

Abbott 1998

GENRE
EXCULT

I believe primitive man saw himself surrounded by a circle of forces--demons, gods, friendly forces, impersonal forces. If there could ever be a movie of a primitive walking through a forest, his stance and movement might be quite different from ours. When we pass through the woods, if it's an easy trail, we just walk, and if it's not open, we bushwhack. But the primitive may have stopped before a certain tree and bowed. Before another, he may have lain prostrate on the ground and waved his hand overhead as if to repel a swarm of gnats. Where there was familiarity, just a nod of the head as he passed by a relatively modest divine force. That was all that was required unless the tree gave an indication that it was annoyed. How did it speak? By many shades of difference in the rustling of its leaves.

Consciousness, therefore, was different for the primitive. He was always a protagonist; his day was heroic or ghastly. For what does it mean to be a hero? It requires you to be willing to deal with forces larger than yourself. The average primitive of that time was terrified and heroic. Small wonder if their lifespan was shorter than ours.

By pagan times, of course, you have societies like the Romans ready to rely on all sorts of rituals and special relation to their gods. If you are trying to form and maintain a society, you can't have people going off every moment to propitiate forces on their own. You do well to get them believing that there's a central force, society itself, which offers the best approach to such propitiation. I think I'd even go so far as to suggest that there is a buried element in many talented writers that unconsciously expects their work to serve

for acts of conjuration or propitiation. When you get down to it, what was Joyce, for example, trying to show us? We haven't begun to catch up with him yet.

LIT B'2

You know, if you're not ready to make a fool of yourself, you're never going to get anything 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. Kind of grandiose. 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 literature did belong among the forces that shaped society in 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 serious novel will be a curiosity. A far cry from what great writing once offered. Where would England be without Shakespeare? Or, Ireland without James Joyce or Yeats? If you ask who has had that kind of influence today, 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.

Rising expectations can create a second revolution in expectations, and then a third, but is the rise earned? I see people now as looking for more and more of what I call passive power, which is one reason for the huge excitement about the personal computer. A built-in fantasy accompanies it: You never have to leave your house, but if you're bright enough, maybe you'll end up running the world, or destroying the world. When people think of reaching those giddy heights, it hardly matters whether you capture a country or jump off into empyrean cyber-space. I expect most teenagers would rather be Bill Gates than Fidel Castro. No wonder. Castro had real problems.

CRAFT

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

People think of me as being a wild man, but finally, what was that? Five to ten percent of my nature. The rest was work. I like work. I remember Elia Kazan saying one day at Actors' Studio, "Here, we're always talking about the work, the work. We talk about it ~~so~~ piously. We say the work, the work. Well, we do work here, and get it straight: Work is a blessing." He said this, glaring at every one of us. And I thought, "He's so right. That's what it is. Work is a blessing. Yes."

An end suggest.

Abbott interview second revision 4/15

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Psychology

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Psychology

yes

HAZARDS & SOURCES

The story is that the distinguished painter Robert Rauschenberg was once given the gift of a pastel from Willem de Kooning. Rauschenberg, with de Kooning's permission, erased the pastel and then signed it Pastel by de Kooning Erased by Robert Rauschenberg and then he sold it. To be crude about it, the story fried one half of my mind because I thought, there's something profound here but I can't get ahold of it. And then light came to me. I said, "Of course, what Rauschenberg is saying is that the artist has the same right to print money as the financier. Money is nothing but authority imprinted upon emptiness," and I laid the story to rest and was totally content until the other day when I thought, wait a minute, maybe the person who bought the pastel was neither a gambler nor even someone who is so aware of chic in painting that he knew he would make a profit from it. Maybe if a truly talented painter erases the work of another truly talented painter, there's a resonance, an echo, in the lost work. If Fidel Castro had executed Charles de Gaulle, let's say, and buried him himself, that would not be ordinary burial ground. There would be an aura about the place. Students of the occult would pay great attention to it and I thought maybe that's what's going on here—that some echo of de Kooning's original work might be illuminating the person who purchased it. Now I am obsessed with the story again because one of two possibilities exists: either the act was an outrage or it advances our understanding of the occult.

