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A CODA TO "CRAFT" 115

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

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

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

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

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

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LEGEND AND IDENTITY

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~~The "Not book" and the letter to Salman Rushdie exemplify~~
~~the problem of the problem of the writer's identity.~~

If I place a large emphasis on the word, it is because our identity
on a given day or year is the seat from which we speak to the
world. Any shifts of identity ~~of identity~~ any sense that
the seat is not fast on its foundations but is sliding away, will play
hell with the modicum of stability that one needs to write at a
given moment.

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

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

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

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~~Answer as to
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Dear Salman Rushdie
I have thought of you
often over the last few
years. Many of us begin
writing with the same
dream that it will be a

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*and certainly, not least, the
highly developed structures
of injustice.*

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

*while offering humanity a
freedom of a
market that is ~~in~~ ⁱⁿ ~~the~~ ^{the} ~~market~~ ^{market}
controlled by those who give the
other ~~incumbents~~ ^{incumbents} to ~~the~~ ^{the} ~~freedom~~ ^{freedom}*

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page 307 to 313

A REVIEW OF THE GROUP

The Group is a collective novel about a ~~year~~ (or let us say) quasi-revolutionary period in American life, the 1930s; its heroines are eight nice girls, all or conceivably all of them Episcopalian at some time or another, all of them upper-middle-class and all of them civilized to a point of Christless High Church rectitude. So it is no easy task Mary McCarthy has set herself. She has eight well-to-do young ladies moving through the Thirties on the very outer fringe of events, and none of them has an inner passion large enough to take over the book and make it run away. Indeed, the only character one would not likely flee at a cocktail party, a rich, arrogant green-eyed beauty named Eastlake, decides to separate from the book herself. She takes off for Europe after the first few chapters and does not get around to coming back until the book is almost done. She has in the interim become an open lesbian. Which encourages the single medical prescription one can elucidate from the book: It tacitly states that a mixture of passionless goodness and squashed mendacity, precisely that lot of average nice rich bright young Protestant girls, is so regurgitative a violation of their nature that cancer or psychosis are now house percentage against any decent woman. No wonder Miss Eastlake left—she would have

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been unconvincing if she had remained.

So, here, let's refine the problem a little further. ~~A~~ collective novel in which the most interesting character is missing, a collective novel in which none of the characters have sufficient passion to be interesting in themselves, none have the power or dedication to wish to force events. Nor does any one of the characters move critically out of her class by marrying drastically up or savagely down. Not one of her girls even exhibits an engaging bitchery. Correlatively, no one of the girls falls deeply and tragically in love. The formal heroine, Kay Strong Petersen, does indeed fall literally out of a twenty-story window in the Vassar Club; clearly, she is a suicide-by-accident before the failure of her love, but she is somehow too horsey ~~and all-but-dyslexic~~ to buy a single tear—gloom, determination, and the void ooze from her persona. The nicest of the heroines by sentimental measure is Polly, but she and her husband are too nice. And there is a second nice heroine named Dottie. She is clean, Boston clean; her conscience moves with the drilled but never unimpressive grace of a fine ballerina. Indeed she has the grace to come to orgasm on the night she gives her first flower to still another in the endless gallery of Mary McCarthy's feverish, loud-talking, drunken, neurotic, and jargon-compensated louts. Did our First Lady of Letters never meet a gentleman on the flying trapeze? No, McCarthy's lout smells like fertilizer and he ploughs Dottie under—there is a good novelistic harvest for the next twenty pages. We are given Dottie's purchase of a diaphragm at her lover's demand; her subsequent repudiation—he is not at home when she calls; her act of renunciation—she quits her purchase beneath a bench in Washington Square Park; and her moment of final suspense when chapters later she confesses to her mother (who has a first-rate sense of modest conscience) that she is still in love with the lout. Her mother's conscience takes the inner journey from Boston to a Village garret and she begs her daughter not to marry the new man she has taken in compensation (a nice rancher who is never to appear in evidence), but instead advises Dottie to go back to her lover of one night and find out what is finally in her love. It is the voice of a most refined moral instinct, and Dottie ducks. She is our second-best nice heroine, but one crack on the mouth and she's out.

Thus it goes. There's Helena, with the finest mind in the book, a quiet girl who rides her considerable culture like a con-

We are being offered a

a good Boston lady

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summate horseman. But she is a eunuch for others, void of relation. There's Pokey Prothoro, rich, society, dumb, sexy, potentially interesting, but never given attention; there's Priss, a young New Dealer who has no breasts but breast-feeds her baby—one can hardly remember more about her. Finally there's a real duncey broad who becomes a literary agent. One can't even recall her name.

Now, this sparse gallery offers a flaccid springboard from which to jump into a major novel of the thirties. But Mary McCarthy is too much of an old pro not to see the odds. Her characters will come from one class and make no heroic journeys to other classes, they will not look to participate in the center of the history that is being made, and they will be the victim of no outsize passion. Nor will they be made sufficiently eccentric to separate clearly from one another. They will be called Lakey and Kay, Pokey and Polly, Dottie, Helena, Norine, and Priss. Nor will there be an attempt to avoid the proportions which are consequent. She will take these women, nearly all finally dull, because they have neither the interest to break out of the cage of their character nor even the necessity—the cage is not that cruel; the girls are merely premature suburbanites—and she will obey the logic of the intricately educated and dull, she will follow them through their furniture and their recipes, she will give us lists of categories that no sociologist would ever dare. This is the most dangerous hurdle of them all; this is the one any professional knows to avoid unless he is willing to dare a real fall. Because lists and categories in novels must be consummately perfect, each detail quivering with the illumination of a touch of true love or a hint of the deep, or indeed you are dead. Lists and categories are always the predictable refuge of the passionless, and the mediocre, who will not make another move until they have exhausted the last.

