

Dr. J Michael Lennon

From: "jm wordcraft" <jmwordcraft@yahoo.com>
To: "Mike Lennon" <lennon@wilkes.edu>; "Mike Lennon"
Sent: Wednesday, May 29, 2002 6:02 PM
Attach: PsychsemifinalBWS.doc
Subject: Psychology
Mike,

Here is:

PsychsemifinalBWS

I don't think you need to print it, but you must have it on your hard drive since it still has the sources for every selection.

This is almost-final form--I can't put the correct page #s in yet but NM doesn't want to see it again.

Best,
Judith

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82.16 Some writers have a powerful sense of identity. I think the best American examples might be Henry Miller, Hemingway, Faulkner, Thomas Wolfe, Henry James, Sinclair Lewis. Then you get to authors like Steinbeck who kept changing his persona with every book he did. As other good examples of this second category, I could add Ed Doctorow or myself. Picasso, however, comes even more to mind. His many changes of style are generally seen as a reaction to the different women in his life. I could 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 establish his identity very early in life. This is probably the case for people who grow up in hostile families—they must arrive at an inner presence sooner, a hard, often hostile identity that the family cannot mess with too easily.

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 whatever kind of good looks I have. I am only wanted for my celebrity. Therefore my experience isn't real. All the habits I'd formed up to that point were as an observer on the sidelines. Suddenly, 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 bitterly 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 all these years to get to that point. Then I began to realize that the kind of writing I was going to do would be altogether different from the kind of writing I had thought I would do. After The Naked and the Dead I had assumed I would write huge collective novels about American life, books that required venturing out to get experience, but my celebrity made the requisite anonymity. Then I began to realize there was something else I could express, which hopefully would be equally valuable. 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 all 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 are 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.

Foreman/2001 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 particularly shy in those years, 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.

McKay/2000 Before The Naked and the Dead was published, I thought maybe I could make a success of writing, or perhaps I couldn't. Then came its startling success. It was number one on the bestseller list for many weeks and I was a celebrity. I was totally unprepared for that. I felt as if I were

secretary to someone named Norman Mailer, and to meet him, people had to meet me first. It took a long time to realize that this fame and celebrity, which had so unhorsed me in the beginning, eventually became 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 and more of it. Fame makes you realize that you are amputated from normal life—people don't look at you in the same way--but it also gives a sense of how delicate and changeable is identity. And so my experience finally became interesting to me. I could now write about the identity of people who had gained a certain amount of power, and had to put up, therefore, with the new person who was themselves.

83.22 There's an irony in the warp of fabricating an alternate self. 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'd like to be and have some reasonable chance of

growing into in a couple of years until, 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. The negative side, however, is that you then end up with this incredible dinosaur's tail of legend, and it's false legend—it never worked even on the day it was created. 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.

Lennon/1999 Most writers go through a long, arduous preparation before they arrive. William Kennedy, for example, worked in the boondocks for 20 years before it was recognized what an exceptionally talented writer he is. By the time he reached his successes, he could enjoy them. He had earned them. He knew the man he was when the good news arrived. There were

fewer shocks and surprises. For me, it was the opposite. It took 20 years to come to terms with who I was and to recognize that my experience was the only experience I was going to have. A few other literary people have also been shot out of a cannon—James Jones, for example. But Jones went through more than I did before he wrote From Here to Eternity. By the time he'd arrived, he was ready to enjoy the success. I was a great pain in the ass to a great many people because I'd keep saying, "Oh, woe is me. I will never have the experience of other people. I will have nothing to write about." Jones didn't give a damn. He knew he had brought home the game and now he wanted to eat it.

{note to ME could be used in Paris}

91.10 Given my interest in identity and its crises, I've always been fascinated with spies and actors who take on roles that are not their. I would not say that actors can be wholly equated to spies, but they do have the experience of embodying a false life that can become more real than their own. The few times I've acted, I've been struck at how alive you can feel. 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.

