

94-96

2253

Esquire

~~WOMEN WE LOVE~~

1984-199

Page 1

LIKE A LADY

estimated 22 pages

~~The counterattack: Just when the world has turned against her, our author makes a forceful case for the woman about whom we know everything and nothing at all.~~

CONCEIVE OF A HISPANIC NOVELIST with exceptional powers whose name is Jesus Ramirez. He has the conviction, given in part by his first name, that he is here on earth to make a great change in the way people perceive themselves, and so he signs his books with his first name only: *Transcendence*, by Jesus; *Vertigo*, by Jesus; *Shadow of War*—Jesus. He is renowned around the world. He lives with his one name, Jesus.

What goes on in Madonna Ciccone's head every time she happens to think of the single name she now carries—the immutable Madonna? She is either among us for extraordinary reasons or is a pint-size Italian American with a heart she hopes is built out of the cast-iron balls of the *paisans* in generations before her. She knows that she doesn't know the answer. Who could? There is nothing comparable to living with a phenomenon when the phenomenon is you and you observe yourself with a cool intelligence, your own, and yet are trapped in the cruelest pit of the narcissist—you not only are more interested in yourself than in anyone else alive, but suffer from the likely suspicion that this may be justified. You could be more interesting than anyone you've encountered.

Page 2

2284 ~~page~~
Well, we can try to get into one or two small corners of Madonna's mind, although the secret may be not to try too hard. It is going to be no easy exploration. Her views and her philosophy are in deeds, not words. Her words give but an indication of where the dark stuff is stored.

Probably it is most comfortable to start our trip in company with David Letterman. He offers the most certitude. She was on his program, *Late Show with David Letterman*, on March 31, and the results produced a two-day Kristallnacht in the media. Madonna, once again, was being called sick, sordid, depraved, unbalanced, out of control, offensive, outrageous, and stupid. So wrote all the boozers, cokeheads, and solid suburbanites who do the TV columns, and their language frothed with enough effervescence to bring in the wire services and even the respectable daily press. Madonna, having said *fuck* thirteen times on the show, also had, with the aid of CBS's precise workmanship, been bleeped every time, and that was enough to light up the media machine guns. Outraged propriety! Defense of home and flag! The first requirement of a news story, after all, is to excise everything that gets in the way of a dramatic judgment. Madonna was a slut.

Actually, she and Letterman had been perfect foils for each other. If Madonna shows a predominant vice, it is that she always stands for something. It is usually rich enough, or by her detractors' estimate, gamy enough, to be on the very edge of the public's digestive powers. Letterman, on the other hand, stands for nothing at all. It is his number-one asset in our parlous time. During periods of lassitude and confusion, it is reassuring to listen to someone who is

2285

absolutely at home in the idle sounds of drift. At 11:30, when his audience is ready for a mild pleasure before bed, Letterman serves as their Ovaltine—a little flavor, a lot of pabulum—and the implicit promise that nothing serious is going to take place. He will not even be too funny. That could stir the blood and inspire thoughts of going out for a drink. Johnny Carson, mean as his own minted embodiment of Waspitude, used, at least, to give audiences his sharp sense—whether you agreed with him or not—of what constituted proper social deportment. Letterman, on an average night, would not be caught dead offering one indication of how to conduct your life. Keep it meaningless and we'll all get along. To be meaningless in a meaningless time is to be the Buddha of the befuddled.

Well, you don't attack Buddha for too little—as Madonna discovered. It is worth excerpting a few moments from their evening.

Madonna came out dressed in black, her hair dark, her manner demure—but for her combat boots, she looked like a socialite stepping out for a charity dinner. Unfortunately, Letterman, at the conclusion of his introduction, did remark that Madonna had “slept with some of the biggest names in the entertainment industry,” to which his bandleader exclaimed in real or simulated horror, “She’s your guest!”

“Just relax,” said David. “Everything’s fine. We’re just trying to have fun.”

All the same, no visitor in the history of late-night television had ever received a comparable greeting. Soon

enough, Madonna said, "Why are you so obsessed with my sex life?"

"Well," said David, "I have none of my own," to which Madonna would shortly reply, "David, you are a sick fuck."

The audience laughter was long. They had heard it. The rest of America would be bleeped, but they had waited on line to get tickets and they had heard Madonna say *fuck*. "You realize this is being broadcast?" David asked. "Well," he added, "you can't go on talking like that."

Madonna reminded him of a pair of her panties that were, presumably, in his desk drawer. "Aren't you going to smell them?" she asked. He said to the audience: "I'll tell you what—we're going to do a commercial and we're going to wash her mouth out with soap."

MADONNA: And he's going to smell my underwear. . . .

DAVID: And we'll be right back.

They broke for the commercial. When they came on again, Madonna was smoking a huge cigar.

MADONNA: You know, you've really changed since the last time I was on the show. . . . Life's made you soft.

DAVID: You think so? . . . In what sense?

MADONNA: Because you kiss up to everybody on your show. . . . I see you kissing up to, like, all these movie stars come on here—you used to give people a hard time.

DAVID: I can suspend that behavior tonight, if you like. *Heavy clapping followed. It inspired Letterman.*

DAVID: You can't—you can't be coming on here—this is American television; you can't talk like that.

MADONNA: Why?

DAVID: Because people don't want that in their own homes at 11:30 at night.

228
Now there was long applause in support of his sentiment: Away with filth at 11:30 P.M.

MADONNA: Wait a minute, wait a minute—people don't want to hear the word *fuck*?

DAVID: Oh, stop it! Will you stop? Ladies and gentlemen, turn down your volume! Turn it down immediately! She can't be stopped! There's something wrong with her.

MADONNA: There's definitely something wrong with me—I'm sitting here!

DAVID: I think you're a decent, nice person, and I'm happy you could come by tonight and gross us all out. . . .

MADONNA: Did you know it's good if you pee in the shower?

DAVID [to the audience]: I'm sorry. . . .

MADONNA: Don't fuck with me . . . peeing in the shower is really good; it fights athlete's foot. [Uneasy audience laughter.] I'm serious. Urine is like an antiseptic. It all has to do with the enzymes in your body.

DAVID: Don't you know a good pharmacist? Get yourself some Desenex. . . .

The air went out of the bout. Right there. Buddha had just blown his cool. He might have spent his working hours dribbling on the brains of Americans, but he could not bear a little dithering over his toes. His voice was so petulant that it all became clear: David worked for the corporation; David believed that cures came in bottles.

page 5

If he was overseer to all that was meaningless, it was because he had no poetry. He did not believe in a god who would be witty enough to put the cure for athlete's foot into the patient's urine.

SO BEGINS our modest story. Norman Mailer had been sufficiently taken with the manner in which Madonna disposed of David Letterman to mention it to Liz Smith. Friends of twenty years' standing, they were happy to talk to each other at parties, and only occasionally was he concerned that an indiscreet remark would slip into one of her columns.

On this occasion, however, he could not pretend that he was unhappy at being quoted. Stick it to Letterman, by all means! What he did not expect were the consequences. His agent was asked the next day whether Mailer would write a substantial piece on Madonna for Esquire. That gave him pause (for twenty-four hours) while Andrew Wylie, agent, and Ed Kosner, editor, came to terms. Nor could he pretend that he was overjoyed at the assignment: Madonna, on the face of it, had to have an ego even larger than his own.

Still, he had liked the woman who was on the Letterman show. What the news stories had failed to convey was how ladylike she had been all the while that she was setting network records at the number of times Outstanding Guest was being bleeped per minute. It is not easy to keep uttering *fuck with style* to millions of Americans you cannot see.

page 6

Moreover, Mailer had a bit of prior interest. During the period after Warren Beatty's liaison with Madonna, the author had spent four days interviewing the actor. Beatty, a Virginia gentleman when you scratched him, maintained a resolute rule not to speak intimately to writers about any of the women in his life; Norman Mailer, having his own hincty opinion of himself, did not care to ask such questions. Still, it was evident that if Warren had been tempted to talk about any of his women with so intelligent an audience as his four-day guest, it would have been Madonna. Given all Beatty knew about women, it was nonetheless obvious that he saw Madonna as a phenomenon and that he had had a relationship with her that was unlike relationships with other luminous ladies.

So, at the least, Mailer had that much interest. Moreover, Esquire had agreed to an offer too decent to refuse. Mailer was a great believer in taking on jobs that simultaneously satisfied both your best and worst motives; a challenging assignment on fields of green was always an inducement to opening that vault where the bullion of extra energy is stored. Since Madonna would obviously be witting to such a principle—had she done anything in her life that did not engage her best and worst sides at once?—they would have for commencement that much in common.

A few days later, he was asked most politely by the magazine whether he would consider being photographed in black tie with Madonna while she was in evening gown. It was the kind of request he usually took pleasure in rejecting: He hated abetting photographic stunts in maga-

but on
 zines and had hated it with personal motive ever since
 Annie Leibovitz had captured him for Rolling Stone in 1975
 wearing bathing trunks, his belly protruding, his hips in
 the water, his face hidden behind a giant face mask, belly
 and face mask considerably swollen by the use of a fish-eye
 lens—one gargoye of asshole for all the world to see. Ever
 since, he had avoided photographers' inspirations. (Like a
 horse at the glimpse of a snake did he rear at the sight of
 a wide-angle lens.)

On this occasion, however, he accepted. He would be
 going to a black-tie party that night, and the photographic
 session could be scheduled to take place an hour earlier.
 Photographer, Wayne Maser; place, a loft in SoHo. It might
 be more interesting to meet Madonna in such manner than
 to drop in at her apartment with a tape recorder.

Let us not, however, pretend that he saw it as a wholly
 happy solution to the magazine's need to have a picture of
 the principals taken together. Mailer was now seventy-one
 years old and, in consequence of the shrinkage that visits a
 senior citizen, was not quite five feet seven inches tall. He
 weighed two hundred pounds. Since he pumped modest
 amounts of iron from time to time, he looked (at his best)
 like a barrel. How can a barrel find pleasure in having itself
 commemorated in a dinner jacket, even a good dinner jack-
 et? He would look like a barrel wrapped in velvet.

The shoot, of course, turned all too quickly into a pre-
 pared scenario. Which is to say that Wayne Maser had his
 own ideas or instructions on where to go with it. Mailer
 had barely had time to say hello to Madonna, who was
 wearing a green evening dress and a black blindfold as she
 stood in front of a white canvas drop, before the blindfold
 was off and the photographer had stepped forward long
 enough to pull down the left strap of her gown, so exposing

her breast, doing it, mind you, with about as much ceremony as a furniture mover flips a throw cloth off an armchair. Now we had portly Norman Mailer standing next to diminutive Madonna, in a green gown, one breast showing, a small nose ring in her left nostril. When she saw the stricken look with which he gazed upon her breast, she covered the gap in her gown with a dainty hand.

best of

He had been stricken for the ~~noblest~~ reasons. Mailer, like many an upstart before him, maintained a secret gentleman in a closet—the nice part of himself, so to speak. This Edwardian was puffed with outrage by the imposition on Madonna. It was not that her breast had been exposed—Mailer, along with much of America, had seen her bare breasts looking splendid more than a hundred times in film, video, magazines, and books. It was just that this was not the time for Madonna to be seen. If a man wished to present his naked genitals to the public, he would choose an occasion when his erection was noble. Much the same can be said of the female breast. It is full of moods. A breast can be as proud as the prow of a racing boat, or it can droop, pallid and sad. Madonna, by this purview, was obviously depressed, or so said her poor breast, and our stout Edwardian was outraged that he should be assisting at such a dim revelation. They had been photographing her for hours before he arrived, and, of course, she was tired; of course her breasts would be the

page 9

first part of her to express such physical discontent, even as any good fellow's penis would shrivel when low in spirit. Still, how could her breast droop so at the sight of him!

Nonetheless, they were able to chat. She was easy to talk to. He looked, Madonna informed Mailer, like her former father-in-law, and after a moment, the connection was clear—she was referring to Sean Penn's father. "Well," he said, "that's not surprising," and went on to explain that on meeting Sean Penn two years ago, he had been struck with the actor's resemblance to himself in his youth, except, of course, that Sean Penn was better looking. A reasonable exchange. Their only difficulty was that they wished to talk, not to take pictures, and Wayne Maser had his job and proceeded to pose them. Pretty soon, he had Madonna sitting on Norman Mailer's lap. The evening strap was up in place over her shoulder again, and her waist certainly felt agreeable, but a shoulder strap that could go up could as easily come down again, and Mailer knew that Esquire, with all its new influx of editorial talent, could hardly keep from printing such a picture. He, Norman Mailer, would be famous for much too little: There would be Madonna—small, fine-toned, spirited

yin to his meat-laden yang. She would hardly care whom she was photographed with or how the sad fellow would look. One more body in an assembly line of photographed bodies.

Moreover, Mailer was hardly comfortable at the thought of his own woman. He had a mate who was all too proficient at bringing up old scores for the thrice-weekly bickerfest. So he certainly didn't want a photograph of himself sitting in a chair, girded in his black dinner jacket, while Madonna in a green gown was perched on his lap, one breast exposed.

It is interesting to note that ten years ago, Mailer would have said to himself, "Damn the torpedoes; full speed ahead—Madonna on my lap!" What we are witnessing is the action of female mind upon male flesh, otherwise known as the cumulative effect of being pussy-whipped over the course of twenty years of marriage by a strong, beautiful, redheaded wife.

So Mailer interrupted the proceedings. If he was going to be photographed, he told everyone, it would be side by side, standing up, head shots only. What a dim prospect for the photographer's craft! Maser kept trying to reinstitute a stunt. Finally, Mailer said to him: "I respect your intelligence. Can't you respect mine?"

Wayne Maser gave up. He could recognize a battle-scarred veteran of the photographic wars, and so a half-dozen more restrained shutter clicks ended the session. Madonna and Mailer agreed to meet a couple of times over the next few days for intensive interviews.

HE WAS DEPRESSED BY the place in which she lived. It was a duplex on Central Park West in a classic apartment house of the West Sixties. The ceilings were high, and the rooms were gloomy by afternoon. Central Park West speaks of upper-middle-class lives, the decorum of prescribed responses, slow, successful professions, and solid family life with few excesses of love. The stairwells in such buildings are as downhearted as slum tenements. Actors also live on Central Park West, but architecture is more powerful than personality, and all the stars of stage and screen whom Mailer had ever visited on Central Park West seemed to have succumbed to the gloom.

Madonna, if anything, had augmented it. The upstairs living room, in which they met for interviews, had white walls, a dark-maroon carpet, and but three massive, dark stuffed chairs without arms.

For two of the four walls, there was only a Picasso of Dora Maar and a Léger, a third wall had windows on the park, and to the rear, a full bar of mirrors, chromium, glass, and black trim—a formidably cold room.

One might find its equivalent in the best hotel suites of the most dictatorial countries in South America: Black, brown, and white are hues to emphasize that power also has its color scheme. Mailer could not help but think that Mussolini would have been happy in a room like this.

Of course, he did catch a glimpse down a long hall of other rooms with hints of pink and rose, but not the upstairs living room! How it all contrasted with the fine, rich colors of her music videos!

Mailer had been greeted by Madonna's assistant, Carisse, pronounced *Careese*, a small, jovial girl who escorted him up the spiral stairway, offered him a drink, and left. Fifteen minutes later, Madonna joined him. Not five minutes after, as if unrecorded preliminaries might waste good dialogue, he was invited to turn on his tape, and hours of questions and answers commenced.

