

nonetheless to do his best every step of the way. Not in command of every situation, but will do his best. And he does have his startling successes. And God does help him.

In the beginning, the style was too Biblical. Moreover, I had to decide whether to travel in first person or third. First person would have everyone saying: "There's Mailer, world class egomaniac. Does he now think he's Jesus Christ? What a pompous ass! What a totally unpleasant human being!" I thought that's the bad side, but at least I can avoid the larger mistake of doing it in the third person. Because that would have to get mixed up with the Gospels, and the reader would wonder, "Is this sentence from the New Testament or has it been added?" That's going to make for a disagreeable page-examining experience. All right, then. First person. Damn the torpedoes, first person. Play the Ace.

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

After which, it was relatively easy. The book was short enough for me to go through seven variations on the style. I had to find the balance between a Biblical rhythm and a contemporary one. Something that would not inflict a Biblical grip on you, yet keep the echo. Before I was done, it all took a year from that night in that much-too-small hotel room on the Ile St. Louis. (15)

REAL LIFE VERSUS PLOT LIFE

The CIA, in its actual workings, is the antithesis to the average spy novel, which, best-seller oriented, tends to present a perfect clock that ticks to its conclusion. In Harlot's Ghost one of my characters remarks that she came into the CIA because she loved spy novels. Now, her complaint was that she could never—precisely because she was inside—experience the full run of a scenario. On occasion, her work put her into the equivalent of a spy novel, but only, let us say, for chapters five and six. She hadn't been there at the beginning, and was soon shifted to another assignment. Often, one did not learn how it all turned out. That struck me as being about what life is like: The gun over the mantelpiece does not often get fired. We live in and out of ongoing plots every day of our lives, but they are discontinuous. Nothing can be more difficult to encounter than a life story that accompanies us through a beginning, middle and end. There is only our own that is not missing many pages, yet how discontinuous it seems all the same! One could make the case that our love of plot—until it gets very cheap indeed—comes out of our need to find the chain of cause and effect that so often is missing in our own existence.

(16)

The decisions you make while writing fiction can leave you uneasy. If your characters come alive, that's fine; they will carry you a part of the way. But, finally, your people have to make what might be termed career decisions. Does your protagonist want to go abroad in the foreign service, or does he decide to stay in New York with the amazing young model he has just met? Needless to say, such choices are non-operative for writers who have the story complete in their mind before they begin. So I repeat: I look to find my book as I go along. Plot comes last. I want a conception of my characters that's deep enough so that they will get me to places where I, as the author, have to live by my wits. That means my characters must keep developing. So long as they stay alive, the plot will take care of itself. Working on a book where the plot is already fully developed is like spending the rest of your life filling holes in rotten teeth. (17)

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

It took some time to learn that this did not necessarily diminish the drama. It could increase it. Most of our lives are spent getting ready for dramatic moments that don't take place. Or if they do, they are less than we expected. About the time we say, "Well, nothing really big ever happens to me," you can get knocked down with something bigger than you expected. All the frustrations of all the little narratives in your life that never had a real climax can be present in the rare denouement that life also offers once in a great while. (18)

I no longer work up a master plan before I begin a novel. When I was younger I used to sit down and write out such plans, but I never finished. Even with The Executioner's Song where, after all, I knew the story in great detail, I was careful not to be too versed in too many details ahead. I preferred to do my research up to no more than 100 pages ahead of where I was. I wanted to keep the feeling that I didn't know how it was all going to turn out. I needed something like the illusion that I was inventing each detail. Obviously, I prefer doing a book that is not too carefully laid out. Some of my best ideas come because I haven't fixed my novel's future in concrete. Once you know your end, it's disastrous to get a new idea. That can only take you away from your pre-arranged conclusion. Yet the new idea that you didn't follow may be worth more than the denouement you planned in advance. (19)

For that matter, the moment I think of a good plot, I find that the book becomes almost impossible to write because I know I won't believe it. Life may consist of people

plotting all the time, but the plots never develop all the way. We decide: I'll make this move in my life, and that should result in the following—then, life confounds us. So I prefer a story that develops out of the writing. I don't like one that moves ahead of my characters, because then my people won't live. Already, I've ordered them to be obedient to my will. Tie your characters to a pre-arranged plot, and you are doing to them what we would do to our children if we carefully selected their colleges, their spouses, and their jobs without ever consulting them. The same unspoken despondency weighs on characters who are treated that way in a novel—they never get to fulfill their own perverse (that is, surprising to the novelist) capabilities; they never come alive. Bill Buckley is wonderful at plots—his mind works that way—but nobody lives and breathes in his books with any more three-dimensionality than some passing movie star who can't act.

20

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

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

I've always stayed away from such close material, never written directly about my parents or my sister. Those experiences are so basic that I encircle them with a favorite word—I characterize these fundamental and primary experiences as crystals. The crystals can be simple, or extraordinarily developed. But provided you don't use them directly, you can sometimes send a ray of your imagination through the latticework in one direction or another and find altogether different scenarios. If you've got a fellow in mind who's, let's say, a pretty tough kid, you can, if you don't write about him head-on, make the boy a bullfighter, or put him in Special Forces, even turn him into a bank robber or an honest cop. So long as you don't use the core of your experience, you will be in command of many possibilities. But if you are bound to get it all accurately on paper, then at a given moment, you will have to face the fact that you are going to hurt people who are close to you.

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

As a novelist, one is engaged in something analogous. Novelists are oxymorons. They are sensitive and most insensitive. Full of heart and heartless. You have to be full of heart to feel what many people are feeling. On the other hand, a novelist has to be relatively cold. If he or she starts thinking of all the damage they are going to do, they can't write the book--not if they're reasonably decent. Of course, a malicious person

might kick up the traces, and feel young and happy again at being so mean, even feel a spark--dare I say Muriel Spark?--because they are going to hurt so many people.

