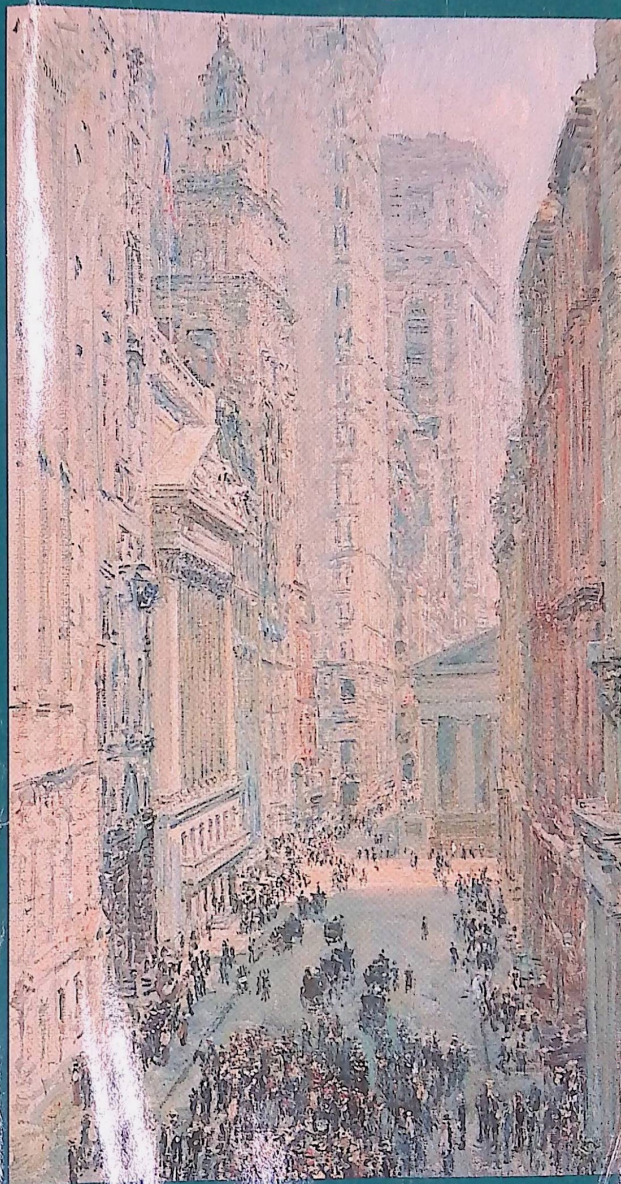


Winter 1997-1998 \$6
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culturefront