If her apartment belonged to a dictatorial spirit, her candor in ~~the interviews~~ ^{contrast} proved agreeable. Never had he met a celebrity who could speak so openly about herself.

He was not altogether surprised. When one is talented enough to become a phenomenon, ~~that~~ ^{the} sensation that the psyche is divided into two halves (with which all of us are

more or less familiar) becomes so pronounced that one lives with it as a condition of existence. ~~One is world-famous, but one is still (and in only slightly decreasing degree) a little girl from a lower-middle-class family in Detroit. That little girl is there with every breath. She is the person whom people have to meet in order to encounter Madonna. It is as if she is secretary to herself.~~

MADONNA: When I'm onstage performing, or even when I was on the David Letterman show, I detach from myself. I have no control over that person. Though I know it's connected to my psyche and my soul, there's really nothing I can do about it.

MAILER: Well, the artist is a separate person from the one who does all the daily things. Each tells the other, "I will permit you, under these terms and conditions . . ." And the other side says, "Let me do my thing, and I won't bother you most of the time."

MADONNA: Exactly. That's interesting.

MAILER: As one gets older, the halves come together.

MADONNA: Really? I'm looking forward to getting together with myself.

Even before Mailer came with his tape recorder, he had arrived at some sense of how to do his story. It would not be necessary to interview her family, her friends, or those who worked for her. They would understand her less well than she could comprehend herself. Besides, they were all on record. As part of the effort Madonna was always making to explore into the profound enigma of herself—how indeed had this girl from ~~an ordinary street~~ emerged as a supernova of celebrity?—of course she would study herself. So had Picasso. Secretive as a bivalve in the mud about his private life, he nonetheless dated every drawing he made; if

a lower-middle-class family in Detroit

page 13

he did twenty drawings in a day, their sequence was numbered. It was a scientific matter as far as Picasso was concerned. By his own reckoning, he was a prodigious talent and so should be available for close study by the art critics and scientists of the future—nature might be expressing herself through him.

Similarly, Madonna was dedicated to examining herself. ~~You could obtain insights from Madonna on every side.~~

Toward the end of *Truth or Dare*, the documentary film that had taken the tour with *Blonde Ambition*, a concert safari through America, Canada, and Europe, one is offered a chorus of voice-overs from her dancers and crew.

WOMAN: Sometimes I feel like she really trusts me, and sometimes I think she's not looking at me.

MAN: I don't think that anybody is really honest with her except for maybe me.

WOMAN: She has a lot to do. She's definitely in a race against time.

MALE DANCER: She can be very mean when she wants to—I mean, we all can.

ANOTHER MALE DANCER: I love it when she's mean.

ANOTHER MAN: I feel she's a little girl lost in a storm. . . .

The sequence reminds us: To interview a number of persons is to view the protagonist through 360 degrees; one perambulates around the outside circle.

Something of the same can be said concerning Madonna's family. We will learn more about the diva by observing a few of her relations to her father, which she considerably presents in the same documentary.

page 14

to p 18

to p 18

MAILER: And he adored you.

MADONNA: Well, I like to think that.

MAILER: Were you singing at an early age?

MADONNA: No. Oh, no.

MAILER: So you had nothing to give you a sense you were going to be a singer.

MADONNA: Absolutely not. Had no particular sense I was going to be anything. When I was in high school, I wanted to be a professional dancer. That was my dream: to get into Alvin Ailey's company.

MAILER: You did.

MADONNA: The junior company, not the main company. I got a scholarship to the school there, and dance just led to music and singing, but I did not grow up wanting to be a singer or thinking of myself that way. Someone taught me how to play a guitar, and I started writing music like I was possessed. Writing songs. It was the strangest thing. I didn't know I was going to be a singer until I was twenty-four.

He could have dwelled a little longer on her development, but it interested him less than her state of mind today. He was bemused by the essential confidence of her speaking voice, for it contrasted with the subtle depression he had encountered on their first meeting, a depression, he felt, that was still present today, although ~~he had no firm sense that~~ ^{might be no} it was anything more than a reaction to how she had been trashed over Letterman.

MADONNA: The funny thing is, David Letterman's been asking me to do the show—forever. I kept saying, "I don't have anything to promote; what's the point?" And he said, "Just come on the show and we'll have a good time, just be

silly and have fun." And I said, "Oh, what the hell, just the kind of mood I was in. Before I went on the show, all his writers were coming in my dressing room, giving me tons of stuff they wanted me to say, and it was all insulting. Rag on this, make fun of his hair, and this and that. They gave me a list of insults, basically. So in my mind, he knew that that's what the game plan was, that we were going to fuck with each other on TV. I told some of the writers I was going to swear, and they went, "Oh, great, do it, we'll bleep it and it'll be hysterical." I just had the best time, and I actually thought he was having a good time, too. But he's kind of like a yuppie version of Beavis and Butt-head, you know, "Ooooooooooh, gross." I don't think he knew what he was getting into, but once he realized how the show went, the next day, instead of just saying, "We had a good time; it was all good fun and completely consensual," maybe the networks freaked out and he didn't want to fall from grace with them, so he went with the gestalt of the media and said, "Yeah, it was really disgusting and, yes, she really behaved badly," and turned it into something to save face.

MAILER: And how do you feel about that?

MADONNA: I don't think there's anything someone could say that would hurt me or shock me. Everyone already thinks I'm insane.

MAILER: Well, my idea for this interview is to prove that if you have a fault, it's that you're so levelheaded.

MADONNA: Oh. Oh, dear . . .

MAILER: At least the half of yourself that you bring to this interview.

MADONNA: Well, I suppose I am. I'm extremely sort of regimented and anal in my thinking.

MAILER: Actually, if I didn't know anything about you, I would think, "~~Well~~ she's a lady. . . ."

MADONNA: What do you mean by lady?

MAILER: One of the things I hate most about female liberationists is their expropriation of the language. *Lady* is a wonderful word. A lady is a woman who will do everything other women will do but with a little more style.

MADONNA: Okay, that's nice.

MAILER: Yes. And the word is going out of existence.

MADONNA: That's important. Having manners can be terribly important.

MAILER: Sometimes it's the only way we can offer some warmth to another human being. ~~There are a lot of people who are giving you the equivalent of love by expressing their good manners.~~

MADONNA: I agree.

MAILER: Anyway, if I saw you under those circumstances, I would say, "That's a lonely lady"—

MADONNA: Why do you say I'm lonely?

MAILER: Just an air about you, an air of privacy.

MADONNA: But no one will believe that. They think I've revealed everything.

They were still talking, however, at arm's length—marvelously polite, but he wished to push the interview.

MAILER: You've withstood attack. But now you're living in a culture that is suffused with all the hatred that used to be funneled out into the cold war.

MADONNA: Right. We've turned it in on ourselves.

MAILER: And you go in and say, "Fuck you. I don't care if you hate me."

Page 20

MADONNA: Well, I've certainly had enough time to think about the ins and outs of being famous and lots of time to analyze people's reactions to me. As a celebrity, or an unbelievably famous person, you are, in this country certainly, allowed to operate with everyone's approval for a certain amount of time. People do live vicariously through you, ~~and they have fantasies about being you and wanting to do what you do~~. But it can never last, because several things need to happen: You need to disappear, run out of steam, run out of ideas. You need to get married, have a lot of children, get fat or something. You need to have a drinking or a drug problem. You have to go in and out of rehabs so people can feel sorry for you. ~~you need to kill yourself, basically~~. The fact is that none of those things have happened to me, and people go around making all these pronouncements. "Oh, her career's over, she's finished now, she's a failure." It just sounds like so much wishful thinking.

MAILER: The people who have power in the media now, there's only one thing they really care about, other than obtaining a little more power. It's not money or sex or good food or pleasure, but their acumen. They are opinion makers. So their acumen is their hard-on. When they're wrong, it's like they're losing an erection. They hate you because you prove them wrong.

MADONNA: Since the David Letterman show, the news is that I've lost my mind.

MAILER: You're also tilting with a huge social machine that no longer knows where it's going and is afraid that it's going to crash sometime in the next twenty or thirty years.

MADONNA: Yes. It's frightening.

Page 21

There was only one way, he recognized, that he could take this interview further. He would have to sacrifice a bit of himself. Confessions—in good society—breed confessions.

MAILER: Certain people cannot live without promiscuity. There have been years of my life when I was young when that was absolutely true. I had this feeling that something was near death in me . . . that something was trapped, and it was symbolized by the word *cancer*. To break out of this trap, I had to take on many roles, because every time you make love with someone else, you are in a new role, you're a new person.

When she was not immediately forthcoming, he ~~changed the subject. He~~ suggested that thirty years ago, his ego would have been on an elevator while talking to her. How was the Sex Queen of America relating to him? Up or down?

MADONNA: The Sex Queen of America—what a great title. [Laughs.] We couldn't be talking about me.

MAILER: Well, there you are, and every time you feel empty inside, you say to yourself, "Sex Queen of America! Oh, brother, they should only know!"

MADONNA: Exactly. If they only knew.

MAILER: Yes, we pay a hell of a price for giving out, giving out. . . . Emptiness is the largest single factor in my life. I just work, work, work, and sometimes it's all going out and nothing's coming back.

MADONNA: Oh, absolutely. I mean, you really feel that when you perform and there's a hundred thousand people in a stadium, and they're all there because of you, and the responsibility of entertaining that many people in two hours is daunting and exhausting—there's no way to describe it, but that's the only word I can come up with now. Then you go up to your hotel room, and you can't go out because you're too famous to go out without everyone following you and twenty bodyguards, so you sit in your room while everyone else has fun being anonymous, and you sit there and you go, ~~"This is fucked. There's something wrong with this picture."~~ Because now you feel the most unbelievable loneliness. Yes, everyone adores you in a kind of mass-energy way, but then you're absolutely separated from humanity. It's the most bizarre irony, don't you think? In *Truth or Dare*, for instance, we worked for six months and we went around the world, and I saw the world and I would sit in my room all the time while everybody else was out, the dancers, the musicians, the bodyguards, and using me to get laid—you know, "I work with Madonna," that type of thing. ~~I was aware of how that works. The little thing everyone wore around their neck, the backstage pass, the laminated thing they use in airports—everyone had one, and I was the only one that was their calling card, and I~~ thought it was sort of unfair, you know, because everyone else was out having fun but me.

He had learned how to listen with full attention. It was an indispensable virtue for a decent interview. But now there seemed a spot to the side of his vision, a flaw in his concentration. Then he realized what was causing it.

MAILER: This is just a personal question, but I am curious. I don't understand nostril earrings.

MADONNA: It's just another adornment.

MAILER: Don't you have practical problems? Don't you need special makeup for that little red spot where it's pierced?

MADONNA: No. You take it out and your nose heals really quickly. So I'm not worried about that.

MAILER: On my stuffy side, I thought: If I had a ring in my nose, it would take me two minutes to get it all cleaned out.

MADONNA: It doesn't take me two minutes. I just have to blow my nose carefully. It's nice to have to think about something you take for granted.

MAILER: But in kissing, you could get injured—slightly, but enough to shift the given.

MADONNA: That's the beauty of it. You have to be careful. It's like, well, someone could hurt my nose. It's like riding a motorcycle without a helmet. It's just a risk. In the most simplistic way, it's just another way to take a chance.

He had the feeling that the cork was now out of the bottle, that they could talk about more.

MAILER: In one of your shows, you had these huge cones for breasts—

MADONNA: The Blonde Ambition tour.

MAILER: And I saw them and I said, "Why?"

MADONNA: Don't look too far for any meaning.

MAILER: They're ugly.

2304
MADONNA: Well, I didn't think so. There's something kind of medieval and interesting about them. I asked Gaultier, who's a French clothes designer, to do the costumes for my tour, and he already had these designs in one of his collections, but now I had two male dancers coming out in them. It's very camp. Women used to wear those cones on their heads, but now they've become like a bra. The idea is to take something meant for one part of the body and place it on another part. Also, they're pointed. So there's something slightly dangerous about them. If you bump into them, you'll cut yourself. Plus the idea that the men were wearing them, not the women. I was singing "Like a Virgin," lying on this red velvet bed, and I reversed the whole Playboy Bunny thing, just two Playboy Bunnies in some costume that pushes their bodies into some unnatural shape, but now it's the men.

MAILER: A woman with her breasts undulating over a man is very close to loveliness. Those cones smash expectation.

MADONNA: The idea behind it is that breasts are these soft things that men rely on to some extent, so it's a way of saying, "Fuck off."

MAILER: But if the women truly succeed in telling men to fuck off and they truly do, then the human race is going to come to an end.

MADONNA [laughing]: No, not fuck off forever and ever; just think of my breasts in another way, that's all, not something soft you can fall into. Believe me, I love to have my breasts touched by a man that I care for—I wouldn't want it

any other way—but it's really important to me—don't ask me why—that people look at life a different way, seeing that women can seduce and women can have sexual fantasies. Imagine Hugh Hefner with two Playboy Bunnies. I was having an inverted fantasy of that in my show . . . just another way of getting people to look at it.

MAILER: What I would argue back is that women have become so obsessed with the idea of not being taken for granted that I think they are in danger of losing sight of their real power over men, which they have always had, an extraordinary power women have over men. What it comes down to is males know, no matter what they've done to women, no matter how they abuse them, no matter how they've tyrannized them, men know that they are not indispensable to human existence. If women ever take over everything, as they well may—now, you're trying to keep from grinning at the thought—

MADONNA [laughs]: I think it's inevitable, too. Every dog has his day, you know?

MAILER: But if they do take over, and you get the equivalent of a Stalin or a Hitler among the women (and having had some contact with a few of the early women's liberationists, I can easily conceive of such a female), I see a day when a hundred male slaves will be kept alive and milked every day and the stuff will be put in semen banks to keep the race going. No more than a hundred men will have to be maintained alive at any time. Men have a very deep fear of women as a result. It isn't that men think, "Oh there's a breast, I'll lay my head on it; it'll cost me nothing. Rather, what they know is that in that tender breast there are chill zones of feeling, icy areas, zones of detestation, and if they have any sense at all of women, they know that approaching a woman is quite equal to climbing a rock face.

2304

MADONNA: Yes, but you're an evolved man.

MAILER: Not everyone thinks the same way I think, but men feel it instinctively, I'd argue. You're talking for all women, after all.

MADONNA: No, I'm not talking for all women. I've been accused for years and years, especially at the beginning of my career, of setting the women's movement back because I was being sexual in a traditional way, with my corsets and push-up bras and garter belts and this and that, and feminists were beating the fuck out of me: "What are you doing? You're sending out all the wrong messages to young girls. They should be using their heads, not their tits and their asses." My whole thing is you use all you have, *all* you have your sexuality, your femininity, your—any testosterone you have inside of you, your intellect—use whatever you have and use bits and pieces wherever it's good. I'm not saying you have to break down every last thing, but . . .

MAILER: Very well said. But in the name of what?

MADONNA: In the name of what?

MAILER: Well, you're a revolutionary. What will this revolution be in the name of?

MADONNA: In the name of human beings relating to human beings. And treating each other with compassion.

MAILER: And for that, you feel that the stereotyped male notions of how to treat women have to be broken down.

MADONNA: Yes.

MAILER: Destroyed.

MADONNA: Yes.

MAILER: What about female attitudes about men?

MADONNA: That, too.

Page 27

MAILER: But the female movement offers almost no compromise with men.

MADONNA: Well, that's a problem, but you've got to start somewhere.

MAILER: I don't argue with what you're doing from your point of view, but I am saying you could come to a dead end: The women could win and have nothing.