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

Hardly anyone is happy with the portrait of themselves in a good novel. (21)

Some of my characters do come from real people. One might emerge out of five individuals, another from one person, greatly altered. Still another is imagined. No matter by which route, there's pleasure when a character becomes, in a sense, independent of yourself. (22)

Graham Greene once said that there were certain characters who took care of themselves. He never had to bother about them in the writing. Others he had to go to great pains with. He would work very hard on them. Later, when he'd read a review and it would mention one of his resistant characters as "well-drawn," he used to think, "Well-dragged." (23)

Up to now, I've not liked writing about people who are close to me because they're too difficult to do. Their private reality obviously interferes with the reality one is trying to create. They become alive not as creatures in your imagination but as actors in your life. And so they seem real while you write, but you're not developing their novelistic reality into your book. For example, it's not a good idea to try to put your wife into your novel. Not your latest wife, anyway. In practice, I prefer to draw a character from someone I hardly know who excites my novelist's instinct. I sense that I will be able to add a great deal to the portrait by what I've learned from other people. (24)

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

distinction I like to make. A character is someone you can grasp as a whole, you can have a clear idea of him, but a being is someone whose nature keeps shifting. In The Deer Park, Lulu Meyers is a being rather than a character. If you study her closely, you will see that she is a different person in every scene. Just a little different. I don't know whether initially I did this by accident or purposefully, but at a certain point I made the conscious decision not to try to straighten her out, she seemed right in her change-
ableness.

25

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

26

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

Looking back on it, I can give you a good and bad motive that I had for killing Hearn where I did. The good motive is that it was a powerful way to show what death is like in war. The shoddy motive was that I wasn't altogether sure in my heart that I knew what to do with him, or how to bring him off.



I think that I truly work on impulse in all of my writing. That's why I don't like to plan too far ahead. It makes it almost impossible for one of your characters to go through a dramatic shift of heart because it's going to violate your larger scheme. It's better if this larger scheme comes into focus at the very last moment. (21)

When it comes to entering a character's mind, a writer has to be ready to be good, even brilliant. So long as you stay outside that head, your character can retain a certain mystery. We walk around such figures with the same respect we offer strange people who come into a room with force. Part of the meaning of charisma is that we don't know the intimate nature of the human presence we're facing. Characters in novels sometimes radiate more energy, therefore, when we don't enter their mind. It is one of the techniques a novelist acquires instinctively—don't go into your protagonist's thoughts until you have something to say about his inner life that is more interesting than the reader's suppositions. To jump in only to offer banal material is a fatal error. It is the worst of best-sellerdom. Second-rate readers enjoying the insights of second-rate writers. (25)

I'd say try not to think of your characters as victims. That sort of classification narrows them. In reality, very few victims ever see themselves exclusively as victims, and when they do, their spirit turns stale. There is a certain sort of self-pitying victim

one wishes to walk away from, and they can be even worse in a book. (Unless one is Dickens. Scrooge, Scrooge, Scrooge.)

29

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

30

If you ask about major weaknesses in a major writer, I would say that Hemingway was not capable of writing a long complex sentence with good architecture in the syntax. But he turned that inability into his personal skill at writing short declarative sentences or long run-on sentences connected by conjunctions. Faulkner, to the contrary, was not capable of writing simply, but his over-rich, congested sentences produced an extraordinary mood. In turn, Henry Miller could rarely tell a full story well.

He preferred his excursions away from the story, and those asides are what make him exceptional. (31)

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

There are some who feel it was not a satisfactory device, but I think I'd do it the same way again. War is disproportions, and the hornet's nest seemed a perfect disproportion to me. We were ready to lose our lives that day but we weren't up to getting stung by a hornet. (32)

If a novelist can take someone who is a legendary figure and invent episodes for them that seem believable, then they've done something fine. There's that meeting between J.P. Morgan and Henry Ford in Ed Doctorow's Ragtime—I think it's one of the

best short chapters in American literature. It told me an awful lot about Morgan and an awful lot about Henry Ford, and the fact that it obviously never took place made it more delicious (33)

The characters you create in a novel become as real in your mind as movie stars. That is no small equation. To a lot of people, Humphrey Bogart might, for example, be the psychic equivalent of an influential uncle given the measure of importance he exerts on those who love his work. (34)

INSTINCT

I am not sure it is possible to describe the experience of novel-writing authentically. It may be that it is not an experience. It may be more like a relation, if you will—a continuing relation between a man and his wife. You can't necessarily speak of that as an experience because it may consist of several experiences braided together; or it may consist of many experiences which are all more or less similar, or indeed it may consist of two kinds of experiences which are antagonistic to one another. (35)

Writing may be an instinctive process, but it's not always clear what the instinct is saying. Sometimes you feel no more than a dull pressure to go in a certain direction for the oncoming chapter. You have to be able to hear the faint voice which prods you toward an honest continuation of the work. That can be hard to hear. A writer is also open to the temptation to take the immediate advantage, even if it doesn't feel quite right. And we all do that in various ways. And pay for it with falsities that burrow directly into our intent. (36)

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

Your immediate experience can be too alive to be put directly into language. Sometimes, you have to wait. (31)

I think Capote's book and mine are formally similar, but vastly different. Obviously, I'll be the first to state that if he hadn't done In Cold Blood, it's conceivable that I wouldn't have thought of taking on The Executioner's Song. Nonetheless, it's also possible that something about The Executioner's Song called for doing it in the way I chose. In any event, its flavor is different from In Cold Blood. Truman retained his style, not the pure style—he simplified it—but it was still very much a book written by Truman Capote. You felt it every step of the way. The difference is that he tweaked it more, where I was determined to keep the factual narrative. I wanted my book to read like a novel, and it does, but I didn't want to sacrifice what literally happened in a scene for what I would like to see happen. Of course, I could afford to feel that way. I had advantages Truman didn't. His killers were not the most interesting guys in the world, so it took Truman's exquisite skills to make his work a classic. I was in the more promising position of dealing with a man who was quintessentially American yet worthy of

Dostoevsky. If this were not enough, he was also in love with a girl who—I'll go so far as to say—is a bona fide American heroine. I didn't want, therefore, to improve anything. Dedicated accuracy is not usually the first claim a novelist wishes to make, but here it became a matter of literary value. What I had was gold, if I had enough sense not to gild it. (38)

If you find some theme that keeps you working, don't question it. Let that theme be sufficient to fuel your work. If you start using the value judgments of others, you're never going to get much done. If I find something is stimulating to me and arousing my energy, that's fine, I'll trust it. If you're a serious young writer and find that you're writing a lot, then don't listen to what anyone else says, do your book. There is probably a deeper truth than you'll ever know in the fact that you're able to work so well. Of course, you could be writing in absolutely the wrong direction. You could be doing a dreadful book.

