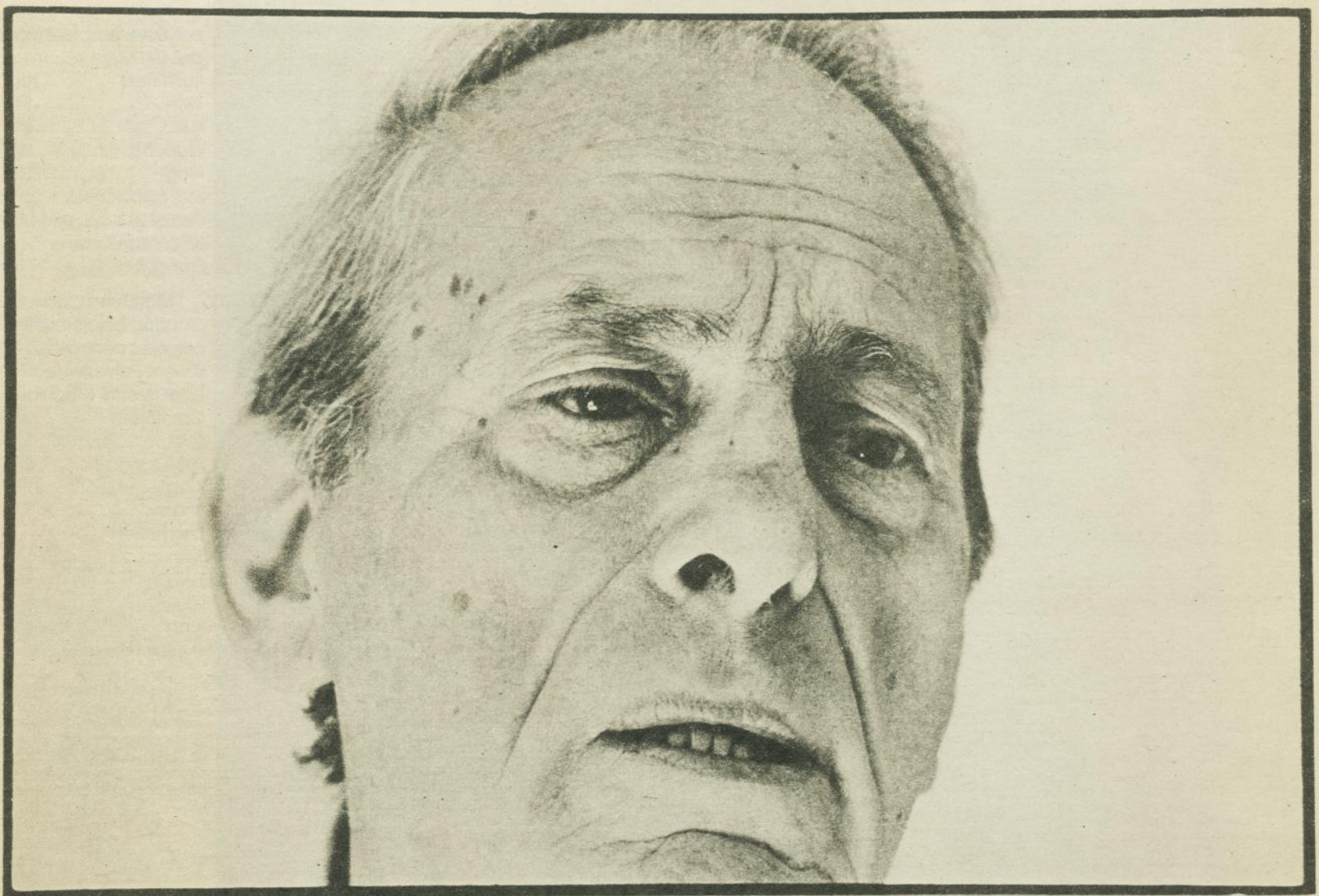


FROM LABORER TO LITERARY LION

Author Pietro di Donato recalls how his life dramatically changed after his overnight metamorphosis from obscurity to international fame 42 years ago.



