

Tape015
Galley 94

AMERICAMP
Mailer: Pieces & Pontifications

1-1618 Little, Brown
Mss 182-186

BASEMENT: I hear Vida Blue is pitching today.

SEVENTH FLOOR: Impossible! He pitched two days ago.

BASEMENT: (Indignantly) Who did?

SEVENTH FLOOR: (Triumphantly) Vida Blue!

That was what the basement wanted to hear said on the seventh floor and said loud enough for the nail in the ceiling of the sixth floor to pick it up — the names of baseball pitchers having been geared to the rise and fall in the discount rate. Now, whoever monitored that conversation could pass the information along. Since more than one team would presumably be working to get advance information on the change in the rate, let us assume our team got the word out with a possible lead of three hours over all the others.

"How much would such information be worth?" a banker was asked.

"Conservatively," he replied, in the rich and pompous voice which is privy to large sums, "*billions*."

"For just a few hours' lead?"

"That is time enough."

The possibility is now open that the CIA was using the break-in to the Democratic National Committee as its elegant cover to the real operation, which was to tap privileged Federal Reserve Board information. Elegance offers its exquisite use of resources, so one would not claim the CIA had no interest in O'Brien nor in Oliver. O'Brien and Oliver had had their propinquity with the CIA, after all. While we know they cannot be in Intelligence — since how may we conceive of a good liberal Democrat who is? — nonetheless, they might attract an enclave in the CIA (if, of course, it is an enclave performing the break-in under the auspices of CREEP and not just a burglary by red-hot amateurs executed at the third rate of CREEP stupidity). Yes, some enclave might legitimately have been curious to know more about what O'Brien and Oliver knew of Chappaquiddick, or Eagleton's secret medical file, or HUGHES in relation to Maheu, Lansky, Rebozo, and Nixon on one side, or HUGHES, Bennett, Hunt, and Helms on the other. Name the teams; HUGHES is on all of them. Recognize that with the Democratic Committee break-in as cover, the operation has power over CREEP — which is to say ultimately over Nixon — even if its burglars are caught. That is elegance. Obtaining neither their first objective — the Federal Reserve tap — nor the second — lines on O'Brien and Oliver — the entrepreneurs still end with more power over the presidency than before. Once everybody made certain the election was won in spite of Watergate, there would be even more power.

Of course, a risk was taken. If Watergate had broken too early, McGovern might have been able to get his campaign turned around (although the thought does not ring loud in the lost ether) but then Watergate never burst until the election was safe and the operators could begin to apply that wrenching pressure on the bones of the Nixon administration.

It must, however, be immediately visible that while this last scenario violates no facts, it is only a literary fancy — not an iota of proof. Just another model. Perhaps we can modernize William of Ockham's razor by saying: The simplest model which satisfies all the facts is likely to lead us to inexplicable facts.

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Four of the five men arrested in the bugging attempt at the Democratic National Committee headquarters Saturday morning were registered as guests at the Watergate Hotel on April 28, the same night that two other firms in the Watergate building were broken into. . . .

The firm of Freed, Frank, Harris, Shriver and Kampelman, located on the 10th floor of the Watergate Building, 2600 Virginia Ave. NW, was broken into on May 18, but officials of the firm did not report the incident to police until yesterday. . . .

A spokesman for the Freed law firm said yesterday that the burglary was not immediately reported to police because nothing appeared to be missing, and employees did not associate the incident with political espionage until disclosure of Saturday's break-in. . . .

On April 28, the night four of the five bugging suspects were registered at the Watergate Hotel, according to police, the 11th-floor offices of the Sterling Institute, a management consulting firm, were broken into and \$1,100 worth of typewriters and calculating machines was stolen. . . .

The same night, police records show, the law firm of Boykin and DeFrancis, located on the eighth floor of the Watergate, was forcibly entered and \$525 worth of office equipment was stolen.

— The Washington Post, June 21, 1972

Maybe if our scenarios have had a purpose, it has been to flavor our reading with the temperament of an agent, a way of saying that we have become sufficiently paranoid to see connections where others see lists. So let us look at a list of the offices in July, 1973, on the seventh and eighth floors of the Watergate Building, and take the pleasure of wondering how many of those names and corporations have no relation to Intelligence.

701 Defense & Aerospace Center of Sterling Institute, Inc. H. F. Dean Human Factors Research Associates, Inc. Inst. for Psychiatry & Foreign Affairs	805 Division of Federal Reserve Bank Operations 808 Foreign Banking Authorities Office of Defense Planning Securities Stat Methodology & Procedures Section
704 Harris Intertype Corp. Harris Shire, Con- ductor Radiation, Inc. R. F. Communications, Inc.	811 Interstate General Corp. L. E. Steele 812 Armistead I. Selden, Jr. Boykin & De Francis
707 EDP Technology Systemed Corp.	815 Perkin Elver Corp. Joseph Dixon, Manager
711 Federal Reserve Board Office of Sec'y	

When we add the three robberies in the last news story and include the possibility of break-ins to other offices we know nothing about by burglary teams who were removing taps that others had been putting in, there is now posed to our brand-new agent-type brain a further question: What part of the Watergate Office Building was not being tapped?

Our procedure has conducted us to the point where we have to recognize that we have used up our last scenario in order to bring us to a place where we have no scenario to replace it. Now, we know less than before of what might possibly be going on.

5.

A Tension of Teleology

Said the CIA:
Authority imprinted upon emptiness
is money,
honey.

Bang bang Howard.
We don't need you.
We need

The space where you were.

— Anonymo L'Rivera

Like a main gear in the clockwork is Nixon's anguish. As we hear the tick, we dwell in the fascination of the inexorable.

Next to Nixon, Hunt is an idler gear. His anguish is all of his existence, but it moves us less. The main gear goes until the last of the tension in the spring runs down, but the idler gear never runs down — it is merely attached to the alarm. So its end is not inexorable but catastrophic — as when the clock is dropped and the idler gear is broken.

Hunt was broken. The style of *Undercover* has that numbness of affect which comes from a fall. He writes without feeling more for one period in his life than another as though he is saying it is costly enough to locate the episodes. He is like a semiconscious victim who senses that coming awake will be equal to crawling up a slope of broken glass. The horrors to come will be greater than the ones he has known already.

Yet, as with Nixon, there is no danger of getting to like Hunt too much. We can decide that Nixon was set up by Watergate and feel no great pity because we can also remember the war in Vietnam he kept going for four years in order to assure his reelection. One can always recall the voice Nixon used when he spoke of the North Vietnamese as "my enemy," on the day he ordered the Christmas bombing. He had always wanted to be an actor and he ended by playing the classic role of the criminal who is convicted for the wrong crime. So one does not have to feel an overcharge of compassion for Nixon — just enough to water our imagination. Your enemies succeed after all when they dry up your imagination.

By the same token, there is a built-in limit to how much compassion we can feel for Hunt. We have only to read his account of his own methods on a caper in the early fifties:

The Mexican Communist leader was then visiting Peking. On the day of his departure Bob North airmailed me a copy of a Chinese newspaper announcing his departure, sending a duplicate copy to CIA headquarters. To replace the departure announcement I fabricated a story in which the Mexican Communist was quoted as deprecating fellow Mexicans and saying, among other things, that Mexican peasants could never hope to achieve the cultural level of the superior Chinese. I cabled the fabrication to headquarters, where a special type font had been made by reproducing samples from the local paper. My fabricated story was set in this duplicate type and the entire front page of the local paper re-created by technical means. A dozen copies were pouched to me and were received before the target Communist returned to Mexico.

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The fabricated newspapers were made available to local journalists who published facsimilies of the offensive interview together with a translation into Spanish. The target's protestations of innocence gained no credence whatever, for technical tests conducted on the duplicated Chinese paper affirmed that the type in which the story was printed perfectly matched other type samples in the same newspaper and so had to be authentic.³⁰

— *Undercover*

³⁰ This story is a perfect example of how a fact can be wiped out by an artifact.

A footnote says, "It was this sort of technical assistance from CIA that I lacked when I undertook to fabricate two State Department cables in 1971."

No, we do not have to like him too much. Self-pity is Hunt's companion, and bitterness is his fuel. He writes with the tightly compressed bile of a disappointed man; the reader is to be reminded that his early prospects were happier than his later ones. Photographs taken of him on the beach at Acapulco a few months out of OSS show the would-be screenwriter looking well built in bathing trunks. He bears a bit of resemblance to Hemingway, and is at pains in *Undercover* to show pictures of himself skiing and hunting. For that matter, he is also adept at fishing, squash, golf, tennis, riding, boxing, and screwing — so the autobiography suggests.

It would be a bet Hemingway is his hero, and that Hunt in the late 1940s was torn between a life as a great novelist and a social life as a spy. We can guess how he chooses. He is, with everything else, a social climber, and drops on the reader every big name he knows from Eisenhower and Nixon down, making a show of his good WASP family origins (Hunt's Point in the Bronx is named after a relative who goes back to the Revolutionary War, and Leigh Hunt is on the family tree) as well as his wife's sterling ancestry ("In addition to being descended from the Presidential Adams and Harrison families, my wife was one-eighth Oglala Sioux . . ."). Before Hunt, she has been married to the Marquis de Goutière. No matter that her maiden name is Wetzel and Hunt is from Brown, not Princeton (a full demerit in the early CIA), he will still look to climb high into the good life of Oh So Social. "The service plates were Revere gadroon, the crystal was an opaline . . ." is a line from one of his novels, and he will make a point of asking Bill Buckley to be godfather to his children. At the end, when tragedy strikes, he and his family are living in a house called Witches Island in Potomac, Maryland, in "what was to be our final family home. On its ample acreage were paddocks, a stable, outbuildings and woods." He is the perfect reader for the magazine edited by the godfather of his children.

Still, he is not just one more anti-Communist with nothing but the righteous moral equivalent of tunnel vision. He has also had a life. It is almost an appealing life. He has had dyslexia as a boy and played trumpet in a high-school dance band. What is most irritating about Hunt is that he is nearly large enough to be a protagonist in a good and solid novel, and yet — hatred has certainly dried his imagination — he is never large enough. No moment of wit will ever separate his soul from his disasters.

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All the heavier must those disasters sit on him. Those disasters pose insoluble questions. Their lack of an answer promises insanity.

What, for instance, can he make of that list of offices on the seventh or eighth floors of the Watergate Office Building? Or of those extra break-ins he may now be hearing about for the first time? With his sophistication in the infiltration of one group of Intelligence by another — he has after all been chief of covert action in the Domestic Operations Division — how could Hunt not entertain the hypothesis that a species of trench warfare in bugging and counter-bugging had been going on in the Watergate Office Building long before his operation ran into its peculiar trap? Let us even assume that everything he has told us is only a cover story for the most serious job he assumed he was doing. After the arrests, how can he be certain he was told anything accurate?

There is a tool of inquiry provided by Lenin. He suggested that when a political event occurred whose origin or motive seemed incomprehensible, then ask the question: "Whom?" Whom does this benefit? Whom did Watergate benefit? Hunt would ask the question. And he would have to face the nightmare that the Nixon-Kissinger wing of the CIA, which by now for practical purposes could be described as the Rockefeller-Détente wing, had been mangled at Watergate by the Cold War wing. If so, however, then he, Hunt had also been set up in the process, had been sacrificed by his own people to implicate Nixon. There was a centrality to such a hypothesis no agent could ignore.

There are not only dimensions to paranoia but degrees. Cold paranoia can serve as the assistant to brilliance, but fevered paranoia (where the heat comes from the thought that one is being done in by one's friends) is the true hellion of hysteria. All panics are loose, all proportions are lost. In such a fry, how can one ignore the smallest detail?

Hunt could even begin to brood over people like R. Spencer Oliver, whose phone happened to be the other line tapped at the Democratic National Committee. Hunt could remember a dinner with a young Democrat named Spencer Oliver who had been out with Mullen, Bennett, and himself back in 1970 or 1971. During the meal, Oliver had made a point of mentioning the names of a few CIA officers Hunt knew personally. Oliver had been surprisingly knowledgeable. Mullen and Bennett had even wanted to take Oliver into Mullen & Company as a partner! But Hunt had disapproved.

Now, he had been caught on an operation which had for one of its tasks the tapping of Oliver's phone. Hunt could mention Oliver casually in his book and make no connection between the Spencer Oliver with whom he had dinner and the R. Spencer Oliver whose phone was tapped. He does not ask if they are not most certainly the same man. Such calm, however, is for his book. From Hunt's point of view, Oliver might have little or a great deal to do with Watergate. In the ongoing crisis of trying to solve the mystery of his life with all the working experience of his career, how is Hunt to measure the relevant importance of that detail, or of McCord and Fensterwald? McCord, for instance, has taken Bernard Fensterwald for his lawyer to go before the Ervin committee, Fensterwald who is chairman of the Committee to Investigate Assassinations. The unspoken shock to the media would not be small. It is a way of saying Watergate is related to Dallas. What enclave now wanted the media to think that way? Dallas and Watergate. That would be the scoop of the century. The people behind McCord might be serving some kind of notice.

S

bad
break

We are trying to live in the measure of Hunt's anguish, but it is impossible to speculate here. We do not know, after all, whether he had anything to do with Dallas. The photograph of the two bums arrested by the police in Dealey Plaza shortly after the murder does show a resemblance to Hunt and Sturgis but there is an indigestible discrepancy in the height. On the other hand, Hunt was chief of covert action in the Division of Domestic Affairs at the time; that is a perfect desk from which to have a hand in such an assassination (especially if it has been brought off by some variant of a Mafia and anti-Castro Cuban team). At the least, we have to assume that Hunt would have been in position to pick up enough to embarrass the CIA profoundly. But then it is staggering to contemplate how much Hunt may have found out about matters he had not necessarily been active in himself. If no one in the CIA could locate to a certainty the details of other operations, still a tremendous amount might be learned through gossip, or by reconnaissance through those more or less secret files which would be more or less available on long, dull office afternoons. And he was a writer of suspense novels, no less. What material might be at hand! To the degree the CIA is bureaucratic and not romantic there would be formal procedures in getting to the files which could be winked at, breached, circumvented, or directly betrayed. To the degree the CIA was a culture, then Hunt was a living piece of inquiring matter, and in the years from 1966 to 1970 as his career in the CIA was ostensibly winding down, he had time to do a little research on some of those hundred and more murders in Dallas supposedly connected to witnesses of the assassination, time to get a line on who might be doing the job. For the CIA, whether implicated or not, could hardly be without interest in a mopup operation of such magnitude. Over a hundred murders to keep the seepage of information under control!

So Hunt may have known a great deal about Dallas. We have to hold this in our attention when we begin to think of the nightmare within Hunt's nightmare — the death of his wife in the crash of United Air Lines Flight 553 from Washington to Chicago on December 8, 1972. The plane had crashed on landing at Midway and she was one of forty-five people who were killed. We do not know how much Hunt knew nor how much he had told his wife. We know that she was making payments to the Cubans with White House money, but that is hardly a piece of information worth silencing by the risk and carnage of sabotaging an airplane. An investigator, Sherman Skolnick, in Chicago, would lay the claim that twelve people in one way or another connected with Watergate were on the plane, and he would remind us that White House aide Egil Krogh, Gordon Liddy's old White House boss, was appointed under secretary of transportation the next day and would supervise the National Transportation Safety Board and the Federal Aviation Administration in their investigations of the crash. That is not an automatically insignificant detail. On December 19, Alexander Butterfield would be appointed the new head of the F.A.A.³¹

³¹ For that matter, Dwight Chapin, appointments secretary to Nixon, moved over two months later to an executive position at United.

If Hunt and Dorothy Hunt had known a great deal about Dallas and were threatening to tell the world, then Hunt would not have to brood over such details. He could assume his wife's plane had been encouraged to crash. Of course, we would no longer be talking about anguish, but masterplots and last-reel peril. The likelihood is that Hunt and Dorothy Hunt were trapped in a smaller game, and the crash was a mixture of inefficiency, cynical maintenance, and who knows? — some overload of psychic intensity among the passengers. (Why else do great athletes live in such fear of traveling by air but that psychic intensity is also a species of physical charge and can even distort the workings of an electronic system?)

No, it is more likely Hunt was living with the subtle horror that attends every inexplicable crash — is there a psychology to machines? Had there been an intervention of moral forces, a play of the dice from the demiurge? At the least, Dorothy Hunt's death was evidence of the raised law of coincidence in dramatic and dreadful events. Great or livid events could indeed be peculiar in their properties, and maybe no perfect conspiracy ever worked, since people were so imperfect — only imperfect conspiracies succeeded and then only when a coincidence drove the denouement home. Was it possible that Hunt was finally obliged to look over the lip of tragedy itself — a view which leaves us, the Greeks were certain, babbling and broken? Did he come to think that a psychic vortex pulls in a higher incidence of coincidence itself?

"A man may defend himself against all enemies save those who are resolved that such a man as he should not exist."

