

STYLE

Adv for Myself

The Deer Park is the book which taught me how to write, but Advertisements followed, and it was the first book I wrote that had a style I thought I might be able to call my own. It was forged out of a continuing recognition of how difficult it was to put words together when writing about oneself.

Style, of course, is what every good young author looks to acquire. In lovemaking, its equivalent is grace. Everybody wants it but nobody seems to find it by working directly toward the goal. In my case, Advertisements was written at the end of the slowest and most morale-disrupting kind of work. I didn't begin the book until 1958, ten years after The Naked and the Dead was published. In between had come Barbary Shore and The Deer Park and I never want to have two novels as hard again to write.

I did not know what I was doing. As I have explained now and again, I had been divorced by success from any intimate sense of my identity and had a hard time getting halfway back. Apart from that psychological vertigo

which will attack any athlete, performer, or young businessman who has huge early success. I had my own particular problem, a beauty—I did not know my metier. The Naked and the Dead had been written out of what I could learn from James T. Farrell and John Dos Passos with good doses of Thomas Wolfe and Tolstoy, plus homeopathic tinctures from Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Faulkner, Melville, and Dostoyevsky. With all such help, it was a book that wrote itself.

I knew however it was no literary achievement. I had done a book in a general style borrowed from many people and did not know what I had of my own to say. I had not had enough of my own life yet. The idea could even be advanced that style comes to young authors about the time they recognize that life is out there ready to kill them, kill them quickly or slowly, but something out there is not fooling. It would explain why authors who were ill in their childhood almost always arrive early in their career as developed stylists: Proust, Capote, and Alberto Moravia give three examples, Gide offers another. This notion would certainly account for the early and complete development of Hemingway's style. He had before he was twenty the unmistakable sensation of being wounded so near to death that he felt his soul slide out of him, then slip back.

The average young author is not that ill in childhood nor that ill used by early life. His little social deaths are overcome by his small social conquests. So he writes in the style of others looking for his own, and tends to love words more than rhythms. In his haste to dominate the world (rare is the young writer who is not a consummate prick) he tends to use words for their precision, their ability to define, their acrobatic action. His style often changes from scene to scene, from paragraph to paragraph. He knows a little about creating mood and the essence of good style is that it sets a mood as intense as a theatrical piece, and then alters that mood, enlarges it, conducts it over to another mood. Every sentence, precise or imprecise, vaulting or modest, is careful not to poke a hyperactive finger through the tissue of the mood, nor do the sentences ever become so empty of personal quality that the mood sinks to the ground of the page. It is an achievement which comes from having thought about one's life right to the point where one is living it. Everything that happens seems capable of offering its own addition to one's knowledge. One has arrived at a personal philosophy or has even reached that rare plateau where one is attached to one's philosophy and so serves to sustain each day. At that juncture, everything one writes comes out of one's own fundamental mood.

Some such development may have gone on in me over the two years from the publication of The Naked and the Dead to the commencement of work on Advertisements for Myself. Maybe I had come to realize that authors literally begin to die a little from the reception of their books, and every dishonesty in oneself added gangrene to the wound. So Advertisements became the book in which I tried to separate my legitimate spiritual bile from my self-pity and maybe it was the hardest continuing task I had yet set myself. What aggravated every problem was that I was also trying to give up smoking and as a corollary of kicking nicotine, I was thrust into the problem of style. In those days, my psyche felt as different without cigarettes as my body felt in moving from air to water. It was as if I perceived with different senses and clear reactions were blunted. Writing without cigarettes, the word I looked for almost never came, not in quick time. In compensation, I was granted a sensitivity to the rhythm of what I wrote and that helped to develop my style, no, rather say it proceeded to turn my nose in the direction of better prose. I began to learn how difficult it is to move from the hegemony of the word to the resonance of the word rhythm. This can be a jump greater than a leap into poetry; maybe it is analogous to changing one's religion.

I suffered from prodigies of brain-curdling, and educated myself all over again how to write without cigarettes, and found the beginnings of a manner that might begin to express the way my own mind (as opposed to other writers' minds) was ready to work. So, Advertisements for Myself was a book whose writing changed my life.

Schroeder/1992 Sometimes the only way you can approach reality is through well-chosen prose. This premise may be arguable, but there is no doubt that a bad style obfuscates your best attempts to approach reality.

61.12 In The Deer Park I was trying to find a style, but it was elusive. I went through three 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. Then I found a tone that was not like the others. It fit the essential material. So I learned how style literally repels certain kinds of experience and can be equal to a bossy wife

who even selects your suits. If a writer insists on a specific tone, despite all inner warnings, it can even limit the varieties of experience that will enter the book.

SHAINBERG

The art of good writing is that you finally get to a place where you can say what you wish to say in a way only you can. Obviously, it's considerably less good to say what you want to say in a way anyone else could. But this has to happen by itself. You cannot force it.

LONDON

Finding one's own manner is therefore elusive. While it certainly helps to develop a unique style, first you have to learn how to write. I remember one time when Nelson Algren was giving his writing class in Chicago, and invited me to sit in. He read a story by one of the kids while I was there. Pure third-rate Hemingway. The guy didn't have much talent to begin with, but after all, this was a writing class. So, afterward, I said to Nelson, "Why

did you pay that much attention? He was just copying Hemingway." And Algren who was about ten years older than me and knew that much more about such things, said, "You know, these kids are better off if they attach themselves to a writer and start imitating him because they learn a lot doing that. If they're any good at all, sooner or later they'll get rid of the influence. But first, they have to get attached to somebody." That was useful.

