

PSYCHOLOGY

LEGEND AND IDENTITY

The Notebook and the letter to Salman Rushdie exemplify in miniature the poles of the problem of writer's identity. If I place a large emphasis on the word, it is because our identity on a given day or year is the seat from which we speak to the world. Any shifts of identity or skews of identity, any sense that the seat is not fast on its foundations, but is sliding away, will play hell with the modicum of stability that one needs to write at a given moment.

So, this discussion of psychology as it refers to writing can begin with some thoughts about identity and its huge overgrown sibling—legend itself.

The Notebook

The writer was having a fight with his young lady. They were walking toward her home and as the argument continued, they walked with their bodies farther and farther apart.

The young lady was obviously providing the energy for the quarrel. Her voice would rise a little bit, her head and shoulders would move toward him as though to add

weight to her words, then she would turn away in disgust, her heels tapping the pavement in an even precise rhythm which was quite furious.

The writer was suffering with some dignity. He placed one leg in front of the other, he looked straight ahead, his face was sad, he would smile sadly from time to time and nod his head to every word she uttered.

"I'm sick and tired of you," the young lady exclaimed. "I'm sick and tired of you being so superior. What do you have to be superior about?"

"Nothing," the writer said in so quiet a voice, so gentle a tone that his answer might as well have been, "I have my saintliness to be superior about."

"Do you ever give me anything?" the young lady asked, and provided the response herself. "You don't even give me the time of day. You're the coldest man I've ever known."

"Oh, that's not true," the writer suggested softly.

"Isn't it? Everybody thinks you're nice and friendly, everybody except anybody who knows you at all. Anybody who knows you, knows better."

The writer was actually not unmoved. He liked this young lady very much and he did not want to see her unhappy. If with another part of his mind, he was noticing the way she constructed her sentences, the last word of one phrase seeming to provide the impetus for the next, he was nonetheless paying attention to everything she said.

"Are you being completely fair?" he asked.



"I've finally come to understand you," she said angrily. "You don't want to be in love. You just want to say the things you're supposed to say and watch the things you're supposed to feel."

"I love you. I know you don't believe me," the writer said.

"You're a mummy. You're nothing but a . . . an Egyptian mummy."

The writer was thinking that when the young lady became angry, her imagery was at best somewhat uninspired. "All right, I'm a mummy," he said softly.

They waited for a traffic light to change. He stood at the curb, smiling sadly, and the sadness on his face was so complete, so patient and so perfect, that the young lady with a little cry darted out into the street and trotted across on her high heels. The writer was obliged to run a step or two to catch up with her.

"Your attitude is different now," she continued. "You don't care about me. Maybe you used to, but you don't care any more. When you look at me, you're not really looking at all. I don't exist for you."

"You know you do."

"You wish you were somewhere else right now. You don't like me when I'm nasty. You think I'm vulgar. I'm too vulgar for your refined senses. Isn't that a pity? Do you think the world begins and ends with you?"

"No."

"No, what?" she cried.

"Why are you angry? Is it because you feel I didn't pay enough attention to you tonight? I'm sorry if I didn't. I didn't realize I didn't. I do love you."



"Oh, you love me; oh, you certainly do," the young lady said in a voice so heavy with sarcasm that she was almost weeping. "Perhaps I'd like to think so, but I know better." Her figure leaned toward his as she walked. "There's one thing I will tell you," she went on bitterly. "You hurt people more than the cruelest person in the world could. And why? I'll tell you why. It's because you never feel anything and you make believe that you do." She could see he was not listening and she asked in exasperation, "What are you thinking about now?"

"Nothing. I'm listening to you and I wish you weren't so upset."

Actually, the writer had become quite uneasy. He had just thought of an idea to put into his notebook and it made him anxious to think that if he did not remove the notebook from his vest pocket and jot down the thought, he was likely to forget it. He tried repeating the idea to himself several times to fix it in his memory, but this procedure was never certain.

"I'm upset," the young lady said. "Of course I'm upset. Only a mummy isn't upset, only a mummy can always be reasonable and polite because they don't feel anything." If she had not been walking so quickly she would have stamped her foot. "What are you thinking about?"

"It's not important," he said. He was thinking that if he removed the notebook from his pocket and held it in the palm of his hand, he might be able to scribble in it while he walked. Perhaps she would not notice.

It turned out to be too difficult. He was obliged to come to a halt beneath a street light. His pencil worked rapidly in nervous elliptic script while he felt beside him the

pressure of her presence. *Emotional situation deepened by notebook*, he wrote. *Young writer, girl friend. Writer accused of being observer, not participant in life by girl. Gets idea he must put in notebook. Does so, and brings the quarrel to a head. Girl breaks relationship over this.*

"You have an idea now," the young lady murmured.

"Mmm," he answered.

"That notebook. I knew you'd pull out that notebook." She began to cry. "Why, you're nothing but a notebook," she shrieked, and ran away from him down the street, her high heels mocking her misery in their bright tattoo upon the sidewalk.

"No, wait," he called after her. "Wait. I'll explain."

It occurred to the writer that if he were to do such a vignette, the nuances could be altered. Perhaps the point of the piece should be that the young man takes out the notebook because he senses that this would be the best way to destroy what was left of the relationship. It was a nice idea.

Abruptly, it also occurred to him that maybe this was what he had done. Had he wished to end his own relationship with his own young lady? He considered this, priding himself on the fact that he would conceal no motive from himself, no matter how unpleasant.

Somehow, this did not seem to be true. He did like the young lady, he liked her very much, and he did not wish the relationship to end yet. With some surprise, he realized that she was almost a block away. Therefore, he began to run after her. "No, wait," he called out. "I'll explain it to you, I promise I will." And as he ran the

notebook jiggled warmly against his side, a puppy of a playmate, always faithful, always affectionate (1)

1951

Rusdie Letter

~~[Letter to Salman Rushdie comes here?]~~

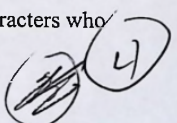
(2)

82.16 Some artists have a powerful, consistent sense of identity. I think the best American examples might be Henry Miller, Hemingway, Faulkner, Thomas Wolfe, Henry James, Sinclair Lewis. In contrast, writers like Steinbeck kept changing his persona with every book he did. As other examples, one could add Ed Doctorow or myself. Picasso, however, comes more to mind than any of us. His many changes of style are generally seen as a reaction to the different women in his life. I might have to say the same about myself. Up to a point. You can become a different man in each marriage. On the other hand, Henry Miller married a number of times and that did not change his personality. I expect that Miller had to fight to establish his identity very early in life. This is probably the case for people who grow up in unsympathetic families—they must arrive at an inner presence sooner, a hard, often hostile identity that the family cannot mess with too easily.

(2) (3)



81.2 For seven or eight years after the success of The Naked and the Dead, I kept saying nobody treats me as if I'm real; nobody wants me for my five-feet eight inches, and my medium good looks. I am only wanted for my celebrity. Therefore my experience is not real. Any habits on how to write that I had formed up to that point were as an observer on the sidelines. Now, willy-nilly, I was the center of many a room, and so regardless of how I carried myself, everything I did was noted. To myself, I complained about the unfairness of it until the day I realized that it was fair, that that was now going to be my experience. It's the simplest remark to make, but it took years to get to that point. Then I began to realize that the kind of writing I was now going to do would be on new and unfamiliar themes. After The Naked and the Dead, I had assumed I would work on large collective novels about American life, books that required venturing out to get experience, but my celebrity took away much of the necessary anonymity. There was, however, something else I could express. I was, after all, having a form of twentieth-century experience that might become more and more prevalent—I was separated from my roots. I was successful and alienated, and this was becoming a twentieth-century condition. This understanding went into of my work after that, and by now I can say that kind of personality interests me more than characters who are rooted.



Vitka/1984 A young writer, if he is unknown, can be at a party and watch what everyone is doing. If he has a marvelous ear for dialogue, he can wake up the next morning and remember all that was said and how it was said. He is a bird on a branch. Sees like a bird and writes books that can be extraordinarily well-observed. But once you are successful, especially if it happens quickly, it's as if the bird is now an emu, and wingless. It's big and grows haunches and fore-shoulders and a mane: Lo and behold, it is a lion. And everyone is looking at the lion, including the birds. But it is a lion with the heart of a bird and the mind of a bird. So there is a terrible period when the metamorphosed emu is trying to live like a lion and has small gifts for it. Then the beast begins to experiment: when it runs, it now sees other animals scamper. It takes a while—often years—to get to appreciate your effect on others, and even longer to begin to understand all over again what makes people tick. In the old days, you could understand friends, enemies and strangers by induction; now, by deduction. Of course, you do have more material on which to work your deductions.

(NH) 5

Dobbie  
 Forzeman/2001  
 Cape Cod Times

When people suffer an identity crisis, they generally have to take all sorts of curious steps to locate who they are. They succeed here, they fail there and the process gives them points of reference. So I began to have a public life even though I was eccentrically shy in those years, that is, half shy and half arrogant, like most young writers. I discovered, however, that I had gregarious gifts and started to employ them.

Before long, I began to enjoy them. I also wasted a lot. You gain, you lose, and it makes for a new kind of life. Eventually, you have a new identity.

(B) 6

McKay/2000 Before The Naked and the Dead was published, I thought perhaps I could make a success of writing. Or, maybe I couldn't. Time would tell. Then came startling success. The Naked and the Dead was number one on the bestseller list for several months and I was a celebrity. Totally unprepared. I felt as if I were secretary to someone named Norman Mailer, and to meet him, people had to say hello to me first. It took a long time to realize that celebrity, which had so unhorsed me in the beginning, had now become an acquired appetite. As the Marquis De Sade once said, "There is no pleasure greater than that obtained from a conquered repugnance." I began to want more. Fame makes you realize that you are amputated from normal life—people don't look at you in the same way. It also offers a sense of how delicate and unstable is identity. And so my experience finally became interesting to me. I could now write about the interior life of people who had gained a certain amount of power, and had to put up, therefore, with the new person they had become. Be it noted that this new person can be full of surprises, bold where one was once timid, and vulnerable in places that once seemed secure, even hard-edged.

(2) 7



83.22 There's an irony to fabricating an alternate self. A surprising amount of choice is involved. When I wrote Advertisements for Myself, I realized that one could literally forge one's career by the idea you instilled of yourself in others. That is, impersonate the person you might have some reasonable chance of arriving at in a couple of years and, soon enough, you are lifting yourself by your bootstraps. It is an unbelievably demanding task—as profound a game as a criminal lawyer plays by cutting himself off forever, perhaps, from any clear notion of what his own morality might be.

One unhappy aspect is that people who have never even met you begin to tell exaggerated stories about your person. Soon you are the inheritor of a legend as long as a dinosaur's tail, and it's false legend—it never existed even on the day it was created. Twenty years later, you're still using your best efforts to drag the tail around. One relief to getting older is that I no longer have to square my shoulders every time I go into a bar.

On the other hand, sometimes you even aid and abet your legend. Let me offer some dialogue:

A Casual Friend: Norman, I have a confession to make. I was at an upper East Side party last night, and I didn't know anyone. So I told this good-looking girl that I was you. (pause) Then, I took her home. I got into the sack with her. I hope you're not mad.

Mailer: Were you good with her?

Friend: Yeah. It was a real good night.

Mailer: Then I'm not mad.

So the legend had become a beard, a front man, a pimp, a procurer of new situations, even a ghost more real to other people than to myself.

(7) (8)

Lennon/1999 James Jones was also shot out of a cannon right into celebrity. But Jones had gone through more than I had before he wrote From Here to Eternity. By the time he'd arrived, he was ready to enjoy his success. I was a great pain in the ass to a great many people because all through the first year I'd keep saying, "Oh, woe is me. Now I will never know the experience of other people." Jones didn't give a damn. He knew he had brought home the game and he wanted to eat it.

{note-to-ML-could-he-used-in-Paris}

(8) (9)

91.10 I've always been fascinated with spies and their spiritual associates—actors. The latter can, of course, not be wholly equated to spies, but they do have the experience of embodying a false life for the duration of a given role, and that characterization can become more real than their own identity. The few times I've acted, I've been struck by how alive you can feel during the impersonation. Sometimes more real than in your own

life. When a spy feels friendship for someone he is going to betray, the friendship is still real. The average journalist is, in that sense, a spy.

9.16

73.14 I think Hemingway got into trouble because he had to feel equal to his heroes. It became an enormous demand. He could not allow a character in his books to be braver than he was in his private life. It's a beautiful demand, and there's honor in forcing oneself to adhere to such a code, but it does cut down on the work you can get out. While it's legitimate to write about a man who's braver than yourself, it is better to recognize him quickly as such. As a novelist, I would like to believe I could put a heavyweight champion of the world into a novel, and make him convincing, even enter his mind without having to be the best old fighter-writer around.

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81.16 Hemingway's death was cautionary to me. His suicide was as wounding as if one's own parent had taken his life. I keep thinking of John Gardner's unforgettable remark that when a father commits suicide he condemns his son to the same end. Well, of course, you can go to suicide by more ways than killing yourself. You can rot yourself out with too much drink, too many failures, too much talk, too many wild and unachieved alliances—Hemingway was a great cautioning influence on all of us. One learned not to live on one's airs.

12



LIVING IN THE WORLD

84.29 Since good novelists have to be brave on the one hand, but prudent on the other, we make up a delicate species. More sensitive than others in the beginning, we have to develop the will, the stamina, the determination, and the insensitivity to take critical abuse. A good writer, therefore, is an oxymoron—a strong, weak person, full of brave timidity, sensitive and insensitive. In effect, we have to learn how to live in the world with all its bumps and falls and occasionally startling rewards while protecting the core of what once seemed a frightfully perishable sensitivity.

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London

As one aspect of this, I tend to look at my contemporaries in the way an athlete looks at rival athletes. You try to have a state of mind where you see everything they do that's better than you can bring off, yet you're able to retain the confidence that you remain aware of those skills that are superior to theirs. Good athletes look at their peers in that manner. After all, they have to face each other.

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

13 14

98.17 If you start a novel before you're ready, it's exactly as if you are a young athlete out in a contest with professionals who are far beyond you. Not ready, you get clobbered. You receive a painful lesson in identity. One does well to build up a little literary experience before trying a long piece of work. On the other hand, if one can accept in advance the likelihood of ending in failure, a young writer can learn a good deal by daring to embark on the long voyage that is a novel.

14 15

81.2 The energy I put into my public, performing self probably helped my mind and hurt my work. I believe it gave me an understanding of the complexity of the world that I would not have had if I'd stayed at home. I would have tended then to have a much

more paranoid vision of how sinister things are. Things are sinister, but not in the way I used to think. That is one of the better tests of the acumen of the writer. How subtle, how full of nuance, how original is his or her sense of the sinister?

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84.14 City life produces caustic wit. In New York and Chicago, it serves as a tonic. It works as a bridge to others. It is one of the essences of a city. But if you live in the country, such readiness for confrontation could get you hurt. People who live in the country have one similarity to convicts. All too often they have nothing to think about but the occasional insult they have received. That is one good reason city and country people do tend to make each other nervous.

~~16~~ 17

75.11 In the world, you have to learn how to live with deceit. Trotsky once made the incisive remark that the only way you can tell the truth is by a comparison of the lies. While you may never be able to find out who is lying more, you can come close to the relations between two liars. Especially if they are married. We may even be able to say with some certainty, "They hate each other," or, "Isn't it extraordinary how they love each other despite all?"

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Lee/2001 You also have to learn to live with the possibility of violence. The few times in my life I've been associated with real danger stay with me and remain a source for writing. I have a theory concerning crucial experiences that I've expressed from time to time but it might be worth stating again. Certain events if they are dramatic or fundamental to us, remain afterward like crystals in our psyche. Those experiences should be preserved rather than written down. They are too special, too intense, too concentrated to be used head-on. Whereas, if you project your imagination through the crystal, you can end up with an imaginative extrapolation of the original events. Later, coming from another angle, you may obtain another scenario equally good and altogether different from the same crystal. The crystal is there to serve as a continuing source so long as you don't use it up by a direct account of what you felt.

Actors, in their way, may use the same primal experiences to fuel many an emotional aspect of many a role. Sometimes in the long run of a play, they can use up such a source and have to find another.

48/19

85.15 Few good writers come out of prison. Incarceration, I think, can destroy a man's ability to write. The noise in prison is tremendous. Plus the paranoia—you do have to fear or distrust too many of the people you are among. The tension of past events is always there—you hassled someone three weeks ago when you were feeling strong; today, you are weak and the other guy is in the yard working out with weights. You get

his bad looks. Then, there is the daily injustice, which is inevitable—some guards have a hardon just for you.

Most convicts may not have a very good sense of the rights due others, but they have a close-to-absolute sense of what is due them. They're not getting their rights most of the time. And injustice breeds obsession. In turn, obsession blots out the power to write well. Obsession is like a magnetic field. You keep being pulled back into a direction you have not chosen. All this militates against writing with clarity, let alone nuance! Given the variety of people in prison, you'd think that writers would ferment like yeast, but they don't. Only the best survive to be able to write once they get out.

(19) (20)

91.23 One of the hardest things about being a young writer is that every day you spend writing is the day you don't meet this fabulous woman who will be the best heroine in American fiction—at least in your willing hands. Now, I'm happily removed from all that. Work used to be the great stone on your back. Today, it's the opposite. I can't quite carry the analogy out to say that the boulder has become a lighter-than-air balloon, but, I confess, work now nourishes me as much as it wears one down

(20) (21)

81.2 The literary world is a dangerous place to inhabit too frequently if you want to get serious work done. It's almost necessary to take on airs in order to protect oneself. And these airs have to be finely tuned if they are to do the job. Capote had a wonderful set

and walked around like a little fortress—at least until lately. Hemingway committed suicide working on his airs. He took the literary world much too seriously. His death is there now as a lesson to the rest of us: Don't get involved at too deep a level or it will kill you and--pure Hemingway-- it will kill you for the silliest reasons: for vanity, or because feuds are beginning to etch your liver with the acids of frustration. Hemingway did his best to eschew much of that world, but he established a fief with his royal court of followers. He may have worked as hard on that as on his books. I would repeat: his airs killed him.

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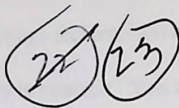


MIND AND BODY, EGO AND WORK

83.10 It may be that part of the ability to remain a writer is to learn how to protect your ego through the years. One does ring oneself around with ego-protections, the first of which, unhappily, is undue prudence. The price is that inspiration does not manage to blow open the door as often. Still, you do carry out the main brunt of your projects. That, of course, is exactly the major function of the ego—this dogged, determined, and often ugly servant of civilization itself. Speak not of the human ego alone, but the world ego, the collection of patriotic egos in every land who may yet destroy our existence before this new and fateful century is concluded.

If we think of all the attitudes we take on to fortify the ego or plug holes in it, blind patriotism is probably the most expensive. That is why we will look long and far

before we find a good writer who is also a blind patriot. A reasonably dependable ego is crucial to a hard-working author, but an ego that is much more powerful than our literary needs is a super-highway straight into mediocrity. A good many best-selling authors can line up for that one.



88.1 Only another writer can know how much damage writing a novel can do to you. It's hell; you can poison your body. It's an unnatural activity to sit at a desk and squeeze words out of yourself. Various kinds of poisons—essences of fatigue—get secreted through your system. As you age, it grows worse. I believe that is one of the reasons I've been so interested in prize fighters. I think often of the aging boxer who has to get into shape for one more fight and knows the punishment it will wreak on his body. No wonder it puts him in gloom. What characterizes every older fighter I have seen training for a fight is the bad mood that hangs over him and his camp. The only good thing likely to come out of it will be money. For the rest is close to a foregone conclusion. Even if he wins the fight—even if he wins it well—he is not going to get a new purchase on life out of a dazzling success, not in the way he did as a young fighter. That's also true in my profession. Often, you have to make grave decisions—am I going to attempt this difficult venture or not? At a certain point, you must believe that the work will yet prove truly important. Or else, why suffer the slow self-destruction it will entail? Writing a novel over two or three years of the hardest work sometimes does the kind of damage to the

body that is equal to obliging someone who has never smoked before to consume two or three packs a day for months. I think one reason I've always been such an interested amateur about medicine is because when you are a writer, you are, in a certain sense, doctor to yourself. You can always feel tensions and ailments creeping into you. It goes with the territory. Your factory is yourself. You are always examining the factory for potential breakdowns, anticipating troubles, and so you become alert to the relation not only between yourself and other people, but between yourself and your body. Writing impinges on that body, writing depends ultimately on that body. Proust, with his asthma, was like an important industrialist who manages to get out an extraordinarily consistent product even if one wing of the factory is notoriously subject to breakdown.

23 24

82.14 Writing can also be a way of using up a large and uncomfortable presence in yourself. It's famously known, for instance, that pornographers end up impotent. That's probably a myth with a certain amount of predictability. If you work a muscle hard, it tends to develop; overworked, it can break down. I think something of the same is true of imagination. Force it too far and it can cease to return anything. We write novels out of two cardinal impulses. (Other than to make a living and the desire to be famous.) One is to understand ourselves better, and the other is to present what we know about others. Of course, it is often impossible to comprehend anyone else until one has plumbed the bottom of certain preoccupations about oneself. That is why the writer is always at risk



of using his or her talent for therapy—which is usually closer to self-absorption than to art.