— Tacitus, epigraph to *Undercover*

Reflect on the phenomenon: A higher incidence of coincidence itself. The more central the dreadful act, then the greater is the number of accidents, disasters, and astonishing connections which surround it. By such a cosmic thesis, more than one assassination plot would come to collision on those murderous days of our history (when Americans began to live in fear of more than the atom bomb) and so, too, more than one agency, more than one enclave, more than one motive, yes, more than one plot have been set up, or unhinged, at Watergate. We have to free our minds of a hundred certainties we have been provided (and have provided ourselves) on that third-rate burglary. We have preferred to rely on the testimony of a hundred skilled and professional liars rather than face into a vision of reality which would recognize that Franz Kafka is the true if abstract historian of the modern age, and the Möbius strip is the nearest surface we can find to a plane.³²

³² A Möbius strip is like a paper band curved into a circle, but twisted a half turn before it is glued. If you start drawing a line down the middle of the band your pencil will end up on the opposite side of the paper once you have circled the ring. Stated by its paradox, the top surface of the plane is now the bottom surface.

To free our minds! We live in one existence, but have the overlay of another upon us. We strive to make our history, and sense, with the uneasiness of confrontations never faced, that we may dwell under the overall domination of an invisible second government (at odds with itself?) whose touch is subtle, but whose scenarios sit like an incubus upon Intelligence itself.

Of course we also live in a world more dazzling with the montage of startling connections than a Kenneth Anger film. Maybe, it is our reward. During that season when Bobby Kennedy, weary from stalking Jimmy Hoffa, would relax with Marilyn Monroe, we find out Hoffa, in his turn, hired a wiretapper, Bernard Spindel, to listen in on Bobby.³³ Spindel, who must have been as proficient as Gene Hackman in *The Conversation*, was going to be arrested eventually and would die in jail. There is reason to think the Kennedys never forgave him, for Spindel seems to have gotten some tapes on Bobby, and the wiretapper's widow appears to have kept and concealed them. She rose up to the polluted surface of the news a year or two ago, Mrs. Barbara Fox Spindel. A small munitions company she owned had been offering (by the claim of its promotion material) to be able to produce fatal exploding cigarette packs and other small works of surprise for the use of the CIA and other espionage. Her company and her name became connected by way of the newspaper story to Lucien "Gus" Conein, an old CIA hand who had long worked for General Lansdale, the CIA station chief in Saigon. Conein denied the connection vehemently, of course, but then we can imagine how quickly somebody in his line of work is going to admit a professional association with Mrs. Spindel.

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Now, it happens to be Conein, an old Company associate, whom Hunt interviewed when Chuck Colson was looking for a way to cook up a few false Kennedy cables on the assassination of Diem. It is a long trail which leads from the tragedy of Marilyn Monroe to E. Howard Hunt and his thunderstruck fun and games, and there is not much voltage in these connections. No shock comes across the gap. It is just that like Agatha Christie's characters we all seem to end up knowing one another. Before too long, if irony does not paralyze, we may be singing, "No man is an Iland, intire of it selfe" in the godawful music of Ernest Hemingway's final whiskey-cracked voice. Listen to his record.³⁴ What a crazy country we inhabit. What a harlot. What a brute. She squashes sausage out of the minds of novelists on their hotfooted way to a real good plot.

³³ Robert F. Slatzer, *The Life and Curious Death of Marilyn Monroe*.

³⁴ Ernest Hemingway Reading, *Caedmon Records TC 1185*.

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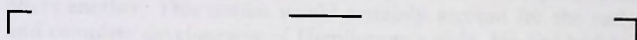
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Mss 187-209

Three Prefaces. . . .gl



Three Prefaces



PREFACE TO *Advertisements for Myself*

The Deer Park is the book which taught me how to write, but *Advertisements* followed, and it was the first book I wrote that had a style I thought I might be able to call my own. It was forged out of a continuing recognition of how difficult it was to put words together when writing about oneself.

Style, of course, is what every good young author looks to acquire. In lovemaking, its equivalent is grace. Everybody wants it but nobody seems to find it by working directly toward the goal. On the other hand, unless born with grace or style, nobody seems to get there without working hard in some direction or other.

Advertisements was written at the end of the slowest and most morale-disrupting kind of work. I didn't begin the book 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 two novels as hard again to write.

I did not know what I was doing. As I explained further along in these pages, I had been divorced by success from any intimate sense of my identity and had a hard time getting halfway back. Apart from that psychological vertigo which will attack any athlete, performer or young businessman 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 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 all such help, it was a book that wrote itself. It had a style-proof style. That is to say it had a best-seller style, no style. Very few people failed to read that book with some interest.

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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 out there ready to kill them, kill them quickly or slowly, but something out there is not 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 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 nor that ill used by early life. His little social deaths are overcome by his small social conquests. So he writes in the style of others looking for his own, and tends to love words more than rhythms. In his haste to dominate the world (rare is the young writer who is not a consummate prick) he tends to use words for their precision, their ability to define, their acrobatic action. His style often changes from scene to scene, from paragraph to paragraph. He knows little about creating mood and the essence of good style is that it sets a mood thick 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 mood sinks to the ground of the page. It is an achievement which comes from having thought about one's life right into the point at which 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, at least, reached that rare plateau where irony rather than philosophy serves to sustain each day. At that juncture, everything one writes comes out of one mood, 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*. Maybe I had come to realize that authors died from the reception of their books, literally began to die a little, and every dishonesty in oneself added gangrene to the wound. So *Advertisements* 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 the advertisements in this book, printed in italics, are testimony to the different way I was now obliged to use language.

For, as a corollary of kicking nicotine, I was thrust into the problem of style. 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 develop my style, no, rather say it proceeded to turn my nose in the direction of style. I began to learn how difficult it might be for a prose writer to move from the hegemony of the word to the resonance of the prose rhythm. That can be a jump greater than a leap into poetry; maybe it is analogous to changing one's religion.

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I suffered, anyway, prodigies of brain-curdling, and educated myself all over again how to write, write without cigarettes, and found the beginnings of a style which might begin to express the way my own mind (as opposed to other writers' minds) was ready to work. So, *Advertisements for Myself* was a book whose writing changed my life. Let us hope that is conceivably for the better.

PREFACE TO
Papa by Gregory H. Hemingway, M.D.

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

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

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

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

PREFACE TO
Why Are We in Vietnam?

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

So it is a strange place. The Pilgrims landed there before they went on to Plymouth — America began here. The Pilgrims lost interest in scrub pine, mournful winds, and sand in the land. They moved on, left ghosts. Whaling captains settled in later, left ghosts. In winter the town is filled with spirits. One can go mad in that rainy climate waiting for March to end. It is a place for murderers and suicides. If decades went by without a single recorded homicide, that record ended abruptly with a crime of true carnage. A few years ago, a young Portuguese from a family of fishermen killed four girls, dismembered their bodies, and buried the pieces in twenty small and scattered graves.

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

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

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

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

(1) I had nothing further to say about them.

(2) Even if I did, I could no longer believe that Tex and D.J. could still be characters in the Provincetown novel. They had another quality by now.

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

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

But then writing has its own occult force. At its best, we never know where our writing comes from nor who gives it to us. If Jack Kennedy's name is invoked in the first sentence of *An American Dream*, nine lines farther down that page, a man named Kelly is mentioned. Later in the same Chapter we learn Kelly's middle name is Oswald — Barney Oswald Kelly. That chapter appeared in *Esquire* about a month after the assassination, but it had been written three months earlier, a coincidence to force one to contemplate the very design of coincidence.

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

We will never know if primitive artists painted their caves to show a representation, or whether the moving hand was looking to placate the forces above and the forces below. Sometimes, I think the novelist fashions a totem just as much as an aesthetic, and his real aim, not even known necessarily to himself, is to create a diversion in the fields of dread, a sanctuary in some of the arenas of magic. The flaws of his work can even be a part of his magical strength, as if his real intent in writing is to alter the determinations of that invisible finger which has written and moved on. By such logic, the book before you is a totem, not empty of amulets for the author against curses, static, and the pervasive malignity of our electronic air.

On Henry Miller*. . . gl

On Henry Miller*

Henry and Ernest



* Excerpts adapted from *Genius and Lust*.

Henry Miller, his work embraced, which is to say swallowed in four or five weeks, and then re-read over another month or two, can sit in one's mind with all the palpability of a huge elm lying in your back yard. The nobility of the trunk is on the ground for you to examine, not to speak of the rich nightmare of the roots and crawlers. To read Miller in that short a period reopens the old question which is always too large: What is a man? Just as our uprooted elm would take on constellations of meaning as it lay in the yard, until finally it could be reminiscent of a battleship, or a host of caverns in Hieronymus Bosch, so might you be forced to ask: What the devil is a tree? Just so does Miller return us to the first question of humanism. What, finally, is a Man? Nothing is settled after all. We have been given the illusion that we know Miller, know every one of his vices, peccadilloes, hustles, horrors, cadges, gifts, flaws, and transcendent generosities, are, yes, familiar with that man who is by his own description "confused, negligent, reckless, lusty, obscene, boisterous, thoughtful, scrupulous, lying, diabolically truthful . . . filled with wisdom and nonsense." Nonetheless, when we are done reading, we wonder if we know anything. It is not that he bears no relation to the Henry Miller who is the protagonist of his books. (That Henry Miller is, indeed, the ultimate definition of the word protagonist.)

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No, the real Henry Miller, which is to say the corporeal Miller certain writers knew intimately and wrote about well, Anaïs Nin being the first, is not very different from his work, but more like a transparency laid over a drawing, copied, and then skewed a degree. He is just a little different from his work. But in that difference is all the mystery of his own personality, and the paradoxes of a great artist. And the failure. For it is impossible to talk of a great artist without speaking of failure. The greater they are, the more they do not fulfill their own idea of themselves. Dostoyevsky failed to write *The Life of a Great Sinner*, and Tolstoy never brought a religious metamorphosis to man. Miller was never able to come to focus on the one subject which cried out to him: D. H. Lawrence's old subject — what is to be said of love between a man and a woman? Miller saw that Lawrence had come to grips with the poetry of sex but none of the sewer gas. Miller would strike matches to the sewer gas, and set off literary explosions, but he never blew himself over to the other side of the divide. While nobody can be more poetic than Miller about fornication itself — two hundred beer-hall accordions might as well be pumping away as he describes the more heavenly engagements he has played — the writing becomes an evocation of some disembodied but divine cunt and what it is doing to him — his appreciation equal to the enjoyment of a great symphony, yet he still cannot write about fucking with love. (Of course, it is fair to ask, who can?) Miller nonetheless pounds away on the subject like a giant phallus trying to enter a tiny vagina — in the pounding is one simple question: How in heaven do you get in?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Henry came to Louveciennes with June. As June walked toward me from the darkness of the garden into the light of the door, I saw for the first time the most beautiful woman on earth. A startlingly white face, burning black eyes, a face so alive I felt it would consume itself before my eyes. Years ago I tried to imagine a true beauty; I created in my mind an image of just such a woman. I had never seen her until last night. Yet I knew long ago the phosphorescent color of her skin, her huntress profile, the evenness of her teeth. She is bizarre, fantastic, nervous, like someone in a high fever. Her beauty drowned me. As I sat before her, I felt I would do anything she asked of me. Henry suddenly faded. She was color and brilliance and strangeness. By the end of the evening I had extricated myself from her power. She killed my admiration by her talk. Her talk. The enormous ego, false, weak, posturing. She lacks the courage of her personality, which is sensual, heavy with experience. Her role alone preoccupies her. She invents drama in which she always stars. I am sure she creates genuine dramas, genuine chaos and whirlpools of feelings, but I feel that her share in it is a pose. That night, in spite of my response to her, she sought to be whatever she felt I wanted her to be. She is an actress every moment. I cannot grasp the core of June.

By the end of the evening I felt as Henry did, fascinated with the face and body which promises so much, but hating her invented self which hides the true one.

Curious! If we fix on Miller's mind rather than June's beauty, Nin could be giving a description of Henry's talent: *startling, burning, phosphorescent, bizarre, fantastic, nervous, in a high fever, full of color, brilliance, and strangeness*, but possessed of an *enormous ego, false, weak, posturing*, and finally *lacking the courage of (its) personality*, leaving behind *chaos and whirlpools of feelings*. Yet it may be all a *pose*. One *cannot grasp* the core of Henry Miller, and one can come near to *hating* (his) *invented self which hides the true one*.

It works. If one is to judge Miller's talent by the vices of his mind, the result is not unequal to the flaws in June's beauty. No wonder they spend seven years together. It is a relation which proves compulsive yet is stripped of roots; as emotional as blood but as insecure as emotion itself. She will take him a long way in seven years from the hard-nosed Brooklyn hard-on he pictured himself to be when they met. More enterprising than he, wiser about the world, a better hustler, she convinces him to quit work and try to write while she makes their living. If ever there is an inner movement in his life, it is here. We are witness to his first metamorphosis. He changes from a promoter of bad debts and riotous Brooklyn nights, to a faithful and tortured young writer helplessly in love with a voluptuous woman whose maddening lack of center leads him into an awareness of his own lack of identity. He comes to discover all those modern themes that revolve around the difficulty of discovering oneself. Soon he will dive into the pit of recognizing that there may not be any geological fundament in the psyche that we can call identity. Like June, he will have to re-create himself each morning. Soon, he realizes he has been doing it all his life. He has never had to look back in moral guilt because whatever act he committed yesterday could be looked in the eye today. The man who did it was no longer himself. In the act of doing it, he had become another man, free to go in a new direction. It could be 180 degrees away from yesterday's attempt. Tomorrow he may be close again to the man he was day before yesterday, but it will never be the same. Since he has a life full of adventure, mishaps, and constant lack of funds, since June brings in their living as irregularly as changes in the weather, so there is no nicety to his liberation. Miller's new psychic life is more like a scab-back scampering upfield on a punt return. He can lose ten yards as easily as gain them. And his head is forever ringing from his last concussion.

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His confusion, however, is great; his passivity feels pervasive. He has changed from a stand-up hallway-fucker to an indolent husband-pimp. His wife is having the adventures. He is home doing the writing, sometimes the cooking. The wife is a consummate liar, and makes money off men to the tune of hundred-dollar bills dropped in from the sky, never tells him how, a woman even more changeable than himself, and vastly more bisexual — their love will crash finally when she brings home a girl to live with them, and becomes hooked on the girl. Sixteen hundred pages of *The Rosy Crucifixion* will founder on Miller's inability to penetrate these bisexual depths, or even come near them. He was brought up by a moral code that taught love was attached to the living room; one's family was one's house. The living room carpet was one's rock. Now he floats in a fluid as limitless as amniotic fluid. He has no limbs and his feet are over his head, his eyes smell sounds and his nose feels colors, he is in the confusion of living with a woman even more unpredictable than himself. He will not use the word, it is not in the vein of his literary blood, but our present temperament can have less difficulty in seeing him as a narcissist awash in the uncategorizability of such experience.

Let us look at the word with fresh interest, however. It is too simple to think of the narcissist as someone in love with himself. One can detest oneself intimately and still be a narcissist. What characterizes narcissism best is that the fundamental relationship is with oneself. That same to-and-fro of love and hate which mates feel for one another is experienced within the self. A special kind of insanity always underwrites the narcissist, therefore. The inner dialogue almost never ceases. Each half of oneself is forever scrutinizing the other. Two narcissists in love are not like two lovers who may feel a visceral need holding them together. Narcissists, rather, are linked up into themselves. They do not attach to each other so much as they approach like crystals brought into communication. They have a passionate affair to the degree that each makes it possible for the other to resonate more fully than when alone. Two narcissists might live together for fifty years in every appearance of matrimonial solidity (although it probably helps if money is present) but essentially, no matter how considerate they may be to one another, the mutual courtesies come more from the decision to be *loving* rather than issuing forth from a love which will express itself whether one wishes it or not. The narcissistic relation insists that the mate be good for one's own resonance. In the profoundest sense, one narcissist is never ready to die for the other. It is not love we encounter so much as fine tuning. Small wonder that the coming together of narcissists is the natural matrimony of the Stereo Century. Small wonder that Henry Miller, the last great American pioneer, is first to boff and bang his way across this last psychological frontier, there first with the most. No love in literature is so long recounted as his sixteen-hundred-page affair and marriage and separation from Mona. *The Rosy Crucifixion* becomes a literary cake as large as the Himalayas. Across half at least of its sixteen hundred pages are peaks and avenues and haunches and battlements and aretes and basins and summits and valleys of writing so good one shakes one's head. Pity the poor aspiring mediocrity of a writer who reads Miller without protection — he will never write another word if he has any decency left. Pity for that matter the good writer. At times Miller is too good.

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Yet *The Rosy Crucifixion* is one of the monumental failures in the history of the novel. For those sixteen hundred pages, Miller knocks on the door of ultimate meaning, and it never opens a crack. By the end he is where he was at the beginning, at least so far as sexual satori is concerned. I-got-laid-and-it-was-wondrous is the opening theme of the book. By the end not one new philosophical connection has been laid onto that first lay. Miller and the reader know no more of the wonders beneath the first wonder.

An obvious critical impulse is to decide the work is too long. But on examination it cannot be cut. Rather, as it stands, it is too fragmentary. Perhaps it should be a novel of four thousand pages. What Miller has bogged into (precisely because he is the first American to make the attempt) is the uncharted negotiations of the psyche when two narcissists take the vow of love. Yet it is finally his own true novelistic terrain. He has always eschewed politics as a literary subject (he merely issues calumnies against it). He has also been indifferent to the finicky if invaluable literary task of trying to place people in society, indeed, he never really writes about society except through metaphor. Since he is a great writer, however, his metaphors can occasionally draw the whole of society over one's brain like an incubus. He does this with his vision of the Cosmodemonic Telegraph Company and the unforgettable metaphor in *Tropic of Cancer* when Miller and Van Norden are exhaustedly fucking a worn-out whore like men standing up in the trenches.

