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One-Night Stands

An Interview with Cathleen Medwick



CATHLEEN 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.

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Ethics and Pornography

An Interview with Jeffrey Michelson and Sarah Stone

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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, cer-
tainly 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 na-
ture of the orgasm.

MICHELSON: Yeah.

MAILER: OK. Looking at it now, that marvelously innovative sen-
tence, 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*.

~~sex~~
 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~~ ^{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.~~

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 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 ~~that he was considerably older than me~~ to come to understand ~~that 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~~ initiate 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~~ ^{increasing} 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.

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 to be sordid, the focal (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

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

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 all-male ~~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

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 awakening 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 shrimper 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. *Women may be more interested in power*
Can you say a little more about

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.

Some of
your
female
friends

But

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 keens 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

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~~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)

1981

1971

The Cavett Show
with Gore Vidal
and Janet Flanner

From a letter to Women's Hour Daily

Sir,

It has come to my attention that Gore Vidal has been speaking in your pages of my hatred of women. Let me present the following items:

Number of times married:	Mailer 3	Vidal 0
Number of children:	Mailer 7	Vidal 0
Number of daughters:	Mailer 3	Vidal 0

These statistics of course prove nothing unless it is to suggest that the reason Vidal may have married no lady and fathered no child is due perhaps to his love of women and his reluctance therefore to acquire their tender flesh with his sharp tongue.

Yours sincerely,
Norman Mailer

1977

1977

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1579

Of a Small and Modest Malignancy

"Yes, you bet," said Cavett. "David Frost, Jesus Christ!"

The next afternoon crossing a street in Chicago — Norman was in Chicago to do more TV to promote the sales of a book that no one who watched TV would ever be likely to buy: could it have been *Of a Fire on the Moon*? — he heard a stranger yell out from across the street, "Hey, Norm, how could you ever do that rotten thing last night to Dick Cavett?"

It took years to recognize that he had uttered no little harm; across the seasons, whenever Cavett might have a fight with his network, one or another executive hostile for certain to Cavett's subtle superiority to TV itself, would be able to say, "After all, Dick, even your friend Norman Mailer thinks David Frost is better than you."

Still, he did not come to understand how often the entertainer could have thought about that remark until the night he was on the Cavett show with Janet Flanner and Gore Vidal. It would prove to be an evening where no one would come out well, unless it was Janet Flanner, but it was a night, nonetheless, to convince Mailer that he was incapable of learning how to conduct a feud on TV.

[Redacted]

Channel 9

The Vidal-Mailer Cavett Show

From a letter to *Women's Wear Daily*:

[Redacted]

Sirs:

It has come to my attention that Gore Vidal has been speaking in your pages of my hatred of women. Let me present the following items.

Number of times married:	Mailer 5	Vidal 0
Number of children:	Mailer 7	Vidal 0
Number of daughters:	Mailer 5	Vidal 0

These statistics of course prove nothing unless it is to suggest that the reason Vidal may have married no lady and fathered no child is due perhaps to his love of women and his reluctance therefore to injure their tender flesh with his sharp tongue.

[Redacted]

Yours sincerely,
Norman Mailer

Until this letter, Vidal and Mailer had managed to keep a public peace for years. They had each decided long ago there were more profitable wars in the literary world, and so maintained the professional pact not to speak ill of each other for too little.

Probably this peace had exacted its small price. It is difficult for certain authors not to say terrible and/or accurate things about each other in print. Mailer might hear occasionally of a nasty remark Vidal had made in private, but ignored it on the assumption that Gore, tuning up for a little writing, was once again confusing malice for precision.

Still, Mailer knew his own career had become too popular for the pact to continue. Sometime after *The Armies of the Night* won a couple of prizes, Vidal began to sour in public. Condescending and somewhat righteous references to Mailer began to appear in Vidal's interviews. That was a clue to the temper of the time. Vidal was one literary politician with an impeccable nose for ripe liberal issues, and he was now rushing into the most useful denunciations, politically speaking, against machismo, and was quick to attach to this theme the-hatred-of-Norman-Mailer-for-women as if that were a well-established fact known to most of the citizenry.

Since Mailer was fond of repeating that there were four stages to comprehending a woman's character, and you could not claim to know her until you had passed through the four, that is, living together, being married, having children, and going through divorce, ~~since he might therefore like or dislike a lost mate in a given season, but finally thought that was equal to approving or disapproving of Paris or London after you have lived there for many years, a woman indeed equal to a culture, so that you could hardly pass through four such stages with her and be left with nothing.~~ He thought (as we can see by his letter to *Women's Wear Daily*) that it was kind of gross of Gore to declare that Mailer hated women when (to be downright crass about it) it was not Vidal, dig! who had spent his life in the collective arms of the powerhouse.