Since we are often obliged to write in a state of ignorance about our real motives, one way to tell whether we are engaged only in therapy is that the work engages no risk, or, to the contrary, is so wild that it will find no public and no publisher. Therapy, taken by its bottom line, is always self-indulgence.

24 25

83.10 If I had tried to write all of Ancient Evenings in one year, my ignorance of the subject would have pressed upon me so powerfully, it could not have been done. Over the course of ten years, however, you can carry such a fear. There is always fear, after all, in writing a book. That is one good reason why there are many more people who can write well than do. And, of course, many can't take the meanness of the occupation. There's nothing so very attractive about going into a room by yourself each day to look at a piece of blank paper (or a keyboard) and make calligraphic marks. To perform that act decade after decade, punishes through the very monotony of the process. The act of writing itself, taken as a physical act, is less interesting, for example, than painting, or certainly, sculpture, where your body is exercised in the doing.

Like all occupations, writing also presents its unique elements of risk. In the case of the novelist, it is to his ego. You really don't want to get into a book where you dare to take no chances, especially if it is a long book. How dignify the time it uses up, if large chances aren't engaged?

25 26

82.16 I'm always a little uneasy when my work comes to me without much effort. It seems better to have to forge the will to write on a given day. I find that on such occasions, if I do succeed in making progress against resistance in myself, the result is often good. As I discover days or weeks later. ( The Armies of the Night, for example, was worked in the face of considerable resistance.) With all else, I was writing about myself in the third person. While it seemed interesting up to a point to speak of a protagonist named Norman Mailer, it was, on the other hand, damned odd. I was halfway into the book before I got used to it. It is even a dislocating way to regard oneself. Yet, by the time I was done, I missed this character of Norman Mailer so much that I brought him back for book after book. It never worked as well again. The commitment has to be there. In The Armies of the Night I was a true protagonist of the best sort—half-heroic, three-quarters comic.

(26) (27)

73.14 Usually, on an average working day, you try to raise yourself to a level where you can pick up your story again. You have to pass through a peculiar hour or two, getting yourself in shape for the daily stint. That is equal to saying you have to face yourself each morning. While every salesman, teacher, executive, fireman or cop does exactly that one way or another on many a morning (and many a pickpocket as well!), the writer must do it alone, day after day after day, a matter of brooding and drifting, and

possibly getting into what's bothering you, or even just unwinding a little. Since you are ready, however, as a novelist to sit in judgment on others, you are obliged to look sooner or later each morning on everything in yourself that's weak or second rate or irrelevant.

(27/28)

71.7 When I'm writing, therefore, I am rarely in a good mood. A part of me prefers to work at a flat level of emotion. Day after day. I see hardly anyone. I'll put in eight or ten hours, of which only three or four will consist of words being put on the page. It's almost a question of one's metabolism. You begin, after all, from a standing start and have to accelerate up to a level of cerebration where the best words are coming in good order. Just as a fighter has to feel that he possesses the right to do physical damage to another man, so a writer has to be ready to take chances with his readers' lives. If you're trying for something at all interesting or difficult then you cannot predict what the results of your work will be. If it's close enough to the root, people can be psychically injured reading you. Full of heart, he was also heartless--a splendid oxymoron. That can be the epitaph for many a good novelist.

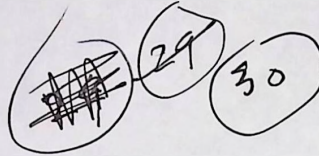
(28/29)

Kakutani

82.14 Today, most of my ideas are less involved with new exploration than with occupying thematic territories I reconnoitered years ago. If you no longer have the pleasure of enjoying your mind in the way you could when young, you have, at least, more worldly knowledge to work with. In 1972, while interviewing Henry Kissinger, I



asked him if he enjoyed the intellectual stimulation of his White House work, and he said in effect, "I am working with ideas I formed at Harvard years ago. I haven't had a new idea since I've been on this; I just work with the old ones." By now, I know what he meant—there are just so many new thoughts you can have. There comes a time in your life when you have no choice but to implement them. To quote from The Deer Park: ". . . for experience when it is not communicated to another must wither within and be worse than lost." One owes the reader a fee when quoting oneself, but here the tariff feels acceptable.



Shainberg

I can sit with an empty mind. I don't try to void my thoughts forcibly. If I do think of something, then, all right, I think of it. But a tired brain is happy to contemplate nothing. It's like a hardworking athlete who likes lying down.

[Suffolk] On the other hand, our continuing existence as novelists can depend on lively hypotheses. They fructify one's fiction. For example, it is likely that one of the covert motives of jealousy is that it always offers a powerful hypothesis. The moment a husband or wife does not trust the mate, his or her life may become painful but it is undeniably interesting.. Let's say the husband comes in after work and by the way he puts his hat and coat away, the wife can think, "Yes, yes, he's feeling guilty." So she can maintain the hypothesis: Yes, he's cheating on me, and she can keep it going—at least so long as the evidence does not absolutely confute the premise. Then something

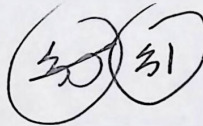
happens—perhaps she finds out that the woman she is convinced he is having an affair with, has been teaching in China for the last half-year. All right, thereby ends this recent hypothesis. Now the wife has to find a new mistress out there, or reassess her acumen.

The above, you might say, is a private chart of reality. We also keep world-sized charts. A huge geographical and/or philosophical map. The West is in decline--that's a large hypothesis. Depending on the character of one's mind, one can have an immensely complicated worldview or a narrower and most restricted map where all you can say is, "I know this region well. Let the rest remain uncharted." Very few of us have a reasonably filled-in vision of the world. We tend to develop only those areas we are interested in.

As a perfect example, how many Americans had Afghanistan anywhere on their charts until September 11<sup>th</sup>? Now, we are picking up bits and tid-bits about Islam in a flurry. A superficial but lively work-in-progress is proceeding on one's charts.

To dignify this notion, let me propose that we use these charts, whether good or superficial, to serious purpose. For we are all navigating through life. That is one reason why novels have this special quality that other forms of communication do not offer. It's very hard to think of a good protagonist who is not always moving between choices. And you, as the writer, have to monitor these choices. When your characters come alive for you, which is one of the more agreeable if undeniably eerie aspects of serious novel-writing--when you find yourself having dialogues with them or at the least thinking about how they might react in certain situations that have nothing to do with your novel—then they do bear comparison to a dear but troublesome friend.

A specific example: At one point in the middle of Harlot's Ghost, I thought it would be interesting to send my protagonist-- who was a young man in the CIA (and very much under the tutelage of a very high CIA official called Harlot) --to Israel. Why? Because Harlot is in competition with the Gray Eminence of the CIA, James Jesus Angleton. Harlot feels Angleton not only has too much of a hegemony in the CIA, but is also on the inside track with the Mossad. So Harlot decides to send over his subaltern. Perhaps the young man will be able to submarine Angleton just a bit. That appealed to me. And I thought: do I dare? Then realized: Can't be done. The research will take a year. I'll probably have to go over to Israel. Never having been in Israel before, that'll be another book, obviously, and I'll have to find out about the Mossad. My chart was no help there. All I had was a blank area that said, "Truly major intelligence organization." Learning about the Mossad would be even more difficult than picking up on the CIA. I deliberated for a good and restless week before I was ready to tell myself, "I could wreck this book if I send Harry Hubbard to Israel. At best, I'll lose much too much time." Instead, I had him do something less bold. But that is the way we make such decisions. Not only when we write our novels, but in life.



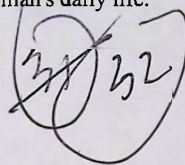


GENDER, NARCISSISM, MASTURBATION

Suffolk

If you believe in fiction, if you believe in the power of the novelist, then all subjects are possible. Of course, certain choices present more obstructions than others. It would be harder, as an example, for a male novelist to learn about the small irritations of a woman's day, than to imagine what her sex would be like. A novelistic elements in sex, after all, is the feeling of nearness to the Other. It's one of the compelling reasons for sex precisely because such sentiments live almost entirely outside formal sacraments and private codes. It may be indeed why pious people so often feel driven to break their own deepest sexual prohibitions. It's because the experience of meeting the Other is incredible. Which is why I say it's easier--if you are going to write about someone of the

opposite gender--to limn them sexually, to portray them from that point of view, than attempt to get into the intimate nitty-gritty of a woman's daily life.

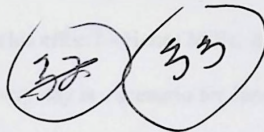


## SUFFOLK

Another word on gender. Women certainly have every right to create men at war, but I think it might be recognized that it's likely to be less comfortable for them. War, after all, is essentially a male invention. How often have women showed the same warlike capacity and determination and excess and inventiveness and hellishness that men have at war? On the other hand, if we ask whether men and women can write equally well about bravery, I would say yes. How are we to define bravery, after all? Take a woman who is awfully timid--let's say she was terrorized through her childhood. When she's an old lady and every bone in her body is aching, it may be an act of courage for her to cross a busy street all by herself. She doesn't know if she can make it across before the lights change, yet she has to do it for her own honor, if you will. And she does it. That may be more brave, given the relative situation, than the bold act of a soldier who's been trained to be courageous, who is bonded to the soldiers he is with, who lives with the idea that there's no disgrace in life worse than not being up to the military occasion. You can't speak of true bravery in combat until a good soldier has exhausted his code to that point where he feels, yes, I may lose--I may lose my heart, my dignity, my honor, I'm scared shitless. If, at this point, he still proceeds to push himself past the

point where he was about to break down, then his existential situation underlines the verdict that his behavior is courageous.

In a certain sense, we all know this, we know what constitutes brave action. So a woman can certainly write about brave soldiers, brave male and brave female soldiers, even though she's not the least bit brave, not at that level. Of course, she has to have an immense talent. I've often thought that Joyce Carol Oates, who is not necessarily one of my favorite writers but nonetheless is a very talented woman, will often, on the basis of a tiny bit of experience, write a 600-page novel. I think she's an arch example of someone who does almost all of it through talent. Very often her judgments seem unsound, but she will try, she tries. I'd say she's a brave writer in that sense because she's pushing far beyond anything that's easily within reach. She's willing to dare terrible humiliation. The irony is that she is rarely attacked. I expect she arouses a fundamental if somewhat bemused respect in many a mean spirit.



#### NARCISSISM (Genius & Lust/Pont)

The narcissist suffers from too much inner dialogue. The eye of one's consciousness is forever looking at one's own action. Yet—let us try to keep the notion clear—a narcissist is not simply a study in vanity and self-absorption so much as one part of the self is immersed in studying the other part. The narcissist is the scientist and the experiment in one. Other people exist, have value to the narcissist because of their



particular ability to arouse one role or another in oneself. And are valued for that. May even be loved for that. Of course, they are loved as an actor loves his audience.

Since the amount of stimulation we can offer ourselves is obviously limited, the underlying problem of the narcissist is boredom. So there are feverish, even violent attempts to shift the given. One must alter that drear context in which one half of the self is forever examining the stale presence of the other. That is one reason why narcissists are forever falling in and out of love, jobs, places, and addictions. Promiscuity is the opportunity to try a new role. The vanity gained from a one-night stand is an antidote to claustrophobia. That is, if the gamble of the one-night stand turns out well! Henry Miller complains bitterly of his dear beloved's lack of center, the incapacity of June to tell the truth or even recognize it. "I want the key," he says once to Anais Nin, "the key to her lies." Blind to himself—does not every artist have to live in partial and self-induced blindness, or he could never find a foundation for his effort?—Henry Miller does not want to recognize that the key may be simple. Every day is a scenario for June. On the best of days she creates a life into which she can fit for a few hours. She can feel real love and real hate for strangers, and thereby leave the circle of her self-absorption. Through scenarios, she can arrive in an hour at depths of emotion other people voyage toward for years. Of course, the scenario once concluded, so, too, is the love for the day. That passing actor she played with for a few hours is again a stranger to her. It is useless to speak of whether she loves or does not love Miller. It depends on whether he dwells in her scenario for that day. So it is also useless to speak of her lies. They are no more real

to her than yesterday's lies. It is today's scenario that is her truth and her life. That is liberation from the prison cell of the narcissist.

Of course, it is not all that bad. Part of Miller's continuing literary obsession with June is due to the variety of her roles. Each, after all, offers a new role for Miller. He does play opposite the leading lady. If for a day, she turns him into a detective, and on the next, a thief, that keeps interest in one's own personality alive.

Narcissists, after all, induce emotion in one another through their minds. It is not their flesh which is aroused so much as the vibrancy of the role. Their relations are at once more electric and more empty, more perfect and more hollow. But the hollow seems never to fill. So, narcissism may be a true disease, a biological displacement of the natural impulse to develop oneself by the lessons of one's experience—narcissism, therefore, could bear the same relation to love that onanism does to copulation, or a cancer to the natural growth of tissue. Can we come a little nearer to the recognition that there may be a base beneath all disease, an ultimate disease, a psychosomatic doom, so to speak, against which all the other illnesses, colds, fevers, infections, and deteriorations are bulwarks to protect us against a worse fate? Which could be an irreversible revolt of the flesh or the mind into cancer or insanity. That is psychosomatic doom—to follow the growth of the flesh or the mind into terminal anomaly. But if that is the case, how can we not suppose that for the narcissist—always so aware that something is wrong within—there is a constant unconscious terror: His or her isolation, if unrelieved, will end in one arm or the other of the ultimate disease.

The paradox is that no love can prove so intense, therefore, as the love of two narcissists for each other. So much depends on it. Each—the paradox turns upon itself—is capable of offering deliverance to the other. To the degree that they tune each other superbly well, they begin to create what before had been impossible—they begin to acquire the skills that enable them to enter the world. (For it is not love of the self, but dread of the world outside the self, which is the seed of narcissism.) Narcissists can end, therefore, by having a real need of each other. That is, of course, hardly the characteristic relation. The love of most narcissists tends to become comic. Seen from the outside, their suffering manages to be equaled only by the rapidity with which they recover from suffering. Is it hundreds or thousands of such examples that come to us from Hollywood?

The reality, of course, is more painful. Given the delicacy of every narcissist, and the timidity which created their detachment, we can see again that the highest intensity of their personal relations is, for good cause, with themselves. For their own self-protection, they need an excess of control over external events. (Not too removed in analogy is that excess of control which technology is forever trying to exact from nature.)

To the degree, however, that narcissism is an affliction of the talented, the stakes are not small, and the victims are playing a serious game right in the midst of their scenarios. For if one can break out of the penitentiary of self-absorption, then there may be artistic wonders to achieve.

Henry Miller could have been playing, therefore, for the highest stakes. He had the energy, the vision, the talent, the outrageous individuality to have some chance of



becoming the greatest writer in America's history, a figure equal to Shakespeare. (For Americans.) Of course, to invoke such contrasts is to mock them. A writer cannot live too seriously with the idea that (as Hemingway once boasted) he will or will not beat Tolstoy—he contains rather some sense of huge and not impossible literary destiny in the reverberations of his own ambition; he feels his talent as a trust, and his loves seem evil when they balk him. He is living, after all, with his own secret plot. He knows that a writer of the largest dimension can alter the nerves and marrow of a nation. No one, in fact, can measure what whole and collective loss would have come to the English people if Shakespeare had not lived to write. (Or, for that matter, conceive of how the South would be strikingly less interesting without Faulkner. It certainly is now.)

In those seven years with June, Miller was shaping the talent with which he would go out into the world. It is part of the total ambiguity of narcissism (despite the ten thousand intimate details he offers of his life) that we do not know by the end of The Rosy Crucifixion whether she breathed a greater life into his talent or exploited him. We do not know if Miller, if he had never met her, could have become capable of writing about tyrants and tycoons (instead, repetitively, of his own liberation) or—we are left wide open—the contrary is the true possibility and he might never have written well at all if he had not met her. All we know is that after seven years of living with June, he went off to Paris alone and learned to live by himself, having come into a confluence of his life where he could extract an overpowering and unforgettable aesthetic from ogres and sewers. It is kin to the nightmare of narcissism that we are left with this question and no answer.

34 35 34

A corollary of narcissism is, of course, masturbation. An author is forever consulting his mind, even as the hand will query the penis. So follows a few remarks from an interview done almost forty years ago. Rereading it, I find it still valid. The act of writing is so close to the psychic character of masturbation that if we are going to discuss the world of the writer, then we ought to deal with that as well. It is the unspoken subtext behind the epithet "scribbler."

KRASSNER: Do you think you're something of a puritan when it comes to masturbation?

MAILER: I think masturbation is bad.

KRASSNER: In relation to heterosexual fulfillment?

MAILER: In relation to everything—orgasm, heterosexuality, to style, to stance, to be able to fight the good fight. I think masturbation turns people askew. It sets up a bad and often enduring tension. Anybody who spends his adolescence masturbating, generally enters his young manhood with no sense of being a man.

KRASSNER: Is it possible you have a totalitarian attitude toward masturbation?

MAILER: I'm saying it's a miserable activity.

KRASSNER: Well, we're getting right back to absolutes. You know—to some, masturbation can be a thing of beauty.

MAILER: To what end? Who is going to benefit from it? Masturbation is bombing oneself.

KRASSNER: I think there's a basic flaw in your argument. Why are you assuming that masturbation is violence unto oneself? Why is it not pleasure unto oneself? And I'm not defending masturbation—well, I'm defending masturbation, yes, as a substitute if and when—

MAILER: All right, look. When you make love, whatever is good in you or bad in you goes out into someone else. I mean this literally. I'm not interested in the biochemistry of it, nor in how the psychic waves are passed back and forth. All I know is that when one makes love, one changes a woman slightly and a woman changes you slightly—

KRASSNER; Certain circumstances can change one for the worse.

MAILER: But at least you have gone through a process which is part of life. One can be better for the experience, or worse. But one has experience to absorb, to think about, one has literally to digest the new spirit that has entered the flesh. The body has been galvanized for an experience of flesh, a declaration of the flesh.

If one has the courage to think about every aspect of the act—I don't mean think mechanically about it, but if one is able to brood over the act, to dwell on it—then one is changed by the act. Because in the act of restoring one's harmony, one has to encounter all the reasons one was jangled.

So, finally, one has had an experience which was nourishing. Nourishing because one is able to feel one's way into more difficult or more precious insights as a result of it. One's able to live a tougher, more heroic life if one can digest and absorb the experience.

But if one masturbates, all that happens is, everything that's beautiful and good in one, goes up the hand, goes into the air, is lost. Now, what the hell is there to absorb?



One hasn't tested oneself. You see, in a way, the heterosexual act lays questions to rest, and makes one able to build upon a few answers. Whereas if one masturbates, the ability to contemplate one's experience is disturbed. Fantasies of power take over and disturb all sleep.

If one has, for example, the image of a beautiful sexy babe in masturbation, one still doesn't know whether one can make love to her in the flesh. All you know is that you can have her in your brain. Well, a lot of good that is.

But if one has fought the good fight or the evil fight and ended with the beautiful sexy dame, then whether the experience is good or bad, your life is changed by it. One knows something of what happened. One has something real to build on.

The ultimate direction of masturbation always has to be insanity. The ultimate direction, mind you, not the immediate likelihood.

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## THE UNCONSCIOUS

Shainberg

In the course of fashioning a character, as you dig into what you have perceived of his or her existence, there often (soon!) comes a point where you recognize that you don't know enough about the person you are trying to create. At such times, I take it for granted that my unconscious knows more than I do. As we go through life, we do, after all, observe everyone, wittingly and unwittingly. Perhaps, out of the corner of your eye, you glimpse someone in a restaurant who represents a particular inspiration or menace or possibility, potentially a friend or foe—and the unconscious goes to work on that. It needs very little evidence to put together a comprehensive portrait because, presumably, the unconscious is working most of the time. To use an unhappy analogy, it's as if the

unconscious is a powerful computer which doesn't often need new material to fashion a portrait considering how much material has already been stored away.

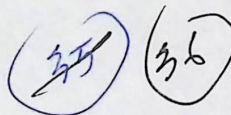
On the other hand, the unconscious can often feel violated by what we demand, by what, indeed, we manage to extract from it. Perhaps a great deal of the material it is now supplying, was originally filed away for its own purposes. Suppose the unconscious has a root in the hereafter that our conscious mind does not. If so, it will have deeper notions about death than we do. Let us then dare to surmise that the unconscious is on very close, even familial, terms with the soul. If that is the case, it can feel exploited by the push of the novelist to extract so much of his product from its separate resources.

Suppose the relation of the unconscious to the conscious is analogous to that of a cultivated Greek slave in service to an overbearing Roman master. I think if we use that as a working analogy, we can assume that our unconscious is full of the trickiest kinds of resistance. It can emit a sullenness, a flatness of affect. All the writer receives is a sense of dull, edgy resentment. Perhaps the unconscious is not ready to plumb into the material requested on this occasion. The acute form of this is writer's block. In this sense, however, there is a touch of writer's block in almost every working day. It is part of the experience of writing. At a certain point we are going well for a page or two perhaps, even as many as four or five. On happy days, you're writing as if it's being to you as a gift. You don't even have to have too much to do with it. You're only there to transcribe what's coming up. Then comes the moment when our ambition orders us to keep going: "You're three pages away from the end of the chapter, so don't stop now, not with this marvelous streak." Then, you can feel the sentences becoming less good and you feel,



—now you'll lose all of tomorrow morning getting to the end of this chapter, but, no, don't try to finish it now, you're going to wreck it.

