

LIT BIZ

Thank you, and we will use these examples, but it contains the late and great (creatively, mentally, and physically) of living as a writer. Let's look, however, for a topic that may be closer to the reality of it. Lit Biz: beyond your working life as a writer and depend on it—your income, your pain, and your love of it.

I LIT BIZ

We grew up with a bit of mystery on my literary childhood, such as it was. In 1971, Steve Martin didn't invent anything for them. Review, and I have given the liberty of expressing his useful and elegant and all-around into weekly with in order to give a bit of context to my first years as a writer. The ones who are more interested in what I have to say

I LIT BIZ

I am tempted to call this section Economics, for it concerns the loss and gain (economically, psychically, and physically) of living as a writer. Let's settle, however, for a term that may be closer to the reality of it: Lit Biz. Spend your working life as a writer and depend on it—your income, your spirit, and your liver are all on close terms with Lit Biz.

We may as well begin with a bit of comment on my literary childhood, such as it was. In 1963, Steve Marcus did an interview with me for Paris Review, and I have taken the liberty of separating his careful and elegant set of questions into several parts in order to give a bit of structure to my first years as a writer. For those who are more interested in what I have to say

about writing in general rather than myself in particular, you are invited to skip over these first autobiographical details and move on to what I have to say about The Naked and the Dead, Barbary Shore and The Deer Park. Or, if you are in quick search of useful nitty-gritty, move even further along to "The Last Draft of The Deer Park" or "Hazards."

Interviewer: Do you need any particular environment in which to write?

Mailer: I like a room with a view, preferably a long view. I like looking at the sea, or ships, or anything which has a vista to it. Oddly enough, I've never worked in the mountains.

Interviewer: Do you need seclusion?

Mailer: I don't know if I need seclusion, but I do like to be alone in a room.

Interviewer: When did you first think of becoming a writer?

Mailer: That's hard to answer. I did a lot of writing when I was young.

Interviewer: How young?

Mailer: Seven.

Interviewer: A real novel?

Mailer: Well, it was a science fiction novel about people on Earth taking a rocket ship to Mars. The hero had a name which sounded like Buck Rogers.

His assistant was called Dr. Hoor.

Interviewer: Doctor . . . ?

Mailer: Dr. Hoor. WHORE, pronounced H-O-O-R. That's the way we used to pronounce whore in Brooklyn. He was patterned directly after Dr. Huer in Buck Rogers who was then appearing on radio. This novel filled two and a

half paper notebooks. You know the type, about 7 X 10. They had soft, shiny blue covers and they were, oh, only ten cents in those days, or a nickel. They ran to about a hundred pages each and I used to write on both sides. My writing was remarkable for the way I hyphenated words. I loved hyphenating and so I would hyphenate "the" and make it "th-e" if it came at the end of the line. Or "they" would become "the-y." Then I didn't write again for a long time. I didn't even try out for the high school literary magazine. I had friends who wrote short stories and their short stories were far better than the ones I would write for assignments in high school English and I felt no desire to write. When I got to college, I started again. The jump from Boy's High School in Brooklyn to Harvard came as a shock. I started reading some decent novels for the first time.

Interviewer: You mentioned in Advertisements for Myself that reading Studs Lonigan made you want to be a writer.

Mailer: Yes. It was the best single literary experience I had had because the background of Studs was similar to mine. I grew up in Brooklyn, not Chicago, but the atmosphere had the same flatness of effect. Until then I had never considered my life or the life of the people around me as even remotely worthy of—well, I didn't believe they could be treated as subjects for fiction. It never occurred to me. Suddenly I realized you could write about your own life.

Interviewer: When did you feel that you were started as a writer?

Mailer: When I first began to write again at Harvard. I wasn't very good. I was doing short stories all the time, but I wasn't good. If there were fifty people in the class, let's say I was somewhere in the top ten. My teachers

thought I was fair, but I don't believe they ever thought for a moment I was really talented. Then in the middle of my sophomore year I started getting better. I got on the Harvard Advocate and that gave me confidence, and about this time I did a couple of fairly good short stories for English A-1, one of which won Story Magazine's college contest for that year. I must say that Robert Gorham Davis, who was my instructor then, picked the story to submit for the contest and was confident it would win.

Interviewer: Was that the story about Al Groot?

Mailer: Yes. And when I found out it had won—which was at the beginning of the summer after my sophomore year (1941)—well, that fortified me, and I sat down and wrote a novel. It was a very bad novel. I wrote it in two months. It was called No Percentage. It was just terrible. But I never questioned any longer whether I was started as a writer.

Interviewer: What do you think were some of the early influences in your life? What reading, as a boy, do you recall as important?

Mailer: The Amateur Gentleman and The Broad Highway were glorious works. So was Captain Blood. I think I read every one of Farnol's books and there must have been twenty of them. And every one of Sabatini's.

Interviewer: Did you ever read any of them again?

Mailer: No, now I have no real idea of their merit. But I never enjoyed a novel more than Captain Blood. Nor a movie. Do you remember Errol Flynn as Captain Blood? Some years ago I was asked by a magazine what were the ten most important books in my development. The book I listed first was Captain Blood. Then came Das Kapital. Then The Amateur Gentleman.

Interviewer: You wouldn't say that Das Kapital was boyhood reading?

Mailer: Oh, no, I read that many years later. But it had its mild influence.

Interviewer: It's been said often that novelists are largely nostalgic for their boyhood, and in fact most novelists draw on their youthful experiences a great deal. In your novels, however, the evocation of scenes from boyhood is rare or almost absent.

Mailer: It's difficult to write about childhood. I never felt I understood it in any novel way. I never felt other authors did either. Not particularly. I think the portrait of childhood which is given by most writers is rarely true to anything more than the logic of their novel. Childhood is so protean.

Interviewer: What about Twain, or Hemingway—who drew on their boyhoods successfully?

Mailer: I must admit they created some of the psychological reality of my own childhood. I wanted, for instance, to be like Tom Sawyer.

Interviewer: Not Huck Finn?

Mailer: The magic of Huck Finn seems to have passed me by, I don't know

quite why. Tom Sawyer was the book of Twain's I always preferred. I

remember when I got to college I was startled to find that Huckleberry Finn

was the classic. Of course, I haven't looked at either novel in thirty years.

Preface to,
Fiction Writers'
Handbook

WRITING COURSES

I don't know if it still is true, but in the years I went to Harvard (so long ago as 1939 to 1943) they used to give a good writing course. In fact, it was not one good course, but six. English A was compulsory for any freshman who did not get a very good mark on the English College Entrance Boards, and five electives followed, English A-1, English A-2, up to English A-5, a vertiginous meeting place for a few select talents whose guide was no less than Professor Robert Hillyer, the Pulitzer Prize poet. By Senior year, I was taking English A-5, in fact, I must have been one of the few students in Harvard history who took all but one of the writing courses (A-4 I missed) and must even be one of the few living testimonials to the efficacy of half a dozen classes in composition and the art of the short story. I entered college as a raw if somewhat generous-hearted adolescent from Brooklyn who did not know the first thing about a good English sentence, and left four years later as a half-affected and much imperfect Harvard man who had nonetheless had the great good fortune to find the passion of his life before he was twenty.

I wanted to be a writer. And had the further good luck to conceive this passion in Freshman year in a compulsory course in elementary composition. That much will be granted to the forces of oppression.

English A at Harvard in 1939 put its emphasis on teaching a student to write tolerably well—an ability we could certainly use over the next three years. The first stricture of the course was a wise one: writing is an extension of speech, we were told. So we were instructed to write with something of the ease with which we might speak and that is a good rule for beginners. In time it can be absorbed, taken for granted, and finally disobeyed. The best writing comes obviously out of a precision we do not and dare not employ when we speak, yet such writing still has the ring of speech. It is a style, in short, that can take you a life to achieve.

At Harvard, however, they knew how to get us to begin, and there were fine men teaching English A, among others Theodore Morrison, Mark Schorer, Albert Guerard and Robert Gorham Davis, and they took me up the ladder of the electives from A-1 to A-5. Over four years of such courses one would have had to have a determined purchase on a lack of talent not to improve. I improved. In those four years, I learned a little about sentence construction, and more about narrative pace; en route I was able to pick up

some of the literary ego a young writer needs to keep going through the contradictory reactions of others to his work. If there is one reason above others for taking a writing course, it is to go through the agonizing but indispensable recognition that one's own short story, so clear, so beautiful, so powerful, and so true, so definite in its meaning or so well-balanced in its ambiguity, has become a hundred different things for other writers in your class. Even the teacher does not get your buried symbols, or worse, does not like them. Being a young writer in a writing course can bruise the psyche as much as being a novice in the Golden Gloves can hurt your head. There is punishment in recognizing how much more punishment will yet have to be taken. Yet the writing course has its unique and ineradicable value. For you get to see the faces of those who like your work, you hear their voices, and so you can gain some comprehension of the perversities of an audience's taste (as when, for example, they like a story by a writer you despise). You can even come to recognize how a fine piece of prose can draw the attention of an audience together. If it happens to you, if you write a piece and everyone in the room listens as if there is nourishment for one ear—their own—then it will not matter afterward if you hear a dozen separate reactions, for you will have at last the certainty that you are a writer. Your work has effect—in

some small way you have begun to enter the life and intelligence of others. Then you are not likely to stay away from writing, indeed, if you get even a glimpse of such a reaction from one of your paragraphs, you will discover that you must have more such paragraphs. You will want more of the ineffable pleasure of such attention.

