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

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

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

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

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

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

~~now lost~~
with us.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The problem of going out and searching for experience, I think, ¹⁵²⁾ is true for very young writers who just don't have enough to write about. There comes a point where you say, "I want to be a writer. I feel all the equipment of a writer, I feel the vivid intelli-

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

JOURNALISTIC RESEARCH

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

EPISTEMOLOGICAL MODEL I:

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

EPISTEMOLOGICAL MODEL II

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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TELEVISION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

through

strange

in the middle of the night

constricted

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

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

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

office

set

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

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

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

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

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

she ~~she~~ has been ready to accept ~~she~~ ₂

she just wouldn't take hold of the mike

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

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

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

"Help yourself," says Steve.

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



FILM

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

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

~~accounts of~~
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many
months
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delves

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

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

meaningless

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

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

pieces of filmed theatre.

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

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

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

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

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

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

the actor

theatre goes

(because each audience is different)

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

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

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

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

the grips

*other
than
the
director,
the script
girls, the
producers*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

So, the categories remained apart, and

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were as the difference between crud and sustenance for that needly if
ghostly part of the psyche the film was supposed to enrich.

Very well. There was film and filmed theatre, there were relatively pure movies, and there were money-making motion pictures, which had almost nothing to do with movies or memory or dream but were filmed circus for the suckers who proceeded to enjoy them enormously, suckers who loved them for their binding glue, and the status of seeing them, and the easy massage such pictures gave to emotions real theatre might have satisfied more. These motion pictures, made for no motive more in focus than the desire for money, were derived from plays, or were written and directed as filmed plays, they composed three-quarters to nine-tenths of the motion pictures which were made, and they might yet be the terminal death of Hollywood, for they were color television on enormous screens and so failed more often than they succeeded ~~to the media were mixed so the messages were mixed~~ audiences tended to regard them with apathy.

Of course the best films were just as often watched in empty theatres. Such films provided experiences which were later as pure in recollection as splendid or tragic days in one's life, they were not unlike the memory of some modest love which did not survive but was tender in retrospect for now it lived with the dignity of old love. Such films also changed as one remembered them, since they had become part of one's psychological life. Like love, they partook a little of some miracle, they had emerged from the abominable limitations of the script, yes, they had emerged out of some mysterious but wholly agreeable lack of focus toward that script in the intent of the director and/or the actor, they were subtly attached to a creative mist, they had the ambiguity of film. For if filmed theatre could sometimes be effective, sometimes be even as perfect and deserving of admiration as *Midnight Cowboy* or *On the Waterfront*, such pictures still had their aesthetic fired by the simpler communication of the theatre where relations between actors usually produced a dramatic outcome as capable of definition as the last line of a family fight. "Go to an analyst" turned out to be the message, or "Lover, we'll get along," or "God bless us, we're unhappy, but we'll stick for the kids." If it is theatre so rich as *The Little Foxes*, it will say, "I am prepared to kill you, and I will." Since the need of a stage actor is to

draw an audience together, his instinct is to simplify the play and concentrate it, give it a single crisp flavor. So theatre speaks. Powerfully or with banality, comically, or in the botch of hysteria, it speaks, secretly it almost always speaks vulgarly, for almost always it says, "We're here to tell you something about life. We've got a piece of the meat for you." Of course if it is bad theatre, conceived in advance as a television series or any other form of Cafeteria, then it is only there to tell you something about public opinion and how that works at the lowest common denominator. But good or bad, theatre functions at its simple best when every resonance of the evening can collect about a single point—that place where the actors seduced the audience to meet the play.

Film, however, is shown to audiences who do not often react together. Some laugh, while others are silent, some are bored. Few share the same time. They have come in on the movie at different places. For film always speaks of death. Theatre rouses desires between the living audience and the living actors; film stirs suicide pacts where each individual in the audience goes over the horizon alone with the star; film speaks of the ambiguity of death—is it nothingness we go to, or eternal life? Is it to peace we travel or the perilous migrations of the soul? So the ambiguity of the movie star is essential, and it helps to understand that subtle emptiness which is usually present in the colors of their acting, that pause in the certainty of what they would say, that note of distraction and sorrows on the other side of the hill, that hint they are thinking of a late date they will meet after this guy is gone. Movie stars are caught in the complexity of the plot but they do not belong to it altogether, as stage actors do. It does not matter of whom we speak: whether it is Garbo or Harlow or Marilyn Monroe, Carole Lombard or Myrna Loy, even Dottie Lamour or Grable, the star is still one misty wink of the eye away from ~~total absorption~~. Even Cagney, phallic as a column of rock, had the hint of bells ringing in his head from blows some big brother gave him in years gone by, and Gable's growling voice always seemed to hint at one big hunk of *other* business he would have to take care of in a little while. The charisma of the movie star spoke of associations with tangential thoughts, with dissipations of the storypoint into ripples which went out wider and wider, out to the shores of some land only the waves

clear presentation.

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of the movies could wash.

The first time one has a profound sexual act, there is, when it's all over, this shocked, stunned, incredible recognition: "Why, God; God exists." That usually happens in sex rather than in love because it's got to happen quickly, a sudden revelation. So there are certain advantages to one-night stands. One brings none of one's baggage to a one-night stand and that makes it possible to have, once in a while, extraordinary emotions. The average one-night stand is, after all, not necessarily a small disaster, but unless it's very good indeed, it can leave very little. All the same, one-night stands can be exceptional; and when that happens, one often has a sense of wonder that is not unlike religious sentiment. For the experience is separate from the person—you don't know the person—it comes from something in sex itself. Sex may be something that's outside of people, something out there.

Last Tango in Paris is, of course, built on this premise.

TANGO, LAST TANGO

To pay one's \$5 and join the full house at the Trans-Lux for the evening show of *Last Tango in Paris* is to be reminded once again that the planet is in a state of pullulation. The seasons accelerate. The snow, which was falling in November, had left by the first of March. Would our summer arrive at Easter and end with July? It is all that nuclear radiation, says every aficionado of the occult. And we pullulate. Like an ant-hive beginning to feel the heat.

We know that the century required for a minor art to move from commencement to decadence is off the board. Whole fashions in film are born, thrive, and die in twenty-four months. Still! It is only a half-year since Pauline Kael declared to the readers of *The New Yorker* that the presentation of *Last Tango in Paris* at the New York Film Festival on October 14, 1972, was a date that "should become a landmark in movie history—comparable to May 29, 1913—the night *Le Sacre du Printemps* was first

performed—in music history,” and then went on to explain that the newer work had “the same kind of hypnotic excitement as the *Sacre*, the same primitive force, and the same jabbing, thrusting eroticism. . . . Bertolucci and Brando have altered the face of an art form.” Whatever could have been shown on screen to make Kael pop open for a film? “This must be the most powerfully erotic movie ever made, and it could turn out to be the most liberating movie ever made . . .” Could this be our own Lady Vinegar, our quintessential cruet? The first frigid of the film critics was treating us to her first public reception. Prophets of Baal, praise Kael! We had obviously no ordinary hour of cinema to contemplate.

Frission!

Now, a half year later, the movie is history, has all the palpability of the historic. Something just discernible has already happened to humankind as a result of it, or at least to that audience who are coming in to the Trans-Lux to see it. They are a crew. They have unexpected homogeneity for a movie audience, compose, indeed, so thin a sociological slice of the New York and suburban sausage that you cannot be sure your own ticket isn't what was left for the toothpick, while the rest of the house has been bought at a bite. At the least, there is the same sense of aesthetic oppression one feels at a play when the house is filled with a theater party. So, too, is the audience at *Tango* an infarct of middle-class anal majesties—if Freud hadn't given us the clue, a reader of faces could decide all on his own that there had to be some social connection between sex, shit, power, violence, and money. But these middle-class faces have advanced their historical inch from the last time one has seen them. They are this much closer now to late Romans.

Whether matrons or young matrons, men or boys, they are *swingers*. The males have wife-swapper mustaches, the women are department-store boutique. It is as if everything recently and incongruously idealistic in the middle class has been used up in the years of resistance to the Vietnamese War—now, bring on the Caribbean. Amazing! In America, even the Jews have come to look like the French middle class, which is to say that the egocentricity of the Fascist mouth is on the national face. Perhaps it is the five-dollar admission, but this audience has an obvious obsession with sex as the confirmed core of a wealthy life. It is enough to make one ashamed of one's own obsession (al-

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though where would one delineate the difference?). Maybe it is that this audience, still in March, is suntanned, or at the least made up to look suntanned. The red and orange of their skins will match the famous "all uterine" colors—so termed by the set designer—of the interiors in *Last Tango*.

In the minute before the theater lights are down, what a tension is in the house. One might as well be in the crowd just before an important fight commences. It is years since one has watched a movie begin with such anticipation. And the tension holds as the projection starts. We see Brando and Schneider pass each other in the street. Since we have all been informed—by *Time* no less—we know they are going to take carnal occupation of each other, and very soon. The audience watches with anxiety as if it is also going to be in the act with someone new, and the heart (and for some, the bowels) shows a tremor between earthquake and expectation. Maria Schneider is so sexual a presence. None of the photographs has prepared anybody for this. Rare actresses, just a few, have flesh appeal. You feel as if you can touch them on the screen. Schneider has nose appeal—you can smell her. She is every eighteen-year-old in a mini-skirt and a maxi-coat who ever promenaded down Fifth Avenue in the inner arrogance that proclaims "My cunt is my chariot."

We have no more than a few minutes to wait. She goes to look at an apartment for rent, Brando is already there. They have passed in the street, and by a telephone booth; now they are in an empty room. Abruptly Brando cashes the check Stanley Kowalski wrote for us twenty-five years ago—he fucks the heroine standing up. It solves the old snicker of how do you do it in a telephone booth?—he rips her panties open. In our new line of *New Yorker*-approved superlatives, it can be said that the cry of the fabric is the most thrilling sound to be heard in World Culture since the four opening notes of Beethoven's Fifth.* It is, in fact, a hell of a sound, small, but as precise as the flash of a match above a pile of combustibles, a way for the director to say, "As you may already have guessed from the way I established my opening, I am very good at movie making, and I have a superb pair, Brando and Schneider—they are sexual heavyweights. Now I place my director's promise upon the material: You are going to be in for a grave and wondrous experience. We are going to get to the bottom of a man and a woman."

NOTE
 Resonance
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*John Simon, as predictable in his critical reactions as a headwaiter, naturally thought *Last Tango* was part of the riff-raff. Since it is Simon's temper to ignore details, he not only does not hear the panties tearing (some ears reside in the music of the spheres) but announces that Schneider, beastly abomination, is wearing none.

So intimates Bertolucci across the silence of that ~~room~~ empty room Brando and Schneider, fully dressed, lurch, grab, connect, hump, scream, and are done in less than a minute, their orgasms coming on top of one another like ~~trash~~ empty cans tumbling down a hill. They fall to the floor, and fall apart. It is as if a hand grenade has gone off in their entrails. A marvelous scene, good as a passionate kiss in real life, then not so good, because there has been no shot of Brando going up Schneider, and since the audience has been watching in all the somber awe one would bring to the first row of a medical theater, it is like seeing an operation without the entrance of the surgeon's knife.

One can go to any hard-core film and see fifty phalluses going in and out of as many vaginas in four hours (if anyone can be found who stayed four hours). There is a monumental abstractedness about hard core. It is as if the more a player can function sexually before a camera, the less he is capable of offering any other expression. Finally, the sexual organs show more character than the actors' faces. One can read something of the working conditions of a life in some young girl's old and irritated cunt, one can even see triumphs of the human spirit—old and badly burned labia which still come to glisten with new life, capital! There are phalluses in porno whose distended veins speak of the integrity of the hardworking heart, but there is so little specific content in the faces! Hard core lulls after it excites, and finally it puts the brain to sleep.

But Brando's real cock up Schneider's real vagina would have brought the history of film one huge march closer to the ultimate experience it has promised since its inception (which is to re-embody life). One can even see how on opening night at the Film Festival, it did not matter so much. Not fully prepared for what was to come, the simulated sex must have quivered like real sex the first time out. Since then we have been told the movie is great, so we are prepared to resist greatness, and have read in *Time* that Schneider said, "We were never screwing on stage. I never felt any sexual attraction for him . . . he's almost fifty you know, and"—she runs her hand from her torso to her midriff—"he's only beautiful to here!"

NOTE

This footnote must be placed at the foot of page 228

room empty of furniture

refuge

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So one watches differently. Yes, they *are* simulating. Yes, there is something slightly unnatural in the way they come and fall apart. It is too stylized, as if paying a few subtle respects to Kabuki. The real need for the real cock of Brando into the depths of the real actress might have been for those less exceptional times which would follow the film long after it opened and the reaction had set in.

Since *Tango* is, however, the first major film with a respectable budget, a superbly skilled young director, an altogether accomplished cameraman, and a great actor who is ready to do more than dabble in improvisation, indeed will enter heavily into such a near to untried ~~movie science~~, so the laws of improvisation are before us, and the first law to recognize is that it is next to impossible to build on too false a base. The real problem in movie improvisation is to find some ending that is true to what has gone before and yet is sufficiently untrue to enable the actors to get out alive.

We will come back to that. It is, however, hardly time to let go of our synopsis. Real or simulated, opening night or months later, we know after five minutes that, at the least, we are in for a thoroughgoing study of a man and a woman, and the examination will be close. Brando rents the empty apartment; they will visit each other there every day. His name is Paul, hers is Jeanne, but they are not to learn each other's names yet. They are not to tell one another such things, he informs her. "We don't need names here . . . we're going to forget everything we knew. . . . Everything outside this place is bullshit."

They are going to search for pleasure. We are back in the existential confrontation of the century. Two people are going to fuck in a room until they arrive at a transcendent recognition or some death of themselves. We are dealing not with a plot but with a theme that is open range for a hundred films. Indeed we are face to face with the fundamental structure of porno—the difference is that we have a director who by the measure of porno is Eisenstein, and actors who are as gods. So the film takes up the simplest and richest of structures. To make love in an empty apartment, then return to a separate life. It is like every clandestine affair the audience has ever had, only more so—no names! Every personal demon will be scourged in the sex—one will obliterate the past! That is the huge sanction of anonymity.

Real Filmic
Procedure

It is equal to a new life.

What powerful biographical details we learn, however, on the instant they part. Paul's wife is a suicide. Just the night before, she has killed herself with a razor in a bathtub; the bathroom is before us, red as an abattoir. A sobbing chambermaid cleans it while she speaks in fear to Paul. It is not even certain whether the wife is a suicide or he has killed her—that is almost not the point. It is the bloody death suspended above his life like a bleeding ~~amputated~~ existence—it is with that crimson ~~rose~~ before his eyes that he will make love on the following days.

Jeanne, in her turn, is about to be married to a young TV director. She is the star in a videofilm he is making about French youth. She pouts, torments her fiancé, delights in herself, delights in the special idiocy of men. She can cuckold her young director to the roots of his eyes. She also delights in the violation she will make of her own bourgeois roots. In this TV film she makes within the movie she presents her biography to her fiancé's camera: she is the daughter of a dead Army officer who was sufficiently racist to teach his dog to detect Arabs by smell. So she is well brought up—there are glimpses of a suburban villa on a small walled estate; it is nothing less than the concentrated family honor of the French Army she will surrender when Brando proceeds a little later to bugger her.