yes

The act of writing is a mystery and the more you labor at it, the more you become aware that it is not answers which are being offered after a lifetime of such activity so much as a greater appreciation of the scope of the literary mysteries. The ultimate pleasure of spending one's days as a writer is the resonance you can bring afterward to your personal experience. So the mystery of the profession—where those words come from and how to account for their alchemy on the page—not only arouses terror at the thought of one's powers disappearing, but also inspires the happiness that one may be in contact with the source of literature itself. Now, of course, we cannot talk directly of such prodigious matters; it is enough to amuse ourselves with approaches to the problem. In my late childhood, for example, which is to say in my college years, students used to have one certainty. It was that environment was all; one was the product of one's milieu, one's parents, one's food, one's conversations, one's dearest and/or most odious human relations. One was the sum of one's own history as it was cradled in the larger history of one's time. One was a product, and if one wrote novels, they were merely a product of the product. With this working philosophy, I did one book—it happened to be The Naked and the Dead—which was wholly comfortable to me. I would not have known at that hour what an author meant by speaking of any of his works as uncomfortable. The Naked and the Dead seemed a sure result of all I had learned up to the age of twenty-five, all I had experienced and all I had read. My characters had already been conceived and put in file boxes before they were ever on the page. I had hundreds of filled-out file cards

before I ever began to write. The novel itself seemed merely the end of a long active assembly line and I felt able to account for each part of it.

The next book, however, after The Naked and the Dead was such a mystery to me that to this day I do not comprehend it. I can tell you what it is about, what I was trying to say, but do not ask me where Barbary Shore came from. I used to feel as if this second novel was being written by someone else. Where The Naked and the Dead had been put together with the solid agreeable effort of a young carpenter constructing a decent house while full of the practices, techniques, and wisdom of those who built houses before him, Barbary Shore might as well have been dictated to me by a ghost in the middle of a forest. Each morning I would sit down to work with no notion at all of how to continue. My characters were strangers to me and each day after a few hours of blind work (because I never seemed to get more than a sentence or two ahead of myself) I would push my plot and people three manuscript pages forward into their eventual denouement, but I never knew what I was doing nor where it came from. It's fortunate that I had heard of Freud and the unconscious; if not, I would have had to postulate such a condition myself. An unconscious was the only explanation for what was going on. Now I was left aware of two presences cooperating in the production of a literary work, and the second had the capacity to take over the act of authorship from the first.

Sometimes when I am feeling tolerant to the idea of karma, demiurges, spirits of the age, and the intervention of angels, saint, and demons, I also wonder if being a writer over a long career does not leave you open to more than one origin for your work. In a long career one may come forth with many books that are products of one's skill and

education, of one's dedication, but I also wonder if once in a while the gods do not look about and have their own novels to propose and peer down among us and say, "Here's a good one for Bellow," or "That would have been a saucy dish for Cheever, too bad he's gone," or in my own case, "Look at poor old Mailer worrying about his job again. Let's make him the agent for this absolutely wicked little thing about Viet-nam." Who knows? We may be sturdy literary engineers full of sound literary practice, or, as equally, unwitting agents for forces beyond our comprehension. It matters less than the knowledge that our books can come from more than wondrous place. After all, it is not so depressing to think that with all our hungers we can also have the fortune to be handed in passing a few gifts we do not deserve. How agreeable to feel kin to the force that put paintings on the walls of caves, set stonecutters to exactitudes that would permit gothic arches, gave the calculus to Newton's age and gave space travel to ours. No, it is not so ill to sense that we are also heir to emanations from some unaccountable and fabulous source. Nothing lifts our horizons like a piece of unexpected luck or the generosity of the gods.



Many a fiction writer lives with at least one sense cocked to the possibility that some events are magical, and if so, how do you write about it then?

