ERNEST AND NORMAN:

A DIALOGUE IN TWO ACTS

ROBERT J. BEGIEBING

Prelude

Out of murky fog a figure emerges, searching, as if for some clue to where he is or how he has come to be here. We hear Miles Davis playing "So What?" As light gradually increases on the wandering figure, we begin to discern someone who looks not unlike Norman Mailer at about age 50. He keeps turning slowly, looking into the surrounding obscurity. Shortly, another figure barely emerges in the near distance.

Mailer: Whatever thing you are, guide me. Tell me where I am.
Shade: Though I once was a man, I'm now a soul among souls.
Mailer: [*Squinting, putting on his glasses, as the shade emerges more clearly*] That fountain of pure speech? How I poured out an apprenticeship on your lines.

The figure of Ernest Hemingway has fully revealed itself by now: a man in his forties, hale, in his prime.

Mailer: What beasts have followed me here? I hear and smell their breathing wherever I turn.
Hemingway: Don't fear these beasts. We cannot slay them. Follow me, instead. I'll lead you to the eternal place, so long the object of your speculations. And to your rest. This way.
Mailer: My rest?

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A Greyhound emerges and leads the men off into the fog, Mailer some five paces behind Hemingway.

ACT I

The men approach a wide river. The Greyhound sits down between two lawn chairs turned sideways to partially face one another. We notice now that both men are wearing bathing suits, overhanging khaki safari shirts, and sandals.

Mailer: What river is this?
Hemingway: The river all must travel. Await the boatman. [*Gestures*] Sit here. You've wanted to talk?
Mailer: I did my part. [*The men seat themselves on opposing chairs*]. I sent my book. And Plimpton tried to arrange a meeting.
Hemingway: We'll have plenty of time. [*Reaching out to shake Mailer's hand*]. Just to be clear, I didn't receive it. That *Deer Park* you sent. Read it later.
Mailer: I wanted to live within your discipline. Cultivate one's manhood. I was desperate for good words of the book, during a time when my nerve was failing me, and I was coming out of a five-year depression.
Hemingway: Because finally after all these years I am deeply curious to know what you think of this.
Mailer: You remember my note?
Hemingway: One eventually remembers everything. You published it, after all, in *Advertisements for Myself*.
Mailer: But if you do not answer, or if you answer with the kind of crap you use to answer unprofessional writers, sycophants, brown-nosers, etc., then fuck you, and I will never attempt to communicate with you again.
Hemingway: [*Laughs*] Your own worst enemy.
Mailer: I was young, unformed. Confused by failure and self-doubt after stupendous success. I liked the novel and didn't like it. Feared I had somehow missed the boat with it. I had to find my courage, physical and mental courage, as I had as a rifleman in the Army. And I had to find my way past my intellectual barriers through the doors of my unconscious.
Hemingway: SOP. Mary sent everything back, unopened, unless it came by way of a trusted friend. Three worst enemies of getting serious work done: the telephone, visitors, and those packages out of nowhere. Learned that lesson in the Key West years.

Mailer: You knew of me?
Hemingway: Everyone did. *Naked and the Dead.* Selling like Daiquiris in hell!
Mailer: I was famous too soon. You read it?
Hemingway: Didn't much care for it.
Mailer: You don't like war stories?
Hemingway: I thought you faked a lot of it. Probably hadn't seen much combat. War, when you've really seen it, is the best subject because it groups the maximum of material and speeds up the action and brings out all sorts of stuff that normally you have to wait a lifetime to get.
Mailer: I was in a platoon in the Pacific theater. I don't have to tell you combat is not just fire fights tallied. Combat is patrols in hostile territory, day after day. Sweat, monsoons, disease, fear, festering corpses, boredom, taking and returning fire from time to time. Hard labor, miles of it, uphill and down, and mucking through rice paddies. Fatigue, danger, despair. I had more direct experience of combat before *Naked* than you before *A Farewell to Arms.*
Hemingway: Couldn't tell from your book.
Mailer: Read "The Dead Gook." It's all in there.
Hemingway: Send me a copy.
Mailer: Fuck you.
Hemingway: And the pastiche put me off. Dos, Farrell, Dreiser. The whole crowd.
Mailer: So why not tell me? Maybe I'd have learned something.
Hemingway: You're riding high. *Wunderkind* and all that crap, but still learning your craft. Why should I be the nay-sayer? They'll destroy a good writer soon enough, without me. A writer has to be as tight about money as a hog's ass in fly time. It's only by hazard that he makes money. *Si Dos y la Puta Hostia quieren.* Then a writer increases his standard of living and he is caught. He has to write to keep up his establishments, his wives, and so on, and he writes slop. Slop not on purpose but because it is hurried, or because there is no water in the well, or because he is ambitious. Then, once you have betrayed yourself, you justify it and you get more slop.

Or else you read the critics. Criticism is shit. These people paid to have attitudes toward things, the camp followers and eunuchs of literature. These veal brains hang attributes on you that when they don't find said attributes

in your work accuse you of sailing under false colors. Look at the condescending phony intellectuality passing as criticism in the *New Yorker*. Most critics are so anxious to fit the new orthodoxies that they are obsessed with their own schisms. The good ones, the ones writers can learn from like Berenson or Ivan Kashkeen, my Russian translator, are all too rare.

Mailer: I always thought the critic had a moral requirement: he owes it to his audience and to the book to separate the book's ideas from his own.

Hemingway: But you read most criticism of your work and you learn nothing, only that they have a thesis to grind or that soon there will be no writers, only critics. I like the slogan in Madrid during the fascist bombing and shelling: "Respect anything you do not understand. It may be a work of art." Anyway, if you believe the critics when they say you are great then you must believe them when they say you are rotten, and you lose confidence.

Mailer: So you were doing me a favor.

Hemingway: Look, I never spoke publicly about my opinion of the novel. All that would do is piss you off. You're pissed now. Same goes for *Deer Park*, once I read it. You really blew the whistle on yourself there.

Mailer: Still, I must have done something in *The Deer Park* to get that many people upset—all through the tragicomedy of trying to get it published and later as displayed by many of the reviewers. Don't tell me you never spoke your opinion to anyone.

Hemingway: Friends only and off the record. And later that one letter to you.

Mailer: Then why'd you tell your son Gregory I was probably the best postwar writer?

Hemingway: My opinion altered and you continued to write.

Mailer: I liked Gregory. Met him through his third wife Valerie, who knew my fourth wife Beverly Bentley from their time together running with your crowd in Spain that "dangerous summer" of 'fifty-nine. I wrote the Preface to Gregory's memoir of living with you and was astonished to see you'd said I was the best of the lot, and then you added: "He's a psycho, but the psycho part is the most interesting thing about him."