Of course, in compensation, Gore had taken up a seat in the power of print. If people saw something in a magazine, they liked to believe it. That much, Vidal knew. Stupid people! So, some time after his letter to *Woman's Wear Daily*, Mailer picked up *The New York Review of Books* one summer day and read a review by Vidal of a book by an author named Eva Figes in which the young-old critic stopped long enough to say, "There has been from Henry

Miller to Norman Mailer to Charles Manson a logical progression. The Miller-Mailer-Manson man, or M3 for short, has been conditioned to think of women as, at best, breeders of sons, at worst, objects to be poked, humiliated, killed. . . .” Vidal, going on from here to speak of M3 as if the case were made — well, in truth, even as Mailer knew that Vidal was looking for just such a result, just so did something blow in his brain.

“Why,” asked Mailer in his mind of Vidal, “didn’t you have the simple literary decency to say, ‘This literary progression, extreme as it may sound at first, will engage my best efforts to show that there are startling and frightening similarities between Manson and Miller and Mailer?’”

Instead, this arrogance! Vidal, with his insensitivity to nuance, would not even make a suitable valet for Henry Miller.

And then, there was himself! He had not been writing for thirty years to be called M3. Mailer could hardly wait to catch up with Gore Vidal.

Yet the opportunity, when it came, did not give good anticipation. Indeed, he hardly knew whether the meeting would take place. He had been invited to appear on Cavett, then he heard Vidal had also been invited, then was told Vidal had dropped off the show. Finally he was informed Vidal was back again. It seemed Cavett would now have one more guest: Janet Flanner. The assistant producer who offered this piece of news said she was formidable.

Mailer had never met Janet Flanner but was used to seeing her pen name, Genêt, in *The New Yorker*. She had been doing a column on Paris for as long as he could remember (for decades it seemed before the real Genet came along) a firm gossip *feuilleton*. It is the kind of writing whose merit is not easy to evaluate unless you know as much about the subject as the author; ergo, he had been less impressed with Janet Flanner’s literary abilities than by her power to keep a job for a lifetime.

“I assume she’s Gore’s friend,” Mailer said.

“It’s more like he’s her doll,” replied the assistant producer.

“Thank you very much,” said Mailer.

It did not bother him. Formidable people were often not formidable under video. Indeed, there was never a reason any longer to be bothered with what was awaiting you. By just so much had Mailer’s opinion of television’s importance changed. By now, he saw no point in being splendid on a TV show — it did not contribute to the

sort of meaningful career where every step was on the staircase, in fact one rarely had an idea of when one was good and when terrible. Mailer had appeared on shows where he felt splendid and full of energy, yet looked uncomfortable to himself, even agitated, when he watched it afterward; conversely, he had come into many a studio feeling lifeless and later looked a model of cool deportment. The secret on TV, if there was a secret, was not to do too much.

Yet it could never be as simple as that. Sitting next to Johnny Carson, for example, was like setting up camp next to an ant-hill. Carson never stopped fidgeting. None of his nervousness, however, passed through the tube. Finally, one was at the mercy, Mailer expected, of this as yet undiscovered psycho-electronic valve that filtered vices out of certain people only to distort enthusiasm into the appearance of hysteria for others.

Of course, if you could not control how you would appear, if it was up to the valve, then there was no point to getting charged-up for a show. Mailer had come to believe in the old Hindu saw: Do not spend time worrying about matters you cannot affect.

So he made other appearances that day, other radio or TV — he could no longer remember — ~~it seemed from the vantage of Limbo where old dates were quietly curved (so that you slid in memory around one winter over to another) that~~ he may have been making some kind of effort on *The Prisoner of Sex* — was it for the hardcover or the paperback? and had, in any case, done a show already, and gone to a cocktail party where he enjoyed three or four drinks to the hilt. Mailer had the operative definition of *to the hilt*: it was the state where a carelessly lit match sent you up in flames.

When he arrived at the studio, they rushed him to makeup. Vidal had been supposed to go on first, but hadn't arrived. Would Mailer object to taking his place? He had hardly given his assent before he was informed that Vidal had arrived after all. Would he now mind if Mr. Vidal went on as originally planned? Since Mailer had formed the little vice when appearing on Cavett, of comporting himself as the star, he could not pretend to happiness at finding himself on the shuttle. Still, he kept his mouth shut. He did not wish to jostle his liquor.

At this moment, alone in the Green Room, he felt a tender and caressing hand on the back of his neck. It was Vidal. Vidal had never touched him before, but now had the tender smile of a man who would claim, "It doesn't matter, old sport, what we say about each other. It's just a..."

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Mailer answered with an open-handed tap across the cheek. It was not a slap, neither was it a punch, just a stiff tap.

To his amazement, Vidal slapped him back.

Norman smiled. He leaned forward and looked pleasantly at Gore. He put his hand to the back of Gore's neck. Then he butted him hard in the head.

