

A CODA TO CRAFT

Conv w/ NM Marcus p. 94

By now, I'm a bit cynical about craft. I think there's a natural mystique in the novel which is more important. One is trying, after all, to capture reality, and that is extraordinarily and exceptionally difficult. Craft is merely a series of way-stations. I think of it as being like a St. Bernard dog with that little bottle of brandy under his neck. Whenever you get into trouble, craft can keep you warm long enough to be rescued. Of course this is exactly what keeps good novelists from becoming great novelists. Robert Penn Warren might have written a major novel if he hadn't had just that extra little bit of craft to get him out of all the trouble in All the King's Men. If Penn Warren hadn't known anything about Elizabethan literature, the would-be Elizabethan in him might have brought off a fantastic novel. As it was, he knew enough about craft to use it as an escape hatch. And his plot degenerated into a slambang of exits and entrances, confrontations, tragedies, quick wails and woe. But he was really forcing an escape from his literary problem which

was the terror of confronting a reality that might open into more and more anxiety and so present a deeper and deeper view of the abyss. Craft protects one from facing those endless expanding realities of deterioration and responsibility. The terror, let us say, of being reborn as something much less noble or something much more ignoble. I think this sort of terror depresses us profoundly. Which may be why we throw up our enormous evasions—such as craft. Indeed, I think this adoration of craft, this specific respect for craft makes a church of literature for that vast number of writers who are somewhere on the spectrum between mediocrity and talent.

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

CRAFT

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 my film, "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 am we going to 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 a psychoanalysis on the cheap.

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75.11 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. We may never know, for instance, what the truth of one human is, or another, but we can discern a lot about the relations between them. We may be able to say with some certainty, "They hate each other," or "Isn't it extraordinary how they love each other?" This is because we can feel the relation.

80.10 I think Capote's book and mine are formally similar, but vastly different.

Obviously, I'll be the first to state that if he hadn't done In Cold Blood, it's conceivable that I wouldn't have thought of taking on The Executioner's Song. Nonetheless, it's also possible that something about The Executioner's Song called for doing it in the way I chose. In any event, its flavor is different from In Cold Blood. Truman retained his style, not the pure style—he simplified it—but it was still very much a book written by Truman Capote. You felt it every step of the way. The difference is that he novelized more, where I was determined to keep the factual narrative. I wanted my book to read like a novel, and it does, but I didn't want to sacrifice what literally happened in a scene for what I would like to see happen. Of course, I could afford to feel that way. I had advantages Truman didn't. His killers were not the most interesting guys in the world, so it took Truman's exquisite skills to make his work a classic. I was in the more promising position of dealing with a man who was quintessentially American yet worthy of Dostoevsky. If this were not enough, he was also in love with a girl who—I'll go so far as to say—is a bona fide American heroine. I didn't want, therefore, to novelize. Dedicated accuracy is not usually the first claim you wish to make for books like this, but here it became a matter of literary value. What I had was gold, if I had enough sense not to gild it.

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

82.14 Hemingway's style affected whole generations of us, the way a roomful of men are affected when a beautiful woman walks through—their night is turned for better or for worse. The style had an ability to hit young writers in the gut and they just weren't the same after that.

83.40 If you ask about major weaknesses in a major writer, I would say that Hemingway was not capable of writing a long complex sentence with good architecture in the syntax. But he turned that inability into the virtue of writing short declarative sentences or long run-on sentences connected by conjunctions. Faulkner, to the contrary, was not capable of writing simply, but his over-rich, congested sentences produced an extraordinary mood. Henry Miller could rarely tell a story with any pleasure. He preferred his excursions away from the story, and those asides are what make him exceptional. The moment I think of a good plot, I find that the book becomes almost impossible to write because I know I won't believe in it. Life may consist of people plotting all the time, but the plots never develop all the way. We decide: I'll make this move in my life, and that should result in the following--then, life confounds us. So I prefer a story that develops out of the writing. I don't like one that moves ahead of my characters, because then my people won't live. Already, I've ordered them to be slaves to my will. When you tie your characters to a pre-arranged plot, you are doing to them what we do to our children if we carefully select their colleges, their spouses, and jobs without ever consulting them. The same unspoken gloom weighs on characters who are treated that way in a novel--they never get to fulfill their own perverse (that is, surprising to the novelist) capabilities; they never come alive. Bill Buckley is wonderful at plots--his mind works that way--but nobody lives and breathes in his books with any more three-dimensionality than some passing movie star who can't act.

81.16 The influence of Henry Adams on The Armies of the Night was peculiar for I had never read much Adams. In my freshman year at Harvard, I was assigned one long chapter of The Education of Henry Adams and remember thinking at the time what an odd thing to do, to write about yourself in the third person. Who is this fellow, Henry Adams, talking about himself as Adams? I remember being annoyed by it in that mildly irritable fashion freshmen have of passing over extraordinary works of literature. It's possible that I then read more of The Education of Henry Adams sometime in my sophomore year, although I never wrote about him, never thought about him, and would not have mentioned his name as one of the writers who were important to me. Yet, start reading The Armies of the Night, and immediately you say—even I said—"My God, this is pure Henry Adams." It's as if I were the great-grandson. Contemplate, therefore, how peculiar is influence: Adams must have remained in my mind as a possibility, the way a painter might look at a particular Picasso, or Cezanne, and say to himself, "That's the way to do it." Yet the influence might not pop forth for 20 or 30 years. When it does, the painter could say, "Oh, yes, that was a Picasso I saw at MOMA 25 years ago, and I've always wanted to try such a palette, and now I have." In effect, that's what happened to me with Henry Adams and myself.

