

THE ART OF THE ESSAY NO. 1

E. B. WHITE

In the issue of The New Yorker dated two weeks after E. B. White died, his stepson, Roger Angell, wrote the following in the magazine's "Talk of the Town" section:

Last August, a couple of sailors paid an unexpected visit to my summer house in Maine: young sailors—a twelve-year-old-girl and an eleven-year-old boy. They were a crew taking part in a statewide small-boat-racing competition at a local yacht club, and because my wife and I had some vacant beds just then we were willingly dragooned as hosts. They were fine company—tanned and shy and burning with tactics but amenable to blueberry muffins and our exuberant fox terrier. They were also readers, it turned out. On their second night, it came out at the dinner table that E.B. White was a near neighbor of ours, and our visitors reacted to the news with incredulity. “No!” the boy said softly, his eyes traveling back and forth over the older faces at the table. “No-o-o-o!” The girl, being older, tried to keep things in place. “He’s my favorite author,” she said. “Or at least he was when I was younger.” They were both a bit old for *Stuart Little*,

Charlotte's Web, and *The Trumpet of the Swan*, in fact, but because they knew the books so well, and because they needed cheering up (they had done badly in the racing), arrangements were made for a visit to E. B. White's farm the next morning.

White, who had been ill, was not able to greet our small party that day, but there were other sights and creatures there to make us welcome: two scattered families of bantam hens and chicks on the lawn; the plump, waggly incumbent dog, name of Red; and the geese who came scuttling and hissing up the pasture lane, their wings outspread in wild alarm. It was a glazy, windless morning, with some thin scraps of fog still clinging to the water in Allen Cove, beyond the pasture; later on, I knew, the summer southwest breeze would stir, and then Harriman Point and Blue Hill Bay and the islands would come clear again. What wasn't there this time was Andy White himself: emerging from the woodshed, say, with an egg basket or a length of line in his hand; or walking away (at a mid-slow pace, not a stroll—never a stroll—with the dog just astern) down the grassy lane that turns and then dips to the woods and shore; or perhaps getting into his car for a trip to town, getting aboard, as he got aboard any car, with an air of mild wariness, the way most of us start up on a bicycle. We made do without him, as we had to. We went into the barn and examined the vacant pens and partitions and the old cattle tie-ups; we visited the vegetable garden and the neat stacks of freshly cut stove wood; we saw the cutting beds, and the blackberry patch behind the garage, and the place where the pigpen used to be—the place where Wilbur was born, surely. The children took turns on the old single-rope swing that hung in the barn doorway, hoisting themselves up onto the smoothed seat, made out of a single chunk of birch firewood, and then sailing out into the sunshine and back into barn-shadow again and again, as the crossbeam creaked above them and swallows dipped in and out of an open barn window far overhead. It wasn't much entertainment for them, but perhaps it was all right, because of where they were. The girl asked which doorway might have been the one where Charlotte had spun her web, and

she mentioned Templeton, the rat, and Fern, the little girl who befriends Wilbur. She was visiting a museum, I sensed, and she would remember things here to tell her friends about later. The boy, though, was quieter, and for a while I thought that our visit was a disappointment to him. Then I stole another look at him, and I understood. I think I understood. He was taking note of the place, almost checking off corners and shadows and smells to himself as we walked about the old farm, but he wasn't trying to remember them. He looked like someone who had been there before, and indeed he had, for he was a reader. Andy White had given him the place long before he ever set foot on it—not this farm, exactly, but the one in the book, the one now in the boy's mind. Only true writers—the rare few of them—can do this, but their deed to us is in perpetuity. The boy didn't get to meet E.B. White that day, but he already had him by heart. He had him for good.

—*George A. Plimpton & Frank H. Crowther, 1969*

INTERVIEWER

So many critics equate the success of a writer with an unhappy childhood. Can you say something of your own childhood in Mount Vernon?

E. B. WHITE

As a child, I was frightened but not unhappy. My parents were loving and kind. We were a large family (six children) and were a small kingdom unto ourselves. Nobody ever came to dinner. My father was formal, conservative, successful, hardworking, and worried. My mother was loving, hardworking, and retiring. We lived in a large house in a leafy suburb, where there were backyards and stables and grape arbors. I lacked for nothing except confidence. I suffered nothing except the routine terrors of childhood: fear of the dark, fear of the future, fear of the return to

school after a summer on a lake in Maine, fear of making an appearance on a platform, fear of the lavatory in the school basement where the slate urinals cascaded, fear that I was unknowing about things I should know about. I was, as a child, allergic to pollens and dusts, and still am. I was allergic to platforms, and still am. It may be, as some critics suggest, that it helps to have an unhappy childhood. If so, I have no knowledge of it. Perhaps it helps to have been scared or allergic to pollens—I don't know.