"Are you crazy?" asked Vidal.

"Shut up," said Mailer.

"You're absolutely mad. You *are* violent," said Vidal.

"I'll see you on the show."

He was, after Vidal left (and that was quickly enough), obliged to pace about. Other people came into the Green Room, saw him, and went away. It was obvious; he did not feel like speaking.

The show began. Cavett did his monologue, and it was a good one. "A lot of critics knock television. They have a kind of snobbish attitude towards TV and they think it lacks culture," he said with a smile. He had the only smile that came through the valves of video looking wicked and angelic at once.

"Tonight," continued Cavett, "I have three people on who are important in writing; they've done other things too, but they're all well-known writers. Just to prove to them that television has figured in the thoughts and writings of people of some stature among the literary profession, I asked my research department to come up with a few things that have been written about this program from some prominent figures. In a couple of cases I have a tendency to do it in the voice of the well-known person. This is from an unpublished work of William F. Buckley, Jr. entitled, 'A Felicitous Discourse on Epistemological Incunabula,' subtitled, 'God: The Man and The Myth.'" The audience applauded his smile with laughter. "The quote is: 'One of the less onerous duties incumbent upon a quondam political journalist is the occasional appearance on sundry quotidian chat programs that proliferate these days like Liberals at a hundred dollar a plate dinner for the poor. Not the least in stature, though clearly the least in stature actually, is a jovial dwarf named Cavett,'" — they roared — "'who fortnightly forays into — or nightly actually — all fields of erudition and these forays are unblemished by the slightest knowledge of any of them.' That's old Bill." There was laughter.

"Here," Cavett went on, "is a paragraph by women's liberationist Kate Millet entitled 'Little Pig's Big Mouth.'" (Laughter) "Let's look at the quiet talk-show host Dick Cavett

facts. In the past year, sexist-talk-show host Dick Cavett

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has welcomed several hundred guests on his show. Why have these not included one woman Supreme Court justice, one woman admiral, one woman pro-football player," — he stopped for the laughter — "'one woman-father, husband, king or rapist? I'll tell you, sisters. Because Mr. Cavett, like all arrogant, ignorant, hypocritical, self-serving, pompous, rotten male chauvinist pigs, is simply . . .'" and then she goes on to become slightly insulting." The audience adored him. "I don't," said Cavett with his finest smile, "want to read that part to you."

A question period with the audience followed, and he was asked "Do you dye your hair?"

"No," Cavett replied, "I tint my body a little to set it off."

Vidal now came out, and was as sluggish as a club-fighter who is looking for his mother.

VIDAL: You're looking very well. Do you tint your body? (*laughter*)

CAVETT: Funny, that was going to be my first question to you.

VIDAL: That was it exactly, yeah.

CAVETT: You heard all that?

VIDAL: I was overhearing the audience, yeah.

CAVETT: The audience was giving me a bit of time there, as we say in America.

VIDAL: As you say in America. Well . . . love it or leave it.

CAVETT: I haven't seen you in a long time. Do they say that in other countries — love it or leave it?

VIDAL: Well, yes. Amsterdam, love it or leave it. No, no, you're free to come and go.

Vidal, however, was not a professional for too little. After the commercial, he began to rally; indeed Mailer was finally obliged to admire how Gore was able (wonder of wonders) to recover from the head-butting. Having been taught this informal martial art by a retired black Light-Heavyweight named John Bates who worked for a spell in the late Fifties as a bouncer in the Cafe Riviera on Sheridan Square — Bates' head felt like a cannonball! — Mailer knew the aftermath; nausea, and an ongoing vacuum in the brain.

Still, Gore was only showing a few bad effects. Of course, his head had been somewhat harder than expected — writers' heads tended to be more rock-like, for example, than actors', who suffered disproportionately from even a tap: head-butting may be ultimately

a question of how heavy an identity (authentic or false) one is able to support — but, even so! Mailer knew how hard he had hit him. (Between half and three-quarter throttle.) Of course, Gore had given his television routines on so many shows that he could probably recite the same lines, with the same wit, same timing, and same turn of delivery, under sodium pentothal. Moreover, Vidal was not one to forget an effective remark; he never used a new thought so long as the old one could still seem new; it was obvious he had no respect for Mailer's long-held belief that repetition kills the soul. On the contrary, if such a law was in force, Gore would decide it was best not to have a soul. The soul was most famous, after all, for getting in your way — this much cynicism had Vidal absorbed from world literature!

Therefore, the only evidence, at present, that young Gore had passed through a contretemps in the Green Room — that is, had his head smashed — was his gesture, repeated somewhat frequently, of bringing up several fingertips to gently massage the skin of his forehead, same fingers indeed that had so recently offered to caress the back of Mailer's stiff neck. Other than that, Mr. Vidal was getting around to presenting a first-rate picture of himself.