73.14 What I write is more important to me than my opinion of myself. I think Hemingway got into trouble because he could never get that necessary imbalance functioning for him. Finally, he had to be equal to his work. It became an enormous demand. He could never allow a character in his books to be braver than himself. It's a beautiful demand, and there's honor in forcing oneself to submit 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's 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 fifty-year old fighter-writer around.

68.1 I learned how to accept and live with my legend. It became my friend, a beard, a front man, a pimp, a procurer of new situations. The legend is a ghost who is more real to other people than to yourself. In time, every single action you take with another person becomes part of a triangle. Many a woman you talk to is attracted to your legend—who (how could it be otherwise?) is more real to her than you are. There are times, therefore, when you beef up your legend, perform some action to support it. At other times, you are ready to accept the desire of some stranger to do something nice for

you. Either way, you don't pretend to yourself—as I did for years—that the legend isn't a real part of your life. It is. You come to appreciate it in those periods when others begin to lose interest in you.

84.29 Good novelists have to be brave on the one hand, but prudent on the other. So, they make up a delicate species. More sensitive than others in the beginning, they 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.

London

I look at my contemporaries in the way an athlete looks at rival athletes. You try to have a state of mind where you can see everything they do that's better than what you bring off, while retaining the confidence that you still know where you are better. That's how good athletes look at their peers. After all, they have to face each other.

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

98.17 If you start a novel before you're ready, it's exactly as if you are a young athlete out in a game with professionals who are far beyond you. Not ready, you get clobbered. You receive a 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.

SUFFOLK

If you believe in fiction, if you believe in the power of the novelist as I do, then all subjects are possible. Of course, certain avenues 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. After all, one of the novelistic elements of sex 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. For example, why do certain people who are pious nonetheless feel driven to break their own deepest sexual prohibitions? It's because the experience of meeting the Other is so incredible. Which is why I say it's easier--if you're 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

Searching for Reality: Gender

A 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 inventiveness and capacity and determination and excess 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 is bravery to be defined, 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 do know what constitutes brave action. So a novelist who keeps her crystals intact, so to speak, can 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.

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 June's lack of center, the incapacity of his beloved 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 one day he is a detective, and the next, a criminal, 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 is none other than that 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 hideous 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. Are there less than a thousand 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 intensity of their 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 (like 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, perhaps, as a trust, he sees his loves as 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

failed 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 at all if he had not met her. All we know is that after seven years of living with her, 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.

KRASSNER (Pont)

Preface—the act of writing is so close to the psychic character of masturbation that one has to deal with it if we are going to discuss the inner world of the writer.

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 s 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 which 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. Instead, 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.

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?

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, that kind of confrontation could get you killed. All too often, 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.

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. 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?"

Lee/2001 The few times in my life that I've been associated with real violence 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. I think that we go through certain events that 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. For instance, I've never written directly about my childhood. Too many crystals there too valuable to approach directly. Whereas, if you project your imagination through the crystal, you end up with an extrapolation of the original events. Later, coming from another angle, you may obtain another scenario from the same crystal. It 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.

SUFFOLK

I've found one rule over the years--the only one I give every writing class. I've probably given this piece of advice twenty times-- it's the only maxim that works for nearly everyone who is working on a novel. It is that if you tell yourself you are going to write tomorrow, you are by that act also telling your unconscious: Prepare the material! I will be there to pick it up from you tomorrow. Count on me, I will write it. The point is that you have to establish trustworthy relations. If you wake up in the morning with a hangover and cannot go to literary work, your unconscious withdraws.

It is quite likely our unconscious is never all that much in love with us. 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 such, as a curious and semi-alienated presence with whom you have to maintain decent relations—if you can see yourself as a sort of benighted general (of the old, aristocratic and careless school) and think of the unconscious as your often unruly body of troops, then obviously, you don't dare keep those troops out in the rain needlessly—certainly not at the commencement of a serious campaign. On the contrary, you make a pact: "Work for me, fight for me, and I will honor and respect you."

