

1. GENRE

GENRE

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

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

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

Preface, Some Honorable Men

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

I began these forays into journalism with prejudices for how the materials of history were gathered. I also possessed the large advantage that I had weeks to ponder over what I had seen and nearly enough days in which to do the writing. I also had a

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

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

The excerpt that follows is part of a piece written for Esquire in 1961 and so, of course, is out of date, but, I will avow—interestingly so. The surface details have gone through a metamorphosis. The noise in one press room of a hundred working typewriters is no longer present since computers and laptops are silent. Large events no longer have long banks of telephones for the assembled journalists—cell phones substitute. The hotels no longer smell like cigars, or armpits, or feet. They are usually new and glitzy. Las Vegas set the new tone. And the reporters are much better dressed. The deadlines are now in many a case more extended and the writing in the pieces has improved. Yet in

one fundamental way, nothing has changed in the profession. The inner death of the soul is still there.

11th Presidential paper

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

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

of money," ends the conversation. If you persist, if you try to point out that the money was made by digging through his grandmother's grave to look for oil, you are met with a middle-class shrug. "It's a question of taste whether one should get into the past," is the winning reply.

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

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

one of the rush hour. An old fight reporter is a sad sight, he looks like an old prizefight manager, which is to say, he looks like an old cigar butt.

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

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

So the reporters smell also of this work, they smell of the dishwasher and the pots, they are flesh burning themselves very quietly and slowly in the service of a machine which feeds goats, which feeds The Goat. One smells this collective odor on the instant one enters their meeting room. It is not a corrupt smell, it does not have enough of the meats, the savory, and the vitality of flesh to smell corrupt and fearful when it is bad, no,

it is more the smell of excessive respect for power, the odor of flesh gutted by avidities which are electric and empty. I suppose it is the bleak smell one could find on the inside of one's head during a bad cold, full of fever, badly used, burned out of mood. The physical sensation of a cold often is one of power trapped corrosively inside, coils of strength being liquidated in some center of the self. The reporter hangs in a power-less power—his voice directly or via the rewrite desk indirectly, reaches out to millions of readers; the more readers he owns, the less he can say. He is forbidden by a hundred censors, most of them inside himself, to communicate notions, which are not conformistically simple, simple like plastic is simple, that is to say, monotonous. Therefore a reporter forms a habit equivalent to lacerating the flesh: he learns to write what he does not naturally believe. Since he did not start presumably with the desire to be a bad writer or a dishonest writer, he ends by bludgeoning his brain into believing that something which is half true is in fact—since he creates a fact each time he puts something into a newspaper—nine-tenths true. A psyche is debauched—his own; a false fact is created. For which fact, sooner or later, inevitably, inexorably, the public will pay. A nation which forms details opinions on the basis of detailed fact which is askew from the subtle reality becomes a nation of citizens whose psyches are skewed, item by detailed item, away from any reality.

So great guilt clings to reporters. They know they help to keep America slightly insane. As a result perhaps they are a shabby-looking crew. The best of them are the shabbiest, which is natural if one thinks about it—a sensitive man suffers from the prosperous life of lies more than a dull man. In fact the few dudes one finds among

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

Still, they do not quit. The charge of adrenalin once a day, that hysteria, that sense of powerless-power close to the engines of history—they can do without powerless-

power no more than a gentleman junkie on the main line can do without his heroin, doctor. You see, a reporter is close to the action. He is not of the action, but he is close to it, as close as a crab louse to the begetting of a child. One may never be President, but the photographer working for his paper has the power to cock a flashbulb and make the eyes of JFK go blink!

