A DIALOGUE ON MAILER'S NOVELS

ROBERT J. BEGIEBING AND
PHILIP BUFITHIS

Mailer's nonfiction has been honored with praises and prizes. One might sensibly argue that it contributed to a revolution in the consciousness of his time. But his fiction is still a matter of vigorous debate, and the Mailer Question persists. Simply put: How good are his novels? Two Mailer scholars having drinks and dinner two years ago in Provincetown discussed the Question. The night wore on, the restaurant closed, but their discussion continued in the months that followed and developed into this dialogue. It opens with two overview statements on Mailer the novelist, debates three novels, then assesses Mailer's other novels starting with The Naked and the Dead.

Bufithis: Norman Mailer's career as a literary celebrity clouded his standing as an authentic artist. An accurate measure of that standing depends on how we judge his novels. Ranging from realistic to mythopoetic, they comprise an adventurous body of work. And Mailer is an impressive prose stylist. But how high is the evaluation we can finally apply to his novelistic achievement? Mailer himself sets the measure when he says, "For if I have one ambition above all others, it is to write a novel which Dostoyevsky and Marx; Joyce and Freud; Stendhal, Tolstoy, Proust and Spengler; Faulkner, and even old moldering Hemingway might come to read, for it would carry what they had to tell another part of the way."

To rank Mailer among the masters, which he invites us to do, is to recognize that on the whole his fiction presents more sensation than substance. We see an abundant vitality in the service of rebellion, but rebellion is not construction. He seldom substantially portrays the meaningful life his combativeness supposedly moves toward. Indeed, against the violence and power of the State or the corporation, Mailer's protagonists exert their own vio-

THE MAILER REVIEW, VOL. 2, NO. 1, FALL 2008. Copyright © 2008. The Norman Mailer Society. Published by The Norman Mailer Society.

lence and power over others. And we're left with a sense not only of sensation but of sensationalism. Mailer's continually lurid evocation of sex amplifies this sense. Nor is it clear what application his metaphoric treatment of sex and violence has to actual human experience. His characters have little relevance to the serious problems and preoccupations of mature life. His fiction does not appreciably present a sincere consciousness articulately alive to essential values: love beyond the erotic, a viable morality, and a spiritual affinity with nature. These are qualities not only typically intrinsic to great novels but primary to life itself. That this needs to be said at all is grim testimony to the condition of the American novel and of literary criticism since at least the mid-twentieth century.

The great importance of the novel has much to do with its being a book to live by. We question the quality of Mailer's novels when early in his career he said, "For I wish to attempt an entrance into the mysteries of murder, suicide, incest, orgy, orgasm, and Time. These themes now fill my head …" We have only to read his last novel, *The Castle in the Forest*, to see a continuation of these mysteries and themes which, when central to literature or life, yield small benefit.

Begiebing: I view Norman Mailer's fiction (complemented by his nonfiction) as a series of experiments—some failed, some producing meaningful results—in the author's bold effort to free himself from the derivative naturalism of *The Naked and the Dead* in order to create not only "a revolution in the consciousness of [his] time," but, and no doubt first, a revolution in the consciousness of Norman Mailer. Mailer's revolutionary effort began, to my mind, with *Barbary Shore*—a strange, allegorical narrative consumed by an ideological debate that even Mailer has admitted collapses "into a chapter of political speech." To transform consciousness through fiction Mailer dived deep into his own psyche to better understand and confront the deepest psychic roots of his compatriots. Like some ancient hero, he has struggled across the decades to return from his journeys into the underworld with the boon of new consciousness; he has struggled to reveal through his visionary fiction both the psychic diseases and the potential cures of his fellow Americans, of the greatest world power to emerge in the twentieth century. To read Mailer's fiction with a mere realist's eye is to read him incompletely, to be frustrated as a reader, and to have little tolerance, especially for those courageous narrative and psychic experiments that fail to

fully engage. We need not suspend judgment, but we do better to read Mailer's fiction with the mythic and mystic eye (of, say, a Joseph Campbell) than with the realistic eye so central to American fiction from the 1870s through the 1940s. Mailer's real literary antecedents are less William Dean Howells and Frank Norris and more Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville—complete with those biblical tidal waves of disarming rhetoric and inventive Shakespearean wordplay.

Bufithis: The standard of evaluation I've described applies to any novel, whether realistic (Howells and Norris) or mythopoetic (Hawthorne and Melville). Certainly, then, there can be no opposition to "courageous narrative and psychic experiments." But how worthy can such experiments of Mailer's be if they, as you say, "fail to fully engage"? Moreover, how can reading with "the mythic or mystic eye" adequately comprehend what is essential to any important novel: creative, nuanced language rendered into cohesive form? Understanding a literary text requires discernments outside a merely mythic or mystic approach like Joseph Campbell's which has little to do with evaluating works of art except as their content illustrates myths. If instead of novels Mailer wrote ballads, Campbell would estimate them no less. As for the mode of Mailer's novels, their direction has been from the mimetic to the expressive, from a world described realistically to a world envisioned by the egocentric imagination which views American society as flagrantly technological, commercial, and imperialistic, thereby devitalizing the individual. But I cannot see that Mailer's opposition to society portrays what you call "potential cures for his fellow Americans." Cures, that is, viable in real life. I question that Mailer has, as you say, "transformed consciousness through fiction." At any rate, the merit of such an act lies not in its being done but in the quality of the transformation.

Begiebing: Some of Mailer's novels fail to fully engage the reader, granted, but they are no less courageous experiments and quests to discover what is essential in the lives of human beings and, to paraphrase D. H. Lawrence, to move the novel ever closer to what makes for life and away from what makes for death. I take it that what we agree are the less successful or engaging novels are those we won't be debating, although their mention may help us make distinctions. When I say we must read Mailer with a mystic eye, I don't mean to exclude other elements of fiction, but only to say that too many of his detractors have made their charges against Mailer *as if* realism were the only

proper mode of fiction, hence the need to reset a balance in any discussion of his merits and demerits. Moreover, I find that often the cohesiveness some critics find lacking lies just below the literal surface at mythic and metaphorical levels of the text, and the metaphorical level, especially, is that level of the text on which Mailer has often said he wishes to be judged. Getting the reader to arrive at some kind of metaphorical vision of human beings and their place in the cosmos is part of Mailer's "program" for revolutionizing consciousness. There are, however, other merits to his fiction, and I assume we will discuss some of those here.

I agree finally—who would not?—that Mailer's fictional world is envisioned by an egocentric imagination. Nonetheless, I think it not strange to argue that his private visions of corporate-totalitarian states, deadening commercialism, mass cowardice, and bipolar (demonic/angelic) temptations are as real as the next corporate or government scandal, the next futile war, the next sad litany of destruction of the planetary ecosystem at the hands of a gargantuan human arrogance and egoism beside which our mere novelist's ego pales. The first stage of curing a disease is diagnosing it—and naming it for what it is. In preventive medicine, diagnosis implies the cure or, better, how to prevent the disease in the first place.

I find myself reading *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, to take a first example for discussion, as a *tour de force* through which Mailer was able to rise above the less successful but important (even developmental) novelistic experiments of *Barbary Shore*, *The Deer Park*, and *An American Dream*. *Why?* is a political novel, but it is a novel that searches out the deepest psychic roots of our policies, in this case the failures of American democracy. Casting off the derivative naturalism of *The Naked and the Dead*, Mailer spent some years thrashing about in the jungles of transformative consciousness to emerge with a narrative mode that is as wild, torrential, cohesive, and mythic as anything William Faulkner ever wrote. The Big Hunt, the Great Bear/Beast, the failings and potential of the hunters (white and Indian), the mythic journey for self-discovery against the largest forces of nature—top predators, vast mountain ranges and forests, solar and planetary magnetic fields—and against the more insidious forces of humanity—predatory corporatism, nationalistic militarism, demonic human ego, overreaching technology—all serve to embody this tale of a young man's quest for self-definition and freedom. If D.J. finally is closer to a failed Ike McCaslin or Huck Finn than a liberated one, it is nonetheless through D.J.'s struggle, his profane outrage

and humor, and the signal betrayals by his elders that Mailer demonstrates precisely what makes for death, as opposed to what makes for life, in our contemporary world.

Bufithis: *Why Are We in Vietnam?* may be "wild, torrential, … and mythic," but such terms are descriptive, not evaluative. Re-reading Faulkner's "The Bear," I am reminded of its greatness and recognize how superficially Mailer's novel resembles it. Faulkner's deeply realized portrayal of human values (social responsibility, justice, love, community, integrity), his loving and reverent depiction of the wilderness, his understanding of how those values and the wilderness relate—all these achievements diminish Mailer's novel. Contrastingly, we have D.J.'s version of destruction, which joins with the U.S. government's and culminates at the novel's end in his eager declaration: "Vietnam, hot dam." I wonder also at the novel's cohesiveness, hobbled as it is by obscurity. The metaphoric significance of electromagnetism, in "Intro Beep 9" for example, is as pretentious as it is unintelligible. And the explanation of the narrator's identity in "Intro Beep 2" is nonsense, even though he could be a Harlem hipster replete with "genius brain." His supersensory perception recalls the White Negro. Mailer's valorization of the urban hipster/psychopath criminal in his essay "The White Negro" is, to put a mild face on it, ethically and logically preposterous, an expression of the bourgeois imagination. Taken on its own merits, *Why Are We in Vietnam?* is what its narrator says: a "rodomontade." Violent, scatological, sexual, it evokes American venality and rapacity with an original style. The novel is an antic performance, but yields little mature thematic substance and less cogent morality.

Begiebing: I agree, Phil, that my descriptive terms are not in themselves evaluative. But they are elements of Mailer's fiction that suggest, also, something more upon which we might base an evaluation. I agree, also, that anyone can separate out a chosen passage or "Intro Beep" to make a novel of such audacity seem to be gibberish. In fact, the more audacious the novel, the easier the disapprobation. I agree, finally, that Mailer's bear story is not Faulkner's; it has some similar merits and sources that my descriptive terms suggest, but Faulkner is writing out of, even while creating, the great tradition of literary modernism, and Mailer is writing not only in the shadow of that tradition but also within the incipient tradition of postmodernism, with echoes of Burroughs, Kerouac, Ginsberg, and other contemporaneous literary reb-

els. His voice and reach are therefore different from Faulkner's, and, yes, far less poignant, but Mailer's is a voice and reach that are in many ways equally substantial and ethically challenging to his compatriots. *Why Are We in Vietnam?* reaches back to the foundational American myth—a subgenre of the ancient quest myth—of the big hunt set in a wilderness against which the hero, among others, tests himself and learns something significant in a personal as well as a collective sense. Mailer is engaged in this novel, first, in a conversation with an American tradition going back to Cooper and flowing through Melville, Hemingway, and Faulkner, to say the least. This conversation, one of the striking and ambitious elements of the novel, gives its performance weight and integrity; perhaps we could call it an external integrity. But more than that, Mailer's contribution to the American version of the mythic quest gives *Why Are We in Vietnam?* an inner integrity and consistency that is the mark of great fiction, an integrity and consistency that for a very long time has been one of the evaluative markers readers and critics alike have used to define aesthetic achievement and wholeness. Moreover, the upshot of that quest in Mailer's novel is both morally prescient and, with the hindsight of shocking revelations from the very architects of the Vietnam war, a historical cautionary tale (deeply anticolonial) of America's intergenerational ambition, arrogance, and hubris.

