

enter—perish the outrageous requirement—a relationship.

Then, even his dialogue, so full of snap, crackle, and pop whenever embattled experts are expounding on a touchy situation (as, for example, the executives at PlannersBanc in the course of giving Charlie Croker a psychic workout over the abominable condition of his loan), alters into speech that is singularly flat as soon as husbands and wives are in battle mode. Whether it is Charlie Croker's new trophy wife, Conrad Hensley's young disgruntled wife, Roger Too White's near-invisible wife, or the cantankerous former wife of Raymond Peepgass (an executive at PlannersBanc), they all sound the same. The dialogue reads as if it had been written by a hack turning out scripts for the afternoon soaps.

In part, that may be true because Wolfe's inclination is usually to return to what he sees as the iron hand of society. Martha Croker, Charlie's ex-wife, is ignored totally by all their old friends once she is divorced from Charlie. While this kind of quiet ostracism is true enough generally—Charlie, after all, has provided the action for their friends—surely it is not as absolute as here portrayed. If the Crokers had a hundred social friends, might we assume ten of that number would have remained loyal to Martha, ten anyway, unless Martha was a monster—which she is not? Society is powerful precisely because its unwritten laws weigh upon us heavily enough to be palpable. But the laws are not absolute—if they were, the less endowed party in a marriage would never allow himself or herself to agree to divorce.

This small vice in Wolfe—to go, when in doubt, for the exaggerated note—was the ultimate reason why *The Bonfire of the Vanities* self-destructed by its end. It certainly injures *A Man in Full*. How difficult it becomes, for another example, to believe in the moral dilemma that the plot presents to Charlie Croker. Wolfe places him in a position where Croker has to defend a black All-American Georgia Tech football player against a rape charge. But such a defense would require Charlie to betray his close friend, Inman Armholster, who comes from one of the most established families in Atlanta. Inman's daughter is the alleged rape victim, and Charlie has promised that he will stand by him any way he can. The black mayor of Atlanta, meanwhile, has come to decide that this rape case, if it ever breaks into the media, would not only sully Atlanta's image nationally but would probably incite serious riots. Ergo, he needs someone like a for-

mer great white athlete from Georgia Tech to stand up in public for the black star. In return, the mayor will convince Planners-Banc to radically restructure Charlie's half-billion dollars of debt. How can the mayor put such pressure on a huge bank? Well, the mayor has tools, never quite defined to a nicety, that he can use to twist the bank around. So Charlie is now presented with a moral dilemma. It comes near to destroying him. Is he ready to give away to the bank his mansion, his plantation, his Croker Global high-rise, his food warehouses, his private airplanes, and all the other installations of his accumulated fortune, or does he save them by betraying his friend Inman Armholster? We are back to the alexandrines of Racine: Love versus Honor.

Wolfe, however, doesn't get into the real complexities of this moral confrontation. He can be most insightful about the back-and-forth maneuverings of bank managers, but the dilemma upon which the moral heart of his book is based never receives close examination. At one point we are told that Inman is Charlie's closest friend. It comes as a surprise. Up to that point, we have been given the impression that Charlie doesn't even like Inman much. We have no idea what makes them friends other than their social propinquity.

Betrayal, however, is no more than a concept unless we know exactly what is being betrayed. We have to feel the antennae of the relationship that is soon to be cauterized. Nor are we prepared for Charlie to feel such responsibility. After all, how did he make his fortune in the first place? Did he betray no close friends on the way up to high wealth? That alone would make him one incredible rich man. In real life, when a tycoon comes to a point where he cannot betray a friend no matter how much money is involved, we have to assume that the sum of his former betrayals has caught up with him. The tycoon is in revolt against his own misdeeds. That is not impossible. Fear of the grave has done as much to many a bucko. But there is nothing of such suggestion in Charlie. He is just a powerful good guy who is so proud of his own strength that, as far as we know, he never cut a dirty deal. For moral dilemmas of this vast size, we need Dreiser rather than our Tom, with his outsize moxie. Moral dilemmas that live only in the pure light of dilemma belong to best-sellers, where the readers want their moral conflicts standing clean and proud, ready to be resolved. That, of course, Wolfe is ready to

provide.

DeLillo's *Underworld* is also full of moral choices, and one of them is between love and honor, but with a notable and salutary difference. The moral dilemmas become part of the mix of the details, projects, confusions, and contradictions that suffuse the lives of his characters.

Where, then, might be the root of Wolfe's faults? Can one say that his strength as a journalist contributes to his weakness as a novelist? It is likely. He was so good as a young reporter that he was promoted to feature writer. But even in the upper reaches of feature writing, you still move on quickly to another subject, another set of people. So you do not form those novelistic habits that are learned best when you are young, exactly the need never to be satisfied with any of your characters just because they have come alive for you on the page. Indeed, the intoxication of creating a person on a page can prove blinding to an untried author's vision of what the character is going to need in his or her development through the narrative. What the young novelist learns, and it can take half a life, is that it is much easier to create a character than to understand a real man or woman. So an inner caution develops. Unless your literary figures keep growing through the events of the book, your novel can go nowhere that will surprise you. Because if the character comes alive on one particular note and stays alive on that note, then there is nowhere to proceed but into the plot.

Part of the problem for feature writers is that they have to bring to life the figures they write about, and must not only do it in a few days or a few weeks but be sharp in every sentence and entertaining (if possible), and then on the next assignment they move on to another person in another occupation. Tom Wolfe became the best of them when it came to capturing the off-edge of each person's dialogue and all the details of their shoes, asses, hairdos, and stomach rumblings. He saw a room in the way a shark sees prey. Details were ectoplasm to him, and luminescence.

He worked for years doing bigger and better articles, then books, high-octane books, but he had formed bad habits. The basic pattern was to go right into new material, bring it off, and move on to the next job. Your characters had to come alive, but since you didn't stay with them, you hardly needed a second note. Johnny One-Note can always hold the reader for the

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length of a magazine piece.

Of course, a great many of Dickens's characters were also Johnny One-Notes. Yet, what notes! Besides, one did not read at that time to explore into character in the way we feel is necessary today. The stakes are higher now. Given the Twentieth Century, so full of vast achievements and horrors, it is viscerally important that our understanding of men and women keep pace with the mechanisms of society. If Wolfe is as good as or better than any other American writer in his power to capture the surface of wholly diverse elements in America, he comes in last of all major American writers when it's a matter of comprehending a little more about men and women. Indeed, this may be the most important and noble purpose of the novelist today. Surely, we are not going to leave it to the jargon-ridden expertise of the oral guns-for-hire in the TV human relations media business, or the fundamentalists' search for the all-purpose power-grip over other humans. We need only contemplate one more time how we are steeped in a nausea-broth of TV pundit-heads, coming to an intellectual climax every night. In parallel, Wolfe is too quick to capture his characters and then doesn't always have an idea of what to do with them. The following passage, which comes just after the earthquake has liberated Conrad from jail, may be appropriate here.

The very floor of the world had *moved* . . . with a power that still resonated in the bones of everyone who had been through the upheaval. A cliff now ran straight through Santa Rita where none had existed before. A new wave of fear and hopelessness swept Conrad's nervous system. He felt as if the very last roots of his past had been ripped out. Zeus had done all this and he was in Zeus' hands. He gave Five-O one last smile and a little wave and then began running alongside the escarpment, away from the remains of West Greystone.

The longer one reads *A Man in Full*, the more one comes to decide that no matter its large virtues, it was chosen by the author to be a best-seller rather than a major novel. Nowhere is this more evident than with the younger protagonist. I can believe that there are people as angelic as Conrad Hensley, and most of us have known a few men who were as heroic as Conrad,

but never before have I seen both those qualities in one person—not unless I was looking at a movie.

It was Wolfe's job to transcend the film of *A Man in Full* before it went into production—which is to say his literary purpose was to make us believe on the page, now, that Conrad exists. And in this he is far from wholly successful. Conrad is too good to be true. What one can know with a sense of sadness as a novelist is that Conrad will become much more believable and moving in the movie. Will it be Matt Damon? Or can Tom Hanks still look young enough to bail out the part?

But if we as readers are to be lectured by Wolfe, via Epictetus, on the honorable avoidance of shame that can and has to be achieved by the serious Stoic, then what is to be said about the shame of writing a best-seller when you are as talented as Wolfe and might at least have tried to bring off one of the most important books of the half-century?

Can we offer a final verdict? Tom may be the hardest-working showoff the literary world has ever owned. But now he will no longer belong to us. (If indeed he ever did!) He lives in the King Kong Kingdom of the mega-best-sellers—he is already a Media Immortal. He has married his large talent to real money and very few can do that or allow themselves to do that. So, he will be king for a year, a year at least, and then in another ten years or less he will write another gargantuan best-seller. Let us hope it is not about education but will be called *A President in Full*. For he is certainly the most gifted best-seller writer to come along since Margaret Mitchell. If her style was banal, she understood nonetheless how signally perverse is the sense of romance in rich and beautiful women, and Mr. Wolfe is not up to that yet.

If this verdict denies him the long-term glory he seeks, let it at least be said that his adjuration to his fellow novelists to go out and dig harder for objective material may, given a whopping bounty in the bookstores for *A Man in Full*, may, yes, actually take root. If it does, let us novelists at least attempt to take back delineation of our country from the media, who have held it too long and for much too little.

PSYCHOLOGY

LEGEND AND IDENTITY

"The Notebook" and the letter to Salman Rushdie exemplify in miniature the poles of the problem of writer's identity. If I place a large emphasis on the word, it is because our identity on a given day or year is the seat from which we speak to the world. Any shifts of identity or skews of identity, any sense that the seat is not fast on its foundations but is sliding away, will play hell with the modicum of stability that one needs to write at a given moment.

So this discussion of psychology as it refers to writing can begin with some thoughts about identity and its huge overgrown sibling—legend.

If I recall, I have already said in passing that the psychology of the novelist may be (in some small but characteristic degree) different from that of other humans.

The following two pieces are here to give some notion of the spectrum between the young writer (still living in a caul) and the older (in Rushdie's case, middle-aged), daring, and embattled novelist having to bear responsibility for his acts.

"THE NOTEBOOK"

The writer was having a fight with his young lady. They were walking toward her home, and as the argument continued, they walked with their bodies farther and farther apart.

The young lady was obviously providing the energy for the quarrel. Her voice would rise a little bit, her head and shoulders would move toward him as though to add weight to her words, then she would turn away in disgust, her heels tapping the pavement in an even, precise rhythm, which was quite furious.

The writer was suffering with some dignity. He placed one leg in front of the other, he looked straight ahead, his face was sad, he would smile sadly from time to time and nod his head to every word she uttered.

"I'm sick and tired of you," the young lady exclaimed. "I'm sick and tired of you being so superior. What do you have to be superior about?"

"Nothing," the writer said in so quiet a voice, so gentle a tone, that his answer might as well have been "I have my saintliness to be superior about."

"Do you ever give me anything?" the young lady asked, and provided the response herself. "You don't even give me the time of day. You're the coldest man I've ever known."

"Oh, that's not true," the writer suggested softly.

"Isn't it? Everybody thinks you're nice and friendly, everybody except anybody who knows you at all. Anybody who knows you, knows better."

The writer was actually not unmoved. He liked this young lady very much and he did not want to see her unhappy. If, with another part of his mind, he was noticing the way she constructed her sentences, the last word of one phrase seeming to provide the impetus for the next, he was nonetheless paying attention to everything she said.

"Are you being completely fair?" he asked.

"I've finally come to understand you," she said angrily. "You don't want to be in love. You just want to say the things you're supposed to say and watch the things you're supposed to feel."

"I love you. I know you don't believe me," the writer said.

"You're a mummy. You're nothing but a . . . an Egyptian mummy."

The writer was thinking that when the young lady became

angry, her imagery was at best somewhat uninspired. "All right, I'm a mummy," he said softly.

They waited for a traffic light to change. He stood at the curb, smiling sadly, and the sadness on his face was so complete, so patient and so perfect, that the young lady with a little cry darted out into the street and trotted across on her high heels. The writer was obliged to run a step or two to catch up with her.

"Your attitude is different now," she continued. "You don't care about me. Maybe you used to, but you don't care anymore. When you look at me, you're not really looking at all. I don't exist for you."

"You know you do."

"You wish you were somewhere else right now. You don't like me when I'm nasty. You think I'm vulgar. I'm too vulgar for your refined senses. Isn't that a pity? Do you think the world begins and ends with you?"

"No."

"No, what?" she cried.

"Why are you angry? Is it because you feel I didn't pay enough attention to you tonight? I'm sorry if I didn't. I didn't realize I didn't. I do love you."

"Oh, you love me; oh, you certainly do," the young lady said in a voice so heavy with sarcasm that she was almost weeping. "Perhaps I'd like to think so, but I know better." Her figure leaned toward his as she walked. "There's one thing I will tell you," she went on bitterly. "You hurt people more than the cruelest person in the world could. And why? I'll tell you why. It's because you never feel anything and you make believe that you do." She could see he was not listening and she asked in exasperation, "What are you thinking about now?"

"Nothing. I'm listening to you and I wish you weren't so upset."

Actually, the writer had become quite uneasy. He had just thought of an idea to put into his notebook and it made him anxious to think that if he did not remove the notebook from his vest pocket and jot down the thought, he was likely to forget it. He tried repeating the idea to himself several times to fix it in his memory, but this procedure was never certain.

"I'm upset," the young lady said. "Of course I'm upset. Only a mummy isn't upset, only a mummy can always be reasonable and polite, because they don't feel anything." If she had not

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been walking so quickly, she would have stamped her foot. "What are you thinking about?"

"It's not important," he said. He was thinking that if he removed the notebook from his pocket and held it in the palm of his hand, he might be able to scribble in it while he walked. Perhaps she would not notice.

It turned out to be too difficult. He was obliged to come to a halt beneath a street light. His pencil worked rapidly in nervous elliptic script while he felt beside him the pressure of her presence. *Emotional situation deepened by notebook*, he wrote. *Young writer, girlfriend. Writer accused of being observer, not participant in life by girl. Gets idea he must put in notebook. Does so, and brings the quarrel to a head. Girl breaks relationship over this.*

"You have an idea now," the young lady murmured.

"Mmm," he answered.

"That notebook. I knew you'd pull out that notebook." She began to cry. "Why, you're nothing but a notebook," she shrieked, and ran away from him down the street, her high heels mocking her misery in their bright tattoo upon the sidewalk.

"No, wait," he called after her. "Wait. I'll explain."

It occurred to the writer that if he were to do such a vignette, the nuances could be altered. Perhaps the point of the piece should be that the young man takes out the notebook because he senses that this would be the best way to destroy what was left of the relationship. It was a nice idea.

Abruptly, it also occurred to him that maybe this was what he had done. Had he wished to end his own relationship with his own young lady? He considered this, priding himself on the fact that he would conceal no motive from himself, no matter how unpleasant.

Somehow, this did not seem to be true. He did like the young lady, he liked her very much, and he did not wish the relationship to end yet. With some surprise, he realized that she was almost a block away. Therefore, he began to run after her. "No, wait," he called out. "I'll explain it to you, I promise I will." And as he ran, the notebook jiggled warmly against his side, a puppy of a playmate, always faithful, always affectionate.

Dear Salman Rushdie,

I have thought of you often over the last few years. Many

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of us begin writing with the inner temerity that if we keep searching for the most dangerous of our voices, why then, sooner or later we will outrage something fundamental in the world, and our lives will be in danger. That is what I thought when I started out, and so have many others, but you, however, are the only one of us in the West who gave proof that this intimation was not ungrounded. Now you live in what must be a living prison of contained paranoia, and the toughening of the will is imperative, no matter the cost to the poetry in yourself. It is no happy position for a serious writer to become a living martyr. One does not need that. It is hard enough to write at one's best each day, but such is your condition, and if I were a man to believe prayer was productive of results, I might wish to send some sort of vigor and encouragement to you, for if you can transcend this situation, more difficult than any of us have known, if you can come up with a major piece of literary work, then you will rejuvenate all of us, and literature, to that degree, will flower.

So, my best to you, old man, wherever you are ensconced, and may the muses embrace you.

Cheers,
Norman Mailer

Some artists have a powerful, consistent sense of identity. I think the best American examples might be Henry Miller, Hemingway, Faulkner, Thomas Wolfe, Henry James, Sinclair Lewis. In contrast, a writer like Steinbeck kept changing his persona with every book he did. As other examples, one could add Ed Doctorow or myself. Picasso, however, comes more to mind than any of us. His many changes of style are generally seen as a reaction to the different women in his life. I might have to say the same about myself. Up to a point. You can become a different man in each marriage. On the other hand, Henry Miller married a number of times and that did not change his personality. I expect that Miller had to fight to establish his identity very early in life. This is probably the case for people who grow up in unsympathetic families—they must arrive at an inner presence sooner, a hard, often hostile identity that the family cannot mess with too easily.

