

NORMAN MAILER:
STUPIDITY BRINGS OUT
VIOLENCE IN ME

LAWRENCE GROBEL

WHAT CAN ONE SAY ABOUT NORMAN MAILER that he probably hasn't already said about himself? I grew up on Mailer. His great journalism in *Esquire*; his incredible gift of metaphor; his surehandedness when it came to writing about taboos, superstitions, and excrement; his knuckleheaded foray into the brave new world of women's lib. And his supreme self-confidence, focusing so superbly on himself in a book he audaciously and precisely titled *Advertisements for Myself* and later in *Pieces and Pontifications*. And, of course, his fiction, which, until recently (and even still ...) he always believed would earn him a Nobel Prize, those purely Mailer novels beginning with *The Naked and the Dead* when he was just 25, and then *Barbary Shore*, *The Deer Park*, *An American Dream*, *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, *The Executioner's Song* (history as novel), *Ancient Evenings*, *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, *Harlot's Ghost*, *The Gospel According to the Son*.

Of all the interviews in this book, this one needed the least editing. With Mailer, conversation flows and you can chart his own comfort and discomfort zones. I had prepared many more questions than I had time to ask and he did insist that a portion of our talk concentrate on the novel he had then wanted to promote, *Ancient Evenings*. That wasn't a problem for me, I read and enjoyed that long, often daring novel, and admired how he managed to get so many of his Maileresque themes into the narrative.

The Brooklyn born, Harvard educated National Book Award and Pulitzer Prize winning larger-than-life father of eight and co-founder of the *Village*

Voice has survived six marriages, public feuds with Gore Vidal, William Styron, and leaders of the Women's Movement, two New York mayoral campaigns, and a Mike Tyson-like battle with Rip Torn biting open a piece of the actor's ear during the making of Mailer's movie *Maidstone*, which he wrote and directed. He's been at the forefront of anti-war demonstrations, he's covered such icons as John F. Kennedy, Marilyn Monroe, Pablo Picasso, Muhammad Ali, and Madonna, has poked his nose into the mysterious lives of Lee Harvey Oswald and Jesus Christ, and spent seventeen days under observation in Bellevue for stabbing his second wife at a party.

He's been described as both a radical and a puritan; as pugnacious and gentle; as anti-establishment and part of the establishment; as a fool and a serious writer. His early success led to his alienation, which he has called a 20th century condition. He believed from the very start that a writer of the largest dimension can alter the nerves and marrow of a nation and was determined to be that kind of writer. He's also called himself one of the most wicked spirits in American life. As far back as 1954 he claimed that marijuana was more important to him than any love affair he ever had. He called drugs a "spiritual form of gambling," experimented with LSD and said he tasted the essence of his own death, and wrote that a man must drink until he locates the truth. As for sex, he believes that masturbation cripples and leads to insanity, considers fellatio a weakness, raises the orgasm to the ultimate act of self-realization, defines great sex as that which makes you more religious, and gives the nod to William Burroughs for changing the course of American literature with one sentence: "I see God in my asshole in the flashbulb of orgasm." Civilization will enter Hell, he's suggested, when no more good novels are written.

At his bar mitzvah he said he hoped to follow in the footsteps of great Jews like Moses Maimonides and Karl Marx. There are those among us who would say, many years later, that he has succeeded.

Grobel: Whenever there's a brief introduction about you what's usually included is that you ran for mayor of New York twice, stabbed your wife, and won two Pulitzer Prizes.

Mailer: That's because there was a worm of a publisher with a hard-on who put out an ad in the New York Times listing my achievements and stuck wife stabber in the middle of 'em. Since then it's been open season.

Grobel: How would you prefer to be introduced?

Mailer: The inimitable Norman Mailer [*chuckles*].

Grobel: You've said that you don't consider yourself moral at all, but as a man who lives in an embattled relationship to morality. What do you mean by that?

Mailer: Morality is always on my mind. I'm always saying to myself: Am I doing the right thing or the wrong thing? I may often decide on the latter and still go ahead and do it. But there are people who are free of morality, they just never question their acts—they're animals.

Grobel: Are you usually aware when you're doing wrong?

Mailer: No. Wrong is often a matter of context. As that great remarker Sherwood Anderson said, 'There is the truth of passion, the truth of virginity, the truth of violence, the truth of gentleness...' he goes on to list all the truths there are. There's a moment in one's life when it's right to be one thing or another. But you have to get into the nature of authenticity, which is a complex philosophical matter. There's no way to go near these questions without diving deep into philosophy.

Grobel: Another thing you've said is that you're so rarely true to your own code that it's hard to maintain self-respect. What is that code?

Mailer: My code years ago used to be never take any crap from anyone. My god, I'd get into eighty fights a day if I were to take no crap at all. So you finally decide that there are probably worse things in the world than taking a little unintentional bullshit from time to time. If it comes your way without truly ill intention, then ignore it. That's just one aspect of the code. I used to have much more of a macho code than I do now. I would take every dare that came my way. But you get to the point where finally, every time you've made a moral decision—that you mustn't stand up when 'The Star Spangled Banner' is being played because we're at war in Vietnam and it's an immoral war—you recognize after a while that you're not going to go to any public place where there's a chance they'll play 'The Star Spangled Banner' because it takes too much out of you sitting down when 3,000 peo-

ple are standing up. So it's a terribly demanding code. It doesn't mean you think the code is wrong, you just decide the code is more of a man than you are.