Hemingway: [*Using a phony British accent*] Spot on there, Old Boy!

Mailer: If you weren't psycho by then you weren't paying attention.

Hemingway: I rest my case. *Advertisements for Myself* caught my attention first: that ragtag assembly of your rewrites, second thoughts, and ramblings shot through with occasional brilliance. You wrote too much and you talked

too much, even on paper. You didn't realize when your stuff smelled of the lamp. Anyway, look Norman, it doesn't matter anymore.
Mailer: It always matters. Posterity matters. No one believes that more than you.
Hemingway: Nobody cares what I *thought*.
Mailer: Feeling sorry for yourself.
Hemingway: Sorry for all of us.
Mailer: Not around to defend yourself.
Hemingway: You shouldn't have to defend yourself, even when you're still around. You don't have to smile and take it up the ass. But writing to the *Times*, correcting some obscure academic with an axe to grind, answering snotty letters: that's a chump's game. Better to keep the little pricks beneath your notice.

What you write is not immediately discernable, and that, as I said in my note to Sweden, is sometimes fortunate. You'll either endure or be forgotten by what is finally discerned about your work and the degree of alchemy you possess. If you grow in public stature when alive, your work deteriorates. Yet all you have is your lonely work facing eternity, or the lack of it, each day.
Mailer: Took me some time to figure that out. After *Advertisements for Myself* when I'd gotten a few things off my chest. I pretty much started over.
Hemingway: Took me some time too.
Mailer: Where you think I learned to make my life good copy? You started advertisements for yourself all the way back to your Pamplona stories for the *Toronto Star Weekly*. You were the grand master. You worked to make your personality enrich and sell your books, and I took a page out of your book.
Hemingway: Not if it's fool's copy.
Mailer: Even Holy Fools?
Hemingway: You're shitting yourself again. You think you're exploiting the press but they're exploiting you as much or more. You have to hold your purity of line through maximum of exposure. [*Pauses*]. Look, Norman, you had a couple of good books. That's enough for anyone. Scott had one. No one had more talent or wasted it more. Scott's the great tragedy of talent in our bloody generation. Only Faulkner could come close in sheer talent, and nobody could write half whore and half straight like wild Bill.

But you're not in competition with your contemporaries; you are competing with the clock, which keeps ticking. Forget success when you are alive: that's my advice to writers. Go for success after you're dead.

Mailer: You didn't try to pump your reputation after the first war?

Hemingway: Before I became a serious writer I did what any kid home from the front might do. And I paid for it. But later I took much effort with Scribner's and the movie people to put the focus on the writing and off my personal life or any phony hero they wanted to make me. I told them I was no football hero, and was only a minor camp follower attached to the Italian infantry whose Italian decorations were only because I was an American attached to their army. And that any sane person knows that writers do not knock down middleweight champs, unless the writer's name is Gene Tunney. I specifically told the boys not to build me into a glamorous personality like Floyd Gibbons or Tom Mix's horse Tony. But as I went on to lead my private life with my own private adventures, the boys wouldn't leave me alone and kept up the bullshit. Your legend grows like barnacles on the bottom of a ship—and is less useful. If a book is any good they won't forget you. If it isn't, why should you want people to remember you for your extracurricular activities? You just have to go ahead and write the fucking books, burning the lamp less, discovering life more.

Mailer: So you think I wrote a couple of good books?

Hemingway: Sure.

Mailer: You're not saying.

Hemingway: I never went in for explaining myself. I go in for it even less now.

Mailer: [*looking around*] Where the Hell are we? Somewhere between *The Inferno* and the *Book of the Dead*?

Hemingway: Close enough.

Mailer: You're not going to tell me anything. No warnings.

Hemingway: An existentialist's dream. [*He stares at the river, as if expecting something*]. You'll learn.

Mailer: Someone coming?

Hemingway: May be a long wait.

A tall slim woman in a long, black close-fitting dress appears, carrying a bottle of Black and White Scotch and two glasses. Behind her, his head about the height of her tempting rump, an ape-like figure, a simian

gargoyle, carries a small plastic folding table. She holds the liquor bottle and two glasses up between Hemingway and Mailer while the gargoyle shoos away the Greyhound, snaps open the little table, and sets it up directly between the men. The woman places the bottle and glasses on the plastic table. Then they turn and disappear.

Mailer: You fucking her?
Hemingway: That's over. Get used to it. No more Mr. Scrooby.
Mailer: No Don Juan in Hell?
Hemingway: You had your chances.
Mailer: Ah, your Beatrice.
Hemingway: I always betrayed my Beatrice.
Mailer: Join the club. [Laughs]. You loved pussy too much.
Hemingway: Coming from you that's absurd. Anyway, you're about to find many who loved pussy too much.
Mailer: No women who loved cock too much?
Hemingway: You don't think the numbers are disproportionate?
Mailer: Not in my experience.
Hemingway: You and Sinatra.

Hemingway picks the bottle of Scotch off the table and pours them both a double shot. From his shirt pocket he pulls two Cuban cigars, hands one to Mailer, and then lights his own with a long match and offers the flame to Mailer. Mailer refuses the light, but sticks the cheroot in his mouth as if testing the feel of it. The two men sit and sip appreciatively, Hemingway puffing.

Hemingway: [*Holding up his glass and turning it slowly*] I've drunk since I was fifteen and few things have given me more pleasure. When you've worked hard all day with your head and know you must work again the next day what else can change your ideas and make them run on a different plane than whiskey? Or what better way to make boring people bearable.
Mailer: We're all rummies at heart. And we're all prison mates.
Hemingway: Modern life, too, is often a mechanical oppression and liquor is the only mechanized relief.
Mailer: Or one drug or another.
Hemingway: I didn't take other drugs.

Mailer: [*Holding his glass up to Hemingway*] Booze is best. [*Sips appreciatively*]. You know, when your life's over you can't help looking back on it, just as you can't help wondering what's next. [*Pauses*] Who weighs my heart against the feather of truth?
Hemingway: No one. You'll weigh your own heart soon enough.

More silence and sipping. More Hemingway puffing.

