MAILER AND WHITMAN: AN INTERVIEW ON DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA

ROBERT J. BEGIEBING

> True liberty will only begin when Americans discover IT . . . IT being the deepest *whole* self of man, the self in wholeness, not idealistic halfness . . .The wholeness of a man being his soul.
>
> —D.H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature*

MY GOAL IS TO PRESENT WHITMAN IN HIS OWN WORDS, allowing for occasional elisions, transitional phrases and sentences, and similar unobtrusive devices of coherence and clarity, so that modern readers might measure for themselves the currency and significance of our most Emersonian poet's ideas on American democracy. The means to this goal of allowing Whitman to speak his own words is rooted in his prose, none more so than Democratic Vistas, his "Preface" to the 1855 edition of Leaves of Grass*, and the rendition of his late-life conversations with his Boswellian acolyte Horace Traubel, published over decades in nine volumes as* With Walt Whitman in Camden. *(The best rendering into manageable form of those volumes is edited by Brenda Wineapple and published in a modest but trenchant volume as* Walt Whitman Speaks *by Library of America, 2019).*

Might Walt Whitman's body of work, even as glimpsed through the limited portal I offer here, represent one of those potentially salutary "wisdom texts" you will notice referred to during the interview with Mailer? Readers decide for themselves, of course, just as they will decide as to the relevancy of Whitman to twenty-first century America. As one contemplates that relevancy or lack of it,

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one might want to keep in mind that the hope for the progressive evolution of a culture is not necessarily limited to a sealed time capsule labelled "Nineteenth-Century Idealism." Everyone who ever dissented, protested, or placed his or her body as "a counter friction to stop the machine," in Thoreau's formulation, in the quest for humane change from the injustices of the status quo has, and today still does, accept the proposition that things can get better (not that they will but that they can).

Whitman's interviewer here, Norman Mailer, I treat with shameless freedom. I use, of course, some of his words, and Mailer's readers will note points of convergence between Mailer's own ideas and body of work and Whitman's side of the interview. Mailer's role here, however, is to prompt Whitman to speak on the many facets of our living American experience that either enlarge or diminish, or even despoil, the republic (still far from flawless) first given to us by the American Revolution and those subsequent documents that established the foundation of our ever-evolving democratic freedoms and responsibilities.

—Robert J. Begiebing

MAILER

[*Entering from stage right, Mailer sees a wicker armchair stage left, sits, settles a reporter's notebook on his lap, and glances at his notes. As Walt Whitman walks in from stage right, carrying an old-fashioned, collapsible, cloth-seated, wooden beach chair, Mailer looks up and stands.*]

Mr. Whitman!

WHITMAN

Norman!

MAILER

Walt!

[*They shake hands. Seat themselves.*]

WHITMAN

[*Breaks into sonorous recitation of lines from "So Long."*]

"My songs cease, I abandon them,
From behind the screen where I hid, I advance personally solely to you
Camerado, this is no book,
Who touches this touches a man."

We are finally face to face. I've felt there's a certain simpatico. *Song of Myself. Advertisements for Myself*! [*Laughs*]

MAILER

[*Joining in the joke*]

Brooklyn!

WHITMAN

Brooklyn Heights. New Jersey.

MAILER

Manhattan.

WHITMAN

The soul-wounds of war.

MAILER

Witnesses to suffering. So, Walt. You knew of *Advertisements*?

WHITMAN

Certain rumblings, let us say, reached the netherworlds.

MAILER

I always hoped *Advertisements* might have sent certain reverberations—out to various layers of existence, or, if you prefer, consciousness. That book was *my* Barbaric Yawp—far too long in coming. My own Cri de Coeur shouted over the rooftops of my repressed compatriots.

WHITMAN

One's Barbaric Yawp may be good and necessary, but too much anger, sheer effrontery, small-minded criticism of your peers is more rebarbative Rant than Yawp. Rant does not satisfy the Soul.

MAILER

Still, I stand by that book. The times called it forth from me. After the Great Depression, World War II, something broke in the American spirit. And the writers, intellectuals, and critics left their artists' opposition to society to embrace "the American Century," as it was called. The writers who inspired my generation had grown too accepting of things as they were shap-

ing up, like a collective paterfamilias. And we younger writers were being pushed toward social acceptance and integration. So I struck out.

WHITMAN

And fear of failure? Fear too makes us lash out. We are all, as Emerson pointed out, creatures of a dual nature.

MAILER

I won't deny it. But making a reconnaissance into my deepest self changed me. I'd created a new, combative, determined self. No longer Mr. Nice Jewish Kid. Like me, Walt, you had dived into your deepest self in your mid-thirties and that process changed your work forever too. Two swaggering Romantic rebels, we might say.

[*Whitman holds up his arms in a caricature of a carnival strongman and grins. Mailer rises out of his chair and shadowboxes, continuing his response as he dances and strikes out with his fists.*]

Two authors of epic ambitions. Portraying ourselves as representatives of our time, our people. In their liberated state.

WHITMAN

We both had our hopes for some larger sort of consciousness, some new American breadth of scope. Some new, unfettered candor. To justify what we say by our deeper consciousness, a sort of heroic animality. But didn't you request, Norman, that we speak of democracy, Democracy in America? [*Breaks into sonorous recitation, again*]

"For you, from me, O Democracy, to serve you ma femme!

For you, for you I am trilling these songs."

MAILER

[*Resuming his seat*]

Such is my assignment for *The Mailer Review*. [*He flips his notepad back open.*]

The idea is to posit your analyses, in song and in prose. Readers in the twenty-first century will have to calculate for themselves the remaining distances we have to travel. I've noticed that like me you change your views over time, even contradict yourself. Ever testing hypotheses, ever the overarching dialectic.