These separate backgrounds divide the film as neatly between biography and fornication as those trick highball glasses which present a drawing of a man or a woman wearing clothes on the outside of the tumbler and nude on the inside. Each time Brando and Schneider leave the room, we learn more of their lives beyond the room; each time they come together, we are ready to go further. In addition, as if to enrich his theme for students of film, Bertolucci offers touches from the history of French cinema. The life preserver in *Atalante* appears by way of homage to Vigo, and Jean-Pierre Léaud of *The 400 Blows* is the TV director, the boy now fully grown. Something of the brooding echo of *Le Jour Se Lève* and Arletty is also with us, that somber memory of Jean Gabin wandering along the wet docks in the dawn, waiting for the police to pick him up after he has murdered his beloved. It is as if we are to think not only of this film but of other sexual tragedies French cinema has brought us, until the sight of each gray and silent Paris street is ready to evoke the lost sound of the *Bal musette* and the sad near-silent

torgo

existence

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wash of the Seine. Nowhere as in Paris can doomed lovers succeed in passing sorrow, drop by drop, through the blood of the audience's heart.

Yet as the film progresses with every skill in evidence, while Brando gives a performance that is unforgettable (and Schneider shows every promise of becoming a major star), as the historic buggeries and reamings are delivered, and the language breaks through barriers not even yet erected—no general of censorship could know the armies of obscenity were so near!—as these shocks multiply, and lust goes up the steps to love, something bizarre happens to the film. It fails to explode. It is a warehouse of dynamite and yet something goes wrong with the blow-up.

One leaves the theater bewildered. A fuse was never ignited. But where was it set? One looks to retrace the line of the story.

So we return to Paul trying to rise out of the bloody horizon of his wife's death. We even have some instinctive comprehension of how he must degrade his beautiful closet-fuck; indeed we are even given the precise detail that he will grease her ass with butter before he buggers her family pride. A scene or two later, he tricks forth her fear of him by dangling a dead rat, which he offers to eat. "I'll save the asshole for you," he tells her. "Rat's asshole with mayonnaise."* (The audience roars—Brando knows audiences.) She is standing before him in a white wedding gown—she has run away from a TV camera crew that was getting ready to film her pop wedding. She has rushed to the apartment in the rain. Now shivering, but recovered from her fear, she tells him she has fallen in love with somebody. He tells her to take a hot bath or she'll catch pneumonia, die, and all he'll get is "to fuck the dead rat."

*Dialogue from *Last Tango in Paris* was not entirely written in advance but was in part an improvisation. In other words, a small but important part of the screenplay has in effect been written by Brando.

No, she protests, she's in love.

"In ten years," says Brando looking at her big breasts, "you're going to be playing soccer with your tits." But the thought of the other lover is grinding away at him. "Is he a good fucker?"

"Magnificent."

"You know, you're a jerk. 'Cause the best fucking you're going

→ RESET to bottom of this page

to get is right here in this apartment."

No, no, she tells him, the lover is wonderful, a mystery . . . different.

"A local pimp?"

"He could be. He looks it."

She will never, he tells her, be able to find love until she goes "right up into the ass of death." He is one lover who is not afraid of metaphor. "Right up his ass—till you find a womb of fear. And then maybe you'll be able to find him."

"But I've found this man," says Jeanne. Metaphor has continued long enough for her. "He's you. You're that man."

In the old scripted films, such a phrase was plucked with a movie composer's chord. But this is improvisation. Brando's instant response is to tell her to get a scissors and cut the fingernails on her right hand. Two fingers will do. Put those fingers up his ass.

"*Quoi?*"

"Put your fingers up my ass, are you deaf? Go on."

No, he is not too sentimental. Love is never flowers, but farts and flowers. Plus every superlative test. So we see Brando's face before us—it is that tragic angelic mask of incommunicable anguish which has spoken to us across the years of his uncharted heroic depths. Now he is entering that gladiator's fundament again, and before us and before millions of faces yet to come she will be his surrogate bugger, real or simulated. What an entrance into the final images of history! He speaks to us with her body behind him and her fingers just conceivably up him. "I'm going to get a pig," are the words which come out of his tragic face, "and I'm going to have a pig fuck you,"—yes, the touch on his hole has broken open one gorgon of a fantasy—"and I want the pig to vomit in your face. And I want you to swallow the vomit. You going to do that for me?"

"Yeah."

"Huh?"

"Yeah!"

"And I want the pig to die while"—a profound pause—"while you're fucking him. And then you have to go behind, and I want you to smell the dying farts of the pig. Are you going to do that for me?"

"Yes, and more than that. And worse than before."

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He has plighted a troth. In our year of the twentieth century, how could we ever contract for love with less than five hundred pounds of pig shit? With his courage to give himself away, we finally can recognize the tragedy of his expression across these twenty-five years. That expression has been locked into the impossibility of ever communicating such a set of private thoughts, ~~through his beggar's art as an actor~~. Yet he has just done it. He is probably the only actor in the world who could have done it. He is taking the shit that is in him and leaving it on us. How the audience loves it. They have come to be covered. The world is not polluted for nothing. There is some profound twentieth-century malfunction in the elimination of waste. And Brando is on to it. A stroke of genius to have made a speech like that. Over and over, he is saying in this film that one only arrives at love by springing out of the shit in oneself.

So he seeks to void his eternal waste over the wife's suicide. He sits by her laid-out corpse in a grim hotel room, curses her, weeps, proceeds to wipe off the undertaker's lipstick, broods on her lover (who lives upstairs in the hotel), and goes through some bend of the obscure, for now, off-stage, he proceeds to ~~move his furniture from the new apartment~~ *disappear*. We realize this as we see Jeanne in the empty rooms. Paul has disappeared. He has ordered her to march into the farts of the pig for nothing. So she calls her TV director to look at the empty apartment—should they rent it? The profound practicality of the French bourgeoisie is squatting upon us. She appreciates the value of a few memories to offer sauce for her lean marriage. But the TV director must smell this old cooking, for he takes off abruptly after telling her he will look for a better apartment.

Suddenly Brando is before her again on the street. Has he been waiting for her to appear? He looks rejuvenated. "It's over," she tells him. "It's over," he replies. "Then it begins again." He is in love with her. He reveals his biography, his dead wife, his unromantic details. "I've got a prostate like an Idaho potato but I'm still a good stick man. . . . I suppose if I hadn't met you I'd probably settle for a hard chair and a hemorrhoid." They move on to a hall, some near mythical species of tango palace where a dance contest is taking place. They get drunk and go on the floor. Brando goes in for a squalid parody of the tango. When they're removed by the judges, he flashes his bare ass.

Now they sit down again and abruptly the love affair is terminated. Like that! She is bored with him. Something has happened. We do not know what. Is she a bourgeoisie repelled by his flophouse? Or did his defacement of the tango injure some final nerve of upper-French deportment? Too small a motive. Must we decide that sex without a mask is no longer love, or conclude upon reflection that no mask is more congenial to passion than to be without a name in the bed of a strange lover?

There are ten reasons why her love could end, but we know none of them. She merely wants to be rid of him. Deliver me from a fifty-year-old may even be her only cry.

She tries to flee. He follows. He follows her on the Métro and all the way to her home. He climbs the spiraling stairs as she mounts in the slow elevator; he rams into her mother's apartment with her, breathless, chewing gum, leering. Now he is all cock. He is the memory of every good fuck he has given her. "This is the title shot, baby. We're going all the way."

She takes out her father's army pistol and shoots him. He murmurs, "Our children, our children, our children will remember . . ." and staggers out to the balcony, looks at the Paris morning, takes out his chewing gum, fixes it carefully to the underside of the iron railing in a move that is pure broth of Brando—culture is a goat turd on the bust of Goethe—and dies. The angel with the tragic face slips off the screen. And proud Maria Schneider is suddenly and most unbelievably reduced to a twat copping a plea. "I don't know who he is," she mutters in her mind to the oncoming *flics*. "He followed me in the street, he tried to rape me, he is insane. I do not know his name. I do not know who he is. He wanted to rape me."

The film ends. The questions begin. We have been treated to more cinematic breakthrough than any film—at the least—since *I Am Curious, Yellow*. In fact we have gone much further. It is hard to think of any film that has taken a larger step. Yet if this is "the most powerful erotic film ever made," then sex is as Ex-Lax to the lady. For we have been given a bath in shit with no reward. The film, for all its power, has turned inside out by the end. We have been asked to follow two serious and more or less desperate lovers as they go through the locks of lust and defecation, through some modern species of homegrown cancer cure, if you will, and have put up with their modern depths—shit on the

flics

(French
slang
for
cops)

face of the beloved and find love!—only to discover a peculiar extortion in the aesthetic. We have been taken on this tour down to the prostate big as an Idaho potato only to recognize that we never did get into an exploration of the catacombs of love, passion, infancy, sodomy, tenderness, and the breaking of emotional ice, instead only wandered from one onanist's oasis to another.

5 tet

It is, however, a movie that has declared itself, by the power of its opening, ~~as equal in experience to a great fuck~~, and so the measure of its success or failure is by the same sexual aesthetic. Rarely has a film's value depended so much on the power or lack of power of its ending, even as a fuck that is full of promise is ready to be pinched by a poor end. So, in *Tango*, there is no gathering of forces for the conclusion, no whirling of sexual destinies (in this case, the audience and the actors) into the same funnel of becoming, no flying out of the senses in pursuit of a new vision, no, just the full charge into a blank wall, a masturbator's spasm—came for the wrong reason and on the wrong thought—and one is thrown back, shattered, too ubiquitously electrified, and full of criticism ~~for the immediate past~~. Now the recollected flaws of the film eat at the pleasure, even as the failed orgasm of a passionate act will call the character of the passion into question.

So the walk out of the theater is with anger. The film has been in reach of the greatness Kael has been talking about, but the achievement has only been partial. ~~Like all executions less divine than their conception, *Tango* will give rise to mutations that are obliged to explore into dead ends. More aesthetic pollution to come!~~ The performance by Brando has been unique, historic, without compare—it is just possible, however, that it has gone entirely in the wrong direction. He has been like a lover who keeps telling consummate dirty jokes until the ravaged dawn, when the girl will say, "Did you come to ~~sing or to screw?~~" He has come with great honor and dignity and exceptional courage to bare his soul. But in a solo. We are being given a fuck film without the fuck. It is like a Western without the horses.

fuck?

knit

Now the subtle sense of displacement that has hung over the movie is clear. There has been no particular high passion loose. Brando is so magnetic an actor, Schneider is so attractive, and the scenes are so intimate that we assume there is sexual glue be-

tween their parts, but it is our libido which has been boiling that glue and not the ~~holy vibration of the~~ actors on the screen. If Kael has had a sexual liberation with *Tango*, her libido is not alone—the audience is also getting their kicks—by digging the snots of the celebrated. (Liberation for the Silent Majority may be not to attend a fuck but hear dirty jokes.) So the real thrill of *Tango* for \$5 audiences becomes the peephole Brando offers us on Brando. They are there to hear a world-famous actor say in reply to “What strong arms you have.”

“The better to squeeze a fart out of you.”

“What long nails you have.”

“The better to scratch your ass with.”

“Oh, what a lot of fur you have.”

“The better to let your crabs hide in.”

“Oh, what a long tongue you have.”

“The better to stick in your rear, my dear.”

“What’s this for?”

“That’s your happiness and my ha-penis.”

Pandemonium of pleasure in the house. Who wants to watch an act of love when the ghost of Lenny Bruce is back? The crowd’s joy is that a national celebrity is being obscene on screen. To measure the media magnetism of such an act, ask yourself how many hundreds of miles you might drive to hear Richard Nixon speak a line like “We’re just taking a flying fuck at a rolling doughnut,” or, “I went to the University of the Congo; studied whale fucking.” Only liberal unregenerates would be so progressive as to say they would not drive a mile. No, one could start mass migrations if Nixon were to give Brando’s pig-and-vomit address to the test of love.

Let us recognize the phenomenon. It would be so surrealistic an act, we could not pass Nixon by. Surrealism has become our objective correlative. A private glimpse of the great becomes the alchemy of the media, the fool’s gold of the century of communication. In the age of television we know everything about the great but how they fart—the ass wind is, ergo, our trade wind. It is part of Brando’s genius to recognize that the real interest of audiences is not in having him portray the tender passages and murderous storms of an unruly passion between a man and a woman, it is rather to be given a glimpse of his kinks. His kinks offer sympathetic vibration to their kinks. The affirmation of passion is that we rise from the swamps of our diapers—by what-

ever torturous route—to the cock and the cunt; it is the acme of the decadent to go from the first explosive bout of love in *Tango* down to the trimmed fingernails up his rectum.

Then follows the murder. Except it does not follow. It has been placed there from the beginning as the required ending in Bertolucci's mind; it has already been written into the screenplay first prepared with Trintignant and Dominique Sanda in mind. But complications and cast changes occurred. Sanda was pregnant, et cetera. Brando appeared, and Schneider was found. Yet the old ending is still there. Since it did not grow convincingly out of the material in the original script, it appears, after Brando's improvisation, to be fortuitous altogether.

In the original screenplay, the dialogue is so general and the characters so vague that one has to assume Trintignant, Sanda, and Bertolucci planned to give us something extraordinary precisely by overcoming their pedestrian script. It is as if Bertolucci purposely left out whole trunklines of plot in order to discover them in the film. Only it was Brando who came along rather than Trintignant to make a particular character out of a general role, to "superimpose"—in accordance with Bertolucci's desire—his own character as Marlon Brando, as well as something of his life, and a good bit of his private obsessions. As he did that, however, the film moved away from whatever logic the script had originally possessed. For example, in the pre-Brando treatment, we would have been obliged to listen to the following:

LEON (alias Paul): I make you die, you make me die, we're two murderers, each other's. But who succeeds in realizing this is twice the murderer. And that's the biggest pleasure: watching you die, watching you come out of yourself, white-eyed, writhing, gasping, screaming so loud that it seems like the last time.

Oo la la! We are listening to a French intellectual. It is for good cause that Bertolucci wants to superimpose Brando's personality. Anything is preferable to Leon. And Brando most certainly obliterates this mouthy analysis, creates instead a character who is half noble and half a lout, an overlay drawn on transparent paper over his own image. Paul is an American, ex-boxer, ex-actor, ex-foreign correspondent, ex-adventurer, and

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now, with the death of his wife, ex-gigolo. He is that character and yet he is Brando even more. He is indeed so much like Brando that he does not quite fit the part of Paul—he talks just a little too much, and is a hint too distinguished to be the proprietor of a cheap flophouse at the age of fifty—let us say that at the least Paul is close enough to the magnetic field of Marlon for an audience to be unable to comprehend why Jeanne would be repelled if he has a flophouse. Who cares, if it is Marlon? ~~who invites you to live in a flophouse?~~ On the other hand, he is also being Marlon the Difficult, Marlon the Indian from the Underworld, Marlon the shade of the alienated, Marlon the young star who when asked on his first trip to Hollywood what he would like in the way of personal attention and private creature comfort points to the nerve-jangled pet he has brought with him and says, "Get my monkey fucked."