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

convention is right there, under the ropes; your meals if you get around to eating them are free, free sandwiches only, but then a reporter has a stomach like shaving mug and a throat like a hog's trough: he couldn't tell steak tartare from guacamole. And the drinks—if you are at a big fight—are without charge. If you are at a political convention, there is no free liquor. But you do have a choice between free Pepsi-Cola and free Coca-Cola. The principle seems to be that the reporting of mildly psychotic actions—such as those performed by politicians—should be made in sobriety; whereas a sane estimate of an athlete's chances are neatest on booze. At a fight Press Headquarters, the drinks are very free, and the mood can even be half convivial. It's like being in an Army outfit everyone's forgotten. You get your food, you get your beer, you get your pay, the work is easy, and leave to town is routine. You never had it so good—you're an infant again: you can grow up a second time and improve the job.

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

It is so easy, so much is done for you, that you remember those days with nostalgia. When you do get around to paying for yourself, it is a joy to buy your own food, an odd smacking sensation to spring for a drink. It is the Welfare State which makes the pleasure possible. When one buys all one's own drinks, the sensation of paying cash is without much joy, but to pay for a drink occasionally—that's near bliss.

Ah, journalism!

PONT (McElroy)

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

I discovered this at the beginning of the Sixties when I started doing journalism and realized it was a marvelous way for me to work. It was vastly easier than trying to write novels, and I was discouraged with the difficulty of writing fiction at that point. I

had run into the business of trying to tell a good story and yet say exceptional things about the nature of the world and society, touch all the ultimates, and still have it read like speed. I always had a terrible time finding my story in the novel. My stories were always ending up begrounded. There I'd be in the middle of the dunes, no gas in the tank. I loved journalism for a little while because it gave me what I'd always been weakest in, exactly that, the story. Then I discovered that this was the horror of it. Audiences liked it better. They'd all been following the same events you'd been seeing up close, and they wanted interpretation. It was those critical faculties that were being called for, rather than one's novelistic gifts. I must say I succumbed, and spent a good many years working at the edge of journalism because it was so much easier.

During sports events and political conventions, reporters get together in the evening to exchange stories. In effect, the average reporter gives away the stories that his paper is not likely to print and gets other stories that other newspapers or magazines are not interested in. In this media marketplace, everybody winds up using everybody else's stuff to some degree. What is worse, however, is that everybody usually arrives at the same general interpretation. To wit, Jack Kennedy is a lightweight, Nelson Rockefeller is a wonderful guy. Whatever is the interpretation is for that week—count on it—it will come out as gospel. So much political wisdom is a consensus of this journalistic marketplace. At my end, possessing the confidence of a novelist, it was easy

to take the larger step of thinking that, yes, the way in which I see this event is likely to be closer to the real story than the way they are seeing it. You can go a long way on that confidence. It's banal to make the remark that all you have to do is look at what is going on, but the trick is to be able to look. That is not easy for the average journalist whose vision is curtailed by the unrelenting impositions, limitations, and urgencies of his job.

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

81.16 One of the elements I knew was wrong is that all events had to be boiled down to, let's say, three thousand words. I thought the trick was to expand, use 20,000 words, capture the human wealth of the event. I also began to feel that the personality of the narrator was probably as important as the event. Not that the narrator would be important in his own person; it was not that I, Norman Mailer, could be a balance-weight to the Democratic Convention of 1960, but rather that I did come in with a set of prejudices. You, as the reader, couldn't begin to understand this event unless you knew enough about me to reflect upon my bias. Then the reader could say, "Oh, well, Mailer is impossibly romantic," or "Norman is outrageously nihilistic," or, "He sure is a fool"—with that sense of superiority, the reader could thus relax sufficiently to enjoy his interpretations of what I reported. It also occurred to me that that is the way we read. We are always saying to ourselves, "Well, John Irving or Updike or Vonnegut"—or whoever it is—"is very good here, but not so good on that." It brought me to a large but obvious conclusion—objective reporting was a myth. The reader was entitled to be aware of the bent of the man or woman pretending to be that quintessential oxymoron, the fair and accurate journalist.

81.6 On the other hand, journalism is easier to live with than a novel. Give me the events that history put in order for me, and I'm content—all I've got to do then is tell the tale. The difficulty of bringing off a truly impressive novel is equal to asking a singer of

the stature of Pavarotti to compose his own music. Journalism makes opera singers of novelists. We've got the story, now all we've got to do is go in and show our vocal cords.

