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THE SPOOKY ART

THE SPOOKY ART

Some Thoughts on Writing

NORMAN
MAILER



RANDOM HOUSE / NEW YORK

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First Edition

Dedication (to come)

He lived at a little distance from his body, regarding his own acts with doubtful side-glances. He had an odd autobiographical habit which led him to compose in his mind from time to time a short sentence about himself containing a subject in the third person and a predicate in the past tense.

James Joyce, "A Painful Case"

I was never so rapid in my virtue but my vice kept up with me. We are double-edged blades, and every time we whet our virtue the return stroke straps our vice.

Henry David Thoreau, *Journals*

A PREFACE WITH THREE WARNINGS

During the seven years I worked on *Harlot's Ghost*, I perceived the CIA and its agents as people of high morals and thorough deceit, loyalty and duplicity, passion and ice-cold detachment. So many writers, including myself, have a good bit of that in their makeup. It is part of what has made us novelists, even as intelligence agents are drawn to their profession by the striking opposites in their natures.

Let me assert from the outset, however, that *The Spooky Art* is not a book about intelligence agents. A work of that sort I might call the *Art of the Spooks*. This book, however, as the subtitle states, is about writing, its perils, its joys, its vicissitudes, its loneliness, its celebrity if you are lucky and not so very lucky in just that way. Needless to add, it speaks of problems of craft and plot, character, style, third person, first person, the special psychology of the writer. (I do not think novelists—good novelists, that is—are altogether like other people.) We novelists, good and bad, are also closet philosophers, and one is ready therefore—how not?—to offer one's own forays into the nature of such matters as being and nothingness, the near-to-unclassifiable presence of the unconscious and its demonic weapon—writer's block. En route, one looks into the need for stamina in doing a

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novel, and the relation of stamina to one's style. There are discussions of the differences and similarities between fiction and non-fiction, fiction and journalism, and, of course, I have often thought about the life of action and the life of meditation as it affects one's work. I have talked and written about the pitfalls of early success and how to cope with disastrous reviews and how we each do our best to live with the competitive spirit of the novelist rather than be eaten out by it. There is talk about identity and occasional crises of identity, as well as the presence of the occult in relation to the novelist, taken together with such strategies as when it is wise to enter a character's mind and when not to make characters out of real people in one's life.

All of that is Part I of this book. Part II concerns Genre and Colleagues. Since writers are often in search of how to work in other arts and crafts, Genre has to do with film and painting and journalism, with television and graffiti, as examples of some of the ways and by-ways down which writers search and/or flee from their more direct responsibility.

Finally, there is another section at the end called Giants and Colleagues, filled with a mix of thoughtful and/or shoot-from-the-hip candor about some of my contemporaries, rivals, and literary idols, as well as a few pieces of more formal criticism. Among the authors discussed, some in reasonable depth, others in no more than passing comment, are Hemingway, Faulkner, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Updike, Cheever, Roth, Doctorow, Capote, Vidal, Bellow, Heller, James Jones, Styron, James T. Farrell, Henry Adams, Henry James, García Márquez, Melville, Proust, Graham Greene, Scott Fitzgerald, Nelson Algren, Kurt Vonnegut, Dwight Macdonald, Toni Morrison, Thomas Wolfe, Tom Wolfe, Jean Malaquais, Don DeLillo, Henry Miller, John Steinbeck, Christopher Isherwood, Mary McCarthy, J. D. Salinger, William Kennedy, Kate Millett, Ralph Ellison, John Dos Passos, D. H. Lawrence, Mark Twain, Freud, and Marx. Even Bill Buckley is mentioned (in relation to character versus plot).

Taken all together, the result—one would hope—is a volume able to appeal to serious writers and to people who wish to write, to students, to critics, to men and women who love to read. But most of all this may be a book for young novelists who wish to improve their skills and their commitment to the subtle difficulties and uncharted mysteries of serious novel-writing itself.

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Now, for the warnings. A good deal of hesitation went along with the title. *Spooky* is virtually a child's word and seemed too casual. Besides, it does not always apply. Not all days at one's desk are odd or subtly frightening or, for that matter, full of scary fun. Novel writing can be dogged. There are unproductive hours that feel like nothing so much as the act of trying to start an old car when the motor has gone dead on you.

Nor is this a geriatric analogy. It is usually young men who have old cars. Moreover, there is no sense of youth that a young man can feel on a truly bad day of writing. Young novelists do get to feel like old men on such unhappy occasions, as if whatever talent they once possessed is now gone. The first intimation of old age for many a young novelist is the day when the gift does not appear, or comes through hobbled. Scenes that one expected to be rich are without presence on the page. One's inner life—that exceptional sense of oneself as possessed of thoughts that are not like others'—is absent. The scene one is working on is as boring as one's breath on a dull day.

That is the worst, and there is nothing mysterious about such mornings, afternoons, or nights unless it is the sense that destiny never guarantees a happy end. You are brought up close, on such occasions, to the future rigor of an unhappy denouement for yourself.

But there are also odd, offbeat, happy days when something does happen as you write and your characters take surprising turns, sometimes revealing themselves to you on the page in a manner other than you expected them to be. You discover that you know more about life and your characters than you thought you did. Such days are glorious. And they are certainly spooky.

Nor are any two days of good work necessarily the same. One may be practical and effective on certain mornings and the skill is actually in the sobriety of the effort. For another kind of hour, one takes risks. Yet if you have gotten good enough over the years (after decades of such varied mornings), there is also the sense of a governing hand (not necessarily and altogether your own) that keeps the highs and the lows from dashing away from one another so outrageously that your novel changes from chapter to chapter. (That is as bad as a car that pops out of gear at the damndest times.)

All right. The point of this introduction has possibly been made. In any event, I, as the author and assembler of this work,

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have succeeded in justifying the title to myself.

Let me add, however, a second warning. We have here a book that will tell you a good deal of what I know about the problems of writing, and more than occasionally, they are advanced problems. So it is not a how-to-do-it for beginners, who want basic approaches to plot, dialogue, suspense, and marketing of manuscripts all carefully laid out. This is, rather, a book for men and women who have already found some vocation to write in college or in graduate school, have perhaps taken courses on novel technique, are even advanced students who have begun to encounter the subtle perils and hazards of the writer's life.

I have also to offer a last warning, which concerns me most. *The Spooky Art*, by the nature of its sources (which derive from pieces I have written and extracts from interviews I have given), is without stylistic unity. The manner shifts at times from page to page. Given the separate components, there was no way to avoid this. The most characteristic single aspect in the daily life of a writer is that his stimulations derive from a host of experiences—some pedestrian, others of reasonable elevation. Off-the-cuff remarks in an interview, even when polished for a modicum of good syntax, can hardly be the equal of an essay done at the top of one's form. Yet the scattered materials of a writer offer just such a spectrum of harsh perceptions roughly stated and insights good enough occasionally to startle even one's best perception of oneself.

I decided then—so be it for this book. The reader will be jolted about from time to time, and for that I apologize. Some may even refuse to treat this as a consecutive work of printed pages so much as an unexpected and possibly dubious gift of chocolates into which they can dip and move on, pleasure alternating with displeasure. I cannot pretend to say this is wrong. I have tried to put some separate elements together with as much order as is possible under these curious circumstances—close to fifty years of reflecting, meditating, musing, and declaring my thoughts on a profession I practiced and could not always feel I understood—but to those readers for whom order in style is one of the cardinal literary virtues (and I am one of them), there may be no other way to treat this volume than as a gift of occasionally exceptional sweetmeats and disappointments. (Nor will every title and subtitle deliver its promise.)

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All this said, I still have a few hopes that the order imposed on these fifty years of opinions and conclusions will be read by some from the first page to the last, and that a few readers will find *The Spooky Art* to be an intimate handbook they can return to over the decades of their careers.

Here then is a collection of literary gleanings, aperçus, fulminations, *pensées*, gripes, insights, regrets and affirmations, a few excuses, several insults, and a good number of essays more or less intact. May the critics feel bound to debate some of these notions in time to come.

It is interesting that my formal sense intensifies as I grow older, and so I have looked to assemble this book in time for it to come out on January 31, 2003. I will be exactly eighty years old on that occasion. I would hope I am not looking for unwarranted easy treatment by this last remark. Can I possibly be speaking the truth?

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PART I

LIT BIZ

LIT BIZ

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

We may as well begin with a bit of comment on my literary childhood, such as it was. In 1963, Steve Marcus did an interview with me for *Paris Review*, and I have taken the liberty of separating his careful and elegantly structured questions into several parts in order to give a quick shape to my first years as a writer. For those who are more interested in what I have to say about writing in general than about myself in particular, you are invited to skip over these first autobiographical details and move on to a few comments on my first two books, *The Naked and the Dead* and *Barbary Shore*. Or, if you are in search of useful nitty-gritty, move even further along, to "The Last Draft of *The Deer Park*" or "Hazards."

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

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NORMAN MAILER: I like a room with a view, preferably a long view.

I like looking at the sea, or ships, or anything which has a vista to it. Oddly enough, I've never worked in the mountains.

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

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

SM: How young?

NM: Seven.

SM: A real novel?

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

SM: Doctor . . . ?

NM: Dr. Hoor. *Whore*, pronounced H-O-O-R. That's the way we used to pronounce whore in Brooklyn. He was patterned directly after Dr. Huer in Buck Rogers, who was then appearing on radio. This novel filled two and a half paper notebooks. You know the type, about seven inches by ten. They had soft, shiny blue covers and they were, oh, only ten cents in those days, or a nickel. They ran to about a hundred pages each and I used to write on both sides. My writing was remarkable for the way I hyphenated words. I loved hyphenating, and so I would hyphenate "the" and make it "th-e" if it came at the end of the line. Or "they" would become "th-e-y." Then I didn't write again for a long time. I didn't even try out for the high school literary magazine. I had friends who wrote short stories, and their short stories were far better than the ones I would write for assignments in high school English and I felt no desire to write. When I got to college, I started again. The jump from Boys' High School in Brooklyn to Harvard came as a shock. I started reading some decent novels for the first time.

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

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

write about your own life.

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

NM: When I first began to write again at Harvard. I wasn't very good. I was doing short stories all the time, but I wasn't good. If there were fifty people in the class, let's say I was somewhere in the top ten. My teachers thought I was fair, but I don't believe they ever thought for a moment I was really talented. Then in the middle of my sophomore year I started getting better. I got on *The Harvard Advocate* and that gave me confidence, and about this time I did a couple of fairly good short stories for English A-1, one of which won *Story* magazine's college contest for that year.

SM: Was that the story about Al Groot?

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

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

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

SM: Did you ever read any of them again?

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

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

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

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

NM: It's difficult to write about childhood. I never felt I understood it in any novel way. I never felt other authors did either.

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Not particularly. I think the portrait of childhood which is given by most writers is rarely true to anything more than the logic of their novel. Childhood is so protean.

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

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

SM: Not Huck Finn?

NM: The magic of Huck Finn seems to have passed me by, I don't know quite why. *Tom Sawyer* was the book of Twain's I always preferred. I remember when I got to college I was startled to find that *Huckleberry Finn* was the classic. Of course, I haven't looked at either novel in thirty years.

WRITING COURSES

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

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pression.

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

At Harvard, however, they knew how to get us to begin, and there were fine men teaching English A, and they took me up the ladder of the electives. Over four years of such courses, one would have had to have a determined purchase on a lack of talent not to improve. I improved. In those four years, I learned a little about sentence construction and more about narrative pace; en route I was able to pick up some of the literary ego a young writer needs to keep going through the contradictory reactions of others to his work. If there is one reason above others for taking a writing course, it is to go through the agonizing but indispensable recognition that one's own short story, so clear, so beautiful, so powerful, and so *true*, so definite in its meaning or so well balanced in its ambiguity, has become a hundred different things for the other writers present. Even the teacher does not get your buried symbols, or, worse, does not like them. Being a young writer in such a course can bruise the psyche as much as being a novice in the Golden Gloves can hurt your head. There is punishment in recognizing how much more punishment will yet have to be taken. Yet the class has its unique and ineradicable value. For you get to see the faces of those who like your work, you hear their voices, and so you gain some comprehension of the perversities of an audience's taste (as when, for example, they like a story by a writer you despise). You can even come to recognize how a fine piece of prose can draw the attention of an audience together. If it happens to you, if you write a piece and everyone in the room listens as if there is nourishment for one ear—his own—then it will not matter afterward if you hear a dozen separate reactions, for you will have at last the certainty that you are a writer. Your work has effect: In some small

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

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

The story, mine to be sure, was about a young bellhop working at a summer hotel. With other bellhops, he would talk about the wives of the businessmen who were having quick affairs with the hotel staff during the week. Their husbands, after all, only came out on weekends. One night, however, one lonely businessman drove up unexpectedly from New York, came into the lobby, and headed right up to his room. The bellhops knew a disaster was coming even before they heard the shots. The narrator then went up to the room. Both the bellhop, who had been in bed with the wife, and the wife were dead. The wife had had her face blown off. The husband had committed suicide. The description given by the narrator went something like this: "I couldn't see her nose, or what was left of her mouth, and I didn't know whether all that was spread on the carpet by now and I was stepping on it, or whether I was still breathing it in."

At this point, the class started to laugh. My description had the misfortune to continue for another such paragraph. I was learning a frightful lesson in a terrible hurry: A story read aloud before an audience can have little in common with its mute presence on the page.

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

I hardly slept. Next day I had an appointment with Robert Gorham Davis. The first thing he said when I came into his of-

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fice was, "Look, I owe you a serious apology. I had no idea the reaction would be so bad. I should have given you my criticisms privately. I hope you'll forgive me."

Of course I did. We even became friends.

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

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

What the course can't satisfy is the problem of experience. Young people who write well are not just reasonably sensitive; they are over-sensitive. Experience is usually painful and difficult for them. Moreover, to choose to go out and find a new subject to write about is always false to a degree. I would argue that your material becomes valuable only when it is existential, by which I mean an experience you do not control. Driving your car along a snowy road, you miscalculated a hairpin turn and are in a bad skid. For a fraction of a second, or for as much as a

or:
miscalculate-
for tense
consistency

WRITING COURSES • 13

second and a half, you don't know if you're going to come out of it. You may wreck your car. Or you may be dead in the next instant. A good deal goes through your mind at a good rate of speed—that's an existential moment. Another existential experience of wholly different character, ongoing, heavy, full of dread, common to many marriages, is where a woman is miserable with her husband but adores her child and hates the thought of divorce. Anna Karenina is one such lady.

In any event, there is no answer to the problem of how a young writer can pick up experience. If you search for it but have your hand on a guardrail—in other words, are able to quit the experience if it gets too hot for you—then such a controlled adventure can be good conceivably for a magazine piece, but it's not necessarily there for bringing you to that deeper level of writing that young scriveners aspire to.

And how I aspired! In those years at Harvard, if I had heard that Ernest Hemingway was going to speak in Worcester, Mass., I might have trudged the forty miles from Cambridge. That was how we felt then about writers. It is probably how I still feel. The shock, decades later, was to realize that this view of the writer is rare, by now.

Full of the intensity of those feelings, I even wrote a long novel in the nine months between my graduation in 1943 and my induction into the Army in March 1944. What follows is the introduction to it, which I would write thirty-five years later, when the novel was brought out in an expensive limited edition.

why
is
the
line
needed?