The rule, therefore, 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. 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 might take weeks, or more—but the unconscious, nursing its disappointments, begins 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 rule) of 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 thoughts about the book you're working on. And indeed, if you are able to avoid the unpleasant condition of having 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.

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 a good deal 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 works on that. It needs very little evidence to put together a comprehensive portrait because, presumably, the unconscious is working all the time. To use an unhappy analogy, it's as if the unconscious is a powerful computer which hardly needs new material to fashion a portrait because so much material has already been stored away.

On the other hand, the unconscious can often feel violated by what we manage to extract from it. Perhaps a great deal of the material it is now supplying you was originally taken in for its own purposes. Suppose the unconscious has a root in the hereafter that our conscious mind does not, and therefore has deeper notions about death than we do. Let us 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 much of his product from its 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 for our relation to what the working model might be. Just like the Greek slave, the unconscious is full of the trickiest kinds of resistance. One form it may take is to emit flatness of affect. The dull, edgy resentment of being forced to plumb into issues the unconscious is not ready to present is all, at certain times, that the writer can receive. The acute form of this is nothing new, is writer's block, but in a sense 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, as many as four or five. On happy days, we're writing as if it's being given to us, a gift, we have very little to do with it. You're only there to transcribe what's coming up, and that is so agreeable, so rich. 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 while this marvelous streak is on." Then, you can feel the sentences getting less good and feel, no, one's got to stop—dammit, dammit—now I'm going to lose all of

tomorrow morning getting to the end of this chapter, but, no, don't try to do 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 and 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 is the co-pilot of being (to indulge a phrase that is as repulsive as a sound bite). But one of the most painful elements of the act of writing is that you do live so much of the day with nothingness. People often exclaim, "How wonderful to be a writer!" Few men and women, however, remain writers for all that many years. Some of the most talented have a 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 an exciting inner life any longer. They remain professional enough to take what is potentially exciting in their scope and put it on a piece of 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 becomes the patron of the nothingness that besets us.

The primitive elements had passed which were closer to the animal. He also had been closer to the animal. These facts are obvious. Anyone who has ever felt down in any real way knows the senseless and desperate that one will do almost anything it would be the best of some way to achieving the notion that civilization came out of man's terror at seeing his first friend as a fully conscious. Therefore, we worked to create a civilization that would insulate us from the constant demands of existence. The not speaking now of those early and irrefragably growing demands of growing men with the strength given to be able to live. I'm talking of a greater sense when the more space is won, and the things will get from the rising of the house and the coming of the men was complete. The story they told you about—that terrible storm that was going to make the river with men for weeks and destroy your settlement in three weeks proved to be true. What a terror. Small wonder then if you did everything he could to get away from that kind of holiness with nature, that knowledge, that dread.

YOUNG (PONT)

The primitive obviously had senses which were closer to the animal. He also had fears closer to the animal. Those fears are intense. Anyone who has ever felt dread in any real way knows it's so unendurable an experience that one will do almost anything to avoid it. So I could come near to advancing the notion that civilization came out of man's terror at having to face dread as a daily condition. Therefore, we worked to create a civilization that would insulate us from the exorbitant demands of existence. I'm not speaking now of those early and unbelievably pressing demands of growing crops or killing enough game to be able to live. I'm talking of a greater terror when the trees spoke to one, and the message one got from the rustling of the leaves and the swaying of the trees was accurate. The storm they told you about—that terrible storm that was going to make the river wash over its banks and destroy your settlement in three weeks proved to be true. What a terror. Small wonder then if man did everything he could to get away from that kind of intimacy with nature, that foresight, that dread.

