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Existential Aesthetics

An Interview with Laura Adams



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LAURA ADAMS: Since the late 1950s you've had a vision of God and the Devil at war for possession of the universe, a vision that has been the metaphysical and moral center of your work. Has that vision changed appreciably over the years?

NORMAN MAILER: I don't know the answer. When you deal with cosmology, the question becomes on the one hand enormous — do God and the Devil war in the galaxies? — yet is intimate on the other. Since we all have our own idea of God and the Devil, it's hard for the idea not to change, even fluctuate. I'd say that over the last ten or fifteen years I've kept going back and forth in my mind over a notion that's hard to formulate, and I don't know that I should try — it's the sort of thing that sounds silly unless you can write a book about it — but for the purpose of this answer, just let me say that if there is a war continuing between God and the Devil for humankind, for the *future* of humankind, then this war is much more complex than a simple confrontation. We have to ask ourselves what the role of technology is in all this, and I've had years when I've believed technology is an instrument of the Devil, other years in which I've seen God in a Faustian contract with technology. Technology is perhaps some third force, some element that's come into our universe from other universes. Now all this is too endlessly and chronically paranoid, to try to get into it in the form of an interview. I think you can dramatize these notions in a major novel, but only a major novel. You

would wreck a minor novel by introducing such ideas. Therefore to talk about it in an interview is hopeless. It leads to people saying you have a windmill for a brain. Still I can see by the look in your eye that you're hardly ready to give up.

ADAMS: Isn't it an obsession, a form of paranoia, or even atavistic to think that there are cosmic forces manipulating us for their own ends?

MAILER: Well, I've never felt we are the simple creatures of these forces. On the contrary, I think they are fighting for our allegiance or even our unwitting cooperation. It isn't only that man needs God, but recall us to the title of that old French movie, *God Needs Men*. (Of course you couldn't use such a title today. You'd have to say "*God Needs Persons*.") Here's what I'm trying to say: To the degree I have any intense religious notion it's that when we fail God we are not merely disappointing some mightily benign paterfamilias who'd hoped we might turn out well and didn't. We are literally bleeding God, we're leeching Him, depriving Him of *His* vision. You see, I start with the idea that the explanation for our situation on earth may be that we are part of a divine vision which is not, necessarily, all loving, but on the contrary is a vision which wishes to take us out across the stars — a vision of existence at war with other varieties of existence in the cosmos. By this light, flying saucers may be, or may represent, a certain unconscious human awareness that there is this possibility in the universe, that there are other forms of intelligence which have nothing to do with us. Nothing even to do with our divinities.

ADAMS: Do you know the Arthur C. Clarke novel, *Childhood's End*?

MAILER: No.

ADAMS: In it the human race mutates into an essence, a form of energy, that unites with a kind of benevolent Oversoul which, interestingly, has used another race of benevolent beings in the form of devils to prepare the way for the human mutants. It appears that our fear of devils was based on a premonition that they would have something to do with the dissolution of our race. The unconscious awareness you spoke of reminded me of this. But isn't this notion that, as D.J. expressed it in *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, "You never know what vision has been humping you through the night," contradictory to the perception of good and evil in *An American Dream*? There it seemed that good and evil were for the most part clearly demarcated,

known to Rojack. Deborah and Barney Kelly were evil; Cherry was good.

MAILER: That was his view of it.

ADAMS: His view of it?

MAILER: That was all it was — Rojack's view of it. To the degree a reader sympathizes with Rojack, that would be the reader's view of it. To the degree a reader decides that Rojack is an absurd hero, he won't go along with that view. But even assuming that Rojack's view had something to do with *my* view of the characters, I was certainly attempting to make Deborah more complex on any spectrum of good and evil than Barney Kelly. Barney Kelly was supposed to be the focus of evil in the book.

ADAMS: The Devil personified.

MAILER: Well, the Devil approached, anyway. Whereas Deborah was someone who was, in quotes, "in thrall" to the Devil. But a woman of complexity, not altogether unacquainted with goodness.

ADAMS: And Cherry?

MAILER: I didn't mean Cherry to be all good by any means. To the degree that she's better than she ought to be, she's too sentimental a character. A gangster's moll is not the simplest kind of goodness we arrive at. But I wanted to indicate some characters had more purchase on good than others.

ADAMS: Cherry seemed to have a hard kernel of goodness even though she was surrounded by corruption.

MAILER: I think she's finally an enigmatic character. In my opinion, she's the weakest character in *An American Dream*. I think people who don't like the book have their strongest argument starting with Cherry. To a great degree, I'm afraid she's a sentimental conception. We don't really know much about her. We're asked to believe that this goodness exists in her but we don't have any idea of the real play of good and evil in her. She's a shadowy figure. Of course, my cop-out is that she's seen through Rojack's eyes. He's in an incandescent state of huge paranoia and enormous awareness. He's more heroic and more filled with dread than at any point in his life. So she seems like a lighthouse in the fog. What else does one do in such a state but fall madly in love for twenty-four hours and lose the love? It would have taken more wit than I possessed to have made her a character of dimension under these circumstances. Perhaps she did have to appear as a sentimental

figure. Still I think there's no getting around it, she's the first weakness of the book.

ADAMS: But it's a highly metaphorical novel. One of the mistakes many critics made in first reviewing it was to take it too literally. Isn't Cherry seen metaphorically as love, the reward of courage?

MAILER: Well, no. I don't believe a metaphorical novel has any right to exist until it exists on its ground floor. You know I never start with my characters as symbols. I'm unhappy if I can't see my characters. I mean, I not only have to know what they look like, and how tall they are, whether they're good looking or plain, but I also like to have some idea of what they smell like. So I had a pretty good idea of Cherry *physically*, a very clear idea in fact, but I would have been happier if her character had emerged somewhat more. I think Deborah, for instance, is vastly more successful. Deborah is worthy of a book in herself. In fact, at one time I thought idly of doing a book on Deborah, and then chose not to. But how she drew coincidences to herself. One of the things about *An American Dream* that's not often realized is my little theory, if you will, that as events become more dramatic so does the play of coincidence become more intense. You can reverse it. You can say that coincidence may fail to occur unless events are dramatic. I think there's a reason for that. If you believe in Gods and Devils, and I choose the plural because not only is God on one side, Devil on the other but they certainly have armies, adjutants, aides, little demons, angels, well, when important events occur why wouldn't they be concerned? Why wouldn't they be present? Why not try to tip the scales? Why wouldn't God and the Devil have their department of dirty tricks? You know, see them as some sort of sublime extension of the CIA.

ADAMS: That is why I see the novel as so highly metaphorical. The kinds of experiences Rojack has, the vision of shooting arrows into Cherry's womb while she's singing in the night club, for example, seem to me to exist in a dream allegory but not at the literal level.

MAILER: I would disagree. I'd had the experience of being in night clubs and thinking evil thoughts and really barbing them like darts and sending them to people and seeing them react. At the time I didn't know whether I was profoundly drunk or, you know, was I all alone in the world? But I had to recognize that there was a psychic reality to it. It wasn't just a fantasy. Since then, there's been any amount, my god, there's so much material

now to indicate that this is not at all unreasonable. For one thing, we do have telepathic powers, we talk about the human aura, about the ability to send hostile vibrations, everybody uses that phrase, but, you know, if you can send a hostile vibration, which is to say, a hostile wave, why not employ modern theories of light and say hate appears not only in the form of a wave but also as a particle? If you can do it with light, you can do it with hate. In other words, send a damn particle into someone. Why not assume you can sting someone with a thought so concentrated that they'll turn around and rub the back of their neck? I invite people who are reading this interview to try it from time to time. It helps if you're drunk, of course.

ADAMS: Is that what you've been doing to tape recorders all these years?

MAILER: Oh, I think there's a good reason why tape recorders bomb out on me. Why not assume we have electrical powers — we know there are pictures taken of the human aura in Russia. What is it called, the Kirlian process? Did you ever notice when you're in a real hurry to make a phone call, and you've got one of those button phones where you can dial quickly, that if you dial too quickly with too much desire, you never get your number?

ADAMS: Yes.

MAILER: Then you have to stop and say, "Okay, I don't really care if I get the number or not," and dial more slowly. Then the phone becomes your servant again. It's as if there's an electrical resistance to your electrical intensity.

ADAMS: I simply assumed the computer couldn't handle the digits as fast as I could push them.

MAILER: Well, I notice it with a dial phone, too. The phenomenon is not only in the speed with which you dial, but the intensity with which you want to get that call through. It's almost as if there is something in the center of electricity that mocks us. I've felt this with all sorts of electrical phenomena. It's possible I'm more charged, have more electricity about me. I don't mean that as any agreeable or attractive condition, it's bound to be disagreeable, but possibly I could have more effect upon electrical instruments than other people, a little more effect, ten percent more, whatever. At any rate, to go back to *An American Dream*, my point is that there wasn't a single phenomenon in that book that I considered dreamlike or fanciful or fantastical. To me, it was a realistic book, but a realistic book at that place where extraordinary things are

happening. I believe the experience of extraordinary people in extraordinary situations is not like our ordinary realistic experience at all. For example, one of the reasons I've never written about great prizefighters in a novel is that the experience they have in the ring is, I think, considerably different from what we believe it is. More intense, more mystical, more "spooky" if you will, than anything we see on the outside. Who wants to write about a fight the way sportswriters do, or even as fighters discuss it after the fight: "I was waiting to set him up with a good right. He dropped his guard and I popped him." That's the way they talk. Only, it isn't their experience.

ADAMS: I grant you that the characters in *An American Dream* perceive and experience reality altogether differently from us ordinary folks. Still, it seems to me that their literal reality has a metaphorical level as well, just as your literal realities nearly always turn into metaphorical ones linked to the central set of metaphors regarding the existence of God or the Devil. I've come to see them as metaphors for our moral directions, which in the absence of absolutes become existential, unknowable as good or evil.

MAILER: My metaphors explain more phenomena to me than any theology I can adopt. I was an atheist for years because I couldn't stomach the notion of the all-good, all-powerful God who calmly watched all sorts of suffering which by any extension of our human imagination could not be productive of anything, not even productive of future karma. In other words that whole waste of human possibilities of the most grinding, grim, dull sort. It seems to me that the only explanation is God is not all-powerful: He's merely doing the best He can.

ADAMS: But how literally does God exist?

MAILER: I believe He exists literally.

ADAMS: How?

MAILER: It's not for me to know how or where He exists. It's reasonable to assume He exists in a great many ways, in places we can comprehend and a great many where we cannot. All I'm saying is that He does not have to be all-powerful. What is there that makes Him all-powerful? He was powerful enough to have created our solar system, perhaps. And if you ask what are His limits, that might be my guess. But this is babbling. It isn't important where God's limits are. What's significant is the idea that God is not all-powerful, nor is the Devil. Rather it is that we exist as some mediating level between them. You see, this notion does restore a certain dignity to moral choice.

ADAMS: Of course, it does.

MAILER: It becomes important whether you're good or bad.

ADAMS: In trying to know what is good or evil aren't you in effect trying to take existentialism to its logical end, that is, to end existentialism?

MAILER: Not end it, seat it. Of all the philosophies, existentialism approaches experience with the greatest awe: it says we can't categorize experience before we've experienced it. The only way we're going to be able to discover what the truth about anything might be is to submit ourselves to the reality of the experience. At the same time, given its roots in atheistic philosophers like Sartre, existentialism has always tended toward the absurd. By way of Sartre, we are to act as if there were a purpose to things even though we know there is not. And that has become the general concept of existentialism in America. But it's not mine. I'm an existentialist who believes there is a God and a Devil at war with one another. Like Sartre in his atheism, I offer a statement of absolute certainty equally founded on the inability to verify it. Atheism is as removed from logical positivism as theology. Still, I don't give a goddamn if I can verify this or not. There has to be something out there beyond logical positivism. I want my brain to live. I want to adventure out on a few thoughts. The fact that I can never demonstrate them is not nearly so important to me as the fact that I may come up with an hypothesis so simple, so central, that I may be able to apply it in thousands of situations. If it begins to give me some inner coherence, if I begin to think that I know more as a result of this philosophy, why not?

ADAMS: But isn't what you've identified as existentialism, extended to its logical end, seeking to know what is finally unknowable?

MAILER: That's not my definition of existentialism. I'd say we find ourselves in an existential situation whenever we are in a situation where we cannot foretell the end. Some of these situations are grave. If you get into a skid on an icy road, at a speed that's uncomfortably high, you don't know if you're going to be able to pull your car out of it without a smack-up. That's an existential situation. When people talk about it afterward they think of that quality of time when it is slowing up. The first time people connect with marijuana — not the first or the twentieth time they smoke it, but the first time they *connect* with it — they're in an existential situation. It's not the universe they have been sitting on all the time. It's slower, more sensuous, more meaningful, more natural, but filled with awe. The light tends to have a little

of the hour of the wolf, a light close to a lavender or purple, that light you get on certain kinds of evenings, or very early on certain kinds of dawns full of foreboding. But it's — there are all kinds of situations. A woman losing her virginity is in an existential situation. Of course, part of the comedy of twentieth-century technology is that it's gotten to the point where a woman can lose her virginity without being in an existential situation for a moment. It's all exactly the way she thought it was going to be, she's been so well oriented.

ADAMS: I think that assumes that her partner is not also a virgin. . . . All right. Your basic existential situation is a situation anyone enters at any moment in time when the end result of his actions is unknown. But isn't to a larger extent your aim in all the work that you've been doing to uncover what is essentially good or evil in our natures and God's nature when that kind of thing is actually unknowable? What I was going to suggest earlier in talking about the demarcations of good and evil in *An American Dream* is that you seem to have become increasingly obsessed since that time with your inability to know what is good and what is evil.

MAILER: You say I'm obsessed, but where would be the literary proof of that? What books would show that?

ADAMS: Start with the case of Richard Nixon in *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* and *St. George and the Godfather*: your inability to know or to intuit whether Nixon is basically good or basically evil; to know, in *Of a Fire on the Moon*, whether our space program will carry God's vision to the stars or the Devil's; to know in *Why Are We in Vietnam?* whether America has made a Faustian compact with the Devil or whether God is using us for evil ends; whether or not our national leaders and events win or lose us ground in this divine battle. It seems to me that you lead us to this question, with increasing desire to know the answer, in every work.

MAILER: Well, it could be said that all I'm doing is leading people back to Kierkegaard. I'd remind you I've written this several times: Kierkegaard taught us, or tried to teach us, that at that moment we're feeling most saintly, we may in fact be evil. And that moment when we think we're most evil and finally corrupt, we may, in fact, in the eyes of God, be saintly at that moment. The first value of this notion is that it strips us of that fundamental arrogance of assuming that at any given moment any of us have enough centrality, have a *seat* from which we can expound our

dogma, or measure our moral value. So we don't have the right to say Richard Nixon is: A. good; B. evil. I might have my opinion of Richard Nixon, but I don't have the right to say that man is evil, any more than I have a right to say he is good.

ADAMS: Do you have a clear notion of the good?

MAILER: No. But I have, if you will, I have and I submit to the force of this word, I have a fairly well-formed *cloud* of intuitions about the nature of the good, and, like a cloud, it has to a certain degree a structure, and yet the structure is capable of altering quickly, depending on the celestial winds blowing and the less celestial winds. A cloud changes shape quickly but it remains a cloud. It's not just simply an unformed chaos.

ADAMS: You've said that an evil person is someone who has a clear notion of the good and operates in opposition to it.

MAILER: Therefore by my own definition I'm definitely not evil.

ADAMS: All right, but are you wicked?

MAILER: Unquestionably wicked, yes.

ADAMS: By your own terms, which is not knowing what is good or evil in any situation, but upping the ante each time.

MAILER: Upping the ante, yes. I'd say I may be one of the most wicked spirits in American life today. Maybe. America may be changing faster than I am.

ADAMS: Is it fair to say that your existentialism is leading us to know the nature of good and evil?

ADAMS: It's leading us to — well, let me take a detour. People who submit to logical positivism, and go on from there into philosophies as difficult as Wittgenstein's, will answer if you ask, "Why go through these incredible disciplines in order to verify the fact that you're able to verify the wing span of a gnat but not of an archangel?" They will answer, "Well, it isn't what we are able to verify that is interesting, so much as that we go through a discipline which enables us to think cogently. We're less likely to go in for sloppy thinking thereafter." That's the value of it. I'd say by going in for my variety of associational, metaphorical thinking (which is, of course, the exact opposite) I may be able eventually to think speculatively without feeling philosophical vertigo. You see, it doesn't take any more illogic to posit that there's a god or devil than it takes to say there is none. The latter statement is absolutely as potent an act of faith. There's a marvelous line in *Jumpers*, the play by Tom Stoppard, to that effect. I paraphrase:

"Well, maybe atheism is that crutch people need to protect themselves against having to face the enormity of the existence of God." You know, once you contemplate the notion that there is God and this God may be embattled, the terror you feel is enormous.

ADAMS: It's a terror, but isn't it also paranoia?

MAILER: No. The terror is not that some force is working on you to ruin you. It's another kind of terror: It's that nothing is nailed down. That we are out there — that our lives are truly existential. That we're not going to end up well. Not necessarily. You see, there's always been this sort of passive confidence implicit in Christianity, the confidence that things are going to work out all right. One does have to die, that's true, but if one keeps one's nose reasonably clean, one is going to heaven. That gave security to everybody. The ship of state was built on that security. The ship of state was nailed down. It didn't travel the stormy seas. Rather, it was carried by the strongest pallbearers of the nation. And what's happened now is we're entering an existential period in our history where nothing is nailed down. All the American faiths, one by one, are being exploded. We lived for too long in a paranoid dream world that believed communism was the secret of all evil on earth because it was the social embodiment of the Devil.

ADAMS: That's paranoid.

MAILER: That's paranoid. But I don't believe the Devil is the secret of all evil on earth. I believe something more complicated than that. I think God might be the source of a considerable amount of evil. Because if God is embattled, He could fail to take care, much to His great woe, of people who are devoted to Him, in the same way that a general might have to surrender soldiers on a hill. And those soldiers could give up with great bitterness in their hearts.

ADAMS: You've talked about evil in one sense as God's shit, God's excrement.

MAILER: Where did I say that?