But indeed, let's talk democracy. You placed your hope in the future, some evolution of the American Revolution, even if you saw every fault-line and flaw in the state of American democracy in your time. Your time predated mine by a century. So, a reader might ask, was your hope misplaced? Though I take it you had in mind centuries upon centuries. Maybe even some sort of Vedic cycle of 25,000 years! For the moment, however, let's ignore the twenty-first century, trusting our readers, as I say, to make whatever leaps are to be made. Begin with the Dream of Prosperity. The machinery of democracy intersecting with those dreams of shared prosperity.

WHITMAN

Well, there are different kinds of prosperity, not only material but moral and spiritual, as well. Have we Americans ever understood that, Norman? The prevailing delusion is always that free political institutions, plentiful intellectual smartness, with general good order, physical plenty, industry, etc. do, of themselves, determine and yield to our experiment in democracy the fruitage of success. Yet the moral conscience, the most important, the vertebrae, to State or man, seems to me either entirely lacking or seriously enfeebled.

Genuine belief seems to have left us—in our underlying principles (for all the hectic glow and melodramatic screaming). Nor is humanity believed in. The spectacle is appalling. We live in an atmosphere of hypocrisy throughout. The men believe not in the women, nor the women in the men. A scornful superciliousness rules in literature. A lot of churches, sects, etc., the most dismal phantasms, usurp the name of Religion.

MAILER

Had you felt the reverberations of D.H. Lawrence? I once made my own study of Lawrence. This novelist and poet followed in your wake and wrote that "as a great poet" you "meant so much to me . . . as the one man breaking a way ahead . . . the pioneer" among classic American authors. Like you, he saw the function of art as moral, not aesthetic only. And above all *not* didactic. Rather, an "implicit morality" which "changes the blood" before the mind. And you he found in this sense "the great moralist."

He saw that the other classic American authors of the nineteenth century had attacked the old morality (of church, of society's proprieties) through their passions, but they still gave "mental allegiance" to the old morality

those passions would destroy. But you, Lawrence believed, were the first to break that mental allegiance, to smash the old moral conception of the soul as superior to and above the flesh. You kept the soul *in* the flesh!

WHITMAN

Then perhaps he understood me, Mr. Lawrence. *Leaves* was for me a necessary religious root ground, but we have to get rid of all our dogmas and hypocrisies and superstitions. My time demanded readjustment, not least of the democratic ensemble of science and religion, of reason and mystery.

MAILER

The biggest problem for Christianity is Christians, someone once said. One imagines the rage of Jesus. But you don't let the political and business leaders off the hook, either. I make so bold as to quote you President Herbert Hoover—no less! "The problem with capitalism is capitalists. They're too damn greedy." The American Dream became the people's nightmare.

WHITMAN

It's unfortunate, appalling. The official services of the state are steeped in corruption and bribery. In business (that all-devouring modern word, business) the one sole object is, by any means, pecuniary gain. The magician's serpent in the fable ate up all the other serpents; and money-making is our magician's serpent, remaining by my day the sole master of the field. The best class we show is but a mob of fashionably dressed speculators and vulgarians. It is as if we were somehow endowed with a vast and more thoroughly appointed body, and then left with little or no Soul.

I wanted the arrogant money powers disciplined. That's why I rejoice in anything the people do to demonstrate their contempt for the conditions under which they are despoiled. Our politics are degraded by wealth unbounded, greed unbounded. If anything will destroy us it will be fraud in the service of wealth.

MAILER

I've said as much myself: "the shits are killing us." Yet somehow you never gave up hope during your lifetime, despite all the flaws and wrong turns of our national experiment. All the ways a corrupt polity can destroy our humanity, much, say, as a war can. Whether that war is fought in our streets or on foreign shores.

WHITMAN

But America cannot afford to despair. Without hope, dreams, what do we have? I have dreamed of a little or larger band of brave and true, unprecedented yet—the members separated by different dates and states—north, south, east, west—a year here, a century there, but always one compact Soul, conscience-conserving, God-inculcating, inspired achievers, not only in Literature, the greatest art, but achievers in all art. A Soul Culture, if you will.

MAILER

That's how you kept your faith in American democracy—in this "band," as you say, within this larger sweep of time. In artists.

WHITMAN

Yes. The seeds of any evolution would have to be within those of larger consciousness. Otherwise we remain where we are. Permanent stasis. Culture as a class of supercilious infidels who believe in nothing. I should demand a program of Culture drawn out not from a single class, or of the parlors and lecture-rooms, but with an eye to practical life, the West, the workingmen, the facts of farms and jackplanes and engineers, and the broad range of women also of the middle and working strata. Culture as a deeper principle. Based on Individuality, a towering Self-hood (yes, that swagger as you say), the female equally with the male, possessing the idea of the Infinite. The Individual Personality of mortal life with reference to the Immortal, the Unknown, the Spiritual. Fear not my brethren, my sisters!

MAILER

I'd make a distinction: small business can be a part of a new polity, a new equity, but the corporation is psychopathic. So, we would in your time and in mine have had to address more pungently the problems of capital and labor—more accurately, the corporations and labor—if a people were to be rescued, allowed to develop the culture you dream of.

WHITMAN

Certainly. Have I not said as much just now? The immense problem of the relation and conflict between Labor and its status and pay, on one side, and the Capital of employers on the other looms over these states like an ominous cloud. The many thousands of decent working people trying to keep up a good

appearance, but living in daily toil, from hand to mouth, with nothing ahead, and no owned homes—the increasing aggregation of capital in the hands of a few—the chaotic confusion of labor in the southern states, consequent on the abrogation of slavery, the growing alarming spectacle of countless squads of vagabond children, the hideous squalor of certain quarters of the cities and the increasing frequency of these pompous, nauseous outside shows of vulgar wealth (What a chance of a new Juvenal!), wealth acquired perhaps by some quack, some measureless financial rogue, triply brazen in impudence, only shielding himself by his money from a shaved head, a striped dress, and a felon's cell, those enormous fortunes for the few and of poverty of the million—all these stand as impedimenta of America's progress.

