

# talks about writing

It is the literal religionists who populate the Bible-belt.

And we have them. I think we have them more than Saskatchewan. I mean we have all the unshriven, manic religions here.

**Hughes:** But do you think it interferes with any sort of cultural climate we might be having in Alberta? Do you think it might interfere with someone who is writing in Alberta?

**Mitchell:** I don't think so. It's disturbing and upsetting, and disgusting, it's disgusted me, especially in the last few years, but . . .

**Hughes:** It's really too ludicrous.

**Mitchell:** Yes, why should it? There are much worse things.

**Hughes:** What do you find is a particular problem as a writer? This is a very vague, very broad question but I was wondering if you . . .

**Mitchell:** Well one of the important things about art is grace. And grace is that a thing shall be accomplished with seeming reserve of power, and gracefulness means done with great ease.

And this is characteristic of art, that it shall seem easily done. But it isn't, and it's very hard work.

I think the big problem with any writer is the fear that he may not do the thing gracefully, with the appearance of ease; but what is even worse than that, is that he may be impotent, that he may be unsuccessful, that he may fail.

I often think in terms of trapeze-artists, because I used to be a high-diver . . .

**Hughes:** Ooooh!

**Mitchell:** I often think of it in those terms, but instead of saying "diver" I say "trapeze-artists"—each time he goes on the trapeze, he thinks he may not be ready to go, that he may not be successful—this, I think, is the big problem: that after the writer has finished a work, he feels he'll never do another, or he can't do another, or feels he hasn't done it well enough or he can't do it well enough.

So the big thing, the big problem, is to gain confidence in yourself, in your art, in your talent.

**Hughes:** A writer is, in a sense, to himself if to no-one else, a performer?

**Mitchell:** Well, a writer, to write, has to be schizophrenic.

One part of the writer's attention or consciousness can work with no criticism from himself.

A writer will have periods when he hopes to sit at his typewriter and just pour out, if things are right, everything that floats to the surface.

And some of it may be used and some of it may not, and he may have that very mildest, gentlest rein or direction upon what is coming to his mind, but very little.

And this will be even ungrammatical. It will be unpunctuated. It will not be in complete sentences.

It will be the roughest sort of thing.

And such a period of creation will last for hours—six or more.

And it all seems wonderful, because during this period the other

half of the personality sleeps; is not there to inhibit.

Then, days later, the writer looks at it, but now the censor is awake; weighing, assessing, rejecting, accepting.

And from what had seemed so wonderful—this is fatuous, this is vulgar, this is cliché, this is not sharp, this must be improved, this has nothing to do, this isn't pertinent.

So he discards ruthlessly. These two are never operative at the same time.

I believe this about the creative process, and I believe only in this fashion could long works, like

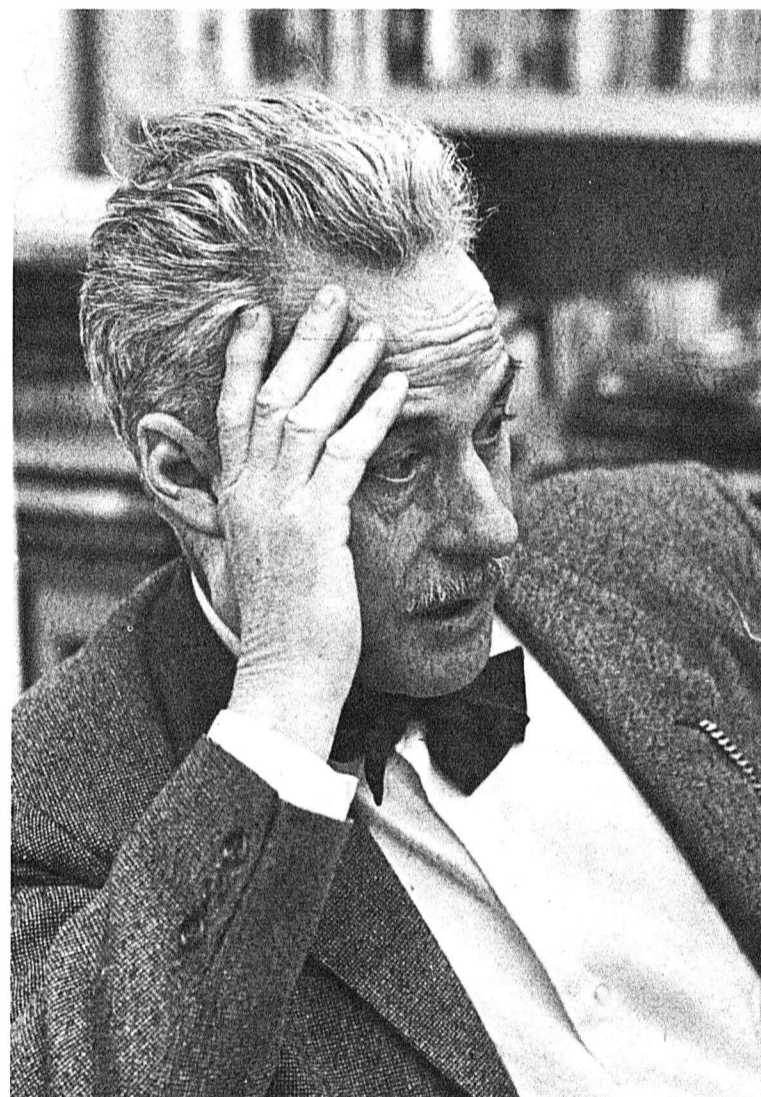
critic says . . . he does of course, he wants verification, he wants confirmation, but he must never rely upon what they say. It's got to be the critic within himself.

