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and suffering no pains greater than the view of his empty pad of paper. Now, granted, that white sheet can look as blank as a television screen when the program is off the air, but that is not a danger, merely a deadening presence. The writer, unlike more active creative artists, works in no immediate peril. Why should not the open season begin so soon as the work comes out? If talented authors were to have it better than actors in all ways, there would be a tendency for actors to disappear and talented authors to multiply, so the critics keep our numbers down.

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

superficial book reviewing is irresponsible and serious literary criticism can be close to merciless. The conviction that such a condition is fair has to take root deep enough to bear analogy to the psychology of a peasant who farms a mountain slope and takes it for granted that he or she was meant to toil through the years with one foot standing higher than the other.

Every good author who manages to forge a long career must be able, therefore, to build a character that will not be unhinged by a bad reception. That takes art. Few writers have rugged personalities when they are young. In general, the girls seldom look like potential beauty contest winners and the boys show small promise of becoming future All-Americans. They are most likely to be found on the sidelines, commencing to cook up that warped, passionate, bitter, transcendent view of life which will bring them later to the attention of the American public. But only later! The young writer usually starts as a loser and so is obliged to live with the conviction that the world he knows had better be wrong or he or she is wrong. On the answer depends one's evaluation of one's right to survive. Thanks to greed, plastics, mass media, and various abominations of technology—lo, the world is wrong. The paranoid aim of a cockeyed young writer has as much opportunity to hit the target as the beauty queen's wide-eyed lack of paranoia. So occasionally this loser of a young writer ends up a winner, for a while. His vision has projected him forward; he is just enough ahead of his time. But dependably, that wretched, lonely act of writing will force him back. Writing arouses too much commotion in one's psyche to allow the author to rest happily.

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

THE LIT WRITER AT WORK DOES NOT TOLERATE TOO MUCH GOOD NEWS

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either. At your desk, it is best if you do not come to like yourself too much. Wonderfully agreeable memories may appear on certain mornings, but if they have nothing to do with the work, they must be banished or they will leave the writer too cheerful, too energetic, too forgiving, too horny. It is in the calm depression of a good judge that one's scribblings move best over the page. Indeed, just as a decent judge will feel that he has injured society by giving an unjust verdict, so does an author have to ask himself constantly if he is being fair to his characters. For if the writer does violate the life of someone who is being written about—that is, proceeds in the ongoing panic of trying to keep a book amusing to distort one's characters to more comic, more corrupt, or more evil forms than one secretly believes they deserve—then one may be subtly injuring the reader. That is a moral crime. Few authors are innocent of such a practice; on the other hand, not so many artists can be found who are not also guilty of softening their portraits. Some writers don't want to destroy the sympathy their readers may feel for an appealing heroine by the admission that she shrieks at her children. Sales fly out the window. It takes as much literary integrity to be tough, therefore, as to be fair. The trail is narrow. It is difficult to keep up one's literary standards through the long, slogging reaches of the middle of a book. The early pleasures of conception no longer sustain you; the writer plods along with the lead feet of habit, the dry breath of discipline, and the knowledge that on the other side of the hill, the critics—who also have their talent to express—are waiting. Sooner or later you come to the conclusion that if you are going to survive, you had better, where it concerns your own work, become the best critic of them all. There is a saying among boxers that the punch you see coming hurts less than the one you never saw at all. An author who would find the resources to keep writing from one generation to the next does well to climb above his own ego high enough to see every flaw in the work. Otherwise he will never be able to decide what are its true merits.

Let yourself live, however, with an awareness of your book's lacks and shortcuts, its gloss where courage might have produced a little real shine, and you can bear the bad reviews. You can even tell when the critic is not exposing your psyche so much as taking off his own dirty socks. It proves amazing how many evil reviews one can digest if there is a confidence one has

done one's best on a book, written to the limit of one's honesty, even scraped off a little of one's dishonesty. Get to that point of purity and your royalties may be injured by a small welcome but not your working morale. There is even hope that if the book is better than its reception, one's favorite readers will come eventually to care for it more. (It is, after all, a lovely but hitherto unloved child!) The prescription, therefore, is simple: One must not put out a job that has any serious taint of the meretricious. At least the prescription ought to be simple, but then how few of us ever do work of which we are not in fact a bit ashamed. It comes down to a matter of degree. There is that remark of Engels to Marx, "Quantity changes quality." A single potato is there for us to eat, but ten thousand potatoes are a commodity and have to be put in bins or boxes. A profit must be made from them or a loss will certainly be taken. By analogy, a little corruption in a book is as forgivable as the author's style, but a sizable literary delinquency is a diseased organ, or so it will feel if the critics begin to bang on it and happen to be right for once. That will be the hour when one's creditors do not go away. I wonder if we have not touched the fear that is back of the writing in many a good novelist's heart, the hazard beneath all others.

To the risks I just cited, let me add what may be the subtlest one of all. Some talented people feel they still haven't read enough to sit down and write. That is paralyzing. My great friend Malaquais had a terrible time. He had read more than anyone I knew. Like many another self-educated man, he had a powerful mind. But he couldn't write quickly, because he could see everything that was wrong in what he did. He'd realize that so-and-so—whichever: Stendhal, Racine, Molière—had done it better. This even extended into the narrowest corners. Some unheralded Polish novelist who was known for one small ability—Malaquais had read him, too. What an agony that he couldn't write a book as large as his vision of society. He was forever living in the harshest judgment on his talents. He could sit for twelve or fourteen hours at his desk and end with a page of work, no more, for the day. He had a good style but not good enough for him. "You must be ready," he would say, "to piss blood in order to find the right tone."

STYLE

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

In my case, *Advertisements* was the first work I wrote with a style that I could call my own, but I didn't begin it until 1958, ten years after *The Naked and the Dead* was published. In between had come *Barbary Shore* and *The Deer Park* and I never want to have again two novels as hard to write.

I did not know what I was doing. Apart from the psychological vertigo that will attack any athlete, performer, or young entrepreneur who has huge early success, I had my own particular problem, a beauty—I did not know my métier. *The Naked and the Dead* had been written out of what I could learn from reading James T. Farrell and John Dos Passos, with good doses of Thomas Wolfe and Tolstoy, plus homeopathic tinctures from Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Faulkner, Melville, and Dostoyevsky. With such help, it was a book that wrote itself.

I knew, however, it was no literary achievement. I had done a book in a general style borrowed from many people and did not know what I had of my own to say. I had not had enough of my own life yet. The idea could even be advanced that style comes

to young authors about the time they recognize that life is also ready to injure them. Something out there is not necessarily fooling. It would explain why authors who were ill in their childhood almost always arrive early in their career as developed stylists: Proust, Capote, and Alberto Moravia give three examples; Gide offers another. This notion would certainly account for the early and complete development of Hemingway's style. He had, before he was twenty, the unmistakable sensation of being wounded so near to death that he felt his soul slide out of him, then slip back.

The average young author is not that ill in childhood or that harshly used by early life. His little social deaths are sometimes balanced by his small social conquests. So he writes in the style of others while searching for his own, and tends to look for words more than rhythms. In his haste to dominate the world (rare is the young writer who is not a consummate prick), he also tends to choose his words for their precision, their ability to define, their acrobatic action. His style often changes from scene to scene, from paragraph to paragraph. He may know a little about creating mood, but the essence of good writing is that it sets a mood as intense as a theatrical piece and then alters that mood, enlarges it, conducts it over to another mood. Every sentence, precise or imprecise, vaulting or modest, is careful not to poke a hyperactive finger through the tissue of the mood. Nor do the sentences ever become so empty of personal quality that the prose sinks to the ground of the page. It is an achievement that comes from having thought about one's life right to the point where one is living it. Everything that happens seems capable of offering its own addition to one's knowledge. One has arrived at a personal philosophy or has even reached that rare plateau where one is attached to one's philosophy. At that juncture, everything one writes comes out of one's own fundamental mood.

Some such development may have gone on in me over the ten years from the publication of *The Naked and the Dead* to the commencement of work on *Advertisements for Myself*. In any event, it became the book in which I tried to separate my legitimate spiritual bile from my self-pity, and maybe it was the hardest continuing task I had yet set myself. What aggravated every problem was that I was also trying to give up smoking, and as a corollary of kicking nicotine, I was thrust into the problem of style itself.