81.16 Large literary canvases are usually left today to best-selling novelists. They will have a cast of 40 or 50 characters, and stories that traverse 50 to 100 years. They'll have several world wars, plus startling changes in the lives of several families. They do all that to keep their book moving. What usually characterizes these novels is that nothing is in them that you haven't come across before. Most good writers tend these days to expatiate on smaller and smaller canvases with more and more clarity. Then, at least, you have the confidence that what you're doing is accurate. That's important. At least you're contributing to knowledge rather than adding to sludge in the culture. So it's hard to take on a large topic. At the moment the only great writer I can think of who can handle what I've described, 40 or 50 characters and ten decades is Garcia Marquez. One Hundred Years of Solitude is an amazing work. He succeeds in doing it, but how, I don't know. In my Egyptian novel, it takes me ten pages to go around a bend in the Nile.

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

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

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

82.16 Metaphors? I had a dear friend, Charlie Devlin, who helped me greatly with The Naked and the Dead, and in fact was the model, considerably removed, for the character named McLeod in Barbary Shore. Charlie was a quiet saturnine forty-year-old Irishman who was living in the small rooming house where I took a cubicle to finish The Naked and the Dead. We used to have long literary conversations. At a certain point I showed him the manuscript. He tore it apart. He could be a severe critic. He said, "It's a better book than I thought it would be, but you have no gift for metaphor." Then he said, "Metaphor reveals a man's true grasp of life. To the degree that you have no metaphor, you have not yet lived much of a life." I never forgot this lecture and began to work with might and main on my life and my metaphors. I like to think they improved with age.

82.16 A writer has to be ready to be good, even brilliant, when he enters a character's mind. So long as you stay outside, your character retains a certain mystery. We walk around such characters with the same respect we offer people who come into a room with force. Part of the meaning of charisma is that we don't know the intimate nature of the human presence we're dealing with. Characters in novels sometimes radiate more energy, therefore, when we don't enter their mind. It is one of the techniques a novelist acquires instinctively—don't go into your protagonist's thoughts until you have something to say about his inner life that is more interesting than the reader's suppositions. A fatal error is to jump in only to offer banal material. That's the worst of best-sellerdom. Second-rate readers enjoying the insights of second-rate writers. [Attach to A Man Half-Full—should it come with Craft?]

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I vote no
gmr

yes

73.14 I believe narrative exists in our everyday lives, but as a discrete phenomenon—in other words, narrative stops and starts. We all live with narrative or its shadow every moment of our existence; we're always cutting a narrative off or picking it up again. Still, it is almost impossible to proceed without an hypothesis on what you are up to. What usually happens, however, is that the hypothesis runs into evidence that confutes it, so the narrative stops until it can pick up again with a revised hypothesis. One example of an hypothesis that creates a narrative is jealousy. Think of a suspicious husband or wife—how they observe what the mate is doing at every moment, and what a story they make of it until they are forced to take active steps or back away from the hypothesis.

61.12 In The Deer Park I was trying to find a style, but it was elusive. I went through four drafts. The first had been Proustian —not first-rate Proust, of course. Attempted Proust. Failed Proust. The second draft was located somewhere between the English novel of manners and Scott Fitzgerald—not good, but in that general direction. The third draft was closer to Hemingway. Then I found my own style, which was not like the others. So I learned how style literally repels certain kinds of experience. Your style is equal to a bossy wife who even wishes to select your suits. If a writer keeps to a specific tone, despite all inner warnings, it will even determine the kind of experience that comes to him..

71.6 You know, a good skier never worries about a route. He just goes, confident that he'll react to changes in the trail as they come upon him. It's the same thing in writing; you have to have confidence in your technique. If you take on something you know you can do easily, your contempt for yourself will sour your comfort. That is the beauty of mustering the right style at the right time—it enables you to feel like a good skier, nice and relaxed for the next unexpected turn.

84.34 Some of my characters come from real people. One character might emerge out of five people, another out of just one person, but greatly altered. Still another from my imagination. There's an exciting moment when a character becomes, in a sense, independent of yourself. When the people in my books don't seem real to me, I'm in trouble. Graham Greene once said that there were certain characters who took care of themselves. He never had to bother about them in the writing. Others he had to go to great pains with. He would work very hard on them. Later, when he'd read a review and it would mention one of his resistant characters as "well-drawn," he used to think, "Well-dragged."

75.13 The people in a novel become real in your mind as you write. You live with them, sleep with them, you can even talk to them on occasion, for they exist within you. They take on the same kind of odd life in our minds that movie stars assume for us. To a lot of people, Humphrey Bogart might, for example, be the psychic equivalent of an uncle, given the measure of importance he exerts on their lives.