ADAMS: It comes up in "The Metaphysics of the Belly." A colleague of mine once remarked that it's but a step from scatology to eschatology and I've often thought of this remark with regard to your work. Now I'm interested in the relationship between excrement and eternity. If God's shit is evil, but shit is associated with the Devil, doesn't this imply that God creates evil?

MAILER: There are references in my work to the idea that shit and the Devil have an umbilical relation, but it's not my idea after all. Luther had a few notions about it.

ADAMS: As did Jonathan Swift.

MAILER: It's an idea that goes — it starts with the most primitive peoples. It goes all the way. There's a reason for it. Shit is what we reject, at least to the degree that the shit felt it deserved a better end for itself. In other words, a lot of our shit has nutrients in it, worth in it. It's just that the body couldn't take it, and so passed it out. Some of the best of the food goes out with the shit as well as some of the worst. That's what I said in "The Metaphysics of the Belly." All right. To the degree that we can loosen our imagination to assume this stuff might have a soul, after all we're beginning to discover now that plants have feelings and souls, so it may be that food, even though in a peculiar relation to life, not as alive as a plant, let's say, or as an animal, but still alive to a degree, has a mood, has a spirit, has something. If food feels it has been violated, suppose it can die with a curse. Of course, the Devil loves to be around and pick up those who die with a curse. Malcolm Muggeridge once had Mother Theresa of Calcutta on a television show with him. Muggeridge, who is by any measure a devoutly religious man, had just written a book about Mother Theresa and obviously revered her. He told me what she used to do in Calcutta. Her order of nuns would take people who were dying on the street and move them into her convent where they'd die anyway a few days later — they didn't begin to have medicine to take care of them or anything like that — but her notion was, and Muggeridge was moved by this, and I agree that it is a moving idea, was that she didn't want them to die with absolutely nothing. She wanted them to be able to come in and get a little attention before they died so they wouldn't go out with a complete bitterness in their hearts. Now that is a religious woman. The recognition that one not die with a curse is fundamental to any inquiry into what could be the possible nature of God and the Devil. If God is embattled, and can't give fair justice to all, then what of those who do not achieve what they saw as their own fulfillment and thereby become spiritual material for the Devil, if not in this life then in another? We haven't said one word about karma, but my first idea these days is that any attempt to speak of these things makes no sense unless you take into account the peculiar calculus of karma. We may have to recognize that we're not only acting for this life but for other lives. Our past lives and our

future lives. Paying dues, receiving awards. Reducing the cost of future dues, for example, by certain acts of abnegation that make no sense to us or our friends, yet ready to dare, on the other hand, sometimes desperate activities because we *are* desperate. The condition in which we live is hurting our karma.

ADAMS: Karma is a word you've used increasingly in the last few years. It's a term that you did not use in "The Metaphysics of the Belly" or "The Political Economy of Time," but which you could have in describing the nature of the soul. Is this something new in your metaphysics or is it a term for something that you've already described, like the way in which the soul exists, in "The Political Economy of Time"?

MAILER: I had come across the word in books but never paid any attention. In about 1953, I think it was in Robinson, Illinois, I went out to visit James Jones in his writers' colony and he and Lowney Handy were talking about karma and I said, "What's all that?" So he gave me the standard explanation which is that we are not only reincarnated, but the way in which we are is the reflection, the judgment, the truth, of how we lived our previous life. If you exist in a simple form of karma with no interference by Gods or Devils, a natural flux of karma, then to the degree you lived a life that was artful, your reincarnation was artful. To the degree you lived a life that destroyed the time of others and dredged up all the swamp muds, so you are a creature of the swamp in your next life. The beauty of this may be that there is now good purpose to the swamp. (This isn't Jones's talk any longer, just a more general explanation of karma.) At any rate, Jones went on about it and I said, "You *believe* in that?" Because I was an atheist and a socialist in those days. He said, "Oh, sure. That's the only thing that makes sense." Well, the line rang in my head for years. "The only thing that makes sense." I thought about it over and over and in the last three or four years I began to think, "Yes, that does make sense. Jones was right."

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An Interview with Buzz Farbar

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BUZZ FARBAR: In your book on Marilyn Monroe, you say of her marriage to Arthur Miller, "It was only a few marriages (which is to say a few failures) later that he [Mailer] could recognize how he would have done no better than Miller, and probably have been damaged further in the process." Why do you feel a few marriages can be equated with a few failures?

NORMAN MAILER: People used to go into marriage without questioning the institution, never thought of a life where they might not be married. By now, weddings are beleaguered. When people go into it today, we have an existential adventure, for they don't know how it will turn out. In other words, marriage has become interesting again. It's a gamble they well may lose. Of course, I'm not referring to all of society — more to that educated leisure class which is the base of the establishment. Precisely in that part of our world, marriage is weakest.

So, in a sense, such men and women are gambling against a social tide. They're saying: We're going to make this marriage work, even though ten thousand obstacles in the scheme of things fight against us. Including almost everybody's greater desire for promiscuity. So it may be legitimate to speak of a marriage that's terminated, as a failure. Like a lost bet.

FARBAR: How about the termination of a bad marriage? Is being able to end it a failure or a success?

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MAILER: Obviously there are all kinds of marriages. I suppose I was referring to people who are relatively independent, and sufficiently narcissistic to want to live their own kind of life. For them to be able to live with someone else is not an automatic venture. But then you can always find men and women who get married out of deep dependence on one another. Such marriages are usually a tyranny on one side, an enslavement on the other. Sometimes they are awful marriages where it may be a victory for the weak mate to split.

FARBAR: Do you feel you learned something from each marriage? Does each marriage get better, or worse, or is it all the same?

MAILER: Oh, each marriage is different. Being married to a woman is the equivalent, I think, of living in a major culture. Should you find yourself married to one woman and then to another, you have gone through the equivalent of spending five years in England after five years in France.

I don't look back on these marriages with bitterness. It seems to me you often get as much as you lost. I even discovered there may be four stages to knowing a woman. First, there's living together. It's often thought equal to marriage. Not by half. You can live with a woman and never begin to comprehend her at all, not until you get married to her. Once you do that, you're in the next stage. The third, obviously, is children. Once again your woman is different. Say it's analogous to a culture going through major transformations. The fourth stage is knowing a woman once you're divorced. Then, indeed, you come to know something at last. So if it weren't for the fact that there are children, there would be something almost agreeable about moving from marriage to marriage, just as there is something exciting about spending five years in England and five in France.

But there are children, and that's the vortex of all postmarital pain, which is always so surprisingly huge. Because finally the children come out of a vision in the marriage. It doesn't always even matter how casually they may have been conceived. Children can be created out of desperation, out of laziness, out of apathy, as a sporting proposition. But, usually, children come out of some covert union, some feeling that you have something together which should be embodied in a child. Otherwise, it's a little absurd to conceive. Therefore, once you have children, if the marriage breaks you can speak of it as failure. The vision that's embodied in that child is now broken. Not to count the damage to the child.

FARBAR: Knowing you as well as I do, I know that you are, to use your word "profoundly," a profoundly moral person —

MAILER: Can I interrupt you? I'm usually called a profoundly moral person by people who are trying to startle others who say I'm immoral or amoral, people who don't know much about my work and think of me as some sort of sexual ogre. Of course, my defenders then say, "On the contrary, he's a very moral man." I don't consider myself moral at all. I see myself as a man who lives in an embattled relation to morality. In other words, it isn't so much that I am moral, as that I have an advanced sensibility toward what may be moral and immoral in my actions. Which I find intolerable as a result, because I know when I'm being immoral, and I'm being immoral most of the time. By my own lights. In other words, I'm so rarely true to my own code that it's hard to maintain any self-respect. But I would never speak of myself as a moral man. Quite the contrary.

FARBAR: Can you love deeply more than one woman? If you're committed to one woman, how do you feel about a relationship with another one at the same time? Do you feel good or bad during an affair?

MAILER: I think it's impossible to be in love with two women at the same time. By now, in the middle of the twentieth century, so few of us get anywhere near that kind of love that it seems a sentimental fallacy. Just think of the people we know. Think of speaking to them of love. A titter runs through the table. What does it mean to most people when you talk about being in love with two people at once? It means you're fucking two women at once, that's all it means.

But if you're really in love with a woman, I think it's almost impossible to be in love with another. If you love a woman, you are engaged in a vision with her. That rarely happens. Maybe two, three, four times in our lives. But once you do, every time you give something to another woman, the beginning of a different vision is being sent to a different place. It can only work successfully when you have people whose souls are neatly separated. I believe we all have divided souls, but few of us have souls that are divided formally — in other words, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Those two psyches can have two great love affairs, yes. But most of us have double personalities that are more amorphous. The edges interreact. They're never clear-cut. And it's not simple for us to decide what our two personalities might be. The borders are

not clear to us. As a result, being in love with two people usually muddies the distinction further.

FARBAR: Getting back to the Monroe book. You say, "It's no accident that studs are usually heartless about the aftermath. By their logic they've already treated the mother well and given the baby a good beginning."

MAILER: That's the stud's vanity. He's given a woman what she needs. We start with the natural assumption that studs are male chauvinists. Obviously, I was trying to explore one facet of that. Other people think, "God, he's a heartless man, he went in and knocked that woman up, walked away, never thought twice about it, he never bothered. How can anyone be that inhuman, that brutal?" I was trying to look for the stud's own self-justification. Wouldn't it come out as, "After all the pleasure I gave that woman, she has no cause for complaint"? To me, there's something a hint comic to it. Anybody who knows anything about women can recognize that the pleasure we assume we are giving to them can be a little less, in most cases, than we assumed.

FARBAR: There's always that little bit of doubt in a stud's mind, too.

MAILER: Oh, of course. You know studs, they're like professional athletes. They don't think of all the guys who can't make love. They think of other studs. They live in the terror that some other dude might be a little better than them. They're like street fighters.

FARBAR: You write about Monroe that "she can be tender, yet cold-blooded — her love tends to end when the role ends." Generally a woman is more cold-blooded than a man. Why is this so?

MAILER: A man is in a more existential position than a woman, he has to get an erection. The act doesn't take place in crackerjack fashion without that erection. So there is a limit to how much a man can simulate in sex. Unless a woman is suffering from a vagina so dry it's impossible for a man to enter her, she can simulate, and throw out a huge number of passions without feeling one. Much harder for a man to pretend to great sexual excitement if he's not feeling it. So it may not be that women are more cold-blooded than men so much as it's easier for women to get away with it.

FARBAR: You say of the marriage of Miller and Monroe, "Actually, they settle into good days and bad days. Which is the narrative line of marriage."

MAILER: Well, you could speak of certain human relations as being comparable to literary forms. For instance, the one-night stand was like a poem, good or bad. An affair of reasonable duration, a short story. By this logic, a marriage is a novel. In a short story we're interested in the point. In a novel we usually follow the way people move from drama to boredom back to drama again. And we often judge a novelist by his skill in moving people in and out of these high and low areas of existence. Of course, marriage is exactly like that. In a marriage, our interest is not that a given point is made in a given night, but the way that recognition is confirmed or eroded over the weeks or months to follow. The narrative line of all marriage, in that sense, is good days and bad days. And most people like to live in the form of a novel. Just as there are people who like to live in the form of the short story.

FARBAR: And psychopaths?

MAILER: They have lives that consist of poems, mostly bummers. But a majority of people seem to prefer endless, meaningless days. They don't want the ups to be so high they can't manage to come down to a life of lower pressure. They are the people who love marriage precisely because it offers an agreeable way to live in a slightly bored state. They seek out boredom, because it relieves them of dread. A mild boredom, not an intense boredom. An intense boredom, of course, is a form of torture.

FARBAR: Do you think that a man, when he is making love to a woman, is always measuring himself in some way, or is he being measured by the woman?

MAILER: Competitive men are obviously going to measure themselves against other men. Many women will have, perhaps, their own private scores for the man. But when a woman is in love, a man can be . . . well, in the sense of a sexual athlete, he can be unpromising, yet he can seem sublime to a woman, because she is open to him. The most tentative caress he offers arouses feeling that more skillful men won't. Obviously, sexual pleasure is not simply related to performance. Otherwise, we would have sexual Olympics. If people are not in love, but happen to like sex as a sport, the way other people like horses or skiing or motorboat racing, then performance comes to the fore. It was my assumption that when Marilyn fell in love, her man became sublime. For a time at least. In fact, it's usually necessary, in love, to believe that the man or woman you're with is better than anyone who has come before, so we find that way in which they are better than others. We have a need to believe our sex life is becoming more

alive all the time. Otherwise, it's hard to continue. Especially as you get older.

FARBAR: Do you feel, as I do, that when a woman says to you, "So-and-so is a lousy lay," you then feel ill-will toward her? Is that purely a male ego thing, not wanting to hear that another man was a bad lay?

MAILER: I'd say we usually take pleasure in hearing another man is a bad lay. But if we have any sense, we recognize it's mostly meaningless. If you hear all over town that a certain man is a bad lay from just about every woman who has spoken about him, there's a reasonable assumption the guy is not too good. But would you like to be described by a woman on the worst night you ever had in bed? Or any of the hundred worst nights? I dread to think of certain descriptions of me. Speaking just of performance, we have a spectrum. So when a woman says of a given man that he was a bad lay, I wince. Unless there's real cause, the woman is usually avenging herself. But then we know that women, maybe out of self-protection, lie a vast amount in sex, even lie to themselves about the past. We have all seen women who couldn't keep their hands off their man; then the years went by, and the man was out of her life. Slowly his sexual reputation sank, inch by inch. A part of the comedy of sexual affairs.

FARBAR: I wonder what your feelings are about promiscuity in women. And promiscuity in men.

MAILER: I suppose I believe you pay for every last thing you get out of life. Years ago, Calder Willingham told me a story about a situation where he tried every trick to make a woman leave him. Finally she began going with another man. Then he discovered he was jealous. He told this story on himself with great humor, and looked at me and said, "Norman, you can't cheat life." He said this in his inimitable Georgia accent. It's not a remark one hasn't heard before. But there's such a thing as hearing a maxim at just the right moment for oneself. Then it goes all the way in. So that remark stayed with me. Whenever I'm trying to work out some sort of moral balance for myself, I find the thought useful.

Of course, certain people get more out of being promiscuous than others, and pay less for it. But the idea that people can be promiscuous without exploiting their own sensitivity is impossible. On the other hand, promiscuity is altogether necessary for some, especially if you have a personality that consists of fragments, as most of us do by now. We live in a time of interruption. The art of the absurd is built on the fact that we live in a contin-

uum of interruption. Turn on the television and see a story slam into an advertisement, and so forth. As a result, there's a huge tendency to become fragmented. Then different relations give us different things in different places.

But as you get older, you begin to discover that promiscuity gets more and more difficult, because it makes you commit too much of yourself. I'm fifty now. I've reached the point where conceivably I could be making love to a woman and die in bed. That can happen. If it did, which woman would I be with? Does one want to die with a stranger? As you get older, making love becomes more apocalyptic exactly because you're closer to the end of your life each time. As a result there's less desire to be promiscuous. On the other hand, if people are rooted in the promiscuous, the attempt to keep themselves monogamous can induce all sorts of neuroses and diseases, no question.

What I distrust always, however, are professional swingers. Come on, join the gangfuck, it's good for you. Those people are as totalitarian as the ones who say chastity is the only good on earth. By now, they're more. Part of the totalitarian is to make an absolute out of the prevailing tendency of the time.

FARBAR: But if you pick up a girl in a bar at three in the morning and have a flying fuck at four and go home at five or six, that to me is not promiscuity. It's just something that happened. It's almost a physical act, like going to the bathroom. Don't you feel that?

MAILER: Yeah, but I hate it. Look, there are times when one has to depart from one's identity. As in *Last Tango in Paris* people making love without identity is exciting. Obviously, there is a need to treat sex as a species of evacuation. We've all had great fucks with people we hardly know. While that satisfies something, by now I hate it. Hate having too much sexual pleasure without feeling a great deal for the woman. I tend by now to stay away from fucking a girl I don't love but really enjoy fucking. I used to like that years ago, loved the power, but by now I kind of hate it. I hate the feeling afterward. I don't hate the fuck. I love the fuck, but I hate what comes afterward.

FARBAR: Because of the way you think she must feel when she knows it's a dead end?

MAILER: No. I'm not even thinking about her. Well, I'm thinking about her in the sense that I'm a guilty enough man so that I can't use people around me much anymore. We were speaking about morality earlier, and it isn't that I'm moral, it's almost rather that

I have enough respect for morality to feel I can't abuse the edges of it forever, can't abuse some of my central premises forever. I have this belief in karmic balance — that we come into life with a soul that carries an impost of guilt and reward from the past. And at the end of each life we may be reborn, which I think is a reward in itself. Which not everyone gets. Some people's souls die, literally die, just as the body dies; some people's souls die in a given life. As you know, I believe in two kinds of death. Final death as some species of oblivion, and transcendental death, where you're reborn in some other form of existence that gives fair measure for your previous lives. So I think as we get older there comes a time when we have to worry about this moral balance in ourselves. Maybe I've come to the point where I can't use people anymore. I do know it leaves me depressed to think I've had a woman for too little, offered no real feeling. I tend to stay away from such women. That wasn't true years ago.

FARBAR: That leads me to another question. How have you been able to maintain such extraordinarily good relationships with three of your four ex-wives? They truly seem to be your good friends. It's more than just being civilized, it's a special kind of talent, I think.

MAILER: I think we loved each other. I certainly loved each of them, and I believe they loved me. We have children together, and we love those children. When we broke up there was a recognition . . . well, we broke up for different reasons each time, but there was a recognition that there had to be something low about making the children suffer.

Of course, each time the marriage broke up, it was hardly agreeable or nice. Maybe over the years we've come together a little. When you're divorced from a woman, the friendship can then start. Because one's sexual vanity is not in it any longer. At least not in the same way. You can look back on it and say, "Yes, we were pretty good together, but not good enough." And let it go at that. Then, of course, everything in the woman you liked in the first place, her charm, the more attractive aspects of her character, now can come back into play, as well as everything that got lost in the harassments of marriage. A hint of tenderness returns.

When you're in love, the stakes are high. There's much more anger when there's love. Because if one's love is frustrated, it means a good deal more than if one's liking is balked. So there's a readiness in marriage to walk around in a state of resentment which starts to flatten all the smaller affections. Of course, there

are marriages where the opposite occurs. When the sexual impulse quiets down or dies even, the people become great friends. Carnally speaking, they're divorced, but they don't separate legally. They live together as dear friends. Such marriages are often nice. I've never been in one, but I imagine it could be very nice.