And there is no remedy in too much flag waving. In the easy hurrah. That is not patriotism in any sense I accept.

MAILER

I call them flag-patriots, Walt. But as I understand you, you see as corollary to the development of conscience the role of literature and of suffrage in dismantling these impedimenta. Consider suffrage first.

WHITMAN

Without fair suffrage there is no hope for controlling our own destiny as a nation beyond its stagnations. But first we cannot gloss over the appalling dangers of universal suffrage, the dangerous state of the gap between democracy's convictions, aspirations, and the people's crudeness, vice, caprices, evil wills, venoms—below which reside the good nature, integrity, and sanity of man. We are destined either to surmount the history of Feudalism or prove the most tremendous failure of time.

I would add, America means, or should mean, above all toleration, welcome, freedom, a concern for Europe, for Asia, for Africa. We are not all in all. We are to make our contribution to the big scheme. I say let that contribution be something worthwhile—something exceptional, ennobling. We cannot love America, desire American prosperity, at the expense of some other nation. We are all sailing together on the same ship.

"Joy, shipmate, joy!"

MAILER

Even if you make allowances for our essential duality, for the folly (or gullibility) of the masses (as you suggest), or at least of a substantial seg-

ment of the voting populace, you still have the errors of the officials—I refuse to say "leaders"!—they elect. Voters may be too easily conned, bamboozled. But it's their officials who did the con and then acted otherwise than the expectations they raised through bromides, pandering promises, and plain old jingoism. I'd argue that the officials' con game is one key to democracy's failures, as well.

WHITMAN

That is the state of the matter so far. We have a long evolutionary path to trod. I speak of an evolution of Conscience and discernment the likes of which we might well look to history for examples and come up short. The din of disputation ever raged around me. And rages still? Acrid the temper of the parties, vital the pending questions. Fortunately, time will dispose of Presidents, Congressmen, party platforms. But the people remain. And there is an immortal courage and prophecy in every sane soul that cannot, must not, under any circumstances, capitulate.

But yes, I have everywhere found, primarily, thieves and scallywags arranging the nominations to offices, and sometimes filling the offices themselves. The North as full of bad stuff as the South. Not one in a hundred has been chosen by the outsiders, the people, but most have been put through by little or large caucuses of the politicians and have got in by corrupt rings and electioneering, not by capacity or desert. And I noticed more and more the alarming spectacle of parties usurping the Government, and openly and shamelessly wielding it for party purposes. But a well-contested American election? I know of nothing grander, better exercise, better digestion, more positive proof of the past, the triumphant result of faith in humankind. I have written that the Poet "sees eternity in men and women; he does not see men and women as dreams or dots. Faith is the antiseptic of the soul."

We have yet to achieve what I call a third stage of our development, however. The first being the political foundation rights of immense masses of people, the organization of a republic, embodied in our Declaration of Independence, for example. The second being material prosperity, including intercommunication and trade, general employment, organization of great cities, the health of books, newspapers, currencies. Technical schools. But the third stage I would promulgate is a native Expression of Spirit, different from others, more expansive, evidenced by original authors and poets *to come*, by American Personalities, plenty of them, male and female. Entirely

reconstructing Society, rising above all errors and wickedness. We have not yet exhausted the progressive conception of America, but rather arise, teeming with it. Daughter of a physical revolution—Mother of the true revolutions, which are of the *interior life*, and of the arts. For so long as the Spirit has not changed, any change of appearance is of no avail.

MAILER

A revolution of consciousness! My own battle cry. Of deepest consciousness, of soul. The first necessity for political and economic change. Because mere politics as politics is too corrupt and shallow for the deeper solutions. You are, my friend—dare I say it—another Left-Conservative!

Regardless: You might be the last of the Mohicans who believes literature to be chief among the instruments for such an evolution in the state. Believes that literature holds the key to the deepest interior changes, to that revolution of consciousness. A good reason for your innovations, your technical and topical courage. The whole poetic tradition was at stake. Just as democracy was at stake. The critic Leslie Fiedler said of you that as a literary pioneer you are as offensive as any disturber of received ideas, as upsetting as Copernicus or Darwin, Nietzsche or Marx or Freud. Nowhere more innovative on this American soil than in your use of erotic imagery, the erotic being the other side of the spiritual coin. [*Quoting from Whitman*'s "*Song of Myself*"]

"I believe in you my soul, the other I am must not abase itself to you,
And you must not be abased to the other. . . .
I mind how once we lay such a transparent summer morning.
How you settled your head athwart my hips and gently turn'd over upon me,
And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged
Your tongue to my bare-stripped heart,
And reached till you felt my beard, and reached till you held my feet . . . ."

WHITMAN

[*Picking up the subsequent lines*]

"Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and knowledge that pass all the argument of the earth,
And I know that the hand of God is the promise of my own,
And I know that the spirit of God is the brother of my own,

And that all the men ever born are also my brothers, and
the women my sisters and lovers,
And that a keelson of the creation is love . . . ."

So you see, Norman, I won't argue with this Fiedler fellow. But, yes, we must remember that political dissent must play a role as well. The eager and often inconsiderate appeals of reformers and revolutionists are indispensable to counterbalance the inertness and fossilism making so large a part of human institutions. The latter will always take care of themselves—the danger being that they rapidly tend to ossify *us*. The reformer is to be treated with indulgence and even respect. As circulation to air, so is agitation and a plentiful degree of speculative license to political and moral sanity.

