A Cow Can Moo: The Irony of the Artistic Lie

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"The original writer is not one who imitates, but one whom nobody can imitate."

--Francois René de Chateaubriand

"A cow can moo. I can, too. A bird can fly. So can I." This simple elementary rhyme, my mother assures me, were the first words I ever read. I'm not certain how old I was when I read them. In my mother's memory, I'm sure the event was highly precocious. She likes to use the story as an indication that my devotion to the written word began just after I learned to focus. For a long time, she mentioned it with pride in herself, too, an indication that she was somehow responsible for my lifetime devotion to letters; in later years, that may have become something she regretted.

Although I have no specific recollection of this book, sometimes, in the periphery of my mind's eye, I seem to catch a glimpse of the brightly colored pages and overlarge letters that formed these meanings. The illustrations, though, are not so important as the unique combination of wit and wisdom reflected in those simple lyrics. There's also more than a slight tinge of irony there, so I suppose it's safe to say that I was first exposed to irony about the same time I learned to read.

I believe that the bridge between wit and wisdom can be found in the sublime appreciation of irony. Irony is, I think, the principal tool of the artist, especially those

artists who fashion themselves as writers. Many artists like to imagine that their primary concern is beauty and truth. I don't think so.

Shelley's reminder in "The Defense of Poetry," that beauty and truth are inexorably linked is all very well, and his observation encompasses the by now over labored definition coined in Keats' famous poetic line. Shelley, who had read that line, I'm sure—probably more often than he wished to—avers that poetry, by which I think he means art, is "the record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds"; elsewhere, though, he notes that poetry differs from logic. We know from Aristotle that that is as it should be, for logic has nothing to do with truth, and it has even less to do with wisdom. Logic, in sum, is witty. Poets, Shelley states, are naturally illogical. They are "teachers, who draw into a certain propinquity with the beautiful and the true that partial apprehension of the invisible world." This attitude is the great equalizer between beauty and truth, the source, doubtless, of the belief that they are the same thing or, at least, that the understanding of one is the same as understanding the other. [1]

It's the irony in that statement that makes it profound. Profundity is often the result of those "elaborate hesitancies," as Edith Wharton defined them, that so often "explode a huge laugh at one's feet." Too often, though, for writers, the laugh is at their own expense, and that's the grimmest irony of all.

As an academic and working critic of fiction, I spend a lot of time reading about what a great many people are pleased to call "the writing process." I'm not sure what that means. The phrase generally calls to mind a snapshot of my over-cluttered office and my

rapidly aging self peering idiotically at the pixels of a computer screen while my fingers try desperately to tap out some meaningful sentence that will advance my characters and plot another page or two. My walls are lined with books I've not had time to read and that demand accusingly that I stop trying to add to their numbers, and my walls contain posters and photographs and other miscellany that seemed important enough to display at some point in the past so I could contemplate them in some future leisure that I never seem to find. Outside my window, the seasons inexorably march along, one after the other, while a calendar featuring gorgeous prints of faraway places I know I'll never have the time nor money to visit taunts me with its metronymic ticking off of days until the next deadline.

That's hardly the glamorous view of "the writing process" that one usually imagines. In movies, authors all sip sherry and brandy and wear lots of expensive woolens and silks. They spend their time in oak-paneled bookshops signing mountains of copies for eager fans who jostle one another for a place in line. They never seem actually to write anything, but they do vacation in exotic places and are on intimate terms with the *maître'd's* of five-star restaurants in famous cities. But the lifestyles of writers in movies are a happiness that most writers never realize. Such fantasies are, however, the principal motivations that usually prompt someone to try to become a writer. Fame and fortune are powerful incentives, even though few writers ever discover them. When they finally abandon such pedestrian ambitions, they decide they'll settle for seeking beauty and truth. Faulkner declared that a writer in pursuit of such an artistic ambition "would not hesitate to rob his mother; 'Ode on a Grecian Urn,'" he said, "is worth any number of old

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[1] The portion bracketed by * was not orally delivered during the 2004 Kusch Lecture, but was omitted in

ladies." I doubt that most writers would be inclined to rob their mothers, but I suspect that, deep down, most doubt that they'll discover beauty or truth, either.

Second to hearing some academic hold forth about some writer's discovery of the approximation of beauty and truth, probably nothing is more boring than hearing a writer talk about his notions of them, unless it's hearing him talk about his own work—which many writers imagine to be "art"—and its supposed importance. Common contemporary protests to the side, my observation has been that for a writer's work to be regarded as universally important or at least artistic, the writer, for the most part, needs to be dead. I think that if they were honest, living writers—even the most sensational and successful ones—would admit that they don't think their work is very important or artistic at all. I think they secretly believe that they're like mischievous children who've sneaked into a midway freak show and suddenly find that they are the act that that everyone has come to debunk.

For me, the road to becoming a writer wasn't even so direct as that. Because I was first educated as a scholar and teacher, I have a different perspective. I think that on some level and in some way, I knew I would become a writer at some point, but I resisted it for years. My love affair with the written word may have begun with that earliest reading experience, but I was too intimidated by books to believe that I might ever write one. The idea of doing so was, somehow, too ironic to contemplate.

