

CRAFT

68.26 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 my film, "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 am we going to 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 a psychoanalysis on the cheap.

75.11 Trotsky once made the incisive remark that the only way you can tell the truth is by a comparison of the lies. While you may never be able to find out who is lying more, you can come close to the relations between two liars. We may never know, for instance, what the truth of one human is, or another, but we can discern a lot about the relations between them. We may be able to say with some certainty, "They hate each other," or "Isn't it extraordinary how they love each other?" This is because we can feel the relation.

80.10 I think Capote's book and mine are formally similar, but vastly different.

Obviously, I'll be the first to state that if he hadn't done In Cold Blood, it's conceivable that I wouldn't have thought of taking on The Executioner's Song. Nonetheless, it's also possible that something about The Executioner's Song called for doing it in the way I chose. In any event, its flavor is different from In Cold Blood. Truman retained his style, not the pure style—he simplified it—but it was still very much a book written by Truman Capote. You felt it every step of the way. The difference is that he novelized more, where I was determined to keep the factual narrative. I wanted my book to read like a novel, and it does, but I didn't want to sacrifice what literally happened in a scene for what I would like to see happen. Of course, I could afford to feel that way. I had advantages Truman didn't. His killers were not the most interesting guys in the world, so it took Truman's exquisite skills to make his work a classic. I was in the more promising position of dealing with a man who was quintessentially American yet worthy of Dostoevsky. If this were not enough, he was also in love with a girl who—I'll go so far as to say—is a bona fide American heroine. I didn't want, therefore, to novelize. Dedicated accuracy is not usually the first claim you wish to make for books like this, but here it became a matter of literary value. What I had was gold, if I had enough sense not to gild it.

82.14 There's nothing glorious about being a professional, but you do become more dogged. You probably relinquish the upper reaches of the mind in order to be able to do your stint of work each day: being a professional means being able to endure a certain amount of pain and drudgery and the higher reaches of the mind are obviously not enthralled by dull conditions. Professionalism probably comes down to being able to work on a bad day.

82.14 Hemingway's style affected whole generations of us, the way a roomful of men are affected when a beautiful woman walks through—their night is turned for better or for worse. The style had an ability to hit young writers in the gut and they just weren't the same after that.

83.40 If you ask about major weaknesses in a major writer, I would say that Hemingway was not capable of writing a long complex sentence with good architecture in the syntax. But he turned that inability into the virtue of writing short declarative sentences or long run-on sentences connected by conjunctions. Faulkner, to the contrary, was not capable of writing simply, but his over-rich, congested sentences produced an extraordinary mood. Henry Miller could rarely tell a story with any pleasure. He preferred his excursions away from the story, and those asides are what make him exceptional. The moment I think of a good plot, I find that the book becomes almost impossible to write because I know I won't believe in it. Life may consist of people plotting all the time, but the plots never develop all the way. We decide: I'll make this move in my life, and that should result in the following--then, life confounds us. So I prefer a story that develops out of the writing. I don't like one that moves ahead of my characters, because then my people won't live. Already, I've ordered them to be slaves to my will. When you tie your characters to a pre-arranged plot, you are doing to them what we do to our children if we carefully select their colleges, their spouses, and jobs without ever consulting them. The same unspoken gloom weighs on characters who are treated that way in a novel--they never get to fulfill their own perverse (that is, surprising to the novelist) capabilities; they never come alive. Bill Buckley is wonderful at plots—his mind works that way—but nobody lives and breathes in his books with any more three-dimensionality than some passing movie star who can't act.

81.16 The influence of Henry Adams on The Armies of the Night was peculiar for I had never read much Adams. In my freshman year at Harvard, I was assigned one long chapter of The Education of Henry Adams and remember thinking at the time what an odd thing to do, to write about yourself in the third person. Who is this fellow, Henry Adams, talking about himself as Adams? I remember being annoyed by it in that mildly irritable fashion freshmen have of passing over extraordinary works of literature. It's possible that I then read more of The Education of Henry Adams sometime in my sophomore year, although I never wrote about him, never thought about him, and would not have mentioned his name as one of the writers who were important to me. Yet, start reading The Armies of the Night, and immediately you say—even I said—"My God, this is pure Henry Adams." It's as if I were the great-grandson. Contemplate, therefore, how peculiar is influence: Adams must have remained in my mind as a possibility, the way a painter might look at a particular Picasso, or Cezanne, and say to himself, "That's the way to do it." Yet the influence might not pop forth for 20 or 30 years. When it does, the painter could say, "Oh, yes, that was a Picasso I saw at MOMA 25 years ago, and I've always wanted to try such a palette, and now I have." In effect, that's what happened to me with Henry Adams and myself.