That's what you learn over the years. Because in the early days of writing, you do force it, and what happens, of course, is equal to blowback. The unconscious has done its job as it sees it. It's damned if it's going to give you any more right now. If you insist, flatness of affect will be your reward—nothingness—the dread antagonist of being. It's true, it's there. One of the most painful elements in the act of writing is that you do live so much of the day with nothingness. It is why so many talented men and women do a good book or two, then stop. Because dealing daily with nothingness vitiates you. Writers who have been working for a long time usually do not have that exciting an inner life any longer. They remain professional enough to take what is potentially exciting in their scope and put it on paper. But the inner life has flattened out. That may be because of our violation of the frustrated desire of the unconscious to be left alone on those occasions when we nonetheless insist on working it. Perversely, our ambition ends by contributing to the nothingness that besets us.



## Suffolk

Part of the art of being a novelist is to play that very delicate game of obtaining experience without falsifying it by the act of observation. Generally speaking, it's easier to take in such knowledge when you are part of an event that is much larger than yourself—like the fall of the Twin Towers. There must be 500 young writers in New

York who had a day of experience that was incomparable—nothing remotely like that had ever happened before in their lives. And it's likely some extraordinary work will come out of it. Hopefully, not all about 9/11. A few may keep it as a crystal. If you never write about 9/11, but were in the vicinity that day, you could in time to come conceivably describe a battle in a medieval war and provide a real sense of such a lost event. You could do a horror tale. Or write about the sudden death of a beloved. All kinds of good writing can derive ultimately from 9/11. What won't always work is to write about it directly. That kind of good writing can be exhausted quickly. And the temptation to go at it head-on, is, of course, immense—the event was traumatic to so many. Unhappily, a large part of writing is this eliminatory process. The worst thing that can be said about literary work is that it can reduce itself—here we go again!—all too easily to therapy. That, as I have indicated before, is opposed to the noblest objective of writing. Ideally, you are there to bring wealth to others. Wealth of experience, wealth of observation, wealth of perception, the riches of a philosophical attitude that's to a degree new, insights into psychology the reader hasn't had before—all these are on the selfless side of writing. On the other hand, there is also the extraordinary interplay of ego, vanity and need—the desire, finally, to advance oneself as a writer. People don't become authors solely to benefit humanity. They're in the same position as priests. Part of them wants to be good to others; the other part wants, one way or the other, to have some sort of acquaintance with power. Which is often hugely at odds with the first notion. Generosity vies with acquisition, compassion is besieged with greed. Not surprising then, if such tension pushes one toward accomplishing neither, but converting it all into

reduction of stress, therapy through the act of writing and writing until such logorrhea exhausts the contradictions to a degree.

37

81.2 I've found that I can't do serious writing without getting into a mild depression. (Note! I am not speaking of a clinical depression.) An ongoing bad mood can be, however, a vital part of the process because, to begin with, it's perilous to fall in love with what you're doing. You lose your judgment. And for the simplest reason—the words, as you are writing them, stir up your feelings too much. Odds are, if they excite you disproportionately, they may do much less to others. (This accounts for the bewilderment of novice writers when a story they have written which charged them up to the heights appears to have little impact on others.)

With veteran writers, a mild working depression is not always simple to explain. The deeper your theme, and the more material you are bringing up from your unconscious to support it, the more you may be exhausting the possibilities of other themes-in-waiting. So, gloom can descend. Certain large possibilities won't get written about after all. No book I wrote kept me in a more profound bad mood (while doing it) than The Armies of the Night. I was putting so much in, and at so fast a rate, that I was probably uprooting all sorts of possibilities for future projects. Gloom descends when you have wounded too many psychic tissues in your determination to achieve one urgent goal.

37 38



81.16 Sometimes, the only way you can be certain you are attracted to a new subject, is that you know so little about it, and yet are drawn toward it. Perhaps you possess one deep insight into the subject—a special kind of purchase that will accelerate your comprehension as you proceed. It's more amusing, for instance, to read a mystery novel if, early in that book, you decide that you have an idea who did it, a feeling that you and the author share something. In that happy condition, you are going, right or wrong, to get more out of the book than others. I think something of that sort occurs sometimes in historical research. Reading about ancient Egypt, I felt I knew more about burial customs than the average Egyptologist. Not more about the details, which I hadn't learned as yet, but more about the underlying reason for some of the practices. That was enough to fire up the wish to pursue it a long way further.

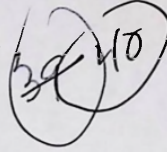
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83.10 I've always had the feeling that it doesn't make much sense to take on a subject if others can do it as well. As an instance, I never felt my childhood was so unique to me that it was worth recording. On the other hand, I conceal, sometimes from myself, what there is to write about those years. It can be wasteful to plunge into what you have to say on a subject before you're ready to give your full commitment.

This may sound odd to people who do not write. They usually have not come in contact with the authority of the unconscious to resist one's conscious will. Over and over again, I discover that my unconscious is going to disclose to me what it chooses,

when it chooses. You can, to a limited degree, force it to respond but that rarely occasions much happiness on either side. Sometimes I think you have to groom the unconscious after you've used it, swab it down, treat it like a prize horse who's a finer animal than you.

Practically, how do you go about this? How do you groom the unconscious? I don't have a clue. The trouble with relying on metaphors is that they too can desert you or betray you just as nicely as anyone or anything else.



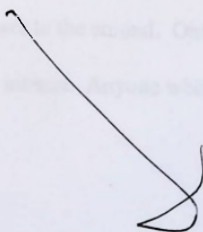
#### SUFFOLK

Over the years, I've found one rule. It's the only one I give on those occasions when I talk about writing. I've probably given this piece of advice twenty times-- it's the only rule of thumb that works for nearly everyone who is trying to do a novel. It is a simple rule. If you tell yourself you are going to write tomorrow, you are by that act also telling your unconscious to prepare the material! You are, in effect, contracting to pick such goods tomorrow. Count on me, you are saying to your unconscious, I will be there to write it. The point is that you have to maintain trustworthy relations. If you wake up in the morning with a hangover and cannot get to literary work, your unconscious after a few such failures to appear will withdraw from you.

It is likely that one's unconscious is never all that much in love with one. The battle between the ego and the unconscious is, I think, a real war. In many people it's

equal to an unhappy marriage, and marriages depend, after all, upon trust. Unhappy marriages depend immensely on what little mutual trust there is. So, I repeat: You have to establish decent relations with your unconscious, and you might as well see this procedure to be possibly as complicated as any far-reaching reality with someone outside your skin. The unconscious presence within may have as many interests, aspects, principalities, chasms, terrors, underworlds, other-worlds, and ambitions as yourself. Your unconscious may even have ambitions that are not your own—for practical purposes, it may be worth thinking of it as a separate creature. If you are ready to look upon it as this curious and semi-alienated presence in yourself with whom you have to maintain decent relations---if you can see yourself as some sort of scruffy general (of the old, aristocratic and careless school) and picture the unconscious as your often unruly cohort of troops, then obviously, you wouldn't dare to keep those troops out in the rain too long—certainly not at the commencement of any serious campaign. On the contrary, you make a pact: "Work for me, fight for me, and I will honor and respect you."

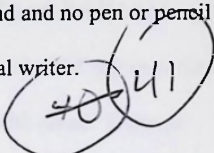
To repeat, therefore: The rule is that if you say to yourself you are going to write tomorrow, then it doesn't matter how badly you're hung over or how promising is a sudden invitation in the morning to do something more enjoyable. No, you go in dutifully, slavishly, and you work. This injunction is wholly anti-romantic in spirit. But if you subject yourself to this impost upon yourself, this diktat to be dependable, then after a period of time—it can take weeks, or more—the unconscious, nursing its disappointments, may begin to trust you again.



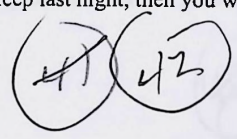


This is a burden on young writers who are not only ambitious but wild enough to feel that their wildness is part of their talent. They hate to submit to the heavy hand (that awful, severe, unbending demand for moderation), and obey the rule that you have to show up.

On the other hand, you can sometimes say to yourself, "I'm not going to work tomorrow," and the unconscious may even by now be close enough in accord not to flood your mind with brilliant and all-too-perishable material. That is also important. Because in the course of going out and having the decent day and night you're entitled to, you don't want to keep having ideas about the book you're on. Indeed, if you are able on your day off to avoid the unpleasant condition of being swarmed with lively thoughts about a work-in-progress when there is no piece of paper under your hand and no pen or pencil in your fingers, then you've arrived at one of the disciplines of a real writer.



83.35 The rule in capsule: If you fail to show up in the morning after your promised yourself you would just before you went to sleep last night, then you will walk around with ants in your brain.



#### YOUNG (PONT)

The primitive had senses which were closer to the animal. Obviously! He also had fears not unlike the animal. Those fears are intense. Anyone who has ever felt dread

in any real way knows it's a near-to-unendurable experience; one will do almost anything to avoid it. One is tempted to advance the notion that civilization came out of man's terror at having to face dread as a daily condition, and so we worked to elaborate a civilization that would insulate us from the exorbitant demands of existence. I'm not speaking now of those early and unbelievably pressing concerns of growing crops or killing enough game to be able to live. I'm conceiving of a greater terror where the trees virtually spoke to one, and the message one got from the rustling of the leaves and the swaying of the branches was accurate. The storm they were ready to tell you about—the terrible storm that was coming in a few weeks was going to make the river wash over its banks and flood your settlement. That warning proved to be prophetic. What terror. Small wonder if man did everything he could to remove himself from that kind of intimacy with nature, that foresight. He even escalated the costs of tribal war in order to found large nations—anything to avoid a daily existence filled with dread. Carnage ensued and philosophy developed. Is it possible that at the heart of Divinity is Irony well-installed? Carnage walks the aisles of history hand-in-hand with philosophy. If there is no afterworld where the game goes on, then existence is indeed absurd.

4/2  
4/3

#### 4. PHILOSOPHY



PRIMITIVE MAN, ART AND SCIENCE, EVIL AND JUDGMENT

Abbott

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

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

By pagan times, of course, societies as developed as the Romans were ready to rely instead on rituals and special relation to their gods. Earlier, among the Egyptians, certain amulets were the equal in value of estate holdings. If you are trying to form and

maintain a society, you can't have people going off every moment to propitiate forces on their own. You do well to get them believing there is a central force, society itself, which offers the best approach of propitiation of the gods. Can one go so far as to suggest that there is a buried element in many talented writers that unconsciously expects their work to serve not only literature but as acts of conjuration or propitiation? What, when you get down to it, was Joyce, as one mighty example, trying to show us in Finnegan's Wake?

74.5

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

(2)

74.5

While the physicist is stirred, if uncomfortably, by feeling the presence of magic in his experiment, and the artist is often drenched in statistical detail (since he has to deal with a world that grows more and more technical and difficult to comprehend), at bottom their interests are opposed. Finally, the physicist is trying to destroy the fundament of

magic, and the artist is trying to undermine the base of technology. The artist believes (and this is the greatest generalization I can make) that all cosmic achievement is attainable within the human frame, that is, if we lead lives witty enough and skillful enough, bold enough and, finally, illumined enough, we can accomplish every communication, and reach every vault within the cosmos that technology would attempt to take by force. Telepathy rather than telephony.

(3)

74.5

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

(4)

73.46

I've long had the notion that when highly charged people have a confrontation—Shakespearean characters, for example—coincidences will occur. Indeed, if there is any order in the cosmos, it should not be so exceptional that this is so. If a general, let us say, is getting ready for battle, and there are gods and devils surrounding him, they are certainly involved in the outcome. Whether the general wins or loses the contest on that



day will have an effect on the fortunes of these gods. So they're going to be paying attention, are they not? In turn, the general is going to be aware of them—at least insofar as he has sensitivity to their presence. Such a man is not necessarily foolish or psychotic if he spends his last ten minutes in bed debating whether he should put his left foot down on the floor first, or should he choose the right? Perhaps he is calling on the left or right echelon of his gods. We can also assume that these gods will be doing their best to create startling coincidences. A coincidence, after all, excites us with the livid sense that there's a superstructure about us, and in this superstructure are the agents of a presence (or a spiritual machine) larger than our imagination. When a warlike general bends his knee in prayer, it is as likely that he is calling upon a demon as invoking Jesus Christ. Of course, he may be thinking that he calls on the Lord. Doubtless, he has never encountered Kierkegaard's dictum that when we feel most saintly we could be working for the devil.

5

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

MAILER: I wouldn't agree with Hannah Arendt at all, not at all. Of course, she can make a case. There are any number of prodigiously evil people who have, from the novelist's point of view, disappointing exteriors. Eichmann, superficially speaking, was a little man, an ordinary man in appearance and vulgar and dull, but to assume therefore that evil itself is banal, strikes me as exhibiting a prodigious poverty of imagination. You

know, one of the paradoxes I always found in the liberal temperament is that they are immensely worshipful of Freud—even though most of his ideas are antipathetic to the notion of liberalism itself. But liberals do go to Freud as if he is their umbilical cord for cerebral nourishment. The reason is simple. Freud's stance is reductive and liberals don't like to believe in the vast power of the unconscious or the evil of true murderousness residing in the most ordinary people. To accept the surface for the reality is to perform the fundamental liberal reflex. In effect, liberals are always saying, "I don't see God, so why do you assume God exists?" Talk of the devil is off the charts. Out of that has come, I think, their present bankruptcy. Liberalism has no exciting ideas to offer. I think this enervation comes because it has not been able to deal with the most haunting question of the twentieth century, which is not communism but nazism. Liberalism can't come near to understanding this incredible phenomenon that took over a country of the most decent, hardworking and clean people in the world, this incredible phenomenon of a fascism that went far beyond the bounds of totalitarianism into the most despicable and extraordinary extermination of vast numbers of peoples. And this, coming out of a nation that had always been exceptionally—even comically—law-abiding, suggested that the unconscious was truly a place of hideous ambushes and horrors. Liberals, unable to weave that thought into their philosophy, were happy to welcome Hannah Arendt's phrase. But I think to speak of the banality of evil is precisely to point us further in the wrong direction. Evil has dimensions. Evil is mysterious. It can be palpable or invisible. It can appear to be banal, or, equally, show itself as intensely dramatic. September 11<sup>th</sup> does come to mind.



Pont. Adams

Back to Kierkegaard. He was ready to suggest that at the moment we're feeling most saintly, we may in fact be evil. And that moment when we think we're most evil and finally corrupt, we may, by the startling judgments of God, be saintly. The value of

this notion is that it strips us of the fundamental arrogance of assuming that at any given moment any of us have enough centrality, that is, possess a seat from which we can expound our dogma or determine our own moral value. I may have a fairly well-formed cloud of intuitions about the nature of the good, and like a cloud, it has, to a certain degree, its structure, yet the form is capable of altering quickly. A cloud changes shape quickly, but it remains a cloud. It's not just simply an unformed chaos. That, I would propose, is as close as we get to any moral truth. This is why I love the novel. It is, I would repeat, the form best suited for developing our moral sensitivity—which is to say our depth of understanding rather than our rush to judgment. Given the complexity of the last century and the surrealistic knockdowns of the first two years of this century, quick judgment has become a need analogous to the kind of all-consuming hunger that is ready to eat grass and dirt to fill the void.

(7)

83.30

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



remarkable achievement. We are in the rare presence of moral evaluations that are severe yet ultimately tender.

8

42.16

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

9

9/2/6

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

(10)

Suffolk

ATTACKS ON REALITY

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

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



and the historian, are making an attack on the possible nature of reality. Such attacks are the fundamental element in good fiction whether the form chosen is history or the novel.

11

9/16

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

12

74.3

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

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

Softolk

13

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

14

Lenny Post.

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

Well, I too am able to believe we're born with a profound appreciation of the universe and do lose it in the first few years of our life, (not to mention the first few weeks!) and then spend the rest of our time trying to gain it back. By the age of six, the school system makes certain we lose it. I don't think this is so awful. It is rather in the nature of things. It was intended that way. We're supposed to lose it and regain it. I

think it is impossible to conceive of any real achievements in knowledge without that fall. Because if knowledge is something we receive merely by opening ourselves to it, well—in the West, we can't conceive of that. Most of us find something a hint repellent about Hindu philosophy. It's the idea that you receive wisdom without a Faustian effort. We react against the assumption that the more you give yourself to the universe, and the more passive, therefore, you become, the nearer you will be to the secrets of existence. This thought is, of course, antipathetic to the Western mind. We feel you only get to the kernel of real secrets by smashing the shell. That's the way we want it. It's what we were built to do. If this doesn't have to do with novel-writing, then I don't know what this book is about.

~~Roas~~ Roas

15

The 20<sup>th</sup> century artist who conceivably had the most influence on my work was not a writer but an artist—Picasso. He kept changing the nature of his attack on reality. It's as if he felt there is a reality to be found out there, but it's not a graspable object like a rock. Rather it is a creature who keeps changing shape. And if I, Picasso, have been trying to delineate this creature by means of a particular aesthetic style and have come only this far, then I am going to look for another style altogether. And off Picasso goes into a new mode of attack on reality. It's as if you have to work your way up the north face of the mountain, come back and do the south face, the southwest face, so forth.

85.15

16

In line with Picasso, what I find most interesting in writing at this point is to keep making a new attack on the nature of reality. It's as if reality has some subtle desire to



protect itself. If we keep pushing forward in the same direction, reality is able to handle us, or evade us, and may even do it in much the same way organisms become resistant to various antibiotics, pesticides and herbicides.

17

45.3

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

18

SOCIAL VISION

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

③ 84.55 First Publication 19  
The great economists pondered the interchanges of human energy. They looked for those means and ways that such energy could be augmented institutionally or dissipated or even destroyed. In that sense, Das Kapital is a phenomenological novel with commodities serving (and experiencing an extraordinarily vital life) as protagonists. The commodities gain and lose energy just as humans do in novels. Perhaps in future years we will yet find some magnificent writer, probably not yet born, who will transcend the categories and write a work to marry those visions of society that have to do with how we offer human energy to each other, and steal it from one another, develop it, divert it.

62-16  
~~62-16~~

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



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

CG 3.18

MORAL VISION

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

throbbing social embodiment of the dialectic—thesis, antithesis, synthesis and new thesis.

22

Vitkus / 1984

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

23

Schneider / 1952

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

24



59.2

I feel that the final purpose of art is to intensify, even, if necessary, to exacerbate, the moral consciousness of people. In particular, I think the novel at its best is the most moral of the art forms. Words are the gravamen of the Commandments, after all, and of moral strictures, and, more important, moral ambiguities. You are exploring the interstices of human behavior—which is the first approach to religious experience for many of us, especially since the organized religions don't begin to cover the enormous and often terrible complexities of moral experience. The wisest rule of thumb for the would-be moralist is there are no answers. There are only questions.

(25)

Farber/Prot.

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

(26)

Better to  
Some Men

Speaking at the MacDowell Colony a while ago, I found myself saying, "There is no reason to believe the novelist is not better equipped to deal with the possibilities of a mysterious and difficult situation than anyone else, since he or she is always trying to

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

27

83.10

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

28

75.11

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

(29)

Shambing

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

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

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



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

30

95.35

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

31

74.3

If I could give one moral maxim to a young writer, I'd say live with your cowardice. Live with it every day. Recognize it, hate it or defend it, but don't try to

slough it off. Cowardice is a prime cause; literary apathy or overt writer's block is all too often the effect.

32

Manus / Post.

### BEING AND NOTHINGNESS

The reader will be aware by now that I have some obsession with how God exists. Is He an essential God or an existential God; is He all-powerful or is He, like us, an embattled existential presence who may succeed or fail in His vision? This theme may become more apparent as the novels go on. I think this obsession began to show itself while I was doing the last draft of The Deer Park. Then it continued to grow as a private theme during all the years I was smoking marijuana. One's condition on marijuana is always existential. One can feel the importance of each moment and how it is changing one. One feels one's being, one becomes aware of the enormous apparatus of nothingness—the hum of a hi-fi set, the emptiness of a pointless interruption, one becomes aware of the war between each of us, how the nothingness in each of us seeks to attack the being of others, how our being in turn is attacked by the nothingness of others. I'm not speaking now of violence or the active conflict between one being and another. That still belongs to drama. But the war between being and nothingness is the underlying

is more of existence than war. I'd hardly read anything by Sartre at this time, and nothing by Heidegger. I've read a bit since and I have to admire their formidable powers, but I suspect they are no closer to the buried continent of existentialism than were medieval cartographers near to a useful map of the world. The new continent which shows on our psychic maps as intimations of eternity is still to be discovered.

(33)

Shawber

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

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



in boredom you come to the wrong kind of rest, a pause that does not restore. There is an uneasy sense that you will sink more into nothingness.

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

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

About the time Beckett arrived on Broadway, therefore, I was certain, given the advance publicity, that he would be the worst of all. Seeing Godot, I had to recognize

that something profound was going on, but I didn't like it. I was all too familiar with those states of existence. Marriage, after all, is filled with such situations. The rigamarole of marriage, the routine, the dreadful repetitions—the husband and wife can have the skill to press each other's buttons. Nothingness pitted against nothingness.