Mailer: Maybe ignoring me you did me a favor, Ernest. [*Blows a contemplative imaginary smoke ring*]. But I spoke well of you, mostly.
Hemingway: When you were in the mood. [*Quoting in a mock-Mailer voice*] "Hemingway's suicide left Mailer wedded to horror. . . . the death would put a secret cheer into every bureaucrat's heart for they would be stronger now. . . . Hemingway constituted the walls of the fort; Hemingway had given the power to believe you could still shout down the corridor of the hospital, live next to the breath of the beast, accept your portion of dread each day. Now the greatest living romantic was dead. Dread was loose. The giant had not paid his dues and something awful was in the air."
Mailer: John Gardner once remarked that a father who commits suicide condemns his son to dread, to suicidal dreams and desires. There's your father, your brother Leicester, son Gregory—
Hemingway: What made it worse was my father was the one I cared about. He caused me to suffer the Black Ass but I gained more tolerance. By my fortieth birthday I had argued myself out of it so often I understood why he did it. I've always said it's a bad example for the children. But you wasted too much juice on theories like that. Norman The Grand Speculator.
Mailer: That *was* my juice.
Hemingway: I never liked to repeat myself.
Mailer: Gregory saw your suicide as an act of courage, but he had to live with it the rest of his life till he took his own.
Hemingway: Gregory! Gig was the son I had the most difficulty with.
Mailer: As I had with my son Stephen. Stephen, who was all soft smiles and chuckles and fun as an infant!
Hemingway: Only wrote me when he was in trouble, like when his wife left him. I never worried how Bumby or Patrick would turn out. But Gig I had to worry about. Part of it was loss of control over him, the youngest, after the divorce with Pauline. Gig had the biggest dark side in the family except for

me, and he kept it so concealed you thought maybe it would back up on him. He was a champion at just about anything he tried—shooting, riding, playing by himself or competing with others. Great shooter from the age of nine. A cold athlete without nerves, a real Indian boy (Northern Cheyenne) with the talents and the defects. As with the others, I tried to teach him everything I knew. Nonetheless, we all have to figure out how to live our own lives and die our own deaths.

Mailer: I had to admire your life-long struggle with your own cowardice and against your secret lust to suicide, spending your nights wrestling with the gods. You carried a weight of anxiety day to day that would have suffocated a lesser man. You were brave by an act of will, not by a grace of nature. Perhaps you and Marilyn Monroe had that in common.

Hemingway: Don't confuse your own imagination with others. A writer makes something from invention that is not a representation but a whole new thing truer than anything true and alive, and you make it alive, and if you make it well enough, you give it immortality.

Mailer: But every writer has to find for himself what makes it work. Sometimes speculations and obsessions germinate the good work.

Hemingway: Better to keep most of it to yourself, then. The better the writers the less they will speak—and write—about what they are thinking, have written, or plan to write. Joyce was a very great writer and he would explain what he was doing only to jerks. Other writers that he respected were supposed to be able to know what he was doing by reading it.

Mailer: I admitted your generation of writers is much more impressive than my own. But where is the great work one of you might have pulled off after the war, in the fifties, I mean? All your best is before. And you ended like so many of the Americans proselytizing for the American Century. You ended with windy writing.

Hemingway: *The Old Man and the Sea*?

Mailer: At the time I thought the prose was affected and too much Hemingway the Fisherman rather than the Cuban fisherman. Your writing grew more narcissistic from *To Have and Have Not* onwards, violating the hermetic logic of your characters.

Hemingway: You should talk! Me a narcissistic writer who imposes himself on his characters? Physician, heal thyself! Listen, that was the prose I had been working for all my life, prose that should read easily and simply and seem short and yet have all the dimensions of the visible world and the world

of man's spirit. But it's not for you to assess your own success or lack of it truly at the end of your life. Time will take care of that.

As for your generation, Algren might have been the best, finally. It seemed nobody wanted to serve an apprenticeship and learn their trade anymore—the immutable laws of prose writing—and all you Brooklyn Tolstoys wanted to be champion without ever having a fight.

Mailer: Not like you to be glib, Ernest, and show your ignorance. I'd probably written a million words before my first novel was published, worked at it like a galley slave.

Hemingway: News to me. Look, Norman, we've had many skilled now dead writers in America. Many with rhetoric who find in others something to write about, but without sufficient experience of their own. Melville was the exception because he had rhetoric and experience, but is praised falsely for his rhetoric. And other deads who wrote like English colonials and men of letters—Emerson, Hawthorne, Whittier and company. Our classic writers did not know a new classic bears no resemblance to preceding classics. You can steal from a classic but not derive from or resemble a classic. But too many of these respectable gentlemen wrote as if they didn't have bodies. Nor the language people speak. Our best were Twain and Crane.

Mailer: I used to think *An American Dream* was the first novel since *The Sun Also Rises* with anything new in it.

Hemingway: We were both sweating it out. Still, no one should write merely to save his soul, or to make money, or to receive praise, or to blame or attack others. And what difference does it make if you live in a picturesque little outhouse surrounded by 300 feeble-minded goats and your faithful black dog. The question is: Can you write? But, yes, no one in your generation, whatever their gifts, produced the truly great work either.

Mailer: Maybe it was way too late for that—even then. You were awfully hard on your fellow writers though, petty and vindictive. By the way, I saw Scott on the way in. He tells me his dong's longer than yours. Jesus, Ernest, in the end you were afraid even to grant most of them their successes. It got to be unseemly, unworthy of you.

Hemingway: You talk like an innocent! Are you shitting me or yourself now? My old friend Philip Percival said it: "We have very primitive emotions. It's impossible not to be competitive. Spoils everything though."

Just don't start feeling sorry for yourself, or about how you wrote and lived. Too damned late for that. And you can never control what other people think of you. Dear Old Lillian Ross. She said it so I didn't have to. Some people didn't like the way I talked, didn't like my freedom, my joshing, my wasting time at boxing matches, talking to friends, celebrating with champagne and caviar completion of a book. They just didn't like Hemingway. Wanted me to be somebody else—probably themselves.

Mailer: [*Laughs*] Instead, maybe in the fifties you should have been President. I nominated you.

Hemingway: I read about it. Lot of good that would have done.

Mailer: Who knows? History takes an interesting turn. That was '56 on the Democratic ticket, against Eisenhower. No one else had a shot. You had the charm before Kennedy. By *then* you had the virtue of an interesting war record, a man of more physical courage than most. You were inclined to speak simply and freshly, opposed to the turgidities of the Kefauvers and Stevensons.

Hemingway: True, I could never have voted for any of those guys, especially with Nixon and his record waiting in the wings for Ike to die, which was looking likely by then. I'd have needed another Eugene Debs, an honest man and in jail, who I once voted for. The only one.

Mailer: You had one fine additional asset: no taint of a previous political life.