FARBAR: Let's change the subject completely. I wondered how you felt about lesbianism. If you had any thought that you could —

MAILER: It's funny, you know, I've always had a puritanical attitude about homosexuality, almost as if I couldn't afford to begin to get homosexual, because God knows where it would all stop. You know about that old Talmudic notion, that if you want to restrain an impulse don't just build a fence around the impulse itself, build a fence around the fence. By analogy, I've never been tolerant of the idea of homosexuality for myself. But I've always had the feeling that if I were a woman, that I somehow would enjoy lesbianism. I think if I were a woman it would mean very little to me to be a lesbian part of the time.

FARBAR: Is that because lesbian women you've known or read about are always saying they know how to do whatever it is they're doing better than men do?

MAILER: Well, obviously there must be fine sensuality among lesbians. Listen, what am I edging around it for? I have seen women together and it's lovely. Or, let us say, it is lovely provided it isn't finally designed to exclude men from every relation with women.

FARBAR: Last spring, in a piece in *New York Review of Books* on *Last Tango* you wrote about Brando and Maria Schneider being nameless when they meet each other, and this made their sexual relationship intriguing. As soon as some sort of relationship begins, and they get to know one another's names, it ends. Why do women enjoy anonymous sex?

MAILER: I think once a woman becomes anonymous in a sexual relationship — it's as if she's weightless. She no longer has the gravity of old responsibility. She can cut loose.

But I think one thing's rarely understood about promiscuity. In *Last Tango* there's that line "Fuck God," with which the picture begins — you can hardly hear it. Brando screams it as the Metro goes overhead. One of the profoundest motives in promiscuity and in perversion is fuck God. God, I'm defying you. A most basic human emotion. Now, whether we actually defy God when we think we do, or are unwittingly dignifying Him, even expressing His will, which has been kept from us for two thousand

years — in other words, it is the pagan who expresses the will of God rather than the Christian — that we don't know. But the impulse is there.

What we can count on is that when a woman throws off her social responsibility, her tendency is to be wilder than a man. Not only in anonymous relations but in orgies. Is there anything in the literature of orgy that doesn't suggest that women are always wilder? After men are used up, the women get together. They can make love to one another for hours until the men are restored. Or maybe it's that women sit upon an endless well of sexuality, whereas men have to keep rebuilding it.

FARBAR: The opposite of orgy is marriage, I suppose. Do you feel that you are still married, in some karmic sense, or some essence of you is still married to each of your wives, and you are never away from them?

MAILER: No, but it's possible certain relations continue from one life to another. Because of a great love or a great hatred, or perhaps because they're unfulfilled.

The logic of karma, it seems to me, is that God, whatever His other motivations, may as well be considered some kind of cosmic artist, engaged in a dialogue, at the least, about the nature of existence with other cosmic artists in other parts of the universe, other gods. So the point of karma may be to enable Him to go back to certain projects, just as an artist sometimes wishes to improve his first attempt. Sometimes what an artist does is perfect. Sometimes one wants to work it further, go to the point where you can do better or, if not, know you've failed and abandon the notion. Perhaps human souls represent some of the most poignant notions of God. You see, there's an extraordinary beauty in the potential of most human relations if we're willing to assume that under all the absurdities, all the spleen and waste and brutality, there's a blocked aesthetic conception. Maybe that's why I object to some of the more casual forms of promiscuity. I don't object across the board. There are times when you need a fuck the way you need a shit. Simple as that. Let's not pretend. One of the troubles with promiscuous fucking is that you not only get the wastes out, but take in waste from the other person's system. You shit on them, and they shit on you. I think one of the best lines in *Marilyn* is, "Less is known about the true transactions of fucking than any science on earth."

FARBAR: Well then, why do so many women look upon the sex act in a much more holy way than a man does?

MAILER: They do, they don't. Some have absolute contempt for sex. Probably just as many women think of sex as evacuation as men. They enjoy sex, but despise it. One of the drives in women's lib is to insist that women are absolutely as cynical about sex as men and have the right to be absolutely as cynical.

FARBAR: Remember when the Pill first came on the scene and made a lot of young people very happy? There was a lot of screwing, and then gradually, the way it is now, there seems to be less joy in sex. When I was eighteen or twenty, I'd be screwing my brains out if it were possible.

MAILER: You were screwing your brains out because it was a criminal activity in your day, and so offered more pleasure than law-abiding activity. Which has been my argument about permissiveness in sex from the beginning. It's why I'm opposed to legalization of marijuana. Reduce the penalties, but don't have marijuana legal. The corporation will take it over. Marijuana with filter-tip cigarettes. You'll have vitamins in the marijuana, and every pollution of advertising. You'll come to hate the very thought of smoking because they'll be working their scheme on you.

By the same token, the moment you get too much permissiveness in sex, you get pulled into somebody else's manipulation scheme. My idea these years is that total promiscuity is the unstated need of the technological society. Its impulse is to accept indiscriminate fucking. It wants humans to become units. About the time we no longer distinguish between a man and a woman, he-she has become an interchangeable sexual part. We put it into the hole of those weaker than us, and get it put into our own hole by those stronger; we become a link in a technological chain of sex.

I've always hated the Pill. It reduces the fuck to a species of upper masturbation. Part of the beauty of the fuck was that you were taking a terrible chance. You could knock the girl up, and if you did, then by God you found out what you really felt about her, how phony were you, how true. When a woman comes to you and says she's pregnant, you know more about what you feel for her than you did before.

All right, the women will counter and say, That's good for you, finding your identity, but we're losing ours. Because we have to get butchered by abortionists. I've never been able to answer this. I will agree that the absence of the Pill was better for the sanity of men than women. I think women, if they are willing to look at

themselves in such fashion, are in the embattled position. Since they are closer to creation, they have to pay more for the privilege. They hate it now. They hate it because we live in a technological world, where to be pregnant means that you're removed for a time from the major scene, which is to say the whole technological process. The last power of the human heart as we approach apocalypse is ambition. Everybody gets more ambitious to be in on more. If we can't wield the power, then we want to be in on the shaping of the power.

FARBAR: What about legalized abortion?

MAILER: I think when a woman goes through an abortion, even legalized abortion, she goes through hell. There's no use hoping otherwise. For what is she doing? Sometimes she has to be saying to herself, "You're killing the memory of a beautiful fuck." I don't think abortion is a great strain when the act was some miserable little screech, or some squeak oozed up through the trapdoor, a little rat which got in, a worm who slithered under the threshold. That sort of abortion costs a woman little more than discomfort. Unless there are medical consequences years later.

But if a woman has a great fuck, and then has to abort, it embitters her. A profound and awful transaction. The Pill didn't come into existence for nothing.

FARBAR: Do you see any future in a formal structure of marriage?

Many young people in various strata of society are no longer getting married.

MAILER: We return to our beginning. I think marriage has a future of a sort. I think it's going to become a classical demand on people. Of course, few people are interested in classical demands. Those who are will look upon marriage with more regard than they have in a century. Because it's not going to be easy to imagine a man and woman getting married when they're young and both virgins, say at the age of eighteen or twenty or twenty-two, and then proceeding to live in happiness and fidelity for fifty or sixty years in order to die together. That is soon going to be equal in difficulty to pitching a no-hitter. And will be respected in the same fashion. The virtuosity of the demand is finally going to keep marriage alive. Not necessarily as a fundamental social institution, but as a grand curiosity. Because there will always be that human wonder. Maybe that was the way it was supposed to be. Maybe there is nothing more beautiful than one man and one woman managing to be that much to each other. What courage it takes, what extraordinary leaps, what a transcendent vision one

needs of the mate. What a transcendent vision one needs of existence in order to ride out the boredom, the entrenched monotonies, the temptations, the small betrayals, the social pressures, and finally the huge social weight of that oncoming future, which will hardly encourage anyone to remain faithful, for to stay in marriage will appear absurd.

The point is you can't cheat life. Go back to Willingham's notion. You pay for everything. The worst notion afoot among the young people I know is that you can get fucking for nothing. You don't get it that way. You pay for fucking with your life and you end with your death. Then something in the balance of things may decide whether you've earned your reincarnation. The new life we're given may be the closest we ever come to the truth.

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An Interview with Cathleen Medwick



CATHELEN MEDWICK: What we're thinking about is an interview on love.

NORMAN MAILER: Love?

MEDWICK: Primarily.

MAILER: Oh — I don't know if I can talk about it.

MEDWICK: I know — I don't know if I can ask you.

MAILER: Let's say that I have enough respect for love so that I think if you start to talk about it, you can get into an awful lot of trouble. You're likely to let all the devils in the cosmos in on your little secret, whatever it is that enables you to trap a little of that substance that's rarer than gold. I mean, if a man had a small supply of gold, he wouldn't go around telling people where he mined it, would he? So I think that the only people who want to talk about love are those who don't have any and pretend to know something about it.

MEDWICK: The reason we're so curious is that people don't necessarily associate sex with love, and I think that you do, almost invariably.

MAILER: Well I think they have a fugue-like relationship, and keep going in and out of one another.

MEDWICK: Yes. You know, I should tell you, or maybe I shouldn't, that most of the time when I read your descriptions of very intimate sex, it reads — it reminds me of something, I couldn't figure

out until recently what it was. And I realized that it reminded me of medieval romances that I had read as a graduate student.

MAILER: Yeah, Marion Faye at the end of *The Deer Park* when he's thinking of his relation to Elena, and I guess Rojack in *The American Dream*. Sure. That's as close as I ever came really to writing about sex. I find that in a funny way I'm slightly embarrassed by explicit descriptions. You know, I did a book about Henry Miller a few years ago and he is such a marvelous pornographic writer, that is I don't know whether he'd call himself a pornographic writer or not, and I don't want to insult the old boy, especially now that he's gone, but let's say he wrote about rip-roaring sex like nobody else. I really felt like a maiden aunt next to him, I'm so nice-nelly compared to Miller. I'm not sure that I really know how to write about sex. I'm always making it too metaphorical.

MEDWICK: Did you ever by any chance read anything that Saint Teresa wrote about her mystical experience?

MAILER: No.

MEDWICK: Well, she described being invaded by the spirit of God in terms that were extremely sexual by modern standards. When the nineteenth-century critics read it they thought, "My God, she thought she was talking about something spiritual but she was really talking about a complete sexual experience." It was very hard to convince them that not only was she aware that she was translating it that way but that there was no reason not to talk about it that way. Do you consider your feelings about sex and love to be somewhat mystical; romantic?

MAILER: That's why I'm not happy talking about it. If you interview a mystic, you've got the single most difficult variety of interview on your hands. Mystics feel about interviews the way primitive people feel about being photographed. It goes back to Hemingway's notion: "If it feels good, don't talk about it." One can talk around it, but I'm not going to give you a definition of love and a definition of sex. I'm going to speak guardedly and circumferentially and let readers make of it what they will in relation to their own experience. That's the way most people talk about sex and love most of the time anyway. My mother once described the plot of *Romeo and Juliet* by saying, "Well, I think they kind of liked each other," my mother having been brought up in a school which believed you should never talk about personal relationships at all.

MEDWICK: Well, do you think that men love differently than women?

MAILER: Let's try to separate sex and love. For instance, it's possible sex inspires more mystical feelings than love. I'm talking about love in the immediate sense, A loves B. Terribly concrete and particular. You love the way someone walks, the way they talk, the way they do all those things in the songs, you love the way they smell and you love the way they wear clothing, you love the way they laugh, you love the way they tell a joke, you love the way they say no to somebody — it's all the things they do. Whereas sex very often makes you feel close to God. Now if you love someone, and if you also have good sex with her, then you can feel very close to God as you love. In fact, it's easier to feel close if you have good sex with someone you love, because having good sex with somebody you don't like can leave you with an angry, confused, lustful feeling that may inspire you to more and more sex until you burn it out, and it drives you further and further away from any tenderness. To that extent you offer nothing to God, you're only thinking of the Devil. Sex also inspires, very often, a feeling that you're awfully close to the Devil. But I think the paradox of sex is that you can have sex with someone you don't know, on the first night, and feel closer to God in that moment than you're likely to feel again for five or ten years, even if you're never going to see the person again. You may say goodbye in the morning and never see each other again, a romance in the airport or something. Although I must confess I've never had a romance in an airport — can you imagine finding God in all that plastic?

MEDWICK: I'm not sure where that leaves love. How much of that feeling remains, that close-to-God feeling remains in a long-term relationship?

MAILER: Well, if one loves one's wife and loves one's children, after a while you begin to feel very close to God — not that your wife is God or the child's God but you're married to still one more aspect of the creation, whatever it is. That is, you touch God. That is the way in which most people become quietly religious, and say at the end of a period of many years, "Yes, I believe in God, I believe in God very much." There's been a quiet growth of sentiment without them necessarily thinking about it. They go along for years with their children, and at a certain point they find themselves praying. Let's say a child is ill, they're praying for the child's protection and they realize they've gotten very close to God because they've seen this extraordinary miracle of a child

growing every day, and changing and having some life that's just not explicable by the wife's wit or the husband's. So the creation becomes beautiful, and manifest. But as I say, that's not the way of the mystic. If you would, that's finding Christ through works.

The first time that someone has a profound sexual act, when it's all over, there's this shocked, stunned, incredible recognition: "Why God, God exists." Which is what Saint Teresa felt perhaps. I say it usually happens in sex rather than in love because it's got to happen quickly, a sudden revelation. So there are certain advantages to one-night stands. One brings none of one's baggage to a one-night stand and that makes it possible to have, once in a while, extraordinary emotions. The average one-night stand is, after all, not necessarily a small disaster, but unless it's very, very good indeed it leaves a terrible aftertaste. They can be exceptional once in a while; when that happens one often has this religious sentiment. It doesn't come from the person — you don't know the person — it comes from something in sex itself. Sex may be something that's outside of people.

MEDWICK: I can't seem to think of a woman who has written about sex in this way, or love in this way. I can think of five or six men.

MAILER: I would argue that women have an immense horror of exposing themselves. Let me give an example. When I wrote *An American Dream*, many people were offended profoundly by the sexual act that takes place between the hero Rojack and the German maid Ruta. It would have been impossible — if Ruta, and not Rojack, had been telling the story — for her to write about that act without revealing herself completely, and in a disadvantageous way. The man could write about it, because one-night stands are altogether different from a continuing sexual relationship where the man dominates in one way, the woman dominates in another, they share here, they're apart there, and it changes over a period of time. In the one-night stand there was, at least until very recently, the notion that no matter what they did in bed, the man was dominant in that he had scored the breakthrough and the woman had been taken, at least in the eyes of society.

MEDWICK: Is that changing now, do you think?

MAILER: Oh, a great deal. It's almost getting to the point where women are saying, "I scored."

MEDWICK: What does that do to the mythology?

MAILER: Well, I don't think one generation can wipe out what may or may not be biological and is certainly historical. But a woman

is not going to admit as readily as a man that she had an extraordinary experience on a one-night stand. Ten or twenty years ago you'd hear of a woman who slashed her wrists — often what happened was that she had an extraordinary experience with a man she met for a night and never heard from again, and that made her feel she was crazy or evil or didn't deserve to live. I'm not saying that one-night stands are better than living in considerable sexual intensity with someone for a long time. I'm not saying that at all. I'm saying that it can be hard for the long-term relationship to be mystical. One reaches heights from time to time, and in fact one may go higher and further with someone one knows very well than one could ever go on a one-night stand, but since a one-night stand is often transcendental to the degree that you really don't know the other person, that they are *strange* — like the cosmos — it suggests that when you're living with someone you love, sex can't be transcendental in that particular way at all. Of course it gets its richness in other ways, but we've talked of that.

1980

Ethics and Pornography . . . gl

Ethics and Pornography

An Interview with Jeffrey Michelson and Sarah Stone



JEFFREY MICHELSON: What do you think makes for great sex?

NORMAN MAILER: Great sex is apocalyptic. There's no such thing as great sex unless you have an apocalyptic moment. William Burroughs once changed the course of American literature with one sentence. He said, "I see God in my asshole in the flashbulb of orgasm."* Now that was one incredible sentence because it came at the end of the Eisenhower period, printed around 1959 in *Big Table* in Chicago. I remember reading it and thinking, "I can't believe I just read those words." I can't tell you the number of taboos it violated. First of all, you weren't supposed to connect God with sex. Second of all, you never spoke of the asshole, certainly not in relation to sex. If you did, you were the lowest form of pervert. Third of all, there was obvious homosexuality in the remark. In those days, nobody was accustomed to seeing that in print. And fourth, there was an ugly technological edge — why'd he have to bring in flashbulbs? Was that the nature of his orgasm? It was the first time anybody had ever spoken about the inner nature of the orgasm.

MICHELSON: Yeah.

MAILER: OK. Looking at it now, that marvelously innovative sentence, with all it did, one of the most explosive sentences ever written in the English language, we can take off from it and say that unless sex is apocalyptic, we can't speak of it as great. We can

* The first sentence in *Naked Lunch* as it was printed in *Big Table*.

speak of it as resonant. We can speak of it as heart-warming. We can speak of it as lovely. But we can't speak of it as great. Great is a word that should never be thrown around in relation to sex. My simple belief is that sex that makes you more religious is great sex. I'm going to live to pay for, to rue, this remark if it gets around.

MICHELSON: I'll never tell anyone. (*laughter*)

MAILER: Remember that awful priest who said, "There are no atheists in foxholes?" It was a remark to turn people into atheists for twenty-five years. I remember every time I got into a foxhole I said to myself, "This is one man who's an atheist in a foxhole!" (*laughter*) Well, what I do believe is that you can't have a great fuck and remain an atheist. Now that means the atheists of America are going to excoriate me. This is striking at them; this is a true blow at their sexual happiness.

MICHELSON: What is the relationship between God and sex, and the Devil and sex?

MAILER: You can't talk about it that way.

MICHELSON: Tell me about the orgies you went to when you were younger?

MAILER: I'm not going to tell you. Certain things belong to my novels. Look, let me make one thing clear: there are matters I won't talk about in an interview. Anything I would find tremendously difficult to write about in a novel, I'm not going to try to discuss in an interview. If it can't be done in a novel, it certainly can't be done here.

MICHELSON: Did you go to one orgy as a philosopher, or did you go to many as a pervert?

