatever stint of time you told yourself that you were going to put in. Then, if nothing happens, you still show up the next day and the next and the next, until that recalcitrant presence, the unconscious, comes to decide that you can, past ill-performance to the contrary, now be trusted. Such acceptance is crucial. The unconscious expects that what it has prepared for you in your sleep should be expressed, ideally, the next day. We live, you see, in an arm's length relationship to our unconscious. It has to be convinced over and over again to trust you. Sometimes when you're writing a novel, you have to live as responsibly as a good monk. That does get easier as you grow older.

~~88~~ 48 47

82.14

There's nothing glorious about being a professional. You become more dogged. You probably relinquish the upper reaches of the mind in order to be able to do your stint of work each day: That means you are ready to endure a certain amount of drudgery. The higher reaches of the mind usually rebel. They are obviously not enthralled by dull conditions. Professionalism probably comes down to being able to work on a bad day.

~~89~~ 49 48

97.26

I used to have a little studio in Brooklyn a couple of blocks from my house—no telephone, not much else. The only thing I ever did there was work. It was perfect. I was like a draft horse with a conditioned reflex. I came in ready to sit at my desk. No television, no telephone. Didn't want to be tempted. There's an old Jewish belief that you build a fence around an impulse. If that's not good enough, you build a fence around the fence. So, no amenities. (But for a refrigerator!) I wrote longhand with a pencil, and I gave it to an excellent assistant named Judith McNally. She would type it for me and next day I would go over it. Since at my age you begin to forget all too much, I would hardly remember what I had written the day before. So it read as if someone else had done it. The critic in me was delighted. I could now proceed to fix some prose. The sole virtue of losing your short-term memory is that it does free you up to be your own editor.

49 56 49

London

When I read something good, I want to do a critical piece. I want to expand on where I think the author is terrific and where he or she is lacking. Especially if readers are blowing it up too high, I may feel, "It's good but not that good---let's get into it." So it can be immensely distracting. Your mind settles on the work you are reading, rather than the one you're supposed to be laboring on. So you tend to protect yourself by not reading anything that's too good. Stendhal, for instance, used to peruse the Code Napoleon every day in the loo before he'd start to write.

Now I didn't always follow that rule. When I was doing The Naked and the Dead, I used to pick up Thomas Wolfe and Tolstoy. I didn't read them every day but they were on my writing desk and they were perfect for what I needed. Tolstoy, particularly. The tone of Anna Karenina was wonderful for The Naked and the Dead. And then there was Thomas Wolfe to steam up the descriptions. If I needed a tropical sunset or how the jungle smelled, I had Wolfe. For the characters, Tolstoy.

~~12~~ ~~51~~ 50

83.30

I never know what the style of a book will be until I get into it. Sometimes you aim high and don't get it--you have to settle for a more functional tone. After all, style is very much like the pace a serious jogger sets for himself. You have to be able to maintain it. In that sense, style is an offshoot of character. With all else, character is the wise or foolish estimate of your resources.

~~12~~ ~~51~~ 51

Marino

I think it's important for a writer to keep in shape. But it's hard to talk about. Harry Greb, for example, was a fighter who used to keep in shape. He was completely a fighter, the way one might wish to be completely a writer. He always did the things which were necessary to him as a fighter. Now, some of these things were extremely irrational from a prize-fight manager's point of view. That is, before he had a fight he would go to a brothel, and he would have two prostitutes, not one, taking the two of them into the same bed. And this apparently left him feeling like a wild animal. Don't ask me

why. Perhaps he picked the two meanest whores in the joint and so absorbed into his system all the small, nasty, concentrated evils that had accumulated from carloads of men. Greb was known as the dirtiest fighter of his time. He didn't have much of a punch but he could spoil other fighters and punish them, he knew more dirty tricks than anyone around. But the two whores were one part of his training methods and he did it over and over again until he died at a relatively early age of a heart attack on an operating table. I think he died before he was thirty-eight. They operated on him, and bang, he went.

The point I want to make is that he stayed in training by the way he lived his life. The paramount element was to keep in shape. If he were drinking, you see, the point was to keep in shape while drinking. I'm being a touch imprecise. . . Put it this way: He would not drink just to release his tension. Rather, what went on was that there was tension in him which was insupportable so he had to drink. But reasoning as a professional, he felt that if he had to drink, he might as well use that too. In the sense that the actor uses everything which happens to him, so Greb as a fighter used everything. As he drank he would notice the way his body moved. One of the best reasons one drinks is to become aware of the way your mind and body move. Now, let me try to apply this.