75.13 In a novel you've got to decide whether your character turns left or right on a given street. And you have to keep making those decisions through the book. One major decision gone wrong can ruin the job. What makes journalism easy is, I repeat, that you are given the story. If I'd written The Fight as a novel, I'd have had to decide does Foreman win or Ali? I'd lose six months deciding. So, you know, there it is; Ali won. A marvelous story.

JOURNALISTIC RESEARCH

HARLOT HIGH (Pieces)

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

Epistemological Model I:

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

Epistemological Model II

Maybe it is the splinters of a mirror rather than the scattered pieces of a jigsaw that provide a superior ground for the model. We are dealing not with reality, after all,

but that image of reality which reaches the surface through the cracked looking glass of the media.

Suffolk

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

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

Ancient Evenings, a novel about ancient Egypt in the Second and Twentieth Dynasties, took me eleven years to finish. In the beginning, all I knew was that I had certain instincts about death—these intimations had curious similarities to Egyptian notions. The ideas of the ancient Egyptians were certainly not identical with mine, but one element was near. In death, believed the Egyptians (and so did I), you entered upon a second set of adventures which brought you to a better place or a worse one. That was stimulating. I spent eleven years writing the book because I had to learn just about everything else on the subject. It's a hell of a way to spend the working part of eleven

years. In fact, I was unfaithful, because, believe me, if you become a serious novelist--- dare I say it?---it's almost easier to steal a march on your beloved than on your manuscript. The real question is who or which is more unforgiving, the book or the lady? It can well be the book. In the case of Ancient Evenings, and I do speak of that work as a creature--she ended up being immensely forgiving. I deserted her for two years to write The Executioner's Song. And it's as if when I came back, the manuscript might as well have said, "Hmmm, you look tired. Do your feet hurt? Here, I'll wash them." And there I was right back in the book. But often, if you desert a big project, that's the end. It does not come back to you.

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

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

Shainberg

Larry Schiller, who I justly famous for getting people to agree, despite all objections, to interviews, was with me in Russia when I was doing the book on Lee Harvey Oswald. We spent quite a bit of time in Minsk because there were still about thirty people living there who had known Oswald well. And they had never spoken to any reporter about him, and for good cause. Right after the assassination, the primal reaction of the KGB had been that President Kennedy was probably assassinated by American powers on high, and Oswald had been framed because the U.S. wanted to start a war with Russia. Oswald was, indeed, the perfect patsy. He had been in the Soviet from 1959 to 1962, and had gone over as a self-declared Communist. So the KGB spread the word to people in Minsk who had known him: Don't say a word about Oswald. And for thirty years, no one had spoken. Schiller and I, there in '92, '93, discovered that the Russians who had known him in 1960, '61 and '62 made wonderful witnesses to what Oswald had been like. Not having opened their mouths all that time, he was minted in their memory.

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

One time, a very nice middle-class woman, a teacher, was being interviewed by us. But when two interrogators are doing an interview, and each has a strong and impatient mind, then each gets infuriated with the other. The fool is taking the interview in the wrong direction. We'd interrupt each other at critical moments, even come close to blows. While this woman was there, we started arguing and before long, were roaring at one another, "You're full of shit." "Go screw!" So forth. The poor woman had to be sitting there saying to herself, "This is the American Tolstoy?"

TELEVISION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

physical sensation of a cold often is one of power trapped corrosively inside, coils of strength being liquidated in some center of the self. The reporter hangs in a power-less power—his voice directly or via the rewrite desk indirectly, reaches out to millions of readers; the more readers he owns, the less he can say. He is forbidden by a hundred censors, most of them inside himself, to communicate notions, which are not conformistically simple, simple like plastic is simple, that is to say, monotonous. Therefore a reporter forms a habit equivalent to lacerating the flesh: he learns to write what he does not naturally believe. Since he did not start presumably with the desire to be a bad writer or a dishonest writer, he ends by bludgeoning his brain into believing that something which is half true is in fact—since he creates a fact each time he puts something into a newspaper—nine-tenths true. A psyche is debauched—his own; a false fact is created. For which fact, sooner or later, inevitably, inexorably, the public will pay. A nation which forms details opinions on the basis of detailed fact which is askew from the subtle reality becomes a nation of citizens whose psyches are skewed, item by detailed item, away from any reality.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ah, journalism!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A marvelous story.