81.16 Large literary canvases are usually left today to best-selling novelists. They will have a cast of 40 or 50 characters, and stories that traverse 50 to 100 years. They'll have several world wars, plus startling changes in the lives of several families. They do all that to keep their book moving. What usually characterizes these novels is that nothing is in them that you haven't come across before. Most good writers tend these days to expatiate on smaller and smaller canvases with more and more clarity. Then, at least, you have the confidence that what you're doing is accurate. That's important. At least you're contributing to knowledge rather than adding to sludge in the culture. So it's hard to take on a large topic. At the moment the only great writer I can think of who can handle what I've described, 40 or 50 characters and ten decades is Garcia Marquez. One Hundred Years of Solitude is an amazing work. He succeeds in doing it, but how, I don't know. In my Egyptian novel, it takes me ten pages to go around a bend in the Nile.

81.2 I tend to build my novels on the basis of what I have already. I no longer work up a master plan before I begin the book. Every time I do—and when I was younger I used to sit down and write out such plans—I never finished. Even with *The Executioner's Song* where, after all, I knew the story in great detail, I was careful not to be too versed in too many details ahead. I preferred to do my research up to no more than 100 pages ahead of where I was. I wanted to keep the feeling that I didn't know how it was all going to turn out. I needed something like the illusion that I was inventing each detail. Obviously, I prefer doing a book that is not too carefully laid out. Some of my best ideas come because I haven't fixed my novel's future in concrete. Once you know your end, it's disastrous to get a new idea. That can only take you away from your pre-arranged conclusion. Yet the good idea that you didn't follow may be worth more than the denouement you planned in advance.

83.30 I never know what the style of a book will be until I get into it. Sometimes you aim high and don't get it--you have to settle for a more functional tone. After all, style is very much like the pace a serious jogger sets for himself. You have to be able to maintain it. In that sense, style is an offshoot of character. With all else, character is the wise or foolish estimate of your resources.

97.26 I used to have a little studio in Brooklyn a couple of blocks from my house—no telephone, not much else. The only thing I ever did there was work. It was perfect. I was like a draft horse with a conditioned reflex. I came in ready to work. No television, no telephone. Didn't want to be tempted. There's an old Jewish belief that you build a fence around an impulse. If that's not good enough, you build a fence around the fence. So, no amenities. (But for a refrigerator!) I wrote longhand with a pencil, and I gave out to an excellent assistant named Judith McNally. She would type it for me and next day I would go over it. Since at my age you begin to forget things easily, I hardly remember what I had written the day before. Now, it read as if someone else had done it. I'd go through it, and say, "Who is the idiot who came up with that stupid sentence." Then I proceeded to fix it. The only virtue of losing your short-term memory is that it does free you up to be your own editor.

82.16 Metaphors? I had a dear friend, Charlie Devlin, who helped me greatly with The Naked and the Dead, and in fact was the model, considerably removed, for the character named McLeod in *Barbary Shore*. Charlie was a quiet saturnine forty-year-old Irishman who was living in the small rooming house where I took a cubicle to finish The Naked and the Dead. We used to have long literary conversations. At a certain point I showed him the manuscript. He tore it apart. He could be a severe critic. He said, "It's a better book than I thought it would be, but you have no gift for metaphor." Then he said, "Metaphor reveals a man's true grasp of life. To the degree that you have no metaphor, you have not yet lived much of a life." I never forgot this lecture and began to work with might and main on my life and my metaphors. I like to think they improved with age.