I began writing because I wanted to tell some stories. It was as simple as that. I never expected the stories to be published, so I was honest in telling them. Like most nascent writers, I followed the most common advice of creative writing teachers

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the interest of time. The following transition was inserted: ". . . home,' to the place of my imagination."

everywhere—although I'd never taken a creative writing course or known a writer—I "wrote what I knew." I didn't think what I knew was very interesting to anyone but me, for I had come from West Texas, a place that few people had ever heard of and even fewer ever wanted to. The idea that total strangers might want to visit a place in the pages of a book that they would not want to visit in person was absurd. That I never wanted to go back there made it even more absurd for me to write about it. But absurd behavior is common to writers, because, at bottom, the whole concept of writing is absurd; the one question that runs constantly through a writer's mind is, "Why would anyone ever want to read this?"

If a writer ever writes with the idea that what is written will actually be read, then he probably won't write honestly. So I was writing my stories honestly, because I never expected anyone to read them. To explain this requires a slight digression into autobiography. That, too, can be boring, but I'll try to show its relevance to irony, and, I hope, irony's connection to art.

Unremarkably, I was born in a small town in Texas. It was fairly typical of hundreds of other small towns in Texas during the "boom years" following World War II, probably fairly typical of tens of thousands of small towns across America in those days of "I Like Ike" and idyllic visions of family life and community spirit. In most ways, I was an ordinary small town kid of the baby-boom generation. I wore baggy dungarees and ugly striped tee-shirts, a flattop held up with Butch Wax, and had a passionate longing for a V-8 engine and a girl who looked like Annette Funicello or, later, Anne Margaret. My father was a blue-collar working stiff, a combat veteran of World War II who came home after trouncing Hitler and his minions to settle down and grow

prosperous. He settled down, but he never grew prosperous, not in the way he planned. He always wanted to be a rancher and to raise horses, as his father had done. He wound up working for the railroad until they farmed him out with bad eyes and a bad heart, at least some of which was probably caused by trouncing Hitler and his minions when he should have been home becoming a rancher and raising horses. My mother was a typical small town girl who married a likeable guy with a big heart and a good work ethic with whom she could have children and grandchildren and grow old and beam proudly whenever her progeny were paraded in public. She got most of that—the progeny, anyway—but my father died comparatively young, and her children moved away to hold their parades in other places where no one knew her—or them. In spite of her maternal pride in teaching me to read virtually before I could walk, it probably is one of the great bewilderments of her life that her elder son became a writer.

It was her fault, though. The mooing cow and flying bird were the genesis of a destiny that she encouraged me to embrace. Mothers rarely understand the damage they do in the name of what's "right" until it manifests itself later on.

I think that I began the "writing process" before I left home, but to realize it, I first had to find it. When the point of departure is West Texas, the trip is apt to be a long one. For me and my friends, the world ended at our city limits' sign, or later, at the county line. We knew there was something else out there, but we were afraid of it. Only a few of us would ever go there, and almost none would come back. I think we knew that would happen, and I think, for most, that was terrifying.

In that pre-computer era when television had but three part-time channels, "out there" was something of a mystery. We weren't ignorant, backward, or poorly informed.

We had AM radio beamed all night at us from KOMA, Oklahoma City, after all; through those static-filled airways, we heard of far off places such as Kansas City and Omaha, Chicago and St. Louis, of phenomena such as boardwalks and beaches, places we could only imagine. We marveled over the wonders of a "hemi under glass" and "double overhead cams" as they were detailed in the rapid-fire commercials for stock car races—interspersed between Gene Pitney and Buddy Holly and Elvis and Patsy Cline croonings about depths of pain and love we couldn't fathom. Cousins from Fort Worth and Dallas, from Atlanta and San Francisco and New Jersey visited and told us of a world of juvenile delinquents, beatniks, surfboards, then flower children and heavy-duty rock and roll. Our vocabularies expanded with words like "cool," "boss," and "far out," and we learned about sex and drugs and even met some kids who had seen Bob Dylan live, been to a Cowboys' game, or flown on an airliner. We heard there were places with rivers you couldn't walk across and trees so abundant you couldn't see the forest for them. We didn't believe it. We also heard that people were orbiting the Earth, but I don't think we believed that, either. For us, West Texas, empty, vast, and hostile as it seemed, was vacuum enough. Who would blast off on a rocket merely to discover more?

Through these outsiders, though, and through grainy black and white television images that other world forced itself into our view. We imitated them and impossibly tried to make our place like theirs; meanwhile, we watched *The Andy Griffith Show* and desperately prayed that such hick-towns as Mayberry weren't a reflection of our own rural reality, knowing all the while that they probably were. We wore the latest fashions, as observed on *American Bandstand* and the Sears Catalogue, combed our hair in the style of our idols on record album and magazine covers, and talked with authority of the

doings of faraway people and places most of us would never see. We sensed that somewhere out beyond the buttes and prairies there were places where people acted the way movie people acted, the way book people acted, and we wanted to know them, to be like them, to know what they knew about beauty and truth. Or some of us did.

I left when I was seventeen, and I was bitter—angry over slights, real and imagined, that I'd endured all my conscious life. I want to "show them"—although I wasn't sure, exactly, who "they" were—and I was insensible to the fact that "they" didn't care, that less than a decade later, most of "them" wouldn't recognize me on the street or have very much to say to me if they did. I didn't understand, then, that each individual has to find his own destiny, has to find his own stories to tell, and that geography doesn't really have much to do with it.