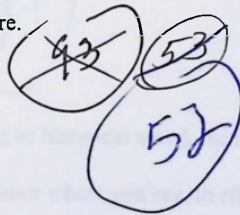
Craft is a grab-bag of procedures, tricks, lore, formal gymnastics, symbolic superstructures, methodology in short. It's the compendium of what you've acquired from others. And since great writers communicate a vision of experience, one can't usually borrow their methods. Their method is married to the vision. Therefore, one acquires craft more from good writers and mediocre writers with a flair. Craft, after all, is what you can take out whole from their work. But keeping in shape is something else. For

example, you can do journalism, and it can be terrible for your style. Or it can temper your style. . . in other words, you can become a better writer by doing a lot of different kinds of writing. Or you can deteriorate. There's a book came out a few years ago which was a sociological study of some Princeton men—I forget the name of it. One of them said something which I thought was extraordinary. He wanted to perform the sexual act under every variety of condition, emotion and mood available to him. I was struck with this not because I ever wanted necessarily to have that kind of sexual life, but because it seemed to me that was what I was trying to do with my writing. I try to go over my work in every conceivable mood. I edit on a spectrum which runs from the high clear manic impressions of a drunk which has made one electrically alert, all the way down to the soberest reaches of a low mood where I can hardly bear my words. By the time I'm done with writing I care about, I usually have worked on it through the full spectrum of my consciousness. If you keep yourself in this peculiar kind of shape, the craft will take care of itself. Craft is very little finally. But if you're continually worrying about whether you're growing or deteriorating as a man, whether your integrity is turning soft or firming itself, why, then, it is in that slow war, that slow rearguard battle you fight against diminishing talent, that you stay in shape as a writer and have a consciousness. You develop a consciousness as you grow older which enables you to write about anything, in effect, and write about it well. That is, provided you keep your consciousness in shape and don't relax into flabby styles of thought. They, after all, surround one everywhere. The moment you borrow other writers' styles of thought, you need craft to shore up the walls. But if what you write is a reflection of your own consciousness, then even

journalism can become interesting. One wouldn't want to spend one's life at it, and I wouldn't ever want to be caught justifying journalism as a major activity (it's obviously less interesting than to write a novel), but it's better, I think, to see journalism as a venture of one's ability to keep in shape than to see it as an essential betrayal of the chalice of your literary art.

Of course, it's virtually as if writers are there to be ruined. Look at the list: booze, pot, too much sex, too little, too much failure in one's private life, too much attrition, too much recognition, too little recognition, frustration. Nearly everything in the scheme of things works to dull a first-rate talent. But the worst probably is cowardice—as one gets older, one becomes aware of one's cowardice, the desire to be bold which once was a joy gets heavy with caution and duty. And finally there's apathy. About the time it doesn't seem too important any more to be a major writer, you know you've slipped far enough now to be doing your work on the comeback trail.

The hardest thing for an older writer to decide is whether he's burned out or merely lying fallow. I was ready to think I was burned out before I even started The Naked and the Dead. I had written a few good things in college and now had to wonder whether my time in the Army had blunted that talent. That is exactly how little sense a young writer can have of his or her own literary future.



McElroy

If you can, I think it's a good idea to rotate your crops. Once you've written a novel that's factual and realistic and big, awfully close to what happened, then it's probably a good idea that your next novel be as fanciful as possible. Yes, if you can, rotate those crops.

94 54 53

McElroy

A few words on rewriting and research.

Rewriting is where your working experience over the years has its day. There comes a time when you know how to get the maximum out of what you've done. The only way to accelerate this skill when you are young is to go through your work in every mood. You have to have the courage to look at it when you're about ready to destroy it. If something still comes through, then it may well have the merit to be worked upon further. It is also not bad to read things at the top of your feelings in order to get a sense of what the maximum might be. If nothing else, all this will give you a tolerance for the extraordinary spectrum of reaction you can receive in the classroom. You realize that the people who don't like your work aren't necessarily evil, and the people who love your stuff don't have to be altogether illustrious.

95 55 51

McElroy

Research is another matter. The trick in doing an historical novel, for example, is to digest the research. One has to avoid that awful stance where you say, in effect, "Hello, I'm Saint-Simon and I'm at the court of Louis XIV. Madame de Maintenon is

very angry this morning." Better to remind yourself that Madame de Maintenon does not necessarily feel that she is the Madame de Maintenon we know through Saint-Simon.

In addition, one must always be on guard against anachronizing. You learn how hard it is to separate what belongs only to your time from the era you are trying to recreate.

46 56 55

A CODA TO CRAFT

Manus

By now, I'm a bit cynical about craft. I think there's a natural mystique in the novel which is more important. One is trying, after all, to capture reality, and that is extraordinarily and exceptionally difficult. Craft is merely a series of way-stations. I think of it as being like a St. Bernard dog with that little bottle of brandy under his neck. Whenever you get into trouble, craft can keep you warm long enough to be rescued. Of course this is exactly what keeps good novelists from becoming great novelists. Robert Penn Warren might have written a major novel if he hadn't had just that extra little bit of craft to get him out of all the trouble in All the King's Men. If Penn Warren hadn't known anything about Elizabethan literature, the would-be Elizabethan in him might have brought off a fantastic novel. As it was, he knew enough about craft to use it as an escape hatch. And his plot degenerated into a slambang of exits and entrances, confrontations, tragedies, quick wails and woe. But he was really forcing an escape from his literary problem which was the terror of confronting a reality that might open into more and more anxiety and so present a deeper and deeper view of the abyss. Craft protects one from facing those endless expanding realities of deterioration and responsibility—the terror, let us say, of losing your novel in the depths of philosophical insights you are not ready to live with. I think this sort of terror depresses us profoundly. Which may be why we throw up our enormous evasions—such as craft. Indeed, I think

this adoration of craft, this specific respect for craft makes a church of literature for that vast number of writers who are somewhere on the spectrum between mediocrity and talent.

