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Literary Ambitions . . . gl

Literary Ambitions

An Interview with Michael Lennon

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MICHAEL LENNON: Norman, once or twice when you were asked which of your books you liked the most, you said, "Oh, I don't know. They're like my children. One day I like one more than the other." Yet this analogy breaks down if you believe that a writer must excel in the art of becoming. Don't you see your books as indices of your growth? Or, do you really agree with E. M. Forster that a writer's works are totally distinct tasks, separate from each other? Like children?

NORMAN MAILER: The advantage of being my age is that you can end up agreeing with everyone. What Forster said is true. On the other hand, I go along with you. It's nice if your books can be looked at as indices of growth. I'm just not certain my work has developed that way. I know a great many people would say that *The Executioner's Song* is my best book. And maybe I'd even agree with them. That doesn't mean it shows the most growth. It might present the most digestion. Maybe, I had assimilated my craft at that point, but I wouldn't take it necessarily as a great indication of growth.

LENNON: The best books of George Orwell were usually about things he despised. Are you like Orwell in this respect?

MAILER: I'm drawn to writing about subjects that I feel comfortable with on the one hand and very uncertain of, on the other. For instance, with *The Executioner's Song*, I felt I understood Gilmore's desire to be executed. It seemed to me that if I were in

such a situation, I would also want that. It's very real to me that your soul can die before your body. So I felt I can write about this man in a way other people can't. On the other hand, I knew very little about prison, knew nothing about Utah and absolutely nothing about the particular circumstances of Gilmore's life. That was a good balance for me. Let me put it an altogether different way. Years ago, I was considerably taken with how you never know the sure meaning of a Latin sentence until you hear the last syllable of the last word. In Latin if you want to say, "I drink poison from the glass," you can put it in any order you wish. For example: "Poison from the glass drink I." Then the listener wouldn't know who took poison until "drink I" is spoken. That means people had to be alert. It was very easy to trick your neighbor. Now the Romans were the first nation to live consistently in terms of world conquest, and perhaps there was a certain unconscious conspiracy to construct the language that way. So that only the people who were most alert, most unscrupulous, most tricky, and most concerned with getting their way would be adept in the tongue. It was, goes my hypothesis, a language for people seeking power and ready to use all means to obtain it. With that as a key, assuming my key is correct, Latin might become a more fascinating study. Whereas, to approach Latin cold, without a key, would fill me with dismay. In any novel I might write, I like that same possibility present — that I know something other people don't. Those are the books I'm drawn to write. I'm never attracted to a topic where I have no more to say than anyone else.

LENNON: It's become a commonplace to note that your nonfiction is written novelistically. Why?

MAILER: It's nice to end with a book that reads like a novel rather than the digested contents of the first stomach of the cow. Which latter is what most nonfiction is to me. Someone spends a lot of time studying a body of material, they digest it, and write books. They skip the confusions. That's not interesting. We never know the living origins of the conclusions. What is fascinating to me in another writer is how his mind works. If I obtain clues that way, I can improve my own mind. But to suppose an author can digest a subject so well that there is no need to think about the subject independently is disagreeable. So I don't like the way most nonfiction is done. Whereas the novel changes our lives to some extent. Marriages have broken up, for instance, because someone read a novel and decided the life of the character in the book was more

interesting than their own. Good novels are painful to read. That's why few people do.

LENNON: Can nonfiction ever be existential in the sense that you've described it in regard to novels?

MAILER: I think an historian could say, "I start this project with two opposed hypotheses. I'm not sure which is correct. As we explore the material, let me show you the arguments for one, and then for the other. In the course of it, maybe we'll arrive at more of an answer than I have now." Although, to bring that off in truly sustained form is so dangerous, and would so violate the canons of the profession of history, which insist that you go for one stance, not two, that it doesn't often happen. It would tend to agitate exactly what disturbs most people about history in the first place which is that they learn somewhere between high school and college — or is it between graduate school and life? — that history is not history, but a series of immensely sober novels written by men who often don't have large literary talents, and have less to say about the real world than novelists. That's a disturbing discovery. That historians are not dealing with fact, but with the hypothesis they developed in relation to a series of isolated data. The desire to make these facts glow as facets in a mosaic that will enable us to perceive the past is not often done. Once we come to realize that no historians do it more closely than novelists, then all history becomes a novel. Just as any novel is the history of the working of one man's imagination, and so is a real historical artifact to illumine a period for us.

LENNON: How have the metaphors you've used changed over the years?

MAILER: I can tell you a story on that. I had a dear friend, Charlie Devlin, who helped me greatly with *The Naked and the Dead*, and in fact was the model, considerably removed, for the character named McLeod in *Barbary Shore*. Charlie was a quiet saturnine Irishman who was living in a small rooming house where I took a cubicle to finish *The Naked and the Dead*. We used to have long literary conversations. At a certain point I showed him *The Naked and the Dead*. He tore it apart. He was a severe critic. He said, "It's a better book than I thought it would be, but you have no gift for metaphor." Then he said, "Metaphor reveals a man's character, and his true grasp of life. To the degree that you have no metaphor, you are an impoverished writer, and have lived no life." I never forgot this lecture and began to work with might and main on my metaphors. But I can't tell you how they've changed.

LENNON: Many of your characters over the years have carried on negotiations with evil — Marion Faye, D. J., Rojack — I take it that you would not agree with Hannah Arendt on the essential banality of evil?