MADONNA: I hope that doesn't happen. Once you reach a certain amount of understanding, knowledge doesn't end. There's more to learn about everything.

MAILER: Don't you feel a certain danger in the women's movement? That the real desire is not for greater compassion and understanding of both sexes but for power over men?

MADONNA: I don't know about the women's movement—it's not my goal, it's not my intention. This is not about me being a woman but about me being a human being.

MAILER: So you wear pointed cones to remind men . . .

MADONNA: It's to wake women up, too—there's a lot of women oppressing other women; it's not just men.

Of course, she had not really answered him. He just gave up on the pointed cones. ~~He saw them as no better than ugly growths, a bad seed or two from the primal trauma of her mother's death.~~ He could recognize, even as he had earlier, that with her, one had to keep raising the ante.

MAILER: As you know, I'm not in love with your book, *Sex*.

MADONNA: I didn't know.

MAILER: I told you the other day that I thought the metal covers were tacky, and the spiral binding kept jamming when you tried to open and close the thing.

page 28

MADONNA: You're talking about the way it was packaged. I'm saying: Look beyond, read the text. You're telling me you don't like the book because it has metal covers.

MAILER: No, I *started* to tell you . . .

MADONNA: And I rudely interrupted you. . . . Go on with your list. I'm curious.

MAILER: Well, let me begin with smaller things and work toward larger ones. I thought your text, while it was funny, was either too much or not enough. There could have been more, and that would have balanced the photographs. Or there should have been less. But the way it was, turned out arch and cute. Besides, the book was a misery to hold.

MADONNA: That's part of it. It was meant to be a piece of pop art.

MAILER: Yes, but I have the idea—correct me if I'm wrong—that the idea of metal covers did not come from you.

MADONNA: It absolutely came from me. What we originally wanted was something completely encased in metal with a lock you couldn't get into. . . .

MAILER: Now, that's an idea. . . .

MADONNA: We couldn't manufacture it because it was too costly. The best thing we could come up with as a compromise was that.

MAILER: Well, there you go. Once you have to compromise an idea, maybe it's better to do without it. I thought if you were going to say, as you did in *Sex*, "I'm not interested in porno movies because everybody is ugly and faking it and it's just silly," and yet you were going to attempt to shock people, then you should have had a beaver shot of yourself. Given the number of nude and seminude pictures of you in costume, I thought that was an evasion, as if you or your advisers were saying, "Beaver shots could hurt us

commercially. What we want is soft porn." So, the fact that *Sex* was designedly commercial got a lot of people's backs up. They felt you were promoting yourself without large enough commitment. This sets up a dismissal of the reader.

MADONNA: Then why did everyone buy it?

MAILER: That's not the measure. People bought it because of everything you'd done up to then. You were saying, "You've seen me in my music videos, you've seen me suggesting aspects of nudity, now you're really going to see something." But if Richard Avedon had ever been able to take a picture of Ronald Reagan's Cabinet while they were all mooning, and put it in book form, that would have sold out, too.

MADONNA [laughs]: I see your point.

MAILER: So I think the sales are irrelevant. But the way you pay for it is in the crap you're running into now.

MADONNA: Right.

He had been married six times, and this was the first occasion on which he had won an argument with an intelligent lady. It was enough to contemplate becoming a Madonna fan.

MAILER: In *Sex*, you say, "Condoms are not only necessary but mandatory." I really want to talk about that. The only thing you can depend on with condoms is that they will take 20 to 50 percent off your fuck. Safe sex is part of the insanity of this country. We are always looking for one simple tool or program with which to solve a serious problem.

MADONNA: A Band-Aid. You don't think they're useful?

MAILER: They're terrible.

page 30

MADONNA: I'll agree with you, they feel terrible; but you don't think their usefulness is valid in terms of preventing sexually transmitted diseases?

MAILER: That they keep some people from getting AIDS? Yes. But that's the short haul. In the long term, sex is difficult enough for most people. Now, with the shadow of AIDS hanging over homosexuals, it's horrendous.

MADONNA: The shadow of AIDS isn't hanging just over homosexuals. It's hanging over all of us. There are a lot of bisexual people in the world who don't cop to their past. So it's hard to say, "I'll never sleep with anyone who's gay." You just never know.

MAILER: What the condom does is make you give up most of the joy of entrance. The insight you get into the other person is diminished. Maybe it would be better to give up instead the idea of penetration, and do all the things you can do without it. Then, if you really love that person, you might say, "Fuck it, I'll take a chance. If I die, I die. I'll die for love."

MADONNA: If you love that person.

MAILER: But what condoms are saying is, "Never die for love or anything remotely resembling it." Probably the single hardest thing emotionally is to distinguish between lust that has enough personal warmth to feel like love, and love itself. The two are very close, yet different for one's karma. So it helps if you don't use a condom, because then at least you can say to yourself, "I lust so much for this person that I'll dare death," or, "I love this person enough to dare it."

MADONNA: Yes, but as you said, most people have a hard time distinguishing between the two. So how do you know at the time if you're lusting for death or loving?

page 31

MAILER: You don't know. What you do know is the intensity of your feelings. Once your lust is pretty well satisfied, then you will know whether it's love—or anger or power or all the things that go into lust. But at least you know more about yourself. What I hate about condoms is that you end up knowing less. And that aggravates one's need for power. It's like those cigarettes that have filters on them and contain less nicotine, and so people draw more deeply and take in the same amount of nicotine. People with condoms have more sexual contacts because they're less satisfying.

MADONNA: Well, to a certain extent, I subscribe to what you're saying. When you get to know somebody and you get to love them, you do say, "I'm willing to take a chance for this." I've been there. I'm not going to sit here and say that from the time I found out about AIDS, I've always had intercourse with a man with a condom on. That would be a lie. And I do think you get to a point with a person that you say, "I love this person or care for them enough that I don't give a fuck what happens to me." I'm willing to take a chance."

MAILER: And you say that's happened to you.

MADONNA: Yes. Absolutely.

MAILER: And there might have been a chance of AIDS?

MADONNA: I didn't even question that. I just said, "I instinctively know that this is the right thing to do." But I would never do that in the beginning, not knowing somebody. And, yes, it is harder to know somebody when—in the physical sense, with a condom on—it's a nightmare. But I guess there are other things you can do—you can meet someone and sleep with them for a month with condoms on, and it's not great sex as far as intercourse is concerned,

page 32

but then you go and get AIDS tests together. That's happened to me, too. "Our tests are both negative, so let's do it without a condom." Now, we could find out in ten years we're both sick and it didn't come out in the test, so I guess that's the chance you take.

MAILER: Well, condoms are one element in a vast, unconscious conspiracy to make everyone part of the social machine. Then we lose whatever little private spirit we've kept.

MADONNA: On the flip side, couldn't you say: If it makes everybody stop and question who they're sleeping with, then isn't that a good thing, too? You don't just blindly and madly go ahead. Maybe it's a way of getting people to think how much they care about this person they're sleeping with. You know what I mean?

Later, it occurred to him that she had moved in one short discussion from what was virtually a public-service announcement about condoms to a real willingness to explore the subject. That was cheering, ~~her mind might be even better than she thought it was~~

MAILER: You see, I think sex has always been dangerous. In the Middle Ages, before modern medicine or contraception, a woman had to love a man, or feel huge lust, in order to have intercourse with him, because if she got pregnant, she could die. Very easy to die—something like one in ten women died in childbirth. That meant your lover could be your executioner. Maybe that's the way it was meant to be. ~~Cad's in~~
~~cont.~~ Take sex seriously. Don't believe it's there to be violated.

~~AUGUST 1991 FOR~~

MADONNA: I've never thought of it that way.

MAILER: Well, in your work, you do daring things with sex and have fun with it, but you never mock the seriousness of it. What you're saying to your audience is, "Look, you're nervous because I'm taking more chances than you are. That's why you hate me."

In *Truth or Dare*, there is a moment when Warren Beatty upbraids Madonna: "She doesn't want to live off-camera," he says to the camera, and turns to her. "Why would you say something," he asks, "if it's off-camera? Tomorrow, if they're not here, what's the point of existing?"

Beatty had said it. Would she give of herself unless it could be recorded? Such a stance is repellent in elected officials, but that is because they offer the part of themselves that is good for their case. Madonna, however, offers all of herself to the occasion: her best, her worst, her middling whimsies, her snarls, her whines, even her fascination with evil. What had impressed Mailer almost as much as her music videos were her last two films. In *Body of Evidence*, she had been absolutely convincing as a murderess. In *Dangerous Game*, she had been equally believable as an actress who is playing a whimpering misery of a half-destroyed slut. It had been a bad, hysterical, messed-up film, but she had given a double characterization: She was an actress, and she was also the same actress playing the slut, two effective performances in the midst of much mess, considering that the sto-

2314

ry has her being abused by a pimp of a husband who puts her out to graze in home-video porn-and-orgy fields of cash. Then he beats her up with all the intensity of violence building on its own violence. (He doesn't know whether he is enraged because his wife is a slut or because she wishes to cease being one.) For an actress, the role bore resemblance to going over Niagara Falls in a barrel.

MADONNA WAS, THEN, a rarity, a world celebrity who did not select roles to buttress her status. If she would consent faster than any other star on earth to an existence in which every movement, every sigh, every sound of love, digestion, and sleep could be recorded, if she was as interesting to herself at her worst

as at her best, that might be because she ~~was captain of a ship she could barely control, despite her drills at navigation. So she always had to learn more about herself. Who~~

~~she was. She was a six-year-old girl from Detroit riding a billion-dollar elephant, and she had to know her reins were power-assisted, but who was providing the power other than the record moguls? Was she, then, part of high-roller capitalist society, or an outgrowth that would be excised as soon as the money wheel rolled on? With all she showed of herself, naked but for a cigarette, a black pocketbook, and high-heeled shoes as she was photographed hitchhiking on Ocean Drive in Miami Beach, or~~

page 35

delete pages 36-42
go to p43

vous, and even though it's not supposed to matter, it does matter what they think. And so I ask you to give me that little extra something special to show everybody that I did make something out of my life. Amen. Have a good show!

A week or two later in New York, a few ugly feuds have developed in her cast, and the prayer now is different.

Shot of Madonna. Again she is standing in a circle with her dancers and the crew.

MADONNA: What I am worried about, and what I do want to say a prayer about, is the way people have been behaving. I don't care what you did with your lives before you came on this tour, I don't care what you do afterward; but while you're working with me and you're doing this show, you will treat everyone in this group with kindness, compassion, and respect. I don't want to hear about it anymore. There's too much pain in the world, and I want you to treat yourselves with kindness and respect. A lot of crazy shit has been happening, and we have to start looking out for each other; we have to start protecting each other. And we have to start loving ourselves a little bit more and loving the person standing next to us a little bit more. [Her voice breaks.] Amen.

ALL [quietly]: Amen.

We could take leave of her here, but do we have any sense of the poisonous spirit of the world ~~she entered after she left Detroit~~ ^{a July} Madonna would have been a star even if Andy Warhol had never existed, yet Warhol is the clue to seeing Madonna in perspective. If we would look to grasp what she aspires to and what she encountered in New York,

~~and come to New York?~~

P43' → in which she succeeded? One does not speak of the ~~that~~ money-wheel or the billion dollar record moguls but of the world in which all of us have lived. → P44

It is worth musing on Warhol's command of one particular gift—divination of social disease.

By the late middle of the twentieth century, human contempt for itself ^{had} reached ^{epidemic} proportions. The recognition had come that we might be a species ready to finish ourselves by way of nuclear apocalypse. It was possible. Even without the atom bomb, the Second World War had left as a legacy the shadow of the concentration camps, and that darkened all belief that humankind was evolving into a more humane future. Then the cold war proceeded to erode those institutions of marriage, family, and property that for two hundred years had kept society—or so society believed—relatively stable but for peculiar times of armed conflict. That happy view of humankind had washed out to sea by the late Fifties, and in the Sixties, nothing made more sense to the average young man or woman than a prodigious absorption in oneself. That usually meant: Explore sex. The search for meaning translated into a search for pleasure. For if death was likely to present itself as nuclear termination arriving without warning, ~~death was therefore absurd. Everyone~~ ^{then everyone would be} destroyed more or less simultaneously, no grave, no ancestors, no roots, ~~no memories of oneself.~~ ^{being}

The intensification of criminal life that drug traffic would provide still lay several decades away, but down the bleak vista of the cold war (which may yet be seen as a spiritual plague more pervasive, although less quickly fatal, than AIDS), Warhol must have been the first to gain keen insight into the pervasiveness of this plague. If its first symptom

P 44

off

P 46

am the emptiness," Warhol could as well have said. "I am the emptiness that prepares you for the message to come." He is the maggot genius of American culture.

Madonna, born in 1958, young enough to have been Warhol's daughter, was ~~nevertheless~~ reacting to the same void. But in ~~drastically~~ ^{was} different fashion. She was, after all, like her generation, ~~part of~~ ^{this} the horde of walking wounded. If nuclear fission would be the mortician to preside over her last rites, then, indeed, she would explore sex, and with an instinctive rebellion against all large hypocrisies. One did not have to be political to sense the vast fraud of the cold war—we had all been adjured to triumph over an Evil Empire that had turned out to be no more than a Sad Morass, ~~at least for the last twenty years~~, a giant Third World quagmire buried in inefficiencies, bereft of desire for world domination. Our political leaders had converted language into cant, and our young—particularly those with good ears—reacted to the false note.

Yet if Madonna spoke to her generation, she was still condemned to explore herself. The explorations were chilling to some. In all the multimillion-dollar crops of her popularity, she was still without that hyperbolic popularity Marilyn Monroe gained in her own lifetime. Madonna was admired, but she was not loved. Not like Marilyn.

Our love for Marilyn is not complex. She was our movie star of the Fifties, but Marilyn spoke of a simpler time, the Thirties. It was to the Thirties that she belonged. She was three and a half years old at the end of 1929, and a young adolescent by the time 1940 arrived. Her smile goes back to such archetypes in our sentimental loyalties as the songs of the Thirties—~~"Let's have another cup of coffee, and let's have another piece of pie."~~ She would be valiant

and loyal through our sorrows—so said the sweet welcome of her face. Marilyn's horrors were kept within, and we mourn her because she gave it all to us and sacrificed herself until she was ridden with inner lividities and died.

Madonna is not only a survivor but has chosen, perhaps out of the necessity to survive, to take her kinks to the public: "You want to be with me, then come along for the fucking cure." She offers no balm to sweet, sore places; she is the stern instructor who shows us how difficult it all is, especially sex, ~~in its consummation~~. Yet she gives us something Marilyn never could, something less attractive but equally valuable; she dramatizes for us how dangerous is any human's truth once we dare to explore it; she reminds us that the joys of life bed down on broken glass. She is not a lapsed Catholic for too little. *Inter faeces et urinam, nascimur*, she is always telling us, even if she never heard of Saint ~~Orbert~~ of Cluny, but indeed it is true. "Between piss and shit are we born," ~~as the great saint told us~~, and the road to heaven, if you would find it, lies ~~by implication~~ between the two. Madonna comes to us as a bastard descendant of the void ~~that Andy Warhol anchored in the ice of his technique~~, but how she seeks to fill that empty space ~~with her world~~.

Odon

MAILER: Does anyone ever speak of music videos as bearing the same relation to feature films as poetry does to novels?

MADONNA: No, I never heard that.