He was speaking of his friendship with Mrs. Roosevelt. He and she had interests in common, including the protection of the Hudson River from further pollution. For Cavett's liberal audience, there was no name, Mailer decided gloomily, more calculated than Eleanor Roosevelt's to give the wholly satisfactory sensation of having one's buttocks stroked with velvet. To be given intimate glimpses of the lady! Even though he sneered at such crowd-pleasing tactics, Mailer was as taken as anyone in the audience. His only contact, after all, with Mrs. Roosevelt had been at long distance in the Fifties when he saw her printed reaction to a statement he had made in Lyle Stuart's *Exposé* that white southerners did not wish to give the Negro his equality because — he had been quick to explain — Southern Whites felt they had their social superiority and Negroes had their sexual superiority, and that — thought Southern Whites — was fair enough. Eleanor Roosevelt's short statement read: "I think Mr. Mailer's remarks are horrible and unnecessary."

Vidal's life with Mrs. Roosevelt transpired, however, on less troubled waters. He spoke of their first meeting with tender éclat. "I drove down," he told Cavett's audience, "to Val-Kill Cottage where

she lived. It was a summer afternoon. The place was absolutely empty. Front door was open, walked in, nobody there. 'Anybody home?' She was a little deaf. No answer. So I went to the — the nearest door was half open, so I opened the door and there to my horror was Eleanor Roosevelt — very tall woman — standing in front of the toilet bowl. And I thought, 'Oh, my God.' And she gave a terrible cry, and then she turned around and she said, 'Well, I suppose you'd better know everything.' And she had some gladiolas in the toilet bowl which she was arranging. She said, 'It keeps them fresh.' The audience laughed happily. "So we began with perfect intimacy, Mrs. Roosevelt and I. I knew everything from then on that was in the bathroom."

Clever Vidal! Out of the twenty-eight routines suitable for an appearance on Cavett, Gore had chosen to disclose Eleanor Roosevelt's watercloset. How could the audience not believe they had divine relations?

VIDAL: (*ruminatively*) What I liked about her was there was nothing human that she felt human ingenuity wouldn't sense and right action could fix it, and she really believed that, and many people found her very boring because of it. I found her very inspiring. Gosh, I've been with her four in the morning in Schenectady trying to get a bus someplace when we were out campaigning, and on and on she would go, this old woman, quite sick, because she felt it was worth doing. And what's gone wrong in the world now, I think a great many of us feel that things are now irreversible, you know. They're never going to make the rivers clear and clean again, they're not going to save the land, they're not going to do anything about Detroit, the American empire is not going to liquidate itself. And there's beginning a sense of despair. You cannot turn it back, and Eleanor was the last person really who said, "Oh, we can, and we must."

Janet Flanner now came on. She was not a large woman, but she was old and grand and had an air of giving short measure to fools. By the manner in which she sat down next to Vidal, and laid her white-gloved hand on his arm, it was also apparent that she was authoritatively fond of him.

Cavett began to say that the last time he had had Janet Flanner on his program, she had told of finding Ernest Hemingway in her bathtub.

"He was stealing my warm water, that's what he was doing. Sheer theft is what I called it," said Janet Flanner.

She had a nice crust to her personality. It was like the crust on good bread that lets out agreeable sounds when a piece is broken off for you. The audience was tittering to show their approval. It hardly mattered how much she said since she could give you a lesson in deportment by the clearing of her throat.

Cavett asked: "Can you bury once and for all the tired old myth of the Frenchman being the sexual marvelous athlete of all time? . . ." And she replied: "Well, I've only buried a few so I can't tell about all the rest of them." In the midst of the applause, it was now obvious that Cavett, in his turn, was certainly fond of her. His manner seemed to suggest that the only reason he had ever wanted to have his own show in the first place was for the honor of introducing a lady so splendid as herself. He was actually laughing with happiness at her remarks.

For that matter, Mailer was obliged to admit all three were getting on very well:

VIDAL: Did you know that George Washington used to take his false teeth at night and put them in a bowl of Madeira wine?

CAVETT: No.

VIDAL: I thought you would like to know that, Dick.

FLANNER: As they were made of wood they must have been quite tasty by breakfast. (*laughter*)

VIDAL: It was his brunch that he would put in the next morning.

CAVETT: Madeira wine. Why? What's the effect of that on the false teeth?

VIDAL: I think he liked the taste and they were made out of elephant bone and wood.

FLANNER: And out of bone. The elephant bone is a new trick to me.

CAVETT: I thought they were always wood. I always wondered — I pictured his dentist saying, "I have bad news for you — termites," or something. (*laughter*)

FLANNER: Oh, you're a wicked boy. (*laughter*)

CAVETT: Am I? (*laughs*) Where are we going?