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In those days, my psyche felt as different without cigarettes as my body felt in moving from air to water. It was as if I perceived with different senses, and clear reactions were blunted. Writing without cigarettes, the word I looked for almost never came, not in quick time. In compensation, I was granted a sensitivity to the rhythm of what I wrote and that helped to turn my hand in the direction of better prose. I began to learn how difficult it is to move from the hegemony of the word to the resonance of the rhythm. This can be a jump greater than a leap into poetry. So, *Advertisements for Myself* was a book whose writing changed my life.

In *The Deer Park* I had been trying to find a style through three drafts. The first had been Proustian—not first-rate Proust, of course. Attempted Proust. Failed Proust. The second draft was located somewhere between the English novel of manners and Scott Fitzgerald—not good, but in that general direction. Then I found a tone that was not like the others. It fit the essential material. So I learned how style literally repels certain kinds of experience and can be equal to a dominating wife who is ever ready to select your suits. If a writer insists on a specific tone, despite all inner warnings, it can even limit the varieties of experience that will enter the book.

Finding one's own manner is elusive. While it certainly helps to develop a unique style, first you have to learn how to write. Back in the Fifties, Nelson Algren was giving a writing class in Chicago and invited me to sit in. He read a story by one of the kids. Third-rate Papa. Afterward, I said to Nelson, "Why did you pay that much attention? He was just copying Hemingway." And Algren, who was about ten years older than me and knew that much more, said, "You know, these kids are better off if they attach themselves to a writer and start imitating him, because they learn a lot doing that. If they're any good at all, sooner or later they'll get rid of the influence. But first, they have to get attached to somebody." That was useful.

On the other hand, it takes so long to find your own manner. It comes down to a set of decisions on which word is valuable and what is not, in every sentence you write. That's one element. Another is the overall consistency. You have writers who are exceptionally talented but are still what I would call great ama-

teurs. The most notable example would be a writer as significantly gifted as Toni Morrison. Her style can shift from chapter to chapter—her strength is not in protecting the tone. She can write beautifully for pages, and then in a following chapter dawdle along in pedestrian mode. It violates what she is at her best, her distinctive voice, those distinctive insights.

Style is character. A good one will not come from a bad, undisciplined character. Now, a man may be evil, but I believe that people can be evil in their essential nature and still have good character. Good in the sense of being well tuned, flexible, supple, adaptable, principle. Even an evil man can have principles; he can be true to his own evil, which is not so easy either. And then I think one has to develop one's physical grace. Writers who are possessed of some may tend to write better than writers who are physically clumsy. It's my impression this is so. I certainly couldn't prove it.

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

And, of course, one's subject matter will also affect one's words. A journalistic voice can get into the workings of a good many topical novels. But then you wouldn't want Henry James to describe the life of Gary Gilmore. There is such a vice as too much splendid writing. For what Henry James wanted to do, however, his language was ideal. He recognized before anyone else that polite social life, despite its ridiculous or affected aspects, also presents a spectrum of small options present at every moment. In social life, a person often chooses among three or four equally agreeable alternatives, even to making the choice of being a little warmer or a little cooler than he or she originally expected to be toward a given person. James had an extraordinary sense of that unforeseen vibration in the almost wholly expected, and he created a fictional world out of such insight, a world that depended altogether on his unique voice.

It is comforting to argue that some major writers develop a style out of the very avoidance of their major weakness. Hemingway

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was not capable of writing a long, complex sentence with good architecture in the syntax. But he turned that inability into his personal skill at writing short declarative sentences or long run-on sentences connected by conjunctions. Faulkner, to the contrary, was not capable of writing simply, but his over-rich, congested sentences produced an extraordinary mood. In turn, Henry Miller could rarely tell a full story well. He preferred his excursions away from the story, and those asides are what make him exceptional.

You know, a good skier rarely worries about a route. He just goes, confident that he'll react to changes in the trail as they come upon him. It's the same thing in writing: You have to have confidence in your technique. That is the beauty of mustering the right tone at the right time—it enables you to feel like a good skier, nice and relaxed for the next unexpected turn.

There are two kinds of writers. Faulkner, Fitzgerald, and Hemingway, Melville and James, write with an air that is inimitable. There are other writers, usually less famous, who go along in a variety of modes. I'm in the latter camp. The same can be said of painters. Matisse painted in one recognizable vein, while Picasso entered a hundred before he was done. Style was the cutting tool by which he could delineate a reality. He saw it as a tool rather than as an extension of his identity. I've found his attitude to be useful for myself. It's better if one's writing is close to the material one is working with—a fairly formal prose for one occasion, casual for another.

Metaphors? You ask about metaphors. I had a dear friend, Charlie Devlin, who helped me greatly with *The Naked and the Dead*, and in fact was the model, considerably removed, for the character named McLeod in *Barbary Shore*. Charlie was a quiet, saturnine forty-year-old Irishman who was living full-time in the small rooming house where I took a cubicle (four dollars a week) to finish *The Naked and the Dead*. We used to have long literary conversations. At a certain point I showed him the manuscript. He tore it apart. He could be a severe critic. He said, "It's a better book than I thought it would be, but you have no gift for metaphor." Then he said, "Metaphor reveals a writer's true grasp of life. To the degree that you have no metaphor, you have not yet lived much of a life." I never forgot this lecture, and

began to work with might and main on my life and my metaphors. I would claim they have improved with age.

On the other hand, good dialogue depends on your ear. There has to be something in each speech that relies on the previous one. But I don't even want to talk about dialogue. Some people have marvelous stuff, some don't, but that's only one aspect of writing, it is not *the* aspect, and besides, I don't think you can teach it. Most kids who have talent start off with good dialogue. They're happy it's there, and they have fun—that can start you as a writer. Those who are not gifted at dialogue will, hopefully, be endowed with philosophy or good language.

If one wants an example of superb dialogue where the bar is set about as high as it can go, then read William Kennedy or Joan Didion. But make no attempt to imitate either. Superb dialogue is inimitable. It is the indispensable aid, however, to most short stories.

A short fictional piece has a tendency to look for climates of permanence—an event occurs, a man is hurt by it in some small way forever. The novel moves as naturally toward flux. An event occurs, a man is injured, and a month later is working on something else. The short story likes to be classic. It is most acceptable when one fatal point is made. Whereas the novel is dialectical. It is most alive when one can trace the disasters which follow victory or the subtle turns that sometimes come from a defeat. A novel can be created out of short stories only if the point in each story is consecutively more interesting and incisive than the point before it, when the author in effect is drilling for oil.

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

NORMAN MAILER: Yes. That you can learn from a writing course.

LS: Tell me what you mean by the tensile strength.

NM: You can't change a single word. What is tensile strength? It is that all the components are working together. I repeat: You can't change a single word. The best short stories are built on this premise.

While Dwight Macdonald gave us no great body of books, he did spend his talents in writing some of the better political and literary criticism of our time. More important than his oeuvre,

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however, was his influence. He was one of the best teachers of writing in the world. He gave no classes, but if one had learned a little about writing already, there were so many avenues to follow in the felicities of his style. Dwight had something fabulous to offer. It was to look to the feel of the intellectual phenomenon. Describe what you see as it impinges on the sum of your passions and your intellectual attainments. Bring to the act of writing all of your craft, care, devotion, lack of humbug, and honesty of sentiment. And then write without looking over your shoulder for the literary police. Write as if your life depended on saying what you felt as clearly as you could, while never losing sight of the phenomenon to be described. If something feels bad to you, it is bad. Others received the same message from Hemingway, but it took Dwight Macdonald to give the hint to many a young intellectual that the clue to new discovery rests not so much on the idea with which you begin a sentence as in the closeness of your attack on the continuation, and your readiness to depart from preconceived intentions by the insight provided in an unexpected and happy turn of phrase.

As a corollary to the above: To know what you want to say is not the best condition for writing a novel. Novels go happiest when you discover something you did not know you knew: an insight into one of your more opaque characters, a metaphor that startles you even as you are setting it down, a truth—it certainly feels like a truth—that used to elude you.