MAILER: While watching "Like a Virgin," I was thinking that the more you look at it, the richer it's going to get. Poetry is also montage. One evocative phrase is set next to another. If you read a poem enough times, it opens—

slowly, if it's a difficult one, but finally it opens. And then every time you read it, a little more comes in. Same with good music videos.

MADONNA: That's interesting. Never thought of that.

The music videos she had made over the last ten years had employed the services of countless directors and cameramen, but just about all of them and particularly the best-known ones—"Like a Virgin," "Like a Prayer," "Justify My Love," "Borderline," "Material Girl," "Papa Don't Preach," "True Blue," "Bad Girl," "Rain," "Erotica"—had belonged to Madonna. There had been ~~an organizing principle~~, a discernment in the style, a characteristic irony, a sensuous sorrow, a wicked rebuttal of expectation, a hoydenish intimacy—one can go on with such a list; appreciations bear resemblance to the plucking of flower petals—but the summary fact was that watching Madonna on music video was to encounter a high intelligence in an artist. There could be no question. She not only made the best music videos of them all, but they transcended personality. She was the premier artist of music video, and it might be the only new popular art form in American life.

If one wished to measure her stature, it was interesting to compare her work with the videos of Michael Jackson. His productions were virtuoso—they depended on his person—a product of his physical gifts, his speed, his agility, his voice, his astonishing looks, whereas Madonna had transcended her own limitations to create visualizations in sound equal to fine poems; one could measure their worth by the resonance they offered. Her best videos would prove richer on each viewing; one could not perhaps say as much about Michael Jackson.

MAILER: ~~I want to leave you with an idea.~~ I've come to, the conclusion that you are a great artist. [Madonna gasps slightly.] It's on record now. 2520

MADONNA: Okay.

MAILER: That's ~~going to~~ be the theme of this piece, that what we have among us is our greatest living female artist.

MADONNA: Thank you.

MOST PEOPLE, no matter how brilliant, are vessels. Once you come to the end of what is interesting in them, you can touch the side of the jar. There will be nothing afterward but repetition of what you have learned already. It might take a night, a year, or half a lifetime, but once you can reach the side of the vessel, a good part of the larger feeling is gone. ~~And the clue to discovering that a masterwork of personality is naught but one more vessel is that you can never win an argument with a glass jar. A vessel is a vessel. Beyond is the void.~~

So it was agreeable talking to Madonna. She had not settled yet on any of her boundaries. Perhaps she never would.

MAILER: Did anyone ever say that you have a resemblance to Princess Diana?

MADONNA: Get out of here! No one has ever said that. That's hysterical. . . . I guess I could do worse.

MAILER: A lot worse.

MADONNA: Poor Princess Diana. 12

end

P49

1964 *

232/

63 pp.
in length

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF TIME

MAILER

We have had an agreeable dialogue until now. It has been superficial in all too many places, and the reasonings have been limited finally by my ability to reason, which is famously limited, but our subject matter proved rich. Feces, after all, are first cousin to gold. If we were obliged to talk of death, there was at least a sense of blood. But today we're off on emptier matters—out in the vacuums of metaphysics, and I have slept poorly, and dreamed of barren landscapes, empty beach, and stagnant pools on a winter day. There will be the taste of this in what we talk of next.

INTERVIEWER

Your mind is dull, you say.

MAILER

It is overstimulated and next to empty. I've had too much coffee, and excitement put upon depression seems to produce an excess of electric in the nerve.

INTERVIEWER

You advance this metaphor as the secret of everything electric?

MAILER

I steal away from it.

INTERVIEWER

Good. Because we are here to talk about form; and electricity, I suspect, has no form, only property.

MAILER

(In gloom) We are here to talk about form.

INTERVIEWER

formal beginning.

* A note
to explain
that this
should
precede
Picasso
since it
is the
Source of
work
started
36 years
ago.

MAILER

Instead let me start by paying my respects to an irony. It is that some fundamental subjects are easy to discuss. The word "soul," for example, lends itself to speculation. But "form!" There's a treacherous word. It can mean the opposite of itself.

INTERVIEWER

To me, form is an easy word. I think I understand it.

MAILER

You do?

INTERVIEWER

Form always means the shape of something.

MAILER

(Shows a fraction of interest) The form of an umbrella is the shape of the umbrella?

INTERVIEWER

Absolutely. That's all there is to it. An umbrella has a form which is identical to its shape. *(Interviewer stops)* Actually, I must admit that, in fact, it has two shapes. Its shape when it is open, and its shape when it is closed.

MAILER

Then it has two forms?

INTERVIEWER

Yes.

MAILER

What about a tree?

INTERVIEWER

(Takes his time) A tree has a form which is its own form, its own particular form. But I see what you are driving at. It also has a form which is the form of all trees of its species.

MAILER

These two forms of the tree are different from the two forms of the umbrella? That is—we are speaking of different kinds of categories?

INTERVIEWER

I think we are.

MAILER

Consider this: what is the form of an amoeba?

INTERVIEWER

An amoeba has no form. It's shapeless.

MAILER

Modern coffee tables are cut into ~~what is presumably~~ a shape called amoeboid.

INTERVIEWER

(*His confidence is back*) The word means no more than that an object is presented in meaningless curves. It does not mean an amoeba has shape. Take the two forms of the tree. Can't I say that not only does the amoeba not have an individual shape, and so not have a particular form which is like the first form of the tree (that is to say, its form at a given moment) but that all amoebae taken as a class do not possess a general shape, a secondary group shape we might call amoeboid, a shape that would be like the second form of the tree.

MAILER

The fact remains: the amoeba may have a shape at any instant.

INTERVIEWER

(*Full of momentum*) Not if it changes constantly. If it keeps changing, the amoeba can have a shape only if you insist on picking a moment when you freeze time. Very much against time's own will, if I may speak that way. A microphotograph would give the amoeba a shape. But only arbitrarily. A concept like the differential of time, dt , in calculus might be able to give it a shape. But those are stage tricks. If the amoeba keeps changing, it cannot possess a particular shape.

MAILER

Suppose when examined closely, the amoeba moves for an instant, is still, then moves again? Can't we select each moment it is at rest and call that a particular shape?

INTERVIEWER

Suppose the amoeba is never completely at rest?

MAILER

Then there is no *particular* form. A *particular* form cannot be detected without a moment of rest. But that should not keep the amoeba from possessing an ideal form.

INTERVIEWER

An ideal form? You speak of the second kind of form? Like the second form of the tree? The form which is the form of all trees?

MAILER

Yes. A man, for example, might possess an ideal form. We could say his ideal form remains unchanged whether he is running, walking, or sleeping. That is because when we speak of his ideal form, we are speaking of a shape he can *probably* assume. (Of course he may have to go on a diet to demonstrate it.) But note that it is not his particular shape until he assumes it.

INTERVIEWER

I can agree with that.

MAILER

Now the amoeba may not possess such an abstract ideal form. I have no idea if it does. But whether it owns an ideal form or not seems to me on reflection not to the point. I wish you only to agree that the amoeba, hypothetically, may have a set of consecutive shapes as discernible as the successive frames of a movie film.

INTERVIEWER

We come back to the problem of rest. Why should I concede to you that the amoeba may have a consecutive set of particular shapes if you have not yet demonstrated that it can ever be discovered at rest? All of it—at rest—all at once.

2325

MAILER

Perhaps I can never demonstrate it to you at rest. Perhaps you can demonstrate that it is *never* at rest. You cannot. Will you concede that the amoeba *may* have a set of consecutive shapes?

INTERVIEWER

It may. I still have the feeling it does not have a form. If it's not shapeless, the amoeba is next to shapeless. Because nothing in it seems to remain the same.

MAILER

You demand of form that it have not only shape but security. It must last?

INTERVIEWER

Yes. It must have a shape in time.

MAILER

So it seems we are talking about time as well. About shape and time. Can you then agree that when we speak of form, we are talking of more than shape?

INTERVIEWER

Maybe we are.

MAILER

Would you concede the likelihood that shape is not equal to form, but merely a first best clue to it?

INTERVIEWER

I may have to. But go on.

MAILER

That is, shape is a clue to form if you can see the shape.

INTERVIEWER

I knew I should concede nothing. What has a form you cannot see?

MAILER

Would you permit a symphony to have form?

INTERVIEWER

It must, I see what you're up to. Of course. The sounds we hear in a symphony vary each instant. Only when it's done do we remember the successive sounds as a shape. A shape composed of many sounds heard in a period of time. (*Stops*) I know you may think I am playing with the word, but I believe it is fair to speak of the shape of a piece of music. In my memory, it has not only permanence but a shape.

MAILER

Already you are talking of form in space, and form in time, of forms we see, forms we hear? You see why I did not wish to get impaled on the amoeba at rest?

INTERVIEWER

I see why exactly. And I still say permanence is the first feature of form.

MAILER

~~Let us say it is a feature of many forms which exist in space or in time.~~
~~But can't we speak of forms which exist in other conditions?~~

INTERVIEWER

I should think form can only have a shape in space or time. What else is relevant here?

MAILER

Can taste have form?

INTERVIEWER

...

MAILER

Or smell? Or touch? Can they have form?

INTERVIEWER

I don't see how.

MAILER

Could you say the taste of wine is a form?

INTERVIEWER

You're leading me to some borderland of the concepts.

MAILER

To what?

INTERVIEWER

To forms which might exist in being. In Being! You bring in Being because you're an existentialist. Dammit all to hell.

MAILER

I'm thinking of a famous wine. Château Margaux '47. Each time one drinks, the taste comes upon the palate in clear acts. Sweet, cool, then earthy and sad, sweet and cool, earthy, sad. If one drinks too much, the sorrow turns to rust. Such wine has a shape in time. The permanence of its form resides in my memory.

INTERVIEWER

~~You are trying to connect form to Being. Perhaps you even succeed. To some slight degree. I distrust your motive. You wish to return to a discussion of the soul. So you are trying to smuggle form over into Being.~~

MAILER

~~In order to smuggle Being over to soul?~~

INTERVIEWER

~~That might be your route.~~ But I would remind you that we are far from done with the amoeba and the tree. I started this discussion by remarking that form was the shape of something. Since an amoeba had no consistent shape, it could have no form. You then pointed out that the amoeba's movement contained hypothetical instants of rest, and so one could speak of a possible succession of forms. But I still say the amoeba does not have a permanent shape in time. It is the opposite of

a tree. Precisely because a tree has a shape to which you can return in your mind. An ideal shape which is related to an ideal form. There you are! Ideal form suggests permanence. Everything to do with form speaks of permanence.

MAILER

~~I now propose to demonstrate that~~ Ideal form is a treacherous hypothesis. Follow me. There is a kind of form which appears to have a durable shape in time as well as in space. This form you presume is there for the tree. Ideal form, you call it. But there is another kind of visual form which has no shape in any kind of time we can perceive. The amoeba, for example. This lack of shape is perceived ~~as lack of shape~~ because we are using man as the measure of time. ~~Only because of that.~~ If we dispense with ourselves as the measure, then I think I can show that the amoeba has a shape which is conceivably definite or indefinite, just as ideal or not ideal, as permanent or impermanent as the shape belonging to the tree.

INTERVIEWER

Let us see you make such a demonstration.

MAILER

To us, a tree changes slowly. Its shape in time alters imperceptibly. But if we take a movie of the tree, if we mount a camera on the wall of a garden during the first season the tree is planted and proceed for the next hundred years (which for simple calculation we may suppose to be the life of the tree) to click off no more than one single frame of film each separate week, we might end with fifty-two hundred frames of film for a century, which by all lightnings of calculation is less than four minutes of projection. In the finished movie our tree would pass through a year in two and a half seconds. Its trunk would sprout and climb toward the sky, its branches would open as fast as an umbrella, the change of color in its leaves from green to red to brown would be a flicker the eye could barely detect. The action of the tree would look spasmodic, convulsive, near to spastic. It might be even reminiscent of the shift of shape in the amoeba.

INTERVIEWER

Still, the tree moves out of a logic which suggests a kind of shape in time. One can see it rise, bud, leaf, lose its leaves, bud again, and go on through a hundred cycles of the years until its death.

MAILER

If the tree were situated in a windless space, one might see that. But assume a small breeze blows the branches one way this week, and the other the next. Then the movements of the tree would have no apparent purpose in our film. Tree limbs would thrash like cilia in a paramecium; the branches would not even possess an outline, but would seem to offer some indefinite nebulous transparent edge.

INTERVIEWER

That is because you film one frame a week. The tiny segments of time you record are unrelated to one another.

MAILER

Only in part are they unrelated. The filmed movement of the branches may be relatively arbitrary, but the film is obedient to the general growth of the trunk and the limbs.

INTERVIEWER

I insist you are being more arbitrary in the way you look at the tree than the way you look at the amoeba.

MAILER

It may be that every procedure we have for looking at anything not human is arbitrary. ~~That is an inhuman remark. Still, I must ask you to conceive~~ of a being on some distant star, some cosmic giant who lives in another rhythm or scale of time, in some relation to time altogether different from ours. A wink of his eyelash occupies a year for us; to him, it is just a wink (that is to say, his personal subjective impression of the duration of his wink is approximately equal to our impression of the duration of our wink). If we close our eye and open it, we have the sensation that a small but definite interval of time has elapsed, something like a second. The giant also feels as if no more than a second has passed, but he is large, his proportions are huge; in fact a year by our measure has passed. Think then of what he might see through some telescope worthy of his size when he studies a tree on earth. It must appear to him as fantastic, nervous, illogical, rapid and shapeless as an amoeba. More so. The life cycle of the tree might look perhaps like a doll or a ballerina who rises from a crouch, shivers, pirouettes and collapses in ninety seconds.

INTERVIEWER

You do not even beg the question, you violate it. What right have you to give this giant another scale of time than ours?

MAILER

I have no right. Neither of us has rights in a discussion of time. Nobody knows anything about time. Consider—what right have you to assume that time is equal anywhere? That its measure is a clock? My notion of time is as reasonable as yours. I use the giant; you use the clock. With the clock, certain kinds of time have to be measured in numbers so great that man is run off the stage and we speak of light-years. I think it is more agreeable to measure time by beings.

INTERVIEWER

What then measures time in each separate being? Soul?

MAILER

Soul.

INTERVIEWER

The amoeba has a soul?

MAILER

Yes.

INTERVIEWER

The tree?

MAILER

Yes.

INTERVIEWER

And their measure of time is proportionate to their relative size?

MAILER

One might say it is probably not unrelated. It seems reasonable to assume that a short interval for the tree might seem like a larger one for the amoeba.

INTERVIEWER

Man and the tree, however, are relatively near to each other in their measure of time?

MAILER

Not necessarily. The condition of Being is so different for each. The hundred years of life a tree can know might seem not nearly enough, a month perhaps to it.

INTERVIEWER

There is a clock in nature. We call it night and day. The tree shares night and day, dark and light with each of us. So does the amoeba in the pond.

MAILER

They do, but they do not necessarily do it in the same way. What is a day for us may be no more than an inhalation of breath for the tree; as we sleep through the night so the tree exhales its breath, the way we might exhale breath as we blink our eyes.

INTERVIEWER

And the amoeba?

