

cinch we don't stand a chance in the world with the people; they're busy with other things; we have an ally in youth, I believe, but as a rule youth reads, does not buy, books.

There is little interest in new directions in living, so it is natural that there shall be still less in N.D. in writing. . . . To us, no doubt, there can be no decent living without decent writing. . . . We ourselves, however, are several thousand light years from the truth, from a decent reality; a reality with dimension, order, reason, spontaneity, and dozens of other good things—and that's why I say that we ourselves are our own enemies. . . .

Some of our greatest writing has been great because it has been evil—evil is that which disintegrates the Man, that's all; good is that which integrates; the world disintegrated man first; we reported what the world had done, and because what it had done was so vast and tragic our reporting was, in one sense at least, great: James Joyce; poor Lawrence, trying to become integrated personally and thereby trying to save the whole race; many others along the way; and now Henry Miller. These men were or will be burned by the enormity of the task and will die, or have died, before they will have reached the light, and balanced the labor; given it dimension; inhaled and exhaled; and put the good over the evil. . . .

I feel pretty certain of this, though; that you won't be knowing the real importance of New Directions for fifteen or twenty years. . . .

"Inhale and exhale," as Gary Snyder and Allen Ginsberg are telling us now, though I never heard Bill talk about Buddhism. But atman, as soul, he certainly had, and at his own level, in his own loving, Armenian way, his self was universal. So much of this comes out, bursts off the page, in a great letter that Bill wrote to Henry Miller in July 1936, when Henry was still in Paris. This letter came my way nearly ten years later. Henry showed it to me when I was visiting him on Partington Ridge in the Big Sur. I admired the letter so much that Henry, the perfect Chinese host, insisted on giving it to me.

The letter begins with Bill's report of an evening with the painter Hilaire Hiler in Berkeley. (Hiler was a Paris friend of Miller's, and the three of them—Miller, Hiler, and Saroyan—teamed up to write the symposium on modern art *Why Abstract?*, which New Directions published in 1945.) Then Bill jumps to the subject of the little magazines in which he published much of his work. He says to their editors:

All right, you sons of bitches are getting out a lousy little magazine and you can't pay for anything you print, so you are offered only lousy stuff and you print only lousy stuff, so here's something that isn't lousy and maybe great, and you can have it free if you want it because a thing which is given must be a good thing, as a thing which is sold must

be a lousy thing. I mean, I give them all the breaks, and it is the same when I gamble, or when I do anything else. I want them to have the advantage because I know I don't need it. And then when I lose, I haven't lost because I haven't sought to win, I have given. As a rule, of course, Not always of course. The gamblers who know me think I'm the best and worst gambler who ever gambled. Every time I walk into a joint everybody gets happy because they remember my crazy and generous and mirthful approach to the art and religion. Poker, horses, or anything else. I am very often very lucky, for no other reason than goodwill and amusement. And when I am unlucky, it is the same, which amazes the gamblers and the others. They weep with the coming of disorder, unluck, and absence of universal smile. I have found out a lot about the living in gambling joints and carried over into the other joints this knowing. I have not yet said what I know I shall some day say about this. Two Days Wasted in Kansas City is an introduction to the theme. A note. Ah-ha, also. Our vices: man's child-like, innocent, vices: our desperate explorations of the scent and substance of mortal magic in the female body, gay and bitter and comical; and throughout the journey our sorrowful remembrance of days gone, years gone, places ended or far away, faces lost, bodies swallowed by the black of earth-river and night; eyes closed. And the world: its dull, cold, hard, absurd presence, in and around us. And our drinking, and the voyages to nowhere. Christ, man is innocent. Man's innocence is endless. Evil, which is super-virtue, is beyond the powers of his being. I am saddened and amused by the delightful and painful. And our goofy ambition.

My God damn Packard. What is it? Why have I got the contraption? I am studying the path across the world: I know it as the walker; and now at seventy miles an hour I am getting to know it as the swift rider; rolling. It is a tremendous, a lovely and desolate, thing. I don't ride often. I walk often; even now with the Packard. Which I never drive around in the city, since it is no good for anything there. It is for the highway. There is something to find out about travel too; which goes down very deeply; which is of reaching or the other of the two only real events, birth and death; of reaching, of being on the way to, one or the other; but mostly death, in our time. There is, at seventy miles an hour, in an automobile, or sixty, in a train, or two hundred in an airplane (perhaps only; I am not sure about the airplane) a sense of deep inward relationship to an operation: to death, though one lives. I think travelers, who are a special tribe, are happiest in motion because deeply they (that depth) feel an increasing nearness to death, to end: sleep. Maybe I'm wrong, but I sure as hell am right too. I don't give a good God damn about the way they receive my stuff, although I'll always tell them it's great stuff and burn hell out of them, especially the lousy writers; they hate my guts; and all I do is keep on showing them how it can be done; there are few great writers over here because there are few great men. They sometimes ask me, the unpublished

ones, often much older than myself, how to do it; and when I tell them it has nothing to do with writing, they don't get it. When I tell them any writer's work has ultimately only one character, the writer himself, they don't get that. When I tell them to reach the first-rate in themselves, they don't get that. So I try to talk their language and tell them something about something they've written which is lousy and always will be. But the published ones are sore at me. I'm not sore at them because they're nothing and I can't waste the anger which is too valuable. That makes me a son of a bitch; they sense these things I'm telling you and it gripes them. They have my good wishes, as usual. I don't sell stuff; I haven't compromised; I don't write for anybody; I don't even write; I don't know anything about the things they know about; I get along all right with the language because it is no language for me until I have made it a language and then it is my language; it is my means of keeping the mood, gay or tragic, kindly or angry, alive. It is going to be one book or course; all of [it] together; very short ones; short ones; and if it happens, long ones; novel, or anything they wish to call it. That doesn't matter; technically the whole thing will be a novel; but the identification tag doesn't please me. I asked Hiler about you last night; about being in Paris. He told me what you've told me, and I get it. I can tell, from the language of your letters, that you are one of the great ones. "Now I am never alone. At the very worst I am with God" is plenty. I want very much to read your stuff. That long novel you are doing sounds great. . . .

Many thanks for being so generous about my stuff: I know you mean it. I'm not that good though; although I know I'm plenty good. I'm writing the book all right. I'll have written it some day; I hope it won't be before I'm seventy or eighty or ninety, because getting to be seventy or eighty or ninety is part of it. . . .

Good luck to you, Miller; and thanks for referring Fay [Frank Fay, the actor-director] to my stuff; he doesn't seem to like it, but he will; they all will; how can they get away from it? I've got them by the nuts, only they don't want to admit it. I look forward to seeing the books; and don't forget to turn on the machine-gun on Cerf; and let me know if I can tell him anything from this side. Yours truly, as they say:

:Bill Saroyan

Yes, inhaling and exhaling, Bill was crazy and generous and mirthful. He didn't always make life easy for himself but he was a damn fine writer, one of the real ones of his time.