Schroeder/1992 Sometimes the only way you can perceive reality is through a good style. That premise may be arguable, but there is no doubt that a bad style obfuscates reality.

Schroeder/1992 I don't think of my characters as victims or victimizers. That sort of classification narrows them. When someone who is doing a novel says, "I'm writing about a victim," the character is not going to be interesting. In reality, very few victims ever see themselves exclusively as victims, and when they do, their spirit turns stale. There is a certain sort of self-pitying victim one wishes to walk away from, and they can be even worse in a book.

Lennon/1999 The first person point of view is an amazing tool. You can get to places you don't arrive at any other way. Of course, you can also injure your writing hand. It's a double-edged instrument. Hemingway had a marvelous sense of the limitations of the first person. It virtually created his style. If you are doing a book in the first person, there are certain things you should not talk about because they're embarrassing. They don't feel right in the telling, not when the "I" stands at the head of the sentence. So there's a tendency, most marked in Hemingway, to keep most of his revelations at arm's length. As, for example, the last few sentences of A Farewell to Arms.

Lennon/1999 Making stuff up is scary. The decisions you have to make are uneasy. Dread is present when you do a narrative that is imaginative. If your characters come alive, that's fine; they will carry you a part of the way. But, finally, you have to make what might be termed career decisions for your people. Does your protagonist want to go abroad in the foreign service, or does he want to stay in New York with the amazing young model he has just met? These are large decisions but they are also opportunities which are non-operative for writers who have the story complete in their mind before they begin. So I repeat: I look to find my book as I go along. Plot comes last. I want a conception of my characters that's deep enough so that they will get me to places where I have to live by my wits. That means my characters have to keep developing for me. When they come alive, the plot, I feel, will take care of itself. Working on a book where the plot is already fully developed is like spending the rest of your life filling holes in rotten teeth.

83.35 Writing is wonderful when you talk about it. It's fun to contemplate. But writing as a daily physical activity is not agreeable. You put on weight, or you strain your gut, you get gout and chilblains. You're alone and every day you have to face that blank piece of paper. This is equal to saying you not only have to face your soul a bit but that you must then proceed to give yourself a passing mark. If you flunk, it's going to be hard to write that day.

86.31 It's as difficult to become a professional writer as to grow into being a professional athlete. Stamina is the key, and the ability to keep faith in yourself. One must be willing to take risks and try again. It needs an enormous amount of practice to be good at it. Since you're affected by what you read as a child and adolescent, it takes a while to unlearn all sorts of reading reflexes that lead you into bad prose. (might attach to a related paragraph.)

83.57 While Dwight Macdonald gave us no great body of books, he did spend his talents in writing some of the better political and literary criticism of our time. More important than his oeuvre, however, was his influence. He was one of the best teachers of writing in the world. He gave no classes, but if one had learned a little about writing already, there were so many avenues to follow in the felicities of his style. Dwight had something fabulous to teach. It was to look to the feel of the intellectual phenomenon. Describe what you see as it impinges on the sum of your passions and your intellectual attainments. Bring to the act of writing all of your craft, care, devotion, lack of humbug and honesty of sentiment. And then write without looking over your shoulder for the literary police. Write as if your life depended on saying what you felt as clearly as you could while never losing sight of the phenomenon to be described. If something feels bad to you, it is bad. Others received the same message from Hemingway, but it took Dwight Macdonald to give the hint to many a young intellectual that the clue to new discovery rests not so much on the idea with which you begin as in the closeness of your attack on the problem, and your readiness to depart from preconceived intentions by the insight provided in an unexpected and happy turn of phrase.

91.17 When doing interviews for The Executioner's Song, I would meet exceptional people who should have had interesting relations with each other, but didn't, and sometimes I would think, "Why didn't God permit these two fascinating people to have a scene together?" With my novelist's instincts, I did want so much for them to get into an action with each other. Yet, when sometimes they did meet, the get-together came to less than I thought it would be. It took some time to learn that this did not necessarily diminish the drama. It could increase it. Most of our lives are spent getting ready for dramatic moments that don't take place. Or if they do, they are less than we expected. About the time we say, "Well, nothing really big ever happens to me," bam, you get knocked down with something much bigger than you expected. All the frustrations of all the little narratives in your life that never had a real climax can be present in the rare denouement that life also offers once in a great while.

Random House Publicity Flyer/2/91 Bad writing often results when exciting things happen to your friends, and you decide you're going to do a novel about them. Though your friends are alive to you, they won't necessarily appear so in the work. So, I almost never write about anyone who's close. It's too hard to bring off. I prefer to choose people for whom I believe I have a special understanding, yet, on the other hand, I still have to get to know a good deal more about them

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

91.3 Literary influence remains endlessly curious. I happened to pick up Moby Dick. I hadn't thought about Melville ten times in the last thirty years, but as soon as I read the first page, I realized my style was formed by Melville, shaped by his love of long, rolling sentences full of inversions and reverses and paradoxes and ironies and exclamation points and dashes. Of course, to be as good as Melville--that's another matter. [Put after Henry Adams]

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Capote

97.24 Capote wrote the best sentences of anyone of our generation. He had a lovely ear. He did not have a good mind. I don't know if a large idea ever bothered him. While he wrote poetically, he did not think like a poet. But he did have a sense of time and place. Breakfast at Tiffany's, for example, is a slight book. Looking at it with a hard eye, it's a charlotte russe. On the other hand, if you are looking to capture a particular period in New York, no other book may have done it so well. In that sense, Capote is a bit like Fitzgerald. If I were to mount them both on one wall, however, I'd certainly put Truman below Scott, but he is of that ilk.

