THE HAZARDS AND SOURCES OF WRITING

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THERE'S NOTHING MORE BORING than a speaker who starts to talk about a writing award and quickly reveals that he knows nothing about it. But it so happens that the Hopwood Awards really do have a well-deserved fame because they were the first significant college literary awards in the country. In the years when I went to Harvard, from 1939 to 1943, we always used to hear about them and wish we had awards of that sort at Harvard, at least those of us who were certain we were going to be writers. In 1946, the year I got out of the Army, I lived in a brownstone in Brooklyn Heights and in the same brownstone, which had only four apartments in it, lived Arthur Miller. I soon learned from his and my friend Norman Rosten that Miller had won a Hopwood Award. That was the first thing I knew about him. He had a play on Broadway that year called *All My Sons* and that was the year he was writing *Death of a Salesman* and I was writing *The Naked and the Dead*. We used to meet occasionally in the hall when we went down to get our mail. Those days Miller was a shy man and I was fairly shy myself and we would just mutter a few words to each other and try to be pleasant and then go our

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separate ways. I think I can speak with authority about Miller's reaction, I know I can about my own: each of us would walk away and say to himself, "That other guy, he ain't going to amount to nothin'."

It's an anecdote about another writer that introduces my talk today. Kurt Vonnegut and I are friendly with one another, but wary. There was a period when we used to go out together a great deal because our wives liked each other and Kurt and I would sit there like bookends. We would be terribly careful with one another; we both knew the huge cost of a literary feud so we certainly didn't want to argue. On the other hand neither of us would be caught dead saying to the other, "Gee, I liked your last book" and then be met with a silence because the party of the second part could not reciprocate. So we would talk about anything else, we would talk about Las Vegas or the Galapagos Islands. We only had one literary conversation and that was one night in New York. Kurt looked up and sighed, "Well, I finished my novel today and it like to killed me." When Kurt is feeling heartfelt he speaks in an old Indiana accent which I will do my best to reproduce. His wife said, "Oh Kurt, you always say that whenever you finish a book" and he replied, "Well, whenever I finish a book I do say it and it is always true and it gets more true and this last one like to killed me more than any."

Before I talk about the ways in which books kill you I want to tell you one final story that has obsessed me for a long time. I have pondered this story for years and just the other day while thinking about it I came up with a new idea. So I'll tell you the story the way I used to tell it and only then will add the new thought. The story is that the distinguished painter Robert Rauschenberg was once given a gift of a pastel from Willem de Kooning. Rauschenberg, with de Kooning's permission, erased the pastel and then signed it *Pastel by de Kooning Erased by Robert Rauschenberg* and then he sold it. To be crude about it, that story fried one half of my mind because I thought, there's something profound here but I can't get ahold of it. And then the light came to me. I said, "Of course, what Rauschenberg was saying is that the artist has the same right to print money as the financier. Money is nothing but authority imprinted upon emptiness" and laid the story to rest and was totally content until the other day when I thought, wait a minute, maybe the person who bought the pastel was neither a gambler nor even someone who is so aware of chic in painting that he knew he would make a profit from it. Maybe if a truly talented painter erases the work of another truly talented painter, there's a resonance, an echo, in the lost work. If Fidel Castro

had executed Charles de Gaulle, let's say, and buried him himself that would not be ordinary burial ground. There would be an aura about the place. Students of the occult would pay great attention to it and I thought maybe that's what was going on here—that some echo of de Kooning's original work might be *illuminating* the person who purchased it. Now I am obsessed with the story again because one of two possibilities exists: either the act was an outrage or it advances art significantly. I will ask you to hold this story in suspension until the very end of my remarks when its meanings will either strike you powerfully or not. As a professional speaker I know that the worst thing you can ever do is introduce some notion that's subtle and profound to an audience at the beginning of your talk because they think of nothing else for the rest of the time that you are up there, or at least half their mind ponders it while they pretend to listen to you. But certain saws are useful when you come to the state of Michigan and one of them is that there is no fool like an old fool. I am always trying out this premise: can you get your audience interested in something and then proceed to desert the topic and never come back? So keep in mind my story about Rauschenberg while I speak more formally on "The Hazards and Sources of Writing."