Hemingway: Another fool's errand. A writer is a Gypsy, owing no allegiance to any government, and a good writer never likes the government he lives under. His hand should always be against it and its hand will always be against him. The minute you know any bureaucracy well enough you will hate it because the minute it passes a certain size it is unjust. That's why a true work of art endures forever, no matter what its politics. All I care for is liberty. First I have to take care of myself and my work; then I care for my family; then I would help my neighbor.

Mailer: So you're an anarchist! Well, they called me a fool running for President in my own mind and running for Mayor of New York for real. But like the writing style you formed after the First World War, timing was everything. After the second war, the time was right for a Hemingway presidency. I think you might have beaten old Ike for that second term.

Hemingway: Timing is a thing you don't plan. You write the way you can to capture best the sense of being alive you are after and if the time is right for what you are doing then you get lucky.

Mailer: That's what happened to me with *Naked*, telling some of the hard

truths about being a soldier, being in the Army, the enigmas of leadership, some of the frightening reaches of men's souls. Jim Jones got the same luck, and did it even better than I did because he had a less-educated raw power to his structures and his prose.

Hemingway: Jones was a whiner and a fuckup. A sneering permanent KP boy.

Mailer: You were much too unfair to him. Jones had great charm and tremendous animal magnetism—a most peculiar mixture of Warden and Prewitt, very complex, noisy, crude, affectionate, amazing in his naiveté and his shrewdness and insight. Loved life instinctively. Very exciting to be around. But all that's another story.

Hemingway: *Sic transit hijo de puta*

Mailer: Point is, if you came along with the style you forged earlier in, say, the 1970s or '80s you wouldn't have had the impact you did. Moods changed, history changed, and technology had profoundly altered people's senses and acuities. When you did come along you moved people profoundly, and a writer could still affect things in the world, alter consciousness maybe, if he was that good. Just after the Second World War, or maybe even just before, time ran out for writers who wanted to be major figures, wanted to alter consciousness.

Hemingway: That might be too ambitious in any time. But as I've said before, my style wasn't so much a calculated effort to change consciousness as it was to try to make something that had not heretofore been made, not a "style" at all, which is a term for amateurs. But my awkwardness in making a new thing is what others call my style.

Trying for a fourth or fifth dimension to prose, seeing how far you could take it, is the hardest writing, harder than poetry. Prose that has never been written, but without tricks or cheating. Writing well is the hardest thing to do, but makes you happier than anything else when you are doing it. Of course, you are likely to fail. But you must have a conception of what it can be and an absolute conscience to prevent faking. Then you must be intelligent and disinterested and above all survive, because time is so short to get the work done.

So I did have the ambition to try to write something of permanent value. Also, I believed it very important for the language to restore its life that they bleed out of it. Those writers who do not last are always more beloved since

no one has seen them in their long, dull, unrelenting no-quarter-given-and-no-quarter-received fights you make to do something as you believe it should be done before you die.

Mailer: Your books did alter both the style of others and the sense of mood in your time. When you do that, you test the conscience of a people as well. When at your best, that is.

Hemingway: Tolstoy, Stendhal, Dostoevsky: writers are forged in injustice as a sword is forged. And the forging is a necessary shock to cut the flow of words and give them a sense of proportion. No unit larger than a village can function justly. Large organizations and countries are badly managed and run by human beings. I care nothing for the state. I'll offer a generalization, which I always hated to do, but at no cost now. A writer without a sense of justice and injustice would be better off editing the Year Book of a school for exceptional children than writing novels. All great writers have that radar.

Mailer: That built-in, shockproof shit detector.

Hemingway: You see, generalizations are easy if they are sufficiently obvious.

Mailer: Which is different from a political writer, unless he sees politics not as politics but as a part of everything else in life. I wrote because I wanted the bastards to itch. I was saying "I hope I make you uncomfortable to death."

Hemingway: Injustice is the normal state of life. But none of what we are talking about is a writer's "style."

Mailer: I never tried to diminish your gifts but I always thought you made a virtue of a weakness—what good writer does not?—when you wrote in a way that suggested you were incapable of writing a long complex sentence with a lot of architecture in the syntax. So your short declarative sentences and your long run-on sentences with a lot of conjunctions suggested your natural strength, even as Faulkner's sentences suggested his incapacity for writing simply.

Hemingway: Once you finally discover your strength you use it to make something of value beyond the moment.

Mailer: I always thought that you and Fitzgerald created experiences through your books. The sensuous evocation of things. Much closer to poetry in effect on the reader. You come away with a new experience in your gut that you remember, as if it were a part of your own life. Rather than a sense of an intellectual or philosophical adventure or experience.

Hemingway: Scott, for all his flaws, was important to me early on when I was learning to write that first novel.

Mailer: You treated Scott badly, but you were both important imaginative figures in my life when I was young. Wolfe too, for the same reason, but with his own completely different approach to laying out language on the page.
Hemingway: What people felt about our writing back then, well, let's say that's byproduct, the byproduct of what you try to do with your talent, as you forge your talent into something new and, if you get lucky, something that will last. If it lasts, it is because, yes, like all good books you've created an experience the reader feels happened to him and now belongs to him.
Mailer: I think it's also part of forging your identity, not just as a writer but as a man, as a human being.
Hemingway: If you are a real writer your identity is in everything you do as that writer. The man and the writing keep changing one another toward firmer identity. Scott died in himself around the age of thirty or thirty-five and his creative powers died somewhat later. Suffered much in his marriage and from depression—The Artist's Reward. And he threw too much of his juice into those *Post* stories, judging a paragraph by not how honest it was but by how much money he could make. Let me put it this way, the person and the writing work together to make oneself stronger or weaker, better or worse, more honest or less honest.
Mailer: Well, Ernest, I think I can say I certainly used more personas, identities, than you ever did, had a quiver of styles and modalities to your one. But I've always thought that you were forging your identity every day of your life—both in the life and in the writing—and that seems to be what you're saying. I think most artists have that problem. And if you have been wounded in any way, the identity must grow out of and beyond that wound.
Hemingway: I came from the Midwest, had a mother with very strong ideas of about who I should be, and had my struggles, lessons, and serious wounds along the way. We are all bitched from the start and you have to hurt like hell before you can write seriously.

You came out of Brooklyn, Norman, a smart, scrawny little kid placed ahead of your peers in school and so mixed in with the bigger kids, the more mature kids, and had to try to hold your own, and to retreat into your own world. Your war changed you as my wars changed me. You came out of the Pacific theatre no longer the good Mama's boy, the little kid in the class, the

brainy little Jewish boy at Harvard. Once you had your shot at fame it changed you. Then your failures wounded and changed you more. You got the shit scared out of you as a writer, Norman, and started getting belligerent. You even did Hemingway manqué for a time. Belligerence is not necessarily a bad thing for a writer. But you've got to put it deep into the work. The rest is posing.