MAILER

Indeed, Walt. But back to literature for a moment. Your verse innovations were with us a long time, in some cases still are. Your lack of pretention. Your use of everyday speech. The exuberant, even joyful, length of your free verse lines, resonating with those internal rhythms (as opposed to tinkling rhymes and conventional rhythms). Rhythm as your fluid instrument. And your invented words. You were part of the revolution in European literature before the Americans even caught on. You have said "Emerson brought me to a boil." You and Emily Dickinson, who also credits Emerson, and whose innovations in compression and very different rhythms and linear emphases or stresses might seem like the opposite of yours; you both, however, were not taken seriously by America's literary leaders of your day.

WHITMAN

Well, they had to keep their skirts clean, Norman. But even Miss Dickinson didn't read me because she heard I was scandalous. [*Laughs*]

MAILER

[*Quoting some "scandalous" lines*]

"She owns the fine house by the rise of the bank,
She hides handsome and richly dressed aft the blinds of the window.
Which of the young men does she like the best?
Ah the homeliest of them is beautiful to her.
Where are you off to lady? For I see you,
You splash in the water there, yet stay stock still in your room.

Dancing and laughing along the beach came the twenty-nineth bather.
The rest did not see her, but she saw them and loved them.
The beards of the young men glistened with wet, it ran
from their long hair,
Little streams pass'd all over their bodies.
An unseen hand also pass'd over their bodies,
It descended tremblingly from their temples and ribs.
The young men float on their backs, their white bellies
bulge to the sun, they do not ask who seizes fast to them.
They do not know who puffs and declines with pendant
and bending arch,
They do not think whom they souse with spray."

WHITMAN

[A*pplauds the recitation in good humor,*
then adds a few other scandalous lines.]

"City of orgies, walks and joys . . . .
As I pass O Manhattan, your frequent and
swift flash of eyes offering me love,
Offering response to my own—these repay me,
Lovers, continual lovers, only repay me."

MAILER

[*Laughs and gives a thumbs up.*]

But here's the point, Walt: your faith in literature for democratic progress might seem at best a faith whose temples have long ago collapsed. At worst, the faith of frustrated—even Jeffersonian—idealists.

WHITMAN

The priest departs, the Literatus comes! We cannot dismiss Literature, if we are serious about political transformation. Literature is an element of the machinery and soul of transformation that is too complex to analyze in an interview. One could spend a lifetime writing about the transfiguring sources, or a lifetime creating those sources. You see, Norman, Literature is a *weapon.* An instrument in the service of something larger than itself, not an end. Not for art's sake! In relation to Democracy, Literature has always been an instrument against those who would draw a line against free speech, free printing, free assembly.

Look at the history of Literature. Many superfluities in any epoch to be sure, but across eons the great Literatus has joined with his brother and sister creators to leave for us, if we will but take counsel from it, a literature of wisdom for humanity. And other arts as well, like music, the combiner, nothing more spiritual, nothing more sensuous, a god, yet completely human.

Moreover, it may be that we need authors far higher in grade than any yet known. Sacerdotal, modern, fit to cope with our occasions, permeating the whole mass of American mentality, taste, belief. Sowing a religious and moral character beneath the political. May not the people of our land all know how to read and write, and all possess the right to vote, and yet the main things be entirely lacking? I would suggest at least the possibility that should some two or three really original American poets arise, they would give more compaction and more moral identity (the quality most needed) to these States than all the constitutions, legislative and judicial ties, and all its hitherto political, warlike, or materialistic experiences. The fruition of Democracy, as I've said, resides altogether in the future. But the throes of birth are upon us.

MAILER

I once had a similar faith in great literature. The writers who formed me I honored and, in the innocence of youth, were to me as gods among men. But I'd argue we've moved not closer but further from such a belief as a people, as citizens. And the corporations who own the publishers have belittled the faith. It's no longer merely capital over labor, as we've said, it's capital over *all*, over every being (organic and inorganic), every creative artifact, every artificial structure. And above all, now more than ever, over politics.

WHITMAN

Am I not to be allowed my prophecy? Admitting all the folly and wickedness, is there no hope for change, growth, higher development of Conscience and Consciousness?

MAILER

For the sake of argument, I might grant that we are in a century-long, or two-century-long slough, and in the larger scheme of human Time we still have opportunity for development. For the moment, however, I'm more interested in your ideas about the democratic potential of literature.

WHITMAN

Think first of what satisfies the Soul: To take expression, to incarnate, to endow a Literature with grand and archetypal models, to fill with pride and love to the utmost capacity, and to achieve spiritual meanings, and suggest the future.

You have the capacity to see our literary shortcomings, even though most readers of this interview would say: Are we not doing well enough here already? Do not our publishers fatten quicker and deeper? Are there not more presses than in any other country? Many, I say, will come under this delusion—but my purpose is to dispel it. A nation may hold and circulate rivers and oceans of very readable print, journals, magazines, novels, library books, "poetry," etc. Hundreds of volumes brought out here, respectable enough, indeed unsurpassed in smartness and erudition. And yet all the while, the nation, strictly speaking, may possess no Literature at all. I reiterate: all else in the contributions of a nation or an age, through its politics, materials, heroic personalities, military éclat, etc., remains crude, and defers, in any close and thorough-going estimate, until vitalized by national, original archetypes in Literature.

MAILER

But to come even close, as a first step, we would have to defeat our culture of best-sellerdom, "page-turners," one of the props of corporate capitalism. These books that dull the mind. I'd argue we do not have, for the most part, literature as dissent—your "weapon"—in the sense you mean it. Not a literature of the soul. The dissenting soul. Nor even a literature that is philosophically disturbing.