MAILER: You're referring to Voltaire's little remark, "Once a philosopher, twice a pervert." Voltaire went once to a male brothel and his friends asked him afterward did he like it, and he said, "Oh, yes, very much. It was better than I thought it would be." They said, "Are you going back?" and he said, "No. Once a philosopher, twice a pervert." Well, I'm not going to tell you.

MICHELSON: I would like to get on to your feelings about sexuality. Not to intrude on your own life, but just to discuss certain things. What do you think you know about sex that most other people do not?

MAILER: Jeffrey, I can't possibly answer that. I'd have to believe it's true . . . Really, all I believe is that I'm more aware of my limitations than most men. I have less vanity about sex than most men.

MICHELSON: You've grown to have less vanity?

MAILER: Yeah. I used to have an immense amount when I was younger. I needed it. I had an immense amount to learn. Sexual vanity probably has an inverse proportion to sexual sophistication. When we're young, we have to believe we're the greatest gift given to women because if we didn't, we would know how truly bad we are. When I was a kid, I remember I had an older cousin who was immensely successful with women. And I was always obsessed with performance. He used to say to me, "You're wrong on that; performance has nothing to do with it." I never knew what he meant. It took years — he was considerably older than me — to come to understand what he was talking about. Performance is empty in sex. Performance is pushups. I mean, we've all had the experience of making love for hours, and getting that airless, tight, exhausted feeling, you know, my God, will she ever come? For God's sakes, please, God, please, let her come! (*laughter*) I have a bad back today and one of the reasons is that I worked so hard when I was younger.

MICHELSON: At sex?

MAILER: I didn't work at lifting furniture, I promise you. If I'd been a furniture mover, at least I'd have some honor. (*laughter*) No, I have a bad back because I was stupid. Because I tried to . . . you see, the minute you try to dominate sex through will, sex escapes you. The connection of female sexuality with cats is not for too little. You cannot dominate a cat with your will. If you do, the cat goes right around you. Sexuality is the same way: can't dominate it. So over the years as you come to recognize this, you begin to approach it from the side, so to speak.

MICHELSON: Tell me about your first experience with pornography. Do you remember when you were a kid and the first magazines you had?

MAILER: I think it was *Spicy Detective*.

MICHELSON: *Spicy Detective*?

MAILER: There used to be magazines called *Spicy Detective* and *Spicy* — I can't remember the others, maybe *Spicy Romance*. The girls always had marvelous large breasts, with tremendously pointed nipples. I don't know how to describe these breasts, it almost fails me. You couldn't call them pear-shaped, nor melon-shaped, somewhere in between. They were projectile-shaped. Literally, they looked like the head of a 105 Howitzer shell, about 4 inches in diameter, and went out about 5½ inches, with those tremendously pointed nipples. The girl always used to be tied to some sort of hitching post with an evil man approaching. They al-

ways had one arm under their breasts. I remember that it made the breasts project out even more. They'd have a wisp of clothing. A torn panty would cover their loins. I've never seen anything I enjoyed as much. Now, I didn't learn much from it.

MICHELSON: Do you feel that there are any social benefits that result from a sexually free press, or do you feel that sexually explicit material must be tolerated simply to protect the wider benefits of the First Amendment?

MAILER: Well, the first benefit is sexual sophistication. Talk about pornography always revolves around: Does it excite more violent impulses, or doesn't it? The women's movement is absolutely up in arms about pornography. An encouragement to rape, et cetera. I just can't agree. I think they don't know quite what they're talking about. Of course, some kinds of pornography are on the cusp. I wouldn't have anything to say for pornography that uses children as models. I'm against anything that sets people's lives on certain tracks too early. Using a child to make money from sex is obviously offensive. If you were a magazine that had pictures of children performing sexual acts, I wouldn't be in it. That's where I draw the line.

But you asked what the social value might be. Pictures of men and women making love is not going to hurt people as much as it's going to help them. It gives them — and I would include pornographic movies — an education in that part of sex which is universal, as opposed to the part that's particular. Those tragedies of high school kids who get married too young, only to discover three, five, eight years later, with a couple of children between them, that they weren't meant for one another at all, and so split, come about because the sex is so compelling when they're young and they know so little about it. That's a profound error we've all made one way or another. We mistake the beauties of sex for the beauties of the particular person that we're with, that is, think the particular person is beautiful because of the sexual feelings they arouse in us. We don't understand those feelings are more or less universal, and could be felt with someone else. The faculty of choice is not present. Now when I was a kid, and I've never known a kid who wasn't absolutely riveted by pornography, I wanted more and more of it. I never saw enough of it to satisfy myself. That's because there's tremendous knowledge there, tremendous knowledge about human behavior. You cannot look at a pornographic picture without learning more about human nature. I can look at some girl who has, on the face of it, a stupid face, let's

say — some of the girls who appear in pornographic magazines look stupid, some rather bright. But let's take one that looks stupid. Nevertheless, there's something in the very way she holds her hand (even if the photographer arranged her hand for her, she had finally to embody his order) there's something in the way her hand is holding a cigarette that'll tell you a great deal about her if you look carefully enough at these matters.

You also get a sense of the sexual behavior of a panorama of people that you couldn't possibly have in your own life unless you devoted your life to sex. One of the ironies of pornography is that it enables people to free themselves from chasing after sex. A lot of that knowledge can now be obtained in a secondary fashion, through pornography.

MICHELSON: Knowledge as opposed to pleasure?

MAILER: Yes. If we all had to go out and acquire every bit of understanding through our own experience, it would take us forever to learn anything. That's why, in fact, civilization moved so slowly for so many thousands of years. From Gutenberg on, there's been an incredible rate of acceleration. Now, people were able to acquire most of their knowledge by reading. They didn't have to go through the experience themselves. The worst thing you can say against pornography, I mean, the only argument I would use if I were determined to stamp pornography out is that it tends to accelerate the same things that are being speeded up by all other communications. Pornography, right at this present point, is a peculiar frontier of communications.

SARAH STONE: What exactly is accelerated?

MAILER: The consciousness of people. In the simplest literal sense, a kid of eighteen will now know what he wouldn't have known till he was twenty-eight.

STONE: Why is that against pornography?

MAILER: Well, if you say that everything is speeding up too quickly and we may end up destroying ourselves because we're advancing at too great a rate and don't really know what we're doing, then, in that sense, pornography is dangerous. But by the same measure, television is endlessly more dangerous. Conservatives who believe that human nature should be slowed up have a legitimate argument, I'd say, against pornography. But they're not consistent. Because if this is their argument against pornography, let them ban television first.

MICHELSON: Do you feel comfortable about appearing in *Puritan*?

MAILER: Not altogether. I've thought about it, and finally decided I probably ought to. I'm not opposed to pornography — in fact, I think it probably has a social benefit. On the other hand, in *Playboy* I've had the experience of seeing my work printed between beaver shots. Now, *Playboy* happens to treat its writers exceptionally well. No magazine is nicer in terms of courtesy, and you get fine pay for your stuff. They're a godawful magazine, however, in terms of layout, at least from the point of view of the writer, because the last thing you want for your prose, is to have a photo of a gorgeous model with her legs going from Valparaiso to Baltimore! Right in the middle of your prose! I'd rather you took an axe and drove it into the middle of the reader's head. Because the reader's not going to follow my stuff. His eye is on the bird. So there have been times when, despite the attractions of *Playboy*, I don't really want that piece there. It's not going to be read properly. In that sense, pornography is a tremendous distraction for a writer.

MICHELSON: I'll try to make sure the layout keeps all your words together.

MAILER: At least let me pick the pictures.

MICHELSON: When does a graphic representation of a sexual act become art, and when, smut? Can you suggest any criteria on which to base a judgment?

MAILER: Let me ask you: what would be *your* idea of smut?

MICHELSON: Things that are particularly degrading to either sex.

MAILER: Get specific.

MICHELSON: I guess it's stuff that turns me on in a way I think I shouldn't be turned on.

MAILER: Excellent.

STONE: I feel the difference is if it's commercially and sloppily done just to get another page in the book, then the insult is to the art. Where it's a true and honest representation of feeling, then no matter what it represents, it's got to be respected.

MAILER: Mmm, that's well put too. You would be saying in effect, then, Sarah, that smut is the equivalent of a sexual act that's casual, what we call sordid, no love, not any real pleasure in it, a cohabitation with a rancid smell to it. So a lack of respect for the seriousness of the occasion when a photographer takes a picture of a woman in a pornographic position makes for smut.

Jeffrey is saying, as I gather, that there are certain acts that tend toward the bestial, the fecal (I assume these are the sort of things

you're thinking of) that may be arousing, but you find that your moral nature disapproves.

MICHELSON: I'm wondering: Is smut to pornography, to good pornography, as trashy romance novels are to good literature? Is it just the lower end of the genre?

MAILER: It's certainly complicated. Take Sarah's criteria, pictures that are transparently cynical. The model's worn out, the photographer's worn out, disgusting. Yet that can be arousing in a funny way. For instance, in *Hustler*, often I find that the most interesting section is those cheap Polaroid pictures that untalented photographers send in of women who are not professional models.

MICHELSON: The reality turns you on?

MAILER: The sordid reality. My sexuality, I expect, is aroused by knowledge. The moment I know more than I knew before, I'm excited. Those gritty Polaroid shots in *Hustler* are often more interesting. They communicate. You know, the picture of some waitress who lives in Sioux Falls. I know more at that moment about Sioux Falls, about waitresses — even if they're lying, even if she isn't a waitress, there's something about the very manifest of the lie that's presented that's fascinating. It arouses your curiosity. Whereas superb pictures of models can get boring. There tends to be a sameness to them. Aren't enough flaws present. The very question of the sordid is . . . tricky.

STONE: In Woody Allen's movie *Annie Hall*, he's on the street and he walks up to this little old lady and says to her something like "Why are relationships so difficult?" And she says, "Love fades . . ." As a man who's had six marriages, what is your reaction to this dialogue? Do you think that love fades and do you feel that sex fades?

MAILER: I don't think that sex fades in marriage necessarily. Without talking about my personal life, I'd say that compatibility is nearer to the problem than sex. What I mean is people can have marvelous sex and not be terribly compatible. That sets up a great edginess in marriage. Some people, in fact, can only have good sex with people who are essentially incompatible for them. I might have been in that category for years, I don't know. If you're terribly combative, then you're drawn toward mates who are not too compatible. Anyone who has a violent or ugly or combative edge is not going to be comfortable with someone who is really sweet and submissive. They want something more abrasive in their daily life. Otherwise they are likely to lose their good opinion of themselves. There's nothing worse than being brutal to some-

body who's good to you. Whereas if you're living with someone whose ideas irritate the living shit out of you, and you fight with them every day and feel justified about it, that can be healthier than living with a soul whose ideas are compatible to yours. All the same, if you do choose this fundamental incompatibility, there will come a point where it ceases to be fun and turns into its opposite. Faults in the mate that were half-charming suddenly become unendurable. Every one of us who has been in love knows how fragile — what's a good word for skin? — how fragile is the *membrane* of love. It has to be mended every day and nurtured. We have to anticipate all the places where it's getting a little weak and go there and breathe on it, shape it again. In a combative relationship, obviously, that's difficult. You have to have a great animal vigor between combative people or they just can't make it for long.

MICHELSON: What about love fading?

MAILER: Well, I don't think love fades; I don't think there's anything automatic about it. I think most of us aren't good enough for love. I think self-pity is probably the most rewarding single emotion in the world for masturbators, which is one of the reasons, I suppose, I'm opposed to masturbation, because it encourages other vices to collect around you. Self-pity is one of the first. You lie in bed, pull off, and say to yourself, I have such wonderful, beautiful, tender, sweet, deep, romantic, exciting and sensual emotions, why is it that no woman can appreciate how absolutely fabulous I am? Why can't I offer these emotions to someone else? Self-pity comes rolling in, and cuts us off from recognizing that love is a reward. Love is not something that is going to come up and solve your problems. Love is something you get after you've solved enough of your problems so that something in Providence itself takes pity on you. I always believed that whoever or whatever it is, some angel, some sour sort of angel, finally says, "Look at those poor motherfuckers. He and she have been working so hard for so many years. Let's throw him and her a bone." So they meet and find love. Then they have to know what to do with it.

MICHELSON: Love is a function of having paid your dues?

MAILER: Truman Capote has got this book he's writing, *Answered Prayers*. I gather from something he said once that its theme is that the worst thing that befalls people is that their prayers are answered. Which is not a cheap idea. Love is the perfect example. Everybody prays for love, but once they get love, they have to be worthy of it. Love is the most perishable of human emotions. It

never fades. That's my answer to the question. There is absolutely no reason in the world why people can't love each other more every day of their lives for eighty years. I absolutely believe that. Without that, I have no faith in love whatsoever. I think it would be a diabolical universe if you're introduced to all these wonderful sentiments that illumine your existence but something is put into the very nature of it that will make it fade. That's the sentiment of a person who is full of self-pity: Love fades. That old woman was full of self-pity.

MICHELSON: Do you feel that there is a spiritual obligation to sexual relationships, and if so, what price do we pay if we don't live up to it?

MAILER: Well, it's always a spiritual obligation. But the trouble with the word spiritual is that we think of churches and priests and clergymen. I do think there's a spiritual demand in love, however, more a demand than an obligation. Love asks that we be a little braver than is comfortable for us, a little more generous, a little more flexible. It means living on the edge more than we care to. Love is always in danger of being the most painful single emotion we can ever feel, other than perhaps a sudden knowledge of our own death. La Rochefoucauld has that wonderful remark that half the people in the world would never have fallen in love if they had not heard of the word. I think that most people I know, maybe three-quarters of the people I know, have never been deeply in love.

MICHELSON: Talking about not being deeply in love, have you ever paid for sex, and what is your opinion about hookers and johns and the outright exchange of sex for money?

MAILER: Well, take it at its best. Because at its worst, there is nothing worse than paying for sex, and being thrown a bad, cynical, dull fuck by a whore who either has no talent, or no interest in you, or feels you don't deserve anything better than you are getting. That's one of the worst single experiences there is. On balance, counting the number of times I've had good sex in whorehouses and bad, I could almost do without it. But, you know, living fifty-eight years, you end up with a lot of experiences. I've had a few extraordinary times in whorehouses, which I'll have to write about some day, too. So I wouldn't put it down altogether. It's just that it's immensely more difficult, I think, to have good sex with a whore unless you're oriented that way.

There are a lot of guys who are not homosexual, but grow up in a male environment. They have four brothers, or they're jocks, or

just live in a male environment as so many smalltown kids do. They're less comfortable with women, and so if all their buddies have been plowing the same broad — and I use these two words, "plowing" and "broad" because that's the way they're looking at it; they're really looking upon it as a field — the fact that they're going to be mixing their semen with the effluvia of their buddies is tremendously aphrodisiacal to them. So sex can be intense for men in whorehouses. It doesn't mean that they're homosexual; that's too quick a jump to make. What it does mean is that they have to cut that close to the edges of homosexual experience in order to get a real send-off.

MICHELSON: You said to Buzz Farbar in a *Viva* interview that you couldn't afford to begin — this is a quote, you "couldn't afford to begin to get homosexual because God knows where it'd stop." Do you feel that homosexual impulses should be repressed, and quite candidly, have you ever experienced such impulses?

MAILER: I've never experienced them dramatically. I've never ever said, "Oh, I got to have that boy," or "I've got to go to bed with that man." I feel it's been a buried theme in my life but a powerful one. It creates its presence by its absence. I don't think you can be an artist without having a . . . well, let's try to define the elements a little.

There are homosexuals who have essentially male experience and others who have female. In a funny way, the difference between male and female in homosexuality is more marked, probably, than it is between men and women. When a man and a woman make love, they can take turns: one more aggressive, then the other — there are many ways in which a woman can almost literally fuck a man. The woman can be active, the man passive, then they reverse it. Many good sexual relationships consist of that back and forth. Nothing like the dialectic when you get down to it. But, in male sexuality, there is a tendency to either be top or bottom, back or front. They have an expression: Did you do it or were you done to? There is much more identification with whether you're going to be the male or the female in the relationship.

Now, I think all humans are born with a man and a woman in us. I think that's self-evident: we have a mother and a father, and to the degree that the mother is female and male both, we have a female-male component in ourselves. In turn, through our fathers we have a male-female side to ourselves. At the least, two sexual systems within us, psychically, at any rate. I also suspect male



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artists have more of a female component to their nature than the average male. I think that's why I've always stayed away from homosexuality. I suppose I felt the female side of my nature would have been taken over by homosexuality to a degree that would have been repulsive to me. What you get down to is that it's a man who's doing it to you. And the man in me does not wish to be dominated by another man, not that way, not that way.

Now the homosexuals whose masculinity comes out through homosexuality are very proud of themselves. I mean, those homosexuals will say, "We're more men than the average heterosexual. The average heterosexual makes love to a woman who is physically weaker than himself. But we men, we go out and we stick it in the asses of men who can fight back, we're real men." In prison, there's great pride in who's doing it to who, because finally what you may be doing is putting it up the ass of a killer — which would give me pause, I'll tell you that. So, when I was younger, I used to cover all these feelings by feeling antipathy toward homosexuals. I don't feel that now. I just think all that is not for me. Any more than becoming a Hindu fakir would be a way of life for me, or going down at the age of fifty-eight to Texas to work in the oil wells, that wouldn't really be a reasonable life any longer.

MICHELSON: A friend of mine who grew up in Puerto Rico said that there the onus is only on the catcher, not the pitcher. Puerto Ricans, he said, didn't consider people who fucked people in the ass homosexuals. They only considered people who got fucked in the ass homosexuals. So that's just a cultural bias.

MAILER: Didn't I say earlier that the difference between the male and female sides of homosexuality is greater than the male and female aspects of heterosexuality?

MICHELSON: As long as the Puerto Rican was in the male role, he was still a male.

MAILER: Certainly criminals, and ghetto people, and tough ethnics do have that attitude, there's no question to it. To some men, active homosexuality doesn't hurt their masculinity; it reinforces it from their point of view.