SPYNOLOGICAL MODEL I

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

Epistemological Model I

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

Epistemological Model II

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

JOURNALISTIC RESEARCH

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

Epistemological Model I:

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

Epistemological Model II

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

TELEVISION

Already there have been many number of remarks made on this book (mostly all derogatory) as to television, but there was a time in the early Fifties when I watched it religiously and the people that believe understand the intensity of the advent attended to "television." In my mind, the place where a line existed between the black-and-white TV of that period and the big color sets of the present. TV has changed so much recently, it makes the name, in fact, the place for which this remark is being made. It's a book that I don't understand, I don't see the point with this.

TELEVISION

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

FILM

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

GENRE

[World]

87.17 Time is your money in a film—literally, it's your money. If you, as the director, don't finish a scene scheduled to be done by lunch, then you are going to come back after lunch, and possibly lose not half an hour or an hour, but two hours. So you're gambling to finish the scene before the break, even if you're not wholly satisfied with the result. Then, you find out in the dailies if your gamble was too costly. The scene brought in before lunch needed one more set-up. Making movies, you're absolutely in the world. You're an existentialist. A gambler. Whereas in literature, you withdraw from the world in order to perceive the world. So movie directing uses opposite sides of yourself from writing. I think you get closer to your soul in a book, but you get nearer to the effective or ineffective working of your psyche with a movie. Let me see if I can amplify this a bit. In writing a book there are exceptional moments when you feel as if you're beaming a torch down into the abyss of your soul. You can feel as if you actually perceive it. Because in the course of writing a novel, you get out to some astonishing places by the light of your intuition. That does throw a long light. When you are making a film, particularly after you've shot it and you start editing it, you look at the same scene over and over to clean out little dead spots. Makes you feel like a surgeon. What it also does

is it involves your taste, and your concentration. Seeing it over and over again, you have to keep your taste alive, have to exercise your ability to concentrate again and again upon the same material. And I'm the guy who wrote, "Repetition kills the soul," which I thought of many times when I was working with the movie editor. Of course, I would tell myself that it was not absolute repetition; I was altering the given a little each time.

[World]

81.16 My journalistic writing started with "Superman Goes to the Supermarket," a piece about Kennedy and the Democratic Convention in 1960. Something developed there in my style. I saw that I didn't know how to write about political conventions—at least not in conventional terms. I wasn't really interested in politics; I thought they were boring. I had suffered the dead, repetitive language of politics all through the Fifties. What seemed fascinating to me, however, was that Kennedy seemed to be more of a protagonist than a candidate and so offered something new to American lives—this daring and romantic and surrealistic and cockeyed idea that the president could be a young man and have an attractive wife. The only thing I will take credit for is that I had enough sense to see that this was more important than the politics. Out of that vague perception, I blundered into a way of writing about the convention that worked. My prose treated politicians as if they were characters on an epic novelistic canvas.

81.16 Until *The Armies of the Night* I stayed very much in the background of my non-fiction narratives. You could feel somebody was observing events, presumably the author, but I wasn't a formal narrator as such. However, one of the elements I knew was wrong about journalism is that all events had to be boiled down to, let's say, three thousand words. I thought the trick was not to boil it down but expand it, use 20,000 words, capture the human wealth of the event. I also began to feel is that the personality of the narrator was probably as important as the event. Not that the narrator would be important in his own person; it was not that I, Norman Mailer, could be a balance-weight to the Democratic Convention of 1960, but rather that I did come in with a set of prejudices. These attitudes were important, and you as the reader couldn't begin to understand this event unless you knew enough about me to reflect upon my bias. Then the reader could say, "Oh, well, Mailer is impossibly romantic," or "Mailer is outrageously nihilistic," or "Mailer is a fool"—with that, the reader could make his own interpretations of what I reported. It also occurred to me that that's the way we do read. We are always saying to ourselves, "Well, John Irving or Updike or Vonnegut"—or whoever it is—"is very good here and not so good on that." It brought me to a conclusion--objective reporting was not possible. The reader was entitled to be aware of the bent of the man or woman pretending to be objective, the journalist.