Over the years I found that, yes, how much I wanted have my own style. All the writers I respected had one, particularly Hemingway, Faulkner, and Fitzgerald.

On the other hand, it takes so long. Style is finally a set of decisions on which word is valuable and what is not in every sentence you write. That's one element. Another is the overall consistency of the prose. You have writers who are exceptionally talented but are still what I would call amateurs. The most notable example would be a writer as highly gifted as Toni Morrison. Her style can shift from chapter to chapter--her strength is not in protecting the tone. She can write beautifully for pages, and then in a following chapter dawdle along in pedestrian mode. It violates what she is at her best, her distinctive voice, her distinctive insights.

CONV W/ NM MARCUS p.88

Style is character. A good one will not come from a bad, undisciplined character. Now, a man may be evil, but I believe that people can be evil in their essential natures and still have good characters. Good in the sense of being well-tuned, flexible, supple, adaptable, principled in relation to their own good or evil—even an evil man can have principles—he can be true to his own evil, which is not so easy, either. I think good style is a matter of rendering out of oneself all your cupidities. And then I think one has to develop one's physical grace. Writers who are possessed of some physical grace may tend to write better than writers who are physically clumsy. It's my impression this is so. I don't know that I'd care to attempt to prove it.

LONDON

Style is also a reflection of identity. Given a firm sense of oneself, you can write in a consistent vein. But should your identity shift, so will the manner change. Illness, tragedy, huge frustration, age itself are bound to alter your notion of yourself.

And, of course, one's subject matter will also affect your words. A journalistic voice can get into the workings of a good many topical novels. But then, you wouldn't want Henry James to describe the life of Gary Gilmore. There is such a vice as too much style. For what Henry James wanted to do, his mode of writing was ideal. He had recognized before anyone else, that polite social life, despite its ridiculous or affected aspects, also presented a spectrum of small options present at every moment. In social life, a person often chooses among three or four equally agreeable alternatives, even to making the choice of being a little warmer or a little cooler than he or she originally expected to be toward a given person. James had an extraordinary sense of that unforeseen vibration in the almost wholly expected, and he created a fictional world out of such insight, a world that depended altogether on his command of his unique style.

71.6 You know, a good skier rarely 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, however, 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.

95.12 There are two kinds of writers. Faulkner and Hemingway and Melville and James, 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 can be said of painters. Matisse painted in one recognizable vein, while Picasso entered a hundred before he was done. Style was the cutting tool by which he could delineate a reality. He saw it as a tool rather than as an extension of his identity. I've found his attitude to be useful for myself. It's better if one's writing is close to the material one is working with-- I'll look for a fairly formal prose on one occasion and be casual in another. Like the loose syntax of these prose bits from interviews.

82.16 Metaphors? You ask about 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 full-time in the small rooming house where I took a cubicle (four dollars a week) 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 writer'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 hope they improved with age.

SHAINBERG

On the other hand, good dialogue depends more on your aural reflex. Rules won't help you; you need an ear. There has to be something in the next speech that relies on the previous one. But I don't even want to talk about

dialogue. Some people have marvelous stuff, some don't, but that's only one aspect of writing, it is not the aspect, I don't think you can teach it. Most kids who have talent start off with good dialogue because that comes naturally, they have a good ear. They're happy it's there and they have fun—that can start you as a writer. Those who are not gifted at dialogue will, hopefully, be endowed with philosophy or good language.

If one wants an example of superb dialogue where the bar is set about as high as it can go, then read any one of William Kennedy's novels, particularly the first ten pages of Roscoe. But make no attempt to imitate Bill Kennedy. Great dialogue is inimitable. And it helps if you're Irish.

SHAINBERG

LS: You used a wonderful phrase I want you to elaborate on: "the tensile strength of a sentence."

NM: Yes. That you can learn from a writing course.

LS: Tell me what you mean by the tensile strength.

NM: You can't change a single word. What is tensile strength? It is that all the components are working together, so you can't change a single word.

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 offer. 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.

How a writer of the event and of yourself

LONDON

If you write in the first person, you get stuck in terms of immediacy but lose insight because you can't move into other people's heads. Not without violating the form.

The *Open Book* reinforced the difficulty. At one point, the man who was telling the story stated that he was shifting from first person to third. He was now old enough, went his client, to understand people he had not understood before. Because he now had access to the plot of how they think, he would write about them in third person. I believe it worked, but I would not return to it.

In first person, the style has to be singular: named to the man who's telling the story. (Only once did I have a woman as the narrator. And that was Marjorie Minner.

FIRST PERSON VERSUS THIRD PERSON

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 do well to have a sense of the event and of yourself.

LONDON

If you write in the first person, you gain much in terms of immediacy but lose insight because you can't move into other people's heads. Not without twisting the form.

The Deer Park underlined the difficulty. At one point, the man who was telling the story stated that he was shifting from first person to third. He was now old enough, went his claim, to understand people he had not understood before. Because he now had more of an idea of how they think, he would write about them in third person. I believe it worked, but I would not swear to it.

In first person, the style has to be altogether tuned to the man who's telling the story. (Only once did I have a woman as the narrator. And that was Marilyn Monroe in Of Women and their Elegance.)

When your prime character is a man, the key choice is not how bright he is, because however bright, he can't be smarter than you are. That's easy. You dumb him down to taste, or bring him up to your level. The real question is how tough is he? Do you have the inner sanction to create a man who's braver and tougher than yourself? The answer is yes. You can do that by exercising your critical imagination—it must not be wish-fulfillment—on how you might act if you were that much more of a hero.

