

Tape022
Galley 166

AMERICAN
Mailer: Pieces & Pontifications

1-1618 Little, Brown
Mss 302-320

If America gets as sick as Germany was before Hitler came in, we'll have our Hitler. One way or another, we'll have our Hitler. After all, one can have Fascism come in any form at all, through the Church, through sex, through social welfare, through state conservatism, through organized medicine, the FBI, the Pentagon. Fascism is not a way of life but a murderous mode of deadening reality by smothering it with lies.

Every time one sees a bad television show, one is watching the nation get ready for the day when a Hitler will come. Not because the ideology of the show is Fascistic; on the contrary its manifest ideology is invariably liberal, but the show still prepares Fascism because it is meretricious art and so sickens people a little further. Whenever people get collectively sick, the remedy becomes progressively more violent and hideous. An insidious, insipid sickness demands a violent far-reaching purgative.

KRASSNER: When I interviewed Jean Shepherd he made the point — sarcastically — how come it's always the Bad Guys who become leaders?

MAILER: Lenin wasn't a Bad Guy. Trotsky wasn't a Bad Guy. I don't think Napoleon was such a Bad Guy. I don't think Alexander the Great was such a Bad Guy. Bad Guys become leaders in a bad time.

One can conceive of a man who's half-good and half-bad who comes to power in a time of great crisis and great change, a time when awful things are going on. He's going to reflect some of the awfulness of his time. He may become awful himself, which is a tragedy.

A man like Danton begins as a great man, and deteriorates. Castro may end badly, but that will be a tragedy. No one's ever going to tell me he wasn't a great man when he started.

KRASSNER: Then you're saying it's bad times which result in bad leaders.

MAILER: Well, if a time is bad enough, a good man can't possibly succeed. In a bad time, the desires of the multitude are bad, they're low, they're ugly, they're greedy, they're cowardly, they're piggish, shitty.

KRASSNER: In *The Naked and the Dead*, there was a theme about the futility of violence on a grand scale; and yet, in "The White Negro," there's almost a justification of violence, at least on a personal level. How do you reconcile this apparent inconsistency?

MAILER: The ideas I had about violence changed 180 degrees over those years. Beneath the ideology in *The Naked and the Dead* was an obsession with violence. The characters for whom I had the most secret admiration, like Croft, were violent people.

Ideologically, intellectually, I did disapprove of violence, though I didn't at the time of "The White Negro."

But what I still disapprove of is *inhuman* violence — violence which is on a large scale and abstract. I disapprove of bombing a city. I disapprove of the kind of man who will derive aesthetic satisfaction from the fact that an Ethiopian village looks like a red rose at the moment the bombs are exploding. I won't disapprove of the act of perception which witnesses that; I think that act of perception is — I'm going to use the word again — noble.

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What I'm getting at is: a native village is bombed, and the bombs happen to be beautiful when they land; in fact it would be odd if all that sudden destruction did not liberate some beauty. The form a bomb takes in its explosion may be in part a picture of the potentialities it destroyed. So let us accept the idea that the bomb is beautiful.

If so, any liberal who decries the act of bombing is totalitarian if he doesn't admit as well that the bombs were indeed beautiful.

Because the moment we tell something that's untrue, it does not matter how pure our motives may be — the moment we start mothering mankind and decide that one truth is good for them to hear and another is not so good, because while *we* can understand, those poor ignorant unfortunates cannot — then what are we doing, we're depriving the minds of others of knowledge which may be essential.

Think of a young pilot who comes along later, some young pilot who goes out on a mission and isn't prepared for the fact that a bombing might be beautiful; he could conceivably be an idealist, there were some in the war against Fascism. If the pilot is totally unprepared he might never get over the fact that he was particularly thrilled by the beauty of that bomb.

But if our culture had been large enough to say that Ciano's son-in-law not only found that bomb beautiful, but that indeed this act of perception was *not* what was wrong; the evil was to think that this beauty was worth the lot of living helpless people who were wiped out broadside. Obviously, whenever there's destruction, there's going to be beauty implicit in it.

KRASSNER: Aren't you implying that this beauty is an absolute? Which, beauty is never . . .

MAILER: Well, you don't know. How do you know beauty is not an absolute? Listen, you guys on the *Realist* — I read you because I think you represent a point of view, and you carry that point of view very, very far, you're true to that point of view — but I think you're getting a touch sloppy because you get no opposition whatsoever from your own people; you'll get your head taken off at its base some day by a reactionary. He'll go right through you, because there are so many things you haven't thought out.

One of them is: How do you know beauty isn't absolute?

KRASSNER: Recently I referred in the *Realist* to Sonny Nunez, a dead prizefighter, and Sherri Finkbone, a pregnant woman, and I suggested that if she really wanted to get a legal abortion, she could just sign up for a boxing match — to point out the irony that it's legal to kill a man in the ring, but it's illegal to remove a fetus from a woman. Would you like to attack that comparison?

MAILER: Ah, yes. Atrocious. I think that's taking a cheap advantage. In one case a man is killed who is able to defend himself. In the other, an embryo who may have voyaged through eternity to be born again is snuffed out because of his mother's cultural propensity for socially accepted drugs like the limb-killer Thalidomide.

KRASSNER: Both incidents took place in Arizona, and I just felt it was a dramatic way —

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MAILER: If somebody takes a handful of shit and throws it against the wall at a party, that's dramatic, but it's distasteful. Your example is distasteful. You were appealing to the low emotions in your readers. You have a terrible responsibility in the *Realist*, because *your* readers have low emotions too. Just because nobody could find the sort of stuff that's printed in the *Realist* except in the *Realist*, there is a danger that the people who read the sheet are going to begin to think there's something superior about them, just from the sheer fact they're reading the *Realist*.

KRASSNER: Do you think you're something of a puritan when it comes to masturbation?

MAILER: I think masturbation is bad.

KRASSNER: In relation to heterosexual fulfillment?

MAILER: In relation to everything — orgasm, heterosexuality, to style, to stance, to be able to fight the good fight. I think masturbation cripples people. It doesn't cripple them altogether, but it turns them askew, it sets up a bad and often enduring tension. I mean has anyone ever studied the correlation between cigarette smoking and masturbation? Anybody who spends his adolescence masturbating, generally enters his young manhood with no sense of being a man. The answer — I don't know what the answer is — sex for adolescents may be the answer, it may not. I really don't know.

KRASSNER: Is it possible that you have a totalitarian attitude against masturbation?

MAILER: I wouldn't say all people who masturbate are evil, probably I would even say that some of the best people in the world masturbate. But I am saying it's a miserable activity.

KRASSNER: Well, we're getting right back now to this notion of absolutes. You know — to somebody, masturbation can be a thing of beauty —

MAILER: To what end? To what end? Who is going to benefit from it?

KRASSNER: It's a better end than the beauty of a bombing.

MAILER: Masturbation is bombing. It's bombing oneself.

KRASSNER: I see nothing wrong if the only person hurt from masturbation is the one who practices it. But it can also benefit — look, Stekel wrote a book on autoeroticism, and one of the points he made was that at least it saved some people who might otherwise go out and commit rape. He was talking about extremes, but —

MAILER: It's better to commit rape than masturbate. Maybe, maybe. The whole thing becomes very difficult.

KRASSNER: But rape involves somebody else. The minute you —

MAILER: Just talking about it on the basis of violence: one is violence toward oneself; one is violence toward others. And you don't recognize — let's follow your argument and be speculative for a moment — if everyone becomes violent toward themselves, then past a certain point the entire race commits suicide. But if everyone becomes violent toward everyone else, you would probably have one wounded hero-monster left.

KRASSNER: And he'd have to masturbate.

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MAILER: That's true . . . But — you use that to point out how tragic was my solution, which is that he wins and still has to masturbate. I reply that at least it was more valuable than masturbating in the first place. Besides he might have no desire to masturbate. He might lie down and send his thoughts back to the root of his being.

KRASSNER: I think there's a basic flaw in your argument. Why are you assuming that masturbation is violence unto oneself? Why is it not pleasure unto oneself? And I'm not defending masturbation — well, I'm defending masturbation, yes, as a substitute if and when —

MAILER: All right, look. When you make love, whatever is good in you or bad in you, goes out into someone else. I mean this literally. I'm not interested in the biochemistry of it, the electromagnetism of it, nor in how the psychic waves are passed back and forth, and what psychic waves are. All I know is that when one makes love, one changes a woman slightly and a woman changes you slightly.

KRASSNER: Certain circumstances can change one for the worse.

MAILER: But at least you have gone through a process which is part of life.

— One can be better for the experience, or worse. But one has experience to absorb, to think about, one has literally to digest the new spirit which has entered the flesh. The body has been galvanized for an experience of flesh, a declaration of the flesh.

If one has the courage to think about every aspect of the act — I don't mean think mechanically about it, but if one is able to brood over the act, to dwell on it — then one is *changed* by the act. Even if one has been *jangled* by the act. Because in the act of restoring one's harmony, one has to encounter all the reasons one was jangled.

So finally one has had an experience which is nourishing. Nourishing because one's able to *feel* one's way into more difficult or more precious insights as a result of it. One's able to live a tougher, more heroic life if one can digest and absorb the experience.

But, if one masturbates, all that happens is, everything that's beautiful and good in one, goes up the hand, goes into the air, is *lost*. Now what the hell is there to *absorb*? One hasn't tested himself. You see, in a way, the heterosexual act lays questions to rest, and makes one able to build upon a few answers. Whereas if one masturbates, the ability to contemplate one's experience is disturbed. Instead, fantasies of power take over and disturb all sleep.

If one has, for example, the image of a beautiful sexy babe in masturbation, one still doesn't know whether one can make love to her in the flesh. All you know is that you can violate her in your *brain*. Well, a lot of good that is.

But if one has fought the good fight or the evil fight and ended with the beautiful sexy dame, then if the experience is good, your life is changed by it, in a less happy way. But at least one knows something of what happened. One has something real to build on.

The ultimate direction of masturbation always has to be insanity.

KRASSNER: But you're not man enough to take the other position, which is sex for the young. Except for petting, what else is there between those two alternatives?

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MAILER: I'd say, between masturbation and sex for the young, I prefer sex for the young. Of course. But I think there may be still a third alternative: At the time I grew up, sex had enormous fascination for everyone, but it had no dignity, it had no place. It was not a value. It had nothing to do with procreation, it had to do with the bathroom — it was burning, it was feverish, it was dirty, cute, giggly.

The thought of waiting for sex never occurred — when I was young my parents did not speak about sex, and no one else I knew ever discussed the possibility of holding on to one's sex as the single most important thing one has. To keep one's sex until one got what one deserved for it — that was never suggested to me when I was young.

The possibilities were to go out and have sex with a girl, have homosexual sex, or masturbate. Those were the choices. The fourth alternative — chastity, if you will — was ridiculous and absurd. It's probably more absurd today. If you talked to kids of chastity today, they would not stop laughing, I'm certain.

But the fact of the matter is, if you get marvelous sex when you're young, all right; but if you're not ready to make a baby with that marvelous sex, then you may also be putting something down the drain forever, which is the ability that you had to make a baby; the most marvelous thing that was in you may have been shot into a diaphragm, or wasted on a pill. One might be losing one's future.

The point is that, so long as one has a determinedly atheistic and rational approach to life, then the only thing that makes sense is the most comprehensive promiscuous sex you can find.

KRASSNER: Well, since I do have an essentially atheistic and more-or-less rational approach to life, I think I can speak with at least my individual authority. As a matter of fact, the more rational I become, the more selective —

MAILER: You know, "selective" is a word that sounds like a refugee from a group therapy session.

KRASSNER: I've never been in any kind of therapy —

MAILER: No, I know, but there's a *plague* coming out of all these centers — they go around *infecting* all of us. The words sit in one's vocabulary like bedbugs under glass.

KRASSNER: But I can't think of a better word. "Selective" is a word that means what I want to communicate to you.

MAILER: Selective. It's arrogant — how do you know who's doing the selecting? I mean you're a modest man with a good sense of yourself, but suddenly it comes to sex and you're selective. Like you won't pick *this* girl; you'll pick *that* one.

KRASSNER: Exactly. It's arrogant, but —

MAILER: Yeah, yeah, yeah — but the fact that one girl wants you and the other girl *doesn't* — I mean, that has nothing to do with it?

KRASSNER: Well, they have a right to be selective, too.

MAILER: Then it's mutually selective. Which means you fall in together or go in together. Now, those are better words than "selective." They have more to do with the body and much less to do with the machine. Electronic machines *select*.

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KRASSNER: Well, what I'm saying is you make a choice. A human choice. It has nothing to do with a machine . . . I'll tell you what's bugging me — it's your mystical approach. You'll use an expression like "You may be sending the best baby that's in you out into your hand" — but even when you're having intercourse, how many unused spermatozoa will there be in on ejaculation of semen?

MAILER: Look, America is dominated by a bunch of half-maniacal scientists, men who don't know anything about the act of creation. If science comes along and says there are one million spermatozoa in a discharge, you reason on that basis. That may not be a real basis.

We just don't know what the *real* is. We just don't know. Of the million spermatozoa, there may be only two or three with any real chance of reaching the ovum; the others are there like a supporting army, or if we're talking of planned parenthood, as a body of the electorate. These sperm go out with no sense at all of being real spermatozoa. They may appear to be real spermatozoa under the microscope, but after all, a man from Mars who's looking at us through a telescope might think that Communist bureaucrats and FBI men look exactly the same.

KRASSNER: Well, they are.

MAILER: Krassner's jab piles up more points. The point is that the scientists don't know what's going on. That meeting of the ovum and the sperm is too mysterious for the laboratory. Even the electron microscope can't measure the striations of passion in a spermatozoon. Or the force of its will.

But we can trust our emotion. Our emotions are a better guide to what goes on in these matters than scientists.

KRASSNER: But in the act of pleasure — go back to your instincts, as you say — in the act of sex, you're not thinking in terms of procreation, you're thinking in terms of pleasure.

MAILER: You are when you're young. As you get older, you begin to grow more and more obsessed with procreation. You begin to feel used up. Another part of oneself is fast diminishing. There isn't that much of oneself left. I'm not talking now in any crude sense of how much semen is left in the barrel. I'm saying that one's very *being* is being used up.

Every man has a different point where he gets close to his being. Sooner or later everything that stands between him and his being — what the psychoanalysts call defenses — is used up, because men have to work through their lives; just being a man they have to stand up in all the situations where a woman can lie down. Just on the simplest level . . . where a woman can cry, a man has to stand. And for that reason, men are often used more completely than women. They have more fights and more powers, and also they are used more.

Sooner or later, every man comes close to his being and realizes that even though he's using the act, the act is using him too. He becomes, as you say, more selective. The reason he becomes more selective is that you can get killed, you literally *can* fuck your head off, you can lose your brains, you can wreck your body, you can use yourself up badly, eternally — I know a little bit of what I'm talking about.

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KRASSNER: Isn't it something of a paradox that your philosophy embraces both a belief in a personal God on one hand and a kind of existential nihilism on the other hand?

MAILER: I've never said seriously that I'm an existential nihilist. I believe all legal structures are bad, but they've got to be dissolved with art. I certainly wouldn't want to do away with all the laws overnight.

The authorities, the oppressors, have had power for so many centuries, and particularly have had such vicious and complete power for the last fifty years, that if you did away with all the laws tomorrow, mankind would flounder in *Angst*. Nobody could think their way through to deal with a world in which there were no laws.

We've got hung up upon law the way a drug addict depends on his heroin.

KRASSNER: Do you think that creativity — art in general — is an effective force in society, or is it in the end, you know, a sop to the individual artist's ego, and maybe entertainment for —

MAILER: Art is a force. Maybe it's the last force to stand against urban renewal, mental hygiene, the wave of the waveless future.

KRASSNER: In his book *Nobody Knows My Name*, James Baldwin — referring to your essay "The White Negro" — complained about "the myth of the sexuality of Negroes which Norman Mailer, like so many others, refuses to give up." Are you still denying it's a myth?

MAILER: Negroes are closer to sex than we are. By that I don't mean that every Negro's a great stud, that every Negro woman is capable of giving great sex, that those black people just got rhythm.

I'm willing to bet that if you pushed Jimmy hard enough, he'd finally admit that he thought that the Negroes had more to do with sexuality than the white — but whether he really believes that or not, Baldwin's buried point is that I shouldn't talk this way because it's bad for the Negro people, talk about Negro sexuality hurts their progress because it makes the white man nervous and unhappy and miserable.

But the white man is nervous and unhappy and miserable anyway. It's not I who think the Negro has such profound sexuality, it's the average white man all through the country. Why deny their insight? Why do you think they react so violently in the South to having their little girls and boys go to school with Negro kids if it isn't that they're afraid of sexuality in the Negro?

That's the real problem. What's the use of avoiding it?

KRASSNER: Are you saying that, whether it's a myth or not, in effect —

MAILER: First of all, I don't believe it's a myth at all, for any numbers of reasons. I think that *any* submerged class is going to be more accustomed to sexuality than a leisure class. A leisure class may be more *preoccupied* with sexuality; but a submerged class is going to be more drenched in it.

You see, the upper classes are obsessed with sex, but they contain very little of it themselves. They use up much too much sex in their manipulations of power. In effect, they exchange sex for power. They restrict themselves in their sexuality — whereas the submerged classes have to take their desires for power and plow them back into sex.

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So, to begin with, there's just that much more sexual vitality at the bottom than there is at the top. Second of all, the Negroes come from Africa, which is more or less a tropical land. Now I don't care to hear how many variations there are in Africa, how complex is its geography, how there's not only jungle but pastureland, mountains, snow, and so forth — every body knows that. Finally, Africa is, at bottom, the Congo. Now tropical people are usually more sexual. It's easier to cohabit, it's easier to stay alive. If there's more time, more leisure, more warmth, more — we'll use one of those machine words — more support-from-the-environment than there is in a Northern country, then sex will tend to be more luxuriant.

Northern countries try to build civilizations and tropical countries seek to proliferate *being*.

Besides, the Negro has been all but forbidden any sort of intellectual occupation here for a couple of centuries. So he has had to learn other ways of comprehending modern life. There are two ways one can get along in the world. One can get along by studying books, or one can get along by knowing a great deal about one's fellow man, and one's fellow man's woman.

Sexuality is the armature of Negro life. Without sexuality they would've perished. The Jews stayed alive by having a culture to which they could refer, in which, more or less, they could believe. The Negroes stayed alive by having sexuality which could nourish them, keep them warm.

KRASSNER: Would you say that your conception of life is mystical as opposed to rationalistic?

MAILER: I would assume mystics don't feel mystical. It's comfortable to them. When the savage was paddling his canoe, and a breeze entered his nose from the East, the savage said to himself, "The God of the East Wind is stirring" — he *felt* that god stirring. He could picture that god in his mind.

Now, for all we know, that god may well have existed. We don't know that he didn't exist any more than we know that beauty is not absolute.

The savage didn't say to himself, "I'm a mystic who is now thinking that the God of the East Wind is stirring. Therefore I'm engaged in a mystical transaction." He was just having a simple, animal experience.

Any mystic who's worth a damn is animal. You can't trust a mystic who gets there on drugs. I had mystical experiences on drugs, and great was my horror when I discovered I couldn't have them without the drugs.

What it meant to me was that the experiences were there to be had, but that I wasn't sufficiently animal to have them, not without having a chemical produced by a machine to break down the machine in me.

But I don't like to call myself a mystic. On the other hand, I certainly wouldn't classify myself as a rationalist. I'm not altogether unhappy living in some no-man's-land between the two.

KRASSNER: OK, final question: You beat me two out of three times in thumb-wrestling matches; would you care to expound briefly on Zen in the art of thumb-wrestling?

MAILER: They are the same. (1962)

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Craft and Consciousness

An Interview with Steven Marcus

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STEVEN MARCUS: You mentioned in *Advertisements For Myself* that reading *Studs Lonigan* made you want to be a writer.

NORMAN MAILER: Yes. It was the best single literary experience I had had because the background of *Studs* was similar to mine. I grew up in Brooklyn, not Chicago, but the atmosphere had the same flatness of effect. Until then I had never considered my life or the life of the people around me as even remotely worthy of — well, I didn't believe they could be treated as subjects for fiction. It had never occurred to me. Suddenly I realized you could write about your own life.

MARCUS: When did you feel that you were started as a writer?

MAILER: When I first began to write again at Harvard. I wasn't very good. I was doing short stories all the time, but I wasn't good. If there were fifty people in the class, let's say I was somewhere in the top ten. My teachers thought I was fair, but I don't believe they ever thought for a moment that I was really talented. Then in the middle of my sophomore year I started getting better. I got on the *Harvard Advocate*, and that gave me confidence, and about this time I did a couple of fairly good short stories for English A-1, one of which won *Story Magazine's* college contest for that year. I must say that Robert Gorham Davis, who was my instructor then, picked the story to submit for the contest and was confident it would win.

MARCUS: Was that the story about Al Groot?

MAILER: Yes. And when I found out it had won — which was at the beginning of the summer after my sophomore year (1941) — well, that fortified me, and I sat down and wrote a novel. It was a very bad novel. I wrote it in two months. It was called *No Percentage*. It was just terrible. But I never questioned any longer whether I was started as a writer.

MARCUS: What do you think were some of the early influences in your life? What reading, as a boy, do you recall as important?

MAILER: *The Amateur Gentleman* and *The Broad Highway* were glorious works. So was *Captain Blood*. I think I read every one of Farnol's books and there must be twenty of them. And every one of Sabatini's.