Grobel: When you say it's hard to maintain your self-respect, do you find that you often don't respect yourself because of that?

Mailer: Most of us have an on-going professional life where we're not looking to walk around with a vast amount of self-respect; I just want to walk around with enough so I'm not truly depressed. Once you get too down on yourself it's hard to do anything, it's hard to get out of it, and there's a pit in depression. So you try to keep enough self-respect so you're viable.

Grobel: Have you fulfilled your own idea of yourself?

Mailer: Half. That half's enough to keep you going.

Grobel: José Torres said that you have the kind of immense ego of a fighter, that you don't like people to be too comfortable when you're around. Why?

Mailer: I love to keep complacent people off balance. I can't bear their complacency. Stupidity brings out violence in me, because I consider stupidity a choice. There's a great difference between people who are stupid and people who are dumb. People who are dumb have been injured and there's something soft and tender about their brain. If it's permanent, it's touching, it's pathetic. People who are stupid made one wise decision in their lives, because if you're stupid and you remain stupid, people have to come to you, have to deal with you; you're the center of a great many energy transactions that you haven't earned. If you can take the abuse, it's a way of life. But it's a way of life that poisons everything around you. So stupid people bring out my most unpleasant reactions and emotions. I will needle stupid people to the best of my ability.

Grobel: Are there a lot of stupid writers?

Mailer: Most writers are stupid at their level. You can be one of the world's greatest writers and still be stupid in that you're not as good as you want to be. I'm sure Dostoevsky thought himself stupid because he wasn't able to write the Life of the Great Sinner. And that probably was an act of cowardice.

Grobel: Do you, then, like to needle writers?

Mailer: Less than I used to, because when I was younger it was a great deal of fun giving them a hard time. But I've recognized over the years that we may be an endangered species, so I'm a little gentler with other writers now.

Grobel: How old were you when you started writing?

Mailer: Seven or eight. Two short stories. Then I wrote a really short novel about going to the moon, or Mars, when I was eleven. I had a genial, mad scientist on this spaceship called Dr. Hoor. It was a takeoff on Buck Rogers, Dr. Huer. I didn't write again until I got to Harvard.

Grobel: Did your mother save those early writings?

Mailer: Yeah, yeah. It's a wonder my mother didn't save my fingernails.

Grobel: What kind of woman is your mother? There are those who say that the foundation of your ego is really based upon your mother. Someone made a comment that of all your wives, the real Mrs. Mailer is your mother.

Mailer: The person who made that comment is an ex-wife, and she was looking to make a rotten remark. No, I never wanted to be married to my mother. She's fine as a mother, but I wouldn't have wanted her as a wife because she's a very opinionated woman. Strong minded and narrow minded. We've had many arguments over the years. I got one thing from her that not everybody gets from their mothers: I had an undivided, uncritical loyalty. It kept on, looking back on it, to almost comical proportions. To this day, if I were to shoot up some housing development with a tommy gun and slaughter twenty people and they came to my mother with this news, she would say: 'What could they have possibly done to Norman to make him act that way?' In that sense there was this unquestioning loyalty and it does give you an ego source. It's a mother-fed ego, which produces all kinds of problems when you get out in the world and start knocking around. Half the Jewish men on earth suffer and are benefited by that kind of ego that they get from their mothers.

Grobel: And what did you get from your father?

Mailer: He was a classy gent and a bit of a gambler. He was a dapper fellow with marvelous manners. He had trouble with jobs because he was a

dreamer. He was a bit, not much, of a writer. When he'd write me a letter he'd spend eight pages of a twelve-page letter telling me about his difficulty in writing to his son who was a writer. That sort of thing. Terribly courtly man. Exact opposite of my mother.

Grobel: You didn't enjoy high school and felt deprived for thirty years afterwards. Why was high school so bad for you?

Mailer: High school's that place, that country, where you get laid for the first time; you have marvelous memories and you go around with a girl, you go to the prom, dance with her. I went to a boy's high school, there were no girls there. I was a year-and-a-half ahead of my class, as far as age went. I graduated when I was sixteen-and-a-half. So I didn't have a high school life and I think it is a form of deprivation. If I'd had a happier high school life I might not have been a writer, so you take what you get.

Grobel: Were you competitive as a teenager?

Mailer: Moderately competitive, not highly. I wasn't that good in anything. I never sunk to *Marty's* level—us dogs must stick together—but I was always looking for some girl to say, 'You're fantastic, you're wonderful, you're marvelous.' They never did.

Grobel: When did girls start telling you that?

Mailer: Not until I was in college and writing. And it wasn't that dramatic. Probably after *The Naked and the Dead* came out is when it started.

Grobel: You achieved huge success at 25 with that novel. Did you mishandle it?

Mailer: Yeah, but I don't brood on it. There's no way in the world I ever could have handled it well. If you were to be made manager of a big league baseball team tomorrow, you wouldn't expect to do that well for a while, would you? It would be almost impossible; you'd have to make huge errors. I went from obscurity into being a well-known author overnight. I wasn't even an average 25-year-old when it happened.

Grobel: In describing how you came to know the officers you wrote about in *The Naked and the Dead*, you said you generally operate on hate, which is the best aid to analysis. That still hold?