In the Green Room, Mailer — like that general he could never become — was contemplating the military chances for entering an ambush of such delicacy connected to such strength. The only answer was attack. Shatter all prepared positions. Go out, he said to himself, and smash that fucking tea-house.

~~Channel 10~~

Those watching would see Norman Mailer emerge on the screen in a dark and disheveled suit, bow heavily to Janet Flanner, shake hands with Cavett, and pointedly not shake hands with Vidal. People in the studio audience would comment audibly at this display of discourtesy. Mailer would glare at them. Cavett would ask why he did not shake hands. Mailer would reply that he did not approve of Vidal, and thought him shameless in intellectual argument.

The camera would cut to Vidal's face. He would look composed on occasion, less composed on other occasions. Occasionally, Janet Flanner would touch his arm in reassurance, as if to signify that she would protect him from ruffians. Vidal was obliged to simper at that. It takes real machismo to look stern when your protection is seventy years old.

Under these loads, the next minutes progressed unevenly. Mailer was wound-up, and Vidal was silent. Cavett did not seem to know whether to put Lanolin on a rash, or pull cocks' feathers. Given this sort of prompting, Norman managed to get in a few words he had written about Vidal in *The Prisoner of Sex*.

MAILER: I said that the need of the magazine reader for a remark he could repeat at dinner was best satisfied by writers with names like Gore Vidal.

FLANNER: All those writers called Gore Vidal.

VIDAL: I know. There are thousands of them, yeah.

CAVETT: Writers with names like Gore Vidal.

MAILER: There are two or three, you see.

CAVETT: Who are some of the others?

MAILER: I don't know.

CAVETT: Who wants to host the rest of this show for me? (laughter)

Who had butted who in the head? Mailer now asked himself. After this exchange, his ability to mount a sustained argument, never impressive at best, was hardly robust in the face of Cavett's wit, and Flanner's deft interruptions. In short time, the audience

Vidal's stowaway were "no more interesting than the contents of an 7P65

intellectual cow," they began to boo. He turned to them, and said, "You boo before you know what the man has done." They booed him again. He knew that he must move the conversation over to how Vidal had characterized Miller, Mailer and Manson as M3, but there was nothing routine about scoring a point when you were debating one on three, or, since Gore was so silent, one on two-and-a-half. During each commercial, Mailer would sit heavily in his seat, staring with a dead eye at Vidal, but this time — air-time certainly racing away — he handed Cavett a page he had torn out of *The New York Review of Books* with Vidal's review, and asked him to pass it over to be read aloud. As the show proceeded, however, Vidal did not read it. Norman began to upbraid him further.

"You go in for intellectual adulteration," he said to Vidal, and then with no great display of coherence added that Vidal was welcome to rip apart any piece of his writing. "By God," Mailer vowed, "I may be writing on the floor, but if you taught me something about writing, I'd look up and I'd love you for having taught me something about writing. But when you only teach me something about the tricks of adulteration," Mailer shook his head. "You say the rivers will never be clean again and you pollute the intellectual rivers . . ."

"I wasn't," Vidal drawled, "setting myself up as the Famous Writers School, you know." He drew the chortles he must have anticipated for that.

MAILER: Why don't you try to talk just once, Gore, without yuks?

Why not just talk to me instead of talking to the audience?

VIDAL: Well, by a curious thing we have not found ourselves in a friendly neighborhood bar, but both, by election, are sitting here with an audience, so therefore it would be dishonest of us to pretend otherwise. (*applause*)

MAILER: All right, Gore, look. We are here with an audience by choice, but let us at least — let us at least —

He wanted to grapple with him in argument, get him to read his own words. In the confusion of trying to get to Vidal with one hand and keep Cavett and Flanner off with the other, he was planning to say, "At least, read your own words," when Flanner whispered half-audibly to Gore.

MAILER: Hey, Miss Flanner. Are you workin' as the referee or as Mr. Vidal's manager? (*laughter*) I'm perfectly willing to accept you

— in either role . . .

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CAVETT: Can we afford you both talking?

MAILER: But my mind is fragile and I find it very hard to think and if you're muttering in the background it's difficult.

FLANNER: I made only the slightest mutter. (*laughter*) You must be very easily put off center.

MAILER: It's true, you made only the slightest mutter.

FLANNER: A tiny mutter.

MAILER: Yes, yes. But I listen to you spellbound —

FLANNER: I won't bother you anymore.

Norman was beginning to wonder if anything would work. He made a small vow never to drink again before going on TV. That valuable paper with Vidal's invaluable comments on Manson, Miller and Mailer was now in Vidal's pocket, oh that fine review with such plums as "M3 is on the defensive, shouting names; he thinks that to scream dyke is enough to make the girls burst into tears. . . ." "It was in those years that M3 was born, emigrated to America, killed Indians, killed blacks, conned women. . . ." "Miller-Mailer-Manson. Women, beware. Righteous murder stalks the land. . . ."