MARCUS: Did you ever read any of them again?

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MAILER: No, now I have no real idea of their merit. But I never enjoyed a novel more than *Captain Blood*. Nor a movie. Do you remember Errol Flynn as Captain Blood? Some years ago I was asked by a magazine what were the ten most important books in my development. The book I listed first was *Captain Blood*. Then came *Das Kapital*. Then *The Amateur Gentleman*.

MARCUS: You wouldn't say that *Das Kapital* was boyhood reading?

MAILER: Oh, no, I read that many years later. But it had its mild influence.

MARCUS: It's been said often that novelists are largely nostalgic for their boyhood, and in fact most novelists draw on their youthful experiences a great deal. In your novels, however, the evocation of scenes from boyhood is rare or almost absent.

MAILER: It's difficult to write about childhood. I never felt I understood it in any novel way. I never felt other authors did either. Not particularly. I think the portrait of childhood which is given by most writers is rarely true to anything more than the logic of their novel. Childhood is so protean.

MARCUS: What about Twain, or Hemingway — who drew on their boyhoods successfully?

MAILER: I must admit they created some of the psychological reality of my own childhood. I wanted, for instance, to be like Tom Sawyer.

MARCUS: Not Huck Finn?

MAILER: The magic of Huck Finn seems to have passed me by, I don't know quite why. *Tom Sawyer* was the book of Twain's I always preferred. I remember when I got to college I was startled to find that *Huckleberry Finn* was the classic. Of course I haven't looked at either novel in thirty years.

MARCUS: Can you say something about your methods of working?

MAILER: They vary with each book. I wrote *The Naked and the Dead* on the typewriter. I used to write four days a week: Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays.

MARCUS: Definite hours?

MAILER: Yes, very definite hours. I'd get up about 8:00 or 8:30 and I'd be at work by 10:00. And I'd work till 12:30; then I'd have lunch. I'd get back to work about 2:30 or 3:00, and work for another two hours. In the afternoon I usually needed a can of beer to prime me. But I'd write for five hours a day. And I wrote a great deal. The average I tried to keep was seven typewritten pages a day, twenty-eight pages a week. The first draft took seven months, the second draft, which really was only half a draft, took four months. The part about the platoon went well from the beginning, but the Lieutenant and the General in the first draft were stock characters. If it had been published at that point the book would have been considered an interesting war novel with some good scenes, no more. The second draft was the bonus. Cummings and Hearn were done in the second draft. If you look at the book you can see that the style shifts, that the parts about Cummings and Hearn are written in a somewhat more developed vein. Less forceful but more articulated. And you can see something of the turn my later writing would take in the scenes between Cummings and Hearn.

MARCUS: What methods did you pursue in your next books?

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MAILER: Well, with *Barbary Shore*, I began to run into trouble. I started it in Paris about six months after I finished *The Naked and the Dead*, and did about fifty pages. It was then called *Mrs. Guinevere* and was influenced by Sally Bowles in Isherwood's *Berlin Stories*. *Mrs. Guinevere* never went anywhere. It stopped, just ground down after those first fifty pages. My novelistic tanks ran out of gas. I dropped it completely, thought I'd never pick it up again, and started to work on another novel. Did all the research, went to Indiana to do research.

MARCUS: On what?

MAILER: On a labor novel. There was a union in Evansville with which I had connections. So I stayed for a few days in Indiana, and then went to Jamaica, Vermont, to write the novel. I spent four to six weeks getting ready to begin. I made a great push on the beginning, worked for two weeks, and quit cold. I didn't have the book. I didn't know a damned thing about labor unions. In desperation (I was full of second novel panic) I picked up *Mrs. Guinevere* and looked at it. And found something there I could go on with. So I worked on it all through the spring of 1949, and then I moved out to Hollywood for the summer. I finished the second half in Hollywood. *Barbary Shore* is really a Hollywood novel. I think it reflected the impact of Hollywood on me in some subterranean fashion. Certainly the first draft is the wildest draft of the three; it's almost insane, and the most indigestible portions were written in the first couple of months I was in Hollywood. I never knew where the book was going, I had no idea where it was going to move from day to day. I'd wake up and push the typewriter in great dread, in literal terror, wondering when this curious and doubtful inspiration was going to stop. It never quite did. It ground along at the rate of three pages, three difficult pages a day. But I'd get it out. I got a first draft done, and was quite unhappy with it; it was a very bad book at that point. When I rewrote it later, in Provincetown, a summer later, again it went at the rate of three pages a day. This revision was different from the first draft, and I think much better. But working on *Barbary Shore* I always felt as if I were not writing the book myself, but rather as if I were serving as a subject for some intelligence which had decided to use me to write the book. It had nothing to do with whether the work was good or bad. It just had to do with the fact that I had absolutely no conscious control of it; if I hadn't heard about the unconscious I would have had to postulate one to explain this phenomenon. For the first time I became powerfully aware of the fact that I had an unconscious which seemed to have little to do with me.

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MARCUS: What about *The Deer Park*?

MAILER: For *The Deer Park* I didn't have much of a method. It was agony; it was far and away the most difficult of my three novels to write. The first and second drafts were written with the idea that they were only the first part of an eight-part novel. I think I used that enormous scheme as a pretext to get into the work. Apparently I just couldn't sit down and write a nice modest Hollywood novel. I had to have something grandiose, in conception, anyway. I started *The Deer Park* with "The Man Who Studied Yoga." That was supposed to be a prologue to all eight novels. It went along nicely and was done in a few weeks. And then I got into *The Deer Park*, and I forget what my methods were exactly; I think they varied. In the revision of *Barbary Shore* I had started working in longhand; as soon as I found myself blocked on the typewriter I'd shift to longhand. By the time I got to *The Deer Park* I was writing in longhand all the time. I'd write in longhand in the morning, and type up what I'd written in the afternoon. I was averaging about four-five pages a day, I think, three days a week; about fifteen pages a week. But I found it an unendurable book to write because I'd finish each day in the most profound depression; as I found out later it was even a physical depression. I was gutting my liver.

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MARCUS: It wasn't alcohol?

MAILER: No, I wasn't much of a drinker in those days. The liver, you see, is not unlike a car battery, and I was draining mine. I was writing with such anxiety and such fear and such distaste, and such gloom and such dissatisfaction that . . .

MARCUS: Dissatisfaction with what?

MAILER: Oh, everything. My work, my life, myself. The early draft of *The Deer Park* was terrible. It had a few good things in it, but it was slow to emerge, it took years, and was stubborn. It still emerges. I mean, I could sit down today and rewrite *The Deer Park*. Of course, what was happening was that this work, such as it was, was continuing to move in a direction which was completely against the grain of my intellect — insofar as my intellect was developed, and had standards and tastes and attitudes toward the novel. I was working toward a novel utterly outrageous to my notion of things.

MARCUS: Say it again?

MAILER: Well, I was a socialist after all, and I believed in large literary works which were filled with characters, and were programmatic, and had large theses, and were developed, let's say, like the Tolstoyan novel. It's as if, all proportion naturally being kept, as if Tolstoy had sat down with the intention of writing *Anna Karenina* and instead came out with *Crime and Punishment*. Obviously, it would have been intolerable for him, and he would have disliked *Crime and Punishment* very much. That was what was going on with me at a much lower level.

MARCUS: How does the idea of a novel come to you?

MAILER: I don't know that it comes. A more appropriate image for me might be that I start with the idea of constructing a treehouse and end with a skyscraper made of wood.

MARCUS: Well, how did the idea of *The Naked and the Dead* come to you?

MAILER: I wanted to write a short novel about a long patrol. All during the war I kept thinking about this patrol. I even had the idea before I went overseas. Probably it was stimulated by a few war books I had read: John Hersey's *Into the Valley*, Harry Brown's *A Walk in the Sun*, and a couple of others I no longer remember. Out of these books came the idea to do a novel about a long patrol. And I began to create my characters. All the while I was overseas a part of me was working on this long patrol. I even ended up in a reconnaissance outfit which I had asked to get into. A reconnaissance outfit, after all, tends to take long patrols. Art kept traducing life. At any rate, when I started writing *The Naked and the Dead* I thought it might be a good idea to have a preliminary chapter or two in which to give the reader a chance to meet my characters before they went on patrol. But the next six months and the first five hundred pages went into that, and I remember in the early days I was annoyed at how long it was taking me to get to the patrol.

MARCUS: Do you keep notes, or a journal, or diaries, or write scenarios? What's your preparatory material?

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MAILER: That also varies with each of the books. For *The Naked and the Dead* I had a file full of notes, and a long dossier on each man. Many of these details never got into the novel, but the added knowledge made me feel more comfortable with each character. Indeed I even had charts to show which characters had not yet had scenes with other characters. For a book which seems spontaneous on its surface, *The Naked and the Dead* was written mechanically. I studied engineering at Harvard, and I suppose it was the book of a young engineer. The structure is sturdy, but there's no fine filigree to the joints. Just spot welding and riveting. And the working plan was very simple. I devised some preliminary actions for the platoon in order to give the reader an opportunity to get to know the men, but this beginning, as I said, took over two-thirds of the book. The patrol itself is also simple, but I did give more thought to working it out ahead of time.

MARCUS: People have commented on the pleasure you seem to take in the military detail of *The Naked and the Dead*.

MAILER: Compared to someone like James Jones, I'm an amateur at military detail. But at that time I did like all those details. I even used to enjoy patrols, or at least I did when I wasn't sick with jungle rot and viruses or atabrine poisoning. I was one of the few men in the platoon who could read a map. I was the only enlisted man I know who really cared about reading a map and once I gave myself away. We used to have classes after a campaign was over; we'd come back to garrison — one of those tent cities out in a rice paddy — and they would teach us all over again how to read maps and read compasses, or they would drill us on the nomenclature of the machine gun for the eighth time. One day very bored, I was daydreaming, and the instructor pointed to a part of the map and said, "Mailer, what are these coordinates?" If I had had a moment to think I would never have answered, it was bad form to be bright in my outfit, but I didn't think: he caught me in a daze, and I looked up and said, "320.17 dash 146.814" and everyone's mouth dropped. It was the first time anybody ever answered such a question thus briskly in the history of infantry map reading. At any rate, that was the fun for me, the part about the patrol. I suppose it had something to do with *Captain Blood* and *The Amateur Gentleman*...

MARCUS: You don't mention (in your description of writing *Barbary Shore*) anything about politics. Wasn't your engagement at the time a considerable part of the plan?

MAILER: I think it was the unspoken drama in the working-up of the book. I started *Barbary Shore* as some sort of fellow-traveler, and finished with a political position which was a far-flung mutation of Trotskyism. And the drafts of the book reflected these ideological changes so drastically that the last draft of *Barbary Shore* is a different novel altogether and has almost nothing in common with the first draft but the names.

MARCUS: Did Jean Malaquais (to whom the book is dedicated) have much to do with this?

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MAILER: Yes. He had an enormous influence on me. He's the only man I know who can combine a powerfully dogmatic mind with the keenest sense of nuance, and he has a formidable culture which seems to live in his veins and capillaries. Since he also had a most detailed vision of the Russian Revolution — he was steeped in it the way certain American families are imbued with the records of their clan — I spent a year living more closely in the history of Russia from 1917 to 1937 than in the events of my own life. I doubt if I would even have gone back to rewrite *Barbary Shore* if I didn't know Malaquais. Certainly I could never have conceived McLeod. Malaquais, of course, bears no superficial resemblance whatsoever to McLeod — indeed Malaquais was never even a communist, he started as an anti-Stalinist, but he had a quality when I first met him which was pure Old Bolshevik. One knew that if he had been born in Russia, a contemporary of Lenin's, he would have been one of the leaders of the Revolution and would doubtless have been executed in the trials. So his personality — as it filtered through the contradictory themes of my unconscious — inhabits *Barbary Shore*.

MARCUS: Would you care to discuss what you mean by the "contradictory themes" of your unconscious? Is that related to what you said a little while ago about becoming aware of your unconscious while writing *Barbary Shore*?

MAILER: *Barbary Shore* was built on the division which existed then in my mind. My conscious intelligence, as I've indicated, became obsessed by the Russian Revolution. But my unconscious was much more interested in other matters: murder, suicide, orgy, psychosis, all the themes I discuss in *Advertisements*. Since the gulf between these conscious and unconscious themes was vast and quite resistant to any quick literary coupling, the tension to get a bridge across resulted in the peculiar feverish hothouse atmosphere of the book. My unconscious felt one kind of dread, my conscious mind another, and *Barbary Shore* lives somewhere between. That's why its focus is so unearthly. And of course this difficulty kept haunting me from then on in all the work I did afterward. But it was a book written without any plan.

MARCUS: And *The Deer Park*?

MAILER: That was different. There I had an idea of what I was going to do. I knew it was going to be a story about a most unhappy love. The problem was getting to the affair: I could hardly wait to reach it, especially because the early parts of the novel were so difficult to write. It is truly difficult to trap Hollywood in a novel. Only in the last draft did I finally get the setting the way I wanted it. I think now the setting is probably the best part. In fact I would judge that the first fifty pages of *The Deer Park* are the best writing I have ever done in fiction. But they were the hardest fifty pages of the book to write and certainly took the longest time.

MARCUS: What writers have you learned the most from, technically?

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MAILER: E. M. Forster, I suppose. I wouldn't say he is necessarily one of the novelists I admire most. But I have learned a lot from him. You remember in *The Longest Journey* somewhere about the fourth chapter, you turn the page and read, "Gerald was killed that day. He was beaten to death in a football game." It was quite extraordinary. Gerald had been very important through the beginning of the book. But now that he was suddenly and abruptly dead, everyone else's character began to shift. It taught me that personality was more fluid, more dramatic and startling, more inexact than I had thought. I was brought up on the idea that when you wrote a novel you tried to build a character who could be handled and walked around like a piece of sculpture. Suddenly character seemed related more closely to the paintings of the new realists. For instance I saw one recently which had a painted girl reclining on a painted bed, and there was a television set next to her in the canvas, a real one which you could turn on. Turning on the literal factual set changes the girl and the painting both. Well, Forster gives you something of that sensation in his novels. I played with such a concept a great deal in *Barbary Shore* and I began to play with it in *The Deer Park* in an altogether different way. When you tell the same story through the eyes of different characters, you have not only a different novel but a different reality. I think I could sit down today and write *The Deer Park* through Charles Francis Eitel's eyes, and if I changed the names and the place, no one might know the new book had anything to do with *The Deer Park*. I suppose what I realized, after reading Forster, was that a novel written in the third person was now impossible for me for many years.

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MARCUS: Forster has never written a novel in the first person.

MAILER: I know he hasn't, but in some funny way Forster gave my notion of personality a sufficient shock that I could not manage to write in the third person. Forster after all had a developed view of the world. I did not. I think I must have felt at that time as if I would never be able to write in the third person until I developed a coherent view of life. I don't know that I've been able to altogether.

MARCUS: You know, Thackeray says at one point, that the novelist knows everything. He is like God, and this may be why he could write in the third person.

MAILER: God can write in the third person only so long as He understands His world. But if the world becomes contradictory or incomprehensible to Him, then God begins to grow concerned with his own nature. It's either that, or borrow notions from other Gods.

MARCUS: Have you ever cribbed anything from other writers?

MAILER: Oh, you know, I have such a — what shall I say? — such a stuffy view of myself that I could never *conceive* of cribbing. But I have been *influenced* by — well, Farrell to begin with. Dos Passos, Steinbeck (I am trying to do it chronologically), Hemingway, and later Fitzgerald — much, much later. And Thomas Wolfe of course.

MARCUS: But back to cribbing. Shakespeare cribs, for example. He never invented a plot.

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MAILER: No, but my plots are always rudimentary. Whatever I've accomplished certainly does not depend on my virtuosity with plot. Generally I don't even have a plot. What happens is that my characters engage in an action, and out of that action little bits of plot sometimes adhere to the narrative. I never have to worry about lifting a plot, because I don't conceive of a book that way.

MARCUS: In connection with plot, when did the idea of using a hornet's nest to thwart the climbers in *The Naked and the Dead* come to you?

MAILER: That idea was there before I wrote the first sentence of the book. Actually that incident happened to my reconnaissance platoon on the most ambitious patrol I ever took with them. They sent out thirty of us to locate and destroy one hundred Japanese marines who had gotten behind our lines. Well, we never found the marines, but we did get stuck climbing one hell of an enormous hill with a mean slimy trail, and when we were almost up to the ridge, somebody kicked over a hornet's nest. Half the platoon went tearing up the hill, and the machine gun squad went flying down to the valley. We never did find each other again that day. We just slunk back to our bivouac.

MARCUS: Putting aside the fact that it happened, do you think in fact it was a satisfactory device? It seems to have bothered some people.

MAILER: I think I'd do it the same way again. War is disproportions, and the hornet's nest seemed a perfect disproportion to me. We were ready to lose our lives but we weren't up to getting stung by a hornet.

MARCUS: Would you say something about style, prose style, in relation to the novel?

MAILER: A really good style comes only when a man has become as good as he can be. Style is character. A good style cannot come from a bad undisciplined character. Now a man may be evil, but I believe that people can be evil in their essential natures and still have good characters. Good in the sense of being well-tuned. They can have characters which are flexible, supple, adaptable, principled in relation to their own good or their own evil — even an evil man can have principles — he can be true to his own evil, which is not always so easy, either. I think good style is a matter of rendering out of oneself all the cupidities, all the cripplings, all the velleities. And then I think one has to develop one's physical grace. Writers who are possessed of some physical grace may tend to write better than writers who are physically clumsy. It's my impression this is so. I don't know that I'd care to attempt to prove it.

MARCUS: Well, how would you describe your own style? I ask this question because certain critics have pointed to deficiencies in it, or what they think of as deficiencies. Didn't Diana Trilling, for instance, criticize certain flatnesses in your style?

MAILER: I think that flatness comes out of certain flatnesses in me. And in trying to overcome that flatness I may push too hard in the other direction. Alfred Kazin once said something very funny about the way I write: "Mailer is as fond of his style as an Italian tenor is of his vocal cords."

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MARCUS: Have you ever written to merely improve your writing, practiced your writing as an athlete would work out?

MAILER: No. I don't think it's a proper activity. That's too much like doing a setting-up exercise; any workout which does not involve a certain minimum of danger or responsibility does not improve the body — it just wears it out.

MARCUS: In writing your novels, has any particular formal problem given you trouble — let's say a problem of joining two parts of a narrative together, getting people from point A to point B.

MAILER: You mean like getting them out of a room? I think formal problems exist in inverse proportion to one's honesty. You get to the problem of getting someone out of the room when there's something false about the scene.

MARCUS: Do you do any research or special reading to prepare for writing a novel, or while you're writing a novel?

MAILER: Occasionally I have to look something up. But I'm always unhappy about that and mistrust the writing which comes out of it. I feel in a way that one's ignorance is part of one's creation, too. I don't know quite how to put it, but for instance if I, as a Jew, am writing about other Jews, and if my knowledge of Jewish culture is exceptionally spotty, as indeed it is, I am not so sure that that isn't an advantage in creating a modern American Jew. Because *his* knowledge of Jewish culture is also extremely spotty, and the way in which his personality is composed may be more in accordance with my ignorance than with a cultivated Jew's immersion in the culture. So in certain limited ways one's ignorance can help to buttress the validity of a novel.

MARCUS: Have you ever written about a situation of which you have had no personal experience or knowledge?

MAILER: I don't know. Let's see . . . *Barbary Shore*, for example, is the most imaginative of my novels. But I did live in a rooming house for a short period while I was writing *The Naked and the Dead*. I certainly didn't live in it the way Lovett lived in it. I never met an FBI agent, at least I had no sense of having met one at the time I was writing *Barbary Shore*. I am sure I have met a great many since. They didn't necessarily introduce themselves to me. I had never met an Old Bolshevik, either, although ironically, writing about FBI agents and Old Bolsheviks in *Barbary Shore*, the greatest single difficulty with the book was that my common sense thought it was impossible to have all these agents and impossible heroes congregating in a rooming house in Brooklyn Heights. Yet a couple of years later I was working in a studio on Fulton Street at the end of Brooklyn Heights, a studio I have had for some years. It was a fine old studio building and they're tearing it down now to make room for a twenty-story building which will look like a Kleenex box. At any rate, on the floor below me, worked one Colonel Rudolph Abel who was the most important spy for the Russians in this country for a period of about eight or ten years, and I am sure we used to be in the elevator together many times. I think he literally had the room beneath me. I have always been overcome with that. It made me decide there's no clear boundary between experience and imagination. Who knows what glimpses of reality we pick up unconsciously, telepathically.

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MARCUS: To what extent are your characters modeled on real people?

MAILER: I think half of them might have a point of departure from somebody real. Up to now I've not liked writing about people who are close to me, because they're too difficult to do. Their private reality obviously interferes with the reality one is trying to create. They become alive not as creatures in your imagination but as actors in your life. And so they seem real while you work but you're not working *their* reality into your book. For example it's not a good idea to try to put your wife into a novel. Not your latest wife, anyway. In practice I prefer to draw a character from someone I hardly know. Hollingsworth came from someone I met in Paris, a vapid young American who inveigled me to have a cup of coffee with him in a cafe, and asked a lot of dull questions. *The Naked and the Dead* had just come out and I think he was impressed with that. Yet, there was something sinister about him. I had met him at the Sorbonne a week or two before and I saw him again just for this afternoon for no more than an hour, but he stayed in my memory and became Leroy Hollingsworth in *Barbary Shore*.