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before
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on
Capote

Lee/2001 I had one existence which lasted for hardly more than two years but felt like a decade. It was being a private in the Army. That gave me real experience as opposed to the kind of experience you search for. Which is one of the problems for young writers. When they don't have enough to write about, they go out to look for it in new situations. But, if need be, they can usually get out of those situations. It's the ones you can't escape that give you the kind of knowledge you need to grow as a writer.

Lee/2001 One thing worth saying again: What's not understood about good writers is that they're as competitive as good athletes. When I come across an interesting novel, I don't go at it as other people do. I read critically, the way one athlete will watch another's performance. Not watch it with venom, quite the contrary. You might say to yourself, "His spiral is tighter than mine and he's got five more yards on me at least, but I scramble better." The thing is to give a good novel its credit and not overlook its power by deciding too quickly that the work is overrated. I believe I could end up as a good critic. I can always tell when someone is drawing sustenance out of his or her best vein and when the needle missed.

Koval/2000 Third person and first person are at least as different as major and minor keys in music. Before you decide which to employ, you have to have a sense of a) the event, b) of the likely reader, c) of yourself. Which person, first or third, will offer the most to these elements? When I was doing The Gospel According to the Son, people asked, "How did you have the nerve to write about Jesus in the first person?" but, in truth, it was a practical decision. I wanted the man Jesus to be predominant in the book, not Christ as the Son of God. I have always felt that Jesus was the cardinal example of a truly powerful personality built on two separate foundations. I was not equipped to write about the Son of God, but maybe I could do something with the man. For that, you need immediacy, which is the strength of first person. You can get bored with the "I," because it's constraining, but it does give easy access. In the beginning, at least. If I had put that book in the third person, it would have gotten mixed up with the Gospels, and people would have gone back and forth wondering which lines came from me, and what had been borrowed from the Gospels? Whereas in the first person, readers could accept the book as a whole, or reject it altogether.

95.12 There are two kinds of writers. Those like Faulkner and Hemingway and Melville, who write with an air that is inimitable. There are other writers, usually less famous, who go along in a variety of styles. I'm in the latter camp. The same is true of painters. Matisse painted in one recognizable vein, while Picasso entered a hundred before he was done. It was as if style was a cutting tool to him by which he could delineate a reality. I've found that principle to be useful for myself. Style has to be close to the material one is working with-- I'll go with a fairly formal prose on one occasion and be more casual on another.

92.12 An American Dream was originally published in Esquire in 1964, and had a sustained scene where a black man said "shit" about twenty times. Now, I didn't really need all twenty. Twelve would be better, but I also knew that if I put in twelve, the magazine editors would take out five, so I put in twenty. And the editors screamed at my twenty and I ended up with my twelve. They were happy and I was happy.

91.37 The CIA, in its workings, is an antithesis to the average spy novel. The latter is a perfect clock that ticks to its conclusion. A couple of characters in Harlot's Ghost agree that one reason they came into the CIA was because they loved spy novels. Now, their complaint was that now that once inside, they could never experience the full run of a scenario in their work. On occasion, they might find themselves in the equivalent of a spy novel, but only, let us say, for chapters five and six. They weren't there at the beginning of the case, and were soon shifted to another assignment. Often they did not learn how it turned out. That struck me as being exactly what life is like: the gun over the mantelpiece does not often get fired. We live in and out of ongoing plots every day of our lives, but they are discontinuous. Nothing can be more difficult to encounter than an ongoing story in life that accompanies us through a beginning, middle and end.

84.14 City life produces caustic wit. It is one of the essences of a city. If you live in a country, that kind of wit could get you killed. All too often, people who live in the country have one similarity to convicts. They have at times nothing to think about except the insults they have received. In New York and Chicago, sharp wit is a tonic. It serves as a bridge.

CRAFT

yes

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 my film, "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 a psychoanalysis on the cheap. I think I've been more balanced since those three years.



75.11 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. We may never know, for instance, what the truth of one human is, or another, but we can discern a lot about the relations between them. We may be able to say with some certainty, "They hate each other," or "Isn't it extraordinary how they love each other?" This is because we can feel the relation.

ABBOTT

yes

Too many Americans don't know that style refers to more than your clothing. I confess I had to learn the real meaning of the word. It took me up to the year I was writing Advertisements for Myself, when I began to recognize how truly curious it was to write in the first person. Now, many, many writers good and bad had been living in the first person for centuries before I came to this remarkable conclusion that the first person was not a routine nor automatic way to write. It's a very interesting and exciting mode of literary being, with huge, sometimes crippling, limitations and you really do have to understand it as such. Especially if you're dealing with your own presence. Nothing is more difficult than to become comfortable writing about yourself in the first person. It's highly unnatural. Because "I" is only about a third of any human being. "I" may be the ego, but you do get into all sorts of places where you want "one" to talk about other aspects of oneself. Or even second person, you, employed as if it is the first person: "You get up, you brush your teeth, you feel lousy this morning." (In the first period of awakening, you can feel like some vague entity slightly outside yourself.) And then there is the third person when used as a substitute for "I" as I—that is, Norman Mailer—did in The Armies of the Night. Using the third person for oneself may be a special condition, but it is legitimate because there is a part of us that is superior to ourselves, the person who observes us carefully even as we're doing things. That is the person who is always saying, "Oh, we're not doing too well right now, are we?" A wonderful voice. Because it enables you to treat yourself as one more character in a field of characters.