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

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

I never heard that story when I was young, but I had no need of it then. I wrote. It came as naturally to me as sexual excite-

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ment to an adolescent—I think from the time I was seventeen, I had no larger desire in life than to be a writer, and I wrote a great deal. Through my Sophomore, Junior, and Senior years at Harvard, and the summers between, I must have written thirty or forty short stories, a couple of plays, a novel, then a short novel, and then a long novel, which I called *A Transit to Narcissus*.

That was not the worst way to work up one's literary talent. There may be too much of a tendency among young intellectuals to think that if one can develop a consciousness, if one is able to brood sensitively and incisively on one's own life, and on the life of others for that matter, one will be able to write when the time comes. That assumption, however, may not recognize sufficiently that the ability to put words on a page also comes through years of experience and can become a skill nearly separate from consciousness and bear more resemblance to the sophisticated instinct of fingers that have been playing scales for a decade.

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

Little enough, certainly, of those three acts are here. While I was writing the novel, a metamorphosis took place. The play, as I recollect, was stark, and its set was the screened-in porch of the violent ward of a mental hospital. In an area eight feet by forty feet, twenty or thirty actors were to mull insanely back and forth. It would have been a play of much shock, brutality, obscenity, and what they used to call untrammelled power, a crude but highly realistic work. I had, after all, spent the earlier part of the

summer of 1942, one week, no more, working in the violent ward of a mental hospital for thirteen hours a day, five days a week (pay, nineteen dollars plus room and board). Then I quit. The experience was sufficient to write the play, digest a few of its faults, and embark less than a year later on that most peculiar novel we have here. Having just reread it after thirty-three years, I am all too unhappily aware that a seed of the psychotic, a whole field of the neurotic, and a crop of youthful energies obviously sprouted from a week of work in the insane asylum. If I was searching that summer for the experience to make me a better writer, most solemnly, of course, was I searching, I could hardly have recognized in advance that working in a mental hospital at the age of nineteen was equal to dropping myself precipitously into the lowest reaches of the proletariat—a charnel house of violence, a drudgery of labor, and a first coming to grips with a theme that would not so much haunt me as stalk me for the rest of my writing life: What is the relation between courage and brutality?

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

I started on it in the last months of my Senior year, then plugged along from month to month, expecting any week to get drafted (it was the summer of '43), and unaccountably did not get drafted. The only explanation I can find for such delay is that my draft card must have fallen into the back of the file. I did not compose the novel, therefore, with any clear sense of how much time I had to work, nor even the confidence I could finish it. Rather, I worked on the book because I was out of college and

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my friends were at war and there was no sense in looking for a job if I would also be a soldier soon. So each month passed, and the novel proceeded. I was as lonely as I have ever been—which emotional tone is most certainly to be felt in the lugubrious weight of the style—and I was a little frightened of going to war and a great deal ashamed of not going to war and terrified of my audacity in writing so ambitious a novel—one part of me certainly knew how ignorant I was—and even more terrified I would not have time to finish, and therefore if I were soon killed in the war, nobody (except my family) would know that a young and potentially important author had lived among them: Such is the tone of the book. It is not a period I look back on with pleasure. Still, the novel got written, and I finished it in January of 1944.

It could not have seemed so bad a novel then as it does today. The politics of *A Transit to Narcissus*—during those war years, when you went a long distance to the Right before you found a liberal who was not moving to the Left—were fashionable politics; its portrait of a mental hospital was without comparison literally!—I cannot think of any other American novel, good or bad, written about an insane asylum before World War II. Moreover, the horror of the descriptions was accurate. In those years, before Thorazine and other tranquilizers changed the mood of our mental wards to the mood of our cancer wards, insane asylums, at least from the point of view of the inmates, had probably not improved significantly since the days of Hogarth. The beatings came every bit as frequently as they are portrayed in this novel, nor is the lack of medical care exaggerated. (That the real situation may not be better today—that Thorazine might do even less for a madman's soul than a brutal beating is a discussion belonging to R. D. Laing and will not be entered here.)

At any rate, this early novel, holding to its virtues and staggering under its faults, went out to publishers with the blessing of my agent, Berta Kaslow, who was beginning at William Morris then and loved the book; Before she was done it went to twenty publishing houses. I was in the Army by then, of course, at last! I went into the Army the week *A Transit to Narcissus* went out to the first publisher, and all through basic training and replacement depots and on troop transports and in Leyte and Luzon and Japan, I would receive letters from Berta. Another publisher or

two had just turned the book down, but she had not lost faith. Nor had I. Maybe we burned longer in our hopes for that book because the first editor to read it, Robert Linscott of Random House, then comparable in distinction to Maxwell Perkins, had liked *A Transit to Narcissus* enough to think of publishing it. The other editors at Random House did not agree with him, however, and since I was in the Army and would not be able to work with him on editing it (and, I'm certain, condensing it), Linscott rejected the book reluctantly, and with a splendid letter to me that I carried through the war.

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

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

Yet if the style is monumentally bad, that is also a curiosity, for all through college I had been writing better stuff. A short story full of action and quick prose called "The Greatest Thing in the World" had won a nation-wide college short story contest two years before, and a short novel, *A Calculus at Heaven*, finished at the beginning of my Senior year (indeed, right after the play was written), had been far superior in style, if considerably less am-

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

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

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

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

Instead, my early talents, such as they were, went through the war, and the over-elaborated sinuosities and intercalations of that young man were hammered into shape by a crude anvil of American society—the American Army at war—and the social

sense, lacking so conspicuously in *A Transit to Narcissus*, was now achieved. The writer would spend the rest of his working years in tension between two major themes rather than one, two mysteries to explore by literary means instead of a search for just one holy grail, and that, we may as well assume, was to his benefit. Maybe it is good to be aware early that society can be as much of a mystery as the individual, that Marx offers no more of a final answer than Freud, and that Satan is as profound an enigma as Jesus.

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

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

STEVEN MARCUS: Can you say something about your methods of working?

NORMAN MAILER: They vary with each book. I wrote *The Naked*

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and the *Dead* on the typewriter. I used to write four days a week—Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays.

SM: Definite hours?

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

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

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

at how long it was taking me to get to my patrol.

SM: Do you keep notes, or a journal? What's your preparatory material?

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

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

NM: Compared to someone like James Jones, I'm an amateur at military detail. But at that time I did like all those details, I even used to enjoy patrols, or at least did when I wasn't sick with jungle rot or Atabrine poisoning. I was one of the few men in the platoon who could read a map and once I gave myself away. We used to have classes after a campaign was over. We'd come back to garrison—one of those tent cities out in a rice paddy—and they would teach us all over again how to read maps and compasses or they would drill us on the nomenclature of the machine gun for the eighth time. One day, very bored, I was daydreaming, and the instructor pointed to a part of the map and said, "Mailer, what are those coordinates?" If I had had a moment to think, I would never have answered. It was bad form to be bright in my outfit, but I didn't think: He caught me in a daze, and I looked up and said, "920.017 dash 146.814" and everyone's mouth dropped open. It was the first time anybody ever answered such a question thus briskly in the history of infantry map reading. At any rate, that was the fun for me, the part about the patrol. I suppose that had something to do with *Captain Blood* and

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The Amateur Gentleman . . .

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

STEVEN MARCUS: What methods did you pursue in your next books?

NORMAN MAILER: Well, with *Barbary Shore*, I began to run into trouble. I started it in Paris about six months after I finished *The Naked and the Dead* and did about fifty pages. It was then called *Mrs. Guinevere* and was influenced by Sally Bowles in Isherwood's *Berlin Stories*. *Mrs. Guinevere* never went anywhere. It stopped, just ground down after those first fifty pages. I dropped it, thought I'd never pick it up again, and started to work on another novel. Did all the research, went to Indiana to do research.

SM: On what?

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

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

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

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

SM: You don't mention [in your description of writing *Barbary Shore*] anything about politics. Wasn't your *engagement* at the time a considerable part of the plan?

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

SM: Did Jean Malaquais [to whom the book is dedicated] have much to do with this?

NM: He had an enormous influence on me. He's the only man I know who can combine a powerfully dogmatic mind with the keenest sense of political nuance, and he has a formidable cul-

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ture which seems to live in his veins and capillaries. Since he has also had a most detailed vision of the Russian Revolution—he was steeped in it the way certain American families are imbued with the records of their clan—I spent a year living more closely with the history of Russia from 1917 to 1937 than in the events of my own life. I doubt if I would even have gone back to rewrite *Barbary Shore* if I didn't know Malaquais. Certainly I would never have conceived McLeod. Malaquais, of course, bears no superficial resemblance whatsoever to McLeod—indeed, Malaquais was never even a communist; he started as an anti-Stalinist, but he had a quality when I first met him which was pure Old Bolshevik. One knew that if he had been born in Russia, a contemporary of Lenin's, he would have been one of the leaders of the Revolution and would doubtless have been executed at the trials. So his personality—as it filtered through the contradictory themes of my unconscious—inhabits *Barbary Shore*.

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

NM: *Barbary Shore* was built on the division which existed then in my mind. My conscious intelligence, as I've indicated, became obsessed by the Russian Revolution. But my unconscious was much more interested in other matters: murder, suicide, orgy, psychosis, all the themes I discuss in *Advertisements*. Since the gulf between these conscious and unconscious themes was vast and quite resistant to any quick literary coupling, the tension to get a bridge across resulted in the peculiar feverish hothouse atmosphere of the book. My unconscious felt one kind of dread, my conscious mind another, and *Barbary Shore* lives somewhere in between. That's why its focus is so unearthly. And of course the difficulty kept haunting me from then on in all the work I did afterward. But it was a book written without any plan.

Barbary Shore, however, taught me one thing about myself: I could get up off the floor. The reviews were unbelievably bad. After all, I'd taken myself a little too seriously after *The Naked and the Dead*. Do that, and the book-review world will lie in wait for you. There are a lot of petty killers in our business. So there it

fictional, or

was. My God, *Time* magazine's review of *Barbary Shore* ended by saying, "Paceless, tasteless, graceless, ~~He is~~ beached on a point of no intellectual return." When you realize that it didn't succeed in draining all your blood, you actually decide you're stronger than you thought you were. It's the way a young prizefighter with a promising start can get knocked out early in his career and come back from that to have a good record. The time he was knocked out has become part of his strength. You start writing a novel and think, This could end up badly, but then you shrug: All right. I've been down before. It won't be the end of the world. That's important. I'm fond of *Barbary Shore* for this reason—not its in-and-out merits.

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STEVEN MARCUS: What about *The Deer Park*?

NORMAN MAILER: For *The Deer Park* I didn't have much of a method. It was agony; it was far and away the most difficult of my three novels to write. The first and second drafts were written with the idea that they were only the first part of an eight-part novel. I think I used that enormous scheme as a pretext to get into the work. Apparently, I just couldn't sit down and write a nice modest Hollywood novel. I had to have something grandiose, in conception, anyway. I started *The Deer Park* with "The Man Who Studied Yoga." That was supposed to be a prologue to all eight novels. It went along nicely and was done in a few weeks. And then I got into *The Deer Park* and I forget what my methods were exactly; I think they varied. In the revisions of *Barbary Shore*, I had started working in longhand; as soon as I found myself blocked on the typewriter, I'd shift to longhand. By the time I got to *The Deer Park* I was writing in longhand all the time. I'd write in longhand in the morning and type up what I'd written in the afternoon. I was averaging about four-five pages a day, I think, three days a week; about fifteen pages a week. But I found it an unendurable book to write because I'd finish each day in the most profound black mood; as I found out later it was even physical. I was gutting my liver.

SM: It wasn't alcohol?

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

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SM: Dissatisfaction with what?

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

THE LAST DRAFT OF THE DEER PARK

In his review of *The Deer Park*, Malcolm Cowley said it wasn't a particularly more difficult book to write than *The Ballad of the Sad Café*. He was right. Most of the time, I worked on *The Deer Park* in a few months my time, which had gone bad in the 1940s, earned a hard price for having the right against the tide of a long depression, and money was not important when nobody at Blackman & Co. liked the first draft of the novel. The second draft, which was the third book, also gave little satisfaction to the editors, and even was to Stanley Rinehart, the publisher. I was incensed to know for months now that I was doing, but before I could go, Rinehart asked for a week to decide whether he wanted to do the book. Since he had already given me a contract that allowed him the option not to accept the novel, my decision to reject the manuscript would cost him a small advance. It later turned out he had been hoping his lawyers would find the book obscene, but they did not, at least not then, in May 1954, so he really had no choice but to agree to put the book out in February and, finally, he accepted. To cheer him a bit, I agreed on the contract that he could pay me my advance and publish it, although the first half was on delivery of the manuscript. I thought the first half's payment was

THE LAST DRAFT OF *THE DEER PARK*

In his review of *The Deer Park*, Malcolm Cowley said it must have been a more difficult book to write than *The Naked and the Dead*. He was right. Most of the time, I worked on *The Deer Park* in a low mood; my liver, which had gone bad in the Philippines, exacted a hard price for forcing the effort against the tide of a long depression, and matters were not improved when nobody at Rinehart & Co. liked the first draft of the novel. The second draft, which to me was the finished book, also gave little enthusiasm to the editors, and open woe to Stanley Rinehart, the publisher. I was impatient to leave for Mexico now that I was done, but before I could go, Rinehart asked for a week to decide whether he wanted to do the book. Since he had already given me a contract that allowed him no option not to accept the novel, any decision to reject the manuscript would cost him a sizable advance. (I later learned he had been hoping his lawyers would find the book obscene, but they did not, at least not then, in May 1954.) So he really had no choice but to agree to put the book out in February, and gloomily he consented. To cheer him a bit, I agreed to his request that he delay paying me my advance until publication, although the first half was due on delivery of the manuscript. I thought the favor might improve our

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relations.

Now, if a few of you are wondering why I did not take my book back and go to another publishing house, the answer is that I was tired, I was badly tired. Only a few weeks before, a doctor had given me tests for the liver, and it had shown itself to be sick and depleted. I was hoping that a few months in Mexico would give me a chance to fill up again.

But the next months were not cheerful. *The Deer Park* had been done as well as I could do it, yet I thought it was probably a minor work, and I did not know if I had any real interest in starting another book. I made efforts of course; I collected notes, began to piece together a few ideas for a novel given to bullfighting, and another about a concentration camp; I read most of the work of the other writers of my generation (I think I was looking for a level against which to measure my third novel), went over the galleys when they came, changed a line or two, sent them back. Keeping half busy I mended a bit, but it was a time of dull drifting. When I came back to New York in October, *The Deer Park* was already in page proof. By November, the first advertisement was given to *Publishers Weekly*. Then, with less than ninety days to publication, Stanley Rinehart told me I would have to take out a small piece of the book—six not very explicit lines about the sex of an old producer and a call girl. The moment one was ready to consider losing those six lines, they moved into the moral center of the novel. It would be no tonic for my liver to cut them out. But I also knew Rinehart was serious, and since I was still tired, it seemed a little unreal to try to keep the passage. Like a miser, I had been storing energy to start a new book; I wanted nothing to distract me now. I gave in on a word or two, agreed to rewrite a line, and went home from that particular conference not very impressed with myself. The next morning I called up the editor in chief, Ted Amussen, to tell him I had decided the original words had to be put back.

"Well, fine," he said, "fine. I don't know why you agreed to anything in the first place."

A day later, Stanley Rinehart halted publication, stopped all ads (he was too late to catch the first run of *Publishers Weekly*, which was already on its way to England with a full-page ad for *The Deer Park*), and broke his contract to do the book. I was started on a trip to find a new publisher, and before I was done, the book went to Random House, Knopf, Simon and Schuster,

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Harper's, Scribner's, and unofficially to Harcourt, Brace. Some day it would be fine to give the details, but for now little more than a few lines of dialogue and an editorial report:

BENNETT CERF: This novel will set publishing back twenty years.