INTERVIEWER

At what age did you know you were going to follow a literary profession? Was there a particular incident, or moment?

WHITE

I never knew for sure that I would follow a literary profession. I was twenty-seven or twenty-eight before anything happened that gave me any assurance that I could make a go of writing. I had *done* a great deal of writing, but I lacked confidence in my ability to put it to good use. I went abroad one summer and on my return to New York found an accumulation of mail at my apartment. I took the letters, unopened, and went to a Childs restaurant on Fourteenth Street, where I ordered dinner and began opening my mail. From one envelope, two or three checks dropped out, from *The New Yorker*. I suppose they totaled a little under a hundred dollars, but it looked like a fortune to me. I can still remember the feeling that “this was it”—I was a pro at last. It was a good feeling and I enjoyed the meal.

INTERVIEWER

What were those first pieces accepted by *The New Yorker*? Did you send them in with a covering letter, or through an agent?

WHITE

They were short sketches—what Ross called “casuals.” One, I think, was a piece called “The Swell Steerage,” about the then

new college cabin class on transatlantic ships. I never submitted a manuscript with a covering letter or through an agent. I used to put my manuscript in the mail, along with a stamped envelope for the rejection. This was a matter of high principle with me: I believed in the doctrine of immaculate rejection. I never used an agent and did not like the looks of a manuscript after an agent got through prettying it up and putting it between covers with brass clips. (I now have an agent for such mysteries as movie rights and foreign translations.)

A large part of all early contributions to *The New Yorker* arrived uninvited and unexpected. They arrived in the mail or under the arm of people who walked in with them. O'Hara's "Afternoon Delphians" is one example out of hundreds. For a number of years, *The New Yorker* published an average of fifty new writers a year. Magazines that refuse unsolicited manuscripts strike me as lazy, incurious, self-assured, and self-important. I'm speaking of magazines of general circulation. There may be some justification for a technical journal to limit its list of contributors to persons who are known to be qualified. But if I were a publisher, I wouldn't want to put out a magazine that failed to examine everything that turned up.

INTERVIEWER

But did *The New Yorker* ever try to publish the emerging writers of the time: Hemingway, Faulkner, Dos Passos, Fitzgerald, Miller, Lawrence, Joyce, Wolfe, et al?

WHITE

The New Yorker had an interest in publishing any writer that could turn in a good piece. It read everything submitted. Hemingway, Faulkner, and the others were well established and well paid when *The New Yorker* came on the scene. The magazine would have been glad to publish them, but it didn't have the money to pay them off, and for the most part they didn't submit. They were selling to *The Saturday Evening Post* and other

well-heeled publications, and in general were not inclined to contribute to the small, new, impecunious weekly. Also, some of them, I would guess, did not feel sympathetic to *The New Yorker's* frivolity. Ross had no great urge to publish the big names; he was far more interested in turning up new and yet undiscovered talent, the Helen Hokinsons and the James Thurbers. We did publish some things by Wolfe—"Only the Dead Know Brooklyn" was one. I believe we published something by Fitzgerald. But Ross didn't waste much time trying to corral "emerged" writers. He was looking for the ones that were found by turning over a stone.

INTERVIEWER

What were the procedures in turning down a manuscript by a *New Yorker* regular? Was this done by Ross?

WHITE

The manuscript of a *New Yorker* regular was turned down in the same manner as was the manuscript of a *New Yorker* irregular. It was simply rejected, usually by the subeditor who was handling the author in question. Ross did not deal directly with writers and artists, except in the case of a few old friends from an earlier day. He wouldn't even take on Woollcott—regarded him as too difficult and fussy. Ross disliked rejecting pieces, and he disliked firing people—he ducked both tasks whenever he could.

INTERVIEWER

Did feuds threaten the magazine?

WHITE

Feuds did not threaten *The New Yorker*. The only feud I recall was the running battle between the editorial department and the advertising department. This was largely a one-sided affair, with the editorial department lobbing an occasional grenade into the enemy's lines just on general principles, to help them remember to

stay out of sight. Ross was determined not to allow his magazine to be swayed, in the slightest degree, by the boys in advertising. As far as I know, he succeeded.

INTERVIEWER

When did you first move to New York, and what were some of the things you did before joining *The New Yorker*? Were you ever a part of the Algonquin group?