MAILER: I wouldn't agree with Hannah Arendt at all, not at all. Of course, she can make a case. There are any number of prodigiously evil people who have, from the novelist's point of view, disappointing exteriors. Eichmann, superficially speaking, was a little man, an ordinary man in appearance and vulgar and dull, but to assume therefore that evil itself is banal, strikes me as an exhibition of a prodigious poverty of imagination. You know, one of the paradoxes I always found in the liberal temperament is that they are immensely worshipful of Freud — even though most of his ideas are antipathetic to the notion of liberalism itself. But they go to Freud. The reason is that he is so reductive. Liberals don't like to believe in the vast power of the unconscious, in evil of true murderousness, residing in the most ordinary people. To mistake the surface for the reality, is to perform the fundamental liberal reflex. In effect, liberals are always saying, "I don't see God, so why do you assume God exists?" Out of that has come I think their present bankruptcy. Liberalism has no exciting ideas to offer. I think this enervation comes because it has not been able to deal with the most haunting question of the twentieth century, which is not communism, but nazism. It can't come near to understanding this incredible phenomenon that took over a country of the most decent, hardworking, and *clean* people in the world, this incredible phenomenon of a fascism that went far beyond the normal bounds of totalitarianism into the most extraordinary and despicable extermination of vast numbers of peoples. And this, coming out of a nation which had always been tremendously law-abiding, suggested that the unconscious was truly a hideous place. Liberals, unable to weave that thought into their philosophy, were happy to welcome Hannah Arendt's phrase. But I think to speak of the banality of evil is precisely to point us further in the wrong direction.

LENNON: Didn't Gary Gilmore's story have characteristics that are relevant to this?

MAILER: Probably. I was captured by how complex he was. It seemed to me that it's not the banality or the brutality of evil with which we have to contend, but its complexity, that is, the similarity of evil in others to ourselves. As I got to know Gilmore, and I came to know him better than I know almost anyone in my life,

I began to see that he was a man easily as complex as myself. Naturally, I've always thought of myself as being fairly complicated. Somewhere, in there, I realized that being a murderer was not a final factor, and shouldn't stop all thought. Once we allow ourselves to see Gilmore in his contradictions, the fact that he is a murderer is significant, let's say it's as much as one-quarter of his personality while the potential murderer in each of us might be only one sixteenth or one sixty-fourth of our personality, but fundamentally he is still more like us than unlike us. That is why I wanted to write the book in this way, with its slow accumulation of detail.

LENNON: You didn't have any final judgments on Gilmore?

MAILER: I started with many more opinions than I ended with. I may not be a good intellectual, but my tendency is to create intellections. I put them on like adhesive plasters. In this case I was pulling off the plasters. As I got deeper and deeper into what his nature might be, I decided that every concept I had about Gilmore proved inadequate. So I wanted the reader to confront the true complexity of a human personality that can come from studying one man close enough. The fact that he was a murderer made my task more easy because we're all fascinated with killers. But any person studied in that depth would prove fascinating. It's Flaubert's old idea. You can take any soul alive, including that simple servant girl he wrote about, and make them incredible if you get to know them well enough.

LENNON: *Of Women and Their Elegance* explores Marilyn Monroe's mind and speculates on her ideas, character, obsessions and desires, but does it by way of her inner voice, precisely what you chose not to do for Gilmore. Why? Is Marilyn Monroe less complex than Gilmore?

MAILER: No. A writer has to be ready to gamble when he enters someone's mind. So long as you stay outside, your characters retain a certain integrity, novelistically speaking. There is a mystery about them, a resonance. We can walk around such characters with the same respect we offer people who have a presence in a room. Part of the meaning of charisma is that we don't know the intimate nature of the human force we're dealing with. So, sometimes characters in novels radiate more energy when we don't enter their mind. It is one of the techniques a novelist acquires instinctively — don't enter your protagonist's mind until you have something to say about the interior that's more interesting than the reader's suppositions. The fatal error is to jump in too

quickly and then offer banal material. That's the worst of best-sellerdom. Second-rate readers enjoying the insights of second-rate writers.

LENNON: Robert Lucid, the literary critic, once wrote that your writing was based on an implicit — you could almost say, magical — promise to connect the world of Freud with the world of Marx, the public world of politics with the private world of dreams and hallucinations. You called it a “radical bridge.” Are you still as committed to this as you were in 1957?

MAILER: I'm no longer particularly interested in Freud. I don't say this disrespectfully. I think Freud had a great deal to say about the nature of the psyche in the nineteenth century. I believe his final importance in intellectual history will be that he gave us more insight into the late nineteenth century than anyone but Marx. Freud is the key to understanding how people put up with the particular kind of lives they led in the 1880s, 1890s, and early 1900s, very much locked up, terribly overstuffed, terrible formal lives. Yet, those lives had a considerable amount of power and energy. In those days the psyche was used like a plumbing system. People were accustomed to living under high pressure. That's not what we have now. Today we know a world in which people act out their anxieties and look to explanations for their conduct all the time. Freud is really not adequate any longer. Marx, for vastly more complex reasons, is also not adequate any longer, not wholly adequate, because corporate capitalism adapted to Marx via Keynes and practically wrapped themselves around some of his ideas. So I don't try to create a bridge from Marx to Freud anymore. I'm not certain I could have.

LENNON: How about other worlds, though? How about the public world of politics and economics, and the private interior world of individuals — hallucinations, surrealism, dream? What about those two worlds? Hasn't your writing always been trying to bridge the inner and outer, public and private?

MAILER: Yes. Always trying. There is a bad sentence I wrote years ago: “Until every manifestation of society from ukase to kiss is comprehended, we will be nowhere.” Something of the sort. A most unpleasant sound, “ukase to kiss.” I was trying too hard. It was in “The White Negro” and I wrote it at a time when I was coming to realize that everything in society from the largest social institution to those private and intimate personal moments, and the deepest mystical moments such as the onset of death, might all be seen in their connections if one had the courage to begin. In

that sense, I'm still trying. But I've come to realize that the task is enormous. Of course, I grew up under the shadow of Marx and Freud. Both men, independently, created an entire world system. They had a vision of all existence. That impressed me immensely. I was nothing if not intellectually ambitious when I was young and wanted to come up with a similar vision that would comprehend everything. By now I've come to realize that it is not only enormously difficult but that I don't have the intellectual discipline to begin to do anything remotely of that sort. But one tries to do one's best with what one's got. I'm still attempting to connect up what I can. Because I do think it's important. Until we understand the ways in which the authorities manipulate us, that is, the ways in which we are obliged to lead our lives in ways we don't particularly enjoy, until we understand all those reasons why so many of us feel dead inside so much of the time, and recognize how much of that is not our lack of imagination but the product of vast institutional systems of greed and injustice that we are schooled to perceive as rather benign manifestations, we are nowhere. The only way I can tell that something terrible is going on is that I feel a little duller than I ought to. Very often that's the end of a very long chain, you might say, of socially intended processes that keeps us malleable, amenable, and short on such powerful emotions as outrage at injustice. In that sense, I'm still trying to find the roots, trace it out, bring in the ultimate indictment against all that's awful and evil in society.