57 56

Tom Wolfe is a study in craft. He knows so much about it that craft hurts him as much as it helps him. I put my review of his last novel here for it amplifies all I have been saying about style, best-sellers, and plot versus character.

55

A Man Half Full

Let me take the unseemly step of commencing a review of another author's work by offering several paragraphs from my own book Cannibals and Christians, published in 1965.

The people who were most American by birth, and who had the most to do with managing America, gave themselves a literature which had the least to say about the real phenomena of American life, most particularly the accelerate rate, the awful rate, of growth and anomaly through all of society. That sort of literature and that sort of attempt to explain America was left to the sons of immigrants who, if they were vigorous enough, and fortunate enough to be educated, now had the opportunity to see that America was a phenomenon never before described, indeed, never before visible in the record of history. There was

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something going on in American life which was either grand or horrible or both, but it was going on—at a dizzy rate—and the future glory or doom of the world was not necessarily divorced from it . . .

No American writer succeeded, however, in doing the single great work that would clarify a nation's vision of itself as Tolstoy had done perhaps with *War and Peace* or with *Anna Karenina* and Stendhal with *The Red and the Black*, no one novel came along which was grand and daring and comprehensive and detailed, able to give sustenance to the adventurer and merriment to the rich, leave compassion in the ice chambers of the upper class and energy as alms for the poor. Dreiser came as close as any, and never got close at all, for he could not capture the moment, and no country in history has lived perhaps so much for the moment as America. After his heroic failure, American literature was isolated—it was necessary to give courses in American literature to Americans. [Otherwise] it was not quite vital to them. It did not save their lives, make them more ambitious, more moral, more tormented, more audacious, more ready for love, more ready for war, for charity, or for invention. No, it tended to puzzle them. . . . The American novel gave up any desire to be a creation equal to the phenomenon of the country itself. It settled for being a metaphor. Which is to say that each separate author made a separate peace. He would no longer try to capture America, he would merely try to give life to some microcosm of American life, some metaphor. The vision would be partial, determinedly so. One must not try to save. Not souls, and not the nation. The country be damned. Let it take care of itself.

And of course the country did. Just that. It grew by itself. Like a weed and a monster and a beauty and a pig. And the task of explaining America was taken over by Luce magazines.

Now, I have no idea whether Tom Wolfe ever came across this piece, but he didn't have to. The Zeitgeist was there for all of us. In 1989, Wolfe wrote an article for *Harper's* after the appearance of *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, and I discovered (to my astonishment) that we were comrades in arms:

The introduction of realism into literature in the eighteenth century by Richardson, Fielding, and Smollett was like the introduc-

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tion of electricity into engineering. It was not just another device. The effect on the emotions of an everyday realism such as Richardson's was something that had never been conceived of before. It was realism that created the "absorbing" or "gripping" quality that is peculiar to the novel, the quality that makes the reader feel that he has been pulled not only into the setting of the story but also into the minds and central nervous systems of the characters. . . .

Dickens, Dostoyevsky, Balzac, Zola, and Sinclair Lewis *assumed* that the novelist had to go beyond his personal experience and head out into society as a reporter. Zola called it documentation, and his documenting expeditions to the slums, the coal mines, the races, the *folies*, department stores, wholesale food markets, newspaper offices, barnyards, railroad yards, and engine decks, notebook and pen in hand, became legendary. . . .

My contention is that, especially in an age like this, [reporting is] essential for the very greatest effects literature can achieve. In 1884, Zola went down into the mines at Anzin to do the documentation for what was to become the novel *Germinal*. Posing as a secretary for a member of the French Chamber of Deputies, he descended into the pits wearing his city clothes, his frock coat, high stiff collar, and high stiff hat (this appeals to me for reasons I won't delay you with), and carrying a notebook and pen. . . .

At this weak, pale, tabescent moment in the history of American literature, we need a battalion, a brigade, of Zolas to head out into this wild, bizarre, unpredictable, Hog-stomping Baroque country of ours and reclaim its literary property. . . . The answer is not to leave the rude beast, the material, also known as the life around us, to the journalists but to do what journalists do, or are supposed to do, which is to wrestle the beast and bring it to terms.

Of one thing I am sure. If fiction writers do not start facing the obvious, the literary history of the second half of the twentieth century will record that journalists not only took over the richness of American life as their domain, but also seized the high ground of literature itself. . . .

America today, in a headlong rush of her own, may or may not truly need a literature worthy of her vastness. But American novelists, without any doubt, truly need, in this neurasthenic hour, the spirit to go along for that wild ride.

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Three cheers. One has to applaud his moxie. Only an innocent or a simpleton could fail to recognize that a live hornet was being deposited in the crevice of every literary seat in town. If *The Bonfire of the Vanities* had excited envy and outrage, Wolfe was now upping the ante. It was the equivalent of a large raise in the World Series of Poker. Could he bring off the huge novel he was obviously suggesting, or was he riding on an outside bluff?