Put a husband and wife on opposite sides of the stage. Hardly a word need be said but occasionally one of them can flick a switch and a light will go on. The other person will rise up in a rage. Title the skit "Marriage." Except that Beckett added to all that an acute sense of despair. Godot had dimension, resonance, vibrancy. Beckett's despair was sinister and joyful at once, as if he was saying, "once you feel this kind of woe, nothing will ever be that bad again." Never as bad again.

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

Philosophically, Beckett seemed to be saying, "Nothingness is at least the half of existence, so let's study it, let's attempt to enjoy it." The assumption that it could be enjoyed was the irritant. If fiction depends on how life moves from being to nothingness, then back again, Beckett chooses to stay in nothingness. He's Mozartian, however, in the

variations he can play on the theme. So I have to admire what I am bound to call the genius of his art. He is one of the very few writers of the second half of the twentieth century you can speak of as a genius. He took a deserted road and went far with it. But he never entered the dialectic between nothingness and being—let me try to exemplify what I am saying.

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

Hemingway called it a novel of affirmation because the man never gave up. My critique is that there never came a moment in the telling when the man said to himself, "It isn't worth it. I'm suffering too much. I'm going to cut the rope." Because if the old fisherman had weakened for one moment, then Hemingway would have had to have a real affirmation. Which is why doesn't his fisherman cut the rope? What is there in him that fights the temptation? The critics also rushed for the most part to call The Old Man



~~and the sea~~ Hemingway's great work of affirmation and they were wrong. It was not affirmative. The old Cuban was never tempted. So Hemingway never had to find a reason for the fisherman to say, "I won't cut it. I'll hold on." Not enough of a character had been created to answer such a question.

I think the same fault in considerably more elaborated form is present with Beckett. He never enters a situation where any of his people might try to break out of whatever trap they are in. They can be ensconced in garbage cans, or talking to a tape recorder, which, speaking of traps, is no mean example. But there is never an arduous attempt to escape whatever trap they are in. Of course, one argues that Beckett dared something no one else had ever attempted and so was reaffirming being. Daring is, after all, a vital element in being. But we are not able to enjoy this daring nearly so much as we have to dwell with the ongoing possibilities of more and more nothingness. He won't let go of that, and so the final impact of his plays is obsessive rather than haunting.

34

Shankar

It could be argued that the essence of the corporate mentality is that it will not tolerate nothingness. It is always pouring its choice of form into our minds. There is, after all, no silence on television. To which I would reply that filling essentially empty forms like commercials is a direct species of nothingness. Whenever you do not fill the aesthetic you set yourself, you are purveying just that. By now, many of not most television commercials, no matter how filled with clash and color, pay, nonetheless, almost no attention to the item they are there to sell. The intent of the advertisers comes

down to the premise that if you entertain your audience, if you pay them, in effect, for the interruption by getting them to laugh during the commercial, it's not inconceivable that a fraction of these viewers may even remember the name of the product—that's all you need. Far better than to have someone speak directly of the sterling virtues of the brand. Who would believe them? No, avoid all of that. Work to overcome the onus of nothingness that the commercial inserts into our nervous system.

35

36

743

37

MISCELLANY: PORNOGRAPHY, PICASSO AND APHORISMS

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

36

74.3

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

37



95.37

One can say that if Picasso had been braver at certain points in his life, he might have been a more generous artist. Some of the cruelty might have gone out of his work. Something grand might have come in. He had enormous talent; he was, arguably, the greatest painter since Michelangelo. With generosity, maybe Picasso would have been nobler, but the odds are that he would have been less. Because the selfishness of the artist is often there to protect the part that is generous. To the degree that artists give of themselves to all people, they don't want to give anything at all in other ways. There's an economy to generosity. And very often, the people who are the most generous are not the most talented. I think the inner sanction that the artist gives himself or herself is that they've got to be selfish—absolutely!--or nothing will get done.

Such thoughts are not happy, but the evidence—if the biographies of artists and writers are at all reliable—does support the notion that it is best to revere painters, poets and novelists for their talent rather than their character.

38

95.37

A great many artists are narcissists—certainly writers. The basic joke about a writer is that no matter how much he is suffering, a small part of him is taking notes. Even as the love of his life is walking out the door, he does note his condition. "How interesting, my left foot is now colder than my right foot. Otherwise, I'm not suffering

all a word. I think he saw himself as an intermediary between humankind and the forces that created the world and kept it in upheaval. I think he saw himself as a demiurge.

39

91.3

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

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

40

*[Handwritten scribble]*

While we are on aphorisms, there is that whole remark of Tolstoy's: "It is amazing how complete is the delusion that beauty is goodness." One can add: Yes,

oration between good and evil is probably going on—which is why Tolstoy distrusted it so, and why we react with fear and avidity to beauty.

41

Voltaire once said: "Common sense is not so common." He could have gone on to remark that the greatest abuse of common sense is generally perpetrated by people who declaim the value of their common sense.

42

Here is another from Abraham Lincoln: "Most of us are just about as happy as we make up our minds to be." That's true, but one doesn't want to decide to be happy when the likelihood is that upcoming events will be dire. For the fall will then arrive from a greater height.

43

"Merit envies success and success takes itself for merit."—Jean Rostand.

Success is, however, so confident that it is indeed possessed of merit that merit also comes to believe this is true of success. To its horror, merit then manages to respect success more than its own merit.

44



One good reason for including these Solomonic bits is to remind young writers that the worth of an aphorism is best measured by the value of the commentary it inspires. Never hitch your mind to a wise saying. A wiser one can always be built upon it.

4/5



PART II

1. GENRE

2. GIANTS AND COLLEAGUES

# 1. GENRE



## GENRE

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

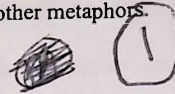
~~8-16-77~~ *Barber*

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

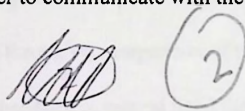
*[Signature]*

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

*Some Am. Men*



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

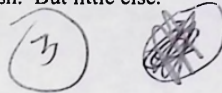


I began these forays into journalism with prejudices for how the materials of history were gathered. I also possessed the large advantage that I had weeks to ponder over what I had seen and nearly enough days in which to do the writing. I also had a literary heritage to remind me that the world is not supposed to be reassembled by panels

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



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



The excerpt that follows is part of a piece written for Esquire in 1961 and so, of course, is out of date, but, I will avow—interestingly so. The surface details have gone through a metamorphosis. The noise in one press room of a hundred working typewriters is no longer present since computers and laptops are silent. Large events no longer have long banks of telephones for the assembled journalists—cell phones substitute. The hotels no longer smell like cigars, or armpits, or feet. They are usually new and glitzy. Las Vegas set the new tone. And the reporters are much better dressed. The deadlines are now in many a case more extended and the writing in the pieces has improved. Yet in one fundamental way, nothing has changed in the profession. The inner death of the soul is still there.



*Pres Papers*  
*11th Pres. Paper*  
*"10, 200 words"*

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

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

middle-class shrug. "It's a question of taste whether one should get into the past," is the winning reply.

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

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



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

The room is in fever. Two hundred, three hundred, I suppose even five hundred reporters get into some of these rooms, there to talk, there to drink, there to bang away on any one of fifty standard typewriters, provided by the people on Public Relations who

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

So the reporters smell also of this work, they smell of the dishwasher and the pots, they are flesh burning themselves very quietly and slowly in the service of a machine which feeds goats, which feeds The Goat. One smells this collective odor on the instant one enters their meeting room. It is not a corrupt smell, it does not have enough of the meats, the savory, and the vitality of flesh to smell corrupt and fearful when it is bad, no, it is more the smell of excessive respect for power, the odor of flesh gutted by avidities which are electric and empty. I suppose it is the bleak smell one could find on the inside of one's head during a bad cold, full of fever, badly used, burned out of mood. The

physical sensation of a cold often is one of power trapped corrosively inside, coils of strength being liquidated in some center of the self. The reporter hangs in a power-less power—his voice directly or via the rewrite desk indirectly, reaches out to millions of readers; the more readers he owns, the less he can say. He is forbidden by a hundred censors, most of them inside himself, to communicate notions, which are not conformistically simple, simple like plastic is simple, that is to say, monotonous.

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

So great guilt clings to reporters. They know they help to keep America slightly insane. As a result perhaps they are a shabby-looking crew. The best of them are the shabbiest, which is natural if one thinks about it—a sensitive man suffers from the prosperous life of lies more than a dull man. In fact the few dudes one finds among reporters tend to be semi-illiterates, or hatchet men, or cynics on two or three payrolls who do restrained public relations in the form of news stories. But this is to make too much of the extremes. Reporters along the middle of the spectrum are shabby, worried,



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

Still, they do not quit. The charge of adrenalin once a day, that hysteria, that sense of powerless-power close to the engines of history—they can do without powerless-power no more than a gentleman junkie on the main line can do without his heroin, doctor. You see, a reporter is close to the action. He is not of the action, but he is close to it, as close as a crab louse to the begetting of a child. One may never be President, but

the photographer working for his paper has the power to cock a flashbulb and make the eyes of JFK go blink!

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

drinks—if you are at a big fight—are without charge. If you are at a political convention, there is no free liquor. But you do have a choice between free Pepsi-Cola and free Coca-Cola. The principle seems to be that the reporting of mildly psychotic actions—such as those performed by politicians—should be made in sobriety; whereas a sane estimate of an athlete's chances are neatest on booze. At a fight Press Headquarters, the drinks are very free, and the mood can even be half convivial. It's like being in an Army outfit everyone's forgotten. You get your food, you get your beer, you get your pay, the work is easy, and leave to town is routine. You never had it so good—you're an infant again: you can grow up a second time and improve the job.

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

It is so easy, so much is done for you, that you remember those days with nostalgia. When you do get around to paying for yourself, it is a joy to buy your own food, an odd smacking sensation to spring for a drink. It is the Welfare State which makes the pleasure possible. When one buys all one's own drinks, the sensation of



paying cash is without much joy, but to pay for a drink occasionally—that's near bliss.

Ah, journalism!



McElroy (Pmt.)

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

I discovered this at the beginning of the Sixties when I started doing journalism and realized it was a marvelous way for me to work. It was vastly easier than trying to write novels, and I was discouraged with the difficulty of writing fiction at that point. I had run into the business of trying to tell a good story and yet say exceptional things about the nature of the world and society, touch all the ultimates, and still have it read like speed. I always had a terrible time finding my story in the novel. My stories were always ending up begrounded. There I'd be in the middle of the dunes, no gas in the tank. I loved journalism for a little while because it gave me what I'd always been weakest in,

exactly that, the story. Then I discovered that this was the horror of it. Audiences liked it better. They'd all been following the same events you'd been seeing up close, and they wanted interpretation. It was those critical faculties that were being called for, rather than one's novelistic gifts. I must say I succumbed, and spent a good many years working at the edge of journalism because it was so much easier.

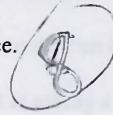
81.16

During sports events and political conventions, reporters get together in the evening to exchange stories. In effect, the average reporter gives away the stories that his paper is not likely to print and gets other stories that other newspapers or magazines are not interested in. In this media marketplace, everybody winds up using everybody else's stuff to some degree. What is worse, however, is that everybody usually arrives at the same general interpretation. To wit, Jack Kennedy is a lightweight, Nelson Rockefeller is a wonderful guy. Whatever the interpretation is for that week—count on it—it will come out as gospel. So much political wisdom is a consensus of this journalistic marketplace. At my end, possessing the confidence of a novelist, it was easy to take the larger step of thinking that, yes, the way in which I see this event is likely to be closer to the real story than the way they are seeing it. You can go a long way on that confidence. It's banal to make the remark that all you have to do is look at what is going on, but the trick is to be able to look. That is not easy for the average journalist whose vision is curtailed by the unrelenting impositions, limitations, and urgencies of his job.

7

73.43

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



81.16

One of the elements I knew was wrong is that all events had to be boiled down to, let's say, three thousand words. I thought the trick was to expand, use 20,000 words, capture the human wealth of the event. I also began to feel that the personality of the narrator was probably as important as the event. Not that the narrator would be important in his own person; it was not that I, Norman Mailer, could be a balance-weight to the Democratic Convention of 1960, but rather that I did come in with a set of prejudices. You, as the reader, couldn't begin to understand this event unless you knew enough about



me to reflect upon my bias. Then the reader could say, "Oh, well, Mailer is impossibly romantic," or "Norman is outrageously nihilistic," or, "He sure is a fool"—with that sense of superiority, the reader could thus relax sufficiently to enjoy his interpretations of what I reported. It also occurred to me that that is the way we read. We are always saying to ourselves, "Well, John Irving or Updike or Vonnegut"—or whoever it is—"is very good here, but not so good on that." It brought me to a large but obvious conclusion—objective reporting was a myth. The reader was entitled to be aware of the bent of the man or woman pretending to be that quintessential oxymoron, the fair and accurate journalist.

9

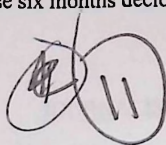
81.6  
On the other hand, journalism is easier to live with than a novel. Give me the events that history put in order for me, and I'm content—all I've got to do then is tell the tale. The difficulty of bringing off a truly impressive novel is equal to asking a singer of the stature of Pavarotti to compose his own music. Journalism makes opera singers of novelists. We've got the story, now all we've got to do is go in and show our vocal cords.

10

75.13  
In a novel you've got to decide whether your character turns left or right on a given street. And you have to keep making those decisions through the book. One major decision gone wrong can ruin the job. What makes journalism easy is, I repeat, that you are given the story. If I'd written The Fight as a novel, I'd have had to decide does

Foreman win or Ali? I'd lose six months deciding. So, you know, there it is; Ali won.

A marvelous story.



## JOURNALISTIC RESEARCH

*Harlot High*

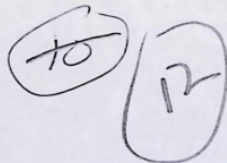
It is painful to admit that study of the CIA may not lead to exposure of facts so much as to the epistemology of facts. We will not get the goods so quickly as we will learn how to construct a model which will tell us why we cannot get the goods.

### Epistemological Model I:

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

### Epistemological Model II

Maybe it is the splinters of a mirror rather than the scattered pieces of a jigsaw that provide a superior ground for the model. We are dealing not with reality, after all, but that image of reality which reaches the surface through the cracked looking glass of the media.





Suffolk

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

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

Ancient Evenings, a novel about ancient Egypt in the Second and Twentieth Dynasties, took me eleven years to finish. In the beginning, all I knew was that I had certain instincts about death—these intimations had curious similarities to Egyptian notions. The ideas of the ancient Egyptians were certainly not identical with mine, but one element was near. In death, believed the Egyptians (and so did I), you entered upon a second set of adventures which brought you to a better place or a worse one. That was stimulating. I spent eleven years writing the book because I had to learn just about everything else on the subject. It's a hell of a way to spend the working part of eleven years. In fact, I was unfaithful, because, believe me, if you become a serious novelist--- dare I say it?---it's almost easier to steal a march on your beloved than on your manuscript. The real question is who or which is more unforgiving, the book or the lady?

It can well be the book. In the case of Ancient Evenings, and I do speak of that work as a creature--she ended up being immensely forgiving. I deserted her for two years to write The Executioner's Song. And it's as if when I came back, the manuscript might as well have said, "Hmmm, you look tired. Do your feet hurt? Here, I'll wash them." And there I was right back in the book. But often, if you desert a big project, that's the end. It does not come back to you.

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

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

13

Shanberg

Larry Schiller, who is justly famous for getting people to agree, despite all objections, to interviews, was with me in Russia when I was doing the book on Lee Harvey Oswald. We spent quite a bit of time in Minsk because there were still about thirty people living there who had known Oswald well. And they had never spoken to any reporter about him, and for good cause. Right after the assassination, the primal

reaction of the KGB had been that President Kennedy was probably assassinated by American powers on high, and Oswald had been framed because the U.S. wanted to start a war with Russia. Oswald was, indeed, the perfect patsy. He had been in the Soviet from 1959 to 1962, and had gone over as a self-declared Communist. So the KGB spread the word to people in Minsk who had known him: Don't say a word about Oswald. And for thirty years, no one had spoken. Schiller and I, there in '92, '93, discovered that the Russians who had known him in 1960, '61 and '62 made wonderful witnesses to what Oswald had been like. Not having opened their mouths all that time, he was minted in their memory.

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

One time, a very nice middle-class woman, a teacher, was being interviewed by us. But when two interrogators are doing an interview, and each has a strong and impatient mind, then each gets infuriated with the other. The fool is taking the interview in the wrong direction. We'd interrupt each other at critical moments, even come close to blows. While this woman was there, we started arguing and before long, were roaring at



one another, "You're full of shit." "Go screw!" So forth. The poor woman had to be sitting there saying to herself, "This is the American Tolstoy?"

~~13~~ 14

## TELEVISION

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

261

~~Channel 3~~~~General~~~~PH~~  
~~Comments~~

In the years before he ever went on TV himself, he used to watch it religiously; after a while, sacrilegiously. It started in the winter he was first smoking marijuana. He smoked it with all the seriousness of what was then his profoundly serious heart. It was 1954, and the drug was more important than any love affair he had ever had. It taught him more. Making love to different women, he would attempt to find that place where marijuana had last left him. It was the arena of the particular sensation he chased, as though he had been given a lovely if ineluctable emotion while watching a bullfight, and so went to the Plaza the following week to look for the same emotion — it did not matter altogether who the bullfighter was.

Since he was then in the opening-out of a career that would later provide a false legend of much machismo, he was still timid. Being deep in pot, and relatively full of life, certainly full of every intimation about himself, he was nonetheless too timid to go out late at night and see what the bars would provide. Since his second wife, not unlike himself in her jangled relations to bravery and cowardice, had usually and prudently gone to bed, he would be up alone at night, his mind teeming, and he would watch TV till the stations shut down. In those days, he made monumental connections on pot. He had to see no more than one animated spiral inserted by a commercial into the guts of a washing machine, a lively spiral that would tunnel right up the tube, and he would try to explain to his friends next day that the advertising agency was promoting the idea that their washing machine was congenial to a housewife's cunt. His friends thought him mad. He examined automobile commercials by the same light and saw that they were no longer selling the car by way of the pretty girl sitting on the fender as once they did; now, they were selling the car itself. The car was the fuck. "Dynaflow does it in oil," the announcer would say of an automatic transmission. So, he would tell his friends. His friends would think him mad and try to dissuade him from smoking too much pot. Marijuana was regarded differently in those days; it offered echoes of *Reefer Madness*.

He would watch Ernie Kovacs and Steve Allen late at night and would recognize that they knew what he knew. They saw how the

; so it was small  
either, not after  
The vampire of  
TV was not the  
was still the se-

eed, how could  
of one's stay in  
the air those vi-

t for an instant  
had written his  
him, and if so,  
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writer I hear,  
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arbles.

Mailer tells  
an Library  
books, she

than those



... did it in oil. Years later when Motivational Research was pre-  
 pared to the world, and everybody was ready to tell everybody at a  
 ry that an automobile was not used by a man to get a mistress,  
 was the mistress; and a housewife liked to identify the health of  
 washing machine with her own genito-urinary harmonies —  
 at no ill of the bowels! — Mailer was merely glad that Vance  
 kard had done the job. He was behind on too many of his own  
 : Marijuana had flung the separate parts of his brain into too  
 y vivid places. In those days he had perceptions on every sub-  
 : was convinced, on the consequence, that he was a genius. He  
 getting very little writing done.

ill, he clung to his set. It explained the world to him. He was  
 up hip to everything, and the beauty was that he did not have to  
 ure out.

would not occur to him until six years later, when he would  
 his wife, that it was not timidity which had been his first vice,  
 violence, a murderous nest of feeling so intransigent that he did  
 lare to go out at night for good cause, and did not know how to  
 at night without Second for even better cause — there was too  
 hatred at the distance between what he wished to do and what  
 as able to accomplish. Since his wife, faced with the choice of  
 : to sleep early, or entering on a claustrophobic quarrel, would,  
 urse, go to sleep, he would sit by himself from midnight until  
 a the morning when the last show would go off the air, the flag  
 ripple in the wind, and The Star-Spangled Banner would be  
 d. In those days, he got to hate The Star-Spangled Banner all  
 gain. It sounded like the first martial strains of that cancer he  
 convinced was coming on him, and who knows? If he had not  
 id his wife, he might have been dead in a few years himself —  
 error of violence is its unspoken logic.

in those early mornings when television was his only friend,  
 w already that he detested his habit. There was not enough to  
 rom watching TV. Some indispensable pieces of experience *wer*  
 missing. Except it was worse than that. Something not in exist-  
 was also present, some malignancy to burn against his own  
 any, some onslaught of dots into the full pressure of his own  
 vision. Often, when the stations would go off the air and *no*  
 prams were left to watch, he would still leave the set on. The  
 ould hum in a timeless pullulation, and the dots would hiss  
 gitation of what forces he did not know. The hiss and the

hum would fill the room and then his ears. There was, of course, no  
 clamor — it was nearer to anti-noise dancing in eternity with noise.  
 And watching the empty video, he would recognize it was hardly  
 empty. Bands of gray and lighter gray swam across the set, roll-  
 overs swept away the dots, and something like sun-spots crackled  
 forth. Then the set went back to the slow scan of the waves and the  
 drone of the audio. He discovered at last that such use of TV was a  
 species of tranquilizer and could deaden the sharpest edge of his  
 nerve. Blunted, impalpably bruted by a half-hour of such odorless  
 immersion, he would with the aid of his Second be a little more  
 ready to go to sleep.