Bufithis: The Intro Beeps I refer to, Bob, do not "seem to be gibberish." They *are* gibberish. We agree though that Mailer is accurate on what could be called American demonism. That is, intrinsic to the collective American character is the urge to turn quest into conquest. Melville and Faulkner expressed this theme with a breadth, a depth, a complexity, a moral vision, a human sympathy that are seldom found in *Why Are We in Vietnam?* Mailer's contribution to the American version of the mythical quest is little more than a confirmation or reiteration of its given elements. As for the novel's supposed morality, I agree when you say D.J's "profane outrage and humor" and the "betrayals by his elders" demonstrate what makes for death rather than life. But the novel takes its vitality from that very outrage and humor much more than from any presentation of a morally positive life. *Why Are We in Vietnam?*'s energetic expressiveness is inseparable from malevolence. To give the novel its due, it does forcefully lay bare what you call American "ambition, arrogance, and hubris." And I take delight in Mailer's salacious, extravagant parodies.

Begiebing: It is in the nature of the hero's defeat, Phil, that meaning and ethics are to be found. The interruptions and annoyances of the narrative voice reflect those of a protagonist and a culture suffering from the contagions and fragmentations, the madness and defeat, of American life circa 1965–70. Mailer brilliantly balances the psychic fragmentation of the narrator with the linear tale the narrator-hero tells of a ritual of regeneration gone bad. I've devoted thirty pages of print elsewhere to tracing that balance and remarkable inner consistency. No chance, mercifully, of my doing that here.

"D.J. has wasted his adolescence," the narrator warns us. At the center of the novel lies D.J.'s story of his search during a wilderness hunt for the root of his failure to grow beyond the limitations of his corporation-boss father, Rusty, the "medium corporate assholes" who accompany them, and the deeply compromised Indian guide Big Luke. "Big Luke knows … he's violating the divine economy which presides over hunters.… This is Yukon, man, heroes fall." This story of a quest for purgation, expiation, and life that failed is revealed through every detail of the hunting story, and that failure reflects our own. The given elements are, I agree, Phil, always present in tales of the mythic hunt, but Mailer rings his own changes for his own time on those venerable givens. What better way to express an essentially ethical failure than to signal defeat (our own, our nation's, and D.J.'s) by giving the defeated hero the words Mailer ascribed to LBJ: "Vietnam, hot dam." What better way to refute policy than to show through narrative the deepest roots of such policy and what those roots feed, on the one hand, and kill off in us, on the other? The adolescent rebellious potential in D.J. and Tex is defeated by forces larger than themselves—corporate power, parental betrayal, overweening technology and its "animal murder," and even the corrupted figure of the hunter-guide-father, the archetypal wise man. *Why Are We in Vietnam?* is ultimately a tale of youth—of rebellious life potential—destroyed by the avaricious and murderous generation in power, an ancient hubristic tale indeed: a tale as perspicacious regarding the devastations of our very own American Religio-Corporate-Imperial State today as it was in 1967 at the height of the Vietnam debacle.

Bufithis: Mailer "balances," you say, "the psychic fragmentation of the narrator with the linear tale the narrator-hero tells of regeneration gone bad." Even if he does this with the structural artistry your thirty pages show, the ethics you say are found "in the nature of the hero's defeat" amount to little

more than a critique of obviously false values. The values, that is, of what you call "our very own Amercan Religo-Corporate-Imperial State." The ethics of such a critique are not ethics enough because Mailer presents no moral vision workable in our actual lives, no constructive concept of life's possibilities. In this regard he has written *Why Are We in Vietnam?* outside the tradition of the English-speaking novel as its greatest practitioners from Austen to Faulkner have conceived it. D.J is something of a literary cartoon as are all the novel's characters. That's how characters of broad parody are. Your mention of William Burroughs points us in the right direction. *Why Are We in Vietnam?* belongs to an emerging postmodernism. Experimental, ribald, hyperbolic—it resembles the attacks on contemporary society found in Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* and William Burroughs's *Naked Lunch*. Call all three books neo-Rabelaisian if you will.

Why Are We in Vietnam? and *Ancient Evenings* are Mailer's most imaginative and daring indictments of American culture. Indeed, his Egyptian novel is a wonderfully ambitious project, but its execution reveals significant deficiencies. I hasten to say though that what Mailer has done should first be given its due as an act of creation worth our attention. Simply put, *Ancient Evenings* is about magic. Mailer proposes that a life lived according to a belief in magic can be deeply vitalizing, for when the gods dwell in the things of this world, energy and meaning can be found everywhere. In a 1983 interview Mailer said, "We're much sillier than the Egyptians" because we use technology "to slowly but systematically deaden and debase our way of life. Each year there's more real poverty in the synapses than the year before." Mailer would agree with Emerson who said, "Man has become the dwarf of himself." Every page of this novel is intended as a chisel working its way into the dull layers of American malaise and guilt.

However creditable Mailer's intention and ideas, the problem remains that for the most part *Ancient Evenings* never comes alive. Except for Menenhetet II's afterlife adventures in the opening pages, one seldom experiences the characters as felt presences. In 700 pages there is certainly, one might think, enough going on to make characters vivid: palace and harem intrigue, the Battle of Kadesh, the teeming life of Thebes, grave robbing, and continual sex. The romantic and political dramas are especially airless. One hardly gets an emotional sense of "how the magnitude of [Menenhetet's] desire" to be pharaoh "remained as large as his defeat" any more than one gets a convincing portrait of Menenhetet II as a six-year-old boy "in his tenderness, his

wisdom, his pleasure." *Ancient Evenings* raises the exciting hope that the lives of its characters will be truly felt. As it turns out, the only life truly felt is Norman Mailer's.

Begiebing: Your mention of the execution of this novel is an important point, Phil. As Henry James advises, we have to grant the author his subject, idea, starting point before we can "estimate quality." Execution belongs "to the author alone," as James put it. "It is what is most personal to him, and we measure him by that.... The advantage, the luxury, as well as the torment and responsibility of the novelist, is that there is no limit to his possible experiments, efforts, discoveries, successes." Most of the negative critics when the novel first came out, and there were many, would not grant Mailer his "givens" and attacked him on that basis—the spurious or repulsive nature of Mailer's topics and ideas. But I'm with you that this is not a perfectly crafted novel; it is more like a series of interrelated novellas (often presented as set pieces) with as much chaff as kernel in the whole. The novel's composition was continually interrupted over a decade, and the interruptions result in fault lines rather than seamlessness. Like many huge, perhaps overly ambitious, artistic projects, it has both flaws and virtues. Richard Poirier pointed out that like any work of "sustained visionary ambition" (*Paradise Lost*, *Moby-Dick*, etc.) a novel of this magnitude is bound "to have stretches of tiresome exposition, phrasings that are ludicrous, whole scenes that, as Dr. Johnson remarked 'should have been not only difficult but impossible'." Reading it requires a certain kind of stamina. One doesn't turn to a Mailer novel for the common pleasures of reading, but for an extraordinary kind of challenge—a unique philosophical disturbance not only of the pleasures of complacent reading but also of the "interminable Sunday and suet of a bourgeois life form," as George Steiner put it regarding Flaubert's *Salammbo* set in ancient Egypt.

By Mailer's own testimony *Ancient Evenings* is his most ambitious novel, and I think it is important in his *oeuvre* as *the* prototypical text, a culmination of his themes, a work that gives significant order and emphasis to the narrative qualities and the ethical issues developed throughout Mailer's fiction and nonfiction career. Chief among these qualities and issues is the dialectic between vitality and entropy. That dialectic Mailer believes is karmic in its roots (or magical, in Egyptian pagan culture), and in his search for those roots in this narrative Mailer uses sex and war to strip off the surfaces

of life and expose the deepest roots. *Ancient Evenings* is a sort of exposé of the connections between war and eroticism, between sexuality and politics, power, wealth, and state violence.

In ancient Egypt Mailer found, as George Stade recognized, his greatest "metaphor for the unconscious." The unities of the novel arise, it seems to me, out of that sustained conceit. Whether the "characters ever come alive," as you question, may be more a matter of a reader's taste than anything else—to say nothing of one's ability to suspend disbelief—but my own take is that some do and some don't, that sometimes a character takes on vital breath and sometimes a character feels like a melodramatic or allegorical construct in a visionary opus. The "logic" of their actions and motivations is not that of realistic fiction, but more that of characters in a dream, in upwellings (the metaphorical occult) of our individual and collective unconscious. It is the unconscious, and our unconscious motivations, that we need to face and understand, Mailer has often said. His turn to Egypt is in part an attempt to re-create the history of the primitive and dynamic human psyche, which, as Jung argued, we can never ignore or sever without catastrophic loss and self-destruction. In hyperrationality and hypercivilization is as much dangerous imbalance (or violation of Maat) as in the bestiality by which humanity has so often been tempted to destroy itself.

Bufithis: I question how accomplished *Ancient Evenings* is if it contains, as you say, "as much chaff as kernel in the whole." And, yes, "huge, perhaps overly ambitious projects" like *Paradise Lost* and *Moby-Dick* have deficient stretches. But such works attain an excellence that this novel cannot even approximate. Most of what you say, Bob, explains Mailer's views and themes, but, after all, what's at stake here is efficacy: Does *Ancient Evenings* work? Ideas do not a novel make. Mailer is too much of what he calls himself in *The Spooky Art: Some Thoughts on Writing* "a closet philosopher." And too little the artist.