Mailer: You never posed, Ernest? As you've said yourself, an unhappy childhood is the best training for a writer. But look, again, everything had changed for a writer in America by the sixties and seventies.

Hemingway: You think the posturing was necessary to your writing?

Mailer: It was more experimenting, in the laboratory of myself. That got me up and moving in the morning. For years I had to get my guts up every day so I could do the writing, no matter how bad things might be for me or for writers in our time and place. No matter how hard the shits were trying to kill us.

Hemingway: You wasted a lot of time poking the shits in the eye on TV, in public, and in the writing.

Mailer: As if you never wasted time. We all waste time that we regret when we have little or no more time.

Hemingway: You have to live so that when you die you know you did everything you could do about your work and enjoyment of your life up to that moment, reconciling the two, which is very difficult.

From deep in the murk along the wide river a muffled sound like that of an oar bumping a boat catches both men's attention. Hemingway gets up, walks to the shore line of the beach and, cupping his hand over his eyes, peers into the river's obscurity. Mailer remains seated, pours himself another two fingers of Scotch, and watches Hemingway on the beach.

Mailer: Anything?

Hemingway continues to peer out into the murk. Cups both ears toward the river. Finally, he turns and walks back up the beach to his chair.

Hemingway: Nothing. Yet.

Mailer: [*Pouring Hemingway another drink*]
Well, then better have another, Ernest.

Fade to darkness as the two men raise their glasses toward one another.

ACT II

Mailer is standing up to his shins in the foggy river water while Hemingway remains seated. Bright light shines on the beach, giving a sense of atmospheric warmth along the sand. Hemingway now sits under an opened large beach umbrella by the table between their chairs. Both glasses have been drained. The bottle of Scotch still stands, half full, on the small plastic table.

Mailer: The water's perfect. If I didn't know any better I'd go for a swim.
Hemingway: Swim if you want. Better not let your head under.
Mailer: [*Turning back toward Hemingway and slowly walking up the beach toward the chairs*] I'd have to be a lot drunker than I am now. [*Laughs*].
Hemingway: Shouldn't be much longer. [*Pours them each two more fingers*]
Mailer: [*wistfully*] I'll miss the women.
Hemingway: Maybe the womens won't miss us.
Mailer: [*sitting down*] Without loving, without fucking, it's going to be a strange trip indeed.
Hemingway: You get over it. Maybe we have some dues to pay.
Mailer: Gives you a little perspective, finally? Karma coming home to roost? I don't believe either of us was easy on the people we lived with—and the dull pomade of marriage tests everyone who marries. [*Looks directly at Hemingway*]. Still, how can you be a misogynist and have loved four wives?
Hemingway: Or your six wives and raised your five daughters? [*He slides Mailer a look*] Saying nothing of the quick affairs. Pauline used to say, "I don't mind Ernest falling in love but why does he always have to marry the girl when he does?"
Mailer: [*Laughs*] Maybe it's generational. Our generations.
Hemingway: Well, I loved Hadley all my life and tried my best financially and otherwise to provide for her and Bumby. That failure was my fault. My guilt created my Hell. Even with Pauline some kind of gentleness set in again during after-divorce relations and feelings, mitigating our version of that great unending battle between men and women.
Mailer: Maybe you never get back what you once had with your first wife, and you carry around a lot of accusing self-pity when you look back on the damage you've done. To all your wives. Lawrence was right. There is a harshness between men and women. Maybe nigh on to impossible to transcend, for most mortals.

Hemingway: I started early in my books exploring women's alienation from men and men from women. And what the absence of any feminine influence does to men.
Mailer: Being married tests everything you have: Can you both go the fifteen rounds? You're certainly not alone if you can't.
Hemingway: Harder if the woman you are in love with is stronger than you are. And since writing and love making are run by the same motor you have to struggle to balance loving and writing.
Mailer: [*After musing a few moments*] If you look back on it, you see we both loved, and married, strong women. All with their own ambition and determination.
Hemingway: Yet for all the adventure and good you bring to them, if you're often as not a sonofabitch to live with you can't expect it to last.
Mailer: We're all sonsofbitches and bitches to live with.
Hemingway: Card-carrying members. But while you love someone, truly, it is only in their pleasure that you are happy.
Mailer: Love gives force to one another's courage, and to the life within both of you. More afterlife perspective.
Hemingway: Mary, who I loved, was determined to be the last Mrs. Hemingway, and suffered on that marital cross. In our later years she came to me and said: "Your insults and insolences to me hurt me, as you surely know. But in spite of them I love you, and I love this place, and I love *Pilar* and our life as we have it here normally. So, try as you might to goad me to leave it and you, you're not going to succeed. Are you hearing me? Because I think it would be bad and disorienting for you as well as me. Okay, that's it. No matter what you say or do—short of killing me, which would be messy—I'm going to stay here and run your house and your Finca until the day you come here, *sober*, in the morning, and tell me truthfully and straight that you want me to leave."

You're easily blinded to her suffering when you're in the middle of that emotional catastrophe a marriage is, but in the aftermath it's not easy to be proud of yourself.
Mailer: Especially if your abused body and mind are turning to shit. Norris had the same determination—to be the last Mrs. Mailer. She put up with a lot of my crap. We loved one another anyway. Loved all the children, had found one another finally despite all the betrayals and battles. [*He looks up toward where a sky should be. Lets out a deep breath*]. She was the warm

presence and subtle influence who created a domestic climate that not only allowed me to thrive at work but even to love the idea that there is work to do and it is worth doing. All the time doing her own work, too. Enduring her own losses and gains.

Hemingway: Marriage is never all down-hill running in powder snow. And once you've made too many cruelties to one another, you can not erase them. Nobody will ever accuse you or me of lacking ineptitudes and self-destructive flaws.

Mailer: Even those who more or less lionized us. But, yes, it's like living chained to a stunted ape. Who among us is not? Still, we've been misunderstood, you and I. Our names turned unsavory. It got to be awfully hard for people to countenance our human frailty. In fact, they couldn't read the writing without recalling our personal flaws—real or trumped up by our enemies—coloring the work, distorting patience and understanding.

Hemingway: In your case you asked for it. Too many public belly flops. Maybe I had a few too many too, but you never learned to stay off the stage, the TV even. We writers have to take off our Rabbi Suits. You never learned to shut up, and you'll be tarred with your worst psycho-rants for a long time to come.