Reading the work of good writers is, of course, an indispensable nutrient for developing your style when you are young. After you have arrived, however, there comes a point where perversely, or from necessity, you don't want to read too much. It becomes impossible to look at each good novel as it comes out. If you're trying to do your own writing, it's distracting. Generally, you stay away from the work of contemporaries for a year or two at a time: It saves a good deal of reading. It is amazing how many much-touted novels disappear in eighteen months. The underlying force in book reviewing is journalism. The editor of a book review has a section which he hopes to make interesting. If, for two or three days, a newspaper is filled with news about a murder, one can be certain it is treated implicitly as the most exciting murder in the last twenty years. So it is with war novels, first novels, novels about homosexuality, politics, novels by au-

thors of the Establishment, and historical novels. If I had a chapter of a novel for each review I've read of a new war novel which was said to be as good as *The Naked and the Dead* or *From Here to Eternity*, I would have fifty chapters. One never knows, of course. Maybe a few of these books are as good as they're said to be, and even if they've since disappeared, they will emerge again in ten or twenty years or in a century, but it is sensible to ignore what is said about a book when it first appears. There is too much direct and personal interest in the initial opinions, and much too much log-rolling. The editor of a large book review is of course not owned by the Book-of-the-Month Club or the Literary Guild, but on the other hand, the editor would just as soon not give more than two or three bad reviews in a year to book-club choices. Nor is his attitude dissimilar when it comes to choosing a reviewer for the novel that a big publishing house has chosen for its big book of the season. Considering how bad these books can be, it's impressive what attention they get. The slack (since a book review, depending on local tradition, can have just a certain proportion of good reviews or it will be seen as no more than a puff sheet) is taken up by misassigning small, determined literary types onto most of the medium good novels, which then receive snide treatment and/or dismissal.

The point is that any serious novelist knows enough to stay out of the flurry which hits a new book. Every year, whether the books deserve it or not, four or five first novelists will be provided a brilliant debut and four or five respectable young novelists will receive the kind of review that "enhances their reputation as one of the most serious and dedicated voices in the vineyard of literature."

So you stay away. If your friends and young writers and girls at cocktail parties keep talking about certain books, if the talk is intriguing because you begin to have less and less of a clear impression of the books as the months go by, then they come to install themselves on your reading list. And every year, or two years, or three, you go off on a binge for a month and gorge on the novels of your contemporaries and see how they made out on their night with the Bitch.

Nor is it always natural for magazine writers to be at home in the novel. Even in the upper reaches of feature work, you still move on quickly to a new subject, another set of people. So you do not

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form those novelistic habits that are learned best when you are young, exactly the need never to be satisfied with any of your characters just because they have come alive for you. Indeed, the intoxication of creating a person on a page can prove blinding to an untried novelist's vision of what the character is going to need in his or her development through the narrative. What the young novelist learns, and it can take half a life, is that it is much easier to create a character than to develop him, or, even harder, *her*. So an inner caution develops. Unless your literary figures keep growing through the events of the book, your novel can go nowhere that will surprise you. Because if the character comes alive on one particular note and stays alive on that note, then there is nowhere to proceed but into the plot.

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

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

Of course, a great many of Dickens's characters were also Johnny One-Note. Yet, what notes! Besides, one did not read at that time to explore into character in the way we feel is necessary today. The stakes are higher now. Given the Twentieth Century, so full of vast achievements and horrors, it is viscerally important that our understanding of men and women keep pace with the mechanisms of society. If Wolfe is as good as or better than any other American writer in his power to capture the surface of wholly diverse elements in America, he comes in last of all major American writers when it's a matter of comprehending a little more about men and women. Indeed, this may be the most im-

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portant purpose of the novelist today. Surely, we are not going to leave it to the jargon-ridden expertise of the oral guns-for-hire in the TV human relations media business, or the fundamentalists' search for the all-purpose power-grip over other humans. We need only contemplate one more time how we are steeped in a nausea-broth of TV pundit-heads, coming to an intellectual climax every night.

FIRST PERSON VERSUS THIRD PERSON

Third person and first person are at least as different as water and oil. Here's why.

In the first person, you gain an authority that, for tonight, because you can hardly move into other people's heads without using a few devices, usually do lose.

The Deer that unfolded the mystery. At one point, the young man who was telling the story said that he was writing from first person to third. He was now old enough, that he didn't understand people he had not understood before. He said he now had more of an idea of how they think, he would write about them in third person. I believe it worked. But I would not write it.

In first person, the style is more like a story that is told to you, who's telling the story. (Only when did I have a woman in the morning. And that was Mark's story in *Of Mice and Men*.)

When your story is written in a story, the key change is not to be thought of as a story. It's not a story. It's a story. It's a story. That's all. You don't know down because you're not up on your head. The real question is, how much is

FIRST PERSON VERSUS THIRD PERSON

Third person and first person are at least as different as major and minor keys in music.

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

The Deer Park underlined the difficulty. At one point, the young man who was telling the story stated that he was shifting from first person to third. He was now old enough, went his claim, to understand people he had not understood before. Because he now had more of an idea of how they think, he would write about them in third person. I believe it worked, but I would not swear to it.

In first person, the style has to be altogether tuned to the man who's telling the story. (Only once did I have a woman as the narrator. And that was Marilyn Monroe in *Of Women and Their Elegance*.)

When your prime character is a man, the key choice is not how bright he is, because however smart, he can't be more intelligent than you are. That's easy. You dumb him down to taste or bring him up to your level. The real question is, How tough is

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he? Do you have the inner sanction to create a man who's braver and tougher than yourself? The answer is yes. Contra Hemingway—yes! You can do that by exercising your *critical* imagination. It must not be wish fulfillment! You are, however, entitled to guess how you might act if you were that much more of a hero.

I don't know, however, where to pose the question for an author who's female. Can she, for example, write about a woman who is more sensitive than herself? Probably not. She could write about a woman who uses her sensitivity and sensibility more than herself, because she can then key on all the frustrated times in her existence when the sensitivity and sensibility she possessed were not appropriate to a harsh occasion. Following question: Can a woman write about another woman more passionate than herself? Probably. Or a woman who's colder than herself? Without doubt.

In the third person, there's a different set of difficulties.

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

First person point of view, however, remains a fine tool. You can get to places you don't arrive at any other way. Of course, you can also injure your writing hand. As an instrument, it's double-edged. Hemingway had a marvelous sense of its limitations and

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used it to create his style. He dramatized its first edict: Do not talk about things that could prove embarrassing. They don't feel right in the telling, not when the "I" stands at the head of the sentence. So there's a tendency, most marked in Hemingway, to keep most of his revelations at arm's length. As, for example, the famous last sentences of *A Farewell to Arms*.

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

It was not until I struggled with *Advertisements for Myself* that I began to recognize how curious it was to be working in the first person. Now, many writers good and bad have been employing that mode for centuries, but I had to come to this remarkable conclusion on my own. The first person was not all that available a way to write. It proved to be a very interesting and exciting mode of literary presence, with large limitations, and you really do have to understand it as such—especially if you're dealing with your own presence. Nothing is more difficult than to become comfortable writing about yourself in the first person. It's highly unnatural, because "I" makes up only about a third of the consciousness of any human being. "I" may be the prow of the ego, but you do get into all sorts of other places where you want "one" to talk about different aspects of yourself. And then there is even second person, *you*, employed as if it is first person: "You get up, you brush your teeth, you feel lousy this morning." (In the first period of awakening, you can indeed feel like a vague entity slightly outside yourself.) And there is also the third person when used as a substitute for "I"—for one, the character named Norman Mailer in *The Armies of the Night*. Using the third person in this manner may be a special condition of first person, but it is legitimate. There is a part of the ego that is superior to ourselves—that person who observes us carefully even as we're doing bizarre things, that special persona, possessed of immaculate detachment, who is always saying, "Oh, are we really doing well right now?" A wonderful voice. Because it enables you to treat yourself as one more character in a field of characters.

Nonetheless, I have considerable regard for the first person. Once I even dared to cross the line with it. That began on a

FIRST PERSON VERSUS THIRD PERSON . 87

given night, in a small Paris hotel room, when I couldn't sleep. The room was tiny, the double bed took up almost all the floor, and you could break your toe trying to walk around. I didn't want to go rummaging in my suitcase for a book, so I picked up a Gideon Bible (in English!) on my bedside table and started reading. I hadn't looked at the New Testament for thirty or forty years, but I recalled that a man named Fulton Oursler once sold over a million copies of a book called *The Greatest Story Ever Told*. Now, with the bona fide Gospels in my hand, I thought, Well, this may be the greatest story, but it is certainly being told abominably. Sayings popped out of the New Testament that were worthy of Shakespeare, but much in the double columns was poorly described. An ungainly prose pronged with golden nuggets. I thought, There have got to be a hundred novelists in the world who can do a better job. I'm one of them.