I don't know, however, how to pose the question for an author who's female. Can she, for example, write about a woman who is more sensitive than herself? Probably not. She could write about a woman who uses her sensitivity and sensibility more than herself, because she, the author, can then use all the frustrated times in her existence when the sensitivity and sensibility she possessed were not appropriate to a harsh occasion. Following question: Can a woman write about another woman more passionate than herself? Probably. Or a woman who's colder than herself? Without doubt.

In the third person, there's a different set of difficulties.

In third person, you are God--well, of course, not God, but one of the angels or at least, a demi-urge. One way or another, you are ready to see into everyone's mind. Of course, it's not that routine. There are two kinds of third

person. There is point-of-view third person where you remain in one character's mind, but are still seeing your protagonist from above, and then there is the classic vein of third person where you enter everyone's head. That's hard. Hard to get over the embarrassment that you are able to enter certain character's minds with considerably more skill than you can with others. That kind of pervasive and Olympian third person, that Tolstoyan presence, needs experience, confidence, irony, and lordly detachment. When it can be done, however, hurrah. Most of the great novels achieve that tone. Just about all the great novels of the 19th century.

Lennon/1999 First person point of view, however, 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. As an instrument, it's double-edged. Hemingway had a marvelous sense of its limitations and used it like no one else to create his style. He dramatized its first edict: do not talk about things which could prove 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.

We live in a time that is astonishingly more open, but the edict, now adjusted, still remains. First person cannot be as free as the separation between author and protagonist offered by the third person.

ABBOTT

It was not until I struggled with Advertisements for Myself that I began to recognize how curious it was to write in the first person. Now, many writers good and bad have been working in the first person for centuries but I had to come to this remarkable conclusion on my own. The first person was not a routine nor automatic way to write. It's a very interesting and exciting mode of literary being, with large limitations and you really do have to understand it as such. Especially if you're dealing with your own presence. Nothing is more difficult than to become comfortable writing about yourself in the first person. It's highly unnatural. Because "I" makes up only about a third of the consciousness of any human being. "I" may be the prow of the ego, but you do get into all sorts of other places where you want "one" to talk

about different aspects of yourself. And then there is even second person, you, employed as if it is first person: "You get up, you brush your teeth, you feel lousy this morning." (In the first period of awakening, you can indeed feel like a vague entity slightly outside yourself.) And there is also the third person when used as a substitute for "I"—for one, the character named Norman Mailer in The Armies of the Night. Using the third person in this manner may be a special condition of first person, but it is legitimate. There is a part of the ego that is superior to ourselves—that person who observes us carefully even as we're doing things. This is the presence who is always saying, "Oh, is this person doing well right now?" A wonderful voice. Because it enables you to treat yourself as one more character in a field of characters.

LONDON

Nonetheless, I have a special feeling for the first person. Once I even dared to cross the line with it. That began on a given night, in a small Paris hotel room when I couldn't sleep. The room was tiny, the double bed took up

almost all the floor, and you could break your toe trying to walk around it, the room was that small. I didn't want to go rummaging in my suitcase for a book, so I picked up a Gideon Bible (in English!) on my bedside table and started reading. I hadn't looked at the New Testament for 30 or 40 years, but I remembered a man named Fulton Oursler who once did a book called The Greatest Story Ever Told. He sold a million-plus copies as I recall. Now, perusing the Gospels, I thought, well, this may be the greatest story ever told, but it is certainly told abominably. Sayings popped out of the text that were worthy of Shakespeare, but much in the double columns was badly, insufficiently, and baldly described. A limp, often ungainly prose pronged with a number of golden nuggets. I thought, there have got to be a hundred novelists in the world who can do a better job. I'm one of them.

I became intrigued with the notion. When I thought of all the hypocrites and corruptibles and power-seekers who had been living with the Gospel for centuries, using it for their own high-octane purposes, standing foursquare on any gnomic chunk of text they could use to abet their aims, I decided why not just tell the story? It is, in fact, a fascinating one. The narrative keel is mind-boggling. We are dealing with a man who is obliged to recognize through the evidence itself that he is the son of God. The difficulty

of such a book would be to write about a man who was considerably nicer than myself. That is never easy. To fashion a character who is meaner than yourself—a piece of cake. But to do someone who is better? Well, Jean Malaquais once remarked that you can write about any character but one. Who, I asked, who, he remarked, "A novelist who is more talented than yourself."

I thought, this is the test. Not that Jesus was a novelist, far from it, but he certainly possessed a noble nature. Nobler than mine! Still, I thought, OK, I will try. The problems are interesting.

I decided he had to be more of a man than a god, an existential man, dominated by a huge cloud hanging over him. It is that he is the son of God. He doesn't feel worthy, but he is ready nonetheless to do his best every step of the way. Not in command of every situation, but will do his best. And he does have his startling successes. And God does help him.

In the beginning, the style was too Biblical. Moreover, I had to decide whether to travel in first person or third. First person would have everyone saying: "There's Mailer, world class egomaniac. Does he now think he's Jesus Christ? What a pompous ass! What a totally unpleasant human being!" I thought that's the bad side of it, but at least I can avoid the larger

mistake of doing it in the third person. Because that would have to get mixed up with the Gospels, and the reader would wonder, "Is this sentence from the New Testament or has it been added?" That's going to make for a disagreeable page-examining experience. All right, then. First person. Damn ~~the~~ torpedoes, first person. Play the Ace.

It became interesting. If it was too Biblical in the beginning, I did have a very tough editor who is totally irreligious, Jason Epstein,. A rationalist if ever there was one. He was appalled that I was writing this book. We're friends, but he's one tough editor. And he's always either absolutely right or absolutely wrong. With him, you have to make a quick decision. Yes, the style was too Biblical.