In the absence of any substance to Mailer's attack, Vidal was taking on strength. The show was past the three-quarter mark and Gore was coming alive. Yes, Gore was now saying avuncularly, the good thing about Norman "is his constant metamorphosis. He does rebear himself like the phoenix, and what the next reincarnation will be, I don't know."

MAILER: You seem to have figured out that the next reincarnation for me is going to be Charles Manson.

VIDAL: Well, you left yourself —

MAILER: Why don't you read what you wrote?

VIDAL: You let yourself in for it, and I will tell you — I'll give you a little background here — that Mailer has —

MAILER: We all know that I stabbed my wife years ago, we do know that, Gore. You were playing on that.

VIDAL: Let's just forget about it.

MAILER: You don't want to forget about it. You're a liar and a hypocrite. You were playing on it.

VIDAL: But that wasn't a lie or a hypocrisy.

MAILER: The fact of the matter is that people who read *The New York Review of Books* know perfectly well — they know all about it and it's your subtle little way of doing it . . .

you, now. OK, I'm getting to the point.

MAILER: Are you ready to apologize?

VIDAL: I would apologize if — if it hurts your feelings, of course I would.

MAILER: No, it hurts my sense of intellectual pollution.

VIDAL: Well, I must say, as an expert you should know about such things. (*laughter*)

MAILER: Yes, well, I've had to smell your works from time to time and that has helped me to become an expert on intellectual pollution, yes.

VIDAL: Yeah, well . . . let's — I was going to say, I —

FLANNER: Not only do you insult each other, not only in public, but you act as if you were in private. That's the odd way —

MAILER: It's the art of television, isn't it?

FLANNER: It's very odd that you act so — you act as if you were the only people here.

MAILER: Aren't we?

FLANNER: They're here, he's here. *I'm* here, and I'm becoming very, very bored. (*laughter, applause*)

MAILER: You still haven't told me whether you're Gore's manager or the referee.

CAVETT: If you make history here by punching a lady . . . (*laughter*)

FLANNER: I won't have it! I won't have it!

MAILER: Now, look, you see the sort of thing that goes on. Now you say I make history by punching a lady. You know perfectly well — you know perfectly well that I'm the gentlest of the four people here. (*laughter*)

CAVETT: I just hope it lasts through the next whatever we have left. (*laughter*)

MAILER: I guarantee you I wouldn't hit any of the people here because they're smaller.

CAVETT: In what ways? (*laughter*)

MAILER: Intellectually smaller.

CAVETT: Let me turn my chair and join these three. (*laughter, applause as he moves his place*) Perhaps you'd like two more chairs to contain your giant intellect. (*laughter, applause*)

MAILER: I'll take the two chairs if you will all accept finger-bowls.

This remark was sufficiently gnomic for Cavett to chew it and get to no witty place.

CAVETT: Who wants to grab this on our team? (*laughter*) I nearly have it, it means something to me. *Flanner's* *Flanner*

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bowls. Things you dip your fingers in after you've gotten them filthy from eating. Am I on the right track? Am I warm?

MAILER: Why don't you look at your question sheet and ask a question.

CAVETT: Why don't you fold it five ways and put it where the moon don't shine.

It was received as the remark of the evening. Boborygimous was the laughter. Mailer sat there, contemplating a region in the depth of his rectum. "Mr. Cavett," he said, "on your word of honor, did you just make that up or have you had it canned for years and were you waiting for the best moment to use it?"

"I have to tell you a quote from Tolstoy," said Cavett, and the laughter continued.

Mailer turned his chair away from the guests and toward the theater. "I want to ask all of you something," he said to the audience. "Are you all really truly idiots or is it me?"

The audience replied, "YOU!"

"Oh, that was an easy answer," said Cavett. The music came up. Another intermission was on them.

CAVETT: I just wonder what the people at home think happened during the break. The four of us sat here in stony silence and —

VIDAL: No, somebody in the audience shouted, "Your argument is immature," to all four of us.

CAVETT: To all four of us. Oh. So we can each take as much —

FLANNER: We can each take a bow.

CAVETT: — as we feel we deserve. I'm sorry, Norman, I did interrupt you, and you were talking to the assembled audience.

MAILER: Yes, I was going to ask the audience what I was doing that was making them cheer every time the other side connected with a pass from one to the other of my three opponents.

MAN IN AUDIENCE: You're rude.

WOMAN IN AUDIENCE: You're a snot.

MAILER: That's fair. Someone said I'm rude and someone said I'm being a snot.

WOMAN IN AUDIENCE: You're a pig.

MAILER: Ohhh, the joint is loaded with libbies, ohhh. (*applause*)

Gore, my God, it wasn't enough to trundle Janet Flanner along, the most formidable presence in the history of television, but you had to load the balcony with your libbies, your little libbies.