On the question of characterization, Mailer has said that if a writer "stays outside" a character's "head," a character "can return a certain mystery." And "part of the meaning of charisma is that we don't know that intimate nature of the human presences we're facing. Characters in novels sometimes radiate more energy, therefore, when we [novelists] don't enter their mind." *Ancient Evenings* doesn't demonstrate what Mailer says—nor typically do his other novels—because his imagination is so egocentric it pulls us into the

author more than it expands outward to illuminate life. The vivid actualization of a character depends in large measure on the author's capacity for impersonality. It's no surprise that Mailer was sixty at the novel's publication, the same age as his narrator-protagonist Menenhetet. Mailer's novel is a diagnosis of Mailer. Indeed, the four main male characters are so much embodiments of Mailer's oppositions to contemporary American society that they don't have a life of their own. You say that the question of whether the characters come alive "may be more a matter of a reader's taste." Well, taste itself is more a matter of passing norms and subjectivity than of true discernment. Whether the narrator is Meni I, Meni II, Ramses II wearing a linen kilt, or Ramses IX wearing a leopard skin, it's still Norman Mailer talking, obsessed, as he has been for the past fifty years, with sex and power, sex as power, sex as violence.

Homosexual rape, castration, incest, orgies, necrophilia, bestiality, coprophagy, and cannibalism represent, I can only assume, Mailer's opposition to what you call "hyperrationality and hypercivilization" and to what George Steiner calls the "interminable Sunday and suet of a bourgeois life form." Homosexual rape, etc., may be opposition all right, but I wonder how they serve the serious concerns of life. "The Book of Queens" section, for example, is in effect not much different from sex scenes in the movie *Caligula*, produced by Bob Guccione. For all Mailer's disdain of American banality, *Ancient Evenings* achieves a banality of its own.

Concerning Mailer's style, he assails the insipidity of American public utterance by loading his narrative with figurative language, but some of it produces more heat than light. We wonder, for example, at Mailer's thematic frame, i.e., the imagery that begins and ends the novel. On the first page we have Meni II's ka who says: "Is one human? Or merely alive? Like a blade of grass equal to all existence in the moment it is torn? Yes. If pain is fundament, then a blade of grass can know all there is." The pain image and the grass metaphor are unintelligible. On the last page, Meni II's ka says: "For the first sound to come out of the will had to traverse the fundament of pain. So I cry out in the voice of the newly born at the mystery of my first breath, and enter the Boat of Ra.… Past and future come together on thunderheads and our dead hearts live with the lightning in the wounds of the Gods." The repeated pain image and the lightning/wounds metaphor might be fascinating at first glance, but they leave us grasping, not like Meni II's ka but because Mailer's writing is unclear. Mailer concludes *Ancient Evenings*—as

he does *The Deer Park* and *The Armies of the Night*—with language that reaches toward the profound, the visionary, the portentous even as it lapses into obscurity.

Begiebing: That was a good, spirited response to my points. I do agree that this novel, for all its ambition and all its significance to understanding Mailer's *oeuvre*, is not the most readable and engaging thing Mailer has written, nor the most engaging and readable compared to certain work of his peers. There are even less readable Mailer novels, to my mind, and *Harlot's Ghost*, which I'll confess here is the only Mailer book I never got through, is one of them. Mailer is best when he's not foregrounding his philosophical and psychological obsessions in a personal voice as in, say, *The Executioner's Song* and *The Gospel according to the Son*. His fiction would be considered greater if it had the restraint in this regard that some of the nonfiction does. It's notable that, ignoring Robert Lowell's comment that Mailer is "the finest journalist in America," the best sellers and prizewinners after *The Naked and the Dead* are the *essentially* nonfiction books, whether masking as "novels" or not—*The Armies of the Night* and *The Executioner's Song* for example. But let's avoid a precious and academic discussion of what constitutes fiction or nonfiction.

If you place *Ancient Evenings* in the grand tradition of the philosophical novel—with all the twists and turns, allegorical characterizations, propounding of ideas, knotty conundrums, bizarre connections and inquiries, portentousness, and varying degrees of obscurity, etc., etc.,—you might be more able to appreciate it as such and look less for realistic coherences and engaging novelistic conventions that make more readable novels "work" for readers. The philosophical tradition in fiction is necessarily egocentric because only an outsize ego (an ego even larger than that of most writers or artists) would dare attempt to question or explain the greatest mysteries of life and death. That Mailer chose to be obsessed with sex and power seems to me to be a good choice given the history of the twentieth century and the sorry history so far of the twenty-first. What else might more appropriately obsess a philosophical novelist in our time? But the roots go deep into the (psychic) foundations of civilization, hence the turn to Egypt. We don't want to fall into the trap of thinking the topics and events in a work of fiction are being condoned by the author. Homosexual rape, castration, cannibalism, to take a few, are cross-cultural, time-honored forms of personal and state violence, the exercise of power over another, the negative power D. H. Lawrence iden-

tified. Human bestiality, violence, and the whole lot of human folly and lust are what Mailer chooses to examine through fiction. Though Rabelais has nothing on Mailer, Mailer has taken some hard hits for his choices.

It seems to me, however, that it is possible to read this book as an examination of virtue, both by the study of virtue's obverse (acts or qualities that you list yourself) and by the effort to understand the nature (its success and its failure) of courage, that virtue upon which all others depend. I've gone on too long already in this response, and I can develop this claim somewhat if you'd like, but let me say at least that Menenhetet I's adventures—the largest and most significant series of embedded tales—and the brief life of Meni II make sense only if we understand how bleak a vision of human vanity, waste, and degeneration most of Mailer's Egyptian tale is. In the Land of the Dead where sufferers learn to recognize the tragic waste and worthlessness of their lives, Meni II comes to recognize the failures of his grandfather's four lives. Woe to the "enemies of Ra" whose misdeeds outweigh their virtues! For in the final bend of the Duad, Anubis awaits to judge the dead by weighing "the moral worth of the heart," as Menenhetet puts it at the outset of the tale, against Maat's feather of truth, the feather of justice and proportion in all things.

Bufithis: If Mailer significantly portrays virtues in *Ancient Evenings*, where are they? Present by their absence? That would be more than a bit of a stretch. This novel is a cautionary tale about the ravages of sex and violence? I'm reminded of Mel Brooks imitation of Frederico Fellini. When Carl Reiner asks Fellini (Brooks) why his films depict sex and violence, Fellini (Brooks) replies, "So people will know not to do that."

You place *Ancient Evenings* "in the great tradition of the philosophical novel." What philosophical novels does Mailer's novel keep company with? And if Mailer attempts, as you say, "to question or explain the great mysteries of life and death," I wonder where he significantly does that.

Finally, Bob, whether a novel is realistic, mythopoetic, or philosophical, successful characterization remains what it is: a vividly actualized creation, a felt presence, which is not merely "novelistic convention" but novelistic excellence. Also, successful articulation remains what it is—clear—and not exclusively a matter of "realistic coherence."

Begiebing: The tradition of the philosophical novel—the novels of ideas—I take to be a varied, "big-tent" tradition. Mailer is nothing without his ideas

or at least his bold explorations of uncommon ideas. It's the tradition of Huxley obviously, Wilde's *Dorian Gray*, Huysmans's *Against the Grain*, Mann's *Doctor Faustus, Felix Krull*, and *Magic Mountain*. Then there's Johnson's *Rasselas*, Rousseau and Goethe, Melville's *Pierre* and even *Moby-Dick*, Fowles's *The Magus*, Gardner's *Sunlight Dialogues*, Murdoch's *Severed Head*, Bellow's *Herzog*, Kundera's *Lightness of Being*. Camus, Ayn Rand, and Hesse, and on and on—a mixed bag of writers and novels exploring ideas as Mailer here explores ideas about the role in civilization (and history) of wealth, power, lust, "magic," and courage. Such explorations (often depicting a dialectic of constructive/destructive oppositions) consume many of his other fiction and nonfiction works as well, in varying degrees and emphases.

Your Mel Brooks reference of course echoes Benjamin DeMott's review in the Sunday *New York Times*. Nothing is easier than taking a philosophically earnest novel and suggesting the *Mad* magazine send-up version of it, as DeMott did, especially in his misunderstanding and lampooning of the social drama in books 3 through 6 of *Ancient Evenings*. DeMott led the pack of what Peter Shaw called the "unprecedented, easy condescension" of a set of smug and amused reviewers who, like DeMott, saw an "unintentional," ludicrous "blend of Mel Brooks and the Marquis de Sade." But as Aldous Huxley said: "The chief defect of the novel of ideas is that you must write about people who have ideas to express—which excludes all but about .01 percent of the human race." Mailer in *Ancient Evenings* has tried to transcend that elitist limitation by blending his philosophical and theological explorations (the long-pursued mysteries of life and afterlife) with vast (cinematic? epic?) historical actions, personal conflict and violence, and bizarre plot twists that would be improbable in a realistic novel or generic action thriller. "The filth of my habits," Ramses says after the Battle of Kadesh, "has led me through many a wonder and many a wisdom." The same obviously is true for Menenhetet, who takes the reader along through his filth, wonders, and wisdom.

Mailer's long-standing idea that the first ethic required of us is courage—the courage and strength to take risks and to rebel against that which would diminish us—is connected in this novel to his main characters by their struggles against their social and spiritual diminishment in a civilization where magic, wealth, and sexuality are the root of power (ultimately totalitarian-pharaoh power), where the overwhelming siren calls of corruption, capitulation, and disproportion threaten at every turn of one's life.

Mailer's heroes have always sought unconscious, divine, regenerative power through courage; their failures to obtain it are the failure of courage, their rare successes, the success of courage. He has thereby nearly always in his novels balanced precariously and melodramatically on the edge between the sacred and the profane. But this time out his disruption or "defamiliarization" of our assumptions and perceptions is not incidental but total. We have entered an ancient magical universe and a psychic condition counter to our own. We find ourselves in an unsettling realm where the sacred and the profane, the metaphorical and the literal, the microcosmic and macrocosmic are inseparable. In this realm, Menenhetet, Nefertiri, Hathfertiti, Honey-ball, and Ramses the Great, among others, are caught in the conflict between entropy and vitality—a both personal and divine conflict (the novel's "Two Worlds") requiring great courage and, as they'll learn in the afterlife at the scales of Maat, great balance and virtue.

Meni says of his mother, Hathfertiti—an insatiably ambitious woman, a monster of greed and lust—that her embraces with Ramses IX are a "joining of His Double-Throne with her insatiable greed." She, like scribe-priest Pepti, seeks to buy, rather than earn, her passage on the pharaoh's golden boat on earth and in the Land of the Dead. But as Menenhetet learns through various incarnations and passages through the Land of the Dead, it is not by such ambition, by wealth and power or lust in high places, that we might purchase any true virtue or merit or peace or even afterlife, but by our own courage alone, by seeking the risk, by placing our individual force *against*, not in collusion with, whatever powers would shape, own, or defeat us. That is Mailer's philosophical and theological "idea" in this novel, as in most of his work. Mailer's catalogue in *Ancient Evenings* of the ambition to power and wealth to the exclusion of other sources or kinds of power, and other sources of merit and virtue, are entirely in line with the catalogue of moral defeat that James Henry Breasted, the great Egyptologist, described in his work on the moral prophets of ancient Egypt. *Ancient Evenings* is an epic spectacle—quite a clear spectacle to my mind—of a man, Menenhetet, of great potential and endowment and of privileged men and women with their fatal flaws and grotesque hubris: their pride and cruel, blind ambition to wealth and power over the structures of state and the people who populate it. The antidote to collusion with such a civilization is not the ambition to succeed in it—for that is bad karma indeed in life and afterlife—but the extraordinarily rare courage to transcend it. This is the courage Menenhe-

tet knows and seeks but cannot muster. At least not in his series of embattled incarnations in *Ancient Evenings*. But who knows? Had Mailer completed his proposed trilogy, we might have seen future incarnations of greater courage and moral proportion, of less corruption and capitulation.