A few years later when McLuhan would torment the vitals of a  
 generation of American intellectuals with the unremovable harpoon  
 that "the media is the message," Mailer could give his agreement.  
 The message of TV was the scan of gray on gray and the hum of the  
 sound when there was neither music nor a voice. Much later, in the  
 Fall of '72, he would set out to make audiences laugh by comparing  
 President Nixon's then featureless but disturbing personality to a  
 TV screen that is lit when nothing is on the air. Nixon was there, he  
 would remark, to deaden the murderous mood of the Republic. In-  
 deed, it was the best explanation for why a man so unpopular was  
 going to win by so great a majority. If Nixon did not make anyone  
 very happy, neither did the TV set. Its message was equal to  
 Nixon's: I am here to deaden you — you need it!

Maybe America did need it. Brooding over America of the Six-  
 ties, that insane expanding America where undercover FBI men  
 were inspiring (wherever they were not committing) the most vio-  
 lent acts of the Left, brooding on that rich and powerful country  
 where puritanism was still as alive as every Baptist, that corporate  
 land with no instinctive response to aesthetics engaged now in the  
 dissemination throughout the world of the worst applied aesthetics  
 in the history of the world, its superhighways the highest form of  
 strip mining, its little buildings kin to shoeboxes, its big buildings  
 scaled to the module of one cardboard carton piled on top of an-  
 other, the U.S. skyline thereby deserting the high needles of Man-  
 hattan for the Kleenex boxes of Dallas; that food-guzzling Republic  
 that froze its food before it would overcook it, and liked to lick  
 ketchup off French fries so soggy they dropped from your fingers  
 like worms — the worst food in the history of the world! — that  
 sex-revolutionary Republic where swinging singles were connecting  
 up with like-units — every other Baptist! — that sadistically revolu-

any repugnant going into black leather, S-M, and knocking off  
gooks in rice paddies, defoliating the foliage, digging the hog-reso-  
nance of motors between one's legs, and flame-throwers and comic  
books, and Haight-Ashbury, hitting golf balls on the moon, yes, that  
America, full of dread, could certainly use TV—I am here to  
deadend you, you need it!

263



Those were legitimate feelings for 1972. One had had a large  
fraction of a life by then watching TV, and one had long ago had the  
education of putting oneself on shows. Back in '53 and '54, however,  
stoned on pot, wadded up and down on Seconal, jammed with ambi-  
tion, terror, and the common lust to learn the secrets of the world  
some easy way, the immersion into TV was profound. By it, one  
could study the world, and the tricks of the world.

So, for instance, would he examine people as strange to him as  
Igor Cassini who had a show in those years for snobs and it was  
hard as fiberglass. TV proved to be more interesting then for you  
could see a genuine article regularly, well-groomed, Republican,  
rich enough to own horses, sexy enough to marry up, and empty  
enough to find any topic of conversation amusing provided it was  
oid of content. Those were Igor Cassini's guests. Mailer would on  
such occasions peer right into the tube to get a little nearer to the  
velutic wealth.

Or: studying the tourist, he learned much about American fella-  
ship. TV was scintillating for that. Next to the oil of Dynaflow and  
the spiral in the washing machine, came the phallic immanence of  
the microphone. A twinkle would light up in Steve Allen's eye as he  
looked at the mike and cord down the aisle and in and out of impromptu  
interviews with his audience, snaking the rounded knob right up to  
the mouth of some starched skinny Middle West matron, lean as  
a cord, tense as rectitude, a life of iron disciplines in the vertical  
folds of the upper lip; the lady would bare her teeth in a snarl  
show a shark's mouth as she brought her jaws around to face  
maybe bite off that black knob so near to touching her  
nose.

high school girl would be next, there with the graduating class  
trip to New York, her folks watching back home. She would  
be before the mike. She could not get her mouth open. She  
kept dodging in her seat, and Steve would stay in pursuit,  
extended. Two nights ago she dodged for two hours in the  
seat of a car. My God, this was in public.  
young housewife, liberal, sophisticated, happy to present her

congenial point of view, compliments Mr. Allen on the quality of  
his show. "We watch you regularly, Steve, and like to think we're  
not too far behind the times up in Norfolk, Connecticut. That's  
right, Norfolk, not Norwalk." Her mouth, which has regular lips, is  
held a regular distance from the microphone. She shows no diffi-  
culty with it, no more than she would have with a phallus; two fin-  
gers and a thumb keep the thing canted right. There can be nothing  
wrong, after all, in relations between consenting adults. So speaks  
her calm.

Then there is a big heavy-set man who owns a grain-and-feed  
store in Ohio. He prides himself on imperturbable phlegm, and  
some thrift with words. He is not quite aware of the mike. If a man  
came into his store and proceeded to expose himself, this proprietor  
would not see it right away. He might, after all, be explaining the  
merits and demerits of one feed-mix to another; since he chews no  
gum when he walks, neither does he offer attention to tangentialia as  
he talks. Now, singled out from the audience to be interviewed, he is  
stiffnecked, and responds only from that side of his mouth adjacent  
to the cheek on which Steve is asking the questions; he allows,  
"New York is a good place to visit, bur, yessir, I'll be glad to start up  
for home," then, bla-looh! he sees it, black blimp-like little object!  
he blinks, he swallows, he looks at Steve: "I guess I've had my say,  
Mr. Allen," he says, and shuts up shop. Later he will tell a pinocchio  
partner about the crazy people in New York. "Yes," the friend will  
acknowledge.

"You bet, Steve," says the next fellow, "I'm awfully glad you  
selected me. I've always wanted to talk to you." He is fully aware of  
the mike and what it portends. "Yes, yes, I'm a male secretary, love  
the work." "It doesn't bother you," asks Steve, "if people say, 'What  
is that, a male secretary, isn't it supposed to be women's work?'"  
"Oh, Steve, that doesn't bother me a bit. Here," he says, reaching  
for the mike. "Do you mind? I'm much more comfortable when I  
hold it."

"Help yourself," says Steve.

"Oh, I intend to," says the guest. "Life is a feast, and I think we  
should all get what we can, don't you?"

~~Hip! Mailer, building dreams of future power in the darkness,  
saw it all. America was getting hip. In the center of marijuana was  
the secret of how to do it. You needed the audacity to take your step.  
In those days his life was simple, if much debilitated. Exhausted  
from writing *The Deer Park*, frantic from trying to do his columns~~

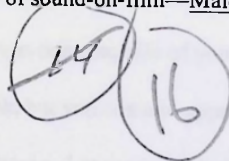
13 51



FILM

68.26

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

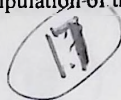


81.16

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



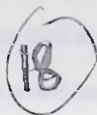
I would also say that to the degree film reaches us in a precise way, it's not very good. Film is best when ambiguous. A truly good film will affect two people profoundly, but, often, they will argue for hours over the message. For one, it's a satire, to the other, a tragedy. That's as it should be.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



87.17

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

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



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

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

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

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



268

always experience, while watching a film, emotions analogous to an afternoon spent on the banks of a stream. That might have been seen instantly as confining, a most confining notion; but to consider the carry-over of the story from literature to the film as equally constricting — no, that was not very evident.

For few people wished to contemplate the size of the job in transporting a novelist's vision of life over to a film; indeed, who in the movie business was going to admit that once literary characters had been converted over to actors, they could not possibly produce the same relation to other actors that the characters once had to each other? Interpretations had to collide. If each actor had his own idea of the dialogue he committed to memory, be certain the director had a better idea. And the producer! Lifetimes of professional craft go into halving such conceptual differences. The director gives up a little of his interpretation, then a little more, then almost all of it. The actor is directed away from his favorite misconceptions (and conceptions). Both parties suffer the rigor mortis of the technical conditions — which are not so close to a brightly lit operating theatre as to a brightly lit morgue. Then the scriptwriter has dependably delivered the scenario with his own private — and sometimes willful — idea buried in it (and if the work is an adaptation, odd lines of the novelist are still turning over). The coherence of the original novel has been cremated and strewn. Now the film is being made with conflicting notions of those scattered ashes. Of course the director is forced back willy-nilly to his script. It is all he can finally depend upon. Given the fundamental, nay, even organic, confusion on a movie set over what everybody is really doing, the company has to pool all differences and be faithful to the script even when the script has lost any relation to the original conception, and has probably begun to constrict the real life which is beginning to emerge on the set. No wonder great novels invariably

269

make the most disappointing movies, and modest novels (like *The Asphalt Jungle*) sometimes make very good movies. It is because the original conception in modest novels is less special and so more capable of being worked upon by any number of other writers, directors, and actors.

Still, the discussion has been too narrow. The film, after all, is fed not only by literature but by the theatre, and the theatre is a conspicuous example of how attractively a blueprint can be unfolded. In fact, the theatre is reduced to very little whenever the collaboration between actors and script is not excellent. Yet the theatre has had to put up with many a similar difficulty. Can it be said that something works in the theatre which only pretends to work in the film? If the first error perpetrated upon movies has been to see them as an adjunct of literature, perhaps the second is the rush to make film an auxiliary of the theatrical arts, until even movies considered classics are hardly more than pieces of filmed theatre.

Of course a film lover could counter by saying that he was not necessarily thinking only of such monuments as *Gone with the Wind* when he used the term classic. In fact, he would inquire about *A Night at the Opera* or *The Maltese Falcon*.

The difficulties had obviously begun. ~~The Argument would be never so simple again.~~ The Marx Brothers, for example, stampeded over every line of a script and tore off in enough directions to leave concepts fluttering like ticker tape on the mysterious nature of the movie art. Certainly, any attempt to declare *The Maltese Falcon* a piece of filmed theatre would have to confess that *The Maltese Falcon* was more, a mysterious ineffable possession of "more" and that was precisely what one looked for in a film. It was a hint to indicate some answer to the secrets of film might begin to be found in the curious and never quite explained phenomenon of the movie star. For Humphrey Bogart was certainly an element of natural



270

film, yes, even *the* element which made *The Maltese Falcon* more than a excellent piece of filmed theatre. Thinking of the evocative aesthetic mists of that movie, how could the question not present itself: why did every piece of good dramatic theatre have to be the enemy of the film? It was unhappily evident to ~~The Argument~~ that any quick and invigorating theses on the character of movie stars and the hidden nature of the movie might have to wait for a little exposition on the special qualities of theatre.

3

A complex matter. You might, for instance, have to take into account why people who think it comfortable to be nicely drunk at the beginning of a play would find it no pleasure to go to a movie in the same condition. Pot was more congenial for a film. If the difference for most hard-working actors between movies and theatre seemed hardly more than a trip across a crack, the split to any philosopher of the film was an abyss, just that same existential abyss which lies between booze and the beginnings of the psychedelic.

Existentially, theatre and film were in different dominions (and literature was probably nearer to each of them than they were to each other). The theatre was a ceremony with live priests who had learned by rote to pool their aesthetic instincts for a larger purpose. So theatre partook of a near obscene ceremony: it imitated life in a living place, and it had real people as the imitators. Such imitation was either sacrilege to the roots of life, or a reinforcement of them. Certainly, sentiments called religious appeared ready to arise whenever a group of people attended a ceremony in a large and dimly lit place. But in fact anyone who has ever experienced a moment of unmistakable balance between the audience, the cast, the theatre and the *manifest* of the



271

play, an awe usually remarked by a silence palpable as the theatrical velvet of an unvoiced echo, knows that the foundation of the theatre is in the church and in the power of kings, or at least knows (if theatre goes back to blood sacrifices performed in a cave — which is about where the most advanced theatre seems ready to go) that the more recent foundations were ecclesiastical and royal. Theatre, at all of its massive best, can be seen as equal to a ceremony, performed by noblemen who have power to chastise an audience, savage them, dignify them, warm them, marry their humors, even create a magical forest where each human on his seat is a tree and every sense is vibrating to the rustle of other leaves. One's roots return then to some lost majesty of pomp and power. Of course, theatre is seldom so good. None of us have had a night like that recently. Still, theatre has its minutes: a scene whose original concept was lost in the mixing of too many talents is recovered by the power of the actor to open relations with his audience. While he is engaged in an emotional transaction which is false by its nature (because he knows by heart the lines of apparently spontaneous passion he will say next), still he has to be true to the honest difficulty of not knowing whether the audience will believe him or not. His position on stage is existential — he cannot know in advance if his effort will succeed or not. In turn, the audience must respect him. For he is at the least brave enough to dare their displeasure. And if he is bad enough . . . well, how can he forget old nightmares where audiences kill actors? So the actor on stage is at once a fraud (because he pretends to emotion he cannot by any Method feel absolutely — *or he would be mad*) and yet is a true man engaged in a tricky venture, dangerous in its potentialities for humiliation. That is the strength of the theatre. A vision of life somewhat different each night comes into existence between the actors and the

272

audience, and what has been lost in the playwright's vision is sometimes transcended by the mood of a high theatrical hearth.

We are speaking of course only of the best and freshest plays. Even in a good play something dies about the time an actor recognizes that he can be mediocre in his performance and survive. The reputation of the play has become so useful that the audience has become a touch mediocre as well; at this point in the season the actor inevitably becomes as interesting as a whore in a house after her favorite client has gone for the night.

Nonetheless, it is still reminiscent of orgy to have relations with two worlds of sentience at once, and when fresh, theatre is orgy. On stage, the actor is in communion with the audience and up to his neck in relations with other actors (if they are all still working together). A world of technique supports them. There are ways and means to live and act with half-thought-out lines of dialogue and errors of placement by the director, ways to deal with sentiments which have no ring and situations one knows by heart and still must enter with a pretense of theatrical surprise. An actor's culture exists, after all, for the working up of the false into the all-but-true; actors know the audience will carry the all-but-true over into the real and emotionally stirring if given a chance. So actors develop a full organ of emotional manifests. Large vibrant voices, significant moves. It all works because the actor is literally alive on a stage and therefore can never be false altogether. His presence is the real truth: he is at once the royal center of all eyes, and a Christian up before lions. So his theatrical emotion (which bears the same relation to real emotion which veneer of walnut bears to walnut) is moved by the risk of his position into a technique which offers truth. A skillful actor with false gestures and false emotions elicits our admiration because he tries to establish a vault under which we can seize on the truth since, after all, he



has told the lie so well. Why, then, must that be an emotional transaction light years of the psyche away from the same transaction carried over to film?

4

273

It is because the risk in film is of other varieties. No audience is present unless the actor plays his scene for the cameramen and the union grips. And that is a specific audience with the prejudices and tastes of policemen. Indeed they usually dress like cops off duty and are built like cops (with the same heavy meat in the shoulders, same bellies oiled on beer), which is not surprising for they are also in surveillance upon a criminal activity: people are forging emotions under bright lights.

But it is no longer false emotion brought by technique to a point where it can be breathed upon and given life by audiences who do not know the next line. No, now the crew is a set of skills and intelligences. They are as sophisticated to the lines of the scene as the actors themselves. Like cops they see through every fake move and hardly care. The camera must move on cue and the sound boom, the lights be shifted and the walls slid apart — the action is easily as complex as a professional football team running through the intricacies of a new play or preparing a defense against it.

In fact, the actor does not usually play for the technicians. It is the director whose intelligence he will feel first, a charged critical intelligence knowing more of the scene than himself, a center of authority altogether different from a theatrical audience's authority (which is ready to relax with every good sound the actor makes). The movie director, however, does not relax then. The good sound of the actor can turn the plot inside out. No, here, the actor must work into a focus of will. The real face he speaks to, whether a step or ten steps to the side of the director, is a circle of glass as empty of love as an empty glass. That lens is his final audience. It takes pre-



274

cedence over the director and even over the actors he plays with. In the moment of his profoundest passion, as he reaches forward to kiss the heroine with every tenderness, his lips to be famous for their quiver, he is of course slowly and proficiently bringing his mouth up to the erogenous zone of the lens.

On stage, an actor, after twenty years of apprenticeship, can learn to reach the depths of an audience at the moment he is employing the maximum of his technique. A film actor with equivalent technique will have developed superb skills for revealing his reaction to the circle of glass. He can fail every other way, disobey the director or appear incapable of reacting to his direction, leave the other actors isolated from him and with nothing to react to, he can even get his lines wrong, but if he has film technique he will look sensational in the rushes, he will bring life to the scene even if he was death on the set. It is not surprising. There is something sinister about film. *Film is a phenomenon whose resemblance to death has been ignored for too long.* An emotion produced from the churn of the flesh is delivered to a machine, and that machine and its connections manage to produce a flow of images which will arouse some related sentiment in those who watch. The living emotion has passed through a burial ground — and has been resurrected. The living emotion survives as a psychological reality; it continues to exist as a set of images in one's memory which are not too different, as the years go by, from the images we keep of a relative who is dead. Think of a favorite uncle who is gone. Does the apparatus of the mind which flashes his picture before us act in another fashion if we ask for a flash of Humphrey Bogart next? Perhaps it does not. Film seems part of the mechanism of memory, or at the least, a most peculiar annex to memory. For in film we remember events as if they had taken place and we were there. But we were not. The psyche has taken into itself a whole country of fantasy and made it psychologically real,

275

made it a part of memory. We are obviously dealing with a phenomenon whose roots are less defined than the power and glory of king and church. Yes, movies are more mysterious than theatre; even a clue to the undefinable attraction of the movie star is that he remains a point of light in that measureless dark of memory where other scenes have given up their light. He has obviously become a center of meaning to millions, possessed of more meaning than the actor next to him who may be actually more attractive, more interesting — definition of the phenomenon frays as we try to touch it. But has the heart of the discussion been sounded? Does it suggest that movie stars partake of the mysterious psychic properties of film more than other actors? that something in them lends itself to the need of memory for images of the past one can refer to when the mind has need to comprehend something new before it? We have to be careful. It is perhaps not so simple as that. The movie star may also suggest obsession, that negative condition of memory, that painful place to which we return over and over because a fundamental question is still unresolved: something happened to us years ago which was important, yet we hardly know if an angel kissed us then or a witch, whether we were brave or timid. We return to the ambiguity with pain. The obsession hurts because we cannot resolve it and so are losing confidence in our ability to estimate the present.

Obsession is a wasteful fix. Memory, when it can be free of obsession, is a storehouse to offer up essences of the past capable of digesting most of the problems of the present, memory is even the libido of the ego, sweetening harsh demands of the will when memory is, yes, good. But the movie star seems to serve some double function: the star feeds memory *and* obsession — one need only think back to one's feelings about Marilyn Monroe! The movie star is welcoming but mysterious, unavailable yet intimate, the movie star is the embodiment of a love



276

which could leave us abject, yet we believe we are the only soul the movie star can love. Quintessence of the elusive nature of film, the movie star is like a guide to bring us through the adventures of a half-conscious dream. It is even possible the movie star gives focus to themes of the imagination so large, romantic, and daring that they might not encounter reality: how can an adolescent have any real idea whether he will ever have sex with a beautiful woman or fight for his life? Nonetheless, events so grand might need years of psychic preparation. It was therefore also possible that the dream life of the film existed not only to provide escape but to prepare the psyche for apocalyptic moments which would likely never come.

Some differences of film from theatre may then have been noted. Theatre works on our ideas of social life and our understanding of manners. At its most generous theatre creates a communion of bodies and a savory of the emotions — it becomes a feast and a fuck. But film speaks to the lost islands of the mind. Film lives somewhere in that underground river of the psyche which travels from the domain of sex through the depths of memory and the dream, on out into the possible montages of death — we need only think of any man who was rescued from drowning after he thought he was on the last trip down. Does he ever relate the experience without speaking of the sensation that his life became a film running backward? *It is as if film has an existence within the brain which may be comparable to memory and the dream, be indeed as real as memory and the dream, be even to some degree as functional.* It was as if the levels of that existential river which runs into ultimate psychic states would no longer read as perhaps once it did: sex — memory — dream — death; but now flows through a technological age and so has to be described by way of sex — memory — film — dream — death. Theatre has to be in the world of manners, but



277

film is in the physiology of the psyche. For that reason, perhaps, film comes nearest to a religion as the movie houses are empty, it speaks across all the lonely traverses of the mind, it is at its most beautiful in precisely those places it is least concrete, least theatrical, most other-worldly, most ghostly, most lingering unto death — then the true experience of the film as some Atlantis of the psyche will manifest itself, and directors like Antonioni and Bergman will show us that the film inhabits a secret place where the past tense of memory and the future intimations of the dream are interchangeable, are partners in the film: there is an unmistakable quality to any film which is not made as filmed theatre but rather appears as some existence we call film. That existence runs through Chaplin and *Sunset Boulevard* and *Persona* — it runs through home movies. It was Warhol's talent to perceive that in every home movie there is a sense of Time trying to express itself as a new kind of creation, a palpability which breathes in the *being* of the film. The best of works and some of the worst of film works have this quality. One can even find it for flashes in cranky old battered films of the purest mediocrity late at night on TV, B-films without an instant of talent, yet the years have added magic to what was once moronic — Time is winking her eye as we look at the film. Time suddenly appears to us as a wit.