A MAGAZINE OF THE HUMANITIES



Botham at 100

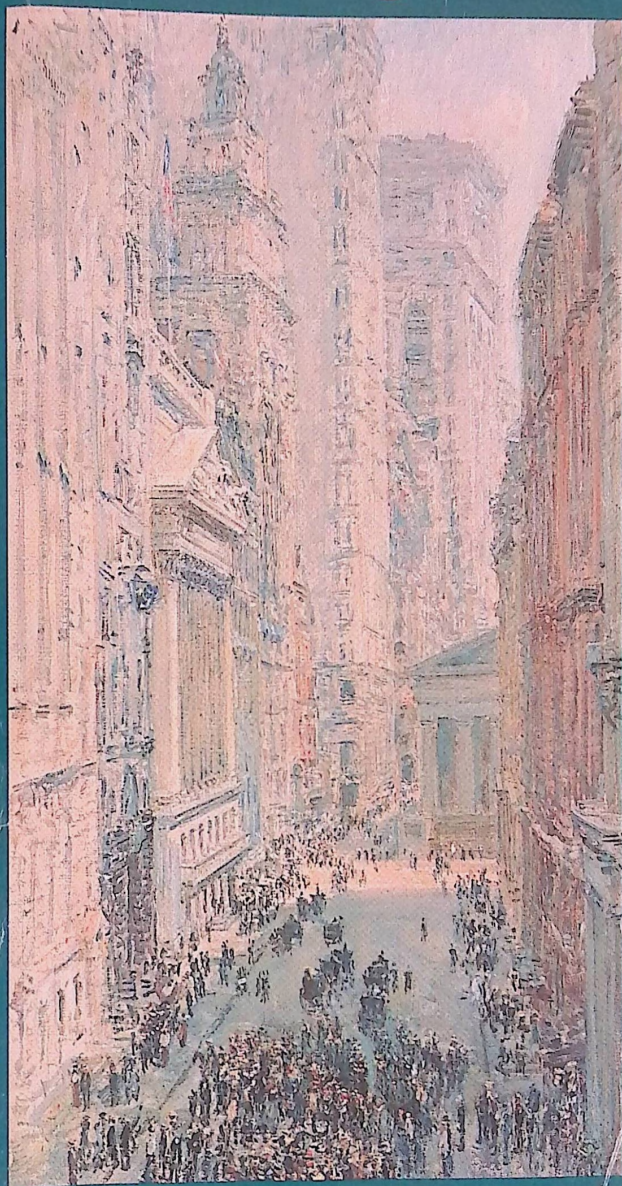


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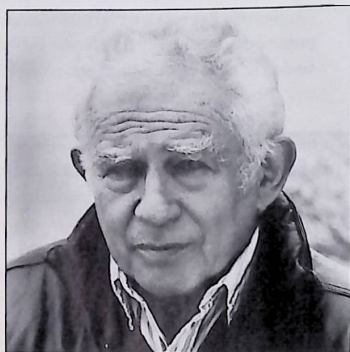


Gotham at 100



EXCLUSIVE!
A Conversation with
Norman Mailer
BARBARA PROBST SOLOMON

A Conversation with NORMAN MAILER



Struggling

With God

BARBARA PROBST
SOLOMON

Solomon's most recent novel is *Smart Hearts in the City* (Harcourt Brace, 1992). Her documentary *When the War was Over*, based on her classic memoir *Arriving Where We Started* (Harper and Row, 1972), premiered at the Walter Reade Theater of Lincoln Center in April 1997. She is a professor in the graduate writing program at Sarah Lawrence College and Senior Visiting Writer at the graduate writing program of City College. • *The Gospel According to the Son* (Random House, 1997) is Norman Mailer's most recent novel. On May 6, 1998, on the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *The Naked and the Dead*, Random House will publish *The Time of Our Time*, an anthology of his work.

I was in Provincetown during the quiet of mid-week, before the town heated up with summer weekend tourists. I was there to talk with Norman Mailer about his novel *The Gospel According to the Son*. Before walking to his house, which faces the bay on the east end of Commercial Street, I let my thoughts amble. Although I have known Norman since I was a kid just out of high school, we have never talked about

religion. At the time we first met, it had only been a matter of weeks since the publication of *The Naked and the Dead*, and Norman had taken his family to visit Chartres, which he passionately adored. He adored it visually. He adored it temperamentally. Norman never had any use for what he once described to me as "suitcase religions" — meaning wacko cults and Johnny-come-lately wishful-thinking religions. I knew that he came from roots and traditions. I envied him that — I came from

a haphazardly assimilated Jewish family. My identity as a Jew was firm, but it was linked to the Holocaust. As a child, I would leaf through my copy of The Children's Bible, a progressive legacy of a pre-Hitler time when the emphasis had been on cultural readings in the New and Old Testaments, rather than instruction in a specific religion. It had been supervised by the Woolsey Professor of Biblical Literature at Yale. Such good intentions did not prevent the Holocaust.

BPS: If an idea is sound, and its time has come, people in different parts of the world unknown to each other will arrive at similar conclusions. You have just published *The Gospel According to the Son* [Random House, 1997] and the Portuguese novelist José Saramago recently published *The Gospel*

it anticipates the history soon to come. But it is no surprise to me that people in different places approach the same thought at the same time. Of course, Saramago and I have different points of view. Mine, that God is not all-powerful, means that nine-tenths of the people who believe in God will be shocked. It is a disturbing notion. But Saramago's view is even more radical. That we have to forgive God is beyond my measure. Because where is the vehicle to accomplish that? In a sense it is all very well for us to say that we have to forgive God, but how does that take place?

BPS: Saramago is a Latin Catholic working in a tradition that includes blasphemy. You don't come to your ideas through blasphemy,

NM: You remember those attitudes prevalent about 30 years ago, that God is dead? Well, the Holocaust is a direct precursor of those attitudes.

BPS: Adorno said in regard to the Holocaust that poetry is dead, which is another way of saying God is dead. Now we are beyond Freud and Marx, beyond modernism, existentialism, and post-modernism. Has the end of the -isms given you a sense of urgency that has caused you to re-examine the life of Jesus?