One thing on which I have a bugaboo is that Women's Liberation keeps talking about rape, rape, rape. So far as I can make out, more men are probably raped every year than women, at least when you get into true cases of rape where it's absolutely against your will. I'll grant that there are many marginal cases of rape between men and women, where the woman rather likes the guy, but doesn't want to do it tonight, and the guy insists, and lo and

behold, she ends up doing it tonight. But that's much nearer to lack of moral consent than rape. Women's Lib throws all those cases into rape. If you only count cases of true force, where there's absolutely no desire on the one hand, and absolute determination on the other hand, I'm willing to bet there are more cases of male rape every year than female rape. Because in the prisons, thousands of men are done to every year.

MICHELSON: I know you're now to the right of the Pope on masturbation. But in the past, have you ever masturbated to an erotic photograph?

MAILER: Of course. In adolescence.

MICHELSON: Why have you become so puritanical about masturbation?

MAILER: I'm not puritanical about it. Puritans put people in jail for their activities, or bring social censure against them. I don't go out with a flag and walk it up and down outside certain people's houses . . .

MICHELSON: Ban masturbation!

MAILER: . . . but, God, I happen to believe, just like the nineteenth-century preachers, that the ultimate tendency of masturbation is insanity.

MICHELSON: You think it does lead to insanity?

MAILER: Well, it doesn't lead to it instantly. People can jerk off all their lives and they're not going to go insane. I said the *ultimate tendency* of masturbation is insanity. Now the ultimate tendency of driving a car at 80 miles an hour in a 55-mile-an-hour zone is collision. But there are people who drive at 80 miles an hour until the cops stop them or indeed, never get caught, but neither do they collide. The ultimate tendency remains just that. My point, however, is that left to itself masturbation does not bring you back into the world, it drives you further out of the world. You don't have the objective correlative.

You see, one of the arguments I would bring against pornography, especially the pornography of my adolescence, is that it encourages fantasy and romance. If I had a fault to find with the pornography magazines in general, it would be that they tend to satisfy elements of fantasy and romance. In other words, they don't — let me see if I can find some analogy. If a kid dreams about football as a wonderful game where he is running for touchdowns, and that's all he ever visualizes, he'd have a rude shock, to say the least, the first time he got into an actual game,

was dumped hard and had a headache afterward. There's nothing like the first tackle or block you throw to wake you up to one fact: If you're going to love football, you have to love it *with* its punishment. And at that point, loving it that way, you have a profound relation to football. To love with the full awareness of punishment is the nature of profundity. So, to the degree that pornography encourages people to believe that sex is easy, it's harmful. But I can't see this as a social harm, since everything in the scheme of things encourages us to believe that life is easier than it is.

One of the fundamental tenets of this business of selling America, selling modern life, is to present modern life as *nicer* than it is. As an example, you have these ads that show the happiness of dishwashing machines. Well, the nearest I came to have a major fight with my wife was the other night, she'd bought a new dishwasher and the thing smelled of plastic. It had the most hideous smell, that kind of antiseptic odor insane people douse themselves with. You know how certain insane people put sort of an antiseptic perfume on themselves. Ever smell that? That damn dishwasher smelled that way. I went into a rage. I said, "You've just bought part of the grand American scheme to drive us out of the kitchen. This thing stinks so bad that you'll never spend time cooking anything."

STONE: It smelled because it was new?

MAILER: That's what she claimed. But I'm telling you that smell's never going to go away. They're putting the odor in so people will go out and buy TV dinners. That's part of the scheme. That's what McDonald's, superhighways, and all general plastic crap is all about. Everything in the scheme of things drives us toward living in a way we don't want to live.

Pornography, to the degree it's sentimental and romantic, is fudging the issue too, not increasing knowledge, but muddying knowledge.

MICHELSON: Are you against fantasy?

MAILER: Against sentimental fantasy. That, I think, is our introduction to cancer. A ticket to the gulch.

STONE: What sexual fantasies get you hot?

MAILER: I won't get into it for a variety of reasons. Years ago a friend of mine agreed to fill out a sexual questionnaire. He had to go through every girl he'd laid, describe her in detail, what they did, their fantasies, their water sports. After he was finished, for

the first time in his life (and this kid was a stud) he was impotent for three months. So one holds onto one's little fantasies.

Actually, I have very few left at this point. As you get older, you need fantasy less and less. Let me put it this way: Fantasy gives resonance to sex so long as it's on the threshold of reality. If two people are making love and play a little game, and pretend they're other people, well, that's perfectly all right. Finally they have to do the acting job. It's not just simple fantasy. But if a man and woman are making love, and the man secretly thinks that he is fucking the Countess Eloise of Bulgaria, and the woman is visualizing a stud from Harlem for herself, then they're in trouble whether they know it or not. Essentially they are masturbating. The ultimate tendency of such love-making is insanity.

MICHELSON: Upper masturbation.

STONE: Then what sexual realities get you hot?

MAILER: Nothing remarkable about it. The innermost parts of the female body exposed, that gets me hot. A fine pair of breasts, a beautiful ass. Hands can get me, not hot, but started. I mean, some women have beautiful hands. It's really not important. To find a woman attractive there has to be some one feature that truly keeps pulling you back. It could be her face, her hands, it could be her toes — you don't have to be a shrinker to love a woman's feet, because it isn't literally the hands or the feet that turn you on. A certain statement about the private nature of that woman's sexuality is in the part of the body that excites you. A breast could be adventurous. That would excite certain men. Others might like a breast that's very domesticated, I mean, men that want to dominate a household are not going to be turned on by a breast that's adventurous. It may turn them on, but it's not going to bring them back again and again 'cause such a breast means trouble to them. Brings out their violent impulses. On the contrary, if they find a woman who's got a gentle, domesticated breast, that'll turn them on because it means they can dominate that woman. And so forth. You can go through the various parts of the body. Every body, in effect, presents a possible lock to our key.

STONE: How can a breast look adventurous?

MAILER: It can suggest that it would be unfaithful to you unless you're very good indeed. (*laughter*)

STONE: Why do you think physical beauty plays such an important part in men's attraction to women, and why does it play such a lesser role in women's attraction toward men?

MAILER: Well, because beauty, finally, is a scalp, no getting around it. When a man goes out with a beautiful woman, he's more respected in the world. I can remember a few ugly women who were attractive to me. Ugliness can be sexually exciting . . . But I will say that I wasn't very happy to be seen in the world with those women. You could say that was demonstrably unfair to them.

Except I'm going to stick at this liberal point. I think there may be — and here we enter into waters that are much too deep for all of us — but it may be that beauty and ugliness are karmic. One reason people are so drawn to beauty is that it speaks of healthy karma, whereas ugliness suggests debts in previous lives that were too hideous to be paid in those lives. So the penalty is worn on the face in this life. Which is why ugly people have such a rage toward God at their ugliness.

MICHELSON: But still, it's much more important for a man to have a beautiful woman than it is for a woman to have a beautiful man.

MAILER: Yeah.

MICHELSON: Please explain the nature of the inequity.

MAILER: Well, I think if you believe, as the more radical Women's Liberationists believe, that the only difference between the sexes is an extra six to eight inches of male skin in a certain place, then it just seems vastly unfair and unnatural. But I happen to believe in the asymmetry of the sexes. The only equality of the sexes comes, I would say, out of the rough balance. Women are strong here, men there. That doesn't mean we can't agree on anything, or that women are not entitled to equality in a thousand ways they do not have it now. Women's Liberationists are not wrong when they say that women've been treated unfairly for centuries. They're right. But that doesn't mean that we're alike.

MICHELSON: Apples and oranges?

MAILER: Apples and oranges are entitled to the same treatment when they're presented to the consumer. But they are still apples and oranges, not one big orapple. Presumably, men and women are entitled to the same treatment before they enter eternity.

MICHELSON: How do you feel about your sexual generation, those people who came of age sexually when you did?

MAILER: We had kind of a nice generation if you're going to look at it from the point of view of sexuality. We were all pioneers. We saw ourselves as breaking ground, as sexually liberated. One of the things that appalls me about Women's Liberation is the way

they feel they discovered it. I remember my first wife was tremendously taken with the ideas of Simone de Beauvoir back in 1950. She spent an unproductive year trying to write a book which in effect would have been a precursor of Women's Liberation. She was a Women's Liberationist; I lived with a premature Women's Liberationist.

MICHELSON: Your first marriage.

MAILER: Yes. And one reason our marriage finally broke up was on precisely that. She was a very strong woman. She profoundly resented the female role into which my success had thrust her. You see, when we married, she was, if anything, stronger than me. She was perfectly prepared to go out and work for years in order to make enough money for me to stay at home and write a good many books. And if that happened, we probably would have been a happy couple of that sort, she the strong one, I the gentle one. Then what happened? I become successful so suddenly I got much more macho. My God, nothing like success for increasing the size of your muscle! I literally went from 140 to 180 pounds in one year — it wasn't all fat, it was muscle. I suddenly felt like a strong man. That altered everything between us.

STONE: There is a certain anger I've encountered with friends of mine when I've said that I know you. You approached this anger in *Prisoner of Sex*. I was wondering if you've discovered whether some of their feelings are based on something real?

MAILER: More and more I think the reason they feel this antipathy toward me is not because I am a conventional sexist. Anyone who reads this interview can see this. I don't have simple notions of machismo or anything of that sort — I think the reason is that my ideas about sexuality are more complicated than theirs, and they hate that. They have a very simple idea of sexuality and they want to ram it through. As far as I'm concerned, when they get like that, they're worse than the Communists I used to know in the '40s and '50s. I mean they are totalitarian in this aspect. They do not want deviation from their view of life. Now the only way you can ever learn anything is by deviation from your own point of view of life. You encounter it, you argue with it, you grapple with it, you're convinced by it or you convince it, and you move on.

MICHELSON: You feel like you're dealing with people with blind prejudice?

MAILER: Well, worse. I'm dealing with people with militant prejudice.

MICHELSON: Norman, I'd like to discuss the nature of inhibition, something that interests me. To put it bluntly, why is it that some women like to get fucked in the ass and some women find it distasteful? Some women like to suck cocks, some women don't. It surely is not purely physical.

MAILER: You can't talk about it generally, you just can't. Everything we do sexually is as characteristic of us as our features. The question you ask is truly bottomless. You could say to me, why do some people have noses with an overhang, and why do some tilt up? Why do we respond to these noses in different ways? I could give an answer; I mean, a nose that tilts up often suggests optimism, confidence about the future, fearlessness, but a nose that turns over suggests a certain pessimism about the very shape of things, an attachment to sentiments of doom. You have to ask next: What is the nature of form? Why do curves do these things to us? But in sexuality, you also have to ask which period of one's life are we talking about? Anyone who's lived with a woman for a few years learns that a woman's tastes can change as much as a man's. There are women who detest being fucked in the ass, as you put it — you see, I refuse to use those words myself . . . The woman who wants nothing to do with a phallus in her crack one year is turned on immensely by it another year. I will make one general observation: It's very dangerous to stick it up a woman's ass. It tends to make them more promiscuous. I'll leave that with your readers. They can think about it from their own experience. They can test it out. Those who are scientifically inclined can immediately approach their mate and tool her, if they're able. Then they can observe what happens, watch her at parties, get a private detective, check up on her. So I guess I answered your question: A woman doesn't want it up the ass because she's doing her best to be faithful to that dull pup she's got for a man, and she knows if it blasts into the center of her stubbornness, that's the end of it. She won't be able to hold onto fidelity any longer. That's one explanation. It doesn't have to be true. But you might ponder it.

MICHELSON: Have you ever been surprised by a woman because she seemed very proper outside and then was very wild in bed? Or a wild woman on the outside and still wild in bed? Is there a relationship between inhibition and personality?

MAILER: No royal road to success. (*laughter*) I'm not sure that women have a sexual nature as such. I mean, think of the variation in sexual performance — to go back to that word — you've had over your life. I'm sure you haven't been the same with all

women, better with some than others, obviously. With women, I think such changes are even greater. When I was a kid in Brooklyn, we'd walk around muttering, "Ah, she's a lousy lay." You know, sure, she was a lousy lay for A, B, C, and D, then E came along. And she was so good, he couldn't even talk about it.

MICHELSON: Let me ask you your thoughts about Plato's Retreat and other on-premise swing clubs. I don't know whether you've been or not, but you certainly know what it's about. This type of anonymous sexual expression was once exclusively the province of the gay community. Does it mean anything that it's filtered into the heterosexual community? That you can go, on any given night, with your wife and these places are full of friendly people from Queens, Long Island — you know, regular, human people are going there and having their —

MAILER: Regular human people as opposed to what?

MICHELSON: People with unconventional lifestyles.

MAILER: People with conventional lives very often are tremendously drawn to orgiastic sex. That's their artistic expression. That's the way in which they are fighting society.

See, I think if there's any guarantee to America, and I believe there is (I hate to say it because it's used so cheaply by all those people who keep shouting, "Our great America, our great democracy") but I think there may be a greatness to democracy. It rests in the profound wisdom that a society can't expand unless, implicit in it, is the acceptance that people are busy working overtime to destroy the society. By that logic, democracy is more dialectical than Soviet Communism. What we recognize is that if you have a society, then you need people who are working to destroy that society. Out of the war comes a metamorphosis, which ideally will be more adaptive to the nature of a changing historical reality than more totalitarian, monolithic states. So — as I say — one natural, normal, healthy function of people is to fight society. The way in which conventional people often do it is through orgiastic behavior. I mean, Saturday night they have a ball with their friends, who either live next door in the next ranch house, or they drive 300 miles to see some other swinging couple. On Sunday they all go to church together. And they're giggling a little. They're living two lives at once. They were having that ball last night, the four of them, now they're in church together. And nobody's going to know. Some people can only feel a sense of balance and satisfaction, happiness, I might say, if they're living two lives at once. Orgiastic life provides that. Orgiastic life provides a

lot of solutions for people. But it is sheer hell for people who are deeply in love. It's almost impossible, I think, to have much orgasmic life if you're profoundly in love with a woman. You can do it, but it takes the edginess in love, and absolutely exacerbates it.

MICHELSON: You've spoken about something totalitarian in people who were proselytizing orgies.

MAILER: The moment there's an attempt to make anything a panacea, then it's totalitarian. Panacea suggests that there's one way to do it. So does totalitarianism suggest that there's only one way. But the cosmos was designed by some divine intelligence who foresaw that if there was only one way to do it, everybody would go there. The world would quickly tip out of balance.

STONE: Have you been sexually pursued by literary groupies? What's it like being fucked as an image rather than a person?

MAILER: Well, I've usually been drawn to women who aren't necessarily that interested in my work. My present wife had read one book of mine before we met. She hardly knew anything about me. It's probably analogous to the poor young rich girl, who wants to be loved for herself and not her money, remember all those movies?

MICHELSON: Sure.

MAILER: You definitely don't want to be loved for your literary fame because you know more about it than anyone else and you know that literary fame has very little to do with your daily habits. I mean, finally you're an animal who lives in a den and goes around, and finally, you know, has to be liked or disliked as an animal first.

STONE: Is jealousy a necessary part of an intense sexual relationship or do you feel that it's a disease?

MAILER: It's a very good question until you realize that you can't answer it. Because you end up with platitudes. It's my general experience that if you don't feel any jealousy at all, a woman will have profound doubt of your love. A little jealousy is marvelously aphrodisiacal, you know that, but real jealousy, when it takes over, is delusional, and has all the dirty pleasures of delusion. Delusion is one of the most profound forms of mental activity. If we have a delusion, we are, in effect, a detective on the scent of a case, picking up clues all over the place. We're trying to bring in the malefactor. So it enables us to go through life with an hypothesis. For some, it is unendurable to live without some hypothesis. So jealousy becomes one of the most satisfactory delusional schemes.

You have an hypothesis: She or he is not faithful to me. Then you study it. You listen to the voice. You check out alibis. It sharpens one's senses. Jealousy gives us a ride we would not have without it. People often come into love with their senses drugged by all their bad habits — I mean, one of my fundamental theses is that virtually everything in American life works to deaden our senses. The proliferation of plastics first. So, given the fact that we find ourselves in a state of love with senses dulled, we have to sharpen them up. Very often jealousy hones that point. Taking off on a delusional trip keeps our instincts. We can feel more alive than we were before if we don't destroy too much en route. Of course, being on the receiving end of jealousy can be abominable. It mickey-mouses you. You're always saying, "No, honey, honest, honey, no, I didn't turn around, no, I didn't look!"

Then there's a lighter form of jealousy that is fascinating. It's jealousy as a way of keeping in touch. Once in a while I'll come home and Norris will say, "What were you doing at three o'clock today?" Not that she does this often, but once in a while. I'll say, "Nothing. I don't know what you're talking about." But then I'll remember, somewhere around three o'clock, *probably* it was three o'clock, I was crossing the street, and I noticed a truly attractive woman. Maybe I turned around and looked at her. It's as if this little act flew through the firmament and lodged in my beloved's head. And at three o'clock she turned around at home and said to herself, "What's that son of a bitch up to?" In that way, that kind of jealousy can be agreeable, can even give you a little glow, oh, God, that dear woman is sure tuned in to me. You see, so that was OK.

MICHELSON: Do you think being in love sharpens psychic connections?

MAILER: Sharpens certain connections at the expense of others. It isn't that love is blind. Love has intense, laser-like tunnel vision, you know, which probably would be a closer way of describing the nature of how love sees.

MICHELSON: One other question: Great artists take risks in their work. What's the greatest risk you've taken?

MAILER: I tend to do things that are chancy, but I wouldn't necessarily dignify them with the word risk. Maybe my novel about Egypt is the one that's —

MICHELSON: The one you're working on now?

MAILER: Yes — is the one most filled with risk. What do we mean

by risk? Do you mean going wrong in a book? In other words, embarking on a book so ambitious that you can fall on your face?

MICHELSON: Yes.

MAILER: Maybe the book on Egypt qualifies for that.

MICHELSON: One final question. What have you told your daughters and sons about sex?

MAILER: One of my daughters was talking once about losing her virginity, and I said, "Oh, God, don't lose it because you come to that decision. Lose it because you can't help yourself. Because you are so attracted to the guy that it happens." That's the sum of my sexual wisdom. Ah, I don't think she took my advice. *(laughter)*

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An Interview with Paul Attanasio



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PAUL ATTANASIO: I guess the obvious first question would be:
Why another Marilyn book?*

NORMAN MAILER: Well, after the reception, I'm asking myself that question. (*laughs*) I did it because I wanted to, and I thought everybody would say, you know, "Hurrah for Norman Mailer, isn't he a virtuoso?" Instead, they said, "That outrageous slanderer!" I was intrigued with trying again. I never was satisfied with the first book, *Marilyn*. I felt that it had an awful lot to say *about* her but that she never necessarily emerged, she was never a presence. So I wanted to try and do her from the inside — see if I could.