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For seven or eight years after the success of *The Naked and the Dead*, I kept saying nobody treats me as if I'm real; nobody wants me for my five feet eight inches, and my medium good looks. I am only wanted for my celebrity. Therefore my experience is not real. Any habits on how to write that I had formed up to that point were as an observer on the sidelines. Now, willy-nilly, I was the center of many a room, and so regardless of how I carried myself, everything I did was noted. To myself, I complained about the unfairness of it, until the day I realized that it was fair, that that was now going to be my experience. It's the simplest remark to make, but it took years to get to that point. Then I began to realize that the kind of writing I was now going to do would be on new and unfamiliar themes. After *The Naked and the Dead*, I had assumed I would work on large, collective novels about American life, books that required venturing out to get experience, but my celebrity took away much of the necessary anonymity. There was, however, something else I could express. I was, after all, having a form of twentieth-century experience that might become more and more prevalent—I was separated from my roots. I was successful and alienated, and this was becoming a twentieth-century condition. This understanding went into all of my work after that, and by now I can say that kind of personality interests me more than characters who are rooted.

A young writer, if he is unknown, can be at a party and watch what everyone is doing. If he has a marvelous ear for dialogue, he can wake up the next morning and remember all that was said and how it was said. He is a bird on a branch. Sees like a bird and writes books that can be extraordinarily well observed. But once you are successful, especially if it happens quickly, it's as if the bird is now an emu. It cannot fly. It's big and grows haunches and fore shoulders and a mane: Lo and behold, it is a lion. And everyone is looking at the lion, including the birds. But it is a lion with the heart of a bird and the mind of a bird. So there is a terrible period when the transmogrified emu is trying to live like a lion and has small gifts for it. Then the beast begins to experiment. When it runs, it now sees other animals scamper. It takes a while—often years—to get to appreciate your effect on others and even longer to begin to understand human beings again. In the old days, you could write about friends, enemies, and strangers by intuition, by induction; now, by deduction. Of

course, you do have more material on which to work your deductions.

When people suffer an identity crisis, they generally have to take all sorts of curious steps to locate who they are. They succeed here, they fail there, and the process gives them points of reference. So I began to have a public life even though I was eccentrically shy in those years—that is, half-shy and half-arrogant, like most young writers. I discovered, however, that I had gregarious gifts and started to employ them. Before long, I began to enjoy them. I also wasted a lot. You gain, you lose, and it makes for a new kind of life. Eventually, you have a new identity.

Before *The Naked and the Dead* was published, I thought perhaps I could make a success of writing. Or maybe I couldn't. Time would tell. Then came startling success. *The Naked and the Dead* was number one on the best-seller list for several months and I was a celebrity. Totally unprepared. I felt as if I were secretary to someone named Norman Mailer, and to meet him, people had to say hello to me first. It took a long time to realize that celebrity, which had so unhorsed me in the beginning, had now become an acquired appetite. As the Marquis de Sade once said, "There is no pleasure greater than that obtained from a conquered repugnance." I began to want more. Fame makes you realize that you are amputated from normal life—people don't look at you in the same way. It also offers a sense of how delicate and unstable is identity. And so my experience finally became interesting to me. I could now write about the interior life of people who had gained a certain amount of power and had to put up, therefore, with the new person they had become. Be it noted that this new person can be full of surprises: bold where one was once timid and vulnerable in places that once seemed secure, even hard-edged.

There's an irony to fabricating an alternate self. A surprising amount of choice is involved. When I wrote *Advertisements for Myself*, I realized that one could literally forge one's career by the idea you instilled of yourself in others. That is, impersonate the person you might have some reasonable chance of arriving at in a couple of years and soon enough you are lifting yourself by your bootstraps. It is an unbelievably demanding task—as profound a game as a criminal lawyer plays by cutting himself off

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forever, perhaps, from any clear notion of what his own morality might be.

One unhappy aspect is that people who have never even met you begin to tell exaggerated stories about your person. Soon you are the inheritor of a legend as long as a dinosaur's tail, and it's *false* legend—it never existed even on the day it was created. Twenty years later, you're still using your best efforts to drag the tail around. One relief to getting older is that I no longer have to square my shoulders every time I go into a bar.

On the other hand, sometimes you even aid and abet your legend. Let me offer a dialogue that took place fifty years ago:

A CASUAL FRIEND: Norman, I have a confession to make. I was at an upper East Side party last night, and I didn't know anyone. So I told this good-looking girl that I was you. (pause) Then, I took her home. We got into the sack. I hope you're not mad.

MAILER: Were you good with her?

FRIEND: Yeah. It was a real good one.

MAILER: Then I'm not mad.

James Jones was also shot out of a cannon right into celebrity. But Jones had gone through more than I had before he wrote *From Here to Eternity*. By the time he'd arrived, he was ready to enjoy his success. I was a great pain in the ass to a great many people, because all through the first year I'd keep saying, "Oh, woe is me. Now I will never know the experience of other people." Jones didn't give a damn. He knew he had brought home the game, and he wanted to eat it.

I've always been fascinated with spies and their spiritual associates—actors. The latter can, of course, not be wholly equated to spies, but they do have the experience of embodying a false life for the duration of a given role, and that characterization can become more real than their own identity. The few times I've acted, I've been struck by how alive you can feel during the impersonation, sometimes more real than in your own life. When a spy feels friendship for someone he is going to betray, the friendship is still real. The average journalist is, in that sense, a spy.

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I think Hemingway got into trouble because he had to feel equal to his heroes. It became an enormous demand. He could not allow a character in his books to be braver than he was in his private life. It's a beautiful demand, and there's honor in forcing oneself to adhere to such a code, but it does cut down on the work you can get out. While it's legitimate to write about a man who's braver than yourself, it is better to recognize him quickly as such. As a novelist, I would like to believe I could put a heavyweight champion of the world into a novel and make him convincing, even enter his mind without having to be the best old fighter-writer around.

Hemingway's death was cautionary to me. His suicide was as wounding as if one's own parent had taken his life. I keep thinking of John Gardner's unforgettable remark that when a father commits suicide, he condemns his son to the same end. Well of course, you can go to suicide by more ways than killing yourself. You can rot yourself out with too much drink, too many failures, too much talk, too many wild and unachieved alliances—Hemingway was a great cautioning influence on all of us. One learned not to live on one's airs.

LIVING IN THE WORLD

Since good novelists have to be brave on the one hand but prudent on the other, we make up a delicate species. More sensitive than others in the beginning, we have to develop the will, the stamina, the determination, and the insensitivity to take critical abuse. A good writer, therefore, does well to see himself as a strong, weak person, full of brave timidity, sensitive and insensitive. In effect, we have to learn how to live in the world with all its bumps and falls and occasionally startling rewards while protecting the core of what once seemed a frightfully perishable sensitivity.

I've virtually said as much before, but it is so worth repeating. I tend to look at my contemporaries in the way an athlete looks at rival athletes. You try to have a state of mind where you see everything they do that's better than what you can bring off, yet you certainly look to remain aware of those of your skills that are superior to theirs. Good athletes look at their peers in that manner. After all, they have to face each other.

Of course, this is not often true for authors. But we act as if it is. That's because if we are good enough, our games can have their conclusions a hundred years after we are gone.

If you start a novel before you're ready, it's exactly as if you are a young athlete out in a contest with professionals who are far beyond you. Not ready, you get clobbered. You receive a painful lesson in identity. One does well to build up a little literary experience before trying a long piece of work. On the other hand, if he can accept in advance the likelihood of ending in failure, a young writer can learn a good deal by daring to embark on the long voyage that is a novel.

The energy I put into my public, performing self probably helped my mind and hurt my work. I believe it gave me an understanding of the complexity of the world that I would not have had if I'd stayed at home. I would have tended then to have a much more paranoid vision of how sinister things are. They can be, but not in the way I used to think. That is one of the better tests of the acumen of the writer. How subtle, how full of nuance, how original, is his or her sense of the sinister?

City life produces caustic wit. In New York and Chicago, it serves as a tonic. It works as a bridge to others. It is one of the essences of a city. But if you live in the country, such readiness for confrontation could get you hurt. People who live in the country have one similarity to convicts. All too often they have nothing to think about but the occasional insult they have received. That is one good reason city and country people do tend to make each other nervous.

In the world, you have to learn how to live with deceit. Trotsky once made the incisive remark that the only way you can tell the truth is by a comparison of the lies. While you may never be able to find out who is lying more, you can come close to the relations between two liars. Especially if they are married. We may even be able to say with some certainty, "They hate each other," or, "Isn't it extraordinary how they love each other despite all?"

You also have to learn to live with the possibility of violence. The few times in my life I've been associated with real danger stay with me and remain a *source* for writing. I have a theory concerning crucial experiences that I've expressed from time to time but it might be worth stating again. Certain events, if they are dramatic or fundamental to us, remain afterward like crys-

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tals in our psyche. Those experiences should be preserved rather than written down. They are too special, too intense, too concentrated to be used head-on. Whereas if you project your imagination through the crystal, you can end up with an imaginative extrapolation of the original events. Later, coming from another angle, you may obtain another scenario equally good and altogether different from the same crystal. It is there to serve as a continuing source so long as you don't use it up by a direct account of what you felt.

Actors, in their way, may use the same primal experiences to fuel many an emotional aspect of many a role. Sometimes, in the long run of a play, they can use up such a source and have to find another.

Few good writers come out of prison. Incarceration, I think, can destroy a man's ability to write. The noise in prison is tremendous. Plus the paranoia—you do have to fear or distrust too many of the people you are among. The tension of past events is always there: You hassled someone three weeks ago, when you were feeling strong; today, you are weak and the other guy is in the yard working out with weights. You get his bad looks. Then there is the daily injustice, which is inevitable—some guards have a hard-on just for you.

Most convicts may not have a very good sense of the rights due others, but they have a close to absolute sense of what is due them. They're not getting their rights most of the time. And injustice breeds obsession. In turn, obsession blots out the power to write well. Obsession is like a magnetic field. You keep being pulled back into a direction you have not chosen. All this militates against writing with clarity, let alone nuance! Given the variety of people in prison, you'd think that writers would ferment like yeast, but they don't. Only the best survive to be able to write once they get out.

One of the hardest things about being a young writer is that every day you spend writing is the day you don't meet this fabulous woman who will be the best heroine in American fiction—at least in your willing hands. Now, I'm happily removed from all that. Work used to be the great stone on one's back. Today, it's the opposite. I can't quite carry the analogy out to say that the boulder has become a lighter-than-air balloon, but, I confess,

work now nourishes me as much as it wears one down.

The literary world is a dangerous place to inhabit too frequently if you want to get serious work done. It's almost necessary to take on airs in order to protect oneself. And these airs have to be finely tuned if they are to do the job. Capote had a wonderful set and walked around like a little fortress. Hemingway committed suicide working on his airs. He took the literary world much too seriously. His death is there now as a lesson to the rest of us: Don't get involved at too deep a level or it will kill you and—pure Hemingway—it will kill you for the silliest reasons: for vanity, or because feuds are beginning to etch your liver with the acids of frustration. Hemingway did his best to eschew much of that world, but he established a fief with a royal court of followers. He may have worked as hard on that as on his books. I would repeat: His airs killed him.

MIND AND BODY, EGO AND WORK

It may be that part of the ability to remain a writer is to learn how to protect your ego through the years. One does ring oneself around with ego protections, the first of which, unhappily, is undue prudence. The price is that inspiration does not manage to blow open the door as often. Still, you do carry out the main brunt of your projects. That, of course, is exactly the major function of the ego—this dogged, determined, and often ugly servant of civilization itself. Speak not of the human ego alone but the world ego, the collection of patriotic egos in every land who may yet destroy our existence before this new and fateful century is concluded.

If we think of all the attitudes we take on to fortify the ego or plug holes in it, blind patriotism is probably the most expensive. That is why we will look long and far before we find a good writer who is also a blind patriot. A reasonably dependable ego is crucial to a hardworking author, but an ego that is much more powerful than our literary needs is a superhighway straight into mediocrity. A good many best-selling authors can line up for that one.

Only another writer can know how much damage writing a

novel can do to you. It's hell; you can poison your body. It's an unnatural activity to sit at a desk and squeeze words out of yourself. Various kinds of poisons—essences of fatigue—get secreted through your system. As you age, it grows worse. I believe that is one of the reasons I've been so interested in prizefighters. I think often of the aging boxer who has to get into shape for one more fight and knows the punishment it will wreak on his body. No wonder it puts him in gloom. What characterizes every older fighter I have seen training for a fight is the bad mood that hangs over him and his camp. The only good thing likely to come out of it will be money. For the rest is close to a foregone conclusion. Even if he wins the fight—even if he wins it well—he is not going to get a new purchase on life out of a dazzling success, not in the way he did as a young fighter. That's also true in my profession. Often, you have to make grave decisions: Am I going to attempt this difficult venture or not? At a certain point, you must believe that the work will yet prove truly important. Or else why suffer the slow self-destruction it will entail? Writing a novel over two or three years of the hardest work sometimes does the kind of damage to the body that is equal to obliging someone who has never smoked before to consume two or three packs a day for months. I think one reason I've always been such an interested amateur about medicine is because when you are a writer, you are, in a certain sense, doctor to yourself. You can always feel tensions and ailments creeping into you. It goes with the territory. Your factory is yourself. You are always examining the factory for potential breakdowns, anticipating troubles, and so you become alert to the relation not only between yourself and other people but between yourself and your body. Writing impinges on that body; writing depends ultimately on that body. Proust, with his asthma, was like an important industrialist who manages to get out an extraordinarily consistent product even if one wing of the factory is notoriously subject to breakdown.

Writing can also be a way of using up a large and uncomfortable presence in yourself. It's famously known, for instance, that pornographers end up impotent. That's probably a myth with a certain amount of predictability. If you work a muscle hard, it tends to develop; overworked, it can break down. I think something of the same is true of imagination. Force it too far, and it can cease to return anything. We write novels out of two cardinal

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impulses (other than to make a living and the desire to be famous). One is to understand ourselves better, and the other is to present what we know about others. Of course, it is often impossible to comprehend anyone else until one has plumbed the bottom of certain preoccupations about oneself. That is why the writer is always at risk of using his or her talent for therapy—which is usually closer to self-absorption than to art.

Since we are often obliged to write in a state of ignorance about our real motives, one way to tell whether we are engaged only in therapy is that the work engages no risk or, to the contrary, is so wild that it will find no public and no publisher. Therapy, taken by its bottom line, is always self-indulgence.

If I had tried to write all of *Ancient Evenings* in one year, my ignorance of the subject would have pressed upon me so powerfully, it could not have been done. Over the course of ten years, however, you can carry such a fear. There is always fear, after all, in writing a book. That is one good reason why there are many more people who can write well than do. And, of course, many can't take the meanness of the occupation. There's nothing so very attractive about going into a room by yourself each day to look at a piece of blank paper (or monitor) and make calligraphic marks. To perform that act decade after decade punishes through the very monotony of the process. The act of writing itself, taken as a physical act, is less interesting, for example, than painting or, certainly, sculpture, where your body is exercised in the doing.

Like all occupations, writing also presents its unique elements of risk. In the case of the novelist, it is to his ego. You really don't want to get into a book where you dare to take no chances, especially if it is a long book. How to dignify the time it uses up if large chances aren't engaged?

I'm always a little uneasy when my work comes to me without much effort. It seems better to have to forge the will to write on a given day. I find that on such occasions, if I do succeed in making progress against resistance in myself, the result is often good. As I discover days or weeks later. (*The Armies of the Night*, for example, was worked in the face of considerable resistance.) With all else, I was writing about myself in the third person. While it seemed interesting up to a point to speak of a protago-

nist named Norman Mailer, it was, on the other hand, damn odd. I was halfway into the book before I got used to it. It is even a dislocating way to regard oneself. Yet by the time I was done, I missed this character of Norman Mailer so much that I brought him back for book after book. It never worked as well again. The commitment has to be there. In *The Armies of the Night*, I was a true protagonist of the best sort—half-heroic, three-quarters comic.

Usually, on an average working day, you try to raise yourself to a level where you can pick up your story again. You have to pass through a peculiar hour or two, getting yourself in shape for the daily stint. That is equal to saying you have to face yourself each morning. While every salesman, teacher, executive, fireman, or cop does exactly that one way or another on many a morning (and many a pickpocket as well!), the writer must do it alone, day after day after day, a matter of brooding and drifting, and possibly getting into what's bothering you, or even just unwinding a little. Since you are ready, however, as a novelist to sit in judgment on others, you are obliged to look sooner or later each morning on everything in yourself that's weak or second-rate or irrelevant.

When I'm writing, therefore, I am rarely in a good mood. A part of me prefers to work at a flat level of emotion. Day after day, I see hardly anyone. I'll put in eight or ten hours, of which only three or four will consist of words getting down on the page. It's almost a question of one's metabolism. You begin, after all, from a standing start and have to accelerate up to a level of cerebration where the best words are coming in good order. Just as a fighter has to feel that he possesses the right to do physical damage to another man, so a writer has to be ready to take chances with his readers' lives. If you're trying for something at all interesting or difficult, then you cannot predict what the results of your work will be. If it's close enough to the root, people can be psychically injured reading you. Full of heart, he was also heartless—a splendid oxymoron. That can be the epitaph for many a good novelist.