NM: Well, I think I can get into my motive now. We won the cold war in a curious but not inclusive way: we won it economically. America bankrupted the Soviet Union. The government kept the arms race going long after all its information told it that

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According to Jesus Christ [Harcourt Brace, 1994]. Two major contemporary novelists who don't know each other, but who have lived through the same world history, have turned to the matter of God and of Jesus Christ. Saramago's conclusion is that man needs to forgive God for the terrible things he has done because God "knows not what he has done." You suggest that God is limited, that we cannot expect everything from this God. Why, in such different parts of the world, are our most gifted novelists now coming to this idea?

NM: It's hard to answer that briefly. I used to be a great believer in the *Weltanschauung* — that there is a world mood. And perhaps

but through Jewish concerns. In your novel Jesus squelches his lust for Mary Magdalene. In his, Jesus has a significant carnal relationship with her.

NM: I suspect that his motives for writing his book are vastly different from mine. I had particular reasons for doing this novel. I didn't know them all in advance. I discovered some of them after I finished.

BPS: You and Saramago lived through the Second World War and the Holocaust. You might say that as young men you both almost saw the end of the world. And then lived on beyond it.

the Soviets wanted to make peace. The Soviets wanted that as far back as Nixon. They knew that an arms buildup would wreck any chances of building up a peacetime economy. Ronald Reagan kept calling the Soviet Union "The Evil Empire," at about the time it had become a broken down third-world country — the largest third-world country in the history of third-world countries, but nonetheless a semi-functioning social organism.

I was there for a half-year in 1991 and saw some of what was happening. Many who had been starving for commodities for 40 years went gung-ho for capitalism. The older people detested what was happening.

Inflation wiped out their savings. They were forced to pawn their closest possessions. If you have lived with an insufficiency of commodities all your life, then the things you did manage to buy are very important. You certainly don't want to lose them. This breakdown of the Soviet Union did them no good. And their numbers are in the multi-millions, so it did the world no good.

BPS: Your trip to the Soviet Union seems to have affected you profoundly. Was it the motor behind the writing of *The Gospel According to the Son*?

NM: I couldn't have written this book ten years ago, because then, as far as I was concerned, formal Christianity was still the enemy. It felt to me as though all of western Christianity was saying that we are noble, and Russia represents Godless materialism. But what impressed me when I was in Russia for the first time in 1984 was that I came across an intensity of religious feeling you couldn't begin to see

NM: Well, Jesus Christ and Karl Marx do have one idea in common: that money leeches out all other values. And Jesus's condemnation of the men of Mammon was, I felt, worth repeating. Precisely because global capitalism has taken over the West, and America is the leader of the global capitalism. Bill Clinton made the longest political march since Mao Zedong when he took the Democratic Party from slightly left of center all the way over into the middle of the Republican Party. That's a trip. Now Clinton is in the middle, between arch-Conservatives who are family-oriented and economic libertarians who want no opposition to the idea that the right to make money in a free market is the only right that counts.

Corporate ideology is taking over the world. Since nothing is more important to half of all Americans than the gospels, I thought it was worth posing the theme dramatically. After all, what are the gospels really saying? Few believers go to the real story. That story is extraordinary. By the

between the two outpost ideologies. Let the story be out there in such a way that people from the left and people from the right can look at the same object — this book — and recognize that maybe they do have something to talk about after all. This was an ambition of mine.

BPS: Accepting the notion of a limited God is akin to the psychological truth that children become adults when they recognize the limits of their parents. It means we must be responsible for our own acts, not passive bystanders watching a boxing match between God and Satan.

NM: Yes, I wanted those ideas out there. Now, I've been around long enough to know that you can write a novel with the largest motives in the world, and the results can be terribly small indeed. So I have no idea whether my book is going to have any life. Roughly three-quarters of the reviews were dreadful. Which I expected, because I knew many people were going to be appalled by it.

BPS: We come from a very bookish, literary generation. Books were our religion. Has it not occurred to you that some of your natural audience might not want to comment because they feel insufficiently grounded in theology?

NM: Well, you've got them, but you also have people who experienced so much church in their childhood they don't want any more. You have people who are devout, who feel that I'm not serving their interests, and they don't care what I've written. And there are those on the left who feel Mailer has betrayed them by taking an interest in Jesus. They are people who still feel that Christianity is the enemy. I'm saying the opposite, that the answer lies in some as yet undeveloped form of Judeo-Christian Socialism. It's the only possible answer to global capitalism. Socialism ultimately failed because it posited no belief in God and therefore asked us to be better than we were capable of being. There simply wasn't enough altruism to enable socialism

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anywhere in the United States. Those Russians were ready to die for their religion. You'd go into a church, and it was stacked with KGB people taking down every name. But the people had this attitude: We're here because we want to be. To hell with the KGB, let them take down our names. Those people really put their bodies on the line, which to me is what spirituality is all about. If you're not willing to suffer for an idea, then don't speak of it as spiritual.