WHITE

After I got out of college, in 1921, I went to work in New York but did not live in New York. I lived at home, with my father and mother in Mount Vernon, and commuted to work. I held three jobs in about seven months—first with the United Press, then with a public relations man named Wheat, then with the American Legion News Service. I disliked them all, and in the spring of 1922 I headed west in a Model T Ford with a college mate, Howard Cushman, to seek my fortune and as a way of getting away from what I disliked. I landed in Seattle six months later, worked there as a reporter on the *Times* for a year, was fired, shipped to Alaska aboard a freighter, and then returned to New York. It was on my return that I became an advertising man—Frank Seaman & Co., J. H. Newmark. In the mid-twenties, I moved into a two-room apartment at 112 West Thirteenth Street with three other fellows, college mates of mine at Cornell: Burke Dowling Adams, Gustave Stubbs Lobrano, and Mitchell T. Galbreath. The rent was \$110 a month. Split four ways it came to \$27.50, which I could afford. My friends in those days were the fellows already mentioned. Also, Peter Vischer, Russell Lord, Joel Sayre, Frank Sullivan (he was older and more advanced but I met him and liked him), James Thurber, and others. I was never a part of the Algonquin group. After becoming connected with *The New Yorker*, I lunched once at the Round Table but didn't care for it and was embarrassed in the presence of the great. I never was well acquainted with Benchley or

Broun or Dorothy Parker or Woollcott. I did not know Don Marquis or Ring Lardner, both of whom I greatly admired. I was a younger man.

INTERVIEWER

Were you a voracious reader during your youth?

WHITE

I was never a voracious reader and, in fact, have done little reading in my life. There are too many other things I would rather do than read. In my youth I read animal stories—William J. Long and Ernest Seton Thompson. I have read a great many books about small boat voyages—they fascinate me even though they usually have no merit. In the twenties, I read the newspaper columns: F.P.A., Christopher Morley, Don Marquis. I tried contributing and had a few things published. (As a child, I was a member of the St. Nicholas League and from that eminence was hurled into the literary life, wearing my silver badge and my gold badge.) My reading habits have not changed over the years, only my eyesight has changed. I don't like being indoors and get out every chance I get. In order to read, one must sit down, usually indoors. I am restless and would rather sail a boat than crack a book. I've never had a very lively literary curiosity, and it has sometimes seemed to me that I am not really a literary fellow at all. Except that I write for a living.

INTERVIEWER

The affinity with nature has been very important to you. This seems a contradiction considering the urbanity of *The New Yorker* and its early contributions.

WHITE

There is no contradiction. New York is part of the natural world. I love the city, I love the country, and for the same reasons. The city is part of the country. When I had an apartment on East

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I think it is safe to say that he will be the first time we've seen a Friendship sloop represented in the United Nations by a man who is not a Friendship sloop.

topics
white

(unclear)

Was it from the paper?
Was it by Wiggins?
Was it by the college?

The question has been raised: is Russell Wiggins the man for the job? He has been named ^{as} our Ambassador to the United Nations. The Times, as soon as it learned of this, jumped on it with both feet. "He is not the man for this job," said the Times, ~~and~~ ^{and} ~~his~~ ^{his} ~~pronouncement~~ ^{pronouncement} struck me as a snap judgment. ~~It is~~ ^{It is} ~~not~~ ^{not} ~~clear~~ ^{clear} ~~who~~ ^{who} ~~knows~~ ^{knows} ~~who~~ ^{who} ~~is~~ ^{is} ~~the~~ ^{the} ~~man~~ ^{man} ~~for~~ ^{for} ~~a~~ ^a ~~job?~~ ^{job?} The Times complained that Wiggins had had no training in diplomacy, ~~and~~ ^{and} ~~this~~ ^{this} ~~is~~ ^{is} ~~true~~ ^{true}, ~~he~~ ^{he} ~~is~~ ^{is} ~~not~~ ^{not} ~~a~~ ^a ~~diplomat~~ ^{diplomat}, ~~he~~ ^{he} ~~is~~ ^{is} ~~the~~ ^{the} ~~editor~~ ^{editor} ~~of~~ ^{of} ~~a~~ ^a ~~good~~ ^{good} ~~newspaper~~ ^{newspaper}. I looked up "diplomacy" in Webster's, and found a definition that said: "Artful management in securing advantages without arousing hostility." A newspaper editor, if he's any good, never gives a thought to arousing hostility, he ~~not~~ ^{not} goes ahead and prints the ~~news~~ ^{facts} as he sees ~~them~~ ^{them}. Maybe the time has come for our Ambassador to the United Nations to act with the same kind of ~~care~~ ^{abandon}.