Bufithis: "Mailer's heroes," you say, "have always sought unconscious, divine, regenerative power through courage." Closer to the truth is: Mailer's heroes have always sought unconscious, divine, regenerative power through sex, violence, and power over others. Earlier examples are Sergius O'Shaugnessy (*The Deer Park*), Stephen Rojack (*An American Dream*), and D.J. Jethro (*Why Are We in Vietnam?*) And now we have Menenhetet. Surely he is courageous in the Battle of Kadesh, but we're discussing moral courage. What's unmistakable is that he's mired in pride, lust, totalitarian-pharaoh power, and wealth. We agree that he does not transcend these corruptions in the course of his four incarnations. If this novel is, as you say, "depicting a dialectic of constructive/destructive oppositions," courage is not a constructive opposition because we don't see it significantly enacted. There are merely statements on courage that Menenhetet's ka utters in the afterlife—courage, in effect, as afterthought. Also, I'm puzzled, Bob, when you say "the sacred and the profane" in this novel "are inseparable." If that's the case, how does Menenhetet's supposed courage against the profane have any meaning?

On the question of wisdom, all we have are ka-uttered pronouncements born of Menenhetet's regret over his four lives. You say Menenhetet "takes the reader along through his … wisdom." I doubt a reader can be taken along through an abstract noun in the sense you mean. Menenhetet's ka may be wise, but there's very little that's wise about Menenhetet's activities—and *those* are what the reader is taken through.

As for magic, it doesn't do in the novel what Mailer says. In his promotional interviews for the novel, he extolled magic as far more nourishing to human life than rationality and technology. You credit Mailer's position, yet you also say otherwise: "[M]agic" together with "wealth" and "sexuality" is "at the root of power (ultimately totalitarian-pharaoh power)." Judging by what's actually in the novel, I can say, yes, magic is intrinsic to a variety of corruptions among a variety of characters and thus subverts Mailer's view of it.

On the matter of Mailer the philosopher, you list some novels in "the tradition of the philosophic novel," but most of them don't contribute to what I had asked about: the *great* tradition of the philosophical novel. The nov-

els you cite that contribute to that tradition—*Moby-Dick* and *The Magic Mountain*, for example—are of an altogether higher order than *Ancient Evenings* on the grounds of—just for a start—character, language, and theme.

Finally, concerning Benjamin DeMott and others who lampooned the novel, it's not that they are, as you say, smug and misunderstand Mailer's philosophy, which is essentially the same neoprimitive philosophy he has promulgated for fifty years, starting with "The White Negro" in 1957; it's that Mailer loads his plot with sensational action to convey his philosophy. In other words, he subordinates the necessities of art to audience appetite. So I have some difficulty, Bob, with the word "earnest" as in your phrase, "earnest philosophical novel." I'm glad you didn't say "honest." I would have total difficulty with that.

Begiebing: We've made our cases and it is nearly time for any reader to decide who makes the more interesting and cogent case. I'll address some of your queries by way of wrapping up our discussion of this novel so that we may move on to the next.

Courage in one form can be a metaphor for other forms—the physical may represent moral or spiritual, especially in fiction. I suspect it is possible that physical courage even requires moral courage at its root. And if one learns upon one's death, or at the moment of one's death, that one's life has been a failure of courage or proportion, surely wisdom is imparted, even if it is merely imparted "too late" for a dying or dead character. One might conjure the ghost of Ivan Illich. In fiction, what's learned by a character in the end might pique or challenge the mind of the reader. If wisdom is not always imparted, at least an author might get readers to think for themselves—a goal (perhaps the basis of wisdom?) Mailer has stated in at least one interview connected to this novel.

In an ancient world where the sacred and the profane are inseparable, where "sacralization" (in the sense that Mircea Eliade used the term) is total, there is all the more demand placed upon the individual to redefine courage beyond a Christian ethic familiar to modern, rationalist Western men and women. And it is not magic that I mean to say is the source of the abuse of power and greed; it is magic (like wealth, like power) that can be used to enhance life or abused to diminish it—but one more element of the moral choices that face these Egyptian characters at every turn. If we were to speak of white versus black magic, we'd be speaking in clichés about a

distinction that is more subtle and complicated in Mailer's portrayal of ancient Egypt.

Finally, I did not mean to suggest you were being smug or condescending, as certain reviewers were when the novel came out. I was merely suggesting, as Joan Didion has said of Mailer, that too many have in the past come to believe "Norman Mailer is no better than their reading of him." I don't think the lampooning critics have made the effort to meet Mailer where James said we must meet an author, accepting his givens and testing his execution. You are perfectly free, of course, to critique that execution, as you have, and you thereby have given Mailer more respect than his lampooners. You and I simply have come to different conclusions about the significance and the quality of execution in *Ancient Evenings*, and it is time for any reader to think for herself about the matter.

One point where I agree with you is relevant to our next book—*The Gospel according to the Son*. When you say that Mailer is at his weakest as a novelist when his own voice enters his characters, I agree. I do not, however, think a writer working through his few obsessions again and again—think James, think Melville—is at fault. Obsessions might just be the mark of a major writer. But when an author's *own voice* creeps or leaps quite obviously into his characters, the novel is weakened. *Barbary Shore*, *The Deer Park*, *An American Dream*, *Harlot's Ghost*, *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, and *The Castle in the Forest* are weaker for the lack of distinction between the author's and the characters' and/or narrator's voices. I find books like *The Naked and the Dead*, *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, *The Executioner's Song*, even, yes, *Ancient Evenings*, perhaps *Oswald's Tale*, and certainly *The Gospel according to the Son* are superior to the extent the author keeps his own voice in check, with varying degrees of success, as he works over his obsessions. To take *Gospel*, for example, I think that putting *The Executioner's Song* aside, there is hardly another work of fiction in Mailer's *oeuvre* that an assiduous Mailer reader "blind" to the book's authorship might have mistaken for another author, or at least not chosen Mailer as the most likely creator of the book. Or, say, he would not be the first chosen out of a list of five or ten contemporary authors. I take that to be one of the strengths of that novel, a sort of touchstone against which one might test the other novels for the author suppressing through art the projection of his personal, all-too-familiar voice onto his characters or narrators. There are other qualities of that novel worth mention, but perhaps there is some ground for agreement between us on the

potential, at least, for Mailer to write of characters engaged in the issues that obsess him in a voice not entirely, or even annoyingly, his own.

Bufithis: I've never noticed Melville, James, or any major novelist "working through … obsessions again and again" because they don't, like Mailer in novel after novel, express their ideas through a first-person narrator protagonist. Mailer's ideas ventriloquize his narrator (and often his minor characters) with an obviousness and consistency that belie his reputation as a protean author. I agree though that *The Gospel according to the Son* presents a protagonist who speaks "in a voice [or style] not entirely, or even annoyingly" Mailer's own. As his Jesus says, "I … learn[ed] how to speak simply and with wisdom rather than by bewildering others with the brilliance of one's words." The problem is that Jesus's wisdom often sounds like the banally dignified locutions screenwriters put in the mouths of sages in togas. At other times Jesus speaks the flat, gelded prose typical of contemporary biblical translations. In contrast, Jesus in the Revised Standard Version and more so in the King James Version expresses himself with an august cadence, a gravity, that stirs the heart and affects millions of people as a form of prayer.

We wonder why Mailer wrote this novel beyond the obviously saleable potential of its subject. Perhaps he intended to confirm his Manichean theology by having God's own son express it. If so, Manicheism is not even *Gospel*'s main theme. Further, almost everyone is a Manichean already in the sense that everyone has suffered and knows darkness. As Jesus observes, "God and Mammon still grapple for the hearts of all men and women."

Mailer has created a low impact Jesus not only because of Jesus's unsatisfactory language or even his intermittent doubts that he's the Son of God (doubts that eventually vanish). Jesus does what the Gospels' Jesus does. He follows John the Baptist, works miracles, converses with the devil, trumps the Pharisees, preaches God's message, dies on the cross, and overcomes death. Yet this Jesus is a pale reduction of the Gospels' Jesus. By casting his protagonist as the narrator of his own story, the purveyor of his own emotions, Mailer has removed Jesus's holiness and magnetism. If you cross over the footlights and watch the magician's act, the mystery dissolves. Still, we might have thought that the autobiography of Jesus in the hands of Norman Mailer would have been a great opportunity for him to soar. Yet the novel we have—seldom affecting, often vapid—is too much a rendition of Scripture ever to get off the ground.

Begiebing: We are back to Mailer's language again, Phil, so let me address it. I have no argument with the criticism that Mailer when he most "ventriloquizes" his narrators and characters produces his weakest novels and least interesting characters, but there are novels where the obsessions—which are but recognizable themes that tie together any author's body of work—are presented otherwise. And I take *Gospel* to be one of those novels.

Mailer had to choose in *Gospel* the language he would use to tell a familiar but deeply affecting tale. His audacious starting point is to enter where we haven't been before, or at least not in the New Testament itself: the inner life of Jesus from childhood until his death. Mailer chose simplicity—a rarity for him—of language and narrative structure to deliver the goods. He had to decide whether he would try to replicate the oracular voice of Jesus or whether to tell the tale simple and straight through his chosen narrator. Wisely, I think, he chose the plainspoken path. Imagine the pitfalls any writer would encounter aiming for that oracular voice; imagine the field day Mailer's most ardent critics would have had! Better to quote the New Testament for some sense of the gravity, mystery, and cadence of Jesus's voice, as he does from I take it various translations, but speak plainly to represent the inner voice of "the savior." There is no way such an imaginative leap can't flatten to some extent our sense of Jesus and his mystery because we know him only from the outside, from the "recorded" public utterances, from that grave, mysteriously affecting voice. But what writers do is take up such challenges; that's the novelist's job description and the proper role of the imagination.