Well, the years went by and Wolfe went through a quintuple heart bypass and the towering depression that ensued. His writing life had to pass through some of the highs and lows of the exalted and the damned. It is not routine to bring off a long novel when your ambition is more than major, when you will settle for nothing less than an attempt to write a great novel, and when you are into your sixties and not all that well.

Given the stakes he set, the tension in reading *A Man in Full* never quite ceases. Is one encountering a major novel or a major best seller?

Wolfe's salient characteristic as a first novelist, the element that raised *The Bonfire of the Vanities* above all considerations of its merits and vices, was that it sold 750,000 copies in hardcover. The book was thereby emblazoned as the literary phenomenon of the Eighties. His finest literary impulses of that era and his pecuniary needs had come together. Naturally, it became somewhat more difficult to conceive of a major novel that would not also be a commercial blockbuster. The flavor of *A Man in Full* suggests a creator who is being obliged to live with a double motive.

Writing a best seller with conscious intent to do so is, after all, a state of mind that is not without comparison to the act of marrying for money only to discover that the absence of love is more onerous than anticipated. When a putative and modest writer of best sellers finally becomes professional enough to write a winner, he or she thinks that a great feat has been brought off, even as a man void of love (and money) will see a wealthy marriage as a splendid union. The point, obviously, is that Tom Wolfe has, in advance, the talent to do either—embark on a major novel or calculate, nay, eyeball the musculature of a huge best seller. And so the real interest is in Wolfe's search for the answer to his own deep question of motive. Is he to deal with major literary matters or adroit commercial counterfeits? The answer to the question vibrates back and forth in this work like a reed in a woodwind, keeping both possibilities alive—not only in each chapter, on each page, but sometimes in the shift itself from good writing to cash-check writing in the same paragraph.

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This much said, one has to add that *A Man in Full* is a much better book than *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. The earlier novel ran like an express for the first third of its pages, but by the middle, it was slowing up. At the end, it pissed out.

The beginning of *A Man in Full* is the reverse. It gets better as it goes. On the early stretch, you have to pay for endlessly detailed descriptions of every room you find yourself in (cataloguing rooms may yet prove to be Wolfe's most ubiquitous talent). And for the first couple of hundred pages, most of the chapters are virtually separate short stories employing one or another group of characters. Some of these stories are very good indeed; some not worth reading. It takes a while to recognize that the real audacity of the book is in its architecture—Wolfe laid it out on three separate foundations, two of which are in Atlanta, our modern, post-Olympic Atlanta. We follow a mighty *arriviste*, Charlie Croker, a former great football player at Georgia Tech who has amassed a fortune in real estate by virtue of his overwhelming life force. Up from southern Georgia, a monument of a self-made man, Croker is in prodigious financial trouble without being quite aware of it, so confident is he of his outsize energy and strength. Soon enough his travails will begin and Wolfe takes him through an enforced descent over many hundreds of pages.

The second element of the novel follows the efforts of the black mayor of Atlanta and a black lawyer to solve a race problem that could result in riots and national humiliation for the city.

The last track takes us along on the odyssey of a sweet, decent young man named Conrad Hensley, who works in Oakland and eventually, after an unjust stint in prison (shades of Jean Valjean!), a most dramatic escape, and many ensuing exceptional adventures, arrives in Atlanta to bring a species of catharsis to the many turns and twists of the plot.

None of the above offers even a remote hint to the complexity of the scheme. For example, Atlanta, high society and low, lives in the book as vividly as did New York in *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. The difference is that Wolfe appreciates the complexities of Atlanta's social issues with a subtlety that was absent from the earlier novel, and one of the surprising virtues of this second novel is how well he has captured the speech and airs and wit and sophistication of the black mayor and the upper-class anxieties of the black lawyer. Indeed, he is so sensitive to the nuances of their situation that it is as if he is making amends for the simple-minded outrage he exhibited against ghetto leaders in the first novel.

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The major surprise in the book, however, is the young protagonist who emerges, the starry-eyed, innocent, honorable working man, Conrad Hensley. He is married (somewhat unhappily) and living out in the Oakland area, where he labors in a frozen-food warehouse owned by no one less than the man in full, Charlie Croker. It takes literally half the tome for the separate sections to start coming together, and a good many readers may never make it to the middle. Too bad! For when the book starts to collect, Wolfe suddenly becomes startlingly good. All of a sudden you don't want to stop. And on you go for a couple of hundred most enjoyable narrative pages with some fine feats of writing en route. Many problems have, of course, also accumulated, and by the end, Wolfe succumbs to too many quick solutions as the elements of plot come crowding in together. The end of the book is a mess, a *tidy* mess (which makes it worse), and it ends as badly as Dickens, who, at his lowest, would cash in his hand, offer sweet remarks, and get out the door. Are we ready to cite *A Christmas Carol*?

