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13th March 1970

institution without the Dear Mr. Mailer, Center. This reproduction was produced by the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin, PO Box

As Melvyn Bragg promised - the transcript of your
Orwell. She who typed it for us had trouble with the
sound, as it was transferred at a very high level, so
we hope you will excuse any errors. The original
recording is all right.

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Yours sincerely,

(Barbara Cannell)
Assistant to Melvyn Bragg

X O well ended with the will to power
as the thing in itself. It is indeed the
dead end of the humanistic influence
upon reason - beyond it, to understand
it, to understand indeed why the
heart of man (and woman) reveals
the will to power, one must take
the leap to believe in God but
not a Calvinist God, not a Catholic
God, indeed even not a God of
love or punishment, but indeed
a God of power, a God who grants
us power that we may attempt
to solve, ^{to enter} as we attempt power essence
of existence which He is powerless
to attain without us. So we are
not only the extensions of his will,
but we are indeed his fate, his triumph
or his failure.

God is involved in a larger existence
which is dependent in its larger life on
the powers which he has granted

OMNIBUS: ORWELL ROLL ONE TWO

~~XXXXXXXX~~ 81 Take 2 MAILER

INT: Is Orwell a writer you admire?

I've admired him enormously for years. He's one of my favourite writers. I don't have an exhaustive knowledge of him but - you know, in other words I've read book - I read a book by Orwell every now and then and usually I like it much more than I expect I'm gonna like it for some funny reason, and think about it a lot afterward. But I've ... gone through the ... of his work.

INT: Was he one of the writers you thought of when you thought of the people who were writing books [when you began]?

No but he wasn't - Orwell began to get some attention in America during the war. And I remember when I was going to Harvard, which was the period from 1939 to '43, ... the literary journals we'd fired (?) and particularly approving article about Orwell ... Orwell ... discovered Orwell in those days. And the sort of critics that one followed in college approved of Orwell. And so - so I had my back up a little against it because the literary snobbery then in America was ferocious, and I sort of as a young man I was a little petrified by it and naturally also ... I wanted to resist it and so Orwell didn't begin ... outside. You know, I resisted him; I felt, he's been applauded by the wrong people. Which is one of the little ironies about it. And then after the war when - about the time THE NAKED AND THE DEAD came out I think ANIMAL FARM came out about - a little earlier than that, just after the war ended; and in those days Life Magazine was my greatest enemy in America. And so I remember disliking ANIMAL FARM just on the face of the fact that it was published in Life Magazine first and that it was ostensibly a complete anti-communist work and I thought probably nothing else. So I can remember Orwell much later, I really didn't start reading Orwell seriously until 1951 or '52,

and I kept discovering him in odd ways, through books like *BURMESE DAYS* and *KEEP THE ASPIDISTRA FLYING* were the books that appealed to me most.

INT:

You liked *ASPIDISTRA*?

Well I think ... I think it's probably my favourite of Orwell's works. I don't mean by that that I think it's his best book. If it was the only book he'd written it would just be a curiosity and a few people would have heard of this book and - you know, once in a while you'd pass it on to a friend and you'd say, here, you want to read a good novel by some poor fellow who never wrote anything else? It's a marvellous little book. And you'd pass it on and let it go at that. But I think in a funny way it's the most perfect of his books. ...

1984 is of course - you know, I think it's his major work and deservedly, and I think the ideals in it are always with us, you know; we live with them and particularly in America we live with them all the time. You know we all live with newspeak and doublethink, and the most marvellous formulas war is peace and love is hate, Orwell's marvellous formulas in 1984 are of course still with us, so that intellectually and philosophically 1984 was his big work. But 1984 is seriously flawed; I mean I would like to talk about that a little later perhaps. I think there are - you know, it's far from a perfect work and it - it collapses a little bit at the end and I think, just as a novel. *KEEP THE ASPIDISTRA FLYING* is a ... book, but he had a ... of a procession in it and the book is just perfect, you know, from the first page to the last page you really wouldn't want to change it; it's a dry smell sour and little book. But what it says is absolutely fantastic; you can't get it out of your head. Because what he's saying I think in that book is - is that finally is that the greatest problem in - in social problems, the greatest problem in alleviating man's condition is that the poor have been given such a bad time for so many years, they have so many really bad filthy habits built into them by the fact that they're poor, by the fact