To be sure the Manichean struggle that has fascinated Mailer returns here, in this case through a Christian focus, but beyond that the given subject matter provides Mailer an opportunity to explore a number of other themes he has explored in varying degrees before: the abuses of wealth and power; the role of courage as virtue; the manipulation of the masses by the wealthy, powerful, and pious; the destructive side of sanctimonious piety and religiosity; the role of magic and miracle in the ancient world; the nature of "Satanic" temptation; and the sources of tyrannical holocausts, just to list a few of the more obvious. That these are also themes that Jesus took up gives at least to Christian readers, perhaps, some authority to the novelist's daring pursuit of them. Like the New Testament itself, Mailer's novel has an ambitious agenda to work through, and in less than 100,000 words. But one key to Mailer's understanding of Jesus, it seems to me, is significant. Jesus is not merely divine; he is "made flesh." That's what makes a novelist's explo-

ration of him interesting. It is our flesh that Jesus shares; that flesh is the source of his doubt, the source of his temptations, the source of his own questioning of his Father, the source of his suffering on earth. It is also, I think, the source of his somewhat commonplace inner voice in the novel: the plain voice of a man (an Essene and carpenter) rather than the public voice of a prophet, savior, miracle-worker, or divinity.

Bufithis: Yes, Mailer's "most ardent critics" would have had a "field day" if *Gospel*'s Jesus had imitated King James or Revised Standard Version English. So Mailer opted for "the plainspoken path," and the critics had a field day anyway. Mailer was in a no-win situation going into this novel. Reading the Gospels translated from the original Greek (King James or RSV), we encounter the 2,000-year-old voice of the biblical Jesus. With *Gospel* Mailer intends us to suspend our disbelief and become unmindful we're experiencing a 1997 A.D. Jesus. That's a very tall order for any reader's imagination.

That imagination is further challenged by a Jesus who merely avers his emotions. Some examples: On meeting the first four of his disciples, he says, "I was … rich in my enthusiasm"; when he visits Peter's house, he's "alive with new strength" and "full of wonder and happiness"; at the death of John the Baptist, he's "full of loss"; after his trial he's in "sorrow." Throughout the narrative "the power of God" rises in him. Jesus has a large emotional life, but seldom is it rendered with specificity and texture, so we have little felt apprehension of it. Hardly anywhere in this novel do we feel or know the livingness, the vibratory interior, of Jesus. As you say, Bob, Mailer's Jesus "is not merely divine; he's 'made flesh'." But the *person* who's made flesh is only half there.

Jesus reinforces his emotional flatness by moving from scene to scene with almost cursory dispatch: I did this, then I did that. I went here, then I went there. Actually, the plot of the four Gospels is similarly unsatisfactory, and Mailer is bent on following them. But (we're back to language again) King James and RSV English give the Gospels flavor and resonance. *Gospel*—whether we contrast it with the Gospels or any achieved novel—is the textual equivalent of freeze-dried food.

Yes, *Gospel* "provides Mailer an opportunity to explore" his familiar themes in a Christian context. However, he treats those themes with so little breadth, depth, and vividness that we get a cut-rate tour of them rather than an exploration.

Begiebing: I'm reminded of John Ruskin's point that "the faults of a work of art are the faults of the workman; its virtues his virtues." Surely Mailer, like any artist, has his faults and virtues.

Mailer actually did get a pretty good review in *Publishers Weekly*, if I recall correctly, but I didn't keep up with the reviews by the time of this novel because I was reading Mailer still but not following others' writings about him as I had left literary criticism in an effort to write my own novels. Perhaps my struggle to write fiction gives me more sympathy for the faults and virtues of any novelist. Can we at least agree that *Gospel* at its worst would be the voice of a Jesus struggling to become relevant to the late twentieth century? Mailer does certainly present our imaginations a tall order to suspend disbelief at the end of the twentieth century: to have us believe that we are experiencing Jesus's interior voice. But I can't fault the artist for the effort alone, no more than I would fault those who have required of us a similar suspension when they create films or "biographical" books about Jesus. Maybe fools rush in, but there have been a lot of creative fools around tracking and re-interpreting Jesus in books and films for many decades. Again, it's the execution that people can, of course, debate.

The heart of your complaint here seems to be the lack of specificity or texture—the felt apprehension—of Jesus's emotional life. The flesh of Jesus, as it were, is thereby incompletely rendered. I think Mailer wisely avoided a twentieth-century confessional voice for the private life, and certainly he doesn't take every opportunity to express a rich inner voice, but again, my guess is he could hear the critics breathing down his neck, sharpening their long knives, waiting for him to stumble. So what we get are Jesus's reflections and reactions to external events. And external events adjusted to a "truth," as Jesus tells us in the opening, against the errors of Mark, especially, but also Matthew, Luke, and John, "who gave me words I never uttered and described me as gentle when I was pale with rage." The Jesus narrator's stated purpose is to "give my own account" and "hope to remain closer to the truth." After stating this largely external purpose, the narrator gives us two private reactions to events early on: first, his reflections and responses to Joseph and John the Baptist (later, as well, to the apostles); second, his visions and revelations upon baptism and in the wilderness during the Satanic temptations. Each personal reflection represents a stage in his divine development and consciousness. Including and beyond those instances, we do have a continuing internal dialogue regarding a number of "corrected"

events. To suggest a few: details and reflections on early family life to his thirteenth year in chapter 3; personal revelations at the end of chapter 10 upon baptism and further inner voices of apparent divinity; doubts about family betrayals on page 105; a sharing of doubt with all flesh on pages 107, 110–111, and 113; prayer and self-doubt consuming the end of chapter 43; a rather long reflection on his ministry, the meaning of it, and his impact, or lack of impact, on the future world on page 235. One could go on, but if we are not given the rich inner life you had hoped for, Mailer certainly is not ignoring moments of reflection, emotional turmoil, self-doubt, and other elements of that internal dialogue we human beings all experience in varying degrees.

But what interests me more about this novel are some of its thematic elements (see above) and their coherences with Mailer's larger body of work. Again, Mailer is nothing if not a novelist of ideas. He tends to evaluate others, and hence himself, on a basis other than the further elaboration of style and technique. Admitting in a 1983 interview that the elaboration of technique and style are the hallmarks of the next generation of novelists, he finds them mostly lacking in the deeper gifts. "I can't think of a single novelist coming along who is philosophically disturbing," is the way he put it. Who could be in his own time and in a re-creation of his life in our time more philosophically disturbing than Jesus? Surely the current century and the last represent an era of Christian hypocrisy surpassing, arguably, the hypocrisy of Jesus's own day. I'll offer the speculation that after abandoning his trilogy upon the publication of *Ancient Evenings*, Mailer saved some of what he had gathered for his second volume and turned it to use in this new fiction about the life and teachings of Jesus. Many of the themes taken up in *Ancient Evenings* appear here; we are still in the ancient (and magical) world, but with the introduction of a Christian ethic, which ethic many scholars have argued arises out of ancient, Eastern (even Egyptian) ethics.

Are the themes, as you say, "freeze-dried" or "cut-rate"? I don't think so. Let readers decide. Often, the familiar biblical themes are presented emblematically, elliptically, relying perhaps on our educated understanding. The thematic layers of this novel are part of Mailer's ongoing dialogue about enduring issues with his compatriots and his epoch. It is a dialogue through his nonfiction and his fiction intended to challenge our pieties and our complacencies, our vast (and far too often Christian) hypocrisy about most of the larger issues before immediate generations and future generations as well. In

framing the issues and in challenging us in this novel or that, Mailer, like any artist, has of course his faults and his virtues. But from my first encounter with Mailer's work, what interests me is his courage and audacity in raising the issues and challenging his contemporaries. Raising questions we'd rather not be asked. Certainly, even the most crude telling of Jesus's story and teachings (and Mailer is better than crude in this novel) should challenge us in ways we Americans have been avoiding, denying, for a dangerously long time.

Bufithis: I agree this Jesus struggles to become relevant to the late twentieth century and *Gospel* continues Mailer's ongoing dialogue with his contemporaries to challenge America's maladies. They are the same maladies dozens of commentators have been pointing out for years. It takes no special acuity to recognize what you call this nation's "pieties and complacencies, our vast (and far too often Christian) hypocrisy."

You suggest that for Jesus's private life Mailer largely avoided a modern confessional voice and a rich inner voice because he could hear the critics ready to attack if he should stumble. If any writer is known to be unafraid of the critics, it's Mailer. Or maybe with this one novel he went timid on us. Either way, the result is a protagonist lacking in palpable vitality. Books about or even by Jesus don't have to be tepidly told, despite the fact that they require a seemingly impossible suspension of disbelief. People the world over familiar with Nikos Kazantzakis's *The Last Temptation of Christ*, for example, have experienced a powerful novel that breathes life.

I agree Mailer may be "nothing if not a novelist of ideas." That is partly why *Gospel* is so inert. Choosing the Gospel form—which is hortatory, not novelistic—Mailer undercut what a novel is: a rendering of life, of the world, animate with imagination, emotion, and articulation. Of course Mailer's Jesus responds to the events you itemize, but they are undeveloped; almost every scene is deficient in detail and dramatic power. Mailer has never written a novel as thin in personal and physical actuality and in ethos. While contemplating his Jesus story, he might have had more success if he had decided to get out from under the Gospels, damn the critical torpedoes, and write a book all his own.

Begiebing: Well, I didn't mean to suggest that Mailer feared critics and adjusted his work out of such fear, and I'm not sure that's what I said. Let me put it this way: Writing *Gospel* Mailer is, to use his own metaphor, in the thir-

teenth or fourteenth round of a fifteen-round championship fight. He's not about to leave a lot of easy openings for "vicious" critics and reviewers, "the sons of bitches," to pound him, as he admits he did with *Barbary Shore* in a letter to William Styron on August 18, 1954. Any writer knows you can't get a book to the public unless you can get through the sons of bitches first. So you don't leave easy openings. Mailer has, moreover, never pulled his punches with his readers; he has said on more than one occasion that if he outrages readers and forces them out of complacency to think for themselves, he's done his job. So it's not a matter of timidity, but a matter of fighting strategy in the real and vicious world of the publishing industry. And finally it's a matter of confronting the consciousness of the public with a voice, a story, and a metaphysic that is anything but what they are getting all day in every way through contemporary American culture and media.