His preference, however, is to create his literary world through the dreams and myths that are appropriate to his use. That has to be a perfumed and fatty literary game unless there is real novelistic meat on each mythic tendon. So Miller naturally goes to sex for his meat. He is not a social writer, but a sexual writer. Even Lawrence never let go of the idea that through sex he could delineate society; Miller, however, went further. Sex, he assumed, was a natural literary field for the novel, as clear and free and open to a landgrab as any social panorama. One could capture the sex-life of two people in all its profundity and have quite as much to say about the cosmos as any literary plot laid out the other way with its bankers and beggars, ladies and whores, clerks and killers. The real novel, went Miller's assumption, could short-circuit society. Give it to us by way of a cunt impaled on a cock.

That is a herculean assumption. Because you need the phallus of Hercules to bring it off (and conceivably the brain of Einstein). A writer works with what he is given, and in Miller's case, for cosmic blast-off, he had a narcissistic cunt on a narcissistic cock and thirty-six years of bewilderment from the day of meeting his love to the hour he finished writing of her. She was so *changeable* went his everlasting lament.

It is hard enough for a man twisting a pencil through the traps and loops of his handwriting to get a character onto an empty page, but to create someone who shifts all the time! As soon teach one's spine to wind like a snake. The narcissist is always playing roles. If there is any character more difficult for an author to create than a writer more talented than himself, it must be a great actor. We do not even begin to comprehend the psychology of actors. Yet the narcissist not being obliged to conform to the severe discipline of the stage or the camera, is, in effect, on the measure of complexity, a great actor without a stage, a Hamlet without a sea of faces to listen to what is nobler.

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

Since the amount of stimulation we can offer ourselves is obviously limited, the underlying problem of the narcissist is boredom. So there are feverish, even violent, attempts to shift the given. One must alter that drear context in which one half of the self is forever examining the stale presence of the other. That is one reason why narcissists are forever falling in and out of love, jobs, places, and addictions. Promiscuity is the opportunity to try a new role. The vanity gained from a one-night stand is an antidote to claustrophobia. That is, if the gamble of the one-night stand turns out well! Miller complains bitterly of June's lack of center, her incapacity to tell the truth or even recognize it. "I want the key," he says once to Anaïs Nin, "the key to the 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? — Miller does not want to recognize that the key may be simple. Every day is a scenario for June. On the best of days she creates a life into which she can fit for a few hours. She can feel real love and real hate for strangers, and thereby leave the circle of her self-absorption. Through scenarios, she can arrive in an hour at depths of emotion other people voyage toward for years. Of course, the scenario once concluded, so, too, is the love for the day. The passing actor she played with is again a stranger. It is useless to speak of whether she loves or does not love Miller. It depends on whether he is in her scenario that day. So it is also useless to speak of her lies. They are no more real to her than yesterday's role. It is today's scenario that is her truth and her life. That is her liberty 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 its new role for Miller. He does play opposite the leading lady. If one day he is a detective, and the next, a criminal, that keeps interest in one's personality alive.

Narcissists, after all, induce emotion in one another through their minds. It is not their flesh which is aroused so much as the vibrancy of the role. Their relations are at once more electric and more empty, more perfect and more hollow. But the hollow seems never to fill, experience is poured into no vessels of the psyche, but seems to drain away. So, narcissism may be a true disease, a biological displacement of the natural impulse to develop oneself by the lessons of one's experience, which could bear the same relation to love that onanism does to copulation, or cancer to the natural growth of tissue. Can we come a little nearer to the recognition that there may be a base beneath all disease, an ultimate disease, a psychosomatic doom, so to speak, against which all the other illnesses, colds, fevers, infections, and deteriorations are bulwarks to protect us against a worse fate? Which is none other than that 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 hideous 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.

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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.

The reality, of course, is considerably more painful. Given the delicacy of every narcissist, and the timidity which created their detachment, we can see again that the intensity of their 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.

Miller could have been playing, therefore, for the highest stakes. He had the energy, the vision, the talent, and the outrageous individuality to have some chance of becoming the greatest writer in America's history, a figure equal to Shakespeare. (For Americans.) Of course, to invoke such contrasts is to mock them. A writer cannot live too seriously with the idea that he will or will not beat Tolstoy — he has rather some sense of a huge and not impossible literary destiny in the reverberations of his own ambition; he feels his talent, perhaps, as a trust; so he sees his loves as 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 collective loss would have come to English people if Shakespeare had failed to write. (Or, for that matter, conceive how the South would be subtly less interesting without Faulkner.)

In those seven years with June, Miller was shaping the talent with which he would go out into the world. It is part of the total ambiguity of narcissism (despite the ten thousand intimate details he offers of his life) that we do not know by the end of *The Rosy Crucifixion* whether she breathed a greater life into his talent or exploited him. We do not know whether Miller if he had never met Mona could have become something like equal to Shakespeare and capable of writing about tyrants and tycoons (instead, repetitively, of his own liberation) or — we are left wide open — the contrary is the true possibility and he might never have written at all if he had not met her. All we know is that after seven years of living with her, he went off to Paris alone and learned to live by himself, having come into that confluence of his life where he could extract a clean 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.

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My Friend,
Jean Malaquais*. . . .gl

My Friend, Jean Malaquais*



I did not like this book twenty years ago, and thought it disappointing. Since I had learned as much about writing from the author as from anyone alive, large demands were put upon the manuscript. Jean Malaquais was not only my good friend, perhaps even my best friend, but my mentor, more — he had had more influence upon my mind than anyone I ever knew from the time we had gotten well acquainted while he was translating *The Naked and the Dead* into French. Part of the friendship rested on his candor. He is hardly rich now, and he was poor then, as only a French intellectual who teaches an evening course at the New School can be bread-crust poor in New York, and he made no pretense — he was not in love with *The Naked and the Dead*. No, he was doing the translation because he needed the work. It proved a munificent sum. The publisher was giving him \$2,000, and in the course of the year, I added another \$1,000 out of shame. I had never seen a man work so hard at a job for which he did not have respect. In the year it took him to make that translation, he must have worked eight hours a day, five or six days a week, he was a perfectionist and a French stylist, and hated my prose in that book with much detailed justice: he would draw vectors across the pages to show how sloppily I had repeated words, or worse, *ideas* — how he detested anything slovenly in literature! He had, after all, fashioned the style of his own French prose out of the hungriest inner disciplines. Like Conrad, he was Polish, and also began to learn the language in which he would write only after he was out of his adolescence. Conceive of such hungry disciplines when he was a young emigrant from Warsaw who worked in French mines and came to clarify the literature of his new tongue by spending fourteen hours a day in the Bibliothèque Nationale in order to keep warm — it was cold on the winter streets of Paris in the years of the Depression — yes, learned his French by reading and writing in that library with all his imagination, ambitions and privations going into it, and took a post-graduate course in the hierarchical elegance of the tongue by being secretary to André Gide for a period, indeed met his future employer by composing a furious letter on the spur of reading a casual piece the author had done for a literary review.¹

* (from an introduction to *The Joker*.)

¹ I think it is worth printing Malaquais' corrections (by way of a recent letter) to a few of my biographical facts.

"The library was la bibliothèque Sainte-Genevieve, the only one in Paris that stayed open till 10 P.M. I'd remain there all day long (10-12 hours), often without a meal. At closing time I'd go to Les Halles where, with some luck, I'd be unloading crates of cackling poultry or frozen cabbage. Still, job or no job, I could always grab there an apple or a couple of carrots to keep the man alive."

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In those pages, Gide had written that he sometimes wondered if poverty might not have deepened his art. We can imagine the irony with which he would surround so direct a sentimentality. Malaquais, however, pulled up the barbarism and shook it in the air. *You ought to get down on your knees and pray to that God you occasionally pretend to believe in that He has let you be a comfortable bourgeois so you can make your art.* Such was the note of the letter, a howl of ferocity torn right out of the bitterness of trying to write at the maximum of one's possible talents when there was no money in the pocket and no food in the belly. Gide wrote back to apologize. He confessed he had not been thinking of the situation of young writers like Malaquais for whom such words had to be naturally and justifiably intolerable, no, he feared he had been playing too inconsiderately with a conceit; he had wished to startle a number of his confreres who were overconcerned with their sensibility and so had been cushioning themselves against too much shock. He hoped to pose the possible stimulations of shock. But it had been unfeeling to ignore the situation of penniless young men like Malaquais and their sentiments on reading his words.² To the letter, Gide pinned a bill, something like ten pre-World War II francs. Let us say the sum might bring back twenty dollars' worth of groceries today. Malaquais tore up the money and mailed the scraps back to Gide. "Do not think," he wrote, "that you can buy a postage stamp for your soul. If you wish to do something for me, do something real, give me a job! Do not throw me crumbs!"

² From Malaquais' letter: "Gide's piece, an excerpt from his *Journal* dated March 1935, appeared in the October issue of *la Nouvelle Revue Française*. I think it was December when I happened to read it. Had you a chance to look it up (cf. Justin O'Brien's transl., Knopf). I am sure you'd agree it was plain sentimental gibberish, and not in the least ironic. Idiocy was the price one had to pay for going along — even for a while — with the Stalinists.

Now came another letter. Would Malaquais come and visit?³

³ From Malaquais' letter: "G. pinned to his letter a postal order for 100.00 francs (20.00 doll. is about right). I mailed it back, telling him he couldn't buy himself a piece of real estate in paradise at my expense. Not that I was beyond bribery. Had he sent 1,000.00 francs, I might have considered. But for 100.00 francs I'd rather have him stay in hell. That's when he wrote, would I come and visit.

"C'est toi, Malaquais?" asked Gide on the day he appeared.

"Oui, c'est moi. C'est toi, Gide?"

Could fifty years have gone by since a younger man had said "toi" to him? Still, it was the period of Gide's growing sympathy for the USSR. How characteristic to be intrigued, therefore, with a young Pole who was both an intellectual and a worker, not only a Marxist, but — perverse prize to esteem — a species of rare Marxist from some rarefied splinter group, the absolute antithesis, therefore, of all those Soviet bureaucrats with whom Gide was now trying to find tillable intellectual ground. All the more intoxicating to listen then to the concentrated polemic of a Marxist who was altogether anti-Soviet — that was in the grain for Gide. He could hardly move toward atheism without encouraging the friendship of every cleric he knew.

So began an intellectual relationship which would continue intermittently for years. If Gide was to absorb little of Marx from Malaquais (which may have been Gide's fault!) the new secretary was to learn a great deal about writing from the master.⁴ A decade and a half later during the winter and spring of 1949 while Malaquais was translating *The Naked and the Dead* and we became friends despite his aforesaid abomination of my writing (with which I secretly agreed — was I the first to think that *The Naked and the Dead* was a good novel in spite of its style?) I would be obliged in my turn to pick up Malaquais' literary precepts, live with them, wrestle with their intent, and even absorb one or two while hearing Gide's example cited so repeatedly during debates on style that I came to feel at last as if I knew him, or at least knew something of his taste and how his strictures were formed.

⁴ From Malaquais' letter: "I was not G's secretary or otherwise in his pay. He did ask me from time to time to do this or that for him — read and comment upon the hundreds of letters (mostly insulting) he had received as a sequel to his two books on Russia; or he'd want me to put some order in his voluminous archives; or call on me at any odd hour for a game of chess; or drag me along the streets through lengthy aimless errands; or drop in my lap a manuscript of his and out of the corners of his eyes watch me as I sniffed over it, and so on. But there was never a question of employment or salary. Yet, it is true that he gave me a helping hand. He had me examined by his doctor, saw to it that I put on a few badly needed pounds of flesh, that I was taken care of when in the hospital, in short possibly kept me from spitting my lungs. And he supported me intermittently when I was writing my first book, and it was he who secured for Galy and myself the Mexican visa which saved our hides."

There was nothing slavish about Malaquais, least of all his mind. He was an intellectual sultan, still is, and so my ongoing education in the niceties of good writing was not a simple concert of homage to Gide — Malaquais had for his old employer the comfortable respect we offer a writer whose virtues are prominent but whose lacks are clear in our estimate. After any harangue by Malaquais designed to reduce my truculence toward elegance, severity, and restraint (which virtues were elevated through all of my friend's dialectic in order to purify the quality of *surprise* in one's work — a traditional Gallic presentation under the very shadow of the great literary chef, André G., himself) my mentor was also perfectly capable of saying in an aside, "Of course when it comes to an analysis of history, Gide is like a schoolboy. He has every gift for seizing the paradox of character — he is virtually the first to comprehend that character *is* paradox — but give him a social context and he will lose all instinct for the dialectic."

On reflection, it was true. Gide did not live with dialectic. His mind was singularly particular just where Malaquais' was marvelously abstract. Malaquais had the most powerful ability to move from any particular offered him into the Leviathan of his general theory — he was not a Marxist for nothing! — and trying to argue in his presence was analogous to being drawn with one's brain along a magnetic field of the intellect. Willy-nilly was one's mind reoriented along one Polish Frenchman's poles. Nothing vulgar or bullying about it. Malaquais loathed formula, propaganda, or any variety of thinking which deprived a situation of its nuance. So he was capable of advancing a new thesis, anticipating your objections, stating them with clarity (like Freud disarming his critics) and then would overtake his own verification of your position in the return swing of the dialectic. He would do this with such power that when he argued, the veins in his forehead would throb as though to demonstrate that the human head was obliged to be the natural site if not the very phallus of Mind. Malaquais would have at such times a remarkable resemblance to Picasso — the same noble vault of forehead and workingman's knob of a nose, same characterological determination of chin, same cleft. (Of course, Malaquais might detest

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the comparison. "What a stinker!" I heard him say once of Picasso.)⁵ Still, speaking of genius, I heard Malaquais give a lecture once at the New School. I never heard a better one. For fifty minutes he spoke (without a note) exploring into the recesses of a novelist's unique relation to his time — memory across the years suggests the lecture may have been on Stendhal, or was it Proust? — I only remember the sensation of feeling my intelligence conducted through exercises I might not ordinarily been able to follow. He had the same intense application of energy upon a given point that one finds only in those few great athletes who bring absolute concentration to every instant of a contest and so reveal to you by their body movement some meanings of the sport. When Malaquais lectured, it was inconceivable that his mind and tongue could separate. To cerebrated was to speak. Once at a party, he went on for hours, dominated the conversation. When his wife later remonstrated, "Jean, you talked nine-tenths of the time," he grunted and said, "I had ten times as much to say." It was not arrogance. Merely his grim estimate of the proportions, grim because this small French Pole with his rugged face and mighty brow, his virile purchase on any question to come his way, this prodigy of debate, this behemoth of orality — he spoke out of the same gusto with which a good appetite devours steak — was a man locked in chains when it came to writing. No author ever had more to be grim about.

⁵ From Malaquais' letter: "Did I ever say of Picasso, 'What a stinker!'? If so, it must have been in relation to some concrete occasion, perhaps his drawing a 'dove of peace' in Stalin's honor."

With no belief in karma, one might still have to postulate a phenomenon like reincarnation to explain the enormity of Malaquais' woes when he tried to write — only a soul paying in this life for outrages it had performed in another could pass through such suffering. So Malaquais may once have been Gilles de Rais. In the late Forties and the early Fifties when Jean was writing *The Joker*, just those years when I first came to know him well, he would sit at his desk for ten or twelve or fourteen hours a day, every day. It was his boast that he would not get up, not pace around, not break for a meal, no, he would sit, contemplate his page, and would write . . . to the tune of two or three hundred words a day. Two hundred words in ten hours! It is twenty words an hour, or a new word every three minutes. Can any torture be more horrifically designed for a man who could deliver an extempore lecture complete in thought, example, and syntax, a work of seven or eight thousand words in less than an hour, to be reduced now, down now, with a pen in his hand, to twenty words in sixty minutes? The culture of the past must have sat on his mind like Gibraltar. How could he dare to write about anything? Given his profound contempt for authors who rushed to place their shoddy artifacts into that small temple where only a few perfect works ought to be installed, how presume to add to the excrementa? So this flame-thrower of a mind (when free at its own unrecorded speech) was now confined to one burning wire which sought to drill a tiny hole into the rock of his weighty regard for the value of literature. A man who sat twelve hours at his desk in meditation might have enjoyed such a life even with no more than two hundred words a day, but Malaquais, like many an author before him, labored in depression and whole fatigue. "Yes," he said once, "if you want to do good work, you must *pisser le sang*," and he must have pissed the blood of every disappearing ambition into the hours he chained himself to that desk. What an effort! Over two years, then three years of just such work, slowly *The Joker* bored its little hole into the great rock of his resistance to himself, and Malaquais emerged at last with this novel.

2.

