

“OOHH NORMIE—YOU’RE
SOOO HEMINGWAY”: MAILER
MEMORIES AND ENCOUNTERS

H . R . S T O N E B A C K

LOOKING BACK NOW, OVER MORE THAN HALF A CENTURY, it seems Norman was always there. He was there, closer to the center of my cultural and literary formation and experience than I had remembered; and there, too, through the encounters I had with him over the years. And, in one way or another, Hemingway was involved in all of my “Mailer moments.” Yet, after my early twenties, I was seldom consciously aware of Mailer’s presence. And I have not finished any of his works published since the early 1970s, which was the last time I taught Mailer in my college classes. I hold no brief as a Mailer scholar, or even as an enthusiast of Mailer’s complete *oeuvre*. Thus, when the editor of this journal invited me to submit a piece on Mailer and Hemingway, I begged off, saying I had not done my Mailer homework in decades and I could provide nothing more than anecdotal reminiscences of my encounters with Mailer. Our sage editor persisted, so I have written these remarks. In the course of mining history and inviting my memory to speak clearly, I have come to believe that a book, several rich and nuanced books, should be written on the subject of Mailer and Hemingway. Surely the special Hemingway-Mailer issue of this journal will constitute a significant step in the direction of that necessary goal. But all I have to offer here is anecdote. Not literary memoir—this is not the place to recount my conversations about Mailer with Mary Hemingway and Gregory Hemingway and Valerie Hemingway. Just personal anecdotes involving Mailer. And if this is taken as a sign that I am approaching my *anecdotalage*, so be it.

I first read *The Naked and the Dead* when I was fourteen years old. I was

in the ninth grade then, in 1955, and my pantheon of great artists at that moment included Ernest Hemingway, Thomas Wolfe, Lord Byron, Hank Williams, Elvis Presley, and Fats Domino. We did not read *The Naked and the Dead* in school, but I read it at the same time that we were reading *A Tale of Two Cities* in my ninth-grade English class. I think I may have ranked Mailer higher than Dickens in my ninth-grade literary pronouncements. And I read Mailer immediately after the summer vacation when I read *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and *The Old Man and the Sea* in my grandmother's attic in our summer place near Atlantic City. I do not remember whether I preferred Hemingway over Mailer then but I do remember the smell of my grandmother's bookcases and the unpainted tongue-and-groove wainscoting of that attic, and the smell of the row-house outside Philadelphia—especially the basement where my father had to keep his copy of *The Naked and the Dead*. And the feeling that reading both Hemingway and Mailer evoked is all mixed up with the scents of that season of reading. My father had to keep Mailer in the basement with certain other books next to his collection of 10,000 jazz records (78s of course) because my mother did not approve of Mailer and certain other authors having a place in the glass-fronted barrister's bookcases in our dining room. Only one Hemingway—*The Old Man and the Sea*—was allowed in those bookcases with the complete works of Cooper, Irving, Scott and other classics, a generous assortment of Bibles and scriptural commentaries, and inscribed copies of books by a famous young evangelist named Billy Graham, who was my mother's personal friend.

The next writing by Mailer that I remember reading was his celebrated and controversial essay, "The White Negro." I was with my father in a used book and record shop when he purchased a soiled copy of the summer issue of *Dissent* for a nickel. Although my father was a factory worker then, in the fall of 1957, he had been in the 1920s and 1930s a publishing poet and jazz pianist of some reputation; he had been, for example, the only white musician and sideman on some "race records" vintage 1930. Thus he was interested in what Mailer had to say in "The White Negro." And since I had long since announced (in the third grade) that I was going to be a writer and a singer, a novelist and a singer-songwriter, and I had long thought of myself as an outsider and a rebel, and I too was interested. By the end of 1957 I was reading *The Village Voice* whenever I could get hold of a copy and I had made my first hitchhiking trip to Greenwich Village to sing in coffeehouses. By the time I read and reread *Advertisements for Myself* in late 1959 I had hitchhiked to

Greenwich Village several times and spent some time singing in the streets and in whatever places would give me ten or fifteen minutes on stage. I also sang with all the other folksingers in the famous gatherings in Washington Square. In spite of all the time I spent singing and playing guitar and writing songs in those high school years, I still thought of myself as primarily and primordially a writer; so I was well aware all during that time of how frequently Mailer's name was linked with Hemingway's—by English teachers, by the press, by anyone near my age who pretended to be a writer and to know something about the contemporary literary situation.