No matter what you find yourself writing about, if it's giving you enough energy, however, to continue, then the work bears a profound relationship to you at that point and so you don't question it. (39)

Let me take this further. You can write a book with a powerful sense of inner conviction, and a year or two later, say, "How could I have so deluded myself? This is awful." Your instinct can betray you, but you still have to go with it. Very often the

instinct sees some light at the end of the tunnel, but that's because you've been trapped in a situation where your creative energies can't get together. Now, at last, you've found a way to work. You may be writing out some very bad tendencies in yourself, but this can be good, too. You might be feeling happy because soon you're going to be done with that malfunctioning side of yourself. That's what your enthusiasm can be about.

Only rarely is one's instinct analogous to a fast highway, but that's exactly when things get hairy. The slow twists and turns of one's creative impulse can be a form of protecting oneself from the driving force which sometimes is manic. (40)

INFLUENCE

The influence of Henry Adams on The Armies of the Night is peculiar. I had never read much Adams. In my freshman year at Harvard, we were assigned one long chapter of The Education of Henry Adams and I remember thinking at the time what an odd thing to write about yourself in the third person. Who is this fellow, Henry Adams, talking about himself as Henry Adams? I remember being annoyed in that mildly irritable way freshmen have of passing over extraordinary works of literature. To my conscious recollection, I hardly ever thought about him again. Yet, start reading The Armies of the Night, and immediately you say—even I said—“My God, this is pure Henry Adams.” It’s as if I were the great-grandson. Contemplate, therefore, how peculiar is influence: Adams must have remained in my mind as a possibility, the way a painter might look at a particular Picasso, or Cezanne, and say to himself, “That’s the way to do it.” Yet the influence might not pop forth for twenty or thirty years. When it does, the painter could say, “Oh, yes, that was a Picasso I saw at MOMA twenty-five years ago, and I’ve always wanted to try such a palette, and now I have.” In effect, that’s what happened with Henry Adams.

41

Literary influence remains endlessly curious. I happened to pick up Moby Dick. I hadn't thought about Melville ten times in the last thirty years, but as soon as I read the first page, I realized my later style was formed by Melville, shaped by his love of long, rolling sentences full of inversions and reverses and paradoxes and ironies and exclamation points and dashes. Of course, to be as good as Melville—that's another matter. (42)

It's disturbing to read a novelist with a good style when you're in the middle of putting your work together. It's much like taking your car apart and having all the pieces on the floor just as somebody rides by in a Ferrari. Now, you may hear a note in the Ferrari that isn't good and say, "His motor needs a little tuning." But nonetheless the car and its roar are still there in your ear while your parts remain on the floor. So while I'm working on a book I rarely read more than The New York Times—which could have the long-term effect of flattening my style. I'd rather blame the Times than old age. (43)

STAMINA

I'm now eighty, but some people still think of me as a wild man. They have no desire to believe that even at my peak that was only five to ten percent of my nature. The rest was work. I like work. I remember Elia Kazan saying one day at Actors' Studio, "Here, we're always talking about the work. We talk about it so piously. We say the work. The work. Well, we do work here, and get it straight: Work is a blessing." He said this, glaring at every one of us. And I thought, "He's right. That's what it is. A blessing."

Of course, if you ask what work is dependent upon, the key word, an unhappy one, is stamina. It's as difficult to become a professional writer as a professional athlete. It often depends on the ability to keep faith in yourself. One must be willing to take risks and try again. And it does need an enormous amount of practice to be good at it. Since you are affected by what you read as a child and adolescent, it also takes a while to unlearn all sorts of reading reflexes that have led you into bad prose.

44

It is useful to become aware of the set of different psychological stances you get into in the course of working on a novel over a year or two. I remember in the summer

before my Junior year, working on a first novel (that will remain forever unpublished), I ran into a phrase by Henry James. He spoke of "the keeping up." That can be the first horror you face when you're young. The novel tends to change all too quickly. That may be the cardinal reason why people in college tend to stay away from longer fiction. Young short story writers, no matter how good, often blow up when they start a novel. They'll have a good beginning, but the second chapter goes off, and they never get it back. The sad truth is that a young would-be novelist possibly has to start a few books that do give out, or even crash, before a sense of the difficulties is acquired. If the same likelihood of early failure applied to young race car drivers, there would not be speedways. (45)

Writing is wonderful when you talk about it. It's fun to contemplate. But writing as a daily physical activity is not agreeable. You put on weight, you strain your gut, you get gout and chilblains. You're alone and every day you have to face a blank piece of paper. (46)

A large part of writing a novel is to keep your tone. I love starting a book, I usually like finishing one. It's the long middle stretches that call on your character—all that inbetween!—those months or years when you have to report to work almost every

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

Sometimes, when you're in a bad period, you must, in effect, contract yourself for weeks running. "I'm going in to write tomorrow," you must declare, and, indeed, show up at your desk, even though there's nothing in you, and you have to sit there for hours, whatever stint of time you told yourself that you were going to put in. Then, if nothing happens, you still show up the next day and the next and the next, until that recalcitrant presence, the unconscious, comes to decide that you can, past ill-performance to the contrary, now be trusted. Such acceptance is crucial. The unconscious expects that what it has prepared for you in your sleep should be expressed, ideally, the next day. We live, you see, in an arm's length relationship to our unconscious. It has to be convinced over and over again to trust you. Sometimes when you're writing a novel, you have to live as responsibly as a good monk. That does get easier as you grow older. (47)

There's nothing glorious about being a professional. You become more dogged. You probably relinquish the upper reaches of the mind in order to be able to do your stint of work each day: That means you are ready to endure a certain amount of drudgery. The higher reaches of the mind usually rebel. They are obviously not enthralled by dull conditions. Professionalism probably comes down to being able to work on a bad day. (48)

I used to have a little studio in Brooklyn a couple of blocks from my house—no telephone, not much else. The only thing I ever did there was work. It was perfect. I was like a draft horse with a conditioned reflex. I came in ready to sit at my desk. No television, no telephone. Didn't want to be tempted. There's an old Jewish belief that you build a fence around an impulse. If that's not good enough, you build a fence around the fence. So, no amenities. (But for a refrigerator!) I wrote longhand with a pencil, and I gave it to an excellent assistant named Judith McNally. She would type it for me and next day I would go over it. Since at my age you begin to forget all too much, I would hardly remember what I had written the day before. So it read as if someone else had done it. The critic in me was delighted. I could now proceed to fix some prose. The sole virtue of losing your short-term memory is that it does free you up to be your own editor. (49)

When I read something good, I want to do a critical piece. I want to expand on where I think the author is terrific and where he or she is lacking. Especially if readers are blowing it up too high, I may feel, "It's good but not that good---let's get into it." So it can be immensely distracting. Your mind settles on the work you are reading, rather than the one you're supposed to be laboring on. So you tend to protect yourself by not

reading anything that's too good. Stendhal, for instance, used to peruse the Code Napoleon every day in the loo before he'd start to write.