The notion was intriguing. When I thought of all the hypocrites and corruptibles and power seekers who had been living with the Gospel for centuries, standing foursquare on any gnommic chunk of text they could use to abet their aims, I decided, Why not just tell the *story*? It is, in fact, a fascinating one. The narrative keel is mind-boggling. We are dealing with a man who is obliged to recognize through the evidence itself that he is the Son of God. The difficulty of such a book would be to write about a man considerably nicer than myself. That is never easy. To fashion a character who is meaner than yourself—a piece of cake. But to do someone who is better? Jean Malaquais once remarked that you can write about any character but one. "Who is that?" "A novelist more talented than yourself."

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

I decided my character had to be more of a man than a god, an existential man, dominated by the huge cloud that he is the Son of God. Jesus, as the protagonist, doesn't feel worthy, but he is ready nonetheless to do his best every step of the way. Not in command of every situation, but will do his best. And he does have his startling successes.

Moreover, I had to decide whether to travel in first person or third. First person would have everyone saying: "That egomaniac. Does Mailer now think he's Jesus Christ? What an over-inflamed vanity!" That's the bad side, I thought, but at least I can avoid the larger mistake of doing it in the third person. Be-

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cause that would soon get mixed up with the actual text of the Gospels, and the reader would wonder, Is this sentence from the New Testament or was it added? That can only make for a squirrelly experience as one reads. All right, then. First person. Damn the torpedoes, first person. Play the Ace.

It became interesting. If it was too biblical in the beginning, I did have an editor who is totally irreligious, Jason Epstein. He was appalled that I was writing this book. We're friends, but he's one tough editor. And he's most often all too right or altogether wrong. So, you have to make a quick decision. Yes, the style was too biblical.

After which, it was relatively easy. The book was short enough for me to work up seven variations on the style. I had to find the balance between a biblical rhythm and a contemporary one—something that would not inflict a biblical grip on one's mind yet would keep the echo. Before I was done, it all took a year from that night in that much-too-small hotel room on the Ile St.-Louis.

REAL LIFE VERSUS PLOT LIFE

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

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The decisions you make while writing fiction can leave you uneasy. If your characters come alive, that's fine; they will carry you a part of the way. But finally, your people have to make what might be termed career decisions. Does your protagonist want to go abroad in the foreign service, or does he decide to stay in New York with the amazing young model he has just met? Needless to say, such choices are non-operative for writers who have the story complete in their mind before they begin. So I repeat: I look to find my book as I go along. Plot comes last. I want a conception of my characters that's deep enough so that they will get me to places where I, as the author, have to live by my wits. That means my characters must keep developing. So long as they stay alive, the plot will take care of itself. Working on a book where the plot is already fully developed is like spending the rest of your life filling holes in rotten teeth when you have no skill as a dentist.

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

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

I no longer work up a master plan before I begin a novel. When I was younger I used to sit down and write out such plans, but I

never finished such projects. Even with *The Executioner's Song*, where, after all, I knew the end of the story, I was careful not to be too versed in too many details ahead. I preferred to do my research up to no more than a hundred pages ahead of where I was. I wanted to keep the feeling that I didn't know how it was all going to turn out. I needed something like the illusion that I was inventing each detail. Obviously, I prefer doing a book that is not too carefully prepared. Some of my best ideas come because I haven't fixed my novel's future in concrete. Once you know your end, it's disastrous to get a new idea. That can only take you away from your prearranged conclusion. Yet the new idea that you didn't follow may be worth more than the denouement you planned in advance.

For that matter, the moment I think of a good plot, I find that the book becomes almost impossible to write, because I know I won't believe it. Life may consist of people plotting all the time, but the plots rarely develop. We decide: I'll make this move in my life, and that should result in the following—then life confounds us. So I prefer a story that develops out of the writing. I don't like one that moves ahead of my characters, because then my people won't live. Tie your characters to a prearranged plot, and you are doing to them what we would do to our children if we carefully selected their colleges, their spouses, and their jobs without ever consulting them. The same unspoken despondency weighs on characters who are treated that way in a novel: They never get to fulfill their own perverse (that is, surprising to the novelist) capabilities; they never come alive. Bill Buckley is wonderful at plots—his mind may work that way—but nobody lives and breathes in his novels with any more three dimensionality than some passing movie star who can't act.

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

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

I've always stayed away from such close material, have never

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written directly about my parents or my sister. Those experiences are so basic that I encircle them with a favorite word: I characterize these fundamental and primary experiences as *crystals*. The crystals can be simple or extraordinarily developed. But provided you don't use them directly, you can sometimes send a ray of your imagination through the latticework in one direction or another and find altogether different scenarios. If you've got a relative in mind who's, let's say, a pretty tough kid, you can, if you don't write about him head-on, make the boy a bullfighter or put him in Special Forces, even turn him into a bank robber or an honest cop. So long as you don't use the core of your experience, you will be in command of many possibilities. But if you are determined to get it all accurately on paper, then at a given moment you will have to face the fact that you are going to hurt people who are close to you.

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

Novelists are engaged in something analogous. If they start thinking of all the damage they are going to do, they can't write the book—not if they're reasonably decent.

The point is that one is facing a true problem. Either you produce a work that doesn't approach what really interests you or, if you go to the root with all you've got, there is no way you won't injure your family, friends, and innocent bystanders.

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

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

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

The question remains: How do you turn a real person into a fictional one? If I have an answer, it is that I try to put the model in situations which have very little to do with his or her real situations in life. Very quickly, the original disappears. The private reality can't hold up. For instance, I might take somebody who is a professional football player, a man whom I know slightly, let's say, and turn him into a movie star. In a transposition of this sort, everything that relates particularly to the professional football player quickly disappears, and what is left, curiously, is what is *exportable* in his character. But this process, while interesting in the early stages, is not as exciting as the more creative act of allowing your characters to grow once you've separated them from the model. It's when they become as complex as real people that the fine excitement begins. Because now they're not really characters any longer—they're *beings*, which is a distinction I like to make. A character is someone you can grasp as a whole—you can have a clear idea of him—but a being is someone whose nature keeps shifting. In *The Deer Park*, Lulu Meyers is a being rather than a character. If you study her closely, you will see that she is a different person in every scene. Just a little different. I don't know whether initially I did this by accident or purposefully, but at a certain point I made the conscious decision not to try to straighten her out; she seemed right in her changeableness.

I've spoken of characters *emerging*. Quite often they don't emerge; they fail to. And one is left with the dull compromise that derives from two kinds of experience warring with each

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

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

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

I think that I truly work on impulse in all of my writing. That's why I don't like to plan too far ahead. I've gotten into this before, but it's worth repeating. Planning too carefully makes it almost impossible for one of your characters to go through a dramatic shift of heart, because it's going to violate your larger

scheme. It's better if this larger scheme unfolds at a rate that is compatible with your characters.

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

I'd say try not to think of your characters as victims. That sort of classification narrows them. In reality, very few victims ever see themselves exclusively as victims, and when they do, their spirit turns stale. There is a certain sort of self-pitying victim one wishes to walk away from, and they can be even worse in a book. Unless one is Dickens. (Scrooge, Scrooge, Scrooge.)

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

I've been asked when the idea of using a hornet's nest to thwart the climbers in *The Naked and the Dead* came to me. In truth, the

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

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

If a novelist can take people who are legendary figures and invent episodes for them that seem believable, then he has done something fine. There's that meeting between J. P. Morgan and Henry Ford in E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*—I think it's one of the best short chapters in American literature. It told me an awful lot about Morgan and an awful lot about Henry Ford, and the fact that it obviously never took place made it more delicious.

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

INSTINCT AND INFLUENCE

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

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

One example I always give to a writing class: A very young writer sits on a park bench with his girl. He kisses her. He's seventeen. He's never had such a kiss before. Later that night, he tries to capture the event. He writes:

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I love you, he said.

I love you, she said.

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

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

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

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

Let me take this further. You can write a book with a powerful sense of inner conviction and a year or two later, say, "How could I have so deluded myself? This is awful." Your instinct can betray you, but you still have to go with it. Very often the instinct sees some light at the end of the tunnel, but that's because you've been trapped in a situation where your creative energies can't get together. Now, at last, you've found a way to work. You may be writing out some very bad tendencies in yourself, but this can be good, too. You might be feeling happy because soon you're going to be done with that malfunctioning side of yourself. That's what your enthusiasm can be about.