MARCUS: How do you name your characters?

MAILER: I try to let the name emerge, because I've found out that the names of my characters usually have roots in the book. I try to avoid quick or cheap symbolisms. Although, I contradict myself, for much is made in *The Deer Park* of the way the name Eitel is pronounced Eye-tell.

MARCUS: I-tell?

MAILER: Eye-tell. But I became aware of that, believe it or not, only when the book was half done. The original title of *The Deer Park* was *The Idol and the Octopus*. The book was going to be about Charles Francis Eitel, the Director, and Herman Teppis, the Producer, and the underlying theme was the war between those who wished to make an idol out of art, the artists, and the patron who used art for power, the octopus.

MARCUS: You also called him "Idell."

MAILER: Frankie Idell in "The Man Who Studied Yoga," yes, but there again, I was obviously getting ready for some — shall we say, hanky-panky, in the eight novels.

MARCUS: Can you describe how you turn a real person into a fictional one?

MAILER: I try to put the model in situations which have very little to do with his real situations in life. Very quickly the model disappears. His private reality can't hold up. For instance, I might take somebody who is a professional football player, a man let's say whom I know slightly, and make him a movie star. In a transposition of this sort, everything which relates particularly to the professional football player quickly disappears, and what is left, curiously, is what is *exportable* in his character. But this process while interesting in the early stages is not as exciting as the more creative act of allowing your characters to grow once they're separated from the model. It's when they become almost as complex as one's own personality that the fine excitement begins. Because then they are not really characters any longer — they're beings, which is a distinction I like to make. A character is someone you can grasp as a whole, you can have a clear idea of him, but a being is someone whose nature keeps shifting. Like a character of Forster's. In *The Deer Park* Lulu Myers is a being rather than a character. If you study her closely you will see that she is a different person in every scene. Just a little different. I don't know whether initially I did this by accident or purposefully, but at a certain point I made the conscious decision *not* to try to straighten her out, she seemed right in her changeableness.

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MARCUS: Is Marion Faye a character or a . . .

MAILER: No, he's a being. Everybody in *The Deer Park* is a being except the minor characters like Herman Teppis.

MARCUS: How did Marion Faye emerge?

MAILER: The book needed something which wasn't in the first draft, some sort of evil genius. One felt a dark pressure there in the inner horizon of the book. But even as I say this I know it's not true to the grain of my writing experience. I violate that experience by talking in these terms. I am not sure it's possible to describe the experience of novel-writing authentically. It may be that it is not an experience.

MARCUS: What is it, then?

MAILER: It may be more like a relation, if you will — a continuing relation between a man and his wife. You can't necessarily speak of that as an experience because it may consist of several experiences which are braided together; or it may consist of many experiences which are all more or less similar, or indeed it may consist of two kinds of experiences which are antagonistic to one another. Throughout all of this I've spoken of characters *emerging*. Quite often they don't emerge; they fail to emerge. And what one's left with is the dull compromise which derives from two kinds of experiences warring with one another within oneself. A character who should have been brilliant is dull. Or even if a character does prove to be first-rate, it's possible you should have done twice as much with him, three times as much.

MARCUS: You speak of characters as emerging, and I gather by that that you mean emerging from yourself and emerging from your idea?

MAILER: They are also emerging from the book. A book takes on its own life in the writing. It has its laws, it becomes a creature to you after a while. One feels a bit like a master who's got a fine animal. Very often I'll feel a certain shame for what I've done with a novel. I won't say it's the novel that's bad; I'll say it's I who was bad. Almost as if the novel did not really belong to me, as if it was something raised by me like a child. I know what's potentially beautiful in my novel, you see. Very often after I've done the novel I realize that that beauty which I recognize in it is not going to be recognized by the reader. I didn't succeed in bringing it out. It's very odd — it's as though I had let the novel down, owed it a duty which I didn't fulfill.

MARCUS: Would you say that there was any secret or hidden pattern being worked out in your novels?

MAILER: I'd rather leave that to others. If I answer the question badly, nothing is accomplished. If I answer too well, it's going to discourage critics. I can imagine nothing more distressing to a critic than to have a writer see accurately into his own work. But I will say one thing, which is that I have some obsession with how God exists. Is He an essential god or an existential god; is He all-powerful or is He, too, an embattled existential creature who may succeed or fail in His vision? I think this theme may become more apparent as the novels go on.

MARCUS: When did this obsession begin?

MAILER: I think it began to show itself while I was doing the last draft of *The Deer Park*. Then it continued to grow as a private theme during all the years I was smoking marijuana.

MARCUS: You have spoken so often of the existential view. What reading or individuals brought you to this?

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MAILER: The experience came first. One's condition on marijuana is always existential. One can feel the importance of each moment and how it is changing one. One feels one's being, one becomes aware of the enormous apparatus of nothingness — the hum of a hi-fi set, the emptiness of a pointless interruption, one becomes aware of the war between each of us, how the nothingness in each of us seeks to attack the being of others, how our being in turn is attacked by the nothingness in others. I'm not speaking now of violence or the active conflict between one being and another. That still belongs to drama. But the war between being and nothingness is the underlying illness of the twentieth century. Boredom slays more of existence than war.

MARCUS: Then you didn't come to existentialism as a result of some literary influence?

MAILER: No. I'd hardly read anything by Sartre at this time, and nothing by Heidegger. I've read a bit since, and have to admire their formidable powers, but I suspect they are no closer to the buried continent of existentialism than were medieval cartographers near to a useful map of the world. The new continent which shows on our psychic maps as intimations of eternity is still to be discovered.

MARCUS: What do you feel about the other kinds of writing you have done and are doing. How do they stand in relation to your work as a novelist?

MAILER: The essays?

MARCUS: Yes: journalism, essays.

MAILER: Well, you know, there was a time when I wanted very much to belong to the literary world. I wanted to be respected the way someone like Katherine Anne Porter used to be respected.

MARCUS: How do you think she was respected?

MAILER: The way a cardinal is respected — weak people get to their knees when the cardinal goes by.

MARCUS: As a master of the craft, do you mean?

MAILER: As a master of the craft, yes. Her name is invoked in an argument. "Well, Katherine Anne Porter would not do it *that* way." But by now I'm a bit cynical about craft. I think there's a natural mystique in the novel which is more important than craft. One is trying, after all, to capture reality, and that is extraordinarily and exceptionally difficult. Craft is merely a series of way-stations. I think of craft as being like a St. Bernard dog with that little bottle of brandy under his neck. Whenever you get into *real* trouble the thing that can save you as a novelist is to have enough craft to be able to keep warm long enough to be rescued. Of course this is exactly what keeps good novelists from becoming great novelists. Robert Penn Warren might have written a major novel if he hadn't had just that little extra bit of craft to get him out of all the trouble in *All The King's Men*. If Penn Warren hadn't known anything about Elizabethan literature, the true Elizabethan in him might have emerged. I mean, he might have written a fantastic novel. As it was, he knew enough about craft to . . .

MARCUS: To use it as an escape hatch?

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MAILER: Yes. And his plot degenerated into a slambang of exits and entrances, confrontations, tragedies, quick wails and woe. But he was really forcing an escape from the problem.

MARCUS: Which was?

MAILER: Oh, the terror of confronting a reality which might open into more and more anxiety and so present a deeper and deeper view of the abyss. Craft protects one from facing those endless expanding realities of deterioration and responsibility.

MARCUS: Deterioration in what sense?

MAILER: The terror, let's say, of being reborn as something much less noble or something much more ignoble. I think this sort of terror depresses us profoundly. Which may be why we throw up our enormous evasions — such as craft. Indeed, I think this adoration of craft, this specific respect for craft makes a church of literature for that vast number of writers who are somewhere on the spectrum between mediocrity and talent. But I think it's fatal for somebody who has a large ambition and a chance of becoming a great writer. I know for myself, if I am going to make this attempt — that the only way to do it is to keep in shape in a peculiar way.

MARCUS: Can you explain what you mean by that?

MAILER: It's hard to talk about. Harry Greb, for example, was a fighter who used to keep in shape. He was completely a fighter, the way one might wish to be completely a writer. He always did the things which were necessary to him as a fighter. Now, some of these things were extremely irrational, that is, extremely irrational from a prize-fight manager's point of view. That is, before he had a fight he would go to a brothel, and he would have two prostitutes, not one, taking the two of them into the same bed. And this apparently left him feeling like a wild animal. Don't ask me why. Perhaps he picked the two meanest whores in the joint and so absorbed into his system all the small, nasty, concentrated evils which had accumulated from carloads of men. Greb was known as the dirtiest fighter of his time. He didn't have much of a punch but he could spoil other fighters and punish them, he knew more dirty tricks than anyone around. This was one of his training methods and he did it over and over again until he died at a relatively early age of a heart attack, on an operating table. I think he died before he was thirty-eight, or so. They operated on him, and bang, he went. Nothing could be done. But the point I make is that he stayed in training by the way he lived his life. The element which was paramount in it was to keep in shape. If he were drinking, you see, the point was to keep in shape *while* drinking. I'm being a touch imprecise about this . . .

*incorrect
by explanation*

MARCUS: Well . . . what?

MAILER: He would not drink just to release his tension. Rather, what went on was that there was tension in him which was insupportable, so he had to drink. But reasoning as a professional he felt that if he had to drink, he might as well use that too. In the sense that the actor uses everything which happens to him, so Greb as a fighter used everything which happened to him. As he drank he would notice the way his body moved. One of the best reasons one drinks is to become aware of the way your mind and body move.

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MARCUS: Well, how do you keep in shape?

MAILER: Look, before we go on, I want to say a little more about craft. It is a grab-bag of procedures, tricks, lore, formal gymnastics, symbolic superstructures, methodology, in short. It's the compendium of what you've acquired from others. And since great writers communicate a vision of existence, one can't usually borrow their methods. The method is married to the vision. No, one acquires craft more from good writers and mediocre writers with a flair. Craft after all is what you can take out whole from their work. But keeping in shape is something else. For example, you can do journalism, and it can be terrible for your style. Or it can temper your style . . . in other words you can become a *better* writer by doing a lot of different kinds of writing. Or you can deteriorate. Craft is very little finally. But if you're continually worrying about whether you're growing or deteriorating as a man, whether your integrity is turning soft or firming itself, why then it's in that slow war, that slow rearguard battle you fight against diminishing talent that you stay in shape as a writer and have a consciousness. You develop a consciousness as you grow older which enables you to write about anything, in effect, and write about it well. That is, provided you keep your consciousness in shape and don't relax into the flabby styles of thought which surround one everywhere. The moment you borrow other writers' styles of thought, you need craft to shore up the walls. But if what you write is a reflection of your own consciousness, then even journalism can become interesting. One wouldn't want to spend one's life at it and I wouldn't want ever to be caught justifying journalism as a major activity (it's obviously less interesting than to write a novel), but it's better, I think, to see journalism as a venture of one's ability to keep in shape than to see it as an essential betrayal of the chalice of your literary art. Temples are for women.

MARCUS: Temples are for women?

MAILER: Temples are for women.

MARCUS: Well, Faulkner once said that nothing can injure a man's writing if he's a first-rate writer.

MAILER: Faulkner said more asinine things than any other major American writer. I can't remember a single interesting remark Faulkner ever made.

MARCUS: He once called Henry James a "nice old lady."

MAILER: Faulkner had a mean small Southern streak in him, and most of his pronouncements reflect that meanness. He's a great writer, but he's not at all interesting in most of his passing remarks.

MARCUS: Well, then, what can ruin a first-rate writer?

MAILER: Booze, pot, too much sex, too much failure in one's private life, too much attrition, too much recognition, too little recognition, frustration. Nearly everything in the scheme of things works to dull a first-rate talent. But the worst probably is cowardice—as one gets older, one becomes aware of one's cowardice, the desire to be bold which once was a joy gets heavy with caution and duty. And finally there's apathy. About the time it doesn't seem too important any more to be a great writer, you know you've slipped far enough to be doing your work now on the comeback trail.

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MARCUS: Would you say that is where you are now?

MAILER: Let others say it. I don't know that I choose to. The hardest thing for a writer to decide is whether he's burned out or merely lying fallow. I was ready to think I was burned out before I even started *The Naked and the Dead*.

MARCUS: What kind of an audience do you keep in mind when you write?

MAILER: I suppose it's that audience which has no tradition by which to measure their experience but the intensity and clarity of their inner lives. That's the audience I'd like to be good enough to write for.

MARCUS: Do you feel under any obligation to them?

MAILER: Yes. I have a consciousness now which I think is of use to them. I've got to be able to get it out and do it well, to transmit it in such a way that their experience can rise to a higher level. It's exactly . . . I mean, one doesn't want one's children to make one's own mistakes. Let them make better mistakes, more exceptional mistakes.

MARCUS: What projects do you have for the future?

MAILER: I've got a very long novel I want to do. And beyond that I haven't looked. Some time ahead I'd like to be free of responsibilities so I could spend a year just taking on interesting assignments — cover the World Series, go to report a war. I can't do that now. I have a feeling I've got to come to grips with myself, with my talent, with what I've made of it and what I've spoiled of it. I've got to find out whether I really can write a large novel or not.

MARCUS: You once said that you wished to become consecutively more disruptive, more dangerous, and more powerful, and you felt this sentence was a description of your function as a novelist. I wonder if you still think that?

MAILER: I might take out "disruptive." It's an unhappy word to use. It implies a love of disruption for the sake of disruption. Actually, I have a fondness for order.

MARCUS: Do you enjoy writing, or is such a term irrelevant to your experience?

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MAILER: Oh no. No, no. You set me thinking of something Jean Malaquais once said. He always had a terrible time writing. He once complained with great anguish about the unspeakable difficulties he was having with a novel. And I asked him, "Why do you do it? You can do many others things well. Why do you bother with it?" I really meant this. Because he suffered when writing like no one I know. He looked up in surprise and said, "Oh, but this is the only way one can ever find the truth. The only time I know that something is true is at the moment I discover it in the act of writing." I think it's that. I think it's this moment when one knows it's true. One may not have written it well enough for others to know, but you're in love with the truth when you discover it at the point of a pencil. That in and by itself is one of the few rare pleasures in life.

MARCUS: How do you feel when you aren't working?

MAILER: Edgy. I get into trouble. I would say I'm wasting my substance completely when I'm not writing.

MARCUS: And to be writing . . . to be a writer?

MAILER: Well, at best you affect the consciousness of your time, and so indirectly you affect the history of the time which succeeds you. Of course, you need patience. It takes a long time for sentiments to collect into an action and often they never do. Still it's no little matter to be a writer. There's that godawful *Time Magazine* world out there, and one can make raids on it. There are palaces, and prisons to attack. One can even succeed now and again in blowing holes in the line of the world's communications. Sometimes I feel as if there's a vast guerrilla war going on for the mind of man, communist against communist, capitalist against capitalist, artist against artist. And the stakes are huge. Will we spoil the best secrets of life or help to free a new kind of man? It's intoxicating to think of that. There's something rich waiting if one of us is brave enough and good enough to get there. (1963)

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Talking of Violence . . .gl

Talking of Violence

An Interview with W. J. Weatherby



W. J. WEATHERBY: People use "violence" — like "love" — in so many, often conflicting ways. Would you like to start by giving your own definition?

NORMAN MAILER: Well, it seems to me there are two kinds of violence and they are altogether different. One is personal violence — an act of violence by man or woman against other men or women. The second kind is social violence — concentration camps, nuclear warfare. If one wants to carry the notion far enough, there are subtler forms such as censorship, or excessively organized piety, or charity drives. Social violence creates personal violence as its antithesis. A juvenile delinquent is violent not because his parents were necessarily violent to him nor even because society is directly violent to him — he's not, let's say, beaten in school — but because his spontaneous expressions are cut off by institutional deadenings of his nature. The boy who lives in a housing project is more likely to be violent than the same boy living in a slum tenement because the housing project puts him in direct contact with a deadening environment. The housing project is not a neighborhood but a massive barracks.

Violence is directly proportional to the power to deaden one's mood which is possessed by the environment. Threatened with the extinction of our possibilities, we react with chronic rage. Violence begins, you see, as the desire to fight one's way out of a trap. Moral questions over the nature of one's violence come only as a secondary matter. The first reaction, the heart of the violence, is the protection of the self. The second question, the moral question, is whether the self deserves to be protected, that is to say — was it honorable to fight? was the danger true? For example, if a boy beats up an old woman, he may be protecting himself by discharging a rage which would destroy his body if it were left to work on the cells, so he takes it out on the old woman. The boy may be anything from a brute to Raskolnikov. It requires an exquisite sense of context and a subtle gift as a moralist to decide these matters at times. Mexicans have a saying that when you commit murder, you carry the dead man's soul on your back, and you have to work not only for one soul then, but for two.

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It does seem more or less self-evident that men who have lived a great deal with violence are usually gentler and more tolerant than men who abhor it. Boxers, bullfighters, a lot of combat soldiers, Hemingway heroes, in short, are almost always gentle men. It is not because they have read Hemingway. They were gentle long before Hemingway was born. It is just that Hemingway was the first writer who observed the repetition of this fact and paid his profound respects to it.

I think the reason is that men who are otherwise serious but ready for personal violence, are almost always religious. They have a deep sense of dread, responsibility, of woe, of reluctance to make an error in violence and a grim, almost tragic sense of how far violence can carry them. If I think of the athletes, criminals, prizefighters I have known, and the Negroes living in Harlem (their lives have much in common with precisely athletes, criminals, and prizefighters), they all have an understanding of life which is comprehensive and often tragic. It is of course deadeningly void of any kind of culture which could sustain them in their more boring times, but they do have a specific gravity and a depth of compassion which one doesn't find in their social opposite, the university-trained intellectual.

WEATHERBY: Is he protected too much from this kind of experience?

MAILER: It's not that he is protected from violence — although of course he is — so much as he is not in contact with existential experience, which is to say experience sufficiently unusual so that you don't know how it is going to turn out. You don't know whether you're going to be dead or alive at the end of it, wanted or rejected, cheered or derided. Now obviously there are few experiences which can by these rigorous terms be called existential. But the hoodlum is more likely to encounter existential experience than the university man.

Something happens in an act of violence which is beyond one's measure. If a bully is beating up a friend who is smaller than himself and knows precisely the point at which he is going to quit, that's not really an act of violence. That's simply excretion. That's why we despise the bully. But when violence is larger than one's ability to dominate, it is existential and one is living in an instantaneous world of revelations. The saint and the psychopath share the same kind of experience. It is just that the saint has the mysterious virtue of being able to transcend this experience and the psychopath is broken or made murderous.

WEATHERBY: How does this view of violence relate to our own time?

MAILER: I wouldn't call the twentieth century a violent period so far as personal violence goes. It is a time of plague. When people sense pestilence is upon them, however, they *tend* to be violent. The powerful impulse of the twentieth century has been to defeat this tendency by elaborate social institutions which destroy the possibility of personal violence before it can have a free expression, the notion finally that if individual feelings are discouraged at every turn and social irritations are blanketed by benefits and welfare programs, then the desire to reach towards one's own individual feelings as a solution becomes stupefied.

The impulse of the twentieth century seems to be a desire to make society run on rails. Anything may be tolerated, even Communism, provided that the dialectic is squeezed out of our nature. The very materials of our world suffocate us everywhere. A perfect material example — the technological signature of the twentieth century — is plastics: materials without any grain, any organic substance, any natural color or predictability. Yet reasonable predictability, after all, is the armature on which great societies in the past have been built. Plastic, however, cracks in two for no reason whatsoever. It bears up under killing punishments and then suddenly explodes in the night. A fiberglass hull can go through storms which would spring a leak in a wooden hull. Then, one day, in a modest squall, the fiberglass splits completely. Or abruptly capsizes. That is because it is a material which is not even divorced from nature but indeed has not ever been a part of nature. Plastic is the perfect metaphor for twentieth-

century man and for the curious stupefying bewildering nature of much modern violence.

Our obsession with violence comes, I think, not because its daily incidence is so high but because we are suffocated and so think constantly of violence. Can one argue seriously that our streets are less safe to walk on than the streets of Paris in 1300? Or Naples in 1644? But the twentieth century, in destroying a romantic view of existence, has created an awareness of violence as electric as paranoia.

WEATHERBY: Does this apply in the arts, too?

MAILER: There was a time when an artist could feel respectable about being a naturalist. Zola, Ibsen, Shaw were heroes. So were De Maupassant, Dreiser, Farrell. The natural work of a good artist is to try to write or discover what it is all about. Realism was a way of moving into this mystery just as manners was a way. Now, violence appeals to the artist because it is the least tangible, the least explored frontier. It's exceptionally difficult to write about.

WEATHERBY: Because it so easily becomes melodrama?

MAILER: It is difficult to write about violence because — like love — while you are experiencing it, you can't observe it. You lose your professional consciousness. Heisenberg's principle of uncertainty is in the wings: If you observe an action, the action is affected by the observation. Now, perhaps such emotions as love can be recorded truly — one's memory returns the truth. One can remember in entirety meeting a woman whom one was once in love with, and so be able to write about it. A number of sentimental memories can be recorded truly. An act of violence, however, cannot be recorded truly because the action did not create a mood but shattered a series of moods. So to write about violence is always an act of creation. One must make up an act of violence in order to write about it.