BPS: Did that experience lead you to reconsider the importance of Jesus Christ?

narrative measure of post-modernism, it can be termed fabulous and wild, a daring story with startling turns. So I thought, all right, I want to write something that might make a connection between those people who are without reference to Jesus Christ and those people who are fundamentalists.

BPS: Your aim was to reach as much of America as possible?

NM: There's an abyss in this country. I thought maybe there's a possibility of creating some kind of slender bridge

to function in decent fashion. It became corrupt...choked in its own bureaucracy.

BPS: You are saying that socialism lacked a corrective. Our forefathers shrewdly assumed that men and their institutions are corruptible, and created checks and balances to be able to rinse our government of its inevitable corruption.

NM: Like the Talmud, which advises putting two fences around a bad impulse.

BPS: Now that you've brought up the Talmud, let's get to the fact that, here we are, two Jews on the bay in Provincetown, talking about Jesus Christ. In previous interviews about writing *The Gospel According to the Son* you have talked about the split you've felt between your inner and public self since the publication of *The Naked and the Dead*. Now, given the fact that your cosmological needs demand a certain universality, do you also feel that there is a split, a complication in your Jewish psyche about how you will deal with Christ?

NM: Well, there's always that. To grow up Jewish in America, when all is said and done, means growing up in a Christian nation. Although anti-Semitism isn't a pressing problem — it doesn't exist the way it did in my mother's time; that's one place where a great deal of progress has been made — the remaining difference is that it's still not *quite* your country. A lot of Jews will become indignant at my saying that, because when you get a devout Jewish American, you've got a devout American, but there is still a sense in which, as a Jew, you're not at the center of things.

BPS: Did the centrality of Christianity in America motivate you to write *The Gospel According to the Son*?

NM: No, I was simply fascinated by the story and wanted to retell it. I also wanted to get closer to how Christians think, and I now understand more about the strength of their religious beliefs. The fundamental notions of Christianity are poetic to me. Judaism has wonderful and

beautiful and poetic ideas. The *Shkkinah*, the female part of *Shabbat* that involves the lighting of the Friday night candles (Mailer pauses as though relishing a particular scene), I remember as beautiful. There are all sorts of nuggets in the Talmud that are immensely poetic, but you can't speak of a fundamental concept in Judaism that is nearly as poetic as the

Baptist church in Arkansas, and was struck by how interested they were in my opinion, because I was Jewish. I thought, yes, here's this man, the son of God whom they worship every day of their lives. And he's Jewish. And most of those people had never met a Jew. My wife, who is from there, says that indeed I'm the first Jew she ever met. The men in this Sunday

I tried to create a Jesus who's terribly concerned with his mission, who wants to fulfill it. He is self-critical. Saddled with doubts, he is still doing his best. He hopes he's large enough for the job.

notion of grace. Or the idea that the son is sacrificed for all of us. That's an immensely poetic notion.

BPS: The rather erudite psychoanalyst Charles Fisher, who was Jewish, remarked to me that the Jewish religion lacked a necessary psychological and emotional mode for confession, and therefore forgiveness.

NM: Jews, with some justice, see the world as very tough, very unforgiving. Whatever you get, you pay for. We don't have this idea of grace, or an extra forgiveness that you don't quite deserve. There's a strength and a weakness in that, even as there's a strength and a weakness in the Christian notion of grace — weakness, because it can lead people to feel more self-pity than they're entitled to.

BPS: You said that, in writing your novel, you wanted to be able to feel what Christians feel. Do you perceive Jesus as being Jewish or Christian, or were you thinking of Christian interpretations of the life of Jesus?

NM: I saw that Jesus was hardly being perceived or treated as what he was: devoutly Jewish. Many years ago I went to a Sunday School class for adults in a Free Will

School class seemed to think that, as a Jew, I might know something about Jesus that they didn't. And for the first time, perhaps, I agreed.

So I tried to create a Jesus who's terribly concerned with his mission, who wants to fulfill it. He is self-critical. Saddled with doubts, he is still doing his best. He hopes he's large enough for the job. After all, being Jewish means that you try to anticipate a lot. You certainly can't take anything for granted. You do worry. I tried to put the emphasis on the part of Jesus that is human, not divine. The Jesus of the gospels is divine, and altogether the son of God. Only incidentally is he human. The part that's human is much less available. I thought that by reversing the proportions you might get something interesting.