ALFRED KNOFF TO AN EDITOR: Is this your idea of the kind of book which should bear a Borzoi imprint?

The lawyer for one publishing house complimented me on the six lines, word for word, which had excited Rinehart to break his contract. This lawyer said, "It's admirable the way you get around the problem here." Then he brought out more than a hundred objections to other parts of the book. One was the line, "She was lovely. Her back was adorable in its contours." I was told that this ought to go because "The principals are not married, and so your description puts a favorable interpretation upon a meretricious relationship."

Hiram Hayden had lunch with me some time after Random House saw the book. He told me he was responsible for their decision not to do it, and if I did not agree with his taste, I had to admire his honesty—it is rare for an editor to tell a writer that kind of truth. Hayden went on to say that the book never came alive for him even though he had been ready to welcome it. "I can tell you that I picked the book up with anticipation. Of course I had heard from Bill, and Bill had told me that he didn't like it, but I never pay attention to what one writer says about the work of another. . . ." Bill was William Styron, and Hayden was his editor. I had asked Styron to call Hayden the night I found out Rinehart had broken his contract. One reason for asking the favor of Styron was that he sent me a long letter about the novel after I had shown it to him in manuscript. He had written, "I don't like *The Deer Park*, but I admire sheer hell out of it." So I thought to impose on him.

Other parts of the account are not less dreary. The only generosity I found was from the late Jack Goodman. He sent me a photostat of his editorial report to Simon and Schuster and, because it was sympathetic, his report became the objective estimate of the situation for me. I assumed that the book when it came out would meet the kind of trouble Goodman expected, and so when I went back later to work on the page proofs I was not free of a fear or two. But that can be talked about in its place.

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Here is the core of his report.

Mailer refuses to make any changes. [He] *will* consider suggestions, but reserves the right to make final decisions, so we must make our decision on what the book now is.

That's not easy. It is full of vitality and power, as readable a novel as I've ever encountered. Mailer emerges as a sort of post-Kinsey F. Scott Fitzgerald. His dialogue is uninhibited and the sexuality of the book is completely interwoven with its purpose, which is to describe a segment of society whose morality is nonexistent. Locale is evidently Palm Springs. Chief characters are Charles Eitel, movie director who first defies the House Un-American Committee, then becomes a friendly witness, his mistress, a great movie star who is his ex-wife, her lover who is the narrator, the head of a great movie company, his son-in-law, a strange, tortured panderer who is Eitel's conscience and, assorted demi-mondaines, homosexuals, actors.

My layman's opinion is that the novel will be banned in certain quarters and that it may very well be up for an obscenity charge, but this should of course be checked by our lawyers. If it were possible to recognize this at the start, to have a united front here and treat the whole issue positively and head-on, I would be for our publishing. But I am afraid such unanimity may be impossible of attainment and if so, we should reject, in spite of the fact that I am certain it will be one of the best-selling novels of the next couple of years. It is the work of a serious artist. . . .

The eighth house was G. P. Putnam's. I didn't want to give it to them. I was planning to go next to Viking, but Walter Minton kept saying, "Give us three days. We'll give you a decision in three days." So we sent it over to Putnam, and in three days they took it without conditions, and without a request for a single change. I had a victory, I had made my point, but in fact I was not very happy. I had grown so wild on my diet of polite letters from publishing houses who didn't want me that I had been ready to collect rejections from twenty houses, publish *The Deer Park* at my own expense, and try to make a kind of publishing history. Instead I was thrown in with Walter Minton, who has since attracted some fame as the publisher of *Lolita*. He is the

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only publisher I ever met who would make a good general. Months after I came to Putnam, Minton told me, "I was ready to take *The Deer Park* without reading it. I knew your name would sell enough copies to pay your advance, and I figured one of these days you're going to write another book like *The Naked and The Dead*," which is the sort of sure hold of strategy you can have when you're not afraid of censorship.

Now I've tried to water this account with a minimum of tears, but taking *The Deer Park* into the nervous system of eight publishing houses was not so good for my own nervous system, nor was it good for getting to work on my new novel. In the ten weeks it took the book to travel the circuit from Rinehart to Putnam, I squandered the careful energy I had been hoarding for months; there was a hard comedy at how much of myself I would burn up in a few hours of hot telephone calls; I had never had any sense for practical affairs, but in those days, carrying *The Deer Park* from house to house, I stayed as close to it as a stage-struck mother pushing her child forward at every producer's office. I was amateur agent for it, messenger boy, editorial consultant, Machiavelli of the luncheon table, fool of the five o'clock drinks. I was learning the publishing business in a hurry, and I made a hundred mistakes and paid for each one by wasting a new bout of energy.

In a way there was sense to it. For the first time in years I was having the kind of experience which was likely to return some day as good work, and so I forced many little events past any practical return, even insulting a few publishers en route as if to discover the limits of each situation. I was trying to find a few new proportions to things, and I did learn a bit. But I'll never know what that novel about the concentration camp would have been like if I had gotten quietly to work when I came back to New York and *The Deer Park* had been published on time. It is possible I was not serious about the book, it is also possible I lost something good, but one way or the other, that novel disappeared in the excitement.

The real confession is that I was making a few of my mental connections those days on marijuana. Like more than one or two of my generation, I had smoked it from time to time over the years, but it never had meant anything. In Mexico, however, down in my depression with a bad liver, pot gave me a sense of something new about the time I was convinced I had seen it all,

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and I liked it enough to take it now and again in New York.

Then *The Deer Park* began to go like a beggar from house to house and en route Stanley Rinehart made it clear he was going to try not to pay the advance. Until then I had had sympathy for him. I thought it had taken a kind of displaced courage to be able to drop the book the way he did. An expensive moral stand, and wasteful for me; but a moral stand. When it turned out that he did not like to bear the expense of being that moral, the experience turned ugly for me. It took many months and the service of my lawyer to get the money, but long before that, the situation had become real enough to drive a spike into my castrated mind. I realized in some bottom of myself that for years I had been the sort of comic figure I would have cooked to a turn in one of my books, a radical who had the nineteenth-century naïveté to believe that the people with whom he did business were 1) gentlemen, 2) fond of him, and 3) respectful of his ideas even if in disagreement with them. Now I was in the act of learning that I was not adored so very much; that my ideas were seen as nasty; and that my fine America, which I had been at pains to criticize for so many years, was in fact a real country which did real things and ugly things to the characters of more people than just the characters of my books. If the years since the war had not been brave or noble in the history of the country, which I certainly thought and do think, why then did it come as surprise that people in publishing were not as good as they used to be, and that the day of Maxwell Perkins was a day which was gone, really gone, gone as Greta Garbo and Scott Fitzgerald? Not easy, one could argue, for an advertising man to admit that advertising is a dishonest occupation, and no easier was it for the working novelist to see that now were left only the cliques, fashions, vogues, snobs, snots, and fools, not to mention a dozen bureaucracies of criticism; that there was no room for the old literary idea of oneself as a major writer, a figure in the landscape. The day was gone when people held on to your novels no matter what others might say. Instead one's potential young readers waited now for the verdict of professionals.

I had begun to read my good American novels at the end of an era—I could remember people who would talk wistfully about the excitement with which they had gone to bookstores because it was publication day for the second novel of Thomas Wolfe, and in college, at a faculty tea, I had listened for an hour

to a professor's wife who was so blessed as to have known John Dos Passos. My adolescent crush on the profession of the writer had been more lasting than I could have guessed. I had even been so simple as to think that the kind of people who went into publishing were still most concerned with the few writers who made the profession not empty of honor, and I had been taking myself seriously. I had been thinking I was one of those writers.

Instead I caught it in the face and deserved it for not looking at the evidence. I was out of fashion and that was the score; that was all the score; the publishing habits of the past were going to be of no help for my *Deer Park*. And so as the language of sentiment would have it, something broke in me, but I do not know if it was so much a loving heart as a cyst of the weak, the unreal, and the needy, and I was finally open to my anger. I turned within my psyche, I can almost believe, for I felt something shift to murder in me. I finally had the simple sense to understand that if I wanted my work to travel further than others, the life of my talent depended on fighting a little more, and looking for help a little less. But I deny the sequence in putting it this way, for it took me years to come to this fine point. All I felt then was that I was an outlaw, a psychic outlaw, and I liked it, I liked it a good night better than trying to be a gentleman, and with a set of emotions accelerating one on the other, I mined down deep into the murderous message of marijuana, the smoke of the assassins, and for the first time in my life I knew what it was to make your kicks.

I could write about that here, but it would be a mistake. Let the experience stay where it is, and on a given year it may be found again in a novel. For now it is enough to say that marijuana opens the senses and weakens the mind. In the end, you pay for what you get. If you get something big, the cost will equal it. There is a moral economy to one's vice, but you learn that last of all. I still had the thought it was possible to find something which cost nothing. Thus, *The Deer Park* resting at Putnam, and new friends found in Harlem, I was off on that happy ride where you discover a new duchy of jazz every night and the drought of the past is given a rain of new sound. What has been dull and dead in your years is now tart to the taste, and there is sweet in the illusion of how fast you can change. To keep up with it all, I began to log a journal, a wild set of thoughts and outlines for huge projects—I wrote one hundred thousand words in

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eight weeks, more than once twenty pages a day, in a style which came willy-nilly from the cramp of the past, a lockstep jargon of sociology and psychology that sours my teeth when I look at those pages today. Yet this journal has the start of more ideas than I will have again; ideas which came so fast and so rich that sometimes I think my brain was dulled by the heat of their passage.

The journal wore down by February, about the time *The Deer Park* had once been scheduled to appear. By then I had decided to change a few things in the novel, nothing in the way of lawyer's deletions, just a few touches for style. They were not happy about this at Putnam. Minton argued that some interest in the book would be lost if the text were not identical to Rinehart's page proofs, and Ted Purdy, my editor, told me more than once that they liked the book "just the way it is." Besides, there was thought of bringing it out in June as a summer book.

Well, I wanted to take a look. After all, I had been learning new lessons. I began to go over the page proofs, and the book read as if it had been written by someone else. I was changed from the writer who had labored on that novel, enough to be able to see it without anger or vanity or the itch to justify myself. Now, after three years of living with the book, I could at last admit the style was wrong, that it had been wrong from the time I started, that I had been strangling the life of my novel in a poetic prose which was too self-consciously attractive and formal, false to the life of my characters, especially false to the life of my narrator, who was the voice of my novel and so gave the story its air. He had been a lieutenant in the Air Force, he had been cool enough and hard enough to work his way up from an orphan asylum, and to allow him to write in a style which at its best sounded like Nick Carraway in *The Great Gatsby* must of course blur his character and leave the book unreal. Nick was legitimate, out of fair family, the Midwest and Princeton—he would write as he did, his style was himself. But the style of Sergius O'Shaugnessy, no matter how good it became (and the Rinehart *Deer Park* had its moments), was a style which came out of nothing so much as my determination to prove I could muster a fine style.

If I wanted to improve my novel yet keep the style, I would have to make my narrator fit the prose, change his past, make him an onlooker, a rich pretty boy brought up let us say by two

old-maid aunts, able to have an affair with a movie star only by luck and/or the needs of the plot, which would give me a book less distracting, well written but minor. If, however, I wanted to keep that first narrator, my orphan, fier, adventurer, *germ*—for three years he had been the frozen germ of some new theme—well, to keep him I would need to change the style from the inside of each sentence. I could keep the structure of my book, I thought—it had been put together for such a narrator—but the style could not escape. Probably I did not see it all so clearly as I now suggest. I believe I started with the conscious thought that I would tinker just a little, try to patch a compromise, but the navigator of my unconscious must already have made the choice, because it came as no real surprise that after a few days of changing a few words I moved more and more quickly toward the eye of the problem, and in two or three weeks I was tied to the work of doing a new *Deer Park*. The book was edited in a way no editor could ever have time or love to find; it was searched sentence by sentence, word for word, the style of the work lost its polish, became rough, and I can say real, because there was an abrupt and muscular body back of the voice now. It had been there all the time, trapped in the porcelain of a false style, but now as I chipped away, the work for a time became exhilarating in its clarity—I never enjoyed work so much—I felt as if finally I was learning how to write, learning the joints of language and the touch of a word, felt as if I came close to the meanings of sound. I even had a glimpse of what Flaubert might have felt, for as I went on tuning the book, often five or six words would pile above one another in the margin at some small crisis of choice. As I worked in this fine mood, I kept sending pages to the typist, yet so soon as I had exhausted the old galley pages, I could not keep away from the new typewritten copy—it would be close to say the book had come alive, and was invading my brain.

Soon the early pleasure of the work turned restless; the consequences of what I was doing were beginning to seep into my stamina. It was as if I were the captive of an illness whose first symptoms had been excitement, prodigies of quick work, and a confidence that one could go on forever, but that I was by now close to a second stage where what had been quick would be more like fever, a first wind of fatigue upon me, a knowledge that at the end of the drunken night a junkie cold was waiting. I was going to move at a pace deadly to myself, loading and over-

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loading whatever little centers of the mind are forced to make the hard decisions. In ripping up the silk of the original syntax, I was tearing into any number of careful habits as well as whatever subtle fleshing of the nerves and the chemicals had gone to support them.

For six years I had been writing novels in the first person; it was the only way I could begin a book, even though the third person was more to my taste. Worse, I seemed unable to create a narrator in the first person who was not over-delicate, over-sensitive, and painfully tender, which was an odd portrait to give, because I was not delicate, not physically; when it was a matter of strength I had as much as the next man. In those days I would spend time reminding myself that I had been a bit of an athlete (house football at Harvard, years of skiing), that I had not quit in combat, and once when a gang broke up a party in my loft, I had taken two cracks on the head with a hammer and had still been able to fight. Yet the first person seemed to paralyze me, as if I had a horror of creating a voice which could be in any way bigger than myself. So I had become mired in a false style for every narrator I tried. If now I had been in a fight, had found out that no matter how weak I could be in certain ways, I was also steady enough to hang on to six important lines, that may have given me new respect for myself, I don't know, but for the first time I was able to use the first person in a way where I could suggest some of the stubbornness and belligerence I also might have, I was able to color the empty reality of that first person with some real feeling of how I had always felt, which was to be outside, for Brooklyn, where I grew up, is not the center of anything. I was able, then, to create an adventurer whom I believed in, and as he came alive for me, the other parts of the book which had been stagnant for a year and more also came to life, and new things began to happen to Eitel my director and to Elena his mistress and their characters changed. It was a phenomenon. I learned how real a novel is. Before, the story of Eitel had been told by O'Shaugnessy of the weak voice; now by a confident young man: When the new narrator would remark that Eitel was his best friend and so he tried not to find Elena too attractive, the man and woman he was talking about were larger than they had once been. I was no longer telling of two nice people who fail at love because the world is too large and too cruel for them; the new O'Shaugnessy had moved me by degrees to

the more painful story of two people who are strong as well as weak, corrupt as much as pure, and fail to grow despite their bravery in a poor world, because they are finally not brave enough, and so do more damage to one another than to the unjust world outside them. Which for me was exciting, for here and there *The Deer Park* now had the rare tenderness of tragedy. The most powerful leverage in fiction comes from point of view, and giving O'Shaugnessy courage gave passion to the others.