The marvelous thing Hemingway did at his best was to show that the only way to begin to write about half the important matters on earth was to create the mood or the destruction of mood in which they occurred rather than try to establish the truth of the event. It is possible that his years as a reporter inspired him with a passion for such emotional accuracy since he knew that the onerous duty of a journalist is to replace the mood by the fact and so create one kind of history, a fictional history, in opposition to the violent — that is, palpable — actuality of the event. (1964)

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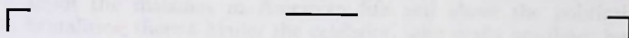
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Vices . . . gl



Vices

An Interview with Paul Carroll, from Playboy



PLAYBOY: How do you feel about being interviewed?

NORMAN MAILER: I start with a general sense of woe.

PLAYBOY: Why?

MAILER: The interviewer serves up 1 percent of himself in the questions and the man who answers has to give back 99 percent. I feel exploited the moment I step into an interview. Of course, once in a while there is such a thing as a good interview; but even then, the tape recorder eats up half the mood. It isn't the interview I really dislike so much as the tape recorder.

PLAYBOY: What do you think is the best way to conduct an interview?

MAILER: There's no good way. It's just a matter of hard, professional technique. In professional football, a quarterback has to contemplate the problem that every third or fourth play he's probably got to gain some yards through the center of the line; and when he's got four very tough linemen opposing him, there's not much he can do that's surprising, so it's just a matter of grinding through — that's all.

PLAYBOY: If you feel so negative about being interviewed, why did you consent to this one?

MAILER: About every two or three years, I feel I have to have a psychic housecleaning, go through my ideas in general, even brutal form — the brutal form of the interview — just to see about where I stand. Because most of the time, I spend my time thinking privately. Without this kind of psychic housecleaning, I might get too infatuated with some ideas. It's a way, I suppose, of exposing ideas that are weak. After that, you can either discard them or think about them a little harder.

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PLAYBOY: As you talk about housecleaning your ideas — disregarding, changing, or improving them — we're reminded of your sentence in *The Deer Park* about growth: "There was that law of life, so cruel and so just, that one must grow or else pay more for remaining the same." Yet you've been charged by many critics with dissipating the potential growth of a major talent in American fiction by wearing so many hats. They point out that there's Mailer the politician; there's Mailer the journalist, who writes about the maladies in American life and about the political brutalities; there's Mailer the celebrity, who grabs headlines by booze brawls and other acts of public violence. How do you answer that criticism?

MAILER: Moving from one activity to another makes sense if you do it with a hint of wit or a touch of grace — which I don't say I've always done; far from it — but I think moving from one activity to another can give momentum. If you do it well, you can increase the energy you bring to the next piece of work.

I've been accused of having frittered many talents away, of having taken on too many activities, of having worked too self-consciously at being a celebrity, of having performed at the edges and, indeed, at the center of my own public legend. And, of course, like any criminal in the dock, I can sing a pretty tune; I can defend myself; I'm my own best lawyer; the day when I'm not will be a sad day. The defense I'll enter today depends on my favorite notion: that an expert, by definition, is opposed to growth. Why? Because an expert is a man who works forward in one direction until he reaches that point where he has to use all his energy to maintain his advance; he cannot allow himself to look in other directions. In other words, he's become nearsighted. Now, I, as a man who's been nearsighted almost all of his life, know that anyone who's born nearsighted or becomes nearsighted early is a man become an expert prematurely. That's why kids with glasses are usually disliked by kids who don't wear glasses. The kids with good eyesight sense that the boy with glasses is an expert who's going to run the world. The first chronic personal shame I suppose I ever felt was having to wear glasses. And I don't wear them today, even though I'm so nearsighted I don't recognize old friends from ten feet away. Having been a premature expert myself, I think I may have reacted against it with a sense that expertise was the trap for me, that to get particularly good at any one thing would leave me top-heavy.

PLAYBOY: Is all this related to *The Naked and the Dead* and the celebrity that followed in its wake?

MAILER: Yes. Being well known at twenty-five created a chain of legend for everything I did. If I left a party early, it wasn't because I might have been sleepy; it was because I had put down the party. This immediately created champions for me: "That Mailer's too much — put down the hostess when he left the party." Others would say, "A barbarian." People expected me to grab the hostess of a party, sound her, yank her, pump her, and if I didn't like her, throw her out the window, then turn to my host, say, "Up your buns, guns," and walk over to sock the nearest guy in the eye. So when I went into a place and didn't behave like that, the other guests would say: "Why, he has such nice manners." Every little thing I did was exaggerated. Lo! There was a feedback that had little to do with me. It was as if — if you will — every one of my actions was tuned to an amplifier.

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PLAYBOY: Is this what you meant when you once remarked that your success at twenty-five was "like a lobotomy"?

MAILER: It cut me off from my past. I felt like someone who had been dropped onto Mars.

PLAYBOY: Did you dig your sudden fame?

MAILER: I had to dig it: it enabled me to get girls I would not otherwise have gotten.

PLAYBOY: You make a distinction between the legendary Mailer in the spotlight whose acts were scrutinized and gossiped about and the Mailer who wanted to grow in his own sweet time. Could you contrast the two Mailers a bit more?

MAILER: Well, contrasting two Mailers might have value in a novel, but to talk about it would end up being tiresome. This is the point I want to make: I had some instinctive sense — right or wrong — that the best way to grow was not to write one novel after another but to move from activity to activity, a notion that began with Renaissance man; it's not my idea, after all. My personal celebrity was an obstacle to any natural ability to move quickly and easily. For years, it was a tremendous obstacle; and I ended up having a very dull, dogged personality that sought to wrestle with the legend, and that tried to say, "Look, fellows, I'm really simple, honest, hardworking; I'm as close to Abe Lincoln as Arthur Miller is."

The hoarseness of this confession is not to enlist sympathy but to prepare the ground for my boast: I learned how to accept and live with my legend. The legend becomes your friend, the beard, a front man, a pimp, a procurer of new situations. You live with a ghost who is more real to people than yourself; every single action you take with another person is part of a triangle. Every girl you talk to is not only in love with you or disappointed in you but also is in love with or hating your legend — who, incidentally, is more real to her than you. There are times, therefore, when you beef up your legend, perform some action to support it; times when you draw credit back from your legend, like cashing in the desire of somebody else to do something nice for you. Either way, you don't pretend — as I did for years — that the legend isn't there; it is.

PLAYBOY: One of your celebrated experiments with growth was your experience with drugs. You were on marijuana, Benzedrine, and sleeping pills for a few years and were addicted to Seconal. Later, you said that a man on drugs will pay for it by "a gutted and burned-out nervous system." How do you feel about that topic today?

MAILER: Drugs are a spiritual form of gambling. This is a poetic equation that can be carried right down to the end of its metaphor, because on drugs you're even bucking the house percentage — which for a drug like marijuana is probably something like 30 or 40 percent.

PLAYBOY: Would you expand this?

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MAILER: Marijuana does something with the sense of time: it accelerates you; it opens you to your unconscious. But it's as if you're calling on the reserves of the next three days. All the sweets, all the crystals, all the little decisions, all the unconscious work of the next three days — or, if the experience is deep, part of the next thirty days, or the next thirty years — is called forward. For a half hour or two hours — whatever is the high of the pot — you're *better* than you are normally and you get into situations you wouldn't get into normally, and generally more happens to you. You make love better, you talk better, you think better, you dig people better. The point is, you've got to get in pretty far, because you're using up three days in an hour — or whatever the particular ratio is for any particular person. So unless you come back with — let us say — seventy-two hours in one hour, you lose. Because you have to spend the next three or four days recovering. You might ask: What happens to the guy who smokes all the time? I don't know. But I do know something is being mortgaged; something is being drawn out of the future. If his own future has already been used up in one or another mysterious or sinister sense, then maybe the pot is drawing it out of the very substance of what I may as well confess I call God. I suspect God feeds drug addicts the way a healthy body feeds parasites.

PLAYBOY: How do you mean?

MAILER: Well, if God has great compassion, He may not be willing to cut the drug addict off from Him. During the time the addict has some of his most intense and divine experiences, it is because he is literally imbibing the very marrow and nutrient of existence. But since I do not believe that God is necessarily inexhaustible, the drug addict may end up by bleeding Him.

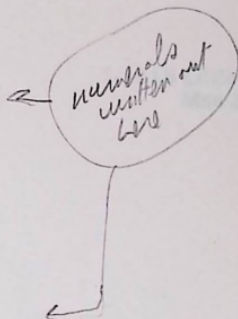
PLAYBOY: Do you think this happens on LSD?

MAILER: I don't think you have a mystical experience on chemicals without taking the risk of exploiting something in the creation. If you haven't paid the real wages of love or courage or abstinence or discipline or sacrifice or wit in the eye of danger, then taking a psychedelic drug is living the life of a parasite; it's drawing on sweets you have not earned.

PLAYBOY: What is the danger of this parasitical self-exploitation on LSD?

MAILER: I'm not going to say that LSD is bad in every way for everyone, but I'm convinced it's bad if you keep taking it. Any drug is bad finally in the same way that being a confirmed gambler is bad. A confirmed gambler ends up losing all his friends because he blows their money and blows their trust. A gambler will tell any lie to get back into the action. By the same token, if you stay on any drug for too long, then you have a habit; you're a victim; to anticipate something, you're a totalitarian.

Let me put it this way: LSD is marvelous for experts to take when they get too frozen in their expertise. Let's suppose they've driven deep into something impenetrable, some obstacle that was bound to trap them because of the shortsighted nature of their expertise. Although they work and work manfully as experts, at this point they're similar to soldiers who have pushed far into enemy territory but are now up against a resistance they cannot get through. Their only action is to retreat, but they don't know how to, because they have no habits of retreat. They're experts; they know only how to move forward to amass more knowledge and put more concentration upon a point. When this concentration does not succeed in poking through the resistance of the problem, the expert is psychically in great trouble. He begins to live in increasing depression; he has to retreat and doesn't know how: he wasn't built to retreat.



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My guess is: On LSD, you begin to die a little. That's why you get this extraordinary, even divine sense of revelation. Perhaps you taste the essence of your own death in the trip; in excess, it's a deadly poison, after all. Therefore, what's given to the expert is a broader vision: dying a little, he begins to retreat from his expertise and begins to rejoin his backward brothers. So that LSD taken a few times could be very good, I would imagine. But before very long, if the expert keeps taking LSD, he can become nothing but an expert on LSD.

PLAYBOY: What do you think of Timothy Leary?

MAILER: Well, I wonder who we were just talking about.

PLAYBOY: More of an answer, please.

MAILER: I never met him. Perhaps I'd like him if I did. Many of my friends like him. But I have heard him speak, and he is then nought but simple shit.

PLAYBOY: Alcohol seems to be another way by which you've tried to grow or "move forward." One of the characters in your stage version of *The Deer Park* declares: "A man must drink until he locates the truth." How does alcohol help a man do that?

MAILER: A man who drinks is attempting to dissolve an obsession.

PLAYBOY: What's the obsession?

MAILER: Talk first about what *an* obsession is. I've thought about obsession a great deal, but I'm not sure I know the answer. Everybody talks about obsessions; nobody's ever really explained them. We can define them, but we don't really know what we're talking about. An obsession, I'd like to suggest, is not unlike a pole of magnetism, a psychic field of force. An obsession is created, I think, in the wake of some event that has altered our life profoundly, or perhaps we have passed through some relation with someone else that has altered our life drastically, yet we don't know whether we were changed for good or for bad; it's the most fundamental sort of event or relation. It has marked us, yet it's morally ambiguous.

PLAYBOY: What kind of event?

MAILER: Suppose a marriage breaks up. You don't know if it was finally your fault or your wife's fault or God's fault or the Devil's fault — four uncertainties. Let's reduce them to two: a man or his wife. Put it this way: People move forward into the future out of the way they comprehend the past. When we don't understand something in our past, we are therefore crippled. Use the metaphor of the Army here: If you move forward to attack a town and the center of this attack depends upon a road that will feed your attack, and this road passes through a town, yet you don't know if your people hold that town or someone else holds it, then obviously, if you were a general, you'd be pretty obsessive about that town. You'd keep asking, "Will you please find out who owns that town?" You'd send out reconnaissance parties to locate the town, enter it, patrol it. If all sorts of mysterious things occurred — if, for example, your reconnaissance platoon didn't return — you'd feel so uncertain you might not move forward to attack. The obsession is a search for a useful reality. What finally did occur? What is real?

PLAYBOY: You haven't told us yet how drink helps dissolve an obsession.

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MAILER: Well, if a man's drink takes him back to an earlier, younger state of sensitivity, it is then taking him to a place back of the place where he originally got into the impasse that created the obsession. If you can return to a state just preceding the one you were in when these various ambiguous events occurred, you can say to yourself, "Now, I'm approaching the event again. What really did happen? Who was right? Who was wrong? Let me not miss it this time." A man must drink until he locates the truth. I think that's why it's so hard for people to give up booze. There's an artwork going on with most serious drinkers. Usually, it's a failed artwork. Once again, one's playing against the house percentage: one drinks, one wrecks one's liver, dims one's vision, burns out one's memory. Drinking is a serious activity — a serious moral and spiritual activity. We consume ourselves in order to search for a truth.

PLAYBOY: Do you feel that you've experienced moments of truth through drink?

MAILER: Extraordinary moments of truth. The thing that had me ready to bawl was that I was close to the truth but too drunk to do anything about it.

PLAYBOY: What sort of thing did you discover?

MAILER: Whatever the truth was. The kind of truths you find in moments like that. Discovering that somebody you thought loved you, hated you, or vice versa. All I'm underlining is that sense of certainty we all know when past moments of ambiguity are resolved. A relationship alters in one's memory from a morass to a crystal of recollection.

PLAYBOY: You've made in *An American Dream* and other writings a brilliant, dazzling, and rather puzzling remark concerning the possibility that God Himself may be involved in a process of growth. You've said that you have an "obsession with how God exists," and you've argued for the possibility that He may be a God whose final nature is not yet comprehended, even by Himself. Could you comment on this?

MAILER: I think I decided some time ago that if there is a God and He's all-powerful, then His relation to us is absurd. All we can see in our human condition are thundering, monumental disproportions, injustices of such dimension that even the conservative notion of existence — which might postulate that man is here on earth not to complain but to receive his just deserts and that the man who acts piggishly on earth will be repaid in hell, regardless of whether he was rich or poor — yes, even this conservative vision depends on a God who is able to run a world of reasonable proportions. If the only world we have is one of abysmal, idiotic disproportions, then it becomes too difficult to conceive of an all-powerful God who is all good. It is far easier to conceive of a God who died, or who is dying, or who is an imperfect God. But once I begin to think of an imperfect God, I can imagine a Being greater than ourselves, who nonetheless shares His instinctive logic with us. We as men seek to grow, so He seeks to grow. Even as we each have a conception of being — my idea of how we should live may triumph over yours, or yours over mine — so, in parallel, this God may be engaged in a similar war in the universe with other gods. We may even be the embodiment, the expression of His vision. If we fail, He fails, too. He is imperfect in the way we are imperfect. He is not always as brave or extraordinary or as graceful as He might care to be. This is my notion of God and growth. What gives me sustenance is that it enables me to love God, if you will bear these words, rather than hate Him, because I can see Him as someone who is like other men and myself, except more noble, more tortured, more desirous of a good that He wishes to receive and give to others — a torturous ethical activity at which He may fail. Man's condition is, then, by this logic, epic or tragic — for the outcome is unknown. It is not written.

God strikes "tragic"
his end of tragedies
as always death

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PLAYBOY: Could you talk a bit more about the relationship between a man and this God who is still involved in discovering His own nature?

MAILER: In capsule: There are times when He has to exploit us; there are times when we have to exploit Him; there are times when He has to drive us beyond our own natural depth because He needs us — those of us, at least, who are working for Him: We have yet to talk of the Devil.

PLAYBOY: You said recently that maybe the Devil is God in exile. What did you mean?

MAILER: I don't know if the Devil is finally an evil principle of God — a fallen angel, a prince of darkness, Lucifer — a creature of the first dimension engaged in a tragic, monumental war with God, or whether the Devil is a species of nonexistence, like plastic. By which I mean every single pervasive substance in the technological world that comes from artificial synthesis rather than from nature. Plastic surfaces have no resonance — no echo of nature. I don't know if plastic is a second principle of evil just as much opposed to the Devil as it is opposed to God — a visitor from a small planet, if you will. So when I talk about the Devil these days, I don't really know whether I'm talking about a corrupter of the soul or a deadening influence. I don't know who or where the enemy is. In fact, I don't have the remotest notion of who or what I'm working for. That's despair.

PLAYBOY: Existential is a term that crops up frequently in your writing: existential God, existential politician. In what way was Kennedy an existential politician?

MAILER: Kennedy was a man who could define himself — or, in other words, comprehend himself — only by his actions. He had such extraordinary ambition that if he had not succeeded in being President, he might have ended up a bad piece of work. There is such a thing as a man starting as a bad piece of work because he has a nature that is extraordinarily disharmonious; he lives with unendurable ambitions. If he succeeds in what the psychoanalysts call "acting it out" — with some scorn they say "acting out" — the fact remains that he also has to have huge courage, high wit, and vast imagination. Kennedy succeeded in getting to play the one role that could allow him to realize himself: the President of the United States. When I call him an existential politician, I mean that Kennedy had no nature other than the particular nature he discovered in himself by the act of living. If he had tried to live a more conventional life, he would have sealed his psyche in a vault and probably would have died young and schizophrenic.

PLAYBOY: How do you feel about Johnson's Great Society?

MAILER: It's a comedy. The Great Society is not only not going to come into being but it shouldn't. It's artificial. Any time you find a great society developed from the top, what you've got, in effect, is a test-tube baby — artificial insemination of the worst sort. Let's say the Great Society is drug addiction on a huge political scale. It's similar to shooting B₁₂ complex into your butt. The patient may feel healthier for a while, but the fact of the matter is that a part of his ass has been violated in a way that bears no relation to his life — at least not as his own flesh can feel it. In other words, your flesh is visited abruptly by a tubular needle that punctures skin, rips delicate strands of muscle, and cuts holes in a vein wall. To what end? The body doesn't understand. If you're in a fight and get hit, your body can usually understand that: it was probably mobilized for action. But what action are you mobilized for when a needle goes into your flesh? The same thing happens, I think, with economic growth. Take the first idea of the poverty program — making jobs. What pleasure can a man take in a job that has been made for him?

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Take housing projects. I see no reason to come in with these tremendous urban-renewal jobs that are unspeakably ugly and tear up neighborhoods; they are like metal plates put in your head or plastic tubes stuck in your gut. These projects disrupt a neighborhood. Instead, some of these tenements could be saved. You could have a scheme where a man could start by being given one hundred dollars' worth of materials — I use the figure arbitrarily — and a little professional labor, and he could set out to improve his apartment: plaster a wall, this or that; say his wife will be in on it. He's working for his own apartment. If he goes out and drinks up the money, all right, he drank it up and presumably he won't get anymore. His neighbors might lean on him.

Not lean on him hard, probably, because if he's the guy who drank it up he's possibly the meanest guy in the house. Still, what you get this way is a house interested in itself; whereas the other way, housing projects, poverty programs, Great Society — any Negro who doesn't set out to exploit the white man who is giving him money is nothing but a fool. With such handouts, honor for the Negro becomes his ability to lie, cheat, and exploit the white man. Whereas a few thousand dollars given bit by bit to a man working very hard on his own apartment over a few years would obviously do much more for that apartment than twenty thousand dollars spent to renovate it by outside methods.

PLAYBOY: Prior to the riots in Newark and Detroit, you said that civil war would erupt soon in this country. Did you see it as happening between Negroes and whites?

MAILER: I think there's a tendency toward civil war — not a war in the sense of people shooting it out over the hills and on battle lines; but certain kinds of functions might cease to exist in this society — technological functions. It may be that people will lose the habit of depending on the subway to get to work, or people might lose the real possibility of driving into certain cities at certain hours of the day or night. What might happen would be scattered outbreaks of violence: people, for example, overturning cars in traffic jams. All sorts of things — products getting worse and worse, shoddiness at the center of production, breakdowns, fissures.

PLAYBOY: How much of this will be the result of what you've often and passionately condemned as our technological society?

MAILER: Oh, much of it. Most of it, perhaps. Another great part of the tendency toward violence might derive from our guilt of the past: we've never paid for the crimes of the past; now we're trying to bury them. That's one reason the technological society advances at such a great rate: it frees people from having to look back into the horrors of the past. Western man has never faced up to the slave trade, the colonization of the world, the imperialization of the world, the concentration camps — the list could go on as long as one's knowledge of history.

PLAYBOY: In *Cannibals and Christians*, you described the cold war as useless, brutal, and enervating. You said we should stop it and get on with the destiny of Western man. What is that destiny?

MAILER: A huge phrase — I suppose I meant that the West is built ultimately on one final assumption — that life is heroic. It's a Faustian notion. Of course, the West is also Christian, but there's always been a contradiction at the heart. Christianity, the gentlest of religious professions, is the most militant and warlike of religions, the most successful and Faustian of religions. Indeed, it conquered the world. In that limited sense, Christianity is the most heroic. The alternative to this heroic notion of man is the passive acceptance of the universe that characterizes Hindu or Oriental philosophy and religion.

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One of the ironies of our century is that the technological society creates an atmosphere of such passivity in people that they are now prepared to entertain Oriental notions precisely because they have lost much of the real power to shape their own lives. The citizens of a technological society are as powerless as an Oriental peasant. Their living standard may be vastly superior, but their social impotence is similar: they command less and less; they are manipulated more and more. They may think they are picking their channel, but TV channels them.