WHITMAN

Would you not honor Thomas Paine, Henry Thoreau? But yes, in the rivalry of writers, especially novelists, success is for him or her who strikes the mean flat average, the sensational appetite for stimulus, incident, and so on, and depicts, to the common caliber, sensual, exterior life. To the luckiest, the audiences are limitless and profitable, but they cease presently. While, this day or any day, to workmen portraying interior or spiritual life, the audiences are limited, and often laggard, but they last forever.

And of course, there are the dandies and ennuyès, dapper little gentlemen from abroad, who flood us with their thin sentiment of parlors, para-

sols, piano-songs, tinkling rhymes, chasing one aborted conceit after another. And what was called the Drama of the United States in my time was on a par with the questions of ornamental confectionery at public dinners, or the arrangement of curtains and hangings in a ballroom, nor more, nor less. On a par with the copious dribble, causing tender spasms in the coteries, either of our little- or well-known rhymesters, which does not fulfill the needs and august occasions of this land. Whereas America needs a poetry that is bold, modern, and as all-surrounding and kosmical as she is herself. Like you, I find the first sign of proportionate, native, imaginative Soul (the other name for Literature) and first-class works to match, is so far largely wanting. But we must not despair.

The great Literatuses will be known, among the rest, by cheerful simplicity, adherence to natural standards, limitless faith in God, reverence, and by the absence of doubt, ennui, burlesque, persiflage, or any strained and temporary fashion.

MAILER

"Tender Spasms in the Coteries," a title I should have used for an essay! Or a book, Walt.

[*Laughs along with Whitman, then flips to a page in his notebook.*]

You wrote in more detail of this concept of literature in your 1855 "Preface" to *Leaves*. The idea of the Kosmos—of the Poet as lover of the people, the earth, the universe. "Who troubles himself about his ornaments or fluency is lost. This is what you must do: Love the earth and sun and the animals, despise riches, give alms to everyone who asks, stand up for the stupid and crazy, devote your income and labor to others, hate tyrants, argue not concerning God, have patience and indulgence toward the people, take off your hat to nothing known or unknown or to any man or number of men, go freely with powerful uneducated persons and with the young and with the mothers of families . . . re-examine all you have been told at school or church or in any book, dismiss whatever insults your soul, and your very flesh shall be a great poem." I've put it this way, with help from Aquinas and Hemingway, that we must trust the authority of our senses. Therein lies an ethic, a connection to the Creator, by freeing ourselves of the maxims and injunctions other people have put into us from childhood.

Let's pursue the point further. When you speak of the Personality of the poet, you also remind me of something Milton wrote: "Books are not ab-

solutely dead things, but do contain a potency of life in them to be as active as that soul whose progeny they are; nay, they do preserve as in a vial the purest efficacy and extraction of that living intellect that bred them." Yet I don't know if you can imagine the response that your faith in the dissenting soul, in the artist's—this Literatus'—unchained imagination, would receive in my time.

WHITMAN

In that regard, not much has changed, Norman. Not yet. Our great journey, however, continues. The process so far is indirect and peculiar, and though it may be suggested, cannot be defined. Observing, rapport, and with intuition, the shows and forms presented by Nature, the sensuous luxuriance, the beautiful in living men and women, the actual play of passions, in history and in life—out of these the poet, the esthetic worker in any field projects them, their analogies, by curious removes, indirections, in Literature and art. (No useless attempt to repeat the material creation by daguerreotyping the exact likeness by mortal mental means, but through the magic of genius.) This is the image-making faculty, coping with material creation: this alone can breathe into Literature and art the breath of life, and endow it with Identity. Milton's idea that books grow out of Personality.

The true question to ask respecting any book is, *"Has it helped any human Soul?"* This is the hint not only of any great Literatus, his book, but of every great artist. The rest are the careless criticisms of a day, these endless and wordy chatterers. The highest, widest aim of Democratic Literature may well be to bring forth and strengthen this sense in individuals and society.

MAILER

Soul, soul, and yet more soul. The dissident living soul, the primary nutrient of democracy, you say! The collection of individual souls—Identities—creating a democratic aggregate, a living—it is not too much to say a spiritual—society. You somewhere called it "compound individuality."

Lawrence, by the way, saw this in you too, that your very definition of democracy was "the recognition of souls"—which soul he also called the "under-consciousness"—as we pass the other wayfarers along the open road of our actual living. Soul and body are one as we travel the common way. Democracy arises out of the *integrity* of our deepest selves, our souls. Though Lawrence feared you might confuse "merging" with "contact," los-

ing your soul's integrity as you, we, give in to the impulse to merge with all the fellow travelers, he ultimately decided you offered nonetheless "a great a new doctrine of life, the morality of actual living." A new basis for democracy as the recognition of the soul-integrity in others. Gone was the idea of the old obsessive morality—the *salvation* of the soul. The soul and flesh are held together in actual living.

It is a fine ideal, Walt, to rise out of such base materials!

WHITMAN

I too at times despair. But then another turn and hope embraces me once again. But one instance: I have stood by the bedside of a Pennsylvania soldier, who lay conscious of quick approaching death, yet perfectly calm; and with a noble, spiritual manner the veteran surgeon, turning aside, said to me that though he had witnessed many, many deaths of soldiers at Bull Run, Antietam, Fredericksburg, etc., he had not seen yet the first case of man or boy who met the approach of dissolution with cowardly qualms or terror. The doctor, the nurse, attending, but no friend or relative nearby. What have we here if not, towering above all talk and argument, the plentifully-supplied, last-needed proof of Democracy in its Personalities? So, Democracy, the leveler, is joined with another principle, equally unyielding, the principle of Individuality. Of Identity. Personality. The Literature, Songs, Esthetics of a country are of importance principally because they furnish the materials and suggestions of Personality for the women and men of that country, whether the Democracy of that country is embryonic, as is ours, or more advanced.