I must say Marilyn fascinates me. She's an angelic witch. There are very few witches who arrive at immense celebrity, very few; the nature is to be secretive. And I've always been fascinated with angels, the idea that certain women have something angelic about them. It's a profoundly sentimental idea, in fact, it's so sentimental it goes beyond being sexist: It's probably — could you say, machoist?

ATTANASIO: I agree with you that it is fascinating. I think one of the problems with the Women's Liberation movement, which I think did a tremendous amount of good, mostly for men —

MAILER: I think that's a good point. I think it did more good for men than for women.

* *Of Women and Their Elegance*. Simon & Schuster, 1980.

ATTANASIO: I think a lot of it was harmful in that it tried to flatten the differences, and make things a whole lot less interesting.

MAILER: I think it succeeded in wrecking the Democratic Party. Ever since the Women's Movement came along, there hasn't been a Democratic politician who's dared to open his mouth and let anything more forceful than oatmeal come out.

ATTANASIO: One thing that struck me about the book, though, was that I didn't think it was progressive in the way almost every other one of your books was. I thought that probably no other writer in America could do it, but I didn't think you were doing things that you hadn't done in previous books.

MAILER: Except for entering a woman's mind. I barely tried that before: maybe Elena's letter in *The Deer Park*. I've always been afraid to try. In *The Executioner's Song* I was able to get into a great many women's minds, but I didn't feel I had *done* it — I felt it had come about, you know, just because they were wonderful subjects for interview. And so I'd say that the nearest I'd come before on my own was April's mind in *The Executioner's Song*. Practically everything she said was in interviews, but I had to put it together.

That was the only thing I felt was new in *Elegance*. I confess I wanted to do one book where I wasn't stretching. It had been a big stretch on *The Executioner's Song*, and my book about Egypt is a huge stretch, so huge that I walk around winded most of the time in relation to it. And I thought, "I want a little vacation." And it may be that the book suffers from that.

ATTANASIO: You dismiss the whole fact/fiction debate. Do you think any of it is useful, or just a lot of wind?

MAILER: I think it's a dumb debate. If a novelist can take someone who's a legendary figure and invent episodes for them that seem believable, then they've done something wonderful. There's that meeting between J. P. Morgan and Henry Ford in *Ragtime* — I think it's one of the best chapters in American literature. It told me an awful lot about Morgan and an awful lot about Henry Ford, and the fact that it obviously never took place made it even more delicious. When you know the kind of bias and warp with which historians write their history — they're dealing with 10,000 facts and they select 300 very careful ones to make their case, and call that stuff history when we all know it's fiction. The mark of a great historian is that he's a great fiction writer. Very few novels are ever true works of the imagination — I mean, how many Kafkas have there been?

I'm not trying to avoid the fact and fiction argument to protect myself. There's one thing that did worry me in the book with Marilyn. I invented an episode for her that was possibly more extreme than anything in her life. And that gave me pause; I'm worried about it, I'm still worried about it, I think I'd feel less bad about it if I'd done it with a man. I start thinking, "Well, my God, what if after I'm dead somebody writes about me and they put me in a homosexual orgy, which I've never been in, I would detest that, wherever I'd be." And I wrote it—this'll sound incredibly demented—but I wrote it with the idea that Marilyn, wherever she is, would accept this treatment of her. But it's a large assumption.

So I do have a continuing uneasiness about that part of the book. On the other hand I do feel that there's no portrait without it.

ATTANASIO: As far as I can tell, no major figure has appeared in American fiction to provide the sort of Oedipal relationship that you've said you had with Hemingway, nobody to beat out and admire at the same time.

MAILER: Well, it could be said that, on the face of it, he had more talent than anyone coming afterwards, which I think is true. I think Hemingway and Faulkner were immensely talented men. I've always felt that way about Faulkner—he just stands out. Hemingway I've had my ups and downs. But I must say after *The Executioner's Song* I realized how very talented he was.

It's obvious why Faulkner had that huge influence on Southern writers. I think that the only metaphor that you can use is that Southern writers are on a rockface, and at the very top of the climb there's that dreadful overhang, Mr. Faulkner.

Hemingway's different. Hemingway occupied the center in every way, not only coming from the Midwest, but he occupies the very center of writing itself. Anyone who's ever read a newspaper can feel how good a writer he is—he uses a vocabulary that if anything is smaller than the average newspaperman's vocabulary. And he does wonderful things with it. So no matter how serious or superficial a reader you are you sense very quickly that you are in the hands of someone who truly can write well. Then, of course, he wrote about things that are very, very interesting to men. There aren't very many women going around saying Hemingway is a great writer. I'm willing to bet more American women who are good writers have been influenced by Proust than by Hemingway. But for men he's central: the anxieties he

feels about being a man cover all our anxieties; it's almost impossible *not* to identify with his work.

I just think that nobody has come along since who occupies as much terrain as he does. There were stages in my life when I had something remotely resembling his ambition, but that man had it from the time he was twenty to the time he died. I think he finally packed it in because he wasn't going to sit around and be the Shah of Iran of American letters.

ATTANASIO: Tom Wolfe suggested in his introduction to *The New Journalism* that journalism has sort of usurped the novel since the mid-'60s.

MAILER: I think it's self-serving of Wolfe to say that, because he's a journalist. I've said a hundred times that I think journalism is easier than novel writing because you know the story. I mean, give me a good story that history wrote for me, and I'm content — all I've got to do then is write it. The difficulty of writing a truly impressive novel is equal to asking a singer of the stature of Pavarotti to compose his own music. Journalism makes opera singers of novelists. We've got the story, now all we've got to do is go in and show our vocal cords.

ATTANASIO: What about Vietnam? Do you think it's significant that great movies were made out of the war, but not great books?

MAILER: I haven't thought about it before. If a great war novel's to be written again — and it could be that the great war novel is a form that's now past, it may come fifty years after the war in Vietnam as *War and Peace* came after the Napoleonic Wars. Because I don't think that war will finally be comprehended until we have that perspective. The Second World War accelerated America into a direction it was trying to get into anyway — America was trying to move from one form of capitalism into another; and the government was trying to get into the act.

Vietnam, however, either injured America permanently, so that we may never be the most important nation in the world again, or it may have been an incredible crucible in which the national character shifted and changed. That perspective awaits us yet. But when it comes, I think there may be some incredible stuff done about it, and we may have great novels about Vietnam. And they may be great the way *War and Peace* was great, because the Napoleonic Wars changed Russia forever.

ATTANASIO: What do you look for in a novel or short story when you read?

MAILER: Well, I look for something that's probably different from what anyone else would. I'm searching for very special little tools that I can add to my toolbox. After all, I've been a working craftsman for thirty-five years, and any mechanic or carpenter who works that long acquires a great many tools. I'll also read for other things — to stimulate my flagging interest in narrative. For instance, I reread all of Chandler last summer because he's got such narrative drive.

ATTANASIO: I think there's got to be a new aesthetic of fiction now, a new generation of writers. Do you have any idea —

MAILER: What the direction will be? I think we're lumbered right now in fiction. There are many too many ideologies that prevail. The women are pleasing the Women's Movement much too much to ever let loose and really write; the men are trying to strike stances; nobody's free of the aftereffects of psychoanalysis yet — there's no confidence among most young novelists that they know more about human nature than psychiatrists. I just read a little bit of Ann Beattie — it's not fair, because I didn't read that much of her — but on the basis of those two short stories, it did remind me that whenever fiction doesn't know where it's going, then there's a tendency to return to the novel of manners. And for a very good reason: Manners are always changing, and it's fascinating how they change, and we can always tell a great deal about society itself if we study manners.

That's the fallback position. But it's a dead end — it gives pleasure, but it doesn't give knowledge. My idea finally is that fiction is a noble pursuit, that ideally it profoundly changes the ways in which people perceive their experience. You know, one Tolstoy, in my mind, is worth maybe 10,000 very good writers.

ATTANASIO: I have an idea that *The New Yorker* is probably the most pernicious single influence on American fiction writers.

MAILER: Well, it is if one would like to see things bust loose. They were a million miles away from Kerouac and Ginsberg when the Beat Movement started. So they're awful at such periods. But on the other hand, they hold the act together when nothing's happening. They're kind of like those actors of the second category who keep repertory companies going forever, and without them there might not be theater.

ATTANASIO: I wanted to talk a little bit about your personal life —

MAILER: Good luck!

ATTANASIO: It just strikes me that whenever I bring you up, peo-

ple don't say "Oh, I read *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, it's a great book," they say, "Did you see that thing about the marriages? Mailer's up to his old shenanigans." Something like your marriages is used as a lever against your work.

MAILER: It is. I don't argue with you. Every time I appear in a newspaper I injure myself professionally. But I don't think there's anything I can do about it. One of the reasons I'm in the papers all the time is that they just keep using the same people, over and over again. It's a game, and there are something like forty players on the board. If I were in a Tarot deck, I'd be the Fool. I used to keep a stern separation between the public legend and myself, but you know, you get older, and after a while, you start to feel like some old slob in Miami, with slits in his sneakers so his feet won't hurt so much. At that point it's harder to fight the legend.

ATTANASIO: One thing about your life that was distressing to admirers of yours: during the '60s, whenever there was a march on Washington, your name was mentioned, and now it seems that whenever there's a society article, you're mentioned.

MAILER: I'm a novelist and I want to know every world. And I would never close myself off to a world unless it's truly repulsive to me. I don't think it means anything if I go to certain kinds of parties, because society is nothing if not fashion. There've been a few homes that invite me for dinner from time to time. If it comes to the point where there's something to fight for and I'm not fighting for it because I don't want to lose my position in society, then there's something to be concerned about. But what's there to march for these days? I just can't get excited about stopping those nuclear plants — I think they're the enemy, yes, but I don't think they're the real enemy. I think big oil and plastics are.

Suppose the Reagan Administration gets us to the point where we're marching on the Pentagon again, and at that point I'm not marching because that might lose me my ticket at certain dinner parties — then I've turned. But up to that point, my feeling is: "Hey, man, that's my wad you're talking about."

ATTANASIO: I guess I was just wondering how important a part of your life this sort of thing was.

MAILER: What's very important to me is knowing how the world works. I think what ruins most writers of talent is that they don't get enough experience to learn, so their novels always tend to have a certain paranoid perfection which isn't as good as the rough edge of reality. If *The Executioner's Song* had a big effect

on people, it was because it wasn't a paranoid work. It had all the rough edges of reality. If I had conceived that book in my imagination, it would have been much more perfect and much less good.

If there's a theme that obsesses me, it's how much of the history that's made around us is conspiracy and how much of it is simple stupid fuckups. And you have to know the world to get some idea of it. You know, how much does the Mafia control, how much do they luck into? How much does the Jewish community affect the mentality of government, and how much are they accused of?

On the other hand, it's very dangerous to live in society too much, because it's a world of very rigid rules. You cannot be yourself completely. There's a marvelous game in society, which is: If you are completely of society, then you're totally uninteresting. If I have any entree at all it's because society is always fascinated with mavericks. Till the point where they'll become bored with me, and then, boom, I'm out. But on the other hand, even as a maverick there are certain rules that I have to obey. If you start obeying those rules past the point where you want to go along with them as part of the game, then you are injuring yourself.

I don't think it's basic to me. For one thing, I could never cut a figure in society the way, say, Truman did. So I don't really think about it that much. I think if I had had these experiences twenty years ago, I might have saved myself a lot of time as a writer.

ATTANASIO: I know you gave speeches earlier in the year for Kennedy. How do you feel about the Reagan victory? Does it scare you? Maybe not just Reagan himself, but the people who put him in office?

MAILER: I think we're going to have the biggest money-grab since the Grant Administration. Beefing up the defense plants is the health of any major economy, no matter how glutted and wasteful it is. You can't go wrong on a war economy for five or ten years. So I think they're going to go in that direction, because it'll solve every problem they've got.

Then they're going to try to increase states' rights; all those lobbyists won't have to run through the tough work of having to push something through Congress, they'll be able to buy up state legislatures. And then the ecology business is going to be a disaster, because there's an awful lot of money to be made if we can just violate nature a little more. So there could be incredible scan-

dals, and if that happens, and the thing looks like it's in danger of falling apart, then that again is a move toward getting more militaristic. The military covers everything. At that moment the trade unions can't beef, and obviously the threat of bringing in martial law everywhere tends to tone things down.

But if it keeps building that way, and the ghettos don't take it passively, we're going to have a hell of a situation.

ATTANASIO: Do you think there'll be that sense there was in the '50s? I know you've said that in the '50s, there was a sense that there was a war going on, for the writers.

MAILER: I think it'll clean up the left a lot; I think they'll start examining themselves. You know, the left has been guilty of overweening vanity for the last twenty years. First the left was too militant and too programmatic and took itself much too seriously and thought it was creating vast revolutions when in fact it was only creating small middle-class revolutions. Then the Women's Movement came along and — I'll say one good thing about it: The Women's Movement did alert us to the notion that women systematically were being brought up to be cowards, and that was onerous. To this extent the men have learned a lot, and the women have learned . . . something. Less than men have. Because we've changed our view of women; I don't think the women of Women's Liberation have changed their view of men, which isn't worth printing anyway. But you know the women on the left have just been abominable, guilty of infantile leftism of the worst sort, as Lenin defined it.

ATTANASIO: Which is — ?

MAILER: Pushing for one's own demands to the exclusion of all else.

Refusing to see the total picture, the total need. A great inner discipline, perhaps, within the enclave, but no interface with other leftist disciplines.

I think now, if the left is threatened from the outside, that might be healthy. The '70s have been a disaster period for the left, which culminated in the Carter Administration. The blandness, the lack of ideas that anyone was even remotely willing to die for. I think the left functions best on adversity. But I think we've got to open our horizons. Marx would've been appalled at the narrowness of his followers.

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The interview
took place in
December, 1980, according
to Attanasio's intro.

A Brief Exchange

*with Anita Eichholz**



ANITA EICHHOLZ: You said that the Women's Movement tends to become totalitarian and that you don't like that. Don't you think the male system in America is totalitarian?

NORMAN MAILER: Yes, but I always thought women had more sense than men.

EICHHOLZ: Why is that? Why should women be better than men?

MAILER: Because they have been forced to suffer our brutalities and our stupidities and our dominance and people that are on the bottom should always be smarter than people on top, or there is no hope for humanity.

EICHHOLZ: But you don't get better by suffering.

MAILER: You don't get a better person, but you should get a smarter one. I think that the average black knows more about life than the average white in America. I've never met — this is a remark that I've made before and people think I'm blowing smoke — I've never met a stupid black man. I've met any number of black men I couldn't speak to, who wouldn't talk to me or I couldn't talk to them, but I never met a black who I felt was stupid. Because stupidity is a choice. It's not a choice that black people can afford.

EICHHOLZ: But you can't compare blacks in every respect to women.

* This was not an interview but a dialogue in a classroom at the University of Munich.

MAILER: Well, but the women in America do. They say: We are your blacks.

EICHHOLZ: This isn't true in all respects.

MAILER: No, of course not. That's one of the troubles with the Women's Movement. They say a great many things that are not true in all respects but they say it as if it is.

EICHHOLZ: But why can't you answer my question with respect to women? Why should women be smarter than men and do everything better than they and be more clever than they are?

MAILER: There's no reason why they should be better. On the other hand, they should not be worse. Men over the centuries have acquired, willy-nilly, a certain rudimentary sense of fair play. The women have yet to learn it. I think they may. I'm not saying that it is impossible for them. But the Women's Movement over the last ten years has not gained respect among those men who are willing to give it. The general attitude among the women in America by now — I do not pretend to speak for them, it's my impression — is that many mistakes were made ten years ago when the movement first came into prominence, great excesses, and the problem is much more difficult than they ever realized. I think there was a certain optimism, almost a manic optimism, among the women back in the early Seventies. They thought they were going to have a quick breakthrough and change the world very quickly and I think that what they've come to recognize is — and I think this is all to the good — they've come to recognize the profound and serious problems that men who are trying to change the world also have. I think that out of all this we may yet arrive at a certain community of agreement that changing the world is a problem that goes beyond sexual gender.

EICHHOLZ: But you could start with that.

MAILER: You could start with that, but you could start with other notions as well. You could start with the idea that the most evil substance on earth today is plastic and that the way to improve society is to tax plastic heavily and reduce all other taxes. If you could remove plastic from human existence, things might be better because people's senses might be more lively. If people's senses were more lively — for instance, if we were in a room with chandeliers instead of these goddamn fluorescent lights overhead — we might all have a little more communion with one another.

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An Interview with Michael Lennon



MICHAEL LENNON: Do you think the election of Reagan might clarify the conflict between right and left?

NORMAN MAILER: Well, I've felt for a long time that liberalism is bankrupt. I think it was trying to do something, let's say from Roosevelt on, that was unique in human affairs. It attempted not only to take care of the top, but to lubricate the bottom. After the Second World War, out of the great guilt many Americans felt at what had been done to black people for two hundred years or more, a decision was made to ameliorate the black condition. A part of the surplus now began to go down to the blacks. Of course, it was still not a tenth of the amount that was being wasted at the top. Nonetheless, America had become the first super-society to attempt, on a major scale, to pay off the top and bottom while allowing the middle to support the ends. Of course, the middle had no cause for complaint. They had chosen the middle precisely because security was there. All the same, the onus of paying was on them. So it created vast resentment, and it was kept focused toward the bottom. Corporate capitalism succeeded, I believe, in convincing Americans that the Democratic Party was supporting people who didn't work, and in a sense, that was true. There were a lot of people in black areas and poor white areas who were ripping off welfare. But they didn't make up a tenth of that patch who were feeding off American society at the

EICHHOLZ: Yes, but that's exactly the problem. The women's question is postponed to all other questions.

MAILER: Well, that's your point of view and I respect it. That the women's question does not have enough prominence. My feeling is that the women have had a huge amount of prominence because the nature of their question was such that television loved it. It made good television — the women having a revolution. But in fact, in America all the women revolutionaries stayed in New York where they were comfortable and safe and very few went down to Texas. It's one thing to be a revolutionary, it's another to be a brave revolutionary. I just say they're not quite as good as they pretend to be.