Today, most of my ideas are less involved with new exploration than with occupying thematic territories I reconnoitered years ago. If you no longer have the pleasure of enjoying your mind

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in the way you could when young, you have, at least, more worldly knowledge to work with. In 1972, while interviewing Henry Kissinger, I asked him if he enjoyed the intellectual stimulation of his White House work, and he said in effect, "I am working with ideas I formed at Harvard years ago. I haven't had a new idea since I've been on this; I just work with the old ones." By now, I know what he meant. There are just so many new thoughts you can have. There comes a time in your life when you have no choice but to implement them. To quote from *The Deer Park*: "... for experience when it is not communicated to another must wither within and be worse than lost." One owes the reader a fee when quoting oneself, but here the tariff feels acceptable.

I can sit with an empty mind. If I do think of something, then all right, I think of it. But a tired brain is happy to contemplate nothing.

On the other hand, our continuing existence as novelists often depend on lively hypotheses. They fructify one's fiction. For example, it is likely that one of the covert motives of jealousy is that it always offers a powerful hypothesis. The moment a husband or wife does not trust the mate, his or her life may become painful, but it is undeniably interesting. Let's say the husband comes in after work and by the way he puts his hat and coat away, the wife can think, Yes, yes, he's feeling guilty. So she can keep the hypothesis going—at least so long as new evidence does not absolutely refute the premise. Then, perhaps, she finds out that the woman she is convinced he is having an affair with has been teaching in China for the last half-year. All right, thereby ends this hypothesis. Now the wife either has to find a new mistress out there or reassess her acumen.

The above, you might say, is a private chart of reality. We also keep world-size charts. A huge geographical and/or philosophical map. The West is in decline—a large hypothesis. Depending on the character of one's mind, one can have an immensely complicated worldview or a narrower and most restricted map, where all you can say is, "I know this region well. Let the rest remain uncharted." Very few of us have a reasonably filled-in vision of the world. We tend to develop only those areas we are interested in.

As a perfect example, how many Americans had Afghanistan

anywhere on their chart until September 11? Now, we are picking up bits and tidbits about Islam. A flurry! A superficial but lively work-in-progress is proceeding.

To dignify this notion, let me propose that indeed we do try to use these charts, whether good or superficial, to serious purpose. For we are all navigating through life. That is one reason why good novels have a quality that other forms of communication do not offer. It's very hard to think of an interesting protagonist who is not always moving between choices. And you, as the writer, have to monitor these decisions. When your characters come alive for you, which is one of the more agreeable if undeniably eerie aspects of serious novel-writing—when you find yourself having dialogues with them or at the least thinking about how they might react in certain situations that have nothing to do with your novel—then they do bear comparison to a prominent and troublesome friend.

A specific example: At one point in the middle of *Harlot's Ghost*, I thought it would be interesting to send my protagonist—who was a young man in the CIA (and very much under the tutelage of a very high CIA official called Harlot)—to Israel. Why? Because Harlot is in competition with the gray eminence of the CIA, James Jesus Angleton. Harlot feels Angleton not only has too much of a hegemony in the CIA but is also on the inside track with the Mossad. So Harlot decides to send over his subaltern. Perhaps the young man will be able to submarine Angleton just a bit.

That appealed to me. And I thought: Do I dare? Then realized: Can't be done. The research will take a year. I'll have to go over to Israel. Never having been in Israel before, that'll be another book, probably, and I'll have to find out about the Mossad. My chart was no help there. All I had was a blank area that said "Truly major intelligence organization." Learning about the Mossad would be even more difficult than picking up on the CIA. I deliberated for all of a restless week before I was ready to tell myself, "You could wreck this book by sending Harry Hubbard to Israel. At best, you'll lose much too much time." Instead, I had him do something less bold. But that is the way we make such novelistic decisions. Very much as we do in life.

GENDER, NARCISSISM, MASTURBATION

If you believe in fiction, if you believe in the power of the novelist, then all subjects are possible. Of course, certain choices present more obstructions than others. It would be harder, as an example, for a male novelist to learn about the small irritations of a woman's day than to imagine what her sex would be like. A novelistic element in sex, after all, is the feeling of nearness to the Other. It's one of the compelling reasons for sex precisely because such sentiments live almost entirely outside formal sacraments and private codes. It may be indeed why pious people so often feel driven to break their own deepest sexual prohibitions. It's because the experience of meeting the Other is incomparable. Which is why I say it's easier—if you are going to write about those of the opposite gender—to limn them sexually, to portray them from that point of view, than attempt to get into the nitty-gritty of their daily life.

Another word on gender. Women certainly have every right to create men at war, but I think it might be recognized that it's likely to be less comfortable for them. War, after all, is essentially a male invention. How often have women shown the same inventiveness and hellishness that men have at war? How can they

approach that near-psychotic mix of proportion and disproportion which is at the heart of mortal combat? On the other hand, if we ask whether men and women can write equally well about bravery, I would say yes. How are we to define bravery, after all? Take a woman who is awfully timid—let's say she was terrorized through her childhood. She has an all-too-acute awareness of how bad things can come upon you suddenly. When she's an old lady and every bone in her body is aching, it may be an act of courage for her to cross a busy street all by herself. She doesn't know if she can make it across before the lights change, yet she has to do it. For her own honor, if you will. And she does it. That may be more brave, given the relative situation, than the bold act of a soldier who's been trained to be courageous, who is bonded to the soldiers he is with, who lives with the idea that there's no disgrace in life worse than not being up to the military occasion. You can't speak of true bravery in combat for such a good soldier until he has exhausted his code to that point where he feels, Yes, I may lose—I may lose my heart, my dignity, my honor. I'm scared. I'm terrified. I can't move. If at this point, he still proceeds to press himself forward, then his behavior is courageous.

In a certain sense, we all know this—we know what constitutes brave action. So a woman can certainly write about brave soldiers, even though she's not the least bit brave, not at that level. Of course, she has to have an immense talent. I've often thought that Joyce Carol Oates, who is not necessarily one of my favorite writers but nonetheless is a very talented woman, will often, on the basis of a small bit of experience, write a six-hundred-page novel. I think she's an arch example of someone who does almost all of it through talent. She's willing to dare terrible humiliation. The irony is that she is rarely attacked. I expect she arouses a fundamental if somewhat bemused respect in many a mean spirit.

The narcissist suffers from too much inner dialogue. The eye of his consciousness is forever looking at his own action. Yet—let us try to keep the notion clear—a narcissist is not simply a study in vanity and self-absorption so much as one part of the self is immersed in studying the other part. The narcissist is the scientist and the experiment in one. Other people exist, have value to the narcissist, because of their particular ability to arouse one

role or another in himself. And are valued for that. May even be loved for that. Of course, they are loved as an actor loves his audience.

Since the amount of stimulation we can offer ourselves is, obviously, limited, the underlying problem of the narcissist is boredom. So there are feverish, even violent attempts to shift the given. One must alter that drear context in which one half of the self is forever examining the stale presence of the other. That is one reason why narcissists are forever falling in and out of love, jobs, places, and addictions. Promiscuity is the opportunity to try a new role. The vanity gained from a one-night stand is an antidote to claustrophobia. That is, if the gamble of the one-night stand turns out well! Henry Miller complains to Anaïs Nin of his dear beloved's lack of center, the incapacity of June to tell the truth or even recognize it. "I want the key," he says, "the key to her lies." Blind to himself—does not every artist have to live in partial and self-induced blindness, or he could never find a foundation for his effort?—Henry Miller does not want to recognize that the key may be simple. Every day is a scenario for June. On the best of days, she creates a life into which she can fit for a few hours. She can feel real love and real hate for strangers, and thereby leave the circle of her self-absorption. Through scenarios, she can arrive in an hour at depths of emotion that other people voyage toward for years. Of course, the scenario once concluded, so too is the love for the day. That passing actor she played with for a few hours is again a stranger to her. It is useless to speak of whether she loves or does not love Miller. It depends on whether he dwells in her scenario for that day. So it is also useless to speak of her lies. They are no more real to her than yesterday's lies. It is today's scenario that is her truth and her life—that is liberation from the prison cell of the narcissist.

Of course, it is not all that bad. Part of Miller's continuing literary obsession with June is due to the variety of her roles. Each, after all, offers a new role for Miller. He does play opposite the leading lady. If for one day she turns him into a detective and on the next, a thief, that keeps interest in his own personality alive.

Narcissists, after all, induce emotion in each other through their minds. It is not their flesh which is aroused so much as the vibrancy of the role. Their relations are at once more electric and more empty, more perfect and more hollow. But the hollow

seems never to fill. So, narcissism may be a true disease, a biological displacement of the natural impulse to develop oneself by the lessons of one's experience—narcissism, therefore, could bear the same relation to love that onanism does to copulation or a cancer to the natural growth of tissue. Can we come a little nearer to the recognition that there may be a base beneath all disease, an ultimate disease, a psychosomatic doom, so to speak, against which all the other illnesses, colds, fevers, infections, and deteriorations are bulwarks to protect us against a worse fate? Which could be an irreversible revolt of the flesh or the mind into cancer or insanity. That is psychosomatic doom—to follow the growth of the flesh or the mind into terminal anomaly. But if that is the case, how can we not suppose that for the narcissist—always so aware that something is wrong within—there is a constant unconscious terror: His or her isolation, if unrelieved, will end in one arm or the other of the ultimate disease.

The paradox is that no love can prove so intense, therefore, as the love of two narcissists for each other. So much depends on it. Each—the paradox turns upon itself—is capable of offering deliverance to the other. To the degree that they tune each other superbly well, they begin to create what before had been impossible: They begin to acquire the skills that enable them to enter the world. (For it is not love of the self but dread of the world outside the self which is the seed of narcissism.) Narcissists can end, therefore, by having a real need of each other. That is, of course, hardly the characteristic relation. The love of most narcissists tends to become comic. Seen from the outside, their suffering manages to be equaled only by the rapidity with which they recover from suffering. Is it hundreds or thousands of such examples that come to us from Hollywood?

The reality, of course, is more painful. Given the delicacy of every narcissist and the timidity that created their detachment, we can see again that the highest intensity of their personal relations is, for good cause, with themselves. For their own self-protection, they need an excess of control over external events. (Not too removed in analogy is that excess of control which technology is forever trying to exact from nature.)

To the degree, however, that narcissism is an affliction of the talented, the stakes are not small, and the victims are playing a serious game right in the midst of their scenarios. For if one can break out of the penitentiary of self-absorption, then there may

be artistic wonders to achieve.

Henry Miller could have been playing, therefore, for the highest stakes. He had the energy, the vision, the talent, the outrageous individuality to have some chance of becoming the greatest writer in America's history, a figure equal to Shakespeare. (For Americans.) Of course, to invoke such contrasts is to mock them. A writer cannot live too seriously with the idea that (as Hemingway once boasted) he will or will not beat Tolstoy. He contains, rather, some sense of huge and not impossible literary destiny in the reverberations of his own ambition; he feels his talent as a trust, and his loves seem evil when they balk him. He is living, after all, with his own secret plot. He knows that a writer of the largest dimension can alter the nerves and marrow of a nation. No one, in fact, can measure what whole and collective loss would have come to the English people if Shakespeare had not lived to write. (Or, for that matter, conceive of how the South would be strikingly less interesting without Faulkner. It certainly is now.)

In those seven years with June, Miller was shaping the talent with which he would go out into the world. It is part of the total ambiguity of narcissism (despite the ten thousand intimate details he offers of his life) that we do not know by the end of *The Rosy Crucifixion* whether June breathed a greater life into his talent or exploited him. We do not know if Miller, if he had never met her, could have become capable of writing about tyrants and tycoons (instead, repetitively, of his own liberation) or—we are left wide open—if the contrary is the true possibility and he might never have written well at all if he had not met her. All we know is that after seven years of living with June, he went off to Paris alone and learned to live by himself, having come into a confluence of his life where he could extract an overpowering and unforgettable aesthetic from ogres and sewers. It is kin to the nightmare of narcissism that we are left with this question and no answer.

A corollary of narcissism is, of course, masturbation. An author is forever consulting his mind, even as the hand will query the penis. So follow a few remarks from an interview done almost forty years ago. Rereading it, I find it still valid. The act of writing is so close to the psychic character of masturbation that if we are going to discuss the world of the writer, then we ought to

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deal with that as well. It is the unspoken subtext behind the epithet *scribbler*.

PAUL KRASSNER: Do you think you're something of a puritan when it comes to masturbation?

NORMAN MAILER: I think masturbation is bad.

PK: KRASSNER: In relation to heterosexual fulfillment?

NM: MAILER: In relation to everything—orgasm, heterosexuality, to style, to stance, to be able to fight the good fight. I think masturbation turns people askew. It sets up a bad and often enduring tension. Anybody who spends his adolescence masturbating generally enters his young manhood with no sense of being a man.

PK: KRASSNER: Is it possible you have a totalitarian attitude toward masturbation?

NM: MAILER: I'm saying it's a miserable activity.

PK: KRASSNER: Well, we're getting right back to absolutes. You know—to some, masturbation can be a thing of beauty.

NM: MAILER: To what end? Who is going to benefit from it? Masturbation is bombing oneself.

PK: KRASSNER: I think there's a basic flaw in your argument. Why are you assuming that masturbation is violence unto oneself? Why is it not pleasure unto oneself? And I'm not defending masturbation—well, I'm defending masturbation, yes, as a substitute if and when—

NM: MAILER: All right, look. When you make love, whatever is good in you or bad in you goes out into someone else. I mean this literally. I'm not interested in the biochemistry of it nor in how the psychic waves are passed back and forth. All I know is that when one makes love, one changes a woman slightly and a woman changes you slightly—

PK: KRASSNER: Certain circumstances can change one for the worse.

NM: MAILER: But at least you have gone through a process which is part of life. One can be better for the experience, or worse. But one has experience to absorb, to think about, one has literally to digest the new spirit that has entered the flesh. The body has been galvanized for an experience of flesh, a declaration of the flesh.

If one has the courage to think about every aspect of the act—I don't mean think mechanically about it—but if one is able to brood over the act, to dwell on it, then one is *changed*

To be
consistent
with
other
interviews
which
return
Q & A

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by the act. Because in the act of restoring one's harmony, one has to encounter all the reasons one was jangled.

So finally, one has had an experience which was nourishing. Nourishing because one is able to *feel* one's way into more difficult or more precious insights as a result of it. One's able to live a tougher, more heroic life if one can digest and absorb the experience.

But if one masturbates, all that happens is, everything that's beautiful and good in one goes up the hand, goes into the air, is *lost*. Now, what the hell is there to *absorb*? One hasn't tested oneself. You see, in a way, the heterosexual act lays questions to rest and makes one able to build upon a few answers. Whereas if one masturbates, the ability to contemplate one's experience is disturbed. Fantasies of power take over and disturb all sleep.

If one has, for example, the image of a beautiful, sexy babe in masturbation, one still doesn't know whether one can make love to her in the flesh. All you know is that you can have her in your *brain*. Well, a lot of good that is.

But if one has fought the good fight or the evil fight and ended with the beautiful, sexy dame, then whether the experience is good or bad, your life is changed by it. One knows something of what happened. One has something real to build on.

The ultimate direction of masturbation always has to be insanity—the ultimate direction, mind you, not the immediate likelihood.

THE UNCONSCIOUS

In the course of fashioning a character, as you search into his or her existence, there invariably comes a point where you recognize that you don't know enough about the person you are trying to create. At such times, I take it for granted that my unconscious knows more than I do. As we go through life, we do, after all, observe everyone, wittingly and unwittingly. Perhaps, out of the corner of your eye, you glimpse someone in a restaurant who represents a particular inspiration or menace or possibility, potentially a friend or foe—and the unconscious goes to work on that. It needs very little evidence to put together a comprehensive portrait because, presumably, it has already done most of that labor. To use an unhappy analogy, it's as if the unconscious is a powerful computer that does not often need new sources to fashion a portrait, considering how much material has already been stored away.

On the other hand, the unconscious can often feel violated by what we demand, by what, indeed, we manage to extract from it. Perhaps a great deal of the material it is now supplying was originally filed away for its own purposes. Suppose the unconscious has a root in the hereafter that our conscious mind does not. If so, it will have deeper notions about death than we do. Let us

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then dare to surmise that the unconscious is on close, even familial, terms with that most elusive presence in the conscious mind—our soul. If that is the case, the unconscious can feel exploited by the push of the novelist to extract so much of his product from its resources.