Mailer: I can wait an eternity now. But look, Ernest, I've said as much myself. And nobody likes to be thought unsavory. Like a bad big review, in practical terms a bad perception of you hurts a professional writer's pocketbook. An unseemly reputation perpetuates, foments, misunderstanding upon misunderstanding. Those misunderstandings you bring on yourself and those others are all too happy to bring on you. It doesn't matter what you do by way of clarifying or testing your speculations further. Fame came to me with my first book, to you by your fourth—at least on the level of losing any control over readers' myth-making about you, the legend and gossip outweighing the work itself.

I should have known—and maybe I did—when I entered the arena of the women's movement that nobody was going to thank me for pointing out what appeared to be certain technological-totalitarian elements in women's liberation, circa 1970–80. I'd been calling out *men* for precisely the same tendencies on different fronts *for decades*. But that didn't matter, any more than it mattered that I was all in favor of greater political and social freedom for women. I didn't see avenues of greater freedom, however, for men or women

through technology, the corporation, and the hierarchies of the corporate state. Instead of the revolution in consciousness I'd been looking for and trying to spark for a long time we were getting a greater and greater absorption of human capital (men, women, and young people) into the Corp-state maw. More death, less life.

Hemingway: Your arguments were too public, too lengthy, and too abstruse. Your own worst enemy, again. And once they decide you're nutty they don't have confidence in you anymore.

Mailer: Coming from you, Ernest, *that's* absurd. You didn't take the women's movement of your time head on, but by your actions, your machismo, it came to the same thing. Not to mention what they say about the women in your novels.

Hemingway: They always say a lot of shit, but Virginia Woolf, who bitched me in her review of *Men Without Women*, mostly because I was outside of Bloomsbury, also said something worth remembering. "Tell a man that this is a woman's book, or a woman that this is a man's, and we have brought into play sympathies and antipathies which have nothing to do with art. The greatest writers lay no stress upon sex one way or the other." And I often spoke highly of Djuna Barnes, Beryl Markham, and Isak Dinesen. Katherine Anne Porter I couldn't read very much but I was polite and she bitched me in return. Beryl wrote so marvelously well I was completely ashamed of myself as a writer.

Mailer: I loved the work of Iris Murdoch, Diana Trilling, Joan Didion, among other women, and had many fan letters from women through the 1960s. When your Mary was asked somewhere in the 1970s whether she agreed that men are chauvinist pigs, she answered: "No more than women are chauvinist sows. I'm thankful for almost every man I've known and the mother who produced him."

Hemingway: [*Laughs*] Mary never suffered fools.

Mailer: But the point is more that the women who took us on, and took Miller and Lawrence on, proved to be unforgiving, unfair, incapable of quoting accurately, and quick to distort the deeds of their adversaries. And they would never admit they tried to eliminate the blind goat-kicking lust from sex.

Hemingway: That's the sort of goddamned phony patriotism ruined a lot of writers. That red and black enthusiasm I sent up in *Torrents of Spring*, the terrible shit about the nobility of any gent belonging to another race than your own. And Gertrude Stein, who I loved and learned from, finally caught her patriot's disease: that nobody was any good who wasn't queer; then that

anybody who was queer had to be good; then, third, that anybody who was good must be that way even if they were concealing it. The main thing is you better not disturb their categories. And nothing will disturb their categories more than when you joke about that patriotic crap. Bullshit is bullshit, so why worry about the bullshit?
Mailer: [*Raising his glass to Hemingway, smiling broadly, and draining it*] You worry if you're thinking too much about posterity.
Hemingway: One has to learn, finally, to let posterity take care of herself.

Hemingway refills their glasses. Mailer gets up, glass in hand. Walks to the edge of the big river again. Dips his feet back into the subtle current.

Mailer: The sun shines over us, yet fog up river and down. Where's that fucking boatman?
Hemingway: He'll be here soon enough. You wanted to talk, Norman, so we're talking. You and me.
Mailer: Hell of a time to finally sit down and talk.
Hemingway: Best time there is. You said it yourself: you get a little perspective, finally.
Mailer: I'm in the moment, the way I like to be. But I've spent a lifetime speculating about this journey, and I want to engage it. I want to be onto the next leg of the trip. *Purgatorio* or *Inferno*. Or the isles of bliss, Paradiso. Or whatever there is to move on to.
Hemingway: Forget *Inferno* and *Paradiso*. Forget *Purgatorio* for that matter. Dante was a great poet but if you study his life he seems to be one of the worst jerks who ever lived. Maybe a lesson to us all, but don't expect to be wending your way through *La divina commedia*
Mailer: I never expected to. Always favored Milton to Dante myself. But why not Karma? Some sort of Karmic state of evolution and return?
Hemingway: Forget all of it. You'll arrive where you're going soon enough.
Mailer: Limbo then. Some kind of Limbo? I've written about Limbo, feel as if I know something about it.
Hemingway: You'll see how much you know. [*Laughs*] Maybe we're in one of Santayana's *Dialogues in Limbo*. My Democritus to your Alcibiades?

Mailer starts to wander up and down the sandy margin of the river, looking off into the fog one moment, up toward the sun-drenched sky the next,

over to Hemingway seated another; down at the sand at his feet yet another. One hand on hip, one holding his glass and sipping from time to time, he turns his head this way and that, peering into the fog still lying over the river in the near distance. He begins to talk, as if to himself, knowing Hemingway is overhearing him, but in a state of dramatic soliloquy nonetheless, quoting himself.

Mailer: Limbo! The telling monotonies of Limbo—those stupors and apathies upon apathies, the playback of cocktail gabble, the gluttony of red wine taken on top of white on top of harshly cooked food, the holes in one's memory plugged by electronic hum, all the stations of the cross of feeling empty while waiting for subway trains and airline shuttles and waitresses in busy lunchrooms—yes, all has to be experienced in Limbo as direct punishment.

But enforced immersion in every sensation, episode, glut, glop, and repellent handle of experience (a recapitulative vision of the faces of digital watches, the smell of pharmacies, the touch of polyester shirts, the wet wax paper of McDonald's hamburgers, the air of summer traffic jams and shrieks of jacked-up stereos) is not to scourge you around one eternity before dispatching you to another, but might be instead your own, each his own, my own, natural field of expiation. No expirations of soul, no sufferings of damnation, but my own karmic chain of purification of my own misspent hours before being thrown back into the contest again. [*He glances toward Hemingway, who remains silent*].