BPS: In the original context doesn't Jesus figure as an Essene Jew who should have been considered one of the many prophets?

NM: It is fundamental to Christianity that Jesus has to be the son of God. God sent his son to us. You have to have that idea or you don't have Christianity. What would be ameliorated if certain Jews had regarded him as a prophet?

No, we suffered because of Jesus. From my mother's point of view, much of the suffering in her childhood came because of the existence of Jesus. She was called "Christ-killer" by other kids on the way to school. Throughout the ages, the Jews have been blamed for killing Christ and have been seen by Christians as the basic enemy. But this notion is wrong. In fact, the Jews supported Christ. Hordes of Jews followed Christ. Most of the Jews wanted Jesus to lead them.

Today ecumenical groups try to handle the question of Jewish responsibility by deciding that it was not the Jews who killed Christ, but the Romans. As if that's going to change anything. The Jews have been too comfortable an enemy for the Christians for 2,000 years. It's very hard to deprive others of a comfortable enemy. The answer is not to declare that the Romans killed Christ, but, rather, that a small fraction of the Jews betrayed Christ. A part of the Jewish establishment, seeking to do their best as they saw it, nonetheless betrayed their own people by striking a deal with the Roman establishment.

BPS: Why do you think so many young American Jews, many of whom are urban intellectuals, are now interested in returning to the synagogue? There seems to be a profound need for ritual that was not evident in our generation.

NM: We live in a fragmented world. The only unifying principle in America today is corporate power. It takes over the way in which we live, and the way in which we perceive things. I'm always fulminating against modern architecture — what gave those people the right to dominate our vision? You can't live in a modern city without being subjugated to two hideous forms: the dull high rise and the suburban mall. When I travel around the country I now see two cities everywhere I go. A suburban mall city surrounds every old American city. I can't tell where I am. Entropy has entered our vision. You cannot locate yourself any longer by the eye of your memory. Everything is now

general. America is homogenized. People are therefore looking for specifics that will save them from the general lack of particulars. It's natural that people will go back to religion to look for rituals that are meaningful to them. Of course, the average young suburban Jew usually has to do his or her worship in a temple that could, in a pinch, be converted to a ski-lodge or a catering hall.

BPS: There is a continuum to your work. From the beginning you were possessed of a certain awe of the universe. There are writers whose creative strengths include a heightened sense of awe, and then there are the cynics. They know the price of everything, a price that is small potatoes. You've always had this spiritual side.

NM: Yes, even when I was an atheist. Well, it may even be in the genes. My grandfather was a rabbi manqué. When he grew up in Lithuania he studied at the local yeshiva, and I believe he was even certified to be

much prefer pornography that is serious rather than comic. Pornographic films that are comic are awful, really awful. Whereas when they're not comic they may also be awful, but usually for lack of talent, not in the very vein of the endeavor.

BPS: This spring is going to be the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *The Naked and the Dead*...

NM: Random House is going to bring out a collection of my work. A huge collection, maybe 1,500 pages. And I'm going to be 75 years old, so it should be a commemorative year in my life; however (Mailer shrugs) who knows?

BPS: The books of the Beat generation roughly coincided with your early years of publication. *The Deer Park* came out just a little before *On the Road*. The Beats espoused a sort of happy land of destruction, with no sense of consequence or responsibility. When you wrote about

I've been startled to see how deep and ongoing my religious bent has been. Since *An American Dream* every one of my books but two has been pondering the nature of God and the Devil.

a rabbi. But when he came to America with a family to support, there was already a rabbi in the town he chose to live in. So he became the town butcher. I received, therefore (Mailer begins to laugh), on one hand, a religious tradition and, on the other, a carnal tradition.

BPS: The way you have written about sex has almost a religious cast, a moral view of its place in the universe. Sex has never been funny or ridiculous to you.

NM: No, I've never seen it as that. I've seen that it could be disastrous, but not funny. Even in something like pornography, I

destructive forces it was in terms of a pitched battle between God and the Devil. There was in your work the footprint of a Dreiserian moral universe. Starting with *Of a Fire On the Moon*, a much underrated book in my opinion...

NM: Mine too.

BPS: ...and in *Ancient Evenings*, you seemed to be wrestling with your feelings about God. In *Picasso: Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* you seemed to be grappling with both Picasso's and your own concerns with God. Therefore, well before you began to write *The Gospel According to the Son* you seemed to have been searching for a spiritual dimension.