When we contemplate the extraordinary terrain, psychologically speaking, that extends across the profession of novel writing it may help to divide this region of endeavor into three self-contained lands. We could speak of the techniques of novel writing, that is, plot, point of view, pace, novelistic strategies, or whatever else can reasonably be taught in a classroom. All of these are elements appropriate to the first territory—techniques—but I will not speak of that today. For all I know, many of you are able to expatiate on these matters with more brilliance than myself. I am an old student of writing, not a young one. I have a tendency to mumble about technical matters like an old mechanic: "Let's put the thingamajig before the whoosits here" is how I usually state the deepest literary problems to myself. Therefore, I am going to move over to the second and third parts of this admittedly arbitrary division of the subject. I am going to speak of the psychology, or maybe it is closer to say the existential state, of the novel writer once he has passed his apprenticeship—and to avoid tremendous amounts of trouble for the rest of this occasion, let me say that I am going back to the old English tradition of using the possessive pronoun his to indicate all of humankind. The apprenticeship of an established writer is subject to all the hazards of his profession, those perils of writer's block and failing energy, alcoholism, drugs

and desertion. For many a writer deserts his writing to go into a collateral profession in advertising or academia, trade journals, publishing … , the list is very long. What is not routine is to become a young writer with a firmly-established name. Luck as well as talent can take one across that first border. Some do surpass the trials of learning technique and commence to make a living at our bizarre profession. It is then, however, that less-charted perils begin. I would like to speak at length of the hazards of writing, the cruelties it extorts out of the mind and flesh and then if we are not too depressed by these bleak prospects, go over to the last of these three lands, which is comparable to heaven or to Atlantis or at least to a kingdom beneath the sea for it resides in no less a place than the mysterious dimension of our unconscious: the source land of all our projects, the essence of our esthetic flights, and no human, no matter how professional, can speak with authority of what goes on there. We are only going to wander at the edges of such a magnificent region and be satisfied, I hope, with the quickest glimpses of its wonders and mysteries. No one can explore the mystery of novel writing to its deepest source.

Let me speak first of the hazards. I know something of them and I ought to. My first story was published after all more than forty years ago and the first novel I wrote that saw print is going to be thirty-six years old in a month. Obviously for a long time I have been accustomed to thinking of myself as a writer, even as others see me that way. So I hear one lament over and over from strangers: "Oh, I too would have liked to be an author." You can almost hear them musing aloud about the freedom of the life. How felicitous to have no boss and face no morning rush to work, to know all the intoxications of celebrity—how they long to satisfy the voice within that keeps saying, "What a pity that no one will know how unusual my life has been! There are all those secrets I cannot tell!" Years ago I wrote, "Experience, when it cannot be communicated to another must wither within and be worse than lost." I often ponder the remark. Once in a while your hand will write out a sentence that seems true and yet you do not know where it came from. Ten or twenty words seem able to live in balance with your experience. It may be one's nicest reward as a writer. You feel you have come near the truth. When that happens you can look at the page years later and meditate again on the meaning, for it goes deep. So I think I understand why people want to write. All the same, I am also a professional and so there is another part of me, I confess, that is ready to laugh when strangers tell me

of their aspirations. I am not free of the scorn of a veteran prize fighter who hears someone say, "I'd like to flatten that bully." The speaker does not know how many years of discipline and dull punishment must be given over to the ability to throw a good punch at will. I say to myself, "They can write an interesting letter so they assume they are ready to tell the story of their lives. They do not understand how much work it will take to pick up even the rudiments of narrative." If I believe that the person who has spoken to me in this fashion is serious I warn them as gently as I can. I say, "Well, it's probably as hard to learn to write as to play the piano." Then if their only reason for wanting to be a writer is to pull in some quick success they get depressed and that's ok with me. One shouldn't encourage people to write for too little. It's a splendid life when you think of its emoluments but it is death to the soul if you are not good at it.

