

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.

In the course of forty years of doing interviews, I've talked and thought and written about such problems in novel-writing as plot, character, style, third person, first person, the psychology of the novelist, 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—often 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 as a movie director. He has worked 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. He has talked and written about the pitfalls of early success, and coping with disastrous reviews. He has 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 interviews were revised until they obtained a 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 rich 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.

A PREFACE WITH THREE WARNINGS

A Preface with Three Warnings

91.37 During the seven years I worked on Harlot's Ghost, I perceived the CIA and its agents as people of high morals and thorough deceit, loyalty and duplicity, passion and ice-cold detachment. So many writers, including myself, have a good bit of that in their makeup. It is part of what has made us novelists, even as intelligence agents are drawn to their profession by the striking opposites of their nature.

Let me assert from the outset, however, that The Spooky Art is not a book about intelligence agents. A work of that sort I might call the Art of the Spooks. This book, however, as the subtitle states, is about writing, its perils, its joys, its vicissitudes, its loneliness, its celebrity if you are lucky and not so very lucky in just that way. Needless to add, it speaks of problems of craft and plot, character, style, third person, first person, the special psychology of the writer. (I do not think novelists—good novelists, that is—are altogether like other people.) We novelists, good and bad, are also closet philosophers, and one is ready therefore—how not?—to offer one's own forays into the nature of such matters as being and nothingness, the near-to-unclassifiable presence of the unconscious and its demonic weapon—writer's block. En route, one looks into the need for stamina in doing a novel, and the relation of stamina to one's style. There are discussions of the

differences and similarities between fiction and non-fiction, fiction and journalism, and, of course, I have often 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 how to cope with disastrous reviews, and how each of us does one's best to live with the competitive spirit of the novelist rather than be eaten out by it. There is talk about identity and occasional crises of identity, as well as the occult in relation to the novelist, taken together with such strategies as when it is wise to enter a character's mind and when not to make characters out of real people.

All of that is Part I of this book. Part II concerns Genre and Colleagues. Since writers are often in search of how to work in other arts and crafts, Genre has to do with film and painting and journalism, with television and graffiti as examples of some of the ways and by-ways down which writers search and/or flee from their more direct responsibility.

Finally, there is another full section at the end called Colleagues filled with a mix of thoughtful and/or shoot-from-the-hip candor about some of my contemporaries, rivals, literary idols, as well as a few pieces of more formal criticism. 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.)

Taken all together, the result—one would hope—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. But most of all, this may be 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.

Now, for the warnings. A good deal of hesitation went along with the title. Spooky is virtually a child's word and seemed too casual. Besides, it does 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. 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. Moreover, there is no sense of youth that a young man can feel on a truly bad day of writing. Young novelists do get to feel like old men on such unhappy occasions as if whatever talent they once possessed is now gone. The first intimations of old age for many a young novelist is the day when the gift does not appear, or, comes through hobbled. Scenes that one expected to be rich 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 a dull day.

That is the worst, 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—as we know!--he was in error!) You are brought up close, on such occasions, to the future rigor of an unhappy denouement for yourself.

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. For 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 gear at the damndest times.)

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

Let me end, however, with a second warning. We have here a book which will tell you a good deal of what I know about the problems of writing and, more than occasionally, they are advanced problems. So it is not a how-to-do-it for most beginners who want the basic approaches to plot, dialogue, suspense and marketing of manuscripts carefully and well laid-out. This is, rather, a book for men and women who have already found some vocation to write in college or graduate schools, have perhaps taken courses on novel technique, are even advanced students who have begun to encounter the subtle perils and hazards of the writer's life.

I have also to offer a last warning which concerns me most. The Spooky Art by the nature of its is without stylistic unity. The manner shifts at times from page to page. Given its components, there was no way to avoid this. The most characteristic single aspect in the daily life of a writer is that his stimulations derive from a host of various sources, some pedestrian, others of reasonable elevation. Off-the-cuff remarks in an interview even when polished a degree for syntax, can hardly be the equal of an essay done at the top of one's form. Yet the inner life of a young writer is filled with just such a spectrum of harsh perceptions roughly stated and insights good enough to startle even one's best perception of oneself.