NM: In my work for the Random House collection, I've been startled to see how deep and ongoing my religious bent has been. Since *An American Dream* every one of my books but two has been pondering the nature of God and the Devil. I don't speak about God in *The Executioner's Song* or in *Oswald's Tale*, but nonetheless that is part of the unvoiced themes in both. You can see that the author is brooding about it all the way. If there is a sadness in *The Executioner's Song*, it is because I'm thinking of how sad God must be, watching these events take place.

BPS: In the Picasso book, I felt that you were trying to imagine the artist's soul, his struggle with his beliefs, and therefore you homed in on his struggles with God.

NM: There, I was working entirely with my own sense of him. Picasso was very careful all his life to indicate that he had no belief in God; indeed, there is no documentary evidence to the contrary. But I think a large part of that was social. The people around him were the kind of French who take great pride in their atheism. Picasso might have felt it to be a disastrous move for him, socially and in terms of his career, to show any open interest in God. Nonetheless Picasso was terrified of punishment. Of divine and demonic punishment. I felt one now had to be bold enough to say, yes, he was struggling with God. There's no inner logic to Picasso's life unless you assume this to be true. Look at the hideous portrait he does of himself near the end of his life. As though he is trying to appease God by saying: God, no matter how much you may condemn me for all the things I have done, look how I condemn myself.

BPS: Picasso's fear of death came across strongly in your book about him, and I am wondering if your interest in Jesus was already percolating in your head before you finished it.

NM: You don't know your influences until they appear.

BPS: So there was a period when you didn't consciously recognize the pull the spiritual had in your life?

NM: I think it was there and I wasn't aware of it. It goes back to *The Naked and the Dead* where one of the soldiers says, "If there is a God, he sure is a son of a bitch," and the other one says, "Don't say that!" I always felt that was the beginning of trying to find a workable cosmology for myself. *Itel* in *The Deer Park* obviously has a sense of spirituality. (*Mailer pauses and grimaces slightly at what he has said.*) I hate pious-sounding words like spirituality. They can have unpleasant connotations for serious people who read novels to find emotional nourishment. Part of the problem of writing a book about Jesus is that a lot of the people I want to reach are going to be antagonistic in advance.

BPS: Speaking of attitudes toward what books should be about, what do you think about the enormous number of biographies now published, which willy-nilly are demolishing all the icons of the twentieth century?

NM: I'll go back to my fulminations about money. Once money becomes the central value, then all other values diminish. So the idea that there have been figures entitled to respect becomes more difficult to accept. It gets in the way of making money. People who devote their lives to acquiring money always have a bad conscience because you can't do that without ignoring too many other human values. When there's bad conscience, there's meanness. Back biting. The idea is to reduce all people. That can help to justify the reductionist as he goes on making lots of money. After all, he would argue, nobody is any good. But I would counter by saying that, if we don't find a way of sharing money more humanely, we may self-destruct as a civilization. (*Mailer pauses and looks out at the bay.*) Before we're done, global capitalism is going to end up eating itself, destroying itself. ■

BOROUGH PARK

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lawyers, teachers, plumbers, and cab drivers; recent Russian immigrants and third-generation Americans. They come directly from work to pick up cartons crammed with foodstuffs and deliver them to almost 700 needy families.

Or look at *Hatzolah*. When private ambulances and the city's Emergency Medical Services took too long to respond to emergencies and demonstrated little appreciation for Orthodox sensitivities about the Sabbath and other rituals, volunteers created their own *Hatzolah* Emergency Corps. Using community funds they developed an extensive training protocol, procured ambulances, and acquired the most advanced emergency equipment, establishing one of the most effective first-response medical corps in the world, prepared to respond within seconds at any time of day or night. To support organizations like *Tomche Shabbos*, *Hatzolah*, and scores of others in Borough Park, ordinary people (it's their earnings, and the wealthy contribute even larger chunks of their income to succor the poor, help the needy, and underwrite the communal educational system).

There is nothing unique about the way the Jews of Borough Park have built their village in the grand metropolis. Others groups, in their own ways, have accomplished the same thing. Long the template for American diversity, New York City has persistently avoided closure. Observers have often suggested that, among world cities, New York pays the least respect to its past, whether in culture, art, architecture, or even in the study of its own history. While the past throws an overweening prescriptive shadow on other cities, New York's civic culture is more diverse. The result has been a city of flamboyant and purposeful tribalism, on the one hand, and a metropolis of willful cosmopolitanism on the other. "Do I contradict myself?" asked New Yorker Walt Whitman. "Very well I contradict myself. I am large. I contain multitudes." ■

MADISON AVENUE

continued from page 8

young salesman with a mustache, who looks either Italian or Puerto Rican: "What does that sign mean, 'complimentary shoe sign'?" I ask.