But the punishment was commencing for me. I was now creating a man who was braver and stronger than me, and the more my new style succeeded, the more was I writing an implicit portrait of myself as well. There is a shame about advertising yourself that way, a shame which became so strong that it was a psychological violation to go on. Yet I could not afford the time to digest the self-criticisms backing up in me. I was forced to drive myself, and so more and more I worked by tricks, taking marijuana the night before and then drugging myself into sleep with an overload of Seconal. In the morning I would be lithe with new perception, could read new words into the words I had already, and so could go on in the pace of my work, the most scrupulous part of my brain too sluggish to interfere. My powers of logic became weaker each day, but the book had its own logic, and so I did not need close reason. What I wanted and what the drugs gave me was the quick flesh of associations, and there I was often oversensitive, could discover new experience in the lines of my text like a hermit savoring the revelation of Scripture; I saw so much in some sentences that more than once I dropped into the pit of the amateur: since I was receiving such emotion from my words, I assumed everyone else would be stimulated as well, and on many a line I twisted the phrase in such a way that it could read well only when read slowly, about as slowly as it would take for an actor to read it aloud. Once you write that way, the quick reader (who is nearly all your audience) will stumble and fall against the vocal shifts of your prose. Then you had best have the cartel of a Hemingway, because in such a case it is critical whether the reader thinks it is your fault or is so in awe of your reputation that he returns on the words, throttles his pace, and tries to discover why he is so stupid as not to swing on your style.

An example: in the Rinehart *Deer Park* I had this:

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"They make Sugar sound so good in the newspapers," she declared one night to some people in a bar, "that I'll really try him. I really will, Sugar." And she gave me a sisterly kiss.

I happened to change that very little. I put in "said" instead of "declared" and later added "older sister," so that it now read:

And she gave me a sisterly kiss. Older sister.

Just two words, but I felt as if I had revealed some divine law of nature, had laid down an invaluable clue—the kiss of an older sister was a worldly universe away from the kiss of a younger sister—and I thought to give myself the Nobel Prize for having brought such illumination and *division* to the cliché of the sisterly kiss.

Well, as an addition it wasn't bad fun, and for two words it did a bit to give a sense of what was working back and forth between Sergius and Lulu, it was another small example of Sergius' hard eye for the world, and his cool sense of his place in it, and all this was to the good, or would have been for a reader who went slowly, and stopped, and thought. But if anyone was in a hurry, the little sentence "Older sister" was like a finger in the eye. It jabbed the unconscious, and gave an uncomfortable nip of rhythm to the mind.

I had five hundred changes of this kind. I started with the first paragraph of the book, on the third sentence which pokes the reader with its backed-up rhythm, "Some time ago," and I did that with intent, to slow my readers from the start, like a fighter who throws his right two seconds after the bell and so gives the other man no chance to decide on the pace.

There was a real question, however, whether I could slow the reader down, and so as I worked on further, at some point beginning to write paragraphs and pages to add to the new Putnam galleys, the attrition of the drugs and the possibility of failure began to depress me, and Benzedrine entered the balance, and I was on the way to wearing badly. Because, determined or no that they would read me slowly, praying my readers would read me slowly, there was no likelihood they would do anything of the sort if the reviews were bad. As I started to worry this it grew worse, because I knew in advance that three or four of my major reviews had to be bad—*Time* magazine for one, be-

cause Max Gissen was the book review editor, and I had insulted him in public once by suggesting that the kind of man who worked for a mind so exquisitely and subtly totalitarian as Henry Luce was not likely to have any ideas of his own. The New York Daily Times would be bad because Orville Prescott was well known for his distaste of books too forthrightly sexual; and Saturday Review would be bad. That is, they would probably be bad; the mentality of their reviewers would not be above the level of their dean of reviewers, Mr. Maxwell Geismar, and Geismar didn't seem to know that my second novel was titled *Barbary Shore* rather than *Barbary Coast*. I could spin this out, but what is more to the point is that I had begun to think of the reviews before finishing the book, and this doubtful occupation came out of the kind of inner knowledge I had of myself in those days. I knew what was good for my energy and what was poor, and so I knew that for the vitality of my work in the future, and yes even the quantity of my work, I needed a success and I needed it badly if I was to shed the fatigue I had been carrying since *Barbary Shore*. Some writers receive not enough attention for years, and so learn early to accommodate the habits of their work to little recognition. I think I could have done that when I was twenty-five. With *The Naked and The Dead* a new life had begun, however. I had gone through the psychic labor of changing a good many modest habits in order to let me live a little more happily as a man with a name which could arouse quick reactions in strangers. If that started as an over-large work, because I started as a decent but scared boy, well I had come to live with the new life, I had learned to like success—in fact I had probably come to depend on it, or at least my new habits did.

When *Barbary Shore* was ambushed in the alley, the damage to my nervous system was slow but thorough. My status dropped immediately—America is a quick country—but my ego did not permit me to understand that, and I went through tiring years of subtle social defeats because I did not know that I was no longer as large to others as I had been. I was always overmatching myself. To put it crudely, I would think I was dropping people when they were dropping me. And of course my unconscious knew better. There was all the waste of ferocious if unheard discussion between the armies of ego and id; I would get up in the morning with less snap in me than I had taken to sleep. Six or seven years of breathing that literary air taught me a writer

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stayed alive in the circuits of such hatred only if he was unappreciated enough to be adored by a clique, or was so overbought by the public that he excited some defenseless nerve in the snob. I knew if *The Deer Park* was a powerful best-seller (the magical figure had become one hundred thousand copies for me) that I would then have won. I would be the first serious writer of my generation to have a best-seller twice, and so it would not matter what was said about the book. Half of publishing might call it cheap, dirty, sensational, second-rate, and so forth and so forth, but it would be weak rage and could not hurt, for the literary world suffers a spot of the national taint—a serious writer is certain to be considered major if he is also a best-seller; in fact, most readers are never convinced of his value until his books do well. Steinbeck is better known than Dos Passos; John O'Hara is taken seriously by people who dismiss Farrell, and indeed it took three decades and a Nobel Prize before Faulkner was placed on a level with Hemingway. For that reason, it would have done no good if someone had told me at the time that the financial success of a writer with major talent was probably due more to what was meretricious in his work than what was central. The argument would have meant nothing to me—all I knew was that seven publishing houses had been willing to dismiss my future, and so if the book did poorly, a good many people were going to congratulate themselves on their foresight and be concerned with me even less. I could see that if I wanted to keep on writing the kind of book I liked to write, I needed the energy of new success, I needed blood. Through every bit of me, I knew *The Deer Park* had damn well better make it or I was close to some serious illness, a real apathy of the will.

Every now and again I would have the nightmare of wondering what would happen if all the reviews were bad, as bad as *Barbary Shore*. I would try to tell myself that could not happen, but I was not certain, and I knew that if the book received a unanimously bad press and still showed signs of selling well, it was likely to be brought up for prosecution as obscene. As a delayed convulsion from the McCarthy years, the fear of censorship was strong in publishing, in England it was critically bad, and so I also knew that the book could lose such a suit—there might be no one of reputation to say it was serious. If it were banned, it could sink from sight. With the reserves I was throwing into the work, I no longer knew if I was ready to take another beating—

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for the first time in my life I had worn down to the edge, I could see through to the other side of my fear, I knew a time could come when I would be no longer my own man, that I might lose what I had liked to think was the incorruptible center of my strength (which of course I had had money and freedom to cultivate). Already the signs were there—I was beginning to avoid new lines in the Putnam *Deer Park* which were legally doubtful, and once in a while, like a gambler hedging a bet, I toned down individual sentences from the Rinehart *Deer Park*, nothing much, always a matter of the new O'Shaughnessy character, a change from "at last I was able to penetrate into the mysterious and magical belly of a movie star," to what was more in character for him: "I was led to discover the mysterious brain of a movie star." Which "brain" in context was fun, for it was accurate, and "discover" was a word of more life than the legality of "penetrate," but I could not be sure if I was chasing my new aesthetic or afraid of the cops. The problem was that *The Deer Park* had become more sexual in the new version, the characters had more force, the air had more heat, and I had gone through the kind of galloping self-analysis which makes one very sensitive to the sexual nuance of every gesture, word, and object—the book now seemed overcharged to me, even a terror of a novel, a cold chisel into all the dull mortar of our guilty society. In my mind it became a more dangerous book than it really was, and my drug-hipped paranoia saw long consequences in every easy line of dialogue. I kept the panic in its place, but by an effort of course, and once in a while I would weaken enough to take out a line because I could not see myself able to defend it happily in a court of law. But it was a mistake to nibble at the edges of censoring myself, for it gave no life to my old pride that I was the boldest writer to have come out of my flabby time, and I think it helped to kill the small chance of finding my way into what could have been a novel as important as *The Sun Also Rises*.

But let me spell it out a bit: Originally, *The Deer Park* had been about a movie director and a girl with whom he had a bad affair, and it was told by a sensitive but faceless young man. In changing the young man, I saved the book from being minor, but put a disproportion upon it because my narrator became too interesting, and not enough happened to him in the second half of the book, and so it was to be expected that readers would be disappointed by this part of the novel.

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Before I was finished, I saw a way to write another book altogether. In what I had so far done, Sergius O'Shaugnessy was given an opportunity by a movie studio to sell the rights to his life and get a contract as an actor. After more than one complication, he finally refused the offer, lost the love of his movie star Lulu, and went wandering by himself, off to become a writer. This episode had never been an important part of the book, but I could see that the new Sergius was capable of accepting the offer, and if he went to Hollywood and became a movie star himself, the possibilities were good, for in O'Shaugnessy I had a character who was ambitious yet in his own way, moral, and with such a character one could travel deep into the paradoxes of the time.

Well, I was not in shape to consider that book. With each week of work, bombed and sapped and charged and stoned with lush, with pot, with benny, saggy, coffee, and two packs a day, I was working live, and over-alert, and tiring into what felt like death, afraid all the way because I had achieved the worst of vicious circles in myself; I had gotten too tired, I was more tired than I had ever been in combat, and so as the weeks went on, and publication was delayed from June to August and then to October, there was only a worn-out part of me to keep protesting into the pillows of one drug and the pinch of the other that I ought to have the guts to stop the machine, to call back the galleys, to cease—to rest, to give myself another two years and write a book which would go a little further to the end of my particular night.

But I had passed the point where I could stop. My anxiety had become too great. I did not know anything anymore. I did not have that clear sense of the way things work, which is what you need for the natural proportions of a long novel, and it is likely I would not have been writing a new book so much as arguing with the law. Of course another man might have had the stamina to write the new book and manage to be indifferent to everything else, but it was too much to ask of me. By then I was like a lover in a bad, but uncontrollable affair; my woman was publication, and it would have cost too much to give her up before we were done. My imagination had been committed—to stop would leave half the psyche in limbo.

Knowing, however, what I had failed to do, shame added momentum to the punishment of the drugs. By the last week or two, I had worn down so badly that with a dozen pieces still to be

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fixed, I was reduced to working hardly more than an hour a day. Like an old man, I would come up out of a Seasonal stupor with four or five times the normal dose in my veins and drop into a chair to sit for hours. It was July, the heat was grim in New York, the last of the book had to be in by August 1. Putnam had been more than accommodating, but the vehicle of publication was on its way, and the book could not be postponed beyond the middle of October or it would miss all chance for a large fall sale. I would sit in a chair and watch a baseball game on television, or get up and go out in the heat to a drugstore for a sandwich and malted—it was my outing for the day: The walk would feel like a patrol in a tropical sun, and it was two blocks, no more. When I came back, I would lie down, my head would lose the outer wrappings of sedation, and with a crumb of Benzedrine, the first snake or two of thought would wind through my brain. I would go for some coffee—it was a trip to the kitchen, but when I came back I would have a scratch-board and pencil in hand. Watching some afternoon horror on television, the boredom of the performers coming through their tense hilarities with a bleakness to match my own, I would pick up the board, wait for the first sentence—like all working addicts I had come to an old man's fine sense of inner timing—and then slowly, but picking up speed, the actions of the drugs hovering into collaboration like two ships passing in view of one another, I would work for an hour, not well but not badly either. (Pages 195 to 200 of the Putnam edition were written this way.) Then my mind would wear out, and new work was done for the day. I would sit around, watch more television, and try to rest my dulled mind, but by evening a riot of bad nerves was on me again, and at two in the morning I'd be having the manly debate of whether to try sleep with two double capsules or settle again for my need of three.

Somehow I got the book done for the last deadline. Not perfectly—doing just the kind of editing and small rewriting I was doing, I could have used another two or three days, but I got it almost the way I wanted, and then I took my car up to the Cape and lay around in Provincetown with my wife, trying to mend, and indeed doing a fair job, because I came off sleeping pills and the marijuana and came part of the way back into that world which has the proportions of the ego. I picked up on *The Magic Mountain*, took it slowly, and lowered *The Deer Park* down to modest size in my brain. Which, events proved, was just as well.

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A few weeks later we came back to the city, and I took some mescaline. Maybe one dies a little with the poison of mescaline in the blood. At the end of a long and private trip which no quick remark should try to describe, the book of *The Deer Park* floated into mind, and I sat up, reached through a pleasure garden of velvety light to find the tree of a pencil and the bed of a notebook, and brought them to union together. Then, out of some flesh in myself I had not yet known, with the words coming one by one, in separate steepes and falls, hip in their turnings, all cool with their flights, like the touch of being coming into other being, so the last six lines of my bloody book came to me, and I was done. And it was the only good writing I ever did directly from a drug, even if I paid for it with a hangover beyond measure.

That way the novel received its last sentence, and if I had waited one more day it would have been too late, for in the next twenty-four hours, the printers began their cutting and binding. The book was out of my hands.

Six weeks later, when *The Deer Park* came out, I was no longer feeling eighty years old but a vigorous, hysterical sixty-three, and I laughed like an old pirate at the indignation I had breezed into being. The important reviews broke about seven good and eleven bad, and the out-of-town reports were almost three-to-one bad to good, but I was not unhappy, because the good reviews were lively and the bad reviews were full of factual error.

More interesting is the way reviews divided in the New York magazines and newspapers. *Time*, for example, was bad, *Newsweek* was good; *Harper's* was terrible, but the *Atlantic* was adequate; the New York *Daily Times* was very bad, the Sunday *Times* was good; the *Daily Herald Tribune* gave a mark of zero, the Sunday *Herald Tribune* was better than good; *Commentary* was careful but complimentary, the *Reporter* was frantic; the *Saturday Review* was a scold, and Brendan Gill, writing for *The New Yorker*, put together a series of slaps and superlatives, which went partially like this:

... a big, vigorous, rowdy, ill-shaped, and repellent book, so strong and so weak, so adroit and so fumbling, that only a writer of the greatest and most reckless talent could have flung it between covers.

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It's one of the three or four lines I've thought perceptive in all the reviews of my books. That Malcolm Cowley used one of the same words in saying *The Deer Park* was "serious and reckless" is also, I think, interesting, for reckless the book was—and two critics, anyway, had the instinct to feel it.

One note appeared in many reviews. The strongest statement of it was by John Hutchens in the New York Daily *Herald Tribune*:

. . . the original version reputedly was more or less re-written and certain materials eliminated that were deemed too erotic for public consumption. And, with that, a book that might at least have made a certain reputation as a large shocker wound up as a cipher. . . .