Yes, he is studying whale-pronging in the Congo. He is the raucous out-of-phase voice of the prairie. Afterward, contemplating the failure, we realize he has been shutting Schneider off. Like a master boxer with a hundred tricks, he has been out-acting her (with all his miser's hoard of actor's lore), has been stealing scenes from her while she is nude and he is fully dressed, what virtuosity! But it is unfair. She is brimming to let go. She wants to give the young performance of her life and he is tapping her out of position here, tricking her there—long after it is over we realize he does not want the fight of the century but a hometown decision. He did not come to fuck but to ~~defecate~~ defecate into the open-mouthed wonders of his audience and take his cancer cure in public. It is the fastest way! Grease up the kinks and bring in the pigs. We'd take a stockyard of pigs if he would get into what the movie is about, but he is off on the greatest solo of his life and artists as young as Schneider and Bertolucci are hardly going to be able to stop him.

So he is our greatest actor, our noblest actor, and he is also our national lout. Could it be otherwise in America? Yet a huge rage stirs. He is so great. Can he not be even greater and go to the bottom of every fine actor's terror—which is to let go of the tricks that ring the person and enter the true arena of improvisation? It is there that the future of the film may exist, but we won't find out until a great actor makes the all-out effort.

But now we are back to the core of the failure in *Last Tango*. It is

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down in the difficulty of improvisation, in the recognition that improvisation that is anything less than the whole of a film is next to no improvisation. It has diminished from the dish to a spice that has been added to the dish (usually incorrectly). Bertolucci is a superb young director, adventurous, steeped in film culture, blessed with cinematic grace. He gives us a movie with high ambition, considerable risk, and a sense of the past. Yet he plows into the worst trap of improvisation—it is the simple refusal of film makers to come to grips with the implacable logic of the problem. One does not add improvisation to a script that is already written and with an ending that is locked up. No matter how agreeable the particular results may be, it is still the entrance of tokenism into aesthetics: "You blacks may work in this corporation and are free to express yourselves provided you don't do anything a responsible white employee won't do." Stay true to the script. It reduces improvisation to a free-play period in the middle of a strict curriculum.

The fundamental demand upon improvisation is that it ~~begin with the film itself, which is to say that~~ the idea for the film and the style of improvisation ought to come out of the same thought. From the beginning, improvisation must live in the premise rather than be added to it. The notion is not easy to grasp, and in fact is elusive. It may even be helpful to step away from *Tango* long enough to look at another example of possible improvisation. An indulgence is asked of the reader—to think about another kind of film altogether, a distracting hitch to the argument, but it may not be possible to bring focus to improvisation until we have other models before us.

So the following and imaginary film is offered: Orson Welles to play Churchill while Burton or Olivier does Beaverbrook in the week of Dunkirk. Let us assume we have the great good fortune to find these actors at the height of their powers and have for *auteur* a film maker who is also a brilliant historian. To these beginnings, he adds a company of ~~intelligent~~ English actors and gives them the same historical material to study in order to provide a common denominator to everyone's knowledge. At this point the *auteur* and the company agree upon a few premises of plot. The *auteur* will offer specific situations. It will help if the episodes are sufficiently charged for the actors to lose their fear first of improvisation—which is that they must make up their lines.

witty

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Then a narrative action can begin to emerge out of the interplay of the characters, in much the way a good party turns out differently from the expectations of the hostess and yet will develop out of her original conception. With a script, actors try to convince the writer, if he is present, to improve their lines—with improvisation they must work upon their wits. Why assume that the wits of this company of intelligent English actors will have less knowledge of manner and history than an overextended script writer trying to work up his remote conception of what Churchill and Beaverbrook might have been like? Why not assume Welles and Burton have a better idea? Are they not more likely to contain instinctive knowledge in their ambulating meat? Isn't the company, in its steeping as good British actors into their own history, able to reveal to us more of what such a week might have been like than any but the most inspired effort by a screen-writer?

We all contain the culture of our country in our unused acting skills. While Clark Gable could probably not have done an improvisation to save himself, since he had no working habits for that whatsoever, the suspicion still exists that Gable, if he had been able to permit himself, could have offered a few revelations on the life of Dwight D. Eisenhower, especially since Ike seems to have spent a good part of his life imitating Gable's voice. If violence can release love, improvisation can loose the unused culture of a film artist.

The argument is conceivably splendid, but we are talking about *historical* improvisation, where the end is still known and it is the details that are paramount. How simple (and intense) by comparison become the problems of doing a full improvisation for *Tango*. There we are given a fundamental situation, a spoiled girl about to be married, a distraught man whose wife is a suicide. The man and the girl are in the room to make love. We are back at the same beginning. But we can no longer project ahead! If the actors feel nothing for one another sexually, as Schneider has indicated in several interviews was the case for Brando and herself—she may even have been telling the truth—then no exciting improvisation is possible on sexual lines. (The improvisation would have to work on the consequences of a lack of attraction.) Actors do not have to feel great passion for one another in order to give a *frisson* to the audience, but enough at-

to fulfill a ~~role~~ role

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traction must exist to provide a live coal for improvisation to blow upon. Without some kernel of reality to an improvisation only a monster can continue to offer interesting lines. Once ~~some little~~ attraction is present, there is nothing exceptional about the continuation of the process. Most of us, given the umbilical relation of sex and drama, pump our psychic bellows on many a sensual spark, but then most affairs are, to one degree or another, improvisations, which is to say genuine in some part of their feeling and nicely acted for the rest. What separates professional actors from all of us amateur masses with our animal instinct for dissembling, our everyday acting, is the ability of the professional to take a small emotion in improvisation and go a long distance with it. In a scripted piece of work, some professionals need no relation to the other actor at all; they can, as Monroe once said, "wipe them out" and substitute another face. But improvisation depends on a continuing life, since it exists in the no-man's-land between acting and uncalculated response; it is a *special* psychic state, at its best more real than the life to which one afterward returns, and so a special form of insanity. All acting is a corollary of insanity, but working from a script offers a highly controlled means of departing from one's own personality in order to enter another. (As well as the formal power to return.)

What makes improvisation fertile, luminous, frightening, and finally *wiggy* enough for a professional like Gable to shun its practice is that the actor is doing two things at once—playing at a fictitious role, while using real feelings, which then begin to serve (rather than the safety of the script) to stimulate him into successive new feelings and responses, until he is in danger of pushing into emotional terrain that is too far out of his control.

If we now examine *Tango* against this perspective, the risks (once there is real sexual attraction between the man and the woman) have to multiply. They are after all not simply playing themselves but have rather inserted themselves into highly charged creatures, a violent man with a blood-filled horizon and a spoiled middle-class girl with buried tyrannies. How, as they continue this improvisation, can they avoid falling in love or coming to hate one another? With good film actors, there is even every real danger that the presence of the camera crew will inflame them further, since in every thespian is an orgiast screaming to get out.

So murder is the first dramatic reality between two such lovers in a continuing film of improvisation. They progress toward an end that is frighteningly open. The man may kill the woman, or the woman the man. For as actors, they have also to face the shame of walking quietly away from one another, a small disaster when one is trying to build intensity, for such a quiet ending is equal to a lack of inspiration, a cowardice before the potential violence of the other. Improvisation is profoundly wicked when it works; it ups the ante, charges all dramatic potential, looks for collision. Yet what a dimension of dramatic exploration is also offered. For the actors can even fall in love, can truly fall in love, can go through a rite of passage together and so reach some locked crypt of the heart precisely because they have been photographed fucking together from every angle, and still—perhaps it is thereby—have found some private reserve of intimacy no one else can touch. Let the world watch. It is not near.

So the true improvisation that *Tango* called for should have moved forward each day on the actors' experience of the day before; it would thereby have offered more aesthetic excitement. Because of its danger! There is a very small line in the last recognitions of the psyche between real bullets in a gun and blanks. The madness of improvisation is such, the intensities of the will become such, that one hardly dares to fire a blank at the other actor. What if he is so carried away by excitement that he will refuse to fall? Bring on the real bullet, then. Bite on it.

Of course, literal murder is hardly the inevitable denouement in improvisation. But it is in the private design of each actor's paranoia. Pushed further together in improvisation than actors have gone before, who knows what literal risks might finally have been taken. That is probably why Brando chose to play a buffoon at a very high level and thereby also chose to put Schneider down. Finally we laugh at those full and lovely tits that will be good only for playing soccer (and she will choose to lose thirty pounds after the film is done—a whole loss of thirty pounds of pulchritude). Brando, with his immense paranoia (it is hardly unjustified), may have concluded like many an adventurous artist before him that he was adventuring far enough. No need for more.

Still, he lost an opportunity for his immense talent. If he has

been our first actor for decades, it is because he has given us, from the season he arrived in *Streelcar*, a greater sense of improvisation out of the lines of a script than any other professional actor. Sometimes he seemed the only player alive who knew how to suggest that he was about to say something more valuable than what he did say. It gave him force. The lines other people had written for him came out of his mouth like the final compromise life had offered for five better thoughts. He seemed to have a charged subtext. It was as if, whenever requested in other films to say script lines so bad as "I make you die, you make me die, we're two murderers, each other's," the subtext—the emotion of the words he was using behind the words—became "I want the pig to vomit in your face." That was what gave an unruly, all but uncontrolled, and smoldering air of menace to all he did.

Now, in *Tango*, he had nothing beneath the script, for his previous subtext was the script. So he appeared to us as a man orating, not improvising. But then a long speech can hardly be an improvisation if its line of action is able to go nowhere but back into the prearranged structures of the plot. It is like the aside of a politician before he returns to that prepared text the press already has in their hands. So our interest moved away from the possibilities of the film and was spent on the man himself, his nobility and his loudness. But his nature was finally a less interesting question than it should have been, and weeks would go by before one could forgive Bertolucci for the aesthetic cacophony of the end.

Still, one could forgive. For, finally, Bertolucci has given us a failure worth a hundred films like *The Godfather*. Regardless of all its solos, failed majesties, and off-the-mark horrors, even as a highly imperfect adventure, it is still the best adventure in film to be seen in this pullulating year. And it will open an abyss for Bertolucci. The rest of his life must now be an improvisation. Doubtless he is bold enough to live with that. For he begins *Last Tango* with Brando muttering two words one can hardly hear. They are: Fuck God.

The unmanageable in oneself must now offer advice. If Bertolucci is going to fuck God, let him really give the fuck. Then we may all know a little more of what God is willing or unwilling to forgive. That is, unless God is old and has indeed forgot and we are merely out on a sea of human anality, a collective Faust

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deprived of Mephisto and turning to shit. The choice, of course, is small. Willy-nilly, we push on in every art and every technology toward the reembodiment of the creation. It is doubtless a venture more demented than coupling with the pig, but it is our venture, our white whale, and by it or with it shall we be seduced. On to the Congo with sex, technology, and the inflamed lividities of human will.

#

to me. I may as well confess, (and indeed the preceding paragraph makes ^{virtually} ~~no secret~~ of it) that film ^{seems refined} is a species of occult practise. Indeed, it sets up shop at the juncture of art, technology, and magic. So the ~~premise~~ to be presented next can be seen as a corollary to what has already been proposed,

KN:

Clarification
makes ^{virtually} no secret of it) that film seems a refined species of occult practise to me. Indeed, etc.

THE OCCULT

Many a fiction writer lives with at least one sense cocked to the possibility that some events are magical, and if so, how do you write about it?

This preface to the book *Unholy Alliance* by Peter Levenda, will not answer the question, but it does give a quick tour of the territory. In corollary, I can add that on very good days, when writing is at its best and keeps revealing ~~to the world~~ insights that you never knew were in you, it is not difficult to recognize that writing itself may be a species of magic.

This ~~part~~
portion
of my
preface

also

hardly

your work

~~*Unholy Alliance* is a stimulating work to read for anyone interested in Nazism, magic, the penitentialia of history, the cults of the occult, and the present agonizing anxiety of our lives. It is as if something larger than our educations, our sense of good and evil, our lives themselves, seems to be threatening our existence, and this anxiety illumines *Unholy Alliance* like a night light in some recess of the wall down a very long corridor.~~

Sometimes, it

moving in
upon

If magic is composed of a good many of those out-of-category forces that press against established religions, so magic can also

be seen, in relation to technology at least, as the dark side of the moon. If a Creator exists in company with an opposite Presence (to be called Satan, for short), there is also the most lively possibility of a variety of major and minor angels, devils and demons, good spirits and evil, working away more or less invisibly in our lives.

~~For some, it is virtually a comfortable notion that magic is a presence and a practice that can exist, can even, to a small degree, be used, be manipulated~~ ^{employed} (if often with real danger for the practitioner). For such men and women, the proposition is assured—magic most certainly does exist as a feasible ~~process~~ ^{undertaking}—even if the affirmative is obliged to appear in determinedly small letters when posed against technology: (How often can a curse be as effective as a bomb?)

Nonetheless, given the many centuries of anecdotal and much-skewed evidence on the subject, it is still not irrational to ~~assume—even if one has never felt its effects oneself—to assume,~~ ^{assume that} ~~yes—~~ phenomena of a certain kind can be regarded as magical in those particular situations where magic offers the only rational explanation for events that are otherwise inexplicable. Indeed, this is probably the common view. One explanation for the aggravated awe and misery that inhabited America in the days after the destruction of the Twin Towers was that the event was not only monstrous but brilliantly effected in the face of all the factors that could have gone wrong for the conspirators. The uneasy and not-to-be-voiced hypothesis that now lived as a possibility in many a mind was that the success of the venture had been fortified by the collateral assistance of magic. Few happenings can be more ~~terrifying~~ ^{unsettling} to the modern psyche than the suggestion that magic is cooperating with technology. It is equal to saying that machines have a private psychology and large events, therefore, may be subject to Divine or Satanic intervention.

^{way and wool} So let us at least assume that magic is often present as a ~~salient~~ ^{element} in the very scheme of things. Anyone who is offended by this ~~need read no further. He will~~ ^{need read no further. He will} not be interested in *Unholy Alliance*. Its first virtue, after all, is in its assiduous detail, its close description of the events and ideas of the occultists who gathered around the Nazis as practitioners, fellow travelers, and, in the case of Himmler and the SS, as dedicated acolytes, fortified cultists.

may conceivably be

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What augments the value of this work is the cold but understanding eye of the author. Since his knowledge of magic and magicians is intimate, one never questions whether he knows what he is writing about. Since he is also considerably disenchanting by the life practices of most of the magic workers, he is never taken in by assumptions of grandiosity or over-sweet New Age sentiments. He knows the fundamental flaw found in many occultists. It is the vice that brought them to magic in the first place—precisely, their desire to obtain power over others without paying the price. The majority of occultists in ~~these~~ ^{his} pages appear to be posted on the particular human spectrum that runs from impotence to greed. All too often they are prone, as a crew, to sectarian war, all-out cheating, gluttony, slovenliness, ill will, and betrayal. Exactly. They are, at whatever level they find themselves, invariably looking for that gift of the gods—power that comes without the virtue of having been earned.

The irony, of course, is that most of them, in consequence, pay large prices in ill health, failure, isolation, addiction, deterioration of their larger possibilities, even personal doom. Goethe did not conceive of *Faust* for too little.