"Just what it says. You want a free shine? Take 'em off."

"Well, I'm a skeptic, that's why I wasn't sure."

"Why a skeptic? New York is the greatest city in the world!"

I hand him my battered brown shoes, heels worn down to their roots. Then I sit there, waiting for him to polish them, wondering if I should buy a pair of shoes as a good-faith gesture in return for this service. No: it is ungrateful to question God's grace. The God who looks after walkers sometimes throws in a minor miracle. I have already gotten my "author's discount" at the Gotham Book Mart; this is my second lagniappe of the day. The skillful shoe salesman does an excellent job of resurrecting my sorry pair, and I leave the store happy.

Adding to my sense of well-being is that I have finally arrived at the "frivolous" stretch of Madison Avenue that most amuses me. Facial salons (Georgette Klinger, Aveda) have already begun to spring up. FAO Schwarz and Barney's are within sight. But before I reach them, I must pass the gauntlet of the few new mega-structures that have elbowed their way onto Madison, most especially Philip Johnson's ATT (now Sony) Headquarters and the IBM Building. When Johnson's post-modernist "Chippendale skyscraper" first appeared, its granitic flippancy seemed an infuriating provocation; now it has aged some and one is used to it. The law of New York architecture is that everything (the Pan Am Building always excluded) looks inevitable and appropriate to its site in time. I still don't like its intimidating base (hyperbolically labelled "Fascist architecture" because of Johnson's vulnerable political past); I don't see jackboots, just cold money. What's funny is that Sony, the new kid on the multinational

block, has taken over this mausoleum for its headquarters, an odd match of futurist, "user-friendly" neon technology and dinosaur snobbism. The building's forbiddingly shallow lobby, with its elevator that takes you only to another "sky lobby" with uniformed security guards, seems designed to exclude the public, while its galleria is so hidden from the street that banners and pennants have needed to be hung, declaring the proximity of a "Public Space." Any public space that has to announce itself so frequently is obviously bordering on an oxymoron. Yet Sony has cheerfully redecorated the galleria with brash, "pop" art works, and installed a talking robot to entertain the waiting-line for its children's exhibit, "Sony Wonder."

Any public

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so frequently is obviously bordering

on an oxymoron.

Another past provocation, the IBM Building, was criticized when it opened as a bad citizen for taking a bite out of the uniform street wall at Madison and 57th. Purism aside, it does seem now as though the Manhattan street wall can absorb this little affront. We miss the IBM Gallery, which used to house ambitious exhibitions, such as an amazing Tibetan art show, but is now given over to a cut-rate display on the importance of the media in society; only the most bored tourist would be enticed into it.

Catty-corner to IBM sits the Fuller Building, a graceful 1929 skyscraper that houses a dozen art galleries. It was here that my brother and I used to climax our peregrinations, taking the elevator from floor to floor. I still like to go in whenever I have the chance, just to check out the brilliant Art Deco lobby.

Passing FAO Schwarz, I think of getting another Barbie doll for my daughter, but I am not in the mood to contribute to that cash cow today, nor to brave the insolent cool at Barney's, a block away. True happiness begins, in any case, above 62nd Street on Madison Avenue. The buildings get shorter, more Parisian in feeling, and a beautiful relationship of scale and ornament prevails between the storefronts and edifices above. Suddenly one has access to the sky, one notices the trees — no more robust than those further downtown, but better harmonized to the proportions of the street as a whole.

This is the realm of specialty luxury stores: Mont Blanc pens, Rolex watches, Teutischer chocolates, Lalique glass. And of course the couture shops of every big-name designer: Armani, Ungaro, Valentino, Versace, Prada, Ralph Lauren. A stroll down this part of Madison Avenue will tell you everything you need to know about the latest fashions, which you may have missed when your subscription to *Vogue* ran out. A group of elderly women are staring at the Yves St. Laurent window. "Look how high up they put the buttons!" declares the oldest. An elegant, well-heeled man hails a cab by lifting one of his metal crutches — it works.

A scrumptious camel's hair men's suit in Valentino's window catches my eye: only \$1,995.