LONDON

Lyon

Style is a reflection of identity. Given a firm sense of oneself, you can create a consistent style. But should your identity change, so will the style go through a shift. Illness, tragedy, huge frustration, age itself are bound to alter your identity.

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

LONDON

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

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

write about any character but one. Who, I asked, and he said, "A novelist who's more talented than yourself."

I thought, this is the test. Not that Jesus was a novelist, far from it, but he certainly possessed a nobler nature than mine. Still, I thought, OK, I will try it. The problems are so interesting.

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

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

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

editors. With him, you have to make a quick decision. Where is he today? I concluded on this occasion, that, yes, the style was too Biblical.

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

LONDON

yes

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

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

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

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

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

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

In third person, you are God--well, of course, not God, but one of the angels or demi-urges. Nonetheless, there you are, ready to see into everyone's mind. While there are two kinds of third person--point-of-view third person where you remain in one character's mind, but are still writing from above, and the major vein of third person where you enter everyone's head. That's hard to do. Hard to get over the embarrassment of obviously being able to enter certain people's minds with more skill than others. That kind of Olympian third person, that Tolstoyan presence, needs experience, confidence, irony, and lordly detachment. When you can do it, however, hurrah. Most of the great novels achieve that tone. Just about all the great novels of the 19th century.

LONDON



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

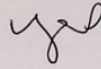
Now I didn't always follow that rule. When I was doing The Naked and the Dead, I used to pick up Thomas Wolfe and Tolstoy. I didn't read them every day but they were on my writing desk and they were perfect for what I needed. Tolstoy, particularly. The tone of Anna Karenina was wonderful for The Naked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

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

It's a book written by an amateur, and so it has all the virtues of such a book. It's daring; it hardly knows what it's getting into. If I were to write it today, it would take me

three to five times as long because I'd suffer at the number of novelistic taboos I was violating. You can transgress any taboo but you have to contemplate the possible price.

You don't, for instance, violate point of view without pondering the loss of your novelistic integrity.



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

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

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



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

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

W.D.

SHAINBERG

The art of good writing is you finally get to a place where you say what you wanted to say in a way that only you can. Because there's no good saying what you want to say in a way anyone else could. Needless to say, this has to happen by itself. You cannot force it.

WJ

SHAINBERG

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

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

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

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



SHAINBERG

Good dialogue depends in a subtle bounce. Rules won't help you; you need an ear. There has to be something in the next speech that is like the previous one, yet subtly different. But I don't even want to talk about dialogue. Some people have marvelous dialogue, some don't, but it's only one aspect of writing, it's not the aspect . . .

I don't think you can teach it. Most kids who have some talent start off with good dialogue because that comes naturally, they have a good ear. It's there and they have fun. People hear their stories and they laugh and that's the beginning of being a writer. Those who are not gifted in that direction are, hopefully, endowed with more philosophy or good language.


SHAINBERG

Hemingway suffered from the honorable need to be the equal of his characters, particularly since he usually wrote in the first person. It's very hard to write in the first person about someone who's stronger or braver than yourself because it can get vainglorious. It's often uncomfortable. But you have to be able to do it. Because if you keep every character down to your own level, or lower, you do not take on large subjects. You need people more heroic than yourself, more enterprising, less timid, sexier, more romantic, more tragic. You've got to be able to make people greater than yourself and not be ashamed of the damnable fact that the "I" who is being promoted is giving a false picture of yourself to all those readers who predictably assume that the author is the man they are encountering in the first person.



SHAINBERG

Working on The Executioner's Song, I came to the realization that God is a better novelist than the novelists. I had encountered an incredible story. It had actually happened. If I had conceived it, the work would have been more dramatic but less true. I learned that the way things work in life is not the way they work in my novels. Which is, my novels up to then. It would have been obscene to me to have a novel with two really fascinating characters who didn't come together and have a fascinating scene. Whereas, what I discovered in The Executioner's Song was that the characters I was most interested in hardly ever came together and when they did, the results were often disappointing. But what would happen occasionally, after all the frustrations of all the putative dramatic events that were not eventful, was that something else would happen which was larger than anything I could conceive of. (Like Gary's letter to Nicole that makes her fall wholly in love with him again.)

And I thought, yes, that is what life is like. We go through years of living the rough small events that we hoped would be larger events and then—wham! Something big! It changes everything. Getting a sense of that, put a certain modesty into my aesthetic.