SHAINBERG

I don't meditate. I prefer that nothing come into my head. I can sit with an empty mind for maybe half an hour. If I do think of something, then, all right, I think of it. I don't try to void my mind forcibly. A tired brain is happy to think about nothing. It's like a hard-working athlete who likes lying down.

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

Add to The Rule.

SUFFOLK

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 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 11th? 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 spooky 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 he can submarine Angleton just a bit through the young man. That appealed to me. And I thought: do I dare? Then realized: No! 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 big 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 a year." 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.

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.

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 experience 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 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 too 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 an eliminatory process. The worst thing that can be said about literary work is that it can reduce itself all too easily to therapy and that 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 more writing until such logorrhea exhausts the contradictions to a degree.

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 be afraid of, 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 feeling weak and the other guy is working out with weights in the yard. You get his bad looks. Then, there is the daily injustice, which is inevitable—the guards who 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, after all, is like a magnetic field. You keep being pulled back into a direction you have not chosen. All this militates against writing with clarity and force, let alone nuance! Given the variety of experience and 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.

82.16 I'm always a little uneasy when my writing comes without much effort. It seems better to have to forge the will to work on a given day. I find that on such occasions, if I do succeed in writing against resistance in myself, even finishing in a bad mood, the result is often good. As I discover days or weeks later. (The Armies of the Night, for example, was written in a towering depression.) 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 look at 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.

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 everyone does exactly that one way or another on many a morning, the difference is that 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.

71.7 When I'm writing, therefore, I am rarely in a good mood. A part of me prefers to work in a flat depression. 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 own 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.

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 there in order to protect oneself. And these airs have to be finely tuned if they are to do the job. Capote has a wonderful set and walks 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.

81.2 I've found that I can't do serious writing without getting into a mild depression. It is 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 your feelings too much. Odds are, if they stir you that disproportionately, they may excite others less. (This accounts for the bewilderment of novice writers when a story they have written which excited them hugely appears to have little impact on others.)

With veteran writers, a 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 descends. Certain large possibilities won't get written about after all. No book I wrote kept me in a

more profound depression (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.

81.16 There's a potentiality in all of us that can only be tapped by writing. 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 which the average reader won't have, 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 like that 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.

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 ideas 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.

83.10 I've always had the feeling that it doesn't make much sense to take on a subject of 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, but only when it chooses.

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

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, some can't take the meanness of the occupation. There's nothing 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 you through the very monotony of the process. The act of writing itself, taken as a physical act, is less interesting, for example, than painting where more of your body is exercised in the doing itself.

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 are not taking some risk, especially if it is a long book. You

can do a novel quickly when the risks are minimal. But for a long work, you would, and should, take some serious risks. How not? How dignify the time it takes if large chances aren't engaged?

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 wreck on his body. No wonder that it puts him in gloom. What characterizes every older fighter I have seen training for a fight is the depression 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 many 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.

82.14 Writing can 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.

81.16 Hemingway's death was cautionary to me. His suicide was a wounding as 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 in 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.

2. GIANTS AND COLLEAGUES

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pages

COLLEAGUES- LONDON

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

I think the younger writers are sick of Roth, Bellow, Updike and myself the way we were sick of Hemingway and Faulkner. We never talked about anyone but them when I was a young writer and that feeling grew into resentment. Since they had no interest in

us, we began to think, "Yeah, they're great--now get off the stage! We want the lights on us!"

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

Reading Toni Morrison, it's more on the order of: "I know so little of black women who don't have a voice, who are not educated, and after all, I should know more.

She certainly has a deep sense of black women, no question. But how good is she on black men? I feel less certain of those portraits." Finally I decide that what she does with black women is an education and I respect her for that. I've only read one or two of her novels, by the way, so I may be reacting on too narrow a base.

On the other hand, Roth is more agreeable to read because you can see all the skillful things he's doing and enjoy them. With Morrison it's like entering a strange country.