MAILER

So you see the single solitary soul, this individual consciousness, this Identity, as you put it, as the yet undernourished source of any democratic society. You, the poet, are the mere instigator. But there must be many instigators over time, if there is to be any, what you call, "fruition"?

WHITMAN

My work, my whole project, is but an exploration. I must do the best I can, leaving it to those who come after me to do much better. The service, if any, must be merely to break a sort of first path or track. The real gist of Democracy still sleeps, quite unawakened. Its history has yet to be enacted. Democracy is a sort of younger brother of another great and often-used

word, Nature, whose history is also unwritten. But it is also good to reduce the whole matter, as I have, to the consideration of a single self, a man, or woman, to one single solitary Soul, a full consciousness. Your Identity for you, and mine for me. Let thereby creeds, conventions fall away and become of no account before this single idea.

This is the lesson of Nature, is it not? The quality of Being, in the object's self, is according to its own central idea and purpose, and of growing therefrom—not by criticism, by any other standards and adjustments to standards. Yes, a full man wisely gathers, culls, absorbs. But if engaged disproportionately in others, he slights or overlays the precious idiosyncrasy and special nativity and intention that he is, the man's self, the main thing; he is then a failure, however general his cultivation or erudition.

And provision for a little healthy rudeness, savage virtue, justification of what one has in one's self, whatever it is, is demanded. Negative qualities, even deficiencies, would be a relief amid this more and more complex, more and more artificialized, state of society.

MAILER

A fucking little healthy rudeness is itself savage virtue. I see Lawrence as another prophet who suffered at the hands of censors, or what he called "the censor morons." I also think of him as a brother-in-arms against what you've called "Feudalism" of any kind.

Technically, of course, we've had capitalism, not feudalism, by in large since the Renaissance or thereabouts as markets began to break down the ancient order. But I think you are getting at the similarity in hierarchies and in the crass exploitations. We might have skipped the vassals of the old system and substituted capital for land, but one might argue that we have our Executive (echoing the Crown) and his oligarchs (our substitute for nobility) still exploiting the peasantry, (or labor, and all the rest of us). The same might be said of the state capitalisms of communism or fascism. So, to my mind you are talking of any devolution of the state that would crush the human spirit, that would mechanize and regiment human beings, that would break us. And break the prophets, the seers, the great Literatuses, as you call them.

Well, one's ego-strength is a bulwark against such forces. I once defined ego as the necessary reservoir of confidence sufficient to keep striving. Call it ego-endurance. Can such ego-endurance help to redirect America? Ex-

pose our social taboos and conventions for the artificial falsehoods they are? You wrote, "I believe in the flesh and the appetites. Seeing hearing, feeling are miracles . . ." Like you, Lawrence saw love (including Eros) as one of the great opponents of regimentation.

WHITMAN

Yes. Good for Mr. Lawrence. Even our lovers must be comrades. Wives, husbands, fathers, mothers: we can't stay together, feel satisfied, grow bigger, on any other basis. Love will always take care of itself; it does not need censors, monitors, guardians. It does not need the state.

[*Quoting himself sonorously*]

"Through me forbidden voices,
Voices of sexes and lusts, voices veil'd and I remove the veil,
Voices indecent by me clarified and transfigured."

MAILER

And love certainly does not need state oppression to crush whatever the state deems "obscene," any more than we need state violence to crush people's dissent or trumped up "enemies" of the state.

WHITMAN

I've always said I'd rather cause the birth of one than the death of twenty!

MAILER

A noble doctrine! [*Laughs*] So, Walt, we are agreed on this, at least: whatever crushes the integrity of the soul crushes democracy as well. [*Flips to his notes again*]

Lawrence too could see mechanization invading the province of love, of emotion, of the vital center. He knew how machinery, technology atrophies our senses; it "is the great neuter; it is the eunuch of eunuchs." He said that "we do not know what we lose by all our labor-saving appliances. Of the two evils, it would be much the lesser to lose all machinery, every bit, rather than to have, as we have, hopelessly too much." He was prophetic in foretelling how technology—like any instrument of convenience—can also become the instrument of oppression. As I've said many times, technology at a certain level of development, its most deadening manifestations stands between us and life, desensitizes us, dulls the senses. The more power the less pleasure, and the more opportunity for oppression. Anyway, you can imagine how

Lawrence—his novels, his poems, his paintings—became a danger to the state. He paid for it, especially for the taboos he confronted openly.

WHITMAN

His paintings?

MAILER

Part of his larger revolutionary project. Lawrence saw his paintings too, in his time, as a confrontation with our "terror of the sexual life," our "abhorrence of the procreative act." He wanted his visual art, as well, to counter our repression of the instinctual and intuitive life, repressed for the sake of our spiritual-mental consciousness alone. This emphasis on the optical and cerebral, Lawrence believed, had atrophied our intuitive-instinctual powers, powers that are the source of "that magic awareness we call art." Had stifled wholeness of imagination and consciousness. And our misplaced emphasis, he added, had led to our "bourgeois psychology"—a psychology enslaved by industrialism—that engendered a morality where bodily existence became evil. William Blake was the exception in Britain and America, to his mind, and Cezanne in France (if to a lesser degree than Blake). Cezanne was heroic, however, *not* for his achievement but for his *struggle*—his sacrifices, his honesty with himself, his own revolution in consciousness. So too with Lawrence.

So too with you, Walt?

WHITMAN

So with you too, Norman?