Pietro di Donato: "I was amazed by how the abstract process of my words on paper could so unequivocally alter people's composure."

By Pietro di Donato

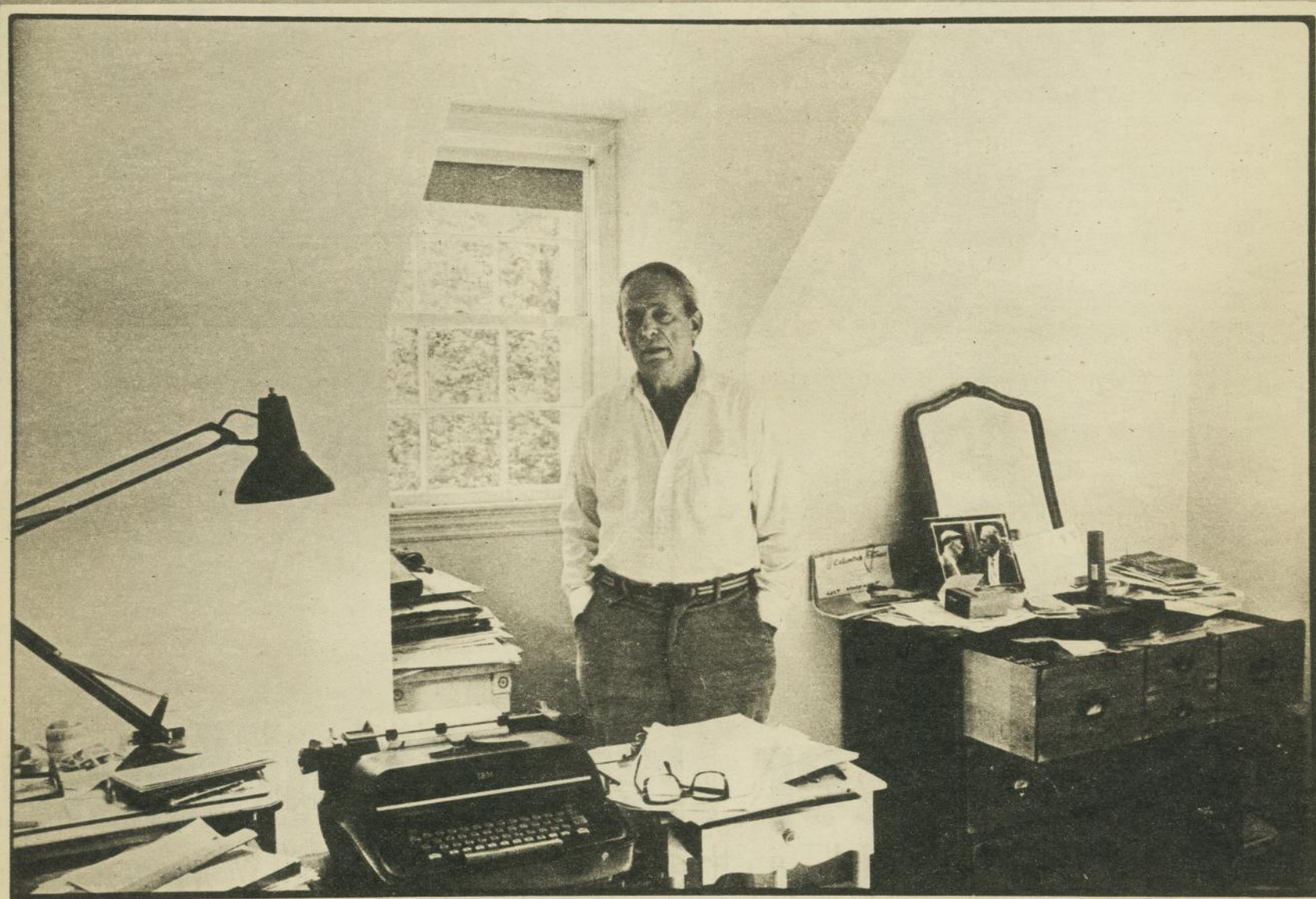
From a faceless bricklayer, a common denominator of the madding crowd, the supine masses, then overnight to a literary figure, an internationally published author—my unplanned, unlooked-for, swift metamorphosis from immigrant-son larva, to proletarian caterpillar, to winged luminary, began in a \$20-a-month house on Bayview Terrace in Northport with a letter to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. The letter was inspired by his speech about "the fear of fear," for it is fear