1980

top. Just think of the needless expense that goes into products that don't need to be surrounded with romantic appurtenances. You know we don't have to fall in love with our soap. Maybe we do have to love our automobile, but we certainly don't have to admire any number of basic products that have no character to distinguish them. Money that could be put into increasing true competitive quality instead goes into contests with other producers to have zappier advertising. All the while, there has been a tacit agreement between black power and liberal power: "You guys (you blacks) keep the ghettos relatively quiet, and the money will keep coming in." Now the American voter has thrown that out. The resentment they've felt for the last ten years — it's been building all through the '70s — is that blacks are getting away with murder, not working and getting too much. Reagan came in on that wave. He said, in effect, "Let's keep all the waste for ourselves."

When I was running for mayor in '69, a number of people took me aside and said, "Look, welfare is the biggest single problem in New York City. The blacks are ripping it off. Why don't you talk to some of them? If you could ever work out a plan that looks like it makes a little sense, it would be your best chance to show people that you are doing something the other candidates are not doing. Maybe you'll have a chance to get into real contention." So Breslin and I went up to Harlem and met some mothers who represented a welfare organization. One black woman got up to speak: "Mrs. Richbucks over on Park Avenue, she says I'm taking my welfare check and riding around in a Cadillac and you know what I say? I say: 'Fuck her.' My Cadillac is five years old and I have a lot of trouble meeting the payments on it, and she's riding around in a brand-new Cadillac. Mrs. Gold-ass over on Fifth Avenue says, Look at her, she's been married four times and she's got eighteen children and is drawing welfare for each one of them. She's ripping off the government, I say, 'Fuck her.' I may be lying about five of those children but I got the other thirteen to take care of, and I been married three times. Mrs. Gold-ass over on Fifth Avenue, she don't have to get married because she's got lovers all over the place and furs and diamond rings." The black woman finally glared at me and said, "We want our share of the waste," I thought, "Madam, your argument is unanswerable." I came back to headquarters and said, "Fellows, we got no welfare program." Because I knew we weren't going to tell black people, "Please stop taking things you're not entitled to," when they

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knew the rich were skimming ten times as much. I think this is the key problem the Democratic Party has to face. If they are truly interested in having a country where everybody has something roughly approaching equal opportunity. To get there, we have to re-think every aspect of American politics and American life, but not in the old radical way of "Let's rally the unions." I mean that is crap beyond crap. By now, America is one vast middle-class consumer nation. Here in the '80s we've got to get into absolutely new ways of looking at politics. You could begin a purification process that might flush out American politics. For instance, America at this point is glutted with needless products that depend for their existence on advertising. Pure waste. Wouldn't sell without it. Suppose any product that advertises itself has to pay a tax in proportion to its relative budget for advertising? That might open up opportunities for a good small business to grow by word of mouth. The left, instead of paying lip service to small business, and then opting immediately for every big government solution they can find, might recognize that big government is truly the enemy of the people and the secret and ultimate ally of the corporation. The Democratic left could begin to re-form around the concept that the economy can't have more productivity until it flushes its waste.

LENNON: Reagan's going to increase the glut.

MAILER: Oh, I think he is an open invitation to big business to take more of a grab. It staggers me how corporate capitalism is endlessly greedy, even greedier than they need to be for their own good.

LENNON: All the counterculture of the '60s didn't really make a dent in the corporation?

MAILER: No effective dent. The corporation has become more and more powerful, controls more and more. It lowers the real standard of living. We used to have roads where people could have an interesting trip. Now even the most beautiful landscape is rendered monotonous by a superhighway. We put up buildings that are absolutely faceless, without decoration, without character, with flat roofs. They do not exalt us when we look at them, they depress us. Exaltation is also part of our real standard of living. Then we adulterate our food. The average food, not only in America by now, but because we export this crap, the average food all over the world is becoming more and more tasteless, more tortured.

LENNON: TV.

MAILER: TV adulterates human relations. TV does the same thing to human relations that frozen food does to real food. All of this is the blight of corporate capitalism. Corporate capitalism is an incubus on the world quite equal to Soviet Communism.

LENNON: And you say that big government is the enemy of the people?

MAILER: Government bears a resemblance to cell fission. Of a cancerous sort. When a cancer cell can't solve a problem, it divides. That's why they proliferate more quickly than normal cells — they're not equipped to solve problems, only to grow. When in doubt, divide; that's cancer. Government proliferates all the time. It doesn't solve problems.

LENNON: What would you like to hear somebody say on American television that's new?

MAILER: Just once let somebody say we don't have to stand up to the Russians. Let them come here and die of indigestion. Let the Russians attempt to take over America. They will perish. Americans would love the idea of joining an underground. The greatest blow for liberty that's ever been struck would indeed be rung. The Russians would founder on the shores of America. That idea is never discussed in America. Let me suggest the real force of it by showing the opposite. What if the Russians invited us to occupy them? It would exhaust us as a nation.

LENNON: What did you think of John Anderson?

MAILER: I thought he was boring. A third party candidate should be interesting, because he has no responsibility.

LENNON: Do you think there is a chance for a third major party in the United States?

MAILER: I think Anderson created some ground for the possibility. He showed that people were interested in a third party in America, he did show that. To such extent we may honor his name someday. But I thought he was awfully boring.

LENNON: Do you think a lot of people didn't vote for John Anderson because they thought he didn't have a chance?

MAILER: That's always true of a third party candidate. You lose half your vote in the last week. As election day gets nearer, people want their vote to count. There is a fetishism to voting. One wants to be buried in the proper cemetery. So, if you're a third party candidate, you should be interesting. You have no responsi-

bilities, you don't have to worry about losing millions of votes for the wrong remark; you're going to lose them anyway. But Anderson had nothing new to offer. He didn't understand that his simple duty was to be interesting.

1980

The Mad Butler

An Interview with Hilary Mills



HILARY MILLS: Looking back on your career, it seems as if your novel *The Deer Park* was a kind of watershed. It was after that book came out in 1955 that you gradually moved away from the novel and into journalism. What happened at that point in your career?

NORMAN MAILER: I think the watershed book was *Advertisements for Myself*. That was the first to be written in what became my style. I never felt as if I had one until that book, and once I developed the style — for better or for worse — a lot of other forms opened to it.

MILLS: You've mentioned previously that you were smoking a lot of marijuana around this time; do you think this had anything to do with the difficulties you were encountering in your work?

MAILER: No. All it did was consume large tracts of my brain. I was doing to my brain what Barry Goldwater recommended we do to the foliage in Vietnam. I think parts of my head have been permanently sluggish ever since. But I don't think the damage to my head was what was giving me difficulty in writing. It was more timidity. I was a little aghast at what I was trying to do because no one had ever done it before. These days everybody is laying claim to having started the New Journalism. Tom Wolfe has been writing manifestos for the last ten years. But I think if I started any aspect of the New Journalism — and I did — it was an enormously personalized journalism where the character of the narra-

tor was one of the elements not only in telling the story but in the way the reader would assess the experience.

I had some dim instinctive feeling that what was wrong with all journalism was that the reporter pretended to be objective and that was one of the great lies of all time. What this really was, was an all-out assault on *New Yorker* writing, and at the same time I had — as all of us did — a vast respect for *The New Yorker*. So I was a little scared at what I was doing. I thought I was either all right or all wrong. The stakes were high, but by now it's more comfortable to write that way.

MILLS: You also pointed out in *Cannibals and Christians* that after the war American society was changing so rapidly that "the novel gave up any desire to be a creation equal to the phenomenon of the country." Did this have anything to do with your move away from the novel form and into journalism?

MAILER: Well, I wasn't taking journalism that seriously.

The thing that makes the novel so hellishly difficult is that you have to elucidate a story from the material. If you make a mistake then you may not discover it until the book is done and you're looking back on it ten years later. It's very much like chess in a funny way. Good chess players always speak of the best line of continuation. They can analyze a game afterward and replay the points of no return and see whether a knight should have been moved to another square. In the novel, you're left wondering.

MILLS: You've talked a lot about your economic problems in the past. If economic necessity hadn't been a factor in your life, would you have written as much as you have?

MAILER: No. I would have written books that are more literary and more well-rubbed, and I would have spent more time on them.

MILLS: Would all these books have been novels or would you have written journalism anyway?

MAILER: I could have gotten into journalism, particularly with the history we had in the Sixties. I'd never come up with a story of my own that was as good as the things that were happening all through the Sixties.

MILLS: So in a sense there has never been a conscious or premeditated orchestration of your own career; it just happened the way it did?

MAILER: Yes. I've always been reacting to the given.

MILLS: There seems to be a kind of tragic irony in American literary life: The youngest writers with the most brilliant first novels are

the ones subjected to the most horrendous pressures. How would you say your early success affected you and your work?

MAILER: It changed my life. For a long time after the success of *The Naked and the Dead*, for seven or eight years, I kept walking around saying nobody treats me as if I'm real, nobody wants me for myself, for my five-feet eight-inches, everybody wants me for my celebrity. Therefore my experience wasn't real. All the habits I'd formed up to that point of being an observer on the sidelines were shattered. Suddenly, if I went into a room I was the center of the room, and so regardless of how I carried myself, everything I did was taken seriously and critically. I complained bitterly to myself about the unfairness of it until the day I realized that it was fair, that that was my experience. It's the simplest remark to make to yourself, but it took me ten years to get to that point.

Then I began to realize the kind of writing I was going to do would be altogether different from the kind of writing I thought I would do. After *The Naked and the Dead* I wanted to write huge collective novels about American life, but I knew I had to go out and get experience and my celebrity made it impossible. I then began to realize that there was something else that I was going to get which hopefully would be equally valuable, and that was that I was having a form of twentieth-century experience which would become more and more prevalent: I was utterly separated from my roots. I was successful and alienated and that was a twentieth-century condition. This went into all my work after that in one way or another and will go on forever because by now I suppose I can say that kind of personality interests me more than someone who is rooted.

MILLS: Do you ever think of an audience when you write?

MAILER: No. I used to have a much clearer idea of who I was writing for — certain friends, certain intellectuals, certain critics, a clearer sense of the kind of audience I wanted out there and who they might be. That was in the Sixties, but in the Seventies there was a stretch where I really didn't know who I was writing for. You go in and out of fashion and your sense of who you're writing for goes in and out of focus. I must say with my Egyptian book I've gotten to the point where I don't care. I wouldn't have a clue who's going to like it. You get old enough and realize there are no literary gods left. That's not bad; there's something de-meaning about being in awe of a critic.

MILLS: Is your concentration different when you work on a novel from when you work on journalism?

MAILER: The novel is much more demanding physically. I've found that I can't do serious writing without getting into a depression. The depression is a vital part of the process because, to begin with, it's dangerous beyond measure to fall in love with what you're doing while you're doing it. You lose your judgment and you lose it for the simplest reason — that the words, as you're reading them, are stirring you too much. The odds are, if they're stirring you too much, they are going to stir no one else.

MILLS: Are you one of those writers who build a book painstakingly from page one or do you like to get the material down and go back and revise?

MAILER: I'm not happy if I feel that what's behind me is wrong or needs work. I tend to build my books on the basis of what I have already. I never have a master plan for the entire book. Every time I have — and when I was younger I used to sit down and write out a complete plan for a book — I never wrote the book. Even with *The Executioner's Song* where, after all, I knew the story in great detail, I was very careful not to be versed in too many details of the story way ahead. In other words, I tended to do my research let's say 100 pages ahead of where I was because I wanted to keep the feeling that I didn't know how it was all going to turn out. I wanted to have the illusion that I was inventing each little detail as if I were writing a conventional novel.

MILLS: Do you ever show your manuscript pages to someone while a work is in progress?

MAILER: Oh sure. I do it the way I box: I pick my sparring partners carefully. Usually I'll box with people who are so good that I'm in no danger of being hurt because they consider it obscene to damage me. Or I'll box with friends where we understand each other and are trying to bring out the best in each other as boxers. The same thing with an early stage of a manuscript. I'd no more dream of showing it to someone like John Simon than I would of carrying a kite to the Brooklyn Bridge and jumping off. But I'll show it to Norris or to Bob Lucid, who is a great friend of mine, or to Scott Meredith, my agent.

MILLS: You've worked on a number of other books while writing your big novel. Do you ever find it hard to get back in sync with the novel after doing these other projects?

MAILER: I've often said that this Egyptian novel is nicer to me than any of my wives. I leave it for two years and come back and it says, "Oh you look tired, you've been away, here let me wash

your feet." I've been able to go back to it without trouble every time so far. But a novel is very much like that mythological creature: a good woman. You can't abuse her forever. So I think I've finally got to finish the Egyptian novel. The time has come.

MILLS: What is it about?

MAILER: It takes place in the reign of Ramses IX who was pharaoh in the twentieth dynasty. The period is 1130 B.C. That's just the first novel. I'm two-thirds of the way through, and it's 1,000 pages long so far. The second novel will take place in the future and a third novel will be contemporary. I've got a tricky way of tying them up, but I'm not going to talk about that.

MILLS: Can you just say what the original inspiration for the book was?

MAILER: I thought I'd take a quick trip through Egypt. At one point I wanted the novel to be picaresque and have a chapter on Egypt of antiquity, a chapter on Greece, and a chapter on Rome just to show how marvelously talented I was to be able to do all these things. So I dipped into Egypt and never got out. I'm kind of sluggish when you get right down to it.

MILLS: Your work is totally unique, but do you see yourself as a direct descendent of any particular literary line?

MAILER: My taste and my loyalties are all in separate places. My loyalties are to people like Dreiser and Farrell and maybe Steinbeck and Wolfe — all the people who were writing about working-class and lower middle-class people. They were the ones who first got me excited about writing. On the other hand, my taste quickly inclined toward Hemingway and Faulkner and Fitzgerald and I learned many things from them that I didn't from the other bunch. Then, in a way, my actual influences are so peculiar. Henry Adams, for instance, obviously had a vast influence on me but I never knew he did until I started to write *The Armies of the Night*.

MILLS: Are you in the habit of socializing a lot with other writers?

MAILER: I think the literary world is a dangerous place to be in if you want to do an awful lot of writing because it's almost necessary to take on airs in order to protect yourself in that world. In a way you can't handle yourself skillfully unless your airs are finely tuned. Capote has a wonderful set and walks around like a little fortress — at least until lately. There are starting to be some cracks in the wall.

Hemingway committed suicide working on those airs. He took

the literary world much too seriously and he's almost there as a lesson to the rest of us: Don't get involved in that world at too deep a level or it will kill you and kill you for the silliest reasons: for vanity and because feuds are beginning to etch your liver with the acids of frustration.

MILLS: On the other hand, you've put almost as much creative energy into your public performing self as you have into your work. Do you think that public self has helped or hurt your work?

MAILER: It's probably helped my mind and hurt my work. I think I've had the kind of experience that made me equipped to deal with certain kinds of problems that a writer who's more serious about keeping to his study and not venturing out too much — or certainly not venturing out on quixotic ventures — would not have had. I think I have an understanding of the complexity of the world that I wouldn't have if I'd stayed at home. I would have tended to have a much more paranoid vision of how sinister things are. Things are sinister but not in the way I used to think.

MILLS: It's interesting that in your latest books, *The Executioner's Song* and *Of Women and Their Elegance*, Norman Mailer is conspicuously absent as narrator. Is this a conscious attempt on your part to get away from the autobiographical mode?

MAILER: I think I've worn out my feeling that that was the style in which to keep writing. It was so difficult for me to arrive at my own style — I didn't start with an identity. I forged an identity through my experience. Because of that, I think, it was easier to give up that style when the time came. I didn't feel as if I were giving myself away.

And then I've always felt as if the way people react to me is not to me but to the latest photograph they've seen of me. So I can change the photograph and have the fun of observing the reactions. The devil in me loves the idea of being just that much of a changeling. You can never understand a writer until you find his private little vanity and mine has always been that I will frustrate expectations. People think they've found a way of dismissing me, but, like the mad butler — I'll be back serving the meal.

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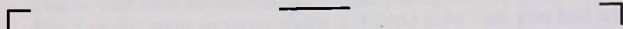
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An Author's Identity . . . gl



An Author's Identity

An Interview with Michael Lennon

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MICHAEL LENNON: To what do you attribute your ability to move from style to style?

NORMAN MAILER: Some writers have a powerful sense of identity. I think the best American example might be Henry Miller. Hemingway too. Faulkner, Thomas Wolfe. Then you get to people like Steinbeck who kept changing his identity with every book he did. I could add myself or Ed Doctorow as other good examples of this second category. I suppose our personality becomes an index to us of how the world is changing. So the act of writing serves us differently than it does Hemingway or Miller. For them, writing works as an assertion of their existence.

LENNON: Picasso went through many styles and it's been attributed by some to his various marriages. Is that true in your case to any extent? Have your relations with your families had a major impact in some underground fashion?

MAILER: Picasso did work in a new vein for every wife. I could say the same about myself up to a point. I suppose I've written a different book with every wife but then I think you become a different man in each marriage. On the other hand, Miller was married many times and that did not change his identity.

LENNON: So what is the crucial difference between you and Miller?

MAILER: Some people are born with clear roots. They know exactly where they came from and who they are and what they are, but the world is mysterious to them. I've always been the opposite —

sensitive to the world and forever in the course of discovering who I am and what I am.

LENNON: Well, I was also going to say you and Miller are both from Brooklyn and Miller has written some about his early life there. You've said your childhood never interested you very much. You didn't really want to write about it. Could it be that you had no sense of reacting against your childhood the way Miller reacted against his German bourgeois roots? What did he say, "My family were Nordic, which is to say idiots." Of course, you had close ties with your family. You still live there. But you never were reacting for or against Brooklyn. Maybe you were freer to move than Miller, in a sense?

MAILER: Well, I was close to my parents. I didn't have to break away. I never had a sense of fighting my way clear. In fact, the outside world was much tougher. Maybe the difference is right there. Someone like Miller had to establish his identity very early in life. If he didn't, a large part of him would have been ruined for any kind of serious effort later in life. I expect this is true for people who grow up in hostile families — they must establish their identities early. So there is often a rock-hard quality to the personality. Hemingway may have had subtler problems in his family, but he also had to establish his identity. Whereas my mother and my father treated my sister and myself as important people. At home, we were the center of their universe. It was the outside world that was difficult. So I was always terribly alert to the street and took the family hearth for granted. I was free to indulge myself there.