that they're frustrated, by the fact that they're inhibited from any kind of good life, that when the time comes for them to open out, to begin to have a good time, to begin to express themselves, uh if they have a little good fortune, they have to blow it, they have to ruin it, they have to uh just spoil it. Spiritually they have to vomit. And it's an incredible perception, you know, and a lot of people have known it one way or another but no one ever did it as beautifully as he does it in that book when the ... gets his little bonus of £5. I think it was, takes his friends out to dinner and - and his girl and just makes a mess of everything and just starts ordering more and more stuff and finally I think literally vomits it as I remember before the meal was over. And I never could get it out of my head, I mean it was one of those perceptions I just lived with for years, ever since ~~I read~~ I read that book, and I've applied it a thousand times. I mean I see it in myself, I see it in others, and it's a book that in a funny way I think has had a salutary effect upon me; it's given me more charity and compassion than I might have had naturally by myself. Orwell's always good for that. With Orwell his pessimism, he's always wonderful for turning a very grim corner and lightening it a little so that either you see something ugly in other people; if you've read Orwell there's a possibility that you may have just a little more respect for the grimness of that life you're observing or the meanness of it, and you'll see something in it ~~that's~~ that's - sometimes that alleviates the sheer ugliness of it.

INT:

Comstock - Orwell makes out this guy's poor.

Symbolic of the poor?

Well it - I'd say that existentially if you will he - Comstock's a poor man. Because he was brought up to have certain expectations and - and uh he doesn't have them. He's much poorer than that, at the time the book is taking place. Granted he's middle class, But now he took the miners - I'm not terribly

... with WIGAN PIER, in fact I never read it, I must confess to you. (LAUGHS) But if you take - miners have a culture after all, and like all really tough hard working working class people, that culture ~~it~~ sustains them; they're not poor existentially speaking. I mean they're - you know, there are many people who really believe that the working class have more of the good life than most of the middle class and uh possibly even more than certain aristocratic classes in certain countries and all that, because they do have that working class ~~it~~ culture that sustains them. And I think an appropriate parallel would be not the miners who were the middle - I take it that in Wigan Pier there was a strike going on, all sorts of things and they were engaged in all sorts of activities at the time and had a great sense of solidarity and a collective sense of each other ~~in~~ in the sense of their culture and everything else. But I think if you were to take working class people at a time when they're broken, when they're demoralised, when they're going from the proletariat to the lumpen-proletariat, when they're coming apart, that if you take them at such a time, then you'd find that if you then fed them a little good fortune they'd blow it. They'd smash it, they'd destroy it. Where if you ... take working class ~~it~~ culture as such, you know, in its more prosperous form, when that gets enriched, that gets enriched drastically. In other words if working class people get a lot of power then the revolutionary problem always is: what the hell are they gonna do with that power, you know, how are they gonna handle it? Well power like money, if you get too much of it abruptly, it's something that one has no habits for ~~wield~~ wielding it. And Orwell ... I think had this sense of - of how dangerous that business is, that part of the social problem is one wants to alleviate the condition of those people who don't really have enough one way or another but in the course of doing that you - there's a subtle tempo to the way it's done and if it isn't done properly you're gonna have disasters. And I think the key to this pessimism but this very structured pessimism, this wise

passivism, is to keep THE ASPIDISTRA FLYING.

INT:

He did meet working class people then.

The word ~~was~~ money.

Well we just obviously read the book in a different mood ...

INT:

ROMAN TO CATALONIA?

I'm afraid

No, ~~index~~/ not. I read BURGESS DAYS and

THE ASPIDISTRA FLYING and DOWN AND OUT IN PARIS AND LONDON and ANIMAL FARM cursorily and 1984 and also DIKENS, DALI AND OTHERS.

INT:

What do you think of him as an essayist?