Pietro di Donato, author of "Christ in Concrete" and numerous articles, lives in Strongs Neck.

that vilely robs us of the dignity due to man and the majesty that can elevate us above tawdry trivia, demeaning vicissitudes and the ultimate horror of inevitable death.

I was 26, and having had to leave school at 12 and be the sole support of widowed mother and seven puling kids, I had never written a word, a note, let alone a letter. Nevertheless, Roosevelt's clarion speech compelled me to go to the stationery store on Main Street and buy the cheapest paper, pencil and envelope to immediately send the President a letter telling him that I had had a mental vision of him having been chosen by our same God, Jesus Christ, to lead the poor and hungry, the old and ill, and the oppressed unemployed out of the Valley of Economic Despair and into the light of the Promised Land that

Photos by Don Jacobsen



Di Donato, who began his writing career while living in Northport in the 1930s, now works in this room of his home in Strongs Neck.

the founding fathers and Walt Whitman's democratic vistas wanted for the New World. And why not, for life is here, and as yet no one, good or evil, has reached us from hell, purgatory or paradise.

I laid out a vast program for a great society: put everybody to gainful work, decentralize the obsolete warren-cities and build a new America through the genius of Frank Lloyd Wright with industrial parks, luxurious public transportation, safe sunlit sanctuary homes, and beautiful hospitals, schools, nurseries, libraries, plazas, theaters, malls and recreation centers; beat swords into ploughshares, nationalize utilities and the auto industry, and with the sacred arts turn ordinary workingmen into fructivous gods.

No answer. I've sent various versions of that letter to every President

since, including the present occupant of the White House. If the village idiot were in the White House, my letter would be heeded and America would be heaven on earth. I was bursting with a literal absolutist concept of Christian brotherhood and fond dreams of peace and happiness for us union workers in the days of my time. And why not! I wasn't asking for the impossible, to bring back the dead as in the Old Testament—in the valley of death bleached bones acquired flesh, spirit, breath, and the killed Jews re-lived—I pleaded only for what was decently and reasonably possible. But political prostitutes have no souls, just bulging pockets.

Fellow workingmen marveled at my letter, and that first, disregard-

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**'For me, the
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ed, written expression told me that I was able to articulate the urgings of an autonomous, involuntary, inner self, a pure idealism seeking birth. That sent me to the Northport Library and the discovery of the immortal minds of all countries. They gave me freedom. For me, the Great Depression was my Golden Age. With unemployment and Home Relief I was permitted the leisure to think, away from bondage to trowel, bricks, scaffold and the dispassionate cruelty of winds, heat, cold, and rain. The nationwide economic and banking crash was a boon in that it deflated prices to a delightful utopian fairy-tale level. To me, it was like Charlie Chaplin's fantasy in his "Modern Times" of the perfect life without working.

I bought a snappy Chrysler roadster for \$30. Good steak was 19 cents a pound. I had a vegetable garden and we also filched corn and cauliflower from surrounding farms. We dug clams, oysters, scallops, mussels, and crabbed and fished; the church brought us clothes. My seven brothers and sisters got hearty free lunches at the school; government, county, and the men of the cloth supplied all our needs with grace. It was an honor and indeed a privilege to be out of work and destitute.