82.16 A writer has to be ready to be good, even brilliant, when he enters a character's mind. So long as you stay outside, your character retains a certain mystery. We walk around such characters with the same respect we offer people who come into a room with force. Part of the meaning of charisma is that we don't know the intimate nature of the human presence we're dealing with. Characters in novels sometimes radiate more energy, therefore, when we don't enter their mind. It is one of the techniques a novelist acquires instinctively—don't go into your protagonist's thoughts until you have something to say about his inner life that is more interesting than the reader's suppositions. A fatal error is to jump in only to offer banal material. That's the worst of best-sellerdom. Second-rate readers enjoying the insights of second-rate writers. [Attach to A Man Half-Full—should it come with Craft?]

73.14 I believe narrative exists in our everyday lives, but as a discrete phenomenon—in other words, narrative stops and starts. We all live with narrative or its shadow every moment of our existence; we're always cutting a narrative off or picking it up again. Still, it is almost impossible to proceed without an hypothesis on what you are up to. What usually happens, however, is that the hypothesis runs into evidence that confutes it, so the narrative stops until it can pick up again with a revised hypothesis. One example of an hypothesis that creates a narrative is jealousy. Think of a suspicious husband or wife--how they observe what the mate is doing at every moment, and what a story they make of it until they are forced to take active steps or back away from the hypothesis.

61.12 In The Deer Park I was trying to find a style, but it was elusive. I went through four drafts. The first had been Proustian—not first-rate Proust, of course. Attempted Proust. Failed Proust. The second draft was located somewhere between the English novel of manners and Scott Fitzgerald—not good, but in that general direction. The third draft was closer to Hemingway. Then I found my own style, which was not like the others. So I learned how style literally repels certain kinds of experience. Your style is equal to a bossy wife who even wishes to select your suits. If a writer keeps to a specific tone, despite all inner warnings, it will even determine the kind of experience that comes to him..

71.6 You know, a good skier never worries about a route. He just goes, confident that he'll react to changes in the trail as they come upon him. It's the same thing in writing; you have to have confidence in your technique. If you take on something you know you can do easily, your contempt for yourself will sour your comfort. That is the beauty of mustering the right style at the right time—it enables you to feel like a good skier, nice and relaxed for the next unexpected turn.

84.34 Some of my characters come from real people. One character might emerge out of five people, another out of just one person, but greatly altered. Still another from my imagination. There's an exciting moment when a character becomes, in a sense, independent of yourself. When the people in my books don't seem real to me, I'm in trouble. Graham Greene once said that there were certain characters who took care of themselves. He never had to bother about them in the writing. Others he had to go to great pains with. He would work very hard on them. Later, when he'd read a review and it would mention one of his resistant characters as "well-drawn," he used to think, "Well-dragged."

75.13 The people in a novel become real in your mind as you write. You live with them, sleep with them, you can even talk to them on occasion, for they exist within you. They take on the same kind of odd life in our minds that movie stars assume for us. To a lot of people, Humphrey Bogart might, for example, be the psychic equivalent of an uncle, given the measure of importance he exerts on their lives.

Schroeder/1992 Sometimes the only way you can perceive reality is through a good style. That premise may be arguable, but there is no doubt that a bad style obfuscates reality.

Schroeder/1992 I don't think of my characters as victims or victimizers. That sort of classification narrows them. When someone who is doing a novel says, "I'm writing about a victim," the character is not going to be interesting. In reality, very few victims ever see themselves exclusively as victims, and when they do, their spirit turns stale. There is a certain sort of self-pitying victim one wishes to walk away from, and they can be even worse in a book.

Lennon/1999 The first person point of view is an amazing tool. You can get to places you don't arrive at any other way. Of course, you can also injure your writing hand. It's a double-edged instrument. Hemingway had a marvelous sense of the limitations of the first person. It virtually created his style. If you are doing a book in the first person, there are certain things you should not talk about because they're embarrassing. They don't feel right in the telling, not when the "I" stands at the head of the sentence. So there's a tendency, most marked in Hemingway, to keep most of his revelations at arm's length. As, for example, the last few sentences of A Farewell to Arms.

Lennon/1999 Making stuff up is scary. The decisions you have to make are uneasy. Dread is present when you do a narrative that is imaginative. If your characters come alive, that's fine; they will carry you a part of the way. But, finally, you have to make what might be termed career decisions for your people. Does your protagonist want to go abroad in the foreign service, or does he want to stay in New York with the amazing young model he has just met? These are large decisions but they are also opportunities which are non-operative for writers who have the story complete in their mind before they begin. So I repeat: I look to find my book as I go along. Plot comes last. I want a conception of my characters that's deep enough so that they will get me to places where I have to live by my wits. That means my characters have to keep developing for me. When they come alive, the plot, I feel, will take care of itself. Working on a book where the plot is already fully developed is like spending the rest of your life filling holes in rotten teeth.