Of course, there are movies which have delivered huge pleasures to millions and never were film at all, just celluloid theatre convertible to cash. Some were good, some very good, some awful, but the majority of motion pictures, particularly the majority of expensive ones, have always labored against the umbilical antipathy of film for theatre. They were, no matter how good as filmed theatre, never equal to theatre at its best — rather, scaled-down repasts for the eye and ear. They had a kind of phlegmatic tempo and all-too-well-lit color which rarely hindered them from reaching lists for the Ten

278

Best Pictures of the year. They were pictures like *Okla-homa!*, *South Pacific*, *The Sound of Music*, *Mary Pop-pins*, and *The Best Years of Our Lives*. They were even such critical favorites as *Marty*, *Born Yesterday*, *Brief Encounter*, and *The Seven Year Itch*, or *Anne of the Thousand Days*, add *Lust for Life*, *All About Eve*, *Around the World in Eighty Days*, *West Side Story*. All that celluloid was super-technique for audiences who had not necessarily ever seen a play but were constantly nourished in the great cafeteria of the American Aes-thetic where the media meals were served up as binder for the shattered nervous system of the masses. To the owners of that cafeteria there was something obscene in the idea that one should not be able to translate a book into a play, film, or TV series — something arrogant, for it would say the difference between the movies just named and films like *Zabriskie Point*, ~~1966~~ *Naked Summer*, *Belle de Jour*, *Limelight*, *Diabolique*, *8½*, *The Bicycle Thief*, *The Four Hundred Blows*, *High Noon*, *Easy Rider*, and *Weekend* were as the difference between crud and sustenance for that ghostly part of the psyche the film was supposed to enrich.

50

Very well. ~~He had his point at least.~~ There was film and filmed theatre; there were relatively pure movies, and there were money-making motion pictures which had al-most nothing to do with movies or memory or dream, but were filmed circus for the suckers who proceeded to en-joy them enormously (~~when they did for some cost~~ ~~anyons of cash and brought back trickles~~), suckers who loved them for their binding glue, and the status of seeing them, and the easy massage such pictures gave to emotions real theatre might have satisfied more. These motion pictures, made for no motive more in focus than the desire for money, were derived from plays, or were written and directed as filmed plays, they composed



279

three-quarters to nine-tenths of the motion pictures which were made, and they might yet be the terminal death of Hollywood for they were color television on enormous screens and so failed more often than they succeeded; the media were mixed so the messages were mixed — audiences tended to regard them with apathy.

Of course the films ~~he loved~~ were just as often watched in empty theatres, but if he would call upon the difference it was that they were not regarded in apathy but in subtle fear or mixed pleasure or with gloom or dread or the kind of fascination which hinted uncomfortably at future obsession. There was a quality he could almost lay his hands on in movies he admired and so would raise to the superior eminence of film: they

~~Such~~ <sup>provided</sup> ~~films~~ were experiences which were later as pure in recollection as splendid or tragic days in one's life, they were not unlike the memory of some modest love which did not survive but was tender in retrospect for now it lived with the dignity of old love. Such films <sup>also</sup> changed as one remembered them since they had become part of one's psychological life. Like love, they partook a little of some miracle, they had emerged from the abominable limitations of the script, yes, they had emerged out of some mysterious but wholly agreeable lack of focus toward that script in the intent of the director and/or the actor, they were subtly attached to a creative mist, they had the ambiguity of film. For if filmed theatre could sometimes be effective, sometimes be even as perfect and deserving of admiration as *Midnight Cowboy* or *On the Waterfront*, such pictures still had their aesthetic fired by the simpler communication of the theatre where relations between actors usually produced a dramatic outcome as capable of definition as the last line of a family fight. "Go to an analyst" turned out to be the message, or "Lover, we'll get along," or "God bless us, we're unhappy, but we'll stick for the kids." If it is theatre so rich as *The Little Foxes*, it will say, "I am prepared to kill you, and I will." Since the



280

need of a stage actor is to draw an audience together, his instinct is to simplify the play and concentrate it, give it a single crisp flavor. So theatre speaks. Powerfully or with banality, comically, or in the botch of hysteria, it speaks, secretly it almost always speaks vulgarly, for almost always it says, "We're here to tell you something about life. We've got a piece of the meat for you." Of course if it is bad theatre, conceived in advance as a television series or any other form of Cafeteria, then it is only there to tell you something about public opinion and how that works at the lowest common denominator. But good or bad, theatre functions at its simple best when every resonance of the evening can collect about a single point — that place where the actors seduced the audience to meet the play.

Film, however, is shown to audiences who do not often react together. Some laugh, while others are silent, some are bored. Few share the same time. They have come in on the movie at different places. For film always speaks of death. Theatre rouses desires between the living audience and the living actors; film stirs suicide pacts where each individual in the audience goes over the horizon alone with the star; film speaks of the ambiguity of death — is it nothingness we go to, or eternal life? Is it to peace we travel or the migrations of the soul? So the ambiguity of the movie star is essential, and it helps to understand that subtle emptiness which is usually present in the colors of their acting, that pause in the certainty of what they would say, that note of distraction and sorrows on the other side of the hill, that hint they are thinking of a late date they will meet after this guy is gone. Movie stars are caught in the complexity of the plot but they do not belong to it altogether, as stage actors do. It does not matter of whom we speak: whether it is Garbo or Harlow or Marilyn Monroe, Carole Lombard or Myrna Loy, even Dottie Lamour or Grable, the star is still one misty wink of the eye away from total absorp-

perilous

281

tion. Even Cagney, phallic as a column of rock, had the hint of bells ringing in his head from blows some big brother gave him in years gone by, and Gable's growling voice always seemed to hint at one big hunk of other business he would have to take care of in a little while. The charisma of the movie star spoke of associations with tangential thoughts, with dissipations of the story-point into ripples which went out wider and wider, out to the shores of some land only the waves of the movies could wash.

~~Now, much of that was gone. There were still stars, even in color film there were bona fide stars. There was Catherine Deneuve and Robert Redford and huge box-office familiars predictable as the neighbor next door and twice as vivid — Bob Hope and Lucille Ball for two. If film spoke of death, motion-pictures-for-money spoke of everything which was boring, unkillable, and bouncy, and could be stopped with a switch quick as TV, and was by couples necking in drive-in theatres. The film had also become brands of sex marked R, X and Hard-Core, the film was epic documentaries like *Woodstock* and *Gimme Shelter*, the film was *Pound* and *Trash* and *Performance*, which some called great and some would not, the film was in transition, the film was in a place no one could name, and he was there with *Maidstone*, caught in the position of talking about a film made near to three years before. Three years was a decade in the recent history of the film. Half of the shock in his sexual scenes was nearly as comfortable by now as the lingerie ads in a fashion magazine, and his emphasis on film without script was evident in small uses everywhere, it had begun for that matter as long ago as Cassavetes' *Shadows*, a film of the fifties he did not particularly remember, but then for that matter, film without script had begun with the two-reeler and the sequence of action worked out on the director's white starched cuff. It was finally not to the point. He had had a conception of film~~



Madwick  
(Pant.)

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

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

### Tango, Last Tango

To pay one's \$5.00 and join the full house at the Translux for the evening show of Last Tango in Paris is to be reminded once again that the planet is in a state of pullulation. The seasons accelerate. The snow which was falling in November had left by the first of March. Would our summer arrive at Easter and end with July? It is all that



nuclear radiation, says every aficionado of the occult. And we pullulate. Like an ant-hive beginning to feel the heat.

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

284

## PIECES • 116

us to her first public reception. Prophets of Baal, praise Kael! We had obviously no ordinary hour of cinema to contemplate.

Now, a half year later, the movie is history, has all the palpability of the historic. Something just discernible has already happened to humankind as a result of it, or at least to that audience who are coming in to the Translux to see it. They are a crew. They have unexpected homogeneity for a movie audience, compose, indeed, so thin a sociological slice of the New York and suburban sausage that you cannot be sure your own ticket isn't what was left for the toothpick, while the rest of the house has been bought at a bite. At the least, there is the same sense of aesthetic oppression one feels at a play when the house is filled with a theater party. So, too, is the audience at *Tango* an infarct of middle-class anal majesties — if Freud hadn't given us the clue, a reader of faces could decide all on his own that there had to be some social connection between sex, shit, power, violence, and money. But these middle-class faces have advanced their historical inch from the last time one has seen them. They are this much closer now to late Romans.

Whether matrons or young matrons, men or boys, they are *swingers*. The males have wife-swapper mustaches, the women are department-store boutique. It is as if everything recently and incongruously idealistic in the middle class has been used up in the years of resistance to the Vietnamese War — now, bring on the Caribbean. Amazing! In America, even the Jews have come to look like the French middle class, which is to say that the egocentricity of the Fascist mouth is on the national face. Perhaps it is the five-dollar admission, but this audience has an obvious obsession with sex as the confirmed core of a wealthy life. It is enough to make one ashamed of one's own obsession (although where would one delineate the difference?). Maybe it is that this audience, still in March, is suntanned, or at the least made up to look suntanned. The red and orange of their skins will match the famous "all uterine" colors — so termed by the set designer — of the interiors in *Last Tango*.

In the minute before the theater lights are down, what a tension is in the house. One might as well be in the crowd just before an important fight commences. It is years since one has watched a movie begin with such anticipation. And the tension holds as the projection starts. We see Brando and Schneider pass each other in



285

11: - *Tango, Last Tango*

the street. Since we have all been informed — by *Time* no less — we know they are going to take carnal occupation of each other, and very soon. The audience watches with anxiety as if it is also going to be in the act with someone new, and the heart (and for some, the bowels) shows a tremor between earthquake and expectation. Maria Schneider is so sexual a presence. None of the photographs has prepared anybody for this. Rare actresses, just a few, have flesh appeal. You feel as if you can touch them on the screen. Schneider has nose appeal — you can smell her. She is every eighteen-year-old in a mini-skirt and a maxi-coat who ever promenaded down Fifth Avenue in the inner arrogance that proclaims, "My cunt is my chariot."

We have no more than a few minutes to wait. She goes to look at an apartment for rent, Brando is already there. They have passed in the street, and by a telephone booth; now they are in an empty room. Abruptly Brando cashes the check Stanley Kowalski wrote for us twenty-five years ago — he fucks the heroine standing up. It solves the old snicker of how do you do it in a telephone booth? — he rips her panties open. In our new line of *New Yorker*-approved superlatives, it can be said that the cry of the fabric is the most thrilling sound to be heard in World Culture since the four opening notes of Beethoven's Fifth.<sup>1</sup> It is, in fact, a hell of a sound, small, but as precise as the flash of a match above a pile of combustibles, a way for the director to say, "As you may already have guessed from the way I established my opening, I am very good at movie making, and I have a superb pair, Brando and Schneider — they are sexual heavyweights. Now I place my director's promise upon the material: you are going to be in for a grave and wondrous experience. We are going to get to the bottom of a man and a woman."

So intimates Bertolucci across the silence of that room, as Brando and Schneider, fully dressed, lurch, grab, connect, hump, scream, and are done in less than a minute, their orgasms coming on top of one another like trash cans tumbling down a hill. They fall to the floor, and fall apart. It is as if a hand grenade has gone off in their entrails. A marvelous scene, good as a passionate kiss in real life, then not so good because there has been no shot of Brando going up Schneider, and since the audience has been watching in all the som-

<sup>1</sup> John Simon, as predictable in his critical reactions as a headwaiter, naturally thought *Last Tango* was part of the riff-raff. Since it is Simon's temper to ignore details, he not only does not hear the panties tearing (some ears reside in the music of the spheres) but announces that Schneider, beastly abomination, is wearing none.



286

## PIECES · 118

ber awe one would bring to the first row of a medical theater, it is like seeing an operation without the entrance of the surgeon's knife.

One can go to any hard-core film and see fifty phalluses going in and out of as many vaginas in four hours (if anyone can be found who stayed four hours). There is a monumental abstractedness about hard core. It is as if the more a player can function sexually before a camera, the less he is capable of offering any other expression. Finally, the sexual organs show more character than the actors' faces. One can read something of the working conditions of a life in some young girl's old and irritated cunt, one can even see triumphs of the human spirit — old and badly burned labia which still come to glisten with new life, capital! There are phalluses in porno whose distended veins speak of the integrity of the hardworking heart, but there is so little specific content in the faces! Hard core lulls after it excites, and finally it puts the brain to sleep.

But Brando's real cock up Schneider's real vagina would have brought the history of film one huge march closer to the ultimate experience it has promised since its inception (which is to re-embody life). One can even see how on opening night at the Film Festival, it did not matter so much. Not fully prepared for what was to come, the simulated sex must have quivered like real sex the first time out. Since then we have been told the movie is great, so we are prepared to resist greatness, and have read in *Time* that Schneider said, " 'We were never screwing on stage. I never felt any sexual attraction for him . . . he's almost fifty you know, and' — she runs her hand from her torso to her midriff, 'he's only beautiful to here!' "

So one watches differently. Yes, they *are* simulating. Yes, there is something slightly unnatural in the way they come and fall apart. It is too stylized, as if paying a few subtle respects to Kabuki. The real need for the real cock of Brando into the depths of the real actress might have been for those less exceptional times which would follow the film long after it opened and the reaction had set in.

Since *Tango* is, however, the first major film with a respectable budget, a superbly skilled young director, an altogether accomplished cameraman, and a great actor who is ready to do more than dabble in improvisation, indeed will enter heavily into such near to untried movie science, so the laws of improvisation are before us, and the first law to recognize is that it is next to impossible to build on too false a base. The real problem in movie improvisation is to

287

find some ending that is true to what has gone before and yet is sufficiently untrue to enable the actors to get out alive.

We will come back to that. It is, however, hardly time to let go of our synopsis. Real or simulated, opening night or months later, we know after five minutes that, at the least, we are in for a thoroughgoing study of a man and a woman, and the examination will be close. Brando rents the empty apartment; they will visit each other there every day. His name is Paul, hers is Jeanne, but they are not to learn each other's names yet. They are not to tell one another such things, he informs her. "We don't need names here . . . we're going to forget everything we knew. . . . Everything outside this place is bullshit."

They are going to search for pleasure. We are back in the existential confrontation of the century. Two people are going to fuck in a room until they arrive at a transcendent recognition or some death of themselves. We are dealing not with a plot but with a theme that is open range for a hundred films. Indeed we are face to face with the fundamental structure of porno — the difference is that we have a director who by the measure of porno is Eisenstein, and actors who are as gods. So the film takes up the simplest and richest of structures. To make love in an empty apartment, then return to a separate life. It is like every clandestine affair the audience has ever had, only more so — no names! Every personal demon will be scourged in the sex — one will obliterate the past! That is the huge sanction of anonymity. It is equal to a new life.

What powerful biographical details we learn, however, on the instant they part. Paul's wife is a suicide. Just the night before, she has killed herself with a razor in a bathtub; the bathroom is before us, red as an abattoir. A sobbing chambermaid cleans it while she speaks in fear to Paul. It is not even certain whether the wife is a suicide or he has killed her — that is almost not the point. It is the bloody death suspended above his life like a bleeding amputated existence — it is with that crimson torso before his eyes that he will make love on the following days.

Jeanne, in her turn, is about to be married to a young TV director. She is the star in a video film he is making about French youth. She pouts, torments her fiancé, delights in herself, delights in the special idiocy of men. She can cuckold her young director to the roots of his eyes. She also delights in the violation she will make of her own bourgeois roots. In this TV film she makes within the



288

P I C C E S . 120

movie she presents her biography to her fiancé's camera: she is the daughter of a dead Army officer who was sufficiently racist to teach his dog to detect Arabs by smell. So she is well brought up — there are glimpses of a suburban villa on a small walled estate — it is nothing less than the concentrated family honor of the French Army she will surrender when Brando proceeds a little later to bugger her.

These separate backgrounds divide the film as neatly between biography and fornication as those trick highball glasses which present a drawing of a man or a woman wearing clothes on the outside of the tumbler and nude on the inside. Each time Brando and Schneider leave the room we learn more of their lives beyond the room; each time they come together, we are ready to go further. In addition, as if to enrich his theme for students of film, Bertolucci offers touches from the history of French cinema. The life preserver in *Atalante* appears by way of homage to Vigo, and Jean-Pierre Léaud of *The 400 Blows* is the TV director, the boy now fully grown. Something of the brooding echo of *Le Jour Se Lève* and Arletty is also with us, that somber memory of Jean Gabin wandering along the wet docks in the dawn, waiting for the police to pick him up after he has murdered his beloved. It is as if we are to think not only of this film but of other sexual tragedies French cinema has brought us, until the sight of each gray and silent Paris street is ready to evoke the lost sound of the *Bal musette* and the sad near-silent wash of the Seine. Nowhere as in Paris can doomed lovers succeed in passing sorrow, drop by drop, through the blood of the audience's heart.

Yet as the film progresses with every skill in evidence, while Brando gives a performance that is unforgettable (and Schneider shows every promise of becoming a major star), as the historic buggeries and reamings are delivered, and the language breaks through barriers not even yet erected — no general of censorship could know the armies of obscenity were so near! — as these shocks multiply, and lust goes up the steps to love, something bizarre happens to the film. It fails to explode. It is a warehouse of dynamite and yet something goes wrong with the blow-up.

One leaves the theater bewildered. A fuse was never ignited. But where was it set? One looks to retrace the line of the story.

So we return to Paul trying to rise out of the bloody horizon of his wife's death. We even have some instinctive comprehension of



289

121 • *Tango, Last Tango*

how he must degrade his beautiful closet-fuck, indeed we are even given the precise detail that he will grease her ass with butter before he buggers her family pride. A scene or two later, he tricks forth her fear of him by dangling a dead rat which he offers to eat. "I'll save the asshole for you," he tells her. "Rat's asshole with mayonnaise."<sup>2</sup> (The audience roars — Brando knows audiences.) She is standing before him in a white wedding gown — she has run away from a TV camera crew that was getting ready to film her pop wedding. She has rushed to the apartment in the rain. Now shivering, but recovered from her fear, she tells him she has fallen in love with somebody. He tells her to take a hot bath, or she'll catch pneumonia, die, and all he'll get is "to fuck the dead rat."

No, she protests, she's in love.

"In ten years," says Brando looking at her big breasts, "you're going to be playing soccer with your tits." But the thought of the other lover is grinding away at him. "Is he a good fucker?"

"Magnificent."

"You know, you're a jerk. 'Cause the best fucking you're going to get is right here in this apartment."

No, no, she tells him, the lover is wonderful, a mystery . . . different.

"A local pimp?"

"He could be. He looks it."

She will never, he tells her, be able to find love until she goes "right up into the ass of death." He is one lover who is not afraid of metaphor. "Right up his ass — till you find a womb of fear. And then maybe you'll be able to find him."

"But I've found this man," says Jeanne. Metaphor has continued long enough for her. "He's you. You're that man."

In the old scripted films, such a phrase was plucked with a movie composer's chord. But this is improvisation. Brando's instant response is to tell her to get a scissors and cut the fingernails on her right hand. Two fingers will do. Put those fingers up his ass.

"Quoi?"

"Put your fingers up my ass, are you deaf? Go on."

No, he is not too sentimental. Love is never flowers, but farts and flowers. Plus every superlative test. So we see Brando's face before us — it is that tragic angelic mask of incommunicable anguish

<sup>2</sup> Dialogue from *Last Tango in Paris* was not entirely written in advance, but was in part an improvisation. In other words, a small but important part of the screenplay has in effect been written by Brando.

## PIECES • 122

which has spoken to us across the years of his uncharted heroic depths. Now he is entering that gladiator's fundament again, and before us and before millions of faces yet to come she will be his surrogate bugger, real or simulated. What an entrance into the final images of history! He speaks to us with her body behind him, and her fingers just conceivably up him. "I'm going to get a pig," are the words which come out of his tragic face, "and I'm going to have a pig fuck you," — yes, the touch on his hole has broken open one gorgon of a fantasy — "and I want the pig to vomit in your face. And I want you to swallow the vomit. You going to do that for me?"

"Yeah."

"Huh?"

"Yeah!"

"And I want the pig to die while," — a profound pause — "while you're fucking him. And then you have to go behind, and I want you to smell the dying farts of the pig. Are you going to do that for me?"

"Yes, and more than that. And worse than before."

He has plighted a troth. In our year of the twentieth century how could we ever contract for love with less than five hundred pounds of pig shit? With his courage to give himself away, we finally can recognize the tragedy of his expression across these twenty-five years. That expression has been locked into the impossibility of ever communicating such a set of private thoughts through his beggar's art as an actor. Yet he has just done it. He is probably the only actor in the world who could have done it. He is taking the shit that is in him and leaving it on us. How the audience loves it. They have come to be covered. The world is not polluted for nothing. There is some profound twentieth-century malfunction in the elimination of waste. And Brando is on to it. A stroke of genius to have made a speech like that. Over and over, he is saying in this film that one only arrives at love by springing out of the shit in oneself.

