

MEETING MAILER

K E R M I T M O Y E R

IN THE FALL OF 1971, WHEN I WAS A NEW ASSISTANT PROFESSOR at American University in Washington, DC, I taught a somewhat experimental course of my own design called “The Self as Paradigm” that focused on Norman Mailer and Robert Lowell, arguably the preeminent living American prose writer and poet at the time. In October of that year, I wrote to Mailer, mentioning the course and asking if he would be interested in coming to AU to talk about his film, *Maidstone*. The problem was, I told him, that finding money for this kind of project had become a bit like finding loose change in a skid-row payphone. Although I was sure his usual fee would be way beyond our means, I asked him to let me know if he would consider such a speaking engagement and, if so, exactly how high the financial hurdles would be. A few days later, I got the following thoughtful reply:

Dear Mr. Moyer:

Just a line to thank you for your letter and to tell you I better refuse your honest and agreeable invitation. I usually go on the road to talk only when I’m temporarily broke and need to eke out some income to pay for my damn films. Out of town appearances usually play hell with your momentum in a piece of work and so when I’m writing I tend to stay in one place. For now, I whisper it, I have ideas of starting a book this fall. Perhaps we’ll meet another year. I think I might look forward to that.

Yours sincerely, Norman Mailer

As it turned out, Mailer changed his mind, and we met a few months later in February of 1972 when he came to Washington, DC, to speak at both American University and Georgetown University. The evening of his appearance at AU, I and my future wife and another faculty member met him for

dinner at a somewhat tony Georgetown restaurant. When we arrived, we could see, way back in the depths of the restaurant, the blue-gray halo of Mailer's hair. As we approached, he stood and introduced his pretty dark-haired young traveling companion, Suzanne Nye, and another young couple who were Washington acquaintances of his, so there were seven of us at the table. I was surprised to see that he was wearing blue jeans and a denim jacket—he said that he had dressed down on purpose because Washington was such a snobby city; it was just a small way of rebelling against the dress code, but it probably accounted for why we were seated so far back in the restaurant.

That afternoon at Georgetown University, Mailer had debated Barbette Blackington, a feminist sociologist, so he was a bit tired and he was also coming down with a cold. When I asked how he thought the debate had gone, he said, "They haven't got anyone to put up against me except maybe Germaine or Gloria" (referring to Germaine Greer and Gloria Steinem). He said that the protagonist of his film *Maidstone*, Norman T. Kingsley (played by Mailer himself) "invites destruction by taunting women the way he does."

The dinner conversation inevitably turned to American literature. I had written my doctoral dissertation on F. Scott Fitzgerald and I had noticed that the first paragraph of Mailer's *An American Dream* made reference to Fitzgerald's story, "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz." He said that the inclusion of such references was akin to melodic allusions to other songs in a piece of music. I told him that in some ways *An American Dream*, which was my favorite of his novels, reminded me of *Tender Is the Night*. Steven Rojack could be seen as a sort of latter-day Dick Diver. He said yes, but that his novel departed from its sort of Dick Diver beginnings, and that he was aiming to write the book Fitzgerald was *trying* to write. While he admired Fitzgerald's work, he didn't seem to think much of Fitzgerald's intellectual acumen. When I told him that *Tender Is the Night* had been influenced by Fitzgerald's reading of Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West*, Mailer was very interested, as well as surprised. He said *The Decline of the West* was probably the deepest book Fitzgerald had ever read. Mailer, it turned out, had carried a four-volume set of Spengler's *Decline* all the way through the Phillipines in his duffel bag when he was in the Army and it had undoubtedly influenced the historical perspective of *The Naked and the Dead*. I told him that he, Mailer, seemed to me more like Fitzgerald than Hemingway in that Mailer's work, like Fitzgerald's, seemed to have gotten better as he got

older, whereas Hemingway's powers seemed to me to have declined. He said that between Fitzgerald and Hemingway, he felt that Hemingway had had a harder life. Fitzgerald, he said, might have been afraid of losing his talent, his wife, etc., but Hemingway was afraid all the time—of not winning.

Throughout dinner, I was struck by the way Mailer tried to draw everyone into the conversation. He also asked me to call Barbettes Blackington from the restaurant to invite her to the post-lecture party at my apartment. When I did, although she couldn't come, she was full of praise for Mailer's treatment of her during the debate, exclaiming over his generosity and kindness.

After dinner, we drove to campus, where I introduced Mailer as "the most important American writer to emerge in the last twenty-five years" and said that he had been able to interpret contemporary American life with such acuity and penetration because somehow he had managed to locate within himself the contradictions of his time. His journalism was therefore as introspective, and as metaphoric, as another man's poetry. Mailer began by talking about his lecture tour in the South, calling himself a carpetbagger, and he got a few laughs at the outset. He also talked about the lousy architecture of the university and the neo-Classical style of so much of the city and commented that "one of these days, the Libbies will tear down the Washington Monument as a symbol of male arrogance. They'll say people are hungry, why spend money to keep the thing up?" But the audience wasn't as responsive as he needed it to be, so he read some of his poems, and then came back to politics again.

Afterwards, on the way to my apartment for the party, he was apologetic about his performance. His effort to provoke something interesting by baiting the audience into some kind of confrontation or argument hadn't really worked. He'd just been too tired, he said, and young audiences wanted primarily to be entertained. But he was hopeful even if disappointed. He said, "Well, maybe tomorrow, or the day after, a couple of things I said will come back to them and have an effect."

At the party at my apartment, Mailer sat on the couch, tired and hemmed-in by students firing questions that he invariably answered with grace and good humor. When we left, Mailer said goodbye to everyone he had met, calling each person by name. Amazingly enough, he also wrote me a check for \$50 to help cover the cost of liquor for the party, the only time in my life a visiting writer has ever done that! On the way to the motel, we

talked about the way Heisenberg's Principle of Uncertainty posited that the investigation of a thing changed the thing being investigated, thus making the mystery of the universe a locked box, accessible only to intuition.

Afterwards, a miscellany of images stayed with me: The furry blue hooded coat that he wore throughout the party because he had a chill. The way he would speak with two fingers of his left hand touching the square of his jaw, elbow pointed out. A nearly constant look of expectation on his face—lips pursed, head back, looking for the reaction to what he was saying. The stage-Irish brogue he would slip in and out of. His refusal to drink out of plastic and his way of mixing a drink, which was to hold a glass of water in one hand and glass of straight bourbon in the other. He seemed to me extremely vulnerable, perhaps because he was so tired yet so generous with himself and so open, which made me feel strangely protective.

At the party when I asked what sort of music he liked, he said, "How about some Sonny Stitt or Sonny Rollins." I said I had some Miles Davis, and he said no, he heard Miles all the time—and then he said something that seemed to sum up his whole attitude in an instant: "Play something I haven't heard," he said. "*You* pick something. Surprise me."