LENNON: You've said that some of your best writing comes out of your worst periods and that you sometimes have to go through the bends to accomplish what you want.

MAILER: I'm a little uneasy when writing doesn't come hard. It's better for me when I have to forge the will to do it on a given day. I find looking back, and I can't even tell you why, that on the days it was very hard, but I finally did succeed, and the same occurred next day and the next and the next, each day writing against great resistance in myself and finishing in great depression, that those became the best things I did. *The Armies of the Night* was written in a towering depression. I did it in two months and those were some of the worst weeks in my life. I would come home each night and think it was terrible.

LENNON: You said that when you were attempting to get started on

Armies, you finally tried the third person and it worked for you. Was that a release of some pressure?

MAILER: No, it merely shifted the pressure. On the one hand, it seemed interesting to speak of a protagonist named Norman Mailer, on the other it was odd. I remained uncomfortable with it for quite a period. I'd say I was halfway into the book before I got used to it. It took me longer than any reader. You may remember how the style felt when you started reading the book.

LENNON: It was a shock.

MAILER: It's a very funny way to look at oneself.

LENNON: Nevertheless, it was like an old shoe by the time you got rid of it.

MAILER: Yes, by the time I was done, I missed it so much I kept going back in book after book. It never worked as well again.

LENNON: I think you said in *The Fight* that you were getting tired of that style. Is that correct?

MAILER: I got less and less interested in myself. In *The Armies of the Night* I was a true protagonist of the best sort, which is half-heroic and three-quarters comic. That makes for a marvelous protagonist.

LENNON: Like a Stendhal hero?

MAILER: No, no. Nothing like. Nothing so large.

LENNON: No, but still, you had a success and you had a failure, you were on top of it, you were sick of yourself. That's a little bit like Julien Sorel, I think.

MAILER: Except he had this vast project. He was going to become one of the mightiest men in France. All I wanted to do, if you remember, was get to a dinner party that night.

LENNON: I always think of *The Armies of the Night* as a nineteenth-century novel.

MAILER: There is no sex. In that sense, it's a nineteenth-century novel. It's courtly, it's deliberate, it's amused with its time and place. It's taken for granted that its characters are all very fine and substantial people. We know it's going to turn out well in the end. I suppose it has the restrained merriment of the early nineteenth-century picaresque novel. I guess I have to agree.

LENNON: Do you think that you can influence society in some way by writing? Or change society?

MAILER: When I was young, I used to believe you could do it with

one book, apocalyptically. Now I know one has very little effect. You can't even measure the results of your books.

LENNON: Do you worry about bruising the readers' sensibilities ever?

MAILER: Anyone who worries about whether they are going to hurt somebody's feelings by their work is no more a writer than a surgeon who would say to himself, "In making this incision I'm going to give this young woman a scar on her belly that could injure her love life for the next thirty years." The surgeon says, "Scalpel, nurse," and makes the cut. He may be right or wrong in the need for the operation, but he keeps a certain insensitivity to other parts of the context. Writers also have to have their own kind of blindness. They can't say to themselves, "This portrait of my good friend is going to scar him terribly." If they feel that, they can't write. Indeed, a great many young writers can't. They think of all the people they're going to hurt, or those they're going to make enemies of, and the retribution that will come, and it doesn't seem worth it to them. There has to be something a bit maniacal about a young man or woman who wants to write. He has to be willing to get that book out no matter how many psychic corpses are left en route, or who is coming after him later.

LENNON: But what sort of responsibility do you have?

MAILER: Never to take the immediate advantage. Never to cash those easy checks. It's very dangerous when you are writing to milk it, to say to oneself, I have a prize cow and the price of milk is high now. I'm going to get every last bit of milk out. You have to be very careful of that. Writing may be an instinctive process, but it's not always clear. You often feel no more than a dull pressure from your instinct to go here or go there. You have to try to listen to the faint voice that tells you how to stay true to the work. Very hard to do. A writer's open to every pressure to take the immediate advantage, whatever it is. We all do in various ways.

LENNON: I think Faulkner said at one point, "A good book is worth a thousand old grandmothers, a thousand old women. And if it were necessary to get rid of the old grandmothers to write a good book, then it would be well worth it." Do you agree with that?

MAILER: No, a thousand is too many. Three or four, maybe.

LENNON: Do you believe that a movie has more possibilities to influence modern people than literature?

MAILER: I think good movies are more likely to reach deep feelings in people.

LENNON: Why? Because it's visual?

MAILER: Because movies are more primitive, I would argue, than literature. Film directs itself to more primitive states of consciousness. People who can't read get profound reactions out of movies. I would also say that to the degree that film reaches us in a precise way, it's no good. Film is best when ambiguous. A truly good film will affect two people profoundly, but they'll argue for hours over the message. One might say it is a satire, the other, a tragedy. That's as it should be. Film should reach way inside the psyche and prove truly disturbing. One person can go through horror watching a film, another person laugh their head off. That's good film. Bad film is when everybody laughs on cue. Then they are being manipulated. They have merely entered the engines of manipulation of the great institutions.

LENNON: You talk a lot about manipulation. Is there anything in life that is not in some sense manipulation?

MAILER: Yes. An existential situation.

LENNON: Doesn't everybody manipulate somebody else?

MAILER: If I'm manipulating you and you're manipulating me, that's interesting. That has elements of the game in it. One of us wins, the other loses. But at least we're both doing it on relatively fair terms. When you have huge institutions manipulating us, it isn't fair. Fair play, that's all I ask for.

LENNON: Well, you call yourself an existentialist. You speak of returning to the instinctual self. Yet you take notice of habit, discipline, even pretense and compromise as sort of civilized qualities that are more or less necessary. I'd like to know how one can be an existentialist in the modern world.

MAILER: You're asking me a small question. (*laughter*) To begin with, habit and discipline are absolutely necessary to serious projects. That doesn't mean we can ignore the fact that the habits which enable us to be productive are dangerous to our psyche. They keep us from living existentially. Now, when I say existentially, I don't mean that every day we must jump from the roof of one building to the roof of another. Although this is certainly as existential an experience as one could look for. Especially if the jump is at the very limit of our ability to leap. If we do not know whether we're going to be able to make the jump successfully,

that would be a pure existential experience. We're going to feel a great rush of adrenaline and happiness if we complete the leap, or know disaster and death if we don't. Obviously, if I speak of living counter to one's habits, I don't mean jumping across the roof every day. However, it may be that one has to leap across that figurative roof once a month, or once a year, or whatever one's inner rhythm is. If one uses discipline to accomplish serious projects in one's life, there comes a point where one becomes a slave of the habit, and one must look then for an existential encounter. But the idea is not that we all go out and climb the Matterhorn every Saturday. It may be that someone who is timid and gentle and reflective and would much rather spend his or her life reading books can still have an existential life. They need only think seriously of climbing the Matterhorn once, or trying it once, and that's enough. For some people, one existential experience is enough nourishment for ten, twenty, thirty years. Other people, like U.S. Marines, need existential experience three times a night. I'm not a bigot about these matters. I don't insist that everybody live the same way.

LENNON: Who would you today consider to be major American authors from your personal perspective? And why?

MAILER: There are probably twenty American authors who if you asked "Who are the major American authors?" would name one writer first — themselves. John Updike would say John Updike, Bellow would say Bellow.

LENNON: What would Norman Mailer say?

MAILER: Norman Mailer, you may depend upon it, would say Norman Mailer. We have a funny situation at present in American letters. There are no giants around. Once we had Hemingway and Faulkner. Now, we're all like spokes in a wheel. You cannot ask, "Who is the major spoke?" Each spoke will reply, "So far as I can feel it, I am the only one."

LENNON: But who, besides yourself?

MAILER: There are a lot of writers for whom I have regard. I think Saul Bellow is a very good writer. John Updike is very good, John Cheever . . .

LENNON: What about Gore Vidal?

MAILER: Vidal is a wit and a good essayist. Not a good novelist.

LENNON: What about Truman Capote?

MAILER: Capote is a stylist and a very good writer, but he's not done

anything memorable lately. Of course, he's been working for years on *Answered Prayers*. We'll have to wait and see.

LENNON: Any authors who are overrated?

MAILER: It's hard for an overrated writer to last. There are many more literary critics in America than men or women who can make a living writing novels. We've all been examined and re-examined for twenty or thirty years. So it would be hard for someone *ersatz* to get through.

LENNON: What about Pynchon?

MAILER: Either a genius or vastly overrated. I've never been able to read him. Just can't get through the bananas in *Gravity's Rainbow*.

LENNON: Are there any Latin American writers you are familiar with?

MAILER: Well, I think Borges and Márquez are the two most important writers in the world today.

LENNON: Why Borges? In political terms he is a reactionary, is he not?

MAILER: Well, he is a conservative, but . . . I detest having to think of a writer by his politics first. It's like thinking of people by way of their anus. Borges has this magical ability to take plots and turn them inside out. I sometimes think Borges may do in five pages what Pynchon does in five hundred. Which is, he shows us the resources of the novel. He's a magician's magician. In that sense, I love his work.

LENNON: Márquez?

MAILER: Márquez is wonderful. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude* he created not one world but a hundred. I don't know how Márquez does it. People come into his books. . . . In ten pages he'll create a family that has eighteen children and they go through ten years, and you know every one of the children, and all the events that occur in their life. In ten pages, I have all I can do to get around one bend in the Nile.

Writers and Boxers

An Interview with Michael Lennon



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MICHAEL LENNON: Writers, I've heard you say, are a little bit like athletes. And then you said, you never question your instincts. I question your premise. Aren't athletes really very disciplined people?

NORMAN MAILER: Well, I make remarks off the top of my head that have a kernel of truth. Then I have to think about it afterwards. I believe what I actually said was that when it comes to decide which book I'm going to write next, I generally follow my instincts. But not in everything. Why, if I did, I would end up in jail. I think athletes go through their own particular drama. They tend to trust their instincts for a long time — at least the instincts of their body. When they can't, in other words when they follow their deepest instincts and lose their game, they're in more trouble than us. I think athletes first come into contact with despair when their instincts fail them. So with all these amendments, I'll still support the remark.

LENNON: I'm assuming again that instincts are connected to the unconscious in some way. Why can't the unconscious be as error prone as the conscious?

MAILER: You know the famous story of Shelley? He rushed up to a mother, seized a two-month-old infant out of her arms, held up the infant and said, "Babe, speak. Reveal your immortal truth!" He believed the infant was born knowing everything. Like Plato — he was a great Platonist at that point, was Shelley — he

believed that the education you receive when you're young obfuscates the instinctive knowledge with which you're born. Then you spend the rest of your life trying to unmake that education. I also believe we're born with a profound appreciation of the universe and lose it in the first few years of our life, then spend the rest of our time trying to gain it back. By the age of six, the school system makes certain we lose it. I don't think this is so evil. It is rather in the nature of things. It was intended that way. We're supposed to lose it and regain it. I think it is impossible to conceive of any real achievement in knowledge without that fall. Because if knowledge is something we receive merely by opening ourselves to it, well — in the West, we can't conceive of that. Most of us find something repellent about Hindu philosophy. It's the idea that you receive wisdom without a Faustian effort. The more you give yourself to the universe, more passive you become, the closer you will be to the secrets of existence. This is profoundly repellent to the Western mind. We feel you get to the kernel of real secrets by smashing the shell. That's the way we want it. It's what we're built to do.

LENNON: Like Melville peeling away the layers of the onion to reach the inmost center?

MAILER: Well, if you're going to peel the layers of the onion, I think we even secretly believe it helps if you cut off a finger or two while peeling. But you say why do I trust *my* instincts? Because like a young professional athlete, I never had to think about earning a living until the last ten or fifteen years. From the time I was twenty-five, I knew I was probably going to have enough money to be a writer the rest of my life, and so I could form a habit of consulting my instincts. Most people don't have the leisure to do that. When you have a nine-to-five job, you can't do much with your instincts because your work is a continuation of the very education that buried the instincts in the first place. Which is another reason why young professional athletes are so different.

LENNON: If you had the advantage as a young man of money coming in, at the same time you had some struggles with shifts in your fame and reputation, didn't you? You were twenty-five and . . .

MAILER: I went through the bends. I find an analogy between my own experience and certain boxers. Occasionally you find a prizefighter like Leon Spinks, who becomes champ before he knows whether he can really fight or not. That's terrifying. It happened to me with *The Naked and the Dead*. I can understand

what Spinks went through afterward. I mean all that idiotic behavior after he beat Ali and won the championship came from the fact that he wasn't ready for it at all. He didn't know whether he was just a main-event fighter in a small club, or champion of the world. So he lost all sense of who he was. If you don't have an identity, it's very important to have established elements you can refer to. It's not enough to say to yourself, "I'm Heavyweight Champion of the world," it helps more if you can also say, "Yes, and I beat Joe Frazier, George Foreman and twenty-two other tough guys." Spinks could only say, "I beat Muhammad Ali, I don't know if that's because I am very good, or he is very old." It has to create a double sense of identity. Every time you have a thought about yourself, you have to refer to two separate identities: the Champ and the Fraud. Your psychic economy begins to work twice as hard.

LENNON: After having so much success with *The Naked and the Dead* you felt you were a false champion?

MAILER: Well, I felt two ways at once. On the one hand, I believed my reviews, on the other I knew *The Naked and the Dead* had been influenced by a great many writers who were better than me. By Hemingway, Farrell, Steinbeck, by Tolstoy, by Thomas Wolfe, by Dreiser, very much by Dos Passos. In a certain sense it was not my own book. These literary influences had flowed through me. I also had to digest the experience of being at war. I hadn't been a very good soldier. If you took a company, in my case a short-handed cavalry troop of one hundred men, maybe seventy-five or eighty soldiers could put up a tent better than me. So I was a bit of an impostor. On the other hand, I had all these wonderful reviews. There were times when you could think it was the greatest book written since *War and Peace*. Given all that, I had to carry two views of myself. Same with Spinks. He needed two halves of his mind to receive every compliment. One half said, "You're wonderful," and the other was always telling him: "These people are lying to you." That's the nature of obsession. We feel two ways about one question. So obsessions tend to paralyze, or flake you out.

LENNON: You've compared yourself to Spinks. I've also heard you call yourself in an interview the Ezzard Charles of Literature. I thought you were being enormously modest.

MAILER: No, I'd still say that. Compare the true stature of Hemingway and Faulkner to writers like Bellow and Cheever and Updike and myself, name eight or ten writers who might be the best

writer in America now, John Barth, Bernard Malamud, Pynchon, Algren, go through the list. Name after name. Out of twenty people, none begin to have, myself included, the stature of Hemingway and Faulkner. In that sense, I'd say to anyone who says I'm the most important writer in America today, well, if I am, I'm still the Ezzard Charles of the heavyweight division.

LENNON: You don't think Hemingway's reputation has slipped in the last ten years? People begin to take a close look at his writing and yours and Pynchon and Bellow? You, Pynchon and Bellow are the three I hear.

MAILER: Well, I don't know. We're all vastly more complex in our preoccupations than Hemingway. But I have to tell you that after I wrote *The Executioner's Song*, I went back and looked at Hemingway again. Cause now I was writing in a simple style. And his style is remarkable. The more I know about writing, the more of an achievement Hemingway's style becomes to me. I know his flaws inside out. I've loved and hated him as if he were my own father for years. There is so much he did for one, so much he didn't do. Truly the relationship you have to him is as a father. But he is a remarkable writer. His sense of the English language, I'd say, is virtually primitive in its power to evoke mood and stir the senses.

LENNON: What do you think he would think of *Executioner's Song*?

MAILER: He'd hate it and say, "That is bad Hemingway!" He'd loathe the book. But you know, he was a prick, let's face it.

LENNON: Who would you compare Ali to as a writer?

MAILER: Ali is very much like Hemingway if you're going to look for a parallel. First of all, he dominated his division entirely. Second of all, Hemingway, like Ali, put in a considerable apprenticeship. He just didn't become famous, he spent a number of years writing short stories and working on newspapers. He had not had a tremendous amount of experience before he became prominent, but it was more than people realize. Ali also had a number of tough fights before he beat Liston. Then, like Hemingway, he remained champion for a long, long time and kept dominating his division. Very much like Hemingway, very vain in the way Hemingway was vain. Couldn't bear competition, nor the idea that anyone around him might be remotely as good as he is. I think there is a wonderful study to be made about the similarities between Ernest Hemingway and Muhammad Ali. They come out of that same American urgency to be the only planet in existence.

bad
break

To be the sun. It goes right back to Egypt. A thousand gods but only one sun.

LENNON: Ali's later career isn't quite as brilliant as his early career. Isn't the same thing true of Hemingway?

MAILER: Roughly true. But Ali still did something Hemingway never quite did. After Ali got old, he still won a couple of great fights. He beat Foreman when he was already over the hill. Foreman was an awesome fighter at the point they met. It's one of the great fights of all time because the weaker man won through vast skill and guile and artistry. Plus a dazzling display of guts.

LENNON: Hemingway, at the end, didn't make the big knockout, to use that metaphor, in his later books.

MAILER: No, he did not.

LENNON: I think you once said that one of the best things Hemingway wrote in his later career was the *Paris Review* interview.

MAILER: Yes, that was the best. That, and *A Moveable Feast*.

LENNON: I'd like to go back to *The Naked and the Dead*. I don't think anyone can deny the brilliance of Hemingway in terms of style. But Hemingway could never write a book like *The Naked and the Dead* in which you're talking about fascism coming to America, technology, and the kinds of themes you have dealt with over the past thirty years.

MAILER: I didn't say Hemingway was brighter than I was. I just said he writes better.

LENNON: But that's not the same as saying his talent is better.

MAILER: Well, I think it is. You can have marvelous character actors like Charles Laughton who could play just about any part. Then you get someone like Marilyn Monroe who, in the technical sense, has a small talent. But she can come out and hold a mandolin in her hand and play a little ditty and wonderful things happen. Let's take an example we would argue about less. In the technical sense, there were limitations, I suppose, to Charlie Chaplin. Any number of actors can do a credible imitation of Charlie Chaplin, and, in addition, play fifty roles Chaplin would never go near. Yet we could never argue that they were greater than Chaplin. Even though they might achieve ninety-five percent of him in an imitation, Chaplin plucked a nerve in us that very few artists reach. What great artists do is so profound, you don't debate with it. Ditto, great athletes.

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