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Soundtrack Transcript of
Norman Mailer documentary:
"The Longest Ball"

(Munich, November 18-21, 1980)

Produced and Directed by Jeffrey Van Davis
Interviewer: Michael Lennon

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Sound Track Transcript "The Longest Ball,"
Jeffrey Van Davis Filmproduktion, Munich

Roll 1 Take 2

L: Norm, one critic of American literature and a friend of yours once described you as the Lon Chaney of American letters. I've always thought it was a good line. How over the years have you managed to keep out of the grove of one style, one mode? What do you attribute your ability to move from style to style and mode to mode to?

M: Well, I don't know if I can attribute it. You know I found that I was moving from one style to another. And writers are notorious guardhouse lawyers. They can re-write their case after it's been brought in. ^{and after...} In other words, a writer can always give you an explanation of why they are doing something after they have done it. ^{In retrospect, they're} They are splendid. So I can give you a lot of wonderful reasons why, ^{you know in which I've} the way I have developed my aesthetic by searching for new styles and new modes of expression and so forth ^{and} but I expect I could probably do that about as well as the next writer. But I really don't know. I ponder ^{it} this, why I keep changing my style. And I think, finally when you get down to it, there are two kinds of writers. There are writers who have a powerful sense of identity and the attraction of their work comes from that identity, coming into collision with a world which maybe moving in directions away from them. I think the greatest single example of that would be Henry Miller. All of Miller's work ^{Finally} for me consists of the world banging on Henry Miller and Henry Miller banging on the world. Hemingway too. Faulkner, Thomas Wolfe. Now

you get to people like Steinbeck and you ^{ve} get the reverse. Steinbeck kept changing his identity for every book he did. When I say changing his identity, he kept changing his style. *and to me* If you change your style you are changing your identity. I think there is that other kind of writer. I've named Steinbeck. I've named myself. We can figure a few more as we go along. Ed Doctorow, who I think is a pretty good writer, is a perfect example of that. And I think there are writers who find that as the world changes and as they change they are perpetually in search of their identity because their identity is a function of the change in the world and the change in themselves. And ^{it's} ~~it is~~ almost as if the act of writing is a different sort of act for them. There is a different, how to put it, the solution they find in writing, the attraction of writing, the benefits of writing, are different for them than they are for people like Hemingway or Miller.

L: Well how about an example sort of like, he's not a writer, but I'm think^{ing}/of Picasso. Picasso went through so many styles and it's been attributed by some, because of the new Picasso show in New York, they talk about his various marriages, his relations with his families, is that true in your case to any extent? Have your marriages, your relations with your families, has that had a major impact in some underground fashion, some shift in style or mode?

M: I remember reading some writer on Picasso. I forget who. It doesn't matter. May be it will occur to me later. Anyway, he made that point, that Picasso worked in a different vein

for every wife and of course it's true. And reading that I thought, well, I could say the same for myself up to a point. I've written a different kind of book with every wife and had a different style. And I think if you^{you'd} had been married as many times as I have you are a different man in each marriage. But on the other hand, the same is true of Miller. Miller was married many times but he did not change his identity.

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

M: I think some people are born with a very firm sense of identity, very clear roots. They know exactly where they came from and who they are and what they are and it^{it's} is the world that is mysterious to them. And I've always been one of those people who is very sensitive to the world and forever in the course of discovering myself and who I am and what I am. I remember I met John^h Erlichman after Watergate, and wrote something about it because Erlichman changed greatly from the days when he appeared before the Erwin committee. He was now very much like a rather gentle midwesterner, far westerner, I think he came from Montana or some place like that. He was teaching at Montana State and he had the air of a gentle, sort of radical college professor. You know a slightly wispy goatee and he was a little punched out but very nice, very decent. And the thing that struck me was how different he was than the way he had been just two years before. And he said, "Well I had an identity and I thought it was my own identity, and then when my life changed so drastically I realized it was not my identity but one that they had given me. They were no longer

referring to me as the same man they had been before. The Erlichman they were now talking to was a different man in their eyes and so I became different."

L: And he was cut off from the public identity, as I remember.

M: Yes, he was cut off from his public identity and he could never go back to it. And because he could never go back to it, his identity was changed force majeure, willy nilly. He had no choice. He had a new identity.

L: Well, I was going to say also you and Miller are both from Brooklyn and Miller has written some about his early life in Brooklyn. You've said your childhood never interested you very much. You didn't really want to write about it. Could it be that you had no sense of reacting against your childhood the way Miller did? He was reacting against that German, bourgeoisie family he was brought up in. He thought it was idiocy. What did he say, "my family were Nordic, which is to say idiots." ^{But} Of course, you have had close ties with your family, always in Brooklyn. You still live there. But you never were reacting for Brooklyn, ^{or} against Brooklyn or anything like that. So maybe you were freer to move than Miller, in a sense?

M: Well, I was close to my family. I didn't have to break away from my family. I never had a sense of fighting my way clear. In fact, if there was anything with the outside world ^{that} it was tougher than the inside world. Maybe there ^{is} the difference right there. That is, the first major difference,

is someone like Miller, I think, had to establish his identity very early in life. Because if he didn't he would have been destroyed, more or less, or ^{his} ~~a~~ larger part of him would have been ruined for any kind of a serious effort later in life. *So very early*

in life -- I ^{think} know this is probably true for people who grow up in hostile families--that they establish their personalities very early. *and* There is a rock-hard quality to the personality that does not shift. Hemingway's family life was subtler and would take much more penetration. *I mean, after all* And we have to assume that what Miller is saying about his family is true too. His mother might have been much more loving than he presents her. A lot of women have complained over the years that Miller was pretty harsh about, you know, their relationship with him had been a lot nicer than the way he had wrote about it. Miller tended to be cruel "after the fact." But all right, let's take it at its face value and see, assume, ~~if~~ it was like that and that would have given him a rock-hard identity. Hemingway had subtler problems, but nonetheless he had to establish his identity. I grew up in a world where really I was cultivated. I was cultivated in the sense that my mother and father treated my sister and myself as very important people. We were the center of their universe and so it was the outside world that was difficult. You know, go out in the street and you know if you didn't have friends you get beaten up. It was as simple as that. And so I was always terribly alert to the outside world. I took the inside world for granted. And I was free to indulge myself too, to change from one personality to another.

L: The way you describe it, if you look at the production, that's a crude way to put it, but look at the amount of work you have produced, this flexibility that you talk about, your production is as great as any American writer I think. The number of important major works you've written, serious works that were not just done offhand, casual stuff, it's probably up to Twain. It may be close to Faulkner. I don't know who is a head in literary production, who's counting. But nevertheless you passed Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Wolfe, Steinbeck....

M: Isn't Joyce Carol Oates ahead of all of us?

L: Joyce Carol Oates is ahead of everyone. That's true. And she will always be ahead if she keeps writing at this pace. But she puts out those books pretty quickly. I don't know how many of them are going to last as long as yours. Nevertheless, something in your career has allowed you to continue to... has the change itself, the shift in change, has that been a function, is that one of the reasons why you produced so much over the years, that you never have got locked in any one mode? Jeff and I were counting up and we came to something like 27 books, a couple of them are re-cycles but there is pretty close to that.

M: Isn't it really more like 21 or 22?

L: Well not if you count The Idol and The Octopus, The Bullfight, Short Fiction. If you knock off about 5, it's about 22, 23. And still, that is a tremendous production in thirty years.

M: It's more than thirty years, thirty-two years. Well, if you are making your living as a writer there is nothing

remarkable about that. You've almost got to put out a book every year-and-a-half if you're going to stay alive.

L: Well if you consider though that the novel you've been working on for so many years, a mammoth work, is going to be appearing in the next 5 to 6 years over a period of time, you've got to be talking about a tremendous expansion, a production right there. I mean that book alone will equal what Thomas Wolfe wrote in a life time.

M: No, well, that book is a long way from being done. I mean I've got about two-thirds of the first book written. And the first book will be almost as long as The Executioner's Song. Now if the other two are equally long, which they may not be, then we're talking about an awfully long piece of work. But that may be fifteen years off too because those long books take forever to write. They do because you get into...they have to grow, you have to grow with them. It's the oddest...you know I have the oddest relation to this book I've been doing about Egypt. For the sake of those who don't know about it I've been writing a book about Egypt, as you know well, that's Egypt in the Twentieth Dynasty, the reign of King Ramses the ninth, about 1130 BC. This book now has eleven hundred pages of manuscript. And I started in 1971. And I keep writing it and then I leave it to do another book and then I go back to it. And it's become really like...my dearest wife. I mean this is the wife I can leave for two years at a time and I come back and all it says is, "Oh hello, good to see you again."

L: What's it like coming back to it after something as major as The Executioner's Song?

M: Well I didn't go back to it. I did another book in between.

L: You did the Marilyn book, the "Elegance" book. Well, those two books ought to give some kind of a turn to your perception. Are you expecting that in coming back to it you're going to have a completely different relationship because you've grown and changed in those years?

M: Well no, but since then I did go back to it. I wrote Of Women And Their Elegance then I went back to the Egyptian book and I've written a good bit on it, maybe another 75,000 words since I've gone back to it. I'm about a year away, a year of hard work away from finishing it.

L: You've compared many times the life of a writer to the life of a monk, the life of a boxer. You've used many metaphors to describe it. And I came across Samuel Johnson's description of a writer the other day and it was, when asked to describe a writer, he said, "toil, envy, want, the patron and the jail." And I wondered, how would you describe the writer's life? What metaphor, boxing, monkish labors, the existential feat of looking at that blank piece of paper every day...how do you think about writing when you think of it abstractly, when you look back on the craft of writing?

M: Well there is one word that always comes to mind...is sanction. Because to write you have to be able to give yourself the sanction to write. Or something in yourself has to

give you the sanction to write. There's a moral judgment always in writing. One is assigning values to the lives of others, no matter how. When you take the meanest piece of small criticism in a weekly magazine, or something like the Village Voice, let's say, somebody is writing about someone else. They're lifting them up or they're putting them down. That's a large act. And even if you're doing it in fiction, you're attempting to affect your reader's brain. We write to influence others. And so to do that you have to be in command of yourself to a great extent. You have to feel that you have the right to do this. Now on the average day most writers don't even think about it, they feel they have the right and they're full of a head of steam and they're working. It's not the good days that you have to worry about although on the bad days, if you've been, if you've done something dumb the day before, or if you're embarrassed by yourself, or if you're profoundly depressed about yourself, or if you're put down seriously by friend or enemy the day before, or if you're having trouble with your mate or any one of a thousand things that can spoil your day and you go in the next morning, when you're a professional, the thing that makes professional writers and the reason there are finally so few compared to how many people there are of talent and write is the ability to work on a bad day is what characterizes the professional.

L: You've always said that you feel that some of your best writing comes out of your worse periods and that you sometimes have to go through the bends to really accomplish what you want. Aren't you suspicious of writing that comes out of....

M: I'm always a little uneasy when the writing comes too easily because there isn't that feeling of true grit--apologies to John Wayne. There isn't that feeling when it's very hard to write and you literally have to work yourself into that noodle of writing. You have to forge the will to write on a given day and you find if you do that day after day and I just find looking back on it, and I can't even tell you why, but on those days when I felt that it was going to be very hard to write and I had a hell of a time writing and finally did succeed in writing and the same happened the next day and the next and the next, each day I wrote against great resistance in myself and great depression after I finished writing, those had to be the best things I wrote. The Armies of The Night was written in a towering depression. I wrote it in 8 weeks, 7 weeks, and they were some of the worse weeks of my life. And I'd come home and think it was terrible every day and I think that there's some...I've never understood it, I've always felt that perhaps there's some, there's some...it's as if one doesn't trust oneself. You see, if I'd known that I was writing something that I now would say is as good as The Armies of The Night, if I had known that each day was that good, I would have gotten slightly manic about it. And when I get manic I'm useless to myself as a writer.

L: Then you start feeling Napoleonic?

M: Yeah, and I start telling other people how to live. Instead of doing it in the pages of the book I'd be doing it in my personal life. They'd be fighting back. There would be

explosions all over the place. You have to, I think one reason writers get depressed is that if the central or if the next-to-central figure in the family is depressed or powerfully depressed, put it more simply if the man or woman in the house is profoundly depressed at a given point, everything in the house tends to slow down and move on a steady keel.

L: You said that when you were writing Armies you had this terrible depression, you were feeling terrible, was this before or after? I mean what happened? You've explained this to me before. You've said all of a sudden in fooling around, trying to get started on it, you finally tried the third person and it worked for you. Didn't that, was that a release of some pressure?

M: No, it merely shifted the pressure. Of course then I began to worry. It seemed to me it worked, maybe it worked. On the one hand it seemed interesting, on the other hand it seemed a little odd. I remained uncomfortable with it for quite a period. I'd say I was half way into the book before I had gotten used to it. It took me longer to get used to it than any reader. And you may remember when you started reading the book it was a little funny in the beginning.

L: It was a shock.

M: And it was not all together agreeable for a while, that is, until the benefits of it began to be visible. It's a very funny way to look at oneself and we all do it.

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

M: Yes, by the time we were done with it, one missed it. In fact I missed it so much I kept going back to that in book after book thereafter. And it never worked as well again.

L: I think you said in The Fight that you were getting tired of that style, your wheels were starting to spin, tired of your own pronouncements and commentary, and you wanted to be a little...Well, I think you got more and more detached as you follow those books from Armies all the way through to The Fight. Is that correct?

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

L: Like a Stendhal hero?

M: No, no. Nothing like it. Nothing so large.