Then I got a WPA job teaching swimming at Crabmeadow Beach, and evenings I taught drama (even though I had never seen or read a play) by telling my pupils to improvise, and they did, with hilarious unforeseen results. We had poverty parties, feasting and singing and sexing. Beer was three big glasses for a dime. The clock meant nothing, and Main Street was Mount Parnassus where daily gossip and the humanities were intermingled without cost.

I took over the VFW building in East Northport and opened the Valley Road Playhouse with a carpenter pal, Joe Dans, and we bought the

'I had been haunted in dreams and consciousness by Father's death on a construction job near the Brooklyn Bridge.'

entire Broadway set of "Of Thee I Sing" for \$40. Dane Clark was one of my Hollywood actors, receiving \$1.50 a day. I was sufficiently ingenious as to think actors were as ethical and heroic as their parts! But they were weak, bad, petulant children who drove me crazy. Had I thicker skin, I might have been a going producer, but by a fortuitous misunderstanding, the Northport Journal (Serving the Best People on Earth) said on the front page that Pietro di Donato was writing a novel. I enjoyed the "Our Town" limelight but was ashamed to say it was not true; it was a mistake, it was news about someone else—but call a man a dog and he'll bark, and I did feel at home with my new friends, Zola, Tolstoy, Homer, Vergil, and the authors of the Gospels. So I transfigured the letter to FDR into a crude play-narrative, "Message From the Messiah," picturing myself marching on Washington with the unemployed and bringing FDR the revelation from Christ to instantly change America.

I tell Roosevelt our Lord has ordained him to scourge the moneychanging plutocrats from the White Temple and establish the United States as the original City of God on the planet Earth. I called myself Peter Phillips because my father had been suckled in an Italian foundling home by a peasant named Di Phillipi. Peter Phillips lays down the law to FDR that if he does not obey Christ's mandate, the entire working class will denude themselves and commit mass suicide, leaving the rich to devour each other. Roosevelt pretends to carry out Christ's command but solves capitalism's financial dilemma the usual way by sending the human sheep to the abattoir of nationalist war, and Peter Phillips hallucinates that the firing guns are celebrating the rise of Christ's New Dawn.

I lost the manuscript, but had the satisfaction of spiritual justice through phantasmagoria.

I had been haunted in dreams and consciousness by Father's death on a construction job near the Brooklyn Bridge in New York City, where he was crushed and buried alive in fresh concrete on Good Friday and his mashed corpse released on Easter Sunday. Statues, stained windows and holy pictures were just clay, glass, paint and paper. Mother was my warm, real, loving madonna, and magnificent Father my loving actual Christ. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John had each a different slant of the Savior tale. For me, the death of the Italian bricklayer, Geremio di Donato, was the true living in this world crucifixion, and without scheming I intuitively called the written account of our family's indelible tragic event "Christ in Concrete," for there was no other possible title.

Friends who read it spontaneously went through the gamut of interest, laughter, pity, terror and tears; they were shriven, hurt. I was amazed by how the abstract process of my words on paper could so un-

equivocally alter people's composure. Someone casually suggested sending it to Esquire. I did, with an explanation, an ironic, haughty, to-hell-with-you note—perhaps as counter-evil-eye to the rejection I surely expected. Esquire promptly bought it—which proved the biggest event in my life—and also published the short story in illustrated hardcover. Today, a copy is worth \$100. It won all laurels, and "Best American Short Stories" was dedicated to me. Bobbs-Merrill publishers took me to the 21 Club, introduced me to Gloria Swanson and other beauties, and encouraged me to continue and expand "Christ in Concrete" into a novel and gave me a contract.