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81.6 If a novelist can take someone who is a legendary figure and invent episodes for them that seem believable, then they've done something fine. There's that meeting between J. P. Morgan and Henry Ford in Doctorow's *Ragtime*—I think it's one of the best chapters in American literature. It told me an awful lot about Morgan and an awful lot about Henry Ford, and the fact that it obviously never took place made it more delicious. When you get a sense of the kind of warp with which historians write their works—they're dealing with 10,000 facts and they select 300 very careful ones to make their case, and still call that stuff history--you know what they are offering is fiction. A great historian is a great writer of fiction.

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

82.16 Movies are more likely than literature to reach deep feelings in people. Movies are more primitive, or so I would argue. Film reaches into deeper states of consciousness. People who can't read are quite able to get profound reactions in the dark of a theatre. I would also say that to the degree film reaches us in a precise way, it's not very good. Film is best when ambiguous. A truly good film will affect two people profoundly, but they'll argue for hours over the message. To one, it's a satire, to the other, a tragedy. That's as it should be. Film should reach so far inside the psyche that one person will react in horror even as another is laughing his head off. That's good film. Bad film is when everybody laughs on cue for then they are being manipulated. They have merely entered the engines of manipulation of the power-trip institutions.

82.16 Ever since the late sixties I've wanted my nonfiction to read like a novel rather than the digested contents of the first stomach of a cow. Which latter is what most nonfiction is to me. Someone spends a lot of time studying a body of material, digests it, regurgitates it, and then calls it a book. There's a tendency to encapsulate the conclusions. After all, once material is processed, it fits best in a capsule or a pill. To many readers, legitimate confusions are not interesting. Yet, a good writer is sometimes most fascinating in how his or her mind works. Obtaining such clues can improve your own mind. Even the supposition that an author is able to digest a subject so well that there is no need to think about how he got there is vaguely disagreeable. So I don't like the way most nonfiction is done. Whereas the novel can change our lives. Marriages break up, for instance, because someone reads a novel and decides the life of the character in the book is more interesting than his own. Good novels are painful to read. I guess it is possible, however, for nonfiction to become somewhat existential. An historian could say, "I start this project with two opposed hypotheses. I'm not sure yet which one is correct. As we explore the material, let me show the arguments for one, then for the other. Maybe we'll arrive eventually at more of an answer than we have now." To bring that off in truly sustained form, however, violates a canon in the profession of history, which usually insists that you travel in one vehicle, not two. Double vision agitates the element that disturbs most people about history in the first place. Somewhere between high school and college—or is it between graduate school and life?—they learn that history is not history, but a series of immensely sober fictions usually written by men who

often don't have large literary talents, and have less to say about the real world than novelists. It's disturbing to discover that historians are not dealing with fact, but with the hypothesis they developed in relation to a series of isolated data. The desire to make these facts glow so brightly that we will be able to perceive the past is not often present.

79.32 I. In a book of nonfiction, the author's conclusions are all too often presented to the reader as the purpose of the work. That assumes you are reading because you want to know what the author has to say definitively about a subject. All too often, the work is definitive when one would learn more if everything was not nailed down. When an author feels impelled to digest his material at all costs in order that the reader can feel rewarded with a clear understanding of what's being said, the conclusions, having been over-purified, are, in consequence, flawed. In The Executioner's Song I wanted to give the readers the feeling that they are participating in the life of the characters and so wouldn't and shouldn't be able to understand everything that's going on any more than we do in life. The moment we understand everything in a book, it can't possibly be fiction, not the way I define it.