Peter Levenda captures this paradox. What he also gives us is a suggestion that cannot be ignored: The occultists on both sides in the Second World War (although most particularly Himmler and the Nazis) did have some real effect on its history—most certainly, not enough to have changed the outcome but enough to have altered motives and details we have been taking for granted. What comes through the pages of *Unholy Alliance* is the canny political sense Hitler possessed in relation to the separate uses of magic and magicians. Levenda's dispassionate treatment of charged evidence is managed (no small feat) in a way to enable us to recognize that Hitler almost certainly believed in magic, and also knew that such belief had to be concealed in the subtext of his speeches and endeavors. Open avowal could be equal to political suicide.

Hitler was hell, therefore, on astrologers—and packed off many to concentration camps, especially after Rudolf Hess's flight to England in 1941, did his best (and was successful) in decimating the Gypsy population of Europe, sneered publicly at seers, psychic gurus, fortune-tellers, all the small fry of the occult movement. He saw them, clearly, as impediments to his own fortunes, negative baggage to his reputation. Yet he also gave his

support to the man he made into the second most important Nazi in existence, Heinrich Himmler, an occultist of no ~~small~~ dimension. *modest*

It was as if Hitler lived within Engels's dictum that "quantity changes quality." A little magic practiced by a small magician can prove a folly or a personal enhancement; a larger involvement brings on the cannibalistic practices to be expected of a magicians' society; and a huge but camouflaged involvement, the Nazi movement itself, with its black-shirted Knight Templars of SS men, becomes an immense vehicle that will do its best to drive the world into a new religion, a new geography, a new mastery of the future.

Why Are We in Vietnam? is the only novel I ever finished under the mistaken belief I was writing another. Living in Provincetown on the edge of those rare, towering and windy dunes that give the tip of Cape Cod a fair resemblance to the desert of the Sahara, I had begun to think of a novel so odd and so horrible that I hesitated for years to begin it. I imagined a group of seven or eight bikers, hippies and studs plus a girl or two, living in the scrub thickets that sat in some of the valleys between the dunes. Only six feet high, those thickets were nonetheless forests, and if you could find a path through the thorns and cat briars, nobody could track you, not in a hurry. So I peopled the thickets with characters: My characters were as wild as anyone who ever came to Provincetown. It is not a tame place. Years ago, a first lady was once told it was "the Wild West of the East," and that is not a bad description. The tip of Cape Cod curls in on itself like a spiral—the long line of the dunes comes around like the curve of one's palm and fingers as they close into a fist. It is one of the very few places in America where one comes to the end of the road for a more profound reason than real estate ceasing to be profitable. In Provincetown, ~~geography~~ runs out, and you are surrounded by the sea.

So it is a strange place. The Pilgrims landed there before they went on to Plymouth—America began here. The Pilgrims lost interest in scrub pine, mournful winds, and sand ~~at~~ *place* over the ~~land~~. They moved on, left ghosts. Whaling captains settled in later, left ghosts. In winter, the town is filled with spirits. One can

the land

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go mad in that rainy climate waiting for March to end. It is a place for murderers and suicides. If decades went by without a single recorded homicide, that record ended abruptly with a crime of true carnage. ~~A few years ago~~, a young Portuguese from a family of fishermen killed four girls, dismembered their bodies, and buried the pieces in twenty small and scattered graves.

Same

That catastrophe was not a good deal worse than anything I had already contemplated for my gang, since I conceived of them making nocturnal trips from the dunes into town, where, out of the sheer boredom of an existence not nearly intense enough to satisfy their health, they would commit murders of massive brutality and then slip back to the dunes. Motiveless ~~crimes~~, I saw a string of such crimes.

murders

I was, as I say, in fear of the book. I loved Provincetown and did not think that was a good way to write about it. The town is so naturally eerie in mid-winter and provides such sense of omens waiting to be magnetized into lines of force that the novel in my mind seemed more a magical object than a fiction, a black magic.

Nonetheless, I began the book in the spring of '66. It attracted me too much not to begin. Yet because I could not thrust Provincetown into such literary horrors without preparation, I thought I would start with a chapter about hunting bear in Alaska. A prelude. I would have two tough rich boys, each as separated from social convention as any two rich boys could be—Texans I would make them, out of reserve memories of Texans I had served with in the 112th Cavalry out of San Antonio. The boys would ~~(be) still~~ young, still mean rather than uncontrollably murderous—the hunting might serve as a bridge to get them ready for more. They would come back from the Alaskan hunting trip ready to travel; Provincetown would eventually receive them.

Now, anyone who reads the book which this preface serves will see that nobody ever gets to Provincetown. The chapter on hunting becomes half a dozen chapters; it ends up being all of the book. If I wrote those chapters wondering how long it would take to extricate myself with novelistic integrity from all the elaborations of the hunt I seemed more and more bound to get into, it was not until those boys were back in Dallas and I was getting ready to move them East that I realized two things:

- (1) I had nothing further to say about them.
 (2) Even if I did, I could no longer believe that Tex and D.J. could still be characters in the Provincetown novel. They had another quality by now.

So I lived with my manuscript for a few months and ended by recognizing that I hadn't been too bright. I had written a novel, not a prelude. The book was done. Later, a number of readers would think *Why Are We in Vietnam?* was far and away my best book. I thought I had never written ~~funnier~~ one.

In retrospect, I was less certain, however, ~~of the humor~~. For when Sharon Tate was murdered in the summer of '69 and the world heard of Charles Manson, I could wonder what state of guilt I might have been in if I had written that novel of desert murderers. How then could I ever have been certain Manson had not been sensitive to its message in the tribal air?

But then writing has its own occult force. At best, we never know where our writing comes from, or who gives it to us. Jack Kennedy's name is invoked in the first sentence of *An American Dream*; nine lines farther down that page a man named Kelly is mentioned. Later in the same chapter we learn that Kelly's middle name is Oswald—Barney Oswald Kelly. That chapter appeared in *Esquire* about a month after the assassination, but it had been written three months earlier, a coincidence to force one to contemplate the very design of coincidence.

So too had I written in *Barbary Shore* about a secret agent named McLeod, who had been, in his time, a particularly important Soviet agent. He lived in a cheap room on the top floor of a cheap rooming house just across the hall from the narrator. Writing that book, I always found it hard to believe that such a man would be found in such a place, and the simple difficulty of not quite believing what I wrote did not help to speed the writing of the book. A year after it was published, I rented a room in a dank old building with high ceilings, called Ovington Studios, on Fulton Street in Brooklyn, not half a mile from the rooming house in *Barbary Shore*, and on the floor below during those ten years I kept the studio was Colonel Rudolph Abel, the most important Soviet spy in America—or, at least, so he was described by the FBI when the arrest was finally made.

We will never know if primitive artists painted their caves to show a representation or whether the moving hand was looking to placate the forces above and the forces below. Sometimes I

the
aftermath

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think the novelist fashions a totem just as much as an aesthetic and that his real aim, not even known necessarily to himself, is to create a diversion in the fields of dread, a sanctuary in some of the arenas of magic. The flaws of his work can even be a part of his magical strength, as if his real intent in writing is to alter the determinations of that invisible finger which has written and moved on. By such logic, ~~the book before you~~ ^{is a} totem, not empty of amulets for the author against curses, static, and the pervasive malignity of ~~our~~ electronic air.

The unconscious can lead one to startling conclusions. In *Ancient Evenings*, I named my protagonist Menenhetet and occasionally made it Meni for short. A couple of years later I came across the translated text of an inscription on an ancient Egyptian temple wall that described the battle of Kadesh, a key event in the novel. In this inscription was mentioned one Menni, Ramses the Second's equerry, which was exactly Menenhetet's role in that part of the book. Somehow, I did not think of the coincidence as eerie—confirmative, rather, as if it proved that there was some very good reason I devoted so many years to the tome.

The story is that Robert Rauschenberg was once given the gift of a pastel from Willem de Kooning. Rauschenberg, with de Kooning's permission, erased the pastel and then signed it "Pastel by de Kooning Erased by Robert Rauschenberg," after which he sold it. The story bothered me. There was something profound there, but how to get ahold of it? Then it came to me: Rauschenberg was saying that the artist has the same right to print money as the financier. Money is nothing but authority imprinted upon emptiness.

I laid the story to rest and was content until the day I thought, Maybe the person who bought the pastel was neither a gambler nor an investor so aware of chic in painting that he knew he could make a profit from reselling it. Maybe if a truly talented painter erases the work of another truly talented painter, there's a resonance, an echo, in the lost work. If, let's say, Fidel Castro had executed Charles de Gaulle and buried him himself, that would not be ordinary burial ground. Students of the occult would pay great attention to the aura about the place. So I thought maybe that's what's transpiring here—some echo of de

~~* (the reference is, of course, to the use of the word in Vietnam)~~

no
italics

Fortifying

THE OCCULT . 253

Kooning's original work might be ~~illuminating~~ the person who purchased it. Therefore, I am obsessed with the story again. One of two possibilities exists: Either ~~the act was an outrage,~~ or it advances our comprehension of the occult.

this
aesthetic

Famous plant-man Backster, attaching the electrodes of his polygraph to a philodendron one night, wonders in the wake of this passing impulse how to test the plant for some emotional reaction. Abruptly, a current courses through the philodendron at the horror of this thought. When Backster cuts or burns the leaf, however, the polygraph registers little: The plant is numb. (Its sensitivity seems to be its life; its suffering, an abstention from life.) The experiment suggests plants may be a natural species of wireless. (What, indeed, did Picasso teach us if not that every form offers up its own scream?) Radio is then no more than a prosthetic leg of communication, whereas plants speak to plants and are aware of the death of animals on the other side of the hill. Some artists might even swear they have known this from the beginning, for they would see themselves as stimulants who inject perception into the blind vision of the century. (And, like a junkie, does the century move into apathy from the superbrilliance of its injections?)

telepathic

The act of writing is a mystery, and the more you labor at it, the more you become aware after a lifetime of such activity that it is not answers which are being offered so much as a greater appreciation of the literary mysteries. The primal enigma of the profession—where do those words come from?—not only arouses fear at the thought of such powers disappearing but also inspires the happiness that one may be in contact with some embodiment of literature itself. Now, of course, we cannot talk directly of such matters; it is enough to amuse ourselves with our variety of approaches to the problem. In my college years, many of us used to have a certainty. It was that environment was all: One was the product of one's milieu, one's parents, one's food, one's conversations, one's dearest and/or most odious human relations. One was the sum of one's own history as it was cradled in the larger history of one's time. One was a product, and if one wrote novels, they were merely a product of the product. With this working philosophy, I wrote a book—it happened to be *The Naked and the Dead*—which was wholly comfortable to me. I

would not have known then what an author meant by speaking of any of his works as uncomfortable or, worse, unnatural. *The Naked and the Dead* seemed a sure result of all I had learned up to the age of twenty-five, all I had experienced and all I had read. My characters had already been conceived and put in file boxes before they were ever on the page. I had hundreds of filled-out file cards before I ever began to write. The novel itself seemed merely the end of a long-active assembly line, and I felt able to account for each part of it.

The next book after *The Naked and the Dead*, however, was such a mystery to me that to this day I do not comprehend it. I can tell you what it is about, what I was trying to say, but do not ask me where *Barbary Shore* came from. I used to feel as if this second novel were being written by someone else. Where *The Naked and the Dead* had been put together with the solid, agreeable effort of a young carpenter constructing a decent house while full of the practices, techniques, and wisdom of those who built houses before him, *Barbary Shore* might as well have been dictated to me by a ghost in the middle of a forest. Each morning I would sit down to work with no notion at all of how to continue. My characters were strangers to me, and each day after a few hours of blind work (because I never seemed to get more than a sentence or two ahead of myself) I would push my plot and people three manuscript pages forward into their eventual denouement, but I never knew what I was doing or where it came from. It's fortunate that I had heard of Freud and the unconscious; if not, I would have had to postulate such a condition myself. An unconscious was the only explanation for what was going on. Now I was left aware of two presences cooperating in the production of a literary work, and the second had the capacity to take over the act of authorship from the first.

Sometimes, when I am feeling tolerant to the idea of karma, demiurges, spirits of the age, and the intervention of angels, ~~spirits~~ and demons, I also wonder if being a writer over a long career does not leave you open to more than one origin for your work. In a long career one may come forth with many books that are products of one's skill and education, of one's dedication, but I also wonder if once in a while the gods do not look about and have their own novels to propose and peer down among us and say, "Here's a good one for Bellow," or, "That would have been a saucy dish for Cheever, too bad he's gone," or, in my own

Saints

Vocational
experience

case, "Look at poor old Mailer worrying about his job again. Let's make him the agent for this absolutely wicked little thing about Vietnam." Who knows? We may be sturdy literary engineers full of sound literary practice or, as equally, unwitting agents for forces beyond our comprehension. It matters less than the knowledge that our books can come from more than one wondrous place. After all, it is not so depressing to think that with all our hungers, we can also have the fortune to be handed in passing a few gifts we do not deserve. How agreeable to feel kin to the force that put paintings on the walls of caves, set stonemasons to exactitudes that would permit gothic arches, gave the calculus to Newton's age and space travel to ours. No, it is not so ill to sense that we are also heir to emanations from some unaccountable and fabulous source. Nothing lifts our horizons like a piece of unexpected luck or the generosity of the gods.

Every good novelist is a failure to himself. Every one of us. Dostoyevsky had to see his career as a failure. He didn't write the last best book he had in mind. He died with a sense of frustration. He had this great work in his being. He was going to create a saint. He had already written about people who had visions of saintly existence but lived in evil—Ivan Karamazov for one. Now, Dostoyevsky wanted more. He looked to do more. He wanted to illumine the Russian people. He wished to introduce them to a more profound grasp of saintliness. This, he felt, was altogether crucial to their survival as a nation. He died with a sense of failure. He had not done the book he had been born to do.

*is the
abstract
example*

The novel has its own particular resource, which is close to magical. If you write purely enough and your style's good enough, you can establish a communion between yourself and the reader that can be found in no other art, and this communion can continue not only for hours but for weeks, years. When the novel is dead, then the technological society will be totally upon us.

For six and a half centuries, we have been moving from the discovery of our humanity, good and evil, into the circulation of the name. By extension, the name is equal to money. Over the millennia, we have been extricating ourselves out of some primitive obeisance to dread so complete that painting once lay inert on

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the field of two dimensions (as if the medieval eye, like the primitive eye, did not feel ready to wander). Then art dared to rise into that Renaissance venture to liberate us from much of the weight of our anxiety. Painters entered the space-perspective of volume and depth. Now, with graffiti, we are back in the prison of two dimensions once more. Or is it the one dimension of the name—the art form screaming through space on a unilinear subway line?