Wiggins has some very unusual qualifications for his new post. He is unquestionably ~~the~~ ^{the} ~~best~~ ^{best} ~~man~~ ^{man} ~~to~~ ^{to} ~~represent~~ ^{represent} ~~us~~ ^{us} ~~in~~ ⁱⁿ ~~the~~ ^{the} ~~United~~ ^{United} ~~Nations~~ ^{Nations} ~~who~~ ^{who} ~~owns~~ ^{owns} ~~a~~ ^a ~~Friendship~~ ^{Friendship} ~~sloop~~ ^{sloop}. I ~~think~~ ^{think} ~~he~~ ^{he} ~~ought~~ ^{ought} ~~to~~ ^{to} ~~have~~ ^{have} ~~the~~ ^{the} ~~sloop~~ ^{sloop} ~~for~~ ^{for} ~~his~~ ^{his} ~~own~~ ^{own} ~~use~~ ^{use}. ~~He~~ ^{He} ~~is~~ ^{is} ~~in~~ ⁱⁿ ~~love~~ ^{love} ~~with~~ ^{with} ~~the~~ ^{the} ~~name~~ ^{name} ~~Friendship~~ ^{Friendship}. ~~Friendship~~ ^{Friendship} ~~sloops~~ ^{sloops} ~~are~~ ^{are} ~~not~~ ^{not} ~~a~~ ^a ~~dime~~ ^{dime} ~~a~~ ^a ~~dozen~~ ^{dozen}, ~~they~~ ^{they} ~~are~~ ^{are} ~~a~~ ^a ~~rare~~ ^{rare} ~~thing~~ ^{thing} ~~these~~ ^{these} ~~days~~ ^{days}. They were built in Friendship, Maine, and were originally a work boat, mostly for hauling traps. They are very close-winded, have a deep forefoot, and a powerful ~~line~~ ^{line} hull. ~~Off~~ ^{Off} ~~the~~ ^{the} ~~wind~~ ^{wind} ~~they~~ ^{they} ~~are~~ ^{are} ~~made~~ ^{made} ~~of~~ ^{of} ~~wood~~ ^{wood}. On the wind, they ~~can~~ ^{can} ~~eat~~ ^{eat} ~~up~~ ^{up} ~~the~~ ^{the} ~~sea~~ ^{sea} ~~in~~ ⁱⁿ ~~no~~ ^{no} ~~time~~ ^{time}.

E. B. White manuscript page: New York Times article.

Forty-eighth Street, my backyard during the migratory season yielded more birds than I ever saw in Maine. I could step out on my porch, spring or fall, and there was the hermit thrush, picking around in McEvoy's yard. Or the white-throated sparrow, the brown thrasher, the jay, the kinglet. John Kieran has recorded the immense variety of flora and fauna within the limits of Greater New York.

But it is not just a question of birds and animals. The urban scene is a spectacle that fascinates me. People are animals, and the city is full of people in strange plumage, defending their territorial rights, digging for their supper.

INTERVIEWER

Although you say you are “not really a literary fellow at all,” have you read any books, say in the past ten years, that deeply impressed you?

WHITE

I admire anybody who has the guts to write anything at all. As for what comes out on paper, I'm not well equipped to speak about it. When I should be reading, I am almost always doing something else. It is a matter of some embarrassment to me that I have never read Joyce and a dozen other writers who have changed the face of literature. But there you are. I picked up *Ulysses* the other evening, when my eye lit on it, and gave it a go. I stayed with it only for about twenty minutes, then was off and away. It takes more than a genius to keep me reading a book. But when I latch onto a book like *They Live by the Wind*, by Wendell P. Bradley, I am glued tight to the chair. It is because Bradley wrote about something that has always fascinated (and uplifted) me—sailing. He wrote about it very well, too.

I was deeply impressed by Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. It may well be the book by which the human race will stand or fall. I enjoyed *Speak, Memory* by Nabokov when I read it—a fine example of remembering.

INTERVIEWER

Do you have a special interest in the other arts?

WHITE

I have no special interest in any of the other arts. I know nothing of music or of painting or of sculpture or of the dance. I would rather watch the circus or a ball game than ballet.

INTERVIEWER

Can you listen to music, or be otherwise half-distracted when you're working on something?

WHITE

I never listen to music when I'm working. I haven't that kind of attentiveness, and I wouldn't like it at all. On the other hand, I'm able to work fairly well among ordinary distractions. My house has a living room that is at the core of everything that goes on: it is a passageway to the cellar, to the kitchen, to the closet where the phone lives. There's a lot of traffic. But it's a bright, cheerful room, and I often use it as a room to write in, despite the carnival that is going on all around me. A girl pushing a carpet sweeper under my typewriter table has never annoyed me particularly, nor has it taken my mind off my work, unless the girl was unusually pretty or unusually clumsy. My wife, thank God, has never been protective of me, as, I am told, the wives of some writers are. In consequence, the members of my household never pay the slightest attention to my being a writing man—they make all the noise and fuss they want to. If I get sick of it, I have places I can go. A writer who waits for ideal conditions under which to work will die without putting a word on paper.