The standard of Limbo is that time is not to be wasted. All who die are guilty, in part, and in part all are innocent. For all are judged by one fine measure: Had they or had they not wasted more of the soul's substance than was required by the exigencies of their life? Taking into account their upbringings, the neurotic, psychotic, screwball, timid, stingy, spendthrift, violent, or fear-filled habits, had they nonetheless wasted time or rather spent it as wittily, cheerfully, and/ or bravely as possible?
Hemingway: [*Holding his glass up to Mailer, grinning now*] You can fornicate yourself into that dreadful state of absolute clear-headedness that is the non-believer's Limbo. Makes you ready to write, to bite the nail once again.
Mailer: [*On a roll*] I would have done less damage to my being by going to

church or temple once in a while rather than increase the total of my appearances on television. The House of Limbo is here to bring you face to face with those sins for which there are no tears, even as a husband and wife cannot weep if they lose a potentially heartfelt piece of ass by watching TV all night. I will be asked to meditate at length on those yaws and palls of my life passed through TV, obliged to regard my own wretched collaboration with the multimillion-celled nausea-machine, that Christ-killer of the ages—television.

Hemingway: As you managed to surmise decades ago, there's no cheating life, even through television.

Mailer: Just as there is no escaping all the disease-inspiring habits of your bad blood, the vast wastes of your dullness, and the thwarting and abuse of others—the very souls of others.

Hemingway: Plenty of that before television.

Mailer: Television is the apotheosis.

Hemingway: No question it made wastefulness a lot more convenient.

Mailer: And the growth of the corporate cancer and the death of democracy more convenient.

Hemingway: You once thought I might intercept the acceleration of democracy's death by writing about Castro's Cuba. Throw my weight behind a meeting between Castro and Kennedy. You thought Americans would listen to me, and the new President. You were always a man of considerable idealism, Norman. Your idealism was the source of your rage.

Mailer: Say I hated to see America ruined, finally. So I wrote that open letter to Fidel Castro in his earliest years, asking him to invite you back to see for yourself and tell us the truth of what you saw, after the Batista tyranny we had supported so long. Before Fidel went over to the Soviets precisely because of our lack of contact. By then the landscape of our psyche had been bleak, gutted, scorched by fifteen years of mindless government, all nerves withered by the management of men who were moral poltroons.

Hemingway: Why do you think I was an expatriate in Cuba almost two decades? When I finally came back to Damerica it was to a country I too loved and hated. I had by then learned the failures of all the systems. Whatever I might have said traveling around Cuba anywhere, as you put it, unmolested, unobstructed, unindoctrinated, would not have made any difference to Americans by then.

Mailer: You were underestimating yourself, Ernest. A paragraph, a line, a

poem, a statement, whatever you said as a Nobel winner could not have been ignored.

Hemingway: Anyone could have ignored it and probably would have. The President would have ignored it.

Mailer: Kennedy couldn't have ignored you, as Castro agreed with me during a conversation I had with him in Cuba in 1989. If Kennedy turned out to be a conventional leader of the party, there was still a particular magic about him; all sorts of subtle but exciting changes were occurring in the culture that he opened the way for, whether he wished to or not. He had taken the lid off and with his death the lid would eventually be clamped on tight again. My only question about Kennedy at the time was whether he had a mind deep enough to comprehend the size of the disaster he had inherited (not unlike President Obama . . .). I think he might have come to recognize that if a man of Hemingway's age was willing to give up some important moment of his time to write new words about Cuba, that the culture of the world—that culture existing in every cultivated mind—would be judging Kennedy if he did not respond or react to Hemingway's view (whatever it might be) of Cuba under the revolutionary regime.

Hemingway: Even if Kennedy did react, would it have made any difference by then? He was a man of courage, and I admit that watching his inauguration on television when we had to turn down his invitation to attend, Mary and I felt a strange kind of hope once again. But you learn to stay out of politics with the very limited time left to you. I never mixed in Cuban politics, nor gave an interview then to American papers, but took the long view of Castro's revolution. And anyway, I was incapacitated.

Mailer: It was more than just politics, it was war, future wars. Our missteps with Cuba from the first, letting the Soviets gain their foothold in our absence, nearly brought the world to an end. Our fears, our misgivings and misunderstandings, our profiteering at the expense of all other considerations. Even now we still repeat the pattern elsewhere. I wrote more than one book about that pattern. It's like some scandalous ritual Americans are bound to repeat over and again. A cycle some rue but no one can break.

Hemingway: So, Norman, you too discovered the failure of political systems? That discovery either defeats you or you dig in and live your life. I moved on as we Americans had always moved on. It's easier to keep well in a good country by taking simple precautions than to pretend that a country which is finished is still good. A country wears out quickly and the earth gets

tired of being exploited. Nothing left but gas stations and sub-divisions where we once hunted snipe on the prairie, and all the rest of that tired story. America had been a good country and we made a bloody mess of it. Our people had seen it at its best and fought for it when it was well worth fighting for.

Mailer: You can move on or hide out only until the current system oppresses you outright, or your children and grandchildren? I have nine children and plenty of grandchildren facing a future hardly full of joy in the twenty-first century.

Hemingway: Yes, of course, sometimes you do have to stand and fight. Fascism was worth defeating. Best, happiest time I ever had in my life was with the 4th Infantry Division, even wished I'd been a soldier rather than a chickenshit writer. But I wouldn't write any of that flag-waving syndicated patriotism.

Mailer: Near my end the Flag Patriots and the nominal Christians, the Fundamentalists, were the worst threat, the tools of a dangerous empire. Jesus and Marx meet in the understanding that money leaches out all other values. Democracy is always under attack.

Hemingway: I wished they'd summoned me to Congress to ask whether I was a subversive. I'd have said to the committee chairman: "You cocksucker, when did you come to this country and where were your people in 1776–79, 1861–65, 1914–18, and 1941–45? That was when we all lost our health and fortunes. What did your miserable chickenshit grandfather do in those times? He was probably hiring himself a substitute and calling hogs." But it's not outright fascism anymore.

Mailer: No. It's not Hitler or Mussolini-fascism with the jackboots and death camps. But, as Mussolini saw, fascism is the eventual merger of the corporation and the state, the ever more perfect union. But because of its technologies and genius of infiltration, instead of brown shirts, it's both more subtle and insidious, more like totalitarianism for a new century.

Hemingway: I doubted capitalism, but before it was over I doubted most everything. When I was a boy someone told me we had to eat a ton of it in our lives so it was better to eat it fast and get it over. So I ate it fast but then I found you were expected to eat it all your life. But sometimes I reacted a little and said, "I am very sorry, gentlemen, but I am not hungry today." Confirmed, or patriotic, shit eaters never forgive this deviation. You are alone, finally, and create your own test of virtue.