After which, it was relatively easy. The book was short enough for me to go through seven variations on the style. I had to find the balance between a Biblical rhythm and a contemporary one. Something that would not inflict a Biblical grip on you, yet keep the echo. Before I was done, it all took a year from that night in that much-too-small hotel room on the Ile St. Louis.

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 full run of a narrative. On occasion, her work put her into the equivalent of a
 narrative, but only, for us say, for chapters five and six. She hadn't begun
 there at the beginning, and was now shifted to another assignment. Often
 one did not know how it turned out. That struck me as being like what life
 is like—the gap even the tiniest hole does not often get fixed. We live in and
 out of ongoing plots every day of our lives, but they are discontinuous.
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 missing many pages, yet how discontinuous it seems all the more. One could
 make the case that our love of plot—until it gets very cheap indeed—comes
 out of our need to find the chain of cause and effect that so often is missing in
 our own existence.

REAL LIFE VERSUS PLOT LIFE

91.37 The CIA, in its actual workings, is the antithesis to the average spy
 novel, which, when best-seller oriented, tends to present a perfect clock that
 ticks to its conclusion. In Harlot's Ghost one of my characters remarks that one
 reason she came into the CIA was because she loved spy novels. Now, her

complaint was that she could never—because she was inside—experience the full run of a scenario. On occasion, her work put her into the equivalent of a spy novel, but only, let us say, for chapters five and six. She hadn't been there at the beginning, and was soon shifted to another assignment. Often one did not learn how it turned out. That struck me as being about 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 a life story that accompanies us through a beginning, middle and end. There is only our own that is not missing many pages, yet how discontinuous it seems all the same! One could make the case that our love of plot—until it gets very cheap indeed—comes out of our need to find the chain of cause and effect that so often is missing in our own existence.

Lennon/1999 The decisions you must make while writing fiction can make you uneasy. If your characters come alive, that's fine; they will carry you a part of the way. But, finally, your people have to make what might be termed career decisions. Does your protagonist want to go abroad in the foreign

service, or does he decide to stay in New York with the amazing young model he has just met? Needless to say, such choices 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, as the author, have to live by my wits. That means my characters must keep developing. So long as they stay alive, the plot 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.

The Armies of the Night

One of the oldest devices of the novelist—one would call it a vice—is to bring his narrative (after many an excursion) to a pitch of excitement where the reader no matter how cultivated is reduced to a beast who can pant no faster than to ask, "And then what? Then what happens?" At which point the novelist, consummate cruel lover, introduces a digression, aware that delay at this point helps to deepen the addiction of his audience.

This, of course, was Victorian practice. Modern audiences, accustomed to super-highways and non-interrupted orgasms, put aside their reading at the first annoyance and turn to the television set. So a modern novelist must apologize, even apologize profusely, for daring to leave his narrative, he must in fact absolve himself of the charge of employing a device, he must plead necessity.

Shainberg

Working on The Executioner's Song, however, I came to the realization that God is a better novelist than the novelists. The story was not only incredible, but it most certainly had happened. If I had conceived it, the work would have been more dramatic, but less true. I learned all over again that the way things happen in life is not the way they work in my novels. It would have seemed wasteful to me to have a novel with two really fascinating characters who didn't come together for a scene. Whereas, what I discovered in The Executioner's Song was that the characters I was most interested in didn't always meet, and when they did, the results were often disappointing.

91.17 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," 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.

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 new idea that you didn't follow may be worth more than the denouement you planned in advance.

83.40 For that matter, 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 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 obedient to my will. Tie your characters to a pre-arranged plot, and you are doing to them what we would do to our children if we carefully selected their colleges, their spouses, and their jobs without ever consulting them. The same unspoken despondency 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.

Suffolk

Many young novelists tend to draw for their material on family, or the near world of friends. How, goes the question, do you manage that without making these near and dear people too recognizable? Can you treat the familiar in such a way as not to incur the rage and tears of those who are close to you?

It is next to impossible. You cannot write about people you care about and not hurt them or, to the contrary, even worse, allow too little to be wrong with them. They then come through as boring. That is the first mark of bottom-level amateur writing.

I've always stayed away from such close material, never written directly about my parents or my sister. Those experiences are so basic that I encircle them with a favorite word—I characterize these fundamental and primary experiences as crystals. The crystals can be simple, or

extraordinarily developed. But provided you don't use them directly, you can sometimes send a ray of your imagination through the latticework in one direction or another and find altogether different scenarios. If you've got a son who's, let's say, a pretty tough kid, you can, if you don't write about him head-on, make the boy a bullfighter, or put him in Special Forces, even turn him into a bank robber or an honest cop. So long as you don't use the core of your experience, you will be in command of many possibilities. But if you do decide you must get it all accurately on paper, then at a given moment, you will have to face the fact that you are going to hurt people who are close to you.

I've used this example before: When a surgeon operates on a young girl, he isn't saying, "I'm going to make an incision on this young lady's stomach that is not only going to scar her but will affect her future sex life for the next 30 years." He just says, "Scalpel, nurse," and does it. The reason is that the surgeon is focused on the act, not its reverberations.

As a novelist, one is engaged in something analogous. Novelists are oxymorons. They are sensitive and most insensitive. Full of heart and heartless. You have to be full of heart to feel what many people are feeling; a certain breadth, you might say, of perception. On the other hand, a novelist

has to be relatively cold. If he or she starts thinking of all the damage they are going to do, they can't write the book--not if they're reasonably decent. Of course, a malicious person might kick up the traces, and feel young and happy again at being so mean, even feel a spark--dare I say Muriel Spark?--because they are going to hurt so many people.