At the small church college I attended from 1959–1961 in Kentucky—first because I had fallen in love with the Kentucky River and then because I thought I was in love with a girl at that college—Mailer was not present on the list of authors who were talked about openly. His books were not in the college library. By the time I went to New York during the Christmas season of 1960 I had heard that Mailer had stabbed his wife, had spent some time at Bellevue, and had only managed to avoid prison time because his wife would not press charges. Some people that I talked to then held Mailer up as the prime example of a great talent laid waste by drink and drugs. I did not know if this were true. I was in Brooklyn for the Christmas season to sing with the Salvation Army on the streets, and to dress up as Santa Claus and ring the bell for donations. I couldn't find any other Christmas break employment and the Sallies offered room and board. And I wanted to be in New York City. When my Santa Claus gig ended I moved from Brooklyn to Greenwich Village where I slept wherever I could find folks hospitable to young folksingers and would-be writers. There was so much hospitality that I had to get away from it for a few days, so I stayed at the old run-down Broadway Central Hotel because I'd read that Thomas Wolfe stayed there. It was so cold that winter that there wasn't any singing outdoors in Washington Square, but I sang in some coffeehouses, the *Café Wha?*, the *Gaslight* and other joints, and I sang at the Monday night hootenanny at *Gerde's Folk City*. At those hoots, we all got our fifteen minutes on stage. Even a kid named Robert Zimmerman, who was already calling himself Bob Dylan, although his name meant nothing at the time, only got fifteen minutes on stage in those days. The Village coffeehouses swarmed with winos and leftover Beats and some good kid-singers and older jazzmen and Uptown folks slumming and I suppose I saw many well-known writers that I did not recognize. I did not really care about meeting any writers although it would have been nice

to see Kenneth Patchen who was, in my book then, in a league by himself. But I knew he could not be there in his wheelchair. One night somebody pointed out Allan Ginsberg to me. I liked *Howl* when I read it in the tenth grade, the year it came out. People said that they sometimes saw Mailer in the jazz and folk joints in the Village but if I ever saw him there I did not know it. But it was due to my momentary spell of infatuation with folksinging in Greenwich Village that I first saw Norman Mailer.

Because of the girl back in Kentucky that everybody but me thought of as my intended, I went back belatedly to attend the college winter quarter. Then, either during spring break or on one of my week-long hitchhiking trips AWOL from college, I was in the Village again in early April. The cops were harassing folksingers in the streets and tension was building over the singing in Washington Square. We sang “We Shall Not Be Moved” and made up words about Mayor Wagner and other city officials. I was lucky not to be in the Square the day the cops cracked down on the folksingers and hauled wagonloads away to jail. I was in the Library up on 42nd Street trying to read all the way through Hemingway’s *Across the River and into the Trees*. Word of the crackdown and assault spread like wildfire and I was still in town a few days later when the protests and right-to-sing meetings started. I went to a few of these gatherings including one that was a kind of protest party in somebody’s place near the Judson Memorial Church.