I simply recorded the livingness that followed in the wake of Father's death and funeral, writing not with logic and outlined structure, but with each and all of my senses: feel, sight, sound, tempo, color, dream, prayer, dance, elegy, violence, comedy, bawdiness, paganism, catholicism, spiritualism, the charisma of the Great God Job, sin, virtue, faith, love, and finally, the critical question of the existence of the supposed Deity, and when I could go no further, I scribbled "The End."

"Christ in Concrete," published in 1939, called by the intelligentsia "the epithet of the 20th Century," was chosen over Steinbeck's "The Grapes of Wrath" by the Book-of-the-Month Club, which showered me with affluence, fame, and red-carpet entry into the magic world of the rich. Bobbs-Merrill sent me on a coast-to-coast lecture tour, teaming me for a while with the middle-aged voluptuous Mabel Bolling Galt Wilson, widow of President Wilson, who was peddling a book about her White House years. And we did so naturally go to bed. Years later I regaled John F. Kennedy with our amour, and he laughingly said, "Why not!"

The sudden transition from one world to another was dizzying and assaulted my fundamental ideals, and the around-the-clock, sensual merry-go-round of uninhibited pleasures easily become addictive. I reveled in the heaven-on-earth of the fortunate franchised, the blase predators, the self-serving takers, and also the prevailing absence of morals and sense of sin. Money could do no wrong. Mammon is the undisputed worshipful God of our society. With every day came erotic and social surprise and intoxicating tokens to ego and the facile mingling with celebrities of every species, including Mafia killers who were proud that I was Italian. Oh yes, a long weekend at the Connecticut estate of Heywood Broun (one of the Book-of-the-Month judges) with the autumn-crocus newlyweds, Alicia Patterson and Harry Guggenheim. Alicia was contemplating a newspaper venture for Long Island—a venture that later was to result in Newsday—and asked my opinion. In 1939, most of Long Island was a hinterland, a geographic and demographic outreach—you couldn't give land and houses away then—and I tried to dissuade her saying that Scott

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'Che Guevara was the most extraordinary man and idealist. His later "Venceremos" is writing I consider superior to any of Hemingway's war stuff.'

Fitzgerald's idle parasites, potato farmers and clamdiggers would not subscribe to modern sophisticated journalism. Many years later, I related that lack of foresight to Robert Kennedy, Alfred Kazin and Robert Moses in Bill Moyers' house in Garden City.

I had been denied adolescence, and then with quick money that came so fast that it did not seem real, I went on an extended Roman holiday, fleeing from all responsibility. Seeking the sexual holy grail took me to Havana, making the transformation from skyscraper scaffold to Ernest Hemingway's table at the Floridita.

My classic "Christ in Concrete" emerged of itself from me, and left me an empty shell, a shed skin. I had wanted to be a writer, and Prometheus-like, be chained to a demanding, relentless discipline. As a child I dreamed of being a movie actor, being everybody, the Proteus of the Hoboken tenement slums, and life would be my stage, my carnival, my religious burlesque, my circus, my fun house, my amusement park, my wonderland of make-believe, for I knew that outside of all that, life was an awful nightmare, and I told Hemingway I was afraid that I would be a one-book creature. He said, "Pete, you got the juice. If you end up in the electric chair or the Bowery gutter, no one can take away from you 'Christ in Concrete.' It belongs to the future."

So I was wafted to a new and bizarre ambience, and beat my class-conscious fight-for-the-underdog breast. Recognition and coin of the realm had separated me from the lumpen leaven, the man in the street, the treadmill robot, the crowd whom Alexander Hamilton called The Great Beast, and the despicable system the Greeks called ochlocracy, mob rule. And I learned the rubrics and rituals of my new role as one of those "who made it," and pressed upon me was the acknowledgement of the mutual psychological understanding and collusion against "The People" of "The Arrived." It amused me in Mephisto-manner to see my profile in the media—ah, *quo vadis*, Pietro? But the scar tissue of my proletarian background was too deep for me to completely let cursed money betray my vision of man's potential in the tardy social evolution.