These are real odds, what! These piss-out characters with their cultivated banalities, their lack of variety or ambition, perversion, simple greed, or depth of feeling, their indifference to the bedrock of a collective novel—the large social events of the season or decade which gave impetus to conceiving the book in such a way. Yes, our Mary's a sneak. Like any First Lady she disapproves of unseemly ambition, and yet she is trying a novel that is all but impossible to bring off in a big way. No ordinary ambition here. Megalomania indeed. Her little boutique on the

when it comes to personal relations.

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Avenue is going to open in competition to Proust's Tiffany.

Well, one cannot certify her as mad. The odds are a hundred to one or a thousand to one against bringing off the book, but it is possible. At least it is existentially possible. For until some great new realist arises, some modern Zola, we will not know. The work of realism was done for the nineteenth century, but whether it can be done for the middle of the twentieth century we shall indeed not know unless the attempt is made—so may have reasoned McCarthy. If one takes a little stillwater of society and captures it in its proportions, its style, its affairs, its moods, *its very relation to reality* (which is to say the mode by which it attempts to perceive reality), if one brings it to life, then a magic is worked. The little book of realistic details has of a sudden its resonance; it is a psychological reality which lives afterward in our brain, touches our motives, affects the history we in turn will make. Any book can do this if it is pure enough and true enough to create a turn of being in the mind of the reader. So goes the premise.

Say, then, did Lady M. bring it off? And the answer is that she came just far enough to irritate the life out of us, because it was ~~just far enough~~ to reinvigorate the premise—it is the grand premise of the novel—but she did not climb high enough ~~not~~ ^{indeed, nearly} ~~clearly enough in the deep councils of her sleep to get up over the first ridge and~~ start a base camp from which one could decide if the mountain is to be negotiated from this direction.

All right, but why did she fail? And this is how ten thousand ~~more words are demanded and one thousand must suffice~~ ^{to}. But first let credit be given to her formal virtues. Because her sense of detail, while suffering from a fatal if tiny taint of the monotonous and overindulgent, is still her single most impressive ~~achievement~~ ^{achievement} → *achiev-*. Her book fails as a novel by being good but not nearly good enough, it fails for a variety of temperamental and characterological reasons soon to be listed, but it is enormously successful as sociology. It will continue to exist as a ~~classic in sociology~~ ^{nice work of} long after it is dim and dull as a novel; it ~~will~~ survive in Soc Sci I at every university and junior college: The specific details are to be mined by the next twenty-five classes of Ph.D.'s.

And at its best, *The Group* is far better than that. It is skillful, intricately knitted as a novel; its characters, while not always distinguishable from one another, are true in their reactions, or at least are true in the severe field of limitation she puts on their

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comings and goings, their paltry passions, their lack of grasp, their lack of a desire to grasp. It is all true what she does, it is just not true enough. Her eye sees with a knife's edge, but her hand, overwary of drama and surprise, blunts the stroke. The book, like a person in depression, is dull in its basic condition—it comes to life only by a stirring, a moment of inspiration, then it lapses into dullness again. And details sweep in and sweep away the possibilities for each little scene to become sufficiently alive to wake up the others. She is to be given respect for conceiving a novel such as this and laying out the ground plan, she is an engineer *manqué* in literature, but her failure diverts judgment away from her technique and over to her character. She is simply not a good enough woman to write a major novel; not yet; she has failed, she has failed from the center out, she failed out of vanity, the accumulated vanity of being overpraised through the years for too little and so being pleased with herself for too little; she failed out of profound timidity—like any good Catholic-born she is afraid to unloose the demons; she failed out of snobbery ~~and~~ *also* compassion for her characters is beginning to stir at last in this book, she can still not approve of anyone who is incapable of performing the small act exquisitely well; she failed by an act of the imagination, there is something ~~cockeyed in her vision and~~ *also* self-satisfied in her demands and this contributes to the failure of her style. The long unbroken paragraphs settle in like bricks. They are all too equal to one another—it is the wrong book in which to lose one's place; there is even mild physical boredom in the act of reading, as if one were watching ~~a wall~~ *bricks* being stacked up rather than seeing the metamorphosis of a creature.

Finally she suffers from a lack of reach. She chooses to be not close enough to the horror in the closet. Her nice girls are refugees from the schisms, the wrinklins, and the crater mold of the upper middle class, that radiation belt of well-to-do Protestants full of church, rectitude, exclusion, guilt, and insanity. Is there a nice rich Episcopalian family or fine Presbyterian clan in our American world which does not have its important secret member raving mad? Nice girls live on the thin, juiceless crust of the horror beneath, the screaming incest, the buried diabolisms of the grand and the would-be grand. One does not have to have that in one's novel, but one has to have a sense of that madness if the book is to be resonant. Yet Mary is too weak to push through the crust and so cannot achieve a view of the world

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which has root.