83.35 Writing is wonderful when you talk about it. It's fun to contemplate. But writing as a daily physical activity is not agreeable. You put on weight, or you strain your gut, you get gout and chilblains. You're alone and every day you have to face that blank piece of paper. This is equal to saying you not only have to face your soul a bit but that you must then proceed to give yourself a passing mark. If you flunk, it's going to be hard to write that day.

86.31 It's as difficult to become a professional writer as to grow into being a professional athlete. Stamina is the key, and the ability to keep faith in yourself. One must be willing to take risks and try again. It needs an enormous amount of practice to be good at it. Since you're affected by what you read as a child and adolescent, it takes a while to unlearn all sorts of reading reflexes that lead you into bad prose. (might attach to a related paragraph.)

83.57 While Dwight Macdonald gave us no great body of books, he did spend his talents in writing some of the better political and literary criticism of our time. More important than his oeuvre, however, was his influence. He was one of the best teachers of writing in the world. He gave no classes, but if one had learned a little about writing already, there were so many avenues to follow in the felicities of his style. Dwight had something fabulous to teach. It was to look to the feel of the intellectual phenomenon. Describe what you see as it impinges on the sum of your passions and your intellectual attainments. Bring to the act of writing all of your craft, care, devotion, lack of humbug and honesty of sentiment. And then write without looking over your shoulder for the literary police. Write as if your life depended on saying what you felt as clearly as you could while never losing sight of the phenomenon to be described. If something feels bad to you, it is bad. Others received the same message from Hemingway, but it took Dwight Macdonald to give the hint to many a young intellectual that the clue to new discovery rests not so much on the idea with which you begin as in the closeness of your attack on the problem, and your readiness to depart from preconceived intentions by the insight provided in an unexpected and happy turn of phrase.

91.17 When doing interviews for The Executioner's Song, I would meet exceptional people who should have had interesting relations with each other, but didn't, and sometimes I would think, "Why didn't God permit these two fascinating people to have a scene together?" With my novelist's instincts, I did want so much for them to get into an action with each other. Yet, when sometimes they did meet, the get-together came to less than I thought it would be. It took some time to learn that this did not necessarily diminish the drama. It could increase it. Most of our lives are spent getting ready for dramatic moments that don't take place. Or if they do, they are less than we expected. About the time we say, "Well, nothing really big ever happens to me," bam, you get knocked down with something much bigger than you expected. All the frustrations of all the little narratives in your life that never had a real climax can be present in the rare denouement that life also offers once in a great while.

Random House Publicity Flyer/2/91 Bad writing often results when exciting things happen to your friends, and you decide you're going to do a novel about them. Though your friends are alive to you, they won't necessarily appear so in the work. So, I almost never write about anyone who's close. It's too hard to bring off. I prefer to choose people for whom I believe I have a special understanding, yet, on the other hand, I still have to get to know a good deal more about them

91.3 I don't read other writers much because I'm writing all the time. It's too disturbing to read a novelist with a good style when you're in the middle of putting your work together. I've used this image before: It's very much like taking your car apart and having all the pieces on the floor just as somebody rides by in a Ferrari. Now, you may hear a note in the Ferrari that isn't good and say, "That motor needs a little tuning." But nonetheless the car and its roar are still there in the distance and your parts remain on the floor. So while I'm working on a book I rarely read anything more interesting than The New York Times--which could have the long-term effect of flattening my style. I'd rather blame the Times than old age.