HAZARDS& SOURCES (Pont)

Kurt Vonnegut and I are friendly with one another, but wary. There was a period when we used to go out together a great deal because our wives liked each other and Kurt and I would sit there like bookends. We would be terribly careful with one another; we both knew the huge cost of a literary feud so we certainly didn't want to argue. On the other hand, neither of us would be caught dead saying to the other, "Gee, I liked your last book," and then be met with silence because the party of the second part could not reciprocate. So we would talk about anything else, we would talk about Las Vegas or the Galapagos Islands. We only had one literary conversation and that was one night in new York. Kurt looked up and sighed, "Well, I finished my novel today and it like to killed me." When Kurt is feeling heartfelt, he speaks in an old Indiana accent which I will do my best to reproduce. His wife said, "Oh, Kurt, you always say that whenever you finish a book," and he replied, "Well, whenever I finish a book I do say it and it is always true and it gets more true and this last one like to killed me more than any."

SUFFOLK

I've always felt that Hemingway and Faulkner who, in my mind, are the two greatest American writers of the 20th century, each possessed half of the whole when it came to style. Hemingway simply could not write a long, powerful, architecturally structured sentence and get away with it. He could do short sentences, and long ones connected by conjunctions, and he did extraordinary things with that limitation. Faulkner, in turn, was incapable of writing about anything simply. They did it, you might say, with one arm rather than two--but what an arm in each man. What an extraordinary arm.

SHAINBERG

Somewhere around the turn of the century, Chekhov was invited to visit Tolstoy at Yasnya Polyana. By that point, of course, Tolstoy was looked upon by Russians as ki to God. At the time, they had, after all, a greater love for their novelists and poets than any nation ever. With considerable justice, Tolstoy had been placed on the highest peak and I think one good reason is that no other novelist ever succeeded so completely in balancing severity of judgment on moral matters, with compassion. While Tolstoy is profoundly compassionate, he is never sentimental. That is an amazing quality. I've said in other places that when I was writing The Naked and the Dead, I used to read a little Tolstoy every day in order to get into the proper mood of compassion and severity. It helped with the book, I must say.

At any rate, here we have Chekhov visiting Tolstoy. He takes the train to the nearest station--in range of Yasnya Polyana--I don't know if it was 6 versts or 20 versts--let's say it was about 10 miles. And it's winter time. He rents a sled and horses and drives out through the snow to Yasnya Polyana. Tolstoy's pretty old by now, big, strong,

severe, of course, and sits him down and they talk. They drink tea and they talk. Tolstoy says: "Chekhov, you are a very good writer. You are excellent. Some of your short stories are so good I would have been pleased to have written them myself. But, Chekhov, I must tell you: You are a terrible playwright! You are awful! You are even worse than Shakespeare!"

Afterward, Chekhov drove back to the railroad station through the snow. In his journal he would write: "I whipped the horses. To the moon I shouted, 'I am even worse than Shakespeare!'"

It's a fine story but I wondered: why did Tolstoy dislike Shakespeare so much? I expect the answer is that Tolstoy was always searching for subtle but precise moral judgment. That required a detailed sense of any sequence of events which produced a dramatic or tragic event. You had to know how to assess the blame; for that, you needed to know exactly when and why things happened.

But there, very much in the way, was Shakespeare, the first great movie writer who ever existed before movies were conceived. For Shakespeare was not interested in making careful connections with his people. Shakespeare was looking to get his most dynamic characters together under any remote circumstances available, no matter how wacky or contrived, (King Lear can be the first example). He was looking for superb exchanges of dialogue and fantastic moments. Shakespeare searches for vertiginous possibilities in the English language. Tolstoy lived for sobriety of moral judgment. So he considered Shakespeare a monster who paid no attention to causality except when it was useful to him. His people did incredible things, fell in love and/or murdered, usually with a minimum of preparation—Hamlet—and then had exceptional speeches that seared

an audience's consciousness. To Tolstoy, this was monstrous, and must have been equal to the way some of us look these days on advertising campaigns that are stuffed with manipulation and little else. Filled with catchy ingredients for the sole purpose of leading people astray.