Shainberg

That is the best of it, but there are also perils. You can go through hell in a writing class, real, true hell. I remember once in my second year at Harvard I was taking a course called English A-1 with a very good man teaching it, Robert Gorham Davis. At a given moment, he said to the class, "I'd like to read to you an interesting story that's quite good but is totally destroyed at the end by the author."

The story, mine to be sure, was about a young bellhop working at a summer hotel. With other bellhops, he would talk about the wives of the businessmen who were having quick affairs with the hotel staff during the week. Their husbands, after all, only came out on weekends. One night, however, one lonely businessman drove up from New York unexpectedly,

came into the lobby and headed right up to his room. The bellhops downstairs knew a disaster was coming even before they heard the gunshots. The narrator then went up to the room. Both the bellhop who had been in bed with the wife, and the wife were dead. The wife had had her face blown off. The husband had committed suicide. The description given by the narrator went something like this: "I couldn't see her nose, or what was left of her mouth, and I didn't know whether all that was spread on the carpet by now and I was stepping on it, or whether I was still breathing it in."

At this point, the class started to laugh. My description had the misfortune to continue for another such paragraph. I was learning a frightful lesson in a terrible hurry. Which is, if you think your work is going to be read aloud, don't charge into unique details that will knock an audience over into happy hysteria.

It became the worst single moment I ever had in a writing class. I didn't know whether to stand up and say, "I am the one who wrote that piece and all of you can go to hell," or was I to stay totally silent and pretend it was someone else? When you don't know what to do, invariably, you do nothing. I did nothing.

I hardly slept. Next day I had an appointment with Robert Gorham Davis. The first thing he said when I came into his office was, "Look, I owe you a serious apology. I had no idea the reaction would be so bad. I should have given you my criticisms privately. I hope you'll forgive me."

Of course I did. We even became friends.

But I can't tell you how my back was scalded by the laughter. In those years, scorn at Harvard was a pure product of the superiority we felt about ourselves at being Harvard men. We used to be a force on Friday nights as we laughed at the idiocies that were put on the screen at the movie theater in Harvard Square. During that stricken ten minutes in English A-1, I felt as if I had become one of those romantic dolts on the screen. In that year, 1940, we all looked upon films as being a sub-par art. Novelists were vastly more important. They were, for my generation, what rock stars are to kids today.

SUFFOLK

In any event, on balance, I learned more than I lost from writing courses. For one thing, you certainly get used to how wide and often surprising are the reactions even to pieces which present no striking problems. You can begin to pick up a lot about how power structures form right there in your class. Certain writers will make up a bloc, others, an enclave. You soon learn a lot about manipulation and hypocrisy--"Oh, I absolutely love your story!" while lying through your teeth. You pick up a few random notes on human nature. Whether you glean enough for the time invested is another question. Indeed, there is a kind of signature to many writers who come out of MFA programs. They tend to give you very good sentences and they move well on small subjects. Sometimes they have a tropism for matters that are bizarre and/or intense. They also tend to be not terribly ambitious. Because in a writing course, nothing makes you crash with a louder sound than a bold attempt that doesn't come off. So, a built-in tendency develops to stay small. Still, some very good writers do come out of the process.

What the course can't satisfy is the problem of experience. Young people who write well are not just reasonably sensitive, they are over-sensitive. Experience is usually painful and difficult for them. Moreover, going out and choosing a new experience to write about is always false to a degree. I would argue that material only becomes valuable when it is existential. By that I mean an experience you do not control. Driving your car on a snowy road, you miscalculate on a sudden hairpin turn. Suddenly, you are in a terrible skid. For a fraction of a second, or for as much as a second and a half, you don't know if you're going to come out of it. You may be dead in the next instant. Or, wreck the car--a good deal goes through your mind at quite a rate of speed--that's an existential moment. Or--another existential experience of a wholly different character, ongoing, heavy, full of dread, common to many marriages, is where a woman is miserable with her husband, but adores her child and hates the thought of divorce. Anna Karenina is one such lady.

In any event, there is no answer to the problem of how a young writer can pick up experience. If you search for it, but have your hand on a guard-rail--in other words, are able to quit the experience if it gets too hot for you--then such a controlled adventure can be good conceivably for a magazine

piece, but it's not necessarily there for bringing you to that deeper level of writing young scribes aspire to.

83.30 And how I aspired! In those years at Harvard, if I had heard that Ernest Hemingway was going to speak in Worcester, Mass., I might have trudged the forty miles from Cambridge. That was how we felt then about writers. It is probably how I still feel. The shock, decades later, was to realize that this view of the writer does not hold for many any longer.

Full of the intensity of those feelings, I even wrote a long novel in the nine months between my graduation in 1943, and my induction into the Army in March, 1944. What follows is the introduction to this novel that I would write thirty-five years later.

Samuel Goldwyn once took a walk down the aisle of the writers' wing of his own studio and did not hear a sound. Supposedly, five writers were working behind five office doors, but Goldwyn did not pick up the clack of a single typewriter. Instead, there was a silence of the tombs. The writers were sleeping a sleep five thousand years old.

Goldwyn came to the end of the hall, turned around in a rage, his expressive face clenched like a fist, and he shouted down the corridor, "A writer should write!"

I never heard that story when I was young, but I had no need of it then. I wrote. It came as naturally to me as sexual excitement to an adolescent—I think from the time I was seventeen, I had no larger desire in life than to be a writer, and I wrote a great deal. Through my Sophomore, Junior, and Senior years at Harvard, and the summers between, I must have written thirty or forty short stories, a couple of plays, a novel, then a short novel, and then a long novel which I called A Transit to Narcissus.

That was not the worst way to work up one's literary talent. There may be too much of a tendency among young intellectuals to think that if one can develop a consciousness, if one is able to brood sensitively and incisively on one's own life, and on the life of others for that matter, one will be able to

write when the time comes. That assumption, however, may not recognize sufficiently that the ability to put words on a page also comes through years of experience, and can become a skill nearly separate from consciousness, and bear more resemblance to the sophisticated instinct of fingers that have been playing scales for a decade.

So I learned to write by writing. As I once calculated, I must have written more than half a million words before I came to The Naked and the Dead, and a large fraction of those words was in the several drafts of this novel. I no longer recall just when I began A Transit to Narcissus, although the spring of my Senior year at Harvard, March or April of 1943, seems a reasonable date, but indeed it was commenced earlier. In the summer before, between my Junior and Senior years, I had written a three-act play about a mental hospital and called it The Naked and the Dead. The play never interested anyone a great deal, most certainly not the Harvard Dramatic Society (although the title was to receive its full attention four years later, when it was transferred without a moment's shame to the war novel I started to write in the summer of 1946). By then, the play was long buried in a carton of papers, its best passages of dialogue—there were not many—cannibalized over to a few pages of A Transit to Narcissus.

Little enough, certainly, of those three acts are here. Writing the novel, a metamorphosis took place. The play, as I recollect, was stark, and its set was the screened-in porch of the violent ward of a mental hospital. In an area eight feet by forty feet, twenty or thirty actors were to mull insanely back and forth. It would have been a play of much shock, brutality, obscenity, and what they used to call untrammelled power, a crude but highly realistic work. I had, after all, spent the earlier part of the summer of 1942, one week, no more, working in the violent ward of a mental hospital for thirteen hours a day, five days a week (pay, nineteen dollars plus room and board). Then I quit. The experience was sufficient to write the play, digest a few of its faults, and embark less than a year later on that most peculiar novel we have here. Having just reread it after thirty-three years, I am all too unhappily aware that a seed of the psychotic, a whole field of the neurotic, and a crop of youthful energies obviously sprouted from a week of work in the insane asylum. If I was searching that summer for the experience to make me a better writer, most solemnly, of course, was I searching, I could hardly have recognized in advance that working in a mental hospital at the age of nineteen was equal to dropping myself precipitously into the lowest reaches of the proletariat, into a charnel house of violence, a drudgery of labor, and a

first coming to grips with a theme that would not so much haunt me as stalk me for the rest of my writing life—what is the relation between courage and brutality?

Being also a good son of the middle class, I could not stay rooted in such misery for too long. A week was enough to jolt my mind for a year. Since it was also the first social experience I came across that was cruel enough and crude enough to oblige me to write about it, I was bound to go back and try a novel. While graduating from a high school in Brooklyn into Freshman year at Harvard had offered a social transition that in its own way was virtually as abrupt, I would hardly have been able to write about it then; did I even know it was there to write about? On the other hand, I was ready in wholly inadequate fashion, of course, to take on the explosive and unmanageable themes of social corruption, insanity and violence in a mental hospital, yes, I went right into the work and in less than a year was to write and rewrite a novel something like a hundred and eighty-three thousand words long.

Since I started on it in the last months of my Senior year, then plugged along from month to month, expecting any week to get drafted (it was the summer of '43), and unaccountably did not get drafted. The only explanation

I can find for such delay is that my draft card must have fallen into the back of the file—I did not compose it with any clear sense of how much time I had to work, nor even the confidence I could finish it. Rather I worked on the book because I was out of college and my friends were at war, and there was no sense in looking for a job if I would also be a soldier soon. So each month passed, and the novel proceeded. I was as lonely as I have ever been—which emotional tone is most certainly to be felt in the lugubrious weight of the style—and I was a little frightened of going to war, and a great deal ashamed of not going to war, and terrified of my audacity in writing so ambitious a novel—one part of me certainly knew how ignorant I was—and even more terrified I would not have time to finish, and therefore if I were soon killed in the war, nobody (except my family) would know that a young and potentially important author had lived among them: such is the tone of the book. It is not a period I look back on with pleasure.