I was bothered to the point of writing a letter to the twenty-odd newspapers which reflected this idea. What bothered me was that I could never really prove I had not "eliminated" the book. Over the years all too many readers would have some hazy impression that I had disemboweled large pieces of the best meat, perspiring in a coward's sweat, a publisher's directive in my ear. (For that matter, I still get an occasional letter which asks if it is possible to see the unbowdlerized *Deer Park*.) Part of the cost of touching the Rinehart galleys was to start those rumors, and in fact I was not altogether free of the accusation, as I have tried to show. Even the six lines which so displeased Rinehart had been altered a bit; I had shown them once to a friend whose opinion I respected, and he remarked that while it was impossible to accept the sort of order Rinehart had laid down, still a phrase like the "fount of power" had a Victorian heaviness about it. Well, that was true, it was out of character for O'Shaugnessy's new style, and so I altered it to the "thumb of power" and then other changes became desirable, and the curious are invited to compare the two versions of this particular passage in *Advertisements for Myself*, but the mistake I made was to take a small aesthetic gain on those six lines and lose a larger clarity about a principle.

What more is there to say? The book moved fairly well. It climbed to seven and then to six on *The New York Times* best-seller list, stayed there for a week or two, and then slipped down. By Christmas, the tone of the *Park* and the Christmas spirit being not all that congenial, it was just about off the lists forever. It did

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well, however; it would have reached as high as three or two or even to number one if it had come out in June and then been measured against the low sales of summer, for it sold over fifty thousand copies after returns, which surprised a good many in publishing, as well as disappointing a few, including myself. I discovered that I had been poised for an enormous sale or a failure—a middling success was cruel to take. Week after week I kept waiting for the book to erupt into some dramatic change of pace which would send it up in sales instead of down, but that never happened. I was left with a draw, not busted, not made, and since I was empty at the time, worn-out with work, waiting for the quick transfusions of a generous success, the steady sales of the book left me deeply depressed. Having reshaped my words with an intensity of feeling I had not known before, I could not understand why others were not overcome with my sense of life, of sex, and of sadness. Like a starved revolutionary in a garret, I had compounded out of need and fever and vision and fear nothing less than a madman's confidence in the identity of my being and the wants of all others, and it was a new dull load to lift and to bear, this knowledge that I had no magic so great as to hasten the time of the apocalypse but that instead I would be open like all others to the attritions of half-success and small failure. Something God-like in my confidence began to leave, and I was reduced in dimension if now less a boy. I knew I had failed to bid on the biggest hand I ever held.

The proper end to this account is the advertisement I took in *The Village Voice*. It was bought in November 1955, a month after publication, it was put together by me and paid for by me, and it was my way I now suppose of saying good-bye to the pleasure of a quick triumph, of making my apologies for the bad flaws in the bravest effort I had yet pulled out of myself, and certainly for declaring to the world (in a small way, mean pity) that I no longer gave a sick dog's drop for the wisdom, the reliability, and the authority of the public's literary mind, those creeps and old ladies of vested reviewing.

Besides, I had the tender notion—believe it if you will—that the ad might after all do its work and excite some people to buy the book.

But here it is:

All over America **"THE DEER PARK"** is getting nothing but

RAVES

"THE YEAR'S WORST SNAKE PIT IN FICTION"

—FRANK O'NEILL, CLEVELAND NEWS

**"SORDID AND
CRUMMY"**

—HERMAN KOGAN,
CHICAGO SUN-TIMES

**"MORONIC MINDLESSNESS...
...GOLDEN GARBAGE HEAP"**

—JOHN HUTCHENS, NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE

"DISGUSTING"—HOUSTON POST

"EXASPERATING"—YALE LIT

"GAUCHE"—CHAS. ROLO, ATLANTIC

"UNFAIR"—LOS ANGELES HERALD EXPRESS

"UNDISCRIMINATING"—ARGONAUT SAN FRAN.

"EMBARRASSING"—HARTFORD TIMES

"UNSAVORY"—DES MOINES REGISTER

"JUNK"—LITTLE ROCK GAZETTE

"NASTY"—ORVILLE PRESCOTT

"SILLY"—HOLLIS ALPERT

"DULL"—LON TINKLE

"BOTCH"—PAUL PICKREL



"A BUNCH OF BUMS"

—SCOTT O'DELL, LOS ANGELES MIRROR NEWS

"THE DEER PARK"—\$4.00 G. P. PUTNAM—AVAILABLE AT YOUR LOCAL BOOK STORE
THIS ADVERTISEMENT HAS BEEN PAID FOR BY NORMAN MAILER
AUTHOR OF "THE NAKED AND THE DEAD" "BARRY SHORE" AND "THE DEER PARK"

THE LAST DRAFT OF THE DEER PARK . 47

HAZARDS

I treat bad reviews in the manner that a politician running for office treats a loss of support. A couple of friends called up after a very bad review of *Ancient Evenings* appeared in *The New York Times Book Review* and asked, "Are you all right?" I'd seen it a week before, so my unhappiness was now digested. I told them that it was like realizing the county chairman in Schenectady had decided against your candidacy. But to lose Schenectady doesn't mean you stop running for governor. It isn't my ego that's hurt, it's my damn pocketbook. Getting a bad review in the *Sunday Times* affects my wallet. That's all. Whereas when I was younger, I used to consider a bad review a personal insult. The guy who wrote it was evil. In fact, however, I have never actually punched out a reviewer, which I say with a certain wistfulness. I did sit next to Philip Rahv after he had written an atrocious review of *An American Dream*. Rahv had his virtues, bless him, but physical courage was not one of them. So I made a point of installing myself beside him on a couch at a party, and while I smiled at him, I kept my body firmly pressed into his, leaning into him all the while that we had a long thirty-minute conversation about something else altogether. I was perfectly pleasant the entire time and everything seemed all right, except

we were both tilted alarmingly from my leaning into him. He was in an absolute panic, waiting for me to strike. It must have seemed an odd sight from across the room: He was a heavy man, and the two of us probably looked like two doughnuts crushed together at one end of the box.

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

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

I am going to speak of the working state of the novelist once he has passed his apprenticeship—and to avoid saying *his* or *her* on every occasion, let me aver that I am going back to the old English tradition of using the possessive pronoun *his* to indicate all of humankind. The apprenticeship of an established writer is subject to all the hazards of his profession, those perils of writer's block and failing energy, alcoholism, drugs, and desertion. For many a writer deserts his writing to go into a collateral profession in advertising or academia, trade journals, publishing—the list is long. What is not routine is to become a young writer with a firmly established name. Luck as well as talent can take one across the first border. Some do surpass the trials of learning technique and commence to make a living at our bizarre profession. It is then, however, that less-charted perils begin. I would like to speak at length of the hazards of writing, the cruelties it extorts out of mind and flesh. I know something of these hazards and I ought to. My first story was published, after all, more than forty years ago and the first novel I wrote that saw print is going to be thirty-six years old in a month. Obviously for a long time I have been accustomed to thinking of myself as a writer, even as

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others see me that way. So I hear one lament over and over from strangers: "Oh, I too would have liked to be an author." You can almost hear them musing aloud about the freedom of the life. How felicitous to have no boss and to face no morning rush to work, to know all the intoxications of celebrity—how they long to satisfy the voice within that keeps saying, "What a pity no one will know how unusual my life has been! There are all those secrets I cannot tell!" Years ago, I wrote, "Experience, when it cannot be communicated to another, must wither within and be worse than lost." I often ponder the remark. Once in a while your hand will write out a sentence that seems true and yet you do not know where it came from. Ten or twenty words seem able to live in balance with your experience. It may be one's nicest reward as a writer. You feel you have come near the truth. When that happens, you can look at the page years later and meditate again on the meaning, for it goes deep. So I think I understand why people want to write. All the same, I am also a professional and so there is another part of me, I confess, that is ready to laugh when strangers tell me of their aspirations. I am not free of the scorn of a veteran prizefighter who hears someone say, "I'd like to flatten that bully." The speaker does not know how many years of discipline and dull punishment must be given over to the ability to throw a good punch at will. I say to myself, "They can write an interesting letter so they assume they are ready to tell the story of their lives. They do not understand how much it will take to pick up even the rudiments of narrative." If I believe that the person who has spoken to me in that fashion is serious, I warn them as gently as I can. I say, "Well, it's probably as hard to learn to write as to play the piano." Then if their only reason for wanting to be a writer is to pull in some quick success, they feel deflated and that's okay with me. One shouldn't encourage people to write for too little. It's a splendid life when you think of its emoluments, but it is death to the soul if you are not good at it.

Let me keep my promise, then, and go on a little about the negative part of being a writer. Those few of you here who don't see yourselves as potential writers may then feel less wistful, for if you still have not discovered whether you are talented enough to tell your private tale, you will at least have escaped an awful pressure. To skip at one bound over all those fascinating and relatively happy years when one is an apprentice writer and learning every day, at least on good days, there is in contrast the

more or less constant pressure on the life of the professional novelist. For soon after you finish each hard-earned book, the reviews come in and the reviews are murderous. Contrast an author's reception to an actor's. With the notable exception of John Simon, theater critics do not often try to kill performers. I believe there is an unspoken agreement that thespians deserve to be protected against the perils of first nights. After all, the actor is daring a rejection that can prove as fearful as a major wound. For sensitive human beings like actors, a hole in the ego can be worse than a hole in the heart. Such moderation does not carry over, however, into literary criticism. *Meretricious, dishonest, labored, loathsome, pedestrian, hopeless, disgusting, disappointing, raunchy, ill-wrought, boring*—these are not uncommon words for a typical bad review. You would be hard put to find another professional field where criticism is equally savage. Accountants, lawyers, engineers, and doctors do not often speak publicly in this manner.

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

In fact, not too many good writers remain productive through the decades. There are too many other hazards as well. We are jerked by the media in and out of fashion, and each drop from popularity can feel like a termination to your career. Such insecurity is no help to morale, for even in the best periods every

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writer always knows one little terror: *Does it stop tomorrow? Does it all stop tomorrow?* Writing is spooky. There is no routine of an office to keep you going, only the white page each morning, and you never know where your words are coming from, those divine words. So your professionalism at best is fragile. You cannot always tell yourself that fashions pass and history will smile at you again. In the literary world, it is not easy to acquire the stoicism to endure, especially if you've begun as a vulnerable adolescent. It is not even automatic to pray for luck if it has been pessimism itself which gave force to your early themes. Maybe it is no more than blind will, but some authors stay at it. Over and over they keep writing a new book and do it in the knowledge that upon its publication they will probably be savaged and will not be able to fight back. An occasional critic can be singled out for counterattack, or one can always write a letter to the editor of the book section, but such efforts at self-defense are like rifle fire against fighter planes. All-powerful is the writer when he sits at his desk, but on the public stage he may feel as if his rights are puny. His courage, if he has any, must learn to live with the bruises left by comments on his work. The spiritual skin may go slack or harden to leather, but the honor of his effort to live down bad reviews and write again has to be analogous to the unspoken, unremarked courage of people who dwell under the pressure of a long illness and somehow resolve enough of their inmost contradictions to be able to get better. I suppose this is equal to saying that you cannot become a professional writer and keep active for three or four decades unless you learn to live with the most difficult condition of your existence, which is that superficial book reviewing is irresponsible and serious literary criticism can be close to merciless. The conviction that such a condition is fair has to take root deep enough to bear analogy to the psychology of a peasant who farms a mountain slope and takes it for granted that he was meant to toil through the years with one foot standing higher than the other.

Every good author who manages to forge a long career for himself must be able, therefore, to build a character that will not be unhinged by a bad reception. That takes art. Few writers have rugged personalities when they are young. In general, the girls seldom look like potential beauty contest winners and the boys show small promise of becoming future All-Americans. They are most likely to be found on the sidelines, commencing

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

It is not easy to explain such disturbances to people unless they do write. Someone who has never tried fiction will hardly be quick to understand that in the study, a writer often does feel God-like. There he sits, ensconced in judgment on other people's lives. Yet contemplate the person in the chair: He could be hungover and full of the small shames of what he did yesterday or what he did ten years ago. Those flashes of old fiascoes wait like ghosts in the huge house of the empty middle-aged self. Sometimes the ghosts even appear and ask to be laid to rest. Consciously or unconsciously, writers must fashion a new peace with the past every day they attempt to write. They must rise above despising themselves. If they cannot, they will probably lose the sanction to render judgment on others.

Yet the writer at work does not tolerate too much good news either. At his desk, it is best if he does not come to like himself too much. Wonderfully agreeable memories may appear on certain mornings, but if they have nothing to do with the work, they must be banished or they will leave the writer too cheerful, too energetic, too forgiving, too horny. It is in the calm depression of a good judge that one's scribbles move best over the page. Indeed, just as a decent judge will feel that he has injured society by giving an unfair verdict, so does an author have to ask himself constantly if he is being fair to his characters. For if the writer does violate the life of someone who is being written about—that is, proceeds in the ongoing panic of trying to keep a book amusing to distort his characters to more comic, more cor-

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rupt, or more evil forms than he secretly believes they deserve—then he may be subtly injuring the reader. That is a moral crime. Few authors are innocent of such a practice; on the other hand, not so many artists can be found who are not also guilty of softening their portraits. Some writers don't want to destroy the sympathy their readers may feel for an appealing heroine by the admission that she shrieks at her children. Sales fly out the window. It takes as much literary integrity to be tough, therefore, as to be fair. The trail is narrow. It is difficult to keep up one's literary standards through the long, slogging reaches of the middle of a book. The early pleasures of conception no longer sustain you; the writer plods along with the lead feet of habit, the dry breath of discipline, and the knowledge that on the other side of the hill, the critics—who also have their talent to express—are waiting. Sooner or later you come to the conclusion that if you are going to survive, you had better, where it concerns your own work, become the best critic of them all. There is a saying among boxers that the punch you see hurts less than the one you never did see. An author who would find the resources to keep writing from one generation to the next does well to climb above his own ego high enough to see every flaw in the work. Otherwise he will never be able to decide what are its true merits.

Let yourself live, however, with an awareness of your book's lacks and shortcuts, its gloss where courage might have produced a little real shine, and you can bear the bad reviews. You can even tell when the critic is not exposing your psyche so much as taking off his own dirty socks. It proves amazing how many evil reviews one can digest if there is a confidence one has done one's best on a book, written to the limit of one's honesty, even scraped off a little of one's dishonesty. Get to that point of purity and your royalties may be injured by a small welcome but not your working morale. There is even hope that if the book is better than its reception, one's favorite readers will come eventually to care for it more. (It is, after all, a lovely but unloved child!) The prescription, therefore, is simple: One must not put out a job that has any serious taint of the meretricious. At least the prescription ought to be simple, but then how few of us ever do work of which we are not in fact a bit ashamed. It comes down to a matter of degree. There is that remark of Engels to Marx, "Quantity changes quality." A single potato is there for us to eat, but ten thousand potatoes are a commodity and have to

be put in bins or boxes. A profit must be made from them or a loss will certainly be taken. By analogy, a little corruption in a book is as forgivable as the author's style, but a sizable literary delinquency is a diseased organ, or so it will feel if the critics begin to bang on it and happen to be right for once. That will be the hour when one's creditors do not go away. I wonder if we have not touched the fear that is back of the writing in many a good novelist's heart, the hazard beneath all others.

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

PUBLICITY

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

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

Moreover, count on it: Three out of four interviewers will not have read your book. That tends to make them ask Cadillac Questions, ones that cost them 2 percent and you 98 percent. For example: "Tell me all about your book." After you've answered that a few times, you begin to feel as if the limousine in which you are traveling is out of gas and you have to push it up the hill.

It usually doesn't matter if your book is good or bad. Across the country, you're going to get more or less the same number of good and bad reviews. A dreadful book will probably get three good reviews in ten, and a very good book may get six. Occasionally, a work will get just about all good or bad reviews across the board and this happens because something in its pages outrages or soothes some part of the national temper to which the media is sensitive.