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

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

Literary influence remains endlessly curious. I happened to pick up *Moby-Dick*. I hadn't thought about Melville ten times in the last thirty years, but as soon as I read the first page, I realized my later style was formed by Melville, shaped by his love of

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long, rolling sentences full of inversions and reverses and paradoxes and ironies and exclamation points and dashes. Of course, to be as good as Melville—that's another matter.

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

STAMINA

I'm now eighty, but some people still regard me as a wild man. Even at my peak, that was only five to ten percent of my nature. The rest was work. I like work. I remember Elia Kazan saying one day at Actors Studio, "Here, we're always talking about the work. We talk about it piously. We say *the work*. *The work*. Well, we do work here, and get it straight: Work is a *blessing*." He said this, glaring at every one of us. And I thought, He's right. That's what it is. A blessing.

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

I remember in the summer before my Junior year, working on my very first novel, *No Percentage* (which will remain forever unpublished), I ran into a phrase by Henry James. He spoke of "the keeping up." That can be the first horror to face when

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you're young. Your novel tends to change all too quickly. It may even be the cardinal reason why people in college tend to stay away from longer fiction. Young short-story writers, no matter how good, often blow up when they attempt a longer work. They'll have a good beginning, but the second chapter goes off and they never get it back. The sad truth is that a would-be novelist possibly has to start a few books that do give out, or even crash, before a sense of the difficulties is acquired. If the same likelihood of early failure applied to young race-car drivers, there would not be speedways.

A large part of writing a novel is to keep your tone. I love starting a book; I usually like finishing one. It's the long middle stretches that call on your character—all that in-between!—those months or years when you have to report to work almost every day. You don't write novels by putting in two brilliant hours a week. You don't write novels if you lose too many mornings and afternoons to a hangover.

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

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

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

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

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

When I read something good, I want to do a critical piece. I want to expand on where I think the author is terrific and where he or she is lacking—especially if reviewers are blowing it up too high. I may feel, It's good but not that good—let's get into it. So it can be immensely distracting. Your mind settles on the work you are reading rather than the one you're supposed to be laboring on. A tendency grows to protect yourself by not reading anything that's too good. Stendhal, for instance, used to peruse the Code Napoléon every day in the loo before he'd start to write.

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

I never know what the style of a book will be until I get into it. Sometimes you aim high and don't get it—you have to settle for

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a more functional tone. After all, style is very much like the pace a serious jogger sets for himself. You have to be able to maintain it. In that sense, style is an offshoot of character. With all else, character is the wise or foolish estimate of your resources.

I think it's important for a writer to keep in shape. But it's hard to talk about. Harry Greb, for example, was a fighter who used to keep in shape. He was completely a fighter, the way one might wish to be completely a writer. He always did the things that were necessary to him as a fighter. Now, some of these things were extremely irrational from a prize-fight manager's point of view. That is, before he had a fight he would go to a brothel and he would have two prostitutes, not one, taking the two of them into the same bed. And this apparently left him feeling like a wild animal. Don't ask me why. Perhaps he picked the two meanest whores in the joint and so absorbed into his system all the small, nasty, concentrated evils that had accumulated from carloads of men. Greb was known as the dirtiest fighter of his time. He didn't have much of a punch, but he could spoil other fighters and punish them; he knew more dirty tricks than anyone around, and the two whores were an essential part of his training methods. He did it over and over again until he died at a relatively early age of a heart attack on an operating table. I think he died before he was thirty-eight. They operated on him, and bang, he went.

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

Craft is a grab bag of procedures, tricks, lore, formal gymnastics, symbolic superstructures—methodology, in short. It's the compendium of what you've acquired from others. And since

great writers communicate a vision of experience, one can't usually borrow their methods. Their method is married to the vision. Therefore, one acquires craft more from good writers and mediocre writers with a flair. Craft, after all, is what you can take out whole from their work. But keeping in shape is something else. For example, you can do journalism and it can be terrible for your style. Or it can temper your style. In other words, you can become a better writer by doing a lot of different kinds of writing. Or you can deteriorate. There's a book that came out a few years ago which was a sociological study of some Princeton men—I forget the name of it. One of them said something which I thought was extraordinary. He wanted to perform the sexual act under every variety of condition, emotion, and mood available to him. I was struck with this not because I ever wanted necessarily to have that kind of sexual life but because it seemed to me that was what I was trying to do with my writing. I edit on a spectrum which runs from the high, clear manic impressions of a drunk that has made one electrically alert all the way down to the soberest reaches of a low mood where I can hardly bear my words. By the time I'm done with writing I care about, I usually have worked on it through the full spectrum of my consciousness. If you keep yourself in this peculiar kind of shape, the craft will take care of itself. Craft is very little, finally. But if you're continually worrying about whether you're growing or deteriorating as a man, whether your integrity is turning soft or firming itself, why, then, it is in that slow war, that slow rearguard battle you fight against diminishing talent, that you stay in shape as a writer and have a consciousness. You develop a consciousness as you grow older which enables you to write about anything, in effect, and write about it well. That is, provided you keep your consciousness in shape and don't relax into flabby styles of thought. They, after all, surround one everywhere. The moment you borrow other writers' styles of thought, you need craft to shore up the walls. But if what you write is a reflection of your own consciousness, then even journalism can become interesting. One wouldn't want to spend one's life at it, and I wouldn't ever want to be caught justifying journalism as a major activity (it's obviously less interesting than to write a novel), but it's legitimate to see it as a venture of one's ability to keep in shape rather than as an essential betrayal of the chalice of your art.

Indeed, many good writers get smashed en route. In that

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sense, they are like race car drivers, and the punishment they take stops them eventually. They write less well, or they take a tremendously long time to write, or they lose the desire to write.

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

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

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

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

I've often felt that those times when you can work or make love with great energy occur when your best and worst motives are working in cooperation for once.

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

A few words on rewriting and research.

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

Research is another matter. The trick in doing a historical novel, for example, is to digest the research. You have to avoid that awful stance where you say, in effect, "Hello, I'm Saint-Simon and I'm at the court of Louis XIV. Madame de Maintenon is very angry this morning." Better to remind yourself that Madame de Maintenon does not necessarily feel that she is the Madame de Maintenon we know through Saint-Simon.

In addition, one must always be on guard against anachronisms. You learn how hard it is to separate what belongs only to your time from the era you are trying to re-create.

A CODA TO "CRAFT"

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

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with. I think this sort of terror so depresses us that we throw up evasions—such as craft. Indeed, I think this adoration of craft makes a church of literature for that vast number of writers who are somewhere on the bell-shaped curve between mediocrity and talent.

PSYCHOLOGY

PSYCHOLOGY

LEGEND AND IDENTITY

If you're large, confident on the stand, it's because you often know a given way to your is the one from which we speak to the world. Any defined identity, however, that the rest is not that as the foundation for it, making every self-play with the material of identity that we make or with whatever material.

In this discussion of psychology as it refers to writing, the focus will be on the light about identity and its image—writing and writing—regard.

Having, in the age of romanticism, broken away from the past, I find with a very few signs of importance. At the same time, I won't read. Much too much, well-framed material. One part of you shows up, another leg behind. It's like having a prism focus on a hand-on. You just can't depend on it. The answer you look to develop comes from, to show your new identity.

Some artists come, however, a powerful, dominant work of themselves. I think the best artists, as examples might be Henry Miller, Friedrich Schiller, Thomas Wolfe, Henry James, Sinclair Lewis. In contrast, I write like the French, say changing his papers with every book he did. As other examples, one could add Ed Dwyer or myself. Finally, however, some come to

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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, 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.

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

Some artists have, however, a powerful, consistent sense of themselves. I think the best American examples might be Henry Miller, Hemingway, Faulkner, Thomas Wolfe, Henry James, Sinclair Lewis. In contrast, a writer like Steinbeck kept changing his persona with every book he did. As other examples, one could add Ed Doctorow or myself. Picasso, however, comes more to

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mind than any of us. His many changes of style are generally seen as a reaction to the different women in his life. I might have to say the same about myself. Up to a point. You can become a different man in each marriage. On the other hand, Henry Miller married a number of times and that did not change his personality. I expect that Miller had to fight to establish his identity very early in life. This is probably the case for people who grow up in unsympathetic families—they must arrive at an inner presence sooner, a hard, often hostile identity that the family cannot mess with too easily.