At that event, more party than protest, there were many Village luminaries present, standing around talking in little circles with drinks in their hands, doing what I then regarded disdainfully as their dismal Prufrockian dance. A few of us proudly *authentic* kid-folksingers were singing in a far corner of that large warehouse-like room. During a break between songs, a tweedy, pipe-smoking professorial-looking older man that I talked to about being a writer said: “That’s Norman Mailer over there.” He gestured with his pipe toward the far side of the crowded room. “Mailer thinks he’s Hemingway but he doesn’t really know who Hemingway is, and he doesn’t write anything like him. And besides, Hemingway’s very sick now.” I remember staring at his lizard-lidded eyes behind thick black rectangular glasses and thinking *what do you really know about Mailer and Hemingway* but I said nothing. I put down my guitar to head over and introduce myself to Norman Mailer. I knew it was Mailer from all the pictures I’d seen. On my way across the large room I stopped at the outer fringe of one circle of talkers, the circle where Moe Asch—head of Folkways Records—held forth. He was the

real reason I had come to that gathering, having heard he'd be there. More than anything, I wanted Moe Asch to offer me a recording contract with Folkways. Just like every other kid-folksinger in the room, in the Village, in the entire country—that's what I wanted then. (Years later, I had a chance to make a Folkways album with Asch but I was too busy writing about Faulkner and Hemingway to take time off from my promotion-and-tenure quest.) That night in 1961 I listened to Asch talk about the record business for a few minutes, and when I turned to make my way through the crowd toward Mailer I saw his shoulders and the back of his head going through the door, leaving the gathering. I was a little disappointed I didn't get to talk to him but I wasn't going to chase him down the steps and into the street. So that was when I first *saw* Mailer. I went back to the singing corner and played guitar and sang some more. That night some girl gave me a copy of *The Old Man and the Sea*, inscribed to me and my "future great writings."

The next day I hitchhiked back to Kentucky, where I put my new copy of *The Old Man and the Sea* on my dorm room bookshelf next to my well-thumbed copy of *Advertisements for Myself*. My Kentucky girl didn't approve of Mailer but she thought Hemingway was OK. And even though she was from Patchen-Country she wouldn't even look at his work. As for my writing I think she liked best the stuff that sounded like bad Byron or Keats or Whitman or Wordsworth that I'd written in the eighth grade. Sometime in May I heard from a country singer hitchhiking through Lexington that Mayor Wagner had just lifted the ban on folksinging in Washington Square. That was in a bar in Lexington where the rules of my college forbade me to be and Hank Williams was playing loud on the jukebox and I had just learned that my girlfriend was pregnant. There wasn't any way we could get married and in those days in that place nobody even thought about abortion. When that term of college ended I was informed that I was expelled from college due to "accumulated demerits," excessive absence from class and required chapel, and "general bad attitude." Maybe I was a better student of Mailer than I realized.

Sometime after I'd heard about the lifted ban on folksinging, I had read about it in the newspapers in the college library. I was happy for my folksinging buddies in the Village but by then I already knew I wasn't going back there. I'd had enough of the Village. So I'd just have to wait to talk to Norman Mailer. I cleaned out my dorm room and threw whatever possessions I had in a duffel bag and slung my guitar over my back, hitting the road,

hitchhiking from Kentucky to Northern Michigan. The toughest decision I had to make was which books to give away and which to carry with me on the road. The choice was generally determined by weight but still I packed *Advertisements for Myself* with *The Old Man* and a few other books along with my notebooks filled with poems and stories in the burlap feed-sack that I tied on to my guitar with baling twine. I had a job for the summer up in Hemingway-Country at a resort not far from Petoskey. My job title was Assistant Social Director, and my duties included singing every night, organizing shows and entertainment, playing guitar at square dances (sometimes even doing the calling, under the tutelage of the regular 70-year-old caller), and generally keeping the tourists—maybe 70% women—happy.

It was mostly a good summer there in Hemingway-Country. That's not the way I thought about Northern Michigan then and even though I was fishing and canoeing his streams and hanging out in places where he had lived and written I rarely thought about Hemingway at all. Until that day came in early July and the news of Hemingway's death filled the airwaves, the newspapers, and all the conversations at the resort and in the nearby towns. Regardless of what the initial press releases said, everybody in that country said from the first that it was suicide.