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

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

Every time a story about me appears in a newspaper, I am injured professionally. I don't think there's anything to do about it. One of the reasons I'm in all the time is that the columns keep using the same people. It's a game, and there may not be many more than a few hundred players on the board. If I were in a Tarot deck, I'd be the Fool. I used to try to keep a stern separation between the public legend and myself, but you know, you get older, and after a while, you can feel at times like an old gink in Miami with slits in his sneakers. At that juncture, it's pointless to fight the legend. The legend has become a lotion for your sore toes.

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

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

NORMAN MAILER: You want to stay above that fear, but once in a great while, I'll still think, "This is going to get the world's worst reviews. I'm diving into something that's going to make

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no one happy and will leave certain people very unhappy." On the other hand, the good side of such risk is that it is exciting. You feel like a free man.

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

MS: How do you deal with it?

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

Having, at the age of twenty-five, broken away from the pack, I lived with a swollen sense of importance. At the same time, I wasn't ready. Much too much well-founded modesty. One part of you shoots up, another lags behind. It's like having a prima donna of a hard-on. You just can't depend on it.

BEST-SELLERS

The ideal, and as you get older you do try to get closer to the ideal, is to write only what interests you. It will prove of interest to others or it won't, but if you try to steer your way into success, you shouldn't be a serious writer. You will do better to study best-sellers and stay away from anything that's *well written*. Reading such books could poison your satisfaction at having pulled off a best-seller. I don't think Jackie Susann went to bed with Rilke on her night table.

Today, large literary canvases are usually left to best-selling novelists. They will have a cast of forty or fifty characters, and stories that traverse fifty to a hundred 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 work on smaller canvases. Then, at least, you have the confidence that what you're doing has some fictional truth. That's important. At least you're contributing to knowledge rather than adding to the sludge of the culture. So it's hard to take on a large topic. At the moment the only great writer I can think of who can handle

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what I've described, forty or fifty characters and three or four decades, is García Márquez. *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.

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

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

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

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

Right now the smart money would bet against the novel. The publishing houses are getting depressed about the future of

good fiction, and the publishers are the ones who will, in a large sense, determine that future. Survival probably comes down to the young editors. When a novel by an unknown gets published these days, it's usually because some young editor has made an issue of it. The publisher generally goes along. In effect, it's the charitable side of publishing, and it will continue so long as publishers keep a little faith in the novel and the young editors manage to hold on to their nerve.

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

Now that fifty years have gone by since *The Naked and the Dead* was published in May 1948, I think it might be interesting to talk about it as a best-seller that was the work of an amateur. Of course, as best-sellers go, it was a good book, and the author who began it at the age of twenty-three and completed it in fifteen months had already written more than a half million words in college and so could be considered a hardworking amateur who loved writing and was prepared in the way of a twenty-four-year-old to fall on his sword in the case of literature.

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

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

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monly available adjective—*scalding* coffee and *tremulous* fear are the sorts of things you will find throughout.

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

All this said, one may now ask the professional what virtue he might ascribe to the work he did as an amateur. The answer is that he had the good luck to be influenced profoundly by Tolstoy in the fifteen months he was writing the opus back in 1946 and 1947—he read from *Anna Karenina* most mornings before he commenced his own work. Thereby, his pages, through the limited perceptions of a twenty-four-year-old, reflect what he learned about compassion from Tolstoy. For that is the genius of the old man—Tolstoy teaches us that compassion is of value and enriches our life only when compassion is severe, which is to say that we can perceive everything that is good and bad about a character but are still able to feel that the sum of us as human beings is probably a little more good than awful. In any case, good or bad, it reminds us that life is like a gladiators' arena for the soul and so we can feel strengthened by those who endure, and feel awe and pity for those who do not.

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

So, I am still fond of *The Naked and the Dead*. It has virtues, it has faults, but it also has a redeeming, even stimulating hint of the Tolstoyan. Which enables me to feel hope for all of us when very occasionally I go back and read a few pages.

RULES OF THUMB

If you have to earn your living from your pen, you discover that you can push yourself. It's analogous to what athletes do when they take steroids to gain more strength. Ultimately damaging, but they set records. We do the same thing. You can force yourself to write much more than you want to. And the writing will not necessarily deteriorate. Not necessarily. But you can end up with a bad nervous system or a shortened life. Of course, one can always hope for transcendence. Sometimes working much harder than one wants to work can liberate energy. Sometimes.

I've often felt that those occasions when you can work or make love with great energy is when you're acting out of your best and worst motives at once.

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

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

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

Good writers are as competitive as good athletes. When I come across an interesting novel, I don't go at it as other people do. I read critically, the way one athlete will watch another's performance. Not watch it with venom—quite the contrary. You might say to yourself, "His spiral is tighter than mine and he's got five more yards on me at least, but I scramble better." The ideal is to give a good novel its credit and never overlook its power by deciding too quickly that the work is overrated, which is exactly the dreadful tendency underwritten by the envy chronic to the writer's occupation. Is this because we work alone so much of the time?

Large literary success is so often a matter of fortuitous publication. *The Naked and the Dead* had the luckiest timing of my career. By 1946, people were no longer that interested in novels about the Second World War. But *The Naked and the Dead* didn't come out until 1948, and by then readers were ready. If it had appeared earlier, I don't know that it would have had equal impact.

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

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

crashshoot.

If you are ever in a situation where you're dealing with a movie company—don't worry about the number-one man or woman. Do your best to have Number Two approve of what you're doing. Because if Number One likes what you offer him and Number Two doesn't, Number One will almost never give the go-ahead. It's to his or her advantage to go along with Number Two's declared opinion.

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

On the other hand, if One turns to Two and says, "Okay, we'll do it your way, we won't take it on," and your script doesn't do well, then Two can feel genial enough to say, "I'm working for a pretty good guy. He pays attention to me; he respects me. That is because he knows I'm usually right." Of course, if they don't do it and some other company picks it up and makes real money, Two is left at a whole disadvantage.

Ergo, the rule suggests: Get to the number-two man and hope he likes your work.

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

On this practical note, let me add another item: *An American Dream* was originally published in *Esquire* in 1964 and had a scene where a black man said *shit* about twenty times. Now, I didn't really need all twenty. Twelve would have been better, but I also knew that if I put in twelve, the editors would take out five, so I put in twenty. And the editors screamed, but I ended up with my twelve. They were happy and I was happy.

LITERARY ETIQUETTE, LITERARY DESIRES, LITERARY CORRUPTION

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

The second remark has as much truth as the first—which is to say, some truth. Of course, many a young man has put himself in danger in order to pick up material for his writing, but as a matter to make one wistful, not one major American athlete, politician, engineer, trade-union official, surgeon, airline pilot, chess master, call girl, sea captain, teacher, bureaucrat, Mafioso, pimp, recidivist, physicist, rabbi, movie star, clergyman, or priest or nun has also emerged as a major novelist since the Second World War.

What with ghostwriters, collaborators, and editors hand-cranking the tongues of the famous long enough to get their memoirs into tape recorders, it could be said that some dim reflection can be found in literature of the long aisles and huge machines of that social mill which is the world of endeavor—yes, just about as much as comes back to us from a photograph insufficiently exposed in the picture-taking, a ghost image substituted for the original lights and deep shadows of the object. So,

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for every good novel about a trade union that has been written from the inside, we have ten thousand better novels to read about authors and the social activities of their friends. Writers tend to live with writers just as automotive engineers congregate in the same country clubs of the same suburbs around Detroit.

But even as we pay for the social insularity of Detroit engineers by having to look at the repetitive hump of their design until finally what is most amazing about the automobile is how little it has been improved in the last fifty years, so literature suffers from its own endemic hollow: We are overfamiliar with the sensitivity of the sensitive and relatively ignorant of the cunning of the strong and the stupid, one—it may be fatal—step removed from good and intimate perception of the inside procedures of the corporate, financial, governmental, Mafia, and working-class establishments. Investigative journalism has taken us into the guts of the machine, only not really, not enough. We still do not have much idea of the soul of any inside operator; we do not, for instance, yet have a clue to what makes a quarterback ready for a good day or a bad one. In addition, the best investigative reporting of new journalism tends to rest on too narrow an ideological base—the rational, ironic, fact-oriented world of the media liberal. So we have a situation, call it a cultural malady, of the most basic sort: a failure of sufficient information (that is, good *literary* information) to put into those centers of our mind we use for assessment. No matter how much we read, we tend to know too little of how the world works. The men who do the real work offer us no real writing, and the writers who explore the minds of such men approach from an intellectual stance that distorts their vision. You would not necessarily want a saint to try to write about a computer engineer, but you certainly would not search for the reverse. All too many saints, monsters, maniacs, mystics, and rock performers are being written about these days, however, by practitioners of journalism whose inner vision is usually graphed by routine parameters. Our continuing inability to comprehend the world is likely to continue.

Being a novelist, I want to know every world. I would never close myself off to a subject unless it's truly repulsive to me. While one can never take one's imperviousness to corruption for granted, it is still important to have some idea of how the

world works. What ruins most writers of talent is that they don't get enough experience, so their novels tend to develop a certain paranoid perfection. That is almost never as good as the rough edge of reality. (Franz Kafka immaculately excepted!)

For example, how much of the history that's made around us is conspiracy, how much is simple fuckups? You have to know the world to get some idea of that. How much does the Mafia control; how much do they luck into because of their reputation? How much do Jews control the mentality of the media and Hollywood; how much are they wrongly accused of?

It's not advisable for a novelist, once he is successful, to live in an upper-class social milieu for too long. Since it is a world of rigid rules, you cannot be yourself. There's a marvelous built-in reflex in such society. It goes: If you are completely one of us, then you are not very interesting. (Unless you have prodigious amounts of money or impeccable family.) If I have any entree, it's because that world is always fascinated with mavericks, at least until the point where they become bored with you. Then, boom, you are out. On the other hand, even as a maverick, there are certain rules you have to obey, and the first is to be amusing. (Capote and Jerzy Kosinski come to mind.) If you start accepting those rules past the point where you enjoy going along as part of the game, then you are injuring yourself. Capote played consiliere to New York society until he could bear it no longer and then he commenced his self-destruction with *Answered Prayers*.

You know, if you're not ready to make a fool of yourself, you're never going to get anything exceptional done. I remember saying in 1958, "I am imprisoned with a perception that will settle for nothing less than making a revolution in the consciousness of our time." And I certainly failed, didn't I? At the time, I thought I had books in me that no one else did, and so soon as I was able to write them, society would be altered. Kind of grandiose.

Now, the things I've stood for have been roundly defeated. Literature, after all, has been ground down in the second half of the twentieth century. It's a gloomy remark, but consider that literature once was one of the forces that helped to shape the latter part of the nineteenth century—naturalism, for example. One can fear that in another hundred years the serious novel will bear the same relation to serious people that the five-act

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

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

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

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

The only thing was to come up with a book in sixty days! I couldn't possibly give them non-fiction. The research would take too long—no, I had to do a piece of fiction that would be quick and comfortable. First thing, therefore, was to make a decision on whether to do it in first person or third. First person is

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always more hospitable in the beginning. You can give a sense of the immediate almost at once. It would be first person, then.

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

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

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

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

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

CRAFT

STYLE

Style, of course, is what every good young author looks to acquire. In lovemaking, its equivalent is grace. Everybody wants it, but who can find it by working directly toward the goal?

In my case, *Advertisements* was the first work I wrote with a style that I could call my own, but I didn't begin it 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 again two novels as hard to write.

I did not know what I was doing. Apart from the psychological vertigo that will attack any athlete, performer, or young entrepreneur who has huge early success, I had my own particular problem, a beauty—I did not know my métier. *The Naked and the Dead* had been written out of what I could learn from reading 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 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

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to young authors about the time they recognize that life is out there ready to injure them, kill them slowly or quickly, 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 or that harshly used by early life. His little social deaths are overcome by his small social conquests. So he writes in the style of others while looking for his own, and tends to look for 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 his words for their precision, their ability to define, their acrobatic action. His style often changes from scene to scene, from paragraph to paragraph. He may know a little about creating mood, but the essence of good writing 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 prose 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. 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 ten years from the publication of *The Naked and the Dead* to the commencement of work on *Advertisements for Myself*. In any event, it 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 itself. 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 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 rhythm. This can be a jump greater than a leap into poetry. So, *Advertisements for Myself* was a book whose writing changed my life.

In *The Deer Park* I had been 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 dominating wife who is ever ready to select 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.

Finding one's own manner is 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, 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, 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.

On the other hand, it takes so long to find your own manner. It comes down to 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. You have writers who are exceptionally talented but are still what I would call amateurs. The

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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, these distinctive insights.

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 nature and still have good character. 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. And then I think one has to develop one's physical grace. Writers who are possessed of some may tend to write better than writers who are physically clumsy. It's my impression this is so. I certainly couldn't prove it.

Style is also a reflection of identity. Given a firm sense of yourself, you can write in a consistent vein. But should your identity shift, so will your presence change in your prose. Needless to say, illness, tragedy, huge frustration, age itself are bound to alter every firm notion of yourself.

And, of course, one's subject matter will also affect one's 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 splendid writing. For what Henry James wanted to do, however, his language was ideal. He recognized before anyone else that polite social life, despite its ridiculous or affected aspects, also presents 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 unique voice.

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. That is the beauty of mustering the right tone at the right time—it enables you to feel like a good skier, nice and relaxed for the next unexpected turn.

There are two kinds of writers. Faulkner, Fitzgerald, and Hemingway, Melville and James, write with an air that is inimitable. There are other writers, usually less famous, who go along in a variety of modes. 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.

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 would claim they have improved with age.

On the other hand, good dialogue depends on your good ear. There has to be something in each 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, and besides, I don't think you can teach it. Most kids who have talent start off with good dialogue. 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,

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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 William Kennedy or Joan Didion. But make no attempt to imitate either. Great dialogue is inimitable.

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

NORMAN MAILER: 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.

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.

FIRST PERSON VERSUS THIRD PERSON

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.

In the first person, you gain immediacy but lose insight, because you can hardly move into other people's heads without using a few devices, usually dubious.

The Deer Park underlined the difficulty. At one point, the young 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 smart, he can't be more intelligent than you are. That's easy. You dumb him down to taste or

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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. Contra Hemingway—yes! You can do that by exercising your *critical* imagination. It must not be wish fulfillment! You are, however, entitled to guess how you might act if you were that much more of a hero.

I don't know, however, where 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 can then key on 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.

With a full use of the third person, you are God—well, of course, not quite, but at the least, a species of demiurge. One way or another, you are ready to see into everyone's mind. That is never routine. There is, however, an easier approach—point-of-view third person, where you remain in one character's mind but are still viewing your protagonist from outside, and usually from above. In the classic vein of third person, however, where you enter each and every one's consciousness, it is not routine to get over the embarrassment that you are able to accommodate certain characters' minds with considerably more skill than you can with others'. This Olympian third person, this Tolstoyan presence, needs experience, confidence, irony, and lordly detachment. When it can be done, however, hurrah. Most of the great nineteenth-century novels achieve just that tone. Today, it's usually up to the novelists who write best-sellers. In their case, God is always ready to offer an adjective adequate to their means. Teeming excitement, unendurable suspense, delightful grim misery, dogged courage. But let me not froth too long at the mouth. There was a time when I used to do that myself.

First person point of view, however, remains a fine 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-

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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 that 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 famous last sentences of *A Farewell to Arms*.