My case was different. My family was sympathetic; it was the world outside that proved hard. For seven or eight years after the success of *The Naked and the Dead*, I kept saying nobody treats me as if I'm real; nobody wants me for my five feet eight inches, and my medium good looks. I am only wanted for my celebrity. Therefore my experience is not real to me. The sense of how to perceive life and new material that I had formed up to that point was as an observer on the sidelines. Now, willy-nilly, I was the center of many a room, and so regardless of how I carried myself, everything I did was noted. To myself, I complained about the unfairness of it, until the day I realized that it was fair, that that was now going to be my experience. It's the simplest remark to make, but it took years to get to that point. Then I began to realize that the kind of writing I was now going to do would be on new and unfamiliar themes. After *The Naked and the Dead*, I had assumed I would work on large, collective novels about American life, books that required venturing out to get experience, but my celebrity took away much of the necessary anonymity I needed personally for that. There was, however, something else I might express. I was, after all, having a form of twentieth-century experience that might become more and more prevalent—I was separated from my roots. People who suffer such an identity crisis generally have to take all sorts of curious steps to locate who they are. They succeed here, they fail there, and the process gives them points of reference. So I began to have a public life even though I was eccentrically shy in those years—that is, half-shy and half-arrogant. Like most young writers. I discovered, however, that I had gregarious gifts and started to employ them. Before long, I began to enjoy them. I also wasted a lot. You gain, you lose, and it makes for a new kind

of life. Eventually, you have a new identity. I was successful and alienated, and this was becoming a twentieth-century condition for others as well. Slowly this understanding went into my work after that, and by now I can say that kind of protagonist interests me more than characters who are firmly rooted.

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

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

One unhappy aspect is that people who have never even met you begin to tell exaggerated stories about your person. Soon you are the inheritor of a legend as long as a dinosaur's tail, and it's *false* legend—it never existed even on the day it was created. Twenty years later, you're still using your best efforts to drag the

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tail around. One relief to getting older is that I no longer have to square my shoulders every time I go into a bar.

On the other hand, others can even aid and abet your legend. Here is my recollection of a dialogue that took place something like fifty years ago:

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

MAILER: Were you good with her?

FRIEND: Yeah. It was a good one. Real good.

MAILER: Then I'm not mad.

James Jones was also shot out of a cannon. But Jones had gone through more than I had before he wrote *From Here to Eternity*. By the time he'd arrived, he was ready to enjoy his success. I was a dependable pain in the ass to a great many people, because all through the first year I'd keep saying, "Oh, now I will never know the experience of other people." Jones didn't give a damn. He knew he had brought home the game, and he wanted to eat it. But I kept wanting to go back to what seemed like a sweet past when only a few people knew that I had talent. A young writer, if he is unknown, can be at a party and watch what everyone is doing. If he has a marvelous ear for dialogue, he can wake up the next morning and remember all that was said and how it was said. He is a bird on a branch. Sees like a bird and writes books that can be extraordinarily well observed. But once you are successful, especially if it happens quickly, it's as if the bird is now an emu. It cannot fly. It's big and grows haunches and fore shoulders and a mane: Lo and behold, it is a lion. And everyone is looking at the lion, including the birds. But it is a lion with the heart of a bird and the mind of a bird. So there is a terrible period when the transmogrified emu is trying to live like a lion and has small gifts for it. Then the beast begins to experiment. When it runs, it now sees other animals scamper. It takes a while—often years—to get to appreciate your effect on others and even longer to begin to understand human beings again. In the old days, you could write about friends, enemies,

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and strangers by intuition, by induction; now, by deduction. Of course, you do have more material on which to work your deductions.

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

LIVING IN THE WORLD

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

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

I've virtually said as much before, but it is so worth repeating. I tend to look at my contemporaries in the way an athlete looks at

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rival athletes. You try to have a state of mind where you see everything they do that's better than what you can bring off, yet you certainly look to remain aware of those of your skills that are superior to theirs. Good athletes look at their peers in that manner. After all, they have to face each other.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

All the same, many of us also knew what it was to come home after a dull, ugly party, full of liquor but not drunk, leaden with boredom, angry, a little sick, on the edge of what might legitimately be called despair. Sometimes, it was so bad, one tried to

put down a few words about it. But writing at such a time is like making love at such a time. Hopeless. It desecrates one's future, yet one does it anyway because at least it is an act. The premise is that what comes out might be valid because it is the record of a mood. What a mood. Full of vomit, self-pity, panic, paranoia, megalomania, *merde*, whimpers, and excuses. The bends of Hell. If you purge it, if you get to sleep and tear it up in the morning, you hope it did no more harm than any other debauch.

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

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

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

The literary world is a dangerous place to inhabit too frequently if you want to get serious work done. It's almost necessary to take on airs in order to protect oneself. And these airs have to be

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

A writer, no matter how great, is never altogether great; a small part of him is seriously flawed. Tolstoy evaded the depths that Dostoyevsky opened; in turn Dostoyevsky, lacking Tolstoy's majestic sense of the proportions of things, fled proportion and explored hysteria. A writer is recognized as great when his work is done, but while he is writing, he rarely feels so great. He is more likely to live with the anxiety of "Can I do it? Should I let up? Will dread overwhelm me if I explore too far? Or depression deaden me if I do not push on? Can I even do it?" As he writes, the writer is reshaping his character. He is a better man and he is worse, once he has finished a book. Potentialities in him have been developed, other talents have been sacrificed. He has made choices on his route and the choices have shaped him. By this understanding, a genius is a man of large talent who has made many good choices and a few astounding ones. He has had the wit to discipline his cowardice and he has had the courage to be bold where others might cry insanity. Yet no matter how large his genius, we can be certain of one thing—he could have been even greater.

The example is extreme. Just so, There is a kind of critic who writes only about the dead. He sees the great writers of the past as simple men. They are born with a great talent, they exercise it, and they die. Such critics see the mastery in the work; they neglect the subtle failures of the most courageous intent and the dramatic hours when the man took the leap to become a great writer. They do not understand that for every great writer, there are a hundred who could have been equally great but lacked the courage. The writer, particularly the American writer, is not usually—if he is interesting—the quiet master of his craft; he is

rather a being who ventured into the jungle of his unconscious to bring back a sense of order or a sense of chaos; he passes through ambushes in his sleep and, if he is ambitious, he must be ready to engage the congealed hostility of the world. If a writer is really good enough and bold enough he will, by the logic of society, write himself out onto the end of a limb that the world will saw off. He does not go necessarily to his death, but he must dare it. And some of us do go into death; Thomas Wolfe most especially, firing the passions which rotted his brain on those long paranoid nights in Brooklyn when he wrote in exaltation and terror on the top of a refrigerator. And Hemingway, who dared death ten times over and would have had to dare it a hundred more in order to find more art, because each time he passed through death the sweet of new creativity was offered.

Well, few of us dare death. Most of us voyage out a part of the way into our jungle and come back filled with pride at what we dared and shame at what we avoided, and because we are men of the middle and shame is an emotion no man of the middle can bear for too long, we act like novelists, which is to say that we are full of spleen, small gossip, hatred for the success of our enemies, envy at the fortunes of our friends, ideologues of a style of fiction which is uniquely the best (and is invariably our own style), and so there is a tendency for us to approach the books of our contemporaries like a defense attorney walking up to a key witness for the prosecution. At his worst, the average good novelist reads the work of his fellow racketeers with one underlying tension—find the flaw, find where the other guy cheated.

One cannot expect an objective performance therefore when one novelist criticizes the work of other novelists. It is better to realize that a group of men who are to a degree honest and to another extent deceitful (to the reader, or to themselves, or to both) are being judged by one of their peers, who shares in the rough their proportions of integrity and pretense and is likely to have the most intense vested interest in advancing the reputation of certain writers while doing his best to diminish others. But the reader is at least given the opportunity to compare the lies, a gratuity he cannot always get from a good critic writing about a novelist, for critics implant into their style the fiction of disinterested passion when indeed *their* vested interest, while less obvious, is often more rabid, since they have usually fixed their aim into the direction they would like the art of the novel

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to travel, whereas the novelist by the nature of his endeavor is not only more ready to change but by the character of the endeavor itself is obliged to be ready for a new approach. Virtually every writer, come soon or late, has a cramped-up love affair which is all but hopeless. *Of Human Bondage* could be the case study of half the writers who ever lived. But the obsession is opposed to art in the same way a compulsive talker is opposed to good conversation. The choice is either to break the obsession or enter it. The compulsive talker must go through the herculean transformation of learning to quit or must become a great monologist. As did Henry Miller!