LENNON: That is still a radical bridge, isn't it?

MAILER: Yes, it's just that I don't have these two marvelous mountains — Marx and Freud — any longer. I'm somewhere tracking around in the old lakebeds, kicking up a lot of dust.

LENNON: So you would say that your writing now is less of an exploration than it used to be?

MAILER: Less of an exploration and more of an occupation of territories I reconnoitered years ago. Twenty years ago my mind was so active, I couldn't keep up with it. I had perceptions of all kinds into all sorts of endeavor. I think, not to compare myself, but I believe the same thing happened to Zola. He spoke about how when he was young his thoughts would come so quickly that his hand could not keep up with them as he wrote. As he grew older, the thoughts slowed down, but that was all right, because his hand could now write as fast as his thought. It was the perfect rate. Something of the same sort has happened to me. I now put leaves on the bare branches. It's more satisfying but not as heady

as it once was. I'm not as interesting to myself as I used to be.
LENNON: But you've got the card file of all the old ideas to go back to.

MAILER: Well, I live with the old ideas. Part of it is natural. They were so startling when they first came to me that I had to inhabit them, had to grow with them. Maybe I'm bragging, but I think I have a coherent philosophy. I believe we could start talking about virtually anything, and before we were done I could connect our subject to almost anything in my universe.

LENNON: The great book that you hope to write, will that require some new ideas or are you going to be able to use the old ones, the old system, the old philosophy?

MAILER: If I can bring off this three-part novel I'm talking about, I will have to get into places I've never been before. And I'll absorb it. The only value it will have for my novel is that the narrator of my book will be able to say, "Yes, back in the twentieth century they believed this was true about the universe. How wrong they were!" That book is going to be staggeringly difficult. Then, of course, the third book, which I look forward to, if I ever get to it, will be contemporary. I've got a couple of tricks up my sleeve that I can't talk about, ways of tying together the Egyptian novel, the novel of the spaceship in the future, and the contemporary book. So that they will all truly be three parts of the same novel, but in the way a tree might have three trunks growing out of a common root. Or, like the mythical phallus of Osiris which presented itself with three prongs.

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A Little on Novel-Writing . . .gl

A Little on Novel-Writing

*An Interview with Joseph McElroy
and His Writing Class at Columbia*



NORMAN MAILER: It might be useful to talk about the practical problems involved in writing a novel, by which I mean the set of psychological stances that you get into in the course of working on one book for a year or two. I remember when I was in college and writing a novel, the great problem I had was (I ran into a phrase by Henry James) "the keeping-up." It's a problem you face when you're young. The novel tends to change too quickly, which is one of the reasons why people in college often tend to write short stories and stay away from longer fiction. Good short story writers often blow up when they start a novel. They'll have a good first chapter, but the second chapter just seems to go off, and they never get it back.

That made me think of the different states I was in when I started each work. Why do I as a voice disappear in one book and appear in another? I found writing some kinds of books to call for this peculiar business of focusing your ego so it becomes literally the hot, burning, highly focused light that underwrites your style.

In other works, your ego tends to disappear completely. You're present as a gentle voice that seems to come in from over the hill — the type of voice that inhabits the third person in most good novels.

In talking about this question of ego and lack of ego, let me make a preface: for reasons that were not very dramatic, I stopped

drinking about eight months ago. It's sort of interesting not drinking. I've never been psychoanalyzed, and I thought, this is the closest I'll ever get to it. I know my idea of myself kept changing every day or two. I found that I sort of lost my sense of identity, and didn't know anymore quite who I was in the way that I used to have certain definite assumptions about who I might be. This was sufficiently interesting so that I still haven't gone back to drinking. Because my idea of myself keeps changing. In a way novel-writing is analogous to that — you keep discovering new facets. When you're working on a novel, a variety of motives arise in yourself that shift your sense of identity. That is, honorable reasons and ignoble reasons are both feeding the work. In effect, you have to be writing the book because it's good for you personally, as well as, ideally, for society (or at least your idea of what's good for society).

Apart from that, there are times when one's identity as an author becomes pressing. It's crucial to have some idea then of your own specific density in the social world. How do you impinge on other people? As a result, almost obligatorily, you have to write a novel that has a great emphasis upon the self.

The act of writing has many purposes and many motives, but one of them is a search for one's own increasing sanity. By that I mean one's own increasing effectiveness in the world. Most people start writing out of the curled-up reflex that they're not quite able to contend with the world. They also write in order to become more attractive in the world, more powerful.

JOSEPH MCELROY: To get your own back, Orwell says.

MAILER: Yes. There are those periods when there's a vast absorption in oneself, and in a way, the nicest and happiest and most elegant solution to that is to write a novel in which the protagonist is close to yourself. If you can keep one hand on that high overhead line, that high-voltage line of irony, so that you don't take yourself too seriously, you get to that wonderful land between high seriousness and self-ridicule that is perfectly balanced. Then you've got something awfully good. When you abase and attack yourself, or take yourself too seriously, you have a disaster. You need a marvelous internal navigator to keep bringing you back on course in such a book.