Having made my mark, self-consciousness bloomed and embarrassed me, and, thus, instead of

greasepaint and two boards and a passion, I resorted to ink on paper because in my heart of hearts I know that as a professional writer I would inescapably be the hypocritical thespian enacting with vowels and consonants. And sitting in a bar in Cuba with Ernest Hemingway, the famous dissembler who had preceded me, I traded lies, half-truths and chance sincerities, struck postures and discussed the gossip-form dubbed literature. Subsequent rapport with popes, presidents, artists and those in the public eye had the ever-same unbricklaying-like synthetic odor. But I include myself with George Orwell, Celine, Agee, Hemingway, and Che Guevara as the most sincere writers of our time.

Lecturing in Mexico City in 1956, I met the Castro group. Fidel and Che had read "Christ in Concrete," in Spanish ("*El Cristo Del Cemento*"), and I autographed their copies. Since then, the Castro regime has positively refused to let me enter Cuba. But I must say, Che was the most extraordinary man and idealist. His later "*Venceremos*" is writing I consider superior to any of Hemingway's war stuff.

Meetings with Somerset Maugham, William Faulkner, Pearl Buck, Studs Terkel, James Farrell and other fantasts resulted in my calloused-hand direct approach to a practical, sweaty reality about our craft's whore-like purpose to seduce and win the reader to buy and pay for our efforts. Every great artist has one unblemished master-song; the rest is tour de force; after the one supreme aria we cry, farewell virgin altruism!

Ernest Hemingway was a congenitally offensive, overgrown, megalomaniac kid with a squeaky, feminine, penny-whistle voice, and had the dirtiest mouth strictly from the smelly walls of latrines. I wondered about his sexual make-up; he was hiding in some kind of a closet. His stock-in-trade devotion to phallic soldiery, goat-stinking matadors and arid, familyless characterizations of women who were masculine and not maternal and endearing made me suspect his literary he-man-ism was all a coverup of bisexuality.

We happened to be staying at the same old hotel, the Ambos Mundo. He had just returned from the Nazi and Fascist invasion of Spain, where international capitalism rehearsed World War II in the vain hopes of

destroying the so-called Red Menace, and he said he was writing "The Fifth Column." In hangover morning he was not the drunken, ridiculous, macho show-off but was quietly behaved and honest. I told him about witnessing the grotesque massacre of some escaped political prisoners from the Presidio on the Isle of Pines by the Batista soldiers. He laughed at my outrage and said I had a lot to learn about humanity that hardly ever changes its stupid treacherous nature. He predicted "1984" even before Orwell wrote it. He said the incontinent, blind, rotten character of the masses left little hope for the world's salvation, that failing American capitalism would definitely lead to a Nazi-like patriotic nationalist democracy and nothing could stop it, for it would be the only way to cope with unemployment, inflation and the degeneration of industrial production. "The slobs," he said, "will love it and not know the difference."

I disagreed, but it seems '84 is arriving on schedule. But we did agree that writing was mainly the art of lying and did not respect the truth any more than did the fables and miracles of *The Good Book*. We were friends until we got personal about our way of writing. I told him I thought in the rich lyrical language of my Roman people, and it came out in English, which was to me the foreign language.

Then I said I tracked down the gimmick of his style: Before he met Gertrude Stein he wrote in an open, breezy, proper way. I said that Stein's style was plainly derivative of the simplistic Hebraic biblical rhythms, for the speech of the Bible was surely that of the prophetic unlettered nomad tribes of the Semite Hyksos—shepherd kings—with its repetition and alliteration with "very" "always" "never," inverted sentence structures and oral stream of consciousness. Hemingway really got miffed when I said he had read Stein's "Three Lives" and copied the word-mannerism of *The Good Anna*, the servant, plagiarizing exactly her unschooled, laconic, stilted, heavy-handed German-English. Hemingway grinned furiously, punched my shoulder, called me a smart-ass wop bastard, and would never speak to me again.