Mailer: I no longer think it's capitalism per se. It's corporate capitalism killing us all, extorting us spiritually and denying the opportunity to find our true growth. Small business, honest competition—or mostly honest—isn't the clear and present danger; it's another sort of capitalism we've used to betray democracy by a vast obeisance to the corporation and its self-perpetuating powers. It's what Islam fears, that empire of the corporation, devouring other nations' economies, infiltrating them, a cultural invasion ultimately backed up by military invasion. And it's nationalism—America's phony patriotism-become-religion.

Listen, Ernest, a poll taken by the European edition of *Time* in 2003 asked what country poses the greatest danger to the world: The United States gets 84%, Iraq 8%, North Korea 7%, and so on. We're too arrogant to see ourselves as others see us. We haven't the humility to consider our own flaws, to see our own stables are overflowing.

Hemingway: Of course the wealthy, the powerful, are never going to change a world they control and benefit from. My sympathies have always been with the exploited working people, never the absentee landlords. I never followed fashions or orthodoxies in politics, letters, religion, or anything. If the boys swing to the left in literature you may make a small bet the next swing will be to the right and some of the same yellow bastards will swing both ways.

Mailer: Well, I considered myself a left-conservative. So fuck-off, Jack. But in fact I always seemed to be swinging in the opposite direction from the pendulum.

Hemingway: There is no left and no right in writing. There is only good and bad writing. And characters in fiction have to be people, people, people; never symbols. Would as soon machine gun left, right, or center any political bastards who do not work for a living—anybody who makes a living by politics or not working.

Mailer: But a writer can still go down fighting. In America the problem is that serious writers are so marginalized, so endangered, they can weed out the cant and bullshit with impunity. And the prosperous are wonderfully creative in their self-exculpations. They find more ways to forgive what they're doing than we can count. Also as true in the Islamic world as it was in the old Soviet Union.

Hemingway: We were all communists in the early 1920s but communism turned out to be tripe and tyranny, as did fascism. Hitler proved that war is

the health of the fascist state, which must have war or threat of war to keep the state going. When a church becomes a state or a state a church you get the tyranny of all combines. But everybody has to go through some political or religious faith sooner or later.

Mailer: As I always say, "Once a philosopher. . . ."

Hemingway: You can speak out against it all, but don't expect to make any difference.

Mailer: Not any more. The CEO will listen and be polite, but he's laughing at you. He's enjoying his yacht, his airplane, his wine cellar, his private golf instruction. Meanwhile you talk or write yourself blue. If we writers had the public's attention, they'd probably line us up and shoot us.

Hemingway: That's why the serious novel finally *is* dead. But every phase of the whole racket has always been so disgusting you feel like vomiting. Publishers are writers' natural enemies. So how do you like it now, gentlemen?

Mailer: Still, the work alone keeps you alive and moving. Serious fiction, if anybody would read it, raises for writer and reader not facts or final answers but questions, better questions that are harder to answer, but that you pursue in the hope the questions lead to richer insights, and in turn bring forth sharper questions.

But no one cares, even if a rare serious novelist this century might sell more copies of his than, say, you or Faulkner, the novelist is not revered; he or she no longer has that prodigious impact and influence on the young. So, as well, the language deteriorates, becomes less eloquent, less metaphorical, less salient, less poignant, and a curious deadening of the human spirit comes seeping in. And the most interesting and subtle moral questions—the questions for that time and place—go unasked, un-contemplated. The serious novel's antipathy to corporate capitalism is eviscerated, rendered impotent, and our minds grow dull and unable to withstand the onslaughts and blandishments of the Corpstate.

Hemingway: But you wrote till the end. As I did. I had to write to be happy whether I got paid for it or not. But it is a hell of a disease to be born with. I liked to do it. That made it from a disease into a vice. Then I wanted to do it better than anybody had ever done it, which made it into an obsession. An obsession is terrible, but to work was the thing, the one thing that always made you feel good. You don't know how it will come out, but you also know only some of those who practiced the arts are alive long after a country is

gone. One thousand years makes economics and politics silly, but art endures. Yet it is very difficult to do and now it is not fashionable, and must never be fashionable art anyway. But working you get that sense of well being that is so much more pleasant to have than to hear about.

I wrote even when I couldn't write anymore. I had nothing left. I cracked up, and still I scribbled, however inane and formless the scribbling, until I couldn't even inanely scribble anymore. All who manage somehow to survive look forward to death by defeat, our bodies gone, our world destroyed.
Mailer: Your doctors were jerks, and you abused your brain and body even more than I did, Ernest. Which is saying something considerable! Decades of alcoholism, and you add to that your repeated brain trauma, reserpine, followed finally by shock therapy.
Hemingway: I don't have any excuses anymore, and I no longer need them. We all have our demons. I'm not alone in that. I fought all my life and never defeated them, just holding the bastards at bay. Every damned thing is your own fault if you're any good. Listen, I'm all right with my conscience. I know just what kind of a son of a bitch I am, or was, but I know what I did well and did badly.
Mailer: I didn't suffer depression and dementia as you did, even as I grew more and more pessimistic. My only way to beat the devil was to work with a vengeance, still trying yet again for the big trilogy, as you had tried.
Hemingway: I never finished the big trilogy either, but I had to have the confidence of a champion to try for it. Trilogies are the big thing: like Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.
Mailer: My lesser books appeared along the way. But I finally learned to lay certain things to rest. Working, I grew more composed, more settled, but more whole with augmented authorial ambition.
Hemingway: Maybe because you were such a psycho, Norman, you exorcised many of your demons.
Mailer: So my rants on paper and on screen served a purpose? Wouldn't it be nice to think so.
Hemingway: Maybe that's one way to survive. Open the sluices for more serious work to follow. In that you were often distracted but more fortunate than I was. Doesn't fucking make you Mr. Tolstoy.
Mailer: Merely a surviving truth-teller, as I saw it, stirring up a murmur of

dissent here and there. In my time such a murmur was the best anyone could hope for.

Hemingway: So make your peace with it, Norman. Be at rest. The world goes on and we are beyond it. Take solace in that. Like me, you've earned solace. Those whose lives we messed up while we were messing up our own have their own bills to pay, as we do. When I couldn't even compose a few lines after Kennedy's inauguration for a collection of tributes, I began to put it all behind me and welcome death, finally. I turned at that pass to Milton and found solace and my courage, saying with Samson in the *Agonistes*:

> My hopes fall flat: Nature within me seems
> In all her functions weary of herself;
> My race of glory run, and race of shame,
> And I shall shortly be with them that rest.

A boat under a large single square sail—the simian gargoyle hanging from the bow like a figurehead—looms through the river fog (breaking up now) like an image on a screen. The Greyhound returns and stands on the river's edge looking intently at the boat. Both men stand up.

Fade out to darkness