L: No, but still, all proportions noted, as you say, "up one day down the next." You had a success and you had a failure, you were on top of it, you were sick of yourself. That's a little bit like Julien Sorel, I think.

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

L: But still, you did say to yourself, "This could be the beginning of a guerrilla warfare in America." And if the war in Vietnam had not ended, it might indeed have been somewhat like it. You were prepared for that.

M: I was prepared to go to jail eventually. I had the feeling if things got worse and worse, and the war didn't end, at a certain point in time a lot of us who were marching on the Pentagon might end up spending a year or two in jail, at the least. And so we were all somewhat heavy-hearted marching on that Pentagon. Because it was a way of putting ourselves on record. But I still wouldn't compare that to Julien Sorel.

L: I always think of Armies of the Night as a nineteenth-century novel.

M: There is no sex in it. But it is a nineteenth-century novel. It's courtly, it's deliberate, it's amused with its time and its place. It entertains itself with the antics of its hero. The notion of personality is somewhat charming because it is taken for granted that these are all very fine and substantial people. When all is said they may be up to their shenanigans, but finally we know that it's all going to turn out well in the end. It has that restrained merriment of the early nineteenth century picaresque novel.

L: And you have an author who is commenting, who intrudes occasionally and sums up what's going to happen to our hero tomorrow. "Little did he know," little Thackeray touches.

M: And he virtually puts capitals on his nouns.

L: If Armies of the Night is a nineteenth-century novel, how would you describe Executioner's Song? What kind of novel is that? I mean, it's a novel.

M: I think Executioner's Song is a very conventional novel. Its fault is not that it is not a novel but that it is a very

conventional novel. There are people who would say "there are other ways to have done the life of Gary Gilmore. You chose the most pedestrian way of doing it."

Roll 3 Take 2

L: Wilfred Sheed once said, it might have been in an essay on you, that as writers get older, especially good writers, they continue to grow, change, take on new styles, but they may not necessarily keep up with what's going on around them. Have you felt any of that? Especially in the 70's?

M: Oh, I felt a great deal of it. The 70's are a blank for me, I don't know what happened in the 70's. I felt in close touch with the 60's, I thought I understood the 60's fairly well. Maybe in fact I even did. But in the 70's I just felt as if everything had gotten away from me. I didn't feel at all close to young people anymore. I remember I'd go out lecturing in the early 70's and didn't understand college audiences any longer. They seemed apathetic, where in the past audiences in the 60's would be reacting to what I was saying. The history of the 70's was a blank. Nixon, Ford and Carter made up a series of particularly dull presidents for me. People magazine, I think, was the greatest phenomenon of the 70's, it began to take over the country. Television certainly took over the country. I hated the 70's. I literally don't know whether my lack of touch with the 70's,... I mean I certainly had the feeling what Sheed was talking about that I'm getting older and in certain ways I'm getting better as a writer, but

I really know very little about the present. I don't know to this day whether it is my fault or the fault of the 70's. I don't think it's a decade that one can get tremendously attached to. It was like the 50's. If you fall in love with someone in the 70's, you might have sentimental memories that way, but certainly not for the period. On the other hand, The Executioner's Song I felt was very much a book of the 70's. But, of course, that was not a book that came out of my own imagination so much as from found material. In a certain sense it is a collage of found material.

L: You've also talked about in The Deer Park, and in other places, about "time dynamic and time potential." I try to connect that with some of things you've said about the 70's. The 70's were sort of a dead time. Time wasn't really happening. There was no movement in the country. Would you compare it to the 50's in that respect?

M: Except, yes, except it was worse than the 50's. My idea of an exciting time is when you have a time when people are ready to die for an idea. Then you have a vital time, a lively time, a dangerous time, a memorable time, a time that people hark back to in their memories. Then you have periods when people are not ready to die for any idea around. I think that is the operative definition of the 70's. There wasn't one idea that anybody would die for. Women's liberation was the most powerful set of ideas in the 70's and I have yet to meet the woman who is ready to die for her ideas with the possible exception of that woman who shot Andy Warhol. But

other than that, you know those girls were real tough, but none of them were dying on the barricades were they? In the 50's there were people who were willing to die for their ideas, but they were all patriots. They wanted to die in Korea, they wanted to die to fight Communism. They never knew what Communism was, never knew that Communism was just as benighted as American capitalism. They thought there was something wonderful about Communism and that it had to be fought because otherwise it was going to win everything in sight. They didn't understand that they were ^{the} same messed-up bastards that we are. Except that they had an even more oppressed system and were less able to do anything about it. But, I mean, people were ready to die to fight Communism in the 50's. In the 70's we didn't even have that.

L: You said if any decade could ever kill a writer, the 50's almost killed me. Now you're saying the 70's may have been worse.

M: Well I think the 70's almost killed America. Nixon's great crime in my mind was not Watergate. Watergate was the kind of crooked thing that any number... I'm certain when we learn the true history of our period, I'm sure every American president had operations going on under his nose, to some degree under his covert knowledge, with or without his covert knowledge, that would rival Watergate. When you have a powerful secret service like the CIA, as a powerful espionage agency, they are not going to sit around. You've got a lot of highly principled, highly determined, highly motivated men,

they're not going to sit around and do nothing. They have all the tools, all the apparatus, they have all the paranoia they need to go out and pull real capers. So of course that was being done under every president. I always felt the fact that Nixon was taken by Watergate, in other words, that it was a set-up and he fell into it. A trap was laid for him and he fell for it. But Nixon's crime in my mind was that he didn't end the war in Vietnam when he could have, which was in '68 or '69. He protracted it all those years. And that's one of the things that truly killed the country. The country morally had come to the recognition by '68 that the war in Vietnam had to end. When people go through a moral revolution and they decide that they want to move from bad conscience to good conscience, nothing is more punishing, more cruel and finally more likely to render that person apathetic than to have to make them wait for four years or for many years or a long period to carry out that act of good conscience. And that's what Nixon did to America. Merely to build his own fortunes. That was a lost cause. No matter when we pulled out of Vietnam, it was going to be a disaster. Everybody knew that. But he protracted it and protracted it and protracted it because he wanted to make himself look good for '72. His vast majority in '72 came in part because of the four years he spent getting out of Vietnam.

L: Do you think then that the 80's, after the dead time of the 70's, do you think we are going to have the same kind of counter-culture, reaction against the establishment that was

there, although it never really got anywhere, in the 50's?

M: Well I hope not. I mean I hope we get into something much more profound and serious. The time to cut up our little moves and have our fun with the establishment--"Look at that establishment, isn't it funny, ha, ha" is long gone. What the establishment has done, because with the exception of a few years in the 60's, they've really been unchallenged. I'm talking now about the corporate establishment of America. We suffer from it in a thousand ways. We suffer from it with the most hideous architecture in the history of the world. This architecture has been exported. It doesn't matter which major European city you go to. For that matter you can go to New Delhi or Moscow or I'm sure you can go to Peking very soon and you'll find the same hideous buildings. They speak of the very emptiness of emotional, human and spiritual content of the 20th century, those buildings. They speak of the fact that we don't have craftsmen any longer the way we used to, that we don't have people who are serious about the environment that provide for the people who are living among them. They speak of the adulteration in aesthetics.

L: So all the counter-culture of the 60's didn't really make a dent in that?

M: It certainly didn't make any effective dent in the onward movement of the corporation. The corporation has become more and more powerful, more and more prevalent. It controls more and more. It fills our life with... it adulterates and lowers the standard of living. We used to have roads where people

could travel down those roads, first on foot and by horse, then by carriage and finally by car. They could have an interesting trip. Now we still move down superhighways, but we're virtually carried down these superhighways. They're monotonous. Even the most beautiful landscape is rendered monotonous by a superhighway. We build these buildings that are absolutely faceless, without decoration, without character, with flat roofs. We adulterate our food. The average food, not only in America by now, because we export this crap, the average food all over the world is becoming more and more tasteless, more tortured.

L: TV.

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

L: So when you said back sometime in the 50's, "There's a shit storm coming." The shit storm hasn't really...

M: There wasn't enough of a shit storm. Finally the storm never reached the working class. The Marxists talked all that time about the working class being reached. The working class was never reached. And of the reasons they were never reached is something that nobody ever talks about much. But, in fact, the working class has worked for the corporation and the corporation proved more adaptable than anyone expected. The corporation realized, because of Marx, because of Marx's message,

the corporation could also read and they decided that the real danger was in the working class and the one thing they were going to be certain of is that the working class was made part of corporate life and they were.

L: Jerry Rubin is now working for them.

M: Well he's working on Wall Street. He's still an individual entrepreneur, heh!

L: I lost a little respect for him when I found out he was an investment banker. But the unions certainly have been tied in for a long time. They're wired right in, the UAW's wired right in to the corporation. I can see what you mean by that.

M: No, they all are. They were coopted.

Roll 4 Take 1

L: Norman, in 1964 you suggested the election of Barry Goldwater might sharpen and clarify the conflict between right and left. Do you think the election of Reagan might have the same effect?

M: I think it's going to have a lot of effect on the left. I hope it will, it should. When we talk of the left, I'm not talking of the extreme or ultra left, I'm talking really about the liberal left, that is the left wing of the Democratic party. I've felt for a long time that liberalism is absolutely bankrupt in America. I think it was trying to do something, let's say from Roosevelt on, that was unique in human affairs.

Which is all human society up to that point had been built more or less on the idea that everything in the society contributed toward bringing the surplus to the top. So that if people were going to waste resources, it would be the people at the top who would waste the resources. In other words, the people at the top would work less than their share. All societies were built on that whether they were monarchies, whether they were early bourgeois republics, that was the way it was done. Then the Soviet Union came along and there was an attempt to do the reverse of that. If there was going to be anything wasted, it would be wasted ideally in giving a great deal to people who were totally underprivileged. That lasted for a year or two and then they very quickly went into a system where again the higher you rose in the society, the more you got of what Marx called surplus value but what I would call waste--you know, excessive emoluments.

Now when liberalism came along, that is, the New Deal liberalism of Roosevelt, what it attempted to do was to not only take care of the top, which they didn't really try to do too much to, but also to pay off the bottom, to lubricate the bottom, to give a share of this surplus, this waste to the bottom. Let's say since the Second World War, and particularly since, the blacks began to achieve some of their liberties, out of the great guilt many Americans felt from what had been done to black people for two hundred years or more, a decision was made to ameliorate the black condition. A large part of the surplus began to go down to the blacks

and this surplus that went down to the blacks was not a tenth of the amount that is being wasted still at the top. But America had become the first society on a major scale that attempted to pay off the top and the bottom allowing the middle to support this. Now the middle had no cause for complaint. Because they had chosen the middle, they had chosen the middle because the security was there. But in fact the onus of paying for this was on them. So it created vast resentment toward the bottom. Given the nature of corporate capitalism, most of the efforts in the communication media kept people from being able to recognize at all that the true enemy was still at the top. All the resentment was focused down toward the bottom. Corporate capitalism succeeded, I believe, in convincing Americans that the Democratic Party was wasteful, that they were supporting people who didn't work, and that was very true. There were a lot of people in black areas who were not working, who were ripping off welfare. But they weren't a tenth of the patch of people who were ripping off American society at the top. When you take the incredible waste in American society from the top right down to the middle, in terms of all the needless work and waste and spending that goes into all our products that don't need it, like soap. Like automobiles that are interchangeable. When we think of the costs of products today, do we realize how much that just goes into the waste of surrounding these products with romantic and sentimental appurtenances that they're not entitled to. You know/^{we}don't have to love our soap. Maybe we have to love our automobile,

but we certainly don't have to love any number of basic products that have no quality to them because the money that could go into increasing the quality, goes instead into competing with other producers to have more public relations, more advertising, more communications, more air in the product. Given all this, what I'm trying to get toward is that the left, the Democratic left, has to take a long look at what their programs have been. Because historically what is true is that the blacks were getting payoffs. In effect, there was no real attempt to administer welfare in any serious fashion. But that on the contrary, there was a tacit agreement between Black Power and liberal power. Which is, "You guys keep the ghettos relatively quiet and the money will keep coming in." And the American public threw that out. The largest resentment they felt for the last ten years, it's been building all through the 70's, is those blacks are getting away with murder. They are not working and they're getting too much of what we do. Reagan came in on that wave. What the Democratic left now has to do is to start looking at the nature of the problem and how to solve it.