The point is that one is facing a true problem in writing about your nearest and the dearest. Either you produce a book that doesn't approach what really interests you, or, if you go to the root with all you've got, there is no way you won't injure your family. Hardly anyone is happy with the portrait of themselves in a good novel.

84.34 Some of my characters do come from real people. One might emerge out of five individuals, another from one person, greatly altered. Still another is imagined. No matter by which route, there's pleasure when a character becomes, in a sense, independent of yourself.

84.34 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."

Conv w/NM, Marcus, p. 90

Up to now, I've not liked writing about people who are close to me because they're too difficult to do. Their private reality obviously interferes with the reality one is trying to create. They become alive not as creatures in your imagination but as actors in your life. And so they seem real while you write, but you're not developing their novelistic reality into your book. For example, it's not a good idea to try to put your wife into your novel. Now your latest wife, anyway. In practice, I prefer to draw a character from someone I hardly know who excites my novelist's instinct. I sense that I will be able to add a great deal to the portrait by what I've learned from other people.

CONV W/ NM MARCUS P. 91

The question remains: how do you turn a real person into a fictional one? If I have an answer, it is that I try to put the model in situations which have very little to do with his or her real situations in life. Very quickly, the real form disappears. The private reality can't hold up. For instance, I might take somebody who is a professional football player, a man, let's say, whom I know slightly, and turn him into a movie star. In a transposition of this sort, everything which relates particularly to the professional football player quickly disappears, and what is left, curiously, is what is exportable in his character. But this process while interesting in the early stages is not as exciting as the more creative act of allowing your characters to grow once you've separated them from the model. It's when they become as complex as real people that the fine excitement begins. Because now they're not really characters any longer—they're beings, which is a distinction I like to make. A character is someone you can grasp as a whole, you can have a clear idea of him, but a being is someone whose nature keeps shifting. In The Deer Park, Lulu Meyers is a being rather than a character, If you study her closely,

you will see that she is a different person in every scene. Just a little different. I don't know whether initially I did this by accident or purposefully, but at a certain point I made the conscious decision not to try to straighten her out, she seemed right in her change-ableness.

CONV W/ NM Marcus p. 92

I've spoken of characters emerging. Quite often they don't emerge; they fail to. And one's left with the dull compromise which derives from two kinds of experience warring with one another within oneself. A character who should have been brilliant is dull. Or even if a character does prove to be first-rate, it's possible you could have done twice as much with him. A novel has its own laws. After a while, it becomes a creature to you. One can feel a bit like a rider who's got a fine horse. Very often, I'll suffer shame for what I've done with a novel. I won't say it's the novel that's bad; I'll say it's I who was bad, as if the novel was a child raised by me, but improperly. I know what's potentially beautiful in my novel, you see. Very often after I'm done, I realize that the beauty I recognize in it is not going to be perceived by

the reader. I didn't succeed in bringing it out. It's very odd—it's as though I had let the novel down, owed it a duty which I didn't fulfill.

MCELROY (Pont)

Hearn's death in The Naked and the Dead was supposed to be shocking. I haven't thought of Hearn's death in years. I stole the way of doing it directly from E.M. Forster. In The Longest Journey, he created a character who was most alive for the reader, then destroyed him on the next page. As I recall the line, it went: "Gerald died next day. He was kicked to death in a football game." You get an idea what a rifle shot is like at that point. In my book, it may have been too big a price to pay, because the denouement of the novel was sacrificed. I don't think I was aware of the size of the problem. Today I'd be much more alert to that. If I did the book over again today, I might have kept Hearn alive until the very end, and it might have been a phonier book as a result. One of the things you always have trouble with when you talk about "true" or "not true," is, of course, the relative truth of the novel. In a way, if you get a fairly good novel going, then

you have a small universe functioning, and this universe lives or does not live in relation to its own scheme of cause and effect. In Kafka's writing, he creates worlds that are absolutely true. You can say practically every sentence in a Kafka story is true to the story.

Looking back on it, I can give you a good and bad motive that I had for killing Hearn where I did. The good motive is that it was a powerful way to show what death is like in war. The shoddy motive was that I wasn't altogether sure in my heart that I knew what to do with him, or how to bring him off. I think that I truly work on impulse in all of my writing. That's why I don't like to plan too far ahead. It makes it almost impossible for one of your characters to go through a dramatic shift of heart because it's going to violate your larger scheme. It's better if this larger scheme comes into focus at the very last moment.

82.16 When it comes to entering a character's mind, a writer has to be ready to be good, even brilliant. So long as you stay outside that head, your character can retain a certain mystery. We walk around such figures with the same respect we offer strange 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 facing. 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. To jump in only to offer banal material is a fatal error. It is the worst of best-sellerdom. Second-rate readers enjoying the insights of second-rate writers.

Schroeder/1992 I'd say try not to think of your characters as victims. That sort of classification narrows them. 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. (Unless one is Dickens. Scrooge, Scrooge, Scrooge.)

SHAINBERG

Hemingway suffered from the honorable need to be the equal of his male characters, particularly since he used the first person so much. It's not easy then to write about a man who's stronger or braver than yourself because it's too close to the self-serving. All the same, you have to be able to do it. Because if every one of your characters is kept down to your own level, you do not take on large subjects. You need people more heroic than yourself, more enterprising, less timid, sexier, more romantic, more tragic. You've got to be able to create people greater than yourself and not be ashamed of the damnable fact that the "I" who is being promoted is offering a false picture of yourself to all those readers who will predictably assume that the author is the man they are now encountering in the first person.