What I eventually learned, though, was that for a writer, it's necessary to leave a place—not merely physically or geographically, but spiritually—in order to come back to it, to understand it, and by all means, to write about it. But there are many ways of leaving, and it's not until you turn around and look that you can appreciate how far you've come. For a writer, it's often not very far. But it's the journey that's important, not the distance or the destination. That's where the first appreciation of irony occurs.

It wasn't until I had been away for a decade that I found myself drawn back "home." At first, it was a kind of pedagogical thing. I found myself wanting to tell stories about where I was from, about the people I knew, about what I, like most writers, firmly believed to be the uniqueness of my life. Over the next several years, those stories coalesced into an idea, ultimately into a place that I eventually named "Sandhill County."

As soon as I thought up the name, almost instantly, it became as real as the actual county in which I grew up.

That's the first step in the journey, I think: understanding that fiction is more beautiful than memory, and that, in the long run, it's truer than fact. That's because, in the end, it's a lie.

Writers are natural liars because fiction by its very definition is stuff we make up. It may be honest, but it's not real. A writer has to lie to be an active investigator of life because most of the time actual life is too painful—and often too boring—to reveal in raw verity; it wants embellishment. That's where the artist and especially the writer comes in. Like a photographer working with a negative, a writer has to frame, isolate, filter, crop, dodge and burn the subject a little, remove a blemish here, lighten a shadow there, tone down some distracting bright spot, or cut it out entirely to reveal something about the subject that might not be apparent in the stark reality of its visage.

In the darkroom of prose, writers seek to discover some deeper *something*—call it the heart, the soul, the psyche—inside the human spirit that might reveal some truth that clarifies Keats' tautology. This is an appropriate activity for writers, at least according to Pope, who dictates that "the proper study of mankind is man." Pope came before Shelley and may have been wiser and, for sure, was wittier, and, overall, he was a better liar. But the point is that since all writing is, ultimately, about character—about some person—then it makes sense that the proper subject of a writer's inquiry also is man.

The writer's renderings—his "findings," if you will—may reveal something about beauty and truth, anyway. It is the reader's obligation to admire that revelation, and that's not always easy; ultimately, it may not be that important. Edgar Allen Poe averred that

"the elevation of the soul" was the principal goal of art, but how? Aristotle taught us that all successful discourse both entertains and informs. Another way of saying that is that art must have wit as well as wisdom. Wit becomes the vehicle, in a metaphoric sense, that carries the tenor of wisdom. By analogy, the writer's job is to entice the reader through a witty portal where some wisdom may be found in the empathetic sharing of the universal nature of our common humanity, in those vital connections between one human spirit and another. This is where the notion of *catharsis*, that mysterious word with which the old Greek saddled us and addled us, comes from, and I think it was what Poe was talking about, too.

The point is that what the reader experiences when he passes through the wit and discovers the wisdom, if there is any, isn't vicarious. It's *empathetic*. It's easily confused with the melding of beauty and truth, or with fear and pity, or with other raw emotions that actually were inside the reader all along. All that the writer does is take them down off the shelf and expose them for what they are, so the reader can feel them. But the experience has to be genuine, which means the writer has to feel them, too. "No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader," as Robert Frost put it.

All of that sounds pretty high-minded, although I am certain that there are some writers who sit down to compose their fictions with that intent in mind. That is, they are *trying* to be artistic, to create beauty and truth in some pure, non-ironic way. Theirs is an ambition that wants admiration, but I suspect they are doomed to fail more often than not. That's because another irony associated with art is that it can't be deliberately created. It can be imitated, duplicated, translated from one form into another; but the creation of original art is as much an accident as the discovery of that gem of wisdom that writers

always are seeking to expose. In short, developing a sharpness of wit is easy; it's the other part that's hard. It takes an abstract set of qualities to do it. Some writers have them; some don't. The trick is that those who do seldom are sure enough to rely on them, for they may inexplicably and capriciously disappear, or they'll suddenly discover that they've used up their entire allotment, and more isn't on the way.

At bottom, all art is synthetic. Whatever is observed and absorbed and, one hopes, understood passes through an interpretative filter that translates its original shape into something plastic. It appears to be true, but it cannot be; it appears to be beautiful, but it can never offer more than the suggestion of beauty. Shelley was right on that point, for sure; but he stole the notion from Wordsworth, who admonished us to remember that the only authentic beauty lies in nature, the "splendor in the grass" and "glory in the flower," and, ironically, only an innocent sensibility can fully appreciate it. Therefore, it is nature that's true, not its recreation or its shadow, for there is too much irony in art for it ever to be genuinely beautiful;, and, as Juvenal pointed out, there's too much indignation for it to be true.

When the point is considered more broadly, I think it becomes self-evident. Irony informs art and makes it appealing. In that sense, irony also defines art. It may be found in the complexities of personalities struggling on Troy's windy field or in the poetic protests of one of Shakespeare's hapless kings; it may be observed in the simple mystery of Mozart's genius or Verdi's arial passion, in something as splendidly tragic as the *Pietà* or in the quiet enigma of *Mona Lisa*'s smile, the sublime sweetness of a ballet or the towering grace of an modern skyscraper. But that's the wide-eyed wonder of it, for it can also be discovered in the contrived terror of a paperback horror novel or the clichéd thrill

of a pulp western, the manipulated tension of a crime story or courtroom drama or the predictable triumph of a war novel's hero or science-fiction tale's alien invader. It can be found in the worst movie ever made or in the base lyric of a country-western cheating song. Whatever makes someone laugh out loud, weep bitter tears, shudder with fear or cringe in pain offers it. The question is only how effective and lasting the sensation may be.