I was aghast when I read it. So much had happened in his life. He had escaped from the Germans after being a prisoner of war, then as a man without a passport had slipped out of Occupied France, only to become metamorphosed into a Jew again, obliged still to hide from the Nazis in Cadiz, while haunting visa factories like a character in *The Consul*, then a penniless émigré living by his wits in Venezuela and Mexico for the rest of the war. He had also been a movie-script writer with respectable credits and an award winner of a major literary prize, the Prix Renaudot, as well as the post-war author of a major novel, *Planete Sans Visa*, and a much-lauded war diary, an ideologist, a romantic, a Marxist, a man with a charmingly demonic wife as well as a critic with every elevated instinct for the kill. He had now written a book so empty of the novelistic riches of his life, that I was in a fury as I read. I had wanted something I was not receiving. *The Joker* seemed bizarre and unlovable — a tract on the bureaucratic horrors of the future written in a nineteenth-century style, an inconglomerate, an *incondominium* of Kafka, *Alice in Wonderland*, some TV afternoon laugh-snort, and *Mission Impossible*. I thought it indigestible; worse, some of the dialogue was guaranteed to grate your teeth. Perhaps it was the fault of the translation I suggested in desperation. No, it was a fine translation, Malaquais insisted. He had worked closely with the translator, a most intelligent woman.

What was one to do with passages like this?

"I'm called Bomba," he said, "and she's called Kouka. What's your name?"

I took his hand absent-mindedly and said nothing. He had a grip of iron.

"You're a oner," he said.

A radio was blasting away on the mantel of a dummy fireplace. Mistress Kouka unstopped one of my jars and plunged her nose into it with delight.

"Oner, punner," she said.

No, Malaquais liked it fine. Nothing wrong with, "You're a oner."

It was obvious this intellectual conquistador had no feeling for the little rhapsodies of the English tongue. I told him what I thought of his book — he had hardly been gentle in his earlier turn on *The Naked and the Dead* and *Barbary Shore* whose imperfections were left forever mortal to me by his critique. What unconscious anger must have been stored in my own reactions; with what an unwitting hostility I must have gone through his pages. The recognition that Malaquais was not one of the world's greatest living writers exploded in me a critical response akin in judgment to a slave rebellion. I was obviously trying to forge my escape from all influence; Malaquais took it like a master. Indeed, it was his turn; if I had been one attentive student through every severity he visited on my work, so he absorbed everything I had to say on the faults of *The Joker*, listened with a half-smile on his face, that painful touch of merriment we feel when good friends are an abyss of agreement apart, and shook his head gloomily from time to time as if it were all too possible that what I had to say might even be true.

Still, he always recovered the private heat of that private and indispensable arrogance which had enabled him to drill the wire into the rock. No, he would always finish by saying, it was a modest book and doubtless had its serious flaws; *quand même*, it had its irreducible little value — he thought finally there was something to it. That was to prove a small consolation in the face of his ongoing poverty, and the modest reception when it came out, its even more modest sale, hardcover for a couple of thousand and no paperback, its quick disappearance. Even in France, where the reviews were good, the book did little.

None of that could have offered him much, and in fact he has not published another novel over all these twenty years — perhaps we keep writing fiction until the pressure of everything in the scheme of things which does not desire novels squeezes us back. It could be said that civilization will enter hell when no more good novels are written and the hum of the TV set is the only resonance in our ear — certain enough, at any rate, a novelist feels that void of substance in his soul (which saints refer to as hell) about the time all urge to write a novel has deserted him. Just as it is the human fate to die, so it may be the novelist's fate to stop writing novels — it comes finally out of the baggage of disappointment in one's life, a species of cumulative nothingness, and Malaquais' fictional talents have indeed been silent.*

* He has published a book: "Kierkegaard: Faith and Paradox" which must surely be one of the most extraordinary studies ever done on the Dane. Unfortunately it has not been translated from French to English.

Still, it was also part of the character, part of the dignity of a master, that my intense dislike of *The Joker* never affected our friendship, in fact may have improved it, for in coming to revere him less and comprehend him a little more, I came also to understand that he was made of the noble material from which the best friendships are formed.

For he was utterly without rancor at my dislike of his work, and it was a soup of good marrow for any friendship to know that the intensity of the critical standard he imposed on others was applicable to himself. Literary criticism had to exist for itself. This is what this good Marxist, full of his own paradox, proceeded to teach me: that there were more important things than vanity or self-expression. One of them was art. Critical standards were the praetorian guard of that most perishable majesty, art. It is, as an original insight, equal to the claim that one has discovered the wheel, but then every artist may have to discover this wheel for himself, and I never knew another writer who was as impersonal about his own work and the work of others, friends or enemies, than Malaquais. If we are buddies we must naturally be ready to die for one another on the barricade, was his unspoken premise, but do not ever ask me to approve of a literary performance I cannot respect. Could anything be less American than to be ready to die for friends if they do not agree with you?

It is the last of my debts to Malaquais and far from the smallest. For whenever I cannot write with ease, whenever the weight of the stone I drag up the ramp of my own pyramid becomes onerous, and I wish for any other occupation than the heavy hours of a writer, the example of my good friend Jean is before me, and I bow my head and go to work again. "Start to pity yourself," says the little voice within, "and you will end up working as hard as Malaquais." How many friends can one count on to set examples for a life?

Date _____



Time _____

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Galley 127

AMERICAN
Mailer: Pieces & Pontifications

1-1618 Little, Brown
Mss 237-260

Two Letters from
Frank Crowther. . . gl

Two Letters from Frank Crowther



May 13, 1976

Dear Norman,

I just wrote Joe Flaherty a note, and he'll probably call you.

But, at the last minute (and this is surely that), I couldn't check out without sending you a last note.

I've been reading Baudelaire's *Last Poems* (1859-63), and stopped after *le Voyage and Anywhere Out Of The World*. They mean different things to different people (especially the author), but I saw some of myself in them. I sure as hell wish I'd written at least one or two things as good. . . .

Before checking out, I merely wanted to say a personal farewell and wish you all the best. If there's some way you can sneak the big novel over to the 'other side,' give it a try. It would be something fine to carry off into eternity.

So long, old man. Keep giving them hell.

Good luck and God bless,
Frank Crowther

P.S. One final thought. If you wouldn't mind, when you have a chance, I'd appreciate your dropping my father a note. I worry, as would any son, how he's going to take this. I had a good life, a good shot at things, and I leave with almost no regrets. It wasn't anything to do with my parents. God knows. They were always loving and kind to me. I just had some bad luck, that's all, and chose this way of departure rather than lingering and getting worse by the day. It might help him through what will undoubtedly be a bad time. . . .

He wrote other letters that day to Wes Joyce, proprietor of the Lion's Head where he drank, and to Joe Flaherty the writer who lived in the same house as himself. The letters were all postmarked at three in the afternoon. That evening he went to the Lion's Head, drank quietly, said little, and studied the faces of Joyce and Flaherty who were also at the bar and would receive his letters in the morning. Then he went home and took an overdose of pills and died in his tidy apartment, dead before he was 44. A number of us went to his funeral. Being asked to speak, I read aloud from his letter. I confess I had read the letter twice before I realized what it said, and so I tried to explain that Crowther lived, more than any friend I knew, by an idea of style. When style is a way of life rather than a literary act, it has only the modern fundament on which to base itself — grace under pressure. It is probable that Frank had more pressure in the last two years of his life than anyone I know, and he was not necessarily prepared for it; his early career had been an easy and attractive one. He had four years in the Marine Corps with two of them at the American Embassy in Paris, followed by a good campus career at the University of North Carolina, and then a stretch of nine years in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations and with Roger Stevens on the White House staff for the National Endowment for the Arts. He was that rarest of career men, a literary functionary on the national level, and it gave him a certain blandness. He was, in the years I first knew him — we would run into one another at Plimpton's parties — a well-built, pleasant-featured slightly round-faced acquaintance, with a half-agreeable, half-promiscuous heartiness, and a great knowledgeability of the activities of everyone in the literary world. I doubt if he missed reading a single issue of any magazine relevant to those times and those people. He was up on every bit of gossip. It was easy not to take him seriously, and I remember my surprise at discovering in 1971 when he came to visit in Provincetown, that Crowther was more of a literary man than I had realized, and had the passionate love of good writing you expect to find in people who have high literary ambitions but know agonies in trying to set it down.

After that, we were friends of a sort, and came closer when he managed my Fiftieth Birthday Party at the Four Seasons (where I announced the need for a Fifth Estate in a sixth-rate speech) and if the affair had any success at all, it was in Frank's skill at getting people to believe that my birthday party was the place you wanted to be seen on that night, a piece of social legerdemain when you consider the not wholly cordial reputation of the principal.

A year later, more or less, he was ill. Sick with a most mysterious and maddening disease. His skin turned red, peeled, and itched intolerably. He lived in the cauldron of a body that itched for twenty-four hours a day. The skin of his hands turned as red as the shell of a boiled lobster. His weight went down. His round face turned thin, and his gray eyes had the imploring light of a man who dwelt in unrelenting torture. He was in and out of hospitals. They tested him for every cancer they could find — they found none; for every common and exotic disease of the skin — they found none. He managed to write during this period and did a screenplay which came close to a good sale and then fell through and he was living now on next to no money. It ought to have been unendurable to see a man with such misfortunes, but the suffering brought an expression close to beauty in what had been once an almost dough-shaped face. I think the first horror for him was that he did not know if his suffering was attached to the mystery of pain itself, or whether he was a sport, his illness a fluke, and himself a protagonist of the absurd.

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That horror breaks through the reserve he usually managed to maintain in his letters. Let me quote from another written six and a half months before his death. He says it there better than I can, and I think he was enough of a literary man to be pleased that I would say so:

I came across the following in Kierkegaard's Diary (p. 19, Entry 18): "All of existence intimidates me, from the tiniest fly to the enigmas of incarnation; as a whole it is inexplicable, my own self most of all; all of existence is pestiferous, my own self most of all. . . ."

I have no pleasure in these days, as well you know, I feel wasted and useless, although in clear moments, there is so much I wish to say, so much I would wish to write were I capable thereof. I remember your saying: "I'm a pro. I can work on a bad day." I'm not a pro, and therefore must try to work on both bad and good days. But the raging of the flesh too often burns away all energy, all motivation. And God knows how terribly difficult it is even to sit down at the typewriter, much less write coherently and well. Ideas abound, but I am unable to capture them. . . .

Finally, although I have both fear and disdain for death (the latter possibly being the greatest mistake of all), I smell its stench approaching, and hear the snicker of that jackal somewhere in the night. I feel useless and, worst of all, irrelevant. My strengths, whatever they were, have waned, and my weaknesses are beginning to overwhelm me. And I feel dirty (not only physically). My circle of 'friends' recedes, and I withdraw more and more. I drink more and more. Although before my illness I hardly ever took so much as an aspirin, I fall back on pills of all nature, knowing they are of no use other than a temporary sop. I loathe my body, and have little faith in whatever I might achieve were I not physically afflicted and mentally depressed. Life still has its light moments of frivolity, and I do have a well-developed sense of detachment, but the harsh realities have become a bad film. . . .

. . . I may soon disappear, or I well may hang about a while longer, but these are some things I wanted to say, sooner rather than later.

*I send you my love and good wishes,
Frank Crowther*

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The Faith
of Graffiti. . . gl

The Faith of Graffiti

2

1.

Journalism is chores. Journalism is bondage unless you can see yourself as a private eye inquiring into the mysteries of a new phenomenon. Then you may even become an Aesthetic Investigator ready to take up your role in the twentieth-century mystery play. Aesthetic Investigator! Make the name A-I for this is about graffiti.

A-I is talking to CAY 161. That is the famous Cay from 161st Street, there at the beginning with TAKI 183 and JUNIOR 161, as famous in the world of wall and subway graffiti as Giotto may have been when this name first circulated through the circuits of those workshops that led from Masaccio through Piero della Francesca to Botticelli, Michelangelo, Leonardo and Raphael. Whew! In such company Cay loses his name, although he will not necessarily see it that way. He has the power of his own belief. If the modern mind has moved from Giotto who could find beatitude in a beheading as well as the beginnings of perspective in the flight of angels across the bowl of a golden sky, if we have mounted the high road of the Renaissance into Raphael's celebration of the True, the Good and the Beautiful in each succulent three-dimensionality of the gluteus maximus on out to our own vales and washes in Rothko and Ellsworth Kelly, why so, too, have we also moved from the celebration to the name, traveled from men and women who wrested a degree of independence from Church and God down now to the twentieth-century certainty that life is an image.

A couple of stories:

The first if a Jewish joke. Perhaps it is *the* Jewish joke. Two grandmothers meet. One is pushing a baby carriage. "Oh," says the other, "what a beautiful grandchild you have." "That's nothing," says the first, reaching for her pocketbook. "Wait'll I show you her picture!"

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The second seems apocryphal. Willem de Kooning gives a pastel to Robert Rauschenberg who takes it home and promptly erases it. Next he signs his name to the erasure. Then he sells it. Can it be that Rauschenberg is saying, "The artist has as much right to print money as the financier?" Yes, Rauschenberg is giving us small art right here and much instruction. Authority imprinted upon emptiness is money. And the ego is capital convertible to currency by the use of the name. Ah, the undiscovered links of production and distribution in the psychic economy of the ego! For six and a half centuries we have been moving from the discovery of humanity into the circulation of the name, advancing out of some primitive obeisance to dread so complete that painting once lay inert on the field of two dimensions (as if the medieval eye was not ready to wander). Then art dared to rise into that Renaissance liberation from anxiety. The painterly capacity entered the space-perspective of volume and depth. Now, with graffiti we are back in the prison of two dimensions once more. Or is it the one dimension of the name — the art-form screaming through space on a unilinear subway line?

Something of all this is in the mind of our Aesthetic Investigator as he sits in a bedroom on West 161st Street in Washington Heights and talks to CAY 161 and JUNIOR 161 and LIL FLAME and LURK. They talk about the name. He has agreed to do a center-piece for a book of photographs on graffiti by Jon Naar, has agreed to do it on the instant (in a Los Angeles hotel room) that he has seen it. The splendid pictures and his undiscovered thoughts on the subject leap together. There is something to find in these pictures, thinks A-I, some process he can all but name. The intellectual hedonism of an elusive theme is laid out before him. So, yes, he accepts. And discovers weeks later that his book has already been given a title. It is *Watching My Name Go By*. He explains to the pained but sympathetic ears of his collaborators that an author needs his own title.

Besides, there is a practical reason. Certain literary men cannot afford titles like *Watching My Name Go By*. Norman Mailer may be first in such a category. One should not be able to conceive of one's bad reviews before writing a word.

But then he also does not like *Watching My Name Go By* for its own forthright meaning. These young graffiti writers do not use their own name. They adopt one. It is like a logo. Moxie or Socono, Tang, Whirlpool, Duz. The kids bear a not quite definable relation to their product. It is not MY NAME but THE NAME. Watching The Name Go By. He still does not like it. Yet every graffiti writer refers to the word. Even in newspaper accounts, it is the term heard most often. "I have put my name," says Super Kool to David Shirey of the *Times*, "all over the place. There ain't nowhere I go I can't see it. I sometimes go on Sunday to Seventh Avenue 86th Street, and just spend the whole day" — yes, he literally says it — "watching my name go by." But then they all use it. JAPAN I, being interviewed by Jon Naar and A-I in a subway, grins as a station cop passes and scrutinizes him. He is clean. There is no spray can on him today. Otherwise he would run, not grin. Japan says, with full evaluation of his work, "You have to put in the hours to add up the names. You have to get your name around." Since he is small and could hardly oppose too many who might choose to borrow his own immortal JAPAN I, he merely snorts in answer to the question of what he would do if someone else took up his name and used it. "I would still get the class," he remarks.

your mission,
a typesetter's
? station

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AMERICAMP
Mailer: Pieces & Pontifications

1-1618 Little, Brown
Mss 237-260

Whether it is one's own interviews or others, the word which prevails is always the name. MIKE 171 informs *New York Magazine*, "There are kids all over town with bags of paint waiting to *hit* their names." A bona-fide clue. An object is hit with your name, yes, and in the ghetto, a hit equals a kill. "You must kill a thing," said D. H. Lawrence once, "to know it satisfactorily." (But then who else could have said it?) You hit your name and maybe something in the whole scheme of the system gives a death rattle. For now your name is over their name, over the subway manufacturer, the Transit Authority, the city administration. Your presence is on their presence, your alias hangs over their scene. There is a pleasurable sense of depth to the elusiveness of the meaning.

So he sits with Cay and Junior and the others in the bedroom of Junior's parents and asks them about the name. It is a sweet meeting. He has been traveling for all of a wet and icy snowbound Sunday afternoon through the monumental drabs of South Bronx and Washington Heights, so much like the old gray apartment house ranks of Eastern Parkway in Brooklyn near where he grew up, a trip back across three generations. The Puerto Ricans in this apartment may not be so different from the poor ambitious families of relatives his mother would speak of visiting on the Lower East Side when she came as a child up from the Jersey shore to visit. So little has changed. Still the-smell-of-cooking-in-the-walls, a single word, and the black-pocked green stucco of the halls, those dark pits in the plaster speaking of the very acne of apartment house poverty. In the apartment, entering by the kitchen, down through the small living room and past the dark bedroom in a file off the hall, all the shades drawn, a glimpse has been had of the television working like a votive light in some poor slum church chapel (one damp fire in the rain-forest) while the father in shorts sleeps on the sofa, and the women congregate — the kitchen is near. The windows are stained glass, sheets of red and yellow plastic pasted to the glass — the view must be on an air shaft. No light in this gray and late winter day. It is all the darkness of that gloom which sits in the very center of slum existence, that amalgam of worry and dread, heavy as buckets of oil, the true wages of the working class, with all that attendant fever for the attractions of crime, the grinding entrapments of having lost to the law — lawyers' fees, bondsmen, probation officers, all of it.