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 his personal skill at 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. In turn, Henry Miller could rarely tell a full story well. He preferred his excursions away from the story, and those asides are what make him exceptional.

CONV. W/ NM/MARCUS p.88

I've been asked when the idea of using a hornet's nest to thwart the climbers in The Naked and the Dead came to me. In truth, the idea was there before I wrote the first sentence of the book. The incident happened to my reconnaissance platoon on the most ambitious patrol we ever took. They sent out thirty of us to locate and destroy one hundred Japanese marines, but we did get stuck climbing one hell of an enormous hill with a mean slimy trail, and when we were almost up to the ridge, somebody kicked over a hornet's nest. Half of us went tearing up the hill, but the machine gun squad was behind us and went flying down to the valley. We never did find each other again that day. We just slunk back to our bivouac.

There are some who feel it was not a satisfactory device, but I think I'd do it the same way again. War is disproportions, and the hornet's nest seemed a perfect disproportion to me. We were ready to lose our lives that day but we weren't up to getting stung by a hornet.

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 short 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.

75.13 The characters you create in a novel become as real in your mind as movie stars. That is no small equation. To a lot of people, humphrey Bogart might, for example, be the psychic equivalent of an influential uncle given the measure of importance he exerts on those who love his work.

INSTINCT

CONV W/ NM Marcus p. 92

I am not sure it is possible to describe the experience of novel-writing authentically. It may be that it is not an experience. It may be more like a relation, if you will—a continuing relation between a man and his wife. You can't necessarily speak of that as an experience because it may consist of several experiences braided together; or it may consist of many experiences which are all more or less similar, or indeed it may consist of two kinds of experiences which are antagonistic to one another.

82.16 Writing may be an instinctive process, but it's not always clear what the instinct is saying. Sometimes you feel no more than a dull pressure to go

in a certain direction for the oncoming chapter. You have to be able to hear the faint voice which prods you toward an honest continuation of the work. That can be hard to hear. A writer is also open to the temptation to take the immediate advantage, even if it doesn't feel quite right. And we all do that in various ways. And pay for it with falsities that burrow directly into our intent.

London

One example I always give to a writing class. A very young writer sits on a park bench with his girl. He kisses her. He's seventeen. He's never had such a kiss before. That evening he writes, "'I love you,' he said, 'I love you,' she said." He stops, throws down his pen and says, "I'm a great writer!"

Your immediate experience can be too alive to be put directly into language. You have to wait.

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 improve anything. Dedicated accuracy is not usually the

first claim a novelist wishes to make, but here it became a matter of literary value. What I had was gold, if I had enough sense not to gild it.

MCELROY (Pont)

If you find some theme that keeps you working, don't question it. Let that theme be sufficient to fuel your work. If you start using the value judgments of others, you're never going to get much done. The thing to remember is that there's nobody who can tell us how to live. Nobody knows the answer any longer. If I find something is stimulating to me and arousing my energy, that's fine, I'll trust it. If you're a serious young writer and find that you're writing a lot, then don't listen to what anyone else says, do your book. There is probably a deeper truth than you'll ever know in the fact that you're able to work so well. Of course, you could be writing in absolutely the wrong direction. You could be doing a dreadful book.

No matter what you find yourself writing about, if it's giving you enough energy, however, to continue, then the work bears a profound relationship to you at that point and so you don't question it.

Mcelroy (Pont)

Let me take this further: A student once asked me, "When you were young, was there a mentor around to tell you that if it felt good, go with it; or did you have your doubts and just write your way through it? Didn't you sometimes get your head turned around by all the different forces working on you? Or were you aware, maybe instinctively, of what to do?"

As I recall, I said I always had a certain urgency about writing because it seemed to me that it was the only thing I could do well. There is a great tendency then to follow your own instincts, because that's all you've got. Let me amplify this. Your instinct could be dead wrong. You can write a book with a powerful sense of inner conviction, finish, and a year or two later, say, "How could I have so deluded myself? This is awful." Your instinct can betray you, but you still have to go with it. Very often the instinct sees some light at the end of the tunnel, but that's because you've been trapped in a situation where your creative energies just can't get together. Now, at last, you've found a way to work. You may be writing out some very bad tendencies in yourself, but this can be good, too. You might be feeling happy

because soon you're going to be done with that stupid side of yourself. That's what the enthusiasm can be about.

Only rarely is one's instinct analogous to a fast highway, but that's when it's hairy. There could be a full-speed crash. The slow twists and turns of one's creative impulse can be a form of protecting oneself from the driving force which sometimes is manic.

INFLUENCE

81.16 The influence of Henry Adams on The Armies of the Night is peculiar. I had never read much Adams. In my freshman year at Harvard, we were assigned one long chapter of The Education of Henry Adams and remember thinking at the time what an odd thing to write about yourself in the third person. Who is this fellow, Henry Adams, talking about himself as Henry Adams? I remember being annoyed in that mildly irritable way freshmen have of passing over extraordinary works of literature. To my conscious recollection, I hardly ever thought about him again. 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 with Henry Adams.

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 later 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.

91.3 It's disturbing to read a novelist with a good style when you're in the middle of putting your work together. It's 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 more 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.

STAMINA

ABOUT

For now, anyway, but some people will think of me as a wild man. They have no desire to believe that even at my peak, that was only five or ten percent of my nature. The rest was work. I like work. I remember Phil Katz saying once they at Arthur Studio. There, we're always talking about the work. "We talk about it as playfully. We say the work. The work. Well, we do work here, and get it straight. Work is a blessing." He said this, pointing at every one of us. And I thought, "He's right. That's what it is. A blessing. Work is a blessing."