The more we wage a religious war against Communism, the more we create the real social equivalent of Communism in America —

which will be the total technological society. You can look forward into a future where Communism's technological society grows nearly identical with ours; the differences will be of the mildest local color. For the natural tendency of the technological society is to try to clean up all sorts of social excesses and to root out random oppression because these activities are illogical; they interfere with the smooth working of the machine. You never want a piston to drive with more force than is necessary to direct the action of the machine; you never put a part in the machine that is heavier than it needs to be. So the natural desire of the technological society is to create a smooth totalitarian society free from the ranker forms of injustice. Its long-term tendency in Russia is to make a totalitarian environment that is relatively civilized and pleasant. Both countries may well end by serving up a life to their citizens about as anonymous and vitiated and pill-ridden and dull as some of our new office buildings.

PLAYBOY: Then why does America fight Communism?

MAILER: Because we're Faustian. We believe we have to grapple with the universe; we have the secret faith that we are inspired by a national genius that enables us to take on anything and do anything. The tragic irony is that in fighting Communism, we are creating the absolute equivalent of Communism in this country. And we will destroy our own Faustian dream in the act of fighting Communism, for the technological society looks to destroy any idea of the heroic. Such ideas seem irrational and unscientific to the technician.

On the other hand, each time Communism has captured some small part of the West, it has been shaken by Western complexities that open huge rents in the Russian Communist ideology. A backward country like Yugoslavia did more to halt Stalinism than fifty military adventures dreamed up by John Foster Dulles. Yugoslavia introduced a complex notion into the center of Communism: the idea that there could be two kinds of Communism, each equally devout and heroic in itself, each more or less oppressive. This made the Communist bureaucrat begin to contemplate the nature of his own system and therefore to doubt his faith and so look for ways to ameliorate the oppressiveness of it.

Communism is cannibalistic, as I said earlier. Any ideology that attempts to dominate all of existence has to split into sects and segments, because the moment disagreement exists between members, it cannot be adjudicated or compromised without losing the primitive force of the ideology. Compromise impossible, splits occur. What you get then is two ideologies equally monotonous, equally total, soon equally at war with each other.

PLAYBOY: Opposed to this, then, is what you call the heroic destiny of the West?

MAILER: Let's say, an *exploration* into the heroic.

PLAYBOY: Is existential politics an exploration into the heroic?

reiterates comment
to Krossner that
TV "drafts" your
eye - but too
repeat is good

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MAILER: To a degree. Existential politics can be understood only by talking practically, specifically, about what you are going to do here in this particular place and time. After you talk about, say, twenty such situations, you get some notion of existential politics. Existential politics depends on a certain intimacy between the law and the people upon whom the law is enacted. For example, not that there should be no capital punishment, but that if someone is going to get killed by the state, then make a spectacle of the event. Let people watch while a professional executioner and the condemned man fight hand to hand in an arena. Since the executioner is professional, he wins practically every time; but he doesn't win to a certainty; that gives the prisoner some last chance to fight for his own existence. It gives him the right of any man to fight for existence under extraordinary circumstances. Such a spectacle also opens the public to the real nature of execution. Let them see that blood on the sand. They may then decide if they still want capital punishment. If they do, more power to them. They like blood. But at least one profound hypocrisy — our quarantine of the execution from the eyes of the public that decrees the act — won't be able to exist anymore.

PLAYBOY: You have any prognostications about the American political and social scene in general?

MAILER: I'm gloomy. The technological society sits upon us like an incubus. It's impossible, for instance, to have any contact with anything in your existence that is not incapsulated by this technological society. I can't take a pat of butter at breakfast that doesn't have some chemical additive to deaden the taste of the butter just a bit, and therefore my taste buds, and therefore deaden me, as well as line my stomach cells with a new if minuscule addition of the chemical. If you could eat a fresh piece of butter for breakfast, certain sensory messages might be able to reach down deep into the secret needs of your nerves — enough to enrich you. You might live a hint better. The technological society gets between us and existence in everything we do, the air we breathe, the buildings we live in with their abstract monotonous forms, the synthetic fibers we wear; ever notice how a rash from a synthetic fiber is more disagreeable than one from cotton or wool? The list is endless. I've written about little else for years.

PLAYBOY: What can be done about it?

MAILER: I don't know. My feeling is that there is going to be some extraordinary holocaust. Who knows? We may all die off in mysterious fashion. For instance, about the time we discover some cure for cancer, a new disease even worse will probably be spawned by the cure — just as new viruses were spawned in relation to penicillin. Modern disease and modern technology are inseparably connected.

PLAYBOY: You've often connected this, which you call "the plague," with the modern technological society. How did the plague begin?

MAILER: I think it began when the first mediocrity discovered he could get power over men stronger than himself by employing magic for control over others rather than for communion with his existence. Jacques Ellul, in his book *The Technological Society*, suggests that the beginning of all scientific technique came from a perversion of primitive magic.

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PLAYBOY: You've written that one aspect of totalitarianism is fear of orgasm, particularly by the liberal mentality, because the orgasm, you claim, is "the existential moment. Every lie we have told, every fear we have indulged, every aggression we have tamed," you say, "arises again at that instant to constrict the turns and possibilities of our becoming." Could you tell us more about that?

MAILER: Orgasm is the moment when you can't cheat life. If the orgasm was no good, something in you — or in your mate, but probably in you — was no good. In an existential moment, something bad can happen to you, because you can't control it; you don't know how it's going to turn out. Anybody who's ever been in an automobile accident experiences such a moment — three or four or five fragments of time that seem endless — and you're into something that is brand new.

But the American liberal is programmatic about sex. Yesterday he believed in sex hygiene. Today he believes in promiscuity. He thinks it's good. I think that's innocent. Promiscuity is good at given times. Other times, dreadful. When sex becomes programmatic, it walks the totalitarian. Because a program does not permit of surprises. Sometimes, existence can reveal itself only by its surprises.

But, you know, I distrust this talk. The older I get and the more I learn about sex, the more I know I don't know anything at all. Sex is more mysterious today than it was the day I started.

PLAYBOY: In what sense?

MAILER: I find it harder to come up with value judgments that can be used from one day to the next. I prefer it this way — having fewer and fewer answers about sex as the years go by.

PLAYBOY: In that case, do you still believe, as you wrote several years ago, that birth control is evil — that it's a kind of murder of what may have been a man's best son?

MAILER: Yes. In fact, not too long ago, I was reading a very generous review of *Cannibals and Christians* in a Catholic magazine called *The Critic*; and at one point the critic said, Of course, Mailer's ideas are almost absurdly sentimental about birth control. I am now to the right of the Catholic Church.

PLAYBOY: Indeed, the Catholic Church is presently struggling with its birth-control position, in order to square it with the problems of the world population explosion and the individual moral problems raised by families that are too large.

MAILER: Regardless of what the Church finally decides, the problem of birth control is the same as all of the other problems in our technological society. They're all part of the same damn problem; something is insulating us away from our existence. My guess is that in primitive times it was more difficult to conceive and — and as a result — more natural. In a just existence, the best things are always the most difficult. Since primitive man lives in a relation to his life that was more biological — which is to say, he felt everything around him with his own body — he was therefore more intelligent *physically* than he is today, even though he might have been smaller. Each man was more an animal; his senses told him more. We notice that many animals don't conceive unless they really want it to take.

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In our modern life, on the other hand, the body is so deadened at its sexual center by contraceptives and pills that we no longer can afford to be as selective as we used to be. This adds desperation. Because people are less sensitive to conceiving, they have to make damn sure they conceive. So men put a child into many a woman they would not choose in the real calling of their blood; and many a woman accepts the seed of a man she would normally despise or half despise. There's an adulteration of distinctions, a losing of the intimacies of form, in the sense that a fine key for a fine lock is intimate. I repeat: People now conceive too easily because they're afraid if they don't, they won't conceive at all.

PLAYBOY: What would happen if there were no birth control?

MAILER: It's possible that it might then become much more difficult to conceive, because there would be more real terror of conceiving for too little.

PLAYBOY: Isn't it also possible that the social consequences would be calamitous — if your theory didn't work?

MAILER: Perhaps — but one thing you can be sure of: People would start making love a lot less; they'd make it only when they really wanted to make it; they'd have to be carried away more. On a flood of passion, yeah. How many people ride on a flood today? One thing I've learned in all these years is not to make love when you really don't feel it; there's probably nothing worse you can do to yourself than that.

PLAYBOY: Why?

MAILER: Well, it's like taking your vitals, putting them on a stone block, and pounding away with a hammer. It's bad for the back — that I know.

PLAYBOY: Do you think it's possible for a couple to have an enduring sexual relationship?

MAILER: Yes, I do. Even after you've been married awhile, it can still be the thing you go through the day for.

PLAYBOY: You don't believe, then, in the old cliché that the early days of marriage are the great times and after that the sexual scene gets less interesting?

MAILER: I think a marriage should get better all the time. By the time they're eighty, a couple should die fucking. But I don't think that happens, because none of us has the guts for that. Cowardice kills love.

PLAYBOY: Cowardice in what sense?

MAILER: It centers around possession. A curious thing: If you gamble with your possession and gamble foolishly and you're not possessive enough, that's fatal. There's something in a woman that is profoundly outraged if you don't want to make her all your own; women will never forgive you for that. Permissiveness to a woman is permissive shit. They hate it. Everything primitive rebels in a woman if a man does not want her absolutely for himself. At the same time, once you claim a woman, you start killing everything in her. Nothing in love or sex is ever simple, because you're always caught in paradoxes.

PLAYBOY: You've been married four times —

MAILER: Heroines, every one.

PLAYBOY: How do you feel about marriage?

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MAILER: I love marriage, but I don't think I'd love it unless I were a novelist. I love it because it's a curious relationship. It's artificial and yet, on the other hand, it has such primitive roots and territorial rights. A novelist can become absolutely obsessed with marriage. I've never written much about it, but I think it's a gold mine: to write about marriage, to really write about marriage and what *really* goes on between a man and a woman — the way they kill each other and keep each other alive.

PLAYBOY: Do you think you may write about it someday?

MAILER: I don't know; I don't know. It's difficult. After all, the marriage you're usually thinking about at the moment is your present marriage, and you can't start writing about that.

PLAYBOY: Some of the critics have taken you to task for a poem in your *Deaths for the Ladies (and other disasters)*:

So long
as
you
use
a knife,
there's
some
love
left.

They say this boastfully exploits the episode when you stabbed your second wife. How do you feel about this charge?

MAILER: I don't want to talk about the stabbing anymore. Not anymore. Say the word eighteen times and it loses its force. I'll just say — this could be hard to believe — that I was not really thinking about the act or myself at the moment I wrote the poem, I was really thinking about a long conversation I had with a man who stabbed his brother. He had been telling me about it and he had such complexity of feeling for his brother that the poem came: "So long as you use a knife. . . ." My feeling about writing such things is simple: If you're not ruthless about your work, you can't be an artist of interest. It doesn't matter who gets hurt, starting with yourself. Your message in the ear of the reader is going to be worth the damage that's done. You can't look back. If, on the other hand, you start thinking, "Will writing about this experience hurt me?" — well, then, you're a bad writer, the kind who spends his life humping for *The New Yorker*. You spend your life hurting other people — not yourself.

PLAYBOY: Why?

MAILER: A sadist can't bear pain, self-examination, anything injurious to the ego. His ego, after all, has to give him sanction to do harm to others.

PLAYBOY: In *Cannibals and Christians*, you spoke of the dangers of the womanization of America. Could you expand on that point?

MAILER: The gist of what I said is that women are getting more power because men want them to. Today, a man wants a wife who is a military assistant, a woman who can go out into the world with her husband and help him climb those hills of status.

PLAYBOY: Do you feel that a woman's place is in the home?

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MAILER: That takes us right back into the technological society. When a woman is in the home today, she's miserable. Our technological society has transformed her home into a minor-league factory with all sorts of plastic and electric services and appliances that keep breaking down constantly — at a far greater rate, be it said, than the clumsiest machines of the nineteenth century. That's part of the mystery of our technological society: nothing really works well. I, of course, put the blame on plastic. The machine bears some umbilical relation to metal, just as a house does to stone or wood and red wine to meat. Plastic in a machine makes about as much sense as a foam-rubber cunt.

PLAYBOY: The "technological society" more directly affects — and you would say, oppresses — the middle and upper classes. Is that the reason you've written that the lower classes enjoy a more satisfactory sex life?

MAILER: I think the lower classes probably have more sexual vitality than the upper classes. They have fewer outlets in life. Another reason: They tend to work more with their bodies than with their minds.

PLAYBOY: But according to Kinsey, the lower economic groups suffer from more sexual rigidity and engage in less sexual experimentation than the upper and middle classes.

MAILER: All such statistics show is the attitude to which people are ready to confess. I don't know how valid such findings are. What we're talking about here is old-fashioned sexual perversion. Members of the upper classes and the more prosperous middle classes tend to be fond of their own pet perversion; they look upon it as an entertainment, an adornment, an enrichment; the lower class, on the other hand, looks upon sexual perversion as weakness; they see it in its other aspect. Perversion has two aspects: it is an adornment; it is also a need, and so they see it as a weakness and they despise it. To the lower classes, need is weakness.

PLAYBOY: What do you mean by "perversion"?

MAILER: Whatever it might be — fellatio, cunnilingus, name it. Lower-class people see it as a weakness in themselves if they desire it. Envision a strong guy who wants to go down on his girl. He thinks he's weak. Of course he's weak. Giving head to your woman is weakness; it's also a good way to get rid of some of your weakness. It's also dangerous because it gives the Devil introduction into the vagina.

PLAYBOY: The Devil? How so?

MAILER: Oh, the mind's a devil. Didn't you know? And connected to the tongue.

PLAYBOY: You've said that D. H. Lawrence was the first novelist who gave you the idea "that sex could have beauty." Do you continue to admire Lawrence?

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MAILER: My objection to Lawrence is that he's sentimental about sex. Sex is not only a divine and beautiful activity; it's also a murderous activity. People kill each other in bed. Some of the greatest crimes ever committed have been committed in bed. And no weapons were used.

PLAYBOY: About the art of fiction in general, do you agree with critics such as Norman Podhoretz who claim that the novel as an imaginative art is dead because of the recent incorporation of reportage techniques into fiction?

MAILER: Obviously, I don't. The novel has its own particular resource, which is magical. If you write purely and your style's good enough, you can establish a communion between yourself and the reader that can be found in no other art. And this communion can continue for hours, weeks, years. When the novel is dead, then the technological society will be totally upon us. You'll need a score card to tell the Communists from the Texans.

PLAYBOY: You've said about your latest book, *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, that it sometimes displeases you; but at other times, you decide it's one of the ten funniest books written since *Huckleberry Finn*. To which of your previous works do you feel closest?

MAILER: Probably *The Deer Park* and *An American Dream*. And one day a month, I really like *Barbary Shore*. Whenever I'm depressed, I'm always pleased *The Naked and the Dead* is around.

PLAYBOY: Why do you write?

MAILER: Why do I write? You can't beat the hours.

PLAYBOY: Do you think you'll continue to write political and cultural essays?

MAILER: In a way, I've been working on one book most of my writing life. Probably since I started with *Barbary Shore*, certainly with and since *The Deer Park*, I've been working on one book.

PLAYBOY: Including the books of essays — *Advertisements for Myself*, *The Presidential Papers*, and *Cannibals and Christians*?

MAILER: Yes.

PLAYBOY: What's the book about?

MAILER: Existentialism. That is to say, the feel of our human condition, which, by the logic of existentialism, is the truth of the human condition.

PLAYBOY: At the beginning of our talk, you said you like interviews because they sometimes serve as a psychic housecleaning for your current ideas. Do you feel you've accomplished that here?

MAILER: I hope we haven't had a curettage. (1967)

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On Science and Art . . . gl

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On Science and Art

An Interview with David Young



DAVID YOUNG: I am interested in your definition of what an artist is.

NORMAN MAILER: I'm not sure I know.

YOUNG: Let me give you a statement that stuck with me. Just one sentence. An artist is someone who perceives relations that are not noticed by other people.

MAILER: By such logic an inventor's an artist; a mathematician is an artist; a physicist is certainly an artist. Besides, there are great artists who don't see many new relations but have an exceptional sense of how various styles and manners work. . . . There are playwrights who don't have original plots.

YOUNG: Shakespeare. . . .

MAILER: I think in one sense he's actually quite an inventor — the relations he discovered in language. His metaphors are extraordinary. You could work up a thesis that Moore and Wittgenstein are a reaction against the metaphorical concepts Shakespeare left in the language.

YOUNG: Let's go back to our first question.

MAILER: It's a riddle, talking about an artist. I feel as if I'm sliding around.

YOUNG: Maybe a definition of art might help. Have you ever read Martin Johnson's *Art and Scientific Thought*? He defined art as the communication of feeling. And science as the communication of measure. But how do you measure feeling? I don't think it's possible. Now you can measure an orgasm, I guess, by some means, cardiograph and encephalograph and all that kind of stuff, but I don't think that is giving you any truth of that particular experience. I have a feeling that art and science and myth and magic are tending to grow together as our thinking progresses in a general sense. I was particularly struck by this when I was discussing anti-matter with a scientist. He said the top twenty scientists who can really deal with this subject have had to invent their own language form in order to be able to discuss it, it's so far out. And it has been discovered that five thousand years ago in Tibet a very similar language form was developed by certain monks who were discussing the sciences. It seems like the magic has come full circle. To me art has always been — well, indigenous to magic in one sense or another.

MAILER: Yet we have so many artists who literally invade technology. It's getting to the point where if you go to the Guggenheim, three out of four new artists are in technology as much as art. Some of it looks as if an engineer took pages out of his workbook and stuck them on a wall. Of course, we can also say that the physicist invokes magic when he works. Oppenheimer has his famous remark about how he always knew he was on the trail of something good when the hair stood up on the back of his neck.

YOUNG: Robert Graves used that as a test for a poem.

MAILER: Yes. They're related. If you stop to analyze it, the equation sign is nothing but a statement of metaphor. When you say: " y equals x^2 " you are in effect establishing a metaphor. Or, the obverse: Some kid in a gallery, looking at a painting, says "I see God in the yellow." All right, that's a metaphor which can be stated mathematically: The yellow in this painting is a function of God. A simple mathematical statement. Either way, artist or physicist has penetrated an equation into the substance of things. In that sense I'd say the physicist and the artist are closer to one another than the artist and the gallery owner, or the physicist and the engineer.

YOUNG: Right. They might be married in the older sense of alchemy.

MAILER: You could say that art and science only separated at that point where alchemy turned into science, and those who refused to go along with the controlled experiment were left with magic. And witchcraft.

YOUNG: That was when men dealing with the heavens split into separate camps of astrology and astronomy.

MAILER: Maybe the essential intent which separates the artist from the physicist is in their relation to theology. But I'd rather not use the word theology. Let's say, brutally speaking, it is in their relation to God.

YOUNG: You mean to their own notion of God?

MAILER: Obviously, they all have their own notion. If many of them can easily — physicists and artists alike — think of themselves as atheists, and I come along and say it hardly matters how they think of themselves, I still say the difference is in their relation to God; it is obviously a way of saying *I believe in God*. Obviously. Then, everything I try to comprehend in others is going to come out of this fundamental belief in me. That is, of course, an arrogance. But the only way I ever begin to comprehend anything is by indulging such a stance. I don't believe it's possible to approach a tricky or mysterious question without assuming that you're right, or at least have an hypothesis to carry you every step of the way — at least until you find out you're not right. Then you can begin to search for the error in your intuition. Other kinds of inquiry can only lead to the computer. There you put in your collected experience plus the reported experience of others and wait for a statistic.

YOUNG: No room for the intuitive leap.

MAILER: I would assume that while the physicist is titillated, even thrilled, by the experience of magic in his work, and while the artist is often drenched in statistical detail (since he has to deal with a world that grows more and more technical and difficult to comprehend), at bottom their interests are opposed and they're enemies. Because the physicist is finally trying to destroy the fundament of magic, and the artist is trying to blow up the base of technology. The artist believes (and this is the greatest generalization I can make) that all cosmic achievement is attainable within the human frame, that is, if we lead lives witty enough and skillful enough, bold enough and, finally, illumined enough, we can accomplish every communication, and make every vault within the cosmos that technology would attempt to make. In fact, we're not coming face to face with the fact that technology has probably come to the end of one of its limits. As we go off into space, we're up against the knowledge that even if technology keeps expanding at the same extraordinary rate, nothing seems to offer any possibility of getting out of the solar system for thousands of years. Which means we may have taken the wrong road.

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Somewhere five, ten, and twenty thousand years ago, man took the wrong road. He separated himself from those dire disciplines of magic which might have enabled him to communicate with the cosmos. In fact, this language of the Lamas that you were talking about might have been precisely that same language. They were dealing with matter and anti-matter; they were communicating.

YOUNG: I have a feeling that an artist pursuing that notion now may be what will save us.