Suppose the relation of the unconscious to the conscious is analogous to that of a cultivated Greek slave in service to an overbearing Roman master. If we use this notion as a working premise, we can assume that our unconscious is full of the trickiest kinds of resistance. All the writer receives is a sense of dull, edgy resentment. Perhaps the unconscious is not ready to plumb into the material requested. The acute form of this is writer's block. But, for that matter, there is a touch of writer's block in almost every working day. It is part of the experience of writing. At a certain point we are going well for a page or two perhaps, even as many as four or five. On happy days, one is writing as if it's all there, a gift. You don't even have much to do with it. You're only around to transcribe what's coming up. Then comes the moment when our ambition orders us to keep going: "Three pages away from the end of the chapter. You can't stop now, not with this marvelous streak." Then, so often, the sentences begin to strain, and you feel, no, we've got to pack it in for now—dammit, dammit—now tomorrow morning will be lost, but, no, don't try to finish now, you're going to wreck it. That's what you learn over time. Because in the early years of writing, you do force it, and what happens, of course, is equal to blow-back. From its point of view, the unconscious has done its job. It's damned if it's going to give you any more right now. If you insist, flatness of affect will be your reward—*nothingness*, the dread antagonist. It's there. One of the most painful elements in the act of writing is to live so much of the day with little but that. It is why many talented men and women do a good book or two, then stop. To deal on a daily basis with *nothingness* is vitiating. Writers who have been at it for decades often do not keep a vital an inner life. They remain professional enough to take what is potentially exciting in their concept and put it on paper. But the inner landscape shows its flats. That may be due to our violation of the frustrated desire of the unconscious to be left alone on those occasions when we nonetheless insist on hard-working its vein. So our ambition ends by contributing to the *nothingness* that besets us. The irony is that so often it is our fear of living

with an inner void that makes us ambitious in the first place.

Part of the art of being a novelist is to play that delicate game of obtaining experience without falsifying it by the act of observation. Generally speaking, it's easier to take in such knowledge when you are part of an event that is much larger than yourself—like the fall of the Twin Towers.

There must be five hundred young writers in New York who had a day of experience that was incomparable—nothing remotely like that had ever happened before in their lives. And it's likely that some extraordinary work will come out of it. Hopefully, not all of it about 9/11. If you never write about 9/11 but were in the vicinity that day, you could conceivably, in time to come, describe a battle in a medieval war and provide a real sense of such a lost event. You could do a horror tale. Or write about the sudden death of a beloved. Or a march of refugees. All kinds of scenes and situations can derive ultimately from 9/11. What won't always work is to go at it directly. That kind of writing can be exhausted quickly. And the temptation to drive in head-on, is, of course, immense—the event was traumatic to so many.

Unhappily, a large part of writing serves this eliminatory process. The worst thing that can be said about literary work is that it can reduce itself—all too easily to therapy when, ideally, you are there to bring wealth to others. Wealth of observation, of perception, the riches of a philosophical attitude that is to a degree new, insights into psychology the reader hasn't had before—all these are on the selfless side of writing. On the other hand, there is also ego, vanity, and need—the desire, finally, to advance oneself as a writer. People don't become authors solely to benefit humanity. They're in the same position as priests. Part of them wants to be good to others; the other side wants, one way or the other, to have some sort of acquaintance with power. Which is often hugely at odds with the first notion. Generosity vies with acquisition; compassion is besieged with greed. Not surprising then, if such tension pushes one toward accomplishing neither, but converting it all into reduction of stress, therapy through the act of writing and more writing until such logorrhea exhausts one's unrest to some degree. In such cases, it is the loss of good writing that pays for the draining of all that badness.

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I've found that I can't do serious writing without getting into a mild depression. (Note! I am not speaking of a clinical depression.) An ongoing bad mood can be, however, a vital part of the process, because to begin with, it's perilous to fall in love with what you're doing. You lose your judgment. And for the simplest reason—the words, as you are writing them, stir up your feelings too much. Odds are, if they excite you disproportionately, they may do much less to others. (This accounts for the bewilderment of novice writers when a story they have written that charged them up to the heights appears to have little impact on others.)

With veteran writers, a mild working depression is not always simple to explain. The deeper your theme and the more material you are bringing up from your unconscious to support it, the more you may be exhausting the possibilities of other themes-in-waiting. So gloom can descend. Certain large possibilities won't get written about after all. No book I wrote kept me in a more profound bad mood (while doing it) than *The Armies of the Night*. I was putting so much in, and at so fast a rate, that I was probably uprooting all sorts of possibilities for future projects. Gloom descends when you have wounded too many psychic tissues in your determination to achieve one urgent goal.

Sometimes, the only way you can be certain you are attracted to a new subject is that you know so little about it and yet are drawn toward it. Perhaps you possess one deep insight into the subject—a special kind of purchase that will accelerate your comprehension as you proceed. It's more amusing, for instance, to read a mystery novel if early on you have an idea who did it, a feeling that you and the author share something. In such happy condition, you are going, right or wrong, to get more out of the book than others. I think something of the sort can also occur in historical research. Reading about ancient Egypt, I felt I knew more about burial customs than the average Egyptologist—not more about the details, which I hadn't learned as yet, but more about the underlying reason for some of the practices. That was enough to fire up the wish to pursue it a long way further.

I've always had the feeling that it doesn't make much sense to take on a subject if others can do it as well. As an instance, I never felt my childhood was so unique to me that it was worth

recording. On the other hand, I conceal, sometimes from myself, what there is to write about those years. It can be wasteful to plunge into what you have to say on a subject before you're ready to give your full commitment.

This may sound odd to people who do not write. They usually have not come in contact with the authority of the unconscious to resist one's conscious will. Over and over again, I discover that my unconscious is going to disclose to me what it chooses, when it chooses. You can, to a limited degree, force it to respond, but that rarely occasions much happiness on either side. Sometimes I think you have to groom the unconscious after you've used it, swab it down, treat it like a prize horse who's a finer animal than you.

Practically, how do you go about this? How do you groom the unconscious? I don't have a clue. The trouble with relying on metaphors is that they too can desert you or betray you just as nicely as anyone or anything else.

Over the years, I've found one rule. It is the only one I give on those occasions when I talk about writing. It's a simple rule. If you tell yourself you are going to be at your desk tomorrow, you are by that declaration asking your unconscious to prepare the material. You are, in effect, contracting to pick up such valuables at a given time. Count on me, you are saying to a few forces below: I will be there to write. The point is that you have to maintain trustworthy relations. If you wake up in the morning with a hangover and cannot get to literary work, your unconscious, after a few such failures to appear, will withdraw.

It is likely that your unconscious is never all that much in love with you. The battle between the ego and the unconscious is, I think, a war of some dimension. In many people it's equal to an unhappy marriage, and marriages depend, after all, upon trust. Unhappy marriages depend immensely on what little mutual trust there is. So, you have to establish decent relations with your working depths, and you might as well recognize that this procedure is possibly as difficult to achieve as any far-reaching union with someone outside your skin.

The unconscious presence within may have as many interests, aspects, principalities, chasms, terrors, underworlds, other-worlds, and ambitions as yourself. Your unconscious may even have ambitions that are not your own. For practical purposes, it

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may be worth thinking of it as a separate creature. If you are ready to look upon it as a curious and semi-alienated presence in yourself with whom you have to maintain decent relations—if practice you are able to see yourself as some sort of careless general (of the old aristocratic school) and picture the unconscious as your often unruly cohort of troops—then, obviously, you wouldn't dare to keep those troops out in the rain too long; certainly not at the commencement of any serious campaign. On the contrary, you make a pact: "Work for me, fight for me, and I will honor and respect you."

To repeat: The rule is that if you say to yourself you are going to write tomorrow, then it doesn't matter how badly you're hungover or how promising is a sudden invitation in the morning to do something more enjoyable. No, you go in dutifully, slavishly, and you work. This injunction is wholly anti-romantic in spirit. But if you subject yourself to this impost upon yourself, this dictat to be dependable, then after a period of time—it can take weeks, or more—the unconscious, nursing its disappointments, may begin to trust you again.

This is a burden on young writers who are not only ambitious but wild enough to feel that their wildness is part of their talent. They hate to submit to the heavy hand (that awful, severe, unbending demand for moderation) and obey the rule that you have to show up.

On the other hand, you can sometimes say to yourself, "I'm not going to work tomorrow," and the unconscious may even by now be close enough in accord not to flood your mind with brilliant and all-too-perishable material. That is also important. Because in the course of going out and having the lively day and night you're entitled to, you don't want to keep having ideas about the book you're on. Indeed, if you are able on your day off to avoid the unpleasant condition of being swarmed with thoughts about a work-in-progress when there is no pen in your hand, then you've arrived at one of the disciplines of a real writer.

The rule in capsule: If you fail to show up in the morning after you vowed that you would just before you went to sleep last night, then you will walk around with ants in your brain. Rule of thumb: Restlessness of mind can be measured by the number of promises that remain unkept.

PHILOSOPHY

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The primitive had senses which were closer to the animal. Obviously! He also had fears not unlike the animal. Those fears are intense. Anyone who has ever felt dread in any real way knows it's a near to unendurable experience; one will do almost anything to avoid it. One is tempted to advance the notion that civilization came out of man's terror at having to face dread as a daily condition and so we worked to elaborate a civilization that would insulate us from the exorbitant demands of existence. I'm not speaking now of those early and unbelievably pressing concerns of growing crops or killing enough game to be able to live. I'm conceiving of a greater terror, where the trees virtually spoke to one and the message one took in from the rustling of the leaves and the swaying of the branches was accurate: the storm they were ready to tell you about—the terrible storm that was coming in a few weeks was going to make the river wash over its banks and flood your settlement. That warning proved to be prophetic. What terror. Small wonder if man did everything he could to remove himself from that kind of intimacy with nature, that foresight. He even escalated the costs of tribal war in order to found large nations—anything to avoid a daily existence filled with dread. Carnage ensued and philosophy de-

veloped. Is it possible that at the heart of Divinity is Irony well installed? Carnage walks the aisles of history hand in hand with philosophy. If there is no afterworld where the game goes on, then existence is indeed absurd.

Primitive man had to see himself surrounded by a circle of forces—demons, gods, friendly forces, impersonal forces. If I think of a primitive walking through a forest, I expect his movement to be different from ours. If we pass through the woods on an easy trail, we walk; if it's not open, we bushwhack. But the primitive may have stopped before a certain tree and bowed. Before another, he may have lain prostrate on the ground; where there was familiarity with a relatively modest divine force, just a nod of the head as he passed by. That was no more than was required unless the tree gave an indication that it was annoyed. How did it speak? By many shades of distinction in the rustling of its leaves.

If we accept these suppositions, then consciousness had to be more intense for the primitive. He was always a protagonist. His day was heroic or ghastly. For what does it mean to be a hero? It requires you to be prepared to deal with forces larger than yourself. Terrified and heroic, it is no wonder that the life span of primitive man was shorter than ours.

By pagan times, of course, societies as developed as the Romans' were ready to rely instead on rituals and special relation to their gods. Earlier, among the Egyptians, certain amulets were the equal in value of estate holdings. If you are trying to form and maintain a society, you can't have people going off every moment to propitiate forces on their own. You do well to get them believing there is a central force, society itself, which offers the best approach of propitiation of the gods. Can one go so far as to suggest that there is a buried element in many talented writers that unconsciously expects their work to serve not only literature but as acts of conjuration or propitiation? What, when you get down to it, was Joyce, as one mighty example, trying to show us in *Finnegans Wake*?

The artist seeks to create a spell. Today, of course, the artist is no primitive man; he is all but completely insulated from the senses primitive man once had. By now, the artist usually acts as a mediator between magic and technology. But no matter how tech-

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nologized he becomes, his central impulse is to create a spell equivalent to the spell a primitive felt when he passed a great oak and knew something deeper than his normal comprehension was reaching him. Perhaps the primitive felt close to what we feel when we see a great painting on a museum wall. We are near then to something we can't even quite call knowledge. It's larger, less definable, and certainly more resonant.

While the physicist is stirred, if uncomfortably, by feeling the presence of magic in his experiment and the artist is often drenched in statistical detail (since he has to deal with a world that grows more and more technical and difficult to comprehend), at bottom their interests are opposed. Finally, the physicist is trying to destroy the fundament of magic, and the artist is trying to undermine the base of technology. The artist believes (and this is the greatest generalization I can make) that all cosmic achievement is attainable within the human frame—that is, if we lead lives witty enough and skillful enough, bold enough and, finally, illumined enough, we can accomplish every communication and reach every vault within the cosmos that technology would attempt to take by force: telepathy rather than telephony.

An equation sign can also be seen as a statement of metaphor. When you say: "y equals x to the 2nd power," you are in effect establishing a metaphor. Or, the obverse: An artist in a gallery, looking at a painting, says, "I see God in the yellow." All right, that can be stated mathematically. The yellow of this painting is a function of God. Either way, artist or physicist is trying to penetrate into the substance of things. In that sense, the physicist and the artist are closer to one another than the artist and the gallery owner, or the physicist and the engineer.

I've long had the notion that when highly charged people have a confrontation—Shakespearean characters, for example—coincidences will occur. Indeed, if there is any order in the cosmos, it should not be so exceptional that this is so. If a general, let us say, is getting ready for battle and there are gods and devils surrounding him, they are certainly involved in the outcome. Whether the general wins or loses the contest on that day will have an effect on the fortunes of these gods. So they're going to

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be paying attention, are they not? In turn, the general is going to be aware of them—at least insofar as he has sensitivity to their presence. Such a man is not necessarily foolish or psychotic if he spends his last ten minutes in bed debating whether he should put his left foot down on the floor first or should choose the right. Perhaps he is calling on the left or right echelon of his gods. We can also assume that these gods will be doing their best to create startling coincidences. A coincidence, after all, excites us with the livid sense that there's a superstructure about us, and in this superstructure are the agents of a presence (or a spiritual machine) larger than our imagination. When a warlike general bends his knee in prayer, it is as likely that he is calling upon a demon as invoking Jesus Christ. Of course, he may be thinking that he calls on the Lord. Doubtless, he has never encountered Kierkegaard's dictum that when we feel most saintly, we could be working for the devil.

MICHAEL LENNON: Many of your characters over the years have carried on negotiations with evil—Marion Faye, D.J., Rojack—I take it that you would not agree with Hannah Arendt on the essential banality of evil?

NORMAN MAILER: I wouldn't agree with Hannah Arendt at all, not at all. Of course, she can make a case. There are any number of prodigiously evil people who have, from the novelist's point of view, disappointing exteriors. Eichmann, superficially speaking, was a little man, an ordinary man in appearance, and vulgar and dull, but to assume therefore that evil itself is banal strikes me as exhibiting a prodigious poverty of imagination. You know, one of the paradoxes I always found in the liberal temperament is that they are immensely worshipful of Freud—even though most of his ideas are antipathetic to the notion of liberalism itself. But liberals do go to Freud as if he is their umbilical cord for cerebral nourishment. The reason is simple: Freud's stance is reductive, and liberals don't like to believe in the vast power of the unconscious or the evil of true murderousness residing in the most ordinary people. To accept the surface for the reality is to perform the fundamental liberal reflex. In effect, liberals are always saying, "I don't see God, so why do you assume God exists?" Talk of the devil is off the charts. Out of that has come, I think, their present bankruptcy. Liberalism has no ex-

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citing ideas to offer. I think this enervation comes because it has not been able to deal with the most haunting question of the twentieth century, which is not communism but Nazism. Liberalism can't come near to understanding this incredible phenomenon that took over a country of the most decent, hardworking, and *clean* people in the world, this incredible phenomenon of a fascism that went far beyond the bounds of totalitarianism into the most despicable and extraordinary extermination of vast numbers of peoples. And this, coming out of a nation that had always been exceptionally—even comically—law-abiding, suggested that the unconscious was truly a place of hideous ambushes and horrors. Liberals, unable to weave that thought into their philosophy, were happy to welcome Hannah Arendt's phrase. But I think to speak of the banality of evil is precisely to point us further in the wrong direction. Evil has dimensions. Evil is mysterious. It can be palpable or invisible. It can appear to be banal or, equally, can show itself as intensely dramatic. September 11 does come to mind.

Back to Kierkegaard. He was ready to suggest that at the moment we're feeling most saintly, we may in fact be evil. And that moment when we think we're most evil and finally corrupt, we may, by the startling judgments of God, be saintly. The value of this notion is that it strips us of the fundamental arrogance of assuming that at any given moment any of us has enough centrality—that is, possesses a *seat* from which we can expound our dogma or determine our own moral value. I may have a fairly well formed *cloud* of intuitions about the nature of the good, and like a cloud, it has, to a certain degree, its structure; yet the form is capable of altering quickly. A cloud changes shape quickly, but it remains a cloud. It's not just simply an unformed chaos. That, I would propose, is as close as we get to any moral truth. This is why I love the novel. It is, I would repeat, the form best suited for developing our moral sensitivity—which is to say our depth of understanding rather than our rush to judgment. Given the complexity of the last century and the surrealistic knockdowns of the first two years of this century, quick judgment has become a need analogous to the kind of all-consuming hunger that is ready to eat grass and dirt to fill the void. Or, go to McDonald's.