Yet now there is also a sense of protection in the air. The mood is not without its reverence: CAY 161 has the face of a martyr. He looks as if he has been flung face first against a wall, as if indeed a mighty hand has picked him up and hurled him through the side of a stone house. He is big, seventeen, and almost six feet tall, once good-looking and may yet be good-looking again, but now it is as if he has been drawn by a comic strip artist, for his features express the stars, comets, exclamation points, and straight-out dislocation of eyes and nose and mouth that accompanies any hero in a comic strip when he runs into a collision. SOCK! ZAM! POW! CAY 161, driving a stolen van, fleeing the cops in an old-fashioned New York street chase, has gone off the road on a turn, "and right on 161st Street where he was born and raised, he hit a hydrant, turned over a few times, and wound up inside a furniture store. . . . When the police looked inside the car," — description by José Torres in the *N.Y. Post* — "Cay lay motionless in the driver's seat, and another youth, a passenger, sprawled unconscious outside, hurled from the car by the impact." The friend had a broken leg, and Cay had part of his brain taken out in a seven-hour operation. The doctor gave warning.

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Mss 237-260

He might survive. As a vegetable. For two months he did not make a move. Now, six months later, Cay is able to talk, he can move. His lips are controlled on one side of his face but slack on the other — he speaks as if he has had a stroke. He moves in the same fashion. Certain gestures are agile, others come up half-paralyzed and top-heavy, as if he will fall on his face at the first false step. So his friends are his witness. They surround him, offer the whole reverence of the whole alertness to every move he makes. There is all the elegance of good manners in the way they try to conceal that he is different from the others.

But Cay is happy now. He is in Junior's house, JUNIOR 161, his best friend. They used to go out writing together for years, both tall, a twin legend — when one stands on the other's shoulders, the name goes up higher on the wall than for anyone else. True bond of friendship: they will each write the other's name, a sacramental interchange. Junior has a lean body, that indolent ghetto languor which speaks of presence. "I move slow, man," says the body, "and that is why you watch me. Because when I move fast, you got to watch out." He is well dressed, ghetto style — a white turtleneck sweater, white pants, a white felt hat, white sneakers, nothing more. Later he will step out like this into the winter streets. You got to meet the eye of the beholder with class. Freezing is for plants.

A-I interviews them. Yes, they started three years ago and would hit four or five names a day. Junior liked to work at least an hour a day. So go the questions: Cay liked to use red marker, Junior blue. Hundreds of masterpieces to their credit. Yes, Junior's greatest masterpiece is in the tunnel where the track descends from 125th Street to 116th Street. There, high on the wall, is JUNIOR 161 in letters six feet high. "You want to get your name in a place where people don't know how you could do it, how you could get up to there. You got to make them think." It is the peril of the position which calls. Junior frowns on the later artists who have come after Cay and himself. The talk these days is of SLY and STAY HIGH, PHASE 2, BAMA, SNAKE, and STITCH. The article by Richard Goldstein in *New York* (March 26, 1973) has offered a nomenclature for the styles, Broadway, Brooklyn and Bronx, disquisitions on bubble and platform letters. Perhaps his source is BAMA, who has said to another reporter in his full articulate speaking style, "Bronx style is bubble letters, and Brooklyn style is script with lots of flourishes and arrows. It's a style all by itself. Broadway style, these long slim letters, was brought here from Philadelphia by a guy named Topcat. Queens style is very difficult, very hard to read."

Junior is contemptuous of this. The new forms have wiped out respect for the old utilitarian lettering. If Cay likes the work of STAY HIGH, Junior is impressed by none. "That's just fanciness," he says of the new. "How're you going to get your name around doing all that fancy stuff?"

Cay speaks into this with his deep, strangled, and wholly existential voice — he cannot be certain any sound he utters will come out as he thinks. "Everybody tries to catch up to us," he says.

"You have to put in the hours?"

A profound nod.

Of course, he is not doing it any longer. Nor is Junior. Even before the accident, both had lost interest. On the one hand, the police were getting tough, the beatings when you were caught were worse, the legal penalties higher, the supplies of paint getting to be monitored, and on the other hand something had happened to the process itself. Too many names had grown — a jungle of ego creepers.

A-I queries them about the prominence of the name. He hesitates how to pose the question — he fears confidence will be lost if he asks straight-out. "What is the meaning of the name?" but, indeed, he does not have to — Cay speaks up on what it means to watch the name go by. "The name," says Cay, in a full voice, Delphic in its unexpected resonance — as if the idol of a temple had just chosen to break into sound — "The name," says Cay, "is the *faith* of graffiti."

It is quite a remark. He wonders if Cay knows what he has said. "The name," repeats Cay, "is the *faith*." He is in no doubt of the depth of what he has said. His eyes fix on A-I, his look is severe. Abruptly, he declares that the proper title is "The Faith of Graffiti." So it is.

A Sunday afternoon has come to its end. A-I walks downstairs with Junior, Cay, Lurk and Li'l Flame, and is shown modest examples of their writing on the apartment house walls. Cay has also used another name. At times he has called himself THE PRAYER 161. They say goodbye in the hall. Cay shows A-I the latest 161st Street sequence of thumb-up finger-curved handshakes. The pistol-pointed forefinger and upraised thumb of one man touch the thumb and forefinger of the other in a quick little cat's cradle. Cay's fingers are surprisingly deft. Then he and Junior spar a bit, half-comic for he lurches, but with the incisive tenderness of the ghetto, as if his moves also say, "Size don't come in packages. A cripple keeps the menace." It is agreeable to watch. As he attempts to spar, Cay is actually moving better than he has all day.

The name is the faith of graffiti. Was it true that the only writing which did not gut one's health lay in those questions whose answers were not known from the start? A-I still had no more than a clue to graffiti. Were the answers to be found in the long war of the will against the power of taboo? Who could know when one of the gods would turn in sleep as images were drawn? Was that a thought in the head of the first savage to put the silhouette of an animal on the wall of a cave? If so, the earliest painting had been not two dimensions but one — one, like graffiti — the hand pushing forward into the terror of future punishment. Only later would come an easier faith that the Lord might be on the side of the artist.

2.

No, size doesn't come in packages, and the graffiti writers had been all heights and all shapes, even all the ages from twelve to twenty-four. They had written masterpieces in letters six feet high on the side of walls and subway cars, and had scribbled furtive little toys, which is to say small names without style, sometimes just initials. There was panic in the act for you wrote with an eye over your shoulder for oncoming authority. The Transit Authority cops would beat you if they caught you, or drag you to court, or both. The judge, donning the robes of Solomon, would condemn the early prisoners to clean the cars and subway stations of the names. HITLER 2 (reputed to be so innocent of his predecessor that he only knew Hitler I had a very big rep!) was caught, and passed on the word of his humiliation. Cleaning the cars, he had been obliged to erase the work of others. All proportions kept, it may in simple pain of heart have been not altogether unequal to condemning Cézanne to wipe out the works of Van Gogh.

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So there was real fear of being caught. Pain and humiliation were implacable dues, and not all graffiti artists showed equal grace under such pressure. Some wrote like cowards, timidly, furtively, jerkily. "Man," was the condemnation of the peers, "you got a messed-up handwriting." Others laid one cool flowering of paint upon another, and this was only after having passed through all the existential stations of the criminal act, even to first *inventing* the paint, which was of course the word for stealing the stuff from the stores. But then, an invention is the creation of something which did not exist before — like a working spray can in your hand. (Indeed, if Plato's Ideal exists, and the universe is first a set of forms, then what is any invention but a theft from the given universal Ideal?)

There was always art in a criminal act — no crime could ever be as automatic as a production process — but graffiti writers were opposite to criminals since they were living through the stages of the crime in order to commit an artistic act — what a doubling of intensity when the artist not only steals the cans but tries for the colors he wants, not only the marker and the color, but steal them in double amounts so you don't run out in the middle of a masterpiece. What a knowledge of cop's habits is called for when any Black or Puerto Rican adolescent with a big paper bag is bound to be examined by a Transit cop if he goes into the wrong station. So after his paint has been invented a writer has to decide by which subway entrance it is to be transported, and once his trip is completed back to the station which is the capital of his turf, he still has to find the nook where he can warehouse his goods for a few hours. To attempt to take the paint out of the station is to get caught. To try to bring it back to the station is worse. Six or seven kids entering a subway in Harlem, Washington Heights, or the South Bronx are going to be searched by Transit cops for cans. So they stash it, mill around the station for a time painting nothing, they are, after all, often in the subways — to the degree they are not chased, it is a natural clubhouse, virtually a country club for the sociability of it all — and when the cops are out of sight, and a train is coming in, they whip out their stash of paint from its hiding place, conceal it on their bodies, and in all the wrappings of oversize ragamuffin fatigues, get on the cars to ride to the end of the line where in some deserted midnight yard they will find their natural canvas which is of course that metal wall of a subway car ready to reverberate into all the egos of all the metal of New York, what an echo that New York metal will give into the slapped-silly senses of every child-psyche who grew up in New York, yes, metal as a surface on which to paint is even better than stone.

But it is hardly so quick or automatic as that. If they are to leave the station at the end of the line, there is foreign turf to traverse which guarantees no safe passage, and always the problem of finding your way into the yards.

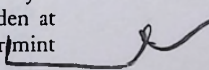
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In the A-train yard at 207th Street, the unofficial entrance was around a fence that projected out over a cliff and dropped into the water of the Harlem River. You went out one side of that fence on a narrow ledge, out over the water, and back the other side of the fence into the yards "where the wagons," writes Richard Goldstein, "are sitting like silent whales."

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



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Now, as Japan speaks, his eyes never failing to miss the collection of names, hieroglyphs, symbols, stars, crowns, ribbons, masterpieces and toys on every passing car, there is a sadness in his mood. The city has mounted a massive campaign. There was a period in the middle when it looked as if graffiti would take over the world, when a movement that began as the expression of tropical peoples living in a monotonous iron-gray and dull brown brick environment, surrounded by asphalt, concrete, and clangor, had erupted to save the sensuous flesh of their inheritance from a macadamization of the psyche, save the blank city wall of their unfed brain by painting the wall over with the giant trees and petty plants of a tropical rain-forest. Like such a jungle, every plant, large and small, spoke to one another, lived in the profusion *and* harmony of a forest. No one wrote over another name, no one was obscene — for that would have smashed the harmony. A communion took place over the city in this plant growth of names until every institutional wall, fixed or moving, every modern new school which looked like a brand-new factory, every old slum warehouse, every standing billboard, every huckstering poster, and the halls of every high-rise low-rent housing projects which looked like a prison (and all did) were covered by a foliage of graffiti that grew seven or eight feet tall, even twelve feet high in those choice places worth the effort for one to stand on another, ah, if it had gone on, this entire city of blank architectural high-rise horrors would have been covered with paint. Graffiti writers might have become mountaineers with pitons for the ascent of high-rise high-cost swinger-single apartments in the East Sixties and Seventies. The look of New York, and then the world, might have been transformed, and the interlapping of names and colors, those wavelets of ego forever reverberating upon one another, could have risen like a flood to cover the monstrosities of abstract empty techno-architectural twentieth-century walls where no design ever predominated over the most profitable (and ergo most monotonous) construction ratio implicit in a twenty-million-dollar bill.

The kids painted with less than this in view, no doubt. Sufficient in the graffiti-proliferating years of the early Seventies to paint the front door of every subway car they could find. The ecstasy of the roller coaster would dive down their chest if they were ever waiting in a station when a twelve-car train came stampeding in and their name, HONDO, WILDCAT, SABU or LOLLIPOP, was on the *front!* Yes, the graffiti had not only the feel and all the super-powered whoosh and impact of all the bubble letters in all the mad comic strips, but the *zoom*, the *aghr*, and the *abhr* of screeching rails, the fast motion of subways roaring into stations, the comic strips come to life. So it was probably not a movement designed to cover the world so much as the excrescence of an excrescence. Slum populations chilled on one side by the bleakness of modern design, and brain-cooked on the other by comic strips and TV ads with zooming letters, even brain-cooked by politicians whose ego is a virtue — I am here to help my nation — brained by the big beautiful

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numbers on the yard markers on football fields, by the whip of the capital letters in the names of the products, and gut-picked by the sound of rock and soul screaming up into the voodoo of the firament with the shriek of the performer's insides coiling like neon letters in the blue satanic light, yes, all the excrescence of the highways and the fluorescent wonderlands of every Las Vegas sign frying through the Iowa and New Jersey night, all the stomach-tightening nitty-gritty of trying to learn how to spell was in the writing, every assault on the psyche as the trains came slamming in. Maybe it was no more than a movement which looked to take some of the excrescence left within and paint it out upon the world, no more than a species of collective therapy of grace exhibited under pressure in which never dreamed of painting over the blank and empty modern world, but the authority of the city reacted as if the city itself might be in greater peril from graffiti than from drugs, and a war had gone on, more and more implacable on the side of the authority with every legal and psychological weedkiller on full employ until the graffiti of New York was defoliated, cicatrized, Vietnamized. Now, as A-I sat in the station with Jon Naar and Japan and they watched the trains go by, aesthetic blight was on the cars. Few masterpieces remained. The windows were gray and smeared. The cars looked dull red or tarnished aluminum — their recent coat of paint remover having also stripped all polish from the manufacturer's surface. New subway cars looked like old cars. Only the ghost-outline of former masterpieces still remained. The kids were broken. The movement seemed over. Even the paint could no longer be invented. Now the cans set out for display were empty, the misdemeanors were being upped to felony, the fines were severe, the mood was vindictive. Two hideous accidents had occurred. One boy had been killed beneath a subway car, and another had been close to fatally burned by an inflammable spray can catching a spark, yes, a horror was on the movement and transit patrols moved through the yards and plugged the entrances. The white monoliths of the high-rise were safe. And the subways were dingier than they had ever been. The impulse of the jungle to cover the walled tombs of technology had been broken. Was there a clue to graffiti in the opposite passion to look upon monotony and call it health? As A-I walked the streets with Jon Naar, they passed a sign: DON'T POLLUTE — KEEP THE CITY CLEAN. "That sign," the photographer murmured, "is a form of pollution itself."

close
up

Date _____



Time _____

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3.

Since the metaphor of plant life had climbed all over his discussion of graffiti he went with profit to the Museum of Modern Art for it confirmed the botanical notion with which he began: that if subway graffiti had not come into existence, some artist might have found it necessary to invent, for it was in the chain of such evolution. Art had been rolling down the fall-line from Cézanne to Frank Stella, from Gauguin to Mathieu. On such a map, subway graffiti was an alluvial delta, the mud-caked mouth of a hundred painterly streams. If the obvious objection was that you might interview a thousand Black and Puerto Rican kids who rushed to write their name without having ever seen a modern painting, the answer, not quite as obvious, was that plants spoke to plants.

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

Still, when it comes to a matter of who might influence the writers of graffiti, one is not obliged to speak only of neon signs, comic strips and TV products, one has the other right to think the kids are enriched by all art which offers the eye a resemblance to graffiti. Which might enable us then to talk of Jackson Pollock and the abstract graffiti of his confluences and meanderings, of Stuart Davis' dramatization of print as a presence that grows in swollen proportion to its size, even include Hans Hofmann's *Memoria in Aeternum* where those red and yellow rectangles float like statements of a name over indistinct washes beneath, or Matisse's blue and green *Dance*. (Matisse's limbs wind onto one another like the ivy-creeper calligraphies of New York graffiti.) So might one refer to work which speaks of ghetto emotion in any place, of Siqueiros' *Echo of a Scream*, or Van Gogh's *Starry Night*. If the family histories of the most messed-up families have all the garbage-can chaos of de Kooning's *Woman*, no wonder the subway writers prided themselves on style and éclat — "you got a messed-up handwriting" being the final term of critical kill.

But on reflection, was A-I trying to slip in some old piety on the distribution of art down from the museums through media to the masses? — these subway children may never have seen *Memoria in Aeternum* at the head of the stairs at MOMA, but it filtered through to them by way of advertising artists. Fell crap! Rather say art begot art, and the migrations were no one's business. For if plants were telepathic, then humans lived in a psychic sea where all the forms of art also passed through the marketplace of the dreamer in his sleep, and every part of society spoke to every other part, if only with a curse.

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So he had the happy thought during his visit to the Modern Art to decide that some paintings might be, by whatever measure, *on the air* — leave it to the engineers of some future techno-coven to try to determine the precise migrations of Miró's *Plate 8 from Series One, 1953*, "*The Family*" into the head of an espontaneo with a spray can looking over his shoulder for the black mother in a uniform who will beat his own black blue.

4.