MAILER

A day might seem a century in the soul of an amoeba; the night an entombment worthy of Pharaohs. As we look through the microscope we see two tentacles reach out from the amoeba and encircle a morsel. Snap! The morsel is whipped toward the nucleus. Half a second by the clock, or five seconds, or three minutes required. But as we study the amoeba in the field of the microscope, our vision distorted by glass, reflected light, optical ache and biological concept, we may be not unlike my slumbering giant. He sees the tree through a telescope which spans heavens. What adventures and distortions in the air and light! The atmospheres of planets, the echo of meteors, and huge seas of radiation twist his comprehension of the tree. So do the concepts of his gigantic mind. His fingers exhaust our decade in the time it takes him to light a cigarette. His concepts involve actions which take centuries, millenniums, some dull eons. So he cannot conceive the sweet complexity of a day or month for us. Men or trees are a flicker in his lens. His concept of time, his

feeling for time's duration, exists in him only by what is suitable to his measure—which is gargantuan, not human, so that he misses everything of human scale just as we are all but closed off from the gargantuan. Look! Man has a decent sense of the hours, the minutes, the days, the years, the seasons, the decades, the instants, the lifetimes, the moments and the centuries. For these he has built a clock. But for the light-years or the micromillionth of a second he has no clock. There, his sense of time is blind. Man's clock becomes absurd. Light-years or micromillionths of a second are categories of time outside the proportions of our life, or our situation in the universe. A being like you or me can comprehend any unit of time, whether arbitrary and measured like a minute or natural like a moment, if it is at least part of the length of our life, if it is pertinent to what I wish to call our *enlifement*—our subjective or biological conception of the size of time. We can only be sensitive to those proportions of time which are a measure of our life. Conversely, we can only have the confidence to understand the sense of time of beings like ourselves. For this reason, we can have reasonable hope of understanding such creations as man. But a being which exists in a radically different enlifement, a being like an amoeba, or like a tree, will have a different measure. *Snap!* go the tentacles of the amoeba. Just three seconds taken. But for the amoeba, those three seconds may have been a convocation of events as complex as the movements of a modern army—those three seconds could have been a year's campaign in the mud, and the particle of food as differentiated and as dangerous as an enemy force. Its form might have been exceptional if we had proper eyes and concepts, which is to say if we lived in the very amoeboid time necessary to glimpse what had been before the amoeba.

INTERVIEWER

Don't you exaggerate? May it be not just an amoeba? Nothing going on but a little wiggle to snap up some food?

MAILER

My cosmic giant might have been able to see the German armies surrounded at Stalingrad. Without his telescope, however, the battle could have looked to him no more impressive than one of those larger amoebae, half the size of the head of a pin, which one can sometimes see on the surface of a pollen in a quiet pond.

INTERVIEWER

Which is a way of saying all of us are insignificant.

MAILER

Maybe it is the giant who is insignificant; maybe it is *his* emotions which are dim. We may be weak in relation to the power of the giant, but he may be insignificant in his emotions, in his perception. His size could speak for the heroic, or could mean no more than that the giant lost all conception of a future and so chose to proliferate himself into an enormous but sluggish space. The giant might be no more interesting than a million miles of styrene.

INTERVIEWER

Space is the measure of power, you are saying, but time is the index of what is possible.

MAILER

That is possible.

INTERVIEWER

So the amoeba is more glorious than you or me.

MAILER

It may be; maybe it is not. Some amoebae are doubtless glorious, some odious. There may be at this instant wars amoebae are fighting which mean more to the future of our being than all rocket ships. We don't know. The amoeba's lack of size and its tremendous number may signify less than we know.

INTERVIEWER

Their number! There are millions of amoebae for each one of us. Or is it billions? They cannot be individual.

MAILER

What if they are some other kind of being altogether? What if all the amoebae in one freshwater pond constitute no more than one soul, one very special sort of soul, not really a soul if you will, but some element of Being, some spirit of the pond. Postulate more men on earth than ponds. If there is an exceptional creation to each pond—

INTERVIEWER

You cheat. You speak of every amoeba possessing a soul, now you speak of all the amoebae within a pond as one single soul. I think you want to bring the conversation around to some back alley, some purlieu of the soul, where no philosophical rigor can catch up to you.

MAILER

We've come to a point of such fearful complexity that I may as well confess that after our conversations of yesterday I have been up half the night trying to find a way to explain some notions to you. But then I began our conversation with complaints. Still, I wish you would understand that I have no desire to discuss the soul. On the contrary, that opens empty vistas, as if indeed you can use up your soul by talking about it. For one thing, the language is unendurable. You must employ words which have been used by the worst churchmen, wardens, editors, policemen, politicians, generals, statesmen and financiers of each century, just such words as God, soul, Devil, spirit, vision, eternal and universal. It may be possible to bring new connotations to these words, although I doubt it. But the alternative is, after all, worse; it is to make up your own words: call the soul psyche or being-in-itself; the will, ego; the conscience, super-ego; call God the Force of Life or the Being of Being; call the Devil Negation; call eternity a limitless parameter; translate the Vision into transcendental numina. There is nausea in such procedure. So I take the words as they are, talk of soul and spirit. I am, you see, obliged to go on because I can't leave our conversation unfinished here. That alternative is even meaner to contemplate. Yet, if I proceed, understand that I am filled with a sense of discomfort. The continuation will be, I expect, so intangible, changeable, and contradictory that the task of communicating it will be similar in difficulty to taking hold of a spider's web in order to pass on something intact. What compounds the nuisance is that this intellectual transaction will take us far from a discussion of form, out very far out, into some unexplored unfeasible regions. We will be talking after all about death, a subject intolerable to most, and are going to be taking the most witch-ridden aspect of it, for we will assume that death is not conventional death—death as the common end—but to the contrary, will talk of death as a continuation, a migration, a metamorphosis. That means we must now enter into speculation of an outrageous sort. And yet we must speculate, and in just such fashion, for if death is continuation—at least for some—then hints and portents are everywhere about us.

INTERVIEWER

So you now forsake all talk of form?

MAILER

I cannot explain form without talking of time. We are agreed upon that. But I think we should not talk about time unless we speculate about death.

INTERVIEWER

You've left me. Here you've left me.

MAILER

Death and time meet in critical fashion.

INTERVIEWER

Beware of banality.

MAILER

No, I am trying to say, and I don't know how to make it easy for you, that time is the continuation from life into death—it commands, if you will, both terminals of the tunnel—that is my supposition.

INTERVIEWER

It is a large one.

MAILER

I offer you something bigger. Soul and Time (if we may, for an instant, speak in the upper case) bear so profound a relation to one another, they are identical.

INTERVIEWER

The soul is equal to time?

MAILER

Nothing less.

INTERVIEWER

So you speak of the soul to explain form? ~~You are neat today.~~

MAILER

Form, you said, is a shape in time. I try to suggest that the only measure of time—no, put it more directly—its only *container* is an enlivenment, that mode ~~or character or style~~ by which time is perceived in each different kind of being. It is a way of saying that time does not have a universal existence, an overall existence like a blanket, nor is it even like a projectile carrying the universe in a cannonball; no, rather it is a set of separate creations similar to the points of pigment ~~so close to light~~ in the paintings of Seurat. Any general sense of time is then a fiction. A clock is a philosophical fiction among men, ~~at best~~ an accommodation between a hundred million or a million million separate creations, each embodying some separate continuation of ~~(not a sense of time, but)~~ time itself.

INTERVIEWER

Man is time?

MAILER

The soul of man is one kind of time.

INTERVIEWER

We are up the garden path by now.

MAILER

It is as far as I can go in this direction without devoting the next ten years to a study of physics, and physicists I have been assured get no new ideas after twenty. So let us slide over in our discussion from time to the more comfortable terrain of soul and death. Do you see already how more intimate they are?

INTERVIEWER

Classmates.

MAILER

...

INTERVIEWER

I recapitulate. It seems to me you suggest that an appreciation of form is related to a comprehension of death, not my idea of death—that final sound I hear echoing in old stone walls and over the wind of burial

grounds—but, no, your more athletic presentation of the matter, death as sea change, voyages, metamorphoses. So we have to talk of the soul, that damn *ghost*, and I don't know bean-pie of what you have in mind. I suspect you will carry me into some sort of discussion clear on the other side of the divide.

MAILER

What is your sense of what I have tried to say?

INTERVIEWER

I recollect that you were sufficiently carried away to speak yesterday of souls in food. Among other items, we fixed on a tin of sardines, and spoke of the fortified soul of a superior sardine in the tin. I feel a little claustrophobic about that.

MAILER

I didn't extend the meaning of the word "soul" beyond its own elasticity, I hope.

INTERVIEWER

Beyond any reasonable comprehension of its meaning? I think you did. Look! Once a body is dead—what do you do then with the soul? Do you contemplate it? Do you eat it? Once you get specific, you're drowning in sardine oil.

MAILER

Take the soul in that sardine. Can we proceed to eat it literally, and go on to think of it philosophically as the same entity which was once in the sardine's body?

INTERVIEWER

That is my question.

MAILER

Yes, can we eat that ~~precise~~ soul-and-body equal to one sardine which we chose yesterday to call one being? I don't know if we can. The intellectual discomfort is too great.

INTERVIEWER

You agree?

MAILER

It is too hard to imagine a soul in a body and alive; then alive without a body, yet unchanged—no, I think we can conceive of it remaining the same only in the way a light beam remains in some manner constant after it has been banked off a mirror, reflected through a lens, and bent in water. Such a light beam is now going in another direction, and for all we know is altered seriously in character; it may possess, for example, electromagnetic properties which are different from its previous possessions, just so different as its new direction. Still, we can say we are probably studying the same light beam we were looking at before its physical adventures. Let us try then to follow the transition, let us speculate upon it. When the soul inhabits a body, it tries to exercise its intent within that body. Sometimes it satisfies itself, often it fails, but it carries some instinct which leads it toward something mysterious, something I will be so mistaken as to now call the Vision (of which more later may be said) but since the word is capitalized let me say that I do not want to beg the quality of its character, nor imply it is routinely religious. The Vision may be beatific, heroic, epic, contemplative, tragic, harmonious, or even Faustian; the Vision may shift in its direction; perhaps it is capable of a Satanic contract—we do not know—each of us would indeed postulate a different kind of Vision. For now, it is enough to say that by our definition the soul has an instinct which leads it toward that part of the Vision it can sense ~~or comprehend~~, and the soul—goes our next hypothesis—is resisted in this attempt by all those forces in the world, whose desire is to frustrate every soul in this attempt.

INTERVIEWER

You speak again of the Devil?

MAILER

For the moment I wish to emphasize only this: the body to which the soul is wed, or bound in love with, or at war against—forgive these legalisms, but that marriage here called soul-to-body is complex beyond imagination—yes, that body at any rate which is ground for a soul, sooner or later dies, it ceases to function, it enters a state of decomposition. Let us consider that.

INTERVIEWER

What then happens to the soul?

MAILER

Well, I would postulate a new condition for it. So long as it was part of a body, it was free, free existentially, it could attempt to do what it wished to do, it could war against everything which resisted it; if it failed, there was failure, but the attempt was at least possible. The soul existed as a dynamic will. And the reason: it was part of a body which was able to change its environment. Yet once the body is dead, a soul is no longer free, or at least it is no longer free to alter its environment actively through the agency of a body. The body was its instrument; without such a tool, the soul enters a radically different state, for now it is passive and acted upon by environment.

INTERVIEWER

It is worn down, it is eroded. Like a material? Like a piece of drift-wood?

MAILER

Yes.

INTERVIEWER

Can it be worn literally out of existence?

MAILER

I think it can be said that, other things being equal, it is worn down.

INTERVIEWER

But are you speaking of the soul as here having still a physical existence? It must if it is being worn down.

MAILER

It is idle how I speak of it. The soul may have some physical existence after the death of the body, or it may not—

~~INTERVIEWER~~

~~I'm sure everyone must talk in private like this.~~

~~MAILER~~

~~Jokes on your philosopher's vocabulary could be endless.~~

INTERVIEWER

~~Proceed. I will bridle my wit until it bleeds at the gums.~~

MAILER

~~Blood is the whiskey of the soul. The point I try to make is that the~~ *Soul is void*
~~soul, whether physical or immaterial, is still a creature of properties and~~
~~desires, forced into the anguish of a situation largely more passive than~~
~~before, so that whatever in its new situation is not essential to it must be~~
~~lost.~~ Unfree of an opportunity to act, it is acted upon by all the forces of
 man, nature, good will, ill will and the wind, and is therefore (in an
 absence of dramatic events) reduced down to a state where it can be
 reduced no more. At that point it is the essence of itself.

INTERVIEWER

You are speaking perhaps of the Greek conception of the atom, of that
 particle which cannot be divided further.

MAILER

That suggests a materiality we do not have to consider here. Even dis-
 embodied, the soul may still have a physical existence, or again it may
 not—we won't be so fancy as to say. But whether it is material, astral,
 spectral, or most modestly psychic, one likelihood presents itself—that it
 must take up an abode in some already prepared form which is inde-
 pendent of itself.

INTERVIEWER

So that is when it becomes attached to a body again?

MAILER

Oh, no. No, no. When a soul is an essential part of a being, it is born
 with the body and grows with the body, perhaps it is even present at the
 conception of the body. But I talk here rather of the soul in its outlaw
 state, after the death of the body. ~~This new form it appropriates serves~~ *(Any*
~~as a shell—we may almost view directly the hermit crab and the empty~~ *now)*
~~shell of the snail. This new form is a house, you see, not a body; unlike a~~
 body it is not capable of adapting to the demands or desires of the soul,
 and therefore the soul, an outlaw from life, has taken to it only from a
 kind of desperation, for we are assuming the most existential of conditions
 for this disembodied state, we are picturing the soul in a time of voyages,

332 *Cannibals and Christians*

and anguish, and loss, the diminution of its properties. For protection it chooses an abode.

INTERVIEWER

You postulate this state as true for everyone who dies.

MAILER

I don't begin to postulate. I offer you images, that is all.

INTERVIEWER

Your presentation is perhaps too general to speak of images.

MAILER

Very well. Let us be precise. Think of the driftings of one particular soul; let it be the disembodiment of a man drowned at sea. This outlaw soul—

INTERVIEWER

You mean, this nautical soul.

MAILER

Call it a Salt. This Salt—disembodied—moves mutely through the water from object to object, from a mussel shell to a barnacle to a drift of seaweed torn from its embedment on the rocks. Finally it chooses a piece of wood whose shape is halfway agreeable to it, a piece of wood whose form is not unlike a particular human face which was once part of the memory of that soul. Of course, there may be other souls attached to the wood already; perhaps a battle of subtle influences is about to ensue; but this is certainly too novelistic a situation to follow further at this point. Let us stay most impoverished. Let us stay lean and philosophical. Assume rather the wood is uninhabited except for our one particular soul which—notice this and bless it—proceeds by the salt of its conviction, by the crystallization of its previous experience, to mobilize its conception of a face into that wood, and so etches the driftwood closer to the Salt's idea of a face it can use. Hold still on this and I'll try to explain what I mean by "use." A week goes by, a month; the wood is illumined by the Salt, which is to say it is *carved* by the soul, for the wood now is able to defend itself against the washing of the water, that is, it is worn down unequally with what is now a particular determination to save a few special artful parts of its potential form. Thrown up

on shore, half the size it was, the wood is now more like the face the soul had glimpsed. Treated by the sun, it rots with dry design. One of us goes strolling along the beach, falls upon it, brings the driftwood back, brushes it, takes it home, and stares at the find. The face, created in part by the soul of the dead sailor, haunts us a little, it shapes our motives, just a touch—that Salt has entered us, just a touch, psychically.

INTERVIEWER

Not physically?

MAILER

That is yet to come. That is another epic.

INTERVIEWER

Sketch it.