Most of the ending is too complicated to summarize in less time than it took Wolfe to tell it, but one termination takes place through Charlie Croker, who has hitherto and for the bulk of the book been a totally dependable stock character despite his heavy sufferings. Toward the end, having landed in a weighty depression, he is extracted only and uniquely by Conrad Hensley, who encourages him (by way of the Stoic philosophy of Epictetus) to become an honest man. Yet, Charlie is not even present in the last chapter. It is an epilogue, and he is only there through hearsay. We learn that he is on the road and has become a minister in Florida, out in the mangrove roots preaching the maxims of Epictetus. So just as Charlie shows signs finally of becoming interesting (and difficult to write about), he is relegated to a short paragraph. Another paragraph, also hearsay, takes care of Conrad, who decides to turn himself in and go back to jail, but is put on probation by a kindly judge. Good novels are being lost on every page of the epilogue.

Be it said. The book has gas and runs out of gas, fills up again, goes dry. It is a 742-page work that reads as if it is fifteen hundred pages long. This is, to a degree, a compliment, since it is very rich in material. But, given its high intentions, it is also tiresome, for it takes us down the road of too many overlong and predictable scenes. So, this book, electric at best, banal at worst—like a long afternoon spent watching soap operas—is read each day for another hundred pages with a sense that the pleasure it offers is accompanied by the strain of encountering prose that disappoints as often as it charms.

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At certain points, reading the work can even be said to resemble the act of making love to a three-hundred-pound woman. Once she gets on top, it's over. Fall in love, or be asphyxiated. So you read and you grab and you even find delight in some of these mounds of material. Yet all the while you resist—how you resist!—letting three hundred pounds take you over.

After a time, I simply began to groan within each time there was a new description. It was not that they were badly written. Taken on its own, the tenth description was as good and certainly as detailed as the first, but quantity, as Engels once remarked, changes quality. Finally, the descriptions became not unequal to a politician declaring: "I gave my stump speech ten times last night, and the tenth was as good as the first." Repetition kills the soul, and the narrative élan of Wolfe's novel is injured by the sheer quantity of his descriptions. They convert a stylistic virtue into a vice, then lock us up in an addiction. It is dispiriting to witness. A pall comes over one's happy attention when a brilliant conversationalist turns into a monologist, only to deaden us further by revealing the true passion—logorrhea.

So much is there, so much is missing. How then does one pass clear judgment on a novel that is as rich and as poor, as genuinely exciting and as seriously disappointing, as observant and as blind, as brilliantly written and as slovenly in its final execution as *A Man in Full*? It is Tom Wolfe's best book by far, it begins to promise that he is ready to become a great American novelist, and then it loses its air and settles (with all the canniness of a hard-nosed business judgment) for being a mega-best seller. At the highest level, it's a failure—at a more modest plateau (which is today, at the corrupt level), it is bound to prove a resounding success with its large popular merits.

Some might now assume that the judgment has just been rendered. Not so. Only the lineaments. The body of the judgment still eludes one—how can a book be so good and so empty all at once, able to tell us so much about America at its best and be so criminally flawed at its worst?

What is bound to create an ongoing argument over the objective merits of this book is that for all of its major faults, it has undeniable major virtues of which the most notable are the set pieces. Every defender of the book will end with his favorite episodes and chapters, but there will probably be a consensus on the inquisition of Charlie Croker by his creditors at the PlannersBanc, the mating of the thoroughbred horses at his plantation, his barehanded capture of a six-foot rattlesnake there, and the "Freaknic" celebration of black college

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students in Atlanta, as well as the first meeting between the two top-level black principals, Roger Too White and the mayor Wes Jordan. Most particularly, the hundred pages of writing about Conrad Hensley in prison and escaping from prison light the book up in the middle. Extraordinarily good writing forces one to contemplate the uncomfortable possibility that Tom Wolfe might yet be seen as our best writer. How grateful one can feel then for his failures and his final inability to be great—his absence of truly large compass. There may even be an endemic inability to look into the depth of his characters with more than a consummate journalist's eye.

Perhaps there is good reason for this. His strategy, when in doubt, is to cook up new ingredients and excursions for his plot. He relies on this to such a degree that we can perceive all over again the vices of plot.

For plot is equal to a drug. It can stimulate a novelist into hordes of narrative energy, and it certainly will keep a reader on the page, but, sooner or later, plot presents its bill, and dire exigencies come down upon the writer. Even one's best characters have to be ratcheted away from believability. Wolfe has resources to attempt to offset this, and the first is dialogue. Indeed, he often succeeds in getting you to believe an improbable reaction by the speed and color of the dialogue—particularly among his black and ethnic characters. He manages thereby to take them around the trickiest corners. If, however, the scene finally fails to produce enough credible turns to convince us of their inner conversion, why then a harsh novelistic law comes into force. Since motivation has to be believable in a serious novel, the writer burdened with a plot is sometimes obliged to enter the character's mind.

Right here is where Wolfe bogs down. How it costs him! A reader's confidence in what he is reading will be subtly betrayed or even squandered should a novelist choose to enter the mind of a character but fail to bequeath the indispensable gift, that the reader can now know more about the character than before. The internal monologues of Wolfe's people are surprisingly routine and insist on telling us what we know already. There is almost no signature quality of mind.