Roll 4 Take 2

M: You know when I was running for mayor in '69, a lot of people took us aside and said, "Look, welfare is the biggest single problem in New York. The blacks are ripping off welfare. Why don't you go up there and talk to some of them because if you can work out something with them that looks like it

makes a little sense, that's your best chance to show people you're serious that you are doing something the other candidates are not doing. Maybe you'll have a chance to draw a lot of votes and get into real contention." So Breslin and I went up to Harlem and met some mothers who represented a Harlem welfare organization. I remember one black woman got on and she said, "Mrs. Richbucks over on Park Avenue, she says I'm taking my welfare check and I'm riding around in a Cadillac and you know what I say, I say 'fuck her.' My Cadillac is five years old and I have a lot of trouble meeting the payments on it and she's riding around in a brand new Cadillac." She went on with this thing and said, "Mrs. Richbucks over on Fifth Avenue says I've been married three times and I got 18 children and I'm drawing welfare for each one of them and I only got 13 children and I'm ripping off the government and I say, 'fuck her.' I may be lying about that five children, but I got the other 13 to take care of and I have been married three times. Mrs. Richbucks over on Fifth Avenue she don't have to get married because she's got lovers all over the place and furs and diamond rings." She went on and on like that and finally she glared at me and she said, "Look, we want our share of the waste." And I thought, "Madam, your argument is unanswerable." I walked out of there and I came back to headquarters and I said, "Fellows, we got no welfare program." Because I knew it was absolutely true. We weren't going to have a welfare program. We weren't going to be able to go in there and say to the black people, "Please stop

taking things that you are not entitled to." And they would look at us right back and say, "We're taking what we're not entitled to and what about the rich people at the top who are taking ten times as much?" I think that this is the key problem that ^{the}Democratic ^tparty has got to face. Which is that they are truly interested in having a country in which everybody has equal opportunity or something roughly approaching that. To get to that point, we've got to re-think every single aspect of American politics and American life. We^{'ve} got to start thinking radically, but not in the old radical way of "Let's rally the workers." I mean that is crap beyond crap by now. It's as if America is one vast, middle-class consumer nation. Things failed in the 60's because finally what you had were middle class troops. So the revolution wasn't large enough, it wasn't thought out and was hysterical because these middle class troops were terrified by being put in jail, beaten up, killed. Four of them finally were at Kent State. Here, in the 80's, what we've got to do is truly try to get into some absolutely new ways of looking at politics.

L: Do you think Reagan might be a trigger?

M: I think...Let's leave Reagan to the side for the moment. Apart from whether Reagan is a good president or a bad one, I can see where Reagan conceivably could end up being not that bad a president in the sense that if the American economy, which is most mysterious, doesn't keep getting worse and worse, ^{if it} as I think it will, but/starts taking some real turns for the better, and certainly if Reagan goes into heavy armament

spending, we're going to have a false prosperity for a period, although with a lot of inflation, but nonetheless I can see where Reagan might seem no worse than Eisenhower. There might be a relatively benign administration for four years. I suspect it's going to be much worse than that because I don't think he can do it. I think the economy is going to get worse and worse. At that point to fight the inflation he is going to start cutting off aid to the cities.

L: Something has got to mobilize the left of the Democratic Party.

M: I think there is a period of a year or two where the left really ought to look at what's going on in American life. I think there are new ways to go at it that haven't even been tried. For instance, I think it would be marvelous if somebody came along and said they were running for the President on a single tax program like the old Henry George program. Except it wouldn't be on land. They would say there would be no income tax, no state tax, there would be just one tax. We'll tax just one thing. Plastics. The happiness that would send through American life.

Roll 5 Take 1

M: You'd have people who would come around and say, "I love plastics." My nightmare is that maybe by now 70 percent of the American public love plastics, that they would fight to the death for the right to use plastics. So the next point that I'm making is that you would have to have referendums on this.

Why not have people vote on what they want their taxation to consist of.

L: What would the options be?

M: I don't know. In other words, you might have to do a great deal of exploration to find out what it is that people detest the most. My guess is that if you really started asking Americans what things they detest most in the life around them, you would find that it's plastics. Now if you found that, then you could really start a large campaign to put a heavy tax upon plastics. So that at a certain point plastics would begin to disappear. Which means that the quality of life would begin to improve. Because there is no question in my mind that plastics debase the quality of life. You can be a wealthy man living in a wealthy house, but if everything in your house is made of plastic, you're living in a cold tomb. It's a repellent tomb. It's far more repellent than living in a tomb that's made of marble. You're living in a tomb of artificial marble. At a certain point if you kept taxing plastics and nobody wanted them, plastics would disappear out of human affairs. We would be in another era. Now at that point you might say what would you get the tax from next? Television. Tax television sets to the skies. At this point--obviously what I'm getting at is you'd have to start voting. The nature of political campaigns would be that you would have the party that wished to put the brunt of taxation on land, or on corporations, or on frozen foods. The ecologists at that point, instead of being people who are

essentially hamstrung and effectively politically wiped out because they are dependent upon something that ecologically is odious--which is large powerful government. Large powerful government is by its nature antithetical to real ecological needs. But yet the ecologists are caught in the paradox of having to appeal to government always to enforce actions against the corporations. If instead of depending upon government, if the people have the instruments with which to vote against those elements in the ecology they consider onerous and have those be the elements that are taxed most highly. Those elements would begin to disappear without government intervention. Merely because they would be priced out of the market. What you could have then is a purification process that might be able to run through all of American society. I think American society at this point is absolutely glutted with all kinds of wasteful actions. In other words there is a certain point what could you put the taxes on? Any product that advertises itself would have to pay a higher tax than a product that doesn't advertise itself. Which would open up all sorts of opportunities for small business. What I'm getting at finally is that the left would do well to look into is that instead of paying lip service to small business, which the Democratic left has been doing, and then opting immediately for every big government solution they can find, if they recognize that big government is truly the enemy, that just because corporate capitalism is saying that big government is the enemy, doesn't mean that corporate capitalism is wrong.

They can be right about something too. And the one thing they're right about is that big government is the enemy. So is corporate capitalism. But the Democratic left could be begin to form around the concept that the economy and the country has got to be flushed out of its waste.

L: Reagan's going to increase the glut. He's going to give big business their way.

M: Oh, I think he is an open invitation to big business to take more of a grab. He didn't get in because he's a true conservative. He got in because big business saw him as the best boy to give them even more, a richer part of the pie. It staggers me how corporate capitalism, big business, is endlessly greedy. They're even greedier than they need to be for their own good.

L: Well, he had big business behind him. He also had a lot of fundamentalists, the Moral Majority; that's another strain. He doesn't know how greedy they are compared to big business.

M: I don't think they are greedy, I think what they feel... There's the strain of right and proper living on the one hand and individualism on the other. The Bible in your left hand and your gun in the right hand. That we don't have to get into. I think that finally is going to be a strain in American life right down to the end. I think America could go through fifty-eight changes and yet at the end of it you would still have a powerful trenchant minority who held to the Bible and held to the gun.

L: Teddy Kennedy is the one that's going to be the titular ruler now of the Democratic Party.

M: I think there is some possibility that he will be open not necessarily to these ideas I just expressed, but that he will be open to new solutions. Because liberalism as such is dead. I think it's true that if Teddy Kennedy had gotten elected with the program that he was arguing for and had attempted to carry it out, he would have had to increase inflation at a great rate. He had to be aware of the problem and I think he felt if he could get elected he could deal with it because he could bring good people in. Nobody should ever expect a politician to be held accountable for the ideas he runs on. Some marvelous politician once said that if politicians only offered the electorate those programs they could carry out, nobody would ever get elected.

L: Do you think Kennedy is flexible enough to really listen to new solutions? The Democratic Party has always been feuding. I have no faith in the Democratic Party to get together and forget the New Deal.

M: Well it's the only party we've got.

Roll 6 Take 1 Boat on Königsee

L: Gilmore wasn't probably as aware of the inner negotiations of evil as Faye was. I mean Faye knew what he was doing.

M: Yes, well, Gilmore in a certain sense is a simple fellow. The French are so impressed at how complex he is, and how intelligent he is. It's interesting, they've got such a low view of criminals, even despite Genet, that they are truly impressed with Gilmore. I mean, if you compare Gilmore to Genet, Gilmore is a clod.

L: But the French have a great love of criminals too. They love Poe, Baudelaire, anybody with a criminal mentality.

M: Yes, well it's such a regularized society. I mean Paris is so safe I can't tell you. I can't remember being in a city where the feeling of being secure is so great that it's boring.

L: Like Munich?

M: Yes, but Munich is not a big city the way Paris is. Paris is congested. There's an opportunity for rising tempers in Paris. Everybody is so pressed together and yet it is so relaxed.

L: Not like in New York?

M: I mean New York has such an impact. And people are always sliding off people. You walk down the street and you can have ten eye encounters a day that pushed to their limit could get bad.

L: But that sense of dread and excitement that you get in New York city, you don't have that in Paris?

M: No.

L: The feeling that you don't know what's going to happen in the next bar or around the next corner, that's not there in Paris at all?

M: I never felt it. But then, of course, I'm not a bar hopper in Paris. Who could afford to be a bar hopper at six bucks a throw? I guess it's not that bad. It's cool if you're buying your own drinks. But what if you're buying two other people's drinks? Or pick up the tab for a party of four?

L: Aren't there any local bistros?

M: You have to drink the local juice. Cognac is awful tough to take for a night.

L: Vin ordinaire?

M: It can be good, but I'm not a wine drinker. Anyway I am not a drinker any longer. I have to keep reminding myself.

L: That's the strangest thing that you've stopped drinking. You haven't really measured the impact of not drinking upon your writing habits yet?

M: No. I've said this to a few people. But not drinking is peculiar because I've never been psychoanalyzed. But I have a feeling that when you stop drinking after drinking for thirty years as I have, it's the next thing to being psychoanalyzed. Because my idea of myself keeps changing everyday and I'm relocating my personality. It's as if I'm remaking my personality. So that I'm much more adaptable in certain ways and I'm more resigned in other ways. Precisely what happens in psychoanalysis.

L: But you've been remaking your personality for years.

M: Yes, but at least I have some touch with the old identity. As if there were a roadmap in my mind. Now I feel as if a helicopter picked me up and has deposited me in a new place. Now everyday when I travel, all I'm doing is leaving this new point of departure and going back to it. The next day I travel in another direction. So it's as if instead of traveling I'm now reconnoitering--if we're going to use a metaphor on how I feel about the shift in identity. It's a most peculiar sensation.

L: Can you compare it to when you were fasting? When you were fasting, you told me that you were getting new ideas about yourself all the time. Your body was changing, being flushed out.

M: Yes, but fasting was boring. I never really had anything remotely resembling a spiritual experience when I fasted. When I fasted for twenty days, the most salient event was a terrible attack of the gout.

L: You need forty days.

M: No, that was twenty. Oh, you need forty days? They say something like thirty is the... Twenty miles into a twenty-six mile marathon you hit the wall, they say. So somewhere about day thirty you go through a set of spiritual changes, but I wasn't interested in that. I was interested in losing weight and that worked. But it was boring. Letting my head idle, it was a great rest for my brain. I didn't have a thought for twenty days, except occasionally I think of food.

L: What was your impetus to quit drinking?

M: I don't know. I wanted to lose some weight and I saw a four-day diet and I started it. The diet worked. I lost seven pounds in four days and I hadn't had a drink for four days and I felt fairly good. So I thought I won't go back to drink because I'll put the pounds right back on. After about three weeks I realized I liked being without booze. It was probably the first time in thirty years I hadn't been drinking and life was interesting. Certain things were better than they had ever been. Things that were important to me were better than they had ever been. My personal life felt smoother and nicer and richer, oddly enough, to use that awful word. That word that covers a multitude of sins. I kept not drinking and after awhile it got to be truly interesting in terms of numbers. I hadn't had a drink for three months, I hadn't had a drink for four months. Now I think I'm probably calculating not to have a drink for a year. And then maybe go back and get drunk once a week or something.

L: I'm interested in the relationship to writing. You've done some writing since you've stopped drinking.

M: Yes, but mostly editing. Not the kind of writing where you are in it day after day. Slogging away. I have the feeling I may be writing better than I ever have. I hope I will. And if this is true, if I'm writing better than I ever have before, more energy than I've ever had before, then I'm going to maybe never go back to drinking.

L: Is there a chance though when you're not drinking and you're writing that you're just going to be on a plateau?

M: It is boring if it is a plateau. You're usually best off when your inner state is the opposite of what you're writing about. If you're writing about events of great violence and soul suffering, you don't have to do it the way Dostoevsky did. You're better off almost if you're writing in a great calm. I've found that. You get psyched up to a certain intensity while you're writing. It comes out of the nature of working when you are writing. Writing is always intense because you're living in the panic that you're going to forget the next thought. That's intense enough.

L: So it's a certain kind of calm because you've also said that when you're depressed you do a lot of good writing.

M: Yes, I like to work in a mild depression and lift out of it just long enough to get the writing done. Then sink back into that depression. I find that if I have to write for a month or two on a long stretch of a novel, that I get more done that way than any other way.

L: You've written when you've had hangovers, no doubt?

M: No, I can't if the hangover is too bad. I never wrote on booze. I knew when I'd finish writing, I'd have the reward. The reason I might not be able to do serious writing without drink is that there would be no reward at the end of the day. That's the trickiest part of not drinking. It's fascinating.

L: You did do that famous last sentence of The Deer Park.

M: That was on mescaline.

L: And that was a gift?

M: The sentence? Yes, I have the feeling that it wouldn't have come without having taken the mescaline. Of course it didn't do the book any good. Generations of readers by now have said, "What the hell does he mean by that idiotic last line: 'Sex is time and time is the connection of new circuits?'"

L: It's a line to be pondered. I've pondered that line for years.

M: I suspect it's my heritage that two hundred years from now, that the equivalent of electronic engineers will discover the nature of time and lo and behold it's the connection of new circuits, and at that point they'll take my old moldy grave and levitate it three feet above the ground shine the equivalent of a few laser beams on it and everybody will look at their television sets and say, "Oh, yes, that was a very wise old man two hundred years ago."

L: What's mescaline like? I hear that it puts you in a sort of primeval state? People have told me. I have never had it.

M: Primeval is the word. I felt blissful for about a half hour. I felt true bliss; I know what true bliss is. I felt absolutely relaxed and my spirit was rosy. I felt washed in the tenderest waters of sex. Although I wasn't in any kind of sexual act at the time. I felt that wonderful tenderness. It was a nice feeling like after lovemaking has been truly happy. It was of that order but far beyond it. You could hear a chorus of angels' voices, as Collie Munshin says. I love that line of Munshin's: "I hear a chorus of angels' voices, only not full of shit."