Mailer: We can get into that, but it's tricky. If you feel the kind of hate that just burns a red haze in front of your eyes, you'll do anything. If you've got a quiet anger—that is, without getting pious or pompous, a righteous anger—you feel that something is unjust in the scheme of things, that can fuel a lot of very good writing. In fact, most good writing is done with a critical edge. There are many more good critics around than there are good fiction writers. The reason is that a critic can get into something he doesn't like and what someone else is doing and he can do it with a firm sense of self-righteousness. Which is why critics are keeping literary standards alive. And they can write well, so anger definitely is a tool; it's that grindstone that just sharpens the cutting edge of your instrument. But too much anger just wipes you out. Since you can't really control it, to keep that nice balance, a lot of it is luck. When you get in a period of your life where you're full of energy and you've got an anger that's usable, then you can write well. I was very angry at the Army when I got out. And that anger was immensely useful for writing *The Naked and the Dead*, because it wasn't just a crazy anger. It was a true anger. The book is true and was kind of funny as a result. It had its separation from what was going on. I also had the good literary instinct to pick on officers even though I hated officers. There couldn't have been a simpler enlisted man than I was. I just hated all officers when I was in the Army. But by the time I got out I had enough sense to pick an officer who was halfway sympathetic, and that kept the book from being a parody. You can never do good work in writing if the hate takes over, it's gotta be balanced by irony, at least. Or detachment.

Grobel: After that initial success, did you feel that the critics were going to be out to get you for the next few books, or do you feel the criticism of those books were deserved?

Mailer: I've always been an optimist. I had no idea that they were waiting for the second book. I used to joke about it, 'Well, I guess the reviews won't be as good as *The Naked and the Dead*,' shifting uncomfortably as I just did. It gave me a huge reputation I didn't know what to do with. It was only three years later when I began to realize what it is to lose your reputation—not to be taken seriously. I began to sense that people were saying, 'Poor Norman, he wrote one book, *The Naked and the Dead*, and he'll never write another like it.' Then my true anger began to come out.

Grobel: Did that anger stay with you throughout your next novel, *The Deer Park*, or did it last until your next big success, which was with nonfiction?

Mailer: That anger stayed with me for many years. It was all uphill after the first book. I wrote *The Deer Park*, which was a damn good book, one of my two or three best novels, and that got slaughtered. There were eighteen major reviews at that time, seven were favorable, eleven unfavorable—that's enough so you don't forget.

Grobel: Did all that early criticism propel you to write more and more?

Mailer: I wasn't prolific in those years. My powers to be prolific are in direct response to needing money. Balzac was immensely prolific. Zola was. Dickens. They earned their living. It helps if you have to earn your living from your pen; you discover that you can push yourself. It's analogous to what athletes do very often, where they'll go through hideous procedures, they'll eat steroids in order to get more strength in their muscles; they're into all sorts of things that are, ultimately, damaging, not only to their bodies but to their souls. But they'll do it in order to set records, because they've gotten into a set where they truly want to break that old record, whether it's theirs or someone else's. We do the same thing as writers. You can force yourself to write much more than you want to write. And yet the writing will not necessarily deteriorate. People think you're going to end up a bad writer if you do that. You won't end up a bad writer, you may end up with a bad liver, or with a shortened life, but you go for transcendence too. Sometimes working much harder than one wants to work can liberate energy. It doesn't always defeat it.

Grobel: Many critics consider you a better nonfiction than fiction writer.

Mailer: They could be right, they could be wrong. I couldn't care less. I think that I'm good at fiction, but there's no reason they have to share my opinion. The only important piece of nonfiction that I wrote was *The Armies of the Night*. *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* is a good piece of reportage. *Of a Fire on the Moon* is a very good book. *Marilyn* is a good biography, but tainted to a degree. Where's all the great nonfiction? Mohammed Ali is interesting. The novels are much better. The critics very often have these opinions but they don't stop and make a count. You need a body count on books.

Grobel: Which of your books do you think you'll be remembered for?

Mailer: I can go through them in order. *The Naked and the Dead*, *The Deer Park*, *An American Dream*, *The Armies of the Night*, *Marilyn*, *Why Are We In Vietnam?*, *The Executioner's Song*, and *Ancient Evenings*. Those will probably be the ones.

Grobel: Is it true you need to make \$350,000 a year just to break even?

Mailer: That's right, yes. With inflation the figure's gone from \$200,000 to \$350,000 over the last ten years.

Grobel: Do you consider yourself a rich man?

Mailer: No, I'm certainly not. I live on a reasonable scale. I own my own apartment and a car, but that's all. I don't have houses. Money's always a problem; we really live from month to month.

Grobel: In the past you looked forward to writing about the inner states of men like Hitler and Napoleon, Lenin and Castro. Yet you wound up with Marilyn Monroe, Mohammed Ali, Gary Gilmore. What happened along the way?

Mailer: How about Ramsey II? He's kind of the equal of Alexander, Hitler and Napoleon. He's a man of immense proportions who saw himself as a god. I could still write about Napoleon if I was willing to do the research. It doesn't appeal to me. As you get older you realize that to do truly good work on any given subject you've got to put in the hours, the years. The amount of research it would take to do something good about Napoleon gives me pause. But the psychology of Napoleon doesn't. I feel I understand him to a degree. Now, you can be wrong about it. I thought I understood Gary Gilmore very well, that's why I began that book. But as I began to do the research I came to the conclusion I didn't understand him at all. So, you can start with the premise that you're on top of it and discover you're not.

Grobel: In the end, did you feel you understood Gilmore?