Then there are books where you can no longer deal with yourself — it's too exhausting. You want a vacation from yourself. Sometimes one wants to live like a ghost. Some writers stay in one vein all their lives; other writers keep going back and forth

between personal and objective books. You have people who always write out of their own voice, like Hemingway. Then you have writers who never step into their work, like Tolstoy* and James Michener.

STUDENT: You were saying at your reading last night, that at a certain point in your life you went out in the world instead of using that energy in your writing. Could you talk about that?

MAILER: I think most writers do have this problem, particularly if they arrive early. Those of you who don't, can have the fine consolation that your experience will at least remain your own; and that if you have a friend, he's real. People who notice you when you are unknown, notice you because you are in fact a lively protagonist in a given situation, and not because you're walking into the room with a reputation.

The problem of going out and searching for experience, I think, is true for very young writers who just don't have enough to write about. There comes a point where you say, "I want to be a writer, I feel all the equipment of a writer. I feel the livid intelligence of a writer, but I don't really know enough." This is where journalism rears its ugly head. It's very hard to enter strange places and learn a lot about them unless you have clout. Kids get into journalism because the moment they flash a card that says they're a bona fide reporter, people start talking to them. Of course it's a false experience. Hopefully, you develop the sense how to filter this experience, and correct it, refract it into what the experience might have been like if you hadn't had this peculiar advantage of being a journalist.

I discovered this all by myself when I started doing journalism, and realized it was a marvelous way for me to work. It was vastly easier than trying to write novels, and I was discouraged with the difficulty of writing them at that point. I had run into this business of trying to tell a good story and yet say wonderful things about the nature of the world and society, touch all the ultimates, and yet at the same time, have it read like speed. There are so many pitfalls to this. I always had a terrible time with the story. My stories were always ending up begrounded. There I'd be, in the middle of the dunes, no gas in the tank. I loved journalism because it gave me the story, which I'd always been weakest in. Then I discovered that this was the horror of it. Audiences liked it better. They'd all been seeing the same story you'd been seeing,

* An irresponsible remark! I must have been thinking of "The Death of Ivan Ilyich" rather than *War and Peace*.

and they wanted interpretation. It was those critical faculties that were being called for, rather than one's novelistic gifts. Under all those temptations, I must say I succumbed, and I spent a good many years working at the edge of journalism, because it was so much easier.

I was asked last night what I'd do if I had it all to do over again, and I said that if I'd had more discipline, I would probably have tried to stick with the novel. Still journalism has its own disciplines. Ideally, you must not only describe the event and bring your own perception to it, but say to the reader, "This is the kind of man or woman I am. This is the way I perceive the event. Now you, having been given me first, and then the event, can see around me into the event, and come away with your own conclusions. They might be different from mine."

In a novel, you do try to create something that exists separately from yourself, even if it's a manifest with yourself as the protagonist. Ideally, at a certain point that novel ought to be able to be separated from you.

STUDENT: How do you write as a novelist when, on the one hand, you have this story that's already been told, and you have all this research, and then you have the act of writing?

MAILER: The trick, as I found for myself, is just to keep from doing it all at once. When I work on a novel — I've had a novel working for years — I don't like to know the end. I'm happier finding things out at the point of the pencil. I think that if you solve the problem of how a chapter's going to end in the shower, then you're not as well off as if you get it while writing. I felt this with *The Executioner's Song*. While I knew the story, I saw this as a hazard. I wanted the book to read as if we did not know the ending. I didn't want to be aware of too many future details, because this would tend to make me curve what was happening to my characters at the place where I had them. I would understand too well their relation to what was going to happen later.

STUDENT: When you're writing about a story that's superficially very well known, there must be some very private experience about what goes into the writing of it.

MAILER: Well, I think *The Executioner's Song*, more than any other book I've ever done, was an exercise in craft. I've never felt close to it. I will say that there were many pitfalls to be avoided in the writing of it, and it did require those many years of experience. What you need is a tremendous amount of lore that'll let

you know where all the pitfalls are, and enable you to avoid them.

MCCELROY: Can we talk a bit about an earlier book, *Why Are We in Vietnam*? How did you feel when you were writing it?

MAILER: Well, it's the perfect foil to *The Executioner's Song*. I must start with an excursion to the side in answer to your question. Years ago I knew a lot of painters, abstract expressionists, young ones, and I had just begun to understand most of the work they were doing. You'd come in and one of them would have done about twenty window shades. It looked to my untutored eye as if they'd thrown some paint on these window shades and then let it drip down. I knew one of the painters better than the others, and I remember she said, "That's awfully interesting work." I said, "Interesting, what do you mean, interesting? It's horrible." She said, "What he's done is very valuable," and I said, "Why?," and she said, "Well, I'm glad he's done it, because now I don't have to do it." That was the period when they were truly exploring every last way you could put color on a surface, and so she was happy with it, because it saved her some work — she didn't have to go in that direction. You'll find very often in writing, that in the beginning, you have to go in certain directions to find out if they're attractive to you, and if you can do something with them, or also just whether you like them or not. I don't think I could have written *The Executioner's Song* if I hadn't written *Why Are We in Vietnam*?, because there I had the experience of expressing myself without a backward look. I think that *Why Are We in Vietnam*? is interesting to me, because I was able this once to transmute myself and create a somewhat ongoing, rampant, inflamed, sort of mad ego. If there are any forces in the cosmos that ever step in and give a helping hand to a writer, I got it right there.

The Executioner's Song, on the other hand, was another kind of gift, and I was delighted to have been given it. So in effect, two of the best books I've done are not mine. One, from the inside, and one, from the outside. They couldn't be more different, those two books, in every way.

STUDENT: Is your new Egyptian novel mostly research, or is it more of a creative process?