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The moment you moralize in your novel, your book is no longer moral. It has become pious. Piety not only corrodes morality but consorts intimately and comfortably with corruption. Piety and corruption go together like hot dogs and mustard. Piety have to. No one can fulfill the demands of piety; as a daily demand, it is too inhuman. So it inspires its opposite—just for the sheer health of the body, if not the soul. Whereas morality, when subtle, brings proportion to human affairs. Tolstoy is a great writer—maybe he is our greatest novelist—because no other can match his sense of human proportion. We feel awe supported by compassion when we read Tolstoy. A remarkable achievement. We are in the rare presence of moral evaluations that are severe yet ultimately tender.

whether

word
dropped

I've used this example before, but it bears repeating: Anyone who worries about he is ~~as~~ going to hurt somebody's feelings by his work is no more a writer than a surgeon who says to himself, "In making this incision, I am going to give this young woman a scar on her belly that could injure her love life for the next thirty years." The surgeon just makes the cut. He may be right or wrong in the need for the operation, but he keeps a necessary insensitivity to the rest of the context. Writers also have their own kind of restricted vision. They cannot afford to say to themselves, "This portrait is going to scar my good friend." Or my father Or my sister. If they feel such sentiments, they can't write. Indeed, a great many young writers think of all the people they're going to hurt or, worse, those they're going to make enemies of, and, full of funk, begin to brood on the retribution that will ensue. So there has to be something a bit maniacal about a young man or woman who would be an exciting writer. He or she has to be willing to get that book out no matter how many psychic casualties are left in its passage. On the other hand, a good young writer does well not to take an immediate advantage over people he dislikes by dumping on them in his pages. It's a bad habit to cash such easy checks. Ergo, the moral vision of the young writer is on a tightrope.

I may not be a good intellectual, but my avocation is, nonetheless, to create intellections. I put them on like adhesive plasters. In the case of Gary Gilmore, however, I had to pull them off. As I explored deeper into what Gilmore's nature might be, I decided that every concept I had about him was inadequate. So I wanted the reader of *The Executioner's Song* to confront the true

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complexity of one human. That state of perception will always arise by studying any person close enough. That he was a murderer made my task simpler, because we are all fascinated by killers. But any person studied in depth will prove fascinating. It is certainly the yeast in any good marriage. Take any soul alive, and he or she will prove exceptional provided you get to know him or her well enough.

ATTENTION ON REALITY

The first thing I noticed when I sat down to write about the complexity of one human was that I had been lulled by the fact that I had known him for so long. I had known him for the purpose of my work, but I had not known him for the purpose of my life. I had not known him for the purpose of my life, and that was the first thing I noticed when I sat down to write about the complexity of one human. I had not known him for the purpose of my life, and that was the first thing I noticed when I sat down to write about the complexity of one human. I had not known him for the purpose of my life, and that was the first thing I noticed when I sat down to write about the complexity of one human.

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ATTACKS ON REALITY

Readers often have a problem when an author mixes real and fictional characters. I've never been bothered by that. As far as I'm concerned, it's all fiction. Let's say for the purpose of argument there are a thousand large and small details necessary for a particular historian to capture a given moment in time—Napoleon's return from Elba or the rise of Robespierre. Whatever is chosen, the historian has to decide which of those details are most relevant. He can't use them all. More important, he can't obtain them all. Let's say he selects a few hundred pieces of information that adhere to his various assumptions on what probably happened within the event. These pieces of detail are usually called *facts*.

Should the novelist come in, also ready to write about the same happening, he or she is not nearly as good, doubtless, at research and comes up with only forty or fifty details that seem vital. Nonetheless, I would argue that the historian and the novelist are both engaged in writing fiction. The difference is that the historian uses more facts, although they can never be numerous enough to enclose the reality. Moreover, the historian usually writes in a more pedestrian style. But there they are both doing fiction. The real point is that each, the novelist and the

historian, is making an attack on the possible nature of reality. Such attacks are the fundamental element in good fiction whether the mode of assault is history or the novel.

Yes, Borges is a conservative, but I detest having to think of a writer by his politics first. It's like studying people by way of their anus. Borges has a magical ability to turn plots inside out. A magician's magician. I sometimes think he does in five pages what Pynchon does in five hundred. By his literary deeds, Borges poses the difficulty of comprehending reality. He shows us that every time we think our mind is approaching reality, we have only been writing a scenario to comprehend it. The scenario is the equivalent of a hypothesis that seems correct until new evidence subverts it. In the course of this subversion, however, we learn a good deal. The revised hypothesis, ideally, should be superior. Reading Borges, you live in this highly diverting and not always agreeable business of seeing elaborate hypotheses destroyed by the one event that is able to turn them inside out. Borges is always teaching us that it is not enough to live with Aquinas's dictum. Trust the evidence of your senses. Rather, trust them until they are dramatically revealed as inadequate, tricked, or downright betrayed—then develop new senses. Borges is not the least bit easy.

Paranoia? It is either the center of one's sanity or the edge of one's psychosis. You never know when it's devoted to your safety or to your ultimate breakdown.

I've always been drawn more toward realism than fantasy, because it seems to me realism is endlessly interesting and finally indeterminable. Realism is a species of fantasy that's much more integrated and hard-core than fantasy itself. If you are ready to come to grips with the inevitable slipperiness of most available facts, you come to recognize that realism is not a direct approach to the truth so much as the most concentrated form of fantasy.

There is a famous story that Shelley rushed up to a mother, seized her infant, held it aloft, and cried out: "Babe, speak! Reveal your immortal truth!" Like Plato—he was a great Platonist at that point, was Shelley—he believed that the education you begin to receive when young obfuscates the instinctive knowl-

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edge with which you're born. Then you spend the rest of your life trying to unmake that education.

Well, I too am able to believe we're born with a profound appreciation of the universe and do lose it in the first few years of our life (not to mention the first few weeks!) and then spend the rest of our time trying to gain it back. By the time we are six, the school system makes certain we lose it. I don't think this is so awful. It is rather in the nature of things. It was intended that way. We're supposed to lose it and regain it. I think it is impossible to conceive of any real achievements in knowledge without that fall. Because if knowledge is something we receive merely by opening ourselves to it, well—in the West, we can't conceive of that. Most of us find something a hint repellent about Hindu philosophy. It's the idea that you receive wisdom without a Faustian effort. We react against the assumption that the more you give yourself to the universe, and the more passive, therefore, you become, the nearer you will be to the secrets of existence. This thought is, of course, antipathetic to the Western mind. We feel you only get to the kernel of real secrets by smashing the shell. That's the way we want it. It's what we were built to do. If this doesn't have to do with novel-writing, then I don't know what this book is about.

The twentieth-century artist who conceivably had the most influence on my work was not a writer but Picasso. He kept changing the nature of his attack on reality. It's as if he felt there is a reality to be found out there but that it's not a graspable object like a rock. Rather, it is a creature who keeps changing shape. And if I, Picasso, have been trying to delineate this creature by means of a particular aesthetic style and have come only this far, then I am going to look for another style altogether. And off Picasso goes into a new mode of attack on reality. It's as if you have to work your way up the north face of the mountain, come back and do the south face, the southwest face, and so forth.

In line with Picasso, what I find most interesting in writing at this point is to keep making a new attack on the nature of reality. It's as if reality has some subtle desire to protect itself. If we keep pushing forward in the same direction, reality is able to handle us or evade us and may even do it in much the same way organisms become resistant to various antibiotics, pesticides, and her-

bicides.

So we tell ourselves stories in order to make sense of life. Narrative is reassuring. There are days when life is so absurd, it's crippling—nothing makes sense, but stories bring order to the absurdity. Relief is provided by the narrative's beginning, middle, and end. Without an end, you have an obsession, a constant circling around a fact or situation that cannot be put in place. The danger, therefore, in recognizing the insubstantiality of fact is that one is all too ready to welcome the art of the absurd. That is one good reason why so many are obsessive (and endlessly boring) in their recitation of supposedly well-seated facts.

SOCIAL VISION

The greatest writer I ever read was Karl Marx. He taught me to begin to think about social matters. He was like a great football coach who would know how to condition your body before you even tried to learn the moves.

The great economists pondered the interchanges of human energy. They looked for those means and ways that such energy could be augmented institutionally or dissipated or even destroyed. In that sense, *Das Kapital* is a phenomenological novel, with commodities serving (and experiencing an extraordinarily vital life) as protagonists. The commodities gain and lose energy just as humans do in novels. Perhaps in future years we will yet find some magnificent writer, probably not yet born, who will transcend the categories and write a work to marry those visions of society that have to do with how we offer human energy to each other, and steal it from one another, develop it, divert it.

Obviously, Freud brought off a revolution in our consciousness of the human psyche. But it may be wise to restrict his insights to the nineteenth century. I expect that his final importance in intellectual history will be that he gave us more insight into the un-

derside of that century than anyone but Marx. Freud is the key to understanding how people put up with the psychic weight of the kinds of lives they led in the 1880s, 1890s, and early 1900s: locked up, terribly overstuffed, yet still existing with a considerable amount of power, energy, and pressure. In those days the psyche was analogous to a plumbing system. People were accustomed to living under high pressure and finding ways, no matter how bizarre, to open the steam valve. That's not what we have now. Today we know a world in which people not only act out many of their anxieties but work to find reassuring explanations of their conduct.

Marx, for vastly more complex reasons, is also not adequate any longer. Corporate capitalism made its end run around him. So I don't try to create a bridge in my mind from Marx to Freud, not anymore. But when I wrote "The White Negro" back in the Fifties, I was ready to see that everything in society—from the largest institutions to private and intimate personal moments—might yet be connected as parts of a new and vast social vision. In a limited sense, I'm still trying. Of course, I grew up under the shadow of both men. I was nothing if not intellectually ambitious when I was young, and wanted to come up with a comprehensive vision of existence. By now I've come to realize that I have neither the intellectual discipline nor the scholarly retentiveness to begin to do anything of that sort. Still, it is important to connect up what one can. Until we understand how we are obliged to lead our lives in ways we don't particularly enjoy ("The mass of men enter into social and productive relations independent of their will."—Marx), until we understand more of those reasons why so many of us feel dead inside so much of the time, yes, until we recognize how much of that is not due solely to our lack of imagination but is also the product of vast institutional systems of greed, injustice, and manipulation that we are schooled to perceive as relatively benign manifestations, we have arrived nowhere. The only way I can tell something terrible is going on is that I feel a little duller than I ought to. Very often that's at the end of a long chain, you might say, of social processes designed to keep us malleable, amenable, and short on such powerful emotions as outrage at injustice. In that sense, I still try to find the ultimate indictment against all that's awful and, yes, evil in society—all the awfals: plastic, high-rise, mall architecture, static, interruptions for commercials, making money

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out of money. They're all there if one can find the grid on which to locate them. A devil's grid.

MORAL VISION

Back in 1976, Ralph Abner and I were not to have together but a literary symposium at the University of Iowa given together by Abner. We had a lovely audience, and the show went on smoothly and merrily. At the end, it seemed a little strange to me that we had really worked that hard, gotten into so many discussions with students and assistant professors, and even argued with each other as fully as best. When it was over, there was a great lot of us here. Something that had become just a bit dampened was done. So I said to Abner, "Why the hell do we do it? Why did we work so hard?" He said, "Idiot, we're responsible." I've always liked that remark.

One's work is just that—responsible. If any of my ideas are correct in changing the mind of someone who's more intelligent than myself, that is my responsibility. If you believe a thought is the best you can do, it's excellent and inspired by someone who will improve the system after, then, in effect you have improved your adversary's mind. We are, however, not the confident that someone will come along who will take your opponent's improvement of your idea and hit it harder on your side. Democracy is the troubling uncertainty of the dialectic—think, write down, argue, and move on.

MORAL VISION

Back in 1959, Ralph Ellison and I were out in Iowa together on a literary symposium at the University of Iowa gotten together by *Esquire*. We had a lively audience, and the show went on for several intense days. At the end, it seemed a little strange to me that we had really worked that hard, gotten into so many discussions with students and attendant academics, and even argued with each other as lively as hell. When it was over, there was even a bit of sadness. Something that had become just a bit exceptional was done. So I said to Ellison, "Why the hell do we do it? Why did we work so hard?" He said, "Man, we're expendable." I've always liked that remark.

One's work is just that—expendable. If any of my ideas can succeed in changing the mind of someone who's more intelligent than myself, fine. If you advance a thought as far as you can and it's overtaken and improved by someone who will argue on the opposite side, then in effect you have improved your adversary's mind. We can, however, feel the confidence that someone will come along who will take your opponent's improvement of your idea and lift it higher on your side. Democracy is the throbbing embodiment of the dialectic—thesis, antithesis, synthesis, and new thesis.

You cannot have a great democracy without great writers. If great novels disappear, as they are in danger of doing, and our storytelling is co-opted by television and journalism, then I think we will be that much farther away from a free society. Novels that reinvigorate our view of the subtlety of moral judgments are essential corrections in a democracy. Americans were affected for decades by *The Grapes of Wrath*.

I don't like to say to myself, "I want to get this idea across to readers." Rather, I try to arouse a state of consciousness in the reader that will accommodate the material I am presenting. My hope is that my work will change their minds. Be it understood! I don't want to change everybody's mind in one direction—that's equal to propaganda. Rather than move all my readers ten degrees to the left; I would be happier if I nudged some there while others were swinging to the right. My fundamental belief about a good society is that the cops get better and so do the crooks.

I feel that the final purpose of art is to intensify—even, if necessary, to exacerbate—the moral consciousness of people. In particular, I think the novel at its best is the most moral of the art forms. Words are the gravamen of the Commandments, after all, and of moral strictures and, more important, moral ambiguities. You are exploring the interstices of human behavior—which is the first approach to religious experience for many of us, especially since the organized religions don't begin to cover the enormous and often terrible complexities of moral experience. The wisest rule of thumb for the would-be moralist is: There are no answers. There are only questions.

The logic of karma, it seems to me, is that it may enable God to go back to certain projects, just as an artist sometimes wishes to improve his or her first attempt, work it further, go to the point where he can do better, or, if not, know he has failed and abandon the notion. Perhaps human souls represent some of the most poignant notions of God. You see, there's an extraordinary beauty in the potential of most human relations if we're willing to assume that under all the absurdities, all the spleen and waste and brutality, there's a blocked aesthetic conception.

Speaking at the MacDowell Colony once, I found myself saying, "There is no reason to believe the novelist is not better equipped to deal with the possibilities of a mysterious and difficult situation than anyone else, since he or she is always trying to discover what the nature of reality might be. It's as if the novelist is out there, sprung early, with something most people never contemplate—which is 'How and what is the nature of this little reality before me?' The novelist is the first to ask, 'Do I love my wife? Does she love me? What is the nature of love? Do we love our child? How do we love? Would we die for our child? Or do we let the child die for us?' The novelist has to deal with these questions because living with them is the only way to improve his or her brain. Without improving that brain, without refining the edge of one's perception, it's almost impossible to continue to work as a writer. Because if there is one fell rule in art, it is that repetition kills the soul. So the novelist is out there early with a particular necessity that may become the necessity of us all. It is to deal with life not as something given us as eternal and immutable but rather as half-worked, because it is our human destiny to enlarge what we were given, to forge (I might have said to *clarify*) a world which was always before us in a manner different from the way we had seen it the day before."

I'm right and I'm wrong so often that I have no interest in convincing others to think the way I do. I'm interested, rather, that we all get better at thinking. If a book is good enough, you cannot predict how your readers are going to react. You shouldn't be able to. If it is that good, it is not manipulative, and everyone, therefore, can voyage off in a different direction.

Yes, it is no ordinary human business to say you are going to write a novel. You are planning to create a world. This God-like presumption may be intoxicating, but it can never be comfortable. Nor should it be. To come up with a vision that can give us some notion of the Lord's mind—that partakes of beauty. When we read Proust or Stendhal or Joyce, any, indeed, of the great novelists, Tolstoy, Mann, or Faulkner, or on occasion Hemingway, they do give us the idea that one special side of God's mind is not alien to the *style* of their mind.

I go back again and again to Dostoyevsky dying in despair be-

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cause he could not write the novel about the great saint he envisioned.

To us, now, it seems, "Why despair? Look at the great books you did write." But Dostoyevsky, given his unique intuitions, may have sensed that Russia was heading toward a prodigious catastrophe that he could not quite name. Nonetheless, he felt he could help avert this oncoming disaster if he could create in his pages a saint who would be believable enough to the Russian people to inspire them.

This is not as impossible a mission as it seems today. In Russia then a few novelists were revered like gods—or, if not a god, Tolstoy certainly was regarded by his readers as a major, virile, powerful saint. In turn, Dostoyevsky may have been looked upon as a mad genius, but absolutely a genius. It was taken for granted that you could learn more about life by reading their novels than from your own personal experience. The Russians paid just this exceptional attention to their novelists. So from Dostoyevsky's point of view, if he could only make that marvelous saint in his mind come to life in a book, then he could help to save Russia. All right, slightly demented, as was so much of Dostoyevsky, but it was not wholly unbalanced. He had one chance in a hundred, one real chance in a hundred. That's all a genius ever looks for—one live chance in that hundred. Geniuses, we do well to remind ourselves, are people who take those hundred-to-one shots because they see the luminescence in the flicker of the solitary candle.