Mailer: He was a very complex man to me. On the one hand he was virtually a mediocrity and disappointing. His mind was not that remarkable; he had a lot of ordinary ideas and small-minded prejudices. But he was at least as complex as I was and that was curious and humbling. The thought of people being so simple that you can comprehend them and deal with them

is depressing. If all of us are complex, it will be that much harder for machines to take us over.

Grobel: You believe that in Hemingway's time there were great writers like Faulkner, Steinbeck, Wolfe, Fitzgerald, and, of course, Hemingway. But that's not true today. Why not?

Mailer: We're getting to questions that are too large to answer. It's probably because of the prevailing currents of the age. Hemingway and Faulkner between them captured profound elements in the American soul. At that time, reading was the most profound way to deepen your knowledge of existence. So writers were respected more. They were more important. We're moving from writing into electronic circuitry, television, computers. Print, as such, is going to disappear. It's a long way from going away, but there is a point where the act of reading a book may become a rare luxury, equal to eating Russian caviar. People now read off word processors on screens where not only are the letters abominable but the image is full of flickering. If you could normally read a hundred pages without stopping, will you be able to read ten or fifteen under those conditions? It's as if the very sensuous qualities of reading are being taken away from us. In other words, reading's become an effort, equal to, say, having a pair of uncomfortable plastic earphones on, the sort they give you in an airplane, where it hurts your ears and your head and the sound's not very good. So you've got to work for the movie that you're seeing.

Grobel: Of the writers in your time, who are the most important?

Mailer: Borges and Marquez. After that, take your pick, there are about forty of us. I say forty because I don't know enough about foreign writers. I'm thinking ten American writers and I'm concealing my ignorance by hiding behind thirty writers from other countries.

Grobel: In the early stages of your career you were obsessed with being the number one writer in America. Have you rethought that?

Mailer: You could have writers who are first in the people's mind but I don't know if that has any literary value. If you had an election tomorrow there would probably be five of us who would be in contention, and you could have a runoff. The results wouldn't matter because each of us would walk away thinking, 'I was the best.' I don't think it's important.

Grobel: Is it important for you, though? To drive yourself?

Mailer: So long as there's no election, I don't give a damn. It's not important anymore. If there was an election and somebody else won, I'd be annoyed.

Grobel: How envious have you been of other writers?

Mailer: By now I don't think I'm envious at all. When I was younger I would fight feelings of envy at times. But I've never felt envious so much about writers as I have about freedom. Since I've been married all my life, I've always envied the great freedom that certain men friends of mine would have.

Grobel: But each time you've divorced you've gotten married again.

Mailer: That's right. Once a philosopher, twice a pervert.

Grobel: You've admitted envy for Truman Capote's ability to get invited to the right parties.

Mailer: That was 20 years ago, when I wanted to get invited to those parties, because I could have written about them. Those parties had a wonderful feeling they don't possess now. When you're young is the time you should go to parties like that. Truman went to those parties at the right time.

Grobel: What's your opinion of Capote?

Mailer: Very, very talented man. I was misquoted in a magazine story that bothered me a great deal, had me saying that he was through.

Grobel: That his life was wrecked.

Mailer: I felt very bad about it, because what happened is the reporter led me down the garden path. She said, 'Wouldn't you say that Truman is through?' And I said, 'Off the record, I'll tell you that even if I thought he was through I would never say it, because I don't have the right to sit in judgment on another writer and decide they're through. People said I was through when I wasn't. I used to laugh inside. But they had no right to say it about me, and I have no right to say it about anyone else.' She said, 'But what do you *really* think?' I said, 'If you push me I'll say that I don't think he's through.' Well, she was reading all these qualifications and in her mind she decided the bot-

tom line was that he was through, so she put the words in my mouth. I never said it. No, I don't think he's through, I think he's not well and is going through a very tough time. We never know when we're going to get out of our troubles. He may not, but he might. The bits of *Answered Prayers* that he's published have been interesting.

Grobel: Think he'll ever finish it?

Mailer: I don't know how much of it he's done. And I don't know what kind of shape he's in.

Grobel: What do you think of James A. Michener's remark that if Capote ever finishes it, *Answered Prayers* will be the book most remembered fifty years from now?

Mailer: It's a remark. But authors' remarks are never terribly interesting. We're all self-serving in our subtle ways. As are politicians. Authors' theories are the same as politicians' theories. Writers advance those theories that are best for their own latest work.

Grobel: Let me give you Capote's remark about your *Ancient Evenings*, spoken before it was published. He said it couldn't possibly be a good book because you're only good at writing about what you know, and you didn't know anything about ancient Egypt, anymore than you knew about Gary Gilmore.

Mailer: Truman's very upset about *The Executioner's Song*. He feels that I should have made a pilgrimage and gotten down on my knees and said, 'Oh great Cardinal Capote, do I have your blessing? May I proceed to write a book about a killer?' And I didn't. He went around saying that I never gave any credit to his *In Cold Blood*. Well, I just thought that book was so famous that you didn't have to give credit to it. I reread *In Cold Blood* after I finished *The Executioner's Song* and it's a very good novel, as much of a novel as *The Executioner's Song*. Maybe more. It's very nicely written and it may end up being a classic because it is remarkable. But I don't know what he's talking about, it just struck me as a dumb remark. Truman is canny as hell but he's not the brightest guy in the world.

Grobel: You and Truman Capote share a dislike for Gore Vidal. Why?

Mailer: I don't want to get into it. We had a feud that went on for a few years and I don't care whether we ever make friends again.