I decided then—so be it for this book. The reader will be jolted about from time to time and for that I apologize. Some may even refuse to treat this as a consecutive work of printed pages so much as an unexpected and possibly dubious gift of chocolates into which they can dip and move on, pleasure alternating with displeasure. I cannot pretend to say this is wrong. I have tried to put some separate elements together with as much

order as is possible under these curious circumstances—close to fifty years of reflecting, meditating, musing and declaring my thoughts on a profession I practised and could not always feel I understood—but to those readers for whom order in style is one of the cardinal literary virtues (and I am one of them), there may be no other way to treat this volume than as this gift of occasionally exceptional sweetmeats and disappointments. (Nor will every title and subtitle deliver its promise.)

All this said, I still have a few hopes that the order imposed on these fifty years of opinions and conclusions will be read by some from the first page to the last, and a few readers will find The Spooky Art to be an intimate handbook they can return to over the decades of their careers.

Here is then a collection of literary gleanings, aperçus, fulminations, pensees, gripes, insights, regrets and affirmations, a few excuses, several insults, and a good number of perceptions. May the critics feel bound to debate some of them 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. I would hope I am not looking for unwarranted sympathy by this last remark.

YOUNG (Pont)

yes

You see, 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'll do almost anything to avoid it. So I would come near to arguing that civilization came out of man's terror at having to face dread as a daily condition. Therefore we created a civilization that would insulate us from the exorbitant demands of existence. I'm not speaking now of those smaller or unbelievably pressing demands in the time of growing or killing enough food to be able to live simply. I'm talking of that greater terror when the trees spoke to one, and the message of the trees was not agreeable, and worst of all, the trees were right. The message one got from the trees was true. The storm they told you about—that terrible storm that was going to make the river wash over its banks and destroy your hamlet in three weeks was true. What a terror. What a terror. I'm saying that man did everything he could, you see, to get away from that kind of intimacy with nature, that foresight, that dread.

PLAYBOY (Pont)

ye

Kennedy was a man who could define himself—or, in other words, comprehend himself—only by his actions. He had such extraordinary ambition that if he had not succeeded in being President, he might have ended up a bad piece of work. There is such a thing as a man starting as a bad piece of work because he has a nature that is extraordinarily disharmonious; he lives with unendurable ambitions. If he succeeds in what the psychoanalysts call "acting it out"—with some scorn they say "acting out"—the fact remains that he also has to have huge courage, high wit, and vast imagination. Kennedy succeeded in getting to play the one role that could allow him to realize himself: the President of the United States. When I call him an existential politician, I mean that Kennedy had no nature other than the particular nature he discovered in himself by the act of living. If he had tried to live a more conventional life, he would have sealed his psyche in a vault and probably had died young and schizophrenic.

KRASSNER (Pont)

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 cripples people. It doesn't cripple them altogether, but it turns them askew, it sets up a bad and often enduring tension. I mean, ahs anyone ever studied the correlation between cigarette smoking and masturbation? Anybody who spends his adolescence masturbating, generally enters his young manhood with no sense of being a man. The answer—I don't know what the answer is—sex for adolescents may be the answer, it may not. I really don't know.

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

MAILER: I wouldn't say all people who masturbate are evil, probably I would even say that some of the best people in the world masturbate. But I'm saying it's a miserable activity.

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

MAILER: To what end? To what end? Who is going to benefit from it?

KRASSNER: It's a better end than the beauty of a bombing.

MAILER: Masturbation is bombing. It'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, the electromagnetism of it, nor in how the psychic waves are passed back and forth, and what psychic waves are. 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 himself. 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 violate 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 if the experience is good, your life is changed by it in a less happy way. But at least 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.

NARCISSISM (Genius & Lust/Pont)

yes

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 self-absorbed so much as one self is immersed in studying the other. 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, her incapacity to tell the truth or even recognize it. "I want the key," he says once to Anais Nin, "the key to the 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. One 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. The passing actor she played with is again a stranger. It is useless to speak of whether she loves or does not love Miller. It depends on whether he is in her scenario 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 her liberty 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 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, experience is poured into no vessels of the psyche, but seems to drain away. 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 could bear the same relation to love that onanism does to copulation, or 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.