Now I didn't always follow that rule. When I was doing The Naked and the Dead, I used to pick up Thomas Wolfe and Tolstoy. I didn't read them every day but they were on my writing desk and they were perfect for what I needed. Tolstoy, particularly. The tone of Anna Karenina was wonderful for The Naked and the Dead. And then there was Thomas Wolfe to steam up the descriptions. If I needed a tropical sunset or how the jungle smelled, I had Wolfe. For the characters, Tolstoy. (50)

I never know what the style of a book will be until I get into it. Sometimes you aim high and don't get it--you have to settle for a more functional tone. After all, style is very much like the pace a serious jogger sets for himself. You have to be able to maintain it. In that sense, style is an offshoot of character. With all else, character is the wise or foolish estimate of your resources. (51)

I think it's important for a writer to keep in shape. But it's hard to talk about. Harry Greb, for example, was a fighter who used to keep in shape. He was completely a fighter, the way one might wish to be completely a writer. He always did the things which were necessary to him as a fighter. Now, some of these things were extremely irrational from a prize-fight manager's point of view. That is, before he had a fight he

would go to a brothel, and he would have two prostitutes, not one, taking the two of them into the same bed. And this apparently left him feeling like a wild animal. Don't ask me why. Perhaps he picked the two meanest whores in the joint and so absorbed into his system all the small, nasty, concentrated evils that had accumulated from carloads of men. Greb was known as the dirtiest fighter of his time. He didn't have much of a punch but he could spoil other fighters and punish them, he knew more dirty tricks than anyone around. But the two whores were one part of his training methods and he did it over and over again until he died at a relatively early age of a heart attack on an operating table. I think he died before he was thirty-eight. They operated on him, and bang, he went.

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

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

craft more from good writers and mediocre writers with a flair. Craft, after all, is what you can take out whole from their work. But keeping in shape is something else. For example, you can do journalism, and it can be terrible for your style. Or it can temper your style. . . in other words, you can become a better writer by doing a lot of different kinds of writing. Or you can deteriorate. There's a book came out a few years ago which was a sociological study of some Princeton men—I forget the name of it. One of them said something which I thought was extraordinary. He wanted to perform the sexual act under every variety of condition, emotion and mood available to him. I was struck with this not because I ever wanted necessarily to have that kind of sexual life, but because it seemed to me that was what I was trying to do with my writing. I try to go over my work in every conceivable mood. I edit on a spectrum which runs from the high clear manic impressions of a drunk which has made one electrically alert, all the way down to the soberest reaches of a low mood where I can hardly bear my words. By the time I'm done with writing I care about, I usually have worked on it through the full spectrum of my consciousness. If you keep yourself in this peculiar kind of shape, the craft will take care of itself. Craft is very little finally. But if you're continually worrying about whether you're growing or deteriorating as a man, whether your integrity is turning soft or firming itself, why, then, it is in that slow war, that slow rearguard battle you fight against diminishing talent, that you stay in shape as a writer and have a consciousness. You develop a consciousness as you grow older which enables you to write about anything, in effect, and write about it well. That is, provided you keep your consciousness in shape and don't relax into flabby styles of thought. They, after all, surround one everywhere.

The moment you borrow other writers' styles of thought, you need craft to shore up the walls. But if what you write is a reflection of your own consciousness, then even journalism can become interesting. One wouldn't want to spend one's life at it, and I wouldn't ever want to be caught justifying journalism as a major activity (it's obviously less interesting than to write a novel), but it's better, I think, to see journalism as a venture of one's ability to keep in shape than to see it as an essential betrayal of the chalice of your literary art.

Of course, it's virtually as if writers are there to be ruined. Look at the list: booze, pot, too much sex, too little, too much failure in one's private life, too much attrition, too much recognition, too little recognition, frustration. Nearly everything in the scheme of things works to dull a first-rate talent. But the worst probably is cowardice—as one gets older, one becomes aware of one's cowardice, the desire to be bold which once was a joy gets heavy with caution and duty. And finally there's apathy. About the time it doesn't seem too important any more to be a major writer, you know you've slipped far enough now to be doing your work on the comeback trail.

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

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If you can, I think it's a good idea to rotate your crops. Once you've written a novel that's factual and realistic and big, awfully close to what happened, then it's probably a good idea that your next novel be as fanciful as possible. Yes, if you can, rotate those crops. (53)

A few words on rewriting and research.

Rewriting is where your working experience over the years has its day. There comes a time when you know how to get the maximum out of what you've done. The only way to accelerate this skill when you are young is to go through your work in every mood. You have to have the courage to look at it when you're about ready to destroy it. If something still comes through, then it may well have the merit to be worked upon further. It is also not bad to read things at the top of your feelings in order to get a sense of what the maximum might be. If nothing else, all this will give you a tolerance for the extraordinary spectrum of reaction you can receive in the classroom. You realize that the people who don't like your work aren't necessarily evil, and the people who love your stuff don't have to be altogether illustrious. (54)

Research is another matter. The trick in doing an historical novel, for example, is to digest the research. One has to avoid that awful stance where you say, in effect,

"Hello, I'm Saint-Simon and I'm at the court of Louis XIV. Madame de Maintenon is very angry this morning." Better to remind yourself that Madame de Maintenon does not necessarily feel that she is the Madame de Maintenon we know through Saint-Simon.