Grobel: Would you agree with Vidal that we live in a time where the personality of the writer is everything and what he writes is nothing?

Mailer: No. There's a tendency in that direction but it's a vastly over-exaggerated remark.

Grobel: Vidal has called you a messiah without hope of Paradise and with no precise mission. How does that strike you?

Mailer: As twelve years old.

Grobel: You've come to blows with Vidal, haven't you?

Mailer: No. I knocked a heavy cocktail glass out of his hand and that was the end of the fight.

Grobel: Didn't you head-butt him?

Mailer: That's not a fight, that's just head-butting.

Grobel: You've butted heads with Hemingway's son Gregory. Was that your way of connecting with his old man?

Mailer: I head-butt with a lot of people. People have the wrong idea about it. It isn't that you head-butt and somebody drops. For me, it's a touch of affection. You just butt heads once lightly.

Grobel: Is it always lightly?

Mailer: No, not always. It wasn't lightly with Vidal that time. But it's always fair for one writer to butt another in the head. Writers have hard heads. The hardest heads you'll ever encounter will be a writer's head. It's just like an erect phallus. All there.

Grobel: During the making of your film *Maidstone*, you punched out a young actor and bit open Rip Torn's ear. Are you aware of what you're doing at such times?

Mailer: No, it's just all-fanciful, like a dream. [*Laughs*]

Grobel: Were you trying to put yourself in a situation where Rip Torn might kill you on camera? Were you in that kind of frame of mind?

Mailer: We don't have enough time to talk about the making of *Maidstone*. A comparatively complex set of notions went into it.

Grobel: Then let me ask you, why are violent men always religious?

Mailer: I don't know if they're always religious, but they tend to be. Violence is one of the existential states. So very often in a violent act you don't know how it's going to turn out. It's different from the way that it seems in the movies or in books. It's indefinable. Anyone who's been in an automobile accident knows how the moments before the accident have some exceptional time changes. I once got hit by a car many years ago and it was an extraordinary experience. I bounced off a couple of rocks and ended up wrapped around a tree, but it all took place very slowly.

Grobel: Were you knocked unconscious?

Mailer: No, but it was odd. It was a sports car, and it just bruised my hip. But it's just so different from the normal and the given that it leaves you with an echo that has a touch of the cosmos in it.

Grobel: For decades you've been pushing violence as existential, hip, and heroic. Is the criminal, in your mind, the true artist?

Mailer: No, most criminals are not very interesting guys.

Grobel: You once told Mike Wallace that violence and creativity have a twin-like relation. Do you still believe that?

Mailer: I think it's still true. That's part of the problem: if you cut all the violence out of society, you also cut out all the creativity. In fact, that's just what we're doing now: working for a law and order society that will not have any violence in the streets. At the same time things are getting less and less creative. I've never taken myself so seriously as to speak of Mailer's Law of this or that, but I finally have one. It's Mailer's Law of Architectural Precedence in American Universities. Go to any university in the country and you have no problem determining the order in which the buildings were erected on that campus. The more atrocious the architecture, the newer the building. If the building next to you is less

atrocious than the one you're in, it was built before. The oldest building on the campus is invariably the nicest. That says something about creativity going out of life. It also says something about violence going out of life, because there's a tendency in American life to become more and more safe.

Grobel: Do you think American life is safer now than in the past?

Mailer: No, of course not. Because it can't be done. It's a vain, false enterprise. A pious enterprise. We're doing it as a cover, which politicians talk about all the time, in their efforts to legislate it. Concomitant with the growth of technology there's a sort of spiritual software that accompanies technology, and that is control over our lives. You push a button delicately here and a button delicately there to adjust the situation. Those people detest violence because they keep breaking up the patterns, and the control. More than half the people in this country opt completely for control of their lives. What they don't control is their death, and that drives 'em right up the wall. One big reason why I'm so obsessed with Egypt and decided to write *Ancient Evenings* is precisely that I wanted to write about a culture that gave great preface to death, that lived for it, prepared for it, dwelt within it, in which virtually all of one's acts in one's life were steered toward one's death. It seemed to me that this is much more profound than what we have now. That's why people have such extraordinary reactions to *Ancient Evenings*, they love it or they detest it. Because people, without exception, who hate it are people who love a lot of control and high tech in their lives and don't like to talk or think about death.

Grobel: In *Ancient Evenings* you've written that none fear death more than the most clever of the scribes. Being the most clever of scribes, do you fear death?

Mailer: I'm not the most clever of the scribes at all. I don't consider myself clever. I consider myself rather dumb, simpleminded, when it comes to cleverness.

Grobel: In other words, you don't fear death?

Mailer: No, not particularly.

Grobel: Have you ever envisioned your own death?

Mailer: No, I don't think about it a great deal, because the one thing I'm sure of is that it won't be what I'm expecting. I'm not much on Hindu philosophy, but there's one notion from the Hindus I do like a great deal: never worry about something you can't effect.

Grobel: Do you still reflect much on the horror of modern life?

Mailer: We're in danger of a nuclear war until we get to a point where the sustenance of existence is almost entirely leeches out. About the time that we live with too many people on earth, all living in high-rise buildings, all utterly colorless, dull, and oppressive, and every building put up is as ugly as the one before, and when we drive we breathe nothing but polluted fumes on superhighways and there's smog everywhere, and all the palm trees are wilted as they are in Mexico City, and the rivers are filthy, and everything is flat and dull, and sex is merely an extension of herpes, etc., etc., and people are dying of AIDS all over the place—at that point, the nuclear bomb is going to seem welcome to people. Because at least it'll be their last shot at transcendence. We'll all go up together in that great white light. And at that point, we're in danger.

