As I did that outline, I asked myself: *What are my strongest scenes? What ideas will I work with? What would make a good ending? What threads should I pull through the entire story?*

I put my trust in the process, and it always allowed me to turn in a solid draft by the following Wednesday.

The Emotional Core of the Story

TOM WOLFE

Philip Roth was the hottest young novelist in America in 1970—he had won the National Book Award with his first book, *Goodbye, Columbus,* in 1960 and had just lit up the sky with *Portnoy's Complaint* in 1969—when he uttered what I call Roth's Lament: *We now live in an age in which the imagination of the novelist lies helpless before what he knows he's going to read in tomorrow morning's newspaper.*

I imagine anyone, writer or otherwise, can sympathize with that. Just think of the story of Paris Hilton. I'm sure some novelist could have dreamed up a plot in which a beautiful young blond heiress with a lower lip like a slice of mango is caught on a pornographic videotape. But the rest of the novel would no doubt be about . . . the extortionists, who are demanding five million dollars for the tape, and so she enlists a couple of young computer hackers to invade her father's investment accounts and extract the five million dollars, but then the hackers demand a 20 percent cut as their commission, which would be a cool million, and she panics, and then—

And I suppose some novelist could have dreamed up a plot in which a beautiful young blond heiress with a sly fructose smile and no immediately detectable acting or show business ability gets a ten-million-dollar contract to star on a television show and goes on to turn herself into a national franchise with a line of clothes, perfumes, and handbags?

But I don't think there is a novelist living who could have dreamed up the actual story line, which is that Paris Hilton got her millions . . . *because* she made the pornographic tape. Otherwise she would have remained just another ripely labial random boldface name in the gossip columns.

I wrote only nonfiction for the first fifty-four years of my life, then wrote a few novels, and I can tell you that the problem with fiction today is that fiction has to be plausible. And plausible is not the first word that comes to mind to describe an age like this. . . . The newspaper will soon be extinct . . . High school students in New York stage cell-phone rights demonstrations protesting a new regulation that would ban cell phones in the schools, thereby making it impossible for them to watch movies during classes or text-message each other during tests . . . In 1992, a man named Francis Fukuyama published a book entitled *The End of History* about how all the world agreed that Western liberal democracy had created a utopia and was hailed as a seer and prophet. Nine years later a bunch of terrorists nobody ever heard of cranked history back up again and made him look like a fool. In an age like this, to update Philip Roth, the "serious literary novel" is now headed for—I started to say "extinction," but that is not exactly what is happening. Instead, that precious lap dog with all its ineffable wafts of sensibility is heading up to a snow-capped peak where poetry, a genre that reigned supreme until the mid-nineteenth century, now lives. It's cold up there. Everyone praises them because that's a lot more pleasant than visiting them.

The upshot is that two varieties of the species *Nonfiction narrative* now reign in American literature. One is the autobiography, whose popularity has never waned in the 444 years since Benvenuto Cellini's *Confessions.* Orwell once characterized autobiography as the most outrageous form of fiction, because autobiographers seemed perfectly comfortable retailing their sins and crimes, their swindles, drug abuses, betrayals, debauches, their pelvic saddle convulsions and loin spasms, even rape, murder, looting and pillaging, since all give off whiffs of excitement and bravado—whereas, said Orwell, they never mention "the humiliations that make up seventy-five percent of life." Yet some of Orwell's own most powerful books, notably *Down and Out in Paris and London* and *Homage to Catalonia,* as well as many of his great essays, such as "Shooting an Elephant" and "Why I Write," are autobiographical. Not even the occasional exposure of fiction masquerading as autobiography, starting with Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe,* is likely to diminish the genre for long.