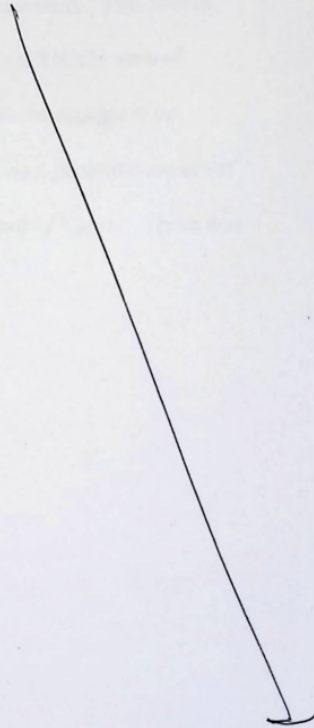
In addition, one must always be on guard against anachronizing. You learn how hard it is to separate what belongs only to your time from the era you are trying to recreate. (55)

A CODA TO CRAFT

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

Which may be why we throw up our enormous evasions—such as craft. Indeed, I think this adoration of craft, this specific respect for craft makes a church of literature for that vast number of writers who are somewhere on the spectrum between mediocrity and talent. (56)

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



A Man Half Full

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

The people who were most American by birth, and who had the most to do with managing America, gave themselves a literature which had the least to say about the real phenomena of American life, most particularly the accelerate rate, the awful rate, of growth and anomaly through all of society. That sort of literature and that sort of attempt to explain America was left to the sons of immigrants who, if they were vigorous enough, and fortunate enough to be educated, now had the opportunity to see that America was a phenomenon never before described, indeed, never before visible in the record of history. There was

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something going on in American life which was either grand or horrible or both, but it was going on—at a dizzy rate—and the future glory or doom of the world was not necessarily divorced from it . . .

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

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

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

The introduction of realism into literature in the eighteenth century by Richardson, Fielding, and Smollett was like the introduc-

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tion of electricity into engineering. It was not just another device. The effect on the emotions of an everyday realism such as Richardson's was something that had never been conceived of before. It was realism that created the "absorbing" or "gripping" quality that is peculiar to the novel, the quality that makes the reader feel that he has been pulled not only into the setting of the story but also into the minds and central nervous systems of the characters. . . .

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

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

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

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

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

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Three cheers. One has to applaud his moxie. Only an innocent or a simpleton could fail to recognize that a live hornet was being deposited in the crevice of every literary seat in town. If *The Bonfire of the Vanities* had excited envy and outrage, Wolfe was now upping the ante. It was the equivalent of a large raise in the World Series of Poker. Could he bring off the huge novel he was obviously suggesting, or was he riding on an outsize bluff?

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

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

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

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

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This much said, one has to add that *A Man in Full* is a much better book than *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. The earlier novel ran like an express for the first third of its pages, but by the middle, it was slowing up. At the end, it pissed out.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Be it said. The book has gas and runs out of gas, fills up again, goes dry. It is a 742-page work that reads as if it is fifteen hundred pages long. This is, to a degree, a compliment, since it is very rich in material. But, given its high intentions, it is also tiresome, for it takes us down the road of too many overlong and predictable scenes. So, this book, electric at best, banal at worst—like a long afternoon spent watching soap operas—is read each day for another hundred pages with a sense that the pleasure it offers is accompanied by the strain of encountering prose that disappoints as often as it titillates.

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

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

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

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

What is bound to create an ongoing argument over the objective merits of this book is that for all of its major faults, it has undeniable major virtues of which the most notable are the set pieces. Every defender of the book will end with his favorite episodes and chapters, but there will probably be a consensus on the inquisition of Charlie Croker by his creditors at the PlannersBanc, the mating of the thoroughbred horses at his plantation, his barehanded capture of a six-foot rattlesnake there, and the "Freaknic" celebration of black college

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students in Atlanta, as well as the first meeting between the two top-level black principals, Roger Too White and the mayor Wes Jordan. Most particularly, the hundred pages of writing about Conrad Hensley in prison and escaping from prison light the book up in the middle. Extraordinarily good writing forces one to contemplate the uncomfortable possibility that Tom Wolfe might yet be seen as our best writer. How grateful one can feel then for his failures and his final inability to be great—his absence of truly large compass. There may even be an endemic inability to look into the depth of his characters with more than a consummate journalist's eye.

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

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

Right here is where Wolfe bogs down. How it costs him! A reader's confidence in what he is reading will be subtly betrayed or even squandered should a novelist choose to enter the mind of a character but fail to bequeath the indispensable gift, that the reader can now know more about the character than before. The internal monologues of Wolfe's people are surprisingly routine and insist on telling us what we know already. There is almost no signature quality of mind.

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

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

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

Nonetheless, this formulation is too severe. Sometimes Wolfe is ready to work for his best characters, sometimes they can surprise us as they move from caricatures into literary reality. It is just that at other times he is all too ready to let them work for him, and moves them back from the possibility of deeper characterization into caricature again. How can he not when plot obviously appeals to him more than the real complexity of men and women? Worse, he appears incapable of creating a vital and interesting woman. He couldn't do it in *The Bonfire of the Vanities* and certainly doesn't here. If all we knew about wives, for example, were to come from Tom Wolfe, we would have to assume that they are without soul, and their greatest strength is to nag.

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

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

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

Conrad's part of the story, as already stated, is far and away the most readable and the most virtuoso element throughout the length of the prison and escape scenes. Unfortunately, these episodes are not quite believable. Prison is a culture, and you violate its canons at your peril. Wolfe poses a question: How is a young, good-looking prisoner to endure when he belongs to no clique and will not submit to becoming a playmate? Wolfe, in the obligatory showdown, uses a martial war trick. Conrad Hensley has powerful hands and forearms from totting eighty-pound cartons of frozen chickens around in the Croker Global warehouse. So when he is sounded by a prison wolf named Rotto (who has a build like a WWF wrestler), he grabs the monster's hand with both his hands and crushes the man's fingers, breaks his wrist. There is no recognition that there are magnum responses available to Rotto, who, after all, is a weathered con who has lived for years with the arts and tricks of dirty fighting. At the least, Rotto could whack Conrad with his free fist, or wrap his forearm around Conrad's windpipe, or knee him in the groin. Whatever! Cons live as close to martial response as Shakespeare scholars to the variant texts.