INTERVIEWER

Do you have any warm-up exercises to get going?

WHITE

Delay is natural to a writer. He is like a surfer—he bides his time, waits for the perfect wave on which to ride in. Delay is instinctive with him. He waits for the surge (of emotion? of strength? of courage?) that will carry him along. I have no warm-up exercises, other than to take an occasional drink. I am apt to let something simmer for a while in my mind before trying to put it into words. I walk around, straightening pictures on the wall, rugs on the floor—as though not until everything in the world was lined up and perfectly true could anybody reasonably expect me to set a word down on paper.

INTERVIEWER

You have wondered at Kenneth Roberts's working methods—his stamina and discipline. You said you often went to zoos rather than write. Can you say something of discipline and the writer?

WHITE

Kenneth Roberts wrote historical novels. He knew just what he wanted to do and where he was going. He rose in the morning and went to work, methodically and industriously. This has not been true of me. The things I have managed to write have been varied and spotty—a mishmash. Except for certain routine chores, I never knew in the morning how the day was going to develop. I was like a hunter, hoping to catch sight of a rabbit. There are two faces to discipline. If a man (who writes) feels like going to a zoo, he should by all means go to a zoo. He might even be lucky, as I once was when I paid a call at the Bronx Zoo and found myself attending the birth of twin fawns. It was a fine sight, and I lost no time writing a piece about it. The other face of discipline is that, zoo or no zoo, diversion or no diversion, in the end a man must sit down and get the words on paper, and against great odds. This takes stamina and resolution. Having got them on paper, he must still have the discipline to discard them if they fail to measure up; he must view them with a jaundiced eye and do the whole

thing over as many times as is necessary to achieve excellence, or as close to excellence as he can get. This varies from one time to maybe twenty.

INTERVIEWER

Does the finished product need a gestation period—that is, do you put a finished work away and look at it a month hence?

WHITE

It depends on what kind of product it is. Many a poem could well use more than nine months. On the other hand, a newspaper report of a fire in a warehouse can't be expected to enjoy a gestation period. When I finished *Charlotte's Web*, I put it away, feeling that something was wrong. The story had taken me two years to write, working on and off, but I was in no particular hurry. I took another year to rewrite it, and it was a year well spent. If I write something and feel doubtful about it, I soak it away. The passage of time can be a help in evaluating it. But in general, I tend to rush into print, riding a wave of emotion.

INTERVIEWER

Do you revise endlessly? How do you know when something is right? Is perhaps this critical ability the necessary equipment for the writer?

WHITE

I revise a great deal. I know when something is right because bells begin ringing and lights flash. I'm not at all sure what the "necessary equipment" is for a writer—it seems to vary greatly with the individual. Some writers are equipped with extrasensory perception. Some have a good ear, like O'Hara. Some are equipped with humor—although not nearly as many as think they are. Some are equipped with a massive intellect, like Wilson. Some are prodigious. I do think the ability to evaluate one's own stuff with reasonable accuracy is a helpful piece of equipment. I've known

good writers who've had it, and I've known good writers who've not. I've known writers who were utterly convinced that anything at all, if it came from their pen, was the work of genius and as close to being right as anything can be.

INTERVIEWER

In your essay, "An Approach to Style," your first rule for the writer is to place himself in the background. But recently you are quoted as saying: "I am an egoist, inclined to inject myself into almost everything I write." Is this not contradictory?

WHITE

There is no contradiction. The precept "place yourself in the background" is a useful one. It's true that I paid little attention to it. Neither have a lot of other writers. It all depends on what's going on, and it depends on the nature of the beast. An accomplished reporter usually places himself in the background. An experienced novelist usually does. But certainly nobody would want B. Cory Kilvert, Jr., to place himself in the background—there would be nothing left. As for me, I'm no Kilvert, neither am I a reporter or a novelist. I live by my wits and started at an early age to inject myself into the act, as a clown does in the ring. This is all very well if you can get away with it, but a young writer will find that it is better discipline to stay in the background than to lunge forward on the assumption that his presence is necessary for the success of the occasion.

INTERVIEWER

Since your interest with Strunk on style, have there been any other such books you would recommend?

WHITE

I'm not familiar with books on style. My role in the revival of Strunk's book was a fluke—just something I took on because I was

not doing anything else at the time. It cost me a year out of my life, so little did I know about grammar.

INTERVIEWER

Is style something that can be taught?

WHITE

I don't think it can be taught. Style results more from what a person is than from what he knows. But there are a few hints that can be thrown out to advantage.

INTERVIEWER

What would these few hints be?