MCELROY (Pont)

It might be useful to talk about the practical problems involved in writing a novel, by which I mean the set of psychological stances that you get into in the course of working on one book for a year or two. I remember when I was in college and writing a novel, the great problem I had was (I ran into a phrase by Henry James) "the keeping up." It's a problem you face when you're young. The novel tends to change too quickly, which is one of the reasons why people in college often tend to write short stories and stay away from longer fiction. Good short story writers often blow up when they start a novel. They'll have a good first chapter, but the second chapter just seems to go off, and they never get it back.

MCELROY (Pont)

yes

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

Looking back on it, I can give you a good and bad motive that I had for killing Hearn at that point. The good motive is that it was a powerful way to show what death is like in war. The shoddy motive was that I wasn't altogether sure in my heart that I knew what to do with him, or knew how to bring him off. I think that I truly work on impulse in all of my writing. That's why I don't like to plan too far ahead. It makes it almost impossible for one of your characters to go through a dramatic shift of heart because it's

going to violate your larger scheme. It's better if the larger scheme comes into focus at the very last moment.

Mcelroy (Pont)

A student once asked me, "When you were young, was there a mentor around to tell you that if it felt good, go with it; or did you have your doubts and just write your way through it? Didn't you sometimes get your head turned around by all the different forces working on you? Or were you aware, maybe instinctively, of what to do?"

As I recall, I said that I think I probably had a certain urgency about writing because it seemed to me that it was the only thing I could do well. There is a great tendency then to follow your own instincts, because that's all you've got. Let me amplify this. Your instinct could be dead wrong. In other words, you could write a book with a powerful sense of inner conviction. You could finish, and a year or two later, look at it and say, "How could I have so deluded myself? This is awful." This inner experience, this instinct can betray you, but you still have to go with it. Very often the instinct sees some light at the end of the tunnel, but that's because you've been trapped in a situation where your creative energies just can't get together. Now, at last, you've found a way to work. You may be writing out some very bad tendencies in yourself, but this can be good, too. You might be feeling happy because some you're going to be done with that stupid side of yourself. That's what the enthusiasm can be about.

MCELROY (Pont)

yes

Rewriting is where your experience comes in. The more you rewrite, the better you get at it. There comes a point where you may feel on the declining side of your powers. At this point, if you've become one of the best editors in town, then those declining powers may seem much less weak to others than to yourself. That's because you know how to get the maximum out of what you have done. The only way to do this when you're young is to go through your work in every mood. You have to have the courage to look at it when you're in a terrible mood, ready to destroy it. If at that point, something still comes through, then at least you have the assurance that it has to be pretty good, at least to you. And then, of course, it's very good to read things at the top of your feelings, way up, to see what the maximum is. If nothing else, all this gives you a tolerance for the extraordinary spectrum of reactions you get in the classroom. You realize that the people that hate your work aren't necessarily evil, and the people who love your stuff are not altogether illustrious.

MCELROY (Pont)

There's an awful lot of research in doing an historical novel but the trick is to digest it. The most difficult thing is to avoid that awful stance where you say, "Hello, I'm Saint-Simon and I'm at the court of Louis XIV and Madame de Maintenon is very angry this morning." You have to get to that point of view in your writing where you say to yourself, "Madame de Maintenon does not quite know that she's the Madame de maintenon that we know through Saint-Simon. She sees herself as someone other." That's what you're trying to get in an historical novel, and it's very difficult. Anachronisms come in with every page.



MCELROY (Pont)

If you find some theme that keeps you working, don't question it. Let that theme be sufficient to fuel your work. If you start using the value judgments of others, you're never going to get much done. The thing to remember is that there's nobody anymore who can tell us how to live. Nobody knows the answer. If I find something is stimulating to me and arousing my energy, that's fine, I'll trust it. If you're a serious young writer and find that you're writing, my God, don't listen to what anyone else says, write your book. There probably is a deeper truth than you'll ever know in the fact that you're able to work so well. Of course, you could be writing in absolutely the wrong direction. You could be doing a dreadful book. You could be, let's take an extreme example, flirting with something that justifies Hitler and you say to yourself, "What am I doing? I'm a monster. Why am I writing this book?" Who knows? In the process of creating such a work you might reawaken civilization to the fact that they're getting kind of casual and complacent about Hitler. You see, you won't know the results of your action. The greatest vanity, the thing that has poisoned Marxist literature for decades, is that they assume writers can affect the population profoundly in ways that are foreseeable, and therefore writers should work like scientists.

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

MOFLAD (over)

If you can, it's a good idea to work as if you're a farmer that grows your
crops. If you're a farmer that's fed and trained and big, we fully expect to what
happened that it's probably a good idea that your work should be as fruitful as possible.
That way you're making the most of your time.

MCELROY (Pont)

yes

If you can, I think it's a good idea to work as if you're a farmer and rotate your crops. If you write a novel that's factual and realistic and big, awfully close to what happened, then it's probably a good idea that your next novel be as fanciful as possible. That way you're rotating the crops in your brain.

yes

MCELROY (Pont)

When I work on a novel, I don't like to know the end. I'm happier finding things out at the point of a pencil. I think if you solve the problem of how a chapter's going to end in the shower, then you're not as well off as if you get to it while writing. I felt this with *The Executioner's Song*. While I knew the story, I saw this as a hazard. I wanted the book to read as if we did not know the ending. I didn't want to be aware of too many future details, because this would tend to make me curve what was happening to my characters at the place where I had them. I would understand too well their relation to what was going to happen later.