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

Wolfe is not a classicist for too little. He employs a *deus ex machina*. The mightiest of California earthquakes commences. Prison cells

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break apart, prison walls crash open, and Conrad (after a very nice piece of action writing) manages to escape. The ducks all fall into line and a friend whose life he saved once in the ice-cold warehouse takes care of getting him out of town. From Oakland to Atlanta. Lol! The book comes together. Conrad, lowly worker out in Oakland in Charlie Croker's ice-cold warehouse, will hook up with his old and hitherto invisible boss, and will do it well enough and close enough to yet save Charlie's life now that Charlie is in a terminal depression. In the course of enabling the two principals to meet, a highly improbable set of twists and turns conducts Conrad through several sub-worlds (Vietnamese boat-folk and poor genteel whites among others). Yet here Wolfe is at his best. He is wonderful at capturing the English of Vietnamese illegals (as he is also for Pakistanis, Hawaiians, ghetto blacks, down-home Georgians). Indeed, he is so good on such matters that you forgive the phony combat, the earthquake that solves all pressing auctorial problems, the convenient underground railroad of the story line—you accept it as Dickensian to the max! Wolfe is only in trouble when he has to slow down and allow his characters to react with one another, to 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

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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 former great white athlete from Georgia Tech to stand up in public for the black star. In return, the mayor will convince PlannersBanc 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

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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 rum-

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blings. 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, ~~if he is~~ ~~vivid enough~~, can always hold the reader for the 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 this 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 for the last nine months we have been 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. He spent his early professional life writing too quickly and moving on. 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.

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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.

~~From The New York Review of Books (December 17, 1998)~~

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3. PSYCHOLOGY

LEGEND AND IDENTITY

il // 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 itself.

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 other humans.

redundant // The first two pieces in the section, The Notebook and the letter to Salman Rushdie, are here to give some notion of the spectrum that runs from the young writer (still living in a caul) to 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 any more. 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 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, girl friend. 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. ①

Dear Salman Rushdie,

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

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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, writers 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. (3)

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 of my work after that, and by now I can say that kind of personality interests me more than characters who are rooted.

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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, and wingless. 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 metamorphosed 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 all over again what makes people tick. In the old days, you could understand friends, enemies and strangers by induction; now, by deduction. Of course, you do have more material on which to work your deductions. ⑤

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. ⑥

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 bestseller 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. ⑦

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 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 some dialogue:

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. I got into the sack with her. I hope you're not mad.

Mailer: Were you good with her?

Friend: Yeah. It was a real good night.

Mailer: Then I'm not mad.

So the legend had become a beard, a front man, a pimp, a procurer of new situations, even a ghost more real to other people than to myself. (8)

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. (9)

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. (10)

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. (11)

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. (12)

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, is an oxymoron—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. (13)

As one aspect of this, 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 you can bring off, yet you're able to retain the confidence that you remain aware of those 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 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. (14)

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 one 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. 15

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. Things are sinister, 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? 16

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. (17)

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?" (18)

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 crystals 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. The crystal 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. (19)

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 hardon 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. (20)

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 your 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. 21

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—at least until lately. 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 his royal court of followers. He may have worked as hard on that as on his books. I would repeat: his airs killed him. 22

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 hard-working author, but an ego that is much more powerful than our literary needs is a super-highway straight into mediocrity. A good many best-selling authors can line up for that one. (23)

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 prize fighters. 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. (24)

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 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. (25)

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 a keyboard) 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 dignify the time it uses up, if large chances aren't engaged?

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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 protagonist named Norman Mailer, it was, on the other hand, damned 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. (27)

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. (28)

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 being put 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.

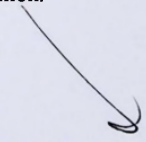
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Today, most of my ideas are less involved with new exploration than with occupying thematic territories I reconnoitered years ago. If you no longer have the pleasure of enjoying your mind in the way you could when young, you have, at least, more worldly 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. (30)

I can sit with an empty mind. I don't try to void my thoughts forcibly. If I do think of something, then, all right, I think of it. But a tired brain is happy to contemplate nothing. It's like a hardworking athlete who likes lying down.

On the other hand, our continuing existence as novelists can 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 maintain the hypothesis: Yes, he's cheating on me, and she can keep it going—at least so long as the evidence does not absolutely confute the premise. Then something happens—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 recent hypothesis. Now the wife 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-sized charts. A huge geographical and/or philosophical map. The West is in decline--that's 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 charts until September 11th? Now, we are picking up bits and tid-bits about Islam in a flurry. A superficial but lively work-in-progress is proceeding on one's charts.

To dignify this notion, let me propose that we use these charts, whether good or superficial, to serious purpose. For we are all navigating through life. That is one reason why novels have this special quality that other forms of communication do not offer. It's very hard to think of a good protagonist who is not always moving between choices. And you, as the writer, have to monitor these choices. 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 dear but 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 probably have to go over to Israel. Never having been in Israel before, that'll be another book, obviously, 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 a good and restless week before I was ready to tell myself, "I could wreck this book if I send Harry Hubbard to Israel. At best, I'll lose much too much time." Instead, I had him do something less bold. But that is the way we make such decisions. Not only when we write our novels, but in life. (31)

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 elements 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 incredible. Which is why I say it's easier—if you are going to write about someone of the opposite gender—to limn them sexually, to portray them from that point of view, than attempt to get into the intimate nitty-gritty of a woman's daily life. (32)

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 showed the same warlike capacity and determination and excess and inventiveness and hellishness that

men have at war? 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. 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 until a good soldier 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 shitless. If, at this point, he still proceeds to push himself past the point where he was about to break down, then his existential situation underlines the verdict that 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, brave male and brave female 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 tiny bit of experience, write a 600-page novel. I think she's an arch example of someone who does almost all of it through talent. Very often her judgments seem unsound, but she will try, she tries. I'd say she's a brave writer in that sense because she's pushing far

beyond anything that's easily within reach. 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. 33

The narcissist suffers from too much inner dialogue. The eye of one's consciousness is forever looking at one's 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 oneself. 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 bitterly 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 once to Anais Nin, "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 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 a day, she turns him into a detective, and on the next, a thief, that keeps interest in one's own personality alive.

Narcissists, after all, induce emotion in one another 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 which 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 she 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—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. (34)

A corollary of narcissism is, of course, masturbation. An author is forever consulting his mind, even as the hand will query the penis. So follows 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 deal with that as well. It is the unspoken subtext behind the epithet "scribbler."

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

MAILER: I think masturbation is bad.