Like a good reporter he goes to see the Mayor. It is ten days to Christmas and the last two weeks of the Lindsay administration on that Saturday morning he has his appointment to visit, nearly a week from the previous Sunday when he talked to Junior and Cay. Again the weather is iron-gray and cold. At Gracie Mansion, the wind is driving in from the East River, and the front porch looks across its modest private lawn to the Triboro Bridge in the north. (To the west apartment houses rise like the sheer face of Yosemite.) It is not a large lawn in front of the Mayor's residence nor even a large house. Old white Gracie Mansion might be no exceptional residence on any wealthy road in Portland, Oregon or Portland, Maine — there is even a basketball hoop on a backboard not far from the front door, a political touch dating from recent years when the Knicks became the most consistently successful team in New York — yet with all its limited grandeur, Gracie Mansion is still one fine Federalist of a house (built in 1799) and if the spirit of an age could have been captured by a radio, then where better to measure this magic mean if not in the proportions of the Mansion's living room and dining room? They speak in their harmony of some perfect period of Arcadian balance between the early frontier being settled to the West and the new sense of democratic government forging itself in the state capitals of the East. How better to characterize the decorum, substance, grace, and calm center of such architecture if not to think that the spirit and style of the *prose* of the American Constitution is also in it (even to the hint of boredom in prose and buildings both), yet, why not precisely these high ceilings, paucity of curves, and all the implicit checks and balances of the right angle? Lindsay, it may be said, is at home in such surroundings. They seem built to his frame. Only a tall lean man could look well-proportioned in so *enlightened* a set of rooms. Nothing like a Gothic arch is present to suggest any mad irreconcilable opposites of God and man, no Corinthian columns to resonate with praetorian tyrannies (and orgies at the top), nor any small and slanted ceilings to speak of craft and husbandry, just government here in Federal style without the intervention of Satan or Jehovah (and next to nothing of Christ), just a fundament of Wasp genius, a building style to state that man could live without faith if things were calm enough. Perhaps the economy of balance is the true god of the Wasp.

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His appointment is at eleven, but it is an unusual morning for the Lindsay family since they have been up until five the night before at a farewell party given the Mayor to honor the eight years of his administration. Lindsay has worked as hard as any man in New York for eight years, and can afford the luxury of being hungover before a reporter this Saturday morning. What a nice relaxation. Lindsay chuckles at the memory of each unexpected rejoinder of party dialogue and laughs at the expression on Tom Morgan's face, press secretary to the Mayor, a tall man with a dark brush mustache who recapitulates in the sardonic gloom of his hungover eyes the incandescence of all those good drinks at that good party. Watching them all, studying Lindsay's face with its patrician features so endowed with every purchase on the meaning of handsome that he could be not only a movie star but there at the front, right ahead of Burt Lancaster and Steve McQueen, on a par with Robert Redford, and hardly a millimeter of profile behind Paul Newman, it occurs indeed that no movie star could be more convincing than Lindsay if it came to playing some very important American politician in the quiet American years from 1800 to 1825. Even his eroded teeth — Lindsay's one failing feature — speak with authenticity of the bad teeth of those English ruling classes who became the American ruling classes in that Federalist era one hundred and seventy years ago. So sitting in such a dining room, and a little later adjourned to a living room with Lindsay and Morgan to bring up the subject of his interview, he is thinking that Gracie Mansion never had a Mayor nearly so perfectly suited to itself; if there were some divine renting agency in the halls of karma, then come soon or late the post of Mayor of New York would have had to be found for John Vliet Lindsay or the house would feel unfulfilled.

For Lindsay, however, the question may have been whether an ambitious man had ever come to power at a time less promising for himself. He had labored in his two terms, innovated and negotiated, explored, tinkered, tampered, and shifted the base of every municipal machine of government upon which he could work his cadres. He had built a constituency in the ghetto. Mailer-Breslin running for the mayoralty in '69 also ran into one argument over and over in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Harlem and the South Bronx. It was, "What do we want with you? Lindsay's our man." Lindsay had walked the streets in summer riots, and held some kind of line for decontrol, which is to say, local control, in the ghetto schools. That had taken political courage. Yet make him no saint! He had also worked with the most powerful real estate interests in the city. No question that in his eight years, the ugliest architecture in the history of New York had also gone up. The new flat tops of the skyline now left New York as undistinguished in much of its appearance as Cleveland or Dallas. It is possible Lindsay had bought ghetto relief at the price of aesthetic stultification. Call it desecration. The view of New York's offices and high-rise apartments proved sacrilegious to the mood of any living eye — Wasp balance had done it again.

Still, with all this effort, New Yorkers hated him. For every intolerable reason, first of which was his defense of the ghettos. "If I wanted a nigger for Mayor, I'd have voted for a nigger," said every archetype of a cab driver to any tourist who would listen. And yet this Federalist movie star, this hard-working mayor for ghetto rights, had been the first and most implacable enemy of subway graffiti. So there was a feather falling through the mood when he told Lindsay and Morgan why he had come.

But A-I had his speech. If he thought the Mayor had done an honorable job, and was prepared to say so, he still could not comprehend how a man who worked so hard to enter the spirit of ghetto conditions had been nonetheless so implacable in his reaction to graffiti. "Insecure cowards," Lindsay had called the kids. "A dirty shame." Others in his administration offered civic blasts: "graffiti pigs," "thoughtless and irresponsible behavior." It was surprising. While the management of a city required you to keep it clean — where would a mayor hide if he could not get the garbage out? — there was a difference between political necessity and the fury of this reaction. How could he call the kids cowards? Why the venom? It seemed personal.

Lindsay grinned. He had heard enough preambles from reporters to know when an interview was manageable. "Well, yes," he said, "I did get hot under the collar, and I suppose if we had to go through it again, I would hope to lose my temper a little less, but you have no idea what a blow that graffiti was to us." He shook his head at the memory. "You see, we had gone to such work, such ends, to get those new subway cars in. It meant so much to people here in the city to get a ride for instance in one of the new air-conditioned cars. On a hot summer day their mood would pick up when they had the luck to catch one. And you know, that was work. It's hard to get anything done here. You stretch budgets, and try to reason people into activities they don't necessarily want to take up on their own. We were proud of those subway cars. It took a lot of talking to a lot of committees to get that accomplished."

Morgan nodded. "And then," Lindsay said, "the kids started to deface them."

A-I put his demurrer. "Deface," after all, was the core of the argument. Some people might think subway graffiti was art. He suggested in passing Claes Oldenburg's classic remark, "... You're standing there in the station, everything is gray and gloomy and all of a sudden one of those graffiti trains slides in and brightens the place like a big bouquet from Latin America."

Lindsay smiled as if recalling the screams, moans, epithets, and agonized squawks of every bright college intellectual on his staff when Oldenburg's quote first came riding in. Grand division in the Establishment! Aesthetic schism! "Yes, we remember that quote," Lindsay's grin seemed to say. He had the most curious quality of personality. One did not know if he were secretly more or less decent than his personality. While the personality itself was decent enough, it was also patently not the man, nor, unhappily for him, characteristic at all of New York. He seemed now like a Westerner, full of probity, rawhide and something buried in the personality, a man you might not get to know at all even after a night of drinking together. He wasn't in the least like Richard Nixon except to share one quality. Lindsay was out of focus. He had always been out of focus. Part of his political trouble.

Well, Lindsay suggested, they had never really wondered whether it was anything but defacement. "People would come into new cars and suddenly they'd see them all marked up, covered inside and out, and it depressed people terribly. You know, we have to be a kind of nerve center to the city. Reports came in from everywhere. This graffiti was profoundly depressing — it truly hurt people's moods. The life would go out of everybody when they saw the cars defaced, they felt it was defacement, no question of that. And we kept hearing one request over and over, 'Can't you do something about it?' Then, too, we had our own pride in these matters. You know, you get to feel after you've put through a new municipal building that it's yours in some way. As Mayor I'd get as angry when a city building got marked up as if I owned it personally. Oh, it's easier to talk about it now, but I must say it was hard at times not to blow up."

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"Actually," Morgan observed, "the Mayor would go around calming some of us down. 'Remember,' he would tell us, 'they're only kids.'"

Yes, in the framework of that time in the Summer of '71 and the Winter and Spring of '72 when Lindsay was looking to get the Democratic nomination for President, what an upset to his fortunes, what a vermin of catastrophe that these writings had sprouted like weeds all over the misery of Fun City, a new monkey of unmanageables to sit on Lindsay's overloaded political back. He must have sensed the presidency draining away from him as the months went by, the graffiti grew, and the millions of tourists who passed through the city brought the word out to the rest of the nation: "Filth is sprouting on the walls."

Of course, where was the tourist who could distinguish between men's-room and subway graffiti? Who was going to dare to look long enough to see that it was a name and not an obscene thought in the writing. Today, just before he had come to Gracie Mansion, he had stopped in the lavatory of a York Avenue bar for a minute, and there on the john wall was drawn a pure old-fashioned piece of smut graffiti. A balloon of dialogue issued out of a girl's mouth. No art in the lettering, no style. "Did you know," said her balloon, "that your clit is in your ass?" Some lost shred of fecal communion now nailed to the wall. Was there a public comfort station in America which did not have a dozen such insights, "Suck me," "Fuck you"? That was what people expected to see on the subways. They assumed the full mad explosive shithouse of America was now erupting in their faces. So they did not look but rode in the cars with their heads down, and brought the news out to the rest of America that Lindsay could not keep the city clean. No wonder he called it a dirty shame. And labeled the aplomb of the graffiti writers cowardice. That was his attempt to soothe the terror in the heart of every subway citizen who looked at the graffiti and put his head down so his eye would not meet any eye that might be connected to a hand which held a knife, yes, that was one side of the fear, and the other was fear of the insane graffiti writer in the self. For what filth would burst out of every civilized office worker in New York if ever *they* started to write on moving public walls, my god, the feces to spread and the blood to spray, yes, the good voting citizen of New York would know that the violent ward at Bellevue was opening its door to him on the day he would take a spray can to a subway. So, New York citizenry saw all the children as mad — and therefore saw madness, instability, and horror in the New York transit. No wonder Lindsay had gone to war against graffiti. The city would tolerate junk, graft, insanities of traffic, mugging, every petty crime of the street, and every major pollution, but it could not accept a towering rain-forest of graffiti on all the forty-story walls. Yes, build a wall and balance a disease. For the blank wall of the new architecture was a deadening agent to balance the growing violence beneath. (Could it be said that the monotony of modern architecture increased all over the world in direct relation to the volcanic disturbances of each society it would contain?) Plastic above, dynamite below.

In the face of such questions the interview was effectively over. They chatted for a while, and got up to say goodbye. On the way out, A-I noticed there was a Rauschenberg on the wall.

Lindsay, in his courtesy, walked with him to the gate. Wearing a blue windbreaker he looked in the gray outdoor light like a veteran big league ballplayer, tall, weathered, knowledgeable. They took leave not uncordially, and he complimented the Mayor on eight good years, even meant it.

"I wish I had the talent to write," Lindsay said in parting. Was that a politician's gift? A-I pulled back the reply that he wished he could have been Mayor.

Outside the fence, a policeman was standing with a drawn gun. It was a simple measure of the times: be forever ready at the Gracie gate.

And indeed a ten-year-old boy on roller skates cried aloud, "That's him, that's him, that's the Mayor," and promptly took out a cap pistol and fired a number of bang-bangs at the back of John Lindsay going back into his house.

For a while, A-I walked, and had a little fantasy of how impossible it would have proved if the miracle worked and he had been elected in the campaign of 1969. What would he have done about graffiti? Would he have tried to explain its virtues to the people of New York — and laughed in all the pain of absolute political failure. The answer was simple — nobody like himself would ever be elected Mayor until the people agreed bad architecture was as poisonous as bad food. No, graffiti as a political phenomenon had small hope for life. His faith in the value of the question would have to explore in another place. Did the final difficulty lie in the meaning of graffiti as art? There the inquiry might become as incomprehensible as the motives of the most advanced artists. On then to the rim of the enigma, to the Sea of Vortices where the meanings whirl with no meaning.

5.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Plagens goes on to describe other "pieces." Burden chooses situations for their possibility of danger, pain, humiliation, or boredom. There is:

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

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

At the least, Burden is fulfilling the dictum of Jean Malaquais that once there are enough artists in the world, the work of art will become the artist himself. Burden is refining his personality. Through existential tests. Burden is not exploring his technique, but his vibrations. The situations he chooses are, as Plagens describes, "edgy." They have nothing remotely resembling a boundary until they are done. In "Movie on the Way Down," Burden can hardly know if he will cut his lip or break his neck, feel a live instant on the descent or some dull anxiety. When he shoots lighted matches at his nude wife the areas defined are empty before the action begins. Given every variable from Women's Liberation to the sadomasochistic tales of Wilhelm Stekel, Burden can know in advance only that a psycho-dramatic enterprise will be commenced. But where it may end, and what everybody might feel — will the matches burn her skin? — will the marriage be fortified or scorched? — no, there is no confidence which question is going to offer an answer. Perhaps he is not refining his personality so much as attempting to clear a space in his psyche free of dread. But isn't that the fundamental operation of the primitive at the dawn of civilization, the establishment of the ego? For what is the human ego but a clearing in the forest of the psyche free of dread? Money, held in one's hand, is free of time. Cash has no past; its future is assignable. It is powerful and empty. So, too, is the ego. It bears the same relation to the psyche as cash bears to the security or comfort of the body. The ego is virtually separate from the psyche even as money is still separate from every organic communicating logic of nature.

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

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

But we are at the possible end of civilization, and tribal impulses start up across the world. The descending line of the isolated artist goes down from Michelangelo all the way to Shoot. But Chris Burden is finally more comfortable to us than the writers of graffiti. For Burden is the last insult from the hippie children of the middle class to the bourgeois art-patron who is their spiritual parent, but graffiti speaks of a new civilization for barbarism stirring at the roots.

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

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

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

Perhaps that is the unheard echo of graffiti, the vibration of that profound discomfort it arouses. Can the unheard music of its proclamation and/or its mess, the rapt intent seething of its foliage, be the herald of some oncoming apocalypse less and less far away? Graffiti lingers on our subway door as a memento of all the lives ever lived, sounding now like the bugles of gathering armies across the unseen ridge.

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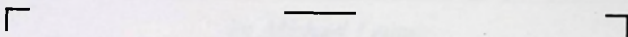
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Pontifications . . . gl



Pontifications

After the White Negro

Mailer Intro To Come . . . gl

Introduction . . .gl

Introduction

by Michael Lennon



I think Gertrude Stein may have been too sweeping when she said to Hemingway, "Remarks are not literature." It depends. Hemingway's remarks in his 1958 interview in *The Paris Review* certainly qualify, and several of the interviews with Norman Mailer collected here are of comparable stature. Collectively, these twenty interviews express his views on every subject close to his concern for the past quarter of a century. If these selected conversations with friends, journalists, academics and students are not literature, not certifiably a formal part of Mailer's literary work, they are at the least, an indispensable adjunct to it.

On some subjects — pornography, drugs, marriage, his books, his career, his theology and the psychological stances involved in writing a novel — the interviews may even be accorded the status of the major biographical sources. But they are to be recommended for more than the exportable information that they provide. As a literary form, the interview has much to offer someone of Mailer's temperament. As sensitive to mood as Hemingway, he has been more willing than his old mentor to exercise that portion of himself most serviceable for the occasion. The chemistry between Mailer and his different interlocutors stimulates him to a variety of conversational gambits: elucidative, admonitory, quasi-confessional, speculative and, of course, forensic. Since Hemingway's death Mailer has been the literary world's finest counterpuncher, although he displays none of Hemingway's archness (or Faulkner's sullenness). He does unload a few good, solid antipathies though: corporate America, plastics, the FBI and modern architecture. His method is more dialectical than peremptory, however. Indeed, the interviews bear some resemblance to a twenty-five-year chess match, new players (most of whom are aware of the games of their predecessors) succeeding old, and Mailer adapting his tactics for each. A great part of the pleasure the interviews provide lies in the opportunity to savor the various gambits Mailer employs, and to watch for the signs of change in his ideas. Even when an interviewer appears to have summed up some aspect of Mailer's thought or art, he resists in favor of a more subtle formulation. Occasionally he asks the questions; at other times he plays devil's advocate and notes the weakness of his own position, stating it earlier or more firmly than his interviewer, a tactic he mastered in *the Armies of the Night* (1968).

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He enjoys a fast, tough exchange (the one with Anita Eicholz in "A Brief Exchange," on the question of the Women's Liberation movement, for example, which is the perfect pendant to *The Prisoner of Sex*); it seems to notch his own thinking higher. His ego, which he once compared to an egg, is like a golf ball — the harder it is hit, the more lively it becomes. He finds artful ways to answer uninformed questions and can usually find a decent peg on which to hang an answer to imprecise ones. An excellent listener, he seems to deploy just enough acumen to raise the discussion one rung higher and he never tries to embarrass. So he will answer dull questions with a modicum of wit, turn intellectual batteries on academics who know his work well and use his knowledge of old-friend interviewers where it will be helpful. In sum, he is a great talker. h

Paradoxically, the final worth of these interviews may reside in the fact that Mailer is suspicious of the form. Because he believes that there is an umbilical relation between good thinking, good writing and mild depression, his first instinct is to be skeptical of any idea that comes too easily, or too enthusiastically. The insight has been well endowed by experience. Imagine then his mistrust of ideas that arise in casual conversation. Consequently, he works to maintain the life of the discussion at its highest possible level. Advancing the argument is more important than making points.