This preface, while it will not answer the question, does give a quick tour of the territory.

In corollary, I can add that on those days when one's writing is at its best and keeps revealing to the author insights that he or she never knew they possessed, it is not difficult to recognize that writing itself may be a species of magic.

A Preface to Unholy Alliance

Unholy Alliance is a stimulating book to read for anyone interested in Nazism, magic, the penetralia of history, the cults of the occult, and the present agonizing anxiety of our lives. It is as if something larger than our educations, our sense of good and evil, our lives themselves, seems to be constricting our existence, and this anxiety illumines Unholy Alliance like a night light in some recess of the wall down a very long corridor.

If magic is composed of a good many of those out-of-category forces that press against established religions, so magic can also be seen, in relation to technology at least, as the dark side of the moon. If a Creator exists in company with an opposite Presence (to be called Satan, for short), there is also the most lively possibility of a variety of major

and minor angels, devils and demons, good spirits and evil, working away more or less invisibly in our lives.

For some, it is virtually a comfortable notion that magic is a presence and a practice that can exist, can even, to a small degree, be used, be manipulated (if often with real danger for the practitioner). For such men and women, the proposition is assured--magic most certainly does exist as a feasible process--even if the affirmative is obliged to appear in determinedly small letters when posed against technology: (How often can a curse be as effective as a bomb?)

Nonetheless, given the many centuries of anecdotal and much-skewed evidence on the subject, it is still not irrational to assume--even if one has never felt its effects oneself--to assume, yes--phenomena of a certain kind can be regarded as magical in those particular situations where magic offers the only rational explanation for events that are otherwise inexplicable. Indeed, this is probably the common view. One explanation for the aggravated awe and misery that inhabited America in the days after the destruction of the Twin Towers was that the event was not only monstrous, but brilliantly effected in the face of all the factors that could have gone wrong for the conspirators. The uneasy and not-to-be-voiced hypothesis that now lived as a possibility in many a mind was that the success of the venture had been fortified by the collateral assistance of magic. Few happenings can be more terrifying to the modern psyche than the suggestion that magic is cooperating with technology. It is equal to saying that machines have a private psychology and large events, therefore, may be subject to Divine or Satanic intervention.

So let us at least assume that magic is often present as a salient element in the very scheme of things. Anyone who is offended by this, need read no further. They will not be interested in Unholy Alliance. Its first virtue, after all, is in its assiduous detail, its close description of the events and ideas of the occultists who gathered around the Nazis as practitioners, fellow travelers, and in the case of Himmler and the SS, as dedicated acolytes, fortified cultists.

What augments the value of this work is the cold but understanding eye of the author. Since his knowledge of magic and magicians is intimate, one never questions whether he knows what he is writing about. Since he is also considerably disenchanted by the life practices of most of the magic workers, he is never taken in by assumptions of grandiosity or over-sweet New Age sentiments. He knows the fundamental flaw found in many occultists -- it is the vice that brought them to magic in the first place--precisely their desire to obtain power over others without paying the price. The majority of occultists in these pages appear to be posted on the particular human spectrum that runs from impotence to greed. All too often, they are prone, as a crew, to sectarian war, all-out cheating, gluttony, slovenliness, ill will and betrayal. Exactly. They are, to repeat, at whatever level they find themselves, invariably looking for that gift of the gods--power that comes without the virtue of having been earned.

The irony, of course, is that most of them, in consequence, pay large prices in ill health, failure, isolation, addiction, deterioration of their larger possibilities, even personal doom. Goethe did not conceive of Faust for too little.

Peter Levenda captures this paradox. What he also gives us is a suggestion that cannot be ignored: The occultists on both sides in the Second World War (although most particularly Himmler and the Nazis) did have some real effect on its history, most certainly not enough to have changed the outcome, but enough to have altered motives and details we have been taking for granted. What comes through the pages of Unholy Alliance is the canny political sense Hitler possessed in relation to the separate uses of magic and magicians. Levenda's dispassionate treatment of charged evidence is managed (no small feat) in a way to enable us to recognize that Hitler almost certainly believed in magic, and also knew that such belief had to be concealed in the subtext of his speeches and endeavors. Open avowal could be equal to political suicide.