L: He was one of your great comic characters.

M: Well, Collie to the side, the thing is on mescaline that was the feeling for a half hour. And then it went away. The worst hangover I've ever had in my life followed. It was so bad I'll never go to mescaline again. I don't want that bliss if I have to pay for it with a three-day hangover. I felt as if my liver had been kicked around by a platoon of marines. As if my liver had become a football.

L: Is that when you went to Mexico and your liver was bothering you badly?

M: It was in that period. It was after I came back from Mexico and my liver had been recovering and I guess that mescaline wiped it out again for a three-day period. It was just the most awful... Now I hadn't done anything, you understand, but I felt like dirt. I felt the way somebody who's respectable would feel if they had been in a truly sordid orgy and woke up with flashes and images of all the things that happened. Except in this case, it was soulful in the worst sense of the word. I was full of the damage I had done my soul. I was very aware, I'm not often aware that I have a soul as such, I was very aware that I did during these three days of the hangover that followed the mescaline. I felt as if I outraged eternal things in myself. I was profoundly depressed. I've never been as depressed in my life.

L: When did the line come? The one in The Deer Park?

M: Oh, in the beautiful half hour.

L: You were thinking about the book?

M: No, I wasn't thinking about the book. The book had been on my mind and I felt a last line somewhere in the offing and didn't have it. I remember I used the line, something about "the tree of a pencil and the bed of a notebook." I remember reaching over as if I were reaching a great distance and picked up a pencil. That was very difficult. It was very unbeautiful to pick up this pencil. And I picked it up and brought it over. My notebook seemed, to be vulgar about it, like a kingsized bed. And this great tree of a pencil came down. And I wrote each word as if I were discovering how to write. It was so marvelously portentous.

Roll 7 Take 4

L: The architecture looks a little strangely Russian, doesn't it?

M: Actually, if you had mescaline in you, that marvelous church with those two onion balls probably would look like a suburban ranch house in Scarsdale. Or the Taj Mahal?

L: Like the Taj Mahal more likely. I'm assuming that mescaline always improves things.

M: Always improves.

L: Well, it's a scene that Emerson could appreciate, or Thoreau.

Roll 7 Take 5

L: You know Aristotle said that the only sure sign of genius was the ability to create great metaphor.

M: I'd say the ability to create great metaphor indicates a

sound talent, a large talent, but not genius. Although, I don't know. Metaphor is an equation. When you say I see God in the yellow, you're saying God is equal to the yellow in this painting. That's an equation. Maybe great metaphors show the ability to see extraordinary relations in nature. At least they give evidence of a penetration of genius into the mystery. I think a good way to approach the idea of genius is how far into the mystery of things do you penetrate? Certainly one measure of genius is always the difficulty of the achievement. I don't think you can point to a genius who had an easy achievement.

L: Freud might appreciate that thought. A penetration into the unconscious.

M: I haven't thought of Freud today, but you know we are virtually in his bailiwick, aren't we? Just a mile or two from Austria?

Roll 8 Take 1

L: Norman, Alfred Kazin has that marvelous metaphor about your style. He said you're as fond of your style as an Italian tenor is of his vocal chords. But if he were talking about a book like Executioner's Song, the metaphor wouldn't work because your style has changed so much. You've moved from mode to mode and nobody can seem to find a metaphor to match it.

M: I think on The Executioner's Song they could have said, "Mailer is as fond of his style as a marathoner is of his legs."

Roll 8 Take 2

L: Can you think of a metaphor that would somehow capture the enormous number of shifts and changes in your style over thirty years of writing?

M: No.

L: There isn't one to capture it?

M: I don't have one at my finger tips.

L: I don't think any of the critics do either. A great difficulty trying to capture you. As soon as they think they've got you in a metaphor, you're off on something new. Has this got anything to do with your personal life? The changes in your own life? I'm thinking of Picasso's life.

Roll 8 Take 3

L: Norman, you have said many times that you are looking forward to the age of 60. What kind of threshold is that for you?

M: I don't think it is the threshold that appeals to me so much as that I hate the sound of 50. I've always had this funny attachment to even numbers and this uneasiness if not detestation of odd numbers. I was happy in my twenties, in my forties, and I look forward being happy in my sixties. I was miserable in my thirties and my fifties have been not quite so exciting as my forties. Probably because I was forty in the sixties and I was fifty in the seventies and the seventies was not an exciting or attractive decade, to me anyway, politically speaking, I look forward to the eighties, I think that may be when I'm in my sixties.

Roll 8 Take 3

L: That will be the time when some of the large work you've been working on for years--we'll see portions of that in the eighties.

M: I don't think I'm thinking practically. It's more just a matter of numbers. Haven't you ever noticed how people,.... you hear a telephone number and it's an attractive telephone number or it is a disagreeable telephone number? I've actually said to people once in a great while, "My, you have a nice telephone number." I'm not at all a numerologist or anything of that sort; I tend to distrust numerologists much more than astrologists.

L: The idea of being 62 whenever it will be, has some appeal?

M: Certain numbers appeal to me more than others. 64 is a better number to me than 62. I think it comes from childhood when you're learning the multiplication table and certain combinations had a certain beauty to them. 8 times 8 is 64; that's rather nice. 2 times 2 times 2 makes 8. Children, long before they realize such functions as exponentiation, have a sense of it already. The sense there is something mysterious about the number 2. 2 times 2 is 4 times 2 is 8 times 2 is 16 and so forth. They sense that evens are built on 2. You can go into it more and more and more. I never cared to. I always felt, leave numbers alone. But they do have their attractions and their miseries for me. I look forward to being sixty. I detested becoming fifty.

L: The thought of retirement from^{an} active life of writing is not something you're considering?

M: I don't know if I can ever retire. I've got nine children and unless one of them strikes it rich and proves tremendously generous as far as taking care not only of me and my wife, but also starts taking care of all the other kids, it seems to me I'm going to go on working for the next twenty years.

L: There's no particular thing you want to do when you are sixty? Take a trip around the world? Go to three world series in three years or something like that?

M: I think I'd like to have six months of lying fallow and unwinding at some point along the way. Because the one trouble with writing year after year after year is you try to keep anything dogged from getting into your style. Maybe you succeed and maybe you don't, but an awful lot that's dogged gets into your nervous system. So I feel much more like a business executive at this point, so far as my nerves go, than a writer. When I was younger the beauty of being a writer is you can indulge long moods, soulful moods. You can wander into the recesses of yourself. You can search out the corners of your heart, to be orotund about it. Now, everything is executive. It's as if I've done my exploring and all I want to do is get the work out now. I remember talking with Henry Kissinger and he said something I didn't forget. "You know, Mailer, I haven't really had a new idea since I've been working in Washington. I worked on all the ideas I had until I came here. Now I'm working too hard and I have no ideas." I thought, well that's close to my life. I don't have new ideas, essentially. I'm still working on all the

ideas I mined for myself when I was in my thirties and in my forties. Now I can use them. I had no trouble with The Executioner's Song, for instance, because I thought out all those things. The exploration that Gilmore was making in his life was one I had made in parallel in mine. So I didn't have to stop and say, "Is this man right or wrong?" As I came across his thoughts in his letters, I'd say to myself, "yes, I understand that. I had thoughts much like that a few years ago." When I work on my novel about Egypt it isn't as if I have to discover a great deal for myself. It's more a matter of when I started reading about Egypt, "My Lord, there are so many ways in which those people think the way I think. I've got to go back to them and write about them." In that sense I would like six months to just wander around, to sit in the sun, to think, to see if I can still think. I'm really a machine of production by now. And that's the only thing I resent in my life. The rest of it, well, I rather like the way things have turned out. Providence, so called, has not been too unjust to me.

L: Would you say that your writing is less of an exploration than it used to be?

M: Yes, it's less of an exploration. It is more of an occupation of territories I reconnoitered years ago. Twenty years ago my mind was so active, I couldn't keep up with it. I had perceptions of all sorts, of all kinds of endeavor. I think, not to compare myself, but I think with Zola the same occurred to him. He spoke about when he was young his thoughts would come so quickly that his hand could not keep up with

them as he wrote. As he grew older the thoughts slowed down, but that was all right, 'cause now his hand could write as fast as he thought and it was the perfect rate. Something of the same sort has happened to me. Because I did a lot of thinking when I was younger, I now take many of these ideas and develop them, put leaves on the bare branches. It's satisfying but it is not quite as heady and thrilling as once it was. I'm not as interesting to myself as I used to be.

L: What about the need for new ideas, though? Do you still feel that thirst for new ideas?

M: No, I don't. Because I've had so many new ideas over the years. I don't speak vaingloriously here, it's just that I had that kind of head. Not that every new idea I had was good, but I used to have the kind of head that if twenty-five new ideas didn't pop into my head a day, it was an odd day. I was not up to myself. Now very often days will go by and I don't have a new idea.

L: But you've got the card file of all the old ideas to go back to.

M: Well, I live with all the old ideas. Part of it is natural, I mean I don't brood about it because I think that in a way those ideas were so startling when they first came to me that I had to inhabit them. I had to live with them. I had to grow up with them. Maybe I'm bragging, but I think I have a coherent philosophy. I think we could start talking about almost anything and before we were done I think, sometimes superficially, but nonetheless, I think I could connect anything I'm talking about to almost anything else in my universe.

L: It almost sounds like the history of an institution.

M: Well, that was an unkind cut, Mike. No, I think anyone who tries to build a coherent philosophy for themselves goes through that sort of intellectual, I won't say intellectual journey, but that sort of construction, let's say, of an institutional edifice.

L: Are your former books presences in your past that you can refer back to? In this book you conquered this territory; in this book you reconnoitered here, and they are sort of guideposts to look back on, to refer to?

M: I must say that I never think a territory is something that I conquered. I think rather that that's the place where I did my best on that theme. I'm not satisfied with any of my books. I think they all could have been considerably better than they are. That goes for every last one of them. I look back with a certain satisfaction. I feel that I've written a number of good books and that maybe a few of them are very good. I don't think I've yet come anywhere near writing a great book. I'm not sure I'm going to be altogether satisfied unless I do so by my own lights. That unless I'm able to say at the end of my career, "Oh, yes, you finally did bring one off to your own satisfaction."

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

M: If I can bring off this three-part novel I'm talking about, I will have to get into places I've never been before. And I'll

have to come up with new ideas. I'll have to be bigger and better than I've ever been before. So it is not at all certain to me that I can bring off this three-part novel. I think I'll be able to, but I'm not laying odds on it. It's an even money bet.

L: You're off to a hell of a good start.

M: With the Egyptian novel? I hope I'm off to a hell of a good start. Practically no one has seen the book, you know.

L: No, but I've heard Bob Lucid and I've heard about your reading and everybody says it's an amazing book.

M: Well, it's amazing, I mean chapter for chapter there is amazing stuff in it. If you read a chapter here or a chapter there that I would pull out, you would say, "Wow." But the question is whether it will hold up. It's one thing to write wonderful chapters but will the book as a whole be something and will it also be... It's not enough for a great book to have great writing. A great book finally has to live in other people's flesh and minds and it has to change them. When I think of great books, I think of books that have changed my life.

L: You're experienced enough and ^{are} professional enough as a writer to know the difference between the good emotion you feel when you finish writing something and the emotion of satisfaction you're going to feel five years later when you look back on it.

M: This book is absolutely beyond my measure of anticipation. One, I don't know if I'm going to be able ever to bring it off.

I think I'll finish the Egyptian novel because I'm two-thirds through it. I've then got a novel I want to do about a space ship in the future, maybe a century or two from now, three centuries from now, and I'm appalled at the difficulties of the task. I'm going to have to sit down and become somewhat familiar with science fiction, which I've never read. I'm going to have to get up on the most advanced astro-physics that we have available now. I know it will be a difficult study for me because I'm not smart that way at all any longer even though I did study engineering once in college. But then I'm going to have to get up on all that stuff, knowing that it is all going to be, that I'll have to throw it away after I absorb it. The ~~the~~ only value it had for my novel is that the narrator of that novel would have to say at a certain point, "Yes, back in the 20th century they believed this and this was true about the universe. How wrong they were!" So that book is going to ^{be} staggeringly difficult to write something that will be serious in that book and at the same time won't be just absurd to our modern mind. It's going to be in my mind as the writer. Then, of course, the third book which I look forward to if I ever get to it, will be contemporary. That will have all the demands of writing a modern novel, which is no small task. So we'll see. There is nothing automatic or routine about these books.

L: Will your short story "The Last Night" have any influence on the later novel? That was such a fine short story.

M: Yes, it's going to be in the second novel. But I'm not

telling you how. That's not going to be the story of the second novel, it's just going to be in the second novel. I've got a couple of tricks up my sleeve that I can't talk about, of ways of tying together the Egyptian novel, the novel of the spaceship in the future and the contemporary novel. So they will all truly be three parts of the same novel. But in the way a tree might grow and have three trunks growing out of a common root.

L: Wilfred Sheed said you were a child prodigy of mathematics and I know you have a degree in Aeronautical Engineering. It shouldn't be too great a leap for you to...

M: When did Sheed say I was a child prodigy in mathematics?

L: When he wrote to you to ask you what you would like to be if you weren't a writer.

M: And what did I say?

L: You said you wanted to be a lazy lover with a lot of women at your command.

M: And he said then that I was a mathematical ...?

L: He said you were a child prodigy of mathematics.

