

## SEYMOUR

### AN INTRODUCTION

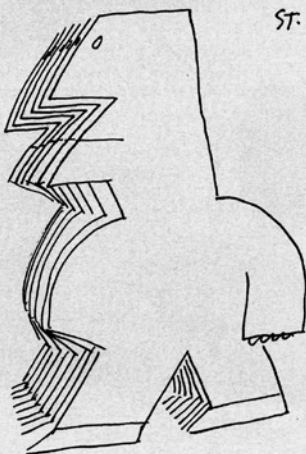
The actors by their presence always convince me, to my horror, that most of what I've written about them until now is false. It is false because I write about them with steadfast love (even now, while I write it down, this, too, becomes false) but varying ability, and this varying ability does not hit off the real actors loudly and correctly but loses itself dully in this love that will never be satisfied with the ability and therefore thinks it is protecting the actors by preventing this ability from exercising itself.

It is (to describe it figuratively) as if an author were to make a slip of the pen, and as if this clerical error became conscious of being such. Perhaps this was no error but in a far higher sense was an essential part of the whole exposition. It is, then, as if this clerical error were to revolt against the author, out of hatred for him, were to forbid him to correct it, and were to say, "No, I will not be erased, I will stand as a witness against thee, that thou art a very poor writer."

At times, frankly, I find it pretty slim pickings, but at the age of forty I look on my old fair-weather friend the general reader as my last deeply contemporary confidant, and I was rather strenuously requested, long before I was out of my teens, by at once the most exciting and the least fundamentally bumptious public craftsman I've ever personally known, to try to keep a steady and sober regard for the amenities of such a relationship, be it ever so peculiar or terrible; in my case, he saw it coming on from the first. The question is, how can a writer observe the amenities if he has no idea what his general reader is like? The reverse is common enough, most certainly, but just when is the author of a story ever asked what he thinks the reader is like? Very luckily, to push on and make my point here—and I don't think it's the kind of point that will survive an interminable buildup—I found out a good many years back practically all I need to know about my general reader; that is to say, *you*, I'm afraid. You'll deny it up and down, I suspect, but I'm really in no position to take your word for it. You're a great bird-lover. Much like a man in a short story called "Skule Skerry," by John Buchan, which Arnold L. Sugarman, Jr., once pressed me to read during a very poorly supervised study-hall period, you're someone who took up birds in the first place because they fired your imagination; they fascinated you because "they seemed of all created beings the nearest to pure spirit—those little creatures with a

normal temperature of 125°." Probably just like this John Buchan man, you thought many thrilling related thoughts; you reminded yourself, I don't doubt, that: "The goldcrest, with a stomach no bigger than a bean, flies across the North Sea! The curlew sandpiper, which breeds so far north that only about three people have ever seen its nest, goes to Tasmania for its holidays!" It would be too much of a good thing to hope, of course, that my very own general reader should turn out to be one of the three people who have actually seen the curlew sandpiper's nest, but I feel, at least, that I know him—you—quite well enough to guess what kind of well-meant gesture might be welcomed from me right now. In this *entre-nous* spirit, then, old confidant, before we join the others, the grounded everywhere, including, I'm sure, the middle-aged hot-rodders who insist on zooming us to the moon, the Dharma Bums, the makers of cigarette filters for thinking men, the Beat and the Sloppy and the Petulant, the chosen cultists, all the lofty experts who know so well what we should or shouldn't do with our poor little sex organs, all the bearded, proud, unlettered young men and unskilled guitarists and Zen-killers and incorporated aesthetic Teddy boys who look down their thoroughly unenlightened noses at this splendid planet where (please don't shut me up) Kilroy, Christ, and Shakespeare all stopped—before we join these others, I privately say to you, old friend (unto you, really, I'm afraid), please accept

from me this unpretentious bouquet of very early-blooming parentheses: ((((((())). I suppose, most unflorally, I truly mean them to be taken, first off, as bowlegged—buckle-legged—omens of my state of mind and body at this writing. Professionally speaking, which is the only way I've ever really enjoyed speaking up (and, just to ingratiate myself still less, I speak nine languages, incessantly, four of them stone-dead)—professionally speaking, I repeat, I'm an ecstatically happy man. I've never been before. Oh, once, perhaps, when I was fourteen and wrote a story in which all the characters had Heidelberg duelling scars—the hero, the villain, the heroine, her old nanny, all the horses and dogs. I was *reasonably* happy then, you might say, but not ecstatically, not like this. To the point: I happen to know, possibly none better, that an ecstatically happy writing person is often a totally draining type to have around. Of course, the poets in this state are by far the most "difficult," but even the prose writer similarly seized hasn't any real choice of behavior in decent company; divine or not, a seizure's a seizure. And while I think an ecstatically happy prose writer can do many good things on the printed page—the best things, I'm frankly hoping—it's also true, and infinitely more self-evident, I fear, that he can't be moderate or temperate or brief; he loses very nearly all his short paragraphs. He can't be detached—or only very rarely and suspiciously, on down-waves. In the wake of anything as large and consuming as happiness, he necessarily forfeits the much smaller but, for a writer, always rather exquisite pleasure of appearing on the page serenely sitting on a fence. Worst of all, I think, he's no longer in a position to look after the reader's most immediate want; namely, to see the author get the hell on with his story. Hence, in part, that ominous offering of parentheses a few sentences back. I'm aware that a good many perfectly intelligent people can't stand parenthetical comments while a story's purportedly being told. (We're advised of these things by mail—mostly, granted, by thesis preparers with very natural, oaty urges to write us under the table in their off-campus time. But we read, and usually we believe; good, bad, or indifferent, any string of English words holds our attention as if it came from Prospero himself.) I'm here to advise that not only will my asides run rampant from this point on (I'm not sure, in fact, that there won't be a footnote or two) but I fully intend, from time to time, to jump



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