MAILER: Well, I don't know if we can pursue it. I'm talking about savage sensibility. The sensibility of the primitive who requires it to exist. You see, the primitive obviously had senses which were closer to the animal. He also had fears closer to the animal. Those fears are intense. Anyone who has ever felt dread in any real way knows it's so unendurable an experience that one'll do almost anything to avoid it. So I would come near to arguing that civilization came out of man's terror at having to face dread as a daily condition. Therefore we created a civilization which would insulate us from the exorbitant demands of existence. I'm not speaking now of those smaller or unbelievably pressing demands in that time of growing or killing enough food to be able to live simply. I'm talking of that greater terror when the trees spoke to one, and the message of the trees was not agreeable, and worst of all the trees were right. The message one got from the trees was true. The storm they told you about — that terrible storm which was going to make the river wash over its banks and destroy your hamlet in three weeks was true. What a terror. What a terror. I'm saying that man did everything he could, you see, to get away from that kind of intimacy with nature, that foresight, that dread.

YOUNG: Do you think that the invention of the devil might have come about from that phenomenon?

MAILER: Well, I'm not so convinced the devil is an invention.

YOUNG: Which brings me to one of my favorite quotes of Carl Jung: "The moment you remove the devil from society, you only allow him to re-appear in an infinite variety of anonymous forms."

MAILER: I would make an obeisance to that remark. A doctor inoculated my two-month-old daughter for diphtheria yesterday. He caught me at a weak moment. I argued with him feebly. They've found through experience that it's easier to inoculate kids at the age of two months than it is to inoculate them when they're four years old or five years old because the kids pass through the discomfort of the inoculation in a few hours when they're infants, and they're sick for a day or two later on. The larger argument that maybe people who get diphtheria should die of diphtheria can't begin to be ventured into. The doctor would have looked at my daughter and me through slant eyes. But what ate at me was that I had slipped my daughter into the technological chain of being. Chemicals stuck into her body at the age of two months. She was now going to be part of the chemical balance, imbalance, balance, imbalance, that all modern medicine consists of. She had gotten into that synthetic chain where chemicals which never grew out of the earth are installed into our bodies and we react to that in ways nobody understands. I think they keep giving us more chemicals to keep finding that balance that they've lost. As I was talking about it, I suddenly said, you know, they do to human beings what they wouldn't do to machines. And it's absolutely true that technology has more regard for the machine and fucks with it less than modern medicine plays with the human body.

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That's what I expect is the ubiquity of the devil. At the least, looking at it phenomenologically, there are powerful forces working to separate man's mind from his body. The intent of technology is to allow man to be a mind independent of all needs which keep the body within physical limitations. The fundamental notion of technology probably is that there is no fundamental wisdom of the body which the brain cannot relocate within itself. In other words, the astral brain, the disembodied brain, is a superior piece of intelligence to the corporeal flesh-enclosed brain. As an expression of that, a lot of the functions of the brain having to do with habit are being taken over by the computer, with the terrible danger that about the time we lose the mental ability to do the intellectual tasks we are passing into the computer, we will be unable to spot errors in the computer. That is, we will be able to spot the errors but we won't be able to locate where they are and how they got there. Nobody will have the will, or the simple stamina, to trace out the circuits to see where the error got in. It'll be too boring, since we will have lost the habit of undertaking drudgery in mental work. Boredom will be as insupportable to the mind in such a future time as fire now is to the flesh.

*could this
response be
trimmed?*

YOUNG: I'd like to give you a quote. A friend of mine says, "Art is inarticulately certain, and science is articulately uncertain."

MAILER: I think that's true. But it doesn't help much, because next you have to get into fundamental philosophical questions like the relation of the articulate to existence. An existentialist could argue that because something is articulate, it does not by itself offer proof that it has any relation to being true. It may have a relationship to being — we usually assume it has a relation to being — but it may not. For example: The yellow matrix of the pyramidal doughnut probably has no relation to being.

YOUNG: Are you speaking of articulate in the sense of the word?

MAILER: The word as opposed to the feeling, to the unvoiced apprehension of things. Language may bear the same relation to man that technology bears to husbandry, or at least to any of the activities by which primitive man hewed out his existence. For instance, if I am a primitive, and alone in a forest, and live with all the terrors and agreeable forces of that forest, and walk with the principalities of the gods of that forest, terribly aware of the huge and ominous sense of pride in that giant oak which I believe is the center of the forest, well, then as I pass by its periphery I may have an exceptional sense of over how far a distance extends the hegemony of the oak. Think of that as equivalent to talking about the aura which surrounds a human. When we speak of charisma, we suggest that as you approach someone who possesses it, you can't get too near before you feel that you're entering some envelope of their presence. You can be three feet away from them, but something has changed in your own psyche. It's what people speak of usually as vibrations. At least one form of vibrations. Like entering a field of resonance which surrounds certain people who are highly charged.

YOUNG: Like an induction coil?

MAILER: Like a magnetic field. I think the primitive lived in a world in which all natural objects around him had these fields. Whenever one powerful psychic field met another, there was a mood. Where the presence of the oak met the presence of the field of tall grass, so there was a mood, and in that mood the savage walking through was aware that he was a third presence who was picking up some sense of events to come. Or picked up some sense of the past. One of the characteristics of most primitive languages, I suspect, is that their sense of past and future is different from ours. For instance, in classic Hebrew, there is no firm difference between past and future. In fact, there are merely two tenses, the present, and another tense which has to do with actions which occurred *either* in the past or in the future. Only a very simple shift is made in that verb form. If you want to talk about the past, you remark, "I left." If you wish to indicate "I will leave," you simply say, "And I left." My God, I spent years thinking about this. What a different sense of existence! Since primitive man keeps no records, the ability to distinguish between his memory of the past, and a dream, becomes next to impossible. Of course, primitive people also employ last night's dream as something which will give them intimations of the future. And, of course, it's possible the dream, far from being a wish fulfillment, is actually that instrument which enables us to anticipate those psychic problems we can or cannot afford to take on in the future. In other words, the anxiety system of the dream gives us clues as to how much intensity our nervous system can bear in different directions. That is why we re-play the experiences of the day before through the complications of the dream. We dramatize them in our imagination. We put ourselves in tense situations to see how much dread we can bear. Therefore the dream deals with the future as it is based on the experience of the past. Which means both past and future are part of the same psychic river. So it's as if the primitive Hebrew saw his experiences forming into two halves: two tenses, two modes of being — the sensuous-at-hand which was the present tense, and the sense of that other time which was not at hand.

YOUNG: That would tend to make the present of less importance, I would think. . . .

MAILER: I don't know. Particularly since primitive man was not abstracted in the way we are. His present, whatever it was, had to have an extraordinary difference from ours. He had to be immersed in it much more as he walked through the forest. Of course, I'm going along now on the not necessarily mystical notion that nature is an exquisite receiving and transmitting set. It's possible that one of the ways God would communicate with the earth and the earth communicated back with God, if you will, is that every tree and blade of grass is capable of sending transmissions. Because parenthetically we know nothing about radio. If you scratch a crystal, and lead the vibration out to any wire of a certain length, called an antenna, why then another wire of an appropriate length attached only to a crystal somewhere else can pick up your signal. That is the basic transaction of radio. We've put it through a million improvements. Amplified it unbelievably. Yet what more do we know about the inner nature of such communication? The assumption may not be unreasonable that other ways of communicating are equally good. One petal of a flower communicating to a bee, literally. Some of the messages we don't begin to perceive. And so, as I say, primitive man, moving through these fields, still able to communicate with these oaks, would have intimations beneath the level of language. At a certain point he knew in the way a plant knows or a tree knows that a storm was coming, or disaster was on the way, or the sun would be beneficent on the morrow.

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YOUNG: Yes. And we've lost that. Almost completely.

MAILER: Well, let me say, we may have lost it at the moment language began. Here is the point: Once there is verbal language, then man has feedback. He no longer communicates to other men the way he once had a dialogue with the tree and the field. So long as he was communicating beneath the level of formal language, he had only to come back from the field and other men would see something in his presence which communicated his message. We just assume that primitives grunted at one another. We don't know. Primitive man may have had to do no more than move into the clearing or into the caves where others lived, and others knew his message. Since he was transmitting mood, others could decide whether he was true or false. But language, while it will often create mood, must as its first function interrupt mood, interpose itself against mood. Mood may be able to survive this insertion, but it is a different mood. The moment primitive man began to speak words to other primitive men — in other words, the moment the articulate was commenced — so the nature of man's reception of an experience larger than himself began to be altered profoundly. And something was lost. For in the grunt had been sounds from every corner of existence, while now, in the words, were oncoming abstractions of existence.

YOUNG: Which brings me, if I may interject, to the idea of art being inarticulately certain. I think what you've just said . . .

MAILER: . . . is an expansion of that remark. Yes. Art bears a relation to those intimations of the primitive. I know it's similar to the experience of every artist if I say that when I get an idea for a piece of work, I get it. There's an illumination in my head at that moment with which I don't have to argue. Trouble starts because you can't keep that incandescence, that illumination. And in fact, the reason it usually requires twenty or thirty years to make a good artist who's dependable as well as good is that it takes all those years to learn how to lose the moment and recover it, lose it and recover it, and learn how finally to be able to get it back each day in some tremendously diluted and warped and tortured form, but nonetheless, get it back. Enough so you can continue with your work. If you will, it's a function of the artist's relation to magic. It's his ceremony. For instance, you said a while ago that the artist now tries to return to magic. But I think the horror of it is that there's no one alive who can return us to anything. Our senses are so destroyed that we may be a light-year away from that primitive man. There may be no road back to him. None ever. We may not be able to begin to do — to comprehend where we lost the way, or where or how we can restore it. The artist may finally be merely some sort of extraordinary recorder of the failure.

YOUNG: I think the big problem for art today is to try to get back to the sense of creating a spell.

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MAILER: Maybe you have brought us to the real separation between the artist and the physicist. Because the artist always seeks to create a spell. Today, of course, the artist is no primitive man, he's all but completely insulated from the senses primitive man had; and he usually acts as a mediator between magic and technology, between the world as instinct and scientific fact. But no matter how technologized the artist is in society, his central impulse is to create a spell equivalent to the spell the primitive felt when he passed the great oak and knew something deeper than his comprehension of things was reaching him. It's possible the primitive felt something analogous to what we feel when we encounter a great work of art which tunes us in to some comprehension of something we can't even quite call any longer our knowledge. It's larger and less definable; to employ the word again, it's more resonant. It's as if art seeks to restore men and women by reproducing in them that sense of a lost spell, as if the artist is some sort of magician or midwife between the lost life of the primitive and the modern world of technology. And, if you will, the ultimate intent of the technologist, or any physicist who is drowned in technology one way and another, is to try to find ways of coping with existence which are independent of the spell. For the spell cannot be measured.

YOUNG: Do you think that art has much chance to flourish in this regard?

MAILER: Well, I think we've begun to come around some extraordinary corner. There is a recognition among technicians themselves that something desperately bad is happening in the very foundations of technology. That the whole machine of technology may finally have been bolted to a base which will not remain permanent, which is in fact rotting beneath. Sometimes, it's only when man enters a series of failures which destroy belief in a huge endeavor that a huge endeavor in an opposite direction can begin. The failure of the Crusades opened the Renaissance. I think this is happening now. I think one note of hope we can feel in these times is that faith in technology is beginning to waver, and in fact, it's possible technology is going to go through a period as destructive to its ambitions as was technology to theology. We could advance the argument that theology was a species of spiritual technology designed to insulate man from existential existence, from the lost senses of the primitive. Failing to work, theology was replaced by technology, but technology, in turn, if it fails to work — well, at that point, it seems to me there is nothing left but a return — if there's *anything* left — to the old notions of magic which orbit around the fundamental notion that we are capable of extraordinary psychic communication, not only with each other, but with elements of the universe we haven't begun to conceive. That may be the great turn of the wheel of history — that is, if we can clear the ecological system of the world. We may not be able to. We may be in the position of an invalid who's going to linger, even for centuries, in some sort of half existence. That could also happen. There's no reason to assume man was not capable of permanently injuring the world he inhabited. We may live on as some sort of crippled social existence.

YOUNG: Waiting for the freeze bags.

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MAILER: I wouldn't doubt it. It's the apathetic people, I'd guess, who generate huge passions on the idea of a freeze bag. Technology sells people the notion they're going to give them something for nothing. Which is the essence of the message of the devil. The reason the devil is associated with magic in people's minds is that magic implies it will give something for nothing. But the word *magic* rather might suggest that there are subterranean relations between things which are deeper than we recognize. But never will you get something for nothing. Precisely, it's technology which promises that something for nothing by sidestepping all the disciplines of magic.

YOUNG: Perhaps it's this awareness of subterranean relations between things that does constitute a good part of what an artist is today.

MAILER: Well, I expect an artist secretly assumes he has some fine and subtle and possibly quite private relation to magic. In some way, some little part of magic is his. He often pays for it by finding himself ineffectual and even tortured by the world. So it isn't as if he's getting something for nothing with his magic. But it's as if, if you will, that people who opt for magic are deciding that they want a life which will have huge advantages and tremendous disadvantages. They're stepping out of the sort of ordinary expectations other people have. Stepping into more and into less.

YOUNG: Choosing perhaps to be more alive.

MAILER: More alive and more bugged. More reduced. I mean, think of people you've known who lived in depression for ten years at a time — you think quickly of artists . . . Because of their sensitivity, their paranoia, because of their relation to magic . . . their exquisite sensitivity to the possibilities of magic, to that communication between subterranean events which everything paranoid in one (for paranoia has to be a disturbed function of the magical sense) would believe is having a powerful effect upon superficial everyday events. So when things are not breaking well, such an artist will never get free of anxiety. His sense of magic will keep producing more exotic conclusions. I mean, there's a reason why man deserted magic and went into technology. Men led lives of exacerbated uneasiness when they lived in the time of primitive man and his magic. They sought, after all, to escape primitive existence and existential life, in order to gain technological life. For precisely the reason that they thought it would be easier. Now we've found that it isn't easier. It may even be deadly. So now we've got to go back.

YOUNG: Would you see any relation to such going back in the way hippies will wear their grandmother's clothes out of the attic or just any kind of thing they feel like putting on? Is that sort of stepping outside of fashion and in a sense stepping outside of time?

MAILER: Oh, I think that's no mean nor small phenomenon. Maybe it isn't so much stepping outside of time, as some profound desire to reverse time. You see, hippies taking all those exceptional LSD trips saw futures in man's continuation that were so terrifying that they recoiled. That recoil has projected them back to the nineteenth century. It's interesting that most of them do go for nineteenth-century styles. You could say it's for practical reasons. Nineteenth-century styles are easier to find, to copy, imitate and wear, than eighteenth-century styles — But it's impossible if this continues that we will see all the centuries repeated, possible that people in one era will yet be wearing all the clothes ever worn on earth. Yes, suppose we have got to go back to that universal dread we tried to escape five, ten, fifteen, twenty-five thousand years ago. Suppose it's now become the underlying trip of the world.

(1970)

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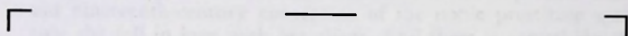
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In Search
of the Devil . . . gl



In Search of the Devil

An Interview with Richard Stratton



RICHARD STRATTON: When I read *Marilyn* in galley, I thought, it's a good book. But then when I saw it with the pictures and everything, there's something that sits wrong about that book.

NORMAN MAILER: Well —

STRATTON: It's so commercial.

MAILER: It is.

STRATTON: And that hurts, coming from you.

MAILER: Well, it didn't. Of course, it came from me in the sense that I didn't withdraw my manuscript and cry out, I protest this book. You could say that if I were being true to my standards, I should never have consented to being presented like that. But I saw it as a job I was taking on to make some money, and I may have felt *too* honorable and *too* satisfied with what I'd done. After all, I was supposed to write twenty-five thousand words and ended up writing ninety thousand, and I didn't say to the publisher, give me more for this. I just said, that's their good luck, and I'm not going to carry on about it. And I was pleased with the book.

Then I saw Pauline Kael's review and she said the book was a "sordid creamy object." I felt, well —

STRATTON: She said the book gives off "bad vibes." And in a sense it does.

MAILER: Yes, I think it does. It has a mixture of incompatibles in it. Although I confess to liking the jacket, I can't say her comment is altogether unfair. I mean, I, for instance, if I had my choice, would not have picked the type the book was set in. It's a type that has almost nothing to do with my style. I didn't like the quality of the paper. However, I'm not going to sit here and bleed for the American public when the book was conceived by all in the first place as a project which would ideally make money for everyone concerned.

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I do want to get to the root of one notion which I don't quite comprehend. I mean, why does a writer not have the same right to make money that a capitalist does, or an entrepreneur or a corporation? I mean, I'm worried about it because maybe a writer doesn't have the same right. But when I think of all the cheap hustlers who carried on what I was doing it for the bucks . . .

STRATTON: You said, once you've decided that you are going to do a book for money, then you have to get into the existentialism of the act, which is whether you do it well or you do it badly, whether the book will finally make you deader as a writer or more alive.

MAILER: If you're doing something for money, the only way you can get through it alive is to give more than was requested. The old nineteenth-century conception of the noble prostitute was that she fell in love with her client. And there is something to that. I mean, if you're going to be a prostitute, what chance have you got if you don't fall in love with a client? One at a time. If you sit down and you say, there is such a thing as a literary gift and God gave me one, and I'm now using it to earn a living, then the only absolution is to fall in love with the object of my fee. Which is what I'm saying I did. I don't know if you necessarily dismiss that summarily out of court.

STRATTON: You know when I get really discouraged? I was walking down the street the other day in New York and saw a Marilyn Monroe date book or calendar, something like that, in a bookstore. With excerpts from Norman Mailer's text. It's beginning to get like Davy Crockett. That's not you. That's not someone who says I'm a psychic outlaw who's going to get more and more outrageous — not outrageous, but, you remember —

MAILER: It was the promise I made.

STRATTON: I've got it written down. "The ambition of a writer like myself is to become consecutively more disruptive, more dangerous and more powerful."

MAILER: Yes. Well, I wrote that in the late Fifties, in *Advertisements for Myself* I assume. Now, it's '74. I am no longer trying to be disturbing. I've come to a point in my life where I'm trying to put it together. If we're going to find fault with *Marilyn*, it isn't because I failed to write a book which is disturbing, but because I was trying to put a few things together — and didn't succeed. I ended with "a sordid creamy object" which cost \$20, which had a huge amount of atrocious and ugly publicity, which got distorted, which alienated many of the people I wanted to read that book, which hurt my reputation, which made people doubt my right to claim or pretend anything, et cetera, et cetera.

I feel a large sense of failure about *Marilyn*, but not so much in the book itself. The book has flaws, it has faults, it has lacks. It has errors of omission. The ending is not nearly good enough. It has more faults than any book I've written. But what is also has, I think, is something that hardly anybody ever stopped to look at. It's got an interesting portrait of a woman who's almost impossible to capture.

From the time I began writing in college, I never tried to write about a difficult woman. From the beginning I always felt women were more difficult than men. They certainly are for me. This is the first time I really tried. And I think just as a piece of prose, it succeeds more than most books about women. At least, that's my claim for it.

What I'm miserable about is that after thirty years in this literary racket, I didn't have enough worldly sense to foresee some of the awful things that were going to happen. And to that extent I did let down people who have a little faith in me. I did act like a sodden besotted general. I mean, I'm trying to make a change in the way people perceive history, and I soil and besmirch my reputation this way. Shameful. Disgusting.

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So I learned a lot from *Marilyn*. I entered that book with a kind of confidence I may never have again. I felt it's possible that I have as much or more to say than anybody around in American life. That was my confidence. But the painful thing I learned was that it isn't enough to be good, it isn't enough to be right, it isn't enough to have the kind of confidence other people don't have. It is absolutely not enough if you don't really have the discipline to carry your idea out to all its stages including the finished product. And know how to protect it. And I committed a small disaster for myself when the product that finally landed on every coffee table was indeed a coffee table object. And I'm going to pay for that over the years. I'm going to pay for what I should have known by the age of fifty and didn't know. And, you know, when you get to that age, you should have really made your dull mistakes earlier. I mean, once a man's fifty he's entitled only to make large and serious mistakes. In other words, he can go into something with the best will and the best intentions and a great deal of skill, and fail because he met a superior opponent or force. But a man at fifty shouldn't still be defeated by himself, by his own indulgence, his own vanity, his own sense of superiority, especially when it is ill founded.

STRATTON: Let's talk about psychopathy and murder. To what degree do you think Charles Manson might be an embodiment of some of the ideas you brought up originally in "The White Negro"? For some time I've been living with the unpopular thought that Manson was probably a very brave man in certain ways.

MAILER: I think there's no question he was brave. One of the more depressing manifestations of public morality is that whenever someone commits a horror or monstrosity, they have to call the criminal a coward. It's automatic. Hitler's a coward. We used to call Tito a coward. Now they call Manson a coward. Part of the pain of maturity is that you come to recognize bravery is not enough. First you break out of the barbed-wire cocoon of a middle-class life with the idea that bravery is crucial to your existence. Maybe it's because the need for bravery is the one thing the middle class has refused to teach. So there's a period in one's life where you believe that anyone who does something brave is good.

Hemingway never got over that discovery. He had a cushioned life until he broke out of it, and like all of us he never broke out of it altogether. Then, years later, you come face to face with the second recognition that people can be brave and still be no fucking good. That some brave people can be worse than cowards, and you can rue the day they discovered the grace of their own bravery, because finally they destroy even more than cowards do. Then you're face to face with the complexity of things and the difficulty of finding your way to any coherent ethics.

Manson is one of the most perfect examples of this. Because whatever else he is, you can't take away from him the fact that he's a brave man. Now, he wasn't altogether a brave man. And he wasn't a warrior. I mean, finally he was a general who sent his troops out to wreak the carnage, and he stayed behind.