CAVETT: Well, now, wait a minute. There was only one lady's voice that rang out. Do you consider that loaded?

MAILER: It was the voice of legions. (*laughter*)

WOMAN IN AUDIENCE: Why do you have to argue so negatively and insulting to your guests?

MAILER: They're not my guests. They're not my guests any more than they're your guests.

CAVETT: It seems it's your show now.

WOMAN IN AUDIENCE: Why do you have to answer them with insults and nasty statements and they're answering you maturely and with dignity? (*applause*)

MAILER: That's because they're mature and full of dignity and they'd cut my throat in any alley and I answer rudely because I'm crude and a lout and a clod, that's why. (*applause*) Now have we progressed at all? Can I reach you, can I talk to any of you, or is it hopeless? I mean, if you care to listen, I do have a thing or two to say, believe it or not.

MAN IN AUDIENCE: Why are you bellyaching so much?

MAILER: Well, I'm bored with being misrepresented, you see. I've been misrepresented, by my own paranoid lights, for twenty-five years in this country, something like that, and to find an older litterateur like Gore Vidal, who knows his way around, you know . . . knows the ropes, and then suddenly, after all these years, he's suddenly developed a particularly dirty literary game. Well, it inflames me, you know. I've been so bold as to pretend to be the presumptive literary champ, you know, whether I deserve to be or not. The reason people always talk about me in relation to Hemingway is just that Hemingway at a certain point said to himself with his huge paranoia, "They're going to kill me for this but I'm going to be the champ, it's all I care about." And he shifted the course of American letters because up to that point people who wrote books were men of letters, they were gentlemen, they wrote books, and Hemingway said, in effect, "No, people who write books take as much punishment as prizefighters and one of them has to be a champion." Now, we've had a time that has not been interesting in terms of champions. In Hemingway's time there were great writers: there was Faulkner, there was Hemingway, and there were many other writers like Steinbeck and Farrell and Dos Passos and Thomas Wolfe, many, many really wonderful writers. Our time has been much more complicated and there hasn't been that many really extraordinary writers around, and I have presumed with all my extraordinary arrogance and lout-

ishness and crudeness to step forth and say, "I'm going to be the champ until one of you knocks me off." Well, fine, but, you know, they don't knock you off because they're too damned simply yellow, and they kick me in the nuts, and I don't like it.

That was perhaps the most impassioned speech he had ever delivered on television. It said little but it was full of feeling, and it contained the cardinal virtue of television (for any ambitious performer) which is that it kept attention on himself. It suggested that his close-up in the scheme of things would demand more minutes than the others. The audience, obedient to these conditioned reflexes of television, actually gave him a hand, a powerful hand of applause. But, of course, he was hardly finished.

The time had now come to give his peroration on Women's Liberation. He was not opposed to it, he wished to tell the world, he even honored it. It would free the best of women to discover how brave they were; a world in which women were maintained systematically in cowardice had to be a bad world. But, look, he wanted to say, as in all revolutions, the worst are running with the best, and there is an evil loose in Women's Liberation. It is the idea that the male search for bravery is mean and ridiculous, and that it is easier to be a man than a woman. Destroy the difference in the sexes, he would tell this audience, and a world of asexual human units, ready to fit the computers of a future totalitarianism, would also be prepared; these were the questions Vidal was polluting with his use of M3.

It might have been worth giving, but the commercial came before he was half-launched, and what he had to say was unsaid.

During the intermission, they argued on how to proceed. Vidal now wanted time to reply. Cavett indicated that it was Cavett's place to decide; he decided Vidal was entitled to equal time. Mailer offered to accept if Vidal would at least read from his review. With nothing agreed, the music came up.

CAVETT: Gore, the aim narrowed down to you and we have three and a half minutes left. I insist that you get them.

VIDAL: Well, I'll begin to answer Norman's charge about what a bad person I am. The attack on him, really, if you want to know, Norman, is simply what I detest in you — and I like many things in you, as you know, I'm a constant friend despite this — but your violence, your love of murder, your celebration

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→ ref rage, of hate... "American Dream" — what was the dream?
A man murders his wife and then buggers this woman → P. 71

afterwards to celebrate an American man's dream. This violence, this knocking people down, this carrying on, is a terrible thing. Now, it may make you a great artist —

MAILER: I demand one minute at the end —

VIDAL: It may make you a great artist —

MAILER: I'll listen, but I demand one minute at the end . . .

VIDAL: It may make you an interesting artist, I don't say that, but to the extent that one is interested in the way the society is going, there is quite enough of this stress, quite enough of this violence, without what I think are your celebrations of it, your attitude towards women in this thing, which I thought really horrible, and you said I compared you to Charles Manson. I said Henry Miller in his way, Norman in his, and Manson in his far out mad way, are each reflecting a hatred of women and a hatred of place.