CONV. W/ NM/MARCUS p.88

yes

I can't pretend I've never been asked when the idea of using a hornet's nest to thwart the climbers in The Naked and the Dead came to me. In truth, the idea was there before I wrote the first sentence of the book. The incident happened to my reconnaissance platoon on the most ambitious patrol I ever took with them. They sent out thirty of us to locate and destroy one hundred Japanese marines, but we did get stuck climbing one hell of an enormous hill with a mean slimy trail, and when we were almost up to the ridge, somebody kicked over a hornet's nest. Half the platoon went tearing up the hill, and the machine gun squad behind us went flying down to the valley. We never did find each other again that day. We just slunk back to our bivouac.

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

yes

CONV W/ NM MARCUS p.88

Young writers are obsessed with finding a style. Yet, a really good style comes only when a man has become as good as he can be. Style is character. A good style cannot come from a bad, undisciplined character. Now, a man may be evil, but I believe that people can be evil in their essential natures and still have good characters. Good in the sense of being well-tuned. They can have characters which are flexible, supple, adaptable, principled in relation to their own good or evil—even an evil man can have principles—he can be true to his own evil, which is not so easy, either. I think good style is a matter of rendering out of oneself all the cupidities, all the crippings, all the velleities. And then I think one has to develop one's physical grace. Writers who are possessed of some physical grace may tend to write better than writers who are physically clumsy. It's my impression this is so. I don't know that I'd care to attempt to prove it.

CONV W/ NM MARCUS p.89



I think formal problems exist in inverse proportion to one's honesty. You get to the problem of getting someone out of the room when there's something false about the scene.

Conv w/ NM Marcus p. 90



Up to now, I've not liked writing about people who are close to me because they're too difficult to do. Their private reality obviously interferes with the reality one is trying to create. They become alive not as creatures in your imagination but as actors in your life. And so they seem real while you work but you're not working their reality into your book. For example, it's not a good idea to try to put your wife into your novel. Now your latest wife, anyway. In practice, I prefer to draw a character from someone I hardly know.

CONV W/ NM MARCUS P. 91

yes

The question goes: how do you turn a real person into a fictional one? If I have an answer, it is that I try to put the model in situations which have very little to do with his real situations in life. Very quickly, the model disappears. His private reality can't hold up. For instance, I might take somebody who is a professional football player, a man, let's say, whom I know sort of slightly, and turn him into a movie star. In a transposition of this sort, everything which relates particularly to the professional football player quickly disappears, and what is left, curiously, is what is exportable in his character. But this process while interesting in the early stages is not as exciting as the more creative act of allowing your characters to grow once they're separated from the model. It's when they become almost as complex as one's own personality that the fine excitement begins. Because they're not really characters any longer—they're beings, which is a distinction I like to make. A character is someone you can grasp as a whole, you can have a clear idea of him, but a being is someone whose nature keeps shifting. Like a character of Forster's. In The Deer Park, Lulu Meyers is a being rather than a character. If you study her closely, you will see that she is a different person in every scene. Just a little different. I don't know whether initially I did this by accident or purposefully, but at a certain point I made the conscious decision not to try to straighten her out, she seemed right in her change-ability.

W
CONV W/ NM Marcus p. 92

I am not sure it is possible to describe the experience of novel-writing authentically. It may be that it is not an experience. It may be more like a relation, if you will—a continuing relation between a man and his wife. You can't necessarily speak of that as an experience because it may consist of several experiences braided together; or it may consist of many experiences which are all more or less similar, or indeed it may consist of two kinds of experiences which are antagonistic to one another. Throughout all of this I've spoken of characters emerging. Quite often they don't emerge; they fail to emerge. And what one's left with is the dull compromise which derives from two kinds of experience warring with one another within oneself. A character who should have been brilliant is dull. Or even if a character does prove to be first-rate, it's possible you should have done twice as much with him, three times as much. A book takes on its own life in the writing. It has its laws; it becomes a creature to you after a while. One feels a bit like a master who's got a fine animal. Very often, I'll feel a certain shame for what I've done with a novel. I won't say it's the novel that's bad; I'll say it's I who was bad. Almost as if the novel did not really belong to me, as if it were something raised by me like a child. I know what's potentially beautiful in my novel, you see. Very often after I've done the novel I realize that the beauty I recognize in it is not going to be perceived by the reader. I didn't succeed in bringing it out. It's very odd—it's as though I had let the novel down, owed it a duty which I didn't fulfill.

CONV W/ NM Marcus p. 94



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

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

There are legends for a writer's drinking habits. But I've heard of none about Henry Cobb. For example, was a fighter who tried to keep in shape. He kept himself in the kitchen. The way one might want to be comfortably a writer. He always did the things which were necessary to retain a fighter. Some, some of these things were not strictly functional, that is, not exactly functional from a fighter's viewpoint's point of view. That is, before he knew a fight he would go to a level 2, and he would have two preparations, one was taking the rest of them into the same hall. And that apparently left him feeling like a wild animal. I don't know why. Perhaps he passed the 100-pounder who was in the past and he showed into the system all the small, easy, controlled, and well that had accumulated from a number of years. Cobb was known as the shortest fighter of his time. I don't know whether a much for he would spell other fighters and remind them, he knew some very little that anyone around. This was one of his training methods and he did it over and over again until a day at a relatively early age of a heart attack, on an operating table. I think he kept it for 10 or 15 years. They operated on him, and long, he was. Nothing would be done.