But why Tolstoy would compare Chekhov to Shakespeare is another question. I don't know that I am prepared to answer that one.

If there is a reason, I expect it was for a different set of faults. Tolstoy may have felt that Chekhov was a prelude to someone yet to arrive, someone like Beckett. Chekhov's people were simply not doing what they ought to be doing. What had to irritate Tolstoy immensely was that they sat in their own spiritual excrement and made vapid sweet speeches and mianed a little and sighed and groaned and never got out of their situation. To Tolstoy, that was a cardinal sin. One should not live with the given when it is vapid and vaguely immoral. This was one of Tolstoy's most basic notions. You may have to live with a dreary given as a discipline but you do not accept such a given as eternal, as the meaning of life. He could not permit that. Could not accept how Chekhov made so much of the essential inanition of the Russian middle class.

COLLEAGUES- LONDON

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

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

LONDON

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

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

On the other hand, Roth is more agreeable to read because you can see all the skillful things he's doing and enjoy them. With Morrison it's like entering a strange country.

HAZARDS& SOURCES (Pont)

Kurt Vonnegut and I are friendly with one another, but wary. There was a period when we used to go out together a great deal because our wives liked each other and Kurt and I would sit there like bookends. We would be terribly careful with one another; we both knew the huge cost of a literary feud so we certainly didn't want to argue. On the other hand, neither of us would be caught dead saying to the other, "Gee, I liked your last book," and then be met with silence because the party of the second part could not reciprocate. So we would talk about anything else, we would talk about Las Vegas or the Galapagos Islands. We only had one literary conversation and that was one night in new York. Kurt looked up and sighed, "Well, I finished my novel today and it like to killed me." When Kurt is feeling heartfelt, he speaks in an Indiana accent. His wife said, "Oh, Kurt, you always say that whenever you finish a book," and he replied, "Well, whenever I finish a book I do say it, and it is always true, and it gets more true and this last one like to killed me more than any."

SUFFOLK

I've always felt that Hemingway and Faulkner were the two greatest American writers of the 20th century, yet each only possessed half of the whole when it came to style. Hemingway simply could not write a long, powerful, architecturally structured sentence and get away with it. He could do short sentences, and long ones connected by conjunctions, and he did extraordinary things with that limitation. Faulkner, in turn, was incapable of writing about anything simply. They did it, you might say, with one arm rather than two--but what an arm in each man. What an extraordinary arm.

SHAINBERG

Somewhere around the turn of the century, Chekhov was invited to visit Tolstoy at Yasnya Polyana. By that point, of course, Tolstoy was looked upon by Russians as kin to God. At the time, the Russians had, after all, a greater love for their novelists and poets than any nation ever. With considerable justice, Tolstoy had been placed on the highest peak and I think one good reason is that no other novelist ever succeeded so completely in balancing severity of judgment on moral matters, with compassion. While Tolstoy is profoundly compassionate, he is never sentimental. That is an amazing quality. I've said in other places that when I was writing The Naked and the Dead, I used to read a little Tolstoy every day in order to get into the proper mood of compassion and severity. It helped with the book, I must say.

At any rate, we have Chekhov visiting Tolstoy. He takes a train to the station nearest Yasnya Polyana—I don't know if it was 6 versts or 20 versts—let's say it was about 10 miles. And it's winter time. He rents a sled and horses and drives out through the snow to see his host. Tolstoy is pretty old by now, big, strong, severe, of course, and sits him down and they talk. They drink tea and they talk. Tolstoy says: "Chekhov, you are a very good writer. You are excellent. Some of your short stories are so good that I would have been pleased to have written them myself. But, Chekhov, I must tell you: You are a terrible playwright! You are awful! You are even worse than Shakespeare!"