He was hell, therefore, on astrologers--and packed off many to concentration camps especially after Rudolf Hess' flight to England in 1941, did his best (and was successful) in decimating the gypsy population of Europe, sneered publicly at seers, psychic gurus, fortune tellers, all the small fry of the occult movement. He saw them clearly as impediments to his own fortunes, negative baggage to his reputation. Yet Hitler gave his support to the man he made into the second most important Nazi in existence, Heinrich Himmler, an occultist of no small dimension.

It was as if Hitler lived within a particular Marxist notion. It was Engels' dictum that "Quantity changes quality." One potato is something you eat, a thousand potatoes are to be brought to market, and with a billion potatoes, corner the market. In parallel, a little magic practiced by a small magician can prove a folly or a personal enhancement, a larger involvement brings on the cannibalistic practices to be expected of a magicians'

society, and a huge but camouflaged involvement, the Nazi movement itself, with its black-shirted Knight Templars of SS men, becomes an immense vehicle that will do its best to drive the world into a new religion, a new geography, a new mastery of the future.

All of this is in Levenda's book. It is an immense if obligatorily compressed thesis--the economies of publishing would never permit a one thousand page tome on this subject by a new author--and the potentially large virtues of the work suffer to a degree from over-compression--one feels the need to expand being held in much too close rein by the writer, but then, there are few daring and ambitious works that do not generate sizable flaws. Literature may be the most unforgiving of the goddesses!

In any event, I am delighted that Unholy Alliance is being republished because I have always found it a most provocative and valuable work on each of the three times I have read it, and have never come away without returning in my mind to the rich ore brought forth at the pit-head of virtually every page.


MCELROY (Pont)

For reasons that were not very dramatic, I stopped drinking about eight months ago. It's sort of interesting, not drinking. I've never been psychoanalyzed, and I thought this is the closest I'll ever get to it. I know my idea of myself kept changing every day or two. I found that I sort of lost my sense of identity, and didn't know any more quite who I was in the way that I used to have certain definite assumptions about who I might be. This was sufficiently interesting so that I still haven't gone back to drinking. Because my idea of myself keeps changing. In a way novel-writing is analogous to that—you keep discovering new facets. When you're working on a novel, a variety of motives arise in yourself that shift your sense of identity. That honorable reasons and ignoble reasons are both feeding the work. In effect, you have to be writing the book because it's good for you personally as well as, ideally, for society (or at least your idea of what's good for society).

Apart from that, there are times when one's identity as an author becomes pressing. It's crucial to have some idea then of your own specific density in the social world. How do you impinge on people? As a result, almost obligatorily, you have to write a novel that has more emphasis upon the self.

The act of writing has many purposes and many motives, but one of them is a search for one's own increasing sanity. By that mean one's own increasing effectiveness in the world. Most people start writing out of the curled-up reflex that they're not quite able to contend with the world. Yet, there is always the opposite motive. They also write in order to become more attractive to the world, more powerful.



CONVERSATIONS W/ NM P.90

Writing about FBI agents and Old Bolsheviks in Barbary Shore, the greatest single difficulty with the book was that my common sense thought it was impossible to have all these agents and impossible heroes congregating in a rooming house in Brooklyn Heights. Yet a couple of years later I was working in a studio on Fulton Street at the end of Brooklyn Heights. It was a fine old studio building and they're tearing it down now to make room for a twenty-story building which will look like a Kleenex box. At any rate, on the floor below me, worked one Colonel Rudolph Abel who was the most important spy for the Russians in this country for a period of about eight or ten years, and I am sure we used to be in the elevator together many times. I think he literally had the room beneath me. I have always been overcome by that. It made me decide there's no clear boundary between experience and imagination. Who knows what glimpses of reality we pick up unconsciously, telepathically.