M: Well, I'm not all together impressed with Sheed's accuracy. And if that is an example of it, his remark is not well-founded. I used to get "A's" in mathematics, but that doesn't make you a child prodigy. In fact, in any math class of thirty men, there were always three or four who were better than me. He said sadly.

L: Nevertheless, I think you were able to master the mechanics of the space flight. I think your explanation of how the

moon shot worked is as good as anything I've ever read.

Better than the astronauts' explanation.

M: Yes, but that doesn't make me a mathematical prodigy.

It just means that for one month in my life I was good at

exposition.

Roll 9 Take 1 "The Golden Bear"--Berchtesgaden

L: I saw you on Tom Snyder recently, the talk show. You said that you never questioned your instincts; writers are a little bit like athletes; they're spontaneous. I've got two questions. One, why do you have such great faith in your instincts and your unconscious? I'm assuming they're connected. And number two, aren't athletes a little less spontaneous than that? I mean, they are really very disciplined people.

M: Well, I make remarks off the top of my head that have a kernel of truth in them. And then I have to think about them afterwards. So, if I said I always followed my instincts, what I meant was that I usually follow my instincts for one; and two, I was talking about a certain kind of instinct. I was talking about the instinct I have while writing a book. I think what I said was when it comes to decide which book I'm going to write, I always follow my instincts. Not that I always follow my instincts in every last thing I ever do, because like everyone else, if I did that I would end up in jail. I think with athletes what you have is, you have a little drama which is athletes tend to be people who can trust their instincts for a long time--at least the instincts of their body. And the moment they get to the point where they can't thrust their instincts, in other words when they have followed their deepest instinct and they lose the game, they're in a lot of trouble. I think athletes first come into contact with despair when their instincts betray them. So with all those amendments, I'll still support the remark.

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

M: Oh, well it is probably part of my philosophy, such as it is. Which is that I think that the ... You know the famous story of Shelley. He rushed up to a mother and he seized a two-month old infant out of her arms and he held up the infant and he said, "Babe, speak. Reveal your immortal truths!" In other words, he believed that the infant was born knowing everything, and like Plato--he was a great Platonist at that point was Shelley--he believed that the education you received when you are young obfuscates the instinctive knowledge with which you are born. And that you then spend the rest of your life trying to unmake that education. I think I subscribe to that generally. I think we're born with a profound appreciation of the universe and we lose it in our early... the first two weeks, the first two months, or the first two years of our life, we lose it. Then we spend the rest of our lives trying to gain it back. To the degree we've lost it by the time we're six years old, the school system makes certain that we lose it all over again. And I don't think this is so evil. It is rather in the nature of things. It was intended that way. We're supposed to lose it and regain it. Every religious tale that you have sooner or later has the theme of the fall and the redemption. I think it is impossible to conceive of any achievement of knowledge without that fall. Because if knowledge is something

that we merely receive by opening ourselves to it, at least in the West, let's say, we can't conceive of that. And we all find there is, or most of us find, something repellent about Hindu philosophy. And what is repellent about it is the idea that you receive wisdom without making a Faustian effort. The idea that the more you relax, the more you give yourself into the universe, the more passive you can become, the closer you will come to the secrets of existence, is profoundly repellent to the Western mind. We feel that you crack the kernel of real secrets by smashing the nut, you know. That's the way we want it. It's what we're built to do.

L: Like Melville peeling away the layers of the onion to get the innermost center, or Ahab trying to strike at the center.

M: Well, if you're going to peel the layers of the onion, we secretly believe that it helps if you cut off a finger or two while peeling the onion. But you say why do I trust my instincts? Because I think I've had a charmed life in one respect. Which is I never had to think about earning a living until the last ten or fifteen years. From the time I was twenty-five, I knew I was going to be a writer or thought I was probably going to be a writer the rest of my life, and so I started to form a habit of consulting my instincts all the time. Looking for them, they hide. The instinct is often like a toad hiding under a stone. You have to know which stone to look for in the garden. I was fortunate to develop habits that most people don't have the leisure to develop. I mean, one thing you can count on is that when you have a

nine-to-five job, you can't develop much in the way of your instincts because that's a continuation of that education that's burying the instincts.

L: If you had that advantage as a young man of having enough money coming in, at the same time you had what some people call the "curse of being labeled with early promise." Cyril Connolly once said that telling a young writer he's got promise is like a medieval hangman who puts the noose around your neck, pushes you off the trestle and then jumps on your back. You had some struggles with that whole thing, didn't you? You were twenty-five and ...

M: To have early success is obviously a mixed blessing. I went through the bends. I think one reason I've always been interested in prize fighters is that if I were to take a prize fighter... I find an analogy between my own experience and the experience of certain kinds of prize fighters. Occasionally you find a prize fighter--Leon Spinks--a young prize fighter who before he knows whether he can really fight or not, wins a lucky fight or two and, lo and behold, he's champ. And he doesn't really know if he can fight. That's terrifying. That happened to me with The Naked and the Dead. I can understand what Spinks went through afterward. I mean all that idiotic behavior after he won the championship and beat Ali came from the fact that he wasn't ready for it at all, and he didn't know whether he was still a gym fighter or a main-event fighter in a small club or champion of the world. And so he lost all sense of who he was and ... It's very important if

you don't have an identity, it's very important to have sound and established elements that you can refer to. You know, if you say to yourself "I'm heavyweight champion of the world," it helps if you say to yourself "Yes, and I also beat Joe Frazier, George Foreman and twenty-two other guys." Spinks couldn't say that. He could say "I beat Mohammad Ali because I am very good," or "I beat Mohammad Ali because he is very old." That creates a double sense of identity. That means that every time you have a thought you gotta refer to two places. And Spinks as champion had to say to himself, "They say that to me because I'm magnificent; they say that to me because they're laughing at me and I'm not magnificent, I'm a false champion." So that creates great disturbance because you might say that your psychic economy is not working properly.

D: Are you saying then that you felt after writing The Naked and the Dead, and the success that that brought, that you were a false champion?

M: Yea, oh sure. I mean I walked around saying to myself do I really have as much talent as they say I do or was it a fluke and that I do not really have that talent at all? The Naked and the Dead, after all, was a book that was tremendously influenced by other writers, by Hemingway, by Farrell, by Dos Passos. Without those three writers I never could have written The Naked and the Dead. And Dreiser, I could name eight writers it was influenced by. It was written in all their styles and I knew it. I felt very uncomfortable with the book. I felt fame has been handed to me, I don't deserve it. I felt terrible

about it in other ways because I was not a particularly good soldier. If you took a hundred guys in an outfit, you'd probably list me as the 70th or 80th from the best soldier.

Roll 9 Take 2

D: Going back to the comparison you made with Spinks being a champion without having fought a lot of fights--a false champion. You mean that after having so much success with Naked and the Dead, 23 years old writing the novel, becoming so successful, that you felt you were a false champion?

M: Well I felt two ways at once. On the one hand I believed my reviews, on the other hand I felt that they weren't accurate at all. I knew that The Naked and the Dead had been influenced by a great many writers. By Hemingway, by Farrell, by Steinbeck, by Tolstoi, by Thomas Wolfe, by Dreiser, very much by Dos Passos. And I knew in a certain sense that it was not my own book, that all these literary influences had flowed through me and that I had had the experience of being at war and I had written this book. And to top it all, I hadn't been a very good soldier. If you pick a company, in my case a calvary troop, of a hundred men, maybe there were 75 or 80 soldiers who were better than me, before you got to me in terms of ability as a soldier. So I felt I was a bit of an imposter. On the other hand, I had all these wonderful reviews and also had the experience of writing the book and there were times when I thought it was the greatest book written since War and Peace. Given all that, I carried two views of myself. The

same thing happened to Spinks. Spinks had two views of himself. One, he was the best fighter in the world, and the other, he didn't really know how to fight. It was all a fluke. Either he beat Mohammad Ali the great champion or Mohammad Ali the old man. And so when anyone gave a compliment to Spinks, when anyone said "You're a great fighter," he had to have two halves of his mind to receive it. One half said to himself "You're wonderful," and the other half said "These people are lying to you." Now that's the nature of obsession. Obsession is when we feel two ways about one question. We speak of a young girl and say she is obsessed with her love affair because she doesn't know if she loves or hates the man or she doesn't know whether the man loves or hates her. When we don't know if the answer to a question is either A or Z, we become obsessed particularly if the question is important to us. We can hardly live because we keep coming back to this terrible imponderable. Do we go directly to the left or do we go directly to the right? As a result, we can't move. Obsessions tend to paralyze people.

Roll 10 Take 1

L: Norman, you were talking about the nature of obsession, the difficulties of being a young writer. You were not sure whether to listen to your critics or to that harsh inner voice that says maybe you were over-praised. Could it be that all that good criticism you received from Naked that got you started in some large psychic, in some large cosmic way, is

compensation for some of the bad cheap shots that people took at you in later years? Some kind of balance there?

M: Yea, but I don't... Really if I have one virtue that I claim to by now, it's that I don't feel sorry for myself. There were years when I did. But I think on balance I think I had it fairly good. You know that early success was not one of the things I would say was good. But it was interesting. And it forced me to grow and change in ways I never would if I hadn't had it. So that my life in those years consisted of a series of forced marches. I had to take my personality and move it, not from A to B as most of us do when we're twenty-five, I had to move from A to, let's say, E or F in a year, and in the following year I had to be at L, let's say.

L: But it seemed like a curse at the time.

M: At the time it seemed like a curse. I don't think there were any years in which my loins felt emptier or older than during those years from twenty-five to thirty. I felt like an old man during that period because I was traveling on these... I couldn't make a move without clashing my gears. I couldn't begin to roll without moving on clouds of anxiety.

L: Barbary Shore is . . .

M: Barbary Shore is a reflection of the intense anxiety and paranoia I felt in those years. To go back to Spinks. You see the reason he was so crazy and did all the things he did was because he was working off two systems. To go back again to the young girl who doesn't know whether she loves or hates

her man. It's terribly exhausting. Every woman understands that feeling to be going in two directions at once is intolerable and wears one out. The advantage of it, the reason why I say it was terrible at the time and gave a great advantage to me, is that I began to realize that all the psychology texts had very little to offer. I was saved, I think, the anguish of those young writers who begin to write and then they say, "Oh God, there's Sigmund Freud. What am I going to do with Sigmund Freud? I can't get through Sigmund Freud." You know the thing that has been the curse of practically every southern writer in America is that they have too much respect for Freud. "There's that New York where Sigmund Freud visited and lived. There's that great big wall of the impenetrable. Those people are too smart for me." You see what I knew at an early age was that they weren't that smart. Nobody knew what it was all about 'cause nobody had an experience remotely like mine.

L: You've compared yourself to Spinks. I've also heard you say in an interview, you compared yourself to ... you called yourself the "Ezzard Charles of literature" which I thought you were being enormously modest, as a later writer....

M: No, I'd still say that. You know when you compare the size, the true stature of Hemingway and Faulkner, you take writers like Bellow and Cheever and Updike and myself and writers let's say, you know I can name eight or ten writers today ^{who} certain people would say is the best writer in America. John Barth, Bernard Malamud, a lot of people you could name. Pynchon, Nelson Algren, you can go through the list. Name

after name. You find that out of twenty people, none of them begin to have, myself included, the stature of Hemingway or Faulkner. So in that sense, I'd say that anyone who says I'm the most important writer in America today, I'd say if I am, I'm still the Ezzard Charles of the heavy-weight division.

L: You don't think that Hemingway's reputation has slipped in the last ten years? People begin to take a close look at his writing and yours and Fynchon's and Bellow? You, Pynchon and Bellow are the three I hear. I don't hear Nelson Algren named as one of the best American writers. I hear you, Pynchon and Bellow. Those are the names I hear.

M: Well, I don't know. We're all vastly more complex than Hemingway. But I gotta tell you that after I wrote The Executioner's Song, I went back and I looked at Hemingway again. 'Cause now I was writing in a simple style. And that style is remarkable. And the older I get, the more I know about writing, the more remarkable Hemingway's style seems to me. I mean I know his flaws inside out. I've loved and hated him as if he were my own father for years. There is so much he did for one and there was so much he didn't do. Truly the relationship you have to him is one of a father. "Ernest, how could you do what you did to us? How could you leave us in the lurch?" is the feeling that not only I had but so many writers had towards him. But he is a remarkable writer. His sense of the English language, I'd say, is virtually primitive in its power to evoke scenes and mood and to stir the senses.

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

M: What would he think? He'd read it and hate it and say "That is bad Hemingway!" He'd loathe that book. But you know he was a prick, let's face it.

G (Gebhard): If we were to compare Ali as a fighter with an author, Ali's an exception because he started out fighting and worked his way up to be a good fighter. That's an exception if you compare it to a writer because most of the writers start off with a very good novel, they get well known, for instance Capote writing In Cold Blood. Then they get bad or get worse and have difficulties. So Ali wouldn't be a comparison to authors, I think. Ali always worked up step to step until he got old. I don't know, did he have trouble losing his fights because he got old or because he got foolish?

M: No, actually I don't agree with your example at all, Gebhard, because Ali actually is very much like Hemingway if you're going to look for a parallel. First of all, he dominated his division entirely. Second of all, Hemingway put in a considerable apprenticeship. He didn't just become famous, he did put in a number of years writing short stories and working on newspapers. So he had had not a tremendous amount of experience as a writer before he became prominent but more than people realize. Ali had a number of fights but not that many before he was champion. Ali was a young

champion. I think he was something like twenty or twenty-one when he became champion. He hadn't really beaten that many good people when he beat Sonny Liston. He went into that fight as a seven or eight-to-one underdog. And then, like Hemingway, he remained champion for a long, long time and he kept dominating his division. Very much like Hemingway, very vain like Hemingway was vain. Cannot bear competition, cannot bear the idea that anyone around could be remotely as good as he is. No, I think there is a wonderful study that could be made about the similarities between Ernest Hemingway and Mohammad Ali. They come out of that same American urgency to be the only planet in existence. To be the sun. It goes right back to Egypt. You know in Egypt life was very simple finally. There were a thousand gods but there was only one sun.