Oh superb. I think he's a better essayist by far than he is a novelist. I think he's close to being a great essayist in a perfectly modest way. He's - if he is a great essayist he's a great essayist without ever taking on any of the postures of the great essayists. It's just that his prose is superb in the essays. And I don't think there's a man writing in English today who can't learn how to write a little better by reading his essays, even his maxims and his instructions on how to write well are - are superb. You know, they're something never to forget. If I were giving a writing class I think that would be the first thing I'd assign.

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OMNIBUS: ORWELL ROLL THREE

81 Take 3 MAILER ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ CONTINUED

INT: Only since he'd been writing out of the left
had he written well. Connection?

Most writers, you know, take a fall when they
try to write about politics although they write out of their
political beliefs. They usually find it indigestible. What makes
Orwell almost a phenomenon in that way is I think he's the only
writer I know who I think we - I really think you can say he wrote
better because he was concerned with politics. But the reason was
that I think that the politics were the most fascinating and
mysterious aspect of life to him in some funny fashion. In other
words some writers will uh write about love because love after all
is never ultimately definable; it keeps shifting and as you study
it and explore it and think about it, it keeps turning under your
pen if you will and there's always - you can always write something
new about the next day and the morning after and so forth. But
politics tends to bring out everything in people that's bullying
and filled with the martinet and authoritative and - and there's
a tendency - everything ... tends to come out and he starts whipping
whipping the reader and trying to push the reader into following
his political ideas, and Orwell is at the opposite. What Orwell
did is - and I think it's remarkable because I think no matter what
one's political philosophy might be, ... a man of the left or the
right, if you read Orwell you'd think better politically. And you
think better politically in your own way because he had an
extraordinary respect for all the subtlety of political activities
and how you had - bad men might - I'm speaking now very largely
because this is intermediately in Orwell but what you got out of
it is that these bad men can work with bad motives and
achieve good ends. Good men can come croppers and have disasters.
And good men can have - can work and have good ends. So in effect
in a funny way Orwell was a little bit like Kierkegaard, you know

as Kierkegaard was to morality, so Orwell was to politics.

I thought Kierkegaard was the man who said that a man cannot know from his own sentiments whether he's acting for good or ill. In other words a saint might feel that he's diabolically evil, and vice versa. A man who thinks he's being very good might ... be committing an act of intense evil. And by the same token Orwell always had this profound scepticism about the very nature of political activity. And so when he wrote about politics he was really exploring the nature of the universe, if you will and in a very quiet modest way always his work was modest, sober, quiet, restrained. But ... one gets those little ~~fix~~ ... and flutterings and those little intimations, ~~xtans~~ of what experience is like when you get out to the edge of it. In other words when you get past the place where you can take guidance from others. You know, every man ... gets into that zone of experience where he has to decide what his own feelings are because there are no guides that he can depend upon. And very often we look to good writers to give us that feeling, and become sort of guides, subcutaneous guides if you will, and Orwell does that with politics. Whenever he gets to politics, one ~~gains~~ begins to feel that there's the mystery of the universe, you know, really -. But in a quiet way; it's almost like a quiet shift of light and then - over the horizon.

INT: In which book do you feel this most?

Well I felt it most in the essays. I feel it most when he writes - first of all when Orwell - politics was with Orwell all the time. When he writes about the English language and when he writes about the good writer and bad writing, he's talking about politics and - I'm not just making a strong point here, you know, forcing a point. After all, if he hadn't written that well about what it meant to write good English or what it meant to write bad English, how could he ever have gotten into newspeak? And doublethink? All the political ideas in 1984 come out of his obsession with this mystery of bad writing. You know, in a funny way it - it ... mysterious when people who are reasonable

intelligent write very badly as it is when they write very well. In other words a man writing ~~rather~~ ^{than} ~~words/~~ ~~saying~~ he ought to write is as curious a phenomenon as a man ^{who is} writing a little better than he ought to write. And you know, why do people savage a language, why do people brutalise a language, why do people debase a language? If you can start to explore that you can start to explain a great many other things, like why do people finally spoil the very universe they live in, why do people, you know, exploit other people in outrageous fashion, in institutional fashion, in dull fashion. Why do people dull the very edge of life? And Orwell's always concerned with this, which is really in a fundamental way ~~the~~ the question he was always asking is: why do people spoil simple little pleasures that are before them? And he approached it in every way; he approached it from politics, he approached it from the act of writing; in other words he was always -- why is there a bad style? He was really the first man to pose this question. And uh it was a question worth posing, you know. Once he's posed it you don't get it out of your head, you keep studying bad style yourself. It's a -- you know, the literary style of politics is almost un-marked to one another. It's almost as if at one can almost take one's measure of a politician by his literary style. Where a politician comes along with a good literary style, we know that whatever else he is, he's an extraordinary politician for his side. As Churchill was or de Gaulle.