Let me keep my promise, then, and go on a little about the negative part of being a writer. Those few of you here who don't see yourselves as potential writers may then feel less wistful, for if you still have not discovered whether you are talented enough to tell your private tale, you will at least have escaped an awful pressure. To skip at one bound over all these fascinating and (as today) happy years when one is an apprentice writer and learning every day, at least on good days, there is in contrast the abominable pressure on the life of the professional novelist. For soon after you finish each hard-earned book the reviews come in and the reviews are murderous. Contrast an author's reception to an actor's. With the notable exception of John Simon, theater critics do not often try to kill performers. I believe there is an unspoken agreement that thespians deserve to be protected against the perils of first nights. After all, the actor is daring a rejection that can prove as fearful as a major wound. For sensitive human beings like actors a hole in the ego can be worse than a hole in the heart. Such moderation does not carry over, however, into literary criticism. Meretricious, dishonest, labored, loathsome, pedestrian, hopeless, disgusting, disappointing, raunchy, ill-wrought, boring—these are not uncommon words for a typical review. I still remember, and it is close to thirty years ago, that my second novel, *Barbary Shore*, was characterized by the massive authority of the reviewer at *Time* magazine as "paceless, tasteless, and graceless." I am still looking forward to the day when I meet him. You would be hard put to find another professional field where criticism is equally savage. Accountants, lawyers, engineers, and doctors do not often speak publicly in this manner.

Yet the unhappiest thing to say is that our critical practice may even be fair, harsh but fair. After all, one prepares a book in the safety of the study and nothing short of your self-esteem, your bills, or your editor is forcing you to show your stuff. You put your book out, if you can afford to take the time, only when it is ready. If economic necessity forces you to write somewhat faster than is good for you—well, everybody has their sad story. As a practical matter not that much has to be written into the teeth of a gale and few notes need be taken on the side of a cliff. An author usually does his stint at the desk, feeling not too hungry and suffering no pains greater than the view of his empty pad of paper. Now granted that white sheet can look as blank as a television screen when the station is off the air, but that is not a danger, merely an awesome presence. The writer, unlike more active creative artists, works in no immediate peril. Why should not the open season begin so soon as the work comes out? If talented authors were to have it better than actors in all ways, there would be a tendency for actors to disappear and talented authors to multiply, so the critics keep our numbers down.

In fact, not too many good writers do remain productive through the decades. There are too many other hazards as well. We are jerked by the media in and out of fashion and each drop from popularity can feel like a termination to your career. Such insecurity is no help to morale, for even in the best periods every writer always knows one little terror. *Does it stop tomorrow? Does it all stop tomorrow?* Writing is spooky. There is no routine of an office to keep you going, only the white page each morning and you never know where your words are coming from, those divine words. So your professionalism at best is fragile. You cannot always tell yourself that fashions pass and history will smile at you again. In the literary world it is not easy to acquire the stoicism to endure, especially if you've begun as an oversensitive adolescent. It is not even automatic to pray for luck if it has been pessimism itself which gave force to your early themes. Maybe it is no more than blind will, but some authors stay at it. Over and over they keep writing a new book and do it in the knowledge that upon its publication they will probably be savaged and will not be able to fight back. An occasional critic can be singled out for counterattack, or one can always write a letter to the editor of the book section, but such efforts at self-defense are like rifle fire against fighter planes. All-powerful is the writer when he sits at his desk, but on the public stage he may feel as if his rights are puny. His courage, if he has any, must learn to live with the bruises left by comments on his work. The

spiritual skin may go slack or harden to leather, but the honor of his effort to live down bad reviews and write again has to be analogous to the unspoken, unremarked courage of people who dwell under the pressure of a long illness and somehow resolve enough of their inmost contradictions to be able to get better. I suppose this is equal to saying that you cannot become a professional writer and keep active for three or four decades unless you learn to live with the most difficult condition of your existence, which is that superficial book reviewing is irresponsible and serious literary criticism can be close to merciless. The conviction that such a condition is fair has to take root deep enough to bear analogy to the psychology of a peasant who farms a mountain slope and takes it for granted that he was meant to toil through the years with one foot standing higher than the other.