I remember a heated discussion that lasted for hours one night at El Rancho—the name of the resort where I worked—that occurred a few days after Hemingway's death. One of the debaters was my co-worker, a six-foot-four man who weighed about 400 pounds and everybody called "Tiny," who was a big fan of both Mailer and Hemingway. He had borrowed my copy of *Advertisements for Myself* and was reading and rereading it all summer. I had borrowed his copy of *The Deer Park* but I was having trouble getting through it, partly because there wasn't much time to read and partly because I hadn't liked any writing about Hollywood since I read Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust* a few summers before. The other debaters were tourists or visitors to the ranch. I was mostly a silent listener, in a rare act of deference to my elders. When Tiny repeatedly asserted that up until then the twentieth century, in a literary sense, had belonged to Hemingway, but now Mailer was Hemingway's only true heir and the rest of the century belonged to Mailer, one of the ranch visitors vehemently disagreed. He maintained that Mailer was nothing like Hemingway, that he had no clue regarding Hemingway's code or vision. And Mailer's sentences, his form, were nothing like Hemingway's. Some of the tourists in the bar that night, the majority of them, agreed with

him. His argument was compelling, citing chapter and verse from the works of both writers. He also said that the worst thing about Mailer was he had no compassion. I was very young, just a kid-folksinger who wanted to be a writer, so I wasn't sure what I thought about the argument that night. I was just happy that it occurred, that people were taking writers and writing seriously, that they argued for hours about Mailer and Hemingway instead of about movie stars or sports or politics. But I did say, during a lull in the heated debate, that the very act of writing was itself an act of compassion. I had believed that for a long time and I had a deep respect for *all* writers, for anyone who was truly driven to write. When the girl from North Dakota was through working in the kitchen and came into the bar, I went off with her and we canoed across the lake. We could hear their voices, still arguing, echo across the lake. Although she was a big Hemingway fan she had never heard of Mailer. But we did not talk about writers and writing. Not that night.

The next morning I learned that Tiny's debate opponent was a journalist from a major newspaper in Detroit or Chicago—I don't remember his name or home base or newspaper—but he was on assignment at the ranch to do a feature story for the travel section on the phenomenon of square dancing *in* the lake that was a regular occurrence at the ranch that summer. He interviewed me over lunch, since he had discovered that I was the inventor of water-square-dancing. In one of my more Edisonian moments as Assistant Social Director, I had realized that for those who didn't want to go horseback riding there wasn't much to do in the afternoon, so I organized square dancing *in* the water as a regular afternoon event. When I said that the water slowed down the dancer's moves, introduced a kind of artistic suspension into the motion that made it like ballet, the reporter wrote that down in his notebook. I had never seen a ballet then and I really just invented water-square-dancing to get myself free from leading trail rides and the dreaded archery instruction that were part of my time-filling assignments in the afternoons. I didn't tell him that. In the course of our interview I mentioned that aside from being a singer-songwriter, I wanted to be a writer. He said he also wrote fiction. He looked like he was about fifty but he hadn't published a novel yet. That afternoon he was down at the edge of the lake studying our water-square-dancing session like a bemused anthropologist investigating a strange lost tribe. His photographer took many pictures of the dancers doing their dose-y-do's and promenades in knee-deep and waist-deep water, and photos of me calling the dance and playing the

guitar in knee-deep water, backed up by another guitar player and a fiddler who did not like fiddling in the water.

That night, after my evening performance, he came up to me and said he'd enjoyed meeting me but he had to leave for the Upper Peninsula—he had to get to Seney to do a story on the country of Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River." He referred to the great Hemingway-Mailer debate of the night before and counseled me firmly against following Mailer, told me to *eschew the Maileresque path of self-involvement and self-advertisement* if I wanted to be a writer. I knew what *eschew* meant, of course—at least since I had spelled it correctly in the fifth grade spelling bee. But I had never heard anybody say it in the course of a normal conversation and I did not like hearing the word. People who said words like *eschew* must live in another world, I thought. Then he said: "If you want to be a real writer, you must learn compassion." I didn't think that you could study and *learn* compassion, you either had it or you didn't, and if you didn't you wouldn't write at all. If you had it, it probably came to you in an epiphanic flash, as it did to me as a teenager, and he was right that you had to have it to be a real writer. But I figured that Mailer had it, like all real writers, and also that this journalist was probably missing some wit and irony in Mailer's deployment of his self-advertisement motif. But I didn't say that to him. I just thanked him for his advice. He reminded me of other older failed writers who were intent on advising young would-be writers like me how to avoid failure. I'd noticed this syndrome before, but had never seen it so clearly. He was really an all right guy and I hope he got his novel written and published.