73.43 Journalism almost always gives a false impression of the event. That is because journalists can afford to have little interest in the mood of an occasion, particularly if it is a political meeting. Invariably, there is an a priori decision that certain elements of experience must be recorded as literally as possible. If a man is giving a speech, his topic is of cardinal importance, the title of the lecture is indispensable, the name of the lecturer is crucial, and whatever quotations taken from the speech had best be given accurately—although if you don't know the tone of the speaker--peremptory, fumbling, thundering, hesitant, forthright, uneasy, etc.--you really know very little. The journalistic assumption is that the additional stuff is not as crucial as the pre-ordained tenets he must obey. The long-term tendency is to deaden future history into an intolerable fact machine. One reason why it would be dreadful if the novel died is that it is one the more formidable attempts of Western civilization to deal with the notion of whole experience.

75.13 In a novel you've got to decide whether your character turns left or right on a given street. And you have to keep making those decisions through the book. One major decision gone wrong can ruin the job. What makes journalism easy for me, is that I am given the story. If I'd written *The Fight* as a novel, I'd have had to decide does Foreman win or Ali? I'd lose six months deciding who wins. So, you know, there it is; Ali won. It's a marvelous story told that way.

75.13 Every good novelist is a failure to himself. Everyone of us. Dostoevsky had to see his career as a failure. He didn't write the last best book he had in mind. He died with a sense of frustration. He had this absolutely great work in his heart. He was going to create a saint. He had already written about people who had visions of being saints but lived in evil, Ivan Karamazov, for one, but now he wanted more. Dostoyevsky wanted to educate the Russian people to the nature of saintliness, which he felt was absolutely crucial to their survival as a nation.

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

82.16 Certain human relations are comparable to literary forms. For instance, the one-night stand is like a poem, good or bad. An affair of reasonable duration is equal to a short story. By this logic, marriage is a novel. In a short story we're interested in the point that's made. In a novel we usually follow the way people move from drama to boredom back to drama again. And we often judge a novelist by his skill in moving people in and out of these high and low areas of existence. Of course, marriage is exactly like that. In marriage, our interest is not that a given point is made in a given night, but in the way that particular understanding is confirmed or eroded over the weeks or months to follow. The narrative line of all marriage, in that sense, is good days and bad days. And most people like to live in the form of a novel. Just as there are people who like to live in the form of a short story. Psychopaths have lives that consist of poems, mostly bummers.

Grobel/1983 Name me any great novel you've ever read that didn't bore you in part reading it for the first time. A great novel has a consciousness that begins by being new to us. We have to become imbued with this new consciousness before we can enjoy the work. First time through, I've been bored in part by Moby-Dick, The Red and the Black, Anna Karenina, The Scarlet Letter, Remembrance of Things Past, Ulysses, The Magic Mountain. Hell, even The Sun Also Rises.

Lennon/1999 Back in 1976 when I wrote The Armies of the Night, I divided the book into two parts, fiction—"History as a Novel"—and nonfiction, "The Novel as History." I was saying, in effect, that they are closely related. For fiction offers its own history of a time. So, the author, whether novelist or historian, is giving his vision of life. How one arrives at that vision is different by way of history than by fiction, but they are closer than is generally recognized.

[Note to M.L. Should we take the short essay from The Armies of the Night that begins the second part? It could fit right here.]

95.7 I'm all for journalists using a literary style. I just wish they didn't have to write their stories the same day they picked up the material. If you can take a day or two, it will be a much better story, and better still if it is given space. You know, I was one of the people who founded the Village Voice. It has changed enormously,. But what it still does it to give a lot of column space to stories that would be two paragraphs in a daily newspaper. Newspapers live in the delusion that they are giving you something just as if it happened. They don't. A story that should be as rich as filet mignon comes through as gruel and water. The notion that the daily news is news is a delusion.