STRATTON: But there were apparently certain aspects of his own personality which were very brave.

MAILER: Well, as an intellectual he was brave.

STRATTON: Yes. Then there was his method of dealing with men who tried to give him trouble. He was known to offer the weapon to the person he was fighting with and say, go ahead and kill me. And if that person didn't have the nerve to kill him, which ... they didn't ...

MAILER: Who ever has the nerve then? It's very hard to kill someone who stands before you, looks into your eyes and says, kill me.

STRATTON: That's bravery, and an instinctual sense of your opponent's strength, because no one ever took him up on the challenge.

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MAILER: Well, that's not bravery, I'd say. That's a knowledge of the con, which is something else. Manson did grow up in prisons. He certainly understood that when you get into trouble you can't handle, then you still have the option to stand there and let the other person get their executioner's desire up to the point where they're going to kill you. It's not automatic.

It's reputed that Jimmy Hoffa once said: Flee a knife, and charge a gun. I have no idea if he ever said it, but I think, if he didn't, somebody who knew an awful lot about the subject had to be the author. Because there is something intimate about a knife, whereas there's something closer to moral decision about a gun. If you charge the gun, the man who holds it finally has to say to himself (since it's not a physical act, but a mental act), has to say to himself that he has the right to shoot you. At that point his moral sense of himself has to be invoked. He may not feel the sanction to shoot. Whereas if you charge a man who has a knife, his physical sense of himself is invoked, it's competitive. Am I going to hold this knife while he gets it away from me and humiliates me? But if you take your own knife and hand it over to the other man, that's different from charging a man with a knife.

We go back to the original advice: Flee a knife, charge a gun. If you hand it over and say, Stab me, you make the knife a gun. And Manson may have had a particularly shrewd sense that the guy he was handing the knife to was a gun man. Weapons are metaphors which fit or do not fit our lifestyle. We do not mix metaphors when it comes to execution. So what we know about Manson is that he wasn't necessarily so brave about these matters as extraordinarily intelligent.

STRATTON: And he had an uncanny sense of where each personally he came in contact with was coming from.

MAILER: Oh, by every report he had an incredible sense of the people he was among. Obviously he had one of the more incandescent sensibilities of our time. The horror of it — not the horror so much as the pathetic aspect of it — is that once again we have a prisoner who's filled with talent, you know, the criminal who leads a prison life from beginning to end. Like Genet. Extraordinary talents. If Manson had become an intellectual, he would have been most interesting. He had bold ideas, and he carried them out — he worked for his ideas. The thing that characterizes Manson's life, whenever you look at it, is how hard that man worked for his ideas.

I like his sense of all these junior debutantes that would get into his gang. He'd have them out there, rolling in what? — not human shit, not cow shit — horse shit. Because if there's any single point of focus of social life in the upper middle class of America, it's that a young lady learns to ride a horse well and live comfortably with horse shit. Which of course is, you know, vastly more compatible than human shit or cow shit or dog shit or, perish the mark, wipe us out, cat shit. So, you know, there he has them rolling in horse shit. He knows how to get an orgy going.

STRATTON: Remember the day you and I went out to see the Spahn Ranch and found it had been bulldozed into nonexistence, which seems to me strikingly American. Like our attitude toward death, cover it up, make believe it doesn't really exist.

MAILER: Well, it's the American way. You know, we must destroy the past. When I was down in Dallas many years ago, a couple of years after Jack Kennedy was assassinated, naturally what's the first thing I do, I went over to see the plaza — the second thing: I went to see what happened to Jack Ruby's burlesque club. And you know, it had become a police gymnasium. They know how to do things in Dallas.

STRATTON: They know how to cut a connection or two.

MAILER: Right on.

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STRATTON: To what degree do you think Manson was psychopathic? He had that other side to his personality, that hustler/pimp workingman's aspect. All the time he was doing his supposedly messianic trip with these young people, he was also hustling.

MAILER: Well, let's start playing with these words, set them up against each other. Not every psychopath is a hustler, not every hustler is a psychopath. Still, it's very hard to be a hustler without having some psychopath in you. It's hard to stay alive as a psychopath if you can't hustle a little. But we have to consider that at bottom the two are qualities opposed. Being a psychopath is existential. You don't know how a situation is going to turn out because you can't control it. Something inside you will not let you cut off the experience. You may be getting every warning that this experience is taking you into more and more bad places, and you can even get killed before the night's out.

STRATTON: Whereas the hustler tries to control the flow of the experience.

MAILER: The hustler's dignity is that he controls the flow of the experience. He considers it obscene if he doesn't.

Of course there's no such thing as a true or pure psychopath. Nor a total hustler. The hustler has elements in himself which are unmanageable, the psychopath has veins of shrewdness, calm judgment and a great ability to hustle. Part of the comedy in criminal affairs is to see how practical, sane, genteel, reasonable, clever and full of the final trick the hustler is. I mean, a good hustler always has a smooth hustle. Smooth's a word that fits with hustle. A player hates it if his cool is pricked. Manson is an intense mixture of the two. He's more psychopathic than just about any psychopath and more of a hustler than any average hustler that's come along. The vulgarity is to seize a personality as Dostoyevskian as Manson's and assume immediately that he has to be uniquely a hustler and everything he did was as a hustler, so don't take him seriously. Or else see him as an example of pure, evil, unrestrained psychopathy.

STRATTON: That's always seemed to me the problem with Truman Capote's work. I mean, even in *In Cold Blood*, where he looks for those easy, quick psychological containers he can pour his characters into. I don't think he got any real insight into those two characters, the murderers in *In Cold Blood*.

MAILER: Well, Truman's abilities, I think, lie in another direction. Truman's always had an exquisite sense of his readership. Which I must say has changed greatly during his career. He started with a special readership. And moved out to an enormously large one. But he's always had this exceptional sense of how much they can bear. And he has always had the accompanying sense of how to vibrate their prejudices without shaking them apart.

STRATTON: And he knows how to end a book just beautifully, the way he ended *In Cold Blood* with that young lady visiting the grave of her murdered friend.

MAILER: Truman's never without his tone. And it would be part of his virtuosity that the elegiac tone would belong naturally to him. Yes. It would be hard to think of Truman ending a book badly. The first time Truman does, I will have to sit down and read that book all over again because it's possible that Truman will have just written far and away his most adventurous book.

STRATTON: Because he's on to something?

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MAILER: The only reason Truman couldn't end a book fantastically well is because he would be on to something large. So, I agree with you about *In Cold Blood* in the sense that I don't think he got near his characters. I think that what he did do, which makes it an important book to me, is end up telling us more about the prejudices and the limited ability of the middle-class reader to encounter criminality than any book I ever read. It tells you almost nothing about the criminals, but how much it does say about that sense of everything-in-its-place that *The New Yorker* has stood for for over forty embattled years.

STRATTON: Perhaps Manson and people who can live with these extremities in their personalities may in fact be the survivors. And all the highly civilized people may be ending up in the worst kind of deaths to themselves. And technological destruction. If it's only in extremes that the society will save itself, then the secret fear of most people is that they're dead . . . moribund . . . and these Manson people are more alive than they are.

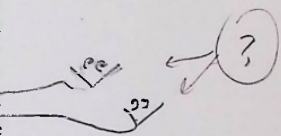
MAILER: Yes, I think that's what they do fear. And I think the reason is we have all grown up in a society that's relatively new in its fundamental premise, a society that claims to believe in life. To coin a piece of jargon, of the worst sort, we could say that we exist in a keep-everybody-alive society. Ironically, most of the cultures to exhibit great energy in history, the societies which produced our society, were, on the contrary, built on killing.

The idea common to all animals, and prehistoric and primitive man, even among civilized societies like the Greeks, the Romans, during the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance, the idea was still that if you didn't have enough right to live — in other words, if you were a drag upon the mood and the energy and the sustenance of other people — you were better off — Christ to the contrary — dead. These societies were kill societies. They got their neatness, their elegance, they got their style — out of killing.

But we are a society which says in effect, Be sure you live. Life is our only gift. We're not going to get anything after this. The kill societies, to the contrary, were religious. They believed in the immanence of God, or a devil, or in demons. Primitive man spent his time placating demons in every tree. If a wind blew a sudden leaf past his face, he began to propitiate some spirit. They believed nothing was accidental. They were, in fact, more scientific than we are, for they believed that anything you can't explain is tremendously disturbing, whereas we prefer to ignore whatever we cannot dominate with our minds. We wipe out the artifacts of the past as if they have no curse.

Well, this notion, this keep-everybody-alive society — is a vulgar notion. There's nothing more livid, more cancer-provoking, than the face of a distorted liberal who shrieks at you, "You're talking about a human being!" Then always italicize — *hu-min*. You're talking about a *life* that can be *lost*, they say. They're the same people who will turn around and absolutely insist upon destroying life, the same people who will soon leap with glee to forbid people to procreate, that is, about the time we decide there are definitely too many people on earth and we have to cut down the population or we won't survive, they will end by insisting that people be electrocuted for daring to conceive without a license.

Of course, today, they're still on the side of keep-everybody-alive. So the thought that someone might be so profoundly repulsive that everybody in their immediate neighborhood wants to let them die, is something they cannot tolerate. Nor can we for that matter. We're not as tough as we sound. We too live in this enormous supermarket of suburban guilt. Because we know we are all destroying the landscape with our homes and our highways. There's such a gassy, dead dull air over everything. Which we create. When you traveled, it used to be the only bad air you ever smelled was in a smoker on a train. Now that air is over everything.



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Fresh air is the anomaly. We almost do not know what to do with it. Given this guilt we live in, we opt for keeping everybody alive because we know we're destroying everything. But that's also why we're, on the other hand, nihilistic. That's why we laugh every time a line or an idea or a disclosure cuts the feet off somebody. We all sit in this guilt that we don't necessarily deserve to live, and that maybe we ought to get back to the old idea of the kill society. So people like Manson just drive us up the tree. This guy's going out and doing it.

STRATTON: Another aspect of Manson that upset everybody was the sex orgies carried on by the "family." The real horror for the American middle class was to know Manson and his family were engaging in out-and-out sex orgies, exactly what so much of the middle class were doing themselves.

MAILER: I don't think the horror was in the idea of orgy itself. After all, one of the unspoken solutions to suburban life has been the orgy. There have probably been more organized balls among respectable people in the seventh and eighth decades of American life in this twentieth century than any other time, certainly in any other mass democratic society. I don't think there's been anything remotely approaching the incidence of systematized orgy we have here. People putting aside Friday night or Saturday night for their orgy, with their neighbors, their special neighbors.

But these orgies have always been, by every book report we have of them, always highly civilized, indeed the most highly civilized expression of sexual endeavor you can find. I mean, nobody at an orgy ever throws a punch. Suddenly America learns about this orgiastic life in Manson's gang that ends in mass murder. Anybody who's ever been in a civilized orgy knows that what you're left with, besides a few interesting memories to feed that part of your fantasy which still needs to be nourished, is a kind of buried bleak sense not so far from murder. I mean, I don't know that most people come out of an orgy full of love. No, a cold icelike feeling is more usually awakened. Most people sense the orgy has left them more murderous than when they started. Now, suddenly, Manson comes along with *his* orgies, and Boom, the murders do take place. Indeed, it's as if the murders were cooked to the boiling point by those orgies. Measure the shock then in the orgiastic suburbs.

STRATTON: Because Manson didn't come from their numbers. I mean, he had been seventeen years out of thirty-five in prison. So he was a natural to take the orgy all the way to murder.

MAILER: Well, I don't think it was that automatic. He also had something inside him he couldn't control at all. His paranoid side, where he saw the blacks taking over the country. At a certain moment he was going to rise as some sort of gray eminence for the blacks and yet at the same time do his best to wipe them out. He had those huge plans to flee to the desert when the war was coming.

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In the crudest psychoanalytical terms, his real connection was to his own timetable toward disaster. It was approaching very quickly. Because he was a man of Napoleonic ambition, he took this interior sense his body and his mind were providing him — the psyche secretly saying him, "Man, the climax is coming. You will not be able to keep your murderous impulses in hand more than another ten months, another ten days." That's why we shrink before any fanatic who comes up to us and says, The end of the world is near.

STRATTON: Let's talk a bit more about the women's movement. I admit many of the women I find most exciting, most impressive, have tendencies toward women's liberation. But I don't think they understand what they call male chauvinism. I love women who have great character and spunk and are not content with being put in any simple category. But I fear the real thrust of this movement is to demean love and attraction between the sexes. A man who loves women is a pig. It's an antiromantic notion. It's sexual technology.

MAILER: Hey, Stratton, this isn't the way you were talking a year ago! I mean, the women are getting to you. They're getting to me and getting to you. Let's face it, they're winning their war.

STRATTON: You think so. They're winning their battle, perhaps. Meanwhile we're all losing our war. What women's liberation does is diminish sexuality.

MAILER: Well — I agree that the tendency is to diminish sexuality. I'm not pretending to know whether it's going to diminish sexuality for *all* time. But I think the immediate effect has been to take something out of it all. That's right in the need of the century. It's still a technological century and too much instinctive sex mucks up the machine.

There are two ways a technological society can weaken sex, through huge puritanism like the Russians, or you can do it through huge license — pornography, a sexual revolution, androgyny, gay lib, women's lib — huge license is even desirable to technology if it'll consume sexual energy and keep it at a low fucked-out level. I mean, what's the use of being able to make love to anyone, any man or any woman, if finally your incentive is taken away altogether? If the hunt is gone? The danger? The rebellion? The achievement? If you now ram it home to a woman and show her where she lives, what are you doing? Naught but revealing the secret boar in your asshole.

STRATTON: "My cunt is my chariot."

MAILER: Well, God bless them. You know, their cunt is their chariot. No one's ever going to be able to write about the way in which my generation grew up, you know, with this secret, profoundly sentimental adoration of the subtle superiority of women to ourselves. That marvelous sense of a woman's wit, that sly sense of the point which arrived so naturally into their thought. That sense of audience a woman provides. That notion we had of ourselves as audience to a woman. That tenderness. That respect for the immanence of a mystery so intimate, so nice, so near, so funny. We were so much stronger than women, and yet not at all. They were so much more powerful than we were, and yet never at all — never in any way. We lived as such romantic and sentimental equals.

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Now we've come into another world where we recognize that they lied, they cheated, they worked overtime to give us this lovely sustaining notion, but all the while their egos were being rotted, their guts were filled with caustic, they were left with the dishes, they were left with the diapers. Left with the pale smell of water and grease and the slightly more unfortunate smell of formula milk and baby shit. And saw their careers going down into dull, somewhat incomprehensible dialogues with plumbers. While we came back and bayed at the moon, and said, you do not support me sufficiently, woman, to enable me to reach the moon. You know?

And then a couple of guys reach the moon, and some guys after them, and they all talk like women libertarians when they get there. In jargon. In a total, perfect, hermetic language. We'd looked upon these men in awe. These guys were cats, they were going out and doing things that really would stop up our stomach. And they had done it, they did it.

STRATTON: Yet they were sexless.

MAILER: They weren't sexless. They were women's libbies. What no one will ever understand is, the first guys to reach the moon — they were men, you know, in terms of bravery. More man than I for sure, maybe more than you, Stratton. They were men. But they had the minds of women's libbies. They were working for the team. They thought of only one thing, can't betray the team, cannot allow an alien idea to ever enter their eyeball, their nose, their mouth, their ear or their fingertips long enough to disrupt the ideological system.

STRATTON: A romantic idea is an alien idea to them.

MAILER: I don't mean a romantic idea. I mean any idea that's not in the system. You could have an antiromantic idea, they still wouldn't let it enter. They have nothing against romance.

STRATTON: Women's liberation is ultimately a team effort?

MAILER: Women's liberation is an astronaut system.

STRATTON: I'm interested in your reaction to the Patricia Hearst kidnapping. The Symbionese Liberation Army is the one group that's done anything really revolutionary since the Weathermen. And even the Weathermen were less radical because their program was more abstract.

MAILER: We can agree that the Symbionese Liberation Army is more radical than anything since I don't know when. You might have to go back to the Bolsheviks before the First World War to find a point of comparison, back to Robin Hood to find something as extraordinary as this. Robbing from the rich to pay the poor. But I find it impossible to say more at this point, because I don't know how it's going to end. At this point, where I'm speaking, which is in late March of '74, we don't know whether Patricia Hearst was kidnapped or, as much gossip would have it, is a member of that army. Or has been converted to a member. We also don't know if it's a black army or a white army. I've heard gossip that there are two black members and any number of young white middle-class kids in that army. They may be much like the kids who, when they went to high school three and four years ago, were — according to Dotson Rader — talking about killing Lindsay because he was too good a mayor; the only way to shock people was to make them realize that no matter how good you were in this system, it wouldn't work. The better you were, the faster you were killed. The idea was to break down the system. It's possible these kids came out of that mood.

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We do know there's never been a kidnapping where everybody has kept their inner discipline for so many weeks, did not kill the kidnappee, did not break apart, did not flake off to the police, but stayed together. What kind of incredible group is this? What sort of internal communion do they have? But we are at the point where the story is not resolved. When it blows up, it may prove to be the noblest or ugliest of stories. We don't know yet. So I don't see how one can begin to render judgments before one possesses some favorable proportion of the facts. My pride is that I'm not one of those people whose pride is that there's no question they can't answer in ten seconds.

We don't begin to know yet whether this is an epic, a tragedy, or if Patricia Hearst has been with them from the beginning, the highest species of family comedy the civilized world has encountered. We may have to recognize that superrealistic-Shakespearean times may soon be upon us.

STRATTON: All right, let's talk about the music we just heard. Truman Capote was hired by *Rolling Stone* to cover the Rolling Stones concert when they were here the last time to tour the States. And he finally didn't do the article because he said the Stones had no mystery for him. But there's a lot of mystery in Jagger's personality and in the personality of the group as a whole.

MAILER: There's something unsatisfying about Jagger. We must have listened to two hours of music. Jagger's always promising so much more than he delivers. You know, finally he's in a sinister bag — he is certainly of all, if we take the three, four, five, six major rock groups in the last ten years, he has been the one who was the most sinister. Yet he's finally not terrifying. Maybe that's what Capote meant, I don't know.

STRATTON: Jagger himself, or his music?

MAILER: His music. I don't know anything about him. I think that the Beatles, you know, can hit eight bars in *Sgt. Pepper* that are more frightening, even though they're not sinister. The Beatles had more of a sense of powers they could summon by playing the wrong note at a given moment. It's as if they're more terrified by music than Jagger. Jagger's terribly spoiled. There's all that muttering in the background: "Oh, no God, you won't break this heart of stone."* What a threat. Beyond that constant dirge, beyond the throatiness which makes you think he's riding on the rims, through all that electric masturbation, you know, all that sound of distant musketry, every drumbeat, there's still a mountain of bullshit. It's not getting in and saying, I'm going to kill you, motherfucker. It's not saying, I'm here to call upon Satan. It pretends to. Some of his music I find, you know, marvelously promising. But it's irritating as hell to listen to for two hours because you keep waiting for the great payoff, and it never comes.

* "Heart of Stone" by Mick Jagger and Keith Richard. © 1965, Abkco Music Co.

But again there's a kind of bullying that I've always distrusted in rock. Which is, it doesn't take big balls to have a big electric guitar and a huge amplifying system and fifty thousand American corporations that they're all sneering at, working overtime to amplify them. You know, it's a little bit like some politician that you despise saying, I represent the people. He only represents his power in his microphone and his media, his vested electronic office.

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STRATTON: But let's look at the Stones in context. The Stones have stayed at the top, they're still the most interesting group playing together. They're all good musicians. Even the Beatles, as musicians, with the possible exception of George Harrison, weren't very exciting. Ringo Starr could never compare with Charlie Watts for drumming ability.

MAILER: Their drummer's incredibly good. In fact, I think their drummer's half of them. Because you've got all that caterwauling, you've got all those half-heard threats, that sense of sullen curses always riding in the background, you've got that sense of disarray, sense of mama with her nerves broken looking for her fix. You got all that. But what keeps it all together is you got this great big driving beat. That you can make anything you want. You can dream up a Third World coming through, Africa rising. There's a — the tension of the music is that one world's dissolving into a kind of marvelous — I mean, their comic gifts are superb. You really get this feeling of androgynous family, and androgynous family relations, like maybe it's never been done. All that's first-rate. I'm criticizing them at, you know, what I consider the highest level. But finally at the highest level, they are fucking disappointing. They depend on noise. You know, we listened to them not at top high. At middle high. And they don't make it.

STRATTON: Take a song like "Sympathy for the Devil." You have to go a long way — Bob Dylan's probably the only other one, plus some songs from the Beatles — you have to go a long way before you get lines as interesting in rock music as, "Just as every cop is a criminal and all the sinners saints."*

* © 1968 Abkco Music Inc.

MAILER: What's splendid, what's new about that? Dostoyevsky used to go into an epileptic fit he grew so bored with that notion.

STRATTON: Well, there's nothing new about it, but compared to most rock lyrics, the Stones have at least considered Dostoyevsky.

MAILER: I don't think these lyrics compare to Dylan's. I don't think they even try to — I think, in fact, I'd almost go the other way. I'd say that Jagger's lyric is interminably repetitive in order to allow for that captivating tension between the guttiness in his voice and the whine. To play that back and forth, you don't really want too good a lyric. Dylan's voice is thinner. At times I find it nasal to the point where I can do without it. There's something a little boring about a man who comes from a fine Jewish family in Minneapolis sounding like an Oklahoma Okie.