Grobel: Is this your vision of the future?

Mailer: No, it's a possible vision of the future. I don't think it's that automatic. If it were, why would I bother to talk about these matters?

Grobel: You've predicted an extraordinary holocaust where we may all die off in a mysterious fashion.

Mailer: I meant that metaphorically. One doesn't want to be prophetic about these matters at all. We have intimations of such horror with AIDS, for instance, where people are dying because their immunological faculties are atrophying or not functioning.

Grobel: You've used the metaphor of cancer to describe our nation. Are we a cancerous nation?

Mailer: Things are going to have to happen. There are going to have to be positive ideas emerging. I can offer you a simple few. One of my most fundamental beliefs is that the government has the right to tax people, but we have a right to say what we're taxed on. I'd like to see all sorts of referendums. I'd love to lead the crusade to tax the hell out of plastic. It would make

it too expensive for them to make that crap any more. So it would tend to disappear. Where plastic was indispensable it would still remain, because people would just pay the tax on it. If the only decent fishing rods or skis would be made out of plastic, we can pay a little more.

Another thing I'd absolutely be for is, we're just surrounded with meretriciousness and mendacity in every aspect of our immediate life. So I'd opt for taking away the tax deduction from advertising and let those businesses that need to advertise pay for the privilege, because what they're selling is not their product but a pile of horseshit. They're attaching values that have nothing to do with the product. It's attached to the entertainment that they give you on TV, which is mediocre entertainment at best. So why should that go into the price of a product? Why do we need to have the three major automobile manufacturers all advertising like crazy when we know they're all equally mediocre? Does it really matter? Is there any American who doesn't know that Ford, Chrysler and General Motors products are all on the same level every year? That finally you're gonna pick it for the paint job? Why do you have to have a helicopter drop a car on top of a mountain peak? The millions that are spent on that, for what? To increase the price of the product? So, take away the tax deductions in advertising. You say that'll put a lot of people out of work? Well, great. They'll have to scuffle.

Grobel: Are these among the stupid people?

Mailer: I wouldn't say the media people are the stupid people, they're the clever people. It'll be hard times for a few of the clever people.

Grobel: Regarding yourself, you said you might be one of the most wicked spirits in American life today. Are you?

Mailer: I was preening. That day I had feathers and I was fluffin' 'em.

Grobel: Oriana Fallaci wrote that the taint of insanity has been following you for years. Is there any truth in that?

Mailer: No, but that's Oriana Fallaci, making a story.

Grobel: In 1942 you worked for a while in a state mental institution in Boston. Some years later, after you stabbed your second wife, you wound up in

a mental institution in Bellevue for a while. Did you feel in any way that you came full circle from that experience?

Mailer: No. I mean, I thought of it. Once could not think of the fact that one worked in a mental hospital earlier on the other side, as an attendant. That may have been of some help for me to get out of that place after seventeen days.

Grobel: Because?

Mailer: When I worked as an attendant, I learned one thing: don't make the guards pay attention to you. The less attention the guards pay to you, the better your chances of getting out are.

Grobel: Were you crazy at that time?

Mailer: Let's say I was highly strung and let it go at that.

Grobel: I don't think you're going to answer me, but why did you stab your wife?

Mailer: You made your try. Why do you want to get into something that personal?

Grobel: It's a subject that you really haven't discussed, except in a poem you wrote, where you said, "So long as you use the knife ..."

Mailer: A knife.

Grobel: "... a knife, there's some love left."

Mailer: The poem was written after the fact.

Grobel: I know it was.

Mailer: It's not a lively topic of conversation for me.

Grobel: The doctor who treated your wife, Adele, said you were having an acute paranoid breakdown with delusional thinking and that you were both homicidal and suicidal.

Mailer: Well, since I didn't kill anybody after that and I didn't commit suicide nor have a mental breakdown, my guess is that he wasn't too accurate.

Grobel: But you later wrote that had you not done that act you might have been dead in a few years yourself.

Mailer: Yes.

Grobel: Have you ever contemplated suicide?

Mailer: No, I never have.

Grobel: When a movie is made of your life, whom would you like to play you?

Mailer: Larry Grobel.

Grobel: You're getting angry with me now.

Mailer: No. Edgy.

Grobel: Okay. You blamed early success as the reason for the breakup of your first marriage

Mailer: I'm not getting angry, I'm getting offended. You want to discuss my life. I'm not going to give away my life. My life is my material. I would give you my life no more than I would give you my mate. That belongs to me, not to an interviewer.

Grobel: Let's stay then with your work. What you do is often based on your need for money. The need for money is because you have to support a number of ex-wives. Germaine Greer called you an alimony slave.

Mailer: I wonder how Germaine Greer came up with that? That was one of her bright days, huh?

Grobel: Have your marriages influenced your career?

Mailer: Of course they have. A marriage is a culture.

Grobel: You've said that there isn't a man alive who doesn't have a profound animosity for women.