The other is nonfiction using the technical devices of the novel and the short story, the specific devices that give fiction its absorbing or gripping quality, that make the reader feel present in the scene described and even inside the skin of a particular character. They are exactly four in number: (1) scene-by-scene construction, i.e., presenting the narrative in a series of scenes and resorting to ordinary historical narration as little as possible; (2) the use of copious dialogue—the (experimentally demonstrated) easiest form of prose to read and the quickest to reveal character; (3) the careful notation of status details, the details that reveal one's social rank or aspirations, everything from dress and furniture to the infinite status clues of speech, how one talks to superiors or inferiors, to the strong, to the weak, to the sophisticated, to the naïve—and with what sort of accent and vocabulary; (4) point of view, in the Henry Jamesian sense of putting the reader inside the mind of someone other than the writer. Those were the devices used by writers in the so-called New Journalism movement that began in the 1960s. In 1973 I took the equivalent of a Trappist vow of silence so far as the subject of New Journalism was concerned. I was tired of arguing. I said it was a technical thing, the use of those four devices in an objective, accurate, i.e., properly journalistic fashion. But others claimed it meant "impressionistic" journalism, "subjective" journalism, New Left Journalism, "participatory" journalism—there was no end to it. But now that thirty-three years have elapsed, I suppose it's okay to offer a brief footnote. Besides, in those thirty-three years there has been the best possible outcome. Journalists no longer argue about New Journalism—I mean, how many decades can you keep arguing about something that calls itself "new"? Instead, a new generation of journalists, writing books and magazine articles, have simply appropriated the techniques however they please and are turning out brilliant work—in fact, the best of contemporary American literature, taken as a whole. I could mention many more names, but consider just these two and you will know what I mean immediately: Michael Lewis and Mark Bowden.

To this day newspaper editors resist the idea, but they desperately need to encourage their reporters to adopt the Lewis and Bowden approach. It is not that it produces pretty writing—although indeed it does. They need such reporters and writers to provide the emotional reality of the news, for it is the emotions, not the facts, that most engage and excite readers and in the end are the heart of most stories. Take the subject of crime, for a start. I have just learned, thanks to the Boston newspapers, that the mayor is upset because there are "gangbangers" on the streets wearing T-shirts that say STOP SNITCHING, conveying the message, "Talk to the police, and you're rat meat." The shirts are sold all over the place. The mayor wishes to confiscate them, and he seems to feel that selling them should be a crime, like selling cigarettes to a minor. In itself, that's a story—but

what a great story awaits the reporter who gets to know these teenagers who wear the T-shirts and finds out what that means to them—and what it means in their neighborhoods at whom the warning is presumably aimed. We report crime in our newspapers but not its emotional heart.

On Long Island, there's an epidemic of break-ins while people are in their homes. The robbers want the owners there, so they can be forced to reveal where jewelry and money are hidden. Invariably the news reports tell you how much was stolen, and perhaps what sorts of arms the assailants carried. But that's not the story. The story is fear, on the part of the victims and sometimes the assailants—or their ecstatic yodels after successfully dominating and humiliating their victims. Such are the vital facts of crime. The underlying emotions reveal so much about life, and they should be developed in journalism and not just in novels.

You need to provide readers two things in this sort of journalism: a detailed picture of the social setting and at least some insight into the psychology of the principals. I think of the setting as a horizontal plane and the individual as a vertical plane. The line created by their intersection—there lies the story. In 1808, the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Hegel coined the term *Zeitgeist*—in English, "the spirit of the age." His theory was that every historical epoch has a "moral tone"—his phrase—that presses down on the life of everyone, and no one can avoid it. I think it's true, and why, in fiction or nonfiction about big cities, for example, the city should be treated as a character because cities are positively feverish with moral tone.

About life beyond the great cities even our best reporters are often clueless. Last August, in Tennessee, I saw the Bristol 500, a NASCAR race. There's a little half-mile track, and grandstands going up almost vertically, seating 165,000, and it's all shaped like a megaphone. The seats are on the megaphone's inner surface and you feel that if you lean too far forward, you'll land on the track. Before the race, a number of people greeted the crowd, including the head of the National Rifle Association—no longer Charlton Heston, not a celebrity. He spoke all of forty-five seconds. The stands rose up as one person and cheered him. Obviously ownership of weapons bears a lot more civic virtue in NASCAR country than it does in Boston. Just before the race, a Protestant minister invoked the Lord's blessing on the event. He asked the Lord to look out for these brave drivers, and these loyal fans. He asked this of the Lord, "in the name of Thy Only Son, Christ Jesus." Anyone who introduced an event that way in San Francisco or New York City would risk arrest for a hate crime. New

York writers really must cross the Hudson River, and writers in Los Angeles really must go as far as the San Joaquin Valley. Most of the meaning of America lies in between the coasts, I'm afraid.