WHITE

They would be the twenty-one hints I threw out in Chapter V of *The Elements of Style*. There was nothing new or original about them, but there they are, for all to read.

INTERVIEWER

Thurber said that if there was such a thing as a *New Yorker* style, possibly it was "playing it down." Would you agree?

WHITE

I don't agree that there is such a thing as *New Yorker* style. The magazine has published an enormous volume of stuff, written by a very long and varied roster of contributors. I see not the slightest resemblance between, say, Cheever's style and the style of the late Alva Johnston. I see no resemblance between, say, Thurber's style and the style of Muriel Spark. If sometimes there seems to be a sort of sameness of sound in *The New Yorker*, it probably can be traced to the magazine's copy desk, which is a marvelous fortress of grammatical exactitude and stylish convention. Commas in *The New Yorker* fall with the precision of knives in a

circus act, outlining the victim. This may sometimes have a slight tendency to make one writer sound a bit like another. But on the whole, *New Yorker* writers are jealous of their own way of doing things and they are never chivied against their will into doing it some other way.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think media such as television and motion pictures have had any effect on contemporary literary styles?

WHITE

Television affects the style of children—that I know. I receive letters from children, and many of them begin: “Dear Mr. White, My name is Donna Reynolds.” This is the Walter Cronkite gambit, straight out of TV. When I was a child I never started a letter, “My name is Elwyn White.” I simply signed my name at the end.

INTERVIEWER

You once wrote that English usage is often “sheer luck, like getting across a street.” Could one deduce from this that great writers are also lucky?

WHITE

No, I don’t think so. My remark about the ingredient of luck in English usage merely referred to the bog hole that every writer occasionally steps into. He begins a sentence, gets into the middle of it, and finds there is no way out short of retracing his steps and starting again. That’s all I meant about luck in usage.

INTERVIEWER

Could we ask some questions about humor? Is one of the problems that humor is so perishable?

WHITE

I find difficulty with the word “humor” and with the word

“humorist” to peg a writer. I was taken aback, the other day, when I looked in *Who’s Who* to discover Frank Sullivan’s birthday and found him described as “humorist.” It seemed a wholly inadequate summary of the man. Writing funny pieces is a legitimate form of activity, but the durable humor in literature, I suspect, is not the contrived humor of a funnyman commenting on the news but the sly and almost imperceptible ingredient that sometimes gets into writing. I think of Jane Austen, a deeply humorous woman. I think of Thoreau, a man of some humor along with his bile.

INTERVIEWER

Dorothy Parker said that S.J. Perelman was the only “humorist” around and that he must be pretty lonely.

WHITE

Perelman is our dean of humor, because he has set such a high standard of writing and has been at it so long. His virtuosity is unchallenged. But he’s not the only humorist around. I can’t stand the word “humorist” anyway. It does not seem to cover the situation. Perelman is a satirist who writes in a funny way. If you part the bushes, I’m sure you will find somebody skulking there—probably a younger, if not a better, man. I don’t know what his name is.

INTERVIEWER

She makes a great distinction between “wit” and “wisecracking.” She said that the satirists were the “big boys. . . . those boys in the other centuries.”

WHITE

I agree that satire is the thing but not that it is the property of “other centuries.” We have had Wolcott Gibbs, Russell Maloney, Clarence Day, Ring Lardner, Frank Sullivan, Sid Perelman, and Don Marquis, to mention a few. Satire is a most difficult and subtle form of writing, requiring a kind of natural genius. Any

reasonably well-educated person can write in a satirical vein, but try and find one that comes off.

INTERVIEWER

You were also an artist. What did Thurber and the other *New Yorker* artists think of your drawings and *New Yorker* covers?

WHITE

I'm not an artist and never did any drawings for *The New Yorker*. I did turn in a cover and it was published. I can't draw or paint, but I was sick in bed with tonsillitis or something, and I had nothing to occupy me, but I had a cover idea—of a sea horse wearing a nose bag. I borrowed my son's watercolor set, copied a sea horse from a picture in Webster's dictionary, and managed to produce a cover that was bought. It wasn't much of a thing. I even loused up the whole business finally by printing the word "oats" on the nose bag, lest somebody fail to get the point. I suppose the original of that cover would be a collector's item of a minor sort, since it is my only excursion into the world of art. But I don't know where it is. I gave it to Jed Harris. What he did with it, knows God.

INTERVIEWER

You did write the famous caption for the Carl Rose drawing of a mother saying to her youngster: "It's broccoli, dear"—with his reply: "I say it's spinach, and I say the hell with it." Why do you think it caused so much reaction as to become, as Thurber said, "part of the American language"?