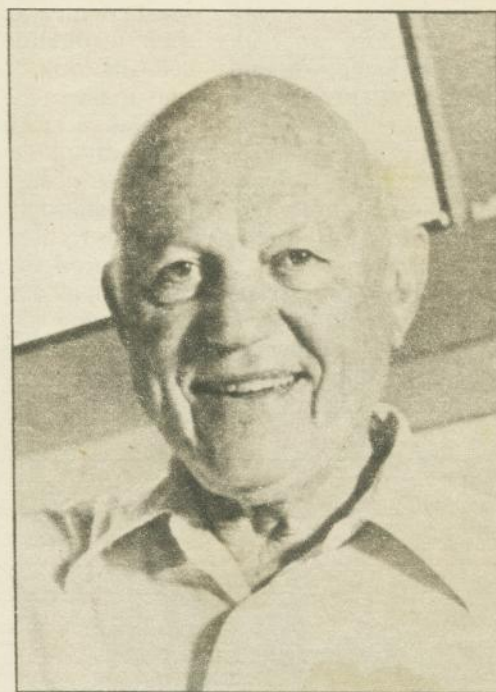
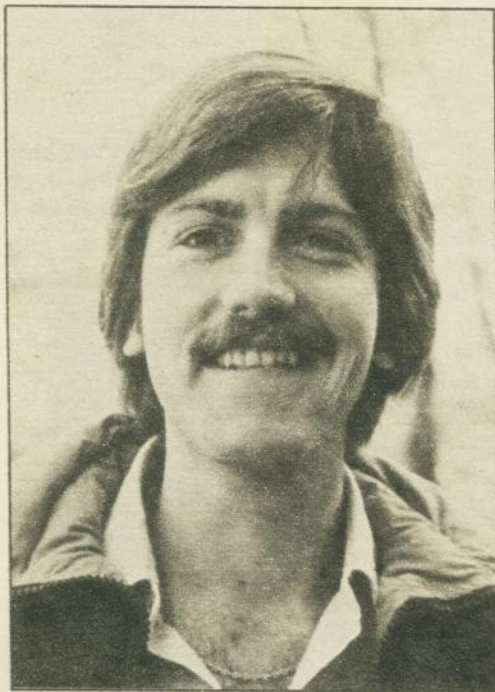
Writing, as Graham Greene once put it, is my therapy. "I wonder how all those who do not write, compose, or paint can manage to escape the madness, the melancholia, the panic fear which is inherent in the human situation," he wrote, and he might have added, the helpless confrontation and coping with the strangeness, the mystery of being, and the cognizance of the measureless infinite cosmos. The most dreadful conflict is not with an absentee God or people but within ourselves. We can exclude unseen alleged divinities and leave family, friends and enemies, but there is no getting away from yourself; for you, your image of

yourself, and the concept of your soul, must surely die, be eternally annihilated in unison. In the Grecian fable, Alcestis can make her husband the king immortal by dying for him. In fables only are all things possible. The times when God came in person and fraternized are no more . . . and today . . . the dead are reluctant and do not return—in spite of prayers, candles, incense, music, choirs, Vaticans, synagogues, and witch doctors

with bones stuck through their noses.

I have studied all the religions and philosophies and ideologies and found them all bathed in criminal blood. The more I knew, the more I discarded as fraudulent and superfluous. One thing has remained constant: nature. I enjoy being every one of many, many characters, and making up stories for readers, but I will not lie to myself, nor swallow the

lies of others. When all things fail, try the truth. At 70, the truth keeps me a young Faust, a romantic Venus-adoring Parsifal. The novel I am writing, "The Venus Odyssey," is about a writer, resembling me, who in his spiritual search finds the one and only true God is The Beautiful Woman. Then I will write "The Spirit and the Flesh," which will be about the Borgia Pope Alexander VI and Savonarola.



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