At night, in the yards, the walls of the subway cars sit there possessed of soul—you are not just writing your name but trafficking with the iron spirit of the vehicle standing before you in the yard. What a set of inert iron beasts. There they stand in all the corrals of the yard! The graffiti-writers, stealthy as the near-to-silent sound of their movement, work up and down the line of cars, some darting in to squiggle a little toy of a name on twenty cars—their nerve has no larger surge—others embark on their first or their hundred-and-first masterpiece, daring the full enterprise of an hour of painting one masterpiece while they carry all the tension of waiting for the disturbance of their entrance to settle, waiting for the guards patrolling the lines of track to grow somnolent and descend into the early morning pall of the watchman. Sometimes the graffiti-writers would set out from their own turf at dark yet not begin to paint until two in the morning, hiding for hours in the surest corners of the yard or in and under the trains. What a quintessential marriage of cool and style to write your name in giant separate living letters, large as animals, lithe as snakes, mysterious as Arabic or Chinese curls of alphabet, and do it in the heart of a winter night, when the hands are frozen and only the heart is hot with fear. No wonder the best of the graffiti writers, those mountains of heavy-masterpiece production, STAY HIGH, PHASE 2, STAR III, get the respect, call it the glory, that they are as famous and luminous to their people as a rock star. It is their year. Nothing automatic about writing a masterpiece on a subway car. "I was scared," said Japan, "all the time I did it." And sitting in the station at 158th and St. Nicholas Avenue, watching the trains go by, talking between each wave of subway sound, he is tiny in size, his dark eyes as alert as any small and hungry animal who eats in a garden at night and does not know where the householder may be waiting with his varmint gun.

Now, as Japan speaks, his eyes never failing to miss the collec-

tion of names, hieroglyphs, symbols, stars, crowns, ribbons, masterpieces, and toys on every passing car, there is a sadness in his mood. The city has mounted a massive campaign. There was a period in the middle when it looked as if graffiti would take over the city, when a movement that began as an expression of tropical peoples living in a monotonous iron-gray and dull-brown-brick environment, surrounded by asphalt, concrete, and clangor, had erupted to save the sensuous flesh of their inheritance from the macadamization of the psyche, save the blank city ~~and of their united brain by painting the wall over~~ with the giant trees and petty plants of a tropical rain forest. Like such a jungle, every plant, large and small, spoke to one another, lived in the profusion and harmony of a forest. No one wrote over another name, no one was obscene—for that would have smashed the harmony. A communion took place over the city in this plant growth of names until every institutional wall, fixed or moving, every modern new school that looked like a brand-new factory, every old slum warehouse, every standing billboard, every huckstering poster, and the halls of every high-rise low-rent housing project that looked like a prison (and all did) were covered by a foliage of graffiti which grew seven or eight feet tall, even twelve feet high in those choice places worth the effort for one to stand on another, ah, if it had gone on, the entire city of blank architectural high-rise horrors would have been covered with paint. Graffiti writers might have become mountaineers with pitons for the ascent of high-rise high-cost swinger-single apartments in the East Sixties and Seventies. The look of New York, and then the world, might have been transformed, and the interlapping of names and colors, those wavelets of ego forever reverberating upon one another, could have risen like a flood to cover the monstrosities of abstract empty techno-architectural twentieth-century walls where no design ever predominated over the most profitable (and ergo most monotonous) construction ratio implicit in a twenty-million-dollar bill.

The kids painted with less than this in view. Sufficient in the graffiti-proliferating years of the early Seventies to cover the front door of every subway car they could find. The ecstasy of the roller coaster would dive down into their chest if they were ever waiting in a station and a twelve-car train came stampeding in and their name, HONDO, WILDCAT, SABU, or LOLLIPOP,

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was on the *front*! Yes, the graffiti had not only the feel and all the super-powered whoosh and impact of all the bubble-letters in all the mad comic strips, but the *zoom*, the *aghr*, and the *ahhr* of screeching rails, the fast motion of subways roaring into stations, the comic strips come to life. So it was probably not a movement designed to cover the world so much as the ~~excessiveness of an~~ ~~excessiveness~~. Slum populations chilled on one side by the bleakness of modern design and brain-cooked on the other by comic strips and TV ads with zooming letters, even brain-cooked by the whip of the capital ~~capital~~ letters in the names of the products, and gut-picked by the sound of rock and soul screaming up into the voodoo of the firmament with the shriek of the performer's electronic strings coiling like neon letters in the blue satanic light, yes, all the excessiveness of the highways and the fluorescent wonderlands of every Las Vegas sign frying through the Iowa and New Jersey night, all the stomach-tightening nitty-gritty of trying to learn to spell was in the writing, every assault on the psyche as the trains came slamming in. Maybe it was no more than a movement that looked to take some of the ~~excessiveness~~ ~~excess~~ left within and paint it out upon the world, no more than a species of collective therapy, of grace exhibited under pressure in which they never dreamed of going on to paint all of the blank and empty modern world, but the authority of the city reacted as if the city itself might be in greater peril from graffiti than from drugs, and a war had gone on, more and more implacable on the side of the authority with every legal and psychological weedkiller on full employ until the graffiti of New York was defoliated, cicatrized, Vietnamized. Now, as I sat in the station with John Naar and Japan and we watched the trains go by, aesthetic blight was on the cars. Few masterpieces remained. The windows were gray and smeared. The cars looked dull red or tarnished aluminum—their recent coat of paint remover having stripped all polish from the manufacturer's surface. New subway cars looked like old cars. Only the ghost-outline of former masterpieces remained. The kids were broken. The movement seemed over. Even cans of spray paint could no longer be stolen. Now the ones set out for store display were empty, the misdemeanors were being upped to felony, the fines were severe, the mood was vindictive. Two hideous accidents had occurred. One boy had been killed beneath a subway car, and another had been close to fatally burned by an inflammable

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spray can catching a spark, yes, a horror was on the movement and transit patrols moved through the yards and plugged the entrances. The white monoliths of the high-rise were safe. And the subways were dingier than they had ever been. The impulse of the jungle to cover the walled tombs of technology had been broken. Was there a clue to graffiti in the opposite passion to look upon monotony and call it health? As I walked the streets with John Naar, we passed a sign: DON'T POLLUTE—KEEP THE CITY CLEAN. "That sign," the photographer murmured, "is a form of pollution itself."

Years ago, back in the early Fifties, he conceived of a story he was finally not to write, for he lost his comprehension of it. A rich young artist in New York in the early Fifties, bursting to go beyond Abstract Expressionism, began to rent billboards on which he sketched huge, ill-defined (never say they were sloppy) works in paint chosen to run easily and flake quickly. The rains distorted the lines, made gullies of the forms, automobile exhausts laid down a patina, and comets of flying birds crusted the disappearing surface with their impasto. By the time fifty such billboards had been finished—a prodigious year for the painter—the vogue was on. His show was an event. They transported the billboards by trailer-truck and broke the front wall of the gallery to get the art objects inside. It was the biggest one-man exhibition in New York that year. At its conclusion, two art critics were arguing whether such species of work still belonged to art.

"You're mad," cried one. "It is not art, it is never art."

"No," said the other. "I think it's valid."

So would the story end. Its title, *Validity*. But before he had written a word he made the mistake of telling it to a young Abstract Expressionist whose work he liked. "Of course it's valid," said the painter, eyes shining with the project. "I'd do it myself if I could afford the billboards."

The story was never written. He had assumed he was proposing a satire, but it was evident he had no insight into how painters were ready to think. Some process had entered art and he could not discern it out.

Let us go back to the pastel by de Kooning which Rauschenberg erased. The details, when further inquiry is made, are less impromptu. Rauschenberg first informed de Kooning of what he would do, and de Kooning agreed. The work, when

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sold, bore the inscription "A drawing from Willem de Kooning erased by Robert Rauschenberg." Both artists are now proposing something more than that the artist has the same right as the financier to print money; they may even be saying that the meat and marrow of art, the painterly core, the life of the pigment, and the world of technique with which hands lay on that pigment are convertible to something other. The ambiguity of meaning in the twentieth century, the hollow in the heart of faith, has become such an obsessional hole that art may have to be converted into intellectual transactions. It is as if we are looking for stuff, any stuff with which to stuff the hole, and will convert every value into packing for this purpose. For there is no doubt that in erasing the pastel and selling it, art has been diminished but our knowledge of society is certainly enriched. An aesthetic artifact has been converted into a sociological artifact. It is not the painting that intrigues us now but the lividities of art fashion which made the transaction possible in the first place. Something rabid is loose in the century. Maybe we are not converting art into some comprehension of social process but rather are using art to choke the hole, as if society has become so hopeless, which is to say so twisted in knots of faithless ideological spaghetti, that the glee is in strangling the victims.

But take the example further. Let us imagine a show at the Guggenheim. It will be like many we have seen. Let us make it a plausible modern one-man show. Nothing will be exhibited but computer read-out sheets from a statistical operation. Hundreds of such sheets tacked to the wall. Somewhat irregularly. Attempts at neatness will be contradicted by a confusion in the style of placing them on the wall of the Guggenheim as it spirals up the ramp. Checkerboards alternate with ascending bands, then cul-de-sacs, paper stapled up every way.

We try to digest the aesthetic experience. Of what do the computer read-out sheets consist? What is the subject of their inquiry? we ask. And what is the motive of the artist? Is he telling us something about the order and disorder of the mind in relation to a technological world? Has he presented us with an ongoing composition of exceptional cunning? Is it possible he even has set the problem for the computer himself? Maybe the endless numbers on these computer sheets reflect some analogue to the tension of major themes in his brain. Do we then have here an arithmetical display whose relation to art is as complex as

Finnegans Wake to literature?

Bullshit, responds the painter. The computer sheets were selected at random. Because the artist did not even wish to bear an unconscious responsibility for the selection, he chose an acquaintance with whom he shared no great psychic identity to pick up the computer sheets for him. Neither he nor the acquaintance ever inquired into the subject of the statistical problem, and he never took a look at what was brought back. Rather, he spoke to the janitor at the Guggenheim by telephone and told him to tack up the pages any way at all. The checkerboards and bands and cul-de-sacs of stapled paper were merely a reflection of the personnel: the janitor worked with two assistants. One was neat, the other drunk. And the painter never came to see the show. The show was the fact that people came, studied the walls, lived for an uncertain hour in the Guggenheim and went out again, their minds exercised by a question that not only had no answer, but may not even have been a question. The artist had done his best to have no intent. Not unless his intent was to demonstrate that most of the experience of viewing a painting is the context of the museum itself. We are next to one of John Cage's compositions in silence. Art has been saying with more and more intensity: The nature of the painting has become less interesting than the relation of painting to society—we can even erase Rauschenberg's erasure. Get the artist out of it altogether, and it is still art. The world is turning inside out.

What step is left to take? Only one. A show that offers no object at all. The last reference to painting or sculpture is the wall on which something can be hung, or the floor on which a piece can sit. That must now disappear. The art-piece enters the artist: the work can only be experienced within his psyche.

From *The New York Times*, September 2, 1973, by Peter Plagens:

a marksman-friend shot Chris Burden in the upper left arm with a .22 long-jacket before an audience of 12 intimates. He (Burden) figured on a graze wound with a Band-Aid slapped on afterward, but it "felt like a truck hit my arm at 80 miles per hour"; he went to the hospital, nauseous, and filed the requisite police report ("accident").

Plagens goes on to describe other "pieces." Burden chooses

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situations for their possibility of danger, pain, humiliation, or boredom. There is:

"Movie on the Way Down," in which Burden, hanging by his heels, nude, six feet off a gym floor with a movie camera in his hands, is summarily chopped loose.

The movie is presumably taken on the way down (is it filmed in slow motion?) and he ends with a cut lip. There are other pieces where he rockets flaming matches "at his nude supine wife" or sets ablaze two 16-foot wooden crosses on Laguna Canyon Road at 2 A.M.—"the intended audience for that piece," says Burden, "was the one guy driving down the road who saw it first." Ah, Los Angeles! For "Endurance/real time," he 1) stays in a locker for five days, 2) does 1600 tours of a gallery on his bicycle and 3) remains in bed for three weeks and a day. He also pretends to be a dead man lying under a tarpaulin on the street and is arrested by the police for creating a traffic hazard. He gets a hung jury at his trial and the case is dismissed but "one of the nine votes for conviction, a stewardess, told Burden if she ever saw him under a tarp again, she'd run over him herself." He even does a study in the shift of identity. For "I Became a Secret Hippie," Burden cuts his hair short and dresses in FBI clothes. "If you want to be a heavy artist nowadays," Plagens, reporting on Burden, concludes, "you have to do something unpleasant to your body, because everything *else* has been done. [Burden] may be a product of art-world art history—backed into some untenable masochistic corner because all the other novelty territory has been claimed."

At the least, Burden is fulfilling the dictum of Jean Malaquais that once there are enough artists in the world, the work of art will become the artist himself. Burden is refining his personality. Through existential tests. Burden is exploring not his technique but his vibrations. The situations he chooses are, as Plagens describes, "edgy." They have nothing remotely resembling a boundary until they are done. In "Movie on the Way Down," Burden can hardly know if he will cut his lip or break his neck, feel a live instant on the descent or some dull anxiety. When he shoots lighted matches at his nude wife the areas defined are empty before the action begins. Given every variable from Women's Liberation to the sadomasochistic tales of Wilhelm

Stekel, Burden can know in advance only that a psychodramatic enterprise will be commenced. But where it may end, and what everybody might feel—will the matches burn her skin?—will the marriage be fortified or scorched?—no, there is no confidence which question is going to offer an answer. Perhaps he is not refining his personality so much as attempting to clear a space in his psyche free of dread. But isn't that the fundamental operation of the primitive at the dawn of civilization, the establishment of the ego? For what is the human ego but a clearing in the forest of the psyche free of dread? Money, held in one's hand, is free of time. Cash has no past; its future is assignable. It is powerful and empty. So, too, is the ego. It bears the same relation to the psyche as cash bears to the security or comfort of the body. The ego is virtually separate from the psyche even as money is still separate from every organic communicating logic of nature.

We are back to the cave man and his cave painting. His hand draws the outline of the animal in defiance of those gods who watch him. Burden is smashing his nose on the floor or displaying his wife in defiance of the last gods of conventional art. They are that audience remnant of a once-leviathan bourgeois culture. They still trickle out to see Happenings, the desire of the middle class to preserve its last religion: the world of the artist, palette, museum and gallery wall. Middle-class passion is to appreciate the work of art.

But art may be the little ball rolling off the table. Perhaps art now signifies some unheard reverberation from the subterranean obsession of us all: Is civilization coming to an end? Is society burning? Is the day of the cave man returning? Has our search for ego which was once so routine—a useful (somewhat heartless) ego to be fashioned for a useful (if heartless) society—now gone past the measure of our experience so that we no longer try to construct a control center at the core of the mind, but plunge instead into absurdities which offer us that curious calm we find in the art of the absurd, even as the cave man, defying his gods, discovered he was not always dead on the next day.

But we are at the possible end of civilization, and tribal impulses start up across the world. The descending line of the isolated artist goes down from Michelangelo all the way to Chris Burden, who is finally more comfortable to us than the writers

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of graffiti. For Burden is the last insult from the hippie children of the middle class to the bourgeois art-patron who is their spiritual parent, but graffiti speaks of a new civilization where barbarism is stirring at the roots.

If at the beginning of Western painting, man was small and God was large; if, in the Renaissance, man was mysteriously large in his relation to God, now, in our times man has disappeared into God. He is mass-man without identity, and he is God. He is all the schizophrenia of the powerless and all-powerful in one psyche.

As we lose our senses in the static of the oncoming universal machine, so does our need to exercise the ego take on elephantiasistical proportions. Graffiti is the expression of a ghetto that is near to the plague, for civilization is now closed off from the ghetto. Too huge are the obstacles to any natural development of a civilized man. In the ghetto it is almost impossible to find some quiet identity. No, in the environment of the slum, the courage to display yourself is your only capital, and in the streets, crime is the only productive process that converts such capital to the modern powers of the world, ego and money. Art is not peace but war, and form is the record of that war.