MAILER

Maybe that's for others to say. But the critics keep missing this: the significance of the author's or painter's *struggle* (his embattled evolution beyond his time, beyond his society's repressions) over the assessment only of his achievement. Or worse, the assessment only of his ideological deficiency.

WHITMAN

So Mr. Lawrence knew that the function of the writer is to shake up the latent forces in all men, shake them up into life. To get in touch with the very deepest sources of life. Tolstoy's *The Kreuzer Sonata* opened my eyes, made me feel we had a master with us, as great as any. But I was astonished

by the blatherskites who attempted to suppress it as indecent. It is incredible, it is stupid, foolish to the last degree.

But put that instance aside. I want the utmost freedom—even the utmost license—rather than any censorship; censorship is always ignorant, always bad. I've suffered enough from the censors. I'd dismiss all monitors, guardians, without any ceremony whatsoever. All this fear of indecency, all this noise about purity and sex and the social order and Comstockism in particular and general is nasty—too nasty to make any compromise with. The dirtiest book in all the world is the expurgated book. We shrink from the realities of our bodily life—something to be kept in the dark and lied about instead of being avowed and gloried in. I have heard nothing but expurgate, expurgate, expurgate from the day I started. It is damnable and vulgar. The body is the other side of the soul. But because of your Mr. Lawrence and others the time will come when the whole affair of sex—copulation and reproduction—will be treated with the respect to which it is entitled. Sex is the root of it all, the coming together of men and women.

MAILER

On that note, allow me to give you a copy of my "Bodily Function Blues."

[*As he pulls out a sheet of paper and hands it over to Whitman, Mailer sings a few bars in his imitation southern drawl.*]

"Ohhh . . . Ah can't piss
Ah can't urinate
Ah can't bleed
Ah can't even menstruate
Ah can't salivate Ah can't talk.
Ah can't elucidate Ah can't eat . . . ."

And so on. Anyway, to the point: you paid a price for that belief in sex, in the body, in your writings. So, we are talking, at bottom, about courage in the writer.

WHITMAN

With *Leaves of Grass*, a work of iconoclasm in its art and its subject matter, I believe now that "price" was an advantage, the book's stormy early life. Nothing could make up for the loss of this price—it was a priceless privilege. Ease, comfort, acceptation, would have ruined me.

MAILER

Early success damned near ruined me!

WHITMAN

But you say you fought your way back by first plumbing your own depths. That too is courage. You see, *Leaves* is ultimately a book of faith. And it all goes back to my faith in the future. Mankind is in process of being; woman's and man's justification is not in themselves today but yet to come, something ahead. And I might add that *Leaves* is essentially a woman's book: the women do not know it, but every now and then a woman shows she knows it, its cry of the right and wrong of the woman sex, of the facts of creation first of all.

MAILER

Of the wronging of women, I said in one of my books that redress is overdue. I took the subject up, in part through the lens of Lawrence's examination where Western Civilization had ended up. But I've truly been misunderstood because I challenged not women's suffrage, not whole and equal political and economic rights for women, but instead the mechanization of sex, love, orgasm, emotion, and the technologizing of the womb, of biological reproduction, and, yes, even the misandry that too often followed from those tendencies in the woman's movement in the 1970s. Then the tendentious literary criticism! The lack of fair play, of fidelity to the literary material, and that lack of understanding of the writer's life-long struggle. It all seemed to be adding up to the technological, totalitarian desexualizing of relations between the male and female. The very opposite of Lawrence, who was being censured, denounced, but who in fact saw sexual love as the salvation of men and women against the regimentations and corruptions of civilization. Artificial insemination—I'll plant my flag here—is not the perfect equal of any great fuck.

WHITMAN

But you buffooned your compunctions in public, let your demons do the talking?

MAILER

Well, some of my daughters tell me it is painful to watch me in the clips!

WHITMAN

Should you have reached out? Could it be the women were part of that revolution you yourself sought, but you misconstrued their true potential? Only combative, never collaborative? Hadn't you all wished to overturn the hierarchies, the systems you railed against?

MAILER

Well, let's say I baited them too often in public. Those who would censor men, who quoted men out of context and out of order, those who worshipped at the altar of technological solutions to ancient contentions, polarities, dualities. Those who were introducing a new kind of prudery even after all the battles had been fought, often by men, to deliver us from the long medieval night of Victorian sex, with its perversions, hypocrisies, and brothel dispensations. Those were parlous times. I leapt in. They didn't call me Stormin' Norman in those days for too little!

WHITMAN

You could be your own worst enemy. [*Laughs*]

MAILER

I have more than once gone on record to say that I don't expect people to accept all my ideas, but I want them to respond to them, challenge them, absorb them, take them a step further and make them evolve or improve on them. These are steps on a journey.

WHITMAN

Indeed, Norman. The quality shared by the greatest men—Emerson, Darwin—is not to be too damned sure about anything.

MAILER

I too have been on a journey to explore the potential sources (you call them "latent forces") for the development of the individual, the soul, the deeper conscience of full consciousness, even the chastening of brutal politics with democratic impulses and inspirations. But as you say, it's all deeper than mere politics, or than politics separated from soul and the full development of the individual, uncrushed by society. One of the great difficulties is knowing whether one's conscience is operating for the good, or to put it in other terms, for God or the Devil.

WHITMAN

Let me address two points you raise before we talk of Gods and Devils. First, yes, one's egotism carries one a great way toward enduring.

MAILER

Ah, one's egotism. Yes, but there's a dangerous line to walk—one might remain strong, one might be brilliant, but there's that self-defeating bluster, those worst impulses flashing forth like one's Mr. Hyde, that one might do better to watch for. But I've always wondered why egotism everywhere—in politicians, in Wall Street operators, in CEOs, in generals, in celebrities, in academics, and so on—is tolerated or even expected. But let the writer reveal egotism and he or she somehow becomes a subhuman fraud.