G: There are exceptions then. Hemingway on one side and Ali on the other. If you go back to Spinks now, he won a very important fight at the beginning and had these difficulties. Ali came up gradually. Or is that incorrect?

M: Ali came up quickly, like Hemingway, not that quickly not as quickly as Spinks at all. Ali was prepared to be champion when he became champion. He was the best fighter around when he became champion.

L: So was Hemingway.

M: Hemingway was the best writer around when he had that tremendous reknown. They were alike in other ways. They hated anyone that was near them. Hemingway's love for Scott Fitzgerald diminished rapidly once he became the number one man. Because Fitzgerald was too good.

L: What about the later career? I mean Ali's later career isn't quite as brilliant as his early career. Isn't the same thing true of Hemingway?

M: That's roughly true. Ali's later career was more brilliant, you might say, than Hemingway's. Because Ali did something which Hemingway never quite did. When Ali got old he still won a couple of great fights. Ali beat Foreman when he was already over the hill. Foreman was potentially a more frightening and awesome fighter than Ali was at the point they met. But Ali used such artistry that finally he knocked Foreman out. It's one of the great fights of all time because the weaker man won. He won through vast skill and guile and artistry.

L: Hemingway had a lot of skill and guile at the end, but he didn't make the big knock-out, to use that metaphor, in his later books.

M: No, he did not.

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

M: Yes, that was the best thing. That and maybe Moveable Feast.

L: Because The Old Man and the Sea

M: The Old Man and the Sea was not a good book, I don't think.

D: I'd like to go back to The Naked and the Dead. We talked about being a false champion. I remember in an interview once--you were twenty-three years old when you started that book, you were twenty-five when it was published and it was a

best seller--and you had said something I thought was quite interesting, and that is that you had never realized how much you knew. After looking at that book and reading it again, you were surprised at how much you knew. For me I don't think anyone can deny in terms of style the brilliance of Hemingway. But Hemingway could never write a book like Naked and the Dead in which you're talking about fascism coming to America, technology and the kinds of themes that you have dealt with in the past twenty-five, thirty years.

M: I didn't say Hemingway was brighter than I was. I just said his style is better. That he has a greater style.

D: But that's not the same as saying his talent is better?

M: Well, I think it is. You know you can have actors who can do wonderful things. They can be marvelous character actors like Paul Muni who can play just about any part on earth. Then you get someone like Monroe who in the technical sense has a very small talent. But she can come out and hold a little mandolin in her hand and play a little ditty and wonderful things happen to people. Let's take an example that people would argue about less. I would guess that in the technical sense there were limitations to Charley Chaplin. I think probably that there are any number of actors who can do a creditable imitation of Chaplin and also play fifty roles that Chaplin could never go near. And yet we would never argue that they were greater actors than Chaplin. Even though they might give you ninety-five percent of Chaplin. Chaplin plucked a nerve in us that very few artists could reach.

There's almost never any argument about who the great artists are. Because what they do is so profound you can't argue with it.

L: Dwight Macdonald says that Chaplin couldn't do the long film, but he was great with those shorter films.

M: Well, I think Monsieur Verdoux is quite a film.

L: That's the only exception.

M: That's quite an exception.

Roll 11, 12, 13 & 14 University Lecture Hall

Introduction by Davis (Quote from Mailer's "The White Negro")

D: "Probably, we will never be able to determine the psychic havoc of the concentration camps and the atom bomb upon the unconscious mind of almost everyone alive in these years. For the first time in civilized history, perhaps for the first time in all of history, we have been forced to live with the suppressed knowledge that the smallest facets of our personality or the most minor projection of our ideas, or indeed the absence of ideas and the absence of personality could mean equally well that we might still be doomed to die as a cipher in some vast statistical operation in which our teeth would be counted, and our hair would be saved, but our death itself would be unknown, unhonored, and unremarked, a death which could not follow with dignity as a possible consequence to serious actions we had chosen, but rather a death by deus ex machina in a gas chamber or a radioactive city;...

The Second World War presented a mirror to the human condition which blinded anyone who looked into it. For if tens of millions were killed in concentration camps out of the inexorable agonies and contractions of super-states founded upon the always insoluble contradictions of injustice, one was then obliged also to see that no matter how crippled and perverted an image of man was the society he had created, it was nonetheless his creation, his collective creation (at least his collective creation from the past), and if society was so murderous, then who could ignore the most hideous of

questions about his own nature?"

And George Steiner has written: "Either a literature is about these things or it is about nothing. Literature to be taken seriously must recognize the hideous enlargement in the range of possible experience. Very few writers have had the nerve or insight to look at the new manner of man. Norman Mailer is among the honest men. He strives to know at the peril of moral chaos what it is that has been loosed upon the world and whether art can cope with it." With that I would like to introduce Norman Mailer and ask him if he'd care to make a few comments about what I just said. Thank you.

M: I'm not sure I'm ready to comment on those two passages, because it's been so long since I wrote one and I never encountered the other by George Steiner. And they're each sufficiently knotty to give me much pause for thought. Maybe by the end of the hour, I'll comment on them after I'm feeling a little more as if I've come out of the cold.

S (Student): Will you answer any kind of question?

M: I'll listen to any kind of question. I may not answer it. I promise not to take offense at an offensive question. But I may not reply. I may say, "Next Question." What's your question?

S: Are you Jewish?

M: Yes.

S: You are Jewish. Cause interestingly enough... Uh, what kind of role does the Jewish community play in the United States today? And what's the influence on American politics?

M: The Jewish community is no more a monolithic community than, let's say, the German community is all of one piece. There is a powerful Jewish political group in America just as there is a powerful Irish political group, powerful Italian political group, a powerful Protestant political group in America. In American there ^{are} any number of powerful political groups and they form alliances and they go to war with one another. Generally speaking, the Jewish people in America have been more associated with the Democratic Party than the Republican Party. However, in the last election a great many of them supported Reagan. The Jews are simply not a simple force in American life that moves in one direction. But what is back of your question? What is your opinion?

S: I think after the election of Reagan that Israel's military forces might be strengthened by the election of Reagan. And a new movement might come in American politics because I think that the American Jews do have some influence not only in financial aspects but also cultural aspects.

M: The Jews have a great deal of influence on American policy in many ways. Politicians in America are notoriously fearful about insulting the Jews. Because the Jews are very sensitive about being insulted and they tend to organize around that principle. However, I don't find myself all together sympathetic to that. Because I don't think that anti- anti-Semitism is a political position. In other words, among the Jews we often mock Jews who are too patriotic as Jews. We say that the only idea that they have in their minds is to say, "Is this

good for the Jews?" Now, I'm never interested in anyone who is too self-consciously ethnic. I think that any people who become too proud, too self-centered, too concerned with own special qualities also tend to destroy their ability to reason subtly. That happened to the German people at a period we all know about. It's in danger of happening to the Jewish people. It is happening to the black people. There is a tendency in the twentieth century because of the, you might say the overall tendency of the twentieth century to homogenize everything, to make everyone like everyone else, to make men and women like each other, to make countries like each other, because of the vast need of the technological society. The technological society works best if every human alive is not a separate nationality and separate sex, but instead is a human unit, you see, which could fit into the computer. The computer much prefers single units rather than double units if I may speak in that fashion. In other words, if the computer has to deal with men and women, that is twice as difficult as if the computer has to deal with human units. So there is an overall tendency in the twentieth century for everything to fit into the same mold. For instance, all the new buildings in Munich look like all the new buildings in Dallas. Every airport in the world looks like every other airport in the world and they all look atrocious. In counter to that is this other tendency in people to become very ethnic, to insist on their own individuality, their own specialty. That's fine as an antidote to the world-wide spread of technology, but in turn the risk is, as I say, to destroy the

ability to think subtly. Because one is always too concerned: "Is this good for the blacks?" say the blacks to themselves, "Is this good for the Jews?" say the Jews to themselves, "Is this good for the Germans?" say the Germans to themselves. And I think it is a false way of thinking.

S: (female): Why do you write? Why did you start to write?

M: Why do I write? Why did I start to write? It was the only thing I was good at. And I wanted to become more attractive to girls. Generally you do something because you are good at it. All through my adolescence I kept looking for something I might be good at. I used to cry piteously to any girl that would listen, I would say, "I'm just not good at anything. I'm average," I'd say. "I want to be good at something." And then, lo and behold, in my first year at college, I discovered that writing was an exciting pursuit for me. It was an engaging activity. It seemed to me that I might even be good at it. So I kept at it. The conclusion to the story is not without some happiness.

S (female): What is your attitude towards women's lib?

M: I am half in agreement with women's lib and half in opposition. I agree with all the arguments in women's lib that state that schematically, institutionally, woman have been encouraged to be cowards for centuries. And that it is very important for woman to become more brave. In that sense I am completely in agreement with woman's lib. I think, however, that like all young revolutionary organizations, they have a lust to become totalitarian. And they want to

destroy their enemies before they can even see them. So I think they did me the, personally, the small disservice of deciding that I was the greatest sexist in America. To which I always used to reply to them, "Ladies, you have not been to Texas."

S: Why did you write a book on a subject like Gary Gilmore? Why didn't you leave that to the boulevard newspapers? Who did you want to aim your criticism at?

M: To begin with, when I wrote the book about Gilmore, I wasn't necessarily looking to criticize anyone or anything. If you are starting a book, a book will take several years of your life. A book will age you as you write it. It will drain you and it will ruin your disposition. So you don't decide to do a book for superficial reasons. Writing a book is a little bit like getting married--at least getting married for a few years. And for that reason you generally have at best something that approaches, for yourself, a profound motive, when you start to do a book. If you start to do a book for no better reason than that you wish to criticize something, you run out of the best energies very quickly. And then writing it becomes a terrible chore. I was fascinated with that book and I wished to write about it because I thought that Gilmore was an exceptional character, that there was no man remotely like him in the public eye. The fact that the subject had been in the newspapers didn't repel me, but it attracted me because I'd been carrying on my own small personal war with the newspapers for many years. I detest

the way they write about experience. I think we'd all be better off if we didn't have newspapers. If once a week a page came out and told us what some of the major events were in the world, we'd absolutely know as much as we know by studying the newspapers every day. The newspapers have become vast machines for misinformation and disinformation. Misinformation by which I mean simple error. Most newspaper stories are half wrong in the facts and disinformation means that many people use the newspapers skillfully in order to spread calculated misinformation. In other words, they tell lies to the newspaper reporters which are then printed. So we tend to hate stories that are in the papers for good cause, which is they occupy our attention and we read about them a great deal and we don't know much more than when we started. For that reason I love a good newspaper story because if you can penetrate behind it, there's always a great deal there, or usually a great deal there. I felt that with Gilmore there probably was some remarkable material back of the story. I discovered indeed there was. You know he was not an ordinary man and it was not an ordinary situation.

S: Did it change your view of the American judicial system at all?

M: Yes it did. I began to have more of a respect for the ways in which the wheels of justice grind slow and small. What happened was that in a certain sense I found it comic, even pathetic, but at the same time heartwarming. Before my book was over I had a book in which there were something like

thirteen lawyers who were all characters. Most of these lawyers were representing different points of view. Among the thirteen lawyers perhaps there were eight separate points of view that you could separate. Everyone of these separate points of view were argued by these various lawyers and believed in and worked hard for. There was something amusing and at the same time touching about the way each one of these lawyers was doing his best. Some of them were doing their best to save Gilmore's life, some of them were doing their best^{to}/hasten Gilmore's execution, some were working for the state, some were working for Gilmore, some were working for the American Civil Liberties Union, all of them were absolutely working at their best. I came to realize that in the course of it that along with American justice there was an element in American life that I never understood before. And that is that Americans are obsessed with the idea that they must be virtuous. Now, I'm not saying that we are any more virtuous than any other country, in fact there are many who would say that we are less virtuous than many another country. But, in fact, if you want to understand Americans, I would suggest to you that no matter what an American does, he can be a drug pusher, or he can be a judge, but it's terribly important to the average American to believe that he or she is virtuous in their actions. Americans go through bends in order to convince themselves that they are not being corrupt or wicked or evil or cynical or this or that. There are very few Americans that can honestly say, "I don't give a damn." Which may be why "Gone With the Wind" had such a smash ending.

S: You called yourself in Advertisements For Myself an American existentialist. In American Dream, for instance, there is a passage in which after you killed your wife in the book, when things like habit, discipline, and pretense and compromise as sort of civilized as bad qualities disappear from you and you become your instinctual self. That's how I understood the passage. I'd like to know if you still believe that you are an existentialist and how the modern man has to live in that way?