Ultimately, novelists must believe that the people who run the world are essentially good, are an expression of God's work (a conservative view), or in antithesis must decide that the Devil is at the shoulder of every ruler. One can presumably write a great novel from either point of view or some conciliation of the two (Proust, Henry James, James Joyce, André Malraux come to mind) but one cannot make a Being of a realistic novel if it has no root. Then there are merely sniffings, snippings, and clippings, codicils of taste, and quick exits for bad taste. Mary's vice is her terror of being ridiculous, and so she is in danger of ending up absurd, an old-maid collector of Manx cats, no tails and six toes, an anomaly of God. It even invades her vision. One called her cockeyed for a cause. There is an atrocious anachronism in the book. Her characters, while engaged in the activities of the Thirties, have a consciousness whose style derives directly from the Fifties. One has to keep reminding oneself that these events did not take place ten years ago, but thirty years ago, and this is unforgivable. It is like wrapping a tuning fork in velvet. Her little book so full of promise and quiver ends up soggy and damp. What rings true does not please the ear, what pleases is not quite true. So the book seems stuffed with cotton and catalogues.

Yet when all is said, *The Group* has one fresh virtue. It has something new in it; it has a conception of the novel which is Mary's own, a tool by which to cut an ascent into some of the sheer ice faces of the social world. And that is her method. Her Method. For she has divined the first law of our social world, which is that we learn by what we can glean from a hundred alienations of context, from a thousand suffocations of our emotions. Mary may be the first American to try this in a thorough-going way. Everything in the profound materiality of women is given its full stop until the Eggs Benedict and the dress with the white fichu, the pessary and the whatnot, sit on the line of the narrative like commas and periods, semicolons, italics, and accents. The real interplay of the novel exists between the characters and the objects that surround them, until the faces are swimming in a cold lava of anality, which becomes the truest part of her group, her glop, her impacted mass.

If, at the highest level, she has failed and even failed miserably to do more than write the best novel the editors of the women's

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magazines ever conceived in *their* secret ambitions, it is nonetheless possible now to conceive that McCarthy may finally get tough enough to go with the boys. She has been a very bad girl these years, mean and silly, postured and overpetted, petty in the extreme, but now there's a hint she may be capable some day of taking a real step, a suggestion that the Saints will preserve our Mary-Joan and bless her with a book that can comprehend a man. Does anyone know where society will end if the heroine of *The Company She Keeps* should encounter Julien Sorel?

But such conjecture is moot. For the present, a decision: Mary McCarthy is judged Guilty of Meretriciousness and equally Guilty of conspiring not to give the goose away, which means, thus, Guilty of refusing to reveal that the genteel lords and ladies who manage America are the psychic descendants of Conrad's Kurtz. "Ah, the horror, the horror," and she will not take a burning look.

PREFACE
TO "SOME CHILDREN
OF THE GODDESS"

on ~~As we approach the end of this~~
I've decided to ~~end the~~ book with a critical roundup of a good many novelists who were working thirty-eight years ago, back in 1965. Some of the assessments show literary acumen, some—particularly those of Roth and Updike and Styron—have much too small a sense of their future and impressive development. But that is to be expected. The best definition of an expert is that he or she will be right fifty percent of the time. (One should be as good as heads or tails!)

a choice between
I decided to offer this piece ~~here~~ because I was struck with how consistent my literary values have been. If most people, including myself, see me as exceptionally changeable, that has not been true of my approach to the art and practice of the novel. Indeed, my present sentiments are virtually the same as my literary tenets, credos, biases, and imperatives thirty-eight years ago. It is nice to know that something in yourself is constant over a period nearly equal to half your life and so reads to you now as if you had written it just last year.

~~SOME CHILDREN OF THE GODDESS~~ *top 325*

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when he was twenty-six, and it was so good (one need today only compare it to *Rabbit, Run* to see how very good it was) that one felt a kind of awe about Styron. He gave promise of becoming a great writer, great not like Hemingway nor even like Faulkner, whom he resembled a bit, but great perhaps like Hawthorne. And there were minor echoes of Fitzgerald and Malcolm Lowry. Since his first novel had failed to make him a household word in America, he had a justifiable bitterness about the obscurity in which good young writers were kept. But it poisoned his reaction to everything. One of the traps for a writer of exceptional talent, recognized insufficiently, is the sort of excessive rage which washes out distinction. Styron was intensely competitive—all good young novelists are—but over the years envy began to eat into his character. Months before James Jones's *Some Came Running* was published (and it had the greatest advance publicity of any novel I remember—for publicity seemed to begin two years before publication), Styron obtained a copy of the galleys. There were long nights in Connecticut on "Styron's Acres" when he would entertain a group of us by reading absurd passages from Jones's worst prose. I would laugh along with the rest, but I was a touch sick with myself. I had love for Jones, as well as an oversized fear for the breadth of his talent, and I had enough envy in me to enjoy how very bad were the worst parts of *Some Came Running*. But there were long, powerful chapters as well; some of the best writing Jones has ever done is found in that book. So I would laugh in paroxysms along with the others, but I was also realizing that a part of me had wanted *Some Came Running* to be a major book. I was in the doldrums; I needed a charge of dynamite. If *Some Came Running* had turned out to be the best novel any of us had written since the war, I would have had to get to work. It would have meant the Bitch was in love with someone else, and I would have had to try to win her back. But the failure of *Some Came Running* left me holding onto a buttock of the lady—if she had many lovers, I was still one of them. And so everything in me which was slack and conservative could enjoy Styron's burlesque readings. Yet I also knew I had lost an opportunity.