Still, the novel got written, Finished in January of 1944—at least I thought it was finished in January—I was still not drafted and so I wrote sixty or seventy more pages in February, inserts, new chapters, and a few revised passages for the draft I had already, and these elaborations would muck up the novel a little more.

Nevertheless, it could never have seemed so bad a novel then, as it does today. The politics of A Transit to Narcissus—during those war years when you went a long distance to the Right before you found a liberal who was not moving to the Left—were fashionable politics; its portrait of a mental hospital was without comparison literally! --I cannot think of any other American novel, good or bad, written about an insane asylum before World War II. Moreover, the horror of the descriptions was accurate. In those years, before thorazine and other tranquilizers changed the mood of our mental wards to the mood of our cancer wards, insane asylums, at least from the point of view of the inmates, had probably not improved significantly since the days of Hogarth. The beatings came every bit as frequently as they are portrayed in this novel, nor is the lack of medical care exaggerated. (That the real situation may not be better today—that thorazine might do even less for a madman's soul than a brutal beating is a discussion belonging to R.D. Laing and will not be entered here.)

At any rate, this early novel, holding to its virtues and staggering under its faults, went out to publishers with the blessing of my agent, Berta Kaslow, who was beginning at William Morris then and loved the book; Before she was done it went to twenty publishing houses. I was in the Army by then, of

course, at last! I went into the Army the week A Transit to Narcissus went out to the first publisher and all through basic training, and replacement depots, and on troop transports, and in Leyte and Luzon and Japan, I would receive letters from Berta Kaslow. Another publisher or two had just turned the book down, but she had not lost faith. Nor had I. Maybe we burned longer in our hopes for that book because the first editor to read it, Robert Linscott of Random House, then comparable in distinction to Maxwell Perkins, had liked A Transit to Narcissus enough to think of publishing it. The other editors at Random House did not agree with him, however, and since I was in the Army and would not be able to work with him on editing it (and, I'm certain, condensing it), Linscott rejected the book reluctantly, and with a splendid letter to me that I carried through the war.

Other readers were not to be as kind. Some editors thought the book more depressing than anything, others were aghast at the murkiness and/or depth of the sexual relations; the consensus suggested that the book had a power of a sort, and the author, considering his youth, might have yet a career, but the work itself was too unpleasant to see print.

Oddly enough, there was, as I recollect, praise for the style. Let us hope it was not a collective lack of taste so much as a collective hypocrisy of

editors; if one can find nothing much good to say about a manuscript, praise the style at least: it was obvious I was proud of my style. But what awful stuff it is today! Catatonically slow and and awkward, as if hanging in with those patients for a week had thickened my tongue for seven seasons, no little word is ever used in A Transit to Narcissus when a polysyllabic slab of jargon will do, and the meaning is not only fuzzy in the pages but in the paragraphs, even in the sentences. Maybe there has never been another novel where as many characters take their psychic temperature after every little event—a few, I fear, take it for ten pages at a time. Never is there a novel where as many people go out for walks to think things through, and do so for as long as the style requires. One is even brought to remember that the book takes place in the late depression years of the thirties when the average American city and mill town was still interesting to walk around, and nobody had money for more.

Yet if the style is so monumentally bad, that is also a curiosity, for all through college I had been writing better stuff. A short story full of action and quick prose called "The Greatest Thing in the World" had won a nationwide college short story contest two years before, and a short novel, A Calculus at Heaven, finished at the beginning of my Senior year (indeed, right

after the play as written) had been far superior in style, if considerably less ambitious in theme. But then, in a couple of years, I would be writing simply again. The war squeezed more than a few ponderosities out of my fingers, and the lethargic dissonance of this prose is soon replaced by the more digestible stylistic flaws of The Naked and the Dead—the life of a soldier was good for one writer! What may be interesting now is that A Transit to Narcissus was done at a time when I was changing my literary gods, moving bag and borrowed baggage from Farrell, Hemingway and Dos Passos to Faulkner, Proust, Mann, Melville, Hawthorne, Henry James, and an intense dose of F.O. Matthiessen's American Renaissance (which was the big book at Harvard my Junior and Senior year). So one's sure taste for life in literature had been temporarily overwhelmed by the cultural reflexes of a half-educated Harvard man. One senses a literary prig working at these pages. As is usually true of young writers and long novels, the prose suffers from every intellectual sloth of the author's character. Indeed, without its operatic plot, the book would be close to unreadable.

Yet now I agree to publish it. True, it will appear in facsimile, and for a most limited audience. The general public will be protected (by the price of this work--\$100!) from my youthful indulgences in prose.

But what is to be gained by showing it? My literary reputation is more likely to survive than be enhanced by this novel.

The answer is curious to myself. I do not recognize the young man who wrote this book, I do not even like him very much, and yet I know that he must be me because his themes are mine, his ambition is as large for his age as my ambition would ever become, and I am not even without an odd regard for him. If I understand what he is trying to say, then he is close to saying the unsayable. The most terrible themes of my own life: the nearness of violence to creation, and the whiff of murder just beyond every embrace of love are his themes also. So I come to recognize myself and realize that if I had not gone to war, I probably would have kept writing books like A Transit to Narcissus, although, in time, better, I hope, and with good fortune might have ended like Iris Murdoch, a writer I greatly admire.

Instead, my early talents, such as they were, went through the war, and the over-elaborated sinuosities and intercalations of that young man were hammered into shape by the crudest anvil of American society—the American Army at war—and the social sense, lacking so conspicuously in A Transit to Narcissus, was now achieved. The writer would spend the rest of his working years in tension between two major themes rather than one, two

mysteries to explore by literary means instead of a search for just one holy grail, and that, we may as well assume, was to his benefit. Maybe it is good to be aware early that society can be as much of a mystery as the individual, that Marx offers no more of a final answer than Freud, and that Satan is as profound an enigma as Jesus.

I stray, however. The point is that despite all its flaws, gracelessness, ponderous sense of narrative and resolute lack of wit, I am probably glad to see *A Transit to Narcissus* published. I cannot pretend to like it, but curiously, I respect it, or at least respect the profundity of its impulse. Like a badly twisted arthritic who nevertheless engages in rock-climbing, I respect the effort, the confidence, and the peculiar bravery (since I do not feel I am speaking about myself) of a young man who was living in some private depth of the psyche and so comprehended early, as some people never do, that the unsayable was all that was worth saying, was indeed all that would save him, and the chaos beyond civilization that reside in each soul might even be an individual chaos as unique as one personality from another. That is a lot for a young man to know—that even in our chaos we are individual works of art, maybe even of design—it is, indeed, a theme to live with for your life, and I

have lived with it, or tried to, and now feel, I suppose, that we may as well reveal where it all began.

Lee/2001 Soon after finishing *A Transit to Narcissus*, I entered another existence. It lasted for hardly more than two years but felt like a decade. I was a private in the Army. That gave me real experience as opposed to the kind of experience I was searching for in the week I spent working in the mental hospital. It's the life you can't escape that gives you the knowledge you need to grow as a writer.

Macms

Interviewer: Can you say something about your methods of working?

Mailer: They vary with each book. I wrote The Naked and the Dead on the typewriter. I used to write four days a week, Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays.

Interviewer: Definite hours?

Mailer: Yes, very definite hours. I'd get up about 8:00 or 8:30 and I'd be at work by 10:00. And I'd work until 12:30; then I'd have lunch. I'd get back to work about 2:30 or 3:00 and work for another two hours. In the afternoon, I usually needed a can of beer to prime me. But I'd write for five hours a day. And I wrote a great deal. The average I tried to keep was seven typewritten pages a day, twenty-eight pages a week. The first draft took seven months, the second draft which was really only half a draft took four months. The part about the platoon went well from the beginning, but the Lieutenant and the General in the first draft were stock characters. If it had been published at that point, the book would have been considered an interesting war novel with some good scenes, no more. The second draft was the bonus. Cummings and Hearn were done in the second draft. If you look at the book, you can see that the style shifts, that the parts about Cummings and Hearn are written in a somewhat more developed vein. Less forceful but more

articulated. And you can see something of the turn my later writing would take in the scenes between Cummings and Hearn.

Interviewer: Well, how did the idea of The Naked and the Dead come to you?

Mailer: I wanted to write a short novel about a long patrol. All during the war I kept thinking about this patrol. I even had the idea before I went overseas. Probably it was stimulated by a few war books I had read: John Hersey's Into the Valley, Harry Brown's A Walk in the Sun, and a couple of others I no longer remember. Out of these books came the idea to do a novel about a long patrol. And I began to create my characters. All the while I was overseas a part of me was working on this long patrol. I even ended up in a reconnaissance outfit which I had asked to get into. I reconnaissance outfit, after all, tends to take long patrols. Art kept traducing life. At any rate, when I started writing The Naked and the Dead I thought it might be a good idea to have a preliminary chapter or two to give the readers a chance to meet my characters before they went on patrol. But the next six months and the first 500 pages went into that, and I remembered in the early days I was annoyed at how long it was taking me to get to the patrol.

Interviewer: Do you keep notes, or a journal, or diaries, or write scenarios?

What's your preparatory material?