For one instance—there are many—we have been provided with a detailed catalog of Charlie Croker's fall. We are living in the depths of his depression, brought there by the novelist's adroit and serial presentations of surrendered hopes, new blows, and obsessive dilemmas. We know in detail how Charlie must feel. Nonetheless, we are given the following soliloquy:

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He was precisely where he had dreamed of being as a young man: living in a mansion in Buckhead, the master builder of metro Atlanta, creator of a gleaming tower named after himself, a man whose footsteps made the halls of the mighty vibrate . . . and how hollow it all was! It meant only that when your egomania and the defects in your character finally plunged you into ruin, your collapse would provoke more and tastier gloating. That would be it! They'd chuckle, rub their hands together, and smack their lips—and that would be the great Charlie Croker's entire legacy. What a fraud he was!—sitting here in his oxblood leather throne as if any of it were still . . . his . . . Why couldn't he put an end to it all by . . . disintegrating, by smashing, by walking out into the woods and never coming back? . . . Oh sure . . . With his knee, he'd be lucky to walk a hundred yards . . .

If there is nothing splendid or new right there, Wolfe can console himself with the alternative: the internal ruminations of the characters in most mega-best sellers are about what you would expect. Mega-best-seller readers want to be able to read and read and read—they do not want to ponder any truly unexpected revelations. Reality might lie out there, but that is not why they are reading.

Nonetheless, this formulation is too severe. Sometimes Wolfe is ready to work for his best characters, sometimes they can surprise us as they move from caricatures into literary reality. It is just that at other times he is all too ready to let them work for him, and moves them back from the possibility of deeper characterization into caricature again. How can he not when plot obviously appeals to him more than the real complexity of men and women? Worse, he appears incapable of creating a vital and interesting woman. He couldn't do it in *The Bonfire of the Vanities* and certainly doesn't here. If all we knew about wives, for example, were to come from Tom Wolfe, we would have to assume that they are without soul, and their greatest strength is to nag.

Perhaps he could do more. Wolfe is not incapable of describing carnality. To the contrary—no one will ever be the same after reading his set piece on the massive copulation of a prize stallion with a thoroughbred mare (after she has been readied for this momentous event by the lubrications produced in her by the mouth and nose of a third horse, Sad Sam!). Wonders might befall us if Wolfe were ready to make the transition from *Equus* to *Anthropos*, but as of now, one has to complain that in neither of his two novels is there a carnal relationship that will give the reader any new sense of what it is all about.

It is his right as a novelist to ignore such stuff, but he ignores too many other possibilities as well. If only he would work half as hard on his characters as on the social gears and levers of his story. Dispirit hangs over him, however, when he is alone with his protagonists, exactly as if they were isolated in a room and he doesn't know what to say or what they might be ready to offer him.

A harsh verdict ensues. It is not only the women who are weak. Once we read these interior monologues, we come to realize that Wolfe doesn't begin to understand enough about his two main male characters. We are not given one moment in Charlie Croker's mind that tries to capture his inner life as an athlete. Football has to be the center of his personality, his feats in college have shot him into orbit, but the only way we know that Croker played football is because we are told he did. And once when he does talk about a great play he made, he describes it about the way a sports reporter might, which is to say, from the outside.

Conrad's part of the story, as already stated, is far and away the most readable and the most virtuoso element throughout the length of the prison and escape scenes. Unfortunately, these episodes are not quite believable. Prison is a culture, and you violate its canons at your peril. Wolfe poses a question: How is a young, good-looking prisoner to endure when he belongs to no clique and will not submit to becoming a playmate? Wolfe, in the obligatory showdown, uses a martial war trick. Conrad Hensley has powerful hands and forearms from totting eighty-pound cartons of frozen chickens around in the Croker Global warehouse. So when he is sounded by a prison wolf named Rotto (who has a build like a WWF wrestler), he grabs the monster's hand with both his hands and crushes the man's fingers, breaks his wrist. There is no recognition that there are magnum responses available to Rotto, who, after all, is a weathered con who has lived for years with the arts and tricks of dirty fighting. At the least, Rotto could whack Conrad with his free fist, or wrap his forearm around Conrad's windpipe, or knee him in the groin. Whatever! Cons live as close to martial response as Shakespeare scholars to the variant texts.

Nonetheless, Conrad wins an uncontested battle from a man much stronger and more combat-seasoned than himself. That night he lies in terror on his bunk. Rotto is the head of a clique, and the clique will hardly let Conrad get away with it. Yes, his honor and his sphincter are still in deadly peril.