You know, Dylan is . . . not Johnny Cash. So I find that part of it a little boring. Dylan's voice is much less exciting to me than his lyrics, his lyrics are superb. Selden Rodman was the first to say this, but I think Dylan may prove to be our greatest lyric poet of this period. Like many another lyric poet, he can't necessarily read his own lyrics. With Dylan, what I think you feel is that it's the poetry that carries the song, not the singer.

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With Jagger, it's the reverse. Jagger has got this marvelous sense of the day in which a family breaks up. The son throws acid in the mother's face, the mother stomps the son's nuts in, and then the fat cousin comes and says, What is everybody fighting for, let's have dinner. And they sit down, the son has no nuts left, the mother's face is scarred, but they go on and, you know, British family life continues. Jagger's got that like no one else's ever had it. If he'd been a writer he would have been one of the best. But that marvelous quality isn't caught in the lyrics so much as in the ensemble of everything, sound, instruments, everything.

STRATTON: And his voice.

MAILER: His voice first.

STRATTON: I don't know if you can find another rock group capable of coming up with a song like "Sympathy for the Devil."

MAILER: "Sympathy for the Devil," I felt, was arch, and much too self-conscious. I couldn't quite catch the words and that's one of the things about Jagger that's always suspect to me. When you play on the edge of the articulation of words it's because you're trying to do two things at once. I did hear him at one point wailing about the Russian Revolution — that the Devil was there at the planning of the Russian Revolution and, you know, that's news. No good Christian ever thought of that before. That, I thought, was finally on the edge of the revolting. You don't, you know, you don't infuse a bunch of dumb, spaced-out, highly sexed working-class kids with a little historical culture while you're singing. Come on! I decided Jagger must have picked up a magazine article about the Russian Revolution the day before he wrote the words. But, you know, there's more profundity in "Eleanor Rigby" than there is in "Sympathy for the Devil."

I mean, there are a lot of vulgar plays in "Sympathy for the Devil," gay-aim for game. A lot of dull choices were made. I expected to be knocked down by "Sympathy for the Devil," and I wasn't. I think maybe it's historically significant. It may be the first song that invokes the Devil in I don't know when. You might have to go back to black masses in the Middle Ages to find a lyric that invokes the Devil. But that doesn't mean it's good any more than *The Exorcist* is. Which is to say, it's phenomenal as an index of the time. What impresses us is not how good the artist is, but that he's right at the place where people are going to react. So Jagger anticipated, just as Blatty did, that there's subterranean belief in the Devil about ready to emerge. Given any kind of encouragement, it comes charging through.

Which brings us to Satanism. The Satanism of shit at the highest level, the standard of Satan. It's his escutcheon. It's his flag. He says, You've been rejected, you've been wasted by the system, passed over, yet you are more redolent, more interesting, more sexy, more incredible, more funky, more filled with undeliverables that should have been delivered than anything they got going out there. And, for years, the Devil has fought a desperate uphill battle.

But by now, when we got those superhighways, with that gas, and the whole world's getting to look more and more like the Jersey flats, given modern life up front, the suburbs, the smell of the gas, smell of plastic in every home, carpets smell of the plastic and the kids grow up licking plastic, play with Play-Doh which has that smell between cheap perfume and deodorant; when you think of the prevalence not of death in every one of our phenomena but of the void — of the presence of void — in every aspect of successful life today, you travel first class on a plane which is an envelope presenting its concept of the void, get off that airplane into an airport which in turn presents its concept of the void or you go through a smog-filled superhighway to that city which looks like every other city, — Moscow, I hear, looks like Washington entering its terminal cancer . . . you then go out for your pleasures which are not as brilliant as they were in the depths of the boredom of the Victorian period; there's no such thing as a thrill for anyone alive any longer. You take all this, all this degradation of the void; because we all move around with a profound sense of degradation these days and under it there's the Devil calling, saying I'm shit, I'm everything that you've wasted, I'm all that rich, crazy passionate fuck guck funky possibility, I'm that other culture. And of course there's a profound desire to move over to that. Now, in this twentieth century where our senses, our souls, are being leached out, where we're all entering a void, the horror of modern life is that there is no horror. So we begin to wonder whether selling the soul to the Devil may not be a life-giving transaction. That's the underlying terror of modern life.

STRATTON: The Devil has always been associated with materialism. There was always, you know, the idea of the temptation of Christ with riches and the wealth of the world.

MAILER: That doesn't deny what I was saying.

STRATTON: So isn't it conceivable that what we might have done is, collectively, sold our souls to the Devil a long time ago; say in the beginning of the nineteenth century, before the Industrial Revolution?

MAILER: If we sold our soul to the Devil centuries ago in order to prosper materially, in this twentieth century we're not happy materially. We're not gorging like Romans. We are prospering electronically. And suffering materially in all the voids and stinks of plastic and pollution.

STRATTON: And lost our karma too, sold our karma along with our soul. We've sold our opportunity for transcendence. That's why we're terminal. You see what I mean? I think that if anything the Devil is winning. I think he's winning and I think he's gloating because he has more control at this point. I think he is the prince of this world.

MAILER: That's one idea I hold. What I pose against it immediately is that the Devil is also miserable, because finally the air conditioner is not the Devil's paradise.

STRATTON: True. But there are those other alternatives we may get into in the next twenty, thirty years, you know. That when people get sick of technology and air conditioners and all the sterile dead aspects of plastic, they're going to revert more and more to Satanism and to orgies, to bloodletting and to shit, all those things —

MAILER: All right. But ask yourself: All those things you're talking about, that you just named, are they equal to technology?

STRATTON: Are they equal to technology?

MAILER: Or are they the opposite?

STRATTON: The opposite.

MAILER: It seems to me you ought to have your Devil, just for the sake of this little matter, one place or the other.

STRATTON: Yes, I said that I think technology may be a tool of the Devil, a means to an end, the end being the complete leaching out of our souls.

MAILER: To drive people toward shit and blood.

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STRATTON: Right. Right. This is Satan's cunning. In a technological and spiritually starved society, he may gain complete control.

MAILER: Well, let me think about that. And have a drink.

STRATTON: Okay. Just to continue with this idea, it may be that technology is a transitional stage as far as the Devil is concerned. I've got to believe God is more opposed to the dead spirit of technology than the Devil would be. I think that the Devil may have said to himself, Well, it looks to me like the only way I'm ever going to win final control over mankind is to offer them all those things they seem to want most, material comforts, wealth, prosperity and lack of suffering, to eliminate suffering from the world. People don't want to suffer, they immediately reach for a pill, mother's little helper.

So, my notion, anyway, is that technology, science, pollution, whatever, is finally probably a tool of the Devil that is going to starve and deaden the soul to such a degree that man will reach out for the funkiness, then for horror — back to Charlie Manson.

MAILER: I think you're passing over too much. To begin with, there's no reason to equate science and technology any more than we put art and bestsellerdom together. After all, there's no reason to assume a bestseller is a work of art at a lower level. That may be a legitimate way to characterize a bestseller, or the opposite may be true, that a bestseller is the precise opposite of art, and to the degree the work is a bestseller, it is meretricious.

STRATTON: Technology may be the opposite of science, then?

MAILER: Well, I think there's much reason to believe that it is. Science, for most of its history, was essentially a poetic endeavor. Every Metaphor, if you stop to think about it, is an equation. If you say, "The sparrow is on the wing," that's a scientific remark, it's a way of saying that the center of essence in the sparrow is within the wing, the sparrow is *on* the wing. It's a way of saying that the sparrow exists in two manifestations at once, body and flight, just as light consists of waves and particles. The sparrow is on the wing. As you start to bear down on the language, you begin to feel the very vibrancy of the wing. The condition of being in two states at once. The sparrow is *on* the wing. You can fix on that point endlessly because it's a metaphor, an equation, a moment of balance. Originally, science had that quality, that its fundamental recognitions were, dare I say it? — poetic.

STRATTON: It was an art at that point?

MAILER: Absolutely an art. Technology is finally, I would suggest, a tradition, and a dull one. A statistical tradition. Technology derives from General Ulysses S. Grant, who said that if I bring enough men and enough ammunition to bear at one point on this line, and if I don't care how many troops of mine get killed, and I just keep pursuing this, if my ego is finally larger than any question that's presented to me, then I am obliged to triumph because I do not care. And he won.

Grant changed the nature of war. Before that, war always consisted of the obligation to win with a certain minimum of skill and grace. There was a code of war. Robert E. Lee subscribed to that code, he believed that you did not win battles at any price, that you didn't lose half your army to win a battle. Because at that point something dreadful would happen. Grant, having to contend with a miserable drafted army, people who did not want to fight the war — the Civil War as far as the North was concerned was not too unlike the war in Vietnam, in the sense that the troops had absolutely no desire to fight — Grant just kept putting in more and more bodies to blast their way through the noise.

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Now that's technology. Technology does not really care what happens in the aftermath, it wishes to succeed on this point. It does not even need to have theory in order to proceed, let alone art. It will push its way through. It is an ego manifestation, and — all right. There's nothing in this that says it's therefore opposed to the notion of the Devil. The Devil may indeed be ego. But we have to draw back just enough to ask ourselves one further question, and it comes up to me as follows. Where is God in all this?

STRATTON: Well, God may be the loss of ego.

MAILER: No, no, no. Face into technology. What's God's relation to technology? Do you believe in God?

STRATTON: Yes.

MAILER: Do you believe God is not dead at all? Is very much alive?

STRATTON: Yes.

MAILER: God, I would take it, knowing you fairly well, is a principle of some judicious mixture of courage and love?

STRATTON: Right. Absolutely. And harmony, a certain kind of harmony, a physical harmony with life and one's place in life and in the cosmos that is opposed to technology.

God, as far as I'm concerned, is mystery, and anything opposed to mystery, that tries to answer out all the mystery of life, is anti-God. Technology wants to eradicate mystery. I think at this point if God exists, He exists as a revolutionary, He's got to be a violent and passionate spiritual revolutionary, because He's out of grace at this stage, very much out of grace.

MAILER: Not out of grace. Out of favor.

STRATTON: Out of favor.

MAILER: Out of favor of what? The universe . . .

STRATTON: No, with mankind, with technological man.

MAILER: We still separate here. Because I think we have to face the possibility that technology is a third force, come to us from the cosmos. That it may have very little to do with God and the Devil.

STRATTON: May be separate altogether?

MAILER: Virtually separate. To go back to one of my oldest and firmest ideas, what if the universe is finally a series of conceptions which are at war with one another? And what we think of as God is only one conception of this universe, out there, at war with other conceptions? What if technology is an invasion of this earth from without? Because technology gives us no evidence whatsoever of having any sympathy for the nature of our world, nothing to do with our desires for an earth on which we can dwell.

STRATTON: No, certainly not. Its aim would seem to be to make the planet uninhabitable in the name of making us all more comfortable. What is a higher standard of living if we are all dying?

MAILER: Well, if at that point — you see — at this point we're reduced to speculation. Either the Devil invited technology here or, what I find more interesting, God entered into a dread compact. At a certain point he decided that Satan had so invaded affairs on earth that God could never begin to lead man up and outward to the stars. So some compact had to be made with technology. Technology, that spirit come to visit us from afar. If we dare to personify our divinities, there's nothing extraordinary about such speculation. Evil often triumphs, because good makes a mediocre compact out of some dire necessity. Where we're far apart is, I don't believe in an omnipotent God. I believe in a God who's like us only more so. Who has a vision of existence of which we are very much a part. Because we will either fulfill that vision of existence, or we will fail God.

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STRATTON: No, I can't agree. God is perfection. I don't actually believe in an omnipotent god as much as in a god whose nature is finally unknowable, as is perfection.

MAILER: The idea that the nature of God is unknowable, at this point, when the world's dying in the exudate of all its diseases, is a cop-out.

STRATTON: Not if you think of God in terms of a quality, a state of being toward which you're constantly trying to become closer, to get more in harmony with, as an ongoing struggle.

MAILER: You've been saying that you want to talk about drugs a little, and I think they're related to this question in a fashion. I think drugs bear the same relation to mysticism as technology to science.

We're coming to learn that most of the world's mystics, in one way or another, have or had their drug. The mystical societies most mystics have been revering for centuries did have, in one fashion or another, their drug ritual. So, it isn't so simple a matter as saying that if you take a drug then you're a technologist and not a scientist. It does mean that there is a use of drugs among mystics and mystical societies which was reverential, ceremonial, sacramental.

The use of drugs today, if we're going to employ an analogy, is again comparable to the war in Vietnam: If you have a great deal of money to spend and very few results to show, and if you can't find the enemy, well then, goddamnit, says Barry Goldwater, burn down the fucking foliage. Scorch those gooks, get them out of there. Denude the land and you will find what is there. That is what the allegedly best generation of our young are doing to their minds. They're saying, If I can't find the idea I was looking for yesterday, I am going to take twice as much tonight.

STRATTON: I'll take a thousand more mics of LSD and burn down the foliage of my mind.

MAILER: Burn down the foliage of my mind to find some of those ideas I can feel running around in there. It's a military operation, it's technological.

I don't think drugs are going to find God or the Devil. I think what they're going to create is the scorched earth of consumed karma. I believe, you know, that one has to be as reverential about drugs as about sex. The mark of an utter idiot, in my mind, is to find, let's say he's a man who falls passionately in love with a woman. He finds this divine cunt and he not only fucks the hell out of her but fucks the hell out of himself until his balls are as wet as gravel. You know, he is grinding his ass up over the stones to get in one more fuck for the ego. He's gone over. He is gassed-out, farted-out goose. That is our drug addict. That's what the drug addict is doing to mysticism. If God is a rabbit, the drug addict is trying to kill that rabbit with a thousand flails. All he's doing is knocking off his own toes. Not to mention the ricochet on his nuts.

In religious discussion, when we start to talk about this tripartite nature of the confusion, God, Devil and technology, and what is with whom, it may serve us to take one little look at cosmology today. One notion that the physicists presented to us about fifty years ago was the idea of the expanding universe. The galaxies were traveling outward. There's reason to decide that we live in a universe which expands and contracts. Curious, isn't it?

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More than that, a universe in which stars expand and contract. Stars exhibit red light in their spectrum and blue — red lights as they expand, no surprise to any of us humans, and blue as they turn cold. As they contract more and more, they turn black. They become the essence of matter, become so compressed, so black, that a star which was once a million miles in diameter is now two miles in diameter, a mile in diameter. It becomes so compressed that finally it is the size of your thumbnail and weighs more than the sun. At least, that is what cosmological evidence and theory has brought certain physicists to thinking.

At that point, there's a gravitational mass so intense that it pulls in everything to it. It pulls in light. Einstein delivered the general theory of relativity, which was that light would be bent by gravity. Indeed it was, as the famous experiment in 1921 or 1922, was it 1919? showed — that light from Mercury in an eclipse was bent by the sun. Now, when we begin to consider these wholly concentrated implosions of matter which have more mass than the sun, they must pull everything into them. Everything disappears. You cannot ever see these particular stars, which are called black holes in space, because everything goes into it, and comes out where, somewhere else. Hum?

Now there is a more curious model of the universe than we're used to considering. Now physics deals with notions of matter and antimatter. Is it so outrageous then to speak of death as having a life which has as many laws as life?

STRATTON: Existential states of death.

MAILER: Existential states of death. Exactly. We speak of the speed of light as being 186,000 miles a second and nothing can go faster than that. Except yesterday we were talking about, what if God is there to give a grace so speed can go faster? What if anti-matter lives on the other side of the speed of light? We live in a universe of such peculiar immensity and intimacy.

As we see more and more into these notions, the differences between the mightiest phenomena and the tiniest seem to have almost nothing to do with space. It's as if finally space becomes no more than our metaphorical incapacity to comprehend. Throw that out. It's rather as if space becomes no more than the measure of our inability to comprehend that every process, large and small, is without meaning as a process which is large or small in itself, because everything exists in its reverberation upon everything else. One atom, one most special atom, may have more significance than a star. So we inhabit a universe which is full with purpose. And therefore must try to create, or at least try to exercise, our profoundest notion of champions and villains, of enemies and new gods within it. Theology will yet probe more amazing than science.

That's where I would like to let this rest. That any view we take of technology has to deal with the principle, it is either a manifest of God or the Devil or some dissertation of purpose or malignity from that universe outside them which gives every suggestion of being a juggler's paradise. Because it can turn its pockets inside out. (1974)

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Existential Aesthetics . . . gl

An Interview with Laura Adams

2

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

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

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

MAILER: No.

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

MAILER: That was his view of it.

ADAMS: His view of it?

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

ADAMS: The Devil personified.

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

ADAMS: And Cherry?

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

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

MAILER: I think she's finally an enigmatic character. In my opinion, she's the weakest character in *An American Dream*. I think people who don't like the book have their strongest argument starting with Cherry. To a great degree, I'm afraid she's a sentimental conception. We don't really now much about her. We're asked to believe that this goodness exists in her but we don't have any idea of the real play of good and evil in her. She's a shadowy figure. Of course, my cop-out is that she's seen through Rojack's eyes. He's in an incandescent state of huge paranoia and enormous awareness. He's more heroic and more filled with dread than at any point in his life. So he comes in like a lighthouse in the fog. What else does one do in such a state but fall madly in love for twenty-four hours and lose the love? It would have taken more wit than I possessed to have made her a character of dimension under these circumstances. Perhaps she did have to appear as a sentimental figure. Still I think there's no getting around it, she's the first weakness of the book.

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

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

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

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MAILER: I would disagree. I'd had the experience of being in night clubs and thinking evil thoughts and really barbing them like darts and sending them to people and seeing them react. At the time I didn't know whether I was profoundly drunk or, you know, was I all alone in the world? But I had to recognize that there was a psychic reality to it. It wasn't just a fantasy. Since then, there's been any amount, my god, there's so much material now to indicate that this is not at all unreasonable. For one thing, we do have telepathic powers, we talk about the human aura, about the ability to send hostile vibrations, everybody uses that phrase, but, you know, if you can send a hostile vibration, which is to say, a hostile wave, why not employ modern theories of light and say hate appears not only in the form of a wave but also as a particle? If you can do it with light, you can do it with hate. In other words, send a damn particle into someone. Why not assume you can sting someone with a thought so concentrated that they'll turn around and rub the back of their neck? No, I invite people who are reading this interview to try it from time to time. It helps if you're drunk, of course.

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

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

ADAMS: Yes.

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

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

MAILER: Well, I notice it with a dial phone, too. The phenomenon is not only in the speed with which you dial, but the intensity with which you want to get that call through. It's almost as if there is something in the center of electricity that mocks us. I've felt this with all sorts of electrical phenomena. It's possible I'm more charged, have more electricity about me. I don't mean that as any agreeable or attractive condition, it's bound to be disagreeable, but possibly I could have more effect upon electrical instruments than other people, a little more effect, ten percent more, whatever. At any rate, to go back to *An American Dream*, my point is that there wasn't a single phenomenon in that book that I considered dreamlike or fanciful or fantastical. To me, it was a realistic book, but a realistic book at that place where extraordinary things are happening. I believe the experience of extraordinary people in extraordinary situations is not like our ordinary realistic experience at all. For example, one of the reasons I've never written about great prizefighters in a novel is that the experience they have in the ring is, I think, considerably different from what we believe it is. More intense, more mystical, more "spooky" if you will, than anything we see on the outside. Who wants to write about a fight the way sportswriters do, or even as fighters discuss it after the fight: "I was waiting to set him up with a good right. He dropped his guard and I popped him." That's the way they talk. Only, it isn't their experience.

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

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

ADAMS: But how literally does God exist?

MAILER: I believe He exists literally.

ADAMS: How?

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

ADAMS: Of course, it does.

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

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

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

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

MAILER: That's not my definition of existentialism. I'd say we find ourselves in an existential situation whenever we are in a situation where we cannot foretell the end. Some of these situations are grave. If you get into a skid on an icy road, at a speed that's uncomfortably high, you don't know if you're going to be able to pull your car out of it without a smack-up. That's an existential situation. When people talk about it afterward they think of that quality of time when it is slowing up. The first time people connect with marijuana — not the first or the twentieth time they smoke it, but the first time they *connect* with it — they're in an existential situation. It's not the universe they have been sitting on all the time. It's slower, more sensuous, more meaningful, more natural, but filled with awe. The light tends to have a little of the hour of the wolf, a light close to a lavender or purple, that light you get on certain kinds of evenings, or very early on certain kinds of dawns full of foreboding. But it's — there are all kinds of situations. A woman losing her virginity is in an existential situation. Of course, part of the comedy of twentieth-century technology is that it's gotten to the point where a woman can lose her virginity without being in an existential situation for a moment. It's all exactly the way she thought it was going to be, she's been so well oriented.

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

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

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

MAILER: Well, it could be said that all I'm doing is leading people back to Kierkegaard. I'd remind you I've written this several times: Kierkegaard taught us, or tried to teach us, that at that moment we're feeling most saintly, we may in fact be evil. And that moment when we think we're most evil and finally corrupt, we may, in fact, in the eyes of God, be saintly at that moment. It's a Dostoevskian, Kierkegaardian notion. Its first value is that it strips us of that fundamental arrogance of assuming that at any given moment any of us have enough centrality, have a *seat* from which we can expound our dogma, or measure our moral value. So we don't have the right to say Richard Nixon is: A. good; B. evil. I might have my opinion of Richard Nixon, but I don't have the right to say that man is evil, any more than I have a right to say he is good.