MAILER

We change. We tire of the face, we put the driftwood into the fire and burn it. A whiff of smoke comes into our nostrils, shocking, clear, aromatic. It has character in its odor. Surprised, we breathe deep, and the Salt has entered our lungs, is now attached to a cell in the blood, red as a root. From that blood cell it must make its way through a thousand adventures to the sperm. It must travel through the perils of enzymes, catalysts, glands and juices, attach itself to and disconnect itself from molecule after molecule until it reaches a form which offers life.

INTERVIEWER

Like the protein molecule DNA, for example, in the chromosomes of a sperm?

MAILER

Something like that. Never doubt it.

INTERVIEWER

If this is religion, it is not agreeable. What is there of eternal slumber, universal verities? This is hectic.

MAILER

Call it ceaseless suffering.

2345

INTERVIEWER

It is not rest.

MAILER

Still, it is an existence. The Salt clinging to a piece of wood can have the pleasure of drifting on an ocean of long summer swells, it can be warmed by the sun, lit by the moon, and even feel a fraction divine as it works along, rapt in the labor of working a design upon the wood. That Salt could say: I, now, subtly, inevitably, insinuate myself into form, I reveal the shape of my Being—just like God.

INTERVIEWER

But why? Why just like God—if indeed He is there—why would God wish to reveal the shape of *His* Being?

MAILER

It is the most elegant way He can communicate Himself, for it avoids the danger of communicating Himself to those who hate Him most.

INTERVIEWER

Do I follow? Not much.

MAILER

The pious response would be: the devil hates nature. I expect I must agree. Now, *I* am solemn. But it is reasonable to assume that the devil hates nature so much he cannot bear to look at it. He must name what he sees before he sees it. Or instantly after. He must dominate nature because it does not belong to him. That is why he cannot bear to contemplate it. (*Pause*)

INTERVIEWER

But now you are suddenly silent and don't go on.

MAILER

I am afraid. This inquiry we are pursuing satisfies a definition just given of the Satanic.

INTERVIEWER

I assure you, you are far from communicating yourself to this believer.

MAILER

(*Cheerfully*) Then perhaps it is safe to proceed.

INTERVIEWER

Nonetheless, you now look worried again. In fact, you look damn worried. It's just come all over you.

MAILER

I've been feeling a contradiction in everything I said earlier. There's something makes me uneasy. I am worrying the possibility that a soul must have something in kind to work upon, something in the driftwood which I might be forced to call spirit, the spirit of the driftwood. But this proposes an indigestible complication, and the truth is that I am a little uneasy of your temper. (*Holds up boths hands to emphasize the measure*) Yes, I think we now say goodbye to all hope of arriving at anything elegant in our speculations. For at this instant, a hundred difficulties rush into the argument, and the first is the worst. I've just come to the grim conclusion that I must change the terms of our discussion, or to be less polite to myself, must now admit that I have to shift my terms around to include another mysterious element in these metamorphoses, an element I expect is far more mysterious than soul: spirit, ²yes, spirit, ~~spirit~~.

INTERVIEWER

What then!—you shift the terms—well, what then is spirit?

MAILER

That is what I am not sure of.

INTERVIEWER

Yet you choose to begin?

MAILER

I may become more certain as I talk. Often I do.

INTERVIEWER

Or contradict yourself further.

MAILER

Either.

INTERVIEWER

You are certainly an existentialist.

MAILER

I began to feel in trouble about the time we started to talk of the soul of the amoeba. Perhaps it does have one, but then, if you remember, I wasn't certain, I began to postulate the possibility that all the amoebae in the pond composed one exceptional soul. And that notion was unsatisfactory. I think what I was trying to say was that the soul of the pond was not a soul but a spirit. And now the idea becomes more clear because one can think more easily of some pullulating unhappy swarm of amoebae all making up the spirit of a slime on the pond, perhaps even a malignant and powerful slime which may be why you dislike amoebae so, and why, secretly, all the while I was promoting their virtues, I found them near to repulsive.

INTERVIEWER

That slime of amoebae on the pond—it is a spirit, you claim now? It is one kind of spirit?

MAILER

Yes.

INTERVIEWER

Tell me of others.

MAILER

I think it would be easier if you ask a few questions.

INTERVIEWER

Is the tree also a spirit?

MAILER

I have no idea. Maybe it is soul *and* spirit.

INTERVIEWER

Once again you've succeeded in whipping up our collective confusions.

MAILER

I feel new ideas emerging, but they make me uneasy. I remember I began to feel uneasy when I spoke of the amoeba as an army. An army after all is a spirit.

INTERVIEWER

An army is made up of men. Of a hundred thousand men, we may say. Which by your count is one hundred thousand souls. Do all of these souls—one hundred thousand—make one spirit?

MAILER

So far as they give themselves to an effort thrust on them by some larger spirit or soul, why yes, then that part of them which is obedient to the army obviously contributes to the *function* of the army. (*Happily*) The function is the center of the spirit. That may be a beginning. Suppose that souls possess a personal life and thus are unpredictable and full of turns, but a spirit is a function. It can only wax strong or weak.

INTERVIEWER

Realize what you've said. You are implicating us in the idea that the cells in our body are spirits and souls. But cells certainly seem to possess far more of one or another specific function than any suggestion of a personal life. They must be spirits.

MAILER

Perhaps they are.

INTERVIEWER

Then you do overthrow much of what you said earlier. And I have no idea of what bearing this has on form.

MAILER

My difficulty is that I do not necessarily have a message to unfold which was once carefully folded. Rather my problem may vary from severing a series of knots to excavating a tomb.

INTERVIEWER

There are too many ideas at once.

MAILER

Yes. Could it be that a cell is a spirit composed of many souls?

INTERVIEWER

A parenthesis: (From where do these souls arrive?)

MAILER

(From their travels.)

INTERVIEWER

And where in the cell are ^{these souls} they to be found?

MAILER

In the nucleus if it will make you happy. In the chromosomes of the nucleus. In your DNA molecule. In particles too small for the electron microscope to discover. God knows. Their precise residence is not a part of this discussion.

INTERVIEWER

But the spirit of the cell rules over the souls within that cell. It makes them offer up allegiance to the government of the spirit?

MAILER

Yes. I will say yes.

INTERVIEWER

A man—a soul!—would, however, command the spirits of his cells?

MAILER

More or less. If he is in command of his cells. If a malignancy had not begun. But forgive me for these examples. They lead but to further confusion.

INTERVIEWER

Still, if one is to stake out the ground in a general way—anything to keep your metaphor afloat—I could go on to ask if people considered in social groups may be seen as collections of *whole souls*—engrave those words!—or if such associations are not too loose to be termed spirits.

MAILER

Some spirits are cohesive, some are not. A bag of beans is probably a spirit—a very weak one, of course.

INTERVIEWER

Groups of men form spirits then, some loose, some cohesive. Yes? In turn the collision of these spirits makes a nation?

MAILER

Yes.

INTERVIEWER

A nation which has a soul? A soul over all these spirits?

MAILER

Some nations seem to have a soul.

INTERVIEWER

Some seem to have a spirit. Soul. Spirit. You have opened a pair of categories which are hopeless. Some people have spirits, others have soul?

MAILER

Yes.

INTERVIEWER

Characterize the difference. Make at least some attempt. What is the difference to me if I am a soul or a spirit?

MAILER

A creature who is a spirit is hardly the same as a man who has spirit. Someone who has spirit is a soul, a fortunate soul, rather a powerful soul.

INTERVIEWER

Whereas, someone who is a spirit is selfless?

MAILER

Precisely. The sort of people we say are full of soul actually are spirits. Beautiful spirits perhaps.

INTERVIEWER

That helps a bit. Still you spoke earlier of a cell which might have a soul *and* a spirit. There is a ladder of dominations you seem to be always about to construct—spirit dominated by a soul who in turn is dominated by a higher spirit which is then dominated by yet a higher soul. Just as we are about to arrive, you confound the two together again. If we are to avoid intolerable ambiguities, you must now try to speak in some decent detail about the properties of soul and spirit, the more particular properties. You must try to separate them.

MAILER

Suppose I define soul by saying it is a sort of creature, doubtless invisible, which has a purchase on eternity. It also has an individual life, a *personal* life, which is contained in itself, and this personal life is carried through its metamorphoses. It is the soul's character in the same way the taste of the sardine is the sardine's character.

INTERVIEWER

Is this character immutable?

MAILER

Of course not. It can change as quickly as a taste can rot. But it is at least continuous. Change in character is the continuing line of the soul.

INTERVIEWER

You speak of character. Is this the moral character of the soul?

MAILER

The Vision is moral. The soul, as we suggested, works its way toward the Vision. But the soul is itself amoral.

INTERVIEWER

Oh, no! Just when I was beginning to understand.

MAILER

I've been too timid in this exposition. We are not dealing with logic but metaphor. Metaphor exists to contain contradiction. I repeat: the soul is amoral. Its purpose is not to be ethical, but to live. Its desire is to

live. So long as it is a healthy soul, its nourishment comes from growth and victory, from exploration, from conquest, from pomp and pageant and triumph, from glory. Is this sufficiently simple for you? It lives for stimulation, for pleasure. It abhors defeat. Its nature is to become more than it is.

INTERVIEWER

But you might just as well be talking of a Roman. Worse. The soul according to you has no impulse to civilize a thing.

MAILER

Civilization is a spirit. I propose to you that the soul is an animal carrying a burden of existence toward the Vision. Like an animal the soul is able to fight, to endure, to war, to kill, to flee, to become lean, wily, hard, a mink, a minx, a wild cat, puma, leopard or tiger. The soul can even descend within a body, and assume the secret sluggish wisdom of a clam, resist change with the force of a clam's valve.

INTERVIEWER

What sort of person would have a soul like a clam?

MAILER

A banker. A banker of the worst sort.

INTERVIEWER

A fair image. Can the soul have no gentle qualities?

MAILER

It can become brave like a lion, noble like a good ape, it can grow as distrustful as an owl, as graceful as a cat, or fierce as a lobster.

INTERVIEWER

Can it love? Can the soul feel love?

MAILER

(*Carried away*) Like a frump, like a poodle, like a fury. Passion comes from the soul. But the soul can only love what offers it growth. It loves most what offers it the happiest, richest growth. It detests sickness, dying, death.

INTERVIEWER

Yet by your definition Romeo and Juliet loved with their soul.

MAILER

Yes And died for it.

INTERVIEWER

Exactly. They died for love. I thought the soul detested death?

MAILER

It does. The only true and passionate lovers are those who love each other because they give life to one another.

INTERVIEWER

What kind of life?

MAILER

Whatever the particular soul needs most. If it needs violence, it will love the violent. There are souls which can be expressed—that is, *un-*deadened—only by violence.

INTERVIEWER

You make the soul sound like the unconscious.

MAILER

But of course it is the unconscious. What did you think it was?

INTERVIEWER

Very well, then. Can the soul be drawn to compassion, to justice, to order?

MAILER

To the degree that an animal can. Perhaps a little more.

INTERVIEWER

An animal has need of justice?

MAILER

An animal dies from injustice. The soul needs justice much as it needs air. But few souls can offer justice.

INTERVIEWER

Compassion?

MAILER

I expect it is even more rare than justice. Still the soul cannot do without the giving of compassion and the receiving of it.

INTERVIEWER

Doesn't the offering of compassion sometimes interfere with one's own growth? Since one must give rather than receive, so the soul is obliged to dispense a part of its wealth?

MAILER

In offering compassion, some souls feel an exquisite sense of beauty.

INTERVIEWER

The soul needs beauty?

MAILER

Like the body needs food.

INTERVIEWER

Why?

MAILER

Beauty is the blood and bone of the soul.

INTERVIEWER

I thought whisky was the blood of the soul.

MAILER

Let us say whisky is the blood and vinegar of the soul.

INTERVIEWER

All right. Now I have a picture. Of sorts. I still don't know why Romeo and Juliet died for love if the soul detests death, and I certainly don't know why if beauty is the blood and bone of the soul, you have so many fucking souls going around blasting up beauty and destroying it, but I think it would be better to wait. I do not want complications here.

MAILER

Oh, they are coming again.

INTERVIEWER

I'm convinced of it. Still I've got some grip at last on what you're talking about. For soul, at any rate. I understand it except for one thing. If it is eternal—

MAILER

Yes.

INTERVIEWER

—why then is it so active?

MAILER

One reason is the metamorphosis from one life to another.

INTERVIEWER

I know about that, I think. It is poor man's Yoga. The soul resides in a cow in one life, a squid in the next, a man—ugh, what a man coming from a cow and a squid—in the third, a cockroach in the fourth, a brave cockroach, to a tulip in the fifth, very self-complacent; it blooms into a blade of grass in the sixth.

MAILER

The migrations sometimes turn out more modest.

INTERVIEWER

Rich Episcopalian, Presbyterian, modest Methodist, Negro Baptist, Puerto Rican Catholic? This is very poor man's Yoga.

MAILER

I neglected to tell you that we are still far from Yoga. I think there is a Western obsession in the soul, a continuing obsession, which is at the source of its activity, its anxiety, its insomnia, its mania, its violence, its despair.

INTERVIEWER

Yes, now you're going to take me by surprise. I feel it. What are you about to claim as the continuing obsession of the soul?

MAILER

It wonders if it will continue to exist, or if it will perish.

INTERVIEWER

I thought you said the soul was eternal.

MAILER

It has a purchase on eternity. It can manage to live forever. But only if it *manages* to do so. Only if it is not finally defeated.

INTERVIEWER

So a soul can be eternal or die?

MAILER

Yes. It can die.

INTERVIEWER

That is the reason everything is so important to it? Is that why it feels such anxiety about its particular metamorphosis, or even the place where as an outlaw soul it may choose to take up its abode, whether in the mussel shell or the seaweed?

MAILER

Yes.

INTERVIEWER

That is why it is so fierce, and so animal when once in a body? That is why even if it needs beauty it might wish still to destroy it?

MAILER

Yes.

INTERVIEWER

Good. Something grows clear to me. In the suffering of the soul you talked about, in its anguish that it might be diminishing or coming close to a final death, there was a glimpse of another anguish. For many people there must be no other choice than to destroy something of beauty, or *else* watch something ~~of value~~ die within themselves. So I wonder—would you agree to an elementary formula: if there is a God and a Devil both, and God creates beauty, then the Devil must attempt to steal it.

MAILER

Yes. And often he succeeds.

INTERVIEWER

How?

MAILER

By communicating himself to every pore of beauty. By convincing beauty it must fear whatever is good. And in fact, it must. Those who are good often hate beauty; they have been betrayed by it too many times. They know the devil which has come to live in beauty, that devil whose pleasure is to defeat possibility, deaden hope, waste effort. Therefore they feel as if they are killing the Devil when they loot the gallery. You see, in their mind, beauty is synonymous to waste.

INTERVIEWER

Do I keep up with you?

MAILER

could Our soul needs beauty for its growth. But beauty is ready forever to betray it. So all too often the soul while remaining very much alive, nonetheless ceases to grow. It becomes timid. It is drawn to beauty, but beauty destroys its possibilities. A fearful tension is begun. It is in the soul's nature to grow, to seek growth. That is not only its pleasure but its duty. It knows—I'm afraid I quote myself—that if it does not grow, it must pay more for remaining the same. Yet each time beauty slays a possibility,

some nerve is blunted. A death begins within which must finally be passed out, or the soul is stifled. So the soul turns to murder.

INTERVIEWER

Tragic.