We can't fairly judge Mailer only or even mostly by the standards, characters, and techniques of nineteenth-century fiction. But I really don't find every, or almost every, scene deficient in dramatic power. Two chapters (13 and 14) depicting Satan's temptations are not without dramatic tension and interesting debate, to suggest a couple. Look also at the chapters depicting Jesus debating the head priest or Judas's confrontations with Jesus. Other instances of dramatic power within scenes are available as well. But the comparatively elliptical nature of this novel—unusual for Mailer, to be sure—that I've referred to must be in part due to Mailer's sense that the essentials of the tale are all too familiar to us. Rather than re-invent the presentation of biblical scenes and stories we've known since childhood, Mailer's more allusive strategy is to have his narrator make some narrative correctives toward "the truth" of his life and thoughts, relying perhaps on our own synapses to fill in familiar, less unimportant details (i.e., "getting up" the ancient settings and characters) a wholly original story would require, by contrast, on the page. It is just such a requirement of detail fulfilled by *Ancient Evenings*—for the obvious opposite reason, the story and culture are in that case deeply estranged from us.

I believe, Phil, we have reached the point in this discussion, however, where we have spent enough time on the three representative novels we agreed to debate at some length. We have mentioned along the way other works of fiction, and even nonfiction, but why don't we turn now briefly to a more free-ranging discussion of Mailer's novels that so far our discussion has not sufficiently allowed for.

Bufithis: Yes, we can start at the beginning with *The Naked and the Dead*, *Barbary Shore*, and *The Deer Park*, which is a kind of jumping-off novel because it contains seeds of the mythopoetic imagination that thereafter pervades Mailer's fiction. *The Naked and the Dead* is a hammering scrutiny of war and might well be the finest American novel on World War II. Mailer's sharply detailed depiction of combat on the sensate level—its confusion, boredom, fear, violence, and agony—is a distinguished artistic achievement. We might, however, be more willing to accept his vision were it not so continually grim. Undue negativity and rawness are the pitfalls of naturalism. The novel's characters, despite race and class differences, belong to the same hopeless family, whether as soldiers or in the "Time Machine" biographies. They are all alienated and either power hungry or made small by thwarting circumstance. Life is a gyp and nothing human is sacred. We question, then, the truth and honesty commentators have claimed for this novel. It presents nonetheless a social range and a human sympathy Mailer never again attains.

Barbary Shore is born of a mind that knows disaffection and inwardness. A claustrophobic novel, it has the power of being small and tense. The rooming house setting and the six characters Mailer brings together generate at times a sense that we're experiencing an expanded version of Sartre's play *No Exit*. A central problem though is Mikey Lovett, the narrator-protagonist. We accept that this amnesiac doesn't know who he is, but his vapidity is more a function of his deficient characterization than of his character. Finally, for all its intensely insular drama, *Barbary Shore* sinks under the weight of its relentless geopolitical theorizing, which is in turns edifying, simplistic, and confusing. The novel's effect on the reader is of life argued more than lived.

The Deer Park presents us with an undersensitive narrator, Sergius O'Shaugnessy, nearly devoid of tenderness; at least that's how he depicts himself. His story is patterned after the alienated hero's: tribulation, temptation, renunciation, and exile. Yet so blithely does he recount these experiences that we fail to feel their emotional import. Things happen to him without things happening in him. He is partly a creation that recalls slick popular fiction and partly a voice of dispassionately intelligent observation. The novel's anti-hero, Marion Faye, is a prototype of the hipster-psychopath Mailer describes two years later in "The White Negro." Faye and Sergius are unconvincingly portrayed for opposite reasons. Faye is developed beyond dramatic justification and Sergius is not developed enough. It's difficult, for example, to know what to make of Sergius's relation to sex. Mailer's pri-

mary thematic value in this novel is that the creation of art is the one redemptive act that will transcend "the mummery of what happens, passes, and is gone." Yet we are faced in the end with Sergius's assertion that new psychic circuits are connected through sex. Are sex *and* art redemptive? And if sex nourishes art, how does it? Matters are further confounded in the novel's last five paragraphs, which mix sense and obscurity and culminate with the unintelligible/unexplained concept of "Sex as Time." To be fair, *The Deer Park* is an often engaging, even comic, inside view of Hollywood. It is a chronicle about people seeking after pleasure as if it were happiness.

Begiebing: I think we have some substantial agreements here, Phil, on the early fiction, especially after *The Naked and the Dead*. As I said early on in our discussion, after *The Naked and the Dead* I see Mailer experimenting and searching for his new consciousness and form, in the process participating to greater and lesser extents in the new definitions of the novel taking place here and abroad from the 1950s to 1970s. I'm not deeply taken with his novels of this period, but I can admire his bold adventures. The adventures seem to me to be both personal and aesthetic. Mailer himself, if you comb numerous interviews and letters, has described his novels prior to *Why Are We in Vietnam?* as representing a period of discovery, faults, and victories. I'm less enamored of *An American Dream* than many Mailer fans, but it is a bold working out of the author's long, archetypal journey to free himself of artistic and psychological hindrances so that he can begin to create the kind of novels (and perhaps life) he was in the process of discovering.

I do admire *The Naked and the Dead* for what it is, rather than what it is not—the novel of a young man learning his trade and depending heavily on the examples of his self-chosen mentors, Dos Passos first on the line. You are no doubt right about the naturalistic grimness of the tale, but war is grim, especially for the grunts and junior officers, and as on the battlefield it is humor that saves grunt-sanity and that saves the novel, in my estimation, from spiraling into unrelieved grimness. Yet when I re-read the novel for the third time, after not reading it for nearly thirty years, I was impressed by much of its derivative craft and even more by the accomplishment it represents for a young man in his early twenties. Moreover, I found myself (as a former, if reluctant, Army officer from 1970 to 1972) taken by how much the young man simply knows—about high and low life in the military, about strategy and tactics, about people's lives from various social strata and geo-

graphic roots. It's a hell of an accomplishment, its derivativeness forgivable in a young writer's first time out of the published-author box.

You make a point about *The Deer Park* that makes me think of a question I've had about Mailer's fiction. He has praised D. H. Lawrence for getting both the violence and tenderness of sex right, and implied he had a similar goal. Be that as it may, Mailer in my estimation has seldom captured the tenderness and too often the violence, particularly in his early novels. I think he began to capture the tenderness in *The Executioner's Song*, but if he were to express more often the strange, conflicting ambiguities of sex and love that he credits Lawrence with expressing, it would be a triumph of growth for him as an artist.

Bufithis: Mailer's growth as an artist is found, as you say, Bob, in *The Executioner's Song*, which we'll discuss, but in chronological fashion I'd like to deal now with *An American Dream*, a considerable departure in style from *The Deer Park* nine years earlier. To read this dark Manhattan odyssey is to recognize that never before or since has Mailer's language attained such flash and vigor, such metaphoric richness. (By contrast the metaphors in *Evenings*, for all their plentitude, scarcely lift off the page.)

Thematically *An American Dream* is a novelistic rendering of "The White Negro." Aside from the fact that the hipster in this essay did and does not exist in any significant number (if at all), the behavior and philosophy ascribed to him is as intellectually indefensible as it is morally repugnant. Here are a few passages to the point. The hipster "encourage[s] the psychopath in ourselves." The hipster-psychopath's "search for a mate" and for love is "for an orgasm more apocalyptic than the one which preceded it. Orgasm is his therapy—he knows at the seed of his being that good orgasm opens his possibilities and bad orgasm imprisons him." The State and conformity contribute to cancer, but "Hip … return[s] us to ourselves" and requires "faith in the creative possibility of the human being to envisage acts of violence as the catharsis that prepares growth." So creative is the psychopath's strength that he can even commit "murder—if he has the courage—out of the necessity to purge his violence" (a stunning absurdity). Further, *An American Dream* is so pervaded with Mailer's Manicheism that almost everybody sounds like a flipped-out Zoroaster: Rojack, his wife Deborah, her maid Ruta, his lover Cherry, her ex-lover Shago Martin, Deborah's father Barney Kelly, and even Rojack's stepdaugh-

ter Dierdre. In novel after novel Mailer cannot get out of his characters' way.

Even if we take the view that "The White Negro" is one text and *Dream* another, we question how Mailer justifies the fact that other people have to be victimized so Rojack can achieve regeneration. This is a protagonist who asserts himself through murder and cruelty. Of course commentators say these acts are symbolic, but I have no idea what the real and literal acts would be. Whether or not we agree with the art historian Kenneth Clark when he says that contemporary novelists consider humane values—kindness, tenderness, compassion—"spiritually inferior to cruelty and violence," Mailer's novels are cases in point.

Rojack's narrative percolates with suprasensory perceptions, dread, divine and diabolic omens. There's abundant heat in Rojack's articulations, but just what self-actualization or fruitful freedom he struggles for is unclear. He does attain love with Cherry, a love so sentimental it puts us in movie-land. More thematic murkiness is born by the moon. Its manifold symbolic meanings throughout the novel, many of them contradictory or obscure, stymie thought.

Donald L. Kaufmann in *Norman Mailer: The Countdown* rightly recognizes the surreal nature of *Dream* when he quotes from Mailer's *The Presidential Papers*: "[T]here is a subtle subterranean river of untapped, ferocious, lonely and romantic desires, that concentration of ecstasy and violence which is the dream life of a nation." Rojack's fevered thirty-two hours demonstrate how little those "desires" nourish life and how confused that "concentration" is. The themes of *Dream* effectively operate only on the fantastical level, and it is on that level we can accept Mailer's achievement: He has contrived a luridly entertaining literary spectacle.

Begiebing: Just a few more comments on *An American Dream*—that book written on a periodical schedule, by Mailer's own testimony, to make money. If you look at the biography and the work of this period—the late 1950s to mid 1960s—it's easy to see that this must be the most destabilized period in Mailer's personal life. The novel is an artifact of the crises and chaos out of which creation, and self-creation, may arise. *Dream* is a fictional revelation of Mailer's own struggle to find his place as a human being and an artist throughout that strange Eisenhower to Johnson era in American life. The novel is not just a dream but a nightmare; its unity and

coherence reside, to my mind, on a deep psychic level. Read literally or as a piece of realist fiction it is, simply, absurd and lacks credible coherence. If you know your Jung, you can read this book as a remarkable exercise in the ancient pattern of the Night Sea Journey—complete with all the classic if bizarre figures threatening and helping the hero in his descent through the muck and his rise back into the world, an ancient cross-cultural myth (i.e., archetype) of the quest for regeneration. The negative critics of this novel read it, again, as a piece of realism gone awry or a piece of fantasy that should have been realism (because, they argue, realism is Mailer's true gift). The novel draws its strange power from a symbolic consistency and mythological roots. It reflects Mailer's avowed quest to suffer a journey into the unconscious in search of wisdom, spiritual power, and healing in a world gone mad. But it's a hell of a novel to teach, and a rather trying experience to read. Now more than ever.