Mailer: That also varies with each of the books. For The Naked and the Dead I had a file full of notes and a long dossier on each man. Many of these details never got into the novel, but the added knowledge made me feel more comfortable with each character. Indeed I even had charts to show which characters had not yet had scenes with other characters. For a book which seems spontaneous on its surface, The Naked and the Dead was written mechanically. I studied engineering at Harvard, and I suppose it was the book of a young engineer. The structure is sturdy, but there's no fine filigree to the joints. Just spot welding and riveting. And the working plan was very simple. I devised some preliminary actions for the platoon in order to give the reader an opportunity to get to know the men, but the beginning, as I said, took over two-thirds of the book. The patrol itself is also simple, but I did give more thought to working it out ahead of time.

Interviewer: People have commented on the pleasure you seem to take in the military detail of The Naked and the Dead.

Mailer: Compared to someone like James Jones, I'm an amateur at military detail. But at that time I did like all those details, I even used to enjoy

patrols, or at least did when I wasn't sick with jungle rot or atabrine poisoning. I was one of the few men in the platoon who could read a map and once I gave myself away. We used to have classes after a campaign was over; we'd come back to garrison—one of those tent cities out in a rice paddy—and they would teach us all over again how to read maps and compasses or they would drill us on the nomenclature of the machine gun for the eighth time. One day very bored, I was daydreaming, and the instructor pointed to a part of the map and said, "Mailer, what are those coordinates?" If I had had a moment to think, I would never have answered. It was bad form to be bright in my outfit, but I didn't think: he caught me in a daze, and I looked up and said, "320.017 dash 146.814" and everyone's mouth dropped open. It was the first time anybody ever answered such a question thus briskly in the history of infantry map reading. At any rate, that was the fun for me, the part about the patrol, I suppose, that had something to do with Captain Blood and The Amateur Gentleman. . .

65.5A I think I suffered more from the reviews of *The Naked and the Dead* than any other of my books. I wanted to sit down and write a letter to every critic and tell them how they had misinterpreted part of my book. I felt this way even when they enthused over the novel. It probably takes twenty years to appreciate book reviewing for what it is—a primitive rite. By then, you are able to ingest unkind reviews, provided they are well-written. Sometimes, an off-the-wall review can be as nourishing as a wild game dinner. (And, by times, as indigestible.) I'd never dream, however, of not reading reviews. It would be like not looking at a naked woman if she happens to be standing in front of her open window. Whether ugly or lovely, she is undeniably interesting under such covert circumstances.

Interviewer: What methods did you pursue in your next books?

Mailer: Well, with Barbary Shore, I began to run into trouble. I started it in Paris about six months after I finished The Naked and the Dead and did about fifty pages. It was then called Mrs. Guinevere and was influenced by Sally

Bowles in Isherwood's Berlin Stories. Mrs. Guinevere never went anywhere.

It stopped, just ground down after those first fifty pages. I dropped it complete, thought I'd never pick it up again, and started to work on another novel. Did all the research, went to Indiana to do research.

Interviewer: On what?

Mailer: On a labor novel. There was a union in Evansville with which I had connections. So I stayed for a few days in Indiana, and then went to Jamaica, Vermont, to write the novel. I spent four to six weeks getting ready to begin. I made a great push on the beginning, worked for two weeks, and quit cold. I didn't have the book. I didn't know a damned thing about labor unions. In desperation (I was full of second novel panic) I picked up Mrs. Guinevere and looked at it. And I found something there I could go on with. So I worked in it all through the spring of 1949, and then I moved out to Hollywood for the summer. I finished the second half in Hollywood.

Barbary Shore is really a Hollywood novel. I think it reflected the impact of Hollywood on me in some subterranean fashion. Certainly the first draft is the wildest draft of the three; it's almost insane and the most indigestible portions were written in the first couple of months I was in Hollywood. I never knew where the book was going, I had no idea where it was going to

move from day to day. I'd wake up and push the typewriter in great dread, in literal terror, wondering when this curious and doubtful inspiration was going to stop. It never quite did. It ground along at the rate of three pages, three difficult pages a day. But I'd get it out. I got a first draft done, and was quite unhappy with it; it was a very bad book at that point. When I rewrote it later, in Provincetown, a summer later, again it went at the rate of three pages a day. The revision was different from the first draft, and I think much better. But working on Barbary Shore, I always felt as if I were not writing the book myself, but rather as if I were serving as a subject for some intelligence which had decided to use me to write the book. It had nothing to do with whether the work was good or bad. I just had to do with the fact that I had absolutely no conscious control of it; if I hadn't heard about the unconscious I would have had to postulate one to explain this phenomenon. For the first time I became powerfully aware of the fact that I had an unconscious which seemed to have little to do with me.

Interviewer: How much of a plan did you have for Barbary Shore?

Mailer: None. As I indicated earlier, Barbary Shore just birthed itself slowly. The book came out sentence by sentence. I never knew where the next day's work was coming from.

Interviewer: You don't mention (in your description of writing Barbary Shore) anything about politics. Wasn't your engagement at the time a considerable part of the plan?

Mailer: I think it was the unspoken drama in the working-up of the book. I started Barbary Shore as some sort of fellow-traveler, and finished it with a political position that was a far-flung mutation of Trotskyism. And the drafts of the book reflected these ideological changes so drastically that the last draft of Barbary Shore is a different novel altogether and has almost nothing in common with the first draft but the names.

Interviewer: Did Jean Malaquais (to whom the book is dedicated) have much to do with this?

Mailer: Yes. He had an enormous influence on me. He's the only man I know who can combine a powerfully dogmatic mind with the keenest sense of nuance, and he has a formidable culture which seems to live in his veins and capillaries. Since he has also had a most detailed vision of the Russian Revolution—he was steeped in it the way certain American families are imbued with the records of their clan—I spent a year living more closely with the history of Russia from 1917 to 1937 than in the events of my own life. I doubt if I would even have gone back to rewrite Barbary Shore if I didn't

know Malaquais. Certainly I would never have conceived McLeod.

Malaquais, of course, bears no superficial resemblance whatsoever to McLeod—indeed, Malaquais was never even a communist, he started as an anti-Stalinist, but he had a quality when I first met him which was pure Old Bolshevik. One knew that if he had been born in Russia, a contemporary of Lenin's, he would have been one of the leaders of the Revolution and would doubtless have been executed at the trials. So his personality—as it filtered through the contradictory themes of my unconscious—inhabits Barbary Shore.

Interviewer: Would you care to discuss what you mean by the "contradictory themes" of your unconscious? It that related to what you said a little while ago about becoming aware of your unconscious while writing Barbary Shore?

Mailer: Barbary Shore was built on the division which existed then in my mind. My conscious intelligence, as I've indicated, became obsessed by the Russian Revolution. But my unconscious was much more interested in other matters: murder, suicide, orgy, psychosis, all the themes I discuss in Advertisements. Since the gulf between these conscious and unconscious themes was vast and quite resistant to any quick literary coupling, the tension to get a bridge across resulted in the peculiar feverish hothouse atmosphere of

the book. My unconscious felt one kind of dread, my conscious mind another, and Barbary Shore lives somewhere in between. That's why its focus is so unearthly. And of course the difficulty kept haunting me from then on in all the work I did afterward. But it was a book written without any plan.

London

Barbary Shore, however, taught me one thing about myself: I could get up off the floor. The reviews were unbelievably bad. After all, I'd taken myself a little too seriously after The Naked and the Dead. Do that, and the book review world will lie in wait for you. There are a lot of petty killers in our business. So there it was. My God, Time magazine's review of Barbary Shore ended by saying "Paceless, tasteless, graceless. He is beached on a point of no intellectual return." When you realize that that didn't succeed in draining all your blood, you actually decide you're stronger than you thought you were. It's the way a young prize fighter with a promising start can get knocked out early in his career, and come back from that to have a good

record. The time he was knocked out has become part of his strength. You start writing a novel and think, "This could end up badly," but then you shrug: "All right. I've been taken down before. It won't be the end of the world." That's important. I'm fond of Barbary Shore for this reason—not its in-and-out merits.

Interviewer: What about The Deer Park?

Mailer: For The Deer Park I didn't have much of a method. It was agony, it was far and away the most difficult of my three novels to write. The first and second drafts were written with the idea that they were only the first part of an eight-part novel. I think I used that enormous scheme as a pretext to get into the work. Apparently, I just couldn't sit down and write a nice modest Hollywood novel. I had to have something grandiose, in conception, anyway.

I started The Deer Park with "The Man Who Studied Yoga." That was supposed to be a prologue to all eight novels. It went along nicely and was done in a few weeks. And then I got into The Deer Park and I forget what my methods were exactly; I think they varied. In the revisions of Barbary Shore, I had started working in longhand; as soon as I found myself blocked on the typewriter, I'd shift to longhand. By the time I got to The Deer Park I was writing in longhand all the time. I'd write in longhand in the morning and type up what I'd written in the afternoon. I was averaging about four-five pages a day, I think, three days a week; about fifteen pages a week. But I found it an unendurable book to write because I'd finish each day in the most profound depression; as I found out later it was even a physical depression. I was gutting my liver.

Interviewer: It wasn't alcohol?

Mailer: No, I wasn't much of a drinker in those days. The liver, you see, is not unlike a car battery, and I was draining mine. I was writing with such anxiety and such fear and such distaste, and such gloom and such dissatisfaction that . . .

Interviewer: Dissatisfaction with what?