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

It is not easy to explain such disturbances to people unless they do write. Someone who has never tried fiction will hardly be quick to understand that in the study a writer often does feel godlike. There he sits, ensconced in judgment on other people's lives. Yet contemplate the person in the chair; he could be hung over and full of the small shames of what he did yesterday, or what he did ten years ago. Those failures of life, those flashes of old fiascos,

wait like ghosts in the huge house of the empty middle-aged self. Sometimes the ghosts even appear and ask to be laid to rest. Consciously or unconsciously, writers must fashion a new peace with the past every day they attempt to write. They must rise above despising themselves. If they cannot, they will probably lose the sanction to appear like god to themselves and render judgment on others.

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

Let yourself live, however, with an awareness of your book's lacks and short-cuts, its gloss where courage might have produced a little real shine, and you can bear the bad reviews. You can even tell when the critic is not exposing your psyche so much as he is turning his own dirty pockets out. It proves amazing how many evil reviews one can digest if there is a confidence that one has done one's best on a book, written to the limit of one's honesty, even scraped off a little of one's dishonesty. Get to that point of purity and your royalties may be injured by a small welcome but not your working morale. There is even hope that if the book is better than its reception, one's favorite readers will come eventually to care for it more. The prescription, therefore, is simple: one must not put out a job that has any serious taint of the meretricious. At least the prescription ought to be simple, but then how few of us ever do work of which we are not in fact a bit ashamed. It comes down to a matter of degree. There is that remark of Engels to Marx, "quantity changes quality." A single potato is there for us to eat, but ten thousand potatoes are a commodity and have to be put in bins or boxes. A profit must be made from them or a loss will certainly be taken. By analogy a little corruption in a book is as forgivable as the author's style, but a sizable literary delinquency is a diseased organ, or so it will feel if the critics begin to bang on it and happen to be right for once. That will be the hour when one's creditors do not go away. I wonder if we have not touched the fear that is back of the writing in many a good novelist's heart, the hazard beneath all others.

Now this much said we might quit with the agreeable moral instruction that one must do one's best to be honest. If I had any common sense I would thank you and leave the podium. Unfortunately, there is more to be mentioned about writing. Like love, one never comes to understand it altogether; there's always room to expound some more. The act of writing is a mystery and the more you labor at it, the more you become aware that it is not answers which are being offered after a life of such activity so much as a greater appreciation of the scope of the literary mysteries. The ultimate pleasure in spending one's days as a writer is the resonance you can bring afterward to your personal experience. So the mystery of the profession—where those words come from and how to account for their alchemy on the page—not only arouses terror at the thought of one's powers disappearing, but also inspires the happiness that one may be in contact with the source of literature itself. Now, of course, we cannot talk directly of such prodigious

matters; it is enough to amuse ourselves with approaches to the problem. In my late childhood, for example, which is to say in my college years, students used to have one certainty. It was that environment was all; one was the product of one's milieu, one's parents, one's food, one's conversations, one's dearest and/or most odious human relations. One was the sum of one's own history as it was cradled in the larger history of one's time. One was a product, and if one wrote novels, they were merely a product of the product. With this working philosophy I did one book—it happened to be *The Naked and the Dead*—which was wholly comfortable to me. I would not have known at that hour what an author meant by speaking of any of his works as uncomfortable. *The Naked and the Dead* seemed a sure result of all I had learned up to the age of twenty-five, all I had experienced and all I had read. My characters had already been conceived and put in file boxes before they were ever on the page. I had hundreds of filled-out file cards before I ever began to write. The novel itself seemed merely the end of a long active assembly line and I felt able to account for each part of it.