The reality, of course, is considerably 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.

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 he will or will not beat Tolstoy—he has 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 collective loss would have come to English people if Shakespeare had failed to write. (Or, for that matter, conceive of how the South would be subtle less interesting with 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 the confluence of his life
when he could extract a clean 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.

SHAINBERG

yep

In the course of fashioning a character, as you dig into what you have perceived of his existence, and his world, there often comes a point where you recognize that you don't know enough about your character. At such times, I assume that my unconscious knows much more than I do. As we go through life, we do, after all, observe everyone, wittingly and unwittingly. Perhaps you glimpse someone out of the corner of your eye 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 that unconscious is working all the time. To use unhappy terms, it's as if the unconscious is a powerful computer which needs very little new material in order to fashion a portrait since there's so much material there already that's analogous, so to speak.

On the other hand, as we write, the unconscious can very often feel violated. Perhaps it has amassed a great deal of the material it is now supplying you for its own purposes. Suppose the unconscious has a root in the hereafter, and therefore has deeper notions about death than we do. Perhaps the unconscious is on very close, even familial, terms with the soul. So it can feel violated by the push of the novelist to obtain certain information.

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 the unconscious, we can have some idea of the unconscious. Just like the Greek slave, it is full of the trickiest kinds of resistance. One

form it may take is to emit nothingness, flatness of affect, the dull, edgy resentment of being forced to plumb into issues the unconscious is not ready to present. The extreme, acute form of this, of course, is writer's block but in a sense there is a touch of writer's block in almost every working day. It's part of the experience of writing. At a certain point we are going well for maybe a page or two, or four on very 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 nice, so rich, so agreeable. Then comes the moment when our ambition orders us to keep going: "I'm three pages away from the end of the chapter, let's not stop now with this marvelous streak." Then, I can feel the sentences getting less good and feel, no, I've got to stop—dammit, dammit—I'm going to lose all of tomorrow morning getting to the end of this chapter, but, no, don't 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 the blowback of the unconscious. It's done its job 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 always the co-pilot of being. One of the most painful elements of the act of writing is that you do live so much with nothingness. People often say, "How wonderful to be a writer—raptures coming out of your head and being put on paper, how divine!" But that is one reason few men and woman can remain writers for many years. Some of the most talented have a book or two and then stop. Why? Because this daily dealing with nothingness violates you, 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 gets flatter. That may be because our violation of the frustrated desire of the unconscious to be left alone on those occasions when we nonetheless insist on working it. Our ambition is the handmaiden of the nothingness that so often besets us.

vgo

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 I think of something. It works when I'm tired—a tired brain is happy to think about nothing. I think writers are very happy to think about nothing. It's like a hard-working athlete who likes lying down.

LS: Do you make a direct effort to think about nothing?

NM: No, no—I don't think about nothing that hard.

SUFFOLK

yes

Part of the art of being a writer 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. Think of the crash 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 not unlikely that extraordinary work will yet 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, was, of course, immense inasmuch as the event was traumatic to so many. A large part of writing, alas, 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. To that degree, it tends not to be good. Literature and therapy are intimately opposed. The noblest objective of writing is, ideally, that you 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 high and selfless side of writing. On the other hand, there is also the extraordinary interplay of ego and vanity and need, the desire, finally, to advance oneself as a writer. People don't become authors for the sole reason that they want to benefit humanity. They're in the same position as priests. Part of them wants to be good to other humans, the other part wants, one way or the other, to have some sort of interesting life. Which is often hugely at odds with the first notion. Generosity view with acquisition, compassion is at war with greed. Not surprising then, if such tension pushes one toward accomplishing neither, but converting it all into reduction of stress, therapy through attempts at literature.

yes

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 harder for them. Why? Because war is essentially a male invention. There's little historical evidence that women ever showed the same warlike inventiveness and capacity and determination and hellishness that men have at war. However, if we ask whether men and women can write equally about bravery, I would certainly 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. 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. She doesn't know if she can make it across in time with the lights, 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 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 noble.