Writers aren't taken seriously anymore, and a large part of the blame must go to the writers of my generation, most certainly including myself. We haven't written the books that should have been written. We've spent too much time exploring ourselves. We haven't done the imaginative work that could have helped define America, and as a result, our average citizen does not grow in self-understanding. We just expand all over the place, and this spread is about as attractive as collapsed and flabby dough on a stainless steel table.

If I could give one moral maxim to a young writer, I'd say live with your cowardice. Live with it every day. Recognize it, hate it, or defend it, but don't try to slough it off. Cowardice is a prime cause; literary apathy or overt writer's block is all too often the

effect.

BEING AND NOTHINGNESS

The reader will be aware by now that I have some obsession with how God exists. Is He an essential God or an existential God? Is He all-powerful or is He, like us, an embattled existential presence who may succeed or fail in His vision? This theme may become more apparent as the novels go on. I think this obsession began to show itself while I was doing the last draft of *The Deer Park*. Then it continued to grow as a private theme during all the years I was smoking marijuana. One's condition on marijuana is always existential. One can feel the importance of each moment and how it is changing one. One feels one's being. One becomes aware of the enormous apparatus of nothingness—the hum of a hi-fi set, the emptiness of a pointless interruption. One becomes aware of the war between each of us, how the nothingness in each of us seeks to attack the being of others, how our being in turn is attacked by the nothingness of others.

I'm not speaking now of violence or the active conflict between one being and another. That still belongs to drama. But the war between being and nothingness is the underlying illness of the twentieth century. Boredom slays more of existence than war. I'd hardly read anything by Sartre at this time and nothing by Heidegger. I've read a bit since and I have to admire their

formidable powers, but I suspect they are no closer to the buried continent of existentialism than were medieval cartographers near to a useful map of the world. The new continent that shows on our psychic maps as intimations of eternity is still to be discovered.

Endgame

I've never felt close to Beckett and haven't read his novels. Friends tell me the best of his literary substance is there. I am, however, familiar with *Waiting for Godot*, *Krapp's Last Tape*, and *Endgame*, and I've always been fascinated by how he has done something that no writer ever did before. When it comes to the presence of *being* or *nothingness*, Beckett has said in effect, "*Nothing* is half of life and it is the half I know about. I am going to dwell on that." The trouble, however, is that we have to live with the words in English, where the reverberation on the ear is not as agreeable as *L'être et le néant* is in French.

Nothingness is, after all, anathema to most writers. We take it for granted that we will have to spend a good part of our lives accepting *nothing* as the price to pay in order to feel a resonant opposite: *being*. On days when one's mind is not alive, one goes through hours where boredom itself can be close to dread. It is, after all, a state that offers no sensual affect and so feels vaguely sinister in ways you cannot name. It's as if in boredom you come to the wrong kind of rest, a pause that does not restore. *Nothingness* invariably suggests endless *nothingness*.

Yet here we have Beckett, lively and witty as he travels into these subtly fetid caves of virtual non-existence. I always saw such states as the price you pay in order to command a grasp of existence, of being. So in advance, my initial reaction to Beckett was disapproval. I was bothered in those years—the late Fifties—at how people were so ready to welcome the art of the absurd.

To this day, I detest the gravamen of this art. When, for instance, I see a college play (and, given the number of my children, I've seen my share), invariably the dramatic department has opted for a play that celebrates the art of the absurd. Their reason is clear: You cannot judge the merit of the production too closely. Professors of drama at these schools do not wish to be measured. It's unfailing how often they choose Lorca, Ionesco, Artaud—name twenty difficult and talented playwrights of the absurd and then set college kids to try to do something with it.

They can't win and they can't lose, because they are going to get laughs. Whenever an audience is not able to follow a nonse-quitur, an automatic laugh comes up. Especially from parents, roommates, relatives, and friends. If you have an actor say, "The situation is getting kind of boborigynmous," the audience will not only roar at the fecal cacophony of the sounds but will look to cover over their ignorance of the exact meaning. A horde of such fail-safes is always available in absurdist plays.

About the time Beckett arrived on Broadway, therefore, I was certain, given the advance publicity, that he would be the worst of all. Seeing *Godot*, I had to recognize that something profound was going on, but I couldn't like it. I felt all too familiar with such states of existence. Marriage, after all, is filled with comparable situations—the rigamarole of marriage, the routine, the dreadful repetitions—nothingness pitted against nothingness—except that Beckett added to it an acute sense of despair. *Godot* had dimension, resonance, vibrancy. Beckett's despair was sinister and joyful at once, as if he were saying, "once you feel this kind of woe, nothing will ever be that bad again." Never as bad again.

There was, inarguably, this remarkably quality in Beckett. Nonetheless, I was still opposed—he was putting the emphasis upon nothingness. My simple outrage came to sententiousness: What if *being* is in trouble? We don't have a clue any longer to what it might be—there is such misuse of *being*. For a daily example, every time you become interested in a narrative on television, a commercial comes on and you are jacked over abruptly from pleasure to nothingness. The impact is there even though the commercial may be lively, noisy, even on occasion amusing. But your concentration has been broken at an instant when you weren't prepared for that.

Philosophically, Beckett seemed to be saying, "*Nothingness* is at least one half of existence, so let's study it, let's attempt to enjoy it." The assumption that it could be enjoyed was the irritant. If fiction depends on how life moves from *being* to *nothingness* and back again, Beckett chooses to stay in *nothingness*. He's Mozartian, however, in the variations he can play on the theme. He is one of the very few writers in the second half of the twentieth century who prompts you to speak of his genius. He took a deserted road and went far with it. But he never entered the dialectic between *nothingness* and *being*. Let me try to exemplify

what I am saying.

I have always felt that *The Old Man and the Sea* was one of Hemingway's failures. He wanted to bring off a short novel about a fine man who worked with his hands, a fisherman. Looking to write a novel of affirmation about just such a man, Hemingway had him row out to sea in his dinghy again and again. But after many days of poor fishing, the old man finally hooks into the biggest fish he's ever had. He hangs on, and the contest goes for hour after hour after hour—the fish tows him for miles—yet the old man succeeds in wearing the beast out, and gaffs him. Since the catch is too heavy to bring on board, he lashes it to the side of his dinghy and starts to row back to shore. Then the sharks come and devour his prize. He's left with nothing. The critics all agreed this was Hemingway's view of the literary world—sharks out to destroy a beautiful work.

Hemingway called it a novel of affirmation because the man never gave up. But there is never a moment in the telling when the man said to himself, "I'm suffering too severely. I'm going to cut the rope." Because if the old fisherman had weakened, then Hemingway would have had to have a serious affirmation. Which is: *Why* doesn't the fisherman cut the fish loose? What remains in him to war with temptation? The critics may have rushed for the most part to call *The Old Man and the Sea* Hemingway's great work of affirmation, but the old Cuban was never tempted. So Hemingway never had to find a reason for the fisherman to say, "I'll hold on." Not enough of a character had been created to answer such a question.

I think the same fault in considerably more elaborated form is present with Beckett. He never enters a situation where any of his people might try to break out of whatever trap they are in. They can be ensconced in garbage cans or talking to a tape recorder, which, speaking of traps, is no mean example. But there is never an arduous attempt to escape whatever trap they are in. Of course, one can argue that Beckett dared to try something no one else had ever attempted and so was reaffirming *being*. Daring is, after all, a vital element in *being*. But we are not able to enjoy this daring nearly so much as we are obliged to feel the ongoing possibilities of more *nothingness*, and so the final impact of his plays is obsessive rather than haunting.

In parallel, the essence all that hubris in corporate advertising

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mentality may be its well-founded fear of *nothingness*. For good cause. The corporates are always pouring their presentations into our minds. To which I would reply that filling such essentially empty forms as commercials is a direct species of *nothingness*. Whenever you do not fill the aesthetic you set yourself, you are purveying just that. By now, many if not most television commercials, no matter how spiked with clash and color, give, nonetheless, little attention to the item they are there to sell. The intent of the advertisers comes down to the premise that if you entertain your audience, if you pay them, in effect, for the interruption by getting them to laugh during the commercial, it's not inconceivable that a fraction of these viewers may even remember the name of the product—that's all the advertiser needs. Far better than to have someone speak directly of the sterling virtues of the brand. Who would believe them? No, advertisers work to overcome the onus of *nothingness* that the TV commercial inserts into our nervous system.

MISCELLANY: PORNOGRAPHY, PICASSO, AND APHORISMS

I can see some reasonably deep moral questions about whether people should be free to create hard-core pornography. I'd say yes, but let's not assume no damage is taking place. For some, it would be a curse; to others, a perverse blessing. But you could be playing with your soul. Let's say the moral shadings are not without their parallel to men doing their best to take each other out in the ring while other men and women cheer them on. Note that I put it this way even though boxing is my favorite sport to watch.

You can tell a lot about every stage of sex—before, during, and after—by odor. One is often aware of one's own spiritual condition through one's scent. Even so, as one enters a house, one knows the happiness or the misery of its people by the smell one encounters. This faculty, therefore, can become unendurable at times. You walk in on old friends and realize that something's going to go bust with them—not yet, maybe, but it's there, maybe a month or two away, a year or two away. The odor speaks unmistakably of stale miseries that will yet exact their payment.

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One can say that if Picasso had been braver at certain points in his life, he might have been a more generous artist. Some of the cruelty might have gone out of his work. Something grand might have come in. He had enormous talent; he was, arguably, the greatest painter since Michelangelo. With generosity, maybe Picasso would have been nobler, but the odds are that he would have been less. Because the selfishness of the artist is often there to protect the part that is generous. To the degree that artists give of themselves to all people, they don't want to give anything at all in other ways. There's an economy to generosity. And very often, the people who are the most generous are not the most talented. I think the inner sanction that artists give themselves is that they've got to be selfish—absolutely!—or nothing will get done.

Such thoughts are not happy, but the evidence—if the biographies of artists and writers are at all reliable—does support the notion that it is best to revere painters, poets, and novelists for their talent rather than their character.

A great many artists are narcissists—certainly writers. In Picasso's case, narcissism is too small a word. I think he saw himself as an intermediary between humankind and the forces that created the world and kept it in upheaval. I think he saw himself as a demiurge. That is, a demiurge with half of himself. The other half was a modest man who spoke French badly and was five feet three inches tall.

I've always felt that there was a good deal of compatibility between La Rochefoucauld and Gore Vidal. I say this critically. One of the largest arguments I have with Vidal and his mind and his work is that they represent the end of an intellectual tradition that began with La Rochefoucauld. Many of Vidal's remarks stand up, I think, in comparison. For example: "Whenever a friend succeeds, a little something in me dies." No one can accuse Gore of not being able to step forth with a good line. What I would argue, however, is that his particular tradition has become inadequate to our needs. The world is growing so genuinely complex (and perplexed) that it's limiting to enclose it with aphorisms, no matter how brilliant. One has to qualify them.

For example: Not everything wilts in me when another novel-

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ist succeeds. There is also admiration—unwanted, it is true, but then whoever insisted that we are absolutely without treachery to ourselves? Sometimes there is even an honest seed of congratulation burgeoning in all that compost of envy. The virtue of Vidal's best *mots*, however, is that he does put a finger on many a boil of conceit that deserves to be pricked.

Is it
"whole"
or
"old"?

There is that whole remark of Tolstoy's: "It is amazing how complete is the delusion that beauty is goodness." Agreed. At the least, a temporary if successful collaboration between good and evil may well be going on—which is why Tolstoy distrusted it so, and why we react with fear, wonder, avidity, and, yes, distrust when we encounter a beautiful woman.

Voltaire once said: "Common sense is not so common." He could have gone on to remark that the greatest abuse of common sense is generally perpetrated by those people who are always declaiming the value of that virtue in themselves.

Abraham Lincoln: "Most of us are just about as happy as we make up our minds to be." That's true, but sometimes one doesn't decide to be happy, because the likelihood is that upcoming events will be dire. Which suggests that the fall will come from a greater height. One never, for example, feels very happy when fully embarked on a big, dangerous, and difficult novel.

? #
Space

"Merit envies success and success takes itself for merit."—Jean Rostand.

Success is, however, so confident that it is indeed possessed of merit that even merit comes to believe this is true of success. To its horror, merit then manages to respect success more than its own merit.

One good reason for indulging these Talmudic commentaries is to remind young writers never to hitch their minds to a wise saying. A wiser one can usually be built upon it, or, at least, one might make the attempt.

Example:

"The whole problem with the world is that fools and fanatics are always certain of themselves, and wiser people so full of doubts."—Bertrand Russell

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This is because stupidity is not a liability but an asset if all you care about is getting your way. Before obstinate fools, we are all weak.

"Rudeness is the weak man's imitation of strength."

—Eric Hoffer

Half-true, no more. Rudeness can lead to a fight one would be wise not to get into. So, for some, harsh discourtesy has sensed already who is weaker at the moment than themselves. Like many another foul art, it has gifted practitioners.

make
Eric Hoffer
consistent
in
pleas
and
spacing

PART II

GENRE

GENRE

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

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

turn, have lives that consist of poems, mostly bummers.

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

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

I began my forays into journalism with prejudices for how the materials of history were gathered. I also possessed the large advantage that I had weeks to ponder over what I had seen and nearly enough days in which to do the writing. I also had a literary heritage to remind me that the world is not supposed to be reassembled by panels of prefabricated words. Rather, I was a novelist. It was expected of me to see the world with my own eyes and my own words. See it by the warp or stance of my character. Which if it could collect some integrity might be called a style. I enlisted then on my side of an undeclared war between those modes of perception called journalism and fiction. When it came to accuracy, I was on the side of fiction. I thought fiction could bring us closer to the truth than journalism, which is not to say one should make up facts when writing a story about real people. I would endeavor to get my facts as scrupulously as a reporter. (At the least!) The difference would be found elsewhere. Journalism assumes the truth of an event can be found by the use of principles that go back to Descartes. (A political reporter has a fixed view of the world; you may plot it on axes that run right to left on the horizontal and down from honesty to corruption on the vertical.) Indeed, the real premise of journalism is

that the best instrument for measuring history is a faceless, even a mindless, recorder. Whereas the writer of fiction is closer to the moving world of Einstein. There, the velocity of the observer is as crucial to the measurement as any object observed, since we are obliged to receive the majority of our experience at second hand through parents, friends, mates, lovers, enemies, and the journalists who report it to us. So our best chance of improving those private charts of our own most complicated lives, our unadmitted maps of reality—our very comprehension, if you will, of the way existence works—seems to profit us most if we can have some little idea, at least, of the warp of the observer who passes on the experience. Fiction, as I use the word, is then that reality which does not cohere to anonymous axes of fact but is breathed in through the swarm of our male and female movements about one another, a novelistic assumption, for don't we perceive the truth of a novel as its events pass through the personality of the writer? By the time we have finished a story, we tend to know, in our unconscious at least, where we think the author is most to be trusted and where in secret we suspect he is more ignorant than ourselves. That is the flavor of fiction. We observe the observer. Maybe that is why there is less dead air in fiction and usually more light. It is because we have the advantage of seeing around a corner, and that is aesthetically comparable to a photograph of a range of hills when the sunset offers its backlighting to the contours. Be certain the journalistic flashbulb is better for recording the carnage of an auto crash. But little else.

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

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

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

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

stock in his portfolio when it is going down and his others are going up.

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

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

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quet rooms on the *inside* of their buildings; it is the best way to fill internal space with revenue.)

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

So the reporters smell also of this work, they smell of the dishwasher and the pots, they are flesh burning themselves very quietly and slowly in the service of a machine which feeds goats, which feeds The Goat. One smells this collective odor on the instant one enters their meeting room. It is not a corrupt smell, it does not have enough of the meats, the savory, and the vitality of flesh to smell corrupt and fearful when it is bad—no, it is more the smell of excessive respect for power, the odor of flesh gutted by avidities that are electric and empty. I suppose it is the bleak smell one could find on the inside of one's head during a bad cold, full of fever, badly used, burned out of mood. The physical sensation of a cold often is one of power trapped corrosively inside, coils of strength being liquidated in some center of the self. The reporter hangs in a powerless power—his voice directly, or via the rewrite desk indirectly, reaches out to millions of readers; the more readers he owns, the less he can say. He is forbidden by

a hundred censors, most of them inside himself, to communicate notions which are not conformistically simple, simple like plastic is simple, that is to say monotonous. Therefore a reporter forms a habit equivalent to lacerating the flesh: He learns to write what he does not naturally believe. Since he did not start, presumably, with the desire to be a bad writer or a dishonest writer, he ends by bludgeoning his brain into believing that something which is half-true is in fact—since he creates a fact each time he puts something into a newspaper—nine-tenths true. A psyche is debauched—his own; a false fact is created. For which fact, sooner or later, inevitably, inexorably, the public will pay. A nation which forms detailed opinions on the basis of detailed fact which is askew from the subtle reality becomes a nation of citizens whose psyches are skewed, item by detailed item, away from *any* reality.