Afterward, Chekhov drove back through the snow to the railroad station. In his journal he would write: "I whipped the horses. To the moon I shouted, 'I am even worse than Shakespeare!'"

It's a fine story but I wondered: Why did Tolstoy dislike Shakespeare so much? I expect the answer is that Tolstoy was always searching for subtle but precise moral judgment. That required a detailed sense of any sequence of events which produced a dramatic or tragic event. You had to know how to assess the blame. For that, you needed to know exactly when and why things happened.

But there, very much in the way, was Shakespeare, the first great movie writer who ever existed before movies were conceived. For Shakespeare was not interested in making careful connections with his people. Shakespeare was looking to get his most dynamic characters together under any remote circumstances available, no matter how contrived, (King Lear can be the first example). He was looking for superb exchanges of dialogue and fantastic moments. Shakespeare searched for vertiginous possibilities in the English language. Tolstoy lived for sobriety of moral judgment. So he considered Shakespeare a monster who paid no attention to causality except when it was useful to him. The Englishman's people did incredible things, fell in love and/or murdered, usually with a minimum of preparation—Hamlet—and then had exceptional speeches that seared an audience's consciousness. To Tolstoy, this was hideous—equal to the way some of us look these days on advertising campaigns that are stuffed with manipulation and little else. Filled with catchy ingredients for the sole purpose of leading people astray.

But why Tolstoy would compare Chekhov to Shakespeare is another question. I don't know that I am prepared to answer that one.

If there is a reason, I expect it was for a different set of faults. Tolstoy may have felt that Chekhov was a prelude to someone yet to arrive, someone like Beckett. Chekhov's people were simply not doing what they ought to be doing. What had to irritate Tolstoy immensely was that they sat in their own spiritual excrement and made vapid sweet speeches and moaned a little and sighed and groaned and never got out of their situation. To Tolstoy, that was a cardinal sin. One should not live with the given when it is vapid and vaguely immoral. This was one of Tolstoy's most basic notions. You may have to endure a dreary given as a discipline but you do not accept that given as eternal, as the meaning of life. He could not permit that. Could not accept how Chekhov made so much of the essential inanity of the Russian middle class.

In the course of forty years of doing interviews, I've talked and thought and written about such problems facing the novelist as plot, character, style, third person, first person, the psychology of the writer, the philosophical implications of the novel, the search for good habits of work, and the changes seen over fifty years in publishing. On more than one occasion, I have given assessments—usually on the fly—of fellow novelists, alive and dead. I have thought a fair bit about the need for stamina in doing a novel, and the relation of this stamina to one's style. Occasionally, I have even worked and therefore lived with the differences and similarities between fiction and non-fiction, fiction and journalism, and thought about the life of action and the life of meditation as it affects one's work. I have talked and written about the pitfalls of early success, and coping with disastrous reviews. I have dealt with memoir versus autobiography, and the competitive spirit of the novelist, about identity and identity crisis; about the occult in relation to the novelist, about renewing one's desire to write, and such strategies as when

it is wise for the writer to enter a character's mind, and when and when not to make characters out of real people.

These numerous subjects revolve around the act of writing fiction. Excerpts from those forty years of interviews were revised until they obtained minimal clarity of meaning and a firming of syntax that was not always present in the more casual back-and-forth of the interview. The author has also chosen illustrative material from some of his prefaces and pieces of criticism that bear directly on these subjects. The result is a volume able to appeal to serious writers and to people who wish to write, to students, to critics, to men and women who love to read and so will be ready to enjoy what is here since Mailer is at his most candid in these observations and evaluations. Most of all, this is a book for young novelists who wish to improve their skills and their commitment to the subtle difficulties and uncharted mysteries of serious novel writing itself. Among the authors discussed, some in reasonable depth, others in passing comment, are Hemingway, Faulkner, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Updike, Cheever, Roth, Doctorow, Capote, Vidal, Bellow, Heller, James Jones, Styron, Cheever, James T. Farrell, Henry Adams,