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

On the other hand, if your character is awfully decent, you are to a degree, estranged from humanity. So it helps if your character is average lousy but with striking contrasts and excellent elements. Then the contradictions in your moral makeup will work for you.

MIND AND BODY, EGO AND WORK

It may be that part of the ability to remain a writer is to learn how to protect your ego through the years. One does ring oneself around with ego protections, the first of which, unhappily, is prudence. The price: Inspiration does not manage to blow the door open as often. Still, you do carry out the main brunt of your projects. That, of course, is exactly the major function of the ego—this dogged, determined, and often ugly servant of civilization itself.

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

Only another writer can know how much damage writing a novel can do to you. It's an unnatural activity to sit at a desk and squeeze words out of yourself. Various kinds of poisons—essences of fatigue—get secreted through your system. As you age, it grows worse. I believe that is one of the reasons I've been

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

Writing can also be a way of using up a large and uncomfortable presence in yourself. It's famously known, for instance, that pornographers end up impotent. That's probably a myth with a certain amount of predictability. If you work a muscle hard, it tends to develop; overworked, it can break down. I think something of the same is true of imagination. Force it too far, and it can cease to return anything. We write novels out of two cardinal impulses (other than to make a living and the desire to be famous). One is to understand ourselves better, and the other is to present what we know about others. Of course, it is often impossible to comprehend anyone else until one has plumbed the bot-

tom of certain preoccupations about oneself. That is why the writer is always at risk of using his or her talent for therapy—which can be closer to creative inanition than to art.

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

There is always fear in trying to write a good book. That is one reason why there are many more people who can write well than do. And, of course, many can't take the meanness of the occupation. There's nothing so very attractive about going into a room by yourself each day to look at a blank piece of paper (or monitor) and make calligraphic marks. To perform that act decade after decade punishes through the very monotony of the process. The act of writing itself, taken as a physical act, is less interesting, for example, than painting or, certainly, sculpture, where your body is more exercised in the doing.

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

I'm always a little uneasy when my work comes to me without much effort. It seems better to have to forge the will to write on a given day. I find that on such occasions, if I do succeed in making progress against resistance in myself, the result is often good. As I only discover days or weeks later. (*The Armies of the Night*, for example, was written in the face of considerable resistance and gloom!) With all else, I was talking about myself in the third person. While it seemed interesting up to a point to speak of a protagonist named Norman Mailer, it was, on the other hand, damn odd. I was halfway into the book before I got used to it. It is even a dislocating way to regard oneself. Yet by the time I was done, I missed this character of Norman Mailer so much that I brought him back for book after book. It never worked as well again. The commitment has to be there. In *The Armies of the Night*, I was a true protagonist of the best sort—half-heroic, three-quarters comic.

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

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

Today, most of my ideas are less involved with new exploration than with occupying thematic territories I reconnoitered years ago. If you no longer have the pleasure of enjoying your mind in the way you could when young, you have, at least, more worldly knowledge to work with. In 1972, while interviewing Henry Kissinger, I asked him if he enjoyed the intellectual stimulation of his White House work, and he said in effect, "I am working with ideas I formed at Harvard years ago. I haven't had a new idea since I've been on this; I just work with the old ones." By now, I know what he meant. There are just so many new thoughts you can have. There comes a time in your life when

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you have no choice but to implement them. To quote from *The Deer Park*: "... for experience when it is not communicated to another must wither within and be worse than lost." One owes the reader a fee when quoting oneself, but here the tariff feels acceptable.

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

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

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

As a perfect example, how many Americans had Afghanistan anywhere on their chart until September 11? Now, we are picking up bits and tidbits about Islam. A flurry! A superficial but lively work-in-progress is proceeding.

To dignify this notion, let me propose that indeed we do try to use these charts, whether good or superficial, to serious purpose. For we are all navigating through life. That is one reason why good novels have a quality that other forms of communication do not offer. It's very hard to think of an interesting protagon-

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onist who is not always moving between choices. And you, as the writer, have to monitor these decisions. When your characters come alive for you, which is one of the more agreeable if undeniably eerie aspects of serious novel-writing—when you find yourself having dialogues with them or at the least thinking about how they might react in certain situations that have nothing to do with your novel—then they do bear comparison to a prominent and troublesome friend.

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

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

GENDER, NARCISSISM, MASTURBATION

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

Another word on gender. Women certainly have every right to create men at war, but I think it might be recognized that it's likely to be less comfortable for them. War, after all, is essentially a male invention. How often have women shown the same inventiveness and hellishness that men have at war? How can they approach that near-psychotic mix of proportion and disproportion which is at the heart of mortal combat? On the other hand,

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

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

The narcissist suffers from too much inner dialogue. The eye of his consciousness is forever looking at his own action. Yet—let us try to keep the notion clear—a narcissist is not simply a study in vanity and self-absorption so much as one part of the self is immersed in studying the other part. The narcissist is the scientist and the experiment in one. Other people exist, have value to the narcissist, because of their particular ability to arouse one role or another in himself. And are valued for that. May even be loved for that. Of course, they are loved as an actor loves his audience.

Since the amount of stimulation we can offer ourselves is, ob-

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

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

Narcissists, after all, induce emotion in each other through their minds. It is not their flesh which is aroused so much as the vibrancy of the role. Their relations are at once more electric and more empty, more perfect and more hollow. But the hollow seems never to fill. So, narcissism may be a true disease, a biological displacement of the natural impulse to develop oneself by the lessons of one's experience—narcissism, therefore, could bear the same relation to love that onanism does to copulation or a cancer to the natural growth of tissue. Can we come a little

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nearer to the recognition that there may be a base beneath all disease, an ultimate disease, a psychosomatic doom, so to speak, against which all the other illnesses, colds, fevers, infections, and deteriorations are bulwarks to protect us against a worse fate? Which is what? Perhaps an irreversible revolt of the flesh or the mind into cancer or insanity. That is psychosomatic doom—to follow the growth of the flesh or the mind into terminal anomaly. But if that is the case, how can we not suppose that for the narcissist—always so aware that something is wrong within—there is a constant unconscious terror: His or her isolation, if unrelieved, will end in one arm or the other of the ultimate disease.

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

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

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

Henry Miller could have been playing, therefore, for the highest stakes. He had the energy, the vision, the talent, the outrageous individuality to have some chance of becoming the greatest writer in America's history, a figure equal to Shake-

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

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

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

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

NORMAN MAILER: I think masturbation is bad.

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PK: In relation to heterosexual fulfillment?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

PK: Certain circumstances can change one for the worse.

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

If one has the courage to think about every aspect of the act—I don't mean think mechanically about it—but if one is able to brood over the act, to dwell on it, then one is *changed* by the act. Because in the act of restoring one's harmony, one has to encounter all the reasons one was jangled.

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

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

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

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

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

THE UNCONSCIOUS

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

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

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

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

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is that so often it is our fear of living with an inner void that makes us ambitious in the first place.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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I've always had the feeling that it doesn't make much sense to take on a subject if others can do it as well. As an instance, I never felt my childhood was so unique to me that it was worth recording. On the other hand, I conceal, sometimes from myself, what there is to write about those years. It can be wasteful to plunge into what you have to say on a subject before you're ready to give your full commitment.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

PHILOSOPHY

PHILOSOPHY

PRIMITIVE MAN, ART AND SCIENCE, EVIL AND JUDGMENT

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

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of Divinity, Irony is well installed? Carnage walks the aisles of history hand in hand with philosophy. If there is no afterworld where the contest continues, then existence is indeed absurd.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The moment you moralize in your novel, your book is no longer moral. It has become pious. Piety not only corrupts morality but

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

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

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

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arise by studying any person close enough. That he was a murderer made my task simpler, because we are all fascinated by killers. But any person studied in depth will prove fascinating. It is certainly the yeast in any good marriage. Take any soul alive, and he or she can prove exceptional provided you get to know him or her well enough. Of course, if we are dealing with a sad case, the exceptional element is more likely to be found in the canyons of their horrendous bad luck or in the contortions of an ongoing cowardice. Or both. Bad luck feeds fear; the obverse may be equally true.