I sigh and cross the street to check out the new Armani store. An austere, subtly manipulated white cube with a large plate-glass window (designed by architect Peter Marino), it looks very Rodeo Drive or Palm Beach. I walk in. Everything is subdued; no one approaches me to badger or help. I find myself pirouetting toward a very pretty salesgirl with café-au-lait skin, behind a necktie counter. "That's a nice shirt," she says to me, taking me aback and winning me over for life. "It's a Gigli," I stammer. Then I ask her where the men's clothing department is and she tells me the third floor, with lovely smile, and I wish I could prolong this conversation indefinitely. I have trouble finding the elevator, it's so discreetly marked. She has to come out from behind

her desk and assist me, with another glorious smile.

I go upstairs and buy two belts. Ties and belts are the only Armani items I can afford. Of course I am also attracted to a black cashmere top (sweater? tee shirt?), which costs \$1,800. The nice, gay salesman, tall with slicked-back hair, informs me that in spite of their outrageous price they are flying out of the shop.

I bid *adieu* to Armani World and wave a last goodbye to the alluring shopgirl on the first floor, who acknowledges me with a smile. In another life, another reincarnation, perhaps....

I don't like Missoni any more, I decide. Too garish. I remember going into the Missoni boutique in Rome and buying an orange-ish patterned sweater, which the friend I was with assured me was "a good investment." Back in the States, another friend ruined my pleasure in the sweater forever by bluntly telling me it looked like airplane upholstery. So much for our fantasies of becoming fashionable.

At the Madison Avenue Bookshop, between 69th and 70th, I pause to examine the window. I rather like this bookshop (what bookstore don't I like?), but the titles the management has chosen to display over-emphasize the escapist, coffee table side of things. I am already thinking of that other, much more intellectual bookstore, Books & Co., which used to hold sway on Upper Madison, in the shadow of the Whitney Museum. I stride purposely toward Books & Co. to pay my last respects. It closed recently, amidst great publicity, unable to meet the rent hike of its landlord, the Whitney. My initial response to this *cause célèbre* was perverse: the spectacle of the city's famous literati rallying to deplore this outcome struck me as self-congratula-

tory if not smarmy. I resented their apocalyptic assertion that the city's cultural life would be dealt a mortal blow by the closing of Books & Co. They seemed to be forgetting that retail establishments have their own life-spans; that proprietors may grow tired of sacrificing to keep their stores open; or that the owner in this particular case, a wealthy heiress, had been withdrawing her energies from the store for the past several years, with the result that its staff was no longer as crisply knowledgeable as it once had been. Still, I shied away from visiting the



The Whitney Museum

store in its last hours, as though protecting myself from pain.

Now I stood before its ruthlessly barred window. Nothing could be seen inside but a portable metal detector, unplugged. Just as we have a hard time accepting the finality of death in a person we love (or even feel ambivalent about), so it seemed impossible now that this site would never again sell books, hold poetry readings, cram crowds into its parties. I remembered when Books & Co. first opened, under the eccentric management of Burt Britton, ex-buyer for the Strand, who kept stacks of the books he loved (such as Malamud's *The Assistant*)

in the basement, and would try to get you to buy a copy of one of his favorites no matter what title you requested. He would offer a glass of wine to the writers he respected, but ignore the unlettered customers, which created a snobby, snubbing air that made me uncomfortable, even though I was one of the vined set. Then the owner, Jeannette Watson, took over, firing Burt, and established the store on a firm, impressively thoughtful level. And now it was no more. You can't get away from that New York dialectic of mawkishly mourning every disappeared piece of the city's past that was also your past, while celebrating its ongoing vitality and blithely ignoring the costs of change. James Schuyler says it well near the end of his terrific poem, "Dining Out With Doug and Frank":

Oh well. When they tore down
the Singer Building,
and when I saw the Bogardus
Building
rusty and coming unstitched in
a battlefield of rubble I
deliberately
withdrew my emotional
investments
in loving old New York. Except
you can't.

Nearby the defunct Books & Co. is its nemesis, the Whitney Museum, now sheathed in scaffolding. They are repairing Marcel Breuer's great minimalist fortress façade — at least I hope they are. Not so long ago there was a plan to let another architect, Michael Graves, swallow up the Breuer masterpiece in his much inferior composition, in the name of institutional expansion. That was shot down after much protest. In New York City, you must count among the urban victories not only improvements made but catastrophes averted.

Although Madison Avenue continues for another thirty or so blocks, I will stop here at the Whitney, having completed a journey from one scaffolded building to another. Feet tired, I am ready to go home now. ■