Recently I undertook what turned out to be a very happy task, writing an afterword for a new edition of *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, by Stephen Crane. Crane is best known as the author of *The Red Badge of Courage*, regarded even in Europe as the greatest portrayal in all of literature of the emotions of a soldier in combat. Crane was the twelfth of fourteen children, with six older brothers. His father was a preacher and his mother a White Ribboner. She wore a white ribbon indicating the passion of her opposition to the sale and consumption of alcohol. She could be hell on wheels, but she was always a terrific writer.

One of Crane's older brothers, Townsend, was a writer, a correspondent for the *New York Tribune* covering the Jersey Shore resort area. Stephen Crane, a slender, good-looking young man with tousled blond hair, had, as of 1891, been thrown out of four schools in the preceding four years. So he went to work with his brother, for the *Tribune*. In 1892, he covered a lecture by Jacob Riis. Riis was one of the first people to pull the covers back on conditions in American slums, in this case the Lower East Side of New York City. He exposed the conditions but never captured the speech or personalities—never got to the emotional heart. His main emotion was pity.

Stephen Crane read Jacob Riis and formed his own questions: What are they thinking? What is it like to be one of these people? Meanwhile his brother was away, and it became his chore to cover a march through Asbury Park, a New Jersey resort, of construction workers on a patriotic holiday. He described the marchers as slope-shouldered, humpbacked, slovenly drudges. The onlookers, he said, were even worse. He described them as typical Jersey Shore resort visitors, the kind of people who, when a dollar bill is held before their eyes, cease to recognize the rights of anyone else. The story got him fired.

So he went to live on the Lower East Side, rooming with three medical students. He decided he could get to know the Bowery by masquerading as a bum. Here's a slender, young, blond, almost pretty guy—but he got his Bowery bum costume together, letting those wisps of beard and long locks of hair get dirty and fall over his face. He slept in the flophouses, not once but repeatedly. He even brought visitors in to take a look. Nobody ever went back a second time. It was probably in the flophouses that he contracted the tuberculosis he died of at twenty-eight. But out of that experience came his extraordinary *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, which is fiction, but closely based on fact.

One of his roommates recalled the day Crane came home highly excited saying, "Have you ever seen a stone fight?" He'd seen some urchins in pitched battle, hurling rocks. The roommates glanced at one another and rolled their eyes as if to say, "Okaaaay . . . a stone fight." Crane's stone fight, however, led to one of the great first lines in American literature: "A very little boy stood on a pile of gravel defending the honor of Rum Alley."

Crane worked as a newspaper writer up until the verge of his death. His accomplishments in what was truly a new journalism 110 years ago should be part of the common knowledge of all newspaper editors, especially now that every newspaper editor in the United States is asking, "How can this newspaper be saved?" They should be asking, how can we get to the emotional heart of our stories? Yet only a few newspaper editors are considering any such thing—not knowing that it is the question of the hour, and that this is the eleventh hour.

Telling the Story, Telling the Truth

ALMA GUILLERMOPRIETO

When I began at the *Washington Post* as a reporter in Central America, I found myself working for a very professional organization, but one located inside the world's greatest military power and largest economy, which considered itself to be under threat by a ten-elevator country. I actually counted all the elevators in Nicaragua while I was living there. As a *Post* reporter working in Managua, I was expected to take this threat seriously and report on it.

As the locus of revolution shifted, I moved from Managua to San Salvador. I continued to report what seemed to me hard facts: massacres and mutilated bodies that appeared on San Salvador street corners at dawn. The evidence pointed to the Salvadoran government as the source of this horror. Since the United States supported the Salvadoran government in its fight against the guerrillas, that evidence was questioned in ways that sometimes made me feel as if I was losing my mind. *Post* editors repeatedly asked me to strike a neutral tone. Those editors were brave, intelligent, caring people, but the Reagan administration was setting the agenda.

Eventually, I wrote about a mass killing that turned out to be the