Wolfe is not a classicist for too little. He employs a *deus ex machina*. The mightiest of California earthquakes commences. Prison cells

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break apart, prison walls crash open, and Conrad (after a very nice piece of action writing) manages to escape. The ducks all fall into line and a friend whose life he saved once in the ice-cold warehouse takes care of getting him out of town. From Oakland to Atlanta. Lo! The book comes together. Conrad, lowly worker out in Oakland in Charlie Croker's ice-cold warehouse, will hook up with his old and hitherto invisible boss, and will do it well enough and close enough to yet save Charlie's life now that Charlie is in a terminal depression. In the course of enabling the two principals to meet, a highly improbable set of twists and turns conducts Conrad through several sub-worlds (Vietnamese boat-folk and poor genteel whites among others). Yet here Wolfe is at his best. He is wonderful at capturing the English of Vietnamese illegals (as he is also for Pakistanis, Hawaiians, ghetto blacks, down-home Georgians). Indeed, he is so good on such matters that you forgive the phony combat, the earthquake that solves all pressing auctorial problems, the convenient underground railroad of the story line—you accept it as Dickensian to the max! Wolfe is only in trouble when he has to slow down and allow his characters to react with one another, to enter—perish the outrageous requirement—a relationship.

Then, even his dialogue, so full of snap, crackle, and pop whenever embattled experts are expounding on a touchy situation (as, for example, the executives at PlannersBanc in the course of giving Charlie Croker a psychic workout over the abominable condition of his loan), alters into speech that is singularly flat as soon as husbands and wives are in battle mode. Whether it is Charlie Croker's new trophy wife, Conrad Hensley's young disgruntled wife, Roger Too White's near-invisible wife, or the cantankerous former wife of Raymond Peepgass (an executive at PlannersBanc), they all sound the same. The dialogue reads as if it had been written by a hack turning out scripts for the afternoon soaps.

In part, that may be true because Wolfe's inclination is usually to return to what he sees as the iron hand of society. Martha Croker, Charlie's ex-wife, is ignored totally by all their old friends once she is divorced from Charlie. While this kind of quiet ostracism is true enough generally—Charlie, after all, has provided the action for their friends—surely it is not as absolute as here portrayed. If the Crokers had a hundred social friends, might we assume ten of that number would have remained loyal to Martha, ten anyway, unless Martha was a monster—which she is not? Society is powerful precisely because its unwritten laws weigh upon us heavily enough to be palpable. But the

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laws are not absolute—if they were, the less endowed party in a marriage would never allow himself or herself to agree to divorce.

This small vice in Wolfe—to go, when in doubt, for the exaggerated note—was the ultimate reason why *The Bonfire of the Vanities* self-destructed by its end. It certainly injures *A Man in Full*. How difficult it becomes, for another example, to believe in the moral dilemma that the plot presents to Charlie Croker. Wolfe places him in a position where Croker has to defend a black All-American Georgia Tech football player against a rape charge. But such a defense would require Charlie to betray his close friend, Inman Armholster, who comes from one of the most established families in Atlanta. Inman's daughter is the alleged rape victim, and Charlie has promised that he will stand by him any way he can. The black mayor of Atlanta, meanwhile, has come to decide that this rape case, if it ever breaks into the media, would not only sully Atlanta's image nationally, but would probably incite serious riots. Ergo, he needs someone like a former great white athlete from Georgia Tech to stand up in public for the black star. In return, the mayor will convince PlannersBanc to radically restructure Charlie's half-billion dollars of debt. How can the mayor put such pressure on a huge bank? Well, the mayor has tools, never quite defined to a nicety, that he can use to twist the bank around. So Charlie is now presented with a moral dilemma. It comes near to destroying him. Is he ready to give away to the bank his mansion, his plantation, his Croker Global high-rise, his food warehouses, his private airplanes, and all the other installations of his accumulated fortune, or does he save them by betraying his friend Inman Armholster? We are back to the alexandrines of Racine: Love versus Honor.

Wolfe, however, doesn't get into the real complexities of this moral confrontation. He can be most insightful about the back-and-forth maneuverings of bank managers, but the dilemma upon which the moral heart of his book is based never receives close examination. At one point we are told that Inman is Charlie's closest friend. It comes as a surprise. Up to that point, we have been given the impression that Charlie doesn't even like Inman much. We have no idea what makes them friends other than their social propinquity.

Betrayal, however, is no more than a concept unless we know exactly what is being betrayed. We have to feel the antennae of the relationship that is soon to be cauterized. Nor are we prepared for Charlie to feel such responsibility. After all, how did he make his fortune in the first place? Did he betray no close friends on the way up to high wealth? That alone would make him one incredible rich man. In real

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life, when a tycoon comes to a point where he cannot betray a friend no matter how much money is involved, we have to assume that the sum of his former betrayals has caught up with him. The tycoon is in revolt against his own misdeeds. That is not impossible. Fear of the grave has done as much to many a bucko. But there is nothing of such suggestion in Charlie. He is just a powerful good guy who is so proud of his own strength that, as far as we know, he never cut a dirty deal. For moral dilemmas of this vast size, we need Dreiser, rather than our Tom with his outsize moxie. Moral dilemmas that live only in the pure light of dilemma belong to best sellers where the readers want their moral conflicts standing clean and proud, ready to be resolved. That, of course, Wolfe is ready to provide.

DeLillo's *Underworld* is also full of moral choices, and one of them is between love and honor, but with a notable and salutary difference. The moral dilemmas become part of the mix of the details, projects, confusions, and contradictions that suffuse the lives of his characters.