MAILER: There's an awful lot of research, but the trick is to digest it. The most difficult thing about writing an historical novel is to avoid that awful stance where you say, "Hello, I'm Saint-Simon

and I'm at the court of Louis XIV and Madame de Maintenon is very angry this morning." You have to get to that point of view in your writing where you say to yourself, "Madame de Maintenon does not quite know that she's the Madame de Maintenon that we know through Saint-Simon. She sees herself as someone other." You have to decide how she sees herself. That's what you're trying to get in an historical novel, and it's very difficult. Anachronisms come in with every phrase. Reading from my Egyptian book aloud last night, I kept thinking, oh my God, there are so many things I like or don't like in terms of style; I felt certain words were reasonable for an Egyptian of the Twentieth Dynasty and others weren't at all. Cleaning up the style is crucial to writing an historical novel. I did a book on Marilyn Monroe which came out last fall, and in that the writing was nothing much — it was easy to write, a question of feeling like a medium — hearing her voice and writing it. Once you begin to discover the ways in which characters talk like themselves and the way they talk like you, you try to write it in their voice, not your own voice. It takes a certain patience to go through and keep weeding out all those traces that don't belong. The problem is magnified in an historical novel.

STUDENT: You once said that form was a substitute for talent or style.

MAILER: I think it's a substitute for inspiration. A perfect example of this is the new journalism. Here the form is delivered to you by the plot of the event. It's a great substitute for the talent to conceive a good story. Of course you still have to flesh it out, but at least the event happened. In novel-writing you have to deal more with time. For instance, putting a story in the first person immediately takes care of the present. I've always found it much easier to write in the first person than in the third person, because in the third person you're making certain philosophical assumptions that the reader may not accept. It is tricky. You're assuming you're God, or some extraordinary observer. In *The Executioner's Song*, the biggest difficulty I had was to get myself knuckled down to the simple point of telling that story flatly, blankly, in the third person.

MCCELROY: I think you're right about the first person — the reader will give you that much.

MAILER: Yes, writing in the first person you don't have to jump from one head to another. As I was saying, in *The Executioner's Song*, since I wanted to move through everybody's head, and

make no pretty bones about it, I was paralyzed for a month. I just couldn't do it. Finally I thought, "Well, you're going to have to make the jump." To this day I feel uneasy about it. I feel I've violated the fundamental integrity of the novel.

One thing though, for me, about many novels — I think you have to work as if you're a farmer, and rotate your crops. If you write a novel that's factual and realistic and big, awfully close to what happened, then it's probably a good idea that your next novel be as fanciful as possible. That way you're rotating the crops in your brain.

MCELROY: Do you ever write short stories?

MAILER: Not often anymore, and I have something not awfully attractive to say about that. After you become a working writer, make your living as a writer, then what you write, to a larger extent than you realize, is determined by whether you make your living at it. The sad thing about writing short stories is that you can't. I don't think there are more than four or five writers of short stories in this country who actually do survive that way year after year.

STUDENT: Can we get back to inspiration? It sounds like if something inspires you, because it inspires you, you're willing to justify it ideologically.

MAILER: If you find some theme that keeps you working, don't question it. Let that theme be sufficient to fuel your work. If you start using the value judgments of others, you're never going to get much done. The thing to remember is that there's nobody anymore, not even the President, who can tell us how to live. Nobody knows the answer. If I find something is stimulating me and arousing my energy, that's fine, I'll trust it. If you're a serious young writer and find you are writing, my God, don't listen to what anyone else says, write your book. There probably is a deeper truth than you'll ever know in the fact that you're able to work so well. Of course, you could be writing in absolutely the wrong direction. You could be doing a dreadful book. You could be, let's take an extreme example, flirting with something that justifies Hitler, and you say to yourself, "What am I doing? I'm a monster. Why am I writing this book?" Who knows — in the process of creating such a work you might reawaken the attention of civilization to the fact that they're getting kind of casual, and complacent about Hitler. You see, you won't know the results of your action. The greatest vanity, the thing that has poisoned Marxist literature for decades, is that they assume writers can af-

fect the population profoundly in ways that are foreseeable, and therefore writers should work like scientists.

But, no matter what you find yourself writing about, if it's giving you enough energy to continue then the work bears a profound relationship to you at that point and so you don't question it.

STUDENT: Could you talk a bit about your early career, and the difficulties of writing your first novel, *The Naked and the Dead*?

MAILER: That was probably the easiest and the happiest book I ever wrote. When it came out I was twenty-five. I did it in about fifteen months. I was filled with the war, I'd just come back. This was a relatively peaceful period. The only anxiety I suffered while writing was that my opinion of the book was much higher than it deserved to be. I was young and I thought, "This is the greatest book since *War and Peace*. Maybe it's better." I used to walk around in a rage after reading the *New York Times Book Review*, because of some awful book that was being celebrated. I'd go to my editor and say, "Do you people realize that if they don't treat this book properly I'm going to be forced to go out and write potboilers?" I took myself very seriously. Once, before I'm done, I'd like to get another book that comes through me so quickly. I was getting five good ideas for every bad one, and happily I was oblivious to the faults of the book. At the time of *The Naked and the Dead* I was writing in a style that had very little literary merit to it. The force of the book prevailed over the style. I was lucky. If I'd been even a fraction more concerned with the merits of style, the book would have slowed up and I wouldn't have been able to write it.

STUDENT: What do you think of the way the book turned out — the death of Hearn? It was sure a big surprise.

MAILER: I haven't thought of that in years. Really, it is a shocking death. I must say I stole that directly from E. M. Forster, in *The Longest Journey*. He created a character who was most alive for the reader, and then destroyed him on the next page. Like a rifle shot. You get an idea what a gun is like at that point. In my book it may have been too big a price to pay, because the denouement of the novel was sacrificed. I don't think I was aware of the size of the problem. Today I'd be much more alert to that. If I did the book over again today, I might have kept Hearn alive until the very end, and it might have been a phonier book as a result. It might have been more effective but less true. One of the things you always have trouble with when you talk about "true" or "not

true" is, of course, the relative truth of the novel. In a way, if you get a fairly good novel going, then you have a universe functioning, and this universe lives or does not live in relation to its own scheme of cause and effect, of reaction and response. In Kafka's writing, he creates worlds that are absolutely true. You can say practically every sentence in a Kafka story is true to the story.