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

It was not until I struggled with *Advertisements for Myself* that I began to recognize how curious it was to be working in the first person. Now, many writers good and bad have been employing that mode for centuries, but I had to come to this remarkable conclusion on my own. The first person was not all that available a way to write. It proved to be a very interesting and exciting mode of literary presence, 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, that special persona, possessed of immaculate detachment, who is always saying, "Oh, are we really doing well right now?" A wonderful voice. Because it enables you to treat yourself as one more character in a field of characters.

Nonetheless, I have considerable regard for the first person.

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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. 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 thirty or forty years, but I recalled that a man named Fulton Oursler once sold over a million copies of a book called *The Greatest Story Ever Told*. Now, with the bona fide Gospels in my hand, I thought, Well, this may be the greatest story, but it is certainly being told abominably. Sayings popped out of the New Testament that were worthy of Shakespeare, but much in the double columns was poorly described. An ungainly prose pronged with 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.

The notion was intriguing. When I thought of all the hypocrites and corruptibles and power seekers who had been living with the Gospel for centuries, standing foursquare on any gnomish 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 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? Jean Malaquais once remarked that you can write about any character but one. "Whom?" "A novelist more talented than yourself."

I thought, This is analogous. A finer sense of morality is also a higher talent. Yes, the problems were interesting.

I decided my character had to be more of a man than a god, an existential man, dominated by the huge cloud that he is the Son of God. Jesus, as the protagonist, 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.

Moreover, I had to decide whether to travel in first person or third. First person would have everyone saying: "That egomaniac. Does Mailer now think he's Jesus Christ? What an overinflated vanity!" That's the bad side, I thought, but at least I

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can avoid the larger mistake of doing it in the third person. Because that would soon get mixed up with the actual text of the Gospels, and the reader would wonder, Is this sentence from the New Testament or was it added? That can only make for a squirrely experience as one reads. 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 an editor who is totally irreligious, Jason Epstein. He was appalled that I was writing this book. We're friends, but he's one tough editor. And he's most often all too right or altogether wrong. So, 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 work up 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 one's mind yet would 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.

REAL LIFE VERSUS PLOT LIFE

The CIA, in its actual workings, is the antithesis to the average spy novel, which, best-seller-oriented, tends to present a perfect clock that ticks to its conclusion. In *Harlot's Ghost*, one of my characters remarks that she came into the CIA because she loved spy novels. Now, her complaint was that she could never—precisely 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 all 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.

The decisions you make while writing fiction can leave 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.

Working on *The Executioner's Song*, 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 novels. (Unless you are Theodore Dreiser!) 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.

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 can get knocked down with something 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.

I no longer work up a master plan before I begin a novel. When I was younger I used to sit down and write out such plans, but I never finished such projects. 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 a hundred 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 prearranged conclusion. Yet the new idea that you didn't follow may be worth more than the denouement you planned in advance.

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 prearranged 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 dependency 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 novels with any more three dimensionality than some passing movie star who can't act.

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, have never written directly about my parents or my sister. Those experi-

ences 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 fellow in mind 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 are determined to 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.

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 to some degree for the next thirty years." He just says, "Scalpel, nurse," and does it. The surgeon is focused on the act, not its reverberations.

Novelists are engaged in something analogous. If they start 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?

The point is that one is facing a true problem. 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, friends, and innocent bystanders.

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.

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

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and it would mention one of his resistant characters as “well drawn,” he used to think, Well dragged.

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 more and more. For example, it’s not a good idea to try to put your wife into your novel. Not 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.

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 whom I know slightly, let’s say, and turn him into a movie star. In a transposition of this sort, everything that 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 changeableness.

I’ve spoken of characters *emerging*. Quite often they don’t

emerge; they fail to. And one is left with the dull compromise that derives from two kinds of experience warring with each other 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 were 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.

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 were to do the book now, I might keep Hearn alive until the very end, and it would probably be 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 that 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.

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That's why I don't like to plan too far ahead. I've gotten into this before, but it's worth repeating. Planning too carefully 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.

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 strangers 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.

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.)

Hemingway suffered from the honorable need to be the equal of his male characters, particularly since he used the first person so much. It is not easy to write in the first person about a man who's stronger or braver than yourself. It's too close to 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 himself to all those readers, who will predictably assume that the author is the

man they are now encountering in the first person.

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.

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.

If a novelist can take people who are legendary figures and invent episodes for them that seem believable, then he has done something fine. There's that meeting between J. P. Morgan and Henry Ford in E. L. 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.

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 peo-

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ple, 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

I am not sure it is possible to describe how to learn to write it. I think it may be that it is just an experience. It may be that the growing-up relation between a man and his wife. You don't necessarily speak of that as an experience, since it may consist of several experiences linked together, or of many experiences all woven into one. But the point is that it may consist of two kinds of experiences that are inseparable to one another.

Writing may be an instinctive process, but it's not always clear what the instinct is. It may be that you feel you have to go to a certain location for the growing-up experience. You have to be able to hear the first voice which speaks to you and be aware of the location of the work. That may be hard to hear. It may be that you are the instinct to take the first voice which speaks, even if it doesn't seem right. And we all do that in various ways. And pay for it with things that we have to write our own story.

One example I always give is a writing class. A very young writer sits in a park bench with his girl. He doesn't see. He's not aware. He's never had such a love before. Later that night, he goes to sleep. He writes.

INSTINCT

I am not sure it is possible to describe how it feels to write a novel. It may be that it is not an experience. It may be more like a continuing relation between a man and his wife. You can't necessarily speak of that as an experience, since it may consist of several experiences braided together; or of many experiences all more or less similar; or indeed it may consist of two kinds of experiences that are antagonistic to one another.

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.

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. Later that night, he tries to capture the event. He writes:

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I love you, he said.

I love you, she said.

He stops, throws down his pen and says, "I'm a great writer!" Sometimes you have to wait.

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 tweaked it 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 Dostoyevsky. 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.

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. 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 to continue, then the work bears a profound

relationship to you at that point and you don't question it.

Let me take this further. You can write a book with a powerful sense of inner conviction 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 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 malfunctioning side of yourself. That's what your enthusiasm can be about.

Only rarely is one's instinct analogous to a fast highway, but that's exactly when things get hairy. 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

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 I 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 Cézanne and say to himself, “That’s the way to do it.” Yet the influence might not pop forth for twenty or thirty years. When it does, the painter could say, “Oh yes, that was a Picasso I saw at MoMA twenty-five 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.

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.

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, "His motor needs a little tuning." But nonetheless the car and its roar are still there in your ear while 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

I'm now eighty, but some people still think of me as a wild man. 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.

Of course, if you ask what work is dependent upon, the key word, an unhappy one, is *stamina*. 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 have led you into bad prose.

I remember in the summer before my Junior year, working on a first novel (which 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. It may even be the cardinal reason why people in college tend to 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 goes off and they never get it back. The sad truth is that a would-be novelist possibly has to start a few books that do give out, or even crash, before a sense of the difficulties is acquired. If the same likelihood of early failure applied to young race-car drivers, there would not be speedways.

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, you strain your gut, you get gout and chilblains. You're alone, and every day you have to face a blank piece of paper.

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 work almost every day. You don't write novels by putting in two brilliant hours a week. You don't write novels if you lose too many mornings and afternoons to a hangover.

Sometimes, when you're in a bad period, you must in effect contract yourself for weeks running. "I'm going in to write tomorrow," you must declare, and, indeed, show up at your desk, even though there's nothing in you, and you have to sit there for hours, whatever number of hours you told yourself 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 that you can, past ill-performance to the contrary, now be trusted. Such acceptance is crucial. The unconscious expects that what it has prepared for you 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 over and over again to trust you. 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.

There's nothing glorious about being a professional. You become more dogged. You probably relinquish the upper reaches

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of the mind in order to be able to do your stint of work each day: That means you are ready to endure a certain amount of drudgery. But your mind is, obviously, not enthralled by such dull conditions. Professionalism probably comes down to being able to work on a bad day.

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 sit at my desk. No television, no way to call out. Didn't want to be tempted. There's an old Talmudic 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 my assistant, Judith McNally. She would type it for me and next day I would go over it. Since at my age you begin to forget all too much, I would hardly remember what I had written the day before. It read, therefore, as if someone else had done it. The critic in me was delighted. I could now proceed to fix the prose. The sole virtue of losing your short-term memory is that it does free you to be your own editor.

When I read something good, I want to do a critical piece. I want to expand on where I think the author is terrific and where he or she is lacking. Especially if reviewers 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 are reading rather than the one you're supposed to be laboring on. So you tend to protect yourself by not reading anything that's too good. Stendhal, for instance, used to peruse the Code Napoleon every day in the loo before he'd start to write.

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 the smell of the jungle, I had Wolfe. For the characters, Tolstoy.

I never know what the style of a book will be until I get into it.

JML
suggestion

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.

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 that were necessary to him as a fighter. Now, some of these things were 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 part 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 was 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 that 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 edit on a spectrum which runs from the high, clear manic impressions of a drunk that has made one electrically alert all the way down to the soberest reaches of a low mood 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 is 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 little, 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 anymore 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 that talent. That is exactly how little sense a young writer can have of his or her own literary future.

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.

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 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 range of reaction you can receive 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.

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Research is another matter. The trick in doing a historical novel, for example, is to digest the research. You have 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.

A CODA TO "CRAFT"

By now, I'm a bit cynical about craft. I think there's a natural mystique in the novel that is more important. One is trying, after all, to capture reality, and that is extraordinarily and exceptionally difficult. Craft is merely a series of way stations. I think of it as being like a Saint Bernard with that little bottle of brandy under his neck. Whenever you get into trouble, craft can keep you warm long enough to be rescued. Of course, this is exactly what keeps good novelists from becoming great novelists. Robert Penn Warren might have written a major novel if he hadn't had just that extra little bit of craft to get him out of all the trouble in *All the King's Men*. If Penn Warren hadn't known anything about Elizabethan literature, the would-be Elizabethan in him might have brought off a fantastic novel. As it was, he knew enough about craft to use it as an escape hatch. And his plot degenerated into a slam-bang of exits and entrances, confrontations, tragedies, quick wails, and woe. But he was really forcing an escape from his literary problem, which was the terror of confronting a reality that might open into more and more anxiety and so present a deeper and deeper view of the abyss. Craft protects one from facing those endless expanding realities of deterioration and responsibility—the terror, let us say, of los-

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ing your novel in the depths of philosophical insights you are not ready to live with. I think this sort of terror depresses us profoundly. Which may be why we throw up our enormous evasions—such as craft. Indeed, I think this adoration of craft, this specific respect for craft, makes a church of literature for that vast number of writers who are somewhere on the bell-shaped curve between mediocrity and talent.

Tom Wolfe is a study in craft. He knows so much about it that craft hurts him as much as it helps him. I put my review of his last novel here, for it amplifies all I have been saying about style, best-sellers, and plot versus character.

A MAN HALF FULL

Let me take the unseemly step of commencing a review of another author's work by offering several paragraphs from my own book *Cannibals and Christians*, published in 1965.

d The people who were most American by birth, and who had the most to do with managing America, gave themselves a literature which had the least to say about the real phenomena of American life, most particularly the accelerate, rate, the awful rate, of growth and anomaly through all of society. That sort of literature and that sort of attempt to explain America was left to the sons of immigrants who, if they were vigorous enough, and fortunate enough to be educated, now had the opportunity to see that America was a phenomenon never before described, indeed, never before visible in the record of history. There was something going on in American life which was either grand or horrible or both, but it was going on—at a dizzy rate—and the future glory or doom of the world was not necessarily divorced from it . . .

No American writer succeeded, however, in doing the single great work that would clarify a nation's vision of itself as Tolstoy had done perhaps with *War and Peace* or with *Anna Karenina* and Stendhal with *The Red and the Black*; no one novel came along which was grand and daring and

comprehensive and detailed, able to give sustenance to the adventurer and merriment to the rich, leave compassion in the ice chambers of the upper class and energy as alms for the poor. Dreiser came as close as any, and never got close at all, for he could not capture the moment, and no country in history has lived perhaps so much for the moment as America. After his heroic failure, American literature was isolated—it was necessary to give courses in American literature to Americans. [Otherwise] it was not quite vital to them. It did not save their lives, make them more ambitious, more moral, more tormented, more audacious, more ready for love, more ready for war, for charity, or for invention. No, it tended to puzzle them. . . . The American novel gave up any desire to be a creation equal to the phenomenon of the country itself. It settled for being a metaphor. Which is to say that each separate author made a separate peace. He would no longer try to capture America, he would merely try to give life to some microcosm of American life, some metaphor. The vision would be partial, determinedly so. One must not try to save. Not souls, and not the nation. The country be damned. Let it take care of itself.

And of course the country did. Just that. It grew by itself. Like a weed and a monster and a beauty and a pig. And the task of explaining America was taken over by Luce magazines.

Now, I have no idea whether Tom Wolfe ever came across this piece, but he didn't have to. The *Zeitgeist* was there for all of us. In 1989, Wolfe wrote an article for *Harper's* after the appearance of *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, and I discovered (to my astonishment) that we were comrades in arms:

The introduction of realism into literature in the eighteenth century by Richardson, Fielding, and Smollett was like the introduction of electricity into engineering. It was not just another device. The effect on the emotions of an everyday realism such as Richardson's was something that had never been conceived of before. It was realism that created the "absorbing" or "gripping" quality that is peculiar to the novel, the quality that makes the reader feel that he has been pulled not only into the setting of the story but

Norm:
This section is much reduced from the original yet you have eclipsed only once. Is this okay?

It does appear the same way in TOOT, but later in this book (pp. 314-323). It appears as it did in Criminals + Christians So the reader will have two versions: — confusion

also into the minds and central nervous systems of the characters. . . .

Dickens, Dostoyevsky, Balzac, Zola, and Sinclair Lewis *assumed* that the novelist had to go beyond his personal experience and head out into society as a reporter. Zola called it documentation, and his documenting expeditions to the slums, the coal mines, the races, the *folies*, department stores, wholesale food markets, newspaper offices, barnyards, railroad yards, and engine decks, notebook and pen in hand, became legendary. . . .

My contention is that, especially in an age like this, [reporting is] essential for the very greatest effects literature can achieve. In 1884, Zola went down into the mines at Anzin to do the documentation for what was to become the novel *Germinial*. Posing as a secretary for a member of the French Chamber of Deputies, he descended into the pits wearing his city clothes, his frock coat, high stiff collar, and high stiff hat (this appeals to me for reasons I won't delay you with), and carrying a notebook and pen. . . .

At this weak, pale, tabescent moment in the history of American literature, we need a battalion, a brigade, of Zolas to head out into this wild, bizarre, unpredictable, Hogstomping Baroque country of ours and reclaim its literary property. . . . The answer is not to leave the rude beast, the material, also known as the life around us, to the journalists but to do what journalists do, or are supposed to do, which is to wrestle the beast and bring it to terms.

Of one thing I am sure. If fiction writers do not start facing the obvious, the literary history of the second half of the twentieth century will record that journalists not only took over the richness of American life as their domain, but also seized the high ground of literature itself. . . .

America today, in a headlong rush of her own, may or may not truly need a literature worthy of her vastness. But American novelists, without any doubt, truly need, in this neurasthenic hour, the spirit to go along for that wild ride.

Three cheers. One has to applaud his moxie. Only an innocent or a simpleton could fail to recognize that a live hornet was being deposited in the crevice of every literary seat in town. If *The Bonfire of the Vanities* had excited envy and outrage, Wolfe

was now upping the ante. It was the equivalent of a large raise in the World Series of Poker. Could he bring off the huge novel he was obviously suggesting, or was he riding on an outside bluff?