A few months later, I ceased seeing Styron—it would take a chapter in a novel to tell you why. I liked the boy in Styron, disliked the man, and had vast admiration for his talent. I was hardly the one to read *Set This House on Fire* with a cool mind.

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Nine years had gone by since *Lie Down in Darkness* was published, and the anticipation of the second novel had taken on grandiloquent proportions among his friends and his closest enemies. One knew it would be close to unbearable if his book were extraordinary; yet a part of me felt again what I had known with *Some Came Running*—that it would be good for me and for my work if Styron's novel were better than anything any of us had done. So I read it with a hot sense of woe, delighted elation, and a fever of moral speculations. Because it was finally a bad novel. A bad, maggoty novel. Four or five half-great short stories were buried like pullulating organs in a corpse of fecal matter, overblown unconceived philosophy, Technicolor melodramatics, and a staggering ignorance about the passions of murder, suicide, and rape. It was the magnum opus of a fat spoiled rich boy who could write like an angel about landscape and like an adolescent about people. The minor characters were gargoyles, and badly drawn. Here and there quick portraits emerged—there was one excellent still life of an Italian police official who was Fascist—the set pieces were laid out nicely, but the vice of the talent insisted on dominating. Whenever Styron didn't know what to do with his men and women (which was often, for they repeated themselves as endlessly as a Southern belle) Styron went back to his landscape; more of the portentous Italian scenery blew up its midnight storm. But Styron was trying to write a book about good and evil, and his good was as vacuous as the spirit of an empty water bag:

I can only tell you this, that as for being and nothingness, the one thing I did know was that to choose between them was simply to choose being, not for the sake of being, or even the love of being, much less the desire to be forever—but in the hope of being what I could be for a time.

Which is a great help to all of us.

His evil character took on the fatal sin of an evil character: He was not dangerous but pathetic. A fink. Styron was crawling with all ten thumbs toward that ogre of mystery who guards the secrets of why we choose to kill others and quiver in dread at the urge to kill ourselves. But like a bad general who surrounds himself with a staff which daren't say no, Styron spent his time digging trenches for miles to the left and miles to the right, and

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never launched an attack on the hill before him. It was the book of a man whose soul had gotten fat.

And yet, much as I could be superior to myself for having taken him thus seriously, for having written predictions in *Advertisements for Myself* that he would write a very good book which the mass media would call great, much as I would grin each day after reading a hundred pages of hothouse beauty and butter bilge, much as I would think, "You don't catch the Bitch that way, buster, you got to bring more than a trombone to her boudoir," much so much as I was pleased at the moral justice which forbids a novelist who envied too much the life of others to capture much life in his own pages, I was still not altogether happy, because I knew his failure was making me complacent again and so delaying once more the day when I would have to pay my respects to the lady.

And indeed I lost something by the failure of *Some Came Running* and *Set This House on Fire*. I never did get going far on my novel. I wrote a four-hour play and essays and articles; two hundred thousand words accumulated over the years since *Advertisements for Myself*, and I showed a talent for getting into stunts, and worse, much worse. Years went by. Now once again, in this season, ready to start my novel about the mysteries of murder and suicide,* I found by taking stock of psychic credit and debit that I had lost some of my competitive iron. I knew a bit of sadness about work. I did not feel sure I could do what I had now settled for doing, and to my surprise I was curious what others were up to. If I couldn't bring off the work by myself, it might be just as well if someone else could give a sign of being ready to make the attempt. In this sad dull mellow mood, feeling a little like a middle-aged mountaineer, I read at one stretch over three weeks the novels I want to write about here.

*This novel was a continuation thematically of the long novel announced in *Advertisements for Myself*. It was put aside six months later to go to work on *An American Dream*.

There was a time, I suspect, when James Jones wanted to be the greatest writer who ever lived. Now, if *The Thin Red Line* is evidence of his future, he has apparently decided to settle for being a very good writer among other good writers. The faults and barbarities of his style are gone. He is no longer the worst writer

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of prose ever to give intimations of greatness. The language has been filed down and the phrases no longer collide like trailer trucks at a hot intersection. Yet I found myself nostalgic for the old bad prose. I never used to think it was as bad as others did—it was eloquent and communicated Jones' force to the reader. It is not that *The Thin Red Line* is dishonest or narrow; on the contrary it is so broad and true a portrait of combat that it could be used as a textbook at the Infantry School ~~if the Army is any less chicken than it used to be~~. But, sign of the times, there is now something almost too workmanlike about Jones. He gets almost everything in—horror, fear, fatigue, the sport of combat, the hang-ups, details, tactics; he takes an infantry company through its early days in combat on Guadalcanal and quits it a few weeks later as a veteran outfit, blooded, tough, up on morale despite the loss of half the original men, gone, dead, wounded, sick or transferred. So he performs the virtuoso feat of letting us know a little about a hundred men. One can even (while reading) remember their names. Jones's aim, after all, is not to create character but the feel of combat, the psychology of men. He is close to a master at this. Jones has a strong sense of a man's psychology and it carries quietly through his pages.