ATTACKS ON REALITY

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

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

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

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

Borges has a magical ability to put plots through metamorphoses. So, he poses the difficulty of comprehending reality. He shows us that every time we think our mind is approaching reality, we have only been writing a scenario to comprehend it. The scenario is the equivalent of a hypothesis that seems correct until new evidence subverts it. In the course of this subversion, however, we learn a good deal. The revised hypothesis, ideally, should be superior. Reading Borges, you live in this highly diverting and not always agreeable business of seeing elaborate hypotheses destroyed by the one event that is able to turn them inside out. Borges is always teaching us that it is not enough to live with Aquinas's dictum. Trust the evidence of your senses. Rather, trust them until they are dramatically revealed as inadequate, tricked, or downright betrayed—then refine them. Borges is not the least bit easy.

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

There is a famous story that Shelley rushed up to a mother, seized her infant, held it aloft, and cried out: "Babe, speak! Reveal your immortal truth!" Like Plato—a great Platonist at that point, was Shelley—he believed that the education you begin to receive when young, obfuscates the instinctive knowledge with which you're born. Then you spend the rest of your life trying to unmake that education.

Well, I too am able to believe we're born with a profound appreciation of the universe and do lose it in the first few years of

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

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

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

We tell ourselves stories in order to make sense of life. Narrative is reassuring. There are days when life is so absurd, it's crippling—nothing makes sense, but stories bring order to the

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absurdity. Relief is provided by the narrative's beginning, middle, and end. Without an end, you have an obsession, a constant circling around a fact or situation that cannot be put in place. The danger, therefore, in recognizing the insubstantiality of fact is that one is all too ready to welcome the art of the absurd. That is one good reason why so many are obsessive (and endlessly boring) in their recitation of supposedly well-seated facts.

SOCIAL VISION

The great scientists produced the world-view of a human being. They found the three worlds and says that with every world he discovered something -- something to work toward. In that sense, the world is a philosophical model, with one end and the other that are connected by a line. It is that line that is important. The scientists give and take energy and in that way we can think of it as a line that we will find some negotiation with, provide that you have, who will understand the energy and what a world is really there. It is a world that has to do with how we offer human energy to each other, and that is from our own, develop it, and so.

Obviously, Freud brought off a revolution in our consciousness of the human mind. But it may be wise to return to his insight to the unconscious. I suspect that his first impression of the unconscious history will be that he gave us enough to have the knowledge of that world. Then we have the Marx. Freud is the key to understanding how people put up with the psychic weight of the love they feel in the 19th, 19th, and early 19th century. They were working over the top, yet still working with a considerable amount of power, energy, and pressure. In those days they were

SOCIAL VISION

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

Obviously, Freud brought off a revolution in our consciousness of the human psyche. But it may be wise to restrict his insights to the nineteenth century. I expect that his final importance in intellectual history will be that he gave us more insight into the underside of that century than anyone but Marx. Freud is the key to understanding how people put up with the psychic weight of the lives they led in the 1880s, 1890s, and early 1900s: locked up, terribly overstuffed, yet still existing with a considerable amount of power, energy, and pleasure. In those days the psy-

che was analogous to a plumbing system. People were accustomed to living under high pressure and finding ways, no matter how bizarre, to open the steam valve. That's not what we have now. Today we know a world in which people not only act out many of their anxieties but work to find reassuring explanations of their conduct, which is often overtly contradictory rather than repressed.

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

MORAL VISION

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

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

You cannot have a great democracy without great writers. If

great novels disappear, as they are in danger of doing, and our storytelling is co-opted by television and journalism, then I think we will be that much farther away from a free society. Novels that reinvigorate our view of the subtlety of moral judgments are essential to a democracy. Americans were affected for decades by *The Grapes of Wrath*. Some good Southerners even develop a sense of the tragic by reading Faulkner.

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

I feel that the final purpose of art is to intensify—even, if necessary, to exacerbate—the moral consciousness of people. In particular, I think the novel at its best is the most moral of the art forms. You are exploring the interstices of human behavior—which is the first approach to religious experience for many of us, especially since the organized religions don't begin to offer sufficient account of the terrible complexities of moral experience and its dark sibling, moral ambiguity. The wisest rule of thumb for the would-be moralist is: There are no answers. There are only questions.

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

Speaking at the MacDowell Colony once, I found myself saying, "There is no reason to believe the novelist is not better equipped

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to deal with the possibilities of a mysterious and difficult situation than anyone else, since he or she is always trying to discover what the nature of reality might be. It's as if the novelist is out there, sprung early, with something most people never contemplate—which is 'How and what is the nature of this little reality before me?' The novelist is the first to ask, 'Do I love my wife? Does she love me? What is the nature of love? Do we love our child? How do we love? Would we die for our child? Or do we let the child die for us?' The novelist has to deal with these questions because living with them is the only way to improve his or her brain. Without improving that brain, without refining the edge of one's perception, it's almost impossible to continue to work as a writer. Because if there is one fell rule in art, it is that uninspired repetition kills the soul. So the novelist is out there early with a particular necessity that may become the necessity of us all. It is to deal with life not as something given us as eternal and immutable but rather as half-worked, because it is our human destiny to enlarge what we were given, to forge (I might have said to *clarify*) a world which was always before us in a manner different from the way we had seen it the day before."

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

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

I go back again and again to Dostoyevsky dying in despair because he could not write the novel about the great saint he envisioned.

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

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

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

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

BEING AND NOTHINGNESS

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

I'm not speaking now of violence or the active conflict between one being and another. That still belongs to drama. But the war between being and nothingness is the underlying illness of the twentieth century. Boredom slays more of existence than war. I'd hardly read anything by Sartre at this time and nothing by Heidegger. I've read a bit since and I have to admire their formidable powers, but I suspect they are no closer to the buried

continent of existentialism than were medieval cartographers near to a useful map of the world. The new continent that shows on our psychic maps as intimations of eternity is still to be discovered.

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

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

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

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

audience is not able to follow a non sequitur, an automatic laugh comes up. Especially from parents, roommates, relatives, and friends. If you have an actor say, "The situation is getting kind of boborigymous," the audience will not only roar at the fecal cacophony of the sounds but will look to cover over their ignorance of the exact meaning. A horde of fail-safes is always available in plays when they are dedicated to the absurd.

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

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

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

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

The critics, however, decided near unanimously (and Hemingway went along) that he had written a novel of human affirmation because the protagonist never gave up. But then there is never a moment in the telling when the man said to himself, "I'm suffering too severely. I'm going to cut the rope." Because if the old fisherman had weakened, then Hemingway would have had to have a serious affirmation. Which is: *Why* doesn't the fisherman cut the fish loose? What remains in him to war with that temptation? Instead, the old Cuban was never tempted. So Hemingway never had to find a reason for the fisherman to say, "I'll hold on." Not enough of a character had been created to answer such a question.

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

In parallel, the essence of all that hubris in corporate advertising may be its well-founded fear of *nothingness*. For good cause. The

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

MISCELLANY: PORNOGRAPHY, PICASSO, AND APHORISMS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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For example: Not everything wilts in me when another novelist succeeds. There is also admiration—unwanted, it is true, but then whoever insisted that we are absolutely without treachery to ourselves?

Which opens a useful exercise for novelists: It is to take on a few of the better maxims, adages, insights, and sayings of the celebrated, and see if you can work them further. There is that whole remark of Tolstoy's: "*It is amazing how complete is the delusion that beauty is goodness.*" Agreed. At the least, a temporary, if successful, collaboration between good and evil may well be going on—which could be why Tolstoy distrusted it so, and why we react with fear, wonder, avidity, and, yes, distrust when we encounter a beautiful woman.

But now that I have commenced this, I cannot stop:

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

Abraham Lincoln: "*Most of us are just about as happy as we make up our minds to be.*" Sometimes, one doesn't decide to be happy, because the likelihood is that upcoming events will be dire. Which suggests that the fall will come from a greater height.

"*Merit envies success and success takes itself for merit.*"—Jean Rostand
Success is so confident that it is possessed of merit that merit, to its horror, comes to respect success more than its own merit.

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

Example:

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

This is because stupidity is not a liability but an asset if all you

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care about is getting your way. Before obstinate fools, we are all weak.

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

Half-true, no more. Rudeness can lead to a fight the rude man would be wise not to get into. Usually, however, the instigator of any harsh discourtesy has sensed already who is weaker at the moment than himself. Like many another foul art, rudeness has gifted practitioners.

PART II

GENRE

GENRE

GENRE

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

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

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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 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 pressroom 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 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 daily writing has improved. Yet in one fundamental way, nothing has changed in the profession: The inner death of the soul is still with us.

Remember the old joke about the three kinds of intelligence: human, animal, and military? Well, if there are three kinds of