Looking back on it, I can give you a good and bad motive that I had for killing Hearn at that point. The good motive was that it seemed to me that it was about as powerful a way to show what death is like in war as anything I could do in that book. The shoddy motive was I wasn't altogether sure in my heart that I knew what to do with him, or knew how to bring him off.

MCELROY: You were suspicious even then for the long-range plans of a given book? That is, you'd let where you were going at a given point decide what to do next, right?

MAILER: I think that I truly work on impulse in all of my writing. That's why I don't like to plan too far ahead. It makes it almost impossible to have one of your characters go through a dipsy-doodle bend, because it's going to violate your larger scheme. It's better if the larger scheme comes into focus at the very last moment.

STUDENT: Back to some of the advice you were giving young writers. It seems you're saying that if it feels good, go with it and don't listen to what everybody says. Back when you were young and you were plowing through your stuff, were you aware or was there a mentor around to tell you that if it felt good, go with it; or did you have your doubts and just write your way through it? Didn't you sometimes get your head turned around by all the different forces working on you? Or were you aware, maybe instinctively, of what to do?

MAILER: I think I probably had a certain urgency about writing, because it seemed to me that it was probably the only thing I could do well. There is a great tendency then to follow your own instincts, because that's all you've got. Let me amplify this. Your instinct could be dead wrong. In other words, you could write a book with a powerful sense of inner conviction. You could finish writing it, and a year or two later, look at it and say, "How could I have so deluded myself? This is awful." This inner experience, this instinct can betray you, but you still have to go with it. Very often the instinct sees some light at the end of the tunnel, but that's because you've been trapped in a situation where your creative energies just can't get together. Now, there's become a

way to work. You may be writing out some very bad tendencies in yourself, but this can be good, too. Feel happy because (thank God) soon you're going to be done with that stupid side of yourself. That's what the enthusiasm can be about.

STUDENT: How do you go about rewriting?

MAILER: That's where your experience comes in. The more you rewrite, the better you get at it. There comes a point when you may feel on the declining side of your powers. At this point, if you've become one of the best editors in town, then those declining powers will seem much less weak to others than to yourself. That's because you know how to get the maximum out of what you have done. The only way to do this when you're young is to go through your work in every mood. You have to have the courage to look at it when you're in a terrible mood, ready to destroy it. If at that point something still comes through, then at least you have the assurance that it has to be pretty good, at least to you. And then, of course, it's very good to read things at the top of your feelings, way up, to see what the maximum is. If nothing else, all this gives you tolerance for the extraordinary spectrum of reactions you get in the classroom. You realize that the people that hate your work aren't necessarily evil, and the people who love your stuff are not altogether illustrious.

STUDENT: What happens when you find yourself lacking in inspiration or impulse? Do you utilize a problem-solving measure to create inspiration?

MAILER: Well, sometimes you're in the middle of an interesting chapter, but you don't know what the denouement is. You've got interesting people and have aroused certain expectations in your reader and now you don't know what to do with it all. That is the ongoing problem of doing a novel from day to day. As I said, James used that expression, "the keeping-up." How do you keep the level up in such a way that you don't get too dramatic or, equally, don't dissipate a good opportunity? You sit there and you have to solve that problem. Practice is a big part of it. There's a sense of inner timing that develops over the years. There is also the key word, taste. Taste becomes refined. Of course, it can get refined to the point where it ceases to exist.

STUDENT: You're a controversial public figure. I wonder how you feel about your past.

MAILER: After a while you walk around your own life as though it were a piece of sculpture. It depends on where you're looking at it

from. Are you thinking of it from the point of view of your work, or your children? Actually, I find I think less and less about myself as I get older. You begin to have the feeling, "Well, I may only have another so many years to write, and write halfway well," and you tend to get more serious. You get practical about your life, and realize that there's going to be more and more work, and less and less fun as you go along. You say, "I'll think about that old part of my life when I'm writing about it, and if I never write about it, I'll never think about it again."

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A Little on
America and Europe . . .gl

An Interview with Barbara Probst Solomon

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BARBARA PROBST SOLOMON: When Hemingway and Miller went to live and write in Europe, writers were not like governments, they were not nationalistic; they had something to say to each other. Americans and Europeans don't talk to each other very much at this point. Do you feel our novelists have gone in very different directions?

NORMAN MAILER: Yes, I think so.

SOLOMON: European writers have been more influenced by developments in linguistics. American innovators—and you have been a leading force—have gone in another direction. What do you think about this?

MAILER: I think of Borges, who is doing something else altogether. I don't know enough about South America to decide how much Borges speaks for Argentina and South America — but finally, I think of Borges as European because to do what Borges does you need a culture that is profound. Almost none of us in America has that kind of culture. It's possible Saul Bellow is the best read of American novelists; John Barth, maybe. I can think of a few others but none of them has been able to take that culture and use it forcefully in their work. It hardly matters that Bellow is conversant with probably all the great and medium great and small great writers of the Western world since Plato and Aristotle. It doesn't enrich his work, not the way Borges' culture does. Borges poses for us, I think, the difficulty of comprehending reality. He

shows us that as we approach reality we are writing scenarios that are the equivalent of propositions and hypotheses in physics. That is, they are correct until the evidence subverts them. But even as they are being subverted we learn a great deal because the next hypothesis, ideally, should be superior.

So in Borges you have this wonderful business of an immensely elaborate hypothesis destroyed by the one fact that turns it inside out. There is this marvelously sinewy dialectical vision of the interplay between culture and history, the two almost being — not artifacts — but separate organisms. Borges reveals to us his immensely vivid inner life which I think is all one finally cares about in another author. It is what I should be able to give others in my own writing. If our inner lives are more alive, we are more able to stand proof against the attacks of the world. And by now the attacks of the world upon our psyche are not so much aggressive as subtle, insidious — we're leached out. We're not destroyed from without, we are sucked out. Our spiritual souls, our social souls, are sucked out of us by the mass media, by information retrievable. I think Borges is the best when it comes to fighting that. Try putting Borges in a computer.