In a certain sense, we all know this, we 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.

needs explaining

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 noble writer in that sense because she's pushing far beyond anything that's comfortable. She's willing to dare terrible humiliation.



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 everyone, I believe. 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, and count on me: I will write it. The point is that you have to establish trustworthy relations with your unconscious. 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 as complex, possibly as complicated as any tricky 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 do look upon it as such, as a curious and semi-alienated presence with whom you have to maintain decent relations---if you look upon yourself as a sort of 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 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 anti-romantic in spirit. But if you subject yourself to this impost upon yourself of dependability, 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 responsibility, the order 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.

yes

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 the sacraments. For example, why do certain people who are very pious nonetheless feel driven to break their own deepest sexual prohibitions? I think 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 treat them sexually, to understand them from that point of view, rather than attempt to get into the intimate nitty-gritty of a woman's daily life. That could prove as difficult as trying to interpret ancient Egypt if you don't have a good feeling for it.

jmlennon1

From: jlm wordcraft <jlmwordcraft@yahoo.com>
To: Mike Lennon <lennon@wilkes.edu>; Mike Lennon <jmlennon1@attbi.com>
Sent: Monday, May 20, 2002 3:25 PM
Attach: Introfinal1WS.doc; Introfinal1.doc
Subject: Intro files

Norman has decided on a new drill:

He is now having me type things in continuous fashion--i.e., no more each separate item on its own page. He also wants the sources OUT, so files are now arriving in two versions--things with a suffix WS (WITH sources) for you and minus that suffix for Norman. I convinced him it was vastly easier to go through a finished file and remove the source notes than pencil in numerals and create a new doc giving you a guide (ay de mi--Norman is at his most dangerous when he is creating "efficient" systems!)

He and his fax are on the outs again, so you have to print both of these--the plain one for him, the WS one for you. (the text is identical but he does not want the distraction of looking at the sources any longer.)

Note we're now throwing the body text into 14 pt. Please also be sure your page margins are

top 1"
bottom 1.3"
left 1.25"
right 1.25"

If you don't reset your "page setup" menu to these numbers, the breaks won't come in the right places and this really annoys him.

Norris sounded much encouraged this morning--her father was walking and was managing to keep food down--this seems to be a result of certain drugs finally getting out of his system. She was going to interview a nurse so--cross fingers it works and she can fly back Thursday.

Judith

Do You Yahoo!?
LAUNCH - Your Yahoo! Music Experience
<http://launch.yahoo.com>

5/20/02

OLD

INTRODUCTION

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 Millet, Ralph Ellison, John Dos Passos, D.H. Lawrence, Mark Twain, Freud and Marx. Even Bill Buckley is mentioned. (In relation to character versus plot.)

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Let me assert from the outset, however, that The Spooky Art is not a book about intelligence agents. Something of that sort I might call the Art of the Spooks. This book, however, as the subtitle states, is a book about writing, its perils, its joys, its vicissitudes, its loneliness, its celebrity if you are lucky and unlucky in just that way, not to speak of problems of craft and stamina, and our private psychology. (I do not think novelists—good novelists, that is—are altogether like other people.) Since novelists, good and bad, are also closet philosophers, this book offers one's own forays into the nature of being and nothingness, the topography of the unconscious, and various other depths of existence we barely perceive.

Finally, since writers are often in search of how to write or live with other arts, there is a section called Genre which has to do with film and art and debate and journalism and television and graffiti and boxing and sex, as well as with memoirs, short stories, God, anger, addiction and suicide—a modest cornucopia of all the ways and by-ways down which writers by times search and/or flee from their more direct responsibility.

Finally, there is a hefty section at the end called Colleagues filled with some shoot-from-the-hip candor about some of my contemporaries, rivals, literary idols, as well as a few pieces of more formal criticism.

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Nevermore! The first intimations of old age for many a young novelist is the day when the gift does not appear, or, comes through hobbled. Scenes that one expected to be rich 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 a dull day.

That is on the worst, 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—we know!--he was wrong!) You are brought up close, on such occasions, to the future rigor of an unhappy denouement for yourself.

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A Preface with Three Warnings

~~new~~
old

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