Mailer: Oh, everything. My work, my life, myself. The early draft of The Deer Park was terrible. It had a few good things in it, but it was slow to emerge, it took years, and was stubborn.

HAZARDS

83.40 I treat bad reviews in the manner that a politician running for office treats a loss of support. A couple of friends called up after a very bad review of Ancient Evenings appeared in the New York Times Book Review on Sunday, and asked, "Are you all right?" I'd seen it a week before, so my unhappiness was now digested. I told them that it was like realizing the county chairman in Schenectady had decided against your candidacy. But to lose Schenectady doesn't mean you stop running for governor. It isn't my ego that's hurt, it's my damn pocketbook. Getting a bad review in the Sunday Times affects my wallet. That's all. Whereas when I was younger I used to consider a bad review a personal insult. The guy who wrote it was evil. In fact, however, I have never actually punched out a reviewer, which I say with a certain wistfulness. I did sit next to Philip Rahv after he had written an atrocious review of An American Dream. Philip Rahv had his

virtues, bless him, but physical courage was not one of them. So I made a point of installing myself beside him on a couch at a party, and while I smiled at him, I kept my body firmly pressed into his, leaning into him, all the while that we had a long 30-minute conversation about something else altogether. I was perfectly pleasant the entire time and everything seemed all right except we were both titled alarmingly from my leaning into him. He was in an absolute panic, waiting for me to strike. It must have seemed an odd sight from across the room: He was a heavy man, and the two of us probably looked like two doughnuts crushed together at one end of the box.

What follows is a piece that was written some time in the Seventies and was later reworked for a speech I gave at the University of Michigan Hopwood Awards in, I believe, 1984. Originally, it was called "The Hazards and Sources of Writing," but here I have broken it into several sections. Stories about Kurt Vonnegut, Robert Rauschenberg and Willem de Kooning appear in other portions of this book, and the last few pages (Sources) has

been moved over to the Psychology of the Occult where I try to talk about the sometimes mysterious origin of our novelistic sources.

This portion here, however, is relatively complete in itself, and it certainly does deal with the heavy difficulties day-to-day of writing a novel when the work does not go smoothly.

Hazards (Conv. W/ NM? Pont?)

I am going to speak of the living state of the novel writer once he has passed his apprenticeship—and to avoid saying his or her on every occasion, let me aver that I am going back to the old English tradition of using the possessive pronoun his to indicate all of humankind. The apprenticeship of an established writer is subject to all the hazards of his professions, those perils of writer's block and failing energy, alcoholism, drugs, and desertion. For many a writer deserts his writing to go into a collateral profession in advertising or academia, trade journals, publishing—the list is very long. What is not routine is to become a young writer with a firmly established name. Luck as well as talent can take one across the first border. Some do

surpass the trials of learning technique and commence to make a living at our bizarre profession. It is then, however, that less-charted perils begin. I would like to speak at length of the hazards of writing, the cruelties it extorts out of mind and flesh. I know something of these hazards and I ought to. My first story was published, after all, more than forty years ago and the first novel I wrote that saw print is going to be thirty-six years old in a month. Obviously for a long time I have been accustomed to thinking of myself as a writer, even as others see me that way. So I hear one lament over and over from strangers: "Oh, I too would have liked to be an author." You can almost hear them musing aloud about the freedom of the life. How felicitous to have no boss and face no morning rush to work, to know all the intoxications of celebrity—how they long to satisfy the voice within that keeps saying, "What a pity that no one will know how unusual my life has been! There are all those secrets I cannot tell!" Years ago, I wrote, "Experience, when it cannot be communicated to another, must wither within and be worse than lost." I often ponder the remark. Once in a while your hand will write out a sentence that seems true and yet you do not know where it came from. Ten or twenty words seem able to live in balance with your experience. It may be one's nicest reward as a writer. You feel you have come near the truth. When that

happens, you can look at the page years later and meditate again on the meaning, for it goes deep. So I think I understand why people want to write. All the same, I am also a professional and so there is another part of me, I confess, that is ready to laugh when strangers tell me of their aspirations. I am not free of the scorn of a veteran prize fighter who hears someone say, "I'd like to flatten that bully." The speaker does not know how many years of discipline and dull punishment must be given over to the ability to throw a good punch at will. I say to myself, "They can write an interesting letter so they assume they are ready to tell the story of their lives. They do not understand how much it will take to pick up even the rudiments of narrative." If I believe that the person who has spoken to me in that fashion is serious, I warn them as gently as I can. I say, "Well, it's probably as hard to learn to write as to play the piano." Then if their only reason for wanting to be a writer is to pull in some quick success, they get depressed and that's OK with me. One shouldn't encourage people to write for too little. It's a splendid life when you think of its emoluments but it is death to the soul if you are not good at it.

Let me keep my promise, then, and go on a little about the negative part of being a writer. Those few of you here who don't see yourselves as

potential writers may then feel less wistful, for if you still have not discovered whether you are talented enough to tell your private tale, you will at least have escaped an awful pressure. To skip at one bound over all those fascinating and relatively happy years when one is an apprentice writer and learning every day, at least on good days, there is in contrast the abominable pressure on the life of the professional novelist. For soon after you finish each hard-earned book the reviews come in and the reviews are murderous. Contrast an author's reception to an actor's. With the notable exception of John Simon, theater critics do not often try to kill performers. I believe there is an unspoken agreement that thespians deserve to be protected against the perils of first nights. After all, the actor is daring a rejection that can prove as fearful as a major wound. For sensitive human beings like actors a hole in the ego can be worse than a hole in the heart. Such moderation does not carry over, however, into literary criticism. Meretricious, dishonest, labored, loathesome, pedestrian, hopeless, disgusting, disappointing, raunchy, ill-wrought, boring—these are not uncommon words for a typical bad review. You would be hard put to find another professional field where criticism is equally savage. Accountants, lawyers, engineers, and doctors do not often speak publicly in this manner.

Yet the unhappiest thing to say is that our critical practice may even be fair, harsh but fair. After all, one prepares a book in the safety of the study and nothing short of your self-esteem, your bills, or your editor is forcing you to show your stuff. You put your book out, if you can afford to take the time, only when it is ready. If economic necessity forces you to write somewhat faster than is good for you—well, everybody has their sad story. As a practical matter, not that much has to be written into the teeth of a gale and few notes need be taken on the face of a cliff. An author usually does his stint at the desk, feeling not too hungry and suffering no pains greater than the view of his empty pad of paper. Now, granted, that white sheet can look as blank as a television screen when the station is off the air, but that is not a danger, merely an awesome presence. The writer, unlike more active creative artists, works in no immediate peril. Why should not the open season begin so soon as the work comes out? If talented authors were to have it better than actors in all ways, there would be a tendency for actors to disappear and talented authors to multiply, so the critics keep our numbers down.

In fact, not too many good writers remain productive through the decades. There are too many other hazards as well. We are jerked by the media in and out of fashion and each drop from popularity can feel like a

termination to your career. Such insecurity is no help to morale, for even in the best periods every writer always knows one little terror: Does it stop tomorrow? Does it all stop tomorrow? Writing is spooky. There is no routine of an office to keep you going, only the white page each morning and you never know where your words are coming from, those divine words. So your professionalism at best is fragile. You cannot always tell yourself that fashions pass and history will smile at you again. In the literary world, it is not easy to acquire the stoicism to endure, especially if you've begun as an over-sensitive adolescent. It is not even automatic to pray for luck if it has been pessimism itself which gave force to your early themes. Maybe it is no more than blind will, but some authors stay at it. Over and over they keep writing a new book and do it in the knowledge that upon its publication they will probably be savaged and will not be able to fight back. An occasional critic can be singled out for counterattack, or one can always write a letter to the editor of the book section, but such efforts at self-defense are like rifle fire against fighter planes. All-powerful is the writer when he sits at his desk, but on the public stage he may feel as if his rights are puny. His courage, if he has any, must learn to live with the bruises left by comments on his work. The spiritual skin may go slack or harden to leather, but the honor of his

effort to live down bad reviews and write again has to be analogous to the unspoken, unremarked courage of people who dwell under the pressure of a long illness and somehow resolve enough of their inmost contradictions to be able to get better. I suppose this is equal to saying that you cannot become a professional writer and keep active for three or four decades unless you learn to live with the most difficult condition of your existence, which is that superficial book reviewing is irresponsible and serious literary criticism can be close to merciless. The conviction that such a condition is fair has to take root deep enough to bear analogy to the psychology of a peasant who farms a mountain slope and takes it for granted that he was meant to toil through the years with one foot standing higher than the other.

Every good author who manages to forge a long career for himself must be able, therefore, to build a character that will not be unhinged by a bad reception. That takes art. Few writers have rugged personalities when they are young. In general, the girls seldom look like potential beauty contest winners and the boys show small promise of becoming future All-Americans. They are most likely to be found on the sidelines commencing to cook up that warped, passionate, bitter, transcendent view of life which will bring them later to the attention of the American public, but only later. The young writer

usually starts as a loser and so is obliged to live with the conviction that the world he knows had better be wrong or he is wrong. On the answer depends one's evaluation of one's right to survive. Thanks to greed, plastics, mass media, and various abominations of technology—lo, the world is wrong. The paranoid aim of a cockeyed young writer has as much opportunity to hit the target as the beauty queen's wide-eyed lack of paranoia. So occasionally this loser of a young writer ends up a winner, for a while. His vision has projected him forward, he is just enough ahead of his time. But dependably, that wretched, lonely act of writing will force him back. Writing arouses too much commotion in one's psyche to allow the author to rest happily.