All of these works, whether brilliant or banal attract us with their wit, then sometimes leave us breathless with the revelation of their wisdom, emotionally awash in their combination of the abstract with the concrete in an exquisite aesthetic. Yet, if we dare stop and consider them objectively, just for a moment, we know that they are not real, not natural; they are imagined, created, wrought, shaped and constructed. How can they be true? How, indeed, in the brighter light of the deeper probing of human experience, can they even be beautiful?

My experience has been that most of those who profess most copiously and with the greatest authority about the "writing process" are not, themselves, writers. They generally are critics, and often they are very good readers. But they seem to spend a lot of time trying to find deep and sometimes "hidden" ideas in another's writing, trying to divine that famous secret everyone believes writers know but are too miserly to share. They're sometimes correct. But sometimes, they're just plain wrong, even when the writers whose work they're analyzing agree with them, and especially when the writers are dead. Most writers, dead or alive, don't have any idea what their work "means," at least not when they're writing it. I think that most are just trying to tell a story the best way they know how.

But if they're careful writers, they never stay within the lines when they "color" their fiction. They may start with a form, a shape, a place or a time that is well drawn, but most writers soon stray outside those boundaries. To do this, they sometimes have to create an imaginary world to contain their lies, a lie to surround their lies, as it were, and to define them. In the process, the original shape changes; in their minds, it becomes more real than the primary source; if not more real, it certainly becomes more ironic.

This isn't such a problem when a writer is writing about New York City or Los Angeles, London or Tokyo, Dallas or Rome; for those are large places in small areas, places where the manipulation of geography and even people can be done with reasonable ease. In a way, it's like looking through the wrong end of a telescope, something that produces a view focused on the wittiness of specific detail but hazy on the overall wisdom that may come to light. But when a writer is dealing with a very small place in a large area—such as a small town in Texas—then the telescope is right-side-around, and a great deal depends on the connections that may be drawn between the mundane and the archetypal. Lying about a small place, even an imaginary one, is hard when the actuality is so handy for comparison. What writers have to do, then, is to step back and take a hard look at the whole context, not merely of the imaginary world that contains the lies they want to tell, but of the place where they are, of who they are and where they came from. That, too, requires a context, though, and it's sometimes a hard one to put into perspective or to find in a confusing depth of field.

Perspective is vitally important to a writer, for in the process of studying man properly, it's necessary to know not only where we have been, but also where we came from. Otherwise, the subject is out of focus or, as Hemingway put it, there's a "hole in

the story." This means writers must develop an ironic view of our time, our collective ego. It occurs to me that like most societies that have gone before, our present culture confidently holds to an affirmation of our own excellence. We're often so pleased with ourselves, that we hang our own images on the wall and do nothing but admire them while we ignore the original subject. Although we disdain the past as primitive and prefatory and speak of the future in reverential and anticipatory terms—almost as if we will live to see all of it, not the mere micro-fraction of it that may be revealed to us in our remaining years—we seldom stop to consider that where we are, philosophically, is no better than where we've been. We forget that the Attic Greeks believed they had achieved the pinnacle of civilized development, as well; so did the Egyptians, and the Romans, the Renaissance Europeans, and the Neoclassicists, the Victorians, and almost every generation that has defined itself in any way. We fail to contemplate the telling moments that reveal how ephemeral our cultures can be, and how dangerously naïve. The present may seem to be comfortably transitional, and the past sustaining permanent, but tomorrow should always remain a mystery. If we become too sure of it, we may well be headed for disaster.

Consider, for example, Montezuma, standing on the apex of the Temple of the Sun the day before Cortez arrived, perhaps, gazing down on the Aztec metropolis at his feet and considering that this, certainly, was the greatest height to which civilized man could climb, a zenith that could never be matched. Or perhaps, we fail to see the tragedy in Cortez's outrage to discover that the feathered rulers of this huge city offered human sacrifices to their gods, while very likely on the same day in Spain, people were being lashed to stakes and burned alive as an act of faith. The irony in these neglected

recollections is obvious, and in the ultimate collapse and crumbling of these historical icons resides the wisdom that the lie of art can reveal. We should learn, it seems, that whenever we arrogantly declare ourselves to be complete in our understanding of the world and ourselves, nature sends us—like Icarus, like the *Titanic*, like the *Columbia*—plummeting into oblivion and into humility. We cannot, as Shakespeare's Richard suggests, "sit upon the ground and tell sad stories of the death of kings"; such resignation betrays our nature. Browning encourages, "A man's reach should exceed his grasp"; but it's the reaching, not the grasping that makes the poet's point, because Browning knew the admonition's irony: no mortal man can ever grasp heaven.

Complacency is an easy arrogance to embrace, and it's hard to avoid the temptation to be awed by what we can do, have done and will yet do. The present generation has lived through astounding times. Launched with the haphazard haste of an expanding mushroom cloud, we have moved in half a lifetime from an era when people plowed fields behind mules to a time when men walked on the Moon. People my own age were born in homes without running water or electrical appliance, but they now blithely cook complete meals in seconds and eat them while casually watching photographs from Mars broadcast via satellites they neither can see nor, truly, comprehend the workings of. I know people whose heartbeats originally began another's life or who see the world through eyes that once were windows to another's soul. We can talk directly to people on the other side of the planet with tiny instruments we carry in shirt pockets, and we dismiss the names of epidemic maladies that ravaged our childhoods with the same relaxed indifference reserved for prehistoric catastrophes. Disaster, deprivation, death, and disease, it would seem, are in full retreat from the power

of our wit; but in our headlong rush to reach an apotheosis of human endeavor, where is the wisdom, where are beauty and truth?