KRASSNER: In relation to heterosexual fulfillment?

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.

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

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

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

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

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—

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—

KRASSNER: Certain circumstances can change one for the worse.

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 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 dig into what you have perceived of his or her existence, there often (soon!) 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, the unconscious is working most of the time. To use an unhappy analogy, it's as if the unconscious is a powerful computer which doesn't often need new material 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 then dare to surmise that the unconscious is on

very close, even familial, terms with the soul. If that is the case, it can feel exploited by the push of the novelist to extract so much of his product from its separate 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. I think if we use that as a working analogy, we can assume that our unconscious is full of the trickiest kinds of resistance. It can emit a sullenness, a flatness of affect. All the writer receives is a sense of dull, edgy resentment. Perhaps the unconscious is not ready to plumb into the material requested on this occasion. The acute form of this is writer's block. In this sense, however, 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, you're writing as if it's being given to you as a gift. You don't even have to have too much to do with it. You're only there to transcribe what's coming up. Then comes the moment when our ambition orders us to keep going: "You're three pages away from the end of the chapter, so don't stop now, not with this marvelous streak." Then, you can feel the sentences becoming less good and you feel, no, one's got to stop—dammit, dammit—now you'll lose all of tomorrow morning getting to the end of this chapter, but, no, don't try to finish it now, you're going to wreck it. That's what you learn over the years. Because in the early days of writing, you do force it, and what happens, of course, is equal to blowback. The unconscious has done its job as it sees it. 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 of being. It's true, it's there. One of the most painful elements in the act of writing is that you do

live so much of the day with nothingness. It is why so many talented men and women do a good book or two, then stop. Because dealing daily with nothingness vitiates you. Writers who have been working for a long time usually do not have that exciting inner life any longer. They remain professional enough to take what is potentially exciting in their scope and put it on paper. But the inner life has flattened out. That may be because of our violation of the frustrated desire of the unconscious to be left alone on those occasions when we nonetheless insist on working it. Perversely, our ambition ends by contributing to the nothingness that besets us. (36)

Part of the art of being a novelist is to play that very 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 500 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 some extraordinary work will come out of it. Hopefully, not all about 9/11. A few may keep it as a crystal. If you never write about 9/11, but were in the vicinity that day, you could in time come conceivably 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. All kinds of good writing can derive ultimately from 9/11. What won't always work is to write about it directly. That kind of good writing can be exhausted quickly. And the

temptation to go at it head-on, is, of course, immense—the event was traumatic to so many. Unhappily, a large part of writing is this eliminatory process. The worst thing that can be said about literary work is that it can reduce itself—here we go again!—all too easily to therapy. That, as I have indicated before, is opposed to the noblest objective of writing. Ideally, you are there to bring wealth to others. Wealth of experience, wealth of observation, wealth of perception, the riches of a philosophical attitude that's 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 the extraordinary interplay of 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 part 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 writing until such logorrhea exhausts the contradictions to a degree.

37

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 which 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. (38)

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 in that book, you decide that you have an idea who did it, a feeling that you and the author share something. In that happy condition, you are going, right or wrong, to get more out of the book than others. I think something of that sort occurs sometimes 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. (39)

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. (40)

Over the years, I've found one rule. It's the only one I give on those occasions when I talk about writing. I've probably given this piece of advice twenty times-- it's the only rule of thumb that works for nearly everyone who is trying to do a novel. It is a simple rule. If you tell yourself you are going to write tomorrow, you are by that act also telling your unconscious to prepare the material! You are, in effect, contracting to pick such goods tomorrow. Count on me, you are saying to your unconscious, I will be there to write it. 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 from you.

It is likely that one's unconscious is never all that much in love with one. The battle between the ego and the unconscious is, I think, a real war. 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, I repeat: You have to establish decent relations with your unconscious, and you might as well see this procedure to be possibly as complicated as any far-reaching reality 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 may be worth thinking of it as a separate creature. If you are ready to look upon it as this curious and semi-alienated presence in yourself with whom you have to

maintain decent relations—if you can see yourself as some sort of scruffy general (of the old, aristocratic and careless 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, therefore: The rule is that if you say to yourself you are going to write tomorrow, then it doesn't matter how badly you're hung over 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 diktat 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 decent 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 lively thoughts about a

work-in-progress when there is no piece of paper under your hand and no pen or pencil in your fingers, then you've arrived at one of the disciplines of a real writer. 41

The rule in capsule: If you fail to show up in the morning after your promised yourself you would just before you went to sleep last night, then you will walk around with ants in your brain. 42

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 got 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 developed. 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. (43)

4. PHILOSOPHY

PRIMITIVE MAN, ART AND SCIENCE, EVIL AND JUDGMENT

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 lifespan 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 Finnegan's Wake? ①

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 technologized 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 work of 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. ②

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. (3)

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. (4)

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 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 he 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.

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J. 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 exciting 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, show itself as intensely dramatic.

September 11th does come to mind. (6)

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 have enough centrality, that is, possess 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. ⑦

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 get together like hot dogs and mustard. They 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. (8)

Anyone who worries about whether they are going to hurt somebody's feelings by their 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 says, "Scalpel, nurse," and 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 must walk a tightrope. (9)

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 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. Take any soul alive, including that simple servant girl Flaubert wrote about, and they will prove exceptional provided you get to know them well enough. It is certainly the yeast in any good marriage. (10)

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. I can't conceive of a history that is not finally a creative and not wholly factual narrative. Let's say for the purpose of argument there are 1000 large and small details necessary for a particular historian to capture a given moment in time—Napoleon's return from Elba, the death of Robespierre, or John F. Kennedy on the night before he was assassinated—whatever is chosen, the historian has to decide which of a large number of facts are most relevant. He can't use them all. More important, he can't obtain them all. Let's say he chooses a thousand pieces of information which adhere in varying degree to various bodies of assumption on what actually happened. These pieces of detail are usually called facts.

Should the novelist come in, also ready to write about Kennedy's last night, he or she is not nearly as good, doubtless, at research and comes up with only 40 or 50 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 style that's more pedestrian. But, there they are, both doing fiction. One is sometimes sprightly, the other, often dull. The real point is that each, the novelist

and the historian, are making an attack on the possible nature of reality. Such attacks are the fundamental element in good fiction whether the form chosen is history or the novel. (11)

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 500. 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 an hypothesis which 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 the hypothesis inside-out. Borges is always teaching us that it is not enough to live with Aquinas' 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. (12)

Superstition? It's either the center of one's sanity or the edge of one's psychosis.