What might make the novel illuminating, however, for readers interested in the larger *oeuvre* is its working-out through fiction of the theories about flesh and spirit, and about the treacherous and beneficent resources of the unconscious, Mailer pursued across two decades, starting with *Advertisements for Myself* and running through *The Presidential Papers* and *Cannibals and Christians* (one of his most challenging and interesting essay collections and still insightful on, among other phenomena, state corporatism). *On God: An Uncommon Conversation* (2007) is just the most recent nonfiction variation on and development of these themes.

"Postulate a modern soul marooned in constipation, emptiness, boredom and a flat dull terror of death," Mailer writes in *Christians*. "A soul which takes antibiotics when ill, smokes filter cigarettes, drinks proteins … takes seconal to go to sleep, Benzedrine to awake, and tranquilizers for poise. It is a deadened existence, afraid precisely of violence, cannibalism, loneliness, insanity, libidinousness, hell, perversion, and mess, because these are the states which must in some way be passed through, digested, transcended, if one is to make one's way back to life."

"Stephen Rojack," Norman Mailer of the 1950s and 1960s could claim, "*C'est Moi!*"

Bufithis: Of course, as you say, *Dream* is a "journey into the unconscious" and draws power, or tries to, from "a deep psychic level." And for all that, as I've said, we have a novel no less symbolically confused. It's easier positively

to describe Mailer's novels than positively to *evaluate* them. This is especially true of *Dream*. Obviously it's not the mode of fiction, nonrealist or realist, that counts but the degree of success. Which brings us perhaps to Mailer's most accomplished novel, *The Executioner's Song*: an original triumph of imagination.

Gone is the Romanticized primitivism, the egocentric, pumped-up combativeness of *Dream*, *Why?*, and *Evenings*. Gone too the pulp-like hauntings of the spirit world in *Tough Guys Don't Dance* and *Harlot's Ghost*. As I've said in these pages last year, what Mailer attempts in *The Executioner's Song* is a modernist project that puts him in high company. Like Joyce, Beckett, and Nabokov, he draws from material the reader regards as off-putting, even repellent—certainly not the province of "literature"—then he reveals the import of that material through the power of imagination and altogether changes the reader's mind. Mailer makes us see how unthinkingly Americans absolutize life and how much trouble they have recognizing spirituality when they see it. However much we may view Gilmore as a native son, his deathly motivation is profoundly un-American. Mailer depicts him as a man possessed of spiritual valor. Believing the soul can die before the body, Gilmore effected the obliteration of his body so the soul could further its ends.

Mailer's style—simple and direct—allows our consciousness to flow into its movement so that we find ourselves intimately inhabiting a world. Removing himself, Mailer has put us in his place. The labyrinthine wranglings in Gilmore's case tire us, but they are of a piece with the catharsis his plight works on us. We are dismayed by his stupidities, moved by his intelligently impassioned struggle for death, wrenched by his agonizing love for Nicole Baker, drained by his miseries, abominations, and cruelties. This is an adhesive novel like *Crime and Punishment*. When death finally comes to Gilmore we know, in some small measure, what it means because of the release it gives us. No Mailer book brings us as close to events and character; and, though some critics claim the book is nonfiction, we should keep in mind that the novel as a genre is continually assimilating other forms. *The Executioner's Song* is a considerable extension of the novel's domain. From 300 to 400 taped interviews, court documents, newspaper articles, psychiatric reports, and letters, Mailer, by the novelist's process of selection, characterization, and structuring, has demonstrated what arguably can be called the art of fiction.

Rojack and D.J. are the psychopath protagonists of Mailer's fantastical subjectivity; they therefore have perhaps more power for him than for us. Not so with the psychopath protagonist of *Song*. For what do we do with the word "psychopath" when we recognize that Gilmore's life, as Mailer renders it, interests us *personally*? To read this book is to feel with unaccustomed intensity desires and fears beneath the tired consistencies of that socially constructed thing we call our conscience. Our chilling fascination with Gary Gilmore is not with the Other, but with ourselves.

Begiebing: Glad you found a "novel" you like, Phil. Of course we're both in agreement on this one, and in good company with the Pulitzer Prize committee. I won't reprise my commentary on the other novels we've discussed here. As I've said before, let our readers judge for themselves, at this point. For Mailer, Gilmore's story is a found object. We can be generous as you are in seeing it as that genre Capote claimed to discover—the nonfiction novel. Not new, but certainly Mailer makes the genre his own. Just as he takes here the long tradition of prison literature and makes it his own. That's Mailer's brilliance this time out, and he allows his talent to shine. The talent is not obfuscated (to greater or lesser extents) by the dangerous, bold, sometimes incompletely formed, "psychic" experiments of his earlier post-*Naked* novels. Because of the material, Gilmore's story helped Mailer to get out of himself—his ventriloquizing voice, as you've complained. This book represents a long-coming return to the third person and multiple points of view, almost full-circle since *Naked*. Mailer's obsessions about flesh and spirit and courage were already embodied in the real story and character. Gilmore is a murderer and philosopher, saint and psychopath, chameleon actor and working class American, a man who could kill two young men in cold-blooded rage and then by the sheer force of his intelligence, wit, and strange integrity make fools of the judicial system, the media, and the whole liberal money-making machine. Gilmore, like Mailer, would restore mystery and divine significance to humanity—a Mailerian hero who acts out the eternal, terrifying drama of the soul's struggle for salvation through ancient patterns of rebirth. "You cannot escape yourself," Gilmore says. "You have to meet yourself." That's the daunting challenge, the quest, before all Mailer's protagonists from Mikey Lovett to D.J. Gilmore's views on karma read like Mailer's own philosophical dialogues "The Metaphysics of the Belly" and "The Political Economy of Time." Gilmore, like Mailer, is a "primitive" (met-

aphorical, metaphysical) mind born into our modern factologists' world. Their separate battles, utterly different in so many ways, are the battles of the misfit.

"All" Mailer had to do is the massive labor of research—those endless tapes—to uncover the found object and then shape the material. Big job. Admirable job. The massive scale of the job Lawrence Schiller makes clear in his long interview with Jeffrey Severs in these pages last year. We could be cynics, however, and challenge the book's status as a novel. Not because of the twentieth-century novel's assimilation of other forms (no one would argue with that), but because the decision to call it a novel rather than nonfiction was a last-minute (one hesitates to say crass) marketing decision based, as Lawrence Schiller explains in that same *Mailer Review* interview last year, on little more than the realities of American publishing/reviewing seasons and prize competitions. In short, during the creation of the book it was composed as nonfiction. But let's not be cynics and happily agree together, finally, on *The Executioner's Song* as perhaps Mailer's finest novel, worthy of the attention we have allotted it in our discussion of his fiction.

Bufithis: Except for *Naked*, *Song*, and *Gospel*, Mailer's novels have a slick, commercial—even campy—dimension starting with *The Deer Park*. With *Tough Guys Don't Dance* he goes all the way and produces a full-fledged murder mystery replete with gothic metaphysics. How do we take this novel? The options are open. Are the nefarious characters truly nefarious? Clownish? Preposterous? Are we in the province of parody? How seriously are we to take the characters' vivid seriousness? I can't resist the impulse to write my own blurbs, which demonstrate how clichéd this novel in its essentials is: Booze, sentimentalism, macho mayhem. Bitchy beautiful women and sexual adventure. A wild mix of the sordid and the bizarre. An exorbitant highbrow potboiler.

If *Tough Guys* is a fun read at the beach, *Harlot's Ghost* (1,300 pages) is heavy labor. A CIA novel set during the Cold War in the U.S., Germany, Uruguay, and Cuba, it is a vast roster of *dramatis personae*: chiefs, division heads, station heads, deputies, agents, and double agents. Complicating this mix are rivalries within and among the CIA, FBI, Pentagon, and State and Justice Departments. The result is a tangled novel—without clearly significant direction—that boggles and exhausts the mind. And bores it: e.g., 170 pages of letters from protagonist-narrator Harry Hubbard to Kittredge, the woman

he loves, recount the duties and intrigues of his intelligence job in Uruguay and read like magnified shop-talk. To be sure, there are impressively imagined set pieces: most notably depictions of CIA high society and a secret expedition against Cuba.

Kittredge is an expositor of quasi-Jungian ideas on male and female principles. Montague, Hubbard's mentor, discourses on a virile version of Manicheism. Both characters sound like Norman Mailer and like him have a movie star aura or glamour. The world of his novels often has a made-in-Hollywood aspect. Unsurprisingly, in a 2003 television interview on *Charlie Rose*, he said, "If my movie *Tough Guys Don't Dance* had been box office, I would probably still be making movies…." He goes on to explain how making movies (he has made four) provides him with more "fun" and "power" than writing novels. A hit movie and probably *Harlot's Ghost* would not exist.

Star-like or celebrity-like as Kittredge and Montague may be, Mailer's epistemological themes are substantial and remind us of Pirandello's. Hubbard's experiences lead us to consider espionage as a metaphor for the manifold duplicities inherent in being human. Indeed, the novel at times seems like a box of mirrors. Truth is fiction. To perceive is to interpret. Reality is a projection of the self.

Less convincing than *Harlot's Ghost*'s epistemology is its theology. God, an underachiever, is neither omnipotent nor omniscient and needs acts of human courage to attain His ends against His cosmic rival, the Devil; but, to confound matters, acts of courage may serve the Devil, and God can be mistaken for the Devil. To stretch a metaphor, *Harlot's Ghost* itself is a double agent: Mailer's ideas/Mailer's main characters. The one pasted on the other. A philosophical novel risks being inorganic in just this way. Finally I must make a simple point that bears repeating: to read 1,300 pages detailing the intricate actions of the CIA is a tedious effort that, for me, offers small reward.

Begiebing: Well, Phil, you won't get any argument from me regarding *Harlot's Ghost*—a behemoth I've already admitted to my shame is the only Mailer book I couldn't get through. I had every intention of picking it up and trying again, but we know where good intentions lead. *Tough Guys* was another of those books Mailer wrote, like *An American Dream* and by his own admission, to make money and fulfill a contract on a short deadline. I see it as minor in the body of work but as a twist on an old, perhaps tired,

genre. Mailer makes it his own by infusing his uniquely Mailerian obsessions into his characters, all the while following most of the conventions of the crime genre. People whose judgment I trust who read heavily in that genre (or those various crime subgenres) have spoken highly of the book. That they've read little else by Mailer maybe says something about how the book can appeal to readers not jaded by the time of its publication by the long drumbeat of Mailer's metaphysical speculations and stylistic quirks. It all seemed fresh to them. And to a person they say the movie didn't come close to the best qualities of the book.