WHITMAN

Like you, I had to adjust myself to the negative condition, to opposition, denunciation, suspicion.

Second point: have you read my poem "The Sleepers"? Find there my own sense of something below mere consciousness, below our waking state—

MAILER

I know the poem, yes. Something there you offer as sub-consciousness as a condition of being too.

WHITMAN

[*Holds up his hand to finish his points.*]

But let me say that I am aware that our Conscience, or the idea of Conscience, of intense moral right, and in its name and strained construction, the worst fanaticisms, wars, persecutions, murders and so on have yet, in all lands, been broached, and have come to their devilish fruition. One corrective should be that in response, side by side, with the unflagging stimulation of the elements of Religion and Conscience must henceforth move with equal sway, Science, absolute reason, and the general proportionate development of the whole man. These scientific facts, deductions, are divine too—precious counted parts of moral civilization, and, with physical health, indispensable to it, to prevent fanaticism. For abstract religion is easily led astray.

MAILER

Or any abstract idealism. And I've said the same myself about Fundamentalisms.

WHITMAN

And as I say, in the Prophetic Literature of these United States, Nature, not abstraction, but the true idea of Nature, long absent, must, above all, become fully restored, enlarged, and must furnish the pervading atmosphere to poems and the test of all high literary and esthetic compositions. I do not mean the smooth walks, trimmed hedges, butterflies, poesies, and nightingales of the English poets, but the whole Orb, with its geologic history, the cosmos, carrying fire and snow, that rolls through the illimitable areas. And that mankind comprehending these, has, in towering super-addition, the Moral and Spiritual Consciences, indicating his destination beyond the ostensible, the mortal.

And think, moreover, that Democracy, biding its time, ponders its own ideals, not of Literature and Art only—not of men only, but of women. The idea of the women. The idea of the women of America (extricated from this daze, this fossil and unhealthy air which hangs over the word Lady), developed, raised to become the robust equals, workers, and, it may be, even practical and political deciders with men—greater than man, we may admit, through their divine maternity, always their towering, emblematical attribute—but great, at any rate as man, in all departments, as George Eliot and George Sand have demonstrated in the arts. Or, rather, capable of being so, soon as they realize it.

I can think of many examples, but I will offer but one here—of a woman, who, from taste and necessity, has gone into practical affairs, carries on a mechanical business, partly works at it herself, dashes out more and more into real hardy life, is not abashed by the coarseness of the contact, knows how to be firm and silent at the same time, holds her own with unvarying coolness and decorum, and will compare, any day, with superior carpenters, farmers, and even boatmen and drivers. For all that, she has not lost the charm of the womanly nature, but preserves and bears it fully, though through such rugged presentation.

So you see, what I have called that Individuality—broad enough to every farmer and mechanic—to the female equally to the male—that towering

Selfhood is the Personality of mortal life possessing, nonetheless, ideas of the Infinite, the Spiritual.

MAILER

Well then, Walt, you place your hopes in a certain species of true democracy, or to be more exact, democratic republic. It is a faith I'm not ready to accede to. Not entirely yet. Though of course theology can be political. Jesus was political, come to that. So, your democracy is of your "Individual" and the aggregation of individuals, all right, but of the individual soul, a great democratic current of souls carrying a welter of science, of fact, and of a true democracy's restraint of capital, of the raw, even predatory, impulses of human greed and unchecked capital. As if democracy were a great riverine ecosystem with all these elements in the current. A current that liberates the individual for growth (of full consciousness, of spiritual and aesthetic growth). And it is organic, to continue our riverine metaphor, neither deterministic, nor materialistic. More like a living system of both spiritual and material reality guiding the individual (who can be both anarchic and communitarian) and the state. Will you be charged with putting your faith in the never-was, the never-will be, the nowhere of Utopianism?

WHITMAN

Has any promulgated Utopia ever contained all that you just described, Norman?

MAILER

But you place extraordinary faith in the potential of human beings to transcend ancient follies, the ancient idiocies of history, and the monstrosities of modern history, including humanity's –what shall we call it?—*aboriginal need* for the "Leader" (political, religious, or whatever) to tell us how to live, what to believe and do. The other side of that human duality.

WHITMAN

Say, rather, that my dream of democracy evolving to the level I've described is both an advance of the *potential* within humanity and a check on humanity's more mephitic impulses. The potential I've propounded, its many elements, its People and Personality, I do argue, exists. Can we, will we, evolve together, as it were, our governing system and ourselves to a new level, at least as new as the opportunity given us by our own Revolution, or

I should say by the first phase of our Democratic Revolution. That Revolution also grows and evolves, corrects its substantial errors, or it can. Our living Revolution is not determined to evolve or to devolve. There will be backslidings, disastrous defeats, but there will be advances, victories as well. And victories born of defeats. And we have wisdom to guide us. So long as we consult that wisdom, and so long as we don't abrogate our Free Will.

MAILER

So long as our all-too-human tendency to abrogate free will to oppressive systems or ideologies does not turn out to be so deeply embedded in humanity that any democratic evolution of your description is impossible—either impossible to stabilize or crushed before it can take wing and rise off the ground.

WHITMAN

Listen, there are in me as much as anyone wild growths of poison flowers, and passions of villainy, that must be fought, in defense of virtue. But as to that outcome—the abrogation of Free Will to oppressive systems—only history, or rather Time, will judge. You and I cannot know it, mired as we are, or were, in my time or in yours. The cosmos evolves and wheels on its way. Within that larger Being we all, who live within it, will ultimately choose life or death.

MAILER

God help us, Walt!

WHITMAN

Indeed, Norman. God help us!