Of course, if you will write more or depend on it, the key word, an unhappy one, is stamina. But I've often said that to become a professional writer is a professional thing. It will depend on the ability to keep faith in yourself. One must be willing to take criticism by again. And it does need an enormous amount of practice to be good at it. Since you're faced by what

STAMINA

ABBOTT

I'm now eighty, but some people still think of me as a wild man. They have no desire to believe that even at my peak that was only 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. 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 right. That's what it is. A blessing. Work is a blessing."

Of course, if you ask what work is dependent upon, the key word, an unhappy one, is stamina. [86.31] It's as difficult to become a professional writer as a professional athlete. It often depends on the ability to keep faith in yourself. One must be willing to take risks and try again. And it does need an enormous amount of practice to be good at it. Since you are affected by what

you read as a child and adolescent, it also takes a while to unlearn all sorts of reading reflexes that lead you into bad prose.

MCELROY (Pont)

It is useful to become aware of the set of different psychological stances you get into in the course of working on a novel over a year or two. I remember in the summer before my Junior year, working on a first novel (that will remain forever unpublished), I ran into a phrase by Henry James. He spoke of "the keeping up." That can be the first horror you face when you're young. The novel tends to change all too quickly. That has to be one of the reasons why people in college often tend to write short stories and stay away from longer fiction. Young short story writers, no matter how good, often blow up when they start a novel. They'll have a good beginning, but the second chapter just seems to go off and they never get it back. The sad truth is that a young would-be novelist possibly has to start a few books that go give out, or just crash, before a sense of the difficulties is acquired. If the same likelihood of early failure applies to young race car drivers, there wouldn't be speedways.

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 up a little to your soul, 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.

LONDON

A large part of writing a novel is to keep your tone. I love starting a book, I usually like finishing one. It's the long middle stretches that call on your character--all that in between! Those months or years when you have to report to your own work every day. You don't write novels by getting in two brilliant hours a week. You don't write novels if you lose too many days to a hangover.

Sometimes, when you're in a bad period and it's hard to work, you must, in effect, contract yourself for weeks running. "I'm going in to write tomorrow," you must declare, and, indeed, you do show up at your desk, even though there's nothing in you, and you have to sit there for hours, whatever stint of time you told yourself that you were going to put in. Then, if nothing happens, you still show up the next day and the next and the next, until that recalcitrant presence, the unconscious, comes to decide, "This particular overseer can at least be trusted." There's a sequence of novelistic events going on in the unconscious. What you prepare on a given night in your sleep should be expressed, ideally, the next day. We live, you see, in an arm's length relationship to our unconscious. It has to be convinced to trust you. Conceivably, it is equal in its independence to a servant who will not work for you unless there is respect. Sometimes when you're writing a novel, you have to live as responsibly as a good monk. That does get easier as you grow older.

82.14 There's nothing glorious about being a professional. You just 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 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.

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 it 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 would hardly remember what I had written the day before, and so it read as if someone else had done it. The critic in me was delighted. I could now proceed to fix it. The sole virtue of losing your short-term memory is that it does free you up to be your own editor.

LONDON

I won't read a good novel while I'm writing a book. It's equal to working on your car, with all the parts out on the garage floor, and then some bastard goes by in a Ferrari. Moreover, when I read something good, I want to do a critical piece. I want to tell where I think the author is terrific and where he or she is lacking. If readers are blowing it up too high, I may feel, "It's good but not that good---let's get into it." So it can be immensely distracting. Your mind settles on the work you read, rather than the one you're supposed to be laboring on. So you tend to protect yourself. Stendhal, for instance, used to peruse the Code Napoleon every day in the loo before he'd start to write. I read the New York Times.

Now I didn't always follow that rule. When I was doing The Naked and the Dead, I used to pick up Thomas Wolfe and Tolstoy. I didn't read them every day but they were on my writing desk and they were perfect for what I needed. Tolstoy, particularly. The tone of Anna Karenina was wonderful for The Naked and the Dead. And then there was Thomas Wolfe

to steam up the descriptions. If I needed a tropical sunset or how the jungle smelled, I had Wolfe. For the characters, Tolstoy.

The Naked and the Dead offered a good, workmanlike prose and wonderful material. You don't always need a tone. Just for certain books. Henry James, given his subject matter, is hopeless without his unique rhetoric. But if The Naked and the Dead had had a more developed language, it might have been less of a novel.

It's a book written by an amateur, and so it has all the virtues of such a book. It's daring; it hardly knows what it's getting into. If I were to write it today, it would take me three to five times as long because I'd suffer at the number of novelistic taboos I was violating. You can transgress any taboo but you have to contemplate the possible price. You don't, for instance, violate point of view without pondering the intimate confusion it can cause the reader.

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.

CONV W/ NM marcus p. 95

I think it's important for a writer to keep in shape. But it's hard to talk about. Harry Greb, for example, was a fighter who used to keep in shape. He was completely a fighter, the way one might wish to be completely a writer. He always did the things which were necessary to him as a fighter. Now, some of these things were extremely irrational, that is, extremely irrational from a prize-fight manager's point of view. That is, before he had a fight he would go to a brothel, and he would have two prostitutes, not one, taking the two of them into the same bed. And this apparently left him feeling like a wild animal. Don't ask me why. Perhaps he picked the two meanest whores in the joint and so absorbed into his system all the small, nasty, concentrated evils that had accumulated from carloads of men. Greb was known as the dirtiest fighter of his time. He didn't have much of a punch but he could spoil other fighters and punish them, he knew more dirty tricks than

anyone around. But the two whores were one of his training methods and he did it over and over again until he died at a relatively early age of a heart attack, on an operating table. I think he died before he was thirty-eight. They operated on him, and bang, he went.