Mailer: I also don't think there's a woman alive who doesn't have a profound animosity for men. But that's half of it. I would continue that remark by saying that there's not a man alive who doesn't have a profound need and love for women. That's part of the human condition. One of my favorite

remarks is that the only time you ever do anything with great energy is when the best and worst motives in you are both involved at the same time. Or let's say the most love-filled and the most hate-filled motives reengaged at the same moment. Lust is a perfect example of that. When one feels and makes lust for a woman, it's precisely because the love we feel for her and the hate we feel for her at both being fully expressed. And those would-be sexual relations really come from just one side or another of oneself being expressed.

Grobel: Do you regret saying on TV in the early seventies that women should be kept in cages?

Mailer: I said it in jest on a show with Orson Welles. One of the troubles with the media is that they are horrendously humorless. They might as well be human walking computers, because whatever you say, it's always assumed that you said it in a deadly earnest voice. We were chatting. He said, 'Norman, you wrote recently that women are low, sloppy beasts.' This was all pre-woman's lib. And I said, 'The rest of that quote is that they're goddesses.' What I was trying to get into was the fundamental male viewpoint towards women: on the one hand we see them as goddesses, on the other hand, as low, sloppy beasts. And he said, 'Beasts?' I started thinking of a few fights I'd had with the ex-wife and began to laugh. And I said, 'Oh come on, Orson, women should be kept in cages.' If I had known what that remark was gonna cost, I'd of really bitten right through my lip before I ever said it. It was a stupid remark in terms of its cost. A moment's fun which I'm paying for ever since.

There's a wonderful remark that a fellow once made with respect to *Women and Their Elegance*. It was that a woman got married to a man who's much beneath her, so she went to a family party and the head of the family looked at her and said, 'Thirty days of pleasure and thirty years at the wrong end of the table.' That remark is equal to the one that I made.

Grobel: There's another remark you made: that it's very dangerous to stick it up a woman's ass, it tends to make them more promiscuous.

Mailer: Yeah, that was a rule of thumb remark. [Laughs] A pole vaulter's remark.

Grobel: Is it any wonder that when the Woman's Movement started you were singled out as a great male chauvinist?

Mailer: I was singled out because I was the last man in America to realize how big and powerful a movement that was. I saw all these men running for cover and paying this great respect to woman and I'm such a fool, I said, 'What are they doing that for?'

Grobel: Why do you feel that masturbation cripples people and leads to insanity?

Mailer: Why do you ask me a question when you know the answer?

Grobel: Because not everyone who may read this will have read what you've written.

Mailer: The tendency of masturbation is insanity. In the same way that the tendency of driving 90 mph in a slow speed zone is a crash up. It doesn't mean it's going to happen. But you can't cheat life—which is about the only remark I made that I still hang on to. There's no objective correlative in masturbation. It encourages one's fantasy life in the weakest fashion possible. The tendency for masturbation nine times out of ten is to push people further and further into loneliness and into a fundamental sense of defeat about not getting what they really want sexually.

Grobel: But can't that also be a release for them?

Mailer: It's a release, in the sense it keeps them from something worse happening to them. But to see masturbation as something marvelous and part of a healthy sex life is dubious in the extreme.

Grobel: You don't write as much about masturbation as you do other sexual acts, including buggery.

Mailer: Buggery was much more common in ancient times than it is now. The Romans talked about it all the time. The Greeks lived with buggery; it was sort of a staple for them. It's my guess that in the Middle Ages you didn't have an extraordinary amount of buggery because it was a form of contraception between men and women. And people lived much closer to excrement in those days. The smell was everywhere in the air. I had the experience once of being in Japan after the war and people lived very close to the excrement of animals and to their own excrement. American soldiers were far more horrified by the fact that the Japanese would carry their human excrement in these honey pots through the cities or use them in gardens than they

were at seeing battlefields with fifty dead soldiers. We seem to have separated ourselves from excrement a long time ago. It may be that you can't build a modern, technological civilization without keeping the shit out of the machines. But in ancient times that's the heart and core of it. You can't conceive of life in those days without a lot of buggery and a lot of living in and around excrement all the time.

Grobel: In *Ancient Evenings* you have the chief charioteer getting buggered in a cave by the pharaoh, first in the ass, then in the mouth. Was this a way a pharaoh behaved?

Mailer: It's the way pharaohs did behave. That was the toughest moment in the writing, because I felt as if I was crossing my own Rubicon at that point. I thought the book demanded it. I had an instinct that this was the great hinge of the book, because the charioteer was a very strong man. When he's buggered by his pharaoh it changes his life entirely. It dominates not only that life, but also his remaining three lives, because he was born three times. He never comes out from under the shadow of that buggery. I feel it works well as a symbol of power and what power means. Power is buggery. People say that the sex drives in *Ancient Evenings* exhibit power relationships; I don't think it's true. There is more love there than you'd expect. The queen, Nefertiti, does bare the charioteer's child, which is only explainable in that she had enough love for him that she didn't abort the child or destroy it when it was born.

Grobel: In the book, the moment of reincarnation comes through the sex act.

Mailer: It's not proper reincarnation. He has himself reborn directly into the belly of his woman. As he dies, so his seed enters her belly and he's reborn. That's not true reincarnation. I always felt reincarnation means that you die and then some cosmic agent looks you over and decides your next life. In other words, there is a moment of truth, where your life is judged and you're sent out to improve the condition of the cosmos by the trials and joys you're going to have in your next existence.

Grobel: Is that what you think will happen to you after you die?

Mailer: I think reincarnation is the natural way to do it.

Grobel: What would you like to come back as?