One person was applauding loudly. At that moment, Norman got up from his chair, took a few steps over to Vidal's chair, flipped the review from *The New York Review of Books* out of his hand (for Vidal had been waving it as he spoke) and then returned to his seat. Vidal had been in the thick of saying, "And frankly if I may say so," when he saw Norman's bulk looming above, and he flinched. Vidal flinched discernibly: a monumentally high number of electrons were thereby shifted in millions of TV sets.

Back in his seat, Mailer began to read from Gore Vidal's review:

MAILER: "There has been from Henry Miller to Norman Mailer to Charles Manson a logical progression." Period. "The Miller-Mailer-Manson man, or M3 for short, has been conditioned to think of women as, at best, breeders of sons, at worst, objects to be poked, humiliated, killed," and from there on in the piece you speak of Miller, the great writer Henry Miller, the greatest writer alive in America — if we're going to talk like muckers, I'll talk too like a mucker — Henry Miller, the greatest writer alive in America, and myself, and Charles Manson, a hugely complex and contradictory figure, are spoken of, lumped together as M3, and if you call that good intellect working, to lump together three people as curious as Henry Miller, Norman Mailer and Charles Manson?

VIDAL: Well, you must read the piece. You can't —

MAILER: I read it.

VIDAL: You happened to read it but the audience has not. You are selecting this one passage as representative of the whole. I made my case very carefully. But I will say, giving you a few minutes

more on the program, you will prove my point. So, it is — I come back to what I said. I detest this violence in you. You have actually written that “murder is never nonsexual.”

MAILER: Well, is it ever nonsexual?

VIDAL: Well, I'm —

MAILER: Don't you know, Gore?

VIDAL: Not having murdered anybody lately, no, I don't know.

MAILER: You bragged about what you did to Jack Kerouac, after all.

VIDAL: He didn't die.

MAILER: Well, he did.

VIDAL: Oh, come on.

MAILER: Don't you remember the stories you used to tell about him —

VIDAL: I'm going to give you a line that Degas said to Whistler — two celebrated painters — and Whistler was a great performer, like Norman, and Degas said, “You know, Whistler, you act as if you had no talent.” You represent yourself as though you really had no talent at all and, of course, you are one of our best writers.

MAILER: I read it in the same place you read it, which is Edmund Wilson's answer to Vladimir Nabokov in last week's *Times*.

VIDAL: So what? What's that got to do with it?

MAILER: I thought it was marvelous.

VIDAL: Good. I'm happy that we both agree that the sentiment is correct.

MAILER: The difference is that I savor the remark and you throw it into the battle.

VIDAL: Oh, Norman.

MAILER: Now, may I have my one minute for rebuttal?

CAVETT: There is one minute remaining.

MAILER: There is one minute. All right. He speaks of a character in a book of mine murdering his wife and then bugging a woman as a celebration of American manhood. Now I throw myself upon your court, hanging judge. I say that's intellectual muckerism of the worst sort because the character I have there was a particularly complex character and, in fact, he did not simply bugger a woman, he entered her the other way as well and there was a particularly complicated —

FLANNER: Oh, goodness sake. (*laughter*)

MAILER: I know you've lived in France for many years, but believe me, Janet, it's possible to enter a woman another way as well.

FLANNER: So I've heard. (*laughter*)

CAVETT: On that classy note ... (*laughter*)

FLANNER: I don't think it's restricted to French information, dear.

CAVETT: She said she doesn't think that's restricted to the French.

FLANNER: Practically international.

MAILER: Are we quitting on that classy note?

CAVETT: On that classy note, we have a brief message from our local stations and we will be back.

Cavett and Mailer were not looking at each other. Vidal was looking off into space. Flanner was grinning at Mailer as if he were a most curious fellow. What a way to use his last minute!

The music came up.

CAVETT: Well, this has been an interesting evening around the old table and, Miss Flanner, I'm glad to see you got that box of cookies that you wanted. And you other two fellows —

FLANNER: It's the only solace.

CAVETT: Yeah. (*laughter*) Could you two come back New Year's Eve and maybe we can — (*laughter*)

MAILER: That's the night.

CAVETT: Christmas Eve. Well, let us know who you think won. That'll be interesting, and we'll see you next time we're on the air. If. (*laughter, applause*)

The goodbyes were short. Mailer turned around and Vidal was gone.

Channel 11

Afterward, long after the mail stopped coming (which took a time in itself) after the magazine accounts were finished, and he no longer heard students ask, "Were you really mad at Mr. Vidal?" every time he gave a lecture, long after he had lost every last bit of interest in the evening and remembered the program only because accounts kept coming back to him of Vidal saying on one network that Mailer-is-finished-as-a-writer, and Norman-is-bad-news on another, a string of claims that was now in its sixth year (and would never end since he knew he would never run into Vidal for an ac-