WHITE

It's hard to say why a certain thing takes hold, as that caption did. The Carl Rose drawing turned up in the office with an entirely different caption—I can't recall what it was, but it had nothing to do with broccoli or spinach. The drawing landed on my desk for recaptioning, and I abandoned the theme of the Rose caption and went off on my own. I can't say why it got into the language.

Perhaps it struck a responsive chord with parents who found it true of children, or, more likely, true of what they liked to *think* a child might say under such circumstances.

INTERVIEWER

Many people have said that your wife, Katharine S. White, was the “intellectual soul” of *The New Yorker* in the early days, and her enormous influence and contributions have never been recorded adequately.

WHITE

I have never seen an adequate account of Katharine’s role with *The New Yorker*. Then Mrs. Ernest Angell, she was one of the first editors to be hired, and I can’t imagine what would have happened to the magazine if she hadn’t turned up. Ross, though something of a genius, had serious gaps. In Katharine, he found someone who filled them in. No two people were ever more different than Mr. Ross and Mrs. Angell; what he lacked, she had; what she lacked, he had. She complemented him in a way that, in retrospect, seems to me to have been indispensable to the survival of the magazine. She was a product of Miss Winsor’s and Bryn Mawr. Ross was a high school dropout. She had a natural refinement of manner and speech; Ross mumbled and bellowed and swore. She quickly discovered, in this fumbling and impoverished new weekly, something that fascinated her: its quest for humor, its search for excellence, its involvement with young writers and artists. She enjoyed contact with people; Ross, with certain exceptions, despised it—especially during hours. She was patient and quiet; he was impatient and noisy. Katharine was soon sitting in on art sessions and planning sessions, editing fiction and poetry, cheering and steering authors and artists along the paths they were eager to follow, learning makeup, learning pencil editing, heading the Fiction Department, sharing the personal woes and dilemmas of innumerable contributors and staff people who were in trouble or despair, and, in short, accepting the whole unruly business of

a tottering magazine with the warmth and dedication of a broody hen.

I had a bird's-eye view of all this because, in the midst of it, I became her husband. During the day, I saw her in operation at the office. At the end of the day, I watched her bring the whole mess home with her in a cheap and bulging portfolio. The light burned late, our bed was lumpy with page proofs, and our home was alive with laughter and the pervasive spirit of her dedication and her industry. In forty-four years, this dedication has not cooled. It is strong today, although she is out of the running, from age and ill health. Perhaps the nearest thing to an adequate glimpse of her role with the magazine is a collection of books in our upstairs sitting room. They are the published works of the dozens of fiction writers and poets she edited over the years, and their flyleaves are full of words of love and admiration and gratitude. Everyone has a few lucky days in his life. I suspect one of Ross's luckiest was the day a young woman named Mrs. Angell stepped off the elevator, all ready to go to work.

INTERVIEWER

Is there any shifting of gears in writing such children's books as *Charlotte's Web* and *Stuart Little*? Do you write to a particular age group?

WHITE

Anybody who shifts gears when he writes for children is likely to wind up stripping his gears. But I don't want to evade your question. There *is* a difference between writing for children and for adults. I am lucky, though, as I seldom seem to have my audience in mind when I am at work. It is as though they didn't exist.

Anyone who writes *down* to children is simply wasting his time. You have to write up, not down. Children are demanding. They are the most attentive, curious, eager, observant, sensitive, quick, and generally congenial readers on earth. They accept, almost without question, anything you present them with, as long

as it is presented honestly, fearlessly, and clearly. I handed them, against the advice of experts, a mouse-boy, and they accepted it without a quiver. In *Charlotte's Web*, I gave them a literate spider, and they took that.

Some writers for children deliberately avoid using words they think a child doesn't know. This emasculates the prose and, I suspect, bores the reader. Children are game for anything. I throw them hard words, and they backhand them over the net. They love words that give them a hard time, provided they are in a context that absorbs their attention. I'm lucky again: my own vocabulary is small, compared to most writers, and I tend to use the short words. So it's no problem for me to write for children. We have a lot in common.

INTERVIEWER

What are your views about the writer's commitment to politics, international affairs? You have written so much (*The Wild Flag*, etc.) about federal and international issues.

WHITE

A writer should concern himself with whatever absorbs his fancy, stirs his heart, and unlimbers his typewriter. I feel no obligation to deal with politics. I do feel a responsibility to society because of going into print: a writer has the duty to be good, not lousy; true, not false; lively, not dull; accurate, not full of error. He should tend to lift people up, not lower them down. Writers do not merely reflect and interpret life, they inform and shape life.