The point I want to make is that he stayed in training by the way he lived his life. The paramount element was to keep in shape. If he were drinking, you see, the point was to keep in shape while drinking. I'm being a touch imprecise. . . Put it this way: He would not drink just to release his tension. Rather, what went on was that there was tension in him which was insupportable so he had to drink. But reasoning as a professional, he felt that if he had to drink, he might as well use that too. In the sense that the actor uses everything which happens to him, so Greb as a fighter used everything. As he drank he would notice the way his body moved. One of the best reasons one drinks is to become aware of the way your mind and body move. Now let me try to apply this.

Craft is a grab-bag of procedures, tricks, lore, formal gymnastics, symbolic superstructures, methodology in short. It's the compendium of what you've acquired from others. And since great writers communicate a vision of experience, one can't usually borrow their methods. Their method is married

to the vision. Therefore, one acquires craft more from good writers and mediocre writers with a flair. Craft, after all, is what you can take out whole from their work. But keeping in shape is something else. For example, you can do journalism, and it can be terrible for your style. Or it can temper your style. . . in other words, you can become a better writer by doing a lot of different kinds of writing. Or you can deteriorate. There's a book came out a few years ago which was a sociological study of some Princeton men—I forget the name of it. One of them said something which I thought was extraordinary. He wanted to perform the sexual act under every variety of condition, emotion and mood available to him. I was struck with this not because I ever wanted necessarily to have that kind of sexual life, but because it seemed to me that was what I was trying to do with my writing. I try to go over my work in every conceivable mood. I edit on a spectrum which runs from the high clear manic impressions of a drunk which has made one electrically alert, all the way down to the soberest reaches of depression where I can hardly bear my words. By the time I'm done with writing I care about, I usually have worked on it through the full spectrum of my consciousness. If you keep yourself in this peculiar kind of shape, the craft will take care of itself. Craft is very little finally. But if you're continually

worrying about whether you're growing or deteriorating as a man, whether your integrity is turning soft or firming itself, why, then, it in that slow war, that slow rearguard battle you fight against diminishing talent that you stay in shape as a writer and have a consciousness. You develop a consciousness as you grow older which enables you to write about anything, in effect, and write about it well. That is, provided you keep your consciousness in shape and don't relax into flabby styles of thought. They, after all, surround one everywhere. The moment you borrow other writers' styles of thought, you need craft to shore up the walls. But if what you write is a reflection of your own consciousness, then even journalism can become interesting. One wouldn't want to spend one's life at it, and I wouldn't ever want to be caught justifying journalism as a major activity (it's obviously less interesting than to write a novel), but it's better, I think, to see journalism as a venture of one's ability to keep in shape than to see it as an essential betrayal of the chalice of your literary art.

Of course, it's virtually as if writers are there to be ruined. Look at the list: booze, pot, too much sex, too much failure in one's private life, too much attrition, too much recognition, too little recognition, frustration. Nearly everything in the scheme of things works to dull a first-rate talent. But the

worst probably is cowardice—as one gets older, one becomes aware of one's cowardice, the desire to be bold which once was a joy gets heavy with caution and duty. And finally there's apathy. About the time it doesn't seem too important any more to be a major writer, you know you've slipped far enough now to be doing your work on the comeback trail.

The hardest thing for an older writer to decide is whether he's burned out or merely lying fallow. I was ready to think I was burned out before I even started The Naked and the Dead. I had written a few good things in college and now had to wonder whether my time in the Army had blunted what talent I had. That was how little sense a young writer can have of his or her own literary future.

Hear, hear! I said all that back in 1964. I was forty-one and I was worried that my best work was behind me. Whatever else is true, it may be that some of us need this kind of foreboding to keep trying to do our best. What interests me now is the obvious need I have always had to approach each new book as a test, a desperate one. It was as if any conviction that my talent was there to be depended upon could only bring down a curse. Sometimes I think it is in my genes—the thousand years of gloom in the ghetto.

MCELROY (Pont)

If you can, I think it's a good idea to rotate your crops. Once you've written a novel that's factual and realistic and big, awfully close to what happened, then it's probably a good idea that your next novel be as fanciful as possible. Yes, if you can, rotate those crops.

MCELROY (Pont)

A few words on rewriting and research.

Rewriting is where your working experience over the years has its day. There comes a time when you know how to get the maximum out of what you've done. The only way to accelerate this skill when you are young is to through your work in every mood. You have to have the courage to look at it when you're about ready to destroy it. If something still comes through, then it may well have the merit to be worked upon further. It is also not bad to read things at the top of your feelings in order to get a sense of what the maximum might be. If nothing else, all this will give you a tolerance for the extraordinary spectrum of reaction once received in the classroom. You

realize that the people who don't like your work aren't necessarily evil, and the people who love your stuff don't have to be altogether illustrious.

MCELROY (Craft

Research is another matter. The trick in doing an historical novel, for example, is to digest the research. One has to avoid that awful stance where you say, in effect, "Hello, I'm Saint-Simon and I'm at the court of Louis XIV. Madame de Maintenon is very angry this morning." Better to remind yourself that Madame de Maintenon does not necessarily feel that she is the Madame de Maintenon we know through Saint-Simon.

In addition, one must always be on guard against anachronizing. You learn how hard it is to separate what belongs only to your time from the era you are trying to recreate.