Well, the years went by and Wolfe went through a quintuple heart bypass and the towering depression that ensued. His writing life had to pass through some of the highs and lows of the exalted and the damned. It is not routine to bring off a long novel when your ambition is more than major, when you will settle for nothing less than an attempt to write a great novel, and when you are into your sixties and not all that well.

Given the stakes he set, the tension in reading *A Man in Full* never quite ceases. Is one encountering a major novel or a major best-seller?

Wolfe's salient characteristic as a first novelist, the element that raised *The Bonfire of the Vanities* above all considerations of its merits and vices, was that it sold 750,000 copies in hardcover. The book was thereby emblazoned as the literary phenomenon of the Eighties. His finest literary impulses of that era and his pecuniary needs had come together. Naturally, it became somewhat more difficult to conceive of a major novel that would not also be a commercial blockbuster. The flavor of *A Man in Full* suggests a creator who is being obliged to live with a double motive.

Writing a best-seller with conscious intent to do so is, after all, a state of mind that is not without comparison to the act of marrying for money only to discover that the absence of love is more onerous than anticipated. When a putative and modest writer of best-sellers finally becomes professional enough to write a winner, he or she thinks that a great feat has been brought off, even as a man void of love (and money) will see a wealthy marriage as a splendid union. The point, obviously, is that Tom Wolfe has, in advance, the talent to do either—embark on a major novel or calculate, nay, eyeball the musculature of a huge best-seller. And so the real interest is in Wolfe's search for the answer to his own deep question of motive. Is he to deal with major literary matters or adroit commercial counterfeits? The answer to the question vibrates back and forth in this work like a reed in a woodwind, keeping both possibilities alive—not only in each chapter, on each page, but sometimes in the shift itself from good writing to cash-check writing in the same paragraph.

This much said, one has to add that *A Man in Full* is a much

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better book than *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. The earlier novel ran like an express for the first third of its pages, but by the middle, it was slowing up. At the end, it pissed out.

The beginning of *A Man in Full* is the reverse. It gets better as it goes. On the early stretch, you have to pay for endlessly detailed descriptions of every room you find yourself in (cataloguing rooms may yet prove to be Wolfe's most ubiquitous talent). And for the first couple of hundred pages, most of the chapters are virtually separate short stories employing one or another group of characters. Some of these stories are very good indeed; some not worth reading. It takes a while to recognize that the real audacity of the book is in its architecture—Wolfe laid it out on three separate foundations, two of which are in Atlanta, our modern, post-Olympic Atlanta. We follow a mighty *arriviste*, Charlie Croker, a former great football player at Georgia Tech, who has amassed a fortune in real estate by virtue of his overwhelming life force. Up from southern Georgia, a monument of a self-made man, Croker is in prodigious financial trouble without being quite aware of it, so confident is he of his outsize energy and strength. Soon enough his travails will begin and Wolfe takes him through an enforced descent over many hundreds of pages.

The second element of the novel follows the efforts of the black mayor of Atlanta and a black lawyer to solve a race problem that could result in riots and national humiliation for the city.

The last track takes us along on the odyssey of a sweet, decent young man named Conrad Hensley, who works in Oakland and eventually, after an unjust stint in prison (shades of Jean Valjean!), a most dramatic escape, and many ensuing exceptional adventures, arrives in Atlanta to bring a species of catharsis to the many turns and twists of the plot.

None of the above offers even a remote hint to the complexity of the scheme. For example, Atlanta, high society and low, lives in the book as vividly as did New York in *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. The difference is that Wolfe appreciates the complexities of Atlanta's social issues with a subtlety that was absent from the earlier novel, and one of the surprising virtues of this second novel is how well he has captured the speech and airs and wit and sophistication of the black mayor and the upper-class anxieties of the black lawyer. Indeed, he is so sensitive to the nuances

of their situation that it is as if he is making amends for the simple-minded outrage he exhibited against ghetto leaders in the first novel.

The major surprise in the book, however, is the young protagonist who emerges, the starry-eyed, innocent, honorable working man, Conrad Hensley. He is married (somewhat unhappily) and living out in the Oakland area, where he labors in a frozen-food warehouse owned by no one less than the man in full, Charlie Croker. It takes literally half the tome for the separate sections to start coming together, and a good many readers may never make it to the middle. Too bad! For when the book starts to collect, Wolfe suddenly becomes startlingly good. All of a sudden you don't want to stop. And on you go for a couple of hundred most enjoyable narrative pages with some fine feats of writing en route. Many problems have, of course, also accumulated, and by the end, Wolfe succumbs to too many quick solutions as the elements of plot come crowding in together. The end of the book is a mess, a *tidy* mess (which makes it worse), and it ends as badly as Dickens, who, at his lowest, would cash in his hand, offer sweet remarks, and get out the door. Are we ready to cite *A Christmas Carol*?

Most of the ending is too complicated to summarize in less time than it took Wolfe to tell it, but one termination takes place through Charlie Croker, who has hitherto and for the bulk of the book been a totally dependable stock character despite his heavy sufferings. Toward the end, having landed in a weighty depression, he is extracted only and uniquely by Conrad Hensley, who encourages him (by way of the Stoic philosophy of Epictetus) to become an honest man. Yet, Charlie is not even present in the last chapter. It is an epilogue, and he is only there through hearsay. We learn that he is on the road and has become a minister in Florida, out in the mangrove roots preaching the maxims of Epictetus. So just as Charlie shows signs finally of becoming interesting (and difficult to write about), he is relegated to a short paragraph. Another paragraph, also hearsay, takes care of Conrad, who decides to turn himself in and go back to jail, but is put on probation by a kindly judge. Good novels are being lost on every page of the epilogue.

Be it said. The book has gas and runs out of gas, fills up again, goes dry. It is a 742-page work that reads as if it is fifteen hundred pages long. This is, to a degree, a compliment, since it is

very rich in material. But, given its high intentions, it is also tiresome, for it takes us down the road of too many overlong and predictable scenes. So, this book, electric at best, banal at worst—like a long afternoon spent watching soap operas—is read each day for another hundred pages with a sense that the pleasure it offers is accompanied by the strain of encountering prose that disappoints as often as it titillates.

At certain points, reading the work can even be said to resemble the act of making love to a three-hundred-pound woman. Once she gets on top, it's over. Fall in love, or be asphyxiated. So you read and you grab and you even find delight in some of these mounds of material. Yet all the while you resist—how you resist!—letting three hundred pounds take you over.

After a time, I simply began to groan within each time there was a new description. It was not that they were badly written. Taken on its own, the tenth description was as good and certainly as detailed as the first, but the descriptions became not unequal to a politician declaring: "I gave my stump speech ten times last night, and the tenth was as good as the first." Repetition kills the soul, and the narrative élan of Wolfe's novel is injured by the sheer quantity of his descriptions. They convert a stylistic virtue into a vice, then lock us up in an addiction. It is dispiriting to witness. A pall comes over one's happy attention when a brilliant conversationalist turns into a monologist, only to deaden us further by revealing the true passion—logorrhea.

So much is there, so much is missing. How then does one pass clear judgment on a novel that is as rich and as poor, as genuinely exciting and as seriously disappointing, as observant and as blind, as brilliantly written and as slovenly in its final execution as *A Man in Full*? It is Tom Wolfe's best book by far, it begins to promise that he is ready to become a great American novelist, and then it loses its air and settles (with all the canniness of a hard-nosed business judgment) for being a mega-best-seller. At the highest level, it's a failure—at a more modest plateau (which is today, at the corrupt level), it is bound to prove a resounding success with its large popular merits.

Some might now assume that the judgment has just been rendered. Not so. Only the lineaments. The body of the judgment still eludes one—how can a book be so good and so empty all at once, able to tell us so much about America at its best and be so criminally flawed at its worst?

What is bound to create an ongoing argument over the objective merits of this book is that for all of its major faults, it has undeniable major virtues of which the most notable are the set pieces. Every defender of the book will end with his favorite episodes and chapters, but there will probably be a consensus on the inquisition of Charlie Croker by his creditors at the PlannersBanc, the mating of the thoroughbred horses at his plantation, his barehanded capture of a six-foot rattlesnake there, and the "Freaknic" celebration of black college students in Atlanta, as well as the first meeting between the two top-level black principals, Roger Too White and the mayor Wes Jordan. Most particularly, the hundred pages of writing about Conrad Hensley in prison and escaping from prison light the book up in the middle. Extraordinarily good writing forces one to contemplate the uncomfortable possibility that Tom Wolfe might yet be seen as our best writer. How grateful one can feel then for his failures and his final inability to be great—his absence of truly large compass. There may even be an endemic inability to look into the depth of his characters with more than a consummate journalist's eye.

Perhaps there is good reason for this. His strategy, when in doubt, is to cook up new ingredients and excursions for his plot. He relies on this to such a degree that we can perceive all over again the vices of plot.

For plot is equal to a drug. It can stimulate a novelist into hordes of narrative energy, and it certainly will keep a reader on the page, but sooner or later, plot presents its bill, and dire exigencies come down upon the writer. Even one's best characters have to be ratcheted away from believability. Wolfe has resources to attempt to offset this, and the first is dialogue. Indeed, he often succeeds in getting you to believe an improbable reaction by the speed and color of the dialogue—particularly among his black and ethnic characters. He manages thereby to take them around the trickiest corners. If, however, the scene finally fails to produce enough credible turns to convince us of their inner conversion, why then a harsh novelistic law comes into force. Since motivation has to be believable in a serious novel, the writer burdened with a plot is sometimes obliged to enter the character's mind.

Right here is where Wolfe bogs down. How it costs him! A reader's confidence in what he is reading will be subtly betrayed

or even squandered should a novelist choose to enter the mind of a character but fail to bequeath the indispensable gift, that the reader can now know more about the character than before. The internal monologues of Wolfe's people are surprisingly routine and insist on telling us what we know already. There is almost no signature quality of mind.

For one instance—there are many—we have been provided with a detailed catalog of Charlie Croker's fall. We are living in the depths of his depression, brought there by the novelist's adroit and serial presentations of surrendered hopes, new blows, and obsessive dilemmas. We know in detail how Charlie must feel. Nonetheless, we are given the following soliloquy:

He was precisely where he had dreamed of being as a young man: living in a mansion in Buckhead, the master builder of metro Atlanta, creator of a gleaming tower named after himself, a man whose footsteps made the halls of the mighty vibrate . . . and how hollow it all was! It meant only that when your egomania and the defects in your character finally plunged you into ruin, your collapse would provoke more and tastier gloating. That would be it! They'd chuckle, rub their hands together, and smack their lips—and that would be the great Charlie Croker's entire legacy. What a fraud he was!—sitting here in his oxblood leather throne as if any of it were still . . . his . . . Why couldn't he put an end to it all by . . . disintegrating, by smashing, by walking out into the woods and never coming back? . . . Oh sure . . . With his knee, he'd be lucky to walk a hundred yards . . .

If there is nothing splendid or new right there, Wolfe can console himself with the alternative: The internal ruminations of the characters in most mega-best-sellers are about what you would expect. Mega-best-seller readers want to be able to read and read and read—they do not want to ponder any truly unexpected revelations. Reality might lie out there, but that is not why they are reading.

Nonetheless, this formulation is too severe. Sometimes Wolfe is ready to work for his best characters, sometimes they can surprise us as they move from caricatures into literary reality. It is just that at other times he is all too ready to let them work for

him, and moves them back from the possibility of deeper characterization into caricature again. How can he not when plot obviously appeals to him more than the real complexity of men and women? Worse, he appears incapable of creating a vital and interesting woman. He couldn't do it in *The Bonfire of the Vanities* and certainly doesn't here. If all we knew about wives, for example, were to come from Tom Wolfe, we would have to assume that they are without soul, and their greatest strength is to nag.

Perhaps he could do more. Wolfe is not incapable of describing carnality. To the contrary—no one will ever be the same after reading his set piece on the massive copulation of a prize stallion with a thoroughbred mare (after she has been readied for this momentous event by the lucubrations produced in her by the mouth and nose of a third horse, Sad Sam!). Wonders might befall us if Wolfe were ready to make the transition from Equus to Anthropos, but as of now, one has to complain that in neither of his two novels is there a carnal relationship that will give the reader any new sense of what it is all about.

It is his right as a novelist to ignore such stuff, but he ignores too many other possibilities as well. If only he would work half as hard on his characters as on the social gears and levers of his story. Dispirit hangs over him, however, when he is alone with his protagonists, exactly as if they were isolated in a room and he doesn't know what to say or what they might be ready to offer him.

A harsh verdict ensues. It is not only the women who are weak. Once we read these interior monologues, we come to realize that Wolfe doesn't begin to understand enough about his two main male characters. We are not given one moment in Charlie Croker's mind that tries to capture his inner life as an athlete. Football has to be the center of his personality, his feats in college have shot him into orbit, but the only way we know that Croker played football is because we are told he did. And once when he does talk about a great play he made, he describes it about the way a sports reporter might, which is to say, from the outside.

Conrad's part of the story, as already stated, is far and away the most readable and the most virtuoso element throughout the length of the prison and escape scenes. Unfortunately, these episodes are not quite believable. Prison is a culture, and you violate its canons at your peril. Wolfe poses a question: How is a young, good-looking prisoner to endure when he belongs to no

clique and will not submit to becoming a playmate? Wolfe, in the obligatory showdown, uses a martial war trick. Conrad Hensley has powerful hands and forearms from toting eighty-pound cartons of frozen chickens around in the Croker Global warehouse. So when he is sounded by a prison wolf named Rotto (who has a build like a WWF wrestler), he grabs the monster's hand with both his hands and crushes the man's fingers, breaks his wrist. There is no recognition that there are magnum responses available to Rotto, who, after all, is a weathered con who has lived for years with the arts and tricks of dirty fighting. At the least, Rotto could whack Conrad with his free fist, or wrap his forearm around Conrad's windpipe, or knee him in the groin. Whatever! Cons live as close to martial response as Shakespeare scholars to the variant texts.

Nonetheless, Conrad wins an uncontested battle from a man much stronger and more combat-seasoned than himself. That night he lies in terror on his bunk. Rotto is the head of a clique, and the clique will hardly let Conrad get away with it. Yes, his honor and his sphincter are still in deadly peril.

Wolfe is not a classicist for too little. He employs a *deus ex machina*. The mightiest of California earthquakes commences. Prison cells break apart, prison walls crash open, and Conrad (after a very nice piece of action writing) manages to escape. The ducks all fall into line and a friend whose life he saved once in the ice-cold warehouse takes care of getting him out of town. From Oakland to Atlanta. Lo! The book comes together. Conrad, lowly worker out in Oakland in Charlie Croker's ice-cold warehouse, will hook up with his old and hitherto invisible boss, and will do it well enough and close enough to yet save Charlie's life now that Charlie is in a terminal depression. In the course of enabling the two principals to meet, a highly improbable set of twists and turns conducts Conrad through several sub-worlds (Vietnamese boat-folk and poor genteel whites among others). Yet here Wolfe is at his best. He is wonderful at capturing the English of Vietnamese illegals (as he is also for Pakistanis, Hawaiians, ghetto blacks, down-home Georgians). Indeed, he is so good on such matters that you forgive the phony combat, the earthquake that solves all pressing auctorial problems, the convenient underground railroad of the story line—you accept it as Dickensian to the max! Wolfe is only in trouble when he has to slow down and allow his characters to react with one another, to