It is not easy to explain such disturbances to people unless they do write. Someone who has never tried fiction will hardly be quick to understand that in the study a writer does often feel godlike. There he sits, ensconced in judgment on other people's lives. Yet contemplate the person in the chair; he could be hung over and full of the small shames of what he did yesterday, or what he did ten years ago. Those failures of life, those flashes of old fiascos, wait like ghosts in the huge house of the empty middle-aged self. Sometimes the ghosts even appear and ask to be laid to rest. Consciously or unconsciously, writers must fashion a new peace with the past every day they

attempt to write. They must rise above despising themselves. If they cannot, they will probably lose the sanction to appear like god to themselves and render judgment on others.

Yet the writer at work does not tolerate too much good news either. At his desk, it is best if he does not come to like himself too much. Wonderfully agreeable memories may appear on certain mornings, but if they have nothing to do with the work they must be banished or they will leave the writer too cheerful, too energetic, too forgiving, too horny. It is in the calm depression of a good judge that one's scribbles move best over the page. Indeed, just as a decent judge will feel that he has injured society by giving an unfair verdict, so does an author have to ask himself constantly if he is being fair to his characters. For if the writer does violate the life of someone who is being written about—that is, proceeds in the ongoing panic of trying to keep a book amusing to distort his characters to more comic, more corrupt, or more evil forms than he secretly believes they deserve—then he may be subtly injuring the reader. That is a moral crime. Few authors are innocent of such a practice; on the other hand, not so many artists can be found who are not guilty, also, of softening their portraits. Some writers don't want to destroy the sympathy their readers may feel for an appealing heroine by the admission

that she shrieks at her children. Sales fly out the window. It takes as much literary integrity to be tough, therefore, as to be fair. The trail is narrow. It is difficult to keep up one's literary standards through the long, slogging reaches of the middle of a book. The early pleasures of conception no longer sustain you; the writer plods along with the lead feet of habit, the dry breath of discipline, and the knowledge that on the other side of the hill the critics—who also have their talent to express—are waiting. Sooner or later you come to the conclusion that if you are going to survive, you had better, where it concerns your own work, become the best critic of them all. There is a saying among boxers that the punch you see hurts less than the one you never came to see. An author who would find the resources to keep writing from one generation to the next does well to climb above his own ego high enough to see every flaw in the work. Otherwise he will never be able to decide what are its true merits.

Let yourself live, however, with an awareness of your book's lacks and short-cuts, its gloss where courage might have produced a little real shine, and you can bear the bad reviews. You can even tell when the critic is not exposing your psyche so much as taking off his own dirty socks. It proves amazing how many evil reviews one can digest if there is a confidence one

has done one's best on a book, written to the limit of one's honesty, even scraped off a little of one's dishonesty. Get to that point of purity and your royalties may be injured by a small welcome but not your working morale. There is even hope that if the book is better than its reception, one's favorite readers will come eventually to care for it more. The prescription, therefore, is simple: one must not put out a job that has any serious taint of the meretricious. At least the prescription ought to be simple, but then how few of us ever do work of which we are not in fact a bit ashamed. It comes down to a matter of degree. There is that remark of Engels to Marx, "Quantity changes quality." A single potato is there for us to eat, but ten thousand potatoes are a commodity and have to be put in bins or boxes. A profit must be made from them or a loss will certainly be taken. By analogy, a little corruption in a book is as forgivable as the author's style, but a sizable literary delinquency is a diseased organ, or so it will feel if the critics begin to bang on it and happen to be right for once. That will be the hour when one's creditors do not go away. I wonder if we have not touched the fear that is back of the writing in many a good novelist's heart, the hazard beneath all others.

LONDON

To the hazards I just cited, let me add what may be the subtlest one of all. Some talented people feel they still haven't read enough to sit down and write. That is dangerous! My great friend Malaquais had a terrible time. He had read more than anyone I knew. Like many another self-educated man, he had a powerful mind. But he couldn't write quickly because he could see everything that was wrong in what he did. He'd realize so-and-so— whoever—Stendhal, Racine, Moliere—had done it better. This even extended into the narrowest corners. Some unheralded Polish novelist who was known for one small ability—Malaquais had read him too. What an agony that he couldn't write a book as large as his vision of society. He was forever living in the harshest judgment on his talents.

PUBLICITY

Ah, publicity! One has written a book and the publisher intends to do a bit with it—the faint hope arises that it will become a best-seller—and so the author is ready to do a tour and excite some attention for the latest work.

82.14 I think for any novelist who's had a great deal of early success, as Capote did and Vidal did and Styron did and I did, it was not automatic or easy to look upon other people with simple interest because, generally speaking, they were more interested in us. One is never more aware of this hybrid vanity than when on a publicity tour. You are the center of attention. But there is a price. You are also an object to be manipulated as effectively as possible. The career of the media interviewer conceivably rises or falls a little by how well they handle you.

Moreover, count on it: three out of four interviewers will not have read your book. That tends to make them ask Cadillac Questions, ones that cost them 2% and you 98%. For example: "Tell me all about your book." After

you've answered that a few times, you begin to feel as if the limousine in which you are travelling is out of gas, and you have to push it up the hill.

Lee/2001 It usually doesn't matter if your book is good or bad. Within reason, you're going to get more or less the same number of good and bad reviews. A dreadful book will probably get three good reviews in ten, and a very good book may get six. Occasionally, a book will get very good or very bad reviews across the board and this happens because something in the work outrages that part of the national temper to which the media is sensitive.

A very crude example: A work that is insensitive to 9/11.

82.14 Buying a good hardcover book is, for some literary people on a tight budget, not unlike a sacramental act, so it's best if they have a certain respect, even a touch of awe, for you as the author. If you're unsavory in public life, it doesn't matter that everyone knows your name, you are not going to sell as many hardcover books as you should. The good authors who do well are usually careful not to be in the public eye—Saul Bellow and John Updike for two. Very few can flout that law. Capote has. So has Vidal. I certainly haven't.

81.6 Every time a story about me appears in a newspaper, I am injured professionally. I don't think there's anything to do about it. One of the reasons I'm in all the time is that the columns keep using the same people, over and over again. It's a game, and there may not be many more than a few hundred players on the board. If I were in a Tarot deck, I'd be the Fool. I used to try to keep a stern separation between the public legend and myself, but you know, you get older, and after a while, you can feel at times like an

oldster in Miami with slits in his sneakers so his feet won't hurt. At that juncture, it's pointless to fight the legend. The legend has become a lotion for your toes.

WRITER'S DIGEST

Many good writers get smashed en route. In that sense, they are like race car drivers, and the punishment they take stops them eventually. They write less well, or they take a tremendously long time to write, or they lose the desire to write.

WD: Should a writer be concerned about looking foolish when taking risks?

MAILER: You want to stay above that fear, but once in a great while, I'll still think, "This is going to get the world's worst reviews. I'm diving into something that's going to make no one happy, and will leave certain people very unhappy." On the other hand, the good side of such risk is that it is exciting. You feel like a free man.

Sometimes, you can tell in advance you're headed for trouble.

Obviously, with a book about ancient Egypt, everyone would have been happier if some unknown author had written it. There might have been a lively curiosity about the author. Who is this unknown and most curious talent? One hurdle I had to overcome with Ancient Evenings was knowing in advance that a lot of people would pick it up and spend the first fifty pages saying, "What the hell is Norman Mailer up to?" It makes them uncomfortable because these days we all pride ourselves on our acumen. We want to think we're in control of the scene. When someone refutes our expectations, it does irritate the hell out of us.

WD: How do you deal with it?

MAILER: Professional confidence. This isn't even arrogance. Not by now. Rather it's analogous to the way a dentist watching a dental student would think, "If I'm not any better than he is at filling teeth, then heaven help my patients." By the same token, if I'm not, in the literary sense, smarter than the reviewer, I'm in a lot of trouble. After all, I should know more about my book than he or she does. So, I can read a very bad review and shrug it off. That works until it doesn't work. If all the reviews are bad, it could feel like a catastrophe. But then, we all live with a few half-buried intimations of doom.

They even become part of that variety of feelings with which we are able to juggle our way through occasional bad days.

LONDON

Having broken away from the pack early when I was 25, I lived with a swollen sense of self-importance. At the same time, I wasn't ready for it. Much too much objective modesty. One part of you shoots up, another lags behind. It's like having a prima donna of a hardon.

BESTSELLERS

LONDON

The ideal, and as you get older you tend to get closer to the ideal, is to write only what interests you. It will be of interest to others or it won't, but if you try to steer your way into success, you shouldn't be a serious writer. You will do better to study best-sellers and stay away from anything that's well-written. Such books could poison your satisfaction at having a best-seller which is without stylistic distinction. I don't think Jackie Susann went to bed with Rilke on her night table.

81.16 Today, large literary canvases are usually left to best-selling novelists. They will have a cast of 40 or 50 characters, and stories that traverse 50 to 100 years. They'll have several world wars, plus startling changes in the lives of several families. They do all that to keep their book moving. What usually characterizes these novels is that nothing is in them

that you haven't come across before. Most good writers tend these days to expatiate on smaller and smaller canvases with more and more clarity. Then, at least, you have the confidence that what you're doing is accurate. That's important. At least you're contributing to knowledge rather than adding to the sludge of the culture. So it's hard to take on a large topic. At the moment the only great writer I can think of who can handle what I've described, 40 or 50 characters and three or four decades is Garcia Marquez. One Hundred Years of Solitude is an amazing work. He succeeds in doing it, but how, I don't know. In my Egyptian novel, it takes me ten pages to go around a bend in the Nile.