The Thin Red Line was of course compared to *The Naked and the Dead*, but apart from the fact that I am the next-to-last man to judge the respective merits of the two books, I didn't see them as similar. *The Naked and the Dead* is concerned more with characters than military action. By comparison it's a leisurely performance. *The Thin Red Line* is as crammed as a movie treatment. No, I think the real comparison is to *The Red Badge of Courage*, and I suspect *The Red Badge of Courage* will outlive *The Thin Red Line*. Yet I don't quite know why. *The Thin Red Line* is a more detailed book; it tells much more of combat, studies the variations in courage and fear of not one man but twenty men and gets something good about each one of them. Its knowledge of life is superior to that of *The Red Badge of Courage*. *The Thin Red Line* is less sentimental, its humor is dry to the finest taste, and yet . . . it is too technical. One needs ten topographical maps to trace the action. With all its variety, scrupulosity, respect for craft, one doesn't remember *The Thin Red Line* with that same nostalgia, that same sense of a fire on the horizon which comes back always from *The Red Badge of Courage*.

No, Jones's book is better remembered as satisfying, as if one

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had studied geology for a semester and now knew more. I suppose what was felt lacking is the curious sensuousness of combat, the soft lift of awe and pleasure that one was moving out onto the rim of the dead. If one was not too tired, there were times when a blade of grass coming out of the ground before one's nose was as significant as the finger of Jehovah in the Sistine Chapel. And this was not because a blade of grass was necessarily in itself so beautiful or because hitting the dirt was so sweet but because the blade seemed to be a living part of the crack of small-arms fire and the palpable flotation of all the other souls in the platoon full of turd and glory. Now, it's not that Jones is altogether ignorant of this state. The description he uses is "sexy," and one of the nicest things about Jim as a writer is his ease in moving from mystical to practical reactions with his characters. Few novelists can do this—it's the hint of greatness—but I think he steered *The Thin Red Line* away from its chance of becoming an American classic of the first rank when he kept the mystical side of his talents on bread and water and gave his usual thoroughgoing company man's exhibition of how much he knows technically about his product. I think that is the mistake. War is as full of handbooks as engineering, but it is more of a mystery, and the mystery is what separates the great war novels from the good ones. It is an American activity to cover the ground quickly, but I guess this is one time Jones should have written two thousand pages, not four hundred ninety-five. But then the underlying passion in this book is not to go for broke but to promise the vested idiots of the book reviews that he can write as good as anyone who writes a book review.

When you discuss eight or ten books, there is a dilemma. The choice is to write eight separate book reviews or work to find a thesis that ties the books together. There is something lickspittle about the second method: "Ten Authors in Search of a Viable Theme" or "The Sense of Alienation in Eight American Novelists." A bed of Procrustes is brought in from the wings to stretch and shorten the separate qualities of the books. I would rather pick up each book by itself and make my connections on the fly. The thesis of the Bitch is thesis enough for me. Its application to Jones would say that *The Thin Red Line* is a holding action, a long-distance call to the Goddess to declare that one still has one's hand in, expect red roses for sure, but for the time, you

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know, like, there're contacts to make on the road, and a few Johns to impress.

Another Country, by James Baldwin, is as different from *The Thin Red Line* as two books by talented novelists published in the same year can turn out to be. It does not deal with a hundred characters but eight, and they are very much related. In fact there is a chain of fornication that is all but complete. A Negro musician named Rufus Scott has an affair with a white Southern girl which ends in beatings, breakdown, and near-insanity. She goes to a mental hospital; he commits suicide. The connection is taken up by his sister, who has an affair with a white writer, a friend of Rufus's named Vivaldo Moore, who in turn gets into bed with a friend named Eric, who is homosexual but having an affair with a married woman named Cass Silenski, which affair wrecks her marriage with her husband, Richard, another writer, and leaves Eric waiting at the boat for his French lover Yves. A summary of this sort can do a book no good, but I make it to trace the links. With the exception of Rufus Scott, who does not go to bed with his sister, everybody else in the book is connected by skin to another character, who is connected to still another. So the principal in the book, the protagonist, is not an individual character, not society, not a milieu, not a social organism like an infantry company, but indeed is sex, sex very much in the act. And almost the only good writing in the book is about the act. And some of that is very good indeed. But *Another Country* is a shocker. For the most part it is an abominably written book. It is sluggish in its prose, lifeless for its first hundred pages, stilted to despair in its dialogue. There are roles in plays called actor-proof. They are so conceived that even the worst actor will do fairly well. So *Another Country* is writer-proof. Its peculiar virtue is that Baldwin commits every *gaffe* in the art of novel writing and yet has a powerful book. It gets better of course; after the first hundred pages it gets a lot better. Once Eric, the homosexual, enters, the work picks up considerably. But what saves the scene is that Baldwin has gotten his hands into the meat and won't let go. All the sex in the book is displaced, whites with blacks, men with men, women with homosexuals; the sex is funky to suffocation, rich but claustrophobic, sensual but airless. Baldwin understands the existential abyss of love. In a world of Negroes and whites, nuclear fallout, marijuana, bennies, inversion, insomnia, and tapering off with beer at four in the morn-