Where, then, might be the root of Wolfe's faults? Can one say that his strength as a journalist contributes to his weakness as a novelist? It is likely. He was so good as a young reporter that he was promoted to feature writer. But even in the upper reaches of feature writing, you still move on quickly to another subject, another set of people. So you do not form those novelistic habits that are learned best when you are young, exactly the need never to be satisfied with any of your characters just because they have come alive for you on the page. Indeed, the intoxication of creating a person on a page can prove blinding to an untried author's vision of what the character is going to need in his or her development through the narrative. What the young novelist learns, and it can take half a life, is that it is much easier to create a character than to understand a real man or woman. So an inner caution develops. Unless your literary figures keep growing through the events of the book, your novel can go nowhere that will surprise you. Because if the character comes alive on one particular note and stays alive on that note, then there is nowhere to proceed but into the plot.

Part of the problem for feature writers is that they have to bring to life the figures they write about, and must not only do it in a few days or a few weeks but be sharp in every sentence and entertaining (if possible), and then on the next assignment they move on to another person in another occupation. Tom Wolfe became the best of them when it came to capturing the off-edge of each person's dialogue and all the details of their shoes, asses, hairdos, and stomach rum-

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blings. He saw a room in the way a shark sees prey. Details were ectoplasm to him and luminescence.

He worked for years doing bigger and better articles, then books, high-octane books, but he had formed bad habits. The basic pattern was to go right into new material, bring it off, and move on to the next job. Your characters had to come alive, but since you didn't stay with them, you hardly needed a second note. Johnny One-Note, ~~if he is~~ ~~vivid enough~~, can always hold the reader for the length of a magazine piece.

Of course, a great many of Dickens's characters were also Johnny One-Notes. Yet, what notes! Besides, one did not read at that time to explore into character in the way we feel is necessary today. The stakes are higher now. Given this century, so full of vast achievements and horrors, it is viscerally important that our understanding of men and women keep pace with the mechanisms of society. If Wolfe is as good as or better than any other American writer in his power to capture the surface of wholly diverse elements in America, he comes in last of all major American writers when it's a matter of comprehending a little more about men and women. Indeed, this may be the most important and noble purpose of the novelist today. Surely, we are not going to leave it to the jargon-ridden expertise of the oral guns for hire in the TV human relations media business, or the fundamentalists' search for the all-purpose power-grip over other humans. We need only contemplate one more time how for the last nine months we have been steeped in a nausea-broth of TV pundit-heads, coming to an intellectual climax every night. In parallel, Wolfe is too quick to capture his characters and then doesn't always have an idea of what to do with them. He spent his early professional life writing too quickly and moving on. The following passage, which comes just after the earthquake has liberated Conrad from jail, may be appropriate here.

The very floor of the world had *moored* . . . with a power that still resonated in the bones of everyone who had been through the upheaval. A cliff now ran straight through Santa Rita where none had existed before. A new wave of fear and hopelessness swept Conrad's nervous system. He felt as if the very last roots of his past had been ripped out. Zeus had done all this and he was in Zeus' hands. He gave Five-O one last smile and a little wave and then began running alongside the escarpment, away from the remains of West Greystone.

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A MAN HALF FULL 1299

The longer one reads *A Man in Full*, the more one comes to decide that no matter its large virtues, it was chosen by the author to be a best seller rather than a major novel. Nowhere is this more evident than with the younger protagonist. I can believe that there are people as angelic as Conrad Hensley, and most of us have known a few men who were as heroic as Conrad, but never before have I seen both those qualities in one person—not unless I was looking at a movie.

It was Wolfe's job to transcend the film of *A Man in Full* before it went into production—which is to say his literary purpose was to make us believe on the page, now, that Conrad exists. And in this he is far from wholly successful. Conrad is too good to be true. What one can know with a sense of sadness as a novelist is that Conrad will become much more believable and moving in the movie. Will it be Matt Damon? Or can Tom Hanks still look young enough to bail out the part?

But if we as readers are to be lectured by Wolfe, via Epictetus, on the honorable avoidance of shame that can and has to be achieved by the serious Stoic, then what is to be said about the shame of writing a best seller when you are as talented as Wolfe and might at least have tried to bring off one of the most important books of the half-century?

Can we offer a final verdict? Tom may be the hardest-working showoff the literary world has ever owned. But now he will no longer belong to us. (If indeed he ever did!) He lives in the King Kong Kingdom of the mega-best sellers—he is already a Media Immortal. He has married his large talent to real money and very few can do that or allow themselves to do that. So, he will be king for a year, a year at least, and then in another ten years or less he will write another gargantuan best seller. Let us hope it is not about education but will be called *A President in Full*. For he is certainly the most gifted best-seller writer to come along since Margaret Mitchell. If her style was banal, she understood nonetheless how signally perverse is the sense of romance in rich and beautiful women, and Mr. Wolfe is not up to that yet.

If this verdict denies him the long-term glory he seeks, let it at least be said that his adjuration to his fellow novelists to go out and dig harder for objective material may, given a whopping bounty in the bookstores for *A Man in Full*, may, yes, actually take root. If it does, let us novelists at least attempt to take back delineation of our country from the media who have held it too long and for much too little.

~~From The New York Review of Books (December 17, 1998)~~

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