Mailer: I don't have a clue. I feel great modesty before the Lord. I wouldn't dream of saying what I'd come back as, that's about the fastest way I know of not getting it. I think the Lord takes one look at you and that's it. I have a working joke on this: since I've contemplated these matters, I find that I'm killing cockroaches less and less often.

Grobel: Do you literally believe in God?

Mailer: It's much simpler than not to accept Him or Her.

Grobel: Her?

Mailer: I learned my lesson. I'll make my peace with the women libbers yet.

Grobel: Is it true that your publisher was worried that they wouldn't make their money back on *Ancient Evenings* so they put you under the gun to write another, shorter novel?

Mailer: Is that the general interpretation of it?

Grobel: It's the interpretation I've given.

Mailer: You're clever. Yeah, they want me to do a short book because their feeling is that their chances of doing well with a short book are fine. I expect they're right. But why do we have to have this evil interpretation of it? I'm not under the gun. I agreed. I wanted to do a short book [*Tough Guys Don't Dance*] after I finished *Ancient Evenings*.

Grobel: *Ancient Evenings* is the first of your planned trilogy. Do you think you'll write the next two books?

Mailer: I hope I will. I've got two huge books to do, one about a spaceship in the future and one about modern times. But it's not automatic. Maybe I'll do it and maybe I won't. *Ancient Evenings* was written to stand by itself, it does not need the other two to fulfill it.

Grobel: How has *Ancient Evenings* been received?

Mailer: It made me a prophet for too little. I said I was going to get the very best and the very worst reviews I'd ever gotten and that's been true. On the

one hand I've been called the best writer in America, on the other hand, two reviewers used the same word, *disaster*.

Grobel: After the dust settles, will it rank among your most important work?

Mailer: I think it will. If you work eleven years on a book and you take yourself seriously, as I do, how could I possibly not think it's my best book? I could be wrong, but I don't think I am. I think it is my best because I know what went into it. It's a very difficult book to get a hold of and seize and control. The prevailing mode in American letters is for high-tech writing. Writing that has a sheer command of the surface.

Grobel: Tom Wolfe?

Mailer: He's a very good example of that. But any number of writers are admired for their ability to capture the surface of things. They do it with skill and wit and irony. Irony is terribly important and crucial to modern writing. The kind of books that we like best are books where we're on top of three-quarter's of the book, because we know and recognize it, we're comfortable with it, and one-quarter of it is new enough to give us pleasure. That's a very good working mixture. With *Ancient Evenings* you've got a novel that's brand new, there isn't anything familiar, there's nothing in psychology we can count on, because it's a profoundly different psychology from our own. It owes nothing to Freud. Or to the Judeo-Christian tradition. As a result it's a book that inspires an awful lot of irritability in people who like to be in command of what they're reading. For some people it's impossibly long, dull and boring. For others it's rich, fabulous and sensuous. There is a fundamental division of opinions.

Grobel: Why are good novels so painful to read?

Mailer: That's an excellent question. Name me any great novel you've ever read that didn't bore you in part while reading it the first time. A great novel has a consciousness that's new first. And any time we undergo that, we get bored because we have to withdraw and digest this new consciousness before we can go back to it. I've been bored in part by *Moby Dick*, *The Red and the Black*, *Anna Karenina*, *The Scarlet Letter*.

Grobel: Your editor compared you to Picasso in terms of your range, your refusal to age or to lose energy. Is that an agreeable comparison for you?

Mailer: It's a little on the grand side. Picasso's a great artist who made huge changes in the word. There are two kinds of artist. There's the artist who essentially has an identity, and we turn to that artist to feel the resonance of that particular identity. Matisse, Renoir, Cézanne, to a lesser extent Van Gogh. We know what we're going to get when we look at their work. But with Picasso, he was interested in throwing away his own identity in order to find a new one. Style for him was not something that was attached to his identity; style was a cutting edge with which he attacked the nature of reality. So he went through a whole series of phases and changes. I find literary style is that for me. But don't trust what I say because it's self-serving, as all writers' remarks are. The negative aspect of that is, 'He can't write good any more so his new style is a departure.' Take your pick.

Grobel: Any other artists or writers you wouldn't mind being compared with?

Mailer: I don't know. I could say no. Yes. Maybe.

Grobel: What about Gabriel Garcia Marquez?

Mailer: Oh, Marquez is wonderful. He may be a great writer, but we're not at all alike. I've read *One Hundred Years of Solitude* after I was halfway into *Ancient Evenings* and I was getting blissful when I read it. I thought, God, this guy covers family with ten people in it and they go through twenty years and he does it all in five or ten pages. In ten pages I'm lucky to get around one bend of the Nile. He writes very quickly about a great many things, he has that gift. If I have a gift it is in the opposite direction. I want to catch the slow movement of that Nile.

Grobel: Marquez won the Nobel Prize. The opening of your *The Prisoner of Sex* dealt with your obsession with winning that prize. What would it mean to you now if you got it?

Mailer: I fully expect not to get it. It's the kind of thing that's not going to come my way.

Grobel: Honestly?

Mailer: Well, there's always a shot at it. But one of the things it depends on is your popularity in your own country with the most respected academics in the country. From what I've gathered, the Swedish Academy listens care-

fully to the literary curators of a country. I don't think my stock would be particularly high with them.

Grobel: Do you feel that you've succeeded in creating a revolution in the consciousness of our times, as you once declared it was your ambition to do?

Mailer: If we can use an image from buggery, I think I've gotten halfway up.

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