We have achieved so much in so little time that it's difficult to stop consider what shreds of wisdom might have been lost in our self-congratulation of just how much wit we can so readily display. We often become so entranced by the minutiae of our capabilities that we forget the grandeur of our possibilities, not as scientists, technicians, scholars, or philosophers, but as mere human beings. We become so caught up in trying to determine how the pyramids were built, that we neglect to appreciate the mystery of their very existence or to consider that next to even a modest mountain, they are pitiful efforts, indeed.

Our *hubris* beggars envy. We often become so enamored of our seemingly limitless ability to create, to progress, to solve, that we neglect to examine our purpose, to question our direction, or to wonder what the problem truly was in the first place. In short, we seem to have forgotten Aristotle's dictum of instruction entirely and to be completely fascinated by the entertainment, more concerned with the causes of our being than with its effects, more caught up in the human comedy, as Balzac put it, than with the human condition. It's a good thing to remind ourselves, from time to time, that while one hand of mankind reaches for the stars, the other shapes itself around a rock to fling at offending enemies. Though the rocks may be jet-propelled and laser-guided, they're still just rocks; and the universe, however close it may seem in telescopic vision, is still too vast to apprehend. In many ways, we've not taken so much as a step away from the ignorant ape contemplating the shadows cast on some cave's wall, too amazed by them to step outside and confront what causes them. Too often, I think, we are terrified of peering

into the void, because we might discover that that the only eyes looking back are our own. Pogo, perhaps, was even more astute than Shelley.

This, I think, is the supreme irony; it's the writer's job to use it to remind us of who we are, from where we came in a fundamental rather than a scientific or anthropological sense, to urge us to pay less attention to the shadows on the wall and far more to the objects that blot out the light. Writers remind us that the abyss holds many mysteries, and that we aren't the most important one or even the most difficult to solve. Writers exist to remind us that while we can moo, we can never be cows, nor can we see the world with a cow's simple understanding; while we can fly, we can never soar with the freedom of will casually displayed by the common sparrow. In the final analysis, we are only what we are; our possibilities, however exciting to contemplate, are always bound by human limitations.

Ideas for writers' fictions come from such translations. I think the mysteries of the past are the most powerful, especially when irony is applied, and they provide some shape to the emptiness that so often threatens to smother us; they give veracity to the artistic lie we so need to define our present.

Sometimes, I look at an old photograph or, maybe, watch an old piece of film--one made long before I was born. Rather than focus on the subject of the picture—whether it's a person, a landmark, or an event—I like to pick some anonymous bystander, some curious and unidentified individual who might, for the briefest moment, peer into the lens and gape, grin, frown, or simply stare. Usually, he or she is quickly out of the frame, or in the case of a still photo, is only a part of the background. But the image of that face, captured forever on grainy celluloid, fascinates me. I wonder what happened to

that person, not years later when he or she was old and decrepit and looking back on a long life; rather, I wonder about the next few moments after the camera was gone, when he turned his attention once more to his ordinary routine, when she retreated back into the anonymity of her personal history. I wonder, did he go back to work, stand behind a counter for the rest of the day, or perhaps exchange that jaunty boater for a welder's helmet, that snazzy suit for a barber's smock? Did she make that bonnet, and what caused the stain on her apron? Had he ever fired that pistol in his belt or polished those scuffed shoes; did she truly love that child beside her, or did she wish her never born? What did he eat for supper that night? Was she in love that day? Was her shirtwaist too tight, or did his underwear bind? Had she seen a dentist lately, or ever? Did he smoke, drink to excess? Or was he a loyal temperance follower? Did she attend church regularly, or was she a prostitute off on a respectable lark? Did he, at that moment, have a tumor that was quietly killing him? Would she live long enough to vote? Was it hot on the street that day, did sweat run down into his eyes, did he have an odor about him? Was she married? What were his worries, her fears, their joys? Was he generally happy, a good man with a good life? Or did he harbor some deep, sinister secret beneath the mugging grin. Did she perhaps leave the street and murder someone for two dollars and an expired trolley-car pass? What did they see in the distance beyond the camera?

Such questions can be maddening if they become obsessive. But to me, it is the raw material of character, the fountainhead of fiction, for from looking into the smeared countenances and studying the vague details, I can often find all kinds of lies to tell, and if I can employ the right amount of wit in telling them, I might detect some wisdom.

I find inspiration for character everywhere: in junkyards full of rusty automobiles, every one of which was once shiny new and probably the answer to some driver's dream; in the flyspecked windows of an old building's second story, where some business or service once found office space and the promise of prosperity; in an abandoned highway that once connected two places, the names of which have been lost to time. These are not the same as cemetery stones or other memorials designed to keep the past in living memory; these are accidental monuments, ironic testaments to the real connection between beauty and truth.

Sometimes, I pass a lone wanderer on the highway. Mindful of commonsense cautions, I never stop; but as I whiz by and spray them with heat and gravel, I catch a glimpse of their eyes, and I find myself wondering about them the same way I wonder about long-dead images in antique photographs, rusty cars, and crusty windows blinded by dust and age. Often these vagabonds are scraggly, dirty, overburdened with packs and possessions. Sometimes, they trudge along with no effort to find a ride; other times, they hold up hastily scrawled signs or the ever-ineffective thumb, seeking a quicker way to wherever they think they're going. They often look sad, weary and worn. I know that somewhere they had a mother, a father, though they might never have known them. Somewhere at some time, someone must have cared about them, perhaps must have loved them, hated them, or at least known their names.