So he seeks to void his eternal waste over the wife's suicide. He sits by her laid-out corpse in a grim hotel room, curses her, weeps, proceeds to wipe off the undertaker's lipstick, broods on her lover (who lives upstairs in the hotel), and goes through some bend of the obscure, for now, off-stage, he proceeds to remove his furniture from the new apartment. We realize this as we see Jeanne in the empty rooms. Paul has disappeared. He has ordered her to march into the farts of the pig for nothing. So she calls her TV director to



291

123 - *Tango, Last Tango*

look at the empty apartment — should they rent it? The profound practicality of the French bourgeoisie is squatting upon us. She appreciates the value of a few memories to offer sauce for her lean marriage. But the TV director must smell this old cooking for he takes off abruptly after telling her he will look for a better apartment.

Suddenly Brando is before her again on the street. Has he been waiting for her to appear? He looks rejuvenated. "It's over," she tells him. "It's over," he replies. "Then it begins again." He is in love with her. He reveals his biography, his dead wife, his unromantic details. "I've got a prostate like an Idaho potato but I'm still a good stick man. . . . I suppose if I hadn't met you I'd probably settle for a hard chair and a hemorrhoid." They move on to a hall, some near mythical species of tango palace where a dance contest is taking place. They get drunk and go on the floor. Brando goes in for a squalid parody of the tango. When they're removed by the judges, he flashes his bare ass.

Now they sit down again and abruptly the love affair is terminated. Like that! She is bored with him. Something has happened. We do not know what. Is she a bourgeoisie repelled by his flop-house? Or did his defacement of the tango injure some final nerve of upper French deportment? Too small a motive. Must we decide that sex without a mask is no longer love, or conclude upon reflection that no mask is more congenial to passion than to be without a name in the bed of a strange lover?

There are ten reasons why her love could end, but we know none of them. She merely wants to be rid of him. Deliver me from a fifty-year-old, may even be her only cry.

She tries to flee. He follows. He follows her on the Métro and all the way to her home. He climbs the spiraling stairs as she mounts in the slow elevator, he rams into her mother's apartment with her, breathless, chewing gum, leering. Now he is all cock. He is the memory of every good fuck he has given her. "This is the title shot, baby. We're going all the way."

She takes out her father's army pistol and shoots him. He murmurs, "Our children, our children, our children will remember . . ." and staggers out to the balcony, looks at the Paris morning, takes out his chewing gum, fixes it carefully to the underside of the iron railing in a move that is pure broth of Brando — culture is a goat turd on the bust of Goethe — and dies. The angel with the tragic face slips off the screen. And proud Maria Schneider is suddenly and



292

## PIECES • 124

most unbelievably reduced to a twat copping a plea. "I don't know who he is," she mutters in her mind to the oncoming *flics*, "he followed me in the street, he tried to rape me, he is insane. I do not know his name. I do not know who he is. He wanted to rape me."

The film ends. The questions begin. We have been treated to more cinematic breakthrough than any film — at the least — since *I Am Curious, Yellow*. In fact we have gone much further. It is hard to think of any film that has taken a larger step. Yet if this is "the most powerful erotic film ever made" then sex is as Ex-Lax to the lady. For we have been given a bath in shit with no reward. The film, for all its power, has turned inside out by the end. We have been asked to follow two serious and more or less desperate lovers as they go through the locks of lust and defecation, through some modern species of homegrown cancer cure, if you will, and have put up with their modern depths — shit on the face of the beloved and find love! — only to discover a peculiar extortion in the aesthetic. We have been taken on this tour down to the prostate big as an Idaho potato only to recognize that we never did get into an exploration of the catacombs of love, passion, infancy, sodomy, tenderness, and the breaking of emotional ice, instead only wandered from one onanist's oasis to another.

It is, however, a movie that has declared itself, by the power of its opening, as equal in experience to a great fuck, and so the measure of its success or failure is by the same sexual aesthetic. Rarely has a film's value depended so much on the power or lack of power of its ending, even as a fuck that is full of promise is ready to be pinched by a poor end. So, in *Tango*, there is no gathering of forces for the conclusion, no whirling of sexual destinies (in this case, the audience and the actors) into the same funnel of becoming, no flying out of the senses in pursuit of a new vision, no, just the full charge into a blank wall, a masturbator's spasm — came for the wrong reason and on the wrong thought — and one is thrown back, shattered, too ubiquitously electrified, and full of criticism for the immediate past. Now the recollected flaws of the film eat at the pleasure, even as the failed orgasm of a passionate act will call the character of the passion into question.

So the walk out of the theater is with anger. The film has been in reach of the greatness Kael has been talking about, but the achievement has only been partial. Like all executions less divine than their

293

125 - *Tango, Last Tango*

conception *Tango* will give rise to mutations that are obliged to explore into dead ends. More aesthetic pollution to come! The performance by Brando has been unique, historic, without compare — it is just possible, however, that it has gone entirely in the wrong direction. He has been like a lover who keeps telling consummate dirty jokes until the ravaged dawn when the girl will say, "Did you come to sing or to screw?" He has come with great honor and dignity and exceptional courage to bare his soul. But in a solo. We are being given a fuck film without the fuck. It is like a Western without the horses.

Now the subtle sense of displacement that has hung over the movie is clear. There has been no particular high passion loose. Brando is so magnetic an actor, Schneider is so attractive, and the scenes are so intimate that we assume there is sexual glue between their parts, but it is our libido which has been boiling that glue and not the holy vibration of the actors on the screen. If Kael has had a sexual liberation with *Tango*, her libido is not alone — the audience is also getting their kicks — by digging the snots of the celebrated. (Liberation for the Silent Majority may be not to attend a fuck but hear dirty jokes.) So the real thrill of *Tango* for \$5.00 audiences becomes the peephole Brando offers us on Brando. They are there to hear a world-famous actor say in reply to "What strong arms you have,"

"The better to squeeze a fart out of you."

"What long nails you have."

"The better to scratch your ass with."

"Oh, what a lot of fur you have."

"The better to let your crabs hide in."

"Oh, what a long tongue you have."

"The better to stick in your rear, my dear."

"What's this for?"

"That's your happiness and my ha-penis."

Pandemonium of pleasure in the house. Who wants to watch an act of love when the ghost of Lenny Bruce is back? The crowd's joy is that a national celebrity is being obscene on screen. To measure the media magnetism of such an act, ask yourself how many hundreds of miles you might drive to hear Richard Nixon speak a line like: "We're just taking a flying fuck at a rolling doughnut," or "I went to the University of the Congo; studied whale fucking." Only liberal unregenerates would be so progressive as to say they would



294

## PIECES • 126

not drive a mile. No, one could start mass migrations if Nixon were to give Brando's pig-and-vomit address to the test of love.

Let us recognize the phenomenon. It would be so surrealistic an act, we could not pass Nixon by. Surrealism has become our objective correlative. A private glimpse of the great becomes the alchemy of the media, the fool's gold of the century of communication. In the age of television we know everything about the great but how they fart — the ass wind is, ergo, our trade wind. It is part of Brando's genius to recognize that the real interest of audiences is not in having him portray the tender passages and murderous storms of an unruly passion between a man and a woman, it is rather to be given a glimpse of his kinks. His kinks offer sympathetic vibration to their kinks. The affirmation of passion is that we rise from the swamps of our diapers — by whatever torturous route — to the cock and the cunt; it is the acme of the decadent to go from the first explosive bout of love in *Tango* down to the trimmed fingernails up his rectum.

Then follows the murder. Except it does not follow. It has been placed there from the beginning as the required ending in Bertolucci's mind, it has already been written into the screenplay first prepared with Trintignant and Dominique Sanda in mind. But complications and cast changes occurred. Sanda was pregnant, et cetera. Brando appeared, and Schneider was found. Yet the old ending is still there. Since it did not grow convincingly out of the material in the original script, it appears, after Brando's improvisation, to be fortuitous altogether.

In the original screenplay, the dialogue is so general and the characters so vague that one has to assume Trintignant, Sanda, and Bertolucci planned to give us something extraordinary precisely by overcoming their pedestrian script. It is as if Bertolucci purposely left out whole trunklines of plot in order to discover them in the film. Only it was Brando who came along rather than Trintignant to make a particular character out of a general role, to "superimpose" — in accordance with Bertolucci's desire — his own character as Marlon Brando, as well as something of his life, and a good bit of his private obsessions. As he did that, however, the film moved away from whatever logic the script had originally possessed. For example, in the pre-Brando treatment, we would have been obliged to listen to the following:



295

LEON (alias Paul): I make you die, you make me die, we're two murderers, each other's. But who succeeds in realizing this is twice the murderer. And that's the biggest pleasure: watching you die, watching you come out of yourself, white-eyed, writhing, gasping, screaming so loud that it seems like the last time.

Oo la la! We are listening to a French intellectual. It is for good cause that Bertolucci wants to superimpose Brando's personality. Anything is preferable to Leon. And Brando most certainly obliterates this mouthy analysis, creates instead a character who is half noble and half a lout, an overlay drawn on transparent paper over his own image. Paul is an American, ex-boxer, ex-actor, ex-foreign correspondent, ex-adventurer, and now with the death of his wife, ex-gigolo. He is that character and yet he is Brando even more. He is indeed so much like Brando that he does not quite fit the part of Paul — he talks just a little too much, and is a hint too distinguished to be the proprietor of a cheap flophouse at the age of fifty — let us say that at the least Paul is close enough to the magnetic field of Marlon for an audience to be unable to comprehend why Jeanne would be repelled if he has a flophouse. Who cares, if it is Marlon who invites you to live in a flophouse? On the other hand, he is also being Marlon the Difficult, Marlon the Indian from the Underworld, Marlon the shade of the alienated, Marlon the young star who when asked on his first trip to Hollywood what he would like in the way of personal attention and private creature comfort, points to the nerve-jangled pet he has brought with him and says, "Get my monkey fucked."

Yes, he is studying whale-pronging in the Congo. He is the raucous out-of-phase voice of the prairie. Afterwards, contemplating the failure, we realize he has been shutting Schneider off. Like a master boxer with a hundred tricks, he has been out-acting her (with all his miser's hoard of actor's lore), has been stealing scenes from her while she is nude and he is fully dressed, what virtuosity! But it is unfair. She is brimming to let go. She wants to give the young performance of her life and he is tapping her out of position here, tricking her there — long after it is over we realize he does not want the fight of the century, but a home town decision. He did not come to fuck but to shit. To defecate into the open-mouthed wonders of his audience and take his cancer cure in public. It is the fastest way! Grease up the kinks and bring in the pigs. We'd take a

## PIECES • 128

stockyard of pigs if he would get into what the movie is about, but he is off on the greatest solo of his life and artists as young as Schneider and Bertolucci are hardly going to be able to stop him.

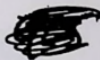
So he is our greatest actor, our noblest actor, and he is also our national lout. Could it be otherwise in America? Yet a huge rage stirs. He is so great. Can he not be even greater and go to the bottom of every fine actor's terror — which is to let go of the tricks that ring the person and enter the true arena of improvisation? Is it there that the future of the film may exist, but we won't find out until a great actor makes the all-out effort.

But now we are back to the core of the failure in *Last Tango*. It is down in the difficulty of improvisation, in the recognition that improvisation which is anything less than the whole of a film is next to no improvisation. It has diminished from the dish to a spice that has been added to the dish (usually incorrectly). Bertolucci is a superb young director, adventurous, steeped in film culture, blessed with cinematic grace. He gives us a movie with high ambition, considerable risk, and a sense of the past. Yet he plows into the worst trap of improvisation — it is the simple refusal of film makers to come to grips with the implacable logic of the problem. One does not add improvisation to a script that is already written and with an ending that is locked up. No matter how agreeable the particular results may be, it is still the entrance of tokenism into aesthetics: "You blacks may work in this corporation, and are free to express yourselves provided you don't do anything a responsible white employee won't do." Stay true to the script. It reduces improvisation to a free play period in the middle of a strict curriculum.

The fundamental demand upon improvisation is that it begin with the film itself, which is to say that the idea for the film and the style of improvisation ought to come out of the same thought. From the beginning, improvisation must live in the premise rather than be added to it. The notion is not easy to grasp, and in fact is elusive. It may even be helpful to step away from *Tango* long enough to look at another example of possible improvisation. An indulgence is asked of the reader — to think about another kind of film altogether, a distracting hitch to the argument, but it may not be possible to bring focus to improvisation until we have other models before us.

So the following and imaginary film is offered: Orson Welles to play Churchill while Burton or Olivier does Beaverbrook in the week of Dunkirk. Let us assume we have the great good fortune to

294





129 • *Tango, Last Tango*

find these actors at the height of their powers, and have for *auteur* a film maker who is also a brilliant historian. To these beginnings, he adds a company of intelligent English actors and gives them the same historical material to study in order to provide a common denominator to everyone's knowledge. At this point the *auteur* and the company agree upon a few premises of plot. The *auteur* will offer specific situations. It will help if the episodes are sufficiently charged for the actors to lose their fear first of improvisation — which is that they must make up their lines.

Then a narrative action can begin to emerge out of the interplay of the characters, in much the way a good party turns out differently from the expectations of the hostess, and yet will develop out of her original conception. With a script, actors try to convince the writer, if he is present, to improve their lines — with improvisation they must work upon their wits. Why assume that the wits of this company of intelligent English actors will have less knowledge of manner and history than an overextended script writer trying to work up his remote conception of what Churchill and Beaverbrook might have been alike? Why not assume Welles and Burton have a better idea? Are they not more likely to contain instinctive knowledge in their ambulating meat? Isn't the company, in its steeping as good British actors into their own history, able to reveal to us more of what such a week might have been like than any but the most inspired effort by a screenwriter?

We all contain the culture of our country in our unused acting skills. While Clark Gable could probably not have done an improvisation to save himself, since he had no working habits for that whatsoever, the suspicion still exists that Gable, if he had been able to permit himself, could have offered a few revelations on the life of Dwight D. Eisenhower, especially since Ike seems to have spent a good part of his life imitating Gable's voice. If violence can release love, improvisation can loose the unused culture of a film artist.

The argument is conceivably splendid, but we are talking about *historical* improvisation where the end is still known, and it is the details that are paramount. How simple (and intense) by comparison become the problems of doing a full improvisation for *Tango*. There we are given a fundamental situation, a spoiled girl about to be married, a distraught man whose wife is a suicide. The man and the girl are in the room to make love. We are back at the same beginning. But we can no longer project ahead! If the actors feel noth-

297

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298

## PIECES • 130

ing for one another sexually, as Schneider has indicated in several interviews was the case for Brando and herself — she may even have been telling the truth — then no exciting improvisation is possible on sexual lines. (The improvisation would have to work on the consequences of a lack of attraction.) Actors do not have to feel great passion for one another in order to give a *frisson* to the audience, but enough attraction must exist to provide a live coal for improvisation to blow upon. Without some kernel of reality to an improvisation only a monster can continue to offer interesting lines. Once some little attraction is present, there is nothing exceptional about the continuation of the process. Most of us, given the umbilical relation of sex and drama, pump our psychic bellows on many a sensual spark, but then most affairs are, to one degree or another, improvisations, which is to say genuine in some part of their feeling and nicely acted for the rest. What separates professional actors from all of us amateur masses with our animal instinct for dissembling, our everyday acting, is the ability of the professional to take a small emotion in improvisation and go a long distance with it. In a scripted piece of work, some professionals need no relation to the other actor at all, they can, as Monroe once said, "wipe them out" and substitute another face. But improvisation depends on a continuing life since it exists in the no-man's-land between acting and uncalculated response, it is a *special* psychic state, at its best more real than the life to which one afterward returns, and so a special form of insanity. All acting is a corollary of insanity, but working from a script offers a highly controlled means of departing from one's own personality in order to enter another. (As well as the formal power to return.)

What makes improvisation fertile, luminous, frightening, and finally *wiggly* enough for a professional like Gable to shun its practice is that the actor is doing two things at once — playing at a fictitious role, while using real feelings, which then begin to serve (rather than the safety of the script) to stimulate him into successive new feelings and responses, until he is in danger of pushing into emotional terrain that is too far out of his control.

If we now examine *Tango* against this perspective, the risks (once there is real sexual attraction between the man and the woman) have to multiply. They are after all not simply playing themselves, but have rather inserted themselves into highly charged creatures, a

violent man with a blood-filled horizon and a spoiled middle-class girl with buried tyrannies. How, as they continue this improvisation, can they avoid falling in love, or coming to hate one another? With good film actors, there is even every real danger that the presence of the camera crew will inflame them further since in every thespian is an orgiast screaming to get out.

So murder is the first dramatic reality between two such lovers in a continuing film of improvisation. They progress toward an end that is frighteningly open. The man may kill the woman, or the woman the man. For, as actors, they have also to face the shame of walking quietly away from one another, a small disaster when one is trying to build intensity, for such a quiet ending is equal to a lack of inspiration, a cowardice before the potential violence of the other. Improvisation is profoundly wicked when it works, it ups the ante, charges all dramatic potential, looks for collision. Yet what a dimension of dramatic exploration is also offered. For the actors can even fall in love, can truly fall in love, can go through a rite of passage together and so reach some locked crypt of the heart precisely because they have been photographed fucking together from every angle, and still — perhaps it is thereby — have found some private reserve of intimacy no one else can touch. Let the world watch. It is not near.

So the true improvisation that *Tango* called for should have moved forward each day on the actors' experience of the day before; it would thereby have offered more aesthetic excitement. Because of its danger! There is a very small line in the last recognitions of the psyche between real bullets in a gun, and blanks. The madness of improvisation is such, the intensities of the will become such, that one hardly dares to fire a blank at the other actor. What if he or she is so carried away by excitement that they will refuse to fall? Bring on the real bullet, then. Bite on it.

Of course, literal murder is hardly the inevitable denouement in improvisation. But it is in the private design of each actor's paranoia. Pushed further together in improvisation than actors have gone before, who knows what literal risks might finally have been taken. That is probably why Brando chose to play a buffoon at a very high level and thereby also chose to put Schneider down. Finally we laugh at those full and lovely tits which will be good only for playing soccer (and she will choose to lose thirty pounds after the film is done — a whole loss of thirty pounds of pulchritude). Brando with



## PIECES • 132

his immense paranoia (it is hardly unjustified) may have concluded like many an adventurous artist before him that he was adventuring far enough. No need for more.

Still he lost an opportunity for his immense talent. If he has been our first actor for decades, it is because he has given us, from the season he arrived in *Streetcar*, a greater sense of improvisation out of the lines of a script than any other professional actor. Sometimes he seemed the only player alive who knew how to suggest that he was about to say something more valuable than what he did say. It gave him force. The lines other people had written for him came out of his mouth like the final compromise life had offered for five better thoughts. He seemed to have a charged subtext. It was as if, whenever requested in other films to say script lines so bad as, "I make you die, you make me die, we're two murderers, each other's," the subtext — the emotion of the words he was using behind the words — became, "I want the pig to vomit in your face." That was what gave an unruly, all but uncontrolled, and smoldering air of menace to all he did.

Now, in *Tango*, he had nothing beneath the script, for his previous subtext was the script. So he appeared to us as a man orating, not improvising. But then a long speech can hardly be an improvisation if its line of action is able to go nowhere but back into the prearranged structures of the plot. It is like the aside of a politician before he returns to that prepared text the press already has in their hands. So our interest moved away from the possibilities of the film and was spent on the man himself, his nobility and his loudness. But his nature was finally a less interesting question than it should have been, and weeks would go by before one could forgive Bertolucci for the aesthetic cacophony of the end.

Still, one could forgive. For, finally, Bertolucci has given us a failure worth a hundred films like *The Godfather*. Regardless of all its solos, failed majesties, and off-the-mark horrors, even as a highly imperfect adventure, it is still the best adventure in film to be seen in this pullulating year. And it will open an abyss for Bertolucci. The rest of his life must now be an improvisation. Doubtless he is bold enough to live with that. For he begins *Last Tango* with Brando muttering two words one can hardly hear. They are: Fuck God.

The unmanageable in oneself must now offer advice. If Bertolucci is going to fuck God, let him really give the fuck. Then we may all



301

153 - Lango, Last Lango

know a little more of what God is willing or unwilling to forgive. That is, unless God is old and has indeed forgot, and we are merely out on a sea of human anality, a collective Faust deprived of Mephisto and turning to shit. The choice, of course, is small. Willy-nilly, we push on in every art and every technology toward the re-embodiment of the creation. It is doubtless a venture more de-mented than coupling with the pig, but it is our venture, our white whale, and by it or with it shall we be seduced. On to the Congo with sex, technology, and the inflamed lividities of human will.

21 19

*Defers to  
 Peter Levenda's  
 ↓  
 Unholy  
 Alliance*

### THE OCCULT

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

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

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

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

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

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

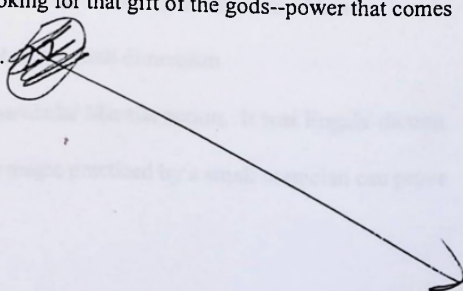
Nonetheless, given the many centuries of anecdotal and much-skewed evidence on the subject, it is still not irrational to assume--even if one has never felt its effects oneself--to assume, yes--phenomena of a certain kind can be regarded as magical in those particular situations where magic offers the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



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

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

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



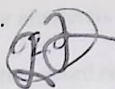
The irony, of course, is that most of them, in consequence, pay large prices in ill health, failure, isolation, addiction, deterioration of their larger possibilities, even personal doom. Goethe did not conceive of Faust for too little.