There were other "Hemingway-Mailer moments" at that Michigan ranch in the summer of 1961 but I will limit my account here to just this one, which does seem to me to be a token, a sign, a charged moment in the oral history of literary reputation. So, too, was the fact that when I finished my duties at the ranch, I left with no less than five books given to me by girls and women, inscribed with love and great hopes for my future writing. All of the books were by Hemingway.

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That September, after some more hitchhiking-singing-on-the-road escapades, I went off to Parris Island to become a Marine. I offer this sidelight on the literary history of the Marine Corps: Marine privates, who were said

in those days to be joining up either because they were running from the law or from a girl, did in fact *read*. My platoon at Parris Island and Camp Lejeune was in fact a remarkably literate group, many of us college dropouts, and most of us dropouts were English *majors*. We devoured war books and all of us preferred *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and *The Naked and the Dead* over Jones and *From Here to Eternity*, over Styron's *The Long March*, over Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* and all the other World War One books by Aldington, Cummings, Dos Passos and the rest. The fact that Hemingway and Mailer received the Good Marine Seal of Approval—in my platoon—must mean at least as much as a good or bad review in the *New York Times*.

Although I am enjoying this informal survey of literary history, I fear my readers may by now be mumbling *mere anecdote* so I will truncate these memories. It's OK to look back, as the slogan goes, just don't *stare*. And I offer my assurance that these remarks contain none of that unearned emotion known as nostalgia, not even *la nostalgie de la boue*, for there is no homesickness here for the fundamentally hungry wretched life of the kid-folksinger on the road.

When my active duty in the Marine Corps ended in 1962, I was based in Kentucky and drove a truck for awhile before I quit and hitchhiked to New Orleans. From my first days in New Orleans, I lost forever any homesickness I might have had for Greenwich Village. The French Quarter became the new capitol of my Bohemian universe and erased almost all memory of an attraction to the Village. After a road-trip to Mexico, I went back to Kentucky and my new girl friend and we ran away to get married and build a log cabin in Alabama. My new wife was a great reader and she had read more Hemingway than I had but she did not like Mailer. While she worked in a café to earn money to pay the rent on our attic apartment, I worked in the deep woods from dawn to dusk, building a log-cabin the old way—no chainsaw, felling all the trees with my ax, skinning all the logs with a draw-knife, notching everything into place. Remarkably, a legendary character and landowner there in east-central Alabama had given me the rights to forty acres of his land for exactly *one penny*. Things like that still happened in the America of 1962. I didn't read much during those long months of deep satisfaction in the singularity of intense physical labor, at least twelve hours every day, and Mailer and the literary life of the Village, all literary life, began

to recede to the far corners of my consciousness. Mailer didn't go well with log cabins in the wilderness; neither did Hemingway.

My wife and I were now singing (sometimes on the local radio station, sometimes in country churches, occasionally in the rare southern coffee-houses which were nothing like the coffeehouses of New York and the Northeast), more classic country and gospel than folk, and Hank Williams and Jimmie Rodgers and Johnny Cash didn't seem to have much to do with Mailer—his American Dream seemed far distant from mine. But then, maybe, Cash and Mailer and Williams were more kindred spirits than they could recognize. And the American Dream—all of our American dreams—were much closer in spirit and substance than any of us could see then or maybe even now.