ing, one no longer just falls in love—one has to take a brave leap over the wall of one's impacted rage and cowardice. And nobody makes it, not quite. Each of the characters rides his sexual chariot, whip out, on a gallop over a solitary track, and each is smashed, more or less by his own hand. They cannot find the juice to break out of their hatred into the other country of love. Except for the homosexuals, who can't break into heterosexual love. Of all the novels talked about here, *Another Country* is the one which is closest to the mood of New York in our time, a way of saying it is close to the air of the Western world; it is at least a novel about matters which are important, but one can't let up on Baldwin for the way he wrote it. Years ago I termed him "minor" as a writer; I thought he was too smooth and too small. Now, on his essays alone, on the long continuing line of poetic fire in his essays, one knows he has become one of the few writers of our time. But as a Negro novelist he could take lessons from a good journeyman like John Killens. Because *Another Country* is almost a major novel and yet it is far and away the weakest and worst near-major novel one has finished. It goes like the first draft of a first novelist who has such obvious stuff that one is ready, if an editor, to spend years guiding him into how to write, even as one winces at the sloppy company that must be kept. Nobody has more elegance than Baldwin as an essayist, not one of us hasn't learned something about the art of the essay from him, and yet he can't even find a good prose for his novel. Maybe the form is not for him. He knows what he wants to say, and that is not the best condition for writing a novel. Novels go happiest when you discover something you did not know you knew. Baldwin's experience has shaped his tongue toward directness for urgency—the honorable defense may be that he has not time nor patience to create characters, milieu, and mood for the revelation of important complexities he has already classified in his mind.

Baldwin's characters maim themselves trying to smash through the wall of their imprisonment. William Burroughs gives what may be the finest record in our century of the complete psychic convict. *Naked Lunch* is a book of pieces and fragments, notes and highmarish anecdotes, which he wrote—according to his preface—in various states of delirium, going in and out of a heroin addiction. It is not a novel in any conventional sense, but

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merry gifts. Heller may yet become Gogol. But what makes one hesitate to call his first novel great or even major is that he has only grasped the inferior aspect of Hell. What is most unendurable is not the military world of total frustration so much as the midnight frustration of the half-world, Baldwin's other country, where a man may have time to hear his soul, and time to go deaf, even be forced to contemplate himself as he becomes deadened before his death. (Much as Hemingway may have been.) That is when one becomes aware of the anguish, the existential *angst*, which wars enable one to forget. It is that other death—without war—where one dies by a failure of nerve, which opens the bloodiest vents of Hell. And that is a novel none of us has yet come back alive to write.

With the exception of *Another Country*, the novels talked about up to now have been books written for men. *Catch-22* was liked, I believe, by almost every man who read it. Women were puzzled. The world of a man is a world of surface slick and rock knowledge. A man must live by daily acts where he goes to work and works on the world some incremental bit, using the tools, instruments, and the techniques of the world. Thus a man cannot afford to go too deeply into the underlying meaning of a single subject. He prefers to become interested in quick proportions and contradictions, in the practical surface of things. A book like *Catch-22* is written on the face of solemn events and their cockeyed contradictions. So it has a vast appeal: it relieves the frustration men feel at the idiocy of their work. *Naked Lunch* fries the surface in a witch's skillet; the joy in reading is equal to the kick of watching a television announcer go insane before your eyes and start to croon obscenely about the President, First Lady, Barry Goldwater, Cardinal Spellman, J. Edgar. Somewhere in America somebody would take out his pistol and shoot the set. Burroughs shatters the surface and blasts its shards into the madness beneath. He rips the reader free of suffocation. Jones wrote a book which a dedicated corporation executive or an ambitious foreman would read with professional avidity because he would learn a bit about the men who work for him. *The Thin Red Line* brings detail to the surprises on the toughest part of the skin. So these three books are, as I say, books for men. Whereas *Another Country*, obsessed with that transcendental divide keeping sex from love, is a book more for women, or for

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men and women. So too is *Set This House on Fire*. And much the same can be said of *Rabbit, Run* and *Letting Go*.

On record are the opinions of a partisan. So it is necessary to admit that John Updike's novel was approached with animus. His reputation has traveled in convoy up the Avenue of the Establishment, *The New York Times Book Review* blowing sirens like a motorcycle caravan, the professional muse of *The New Yorker* sitting in the Cadillac, membership cards to the right Fellowships in his pocket. The sort of critics who are rarely right about a book—Arthur Mizener and Granville Hicks, for example—ride on his flanks, literary bodyguards. *Life* magazine blew its kiss of death into the confetti. To my surprise, *Rabbit, Run* was therefore a better book than I thought it would be. The Literary Establishment was improving its taste. Updike was not simply a junior edition of James Gould Cozzens. But of course the Establishment cannot nominate a candidate coherently. Updike's merits and vices were turned inside out. The good girlish gentlemen of letters were shocked by the explicitness of the sex in *Rabbit, Run*, and slapped him gently for that with their fan, but his style they applauded. It is Updike's misfortune that he is invariably honored for his style (which is atrocious—and smells like stale garlic) and is insufficiently recognized for his gifts. He could become the best of our literary novelists if he could forget about style and go deeper into the literature of sex. *Rabbit, Run* moves in well-modulated spurts at precisely those places where the style subsides to a ladylike murmur and the characters take over. The trouble is that young John, like many a good young writer before him, does not know exactly what to do when action lapses, and so he cultivates his private vice; he *writes*. And there are long over-fingered descriptions in exacerbated syntax, airless crypts of four or five pages, huge inner exertion reminiscent of weight-lifters; a stale sweet sweat clings to his phrases.