Yet there is a mystery still. From which combat came these curious letters of graffiti, with their Chinese and Arabic calligraphies? Out of what connection to the past did these lights and touches of flame become so much like the Hebrew alphabet, where the form of the letter itself was worshipped as a manifest of the Lord? No, it is not enough to think of the childlike desire to see one's name ride by in letters large enough to scream your ego across the city, no, it is almost as if we must go back into some more primeval sense of existence. If our name is enormous to us, it is also not real—as if we have come from other places than the name, and lived in other lives.

Perhaps this is the unheard echo of graffiti, the vibration of that profound discomfort it arouses. Can the unheard music of its proclamation and/or its mess, the rapt intent seething of its foliage, be the herald of some oncoming apocalypse less and less far away, and so graffiti lingers on our subway door as a memento of all the lives ever lived, sounding now like the bugles of gathering armies across the unseen ridge. That sound will be muted and heard again and muted and heard and muted into all the decades of the century to come.

GIANTS ~~AND~~ ~~COLLEAGUES~~

TOLSTOY*

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Chekhov,

In John Ford Noonan's very funny play *Talking Things Over with Tolstoy*, a story is told. It lived for me with such intensity that I came to decide it was true. Whether or not it actually happened was beside the point. It was just too good a story not to believe it took place.

Somewhere around the turn of the century, we have Chekhov visiting Tolstoy. He takes the train to the nearest station. Let's say ~~in~~ wintertime. He rents two horses and a sled, and drives out through the snow to Yasnaya Polyana. Tolstoy's pretty old by now, big, strong, severe, of course, and sits him right down and they talk. They drink tea and they talk. Tolstoy says: "Chekhov, you are a very good writer. You are excellent. Some of your short stories are so good I would have been pleased to have written them myself. But, Chekhov, I must tell you: You are a terrible playwright! You are awful! You are even worse than Shakespeare!"

Afterward, Chekhov drives back to the railroad station through the snow. In his journal he will write: "I whipped the horses. To the moon I shouted, 'I am even worse than Shakespeare!'"

It's a fine story, but if it's true, why did Tolstoy dislike Shake-

it's

~~I don't
think the
title says
Chekhov
is the
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character
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Chekhov
and
Tolstoy~~

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peare so? I expect the answer is that Tolstoy was always searching for subtle but precise moral judgment. That required a detailed sense of any sequence of events which had produced a dramatic or tragic event. You had to know how to assess the blame. For that, you needed to know exactly when and why things happened.

But there, very much in the way, was Shakespeare, the greatest movie writer who ever existed—centuries before cinema had a silver screen. For Shakespeare was not interested in making careful connections with his characters. Shakespeare was looking to get the most dynamic actors together under any circumstance available, no matter how contrived (King Lear can be the first example). He was looking for superb exchanges of dialogue and fantastic moments, vertiginous possibilities for the English language, whereas Tolstoy ~~lived for~~ ^{looked for} sobriety of moral judgment. So he considered Shakespeare a monster who paid no attention to causality except when it was useful to him. Will's people did incredible things, fell in love ~~and~~ ^{for} murdered, usually with a minimum of preparation—~~Hamlet~~—and then had exceptional speeches that seared an audience's consciousness. To Tolstoy, this was monstrous, and must have been equal to the way some of us look these days upon advertising campaigns that are stuffed with manipulation and little else—~~catchy ingredients for the sole purpose of leading people astray~~ ^{the latter}.

But why Tolstoy would compare Chekhov to Shakespeare is another question. I don't know that anyone is prepared to answer.

If there is a reason, I suspect it was for a different set of faults. Tolstoy may have felt that Chekhov was a prelude to someone yet to arrive, someone like Beckett. In his plays, Chekhov's people were simply not doing what they ought to be doing. What had to irritate Tolstoy immensely was that Anton's play-actors sat in their own spiritual excrement and made sweet speeches and moaned a little and sighed and groaned and never got out of their situation. To Tolstoy, this was a cardinal sin. One should not live with the given when it is vapid and vaguely immoral. That was one of Tolstoy's most basic notions. You may have to endure a dreary given as a discipline, but you do not accept your condition as eternal, as the meaning of life. He could not permit that. Could not accept how Chekhov made so much of the essential inanition of the Russian middle class.

Macbeth

looked for

the latter

HUCKLEBERRY FINN— ALIVE AT 100

Is there a sweeter tonic for the doldrums than old reviews of great novels? In nineteenth-century Russia, *Anna Karenina* was received with the following: "Vronsky's passion for his horse runs parallel to his passion for Anna" . . . "Sentimental rubbish" . . . "Show me one page," says *The Odessa Courier*, "that contains an idea." *Moby-Dick* was incinerated: "Graphic descriptions of a dreariness such as we do not remember to have met before in marine literature" . . . "Sheer moonstruck lunacy" . . . "Sad stuff. Mr. Melville's Quakers are wretched dolts and scrivellers and his mad captain is a monstrous bore."

By this measure, *Huckleberry Finn* gets off lightly. *The Springfield Republican* judged it to be no worse than "a gross trifling with every fine feeling. . . . Mr. Clemens has no reliable sense of propriety," and the public library in Concord, Massachusetts, was confident enough to ban it: "the veriest trash." *The Boston Transcript* reported that "other members of the Library Committee characterize the work as rough, coarse, and inelegant, the whole book being more suited to the slums than to intelligent, respectable people."

All the same, the novel was not too unpleasantly regarded. There were no large critical hurrahs, but the reviews were, on

the whole, friendly. A good tale, went the consensus. There was no sense that a great novel had landed on the literary world of 1885. The critical climate could hardly anticipate T. S. Eliot and Ernest Hemingway's encomiums fifty years later. In the preface to the English edition, Eliot would speak of "a masterpiece . . . Twain's genius is completely realized," and Ernest went further. In *Green Hills of Africa*, after disposing of Emerson, Hawthorne, and Thoreau, and paying off Henry James and Stephen Crane with a friendly nod, he proceeded to declare, "All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*. . . . It's the best book we've had. All American writing comes from that. There was nothing before. There has been nothing as good since."

Hemingway, with his nonpareil gift for nosing out the perfect *vin du pays* for an ineluctable afternoon, was more like other novelists in one dire respect: He was never at a loss to advance himself with his literary judgments. Assessing the writing of others, he used the working author's rule of thumb: If I give this book a good mark, does it help appreciation of my work? Obviously, *Huckleberry Finn* has passed the test.

A suspicion immediately arises. Mark Twain is doing the kind of writing only Hemingway can do better. Evidently, we must take a look. May I say it helps to have read *Huckleberry Finn* so long ago that it feels brand-new on picking it up again. Perhaps I was eleven when I saw it last, maybe thirteen, but now I only remember that I came to it after *Tom Sawyer* and was disappointed. I couldn't really follow *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The character of Tom Sawyer, whom I had liked so much in the first book, was altered, and did not seem nice anymore. *Huckleberry Finn* was altogether beyond me. Later, I recollect being surprised by the high regard nearly everyone who taught American Lit lavished upon the text, but that didn't bring me back to it. Obviously, I was waiting for an assignment from *The New York Times*.

Let me offer assurances. It may have been worth the wait. I suppose I am the ten millionth reader to say that *Huckleberry Finn* is an extraordinary work. Indeed, for all I know, it is a great novel. Flawed, quirky, uneven, not above taking cheap shots and cashing far too many checks (it is rarely above milking its humor)—all the same, what a book we have here! I had the most curious sense of excitement. After a while, I understood my pe-

culiar frame of attention. The book was so up-to-date! I was not reading a classic author so much as looking at a new work sent to me in galleys by a publisher. It was as if it had arrived with one of those rare letters that says, "We won't make this claim often, but do think we have an extraordinary first novel to send out." So it was like reading *From Here to Eternity* in galleys, back in 1950, or *Lie Down in Darkness*, *Catch-22*, or *The World According to Garp* (which reads like a fabulous first novel). You kept being alternately delighted, surprised, annoyed, competitive, critical, and, finally, excited. A new writer had moved onto the block. He could be a potential friend or enemy, but he most certainly was talented.

That was how it felt to read *Huckleberry Finn* a second time. I kept resisting the context until I finally surrendered. One always does surrender sooner or later to a book with a strong magnetic field. I felt as if I held the work of a young writer about thirty or thirty-five, a prodigiously talented fellow from the Midwest, from Missouri probably, who had had the audacity to write a historical novel about the Mississippi as it might have been a century and a half ago, and this young writer had managed to give us a circus of fictional virtuosités. In nearly every chapter new and remarkable characters bounded out from the printed page as if it were a tarmac on which they could perform their leaps. The author's confidence seemed so complete that he could deal with every kind of man or woman God ever gave to the middle of America. Jail-house drunks like Huck Finn's father take their bow, full of the raunchy violence that even gets into the smell of clothing. Gentlemen and river rats, young, attractive girls full of grit and "sand," and strong old ladies with aphorisms clicking like knitting needles, fools and confidence men—what a cornucopia of rabble and gentry inhabit the author's river banks.

It would be superb stuff if only the writer did not keep giving away the fact that he was a modern young American working in 1984. His anachronisms were not so much in the historical facts—those seemed accurate enough—but the point of view was too contemporary. The scenes might succeed—say it again, this young writer was talented!—but he kept betraying his literary influences. The author of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* had obviously been taught a lot by such major writers as Sinclair Lewis, John Dos Passos, and John Steinbeck; he had certainly

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lifted from Faulkner and the mad tone Faulkner could achieve when writing about maniacal men feuding in deep swamps; he had also absorbed much of what Vonnegut and Heller could teach about the resilience of irony. If he had a surer feel for the picaresque than Saul Bellow in *Augie March*, still he felt derivative of that work. In places one could swear he had memorized *The Catcher in the Rye*, and he probably dipped into *Deliverance* and *Why Are We in Vietnam?* He might even have studied the mannerisms of movie stars. You could feel traces of John Wayne, Victor McLaglen, and Burt Reynolds in his pages. The author had doubtless digested many a Hollywood comedy on small-town life. His instinct for life in hamlets on the Mississippi before the Civil War was as sharp as it was farcical, and couldn't be more commercial.

No matter. With a talent as large as this, one could forgive the obvious eye for success. Many a large talent has to go through large borrowings in order to find his own style, and a lust for popular success, while dangerous to serious writing, is not necessarily fatal. Yes, one could accept the pilferings from other writers, given the scope of his work, the brilliance of the concept—to catch rural America by a trip on a raft down a great river! One could even marvel uneasily at the depth of the instinct for fiction in the author. With the boy Huckleberry Finn, this new novelist had managed to give us a character of no comfortable, measurable dimension. It is easy for characters in modern novels to seem more vivid than figures in the classics but, even so, Huckleberry Finn appeared to be more alive than Don Quixote and Julian Sorel, as naturally near to his own mind as we are to ours. But how often does a hero who is so absolutely natural on the page also succeed in acquiring convincing moral stature as his adventures develop?

It is to be repeated. In the attractive grip of this talent, one is ready to forgive the author of *Huckleberry Finn* for every influence he has so promiscuously absorbed. He has made such fertile use of his borrowings. One could even cheer his appearance on our jaded literary scene if not for the single transgression that goes too far. These are passages that do more than borrow an author's style—they copy it! Influence is mental, but theft is physical. Who can declare to a certainty that a large part of the prose in *Huckleberry Finn* is not lifted directly from Hemingway? We know that we are not reading Ernest only because the au-

thor, obviously fearful that his tone is getting too near, is careful to sprinkle his text with “a-clutterings” and “warn’ts” and “anywheres” and “t’others.” But we have read Hemingway—and so we see through it—we know we are reading pure Hemingway disguised:

We cut young cottonwoods and willows, and hid the raft with them. Then we set out the lines. Next we slid into the river and had a swim . . . then we set down on the sandy bottom where the river was knee-deep and watched the daylight come. Not a sound anywheres . . . the first thing to see, looking away over the water, was a kind of dull line—that was the woods on t’other side; you couldn’t make nothing else out; then a pale place in the sky; then more paleness spreading around; then the river softened up away off, and warn’t black any more . . . by and by you could see a streak on the water which you know by the look of the streak that there’s a snag there in a swift current which breaks on it and makes that streak look that way; and you see the mist curl up off the water and the east reddens up and the river.

Up to now I have conveyed, I expect, the pleasure of reading this book today. It is the finest compliment I can offer. We use an unspoken standard of relative judgment on picking up a classic. Secretly, we expect less reward from it than from a good contemporary novel. The average intelligent modern reader would probably, under torture, admit that *Heartburn* was more fun to read, minute for minute, than *Madame Bovary*, and maybe one even learned more. That is not to say that the first will be superior to the second a hundred years from now but that a classic novel is like a fine horse carrying an exorbitant impost. Classics suffer by their distance from our day-to-day gossip. The mark of how good *Huckleberry Finn* has to be is that one can compare it to a number of our best modern American novels and it stands up page for page, awkward here, sensational there—absolutely the equal of one of those rare incredible first novels that come along once or twice in a decade. So I have spoken of it as kin to a first novel because it is so young and so fresh and so all-out silly in some of the chances it takes and even wins. A wiser old novelist would never play that far out when the work was already well

along and so neatly in hand, but Twain does.

For the sake of literary propriety, let me not, however, lose sight of the actual context. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a novel of the nineteenth century and its grand claims to literary magnitude are also to be remarked upon. So I will say that the first measure of a great novel may be that it presents—like a human of palpable charisma—an all but visible aura. Few works of literature can be so luminous without the presence of some majestic symbol. In *Huckleberry Finn* we are presented (given the possible exception of Anna Livia Plurabelle) with the best river ever to flow through a novel, our own Mississippi, and in the voyage down those waters of Huck Finn and a runaway slave on their raft, we are held in the thrall of the river. Larger than a character, the river is a manifest presence, a demiurge to support the man and the boy, a deity to betray them, feed them, all but drown them, fling them apart, float them back together. The river winds like a fugue through the marrow of the true narrative, which is nothing less than the ongoing relation between Huck and the runaway slave, this Nigger Jim whose name embodies the very stuff of the slave system itself—his name is not Jim but Nigger Jim. The growth of love and knowledge between the runaway white and the runaway black is a relation equal to the relation of the men to the river, for it is also full of betrayal and nourishment, separation and return. So it manages to touch that last fine nerve of the heart where compassion and irony speak to one another and thereby give a good turn to our most protected emotions.

Reading *Huckleberry Finn*, one comes to realize all over again that the near burned-out, throttled, hate-filled dying affair between whites and blacks is still our great national love affair, and woe to us if it ends in detestation and mutual misery. Riding the current of this novel, we are back in the happy time when the love affair was new and all seemed possible. How rich is the recollection of that emotion! What else is greatness but the indestructible wealth it leaves in the mind's recollection after hope has soured and passions are spent? It is always the hope of democracy that our wealth will be there to spend again, and the ongoing treasure of *Huckleberry Finn* is that it frees us to think of democracy and its sublime, terrifying premise: Let the passions and cupidities and dreams and kinks and ideals and greed and hopes and foul corruptions of all men and women have their

HUCKLEBERRY FINN—ALIVE AT 100 • 275

day and the world will still be better off, for there is more good than bad in the sum of us and our workings. Mark Twain, whole embodiment of that democratic human, understood the premise in every turn of his pen, and how he tested it, how he twisted and tanzitized and tested it until we are weak all over again with our love for the idea.