95.7 It's counter-productive to think, "I'm going to put this in because it will sell copies." Usually, that doesn't work. There is an integrity to best-sellerdom—it is the best book that the author is capable of writing at that time. He or she believes in the book. That's why it's a best seller. Stephen King was a desperately clumsy and repetitive writer when he started, but best-seller book readers responded to his sincerity. That was present on

every badly-written page. The popularity of bad writing is analogous to the enjoyment of fast food.

I must say King has improved in style since he started. Hopefully, his readers also have, but that is not as certain.

83.20 Editing tends to make best sellers read more like each other. As one instance, few bestsellers don't suffer from a spate of adjectives. For when a writer can't find the nuance of an experience, he usually loads up with adjectives. That tells the reader what to think. This goes along with a tendency in publishing houses to gussy books up, get the emphasis on entertainment at all costs. Of course, a pervasive weariness could come into us because of the rate at which we are being entertained.

Hughes/2001 When I started, we were under the umbrella of Maxwell Perkins—anyone who became an editor wanted to be like him. Young editors felt a loyalty toward their writers. There were spiritual marriages, if you will. It's still true to a degree, but the odds against sustaining such loyalty are now much higher. Today's publishing dictates that an editor has to bring in books which make money. This diktat has to enter the interstices of a young editor's thinking. (And his or her intestines.) I imagine it would be hard for most young editors not to start pushing their authors just a bit in the direction of trying to be more popular. That, of course, strains the bond.

73.43 Right now the smart money would bet against the novel. The publishing houses are getting depressed about good fiction's future, and the publishers are the ones who will, in a large sense, determine that future. Survival probably comes down to the young editors. When a novel by an unknown gets published these days it's usually because some young editor has made an issue of it. The publisher generally goes along. In effect, it's the

charitable side of publishing, and it will continue so long as publishers keep a little faith in the novel, and the young editors manage to hold onto their nerve.

95.22 Bookstore managers often ask, "Why don't you write a short book?"

They don't have to state their motive. We both know. Short books take up less space on shelves. Then the shelves can bring in more income per foot. Marketing has taken over writing. But short novels? Unfortunately, I was co-opted at an early age by Thomas Mann who said that only the exhaustive is truly interesting.

554th Answer
to Naked
Preface

Now that fifty years have gone by since The Naked and the Dead was published in May, 1948, I think it might be interesting to talk about it as best-seller that was the work of an amateur. Of course, as best-sellers go, it was a

good book, and the author who began it at the age of twenty-three and completed it in fifteen months had already written more than a half million words in college and so could be considered a hard-working amateur who loved writing and was prepared in the way of a twenty-four-year-old to fall on his sword in the cause of literature.

He was naïve, he was passionate about writing, he knew very little about the subtlest demands of a good style, he did not have a great deal of restraint, and he burned with excitement as he wrote. He hardly knew whether he should stand in the shadow of Tolstoy or was essentially without talent. He was an amateur.

He was also a writer of what soon became a big best-seller. Indeed, The Naked and the Dead was his only prodigious best-seller. It had a good story that got better and better, it had immediacy, it came out at exactly the right time when, near to three years after the Second World War ended, everyone was ready for a big war novel that gave some idea of what it had been like—it thrived on its scenes of combat—and it had a best-seller style. The book was sloppily written in many parts (the words came too quickly and too easily) and there was hardly a noun in any sentence not holding hands with the nearest and most commonly available adjective—scalding coffee and

tremulous fear are the sorts of thing you will find throughout. Over-certified adjectives are the mark of most best-seller writing.

The book also had a vigor. This is the felicity of good books by amateurs. They venture into scenes that a writer with more experience (and more professional concern) would bypass or eschew altogether. The Naked and the Dead took chances all over the place and more of them succeeded than not. It was rightly a best-seller; it fulfilled one of two profiles of such a category—for invariably these books are written by bold amateurs or by niche professionals who know more about a given subject than they ought to.

All this said, one may now ask the professional what virtue he might ascribe to the work he did as an amateur. The answer is that he had the good luck to be influenced profoundly by Tolstoy in the fifteen months he was writing the opus back in 1946 and 1947—he read from Anna Karenina most mornings before he commenced his own work. Thereby, his pages, through the limited perceptions of a twenty-four-year-old, reflect what he learned about compassion from Tolstoy. For that is the genius of the old man—Tolstoy teaches us that compassion is of value and enriches our life only when compassion is severe, which is to say that we can perceive everything that is good and bad about a character but are still able to feel that the sum of

us as human beings is probably a little more good than awful. In any case, good or bad, it reminds us that life is like a gladiators' arena for the soul and so we can feel strengthened by those who endure, and feel awe and pity for those who do not.

That fine edge in Tolstoy, the knowledge that compassion is valueless without severity (for otherwise it cannot defend itself against sentimentality) gave The Naked and the Dead whatever enduring virtue it may possess and catapulted the amateur who wrote it into the grim ranks of those successful literary men and women who are obliged to become professional in order to survive—no easy demand, for it would insist that one must be able to do a good day's work on a bad day, and indeed, that is a badge of honor decent professionals are entitled to wear.

So, I am still fond of The Naked and the Dead. It has virtues, it has faults, but it also has a redeeming, even stimulating touch of Tolstoyan. And thereby enables me to feel hope for all of us when very occasionally I go back and read a few pages. Allow me then to suppose that there is a good deal of hope to be found if one reads all of its pages.

But you can end up with a bad liver or a shattered hip. Of course, she can always hope for recuperation. Sometimes working much harder than you want to work can liberate energy. Sometimes.

24:24 I've often felt that the only time you do anything with great energy is when you're writing out of your heart and heart requires it more.

LONDON

RULES OF THUMB

Grobel/1983 If you have to earn your living from your pen; you discover that you can push yourself. It's analogous to what athletes do when they take steroids to gain more strength. Ultimately damaging, but they set records. We do the same thing. You can force yourself to write much more than you want to. And the writing will not necessarily deteriorate. Not necessarily.

But you can end up with a bad liver, or a shortened life. Of course, one can always hope for transcendence. Sometimes working much harder than one wants to work can liberate energy. Sometimes.

84.24 I've often felt that the only time you do anything with great energy is when you're acting out of your best and worst motives at once.

LONDON

Large literary success is so often a matter of fortuitous publication. The Naked and the Dead had the luckiest timing of my career. People were not that interested in the war immediately after the war. But The Naked and the Dead came out in 1948, and by then, people were ready for a good war novel. If it had appeared a couple of years earlier or later, I don't think it would have had the same impact.

On the other hand, when I wrote Ancient Evenings, (and that novel took eleven years), I ended up wishing I had been a bit more productive on a few of those working days and so could have come out twelve months earlier. That might have offered me a following breeze. There was large interest in the Egyptian dynasties the year before. New York had had a massive museum exhibit at the Metropolitan that then went all over the country. By the time Ancient Evenings came out, I was in the wake. The curious had, for the most part, lost interest in Egypt.

Something of the same happened with Harlot's Ghost. Published in 1992, the Cold War was over. Much direct interest was gone. When I'd begun seven years earlier, people were still fascinated (as I certainly was) by the CIA. My point is, don't write a book with the idea people are going to be interested, and therefore you have a good chance to do well with your sales. The situation is bound to be different when the work is ready to show itself. No need to calculate. It's a crapshoot.

SUFFOLK

A rule of corporate life: If you are ever in a situation where you're dealing with a publishing house, or with a movie company, don't worry about the Number One man. Do your best to have the Number Two man or woman approve of what you're doing. Because if Number One likes what you give him and Number Two doesn't, Number One will almost never signal the go-ahead. It's to his or her advantage to stay in line with Number Two's declared opinion.

We can approach it as a logical proposition. If One insists on doing your project, and the book or movie that comes out doesn't do well, then Number Two now has a real edge. Conceivably—if the stakes have been high—he or she might someday be in a position to take over One's job. On the other hand, if One was right in going ahead with you and your submission does well for the company, then Number Two may never forgive Number One for exhibiting better acumen.

On the other hand, if One turns to Two and says, "OK, we'll do it your way, we won't take it on," and your script or film doesn't do well, then Two can feel genial enough to say, "I'm working for a pretty good guy; he pays attention to me, he respects me. That is because he knows I'm usually right."

Of course, if they don't do it, and some other company picks it up and does well, Number Two is left at a whole disadvantage.

Ergo, the rule suggests: Get to the Number Two man, and hope he likes your work.

On the other hand, if you've written your best, forget about these practicalities. It's taken me fifty years to learn this sort of thing. In that sense, it's not worth learning. After all, I still have to find out how to get to the Number Two man.

SUFFOLK

When it comes to being judged on a moral scale, good novelists are usually in the middle. Not too good, and preferably not too evil. The evil, after all, do see more advantages to telling lies than truth. Not a good practice for a novelist. Fiction is the only overriding lie you are permitted.

On the other hand, if your character is awfully decent, then, to a degree, you are estranged from humanity. So it helps if your character is

average lousy, but with striking contrasts and excellent elements. Then the contrasts in your moral makeup will work for you.