Example: *Redbook*, *Cosmopolitan*, *McCall's*.

Boys are playing basketball around a telephone pole with a backboard bolted to it. Legs, shouts. The scrape and snap of Keds on loose alley pebbles seems to catapult their voices high into the moist March air blue above the wires. Rabbit Angstrom, coming up the alley in a business suit, stops and watches, though he's twenty-six and six-three. So

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tall, he seems an unlikely rabbit, but the breadth of white face, the pallor of his blue irises, and a nervous flutter under his brief nose as he stabs a cigarette into his mouth partially explain the nickname.

Example: *True Confessions*.

Outside in the air his fears condense. Globes of ether, pure nervousness, slide down his legs. The sense of outside space scoops at his chest.

Example: *Elements of Grammar*.

His hands lift of their own and he feels the wind on his ears even before, his heels hitting heavily on the pavement at first but with an effortless gathering out of a kind of sweet panic growing lighter and quicker and quieter, he runs. Ah: runs. Runs.

It's the rare writer who cannot have sentences lifted from his work, but the first quotation is taken from the first five sentences of the book, the second is on the next-to-last page, and the third is nothing less than the last three sentences of the novel. The beginning and end of a novel are usually worked over. They are the index to taste in the writer. Besides, trust your local gangster. In the run of Updike's pages are one thousand other imprecise, flatulent, wry-necked, precious, over-preening, self-indulgent, tortured sentences. It is the sort of prose which would be admired in a writing course overseen by a fussy old nance. And in Updike's new book, *The Centaur*, which was only sampled, the style has gotten worse. Pietisms are congregating, affirmations à la Archibald MacLeish.

The pity is that Updike has instincts for finding the heart of the conventional novel, that still-open no-man's-land between the surface and the deep, the soft machinery of the world and the subterranean rigors of the dream. His hero, Rabbit Angstrom, is sawed in two by the clear anguish of watching his private vision go at a gallop away from the dread real weight of his responsibility. A routine story of a man divided between a dull wife he cannot bear to live with and a blowsy tough tender whore he cannot make it with, the merit of the book is not in the simplicity of its problem but in the dread Updike manages to convey, despite the literary commercials in the style, of a young man who is beginning to lose nothing less than his good Ameri-

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can soul, and yet it is not quite his fault. The power of the novel comes from a sense, not absolutely unworthy of Thomas Hardy, that the universe hangs over our fates like a great sullen hopeless sky. There is real pain in the book, and a touch of awe. It is a novel which could have been important—it could have had a chance to stay alive despite its mud pies in prose—but at the very end the book drowns in slime. Updike does not know how to finish. Faced with the critical choice of picking one woman or another (and by the end, both women are in fearful need), his character bolts over a literal hill and runs away. Maybe he'll be back tomorrow, maybe he'll never be back, but a decision was necessary. The book ends as minor, a pop-out. One is left with the expectation that Updike will never be great; there is something too fatally calculated about his inspiration. But very good he can be, a good writer of the first rank, with occasional echoes from the profound. First he must make an enemy or two of the commissioners on the Literary Mafia. Of course a man spends his life trying to get up his guts for such a caper.

Letting Go, by Philip Roth, has precisely the opposite merits and faults. As a novel, its strategy is silly, tiresome, and weak. But its style, while not noteworthy, is decent and sometimes, in dialogue, halfway nice. It is good time spent to read any ten pages in the book. The details are observed, the mood is calm, the point is always made. It is like having an affair with a pleasant, attentive woman—the hours go by neatly. It is only at the end of a year that one may realize the preoccupations of the mistress are hollow and the seasons have been wasted.

Letting Go is a scrupulous account in upper-Jewish New Yorker genre of a few years in the lives of two English Department college instructors, one married to that most coveted of creatures, a fragile dreary hang-up of a heroine, the other a bachelor and lover of worried proportions. Very little happens. The wife goes on being herself, the husband remains naturally frozen and stingy, and the instructor-lover has a small literary breakdown. One can say, Well, isn't this life? Didn't Chekhov and de Maupassant write about such things? And the answer is, yes they did, in five pages they did, and caught that mood which reminds us that there is sadness in attrition and grinding sorrows for decency. But Roth is not writing a book with a vision of life; on the contrary, one could bet a grand he is working out an

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and *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters*, seem to have been written for high-school girls. The second piece in the second book, called *Seymour*—*An Introduction*, must be the most slovenly portion of prose ever put out by an important American writer. It is not even professional Salinger. Salinger at his customary worst, as here in the other three stories of the two books, is never bad—he is just disappointing. He stays too long on the light ice of his gift, writes exquisite dialogue and creates minor moods with sweetness and humor, and never gives the fish its hook. He disappoints because he is always practicing. But when he dips into Seymour, the Glass brother who committed suicide, when the cult comes to silence before the appearance of the star—the principal, to everyone's horror, has nausea on the stage. Salinger for the first time is engaged in run-off writing, free suffragette prose; his inhibitions (which once helped by their restraint to create his style) are now stripped. He is giving you himself as he is. No concealment. It feels like taking a bath in a grease trap.