Paranoia is the most useful or the most destructive faculty of the human spirit. One never knows when it's devoted to your safety or to your ultimate breakdown. (13)

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 it is the most concentrated form of fantasy. (11)

(MAILER): 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 the education you begin to receive when young obfuscates the instinctive knowledge 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 age of 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. (15)

The 20th century artist who conceivably had the most influence on my work was not a writer but an artist—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 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, so forth. (16)

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 herbicides. 17

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, is 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. 18

SOCIAL VISION

The greatest writer I ever read was Karl Marx. He taught me to begin to think about social matters. He was analogous to a great football coach who would know how to get you to get the most out of your body before you even tried to learn the moves. 19

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. 20

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 underside 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 engaged in lives 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 and but work to find reassuring explanations of their conduct. Marx, for vastly more complex reasons, is also not adequate any longer. Corporate capitalism made their end run around him. So, I don't try to create a bridge in my mind from Marx to Freud, not any more. 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 that 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 awfuls--plastic, high-rise, mall architecture, static, interruptions for commercials, making money out of money. It's all there if one can find the grid on which to locate them. A devil's grid. (21)

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 in 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 which 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 on your side who will take your opponent's improvement of your idea and lift it higher on your side. Democracy is the living throbbing social embodiment of the dialectic—thesis, antithesis, synthesis and new thesis. (22)

You cannot have a great democracy without great writers. I believe that if great novels disappear, as they are in danger of doing, and our story-telling culture becomes television, then I think we will be that much nearer to fascism, benign, of course, at the outset if television is the prime mover. One of the remaining correctives in a democracy is novels, not just great novels but novels that at least reinvigorate our view of the subtlety of moral judgments. (23)

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 propaganda. Rather than move all my readers ten degrees to the left; I would be happier if I nudged some to the left, 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. (24)

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. (25)

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 you can do better, or, if not, know you've 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. (26)

Speaking at the MacDowell Colony a while ago, 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 than may become the necessity of us all. It is not to deal with life 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. (27)

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. (28)

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. [79.26] 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. 29

I go back again and again to Dostoyevsky dying in despair because 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 gods, 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. (30)

Writers aren't taken seriously any more, 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. (31)

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. (32)

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 which shows on our psychic maps as intimations of eternity is still to be discovered. (33)

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 End Game, and I've always been fascinated with him—as if he were a Martian. He has done something, after all, that no writer ever did before. (Here I must give a passing comment on the concept of L'etre et Le Neant—Being and Nothingness. The trouble, however, is that we have to live with the words in English where the reverberation on the ear is not agreeable as it is in French.) When it comes to 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."

Nothingness is, after all, anathema to most writers. We take it for granted we have to spend a good part of our lives accepting nothing as a price to pay in order to feel the vital opposite—being. On days when one's mind is not working, one goes through dull slogs—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. There is an uneasy sense that you will sink more into nothingness.

Yet here we have Beckett, lively and witty as he goes 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 it. When, for instance, I see a college play (and, given the number of my children, I've seen my share), invariably the college's dramatic department has opted for an absurd play. The reason is clear. You cannot judge the merit of the production too closely. Professors of drama at these schools do not wish to be so 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. Can't lose because they are going to get laughs. Whenever an audience is not able to follow a non sequitur, an automatic laugh comes up. Especially from parents, roommates, relatives and friends. If you have an actor say, "The situation is getting downright boborigynmous," the audience will roar at the cacophony of the sounds and also to cover over their near-to-complete ignorance of the meaning of boborigynmous. A horde of such fail-safes are 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 didn't like it. I was all too familiar with those states of existence. Marriage, after all, is filled with such situations. The rigamarole of marriage, the routine, the dreadful repetitions—the husband and wife can have the skill to press each other's buttons. Nothingness pitted against nothingness.

Put a husband and wife on opposite sides of the stage. Hardly a word need be said but occasionally one of them can flick a switch and a light will go on. The other person will rise up in a rage. Title the skit "Marriage." Except that Beckett added to all that an acute sense of despair. Godot had dimension, resonance, vibrancy. Beckett's despair was sinister and joyful at once, as if he was 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 much opposed—because 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 mis-use 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 the 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, then back again, Beckett chooses to stay in nothingness. He's Mozartian, however, in the variations he can play on the theme. So I have to admire what I am bound to call the genius of his art. He is one of the very few writers of the second half of the twentieth century you can speak of as a 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. Hemingway was ready to write a novel of affirmation about just such a man. He had him row out to sea in his dinghy on a given day after many days of poor fishing. On this occasion, however, the old man hooks into the biggest fish he's ever had. He hangs on. The contest goes for hour after hour after hour after hour—the fish tows him for miles—but the old man wears the beast out and gaffs him. Since the catch is much 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 catch. He's left with nothing. The critics all agreed this was Hemingway's view of the literary world—sharks out to destroy his beautiful catch.

Hemingway called it a novel of affirmation because the man never gave up. My critique is that there never came a moment in the telling when the man said to himself, "It isn't worth it. I'm suffering too much. I'm going to cut the rope." Because if the old fisherman had weakened for one moment, then Hemingway would have had to have a real affirmation. Which is why doesn't his fisherman cut the rope? What is there in him that fights the temptation? The critics also rushed for the most part to call The Old Man and the Sea Hemingway's great work of affirmation and they were wrong. It was not affirmative. The old Cuban was never tempted. So Hemingway never had to find a

reason for the fisherman to say, "I won't cut it. 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 argues that Beckett dared 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 have to dwell with the ongoing possibilities of more and more nothingness. He won't let go of that, and so the final impact of his plays is obsessive rather than haunting. (34)

It could be argued that the essence of the corporate mentality is that it will not tolerate nothingness. It is always pouring its choice of form into our minds. There is, after all, no silence on television. To which I would reply that filling essentially empty forms like 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 of not most television commercials, no matter how filled with clash and color, pay, nonetheless, almost no 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 you need. Far better than to have someone speak directly of the sterling virtues of the brand. Who would believe them? No, avoid all of that. Work to overcome the onus of nothingness that the commercial inserts into our nervous system. (75)