M: You're asking me a small question. (laughter) Let's break it down. It will be easier to reply if... To begin with, as I understand what you're asking me, you are saying in effect do I believe that to be an existentialist one must eschew discipline, habit, and so forth. I would say no. But you must be very aware of the negative powers of habit and discipline. There is very little that could ever be accomplished that's purposeful and that takes many months or years to accomplish that can be done without habit or discipline. But because they are necessary to serious and ambitious projects doesn't mean that we can ever ignore the fact that they are very dangerous medicine for us. We have to live with the fact that these habits that are enabling us to be productive are at the same time dangerous to our psyche and perhaps even to our soul and be aware of that and in that sense live existentially. When I say live existentially, I don't mean that every day we jump from the roof of one building to the

roof of another. Although that is certainly as existential an experience as one could look for. Especially if the jump is just at the very limit of our ability to leap. In other words if we do not know if we're going to be able to make the jump successfully, that would be the pure definition of an existential experience. We're either going to feel a great rush of adrenalin and happiness if we complete the jump, or we're going to know broken bones or disaster and death if we don't. That's an existential experience. Now obviously if I speak of living existentially in relation to one's habits and one's discipline, I don't mean jumping across the roof every day. However, it may be that one has to jump across that roof once a month (I speak now figuratively) or once a year or whatever one's inner rhythm is. And there comes a point when if one lives, if one uses these habits in order to achieve certain serious projects in one's life, one uses one's discipline, there comes a point when one becomes a slave of the discipline and the habits. That's the point precisely when one must look for an existential encounter with oneself. What I'm trying to say, I suppose, is that the horror is that there is no royal road to happiness for the psyche. We achieve the smallest amount of self-satisfaction or a sense of personal integrity only through the greatest efforts and through the greatest awareness of the opposites between which we must navigate our course.

S: You spoke about habit and existential living. Don't

you feel that your habit of writing is just that what you have become a slave to?

M: My habit of writing is what I have become a slave to? I often feel that I have become a slave precisely to having to write too much. I have come to the point in my life where I now have to write in order to make a living. I've been in debt for ten years and I write more than I care to write in order to attempt to get out of this debt. To that extent I find writing onerous and a habit and I'm not all together happy with it.

S: How do you justify your being a media personality with putting the media down by saying they're totalitarian and on the other hand you use them. Let's say it's a consequence that your books are being publicized and you get free advertisement and, of course, scandals in your life are being sort of publicized by the media which helps sell the books. So I'm talking about this odd commerce spiral in which you are in, but at the same time you're criticizing the media for sort of penetrating into everybody's personal life.

M: I'll leave the last part to come back to about the media penetrating into everybody's personal life. I'd say that to begin with, I've often been attacked for flaunting my personal life in order to sell my books. I can promise you that I may or may not be guilty of flaunting my personal life, but that I have known for the last twenty years that that does not sell books. Quite the contrary, you do not sell books nearly so

well as writers who keep a respectable persona before the public. There is a simple reason for that. When people go out to buy books, particularly hardcover books, they often have a choice, books are expensive. If you have a young couple, they often have to choose--and I'm not being sentimental or treacly about this--between buying the baby a new pair of shoes or buying a hardcover book. So buying the book, if they choose to buy the book, is a small sacramental act. They are doing something that is terribly serious to them and they want to be able to respect the writer. So writers that have a great deal of notoriety in their lives are not respected. They're less respected, let us say, than the quality of their work. That's no help to selling books. Writers like John Updike and Saul Bellow--you never hear anything about their personal lives to speak of and their books sell very, very well. James Michener sells extraordinarily well in America and no one's ever heard anything about his personal life. I could point to author after author in America who sells very well indeed with no personal publicity. In fact the only reason one does personal publicity for one's books, why one goes out on tours, is that you are part of a commercial process that you confront at your peril. If want to be able to sell your books, if you want to be able, let's say, to get good advances from publishers, which I'll be frank, I'll always want/^{ed}to get because I need the money, then I have to have a reputation as someone who's reasonably amenable to

publicity tours. It's my personal opinion that publicity tours do not sell books because people who watch television have lost the ability to read. However, there is an apparatus there. The publisher is able to sell more books to the booksellers in advance because they say to the bookseller that there's going to be a national television tour. At that point the bookseller says, "Oh, is there! Well then I'll take a few more copies." These are the facts of the economic life. That, for the first part of your question. As to why I use television when I consider it a totalitarian medium, I use it with a certain desperation. I feel that there are two choices and neither of them is agreeable. Either one gives up the three-quarters of mankind, of humankind, that by now only watch television and say "To hell with them, they're lost. Let's save the little culture we have left." Which seems to me is a dangerous offering to make or you go out and you attempt to argue into the teeth of this gale of electronic homogenization. You dare to loose the salts of your own personality by going on TV. In fact I compromise on that as I do on many elements in my life, I go on TV as seldom as I can, believe it or not. There are times when I don't go on TV for six months, nine months, or a year at a time. I'm never so happy as when I don't go on TV. But there come times when I think, "My God, there's nothing left in America but TV-idiots. TV-idiots talking to TV-idiot audiences. And somebody has to get out there and say something." And being nothing if not modest, I nominate myself.

S: How do you get these TV-idiots to read when you know at the same time that they are TV-idiots?

M: Well I'm not optimistic about it. It was my hope that this book, The Executioner's Song, would be read by millions before it's done, maybe it will be. One of the reasons I wrote it in the style I did, which is a tremendously simple style, is I thought people have lost the ability to read in the old way. They don't like sentences that they have to work on. All right, I'm going to write a book in the simplest prose I can manage. I'm going to try to reach people who have never read a book before. Maybe they'll see that there's an experience in literature that they don't get in other places. That was the attempt that I had made in this book. Whether I succeeded in it or not is something we'll find out in the years to come. But I was hoping just once to write a book that would have a certain subterranean affect.

S: In the book on Gary Gilmore, didn't you try to take a stand on the death penalty in the United States?

M: No, this may sound odd to you, but capital punishment is not one of the questions that occupies me a great deal. I think that if a thousand people a year were being executed in America, I'd be concerned with it. Because Engels once said, "Quantity changes quality." If you have a thousand people being executed, you're very close to having ten thousand people being executed or a hundred thousand being executed and you're in danger of having a state that starts to execute its people in

large numbers. But you know we haven't had an execution in America for ten years. It may be that,....It's a very complicated question, I hesitate to break into it because it's so difficult to talk about. But it may be that an occasional execution is not the worst single element in a society's life. It may be that it still gives us some connection back to the primitive. I feel that the great danger with a liberal-totalitarian-technological society--I say liberal, totalitarian and technological and put the three words together because it seems to me that we are moving into some peculiar benighted form of technological totalitarianism in which everyone will be more or less taken care of and there may not be terrible excesses in the form of the earlier totalitarianisms--is that there will be manipulation of the populace from above. There still remains the need to find again our primitive roots. One of the most powerful and primitive experiences that a society can have is to execute one of its members. To me there is an enormous difference between executing someone once and a while and the state arbitrarily proceeding to execute people at the rate of five, ten, twenty a week. The difference being that one execution in a great while--quantity changes quality--loses a tremendous amount of energy and concern and anxiety and soulsearching in people. Whereas many executions merely contributes to enhancing the smugness and complacency of the authority that runs our lives. To answer your question, I would be against capital punishment if it

were a powerful phenomenon in American life. If it's an occasional phenomenon, then I think it has to be treated on its own terms. Since Gilmore definitely wanted to be executed, since he did not wish to spend the rest of his life in jail, since he did not wish to commit suicide, because in his mind it was more noble to be executed and have to stand up to the people who were going to execute him, than to commit suicide in the loneliness of his own cell, I felt that wasn't really the question in the book.

S: Can you envision a society where all members would be living a so-called existential life?

M: Again, I think the idea of the existential life is not that we all go out and climb the Matterhorn every Saturday. It may be that someone who is timid and gentle and reflective would much rather spend their life reading books could still have an existential life. They need only think seriously of climbing the Matterhorn once and trying it once and that's enough. For some people one existential experience is enough to nourish them for ten, twenty, thirty years. Other people, like U.S. Marines, need existential experience three times a night. I'm not a bigot about these matters. I don't insist that everybody live the same way. In fact I find that anathema, I think that's the trouble. There's a tendency to get everybody to live the same way. There's now a tendency to get us all to live like rather pleasureless hedonists. We're all supposed to have a good time, but we're also supposed to wear

more or less the same clothing while we're doing it. We live in the age of plastics. That's the attempt to make us all live the same way--that is, without much sensation in our fingertips. Because if we have to go around touching plastic all the time, we soon go dead.

S: Touching what?

M: Plastic. A German and a Jewish invention.

S: Can you speak to trying to express yourself through film as compared to writing?

M: I'm sure most of you don't know much about my films. I made three films about twelve years ago. Over a period of about two years. The idea I had at the time was that the physical apparatus that was necessary to make a professional film was so cumbersome and so expensive and so unwieldy that very little that was human could find its way through. Actors and directors had to be geniuses to get anything approaching true quality, true esthetic quality in film. At that time I happen to meet some cinema verite photographers. They're photographers who work with very limited means, sometimes with no more than two men--the cameraman who supports the camera on his shoulder and the soundman--who would go out and do documentaries. And I thought, why not take this technique which I found fascinating when I'd see the documentaries. Because what you find is if two people are speaking in a documentary, the cameraman did not have a script. So he was not able to set the camera angles in advance. He didn't know who

was going to be speaking next. Particularly if there were more than two people there. So very often the camera began to act the way we act in real life. If we're in a room and three or four of us are having a conversation, we tend to look at the person we expect to speak next. Sometimes they do and sometimes they don't. It occurred to me as I watched the cinema verite photography where the cameraman very often would anticipate correctly who was going to speak next and the camera would move to that person just a moment before they spoke, which gave for some odd reason an aesthetic satisfaction, and sometimes the cameraman would miss. He'd be on the wrong face. You'd hear a voice coming from somewhere else and the the camera would look around nervously to find who was actually speaking. I thought what a wonderful way it'd be if we could take this technique and carry it over to fictional work. Then I thought that you can't have a script because once you have a script you start moving the actors through their paces and you have something that very quickly begins to call for more and more equipment and technique. So then I thought, all right we'll have improvised films. I then proceeded over the next couple of years to make three improvised films. They were complete improvisations, to wit, there was no script. The movie was not written, you might say, until after it was filmed. After it was filmed I had many hours of film in each case and I then sat down with the editor. In the case of the last film we filmed forty-five hours of sound and

film with five camera crews in five-and-a-half days. Those forty-five hours then took three years to cut into a film. It was a film called "Maidstone" and in many ways it was the most interesting and extraordinary film and in many ways it was an unhappy and unsuccessful film cause the sound wasn't good enough. The sound was good enough so long as you could show it in small groups, to film students and museums. We showed it in one museum in New York, the Whitney, and we set an attendance record. More people came to see that film than had ever come to see any other film in the history of the Whitney. At that point, encouraged, I said "Let's get some money together and distribute it ourselves." So we did. And we put it into a commercial theatre and we then set a record in reverse. Fewer people came to see that movie than anyone in the history of that theatre. The reason was simple: People are not going to spend money and then sit there and strain to hear what's being said. It makes them furious. Their feeling is, "Either I'm going deaf or this guy doesn't respect the fact that I'm here and I spent my hard-earned money and I can't hear what he is saying." I gave up making^{films}/at that point because I felt that I cannot solve this technological problem. There seemed no way to get sound that was good enough in cinema verite to meet the professional standards that were necessary if you were going to be able to convince the big league movie makers that you had a way of making films that was more interesting than their way. The only way that

they understand if your way is more interesting than their way is if you could make more money than they make. Then they would say "Yes, this fellow has something." You could create a revolution in film. Without that you're reduced to being an avant-garde filmmaker. At that point I thought, "I'd rather be a notorious and somewhat unsavory literary personality than an avant-garde filmmaker." So I went back to writing books. But with a tear in my heart, because I enjoyed making films much more than I enjoy writing.

S: How's Cagney?

M: Your referring to the picture I am now making: "Ragtime." In which I have a small part. James Cagney is now old. He's in his eighties. Most people who turn eighty, I've observed, become interested in only one thing. And that is where do they put their feet. It's the one truly depressing element in growing old. So Cagney is one man when he is walking. When he's walking, he's like any other eight-year-old. He thinks a great deal about where the next foot is going to fall, will he keep his balance and so on. Once he sits down, he's the old Cagney. He's still a marvelous actor. He does very little and he does it magnificently well. I realize that what a movie star does is they take everything that's been going on in the movie until that point and they funnel it into their silences. We actors speak and Cagney just looks at us like this. And as he looks you can feel all the movie revolving around him and you just know the critics are going to say

that he's giving a splendid performance and in fact he is. He knows the nature of film. The nature of film is that you frighten the camera slightly.

S: You said that the women's movement tends to become totalitarian and that you don't like that. Don't you think that the male system as it is in America is totalitarian?

M: Yes, but I always thought that women had more sense than men.

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

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

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

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

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

M: Well, but the women in America do. They say we are your blacks.

S: This isn't true in all respects.

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

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

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

come to recognize the profound and serious problems that men who were trying/^{to change}the world also have. I think that out of all this we may yet arrive at certain community of agreement that changing the world is a problem that goes far beyond sexual gender.

S: But you could start with that.

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

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

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

it's another to be a brave revolutionary. I don't mock the women, I just say that they're not quite as good as they pretend to be.

S: Might the fact that you are Jewish be important for your writing about concentration camps?

M: It would certainly be a factor in it, sir.

S: Why do you write about concentration camps and what kind of feeling do you have being here in Germany now?

M: When you say what kind of feeling do I have writing about concentration camps, I can see that you know little of my work. Because that's one of the few references I ever made to concentration camps is in that passage that Mr. Van Davis quoted. As to what feeling I have being here? I've always been interested to come to Germany. I find Germany a very interesting country. Believe it or not, I've always felt I'm in part, in some odd way, German. And I often wondered why and I finally realized why. I asked my mother once and it turned out, lo and behold, I was brought up to some extent by two or three German nurses. I can only say that I find Germany the oddest country for me because I feel comfortable here.