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

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

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

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



~~But~~ P+P  
to V-N

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



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

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

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

Nonetheless, I began the book in the spring of '66. It attracted me too much not to begin. Yet because I could not thrust Provincetown into such literary horrors without preparation, I thought I would start with a chapter about hunting bear in Alaska. A prelude. I would have two tough rich boys, each as separated from social convention as

any two rich boys could be—Texans I would make them out of reserve memories of Texans I had served with in the 112<sup>th</sup> Cavalry out of San Antonio. The boys would be still young, still mean rather than uncontrollably murderous—the hunting might serve as a bridge to get them ready for more. They would come back from the Alaskan hunting trip ready to travel—Provincetown would eventually receive them.

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

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

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

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

In retrospect, I was less certain, however, of the humor. For when Sharon Tate was murdered in the summer of '69, and the world heard of Charles Manson, I could wonder what state of guilt I might have been in if I had written that novel of desert

murderers. How then could I ever have been certain Manson had not been sensitive to its message in the tribal air?

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

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

We will never know if primitive artists painted their caves to show a representation, or whether the moving hand was looking the placate the forces above and the forces below. Sometimes I think the novelist fashions a totem just as much as an



aesthetic, and his real aim, not even known necessarily to himself, is to create a diversion in the fields of dread, a sanctuary in some of the arenas of magic. The flaws of his work can even be a part of his magical strength, as if his real intent in writing is to alter the determinations of that invisible finger which has written and moved on. By such logic, the book before you is a totem, not empty of amulets for the author against curses, static, and the pervasive malignity of our electronic air. (23)

83.20

The unconscious can lead one to startling conclusions. In Ancient Evenings, I named my protagonist Menenhetet and occasionally made it Meni for short. A couple of years later I came across the translated text of an inscription on an ancient Egyptian temple wall which described the battle of Kadesh, a key event in the novel. In this inscription was mentioned one Menni, Ramses the Second's equerry, which was exactly Menenhetet's role in that part of the book. Somehow, I did not think of the coincidence as eerie. Confirmative, rather, as if it proved that there was some very good reason I was devoting so many years to the tome. (24)

Hazard's  
Sources of  
Writing

The story is that Robert Rauschenberg was once given the gift of a pastel from Willem de Kooning. Rauschenberg, with de Kooning's permission, erased the pastel and then signed it Pastel by de Kooning Erased by Robert Rauschenberg, after which he sold it. The story bothered me. There was something profound there but how to get ahold of

it? Then it came to me. Rauschenberg was saying that the artist has the same right to print money as the financier. Money is nothing but authority imprinted upon emptiness.

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

*Father of  
Grafitti,*

25

Famous plant-man Backster, attaching the electrodes of his polygraph to a philodendron one night, wonders in the wake of this passing impulse how to test the plant for some emotional reaction. Abruptly, a current courses through the philodendron at the horror of this thought. When Backster cuts or burns the leaf, however, the polygraph registers little: The plant is numb. (Its sensitivity seems to be its life; its suffering, an abstention from life.) The experiment suggests plants may be a natural species of wireless. (What, indeed, did Picasso teach us if not that every form offers up its own scream?) Radio is then no more than a prosthetic leg of communication whereas plants

speak to plants, and are aware of the death of animals on the other side of the hill. Some artists might even swear they have known this from the beginning, for they would see themselves as stimulants who inject perception into the blind vision of the century. (And, like a junkie, does the century move into apathy from the superbrilliance of its injections?)

Hays  
 7/6

(21)

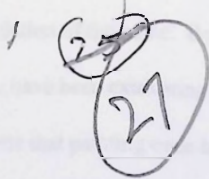
The act of writing is a mystery and the more you labor at it, the more you become aware after a lifetime of such activity that it is not answers which are being offered so much as a greater appreciation of the literary mysteries. The primal enigma of the profession—where do those words come from?—not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



result of all I had learned up to the age of twenty-five, all I had experienced and all I had read. My characters had already been conceived and put in file boxes before they were ever on the page. I had hundreds of filled-out file cards before I ever began to write. The novel itself seemed merely the end of a long active assembly line and I felt able to account for each part of it.

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

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



75.13

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

(26) (28)

68.1

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

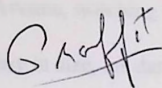
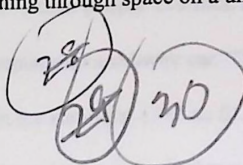
(27) (29)

Gnostik,

For six and a half centuries, we have been moving from the discovery of our humanity, good and evil, into the circulation of the name. By extension, the name is equal to money. Over the millenia, we have been extricating ourselves out of some primitive obeisance to dread so complete that painting once lay inert on the field of two dimensions (as if the medieval eye, like the primitive eye, did not feel ready to wander).



Then art dared to rise into that Renaissance venture to liberate ourselves from much of the weight of our anxiety. Painters entered the space-perspective of volume and depth. Now, with graffiti, we are back in the prison of two dimensions once more. Or is it the one dimension of the name—the artform screaming through space on a unilinear subway line?

At night, in the yards, the walls of the subway cars sit there possessed of soul—you are not just writing your name but trafficking with the iron spirit of the vehicle standing before you in the yard. What a set of inert iron beasts. There they stand in all the corrals of the yard! The graffiti-writers, stealthy as the near-to-silent sound of their movement, work up and down the line of cars, some darting in to squiggle a little toy of a name on twenty cars—their nerve has no larger surge—others embark on their first or their hundred-and-first masterpiece, daring the full enterprise of an hour of painting one masterpiece while they carry all the tension of waiting for the disturbance of their entrance to settle, waiting for the guards patrolling the lines of track to grow somnolent and descend into the early morning pall of the watchman. Sometimes the graffiti-writers would set out from their own turf at dark, yet not begin to paint until two in the morning, hiding for hours in the surest corners of the yard or in and under the trains. What a quintessential marriage of cool and style to write your name in giant separate living letters, large as animals, lithe as snakes, mysterious as Arabic or Chinese curls of

alphabet, and do it in the heart of a winter night when the hands are frozen and only the heart is hot with fear. No wonder the best of the graffiti writers, those mountains of heavy-masterpiece production, STAY HIGH, PHASE 2, STAR III, get the respect, call it the glory, that they are as famous and luminous to their people as a rock star. It is their year. Nothing automatic about writing a masterpiece on a subway car. "I was scared," said Japan, "all the time I did it." And sitting in the station at 158<sup>th</sup> an St. Nicholas Avenue, watching the trains go by, talking between each wave of subway sound, he is tiny in size, his dark eyes as alert as any small and hungry animal who eats in a garden at night and does not know where the householder may be waiting with his varmint gun.

Now, as Japan speaks, his eyes never failing to miss the collection of names, hieroglyphs, symbols, stars, crowns, ribbons, masterpieces and toys on every passing car, there is a sadness in his mood. The city has mounted a massive campaign. There was a period in the middle when it looked as if graffiti would take over the city, when a movement that began as an expression of tropical peoples living in a monotonous iron-gray and dull brown brick environment, surrounded by asphalt, concrete, and clangor, had erupted to save the sensuous flesh of their inheritance from the macadamization of the psyche, save the blank city wall of their united brain by painting the wall over with the giant trees and petty plants of a tropical rain forest. Like such a jungle, every plant, large and small, spoke to one another, lived in the profusion and harmony of a forest. No one wrote over another name, no one was obscene—for that would have smashed the harmony. A communion took place over the city in this plant growth of names until every institutional wall, fixed or moving, every modern new school which looked like a

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

The kids painted with less than this in view. Sufficient in the graffiti-proliferating years of the early Seventies to cover the front door of every subway car they could find. The ecstasy of the roller coaster would dive down into their chest if they were ever waiting in a station and a twelve-car train came stampeding in and their name, HONDO, WILDCAT, SABU, or LOLLIPOP, was on the front! Yes, the graffiti had not only the feel and all the super-powered whoosh and impact of all the bubble-letters in all the mad comic strips, but the zoom, the aghr, and the ahhr of screeching rails, the fast motion of subways roaring into stations, the comic strips come to life. So it was probably not a movement designed to cover the world so much as the excrescence of an excrescence.



Slum populations chilled on one side by the bleakness of modern design, and brain-cooked on the other by comic strips and TV ads with zooming letters, even brain-cooked by the whip of the capital capital letters in the names of the products, and gut-picked by the sound of rock and soul screaming up into the voodoo of the firmament with the shriek of the performer's electronic strings coiling like neon letters in the blue satanic light, yes, all the excrescence of the highways and the fluorescent wonderlands of every Las Vegas sign frying through the Iowa and New Jersey night, all the stomach-tightening nitty-gritty of trying to learn to spell was in the writing, every assault on the psyche as the trains came slamming in. Maybe it was no more than a movement which looked to take some of the excrescence left within and paint it out upon the world, no more than a species of collective therapy, of grace exhibited under pressure in which they never dreamed of going on to paint all of the blank and empty modern world, but the authority of the city reacted as if the city itself might be in greater peril from graffiti than from drugs, and a war had gone on, more and more implacable on the side of the authority with every legal and psychological weedkiller on full employ until the graffiti of New York was defoliated, cicatrized, Vietnamized. Now, as I sat in the station with John Naar and Japan and we watched the trains go by, aesthetic blight was on the cars. Few masterpieces remained. The windows were gray and smeared. The cars looked dull red or tarnished aluminum—their recent coat of paint remover having stripped all polish from the manufacturer's surface. New subway cars looked like old cars. Only the ghost-outline of former masterpieces remained. The kids were broken. The movement seemed over. Even cans of paint-spray could no longer be stolen. Now the ones set out for store

display were empty, the misdemeanors were being upped to felony, the fines were severe, the mood was vindictive. Two hideous accidents had occurred. One boy had been killed beneath a subway car, and another had been close to fatally burned by an inflammable spray can catching a spark, yes, a horror was on the movement and transit patrols moved through the yards and plugged the entrances. The white monoliths of the high-rise were safe. And the subways were dingier than they had ever been. The impulse of the jungle to cover the walled tombs of technology had been broken. Was there a clue to graffiti in the opposite passion to look upon monotony and call it health? As I walked the streets with John Naar, we passed a sign: DON'T POLLUTE—KEEP THE CITY CLEAN. "That sign," the photographer murmured, "is a form of pollution itself."

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

321

153 - *The Faith of Graffiti*

lines, made gullies of the forms, automobile exhausts laid down a patina, and comets of flying birds crusted the disappearing surface with their impasto. By the time fifty such billboards had been finished — a prodigious year for the painter — the vogue was on. His show was an event. They transported the billboards by trailer-truck and broke the front wall of the gallery to get the art objects inside. It was the biggest one-man exhibition in New York that year. At its conclusion, two art critics were arguing whether such species of work still belonged to art.

"You're mad," cried one, "it is not art, it is never art."

"No," said the other, "I think it's valid."

So would the story end. Its title, *Validity*. But before he had written a word he made the mistake of telling it to a young Abstract Expressionist whose work he liked. "Of course it's valid," said the painter, eyes shining with the project. "I'd do it myself if I could afford the billboards."

The story was never written. He had assumed he was proposing a satire, but it was evident he had no insight into how painters were ready to think. Some process had entered art and he could not discern it out.

Let us go back to the pastel by de Kooning which Rauschenberg erased. The details, when further inquiry is made, are less impromptu. Rauschenberg first informed de Kooning of what he would do, and de Kooning agreed. The work, when sold, bore the inscription "A drawing from Willem de Kooning erased by Robert Rauschenberg." Both artists are now proposing something more than that the artist has the same right as the financier to print money, they may even be saying that the meat and marrow of art, the painterly core, the life of the pigment, and the world of technique with which hands lay on that pigment are convertible to something other. The ambiguity of meaning in the twentieth century, the hollow in the heart of faith, has become such an obsessional hole that art may have to be converted into intellectual transactions. It is as if we are looking for stuff, any stuff with which to stuff the hole, and will convert every value into packing for this purpose. For there is no doubt that in erasing the pastel and selling it, art has been diminished but our knowledge of society is certainly enriched. An aesthetic artifact has been converted into a sociological artifact. It is not the painting that intrigues us now but the lividities of art fashion which made the transaction possible in the first place. Something rabid is loose in the century. Maybe we are not convert-



322

## PIECES • 154

ing art into some comprehension of social process, but rather are using art to choke the hole, as if society has become so hopeless, which is to say so twisted in knots of faithless ideological spaghetti, that the glee is in strangling the victims.

But take the example further. Let us imagine a show at the Guggenheim. It will be like many we have seen. Let us make it a plausible modern one-man show. Nothing will be exhibited but computer read-out sheets from a statistical operation. Hundreds of such sheets tacked to the wall. Somewhat irregularly. Attempts at neatness will be contradicted by a confusion in the style of placing them on the wall of the Guggenheim as it spirals up the ramp. Checkerboards alternate with ascending bands, then cul-de-sacs, paper stapled up every way.

We try to digest the aesthetic experience. Of what do the computer read-out sheets consist? What is the subject of their inquiry? we ask. And what is the motive of the artist? Is he telling us something about the order and disorder of the mind in relation to a technological world? Has he presented us with an ongoing composition of exceptional cunning? Is it possible he even has set the problem for the computer himself? Maybe the endless numbers on these computer sheets reflect some analogue to the tension of major themes in his brain. Do we then have here an arithmetical display whose relation to art is as complex as *Finnegans Wake* to literature?

Bullshit, responds the painter. The computer sheets were selected at random. Because the artist did not even wish to bear an unconscious responsibility for the selection, he chose an acquaintance with whom he shared no great psychic identity to pick up the computer sheets for him. Neither he nor the acquaintance ever inquired into the subject of the statistical problem, and he never took a look at what was brought back. Rather, he spoke to the janitor at the Guggenheim by telephone and told him to tack up the pages any way at all. The checkerboards and bands and cul-de-sacs of stapled paper were merely a reflection of the personnel: the janitor worked with two assistants. One was neat, the other drunk. And the painter never came to see the show. The show was the fact that people came, studied the walls, lived for an uncertain hour in the Guggenheim and went out again, their minds exercised by a question that not only had no answer, but may not even have been a question. The artist had done his best to have no intent. Not unless his intent was to demonstrate that most of the experience of viewing a painting is the context of the museum itself. We are next to one of John

323

155 • *The Faith of Graffiti*

Cage's compositions in silence. Art has been saying with more and more intensity: The nature of the painting has become less interesting than the relation of painting to society — we can even erase Rauschenberg's erasure. Get the artist out of it altogether, and it is still art. The world is turning inside out.

What step is left to take? Only one. A show that offers no object at all. The last reference to painting or sculpture is the wall on which something can be hung, or the floor on which a piece can sit. That must now disappear. The art-piece enters the artist: the work can only be experienced within his psyche.

From the *New York Times*, September 2, 1973, by Peter Plagens:

a marksman-friend shot Chris Burden in the upper left arm with a .22 long-jacket before an audience of 12 intimates. He (Burden) figured on a graze wound with a Band-Aid slapped on afterward, but it "felt like a truck hit my arm at 80 miles per hour"; he went to the hospital, nauseous, and filed the requisite police report ("accident").

Plagens goes on to describe other "pieces." Burden chooses situations for their possibility of danger, pain, humiliation, or boredom. There is:

"Movie on the Way Down," in which Burden, hanging by his heels, nude, six feet off a gym floor with a movie camera in his hands, is summarily chopped loose.

The movie is presumably taken on the way down (is it filmed in slow motion?) and he ends with a cut lip. There are other pieces where he rockets flaming matches "at his nude supine wife" or sets ablaze two 16-foot wooden crosses on Laguna Canyon Road at 2 A.M. — "the intended audience for that piece," says Burden, "was the one guy driving down the road who saw it first." Ah, Los Angeles! For "Endurance/real time," he 1) stays in a locker for five days, 2) does 1600 tours of a gallery on his bicycle and 3) remains in bed for three weeks and a day. He also pretends to be a dead man lying under a tarpaulin on the street and is arrested by the police for creating a traffic hazard. He gets a hung jury at his trial and the case is dismissed but "one of the nine votes for conviction, a stewardess, told Burden if she ever saw him under a tarp again, she'd run over him herself." He even does a study in the shift of identity. For "I Became a Secret Hippie," Burden cuts his hair short and dresses in



324

## PIECES - 156

FBI clothes. "If you want to be a heavy artist nowadays," Plagens, reporting on Burden, concludes, "you have to do something unpleasant to your body, because everything *else* has been done. . . . [Burden] may be a product of art-world art history — backed into some untenable masochistic corner because all the other novelty territory has been claimed."

At the least, Burden is fulfilling the dictum of Jean Malaquais that once there are enough artists in the world, the work of art will become the artist himself. Burden is refining his personality. Through existential tests. Burden is not exploring his technique, but his vibrations. The situations he chooses are, as Plagens describes, "edgy." They have nothing remotely resembling a boundary until they are done. In "Movie on the Way Down," Burden can hardly know if he will cut his lip or break his neck, feel a live instant on the descent or some dull anxiety. When he shoots lighted matches at his nude wife the areas defined are empty before the action begins. Given every variable from Women's Liberation to the sadomasochistic tales of Wilhelm Stekel, Burden can know in advance only that a psycho-dramatic enterprise will be commenced. But where it may end, and what everybody might feel — will the matches burn her skin? — will the marriage be fortified or scorched? — no, there is no confidence which question is going to offer an answer. Perhaps he is not refining his personality so much as attempting to clear a space in his psyche free of dread. But isn't that the fundamental operation of the primitive at the dawn of civilization, the establishment of the ego? For what is the human ego but a clearing in the forest of the psyche free of dread? Money, held in one's hand, is free of time. Cash has no past; its future is assignable. It is powerful and empty. So, too, is the ego. It bears the same relation to the psyche as cash bears to the security or comfort of the body. The ego is virtually separate from the psyche even as money is still separate from every organic communicating logic of nature.

We are back to the cave man and his cave painting. His hand draws the outline of the animal in defiance of those gods who watch him. Burden is smashing his nose on the floor or displaying his wife in defiance of the last gods of conventional art. They are that audience remnant of a once-leviathan bourgeois culture. They still trickle out to see Happenings, the desire of the middle class to preserve its last religion: the world of the artist, palette, museum and gallery wall. Middle-class passion is to appreciate the work of art.

But art may be the little ball rolling off the table. Perhaps art now



325

signifies some unheard reverberation from the subterranean obsession of us all: Is civilization coming to an end? Is society burning? Is the day of the cave man returning? Has our search for ego which was once so routine — a useful (somewhat heartless) ego to be fashioned for a useful (if heartless) society — now gone past the measure of our experience so that we no longer try to construct a control center at the core of the mind, but plunge instead into absurdities which offer us that curious calm we find in the art of the absurd, even as the cave man, defying his gods, discovered he was not always dead on the next day.

But we are at the possible end of civilization, and tribal impulses start up across the world. The descending line of the isolated artist goes down from Michelangelo all the way to Shoot. But Chris Burden is finally more comfortable to us than the writers of graffiti. For Burden is the last insult from the hippie children of the middle class to the bourgeois art-patron who is their spiritual parent, but graffiti speaks of a new civilization where barbarism is stirring at the roots.

If at the beginning of Western painting, man was small and God was large; if, in the Renaissance, man was mysteriously large in his relation to God; now, in our times man has disappeared into God. He is mass-man without identity, and he is God. He is all the schizophrenia of the powerless and all-powerful in one psyche.

As we lose our senses in the static of the oncoming universal machine, so does our need to exercise the ego take on elephantiasistical proportions. Graffiti is the expression of a ghetto that is near to the plague, for civilization is now closed off from the ghetto. Too huge are the obstacles to any natural development of a civilized man. In the ghetto it is almost impossible to find some quiet identity. No, in the environment of the slum, the courage to display yourself is your only capital, and in the streets crime is the only productive process that converts such capital to the modern powers of the world, ego and money. Art is not peace but war, and form is the record of that war.

Yet there is a mystery still. From which combat came these curious letters of graffiti, with their Chinese and Arabic calligraphies? Out of what connection to the past did these lights and touches of flame become so much like the Hebrew alphabet where the form of the letter itself was worshipped as a manifest of the Lord? No, it is not enough to think of the childlike desire to see one's name ride by in letters large enough to scream your ego across the city, no, it is almost as if we must go back into some more primeval sense of exis-

tence. If our name is enormous to us, it is also not real—as if we have come from other places than the name, and lived in other lives.

Perhaps this is the unheard echo of graffiti, the vibration of that profound discomfort it arouses. Can the unheard music of its proclamation and/or its mess, the rapt intent seething of its foliage, be the herald of some oncoming apocalypse less and less far away, and so graffiti lingers on our subway door as a memento of all the lives ever lived, sounding now like the bugles of gathering armies across the unseen ridge. That sound will be muted and heard again and muted and heard and muted into all the decades of the century to come.