Somehow I ended up back in New Orleans by mid-1963, largely from the need to earn money so that I could complete my cabin in Alabama. This time I landed a regular gig singing in a club on Bourbon Street. I became a kind of local *star*, and people came to my club to hear me sing my own songs, which felt nothing like the songs I'd been writing in the Village two years before. I was hired to sing at private parties, on Mississippi river-boats, at Tulane sorority parties and I even had my own day-time television show. I knew everybody in the French Quarter, including legendary old jazz musicians who played at Dixieland Hall (then more important than Preservation Hall). I also knew all the literary types in the Quarter and none of them admired Mailer. One of the few who even mentioned him—a would-be writer, who had been a would-be writer much longer than I'd been one—said that *Advertisements for Myself* was very passé, that Mailer seemed like a 1930s Old Left character who had discovered drugs, an old Leftie who couldn't even sing.

When the price of living my entertainer's Bohemian life in the French Quarter began to seem too high, I decided to go back to college. It seemed like a way to give shape to time. I was twenty-three and I hadn't written much of anything except songs for several years. If I was going to be a writer, I knew I had to know more writers. My decision to get a B.A. was in fact my decision to get a Ph.D. and read everything I had not yet read. So I went to Rutgers, where neither Hemingway nor Mailer played any role in my coursework or indeed in any of the courses offered. By 1964 the anti-Hemingway reaction that so characterized the later '60s and after had set in; and, if you were in the grip of a thoroughly wrong-headed assessment of Hemingway,

how could you accurately gauge Hemingway-Mailer connections? At the level of literary *conversation* (not coursework), you still heard talk in Rutgers circles about Mailer as the heir to the Hemingway legacy. But now this was understood to be a negative thing—a tainted and unfortunate legacy, macho, violent, and solipsist, claimed by a confused heir. Confusion was rampant on all sides. As escape from what I felt to be the dead-end imperatives of contemporary American writing, I invested most of my time and passion in exploration of the Russians and the French, and even considered doing my Ph.D. in French literature.

As usual when I needed money my only sure fallback position was entertainment. So my wife and I, with some student partners, opened a coffeehouse, which immediately became *the* place to go for Rutgers students and many locals. We did all the cooking and we sang almost every night of the week. Sometimes, we put on stage the folksingers passing through town—although there were not as many kid-folksingers on the road as there had been just a few years before. We had a hootenanny night (“Open Mike” in today’s terminology) for mostly locals, with the predictable mixed results. Something had changed in the folk music world: audiences were more receptive to our stage repertoire—mostly deep old country, authentic traditional (and non-politicized) folksongs, gospel, and some of our own songs. By then, too, Dylan songs were *de rigueur*. Some things about our coffeehouse carried on what I then felt to be the old-fashioned late 1950s Greenwich Village traditions—jazz records that customers could choose from and play until live show times. And chessboards.

The best chess player was an older black man, an artist and a fine painter who had been Ezra Pound’s attendant when he was incarcerated at St. Elizabeth’s Hospital. Gregory—that was the only name we knew him by and the way he signed all his paintings—was a regular. I never saw him lose a game of chess. I talked many hours and days with him about the kind of man Ezra Pound was—Gregory loved him deeply, but preferred to talk about the *Cantos*, with which I had then only a passing and superficial acquaintance. We had several shelves of books for our customers to peruse in the quiet hours. One day I tried to give Gregory my now-ancient and much-traveled copy of *Advertisements for Myself*, which had been on the coffeehouse bookshelves since we opened. He held the book in his hand with a certain world-weary look while he talked about Mailer. Gregory had been a *hipster* in the late 1940s sense and a regular at New York jazz clubs from the 1940s into the

1950s. He said he had often seen Mailer in the jazz clubs and talked to him a few times. Said he was a nice guy but Gregory didn't like Mailer's work. He had particular words of disdain for "The White Negro." He said it was an all too familiar case of *la nostalgie de la boue* (it was from Gregory that I first heard that seminal phrase), the kind of *romanticized slumming*—Gregory spoke this sentence very slowly and firmly—*that you might expect from a rich Ivy League Jewish boy*. He said he could no longer read Mailer, and, anyway, he much preferred Pound. He liked Hemingway, too, and thought that nobody had really understood Hemingway yet and how he was Pound's best student. Gregory declined my gift of *Advertisements for Myself*. A few weeks later I gave it to a fellow student who, shortly thereafter, drove his Harley—stoned—over a cliff at 120 MPH.