Mailer is, among many other things, an unfrocked prophet, full of foreboding about contemporary American culture, and this collection shows how he has gone about this business. In the earlier interviews, especially, he barnstorms through familiar territory: the sexual revolution, drugs, technology, violence, the media, God and the Devil, the death of the romantic spirit, American politics, existentialism and the various forms of totalitarianism, "displaying," as Robert F. Lucid once noted, "a hundred different moods and attitudes when he is in them, above all trying always to evoke the essence of the moment through his endless conjuring of metaphor."

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In the later interviews Mailer's range is even greater, and he is just as concerned to refine his metaphors, but he is conjectural. His ideas have changed over the years, of course, significantly in some cases, but then so has the country. Yet the changes in his emphases have never been purely reflexive. Mailer chooses his targets, and his arrows, with care. If he has no idiosyncratic insight or perspective on a matter, he passes, which partly explains why his most controversial remarks are often his most serious. If he cannot inform he won't provoke. His goal is to tell us how the world works. In this sense, he is still a realist in the tradition of Zola and Dos Passos.

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In the late Eisenhower period Mailer billed himself as a "psychic outlaw." Thirteen years later during the Nixon-McGovern campaign, a "modest and half-invisible Aquarius" vibrated in the winds of the *Zeitgeist*. These are the extremes that are represented in these interviews. Compare for example the all-out slugging exchanges with Krassner in 1962 with the reflective conversation he has with McElroy and a group of writing students at Columbia University in 1981. In the earlier interview "the subjects grind by like boxcars on a two-mile freight," as Mailer later put it. In the Columbia interview, he proceeds with Jamesian deliberation, lingers actually, in his discussion of the lore and craft of novel-writing, admitting uncertainties, offering suggestions and making subtle forays into an area at the edge of the word system: the mysterious powers of ego and identity that have sustained him in his life as a writer. Mailer is considerably more intrigued with questions of craft and style in the recent interviews than he was, for example, in the 1963 interview with Marcus, perhaps for no better reason than he has now lived the writer's life for twice as long, over forty years.

Each interview illumines some moment of his career and most cover a multitude of topics (the 1967 interview with Carroll and the Munich conversations he conducted with me in 1980 come closest to being synopticons of his views). Even those with similar subjects (with Farbar, for example, in 1973, Medwick in 1980 and Michelson/Stone in 1981 on sex, love and marriage; and with Stern in 1958, Stratton in 1974 and Adams in 1975 on God and the Devil) are markedly different. Some of the interviews, moreover, offer Mailer's most important or only substantial utterance on a major topic and so have their claim to interest. His long discussion of pornography in the Michelson/Stone interview is one; the portions of the 1970 Young interview in which he explores the primitive sensibility is another. A third is his conversation with Stratton on Charles Manson and rock music. Several of the interviews contain unrehearsed and incisive comment on writers, or "fellow racketeers," as he calls them, that he has discussed little or not at all before: Borges, Márquez, Hannah Arendt, Doctorow, Tom Wolfe and Ann Beattie. There are also some surprising remarks on writers he has had on his mind for decades: Marx, Freud, Hemingway, Faulkner, Fitzgerald and Sartre. Speckled throughout are asides and quick references to many more: Kafka, Forster, Burroughs, Penn Warren, Steinbeck, Graham Greene, Heller, Nin, Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, Styron, Porter, Capote, Durrell, Fowles and Raymond Chandler. The 1981 interview with Attanasio is notable for its capsule discussions of writers.

In the earliest interview presented here, his 1958 dialogue with Stern on his unique theology, Mailer begins by saying, "I started as one kind of writer and I've been evolving into another kind." Over the twenty-four-year period (1958-1981) from which these interviews are drawn, Mailer has become another kind of writer at least three times. The first metamorphosis came a year after the Stern interview with the publication of *Advertisements for Myself*. There, he dropped all pretense of separating his personal and creative lives and candidly dissected his achievements, failures and ambitions. The second was revealed nine years later in *The Armies of the Night*, in which he describes his former self in the third person, thus casting his outspoken public persona into sharp relief. Mailer used this unusual point of view in the four nonfiction narratives he published after *Armies*, all of which are personal testaments of the public life of the nation during the period from 1967-72. If the sixties could be considered Mailer's autobiographical decade, the seventies may fairly be called his biographical period. After the 1972 elections he all but lost himself as a protagonist and devoted the rest of the decade to a series of works on famous-infamous Americans: Marilyn Monroe (*Marilyn: A Novel Biography*, 1973); Muhammad Ali (*The Fight*, 1975); Henry Miller (*Genius and Lust*, 1977); Gary Gilmore (*The Executioner's Song*, 1979); and Marilyn again in *Of Women and Their Elegance*, published in 1980. These four figures, and their narcissistic obsessions, are discussed in several of the interviews from 1974 on.

Mailer is now poised for another change, by his own estimate perhaps the largest. From reports of his public readings from the huge novel set in ancient Egypt that he has been working on since 1971, it seems likely that its publication in a year or two will reveal still another kind of writer. For the first time, we perhaps will encounter a Mailer who has tried to get outside of both history and personality — to get so far back in time as to stop it, to imagine human society in a time and place where historical memory cannot reach. He makes a number of tantalizing comments on this long-awaited novel in several of the later interviews, and also explains why he is usually unwilling to discuss his fictional, as opposed to his nonfictional, work-in-progress.

Novelists, Mailer says, must believe that words can change lives — if they are good enough. So words are best devoted to novels. Agreed; and there is where our chief interest will be. But if we wish to glimpse the process as well as read the product, these conversations may be the best places to look.

(Note: Dates given here and at the end of each interview refer to the years the interviews were conducted, not the years of first publication)

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Hip, Hell
and the Navigator . . .gl

Hip, Hell and the Navigator

An Interview with Richard G. Stern



RICHARD STERN: I've been reading "The White Negro" and a fair amount of other material on the hipster, and I must say that intellectually I resent Hip as much as I can resent anything. Now I wonder about the extent of your allegiance to Hip. Are you using this material for fiction, or are you committed to it as a style of life, one which you want to practice yourself and recommend to others?

NORMAN MAILER: All right, good, I think the difficulty for most people who are at all interested in my work is that I started as one kind of writer, and I've been evolving into another. And since we live in a time of enormous insecurity, what generally happens is that this insecurity is reflected in the critical snobberies of the moment. Most serious readers like a writer to be a particular thing. It's important; it's reassuring, somehow, I've noticed that most of the writers one might consider as thin blades, yes? stiletos, dirks, mmm? end up having a sure critical niche. And there have been a few writers like myself taking a particular little journey, and this journey consists of losing all the friends that one's found in the past, and not making enough new ones to make it a profitable venture in and of itself. So, I think if I'm going in this direction, it has to be assumed at least from the outside that I'm serious. Now whether I advocate Hip is another thing entirely.

STERN: The interesting thing about Hip is that Hip shouldn't belong to writers. If you're a genuine hipster you're committed, it seems to me, to a kind of anti-expressionism, Dada, or something like that. You're interested in the quality of the experience itself. If you're a sincere hipster you shouldn't be a writer.

MAILER: As a writer I'm not interested in less expression. What attracts me about Hip is that it's involved with more expression, with getting into the nuances of things.

STERN: More expression or more experience?

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MAILER: The two have an umbilical relationship. What makes a novelist great is that he illumines each line of his work with the greatest intensity of experience. One thing about Hip you have to admit is that the hipster lives in a state of extreme awareness, and so, objects and relations that most people take for granted become terribly charged for him; and, living in a state of self-awareness his time slows up. His page becomes more filled. The quality of his experience becomes more intense. That doesn't make for less expression; it makes for greater difficulty of expression. It makes for writing more pages about fewer episodes which is certainly not the quintessence of the inarticulate.

STERN: OK. You maintain that there is an easy relationship between having experience and expressing it. It seems to me that the hipster is someone who has a lot of trouble with both experience and expression. His "kicks," his psychic-jogging, might I think be traced to the trouble.

Then there's another thing as far as writing goes. Isn't a novel controlled by some overriding notion, by a kind of fanaticism which organizes a great deal of disparate material? In a sense, a novel is like the mind of a madman: everything — casual looks, street signs, world news reports — is charged with meaning. That's why novelists write about ruling passions like love and ambition, passions which put their mark on all they touch, trivial or major. Now I can't believe that Hip allows for such overriding notions and passions. For the hipster, the cool one, detail is illumined, livid, but for its own sake, unqualified by considerations of any organizations, the sort of organization which novels demand. I wonder if such material can be put into fiction.

MAILER: I think it can; and not only that, but I think Hip is particularly illumined by one notion so central and so shattering that its religious resonances and reverberations are going to dominate this coming century. And I think there is one single burning pinpoint of the vision in Hip: it's that God is in danger of dying. In my very limited knowledge of theology, this never really has been expressed before. I believe Hip conceives of Man's fate being tied up with God's fate. God is no longer all-powerful. The moral consequences of this are not only staggering, but thrilling, because moral experience is intensified rather than diminished.

STERN: Now that's a fantastic assertion. That really makes me sit up. What is the notion of God behind all this? Do you mean that some kind of personal god is dying with us?

MAILER: Now I only talk about my own vision of it, really, because it's not the sort of thing that you normally talk about with most hipsters. I think that the particular God we can conceive of is a god whose relationship to the universe we cannot divine; that is, how enormous He is in the scheme of the universe we can't begin to say. But almost certainly, He is not all-powerful; He exists as a warring element in a divided universe, and we are a part of — perhaps the most important part of — His great expression. His enormous destiny; perhaps He is trying to impose upon the universe His conception of being against other conceptions of being very much opposed to His. Maybe we are in a sense the seed, the seed-carriers, the voyagers, the explorers, the embodiment of that embattled vision; maybe we are engaged in a heroic activity, and not a mean one.

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STERN: This is really something.

MAILER: Well, I would say it is far more noble in its conception, far more arduous as a religious conception than the notion of the all-powerful God who takes care of us.

STERN: And do you take to this conception for its perilous nobility, or do you take to it because you believe in it?

MAILER: I believe in it.

STERN: You believe in it.

MAILER: It's the only thing that makes any sense to me. It's the only thing that explains to me the problem of evil. You see, the answer may well be — how to put it? — that God Himself is engaged in a destiny so extraordinary, so demanding, that He too can suffer from a moral corruption, that He can make demands upon us which are unfair, that He can abuse our beings in order to achieve His means, even as we abuse the very cells of our own body.

STERN: Is it a person's duty to find out whether he's of God's party, whether he's working with God-beneficent or God-maleficent?

MAILER: Well, look, let's go back; let's go back to something much more modest for the moment which I think may tie this up, to a small extent, anyway. You asked me before why Hip is interesting for the novel. Well, up to now, when a novelist treats someone like a drug addict, the Square way is to treat the addict as a poor sociological cripple who is doomed and damned and goes down to his inevitable defeat. In Hip, which has after all to a certain extent come out of drug-taking (it's one of the elements in the growth of Hip) the attitude would be more that if taking drugs gives one extraordinary sensations, then the drug-taker is probably receiving something from God. Love perhaps. And perhaps he is. Let's just entertain the notion as a rational hypothesis which may or may not be true and let's see how far we go with it. If the hipster is receiving love from God he may well be draining some of the substance of God by calling upon this love, you see, which the drug releases. And in draining the substance of God he's exhausting Him, so that the drug-taker may be indulging an extraordinarily evil act at the instant he is filled with the feeling that he is full of God and good and a beautiful mystic. This involves new moral complexities which I feel are far more interesting than anything the novel has gotten into yet. It opens the possibility that the novel, along with many other art forms, may be growing into something larger rather than something smaller, and the sickness of our times for me has been just this damn thing that everything has been getting smaller and smaller and less and less important, that the romantic spirit has dried up, that there is almost no shame today like the terror before the romantic. We're all getting so mean and small and petty and ridiculous, and we all live under the threat of extermination. In contrast, the notions of Hip enlarge us, they make our small actions not necessarily large, but more meaningful. If we pick up a bottle while listening to some jazz and we feel each of our five fingertips in relation to the bottle, the bottle begins to have a kind of form for us and we begin to feel each of our fingertips is receiving a different thing from the shape and the structure of the glass, and we then begin to think that maybe the very structure of this glass could conceivably contain some kind of hell within its constitution, some inorganic frozen state of imprisoned being less being than us. I think it's a more interesting notion that just picking up a bottle and pouring out some whiskey.

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STERN: It's a very pretty notion.

MAILER: Hip is pretty.

STERN: But it's all action, it's all erectile, isn't it? It's all feeling and taste and touch and smell. Isn't that the trouble with it?

MAILER: The trouble is that it's enormously difficult to return to the senses. We're all civilized, and to return to the senses and keep the best parts of our civilized being, to keep our capacity for mental organization, for mental construction, for logic, is doubly difficult, and there's a great danger that the nihilism of Hip will destroy civilization. But it seems to me that the danger which is even more paramount — the danger which has brought on Hip — is that civilization is so strong itself, so divorced from the senses, that we have come to the point where we can liquidate millions of people in concentration camps by orderly process.

STERN: Every powerful and refining force involves danger and waste. Does this divorce from the senses you talk about justify cashing in two or three thousand years of continuous culture?

MAILER: Well, your argument is moot. It's too vast for this — for me. But let me try to put it this way. If the divorce from the senses I talk about is becoming a human condition, then by all means, yes, civilization must be cashed in or we will destroy ourselves in the cold insensate expressions of due process of law and atomic radiation. On the other hand maybe this divorce from the senses involves just a small part of my generation, and the Square, in contrast, leads a sensuous life with sufficient contentments to keep him civilized (in the good sense) and equable. It is we — hipsters — who would then be the only ones alienated from our senses. If this be true, then everything I have said is merely an intricate and ingenious rationalization to defend my neurotic ... perversities, and? Of course, I don't believe this is true.

STERN: All right, let's grant that it's moot. Now you have a career, a personal career, a career as novelist, and then maybe a career as an apostle of a new creed. Let's leave the last.

MAILER: Yes, let's leave the last.

STERN: Let's even leave the first and just look at the novelistic career. You are a novelist. You conceive of yourself as a novelist, though for the past week you've been saying you don't get much from literature any more. You're looking for something else. But still, you conceive of yourself as a novelist.

MAILER (*interrupting*): I don't want to be put on record that way. It's more complex than that.

STERN: All right, let's ~~forget that~~ and concentrate on what all this has to do with you as a practising novelist. How are these notions going to work for you? I saw them operating in the play version you made of *The Deer Park*. There you had a prologue in Hell, but I think you will remember I thought the Prologue was extraneous to the play. It was as if a critic had watched the play and said: "Doesn't seem like much until I let you in on the secret: These people are in Hell." Wasn't that something you just "put over" on your material? After you had really treated it, finished with it?

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MAILER: Well ... (*sighs*) when I was doing *The Deer Park* as a novel, characters existed on one level. It seemed to me that putting them into Hell deepened the meaning of their moral experience. That the situation of being in Hell and not knowing it is perhaps the first inversion — no, I don't want to say it that way — it is the first dislocation of the moral space. I find it difficult to express these things — they're terribly intangible for me. It's as if the belief that one exists on one level of being, when in fact — if one could ever discover that fact — one exists on another level of being may literally be the human condition. And so, I didn't do it as a casual or superficial thing. It may be that I lacked enough art to make the Prologue work for the play. But I wanted precisely this double state of existence, this existence of a people who are in Hell and did not know it.

STERN: You had a kind of double state in the novel. There it was a natural extension of the fiction, however. You quoted from the memoirs of a French courtier, one who described the rot of Louis Quinze's court, and I think the idea was to give an extra dimension to the people you were writing about. It was like saying, here's another ash about to fall into the chasm. There you didn't falsify — my opinion here of course — your work, only expanded it. The idea of art seems to me to be to generate emotion from the treated material, not to point out some material and some feeling and say, "Put them together, reader."

MAILER: Well, let me avoid answering you directly. 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 is at its best the most moral of the art forms because it's the most immediate, the most overbearing, if you will. It is the most inescapable. One could argue much more easily about the meaning of a non-objective painting or of music, or whatever. But in the novel, the meaning is there. It's much closer; one could argue about ambiguities, but, because one is using words, it's much closer to the sense of moral commandments, moral strictures. And one gets into a particular thing which is terribly interesting, you begin to explore the interstices of moral reaction — which is the first approach to religious experience for many of us, especially since the organized religions don't begin to cover the enormous and terrible complexities of moral experience. It may be that particular people, working in various religions, individually working with particular people in their parish or whatever may bring some good along with a great deal of harm. But institutionally I believe that the organized religions are morally dead, that their net effect is deleterious, if not hideous and horrible. Organized religion is probably becoming one of the great enemies of our time ... (*reflectively*) They're murderers of the senses.

STERN: So, as far as a work of art goes, we can work it out and then shove it into any pew or forum we want, all to exacerbate the moral consciousness. We can write a Prologue in Hell — or, how about a Prologue in Heaven?

MAILER: Oh, it would be more interesting.

STERN: More interesting?