PONT. MCELROY

I don't write short stories any more and I have something not awfully attractive to say about that. What you write, to a larger extent than you realize, is determined by whether you make your living at it. The sad thing about writing short stories is that there are probably not more than four or five good writers in this country who actually do survive that way year after year.

Lee/2001 Good writers are as competitive as good athletes. When I come across an interesting novel, I don't go at it as other people do. I read

critically, the way one athlete will watch another's performance. Not watch it with venom, quite the contrary. You might say to yourself, "His spiral is tighter than mine and he's got five more yards on me at least, but I scramble better." The ideal is to give a good novel its credit and never overlook its power by deciding too quickly the work is overrated, which is exactly the dreadful tendency underwritten by the envy chronic to the writer's occupation precisely because we work alone so much of the time.

LITERARY ETIQUETTE.

LITERARY DESIRES.

LITERARY CORRUPTION

Foreword (to something by Gene Kennedy)

One of the cruelest remarks in the language is: "Those who can do, those who can, teach"; its parallel must be: Those who encounter experience, learn to live; those who don't, write.

The second remark has as much truth as the first—which is to say, some truth. Of course, many a young man has gotten himself into danger to

pick up material for his writing, but as a matter to make one wistful, not since the Second World War has even one major American writer, major American athlete, politician, engineer, trade union official, surgeon, airline pilot, bullfighter, chess master, call girl, sea captain, teacher, bureaucrat, mafioso, pimp, recidivist, physicist, rabbi, clergyman or priest seems to have also emerged as a good novelist.

What with ghost-writers, collaborators, and editors hand-cranking the tongues of less-illuminated famous men long enough to get their memoirs into tape recorders, it could be said that some dim reflection can be found in literature of the long aisles and huge machines of that social mill which is the world of endeavor, yes, just about as much as comes back to us from a very old piece of film insufficiently exposed in the picture-taking. A ghost image with the faintest coating of silver crystals has been substituted for the original lights and deep shadows of the object. So, for every good novel about a trade union that has been written from the inside, we have ten thousand better novels to read about authors and the damnable social activities of their friends. Writers tend to live with writers just as automotive engineers congregate in the same country clubs of the same suburbs around Detroit.

But even as we pay for the social insularity of Detroit engineers by having to look at the repetitive hump of their design until finally what is most amazing about the automobile is how little it has been improved, so literature suffers from its own endemic hollow: we are overfamiliar with the sensitivity of the sensitive and relatively ignorant of the cunning of the strong and the stupid, one—it may be fatal—step removed from good and intimate perception of the inside procedures of the corporate, financial, governmental, Mafia and working-class establishment. Investigative journalism has taken us into the guts of the machine, only not really, not enough—we still do not have much idea of the soul of any inside operator—we do not, for instance, yet have a clue to what makes a quarterback ready for a good day or a bad one. In addition, the best investigative reporting of new journalism tends to rest on too narrow an ideological base—the rational, ironic, fact-oriented world of the media liberal, so we have a situation, call it a cultural malady, of the most basic sort—a failure of sufficient real literary information (that is, good literary information) to put into those centers of our mind we use for assessment. No matter how much we read, we tend to know too little of how the world works. The men who do the work offer us no real writing, and the writers who explore the minds of such men approach from an intellectual

stance which distorts their vision. You would not necessarily want a saint to try to write about a computer engineer, but you certainly would not search for the reverse. All too many saints, monsters, maniacs, mystics and rock performers are being written about these days, however, by practitioners of journalism whose inner vision could be laid out by rational maxims (like: what's his angle?) sufficiently constant to be fed into a computer. Our continuing inability to comprehend the world makes certain to continue.

81.6 Being a novelist, I want to know every world. I would never close myself off to a subject unless it's truly repulsive to me. While one can never take one's imperviousness to corruption for granted, it is still important to have some idea of how the world works. What ruins most writers of talent is that they don't get enough experience, so their novels tend to develop a certain paranoid perfection. That is almost never as good as the rough edge of reality. (Franz Kafka immaculately excepted!)

For example, how much of the history that's made around us is conspiracy, how much is simple fuckups? You have to know the world to get

some idea of that. How much does the Mafia control, how much do they luck into because of their reputation? How much do Jews control the mentality of the media and Hollywood, how much are they wrongly accused of?

81.6 It's not advisable for a novelist, once he is successful!, to live in an upperclass social milieu for too long. Since it is a world of rigid rules, you cannot be yourself. There's a marvelous built-in reflex in such society. It goes: If you are completely one of us, then you are not very interesting. (Not unless you have prodigious amounts of money or impeccable family. If I have any entree, it's because that world is always fascinated with mavericks, at least until the point where they become bored with you. Then, boom, you are out. On the other hand, even as a maverick, there are certain rules you have to obey, and the first is to be amusing. (Capote and Jerzy Kosinski come to mind. If you start accepting those rules past the point where you enjoy going along as part of the game, then you are injuring yourself. Capote

played consigliere to New York society until he could bear it no longer and then he commenced his self-destruction with Answered Prayers.

ABBOTT

You know, if you're not ready to make a fool of yourself, you're never going to get anything exceptional done. I remember saying in 1958, "I am imprisoned with a perception that will settle for nothing less than making a revolution in the consciousness of our time." And I certainly failed, didn't I? At the time, I thought I had books in me that no one else did, and so soon as I was able to write them, society would be altered. No word but grandiose can serve such a remark. Now, the things I've stood for have been roundly defeated. Literature, after all, has been ground down in the twentieth century. It's a gloomy remark, but consider how much literature did belong once to the forces that actually shaped the latter part of the nineteenth century. Naturalism, for example. Now, my fear is that in another hundred years the serious novel will bear the same relation to serious people that the five-act

verse play does today. The profound novel will be a curiosity, a long faraway cry from what great writing once offered. Where indeed would England be now without Shakespeare? Or, Ireland without James Joyce or Yeats? If you ask who has had that kind of influence today in America, I'd say Madonna. Five years ago, the average young girl was completely influenced by her. She affected the way girls dressed, acted, behaved. So far, she's had more to do with women's liberation than Women's Liberation. I mean, for every girl who was affected by feminist ideology, there must have been five who tried to live and dress the way they thought Madonna did. They had their own private revolution without ever hearing about Ms. Magazine.

SUFFOLK

Sometimes you write a novel because it comes out of elements in yourself that—no better word—are deep. The subject appeals to some root in your psyche, and you set out on a vertiginous venture. But there are other times when you may get into an altogether different situation. You just

damned well have to write a book for no better reason than that your economic problems are pressing.

Tough Guys Don't Dance comes under that rubric. After I finished Ancient Evenings, I was exhausted. I also felt spoiled. So I did no writing for ten months. Unfortunately, my then-publisher, Little Brown, and I, were parting company. (They weren't mad about authors who took eleven years on a massive tome like Ancient Evenings.) However, there was one more book owed to them. And my feeling was, well, they won't want the book right away even if they have been paying me good money every month to write it and I haven't been doing the job. Reality had not tapped on any of my windows for all those months. If it sounds silly that a grown man could be that naïve, well, we are all, you know, somewhat less than our sophistication.

So, on Month Ten, they said to me in effect, "Are you going to give us a novel or will you repay us the money?" Now, I had to recognize that if I ended up owing them a year of sizable monthly stipends, I would never catch up with the IRS.

So the only thing was to come up with a book in sixty days! I couldn't possibly give them non-fiction. The research would take too long, no, I had to do a piece of fiction that would be quick and comfortable. First thing,

therefore, was to make a decision on whether to do it in first person or third. First person was always more hospitable in the beginning. You can give a sense of the immediate almost at once. It would be first person, then.

But where would it take place? New York is too complicated to write about quickly. Besides, given the constrictions of time, I had to know the place well. All right, it would have to be a book about Provincetown. At that time, in the early Eighties, I had been going there off and on for forty years. For practical purposes, it was all the small town I would ever have.

What should it be about? Well, I could take my cue from An American Dream, make it a story of murder and suspense. But who would the narrator be? An easy decision: let him be a writer. In first person, a writer is the single most cooperative character to deal with. Let him be between 35 and 40, frustrated, never published, bitter, quite bright, but not as bright as myself. After all, I had to be able to write this book in a hurry. Then, given these quick guidelines, I thought if I had one pious bone in my body, just one, I would now get down and pray. Because I was still in trouble. Sixty days to produce a novel!

I set out. It's one of the few times I've felt blessed as a writer. I knew there was a limit to how good the book could be, but the style came through,

and that is always half of a novel. You can write a very bad book but if the style is first-rate, then you've got something that will live, not forever, but for a decent time. The shining example might be G.K. Chesterton's The Man Who was Thursday. It has an undeniably silly plot unless you invest a great deal into it. A worshipful critic can do a blatheringly wonderful thesis on the symbolic leaps and acrobatics of The Man Who was Thursday, but, actually, it's about as silly as a Jules Verne novel. Yet, the writing itself is fabulous. The style is extraordinary. The aperçus are marvelous. The Man Who Was Thursday proves the point. Style is half of a novel.

And for some good reason, unknown to me, the style came through in Tough Guys Don't Dance. The writing was probably, for the most part, close to as good as I can muster. The plot, however, was just as close to silly. That was the price to pay for the speed of composition. The irony is that the book did not end up at Little, Brown but I was able to pay off my debts because Random House wanted me, and I have been there ever since. This story even has the hint of a reasonably happy ending.

I expect we are now ready to talk about the writer's daily means, also known as Craft.