So great guilt clings to reporters. They know they help to keep America slightly insane. As a result perhaps, they are a shabby-looking crew. The best of them are the shabbiest, which is natural if one thinks about it—a sensitive man suffers from the prosperous life of lies more than a dull man. In fact the few dudes one finds among reporters tend to be semi-illiterates, or hatchet men, or cynics on two or three payrolls, who do restrained public relations in the form of news stories. But this is to make too much of the extremes. Reporters along the middle of the spectrum are shabby, worried, guilty, and suffer each day from the damnable anxiety that they know all sorts of powerful information a half-hour to twenty-four hours before anyone else in America knows it, not to mention the time clock ticking away in the vault of all those stories which cannot be printed or will not be printed. It makes for a livid view of existence. It is like an injunction to become hysterical once a day. Then they must write at lightning speed. It may be heavy-fisted but true, it may be slick as a barnyard slide, it may be great, it may be fill—what does it matter? The matter rides out like oats on a conveyor belt, and the unconscious takes a ferocious pounding. Writing is of use to the psyche only if the writer discovers something he did not know he knew in the act itself of writing. That is why a few men will go through hell in order to keep writing—Joyce and Proust for example. Being a writer can save one from insanity or cancer; being a bad writer can drive one smack into the center of the plague. Think of the poor reporter, who does not have the

leisure of the novelist or the poet to discover what he thinks. The unconscious gives up, buries itself, leaves the writer to his cliché, and saves the truth, or the part of it the reporter is yet privileged to find, for his colleagues and his friends. A good reporter is a man who must tell you the truth privately; he has bright, harsh eyes and can relate ten good stories in a row standing at a bar.

Still, they do not quit. The charge of adrenaline once a day, that hysteria, that sense of powerless power close to the engines of history—they can do without powerless power no more than a gentleman junkie on the main line can do without his heroin, Doctor. You see, a reporter is close to the action. He is not *of* the action, but he is close to it, as close as a crab louse to the begetting of a child. One may never be President, but the photographer working for his paper has the power to cock a flashbulb and make the eyes of JFK go blink!

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

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

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

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

The problem of going out and searching for experience, I think, is true for very young writers who just don't have enough to write about. There comes a point where you say, "I want to be a writer. I feel all the equipment of a writer, I feel the livid intelli-

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gence of a writer, but I don't really know enough." This is where journalism rears its ugly head. It's very hard to enter strange places and learn a lot about them unless you have clout. Kids get into journalism because the moment they flash a card that says they're a bona fide reporter, people often start talking to them. Of course it's a false experience. Hopefully, you develop a sense of how to filter this experience and correct it, refract it into what experience might have been like if you hadn't had the peculiar advantage of being a reporter.

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

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

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

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

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

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good on that." It brought me to a large but obvious conclusion: Objective reporting is a myth. The reader is entitled to be aware of the bent of the man or woman pretending to be that quintessential impostor, the fair and accurate journalist.

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

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

JOURNALISTIC RESEARCH

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

EPISTEMOLOGICAL MODEL I:

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

EPISTEMOLOGICAL MODEL II

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

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the media.

A novelist ought to be able to pick up a good bit about a subject just by going into a room. If, for example, you visit an auto-sales showplace with the idea you might buy a car, you could end by deciding to write about the people who work there. One difficulty—you don't know a great deal about the milieu. All the same, you have an insight that feels as if it is your private insight, no one else's. In this good state, it is not that hard to pick up collateral material. Everything you witness is illumined by this private perception. Sometimes, however, you really have to do the research. If it's a large subject, you can spend ages reading related books.

Ancient Evenings, a novel about ancient Egypt, took over a decade to finish. In the beginning, all I knew was that I had certain instincts about death—these intimations had curious similarities to Egyptian notions. The ideas of the ancient Egyptians were certainly not identical with mine, but one element was near. In death, believed the Egyptians (and so did I), you entered upon a second set of adventures, which brought you to a better place or a worse one. That was stimulating. But I had to learn just about everything else on the subject. It's a hell of a way to spend all those years. In fact, I was unfaithful, because, believe me, if you become a serious novelist—dare I say it?—it's almost easier to steal a march on your beloved than on your manuscript. The real question is who or which is more unforgiving, the book or the lady? It can well be the book. In the case of *Ancient Evenings*—and I do speak of that work as a creature—*she* ended up being immensely forgiving. I deserted her for two years to write *The Executioner's Song*. And it's as if when I came back, the creature in the manuscript might as well have said, "Hmmm, you look tired. Do your feet hurt? Here, I'll wash them." And there I was right back in the book. But often, if you desert a big project, that's the end. It does not come back to you.

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

the style of the worst and heaviest scholars (who, half the time, were the most essential to read).

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

Larry Schiller, who is justly famous for getting people to agree, despite all objections, to interviews, was with me in Russia when I was doing *Oswald's Tale*. We spent most of our time in Minsk, because there were still about thirty people living in the city who had known Lee Harvey Oswald well. (He had lived there for more than two years.) These putative witnesses had never spoken to any reporter about him. For good cause. Right after the assassination, the primal reaction of the KGB had been that President Kennedy was probably assassinated by American powers on high and that Oswald had been framed because the U.S. wanted to start a war with Russia. Oswald was, indeed, the perfect choice for such a purpose. He had been in the Soviet Union from 1959 to 1962 and had gone over as a self-declared Communist. So the KGB spread the word to anyone in Minsk who had known him: Don't say a word about Oswald. And for thirty years, no one had spoken. Schiller and I, there in 1992 and 1993, discovered that the Russians who had spent time with him in 1960, '61, and '62 made wonderful witnesses to what Oswald had been like. They hadn't opened their mouths since then, so he was minted in their memory.

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

One time, a very nice middle-class woman, a teacher, was being interviewed by us. But when two interrogators are doing an interview and each has a strong and impatient mind, then each gets infuriated. The interview is going in the wrong direction. We'd interrupt each other at critical moments. Before long, we were roaring at each other, "You're asking the wrong ques-

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tion." "Go screw!" The poor woman had to be sitting there saying to herself, *This* is the American Tolstoy?

TELEVISION

A fairly short time ago, a number of remarks were made in this column regarding the state of television, and there was a hint in the early fall when I published it, regarding the state of the television industry. In any event, the picture was up a little better than when the black and white TV of that period had the day after yesterday of the present. Television has changed so much, in fact, it is hardly the same. In fact, the place from which this column is taken is called "TV & the World and Modern Man." It is a book and is called "TV & the World and Modern Man."

In the years before he was elected as TV himself, he was in the world of television, where a whole new world. It started in the winter he was first elected as TV. He started it with all the excitement of what was then his political career. It was 1954, and the drug was more important than was ever before. It taught him more. Making him to do more. However, he would attempt to find that place where he was. He had lost his. It was the point of the world's situation for

TELEVISION

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

In the years before he ever went on TV himself, he used to watch it religiously; after a while, sacrilegiously. It started in the winter he was first smoking marijuana. He smoked it with all the seriousness of what was then his profoundly serious heart. It was 1954, and the drug was more important than any love affair he had ever had. It taught him more. Making love to different women, he would attempt to find that place where marijuana had last left him. It was the arena of the particular sensation he

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chased, as though he had been given a lovely if ineluctable emotion while watching a bullfight, and so went to the Plaza the following week to look for the same emotion—it did not matter altogether who the bullfighter was.

Since he was then in the opening-out of a career that would later provide a false legend of much machismo, he was still timid. Being deep in pot, and relatively full of life, certainly full of every intimation about himself, he was nonetheless too timid to go out late at night and see what the bars would provide. Since his second wife, not unlike himself in her jangled relations to bravery and cowardice, had usually and prudently gone to bed, he would be up alone at night, his mind teeming, and he would watch TV till the stations shut down. In those days, he made monumental connections on pot. He had to see no more than one animated spiral inserted by a commercial into the guts of a washing machine, a lively spiral that would tunnel right up the tube, and he would try to explain to his friends next day that the advertising agency was promoting the idea that their washing machine was congenial to a housewife's cunt. His friends thought him mad. He examined automobile commercials by the same light and saw that they were no longer selling the car by way of the pretty girl sitting on the fender as once they did; now, they were selling the car itself. The car was the fuck. "Dynaflow does it in oil," the announcer would say of an automatic transmission. So, he would tell his friends. His friends would think him mad and try to dissuade him from smoking too much pot. Marijuana was regarded differently in those days; it offered echoes of *Reefer Madness*.

He would watch Ernie Kovacs and Steve Allen late at night and would recognize that they knew what he knew. They saw how the spiral worked in the washing machine commercial, and why Dynaflow did it in oil. Years later, when Motivational Research was presented to the world, and everybody was ready to tell everybody at a party that an automobile was not used by a man to get a mistress but was the mistress, and a housewife liked to identify the health of her washing machine with her own genito-urinary harmonies—speak no ill of the bowels!—Mailer was merely glad that Vance Packard had done the job. He was behind on too many of his own jobs. Marijuana had flung the separate parts of his brain into too many vivid places. In those days he had perceptions on every subject; was convinced, on the con-

sequence, that he was a genius. He was getting very little writing done.

Still, he clung to his set. It explained the world to him. He was getting hip to everything, and the beauty was that he did not have to venture out.

It would not occur to him until six years later, when he would stab his wife, that it was not timidity which had been his first vice, but violence, a murderous nest of feeling so intransigent that he did not dare to go out at night for good cause, and did not know how to sleep at night without Seconal for even better cause—there was too much hatred at the distance between what he wished to do and what he was able to accomplish. Since his wife, faced with the choice of going to sleep early or entering on a claustrophobic quarrel, would, of course, go to sleep, he would sit by himself from midnight until two in the morning, when the last show would go off the air, the flag would ripple in the wind, and “The Star-Spangled Banner” would be played. In those days, he got to hate “The Star-Spangled Banner” all over again. It sounded like the first martial strains of that cancer he was convinced was coming on him, and who knows? If he had not stabbed his wife, he might have been dead in a few years himself—the horror of violence is its unspoken logic.

So, in those early mornings when television was his only friend, he knew already that he detested his habit. There was not enough to learn from watching TV. Some indispensable pieces of experience were missing. Except it was worse than that. Something not in existence was also present, some malignancy to burn against his own malignancy, some onslaught of dots into the full pressure of his own strangled vision. Often, when the stations would go off the air and no programs were left to watch, he would still leave the set on. The audio would hum in a tuneless pullulation, and the dots would hiss in an agitation of what forces he did not know. The hiss and the hum would fill the room and then his ears. There was, of course, no clamor—it was nearer to anti-noise dancing in eternity with noise. And watching the empty video, he would recognize it was hardly empty. Bands of gray and lighter gray swam across the set, rollovers swept away the dots, and something like sun-spots crackled forth. Then the set went back to the slow scan of the waves and the drone of the audio. He discovered at last that such use of TV was a species of tranquilizer and could deaden

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the sharpest edge of his nerve. Blunted, impalpably bruted by a half-hour of such odorless immersion, he would with the aid of his Seconal be a little more ready to go to sleep.

A few years later, when McLuhan would torment the vitals of a generation of American intellectuals with the unremovable harpoon that "the media is the message," Mailer could give his agreement. The message of TV was the scan of gray on gray and the hum of the sound when there was neither music nor a voice. Much later, in the Fall of '72, he would set out to make audiences laugh by comparing President Nixon's then featureless but disturbing personality to a TV screen that is lit when nothing is on the air. Nixon was there, he would remark, to deaden the murderous mood of the Republic. Indeed, it was the best explanation for why a man so unpopular was going to win by so great a majority. If Nixon did not make anyone very happy, neither did the TV set. Its message was equal to Nixon's: I am here to deaden you—you need it!

Maybe America did need it. Brooding over America of the Sixties, that insane expanding America where undercover FBI men were inspiring (wherever they were not committing) the most violent acts of the Left, brooding on that rich and powerful country where puritanism was still as alive as every Baptist, that corporate land with no instinctive response to aesthetics engaged now in the dissemination throughout the world of the worst applied aesthetics in the history of the world, its super-highways the highest form of strip mining, its little buildings kin to shoeboxes, its big buildings scaled to the module of one cardboard carton piled on top of another, the U.S. skyline thereby deserting the high needles of Manhattan for the Kleenex boxes of Dallas; that food-guzzling Republic that froze its food before it would overcook it, and liked to lick ketchup off French fries so soggy they dropped from your fingers like worms—the worst food in the history of the world!—that sex-revolutionary Republic where swinging singles were connecting up with like-units—every other Baptist!—that sadistically revolutionary Republic going into black leather, S-M, and knocking off gooks in rice paddies, defoliating the foliage, digging the hog-resonance of motors between one's legs, and flame-throwers and comic books, and Haight-Ashbury, hitting golf balls on the moon, yes, that America, full of dread, could certainly use TV—I am here to deaden you, you need it!

Those were legitimate feelings for 1972. One had had a large fraction of a life by then watching TV, and one had long ago had the education of putting oneself on shows. Back in '53 and '54, however, stoned on pot, wafted up and down on Seconal, jammed with ambition, terror, and the common lust to learn the secrets of the world some easy way, the immersion into TV was profound. By it, one could study the world, and the tricks of the world.

So, for instance, would he examine people as strange to him as Igor Cassini, who had a show in those years for snobs and it was hard as fiberglass. TV proved to be more interesting then, for you could see a genuine article regularly, well-groomed, Republican, rich enough to own horses, sexy enough to marry up, and empty enough to find any topic of conversation amusing provided it was void of content. Those were Igor Cassini's guests. Mailer would on such occasions peer right into the tube to get a little nearer to the novelistic wealth.

Or: studying the tourist, he learned much about American fellatio. TV was scintillating for that. Next to the oil of Dynaflo and the spiral in the washing machine came the phallic immanence of the microphone. A twinkle would light up in Steve Allen's eye as he took the mike and cord down the aisle and in and out of impromptu interviews with his audience, snaking the rounded knob right up to the mouth of some starched skinny Middle West matron, lean as whipcord, tense as rectitude, a life of iron disciplines in the vertical wrinkles of the upper lip; the lady would bare her teeth in a snarl and show a shark's mouth as she brought her jaws around to face and maybe bite off that black dob of a knob so near to touching her tongue.

A high school girl would be next, there with the graduating class on a trip to New York, her folks watching back home. She would swoon before the mike. She could not get her mouth open. She would keep dodging in her seat, and Steve would stay in pursuit, mike extended. Two nights ago she dodged for two hours in the back seat of a car. My God, this was in public.

A young housewife, liberal, sophisticated, happy to present her congenial point of view, compliments Mr. Allen on the quality of his show. "We watch you regularly, Steve, and like to think we're not too far behind the times up in Norfolk, Connecticut. That's right, Norfolk, not Norwalk." Her mouth, which has regular lips, is held a regular distance from the microphone. She

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shows no difficulty with it, no more than she would have with a phallus; two fingers and a thumb keep the thing canted right. There can be nothing wrong, after all, in relations between consenting adults. So speaks her calm.

Then there is a big heavy-set man who owns a grain-and-feed store in Ohio. He prides himself on imperturbable phlegm, and some thrift with words. He is not quite aware of the mike. If a man came into his store and proceeded to expose himself, this proprietor would not see it right away. He might, after all, be explaining the merits and demerits of one feed-mix to another; since he chews no gum when he walks, neither does he offer attention to tangentialia as he talks. Now, singled out from the audience to be interviewed, he is stiffnecked, and responds only from that side of his mouth adjacent to the cheek on which Steve is asking the questions; he allows, "New York is a good place to visit, but, yessir, I'll be glad to start up for home," then, bla-looh! he sees it, black blimp-like little object! he blinks, he swallows, he looks at Steve: "I guess I've had my say, Mr. Allen," he says, and shuts up shop. Later he will tell a pinochle partner about the crazy people in New York. "Yes," the friend will acknowledge.

"You bet, Steve," says the next fellow. "I'm awfully glad you selected me. I've always wanted to talk to you." He is fully aware of the mike and what it portends. "Yes, yes, I'm a male secretary, love the work." "It doesn't bother you," asks Steve, "if people say, 'What is that, a male secretary, isn't it supposed to be women's work?'" "Oh, Steve, that doesn't bother me a bit. Here," he says, reaching for the mike. "Do you mind? I'm much more comfortable when I hold it."

"Help yourself," says Steve.

"Oh, I intend to," says the guest. "Life is a feast, and I think we should all get what we can, don't you?"

FILM

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

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

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

Time is your money in a film—literally, it's your money. If you, as the director, don't finish a scene scheduled to be done by lunch, then you are going to come back after lunch and possibly lose not half an hour or an hour but two hours. So you're gambling to finish the scene before the break, even if you're not wholly satisfied with the result. Then you find out in the dailies if your gamble was too costly. The scene brought in before lunch needed one more setup. Making movies, you're absolutely in the world. You're a gambler. Whereas in literature, you withdraw from the world in order to perceive it. So movie directing uses another, even opposite, side of yourself from writing. I think you can get closer to your soul in a book, but you come to appreciate the effective or ineffective working of your psyche with a movie. Let me amplify this if I can. In writing a book, there are exceptional moments when you feel as if you're beaming a flood-lamp down into the abyss of your soul. By the light of your intuition, you do, in the course of writing a novel, get out to some astonishing places. But when you are making a film, particularly after you've shot it and start editing it, you have to look at the same scene over and over in order to clean out little dead spots. Makes you feel like a surgeon. What it also involves is your taste, and your concentration. Seeing one piece of film over and over, you must still keep your taste alive even as you exercise your ability to concentrate again and again upon the same material. Since I am the one who wrote "Repetition kills the soul," I thought that remark more than once while working with the movie editor. Of course, I would tell myself it was not absolute repetition. Rather, I was altering the given a little each time.