ODDMENTS ON HEMINGWAY

Note
Lift one line up.
See p 277

J. MICHAEL LENNON: I don't think anyone can deny the brilliance of Hemingway in terms of style. But Hemingway could never write a book like *The Naked and the Dead*, in which you're talking about fascism coming to America, technology, and the kinds of themes you have dealt with over the past thirty years.

NORMAN MAILER: I didn't say Hemingway was brighter than I was. I just said he writes better.

JML: But that's not the same as saying his talent is better.

NM: Well, I think it is. You can have marvelous character actors like Charles Laughton, who can play just about any part. Then you get someone like Marilyn Monroe, who, in the technical sense, has a small talent. But she can come out and hold a mandolin and play a little ditty and wonderful things happen. Let's take an example we would argue about less. In the technical sense, there were limitations, I suppose, to Charlie Chaplin. Any number of actors can do a credible imitation of Charlie Chaplin and, in addition, play fifty roles Chaplin would never go near. Yet we could never argue that they were greater than Chaplin. Even though they might achieve ninety-five percent of him in an imitation, Chaplin plucked a nerve in us that very few artists reach. What great artists do is

Note
Lift one line up

so profound, you don't debate with it.

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

I guess I would say that he occupies the very center of American writing. No matter how serious or superficial a reader you are, you quickly sense that you are in the hands of someone who writes so well that your wits are keyed afterward to the flaws in the bad writing of others, and, worse, in yourself.

What characterizes every book about Hemingway I have read is the way his character remains out of focus. Even a writer with an edge as hard as Lillian Ross did not seem able to catch him properly in her famous *New Yorker* piece. Hemingway was there, but much too precise in his portrait, as if he had sat for one of those neo-realist paintings where the pride of the artist is to make the subject look as if he has been photographed, not painted.

For contrast, there is Carlos Baker's monumental biography, and it gives us an immense amount of day-to-day material somewhat modestly undigested. It is nonetheless an invaluable book that every ambitious biography to come will evaluate detail by detail, a necessary task, for Baker's book was written with a determinedly soft focus, as if the author felt his literary mission was not so much to present the man as to cover every year of Hemingway's existence in the recollections of his friends.

There is also A. E. Hotchner's book, which gives us a portrait, and most readable it is, but askew. Hotchner is using a wide-angle lens; the very nostrils of the great man are distorted. Sadly, we learn there is reason to believe the materials are transposed. A long and marvelously articulated speech which Hemingway makes once to Hotchner turns out in fact to have been taken from a letter. It is a minor literary peccadillo of the sort professional magazine writers commit often, since their skills mature in a school which demands you tell your story fast and make it track (and a quotation from a letter comes off slower than a man talking), but such methods breed distortion with their speed.

Now, we have here a book written by a son about his father,

PAPA by Gregory Hemingway.

NOTE
Again
Can we
get this
line
over to
Page 276?

NOTE
Do we
need
a note
to
indicate
on this
page that
we have
here a
perfect
and good
called
PAPA
by
Gregory
Hemingway.
Let's
discuss

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written by a son who is not a professional writer as he is quick to tell you (although he can write interestingly enough—it may even be a book which will be read at one sitting by more than half the readers who pick it up). That is because it is unlike most books written by sons about great fathers. There is nothing slavish here. The son lies to the father, and the father pays him back, meanly; the son loves the father and the father loves him back, but in his own style, and it is remote enough for the son to hate him a little as well. If it is a portrait written in love, it is with all the sweets and sours of love. What characterizes love when not wholly blissful is how damnably sweet and sour it gets. It kills any man or woman if they have the bad luck to be deeply in love with a veritable son of a bitch, and every bad thing we have ever heard about Hemingway can find its echo in this book. You do not have to wonder when you are done why any number of men and women could know Hemingway well and hate him. Yet everything fine, noble, attractive, and splendid in the man comes in with its echo as well. For once, you can read a book about Hemingway and not have to decide whether you like him or not. He is there. By God, he exists. He is a father, good and bad by turns, even sensational and godawful on different days of the year, and his contradictions are now his unity, his dirty fighting and his love of craft come out of the same blood. We can feel the man present before us, and his complexes have now become no more than his moods. His pride and his evasions have become one man, his innocence and sophistication, his honesty and outsize snobbery, his romantic madness and inconceivably practical sense of how to be outrageously romantic; it all comes through as in no other book about Hemingway, and for the simplest reason—the father was real to the son. Whereas those of us who approach Hemingway from without have been in the position of trying to find the reality behind the legend, and that is an especially contemporary form of analysis which tends to come out wrong. Hemingway, when all is said, was a Midwestern boy seized by success and ripped out of every root, and he spent the rest of his life trying to relocate some of his old sense of terra firma by following each movement of the wind (and there were many) through his talent and his dread. What a remarkable achievement that the sense of that talent and dread, while hardly ever referred to in these pages, is nonetheless in every paragraph of this unassuming and affective memoir.

THE TURD TEST

The cruelest criticism ever delivered of Henry James is that he had a consciousness (and a style) so hermetic that his pen would have been paralyzed if he had ever entered a town house, removed his hat, and found a turd on his head (a matter we would hope of small moment to Tolstoy or to Dostoyevsky or to Stendhal). Hemingway would have been bothered more than he liked. Miller would have loved it. How did his host react to the shit? How did our host's wife? My God, the way she smacked her nostrils, you can be sure her thighs were in a lather.

In fact, Hemingway would have hated such a scene. He was trying to create a world where mood—which Hemingway saw as the staff of life—could be cultivated by the scrupulosity with which you kept mood aloft. Mood surviving through the excellence of your gravity, courage, and diction, that is to say, your manners.

Hemingway's dreams must have looked down the long vista of his future suicide. So he had a legitimate fear of chaos. He never wrote about the river—he contented himself with the quintessentially American aesthetic of writing about the camp he set up each night by the side of the river: That was the night we made camp at the foot of the cliffs just after the place where the

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rapids were bad.

Miller became the other half of literature, an *espontaneo* without fear of his end, a literary athlete at ease in air, earth, or water. I am the river, he was always ready to say, I am the rapids and the placids, I'm the froth and the scum and the twigs—what a roar as I go over the falls. Who gives a fart? Let others camp where they may. I am the river and there is nothing I can't swallow.

Hemingway's world was doomed to collapse so soon as the forces of the century pushed life into a technological tunnel; with Hemingway, mood could not survive grinding gears, surrealist manners—here's shit in your hat—static, but Miller took off at the place where Hemingway stopped. In *Tropic of Cancer* he was saying—and it is the force of the book—I am obliged to live where mood is in the meat grinder, so I know more about it. I know all of the spectrum that runs from good mood to bad mood, and can tell you—a stinking mood is better than no mood. Life has been designed to run in the stink.

Miller bounces in it. We read *Tropic of Cancer*, that book of horrors, and feel happy. It is because there is honor in the horror, and metaphor in the hideous. How, we cannot even begin to say. Maybe, mood is vastly more various, self-regenerative, hearty and sly than Hemingway ever guessed. Maybe mood is not a lavender lady, but a barmaid. Without stoicism or good taste, or even a nose for the nicety of good guts under terrible pressure, Miller is still living closer to death than Hemingway, certainly he is closer if the sewer is nearer to our end than the wound.

History proved to be on Miller's side. Twentieth-century life was leaving the world of individual effort, liquor, and tragic wounds, for the big-city garbage can of bruises, migraines, static, mood chemicals, amnesia, absurd relations, and cancer. Down in the sewers of existence where the cancer was being cooked, Miller was cavorting. Look, he was forever saying, you do not have to die of this crud. You can breathe it, eat it, suck it, fuck it, and still bounce up for the next day. There is something inestimable in us if we can stand the smell. Considering where the world was going—right into the world wide sewer of the concentration camps—Miller may have had a message that gave more life than Hemingway.

Henry Miller, his work embraced, which is to say swallowed in four or five weeks, and then re-read over another month or

Note to
editor.
This requires
a separate
piece with
its own
title.

HENRY MILLER

HENRY MILLER

Davidson

two, can sit in one's mind with all the palpability of a huge elm lying in the backyard. The nobility of the trunk is on the ground for you to examine, not to speak of the rich nightmare of the roots and crawlers. To read Miller in that short a period reopens the old question, which is always too large: What is a man? Just as our uprooted elm would take on constellations of meaning as it lay in the yard until finally it could be reminiscent of a battleship, or a host of caverns in Hieronymus Bosch, so might you be forced to ask: What the devil is a tree? Just so does Miller return us to the first question of humanism. What, finally, is a Man? Nothing is settled after all. We have been given the illusion that we know Miller, know every one of his vices, peccadilloes, hustles, horrors, cadges, gifts, flaws, and transcendent generousities, are, yes, familiar with that man who is by his own description "confused, negligent, reckless, lusty, obscene, boisterous, thoughtful, scrupulous, lying, diabolically truthful . . . filled with wisdom and nonsense." Nonetheless, when we are done reading, we wonder if we know anything. It is not that he bears no relation to the Henry Miller who is the protagonist of his books. (That Henry Miller is, indeed, the ultimate definition of the word *protagonist*.) No, the real Henry Miller, which is to say, the corporeal protean Miller, a few writers knew intimately and wrote about well, Anaïs Nin being the first, is not very different from his work, but more like a transparency laid over a drawing, copied, and then skewed a degree. He is just a little different from his work. But in that difference is all the mystery of his own personality, and the paradoxes of a great artist. And the failure. For it is impossible to talk of a great artist without speaking of failure. The greater they are, the more they do not fulfill their own idea of themselves. Miller was never able to come to focus on the one subject which cried out to him: D. H. Lawrence's old subject—what is to be said of love between a man and a woman? Miller saw that Lawrence had come to grips with the poetry of sex but none of the sewer gas. Miller would strike matches to the sewer gas and set off literary explosions, but he never blew himself over to the other side of the divide. While nobody can be more poetic than Miller about fornication itself—two hundred beer-hall accordions might as well be pumping away as he describes the more heavenly engagements he has played—the writing becomes an evocation of some disembodied but divine cunt and what it is doing to him—his appreciation equal to the

whom

placed

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enjoyment of a great symphony, yet he still cannot write about fucking with love. (Of course, it is fair to ask, who can?) Miller nonetheless pounds away on the subject like a giant phallus trying to enter a tiny vagina—in the pounding is one simple question: How the hell do you get in?

Miller has not lacked for adulation. A small but accountable part of the literary world has regarded him as the greatest living American writer for the last four decades, and indeed, as other American writers died, and Hemingway was there no longer, nor Faulkner and Fitzgerald, not Wolfe, not Steinbeck, nor Dos Passos, and Sinclair Lewis long gone, Dreiser dead and Farrell in partial obscurity, who else could one speak of as the great American author? Moreover, Miller provided his considerable qualifications. One had to go back to Melville to find a rhetoric that could prove as noble under full sail. Miller at his best wrote a prose more overpowering than Faulkner's—the good reader is revolved in a farrago of light with words heavy as velvet, brilliant as gems; eruptions of thought cover the page. You could be in the vortex of one of Turner's oceanic holocausts, where the sun shines in the very center of the storm. No, there is nothing like Henry Miller when he gets rolling. Men with literary styles as full as Hawthorne's appear by comparison stripped of their rich language; one has to take English back to Marlowe and Shakespeare before encountering a wealth of imagery equal in intensity.

Yet it can hardly be said that the American Establishment walks around today thinking of Henry Miller as our literary genius or one of the symbols of human wealth in America. Born in 1891, he will be eighty-five by December 26 of 1976, an artist of incomparably larger dimensions than Robert Frost, yet who can conceive of a President inviting him to read from his work on Inauguration Day—no, the irony is that a number of good and intelligent politicians might even have a slight hesitation over whether it is Arthur Miller or Henry Miller being talked about. "Oh yes, Henry Miller," they might say at last, "the guy who writes the dirty books."

Even in the literary world, however, Miller's reputation survives in a vacuum. It is not that he lacks influence. It is not even excessive to say that Henry Miller had influenced the style of half the good American poets and writers alive today: Would

Nothing
on that
page in
the
gallery

??
All

P. 376

I don't
understand
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books as different as *Naked Lunch*, *Portnoy's Complaint*, *Fear of Flying*, and *Why Are We in Vietnam?* have been as well received (or as free in language) without the irrigation Henry Miller gave to American prose? Even a writer so removed in purpose from Miller as Saul Bellow shows a debt in *Augie March*. Miller has had his effect. Thirty years ago, young writers learned to write by reading him along with Hemingway and Faulkner, Wolfe and Fitzgerald. With the exception of Hemingway, he has had perhaps the largest stylistic influence of them all. Yet there is still that critical space. Miller has only been written about in terms of adulation or dismissal. One does not pick up literary reviews with articles entitled "Ernest Hemingway and Henry Miller—Their Paris Years," or "The Social Worlds of F. Scott Fitzgerald and Henry Miller," no comments on "The Apocalyptic Vision of Henry Miller and Thomas Wolfe as Reflected in Their Rhetoric." Nor is there bound to be a work titled "Henry Miller and the Beat Generation" or "Henry Miller and the Revolution of the Sixties." Young men do not feel they are dying inside because they cannot live the way Henry Miller once lived. Yet no American writer ~~not even Hemingway~~ ^{has} necessarily came closer to the crazy bliss of being alone in a strange city with no money in your pocket, not much food in your stomach, and a hard-on beginning to stir, a "personal" hard-on (as one of Miller's characters nicely describes it).

The paradox therefore persists. It is a wonder. To read *Tropic of Cancer* today is to take in his dimension. He is a greater writer than one thought. It is one of the few great novels of our American century, a revolution in style and consciousness equal to *The Sun Also Rises*. You cannot pass through the first twenty pages without knowing that a literary wonder is taking place—nobody has ever written in just this way before, nobody may ever write by this style so well again. A time and a place have come to focus in a writer's voice. It is like encountering an archaeological relic. Given enough such novels, the history of our century could never be lost: There would be enough points of reference.

It is close therefore to incomprehensible that a man whose literary career has been with us over forty years, an author who wrote one novel that may yet be considered equal to the best of Hemingway, and probably produced more than Thomas Wolfe day by day, and was better word for word, and purple passage for purple passage, a writer finally like a phenomenon, has

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somehow, with every large acceptance, and every respect, been nonetheless ignored and near to discarded.

We must assume there was something indigestible about Miller that went beyond his ideas. His condemnations are virtually comfortable to us today, yet he is not an author whose complexities are in harmony with our own. Hemingway and Fitzgerald may each have been outrageous pieces of psychic work, yet their personalities haunt us. Faulkner inspires our reverence and Wolfe our tenderest thoughts for literary genius. They are good to the memories we keep of our reading of them—they live with the security of old films. But Miller does not. He is a force, a value, a literary sage, and yet in the most peculiar sense he does not become more compatible with time—he is no better beloved today than twenty, thirty, or forty years ago—it is as if he is almost not an American author; yet nobody could be more American. So he evades our sense of classification. He does not become a personality; rather he maintains himself as an enigma.