But the point I make is that he kept it training by the way he lived his life. The legend which was prominent in it was to keep in shape. If he were drinking, you see, the point was to keep in shape while drinking. Including a much experience. . . Put it this way. He would not drink you to relieve his tension. Rather, what with it was that there was perhaps in him which was important as he had to drink. But it was not as a

CONV W/ NM marcus p. 95

I think it's important for a writer to keep in shape. But it's hard to talk about. Harry Greb, for example, was a fighter who used to keep in shape. He was completely a fighter, the way one might wish to be completely a writer. He always did the things which were necessary to him as a fighter. Now, some of these things were extremely irrational, that is, extremely irrational from a prize-fight manager's point of view. That is, before he had a fight he would go to a brothel, and he would have two prostitutes, not one, taking the two of them into the same bed. And this apparently left him feeling like a wild animal. Don't ask me why. Perhaps he picked the two meanest whores in the joint and so absorbed into his system all the small, nasty, concentrated evils that had accumulated from carloads of men. Greb was known as the dirtiest fighter of his time. He didn't have much of a punch but he could spoil other fighters and punish them, he knew more dirty tricks than anyone around. This was one of his training methods and he did it over and over again until he died at a relatively early age of a heart attack, on an operating table. I think he died before he was thirty-eight. They operated on him, and bang, he went. Nothing could be done.

But the point I make is that he stayed in training by the way he lived his life. The element which was paramount in it was to keep in shape. If he were drinking, you see, the point was to keep in shape while drinking. I'm being a touch imprecise. . . Put it this way: He would not drink just to release his tension. Rather, what went on was that there was tension in him which was insupportable so he had to drink. But reasoning as a

professional, he felt that if he had to drink, he might as well use that too. In the sense that the actor uses everything which happens to him, so Greb as a fighter used everything which happened to him. As he drank he would notice the way his body moved. One of the best reasons one drinks is to become aware of the way your mind and body move. Now let me apply this to craft.

It is a grab-bag of procesures, tricks, lore, formal gymnastics, symbolic superstructures, methodology in short. It's the compendium of what you've acquired from others. And since great writers communicate a vision of experience, one can't usually borrow their methods. Their method is married to the vision. Therefore, one acquires craft more from good writers and mediocre writers with a flair. Craft, after all, is what you can take out whole from their work. But keeping in shape is something else. For example, you can do journalism, and it can be terrible for your style. Or it can temper your style. . . in other words, you can become a better writer by doing a lot of different kinds of writing. Or you can deteriorate. There's a book came out a few years ago which was a sociological study of some Princeton men—I forget the name of it. One of them said something which I thought was extraordinary. He wanted to perform the sexual act under every variety of condition, emotion and mood available to him. I was struck with this not because I ever wanted necessarily to have that kind of sexual life, but because it seemed to me that was what I was trying to do with my writing. I try to go over my work in every conceivable mood. I edit on a spectrum which runs from the high clear manic impressions of a drunk which has made one electrically alert, all the way down to the soberest reaches of depression where I can hardly bear my words. By the time I'm done

with writing I care about, I usually have worked on it through the full spectrum of my consciousness. If you keep yourself in this peculiar kind of shape, the craft will take care of itself. Craft is very little finally. But if you're continually worrying about whether you're growing or deteriorating as a man, whether your integrity is turning soft or firming itself, why, then, it in that slow war, that slow rearguard battle you fight against diminishing talent that you stay in shape as a writer and have a consciousness. You develop a consciousness as you grow older which enables you to write about anything, in effect, and write about it well. That is, provided you keep your consciousness in shape and don't relax into the flabby styles of thought which surround one everywhere. The moment you borrow other writers' styles of thought, you need craft to shore up the walls. But if what you write is a reflection of your own consciousness, then even journalism can become interesting. One wouldn't want to spend one's life at it, and I wouldn't ever want to be caught justifying journalism as a major activity (it's obviously less interesting than to write a novel), but it's better, I think, to see journalism as a venture of one's ability to keep in shape than to see it as an essential betrayal of the chalice of your literary art.

Of course, it's virtually as if writers are there to be ruined. Look at the list: booze, pot, too much sex, too much failure in one's private life, too much attrition, too much recognition, too little recognition, frustration. Nearly everything in the scheme of things works to dull a first-rate talent. But the worst probably is cowardice—as one gets older, one becomes aware of one's cowardice, the desire to be bold which once was a joy gets heavy with caution and duty. And finally there's apathy. About the time it doesn't

seem too important any more to be a great writer, you know you've slipped far enough now to be doing your work on the comeback trail.

The hardest thing for an older writer to decide is whether he's burned out or merely lying fallow. I was ready to think I was burned out before I even started The Naked and the Dead.