Now, the ways in which the Europeans have been going at it, have come out of a profound weariness with the novel, with plot, with all the impedimenta of writing a book. Everything that is detestable in the best-selling novel comes to visit you every time you try to tell a story. It's getting harder and harder. So you look for ways to get away from it. I suppose I've looked to other fields. To journalism. To historical events that I could write about as they were occurring. Because it's another way of apprehending reality. My fundamental stance in all this is that the attempt to apprehend reality is what is interesting. Because we learn from the attempt. We can't learn that much from the final product. All we can do is argue about how successful it is.

SOLOMON: You wrote, in *The Armies of the Night*, that what saved America was our humor, the belly laugh, "The noble common man was obscene as an old goat and his obscenity was what saved him." The guy who says, "Man, I just managed to take me a noble shit." That cadence is at the heart of the American vernacular. Do you feel all this European weariness comes from their essentially non-democratic society? Where writers feel their connection to the upper rather than lower reaches of society?

MAILER: I think it has a great deal to do with it. I think it's also impossible to live with a culture as rich as the culture of the Western

world without being aghast at the poverty of one's ability to write about it. Americans have a saving instinct — we're not that near to European high culture. Sooner or later we suffer from having ignored it; we feel the paucity of our own culture, but at least we're not living in the shadow of the great beauty. Which is the shade, let us say, that sits over the light of European literary endeavor. Americans can live and work on a different street. We don't have to contemplate the beauty every day. In America one can still have the illusion that one is doing something brand new. One can feel like a pioneer.

But it's getting harder; we didn't start with much culture and we never achieved a truly rich American marrow. We're now in terrible trouble because we're getting to the point where we are destroying our culture at a much greater rate than we are creating it. And on top of that, we are exporting it to the rest of the world. Our heritage is in danger of arriving on the main historical stage all but cultureless; and for some time Europe has been attracted by the novelty of America's cultureless culture — taking our architecture, our superhighways, our plastics, our McDonald's, our Coca-Cola and all of it. They're destroying their culture. But in Europe, at least, they have something interesting to burn. So it's going to take them much longer. I make a prediction that European literature is going to get vastly interesting a little further down the road about the time that a great deal of European culture is being destroyed. I think that talented European writers are going to be struck by the tension between the value of what is being destroyed and the ferment of the destruction itself. Some very interesting works are going to come out of it.

SOLOMON: So you think the balance of tension is going to shift because of their fascination with America?

MAILER: Not so much because of America. I think it's going to shift because they won't be living in the shade of their culture any longer. That culture is going to be destroyed to a degree where Europeans will be able to breathe again. At a terrible price to that culture. But they'll be able to breathe again and, of course, breathing again, they're going to value that culture for the first time in decades, rather than feel awe, resentment and reverence for it.

SOLOMON: You were influenced by a European, Jean Malaquais?

MAILER: Yes, very much.

SOLOMON: In *The Armies of the Night*, which was published in '68, you wrote, "Communism would continue to produce heretics

and great innovators just so long as it expanded. Between Poland and India, Prague and Bangkok was a diversity of primitive lore which would jam every fine gear of the Marxist." You seem to be proved right.

MAILER: Yes, perhaps.

SOLOMON: That doesn't interest you?

MAILER: I think it would be more Malaquais' idea than mine. Jean Malaquais is the first person I knew who talked seriously and coherently about the inner contradictions of Soviet communism. That is, the very forces that would ultimately destroy communism. But the language in *The Armies of the Night* is not his but mine. I don't know that Malaquais pays as much attention as I do to primitive lore. I can't take credit for the idea, but feel satisfaction as I read it.

SOLOMON: Yes, but you can take credit for the ideas that you choose. We're always choosing somebody else's ideas.

MAILER: I think in choosing some of Malaquais' ideas, I chose well. Better than I usually do.

SOLOMON: In *Armies*, when you are in your Washington hotel room in the Hay-Adams, you reflect on federalist architecture, and suddenly what swam in front of my mind was *The Federalist Papers*, *Democracy*, and *The Education of Henry Adams*. In that section you mention his influence on you. Did you mean his novel *Democracy* or *The Education of Henry Adams*?

MAILER: The influence of Adams on *The Armies of the Night* was most peculiar. To the best of my recollection, I never read much Adams. I know for certain that I read one long chapter of *The Education of Henry Adams* in my freshman reader at Harvard. I remember thinking at the time, "What an odd thing to do, to write about yourself in the third person. Who is this fellow, Henry Adams, talking about himself as Adams," and being struck with it in that mildly irritable way freshmen have of passing over extraordinary works of literature. It's possible that I then read more of *The Education of Henry Adams* sometime in my freshman or sophomore year although I wouldn't claim that I did. I never wrote about Adams, never thought about him particularly, would never have mentioned his name as one of the writers that were important to me, and yet in *Armies*, one starts reading it, and immediately one says — even I said — "My God, this is pure Henry Adams." What the hell is going on here? It's an absolute take-off, as if I were the great-grandson of Henry Adams. You

don't have to posit any other influence but Adams for *The Armies of the Night*.

So look how peculiar is influence: Adams was stuck in my unconscious as a possibility, the way it happens with painters much more than with writers. A painter can look at a particular Picasso, or Cézanne and say to himself, "That's the way to do it." But the work might not pop out for twenty or thirty years. When it does, they say, "Oh yes, there was a Picasso I saw at MOMA twenty-five years ago. I always wanted to try a palette of such and such, and I decided to use it here." In effect, that's what happened to me.