The authors who live best in legend offer personalities we can comprehend like movie stars. Hemingway and Fitzgerald impinge on our psyche with the clarity of Bogart and Cagney. We comprehend them at once. Faulkner bears the same privileged relation to a literary Southerner as Olivier to the London theatregoer. A grand and cultivated presence is enriching the marrow of your life. Nobody wishes to hear a bad story about Olivier or Faulkner.

Henry Miller, however, exists in the same relation to legend that anti-matter shows to matter. His life is antipathetic to the idea of legend itself. Where he is complex, he is too complex—we do not feel the resonance of slowly dissolving mystery but the madness of too many knots; where he is simple, he is not attractive—his air is harsh. If he had remained the protagonist by which he first presented himself in *Tropic of Cancer*—the man with iron in his phallus, acid in his mind, and some kind of incomparable relentless freedom in his heart, that paradox of tough misery and keen happiness, that connoisseur of the spectrum of odors between good sewers and bad sewers, a noble rat gnawing on existence and impossible to kill, then he could indeed have been a legend, a species of Parisian Bogart or American Belmondo. Everybody would have wanted to meet this post-gangster, barbarian-genius. He would have been the American and heterosexual equivalent of Jean Genet. But that was

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not his desire. Paradoxically, he was too separate from his work.

In fact, he could never have been too near to the character he made of himself in *Tropic of Cancer*. One part never fits. It is obvious he must have been more charming than he pretends—how else account for all the free dinners he was invited to, the people he lived on, the whores who loved him? There had to be something angelic about him. Anaïs Nin when describing the apartment in Clichy that Miller kept with Alfred Perles made the point that Miller was the one tidying the joint. "Henry keeps house like a Dutch housekeeper. He is very neat and clean. No dirty dishes about. It is all monastic, really, with no trimmings, no decoration."* Where in all of *Tropic of Cancer* is this neat and charming man?

"The Diary of Anaïs Nin (Vol. 1) (New York: The Swallow Press and Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1966), p. 62.

The novel must be more a fiction than a fact. Which, of course, is not to take away a particle of its worth. Perhaps it becomes even more valuable. After all, we do not write to recapture an experience; we write to come as close to it as we can. Sometimes we are not very close, and yet, paradoxically, are nearer than if we had a photograph. Not nearer necessarily to the verisimilitude of what happened but to the mysterious reality of what can happen on a page. Oil paints do not create clouds but the image of clouds; a page of manuscript can only evoke that special kind of reality which lives on the skin of the writing paper, a rainbow on a soap bubble. Miller is forever accused of caricature by people who knew his characters, and any good reader knows enough about personality to sense how much he must be leaving out of his people. Yet what a cumulative reality they give us. His characters make up a Paris more real than its paving stones until a reluctant wonder bursts upon us—no French writer, no matter how great, not Rabelais, nor Proust, not De Maupassant, Hugo, Huysmans, Zola, or even Balzac, not even Céline has made Paris more vivid to us. Whenever before has a foreigner described a country better than its native writers? For in *Tropic of Cancer* Miller succeeded in performing one high literary act: He created a tone in prose which caught the tone of a period and a place. If that main character in *Tropic of Cancer* named Henry Miller never existed in life, it hardly matters—he is the voice and spirit which existed at the time. The

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spirits of literature may be the nearest we come to historical truth.

For that matter, the great confessions of literature are apart from their authors. Augustine recollecting his sins is not the sinner but the pieties. Stendhal is not Julian Sorel, nor Kierkegaard the seducer. *On the Road* is close to Jack Kerouac, yet he gives a happier Kerouac than the one who died too soon. Proust was not his own narrator, even as homosexuality is not heterosexuality but another land, and if we take *The Sun Also Rises* as the purest example of a book whose protagonist created the precise air of a time and a place, even there we come to the realization that Hemingway at the time he wrote it could not have been equal to Jake Barnes—he had created a consciousness wiser, drier, purer, more classic, more sophisticated, and more graceful than his own. He was still gauche in relation to his creation.

The difference between Hemingway and Miller is that Hemingway set out thereafter to grow into Jake Barnes and locked himself, for better and worse, for enormous fame and eventual destruction, into that character who embodied the spirit of an age. Miller, following, had only to keep writing *Tropic of Cancer* over and over, refining his own personality to become less and less separate from his book, and he could have entered the American life of legend. But Henry, eight years older than Hemingway, yet arriving at publication eight years later, and so sixteen years older in 1934 than Hemingway was in 1926, chose to go in the opposite direction. He proceeded to move away from the first Henry Miller he had created. He did not wish to be a character but a soul—he would be various. He was.

D. H. LAWRENCE

That new force in life which would ask men and women to become more and more alike gave him a species of aesthetic nausea as subtle and complete as the sense of displacement that comes upon one in an airplane when it is learned that the sweet and gentle soul in the next seat is the product of surgical virtu-
 cities which have extended his life.

Why at this point did he think then of Kate Millet? Why, then, of sturdy Kate Millet next to such an invalid and such an aversion if not for her political genius in perceiving that any technologizing of the sexes into twin-unit living teams with detachable subunits (kids) might yet have to contend with the work of D. H. Lawrence. Not, of course, for any love of children, ~~he~~ would not be until his last book that one of Lawrence's romances would end with the heroine pregnant, tranquil, and fulfilled. ~~For~~ Lawrence's love affairs were more likely to come in like winds off Wuthering Heights—but never had a male novelist written more intimately about women—heart, contradiction, and soul; never had a novelist loved them more, been so comfortable in the tides of their sentiment, and so ready to see them murdered. His work held, on the consequence, huge fascination for women. Since by the end he was also the sacramental poet of the

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sacramental act, for he believed nothing human had such significance as the tender majesties of a man and woman fucking with love, he was also the most appalling subversive to the single permissive sexual standard. The orgy, homosexuality, and the inevitable promiscuity attached to a sexual search repelled him, and might yet repel many of the young as they become bored with the similarity of the sexes.

Indeed, which case-hardened guerrilla of Women's Liberation might not shed a private tear at the following passage:

And if you're in Scotland and I'm in the Midlands, and I can't put my arms round you, and wrap my legs round you, yet I've got something of you. My soul softly flaps in the little pentecost flame with you, like the peace of fucking. We fucked a flame into being. Even the flowers are fucked into being between the sun and the earth. But it's a delicate thing, and takes patience and the long pause.

So I love chastity now, because it is the peace that comes of fucking. I love being chaste now. I love it as snowdrops love the snow. I love this chastity, which is the pause of peace of our fucking, between us now like a snowdrop of forked white fire. And when the real spring comes, when the drawing together comes, then we can fuck the little flame brilliant and yellow . . .

Yes, which stout partisan of the Liberation would read such words and not go soft for the memory of some bitter bridge of love she had burned behind. Lawrence was dangerous. So delicate and indestructible an enemy to the cause of Liberation that to expunge him one would have to look for Millett herself. If she is more careful with Lawrence than with Henry Miller, acting less like some literary Molotov, if her disrespect for quotation is in this place more guarded, if she even functions as a critic and so gives us a clue to the meaning of Lawrence's life and work, she has become twice adroit at hiding the real evidence. So she rises from abuse to night-school legal briefs—it is crucial to her case that Lawrence actually be the “counterrevolutionary sexual politician” she terms him, but since women love his work, and remember it, she is obliged to bring in the evidence more or less fairly, and only distort it by small moves, brief elisions in the quotation, the suppression of passing contradictions, in short bring in all the evidence on one side of the case and harangue the jury ~~for~~ a little further. Since she has a great deal of evi-

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dence, only a careful defense can overthrow her case. For Lawrence can be hung as a counterrevolutionary sexual politician out of his own words and speeches. There is a plethora of evidence—in his worst books. And in all his books there are unmistakable tendencies toward the absolute domination of women by men, mystical worship of the male will, detestation of democracy. There is a stretch in the middle of his work, out in such unread tracts as *Aaron's Rod* and *Kangaroo*, when the uneasy feeling arrives that perhaps it was just as well Lawrence died when he did, for he could have been the literary adviser to Oswald Mosley about the time Hitler came in; one can even ingest a comprehension of the appeal of fascism to Pound and Wyndham Lewis, since the death of nature lived already in the air of the contract between corporate democracy and technology, and who was then to know that the marriage of fascism and technology would be even worse, would accelerate that death. Still, such fear for the end of Lawrence is superficial. He was perhaps a great writer, certainly full of faults, and abominably pedestrian in his language when the ducts of experience burned dry, he was unendurably didactic then, he was a pill, and at his worst, a humorless nag; he is pathetic in all those places he suggests that men should follow the will of a stronger man, a purer man, a man conceivably not unlike himself, for one senses in his petulance and in the spoiled airs of his impatient disdain at what he could not intellectually dominate that he was a momma's boy, spoiled rotten, and could not have commanded two infantrymen to follow him, yet he was still a great writer, for he contained a cauldron of boiling opposites—he was on the one hand a Hitler in a teapot, on the other he was the blessed breast of tender love, he knew what it was to love a woman from her hair to her toes, he lived with all the sensibility of a female burning with tender love—and these incompatibles, enough to break a less extraordinary man, were squared in their difficulty by the fact that he had intellectual ambition sufficient to desire the overthrow of European civilization, his themes were nothing if not immense—in *The Plumed Serpent* he would even look to the founding of a new religion based on the virtues of the phallus and the submission of women to the wisdom of that principle. But he was also the son of a miner; he came from hard practical small-minded people, stock descended conceivably from the Druids, but how many centuries had hammered the reductive

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wisdom of pounds and pennies into the genes? So a part of Lawrence was like a little tobacconist from the English Midlands who would sniff the smoke of his wildest ideas— notions, we may be certain, which ran completely off the end of anybody's word system—and hack out an irritable cough at the intimate intricate knobby knotty contradictions of his ideas when they were embodied in people. For if we can feel how consumed he was by the dictatorial pressure to ram his sentiments into each idiot throat, he never forgets that he is writing novels, and so his ideas cannot simply triumph, they have to be tried and heated and forged, and finally be beaten into shapelessness against the anvil of his ~~profound~~ British skepticism which would not buy his ideas, not outright, for even his own characters seem to wear out in them. Kate Leslie, the heroine of *The Plumed Serpent*, a proud, sophisticated Irish lady, falls in love with one of the Mexican leaders of a new party, a new faith, a new ritual, gives herself to the new religion, believes in her submission—but not entirely! At the end she is still attached to the ambivalence of the European mind. Lilly, the hero of *Aaron's Rod*, finally preaches "deep fathomless submission to the heroic soul in a greater man" and the greater man is Lilly, but he is a slim, small, somewhat ridiculous figure, a bigger man for example strikes him in front of his wife and he is reduced to regaining his breath without showing he is hurt; he is a small hard-shelled nut of contradictions, much like Lawrence himself, but the grandeur of the ideas sound ridiculous in the little cracked shell. Of course, Lawrence was not only trying to sell dictatorial theorems, he was also trying to rid himself of them. We can see by the literary line of his life that he moves from the adoration of his mother in *Sons and Lovers* and from close to literal adoration of the womb in *The Rainbow* to worship of the phallus and the male will in his later books. In fact, Millett can be quoted to good effect, for her criticism is here close to objective, which is to say not totally at odds with the defense:

Aaron's Rod, Kangaroo, and The Plumed Serpent are rather neglected novels, and perhaps justly so. They are unquestionably strident, and unpleasant for a number of reasons, principally a rasping protofascist tone, an increasing fondness of force, a personal arrogance, and innumerable racial, class, and religious bigotries. In these novels one sees how terribly Lawrence strained after triumph in the "man's world" of formal politics, war, priestcraft,

art and finance. Thinking of Lady Chatterley or the early novels, readers often equate Lawrence with the personal life which generally concerns the novelist, the relations of men and women—for whether he played a woman's man or a man's man, Lawrence was generally doing so before an audience of women, who found it difficult to associate him with the public life of male authority. After Women in Love, having solved, or failed to solve, the problem of mastering the female, Lawrence became more ambitious. Yet he never failed to take his sexual politics with him, and with an astonishing consistency of motive, made it the foundation of all his other social and political beliefs.

It is fair analysis as far as it goes, but it fails to underline the heroism of his achievement, which is that he was able finally to leave off his quest for power in the male world and go back to what he started with, go back after every bitterness and frustration to his first knowledge that the physical love of men and women, insofar as it was untainted by civilization, was the salvation of us all, there was no other. And in fact he had never ceased believing that, he had merely lost hope it could be achieved.

Millett's critical misdemeanor is to conceal the pilgrimage, hide the life, cover over that emotional odyssey which took him from adoration of the woman to outright lust for her murder, then took him back to worship her beauty, even her procreative beauty. Millett avoids the sympathy this might arouse in her female readers (which ~~head~~ lover is more to be cherished ~~after all~~ than the one who returned at the end?), yes, avoids such huge potential sympathy by two simple critical stratagems; she writes about his last book first, which enables her to end her very long chapter on Lawrence with an analysis of his story "The Woman Who Rode Away." Since it may be the most savage of his stories and concludes with the ritual sacrifice of a white woman by natives, Millett can close on Lawrence with the comment, "Probably it is the perversion of sexuality into slaughter, indeed, the story's very travesty and denial of sexuality, which accounts for its monstrous, even demented air." Not every female reader will remind herself that Lawrence, having purged his blood of murder, would now go on to write *Lady Chatterley*. But then Millett is not interested in the dialectic by which writers deliver their themes to themselves; she is more interested in hiding the process, and so her second way of concealing how much

Lawrence has still to tell us about men and women is simply to distort the complexity of his brain into snarling maxims, take him at his worst and make him even worse, take him at his best and bring pinkish shears to his context. Like a true species of literary Mafia, Millett works always for points and the shading of points. If she can't steal a full point, she'll cop a half.

Examples abound, but it is necessary to quote Lawrence in some fullness, a defense of his works rests naturally on presenting him in uninterrupted lines, which indeed will be no hardship to read. Besides, the clearest exposure of the malignant literary habits of the prosecutor is to quote her first and thereby give everyone an opportunity to see how little she shows, how much she ignores, in her desire to steal the verdict.

"You lie there," he orders. She accedes with a "queer obedience"—Lawrence never uses the word female in the novel without prefacing it with the adjectives "weird" or "queer": this is presumably done to persuade the reader that woman is a dim prehistoric creature operating out of primeval impulse. Mellors concedes one kiss on the navel and then gets to business:

"And he had to come into her at once, to enter the peace on earth of that soft quiescent body. It was the moment of pure peace for him, the entry into the body of a woman. She lay still, in a kind of sleep, always in a kind of sleep. The activity, the orgasm was all his, all his; she could strive for herself no more."

This is the passage from which she has drawn her quotation:

"You lie there," he said softly, and he shut the door, so that it was dark, quite dark.

With a queer obedience, she lay down on the blanket. Then she felt the soft, groping, helplessly desirous hand touching her body, feeling for her face. The hand stroked her face softly, softly, with infinite soothing and assurance, and at last there was the soft touch of a kiss on her cheek.

She lay quite still, in a sort of sleep, in a sort of dream. Then she quivered as she felt his hand groping softly, yet with queer thwarted clumsiness among her clothing. Yet the hand knew, too, how to unclothe her where it wanted. He drew down the thin silk sheath,