For a number of years, I was thinking almost continuously about the needless chaos and cruelty of a world that is essentially parochial, composed of more than a hundred parishes, or nations, each spying on the others, each plotting against the others, each concerned almost solely with its own bailiwick and its own stunt. I wrote some pieces about world government, or "supranational" government. I didn't do it from any sense of commitment, I did it because it was what I felt like writing. Today, although I seldom

discuss the theme, I am as convinced as I ever was that our only chance of achieving an orderly world is by constructing a governed world. I regard disarmament as a myth, diplomacy as a necessary evil under present conditions, and absolute sovereignty as something to outgrow.

INTERVIEWER

Can you suggest something about the present state of letters, and, perhaps, the future of letters?

WHITE

I don't suppose a man who hasn't read *Portnoy's Complaint* should comment on the present state of letters. In general, I have no objection to permissiveness in writing. Permissiveness, however, lets down the bars for a whole army of non-writers who rush in to say the words, take the profits, and foul up the room. Shocking writing is like murder: the questions the jury must decide are the questions of motive and intent.

INTERVIEWER

In a country such as ours, which has become increasingly enamored of and dependent upon science and technology, what role do you see for the writer?

WHITE

The writer's role is what it has always been: he is a custodian, a secretary. Science and technology have perhaps deepened his responsibility but not changed it. In "The Ring of Time," I wrote: "As a writing man, or secretary, I have always felt charged with the safekeeping of all unexpected items of worldly or unworldly enchantment, as though I might be held personally responsible if even a small one were to be lost. But it is not easy to communicate anything of this nature."

A writer must reflect and interpret his society, his world; he must also provide inspiration and guidance and challenge. Much

writing today strikes me as deprecating, destructive, and angry. There are good reasons for anger, and I have nothing against anger. But I think some writers have lost their sense of proportion, their sense of humor, and their sense of appreciation. I am often mad, but I would hate to be nothing but mad: and I think I would lose what little value I may have as a writer if I were to refuse, as a matter of principle, to accept the warming rays of the sun, and to report them, whenever, and if ever, they happen to strike me. One role of the writer today is to sound the alarm. The environment is disintegrating, the hour is late, and not much is being done. Instead of carting rocks from the moon, we should be carting the feces out of Lake Erie.

INTERVIEWER

How extensive are the journals you have kept and do you hope to publish them? Could you tell us something of their subject matter?

WHITE

The journals date from about 1917 to about 1930, with a few entries of more recent date. They occupy two-thirds of a whiskey carton. How many words that would be I have no idea, but it would be an awful lot.

The journals are callow, sententious, moralistic, and full of rubbish. They are also hard to ignore. They were written sometimes in longhand, sometimes typed (single spaced). They contain many clippings. Extensive is the word for them. I do not hope to publish them, but I would like to get a little mileage out of them. After so many years, they tend to hold my attention even though they do not excite my admiration. I have already dipped into them on a couple of occasions, to help out on a couple of pieces.

In most respects they are disappointing. Where I would like to discover facts, I find fancy. Where I would like to learn what I did, I learn only what I was thinking. They are loaded with opinion, moral thoughts, quick evaluations, youthful hopes and cares and

sorrows. Occasionally, they manage to report something in exquisite honesty and accuracy. This is why I have refrained from burning them. But usually, after reading a couple of pages, I put them aside in disgust and pick up Reverend Robert Francis Kilvert, to see what a *good* diarist can do.

INTERVIEWER

Faulkner has said of writers, “All of us failed to match our dreams of perfection.” Would you put yourself in this category?

WHITE

Yes. My friend, John McNulty, had a title for a popular song he always intended to write and never did: “Keep your dreams within reason.” We both thought this was a very funny idea for a song. I still think it is funny. My dreams have never been kept within reason. I’m glad they’ve not been. And Faulkner was right—all of us failed.

INTERVIEWER

Could you say what those dreams were?

WHITE

No. Here I think you are asking me to be specific, or explicit, about something that is essentially vague and inexpressible. Don Marquis said it perfectly:

My heart has followed all my days
Something I cannot name.

INTERVIEWER

What is it, do you think, when you try to write an English sentence at this date, that causes you to “fly into a thousand pieces”? Are you still encouraged (as Ross once wrote you after reading a piece of yours) “to go on”?

WHITE

It isn't just "at this date"—I've always been unstable under pressure. When I start to write, my mind is apt to race, like a clock from which the pendulum has been removed. I simply can't keep up, with pen or typewriter, and this causes me to break apart. I think there are writers whose thoughts flow in a smooth and orderly fashion, and they can transcribe them on paper without undue emotion or without getting too far behind. I envy them. When you consider that there are a thousand ways to express even the simplest idea, it is no wonder writers are under a great strain. Writers care greatly how a thing is said—it makes all the difference. So they are constantly faced with too many choices and must make too many decisions.

I am still encouraged to go on. I wouldn't know where else to go.