INT: He studied style in all sorts of ways and came on to a book - 1984. What's your rounding off that?

1984 I think is a great work, you know, ^{if} he hadn't written 1984 then he'd be respected but he would not be taken seriously. I don't think there'd be a programme about him today. 1984 was the -- the book in which he cupped his career and for three-quarters of it, for four-fifths of it, it's a mighty book, and again in a quiet, modest, unpretending fashion which always was marvelous about it; he's always better than he seems

to be at any given moment, because there's just no - you know, there's just no - he just is - he never does any weightlifting as a writer; he's never straining, he's never - ~~he~~ makes you feel all that rich baroque power that some of us are guilty of making the reader feel. He's always just there quietly and in boxing terms, you know, he's - when he - a fella's knocked down by him, no one ever quite saw the punch, just seemed rather an economical punch and there's the guy on the floor. So it - with all that, it's a totally as a modest book, ~~but~~ nonetheless it gets into something that's absolutely incredible, which is ~~that~~ it's the only political book that's been written I think since the second world war that is prophetic and profoundly prophetic. At the time when it came out it seemed a little far-fetched ~~but~~ that Russia and China would be splitting off from one another and each of them individually making alliances with America. Well all right, we already can see the perfect possibility of America and Russia actually literally fighting a war together against China some time in the future. We can see that possibility. It doesn't take too much of a stretch of the imagination to imagine America and China teaming up against Russia if there was some change in the balance of forces. But the extraordinary perception that Orwell had in 1984 was that when these wars took place they weren't going to be uh totalistic wars, utterly annihilating wars; they were going to be dull, awful, obscene, miserable picayune little wars that will always be fought as in unimportant places and involve ~~great~~ great waste of materials, ~~in~~ that would use up/productive resources of the world, that would just pollute the world, and proceed to deaden the world and kill the world ~~slowly~~ slowly but there would never be anything dramatic about these wars. But of course Vietnam is the most extraordinary and perfect example of that. And uh you knew, they'd always be meaningless wars. And - and of course he was absolutely prophetic in - in the way he would talk about - that notion of war as peace; I mean every war that America has fought recently of course was

peace. We don't even go to war as he predicted. The prophetic aspects of 1964 are just breathtaking; I mean when you really start to look at them the man ~~was~~ ^{gets to be} more and more of a prophet all the time. All that is extraordinary. And that since people are absolutely brainwashed and programmed is incredible. He didn't really have a great sense of the computer at the time he was writing the book computers hadn't really come along. If they had - you know, in other words if he'd written the book two or three years later, been alive about two or three years later, uh the - he probably would have done some marvellous things ^{of what} with computers could do to people, but in any case not quite foreseeing the effect of the computer, nevertheless he had every one programmed and brainwashed and he set up the possibilities for an extraordinary work. In other words the expectations that the reader has by the time they're halfway through that book, three-quarters through that book, are enormous. And one wonders finally how Winston Smith is gonna be ~~broken~~ ^{broken} down. And I thought that the choice was a desperate choice for a man who's failing in health, that this is of the rats in the box. As I remember it he was - is that right, he was going to have his face thrust into it and the rats were going to go at his face. And this was equal to the demolishment of his entire uh everything he stood for. Now it isn't that that literally might not work. But there's enough in Winston Smith up to that point that prepares for that as the key that would unlock the man's strength, you know, and ~~gives~~ ^{gives} O'Brien's wisdom in picking the rats didn't seem particularly a wisdom; it just seemed an ugly piece of sadism, of a rather unimaginative sort. And it was as if everything in the book that had been built up philosophically and structurally did not have its denouement; nothing really came through in a way that took the reader over these rapids into a new sort of uh consciousness of what the experience had been. If I talk vaguely about it because it's very hard really - to talk about novel - in another way

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currents and they tend to uh - you know, a really good novel will
give you the sensation of perhaps that you're dreaming or are being
overcome.