As I zoom past, I often wonder: Where have they been? What do they think they're running from? Why do they think that where they're going will be better, safer, more secure or comfortable than anywhere else? Like Odysseus, they're bouncing from place to place, they think; like Oedipus, they're running from their fates, they think; like

Candide, they're avoiding tending their gardens for as long as they can, they think; and like Huck, they've "lit out" for the territories, they think. Like Dos Passos' "Vag," they stare at the passing cars and planes and trains that pass them by, then they growl with contempt at those they think ignore them. But they're wrong about that. Although forever anonymous, they invade our consciousnesses; one way or another, and whether they know to or not, they're always going home.

In a way, that is the same impulse that draws me to the photographs, that notion of "coming home."* And as a writer coming home meant going back, over and over again, to Sandhill County.

"Sandhill County" is the background for my lies. I made up the name after carefully checking an almanac and making sure that there really wasn't a "Sandhill County" anywhere in Texas. Writers, I understood, have to be very careful about inadvertently telling the truth. The name was appropriate, because the county I was writing about was bordered on the north by the Prairie Dog Town Fork of the Red River, a sandy and treacherous waterway. It was bordered on the east and south by the Pease River, a smaller and less treacherous but no less sandy road that frequently flooded and washed out bridges and fields. Lining both steams were huge mounds of sand, diluvium hills covered with light vegetation at their crowns, and descending into labyrinthine loblollies filled with dark and dank plants, thickets of thorns and dens of coyotes, wild cats and poisonous snakes.

Among the few more naturally appealing fauna farmers and ranchers hadn't hunted into extinction or merely killed out of pure meanness, was the sandhill crane. These huge, graceless birds made an annual pilgrimage from points north each winter,

camping out on their stork-like legs on the riverbeds, enticing the blood sportsmen among us to—what else?—kill them.

As a youngster, I tried to hunt sandhills along with quail, dove, and rabbits, but the birds were skittish and elusive. Their preference was the vast, sandy emptiness of the rivers' bottoms, which, when they weren't flooded, were truly just huge sandbars occasionally cut by shallow rivulets of briny water. To reach the browsing flock, I often crawled through a frozen swamp, a quarter mile of mud, mesquite and plum thickets and endured thick red goo and horsefly and mosquito bites, sharp thorns and stings from a variety of nasty, ugly plants no one in his right mind would even touch. Finally, I and my stealthy companions would emerge onto the riverbed, wipe off the slime and ignore the pain, then tread our way around quicksand bogs. When at last nearly in shotgun range of the tall, gray birds, we would stand there helplessly in our frigid, wet misery and watch them rush in an awkward gait down an icy sandbar, spread their huge wings, and rise, slapping and honking into the cloud-mottled blue West Texas winter sky.

I think we tried to bag a sandhill crane maybe fifty or sixty times when I was young. We were assured they tasted "just like turkey," by old timers who said they knew. But we never found out. The closest we ever came to them was still too far away to identify their cockscombs' colors with the naked eye, and we never forgave them for waiting until we had labored so hard to come near them before taking off and beating, tantalizingly close, over our heads toward a safer haven, while we faced the discouraging return trip through the swamp.

So I named my imaginary county after those rivers and those elusive birds, and after the hundreds of fields of dry-land cotton that were plowed and churned out of the

loamy soil of the bottoms, farms that were mostly abandoned to the Dust Bowl and Great Depression before I was born. Those fields contributed to my motivation to leave that gritty, biting, stinging hell.

I remember one summer, hired at the exploitative rate of .50 per hour, I trudged row after row of cotton plants, officially charged to chop out the weeds that threatened them. In point of fact, we cut few weeds with hoes. The weed of cotton field choice in that loosely packed soil was the "careless weed," a tube-rooted, fuzzy-shafted vegetable demon that thrust its sticky leaves upward toward the sun from the shadows of the tender cotton plants. A careless weed could not be hoed out. If chopped it off, it would merely grow back—overnight, it seemed. It had to be pulled, and in that field—which was irrigated—the roots ran deep. This meant stooping, grasping and tugging, until the tip of the root came reluctantly from the dusty sand, where it could then be dropped, exposed to the harsh sun and utter aridity of West Texas' summer that would, in a day's time, shrivel it to virtually nothing. The thing about West Texas is that, fecund as it sometimes is, it often shrivels everything, particularly ambition and personal dreams, to virtually nothing.

In an hour of this labor, my hands stung from the sap of the plant and its pointy, tactile leaves, and my back ached from the effort of tugging them from the soil. It was July, which meant it was yellow-grass hot. At the end of each row, I turned and went back up the other. But alongside of the field at one end was a huge billboard designed to be seen from the highway some two miles away. Across the enormous blank white field of the sign swept a muscular fist that held a frothy stein of FALSTAFF BEER, or such was the red-lettered claim. The foamy head of the brew swept out behind it in an icy contrail that splashed the hairy, disembodied forearm that moved it as, I imagined, a

bartender might sweep the beverage across a mahogany plain to sit in front of a thirsty customer. In the history of the world, no one has ever been thirstier than a kid chopping cotton in a sandy river bottom.