Roll 15 & 16 Gasthaus "Max"

S: Can you compare editing or shooting a movie with editing a book? You did both, you shot three movies and you wrote twenty-two books.

M: The editing of a movie is much more of an art than cutting a book. You edit a book out of experience and out of taste and essentially it's the same kind of activity all the time. That is, you have one consideration which is the quality of the work that's going to result. When you cut, particularly if you have a lot of film to work with--let me say I think there are two kinds of cutting. In the average conventional film, the film that's made with a big crew and a script, there's a tendency to have cutting, I think, is much less important there than in the cinema verite films, for a reason. Which is that in the scripted film the actors know that the scene is coming to an end because they all have the same script. If I may borrow your glass for a moment. There an actor knows that this is the last line in the scene and he says his line, takes a sip of his drink and he puts his glass down. Because unconsciously he knows it's the end of the scene and he wishes to characterize it as the end of the scene. And so there are a great many scenes in scripted films that end with something coming to the end of a slow movement. That means that the next cut almost obligatorily has to be a slow opening upward. You have that leisurely kind of almost what I call funereal cutting in most professional films. In cinema verite, because the actors don't know when a scene is coming to an

end 'cause there is no scripted scene as such. They're talking and they may talk for ten minutes and fifteen seconds may be used. Or three minutes may be used. Given the fact that there is no particular end to the scene, that is you go through the scene and you say, "Well I can either use three minutes of this or I can use ten seconds of this. Depending how I'm going to use it." You may decide that the ten seconds are more interesting because there is a marvelous movement of one actor's hand. As they're talking if someone says this and the movement is more interesting than anything that's being said. Because film really lives in two worlds at once--part of it is movement and the other part is of course the particular narrative element in what's present. So as I say, if the hand goes up like this, the cutter may choose that. Then there are any number of movements that can come out of it. It's much more musical. This goes up like this. And you can have something come up like that slowly or you can have something come slamming back. As a result cutting in cinema verite films becomes more of a high art. Editing has endless permutations and possibilities. I said earlier that in "Maidstone" we spent in five days, I had five camera crews, we shot forty-five hours of sound and film. We then cut it down to seven hours very quickly. There were seven usable hours out of the forty-five. But it took us something like three years to cut it from seven hours to ninety minutes. Because we had so many movies within the seven hours that we just couldn't decide... We had too many choices and it was

monumentally interesting despite the final result which was less interesting than all the interesting moments en route. Mainly because the sound was not good enough to make a satisfying film. But the cutting in it, I think, was far superior to the average film. Not because we were great editors, but because we had much more interesting material to work with. In a certain sense, we weren't cutting so much as writing the film with film. The average professional Hollywood film is written with a script. It's first written by a script writer, the director works with him, the producer works with him, the cost people work with it, it's a blueprint. You might say it's written at that point and the cutting is merely the final application of the plaster and the paint to what's been done. When you are making a cinema verite film, because you're working with improvisation and you don't know quite where your story is going to lead and very often you don't have a story in the normal sense, you have a set of attitudes and collisions, a set of possibilities that you can write with. It's as if you have the material in a large bag. It's as if someone has handed you a vocabulary, but it's not a vocabulary of words, it's a vocabulary of film strips. You might have five thousand such film strips because the same scene could be cut in many different ways. You might use three minutes of a scene. In which case it would be the keel for a narrative section of your film. Or you might just use little snippets from it because the movements are so wonderful. And you might use it in a montage

where you wanted another effect entirely. You sit down with the film and you start writing your picture. Cutting as such becomes vastly interesting.

S: What do you think, as far as your own potential for self-expression is concerned, the advantages are using solely the written word and then also using film? And I'd like to follow it up with another question. Earlier you talked about a sort of technological homogenization that's happening in the Western world. Do you feel that there is also a certain amount of alienation that's almost inherent in filmmaking because you have to use machines to express yourself?

M: I think particularly in professional filmmaking there is an immense amount of alienation present. I had the experience last week of working in a professional film for the first time as an actor. I was playing the part of Stanford White in "Ragtime." A fine director, Milos Forman, is making the film. I had two days of work, my first two days in a professional film as an actor, and I was overcome with what a difficult art it is to be a professional film actor. The conditions are even more difficult than working on stage. Because you don't act in the normal way. In half the scenes I was playing, I would be lucky if I could see the eye of the actor I was playing with. The emphasis is enormously on the camera position. You have these immense cameras as opposed to the small stuff we use here. Given these immense cameras, the actors become almost like marionettes that are moved and shifted around the cameras. So very often you'd be playing

a scene and if the camera was on you in the scene, the actor you were playing with might be hiding behind one of the cameras. And you would see his eye back of the cameraman and you would hold on this eye. It would be like a lighthouse beacon and you were steering your ship toward that eye because that's all you have to work with. Otherwise you're just emoting, you're talking by yourself, you have no face that's reacting to you. In that sense I was filled with a certain sense of wonder which is how do they ever get wonderful moments in these professional films? There are professional films finally where this extraordinary stuff comes through. In the "Tin Drum"--which is the best movie I've seen in quite a while, that and the "Marriage of Maria Braun" in those two films were extraordinary moments that the actors got. I don't know how they do it. Given the absolute alienation of the conditions in which one works. I've been interested in cinema verite methods because if you could ever get actors who got comfortable enough with the idea that they didn't have a script to fall back on, but on the contrary, they would have to use their wits because they proceeded through scenes. And if you had a school of such actors who were skilled, you could always use people off the street in cinema verite because everyone alive is an actor. We all spend our lives acting. We're always pretending to be a little happier or a little more miserable than we really are. That's acting. It's nothing to be an actor if you don't have to rely on a script. The moment you have to say a line like, "I would be in love

with you, but I must catch the five o'clock train." And you have to keep repeating it, you have to say it a hundred times, then you have to be a professional actor. That's where the difficulty comes in. So long as you're just in a scene and you're talking back and forth and the scene is more intense to you than the presence of the cameraman, then it's very easy to be an actor. There's no problem at all. There are means to make films this way. But it would mean a radically different approach to filmmaking because the fundamental assumption would be that so long as film attempts to tell a story, it alienates the actors from any true possibility of relatively natural expression because the machine has to predominate. The machine has to predominate because the sound has to be perfect, the placement of the actors has to be perfect, the camera has to know where the actors will move so the camera can move in harmony with them, and all that violates any possibility of Stanislavsky methods in filmmaking, any attempt of the actor to truly have a deep experience. You can't have a deep experience if it's going to be interrupted twenty times in five minutes, which is the condition of filmmaking.

S: What advantages do you see personally over literature for your own personal self-expression?

M: I loved making films this way without a script. Because I never had great interest in writing a film script. When you write a novel, you have absolute control up to a point. If you are a young writer, you may run into an editor who says

your book is good, but it's not good enough and you've got to rewrite it to my specifications. No matter how polite he may be, that is what he is saying and you end up having a book that is not quite your own if you want to get it published. That happens to authors. If you are an established author, generally speaking, your book is yours. Its virtues are yours and its vices can be laid upon your head. In effect you have absolute control over your own work or relatively absolute control. It's a satisfying experience in that sense that you're truly expressing yourself and at the same time it's a lonely occupation. It has all the faults of being a writer. Which is you have to be alone with yourself the most of every day and you have to find the sanction every day to decide that you are worthy to sit in God-like judgment upon the activities of other people. That's being a writer. In film I moved toward cinema verite where there is no script because I felt the scenario writer has very little control over the final product. When you write a movie script, you're lucky if the movie bears some relation to what you wrote. That's the most you can hope for. People who write movie scripts are almost always secretly interested in going on to become directors. To spend one's life as a writer of movie scripts is a miserable occupation for all but maybe two or three script writers in the world. Since it's not a profession that's necessarily nearly as honored as being an actor or director or even for that matter a producer. The glamour of film is not present in script writing.

Nor is there control. So I was interested in going the other direction entirely--to make movies without scripts. I felt that's what I did do. They were written on the editing table.

S: You said the best movies you've seen lately come from Germany. You've seen "The Tin Drum" and "Maria Braun" and they are highly professional. Have changed from cinema verite when you say you like the German films now? I mean they are not typically German films. One major point is that the Americans control them in their cinemas because they're highly professional, they're nearly American movies.

M: That isn't why I like them. I respect them for being highly professional films, but that isn't why I like them. I like them because I felt they were entering areas of experience that were more appropriate to film than the average film. You see, I think that film bears a profound relation to the dream. I think that film is all together different from literature. One might just as well be talking about the state of Kansas in America and Mars as to talk about literature and film in the same breath. Literature I believe is closer to theater than it is to film. I mean theater is closer to literature than it is to film. Because film occupies the most peculiar place in the mind. If I say to you, "Think of a favorite uncle of yours," you'll have a mental image in your mind for a moment. If I say to you think of Humphry Bogart, you'll have a mental image in your mind and the two are not that different. Film inhabits an area of the mind that's somewhat mysterious. It's that area

somewhere between sex and sleep, somewhere between sex and the dream. It's always as if you can establish a hierarchy of existential states that are less and less definable and more and more mystical. You could almost say that it would be: memory, sex, dream, death. And perhaps between sex and dream, you can put film. Film always has something slightly sinister about it when it's good. The trouble with most professional films is that they are photographed stage plays. The emphasis is upon story and upon all the values of the theater. And so the average film has an artificial unpleasant quality, a certain aesthetic emptiness to it no matter how well made it is. What I loved about those two films is exactly that they had this quality. They were sinister in a lovely way. They were not films in which you could afterward describe the plot in such a way that the plot was coherent. It's almost a vice if you can tell the story of a film clearly, it's a bad film at the highest level. Film should be evocative. The best films are like personal experiences that you keep returning to because the experience was so particular, at the same time so mysterious that you cannot define it, you cannot circumscribe it with words. And to the degree that film inhabits a region of the mind or the psyche that's beyond words, it's successful film. And to the degree it does not, it is merely a debased form of literature or theater.

S: Am I correct in assuming that you seem to be moving toward the cinematic because it's the sort of language which

transcends words or it's a medium which transcends language?

M: No, I'm not moving toward it. I've always had this profound admiration for film at its best. I think you see what I'm talking about in Chaplin for instance. Chaplin always transcends story. You can't tell the story of a Chaplin movie and have it make any sense. You can tell the story of a Chaplin movie but no one who had not seen the movie would ever know why you say it's a great movie. Tell the story of "City Lights" and it's a little sentimental legend. See it and you have an experience that goes into the very extensions of yourself. I have vast respect for film for that reason. But I don't necessarily think that I am all that talented at film. I grew up writing books and writing books is probably what I'll end up doing for the rest of my life. If I were young, I might be more interested in a life in film than a life in literature. But I'm not young. So, voila! Making a film takes certain athletic abilities. You have to have immense stamina, you have to be... I mean a great film director has the same stamina that an olympic athlete has.

S: Does a writer not have that stamina?

M: He doesn't need it physically quite so much. I know any number of writers that are all but dead, but they continue to write because all they need is a little bit left alive here and a little bit left alive there and they can still do it. Like my good friend Truman Capote for instance.

S: You mentioned too that as an author you have sovereign

control over your characters and I think it was John Fowles who said at a certain point in The French Lieutenant's Woman, "I don't have any control over my characters at all anymore." I'd like to ask you for instance could Rusty in Why Are We In Vietnam? have reacted any differently in the bear hunt if you had wanted him to?

M: Well, I think Fowles was saying it's a happy book when one's characters take on their own life. To that extent, if you didn't have that in writing, there'd be very little in writing. There's nothing terribly attractive about being alone in a room looking at an empty piece of paper and making little scribbles on that piece of paper. The pleasure of making literature comes from that moment when your characters come alive and they take a form. You can exaggerate it, however. Once a character becomes alive they are no more and no less remarkable than thinking about someone who is alive. We can think of a friend and the peculiar things a friend does and they can be very vivid for us. We can think of a character in a book we're writing and they can be vivid for us in that way. But I wouldn't go beyond that. I would say this: If you are a young writer and your characters never come alive for you as you are writing them, you might think seriously about whether you really want to be a writer or a novelist. On the other hand, it is very dangerous to use that as the sign that you've been anointed by the Lord to become a writer, because most young writers can think of their characters. They are very vivid to them. They just

don't succeed in making them very vivid to the reader.

That emotion, that inner experience in writing, while it is delightful, is not the sine qua non of the professional writer. The professional writer very often writes with a great detachment. If his characters come alive for him, that's nice. But you can write about characters who never come alive for you, but you know through the years of skill that you've acquired that they're living very well for the reader. Graham Greene once spoke of characters he had to work on very very hard. He was always pleased when he read a review afterward that said that the character was well-drawn. Because he would think to himself "well-dragged."

S: If we could get to Executioner's Song which is "faction."

M: "Faction," now that is a terrible word. That's a media word--"faction." The media can't live with a phenomenon they can't classify. So they immediately look for any word, any word at all. They're like a ship that'll throw anchor on any rock. "Faction." It's a horrible word.

S: Ok, let's forget the word. Let's get to Gary Gilmore. Did you shape this figure, Gary Gilmore, or was he more shaped from coming to Provo? Do you think if he wouldn't have come to Provo, let's say to San Francisco or Los Angeles, just somewhere else, not around the Mormons, do you think you could have shaped the character differently or would he have moved differently or could he have changed? He sort of got trapped in Provo.

M: Yes, he did, he did.