91.3 Literary influence remains endlessly curious. I happened to pick up *Moby Dick*. I hadn't thought about Melville ten times in the last thirty years, but as soon as I read the first page, I realized my style was formed by Melville, shaped by his love of long, rolling sentences full of inversions and reverses and paradoxes and ironies and exclamation points and dashes. Of course, to be as good as Melville--that's another matter. [Put after Henry Adams]

97.24 Capote wrote the best sentences of anyone of our generation. He had a lovely ear. He did not have a good mind. I don't know if a large idea ever bothered him. While he wrote poetically, he did not think like a poet. But he did have a sense of time and place. Breakfast at Tiffany's, for example, is a slight book. Looking at it with a hard eye, it's a charlotte russe. On the other hand, if you are looking to capture a particular period in New York, no other book may have done it so well. In that sense, Capote is a bit like Fitzgerald. If I were to mount them both on one wall, however, I'd certainly put Truman below Scott, but he is of that ilk.

Lee/2001 I had one existence which lasted for hardly more than two years but felt like a decade. It was being a private in the Army. That gave me real experience as opposed to the kind of experience you search for. Which is one of the problems for young writers. When they don't have enough to write about, they go out to look for it in new situations. But, if need be, they can usually get out of those situations. It's the ones you can't escape that give you the kind of knowledge you need to grow as a writer.

Lee/2001 One thing worth saying again: What's not understood about good writers is that they're as competitive as good athletes. When I come across an interesting novel, I don't go at it as other people do. I read critically, the way one athlete will watch another's performance. Not watch it with venom, quite the contrary. You might say to yourself, "His spiral is tighter than mine and he's got five more yards on me at least, but I scramble better." The thing is to give a good novel its credit and not overlook its power by deciding too quickly that the work is overrated. I believe I could end up as a good critic. I can always tell when someone is drawing sustenance out of his or her best vein and when the needle missed.

Koval/2000 Third person and first person are at least as different as major and minor keys in music. Before you decide which to employ, you have to have a sense of a) the event, b) of the likely reader, c) of yourself. Which person, first or third, will offer the most to these elements? When I was doing The Gospel According to the Son, people asked, "How did you have the nerve to write about Jesus in the first person?" but, in truth, it was a practical decision. I wanted the man Jesus to be predominant in the book, not Christ as the Son of God. I have always felt that Jesus was the cardinal example of a truly powerful personality built on two separate foundations. I was not equipped to write about the Son of God, but maybe I could do something with the man. For that, you need immediacy, which is the strength of first person. You can get bored with the "I," because it's constraining, but it does give easy access. In the beginning, at least. If I had put that book in the third person, it would have gotten mixed up with the Gospels, and people would have gone back and forth wondering which lines came from me, and what had been borrowed from the Gospels? Whereas in the first person, readers could accept the book as a whole, or reject it altogether.

95.12 There are two kinds of writers. Those like Faulkner and Hemingway and Melville, who write with an air that is inimitable. There are other writers, usually less famous, who go along in a variety of styles. I'm in the latter camp. The same is true of painters.

Matisse painted in one recognizable vein, while Picasso entered a hundred before he was done. It was as if style was a cutting tool to him by which he could delineate a reality.

I've found that principle to be useful for myself. Style has to be close to the material one is working with-- I'll go with a fairly formal prose on one occasion and be more casual on another.

92.12 An American Dream was originally published in Esquire in 1964, and had a sustained scene where a black man said "shit" about twenty times. Now, I didn't really need all twenty. Twelve would be better, but I also knew that if I put in twelve, the magazine editors would take out five, so I put in twenty. And the editors screamed at my twenty and I ended up with my twelve. They were happy and I was happy.

91.37 The CIA, in its workings, is an antithesis to the average spy novel. The latter has a perfect clock that ticks to its conclusion. A couple of characters in Harlot's Ghost agree that one reason they came into the CIA was because they loved spy novels. Now, their complaint was that now that once inside, they could never experience the full run of a scenario in their work. On occasion, they might find themselves in the equivalent of a spy novel, but only, let us say, for chapters five and six. They weren't there at the beginning of the case, and were soon shifted to another assignment. Often they did not learn how it turned out. That struck me as being exactly what life is like: the gun over the mantelpiece does not often get fired. We live in and out of ongoing plots every day of our lives, but they are discontinuous. Nothing can be more difficult to encounter than an ongoing story in life that accompanies us through a beginning, middle and end.

84.14 City life produces caustic wit. It is one of the essences of a city. If you live in the country, that kind of wit could get you killed. All too often, people who live in the country have one similarity to convicts. They have at times nothing to think about except the insults they have received. In New York and Chicago, sharp wit is a tonic. It serves as a bridge.