~~When all of us have written as badly there are nights when one comes home after a consciously dull party, full of liquor but not drunk, laden with boredom, somewhere out in Fitzgerald's long dark night. Writing at such a time is like making love at such a time. It is hopeless. It desecrates one's future, but one does it anyway because at least it is an act. Such writing is almost always unspurring. It is reminiscent of the wallflower who says, "To hell with inhibitions, I'm going to dance." The premise is that what comes out is valid because it is the record of a mood. So one records the mood. What a mood. Full of vomit, self-pity, panic, paranoia, megalomania, merde, whimpers, excuses, turns of the neck, flips of the wrist, transports. It is the bends of Hell. If you purge it, if you get sleep and tear it up in the morning, it can do no more harm than any other bad debauch. But Salinger went ahead and reread his stew, then sent it to *The New Yorker*, and they accepted it. Now, several years later, he reprints it in book covers.~~

There is social process at work here. Salinger was the most gifted minor writer in America. *The New Yorker's* ability is to produce such writers. The paradox comes from the social fact that *The New Yorker* is a major influence on American life. Hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of people in the most established parts of the middle class kill their quickest impulses before they

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dare to act in such a way as to look ridiculous to the private eye of their taste whose style has been keyed by the eye of *The New Yorker*. Salinger was the finest writer *The New Yorker* ever produced, but profoundly minor. The major writer like James Jones, indeed James Jones, leads the kind of inner life which enables him to study victories as well as defeats; Salinger was catapulted by a study of excruciating small defeats into a position of major importance. The phenomenon in the nation was the same those years. Men of minor abilities engaged America in major brinkmanships.

But it is always dangerous when the Literary Mafia (*The New Yorker*, the *Saturday Review*, *The New York Times Book Review*, *Time* magazine's book reviews, and the genteel elements in publishing) promotes a minor writer into a major writer. A vested interest attaches itself to keeping the corpse of the violated standards buried. Readers who might be average keen in their sense of literary value find their taste mucked up. The greatest damage in this case, however, seems to have been to Salinger himself. Because a writer, with aristocratic delicacy of intent and nerves so subtle that only isolation makes life bearable for him, has been allowed to let his talent fester in that corrupt isolation. Salinger has been the most important writer in America for a generation of adolescents and college students. He was their leader in exile. The least he owed them for his silence was a major performance.

But it's a rare man who can live like a hermit and produce a major performance, unless he has critics who are near to him and hard on him. No friend who worried about Salinger's future should have let him publish *Stymour—An Introduction* in *The New Yorker* without daring to lose his friendship first by telling him how awful it was. Yet there was too much depending on Salinger's interregnum—he was so *inoffensive*, finally. So a suspension of the critical faculty must have gone on in the institutional wheels of *The New Yorker* that was close to psychotic in its evasions.

As for the other three stories in the two books, they are not as good as the stories in *Nine Stories*. Affectations that were part once of Salinger's charm are now faults. An excessive desire to please runs through his pages. There is too much sweetness. He is too pleased with himself, too nice, he lingers too much over the happy facility of his details in a way Fitzgerald never would. He is no longer a writer so much as he is an entertainer, a slim,

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much-beloved version of Al Jolson or Sophie Tucker; the music hall is in the root of his impulse as much as the dungeons and mansions of literature. Does one desire the real irony? There is nothing in *Franny and Zooey* which would hinder it from becoming first-rate television. It is genre with all the limitations of genre: catalogs of items in the medicine chest, long intimate family conversations with life, snap with mother, crackle and pop. If I were a television producer I'd put on *Franny and Zooey* tomorrow. And indeed in ten years they will. America will have moved from *One Man's Family* to *The Glass Family*. Which is progress. I'd rather have the Glass family on the air. But don't confuse the issue. The Glass stories are not literature but television. And Salinger's work since *The Catcher in the Rye* is part of his long retreat from what is substantial, agonizing, uproarious, or close to awe and terror. *The Catcher in the Rye* was able to change people's lives. The new books are not even likely to improve the conversation in college dormitories. It is time Salinger came back to the city and got his hands dirty with a rough corruption or two, because the very items which composed the honor of his reputation—his resolute avoidance of the mass media and society—have now begun to back up on him. There is a taste of something self-absorptive, narcissistic, even putrefactive in his long contemplation of a lintless navel.

The value of past predictions by this critic may be judged by the following about Saul Bellow. It is taken from page 467 in *Advertisements for Myself*.

When and if I come to read *Henderson the Rain King*, let me hope I do not feel the critic's vested interest to keep a banished writer in limbo, for a sense uneasily that without reading it, I have already the beginnings of a negative evaluation for it since I doubt that I would believe in Henderson as a hero.

Well, one might as well eat the crow right here. Henderson is an exceptional character, almost worthy of Gulliver or Huckleberry Finn, and it is possible that of all the books mentioned in this piece, *Henderson the Rain King* comes the closest to being a great novel. Taken even by its smallest dimension, and its final failure, it will still become a classic, a fine curiosity of a book,

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