EXERCISE

OMNIBUS: ORWELL ROLL FOUR

81 Take 4 MAILER CONTINUED

INT:

Now Orwell was one of the people in this

century and yourself another, Hemingway, Camus, whose life seems to match their work. What is interaction between that living and that writing?

He is one of the few writers who seem to

present no obstacle between his experience - let's put it this way: there's no impediment between the experience, his style and the uh - very - what can one say - the flair flavour of the man. They all seem one. And it's - it's a remarkable business. You know, there are very few writers who really are like that who are any good. Usually you find that in a minor writer. It'll be a minor writer who's got a certain sort of flair in his life and has that flair in his books and will have that flair when you meet him. And he's perfect. And Orwell has I think in a way I think he had it even more than Hemingway; I think Hemingway was - you know, as I say was a much greater writer, a much more ambitious writer, a much more daring writer finally. But Hemingway has all sorts of contradictions when you start to look about - start to look at him and think about him. But the other thing with Orwell if you met him you really would know what he'd say under certain circumstances, how he'd react and you can see him walking out of a certain sort of party and saying, oh god they're all swine and just walking out, and you do get this feeling that you - with Orwell more than with any other English or American writer I can think of at the moment, you get the feeling of knowing the man; you get the feeling that the man was a friend of yours in some funny way and that uh you really were close to him. And I think - but I think part of that with Orwell is he really is very severe and - and his strengths are his limitations. He's absolutely what he is. Uh he - his pleasure is in uh the - the - well his pleasure is in never, never - let me start this all over again; this is just getting too ...

81 Take 5

I've thought for quite a while that one of the ways in which a lot of talent becomes a great writer or approaches becoming a great writer is - is that they have some sense of their ... ~~I~~ ~~my~~ Their weakness as a man, as a writer, as an artist, and they know how to convert that weakness into their strength. So the circumstance Faulkner for example had no - he really had no highly developed rational faculties, at least on a high severe standard. And so he purposely eschewed them, and he developed that sort of extraordinary style which always swarmed around and encircled a subject and made it his. Hemingway was almost incapable of writing a long sentence that had any real architecture to it. So he ~~in~~ discovered the uh magnificent of the play of one short sentence upon another, used over and over, and discovered the uses of repetition. I think Orwell had absolutely no - I would suspect deep down that - and I could never prove it because I don't know enough about the man's life - but I suspect deep down Orwell's terror always was insanity. And that was why he leaned towards such severity and such sort of classical style, such leanness of fibre in the way he put his words together, in the way he really detested an excess of any sort of and disliked the oratorical and always worked toward the simplest way of expressing everything. Because it was reason, British reason, particularly, well applied, to a parlous matter, was that firm ground upon which every man could relocate his sanity every day. And uh what makes him a particularly interesting writer is that he never - he's sufficiently unstable since some part of himself, so he never could really take anything for granted. And so he really has to get into it; it's almost as if the man was propelled into studying all the ugly details of life, because if he had eschewed and tried something more superficial he just would have been washed out; in other words the man found his integrity by digging deeper into every little thing he looked at. So that in DOWN AND OUT IN PARIS AND LONDON

4/3

those kitchens are, back at those restaurants. Uh you know, which at the time was a way for a British writer to commit har-
kari, to write a book like that was to make oneself persona non
grata with the publishers, with the audience, the British reading
audience, and the rest of it. But he had to do it. In other
words he was a man who was driven I think by large unmythical fears;
most great writers are but in Orwell's case I think what made it
particularly interesting is that his means were so modest. He
took those modest means and he kept pushing them. In other
words he took his own limitations and kept pushing them into a
narrower and narrower place until finally he was like a very fine
piece of wire, fine wires pulled out of cruder wire. It's pulled
from narrower and narrower apertures until you get a wire that
really is extraordinarily thin. Uh so think that you can use it
it to create incandescents and uh Orwell was pulling himself into
that fine a wire when he died I think.