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MAILER: But it would be more difficult. That was beyond my grasp.
STERN: So for you, actions themselves are neutral. The novelist delivers and then labels them in any way he wants. The belief here is that the actions themselves won't satisfy the reader; he won't be used up, happily cleared of his emotional clots at the end of the book, but will have something left over, will ache for a balm to be supplied outside the novel. Art exacerbates the moral conscience, and then the moral conscience goes out to vote for the reform ticket, and thus eases the ache the novelist has put in it. The novelist's deposit is to be cashed in the world.

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MAILER: Well, ideally, what I would hope to do with my work is intensify a consciousness that the core of life cannot be cheated. Every moment of one's existence one is growing into more or retreating into less. One is always living a little more or dying a little bit. That the choice is not to live a little more or to not live a little more; it is to live a little more or to die a little more. And as one dies a little more, one enters a most dangerous moral condition for oneself because one starts making other people die a little more in order to stay alive oneself. I think this is exactly the murderous network in which we all live by now.

STERN: And this is what the hipster does; he strikes out at others; he's constantly craving for more. He faces the risk of the extinction of his senses, extinction of his being, extinction of his capacity for making distinctions.

MAILER: He does certain things that are very brave in their way; he gambles for one thing with his soul — he gambles that he can be terribly, tragically wrong, and therefore be doomed, you see, doomed to Hell. Which the churchy people don't do at all. They're thinking of nothing but their own nasty little souls which are being maintained for some careful preservation afterward. The hipster is gambling with death and he is gambling with the Hereafter; and he may be wrong.

STERN: And the novelist is gambling with his talent as a novelist.

MAILER: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

STERN: The one talent he's got.

ROBERT LUCID: I can see it with the novelist, but I can't see it with the hipster. This is what kills me. You presume consciousness, you presume purpose, you presume direction on the part of this class — if that's the word — analogous to the novelist. And it seems to me that the whole notion of Hip is, in fact, unconscious, it is mere action.

STERN: I think it was said that the hipster risks his personal being — whatever that may be — and that the novelist risks his talent as a novelist. He does it because he has the choice of living a little more or dying a little more.

LUCID: The point is that the novelist consciously makes decisions and accepts the moral consequences. It seems to me the kind of guy we're talking about as hipster *qua* hipster is a guy who is, in fact, unconscious of risks of this kind, of the profundity . . .

MAILER: Consciously, he may think it's cutting quite a few corners as far as that goes. What I'm postulating in all this — the notion I've been working with all along that's been tacit to my remarks, implicit in my remarks, is that the unconscious, you see, has an enormous teleological sense, that it moves towards a goal, that it has a real sense of what is happening to one's being at each given moment — you see — that the messages of one's experience are continually saying, "Things are getting better," or "Things are getting worse." For me. For that one. For my future, for my past, mmm? It is with this thing that they move, that they grope forward — this navigator at the seat of their being. (1958)

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An Impolite Interview . . .gl

An Impolite Interview

An Interview with Paul Krassner

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PAUL KRASSNER: When you and I first talked about the possibility of doing an impolite interview, we kind of put it off because you said: "I find that when I discuss ideas, it spills the tension I need to write." Which seems like a very Freudian explanation. Does it still apply?

NORMAN MAILER: It does. Sure it does. I think putting out half-worked ideas in an interview is like premature ejaculation.

KRASSNER: Then why bother?

MAILER: I got tired of saying no to you.

KRASSNER: That's all?

MAILER: I'm beginning to get a little pessimistic about the number of ideas I never write up. Perhaps the public is better off with premature ejaculation than no intellectual sex at all. I'm just thinking of the public, not myself.

KRASSNER: All right, this is a question which I'm asking in the context of the cold war and the possibility of a hot war: Isn't there a basic dichotomy between creative artists who express themselves in their work — there's a definite excitement in their life — as opposed to the average person whose days are filled with boredom — in the factory, in the office — and who can almost find a sort of pleasure in identifying nationalistically with international tensions? And so the people who are happy in their own creative outlets are the ones who write poems about peace . . .

MAILER: First time I've heard you talking like a totalitarian. Very few artists I know are happy. The kind of artist who writes a poem about peace is the kind of guy I flee.

There's something pompous about people who join peace movements, SANE, and so forth. They're the radical equivalent of working for the FBI. You see nobody can criticize you. You're doing God's work, you're clean. How can anyone object to anybody who works for SANE, or is for banning the bomb?

KRASSNER: You're not questioning their motives, are you?

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MAILER: I *am* questioning their motives. I think there's something doubtful about these people. I don't trust them. I think they're totalitarian in spirit. Now of course I'm certainly not saying they're Communist, and they most obviously are not Fascists, but there are new kinds of totalitarians. A most numerous number since World War II.

I think, for example, most of the medical profession is totalitarian by now. At least those who push antibiotics are totalitarian. I think the FBI is totalitarian. I think pacifists are totalitarian. I think *Time* magazine is a Leviathan of the totalitarian. There's a totalitarian *Geist*, a spirit, which takes many forms, has many manifestations. People on your own side are just as likely to be totalitarian as people on the other side.

KRASSNER: Yes, but totalitarian to me implies force —

MAILER: A dull, moral, abstract force. There is just such a force in the campaign for "Ban the Bomb." It's too safe. That's the thing I don't like about it. You don't *lose* anything by belonging to a committee to ban the bomb. Who's going to hurt you? Is the FBI going to stick you in jail?

KRASSNER: There are certain employers who frown upon it —

MAILER: Which employers? I think many good people are beginning to get a little complacent. The sort of good people who are militant and imaginative and active and brave, and want a world they're willing to fight for; if there were a revolution they would carry a gun; if there were an underground they would fight a guerrilla war. But there is no real action for them, and so they end up in what I think are essentially passive campaigns like "Ban the Bomb."

I'm against sit-down strikes. I'm against people sitting down in Trafalgar Square, and cops having to carry them off. I think if you're not ready to fight the police, you mustn't sit down and let them carry you off. You must recognize that you're not ready to fight to the very end for your principles. I was carried off in a chair not so long ago and I'm not proud of it.

KRASSNER: Joe Heller told me that he admires you for — and may join you next time — just standing in City Hall Park and not taking shelter during the Civil Defense drill. Why is this any more manly than other activities?

MAILER: I didn't stand there because I was a pacifist, but because I wanted to help demonstrate a complexity. It's a physical impossibility to save the people of New York in the event of atomic attack. Anyone who chooses to live in New York is doomed in such a case. That doesn't mean one should not live in New York, but I think it does mean one should know the possible price. Air raid drills delude people into believing that they're safe in New York. That's what I object to, rounding up the psyches of New Yorkers and giving them mass close-order drill to the sound of an air raid siren. It's piggish. It makes cowardly pigs of people.

KRASSNER: You once referred in passing to the FBI as a religious movement: would you elaborate on that?

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MAILER: I think a lot of people need the FBI for their sanity. That is to say, in order to be profoundly religious, to become a saint, for example, one must dare insanity, but if one wishes instead to flee from insanity, then one method is to join an organized religion. The FBI is an organized religion.

The FBI blots out everything which could bring dread into the average mediocrity's life. Like a weak lover who rushes to immolate himself for love, since that is easier than to fight a long war for love, the mediocrity offers the FBI his complete conformity. He gives up his personal possibilities. He believes he is living for the sake of others. The trouble is that the others are just as mediocre as he is.

At bottom, I mean profoundly at bottom, the FBI has nothing to do with Communism, it has nothing to do with catching criminals, it has nothing to do with the Mafia, the Syndicate, it has nothing to do with trustbusting, it has nothing to do with interstate commerce, it has nothing to do with anything but serving as a church for the mediocre. A high church for the true mediocre.

KRASSNER: In terms of the mass media being a force to which one subjects oneself more voluntarily than to the FBI, isn't it possible that the mass media which you call totalitarian are a reflection rather than a cause of this condition in society?

MAILER: A reflection of what people want? No, I don't think so. That's like saying that the United States Army was a reflection of what the soldiers wanted.

KRASSNER: But they were drafted —

MAILER: And you're not drafted — your eye is not *drafted* when you turn on that TV set? To assume that people are getting what they want through the mass media also assumes that the men and women who direct the mass media know something about the people. But they don't know anything about the people. That's why I gave you the example of the Army. The Private exists in a world which is hermetically alienated from the larger aims of the Generals who are planning the higher strategy of the war. I mean part of the tragedy of modern war (or what used to be modern war) is that you could have a noble war which was utterly ignoble at its basic level because the people who directed the war couldn't reach the common man who was carrying the gun. As for example, Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the average infantryman.

And the reason they can't is because there *is* such a thing as classes. Every little detail of their upbringing turns them away from the possibility of such understanding.

The mass media is made up of a group of people who are looking for money and for power. The reason is not because they have any moral sense, any inner sense of a goal, of an ideal that's worth fighting for, dying for, if one is brave enough. No, the reason they want power is because power is the only thing that will relieve the profound illness which has seized them. Which has seized all of us. The illness of the twentieth century. There isn't psychic room for all of us. Malthus's law has moved from the excessive procreation of bodies to the excessive mediocrization of psyches. The deaths don't occur on the battlefield any longer, or through malnutrition: they occur within the brain, within the psyche itself.

KRASSNER: There's a certain indirect irony there. I'm under the impression that you have almost a Catholic attitude toward birth control.

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MAILER: I do. In a funny way I do. But I've come a long way to get there. After all, if my generation of writers represents anything, if there's anything we've fought for, it's for a sexual revolution.

We've gotten things printed here that twenty years ago would've seemed impossible for a century or forever. I can name them. Not only *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and *Tropic of Cancer*, but little things like "The Time of Her Time," extraordinary works like *Naked Lunch*.

We've won this war, or at least we're in the act of winning it. You might say that the church and the reactionaries are in long retreat on sex.

It's altogether their fault, as far as that goes. They flirted with sex. They used sex in order to make money or gain power. It was the Church, after all, who dominated Hollywood. They thought they could tolerate sex up to a point in Hollywood, because there was obviously a fast buck if you used sex in the movies, and they didn't want to alienate the producers of movies. So the Church compromised its principles.

What happened was that they set something going they couldn't stop. And then people came along who were sincere about sex, and idealistic, naive no doubt like a good many of us, innocent sexual totalitarians, we felt sex is good, sex has to be defended, sex has to be fought for, sex has to be liberated. We were looking for a good war. So we liberated sex.

The liberation goes on now. It's going to keep going on. But the liberation's gotten into the hands of a lot of people who aren't necessarily first-rate. A crew of sexual bullies may be taking over the world. Sexual epigones. Corporation executives who dabble.

The fact of the matter is that the prime responsibility of a woman probably is to be on earth long enough to find the best mate possible for herself, and conceive children who will improve the species.

If you get too far away from that, if people start using themselves as flesh laboratories, if they start looking for pills which prevent conception, then what they're doing, what really at bottom they're doing, is acting like the sort of people who take out a new automobile and put sand in the crankcase in order to see if the sound that the motor gives off is a new sound.

KRASSNER: You're forcing me to the point of personalizing this. Do you use contraception? Do you put sand in your crankcase?

MAILER: I hate contraception.

KRASSNER: I'm not asking you what your attitude toward it is.

MAILER: It's none of your business. Let me just say I try to practice what I preach. I try to.

KRASSNER: Then you believe in unplanned parenthood?

MAILER: There's nothing I abhor more than planned parenthood.

Planned parenthood is an abomination. I'd rather have those fucking Communists over here. Will you print fucking?

KRASSNER: You said it, didn't you? Just tell me if you want it spelled with two g's or a c-k.

MAILER: Those fucking Communists.

KRASSNER: You want a g on the end of it, or just an apostrophe?

MAILER: No, I want a g on the end of it.

KRASSNER: In "The Time of Her Time," the protagonist calls his penis The Avenger. Doesn't this imply a certain hostility toward women?

MAILER: Of course it does. Is that news?

KRASSNER: All right, why is the narrator of your story — or why are you — hostile toward women?

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MAILER: If you're assuming there was an identification with the character, I can only say I *enjoyed* him. He was not altogether different from me. But he certainly wasn't me. I thought The Avenger was a good term to use. I think people walk around with terms like that in their unconscious mind. There're a great many men who think of their cock as The Avenger.

But O'Shaugnessy happened to be enormously civilized. So he was able to open his unconscious and find the word, find the concept, and use it, humorously, to himself.

KRASSNER: If there was any hostility beneath the humor, would you say it was justified?

MAILER: I would guess that most men who understand women at all feel hostility toward them. At their worst, women are low sloppy beasts.

KRASSNER: Do you find that men and women have reacted differently to "The Time of Her Time"?

MAILER: I've found that most women like "The Time of Her Time" for some reason. Men tend to get touchy about it. They feel — is Mailer saying this is the way he makes love? Is he this good or is he this bad? Is he a phony? Is he advertising himself? Does he make love better than me? To which I say they're asses.

KRASSNER: Oh, so you're hostile toward men!

MAILER: I'm hostile to men, I'm hostile to women. I'm hostile to cats, to poor cockroaches, I'm afraid of horses. You know.

KRASSNER: Several months ago I mentioned, in order to make a very definite point, a Cuban prostitute — this was the first prostitute I'd ever gone to, and I had been asking her all these questions about the Revolution — and she stopped later in the middle of fellatio to ask me if I was a Communist.

MAILER: You were in Cuba at the time?

KRASSNER: Yes. And she was anti-Castro.

MAILER: Because he was cleaning them out of the whorehouses?

KRASSNER: Well, there were no more tourists coming to Cuba, and it was ruining their business. Anyway, I described this incident in the *Realist*, and was accused of exhibitionism by some friends of mine. And I'm secure enough in my life that I had no need to boast about this; but it was a funny, significant thing which I wanted to share with the readers.

MAILER: Oh, I remember that, I remember reading your piece now. I was a little shocked by it.

KRASSNER: You're kidding.

MAILER: No, I was shocked. I wasn't profoundly shocked. It threw me slightly. I had a feeling, "That's not good writing." And the next thought was, "Mailer, you're getting old." And the next thought was, "If you're not really getting old, but there is something indeed bad about this writing, what is it that's bad about it?"

KRASSNER: And?

MAILER: A whore practicing fellatio looks up and says, "Are you a Communist?" — that's what the modern world is all about in a way. Saying it head-on like that probably gave the atmosphere honesty. But, in some funny way, it didn't belong. I don't want to start talking like a literary buff, because I dislike most literary language. Hemingway's perhaps most of all (it was so arch), but still in a way a good writer is like a pitcher, and a reader is happy when he feels like a good batter facing a good pitcher. When the ball comes in, he gets that lift.

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But writing it the way you did, Krassner, you were in effect hitting fungoes. You were making the reader field it, which is less agreeable than batting. If the reader had been able to guess that this was what was going on with the whore — I don't know how you could have done it; that would have been the art of it — to phrase the language in such a way that the reader thinks, "Oh, Jesus, she's sucking his cock, and she asks him if he's a Communist." If it had happened that way, it might have been overpowering. What a montage.

Maybe it was the use of "fellatio," maybe you just should have said, "I was having my cock sucked and she said, 'Are you a Communist?'" If you're getting into the brutality of it, get into the brutality of it. Throw a beanball. Don't use the Latinism. Maybe it was the Latinism that threw me. All I know is that there was something bad about it, the effect was *shock*.

KRASSNER: So you were shocked by a euphemism . . .

MAILER: Shock is like banging your head or taking a dull fall; your wits are deadened.

KRASSNER: That's what I wanted to do in the writing, because that's what happened to me in the act.

MAILER: Then you're not interested in art, you're interested in therapy. That's the trouble — there are too many people writing nowadays who give no art to the world, but draw in therapy to themselves.

KRASSNER: No, not in my case. It didn't change me one way or the other, writing it. I just wanted to put it into the consciousness of the reader. That's not therapy for me.

MAILER: Well, then you should've said, "She was sucking my cock." I mean that's my professional opinion.

KRASSNER: It wasn't in *Roget's Thesaurus* . . . Would you agree that you have an essentially biological approach to history?

MAILER: I think I do, but I could never talk about it. I don't know enough history.

KRASSNER: To narrow it down to the present, if you were a future historian of sex, how would you look upon the Kennedy administration?

MAILER: I'd say there's more acceptance of sexuality in America today than there was before he came in. Whether that's good or bad, I don't know. It may be a promiscuous acceptance of sexuality.

KRASSNER: Are you saying it's because of . . . ?

MAILER: Because of Kennedy — *absolutely*. I mean, just think of going to a party given by Eisenhower as opposed to a party thrown by Kennedy. Do you have to wonder at which party you'd have a better time?

The average man daydreams about his leader. He thinks of being invited to his leader's home. If he thinks of being invited to Eisenhower's home, he thinks of how proper he's going to be. If he thinks of going to the Kennedys for a party, he thinks of having a dance with Jackie. Things liven up.

Why do you think people loved Hitler in Germany? Because they all secretly wished to get hysterical and *stomp* on things and scream and shout and rip things up and *kill* — tear people apart. Hitler pretended to offer them that. In some subtle way, he communicated it. That's why they wanted him. That's why he was good for Germany — they wanted such horror. Of course, by the end he didn't tear people apart, he gassed them.

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