MAILER

You bet. Left to itself the soul might ~~always~~ look for the kind of love which would offer the greatest possible growth. But, in life, ~~nobody or~~ almost nobody comes within a million human beings of whom he really needs. Spirits and shattered communications lie between the soul and a clear sense of its desire. Anyone who searches seriously for love comes to realize it is more difficult to find than the ~~Holy Grail, or the way to~~ Kafka's castle. So that is why Romeo and Juliet kill themselves, each separately, each by choice. They know they will not find such a love again in life. Therefore they are ready to search for one another across eternity. That offers more life to their soul than the bleak hope of recovery and new love. But for any situation which is not tragic, the soul detests death and abhors suicide.

INTERVIEWER

Why? Why not choose suicide often in order to hasten into the next stage?

MAILER

Because deep in the economy of Being, huge waste must be caused by any indiscriminate odyssey of souls, any incoherent metamorphoses.

INTERVIEWER

Eternity desires tidiness?

MAILER

Not as a passion, but as a use, as a most useful function.

INTERVIEWER

You make eternity sound like a neat old spinster.

MAILER

You think of eternity as some complacent cerulean vault which can afford tidiness or untidiness. But I use the word in the existential sense where eternity is not automatically eternal.

INTERVIEWER

Eternity means not eternal?

MAILER

Eternity means the will and the possibility to be eternal. Whether it can succeed is another matter. Eternity can perish. Tidiness and some reasonable law of order are as necessary therefore to its survival as lack of clutter on a sailing ship.

INTERVIEWER

We are outward bound?

MAILER

I do not feel we are coming home.

INTERVIEWER

Eternity is on a voyage?

MAILER

Life and eternity are on a voyage, yes.

INTERVIEWER

To go where?

MAILER

Out. Out to where whatever created us wishes us to be, out to where it was conceived we would move.

INTERVIEWER

And we have not gone as far as we were supposed to go?

MAILER

I think we have not gone near to far enough.

INTERVIEWER

All right. I can take a breath on that. (*Lights a cigarette*) I suppose I have to. I've got a picture of the soul. Yes, it's clear. But spirit. Oh, yes. I knew I had something to be depressed about. There's spirit. Even thinking about it, I know I'm nowhere near spirit—it feels like a wet

paper bag over my head. Tell me, is a spirit as capable of dying as a soul?

MAILER

(*Long pause*) I would assume its existence is never alive, not finally alive in the way a soul is alive. In that sense spirit does not die, it cannot—it is never really alive. Rather it waxes strong or weak—like a function. But it does not die. It ebbs.

INTERVIEWER

But spirit is the medium, the solution if you will, into which soul submerges after each little death?

MAILER

It is ~~the culture, the nutrient, it is~~ the abode; not the body, but the abode; as the driftwood was an abode for the Salt.

INTERVIEWER

A soul passes then through spirit after it dies, after its little death, the one which makes it ready for its metamorphosis?

MAILER

I think it must. Perhaps it passes through many spirits.

INTERVIEWER

I'm going to be brutal. Forgive the lack of amenities, but spirit as I see it is a collection of souls without bodies, a collection station for what you call outlaw souls.

MAILER

Presumably the soul passes through spirit. It is not however sealed permanently in it. Not necessarily. It may merely be working for it. Often against its will. On the other hand, I think a spirit may contain any number of souls who have lost the power to find further metamorphoses, souls no longer eternal but rootless, alienated from existence, souls which can no longer grow within a body. So they pass permanently into spirit. They are the part of spirit which gives spirit a character, a discontent, a demonic fury. A hurricane might be such a spirit.

INTERVIEWER

Spirit is then some kind of psychic embodiment?

MAILER

I think it can be material as well. Spirit is not so clear an entity as soul. Spirit tends to *not* delineate its existence. Think of the cluster of one-celled animals in a Portuguese man-of-war. That is one kind of spirit. But the example is too clear. There are spirits you cannot picture. Psychic spirits. Like a habit.

INTERVIEWER

A habit is a spirit?

MAILER

A predictable spirit.

INTERVIEWER

What is a lively spirit?

MAILER

A gay little brook.

INTERVIEWER

All right, then. What is the largest spirit of which you can conceive?

MAILER

The heavens.

INTERVIEWER

I meant to ask for the largest spirit we might both be able to see.

MAILER

The ocean.

INTERVIEWER

Speak of a large spirit which has a shape.

MAILER

Of objects which have a shape, I would think of a mountain range or a cave.

INTERVIEWER

And what is the smallest spirit?

MAILER

A virus, I suspect.

INTERVIEWER

But the very smallest you could still see?

MAILER

A mildew or a mold. A drop of oil.

INTERVIEWER

What would be the most miserable spirit?

MAILER

A common cold.

INTERVIEWER

And the most palpable?

MAILER

A mood.

INTERVIEWER

What would be the most dramatic?

MAILER

A revolutionary spirit.

INTERVIEWER

And the most material?

MAILER

A tin of sardines.

INTERVIEWER

So now we have findings (of all sorts!) and may draw propositions. If we can find needles in haystacks! A soul, as I see it—this strapping little bugger—comes to the end of his existence in one body, and therefore

352 Cannibals and Christians

enters a spirit for rest and necessary rehabilitation until the happy day he succeeds in moving his soul over to an embryo just begun.

MAILER

Yes.

INTERVIEWER

Then spirit must be always in flux, Souls coming in, souls saying farewell. *Are you saying that a spirit*

~~MAILER~~

You may think of a girl's dormitory.

~~INTERVIEWER~~

~~A spirit~~ has no form?

MAILER

No form. It is a purpose, not an embodiment.

INTERVIEWER

What about the tin of sardines?

MAILER

The form of that is the form of the tin can. It could be filled with wax or honey or anchovies and look the same. Spirit is not apparent in the form but in the presence. You would have to open the can to discover the presence.

INTERVIEWER

Do I understand you? A mountain peak is a spirit, but it is also a form.

MAILER

It is a presence. One could cut a road through it, and the spirit would alter, but not because its shape was changed, but because birds left a hillside. It is a presence.

INTERVIEWER

You say a cold is a spirit, but it has a form. It has a shape in time, a run of symptoms.

MAILER

The symptoms do not make up a shape—rather they are indications that something is shrinking out of time. A cold is a presence which speaks of a partial death of soul.

INTERVIEWER

A partial death of soul?

MAILER

A loss of some part of soul.

INTERVIEWER

Can soul be lost in part?

MAILER

As particularly as a limb can be amputated from a body. A soul can lose its best qualities, its courage, its compassion, its grace, or it can slough off its worst features, its cowardice, its terror, its avarice, its sloth. A soul is changed by inhabiting a body. At the time of ~~its little~~ death, it is better or it is worse than when it entered that body. Its form has altered.

INTERVIEWER

But when it enters a spirit it does not retain its form?

MAILER

At such a time, it has a potential form, but no body. It has a style, it has a character. Given the opportunity it will try to shape creation in its fashion. I refer you to the piece of driftwood.

INTERVIEWER

But, ultimately, the soul must find a body?

MAILER

It must be present in some way at a conception.

INTERVIEWER

Might it not have to wait for centuries?

2345

MAILER

It would have to wait long, I would think. Unless it was an exceptional soul.

INTERVIEWER

And then?

MAILER

It might so illumine the spirit in which it found itself that the spirit would encourage an act of conception which the soul could join.

INTERVIEWER

For instance?

MAILER

A moonlit night on a lake. A swimmer drowns saving a child. His exceptional soul might then rise to the moon, be gilded when the moon is full, ride back on a beam and glide into a lover's act. He could be conceived in the first moment after he died.

INTERVIEWER

But what if the exceptional soul had the bad fortune to be trapped in a lesser spirit? The spirit of a common cold?

MAILER

Why he might relax the sufferer and stir their sex.

INTERVIEWER

But a more ordinary soul?

MAILER

Would have to wait a period in any spirit in which it found itself. There might be no occasion for a leap.

INTERVIEWER

The soul can find a new body only by a leap?

MAILER

One would think so.

INTERVIEWER

A literal or a metaphorical leap?

MAILER

Either.

INTERVIEWER

But if no leap suggests itself, one must wait. Isn't it grievous to wait in a spirit?

MAILER

I could not suggest.

INTERVIEWER

Do you know I still have no real sense of what a soul is—I think I know, and then I realize I can't quite distinguish it from a spirit, at least not when it is once in the soup.

MAILER

But we have not said nearly enough about spirit. There's the difficulty. I've just come to the conclusion a spirit must be led by a soul. By a soul which has lost eternity.

INTERVIEWER

I am fortified to hear that every spirit has a leader. Would you offer an example?

MAILER

Every house is a spirit. Except, perhaps, a new ranch house. So every house has a leader. A fine house might have a cricket under the stair. Of course the leader can just as easily be a poor creation, an owl, a termite, a cockroach, an earthworm in the cellar. There are corporation buildings with walls of glass and aisles of stainless steel whose leader is a bitter confirmed molecule of urine adhering to the drain in the executive's urinal.

INTERVIEWER

Such a leader cannot last very long.

MAILER

He could surprise you. Some molecules are crab-shaped and adhere to the porcelain for years. Of course all the urine going by does its best to dislodge it. But the moment such a leader succumbs he is replaced immediately by another molecule very much like himself.

INTERVIEWER

That is the spirit of the corporation?

MAILER

The spirit of the corporation extends over its buildings, factories, stocks, workers, commodities, salesmen, advertising agencies, and so on. I was speaking only of the main office.

INTERVIEWER

What of the spirit of the total corporation? Who is its leader?

MAILER

A mind without a body. A soul which died forever.

INTERVIEWER

Some major soul?

MAILER

A large soul but not a major soul. Not a dramatic soul—certainly not a dramatic soul.

INTERVIEWER

This is becoming agreeable, but I'm going to bring it up short. Because I don't think you realize that you're now saying a spirit can also be an organism.

MAILER

I think it is more like a field, or a mood. A presence. If it is an embodiment, a slice of meat for instance, it still has no body, not in the sense of a set of organs which function with one another.

INTERVIEWER

But a corporation has such organs.

MAILER

Yes, but the organs of a corporation are not materially connected.

INTERVIEWER

So a spirit can have shape or be shapeless, have organs or be bereft of them, can be seen or invisible, can have odor, color, taste, or no properties at all.

MAILER

Yes.

INTERVIEWER

Air? Is air a spirit?

MAILER

Air is filled with spirits and is itself a spirit.

INTERVIEWER

So spirits inhabit other spirits.

MAILER

Oh yes.

INTERVIEWER

And souls-in-bodies can inhabit spirits? Souls-in-bodies! I mean, people.

MAILER

Yes, people can be a part of many spirits. In a sense, all words are spirit.

INTERVIEWER

In precisely that sense, I shall soon become a part of the spirit of vertigo.

MAILER

Think of an ambitious advertising executive. He works for the main office of the corporation we just discussed. He is obedient to the spirit of the main office. To that molecule of urine. He goes to Mass on Sun-

358 *Cannibals and Christians*

day. He is a good Catholic. He belongs, he is a small part of the considerably more indefinable spirit of the Catholic Church. He is a sports fan. He roots for a major-league team, which is a sharply defined spirit, but since it is about to move to a new stadium in a different city, he will soon be less a part of its sharply defined spirit. At midnight he regularly watches a television host on a variety show.

INTERVIEWER

This television host is the leader of a spirit?

MAILER

He is the leader of a television audience. It is a wide spirit but not an incisive one.

INTERVIEWER

Then a spirit is a convocation?

MAILER

As we said earlier, yes.

INTERVIEWER

An assemblage?

MAILER

Yes.

INTERVIEWER

A collection?

MAILER

Yes, it is any of these.

INTERVIEWER

And yet, to return to this point, to return again to a point which is too simple or too mysterious for me, I wonder how a cell can be a spirit. It is an organism, not a convocation.

MAILER

But a cell is not free. The average cell is part of a larger organism.

INTERVIEWER

Let us say it is a part of the liver. The liver is an organ. Does the liver have a soul?

MAILER

It may or it may not. In most cases I expect it does.

INTERVIEWER

But the liver is not free of the body.

MAILER

It can have freedom within the body. It can choose to cooperate with the body, or merely to put up with the body. It can do its best to cure itself when it is ill, or it can fold upon itself like an invalid, and call to other portions of the body for aid.

INTERVIEWER

You speak of organs as if they were states or countries.

MAILER

They have character, like nations. They too can be spirits or souls. Or close to nothing at all.

INTERVIEWER

And it is freedom, the very limited freedom of the liver which allows it to be a soul?

MAILER

France may be free, but it is not free to detach itself from the earth and ascend to the moon. It is not unnatural to speak of the soul of an organ. It is merely a soul with a fixed position. Its freedom lies elsewhere.

INTERVIEWER

But there are organs which are spirits, you say.

MAILER

Yes, finally I will agree. There are organs which are spirits and organs which are not. They are without freedom. They are obedient to

360 *Cannibals and Christians*

an external will. By themselves they are not able to adapt to new conditions. So there is a limit to how much they can help the body.

INTERVIEWER

A while ago you seemed to indicate that a spirit was not alive, not alive as an organism. You spoke of houses, systems of plumbing, of air, hurricanes, common colds, the ocean. Now you speak of organisms and organs and call them spirits.

MAILER

Spirits are habits, not innovations; functions, not creations; waves, not forms; not so much the act as the context; never the event, but the institution. So there are even people whom one may call spirits. Some years ago there was a fashion to call them other-directed.

INTERVIEWER

By now, have you not violated every category altogether?

MAILER

Not if we hold to the primary distinction. A spirit, no matter how close it approaches resemblance to a soul, is still a being in which something vital has died.

INTERVIEWER

But how would you define what is vital?

MAILER

It is a grasp upon the present which enables you to alter it in surprising fashion.

INTERVIEWER

Is this another way of saying that a human being becomes a spirit if his soul has died?

MAILER

If the soul has died while right within the body, if it has died finally right there, has ceased to exist forever, ceased to exist in eternity, then

INTERVIEWER

Such a man could not create life?

MAILER

He could create life, but still be a spirit.

INTERVIEWER

How is that? Don't you betray your last distinction?

MAILER

The soul may exist still within the body, but *the soul* it has surrendered.

INTERVIEWER

Surrendered what?

MAILER

Its hope of eternity.

INTERVIEWER

How fearful a state that must be.

MAILER

I think we all have intimations of such a condition.

INTERVIEWER

Still—it must be very painful. Yet, you are not logically scrupulous, you pass by a distinction which is most crucial. I ask you: if a man can create children, how can you say that he has nonetheless surrendered his hope of eternity?

MAILER

His children could be somebody else's purchase on eternity. Perhaps our sperm does not contain our soul, but others with their own separate chain of metamorphoses. Remember the effort of the Salt to return to the blood and the root? It could have been a stranger's blood, a stranger's root.

INTERVIEWER

Too poetic. And too quick. You deprive us of the claim that there are families in which a soul may reappear in a man's descendants. Don't forget you spoke earlier about the tidiness of eternity.

MAILER

Yes, I am not here to say it is impossible. Probably we are talking of the unspoken impulse behind family vaults and plots.

INTERVIEWER

Yes, if eternity is well managed, that would account for the weakness some of my friends feel before titles, or speaking to families of unbroken line.

MAILER

Yes, that could explain their weakness.

INTERVIEWER

Think of the metamorphoses in such a family. Why, they could move in a direct line. The body, just expired, of the master of the house is taken from the master bedroom to the family crypt. Presto! He is back from the tomb and bawling in the nursery, an infant now forced to put up with all the ice of a British infancy. It is orderly. It accounts for the complacency, the solidity, and the strength of certain families. They know the Lord does not have to put Himself out for them, and bear with migrations which travel too far and exhaust too much of His time.