Henry James, Garcia Marquez, Melville, Proust, Graham Greene, Scott Fitzgerald, Nelson Algren, Kurt Vonnegut, Dwight MacDonald, Toni Morrison, Thomas Wolfe, Tom Wolfe, Jean Malaquais, Don DeLillo, Henry Miller, John Steinbeck, Christopher Isherwood, Mary McCarthy, J.D. Salinger, William Kennedy, Kate Millett, Ralph Ellison, John Dos Passos, D.H. Lawrence, Mark Twain, Freud and Marx. Even Bill Buckley is mentioned. (In relation to character versus plot.)

Let it be explained that most of this material is either uncollected or long out-of-print. More formal essays on Mark Twain, D.H. Lawrence, Mary McCarthy, and Tom Wolfe's last book are included, but they amount to no more than a fraction of the pages in the collection. The rest cannot be obtained without grubbing through old magazines and out-of-print book catalogues. Here, without dust, is then a collection of literary gleanings, aperçus, fulminations, pensees, gripes, insights, regrets, affirmations, a few excuses, several insults, and a cornucopia of perceptions whose worth critics are bound to debate in time to come

It is interesting that my formal sense intensifies as I grow older and so I have looked to assemble this book in time to come out on January 31, 2003. I will be exactly eighty years old on that occasion.

Television has destroyed that to a huge degree. It has cut the attention span of children. By now, to most people in America, a narrative is something that doesn't go on for too long—usually, it is cut short at seven minutes. It can remain intact as long as twelve minutes before a new commercial comes on. And in that manner are our emotions deadened. The need for quick injections of amusement or wit becomes paramount. Aesthetics becomes one-liners.

WRITING NOVELS

Reflections on a Spooky Art

A good deal of hesitation went into the qualifier. Spooky is virtually a child's word and seemed too casual. Besides, it did not always apply. Not all days at one's desk are odd or subtly frightening, or, for that matter, full of scary fun. Novel writing can also be dogged, and there are unproductive hours that feel like nothing so much as the act of trying to start an old car when the motor has gone dead on you.

Nor is that a geriatric analogy. It is usually young men who have old cars and, moreover, there is no sense of youth that a young man can feel on a truly bad day of writing. (Only the old can be aware of the true abyss of inexperience. Young novelists do feel like old men on such occasions as if whatever talent they once possessed has now departed forevermore. The first intimations of old age for many a young novelist is the day when the gift does not appear, or, if it does, it hobbles. Scenes that one expected to be good are without life on the page. One's inner life, that exceptional sense of oneself as

possessed of an inner life that is not like others--is absent. The scene one is working on is as boring as the lifelessness of one's breath on such occasions.

That is on the worst of days, and there is nothing mysterious about such mornings, afternoons, or nights, unless it is the sense that destiny never guarantees a happy end (unless you are Napoleon and—beware!--he was wrong!) You are brought up close, on such occasions, to the future rigor of an unhappy denouement for oneself.

But then there are also the odd, off-beat, happy days when something does happen as you write and one's characters take surprising turns, sometimes revealing themselves to you by their words appearing on the page in a manner other than you expected them to be. You discover that you know more about life and your characters than you thought you did. Such days are glorious. And they are certainly spooky.

Nor are any two days of good work necessarily the same. One may be practical and effective on certain mornings and the skill is actually in the sobriety of the effort. On another kind of hour, one takes risks. Yet if you have gotten good enough over the years (after decades of such varied mornings), there is also the sense of a governing hand (not

necessarily and altogether your own) that keeps the highs and the lows from dashing away from one another so outrageously that one's novel changes from chapter to chapter. (That is as bad as a car that pops out of its gear-shift at the damndest times.)

All right. The point of this introduction has been made. Possibly it has been made. In any event, I, as the author of this work, have succeeded in justifying the title to myself.