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

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

Perhaps a thousand actors and two thousand films can be cited where the movie frame comes alive and there is no dip at the foot of consciousness because something is false at the root. Nonetheless any such appearance of talent was close to magic. The conventional way of making most films usually guaranteed its absence. For there was an element which interfered with motion pictures as much as the blurring of print would hinder the reading of a book, and this flaw derived from the peculiar misapprehension with which the silent film gave way to sound, the supposition that sound-and-film was but an extension of the theatre, even as the theatre was but an extension of literature. It was assumed that movies were there to tell a story. The story might derive from the stage or from the pages of a book or even from an idea for a story, but the film was asked to issue from a detailed plan, which would have lines of dialogue. The making of the movie would be a fulfillment of that script, that literary plan; so each scene would be shaped like a construction unit to build the architecture of the story. It was one of those profoundly false assumptions which seem at the time absolute common sense, yet it was no more natural than to have insisted that a movie was a river and one should always experience, while watching a film, emotions analogous to an afternoon spent on the banks of a stream. That might have been seen instantly as confining, a most confining notion; but to consider the carry-over of the story from literature to the film as equally constricting—no, that was not very evident.

For few people wished to contemplate the size of the job in transporting a novelist's vision of life over to a film; indeed, who

in the movie business was going to admit that once literary characters had been converted over to actors, they could not possibly produce the same relation to other actors that the characters once had to each other? Interpretations had to collide. If each actor had his own idea of the dialogue he committed to memory, be certain the director had a better idea. And the producer! Lifetimes of professional craft go into halving such conceptual differences. The director gives up a little of his interpretation, then a little more, then almost all of it. The actor is directed away from his favorite misconceptions (and conceptions). Both parties suffer the rigor mortis of the technical conditions—which are not so close to a brightly lit operating theatre as to a brightly lit morgue. Then the scriptwriter has dependably delivered the scenario with his own private—and sometimes willful—idea buried in it (and if the work is an adaptation, odd lines of the novelist are still turning over). The coherence of the original novel has been cremated and strewn. Now the film is being made with conflicting notions of those scattered ashes. Of course the director is forced back willy-nilly to his script. It is all he can finally depend upon. Given the fundamental, nay, even organic, confusion on a movie set over what everybody is really doing, the company has to pool all differences and be faithful to the script even when the script has lost any relation to the original conception, and has probably begun to constrict the real life which is beginning to emerge on the set. No wonder great novels invariably make the most disappointing movies, and modest novels (like *The Asphalt Jungle*) sometimes make very good movies. It is because the original conception in modest novels is less special and so more capable of being worked upon by any number of other writers, directors, and actors.

Still, the discussion has been too narrow. The film, after all, is fed not only by literature but by the theatre, and the theatre is a conspicuous example of how attractively a blueprint can be unfolded. In fact, the theatre is reduced to very little whenever the collaboration between actors and script is not excellent. Yet the theatre has had to put up with many a similar difficulty. Can it be said that something works in the theatre which only pretends to work in the film? If the first error perpetrated upon movies has been to see them as an adjunct of literature, perhaps the second is the rush to make film an auxiliary of the theatrical arts, until even movies considered classics are hardly more than

pieces of filmed theatre.

Of course a film lover could counter by saying that he was not necessarily thinking only of such monuments as *Gone with the Wind* when he used the term *classic*. In fact, he would inquire about *A Night at the Opera* or *The Maltese Falcon*.

The difficulties had obviously begun. The Marx Brothers, for example, stampeded over every line of a script and tore off in enough directions to leave concepts fluttering like ticker tape on the mysterious nature of the movie art. Certainly, any attempt to declare *The Maltese Falcon* a piece of filmed theatre would have to confess that *The Maltese Falcon* was more, a mysterious ineffable possession of "more" and that was precisely what one looked for in a film. It was a hint to indicate some answer to the secrets of film might begin to be found in the curious and never quite explained phenomenon of the movie star. For Humphrey Bogart was certainly an element of natural film, yes, even *the* element which made *The Maltese Falcon* more than a excellent piece of filmed theatre. Thinking of the evocative aesthetic mists of that movie, how could the question not present itself: Why did every piece of good dramatic theatre have to be the enemy of the film? It was unhappily evident that any quick and invigorating theses on the character of movie stars and the hidden nature of the movie might have to wait for a little exposition on the special qualities of theatre.

A complex matter. You might, for instance, have to take into account why people who think it comfortable to be nicely drunk at the beginning of a play would find it no pleasure to go to a movie in the same condition. Pot was more congenial for a film. If the difference for most hardworking actors between movies and theatre seemed hardly more than a trip across a crack, the split to any philosopher of the film was an abyss, just that same existential abyss which lies between booze and the beginnings of the psychedelic.

Existentially, theatre and film were in different dominions (and literature was probably nearer to each of them than they were to each other). The theatre was a ceremony with live priests who had learned by rote to pool their aesthetic instincts for a larger purpose. So theatre partook of a near obscene ceremony: It imitated life in a living place, and it had real people as the imitators. Such imitation was either sacrilege to the roots of

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life, or a reinforcement of them. Certainly, sentiments called religious appeared ready to arise whenever a group of people attended a ceremony in a large and dimly lit place. But in fact anyone who has ever experienced a moment of unmistakable balance between the audience, the cast, the theatre and the *manifest* of the play, an awe usually remarked by a silence palpable as the theatrical velvet of an unvoiced echo, knows that the foundation of the theatre is in the church and in the power of kings, or at least knows (if theatre goes back to blood sacrifices performed in a cave—which is about where the most advanced theatre seems ready to go) that the more recent foundations were ecclesiastical and royal. Theatre, at all of its massive best, can be seen as equal to a ceremony, performed by noblemen who have power to chastise an audience, savage them, dignify them, warm them, marry their humors, even create a magical forest where each human on his seat is a tree and every sense is vibrating to the rustle of other leaves. One's roots return then to some lost majesty of pomp and power. Of course, theatre is seldom so good. None of us have had a night like that recently. Still, theatre has its minutes: A scene whose original concept was lost in the mixing of too many talents is recovered by the power of the actor to open relations with his audience. While he is engaged in an emotional transaction which is false by its nature (because he knows by heart the lines of apparently spontaneous passion he will say next), still he has to be true to the honest difficulty of not knowing whether the audience will believe him or not. His position on stage is existential—he cannot know in advance if his effort will succeed or not. In turn, the audience must respect him. For he is at the least brave enough to dare their displeasure. And if he is bad enough . . . well, how can he forget old nightmares where audiences kill actors? So the actor on stage is at once a fraud (because he pretends to emotion he cannot by any Method feel absolutely—or *he would be mad*) and yet is a true man engaged in a tricky venture, dangerous in its potentialities for humiliation. That is the strength of the theatre. A vision of life somewhat different each night comes into existence between the actors and the audience, and what has been lost in the playwright's vision is sometimes transcended by the mood of a high theatrical hearth.

We are speaking of course only of the best and freshest plays. Even in a good play something dies about the time an actor rec-

ognizes that he can be mediocre in his performance and survive. The reputation of the play has become so useful that the audience has become a touch mediocre as well; at this point in the season the actor inevitably becomes as interesting as a whore in a house after her favorite client has gone for the night.

Nonetheless, it is still reminiscent of orgy to have relations with two worlds of sentience at once, and when fresh, theatre is orgy. On stage, the actor is in communion with the audience and up to his neck in relations with other actors (if they are all still working together). A world of technique supports them. There are ways and means to live and act with half-thought-out lines of dialogue and errors of placement by the director, ways to deal with sentiments which have no ring and situations one knows by heart and still must enter with a pretense of theatrical surprise. An actor's culture exists, after all, for the working up of the false into the all-but-true; actors know the audience will carry the all-but-true over into the real and emotionally stirring if given a chance. So actors develop a full organ of emotional manifests. Large vibrant voices, significant moves. It all works because the actor is literally alive on a stage and therefore can never be false altogether. His presence is the real truth: he is at once the royal center of all eyes, and a Christian up before lions. So his theatrical emotion (which bears the same relation to real emotion that veneer of walnut bears to walnut) is moved by the risk of his position into a technique which offers truth. A skillful actor with false gestures and false emotions elicits our admiration because he tries to establish a vault under which we can seize on the truth since, after all, he has told the lie so well. Why, then, must that be an emotional transaction light-years of the psyche away from the same transaction carried over to film?

It is because the risk in film is of other varieties. No audience is present unless the actor plays his scene for the cameramen and the union grips. And that is a specific audience with the prejudices and tastes of policemen. Indeed they usually dress like cops off duty and are built like cops (with the same heavy meat in the shoulders, same bellies oiled on beer), which is not surprising, for they are also in surveillance upon a criminal activity: People are forging emotions under bright lights.

But it is no longer false emotion brought by technique to a point where it can be breathed upon and given life by audiences

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who do not know the next line. No, now the crew is a set of skills and intelligences. They are as sophisticated to the lines of the scene as the actors themselves. Like cops they see through every fake move and hardly care. The camera must move on cue and the sound boom, the lights be shifted and the walls slid apart—the action is easily as complex as a professional football team running through the intricacies of a new play or preparing a defense against it.

In fact, the actor does not usually play for the technicians. It is the director whose intelligence he will feel first, a charged critical intelligence knowing more of the scene than himself, a center of authority altogether different from a theatrical audience's authority (which is ready to relax with every good sound the actor makes). The movie director, however, does not relax then. The good sound of the actor can turn the plot inside out. No, here, the actor must work into a focus of will. The real face he speaks to, whether a step or ten steps to the side of the director, is a circle of glass as empty of love as an empty glass. That lens is his final audience. It takes precedence over the director and even over the actors he plays with. In the moment of his profoundest passion, as he reaches forward to kiss the heroine with every tenderness, his lips to be famous for their quiver, he is of course slowly and proficiently bringing his mouth up to the erogenous zone of the lens.

On stage, an actor, after twenty years of apprenticeship, can learn to reach the depths of an audience at the moment he is employing the maximum of his technique. A film actor with equivalent technique will have developed superb skills for revealing his reaction to the circle of glass. He can fail every other way, disobey the director or appear incapable of reacting to his direction, leave the other actors isolated from him and with nothing to react to, he can even get his lines wrong, but if he has film technique he will look sensational in the rushes, he will bring life to the scene even if he was death on the set. It is not surprising. There is something sinister about film. *Film is a phenomenon whose resemblance to death has been ignored for too long.* An emotion produced from the churn of the flesh is delivered to a machine, and that machine and its connections manage to produce a flow of images which will arouse some related sentiment in those who watch. The living emotion has passed through a burial ground—and has been resurrected. The living emotion

survives as a psychological reality; it continues to exist as a set of images in one's memory which are not too different, as the years go by, from the images we keep of a relative who is dead. Think of a favorite uncle who is gone. Does the apparatus of the mind which flashes his picture before us act in another fashion if we ask for a flash of Humphrey Bogart next? Perhaps it does not. Film seems part of the mechanism of memory, or at the least, a most peculiar annex to memory. For in film we remember events as if they had taken place and we were there. But we were not. The psyche has taken into itself a whole country of fantasy and made it psychologically real, made it a part of memory. We are obviously dealing with a phenomenon whose roots are less defined than the power and glory of king and church. Yes, movies are more mysterious than theatre; even a clue to the undefinable attraction of the movie star is that he remains a point of light in that measureless dark of memory where other scenes have given up their light. He has obviously become a center of meaning to millions, possessed of more meaning than the actor next to him who may be actually more attractive, more interesting—definition of the phenomenon frays as we try to touch it. But has the heart of the discussion been sounded? Does it suggest that movie stars partake of the mysterious psychic properties of film more than other actors? that something in them lends itself to the need of memory for images of the past one can refer to when the mind has need to comprehend something new before it? We have to be careful. It is perhaps not so simple as that. The movie star may also suggest obsession, that negative condition of memory, that painful place to which we return over and over because a fundamental question is still unresolved: Something happened to us years ago which was important, yet we hardly know if an angel kissed us then or a witch, whether we were brave or timid. We return to the ambiguity with pain. The obsession hurts because we cannot resolve it and so are losing confidence in our ability to estimate the present.

Obsession is a wasteful fix. Memory, when it can be free of obsession, is a storehouse to offer up essences of the past capable of digesting most of the problems of the present, memory is even the libido of the ego, sweetening harsh demands of the will when memory is, yes, good. But the movie star seems to serve some double function: The star feeds memory *and* obsession—one need only think back to one's feelings about Marilyn Mon-

roe! The movie star is welcoming but mysterious, unavailable yet intimate, the movie star is the embodiment of a love which could leave us abject, yet we believe we are the only soul the movie star can love. Quintessence of the elusive nature of film, the movie star is like a guide to bring us through the adventures of a half-conscious dream. It is even possible the movie star gives focus to themes of the imagination so large, romantic, and daring that they might not encounter reality: How can an adolescent have any real idea whether he will ever have sex with a beautiful woman or fight for his life? Nonetheless, events so grand might need years of psychic preparation. It was therefore also possible that the dream life of the film existed not only to provide escape but to prepare the psyche for apocalyptic moments which would likely never come.

Some differences of film from theatre may then have been noted. Theatre works on our ideas of social life and our understanding of manners. At its most generous theatre creates a communion of bodies and a savory of the emotions—it becomes a feast and a fuck. But film speaks to the lost islands of the mind. Film lives somewhere in that underground river of the psyche which travels from the domain of sex through the deeps of memory and the dream, on out into the possible montages of death—we need only think of any man who was rescued from drowning after he thought he was on the last trip down. Does he ever relate the experience without speaking of the sensation that his life became a film running backward? *It is as if film has an existence within the brain which may be comparable to memory and the dream*, be indeed as real as memory and the dream, be even to some degree as functional. It was as if the levels of that existential river which runs into ultimate psychic states would no longer read as perhaps once it did: sex—memory—dream—death; but now flows through a technological age and so has to be described by way of sex—memory—*film*—dream—death. Theatre has to be in the world of manners, but film is in the physiology of the psyche. For that reason, perhaps, film comes nearest to a religion as the movie houses are empty, it speaks across all the lonely traverses of the mind; it is at its most beautiful in precisely those places it is least concrete, least theatrical, most other-worldly, most ghostly, most lingering unto death—then the true experience of the film as some Atlantis of the psyche will manifest itself, and directors like Antonioni and Bergman will show

us that the film inhabits a secret place where the past tense of memory and the future intimations of the dream are interchangeable, are partners in the film: there is an unmistakable quality to any film which is not made as filmed theatre but rather appears as some existence we call film. That existence runs through Chaplin and *Sunset Boulevard* and *Persona*—it runs through home movies. It was Warhol's talent to perceive that in every home movie there is a sense of Time trying to express itself as a new kind of creation, a palpability which breathes in the *being* of the film. The best of works and some of the worst of film works have this quality. One can even find it for flashes in cranky old battered films of the purest mediocrity late at night on TV, B-films without an instant of talent, yet the years have added magic to what was once moronic—Time is winking her eye as we look at the film. Time suddenly appears to us as a wit.

Of course, there are movies which have delivered huge pleasures to millions and never were film at all, just celluloid theatre convertible to cash. Some were good, some very good, some awful, but the majority of motion pictures, particularly the majority of expensive ones, have always labored against the umbilical antipathy of film for theatre. They were, no matter how good as filmed theatre, never equal to theatre at its best—rather, scaled-down repasts for the eye and ear. They had a kind of phlegmatic tempo and all-too-well-lit color which rarely hindered them from reaching lists for the Ten Best Pictures of the year. They were pictures like *Oklahoma!*, *South Pacific*, *The Sound of Music*, *Mary Poppins*, and *The Best Years of Our Lives*. They were even such critical favorites as *Marty*, *Born Yesterday*, *Brief Encounter*, and *The Seven Year Itch*, or *Anne of the Thousand Days*, add *Lust for Life*, *All About Eve*, *Around the World in Eighty Days*, *West Side Story*. All that celluloid was super-technique for audiences who had not necessarily ever seen a play but were constantly nourished in the great cafeteria of the American Aesthetic, where the media meals were served up as binder for the shattered nervous system of the masses. To the owners of that cafeteria there was something obscene in the idea that one should not be able to translate a book into a play, film, or TV series—something arrogant, for it would say the difference between the movies just named and films like *Zabriskie Point*, *Naked Summer*, *Belle de Jour*, *Limelight*, *Diabolique*, *8½*, *The Bicycle Thief*, *The Four Hundred Blows*, *High Noon*, *Easy Rider*, and *Weekend*

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