**Hughes:** I find a great many people writing in universities . . .

**Mitchell:** Yeah, they have resident novelists . . .

**Hughes:** There seems to be a certain amount of discussion going on about whether or not a person can be creative, and be an academic as well . . .?

**Mitchell:** Well, I'm very interested in teaching. I've always known that at any time those springs I



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books, or short ones too be written.

How could the tremendous area be covered for a novel if the censor were always tripping and inhibiting?

I think what the writer worries about—and this goes back again to your asking "What is the big problem?"—is not that the critic, the censor, or the discipliner will fail him but these powerful springs may not come, and after he's finished a piece of work he's afraid that they will never come again.

But they do, and the biggest audience a writer has is himself, the philosopher-king within himself, and if he had not had that critic within himself, he could never then have created—the critic was necessary for creation.

So ideally, a writer can say that he does not care, or is not interested, in what a publisher says, or a

was speaking of might dry up, or I couldn't make a living, and the second thing I wanted to do next to writing was to teach.

And I've always thought, well, I'll go back to teaching if I don't write. That wouldn't be a terrible thing.

I would highly doubt if there was much—the sociologist would call it correlation, wouldn't he?—between being able to teach, and being able to write. But there should be . . .

**Hughes:** They both demand intelligence, but I imagine in different ways.

**Mitchell:** They are, they're both talents . . . I've never, to this very moment, wondered whether the teaching talent and the writing talent had anything in common.

I was a good teacher and I don't think it hurt me as a writer, so . . .

**Hughes:** There seems to be sort of vague talk floating around, hinting that if a person is to be an academic, the university, the working with the old, dead things, will somehow have a sterilizing effect on one's ability.

**Mitchell:** MY God! What would have more of a sterilizing effect would be if you were a pipe-fitter and you had to handle toilet-bowls . . . THAT would have a sterilizing effect because it would weary you and tire you out.

Traditionally, English writers have been journalists. I think of Shaw, and Wells, and . . . but at the time that they were journalists, the work they were expected to do for

involved in an intellectual community, with the tightness, of say a specific department of a university.

**Mitchell:** I can see conceivably how it might limit a writer. It's nice to be immersed in the people you're writing about. So the tendency would be to write about people of this setting, as does C.P. Snow.

**Hughes:** Do you write with a typewriter?

A friend suggested that I ask you whether you wrote with a typewriter or a quill. I think perhaps he was teasing. . .

**Mitchell:** The typewriter is so much a part of my writing that without it, it isn't dynamic anymore, and so to have to use a pencil bothers me terribly.

**Hughes:** Do you consider this a sterile place to write, or do you feel this to be just one big irrelevancy?

**Mitchell:** I think it's one big irrelevancy, because . . .

**Hughes:** People often say, "I can't write here, I've got to go to Europe, I've got to go where the action is . . ."

**Mitchell:** Action is found in the big art cities of the world.

It is the thing I miss, living in High River, which has a population of 2,000 people.

I miss the talk . . . it isn't necessarily a good thing for a writer. I met and knew in Toronto, more talker-composers, and talker-painters, and talker-writers—really—but at the cocktail parties you could see your friends talk, and the talking was good enough. There is a tremendous catharsis in that.

Also, and this is more noticeable today, the beards and the long hair, males I mean, these are the trappings of the artist, you see.

In the west you don't get much mileage out of wearing a beard, and having long hair and having mistresses, and drinking absinthe . . .

For instance, if I did it in High River, it doesn't prove I'm an artist as it might prove in Edmonton or Toronto, or Paris, or London, or San Francisco, but it just proves I'm a damned fool!

This didn't answer the question about the west . . . I don't think so . . . the only way one can prove himself a good performer is to go up on the trapeze.

My goodness sakes! We have the post office, and the Atlantic Monthly; and incidentally I think Canada has a pretty good record.

**Hughes:** A place with ground and trees and people and gophers. Mr. Mitchell, thank you very much.

newspapers was different from what newspaper men do now.

These men were doing essays and literary criticisms.

Now, I do not advise young writers to go into journalism if they expect to do novels or be poets or playwrights, because I think the better setup is that a person should do something as divorced from writing as possible, so that he does not deviate any of his creative energies when evenings or weekends come and he wants to work on a chapter in a novel.

Teaching at a high academic level might be included in this. I found highschool teaching simply stimulating.

**Hughes:** I imagine you have a great deal more freedom teaching just with your students in a highschool classroom than one would have, being