Since its immediate success catapulted this author into another existence altogether, however, such a comfortable view of literature was soon lost. You will forgive me for now proceeding to go on a bit about my own works. It's because I am an authority on the conditions under which they were written. It is the only matter on which I am an authority and if I were to talk on the novels of other authors in the same vein I would merely be speculating on how they were written. So let me say that the next book on which I embarked after *The Naked and the Dead* was such a mystery to me that to this day I do not comprehend it. I can tell you what it is about, what I was trying to say, but do not ask me where *Barbary Shore* came from. I used to feel as if this second novel was being written by someone else. Where *The Naked and the Dead* had been put together with all the solid agreeable effort of a young carpenter constructing a decent house while full of the practices, techniques and wisdom of those who built houses before him, *Barbary Shore* might as well have been dictated to me by a ghost in the middle of a forest. Each morning I would sit down to work with no notion at all of how to continue. My characters were strangers to me and each day after a few hours of blind work (because I never seemed to get more than a sentence or two ahead of myself) I would push my plot and people three manuscript pages further forward into their eventual denouement, but I never knew what I was doing nor where it came from. It's fortunate that I had heard of Freud

and the unconscious; if not I would have had to postulate such a condition myself. An unconscious was the only explanation for what was going on. Of course, given my distraught state I might well have been committed the moment I started to babble about this unconscious, if not for the happy fact that everyone around me was also aware of the now-established theories of the good doctor from Vienna. I was left aware, however, of two presences cooperating in the production of a literary work, and the second had the capacity to take over the act of authorship from the first.

Since then I have not written a novel which has not belonged to one category or the other. Some, of course, have belonged to both. They have come out of the deepest parts of my unconscious but have also been the obvious result of long and painstaking conscious preparations. *The Deer Park* and *Ancient Evenings* are fair representatives of this mixture of categories, and then there was my novel *The Executioner's Song* which was so close to the facts of a real event that many would argue that it was not a novel at all. Obviously it was as much a part of the same family of books as *The Naked and the Dead*. At the other extreme is *Why Are We in Vietnam?* That was a work which not only emerged out of some obscure part of me but was also not in my style. Indeed not even in a voice remotely like my own. I can never read it aloud with success. When I try to, I'm tempted to ask for an actor to step up from the audience who can do it better than I can. Yet I wrote it in three happy and confused months. Some novels take years, and some novels shift the weights and balances of your character forever by the act of writing them, but this work took only three months and passed through me with the strangest tones. Never before or since have I been remotely as funny. The work was wild and comic to an extreme. I used to go in each morning and the voice of my main character, a highly improbable sixteen-year-old genius—I did not even know if he was white or black; he claimed to be one or the other at different times—would commence, he would travel through my mind and emerge. I had no idea where he came from nor where he was going. I felt like a spirit medium; I needed only to have the decency to appear at my desk at the regular time and (I cannot call him He) It would begin to speak. I thought of the book afterward as a gift, for compared to others I hardly had to work at all.

Sometimes when I am feeling tolerant to the idea of karma, demiurges, spirits of the age, and the intervention of angels, saints, and demons, I also wonder if being a writer over a long career does not leave you open to more

than one origin for your work. In a long career one may come forth with many books that are products of one's skill and education, of one's dedication, but I also wonder if once in a while the gods do not look about and have their own novels to propose and peer down among us and say, "Here is a good one for Bellow" or "That would have been a saucy dish for Cheever, too bad he's gone" or, in my own case, "Look at poor old Mailer worrying about his job again. Let's make him the agent for this absolutely wicked little thing about Vietnam." Who knows? We may be sturdy literary engineers full of sound literary practice or, as equally, unwitting agents for forces beyond our comprehension. It matters less than the knowledge that our books can come from more than one wondrous place. After all, it is not so depressing to think that with all our hungers we can also have the fortune to be handed in passing a few gifts we do not deserve. How agreeable to feel kin to the force that put paintings on the walls of caves, set stonecutters to exactitudes that would permit gothic arches, gave the calculus to Newton's age and space travel to ours. No, it is not so ill to sense that we are also heir to emanations from some unaccountable and fabulous source. Nothing lifts our horizons like a piece of unexpected luck or the generosity of the gods.