SOLOMON: Adams seems to have been one of the few good American writers who thought of putting Washington, D.C. and an American president at the center of a novel — *Democracy*. I thought of this in connection with you — the protagonist discards Washington and ends contemplating Egypt. So I felt that Adams subliminally was reaching to you on all levels.

MAILER: Well, he is and he isn't. I feel absolutely at a loss before Henry Adams. I mean, on the basis of these facts, it's spooky. I didn't know about Egypt, for instance. Yet one of his books ends with a character going there?

SOLOMON: Madeline Lee in *Democracy* gets disgusted with Washington and then goes off to Egypt at the end of the book. You do seem more like Henry Adams' great-grandson at this moment that you do Hemingway's son.

MAILER: Yes, because here I am going off to Egypt . . . for the last ten years.

SOLOMON: Did any of the elasticity of the Jewish historical experience help you make that imaginative leap into Egypt?

MAILER: I don't know why I started writing about Egypt. I've been working on that book off and on for ten years. I feel only now as if I'm slowly beginning to understand it, that is, the Egypt of antiquity. You can very often write well about matters that you don't understand too well. Most of my life I've written in advance of my comprehension of a subject. Often, years later, I would come to understand the material better and be amazed that I could have done it at all when I did. Oddly enough, now that I have the knowledge, I probably couldn't write about it. There's some potentiality in all of us that we tap when we write. The best writing comes out of that. I don't know that the work I'm writing about Egypt now is better than the stuff eight to ten years ago when I knew very little.

Something in me then was drawn toward Egypt although nothing in my past was even remotely related. All my interests are contemporary. I'm certainly not a man of classical education, in relation to most writers not a man with historical concerns. Yet in this Egyptian book I wish nothing in it to be contemporary. And of course it is a totally different culture. It existed long before Jesus, so there's absolutely nothing of a Christian notion of compassion, which is the very center of all Western thought. There is also nothing of the Judaic tradition. At the time I am writing about, the Jews are a tribe of barbarians who occasionally give a little trouble on the borders. Moses comes into the book for a page. He's mentioned as this fellow who went wild out on the Eastern desert and helped some of the Hebrews pull off a massacre and then took off farther east. That's all we know about Moses in my book. I can't answer why I've been so fascinated with Egypt. I sometimes think that I'm attracted to a subject for literary purposes because I know so little about it — except that I have one deep instinct into the subject.

Let me give you an example. It's more fun to pick up a mystery novel and read it, if early in that book you decide that you and the author share a perception that no one else has. Then you are going to get more out of this book than anyone else, even though you know nothing about the material or the crime. I think something of that sort works in historical research. You have to feel that you do know more than the average historian about one aspect of the subject. I think that I felt I knew more about burial customs than the average Egyptologist. Not more about the details of them, which I hadn't learned, then, but more about the reason for them.

SOLOMON: Did you need a subject of the dimension of Egypt to be able to pull yourself away from America? Up until now America has been a big character in your novels.

MAILER: Yes, but I haven't been altogether successful in pulling away. Sometimes I've gotten terribly tired of this Egyptian book because there's nothing to say in it about America today. *The Executioner's Song* was written as a reaction. It allowed me to immerse myself again in daily matters of American life. I went out to Utah, a place whose inhabitants have hardly heard of New York and where they certainly never have heard of me. I learned again how Americans who don't live in the media do in fact live interesting lives and I steeped myself in all the minutiae of American life. When I went back to the Egyptian book, it was

with a certain sense of refreshment. There's been this alternation over the last ten years — writing about Egypt and then writing about matters that are very American: Marilyn Monroe, Muhammad Ali, Henry Miller, Gary Gilmore.

SOLOMON: Do you physically *see* Egypt?

MAILER: Yes, oh yes. I see it so clearly that I can't stand going there. I went once for a visit and said, I have to get out of here. Because it was ruining my vision. It had nothing to do with Egypt of antiquity. I got out fast.

SOLOMON: Language has always been very important in your books. What do you hear in the Egyptian book? What vernacular?

MAILER: I've been studying the Egyptian language a little bit, not in a very serious or concerted way, but I've been using an Egyptian dictionary and I find it fascinating. Ancient Egyptian is a wonderful language, a very dialectical language. Often the nearest cousin to a word means the exact opposite. For example: the word for "dung" also means "the bleaching of linen." And you find this all through the language. The word for "magnetism" is also the word for "you." It's a tremendously sensuous language, rather existential. You feel that the ancient Egyptians had already articulated one highly complex and wonderful and rather magical civilization, and yet they were still close to the primitive. Every word in the language is a revelation. Every word is related to every other word in a fashion that we don't have today. Like "you" and "magnetism." The reason the two words were the same is that when people looked at one another they felt the play of forces between them. Today we have that crude expression, "good vibes," but it's a pale reflection of ancient Egyptian.

SOLOMON: Very few novelists, excepting Saul Bellow, seem to write expansive books.

MAILER: Well, it's hard. It's hard to write well on a large subject. Actually, most large subjects are handled by best-selling novelists. They will have a cast of forty or fifty characters. They'll have stories that cover fifty to one hundred years. They'll have a couple of world wars. They'll have startling changes in the lives of several families. The reason they do all that in a hurry is because they can keep their book moving. What characterizes a best-selling novel is that there's nothing in it that you haven't come across before. At least if you're a reader of some experience. Most serious writers tend to work on smaller and smaller canvases and expatiate upon them with more and more clarity. And that's terri-

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bly important. At least they're contributing to knowledge rather than adding to the general cultural sludge that lies over everything. So it's very hard to take on a large topic. At the moment the only living writer I can think of who can handle what I've described — forty to fifty characters and one hundred years — is Garcia Márquez. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is an amazing work. Garcia Márquez succeeds in doing it, but how, I don't know. In my Egyptian novel — although it's very, very long — not that much happens. As I've said before it takes me ten pages to go around a bend in the Nile.

1981

Acknowledgments

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