MAILER

Once this used to be true, I'm sure.

INTERVIEWER

You think death now refuses to be so accommodating?

MAILER

Perhaps. It is restless. Modern death gives a hint of horror—as if it goes in two directions at once. Sometimes I think God may have lost His way.

INTERVIEWER

How could He have lost His way?

MAILER

He could be too far behind. We could have been too slow. Too many of us might have died, too many surrendered. God no longer knows whether to reduce our migrations to the family plot, or encourage the most exceptional surrealist journey.

INTERVIEWER

Brilliant! If you are saying that surrealism speaks of the migration of souls.

MAILER

~~It speaks of metamorphoses. Frightening metamorphoses. Startling metamorphoses. Teacups come to look like heads, and bodies turn to wooden toys. I am saying that eternity does not offer the rest it once possessed.~~

INTERVIEWER

You are so unhappy about all this. You insist that death is now worse than it has been.

MAILER

It is restless. The thought of death is equal to dread for the modern soul. Talk of the possibilities within death gives cheer to no one any longer. Maybe we are told each night in our sleep (by the great spirit of sleep!) that death is not the end of anything, but is instead a continuation of the worst terrors of life. Perhaps that is why people wish to see death as the end, as a final conclusion. It may be too awful to contemplate the debt there is to be paid each time the body dies (whatever that debt may be) and how do you bear your anguish if the soul must sink to a lower existence? There is always the terror that you may finally betray the deepest value of your experience. Besides, the soul must bear the weight of continuing to exist. Much of existence is now war; it is a grim war for most.

INTERVIEWER

A war against whom? Against what?

MAILER

Against the desire of something, some spirit perhaps, that life should end.

INTERVIEWER

Life end? Why should it? Why should there be a spirit which wishes life to cease?

MAILER

Life may now be intolerable to some other conception of Being—I would not know what else to call it but a plague—which is different from ourselves, more powerful perhaps, some conception so antagonistic to the Vision by which we try to discover our life that its presence has invaded our world, perhaps even our universe. The intent of such a plague is to deaden the soul of all of us, invite it to surrender.

INTERVIEWER

Couldn't the Devil be this spirit?

MAILER

Perhaps he is. But who can know? Perhaps the plague wishes to destroy spirit. Perhaps the plague collaborates with spirit.

INTERVIEWER

Is this plague equal to the Devil?

MAILER

Again I have no idea. Perhaps it wishes to destroy the Devil along with everything else. Perhaps the Devil bears the same relation to the plague that Faust bears to Mephisto.

INTERVIEWER

But whichever it is, the plague wishes that life cease to exist?

MAILER

Yes.

INTERVIEWER

And time would then cease?

MAILER

Time by our scheme is Being in its becoming, ^{so} time would cease.

INTERVIEWER

This bears, I suppose, some relation to Nietzsche's dictum that God is dead.

MAILER

Other than a suggestion that God is mortal, it bears no relation.

INTERVIEWER

Well, that saves time. In fact, you believe that God can be either eternal, or perish?

MAILER

His nature is to be eternal if He succeeds in remaining eternal. If He is not destroyed.

INTERVIEWER

Yes. I follow that. When you speak of the surrender of souls, it is as if you make the totality of them synonymous to God.

MAILER

They are not synonymous. ~~There is the Spirit and the Vision as well.~~
~~You must account for the Spirit and the Vision.~~

INTERVIEWER

But souls are the essence of God? His *élan vital*? His flux?

MAILER

They are His present tense. His moral nature exists, you remember, not in the soul but in the Vision. Good. I will give you a scheme. It will make you happy. Vision is the mind of God; soul, His body; and Spirit is what He has left behind. Literally. It is His excrement.

INTERVIEWER

2377

MAILER

Not so bad. Moral nature resides after all in the Spirit as well as the Vision.

INTERVIEWER

In the Spirit? In God's excrement? In the Devil?

MAILER

Think of this Devil as the echo of history, the lore of the past, the mansions of philosophy, as the blunt weight of every problem which has been solved and every lie which has succeeded. Think of this Devil as the spirit of magic and the dead spirit of institutional life, as mass communication, and the passing of the guards. Everything rich, hideous, poor, proud, nauseating and marvelous goes into that excrement, but it is God's excrement, ~~it is more so~~. So take Spirit and pose it ^{against} ~~upon~~ the Vision of the future—between just these two leviathans, at their junction, is moral nature. Of course this moral nature, this junction, is being rotted by the plague.

INTERVIEWER

You balance a cliché like a barbell. What I do not comprehend is whether this new Spirit with its capital S, this new property of God, is the same vast malign spirit which seeks to obliterate Time, or if it is some other Spirit altogether, a visitor from out of somewhere. Or has the Spirit of God become diseased by the plague? I see you preparing to object—you are about to say that you cannot possibly know the answer, your admission that you do not know where to place the Devil in relation to plague is the answer, that my question is therefore insulting because repetitious, yet I would present to you that the essential presumption of the enterprise makes one almost disappointed you are not ready to answer. For consider: what you have stated up to here is so obviously a philosophy of hugely paranoid proportions that for your own sake and for a general inspiring of confidence one would hope you are ready to offer some hint of a few objective criteria, some warrant that your ideas are not merely a projection from the eye of your brain to the wall of your brain. Now, I know it's getting late, and this is a demand of proportions—I can see by your eye that you think it's getting very late—

MAILER

INTERVIEWER

You will tell me the invasion of this malign spirit presents itself in flying saucers?

MAILER

~~Of course not.~~ No need for saucers. Though nothing has to cause surprise, for existence approaches a climax.

INTERVIEWER

What then are the objective criteria? Display them.

MAILER

They show themselves in every crack of every detail in our lives, in the processing of our food is one seat of the plague, and in the plastic commodities we handle, the odor of vaginal jelly, the dead character of public communication, the pollution of air, the collective assaults upon human nerve.

INTERVIEWER

Are these criteria? or merely temporary technological trials?—just a list of your familiar prejudices?

MAILER

Look to the forms. The forms of the modern world break down. That is where you find all objective criteria—in the art of the twentieth century, above all in the architecture, in the empty monotonous interchangeable statements of our modern buildings.

INTERVIEWER

Not that again! Not all this reduced to still one more of your endless diatribes about modern architecture.

MAILER

I'm talking not of architecture but of form. Form is the deepest clue we possess to the nature of time in any epoch, to the style of the time, to the mode by which reality is perceived in the time, to the way time moves in the consciousness of man, where it possesses grace, where it is hobbled, how strength addresses itself to weakness. Time is all but equal to creativity, for time is the potential to create as it resides in each of

368 *Cannibals and Christians*

us. So form is the clue to the vitality or lethargy of time, and the most pervasive forms of the modern world speak now of an absence of invention, a pall upon good spirit, an erosion of memory. Only in the corners is there preoccupation with complexity of form, with those interruptions of time we comprehend in the absurd. Full of feverish creativity and feverish destruction are the forms in the corners and the edges—in the center is nothing but an aesthetic desert, those pillars of salt which rise out of the plains of urban renewal, out of the triumph of that totalitarian spirit whose impulse is to betray form, to abstract form, until the meanings in its creation are lost. The passion of totalitarianism is to conceal its own process; so its passion is to abstract form into monotony for monotonous forms are superior at concealing the sinister processes of their creation since it drains vitality to study them. That bleakness of form speaks of an apathy in the heart of time, and by implication—a terror, an exhaustion. No rest. (*Sways slightly*)

INTERVIEWER

Not, I fear, in this metamorphosis. (*Smiles*) Tell me, when did eternity possess the sort of rest of which you speak?

MAILER

Why, when the Greeks thrived, the Goths hunted, and the Renaissance came to Rome, the guillotine to France.

INTERVIEWER

You look fatigued. I will not ask you more. Do you wish to end here?

MAILER

Not at all. But *you* look in need of a drink. So I take pity on us both, and crack out a glass.

INTERVIEWER

We have not finished properly.

MAILER

No. We have not even begun to discuss the subject. There is so much of which to talk. I have not mentioned the positive properties of spirit, the fields of communication it lays open, that subtle intimate collaboration of soul and spirit in everything alive, the secrets of grace where soul

talking of disease. But then, there is no end to metaphysics, they say. (*Stands up*) This is the place we stop. I offer you one last question. You may ask anything.

INTERVIEWER

Soon they will be reading your book. This book. This is therefore the moment for us to end and book reviewers to begin. So I would ask you—what is form?

MAILER

Did I not explain?

INTERVIEWER

You certainly didn't.

MAILER

My God!

INTERVIEWER

Is it now too late?

MAILER

My God. I could have sworn I explained it a thousand times.

INTERVIEWER

You did, but then you didn't. You see, now I know that form, and shape, and space, and time, and even death, I suppose, each give off their own special taste to every little pickle in the pickle barrel, but no, I could not tell a soul in five easy words just what we mean by form.

MAILER

I must help you. Certainly I must. Here, have a drink. (*Passes ice and glasses*) Maybe we must go back to the driftwood again. (*Scratches his head*) Is that too long a way for you to go back?

INTERVIEWER

Now that I have a drink it is easy.

MAILER

Driftwood is a fine form. It expresses the essence of form.

INTERVIEWER

Why? Why the essence!

MAILER

Because it proclaims the value of what is kept. Form always makes one tacit statement—it says: I am a definite *form* of existence, I choose to have character and quality, I choose to be recognizable, I am—everything considered—the best that could be done under the circumstances, and so superior to a blob.

INTERVIEWER

Bravo!

MAILER

Yes, driftwood is a fine form. It tells us what in a piece of wood proved most dear to the wood, what resisted decomposition the longest, what—if we know how to read it—was saved by accident, what was etched by design. The form of driftwood is the record of a siege.

INTERVIEWER

But driftwood rots from the outside in—which suggests that its center is not so much essential as most protected?

MAILER

What is most valuable is usually most protected. When the center is not valuable, it rots, it rots first. Occasionally we see driftwood which has hollows in its heart or holes. Form in general—now I let you in on the secret—is the record of a war.

INTERVIEWER

Of a war? Damn you! Of a war?

MAILER

It is the record, as seen in a moment of rest; yes, it is the record of a war which has been taking place. Don't you see whatever is alive, or intent, or obsessed, must wage an active war: it creates the possibility for form in its environment.

ment. Wherever the environment resists, the result is a form. When the soul is mighty and the environment resists mightily, the form is exceptional or extraordinary. Sometimes it speaks of what is great or exquisite. Stone hoisted up ramps by men became the pyramids. Cut by crude iron tools and harder stone, shaped over years by sculptors who attacked the rock out of the stone of their own being, one had Chartres, Notre Dame. Today the stones are made from liquid cooked in vats and rolled into blocks or sheets. Fiberglas, polyethylene, bakelite, styrene, styronware. The environment has less resistance than a river of milk. And the houses and objects built from these liquids are the record of a strifeless war, a liquidation of possibilities. But forgive me for the diatribe.

INTERVIEWER

Then let me give the emphasis here. You say—finally, now, at the end of the day, you remark: form is the record of a war. Of a good war? of a bad war? Of a sharp engagement? or a very dull one? Do I understand you correctly? You are claiming that it is the character of the war which creates the particular style of the form?

MAILER

In all sense of duty I answer: form is the detailed record of an engagement—war reveals the balance of forces, discloses the style of the forces, it hints at the move from potential to the actual.

INTERVIEWER

But what of memory? Does form have no existence in memory?

MAILER

An extraordinary existence in memory. Precisely in memory. You could even claim that memory like history is nothing but the record of all the oppositions in one's life, of cruel oppositions, calm oppositions, ecstatic oppositions—war, peace, and love, hurrah. Memory is the mind's embodiment of form; therefore, memory, like the mind, is invariably more pure than the event. An event consists not only of forces which are opposed to one another but also of forces which have no relation to the event. Whereas memory has a tendency to retain only the oppositions and the context.

INTERVIEWER

Then can't you say that form is the record of a relationship?

MAILER

Now that I've emphasized its warlike properties, I can agree with you—form is the record of a relationship.

INTERVIEWER

It is that part of the past which is carried into the present? Like memory?

MAILER

It is what survives the relationship. Form is the physical equivalent of memory.

INTERVIEWER

Do you know? This is interesting.

MAILER

(*Gloomy again*) Yes, but it encourages me to go back to our more difficult notions.

INTERVIEWER

Soul? More soul? (*Throws up his hands*) That bloody fucking word. I've heard it too much today. Every time you use it, it leaves an empty space in me.

MAILER

I'm afraid it does. I think the British chose the word so that nobody with blood would ever wish to discuss the subject. They didn't reckon on us poor landless inquirers. Well, we're done. I'm glad it's rounded off.

INTERVIEWER

No, we're not done. You've brought up soul again. What is its direct relation to form? Tell me again.

MAILER

But as I've just explained, it's the father of form. What did you expect it was?

INTERVIEWER

I hoped it would not be the mother.

MAILER

Form is the record of every intent of a soul to express itself upon another soul or spirit, its desire to reveal the shape—which is to say the *mystery* of the time it contains in itself. And it is aided or resisted in achieving that shape by every spirit it encounters. You see we did not begin to discuss a thing. All the problem is still there before us. (*Yawns*) Now, I quit. No more questions.

INTERVIEWER

You have not touched on one huge difficulty. It is false form. For example, I may smile when I am full of hate. Or a girl with small breasts might wear an inflated brassiere, yet you could not tell her breasts are false.

MAILER

Oh, but you could tell—that is what is meant by a fine eye for form.

INTERVIEWER

You cannot always tell.

MAILER

You cannot tell by the shape. But by the mood you can tell, by the presence. That is why form is not shape-by-itself, but shape in the frame of the spirit which contains it.

INTERVIEWER

Oh, now you are perfectly clear.

MAILER

But I am. To myself at any rate. You have pushed me right into the truth. One can distinguish false form from real form by its air, by its presence—do you see? ^{that} A real form always attracts a spirit which bears a close relation to the war the form was engaged in.

INTERVIEWER

Why? Why should a real form necessarily attract an harmonious spirit?

MAILER

The spirit is not necessarily harmonious so much as truthful. We can detect a real form because it is surrounded by what we perceive subjectively as aesthetic satisfaction, or a sense of elegance, or what we may think of as an air of truth. That air is the spirit which is attached to the real form, and if you ask why a spirit should seek out a form appropriate to it and then manage to muster an air of truth, I tell you it is because spirit can come to rest only in those forms which offer a close relation to the experience of the spirit. ~~Of course, conversely, rest for the spirit offers a glimpse of reality to the soul.~~

INTERVIEWER

~~And what does this glimpse of reality for the soul appear to be like?~~

MAILER

~~Like the passing sense of grace the alcoholic and the drug addict know.~~ (Swallows his drink) And now, friend, I have gotten my mental rocks nicely shifted, and have blown a few miniscule hemorrhages in the upper brain—how we thinkers suffer—and so I will not go on to pursue even one further complication. I am done. I swear to you I am done.

INTERVIEWER

Then can it be you are ready to listen?

MAILER

You have much to offer?

INTERVIEWER

(Obviously excited by the opportunity) I've been thinking of what you said at the beginning of the day, about depression and excitement.

MAILER

What did I say?

INTERVIEWER

I think you said excitement applied to a depression creates electricity. Did you have anything in mind?