With that I agree. I recall going with a friend to a Cineplex, no less, to see "the new Mailer movie!" in a state of real anticipation. We walked into the box office and were told the movie had been pulled after just two nights. People were, apparently, running from the theater tearing their hair out in agony. So my friend and I—one of the crime genre heavy readers—went to a bar next door, got bombed, and then went back in to the movie house to watch *Fatal Attraction* instead. Until I saw *Tough Guys* (twice) later, I felt as though I'd missed something, felt really disappointed and not too happy with stupid American audiences who don't appreciate art, and all that. Turned out the stupid Americans were right, this time. The only redeeming thing about this movie-from-the-novel for me is the Provincetown setting, which I enjoyed, and a single line about "that crummy hotel" built on sand dunes—the very hotel I was staying in when I watched the movie for the second time. The audience in the hotel "theater" roared in laughter at that line about the hotel. And then we were all shaking our heads the next morning at how bad the movie was, how we had all forgotten how bad. So instead of Hollywood Norman, we got *Harlot's Ghost*, a prodigy of research, but to my mind an unreadable tome. I'm not sure it was a good trade-off for that particular book, but I respect the writer so much I'm glad that instead of going Hollywood Mailer stayed in P-town and went on to write more books of fiction and nonfiction. And since then he's still never once pulled his punches.

Bufithis: I know what you mean by readers tired of "the long drumbeat of Mailer's metaphysical speculations," so they might not like *The Castle in the Forest*. The phenomenon of Adolf Hitler seems always to prompt metaphysical, even mythological, explanations. Such thinking is right down Mailer's street. Indeed, he makes of *Castle* what most mythologies are—a tale of the supernatural. So we have our narrator Dieter, the Devil's assistant.

Despite Dieter's omniscient point of view, he portrays Hitler, father Alois—the whole family—as unprismatic. For example, Alois as a characterization is petty-minded, lecherous, and cruel; and Klara (Hitler's mother) is a God-fearing, sexually repressed hausfrau. Dieter might be a smart devil, but he's a blinkered novelist. Of course we can insist that Mailer is writing in his mythopoetic, not his psychologically realistic, mode; and so *Castle*'s almost simplistic characters are the product of Dieter's limited, venal vision. We can say further that Dieter/Devil is a metaphor for the self's dark side. But such an equation is not only tired and unoriginal; it doesn't accord with Mailer's premise. He wants us to understand what he declared in promotional interviews for the novel: Hitler was in large measure empowered by the Devil. As Dieter says, "I was there with them [Alois and Klara], I was the third presence, and was carried into the caterwauling of all three of us going over the falls together, Alois and myself filling the womb of Klara Poelzl Hitler, and indeed, I knew the moment when creation occurred. Even as the Angel Gabriel served Jehovah on a momentous night in Nazareth, so too I was there with the Evil One at this conception.…" Thereafter, as young Hitler develops, the Devil orders Dieter to "stiffen the boy's spine" and "etch visions of power in his dreams." The problem with all this is that a Devil-ordained Hitler excludes the principle of human responsibility and defies moral truth. Mailer's Hitler at the Nuremberg trials would have said, "I was following orders."

Mailer's concept of God in *Castle* stretches our credulity as much as his concept of the Devil. We know his theology posits a limited God Who does the best He can, operating effortfully in the universe, but now He is not even universal. He is the God of Christianity, the "Lord," defender of the "Kingdom." Moreover, Dieter says, "Our ultimate aim [His and the Devil's] is to destroy civilization as a first step to obviating God." This Deity is the ultimate provincial. He has not adequately diversified His portfolio but principally invested His creative powers in an infinitesimal slit in time called civilization. Mailer's theology is more interesting than cogent. We can regard Alois with scarcely more seriousness. He is yet another of Mailer's sexual champions, a crass cousin of Sergius, Rojack, Menenhetet, and Hubbard whose phallic mastery awes the beautiful woman they desire.

Dieter's narrative is a medley of incest, slathery copulation, bowel movements, possible fratricide, disease, cruelty, and stench. The world of the Hitler family is so nearly devoid of sunshine we can't believe it ever existed—

except in the mind of a devil. An alternate title for this novel could be *The Book of Dieter*. Through the voice of a perfidious knave Mailer is taking pleasure in the wicked side of himself. I imagine his mischievously smiling eyes as he writes. Such is *Castle*'s nasty charm.

Begiebing: What I have to say about *Castle* I said for the most part last year in these pages, so I'll just try to respond to specific elements of your estimate here. Hitler is for Mailer another found object, a distinction Hitler shares with Gary Gilmore. Hitler is the dark Messiah, Jesus's charismatic obverse. Hitler gives Mailer the opportunity, through Dieter the narrator-demon, to engage in the sheer delight of creating the voice of a devil. There's no doubt that Mailer believes that such demonic impulses are in all of us: At some deep unconscious and spiritual level, they are a part of our essential human nature and are embodied as demons in various religious traditions. This novel was Mailer's opportunity to give his inner devil free reign on a focused topic—Hitler, or more accurately, Hitler's devil. To let loose and *become* Hitler's demon. Once again we have an audacious conceit upon which to construct a novel. I'd agree it is only a partially successful novel, but perhaps more successful than you would credit.

For those of us who have read most of what Mailer has published, especially the many essays, it's hard not to hear Mailer's own voice here once again, rather than the voice of an independent character and narrator. Still, the humor is often a delight, the research prodigious, and the evil depicted as good an explanation as any—whether taken metaphorically or literally—of the vast mystery of Hitler's world-transforming evil. It is a mythopoeic explanation, as you suggest, deeply invested in the primitive forces of the collective and individual unconscious.

Nonetheless, Phil, I wouldn't put the father Alois in the same phallic mastery category as Sergius, Rojack, or Menenhetet because Alois is an unrelieved, brutal family tyrant whose cocksmanship, unlike these others, has no *potential*, at least, to redeem or transform himself or another. Nor would I say with you that the novel is a lesson in the absence of Free Will because Dieter at a number of points makes it clear that "we [devils] look to human excess" of every kind to leave portals open for the demonic, the forces of which demonism require human folly and fallibility (including stupid choices) to gain a foothold on the dreams and waking actions of human beings. It is, rather, Fundamentalism that Mailer has in this novel and else-

where charged with eliminating Free Will. In *On God*, which Mailer published just before his death, with Michael Lennon, Mailer provides a final, coeval exegesis on this point: "If it is only a contest between God and the Devil, and we are no more than the field on which it all takes place—some species of Astroturf—then we still do not have free will. We have to be equal as players to God and the Devil." Moreover, it is clear that the violence of the father Alois is *one* fallacious human choice (excess) that warps his children and makes them open to the evils and violence they perpetrate in turn. So to my mind you are simplifying Mailer somewhat here, even though I wouldn't hold *Castle* up as one of Mailer's strongest performances. "After the Holocaust," as Mailer says in *On God*, "we were forced to recognize there was something absolutely murderous in our species …, something vastly destructive in our nature."

His final novel is an attempt to explore what he once called this "dangerous question" about human nature, to explore that destructive potential in us to which we can capitulate or which (through courage) we can transcend. Historically, many human beings obviously have capitulated to the blandishments of the Shadow-self, but many others have managed to transcend their deepest destructive impulses. In *Castle* we witness a brutal depiction of human beings choosing to embrace the Shadow-self and laying thereby the foundation for convincing millions of others collectively to embrace it. Mailer is confronting here, as he has done in so many of his novels and nonfiction books, one of the greatest, unresolved mysteries of human life, the mystery of evil, a mystery at the heart of our past, our present, and—God help our children and theirs—our future.

Bufithis: Yes, brutish Alois is a sublunary cocksman, whereas Mailer tries to invest the phallic power of Sergius, Rojack, and Menenhetet with potential for redemption or transformation, though I can hear Alois protest, "What a minute. Don't I take women to the stars?" As for the more significant matter of free will in *Castle*, I agree, Bob, when you say the novel's characters freely "embrace the Shadow-self." But Adolf is a case apart. As I've shown, the Devil initially does the embracing, not Adolf. Though Mailer posits free will in his *On God* interviews, we don't have a free will Hitler in Mailer's promotional interviews for the novel. For example, on *Charlie Rose* last year he said, "Over and above … the shaping of the father are the mother and siblings …, who were all shaping" Hitler, but "the largest element in it is that" Dieter is

"receiving orders from the Maestro, who is the Devil, on what to do and what not to do." That "Hitler was controlled by the Devil," Mailer says, "is not hard to believe." In other interviews for *Castle* Mailer continually claimed Hitler's evil was too monstrous to explain in merely human terms. "Hitler," Mailer said to the *Washington Post*, "is the Devil's answer to Jesus Christ." Of course we must add that circumstances play a part if evil is to flourish. As Mailer said in the Rose interview, by the time Hitler was an adult (outside the time frame of this novel) history allowed him to take full advantage of his diabolic endowment.

However we disagree on free will in *Castle*, we agree that the novel's energy derives from Mailer's fictional treatment of himself. As you say, he becomes "Hitler's demon." If *Castle* is the story of human beings capitulating to their destructive impulses, the power of that story is the achievement of Mailer's dark daring.

Begiebing: I think of the Free Will issue in Mailer's work, instead, in a more classic, even Greek, sense. Fate is not only what the gods—dark and light—would determine for us but also what we, given our character, determine for ourselves as we inhabit a world replete with opposing forces. Individual will stands at the center of supernal forces contending in the material, historical world; the sum of pressures from either angels or demons is about equal, but at any given moment one side may exert against our human strengths and failings—courage, greed, ambition—greater tests and pressures than we can withstand alone. Jesus chooses one way, Hitler another. Devils (ever trying to diminish human potential) and angels or "cudgels" (ever trying to expand our possibilities) tempt both messianic wills (Jesus and Hitler) with opposite results.

One of the more humorous themes of *Castle* is that after Hitler's Germany, Satan moves his operations to the USA. Might be hard to find where else in the contemporary world human will (and hence power) has been bent—for all our nominal Christianity and righteous ranting religiosity—in a deadening Satanic direction in ways more subtle than in the world's obvious modern tyrannies. But we look at the melodramas of our world's obvious tyrannies and are blinded thereby to our own Fall. This failure of human possibility, of character and courage, is one of Mailer's continuing themes. I think we can look back at the body of his work now and see that if two books like *Gospel* and *Castle* work in constructive opposition like a paint-

er's pendants (paired works), the entirety of Mailer's work is interconnected to ramify meaning through a complex, allusive, and self-allusive body of fiction and nonfiction writing. Some individual works are more skilled, convincing, or engaging than others, to be sure, but the courage and dignity of the effort, the sheer audacity of the plan of his life's work, deserve our attention and respect. My hope is that this dialogue, for all our differences and our occasional agreements, demonstrates our own attention to and respect for Mailer as the unavoidable literary presence in post-World War II America.