For half the time I trudged through the grasping, ankle-deep sand of those cotton furrows, I was confronted with that promise of permanently slaked thirst and icy, frothy wonder of pure refreshment. Although at that tender age, I had never tasted beer—never even smelled it or been in the room where anyone had done so—I knew that people "out there" could have it, and at will. They could walk into any saloon or bar—dens of sin, from my mother's point of view— plunk down a few coins, and for that miniscule amount could be presented with this ambrosia, this golden liquid that I was sure had a bouquet and aroma that not even a Baptist god could resist.

From that agonizing week of summer on I vowed that, once departed from that powder-house dry county, I would never again live where such liquid balm could not be had, even by a pre-teenager whose only barrier against grainy, gritty thirst was tin-cooler of warm gyp water and a well-worn stick of Juicy Fruit.

Sand and West Texas, skin-scorching heat and bone-aching cold, then, were inscribed on my experience from my youth. I became familiar with the bitter disappointment of anyone who realizes that his entire life would be rooted in the loose and shifting soil of a county drawn out of the sand of West Texas. But it's the effect, not the cause that matters. I wasn't leaving to find a place where I could have a beer; I left to find a place where such a possibility wouldn't be a distracting consideration. I wasn't, in sum, either the best or happiest mind around, but I may well have been the most desperate.*

It struck me later how much more ironic it would have been to accept that; for not every vagabond is an aimless wanderer, and not every writer has to leave his geography in order to find the wisdom it might have to offer. In many cases, people who spend their lives trying to avoid their fate often go nowhere. They remain where they always are and keep a wary eye on the horizon, fearful that any day, fate might come riding in on a horse—pale or otherwise—and bring with it some cosmic vengeance blown on an ill wind. The choices are not particularly appealing. Run and you rush toward it, stand where you are, and it will find you out.

My relationship with this place of my imagination was initially one of antipathy for its shifting and ephemeral but somehow always painful and torturous nature. Its clinging insistence vied with its centrifugal velocity. It had existed in reality, briefly, when I was a child in my own reality. But, when I finally decided to run, it very quickly became a memory, and as a memory, it shaped itself into a destiny; like an open wound, it festered and was ultimately mortified by the suggestions of wit and wisdom. At first, of course, such values somehow escaped me. Like most youngsters in their callow twenties, I was far more interested in outrage than in irony, more interested in causes than effects. But eventually I came to understand that both those elements were a part of who I was and who everyone who had ever lived there was. If I was going to tell stories about it, about them, to find some wisdom through the wit, then that had to be my subject, and it had to reflect, however indirectly, the ironic relationship between beauty and truth in a place that offered very little of either.

Just as with old photographs and films, I also often find myself speculating about the myriad of small towns that dot the nation's landscape, especially those that scatter

themselves across the vapid prairies of West Texas. When I have occasion to pass through one of those many fading hamlets and see the bricked-over windows and boarded-up doors facing cracked and abandoned sidewalks, I think, sometimes, if I squint just right, I can bring back a time when hope had promise to bolster it, when the ragged and deteriorating buildings lining a vacated Main Street were once teeming with life and commerce. I understand that the people who carved this place out of raw prairie or flatland plain believed in the future, in themselves, in the values and principles and dates of construction they stamped in mottos on the structures' capstones or carved into the bases of crumbling statues on the courthouse squares. They took pride in where they were, whence they'd come, and where they believed they were going. For them, it was a sufficiency of surplus.

In a way, the towns were constructed as bastions, fortresses to protect the people there from their collective fate. They were attempts to ward off the inevitable ends that would most certainly come if they ever let down their guard or failed to stand a vigilant watch. What they never understood was that no matter how strong their defenses or alert their pickets, the ends would manifest themselves anyway. In a tragic sense, then, they become heroic; but not all of life is tragic, much of it is comic, as well. And the essence of both forms is irony.

Such towns are very much like characters with whom I've populated my fictions. Each has a distinct personality, and each has a particular point of view. Though small, virtual microcosms of human experience, they are complex and diverse, emotionally sensitive, ambitious, and self-deceiving. In that way, they're also archetypes. Like people, these towns were born, grew up, and then were obliged to seek their own

destinies, in some cases, their own mythologies. Some died away quickly; others adapted and prospered. But some continue to rock along from year to year in abject denial that the world was changing around them and their time is limited. Clinging to false values, they bask in the glow of self-gratification they hear preached from pulpit and political dais; they observe the outside world with a chary eye, hopelessly awaiting something supernatural to rise that would save them from the inevitable.

These tiny towns call themselves "cities," replete with police and "municiple" cemeteries, buildings, and hospitals; but they usually devolve into parodies of what they imagine, lies incarnate to some extent. Insensitive to injustice and impervious to the revelation of their own faults, they come to mistake pity for compassion, indolence for pride. Substance eventually gives way to sensation, and nothing is concrete, nothing real. The fears and hatreds that once were honestly expressed and dealt with openly, are eventually suppressed. Someday, they have to emerge, though, because, fate always catches up with small towns, just as it does with people. Sometimes, the confrontation is exquisitely painful.

Some readers and critics have made much of my using a small town in West Texas as the setting for my fictional lies. They enjoy pointing to Faulkner's Jefferson or even Larry McMutry's Thalia and say, "See? He's doing the same thing." And I guess I am, in a way. But what's annoying about this kind of comment is that those esteemed writers were doing the same thing writers—who are liars, remember—have always done. They've sought wit in choosing a setting that would be familiar to their audiences and would, at the same time, reflect the wisdom their stories hoped to reveal. Jefferson—the father of democracy and, not incidentally, of unacknowledged children; Thalia, a

classical muse and, not incidentally, a ghost town in Foard County, Texas. Has McMurtry visited Foard County? Did Faulkner consider Monticello's hypocrisy?

We don't know if Sophocles ever saw Thebes or if Homer dropped by Troy, if Shakespeare ever visited Padua, or Coleridge ever discovered Xanadu; but, they created them in their minds, and I believe they created them out of their memories of places that they wanted to recreate in the reality of their fiction. The difference was that most of their audiences hadn't seen these places—the actual ones, anyway—either. And to them, it was unlikely that Trojans or Paduan readers would ever sit around saying, "Oh, that's not the correct location for that," or "They were nothing like that." These writers could lie with aplomb. They had the liberty of irony to insulate their imaginings with wit, so they cut directly to the wisdom. In such settings the power of their stories, of their people and their places won't disappear, won't fall into the oblivion of actual places and people. They somehow endure. And unlike memory or geography, or beauty or truth, all of which are imperfect and temporary, the lies of fiction somehow endure.

I feel no propinquity with regard to my fiction. I regard my writing as a long-term relationship that I still don't understand. I never think of my work as art. I am just telling loose and unconnected stories about a place I know. I made it up, and I make the stories up. In sum, I'm lying, and that's about as far as I go in terms of applied aesthetics. When I started, naiveté vied with insecurity to keep me from pushing this notion any further, for I had small hopes of becoming a writer; in truth, I never thought about it at all. I wasn't from New York or even Mississippi. I was just a small town boy from Texas. I'd have as much luck mooing like a cow or trying to imitate a bird. I thought maybe I might become a lawyer, someday, or maybe a mobile home salesman. Writing wasn't on my menu. But,

as I hope I've demonstrated here, destiny is like a poor relation or a demanding god, or perhaps it's just Juvenal's "incurable itch." It shows up at the least convenient time and will not be denied. History and mythology are filled with humans who have cursed their fate, cursed their gods, then bowed their heads and accepted the inevitable because there simply wasn't any other choice.

It's always dangerous for a writer to discuss philosophy or art, particularly with regard to his own work; and I don't want to imply that I am trying, somehow, to make more of my work than it is. I could claim, I suppose, that I've tried to adapt my small-town Texas fiction into a mythological framework and to give it some kind of universality, but that would be too big a lie even for a writer to tell. Still, just as we are products of all we've done, we are also products of all we know. I began to understand as I wove my lies that I wasn't so much adapting the mythology of the literary past to my own purpose; rather, I was trying to demonstrate that the place and people I wanted to reveal fit into that mythology almost too neatly. The trick was to show how they were all a part of the same thing and how the irony of that made it relevant.

Such pronouncements and evaluations are probably bogus. For sure, they seem self-serving. Most anything a writer says about his own work is probably bogus, and everything an artist says is self-serving. But, as I said, I've always been more interested in effects than in causes, so trying to come to terms with the reasons why things turn out the way the do tends to kill my enthusiasm for the examination. I write the same way I read: one page at a time. If I know how the story will turn out, I have no particular interest in finishing it. The best surprise is always the genuine one, that moment when

you open the door to “the eternal footman” and decide that maybe things won’t turn out so badly after all.

I do think my work is important. I’d be truly lying if I said otherwise, and I’d quit doing it, too. It may be self-gratifying to think that way, but I hope not. I hope that what I write provides at least some wit and reveals at least some wisdom. Some more forward-looking writers and critics have averred that the “myths” of the past are dead letters written by dead hands, that there is nothing left there of interest and nothing to learn. I don’t agree. I think that in the greater scheme of things the dramatic moments of imagined lives caught in microcosm, as it were, and fretted by the significance of exposure provide a closer and more cogent look at the truth of the human experience, of the beauty of the human heart; and time has even less to do with it than geography.

But in the end, I have to admit, that I have no idea in the world how “fiction works”; I know nothing insightful about the “writing process.” The only method I understand about writing fiction that makes sense to me is that I create a character or two, put them into situations that cause them to react in some human way. After that reaction, I think, the characters are on their own, just as, finally, we’re all on our own, and it’s the effects, not the causes that matter. As the writer, I can “nudge” them here and there, can throw more obstacles, opportunities, and situations in their paths; but how they find their way to some kind of resolution—some sense of self—is up to them. It’s not up to me to conclude their stories. They must do that. The writer really shouldn’t—in my case can’t—interfere with how things develop, with how the effects are assessed. To me, my characters are as real as my own life, my own memories; and, in many, many ways,

they're more real than the actual county and town and the people, still living or long dead, who drift shadow-like in the gritty fog of the sandy past.

I probably will tell as many stories as publishers are pleased to put into print. I hasten to say, though, that I don't do this out of pure ego—although on at least one level, all writing is merely an exercise of nothing else—but rather because this is ultimately what I know, what I do. I am hopeful that by melding wit and wisdom and greasing the skids with irony, I can send a reader sliding into some unique perception of beauty and truth, however fleeting it may be. It's enough to ask for, more than enough; I can only hope that if it happens, it will bring me and my reader closer to a better understanding of what kind of creatures we are, and what kind we may become.