I finished my B.A. at Rutgers quickly; in spite of having been expelled years before from that college in Kentucky I spent only three-and-a-half years total earning the degree. I already knew that I wanted to get my Ph.D. at Vanderbilt, so the location of my M.A. degree didn't matter a great deal to me. When the University of Hawaii offered me a Teaching Assistantship, complete with travel pay from the East Coast, I packed my bags. I earned my M.A. there in nine months of intense coursework that did not, however, include any Hemingway or Mailer. It was 1966 and dismissal of Hemingway and Mailer was pervasive. In Hawaii, of all places, I first truly discovered Faulkner, read twice everything he wrote, and wrote my M.A. thesis on Faulkner's folk usages. Hawaii was as far as you could get from Greenwich Village, from Mailer and the New York literary life. There were no coffee-houses but we sang occasionally in some local joints and even learned some Hawaiian folksongs from Big Island cowboys. But they really preferred Hank Williams to their own folksongs. If there was a jazz scene in Hawaii, we never saw it. We lived in the apartment in the old Jungle of Waikiki that Kui Lee, the legendary Hawaiian songwriter-poet, had just vacated. His songs were scrawled on the wooden walls of that shack. And Frank Zappa played the guitar up in a tree at a party in my front yard. But no Mailer, no Hemingway—not in those islands.

I accepted a Ph.D. fellowship at Vanderbilt and in the fall of 1966 I moved to Nashville. Mailer and Hemingway were not read in any of the courses at Vanderbilt then, and if their names came up at all it was only in a negative sense in passing disdainful remarks. There we lived, to be sure, in what was regarded as the capitol of the Southern Renaissance, and the long shadow of

Fugitive-Agrarianism was a palpable daily presence. We took literary criticism courses with Allen Tate and special seminars with Cleanth Brooks, down from Yale for a week. I got to know Robert Penn Warren and, immersed as I was by then in southern lit, I started thinking of Red as my literary father. The literary life of New York and the East Coast, if it were granted existence at all, was something from another planet. There was only one other doctoral candidate who read *Why Are We in Vietnam?* and *The Armies of the Night* at the same time as I did. He was also the only other graduate student who sang and played music in clubs when he needed money. There weren't any coffeehouses in Nashville and the folksongs that were sung in the Village were not sung there. But there were plenty of juke-joints and country music places where I sang what I thought of by then as *authentic* folksongs, along with the songs I was writing and trying to pitch to the likes of Johnny Cash. My only Maileresque moment in Nashville was when we set up a temporary coffeehouse at the headquarters of Eugene McCarthy's brief quixotic presidential campaign. I sang some of the old Village songs there, and some new ones, but I had nothing to do with the place being named *EUGENE*, surely the worst name ever for a coffeehouse. After three years at Vanderbilt, with my newly minted Ph.D. in hand, I accepted a job teaching graduate studies in Faulkner and southern lit, as well as undergraduate and graduate folksong courses, at a place I had never heard of—SUNY-New Paltz, an hour and a half north of Manhattan. It seemed like a good place to be for a few years. I am still there, still teaching, forty-one years later. It is still one of the good places. Inevitably, as a function of landscape or place or location, I was drawn back into the literary life of New York City.

The first night I saw Mailer face-to-face and shook hands with him was at *The Lion's Head* in the Village in the early 1970s. It was perhaps the most famous literary saloon in New York City and, as I would learn, one of Mailer's favorite hangouts. But I did not go there to meet Mailer. I'd heard on the street that the Clancy Brothers might be singing there that night, informally, as they often did. And I knew that other singer-songwriters often performed there. In the late 1960s, Jerry Jeff Walker's greatest hit "Bo Jangles" had its debut there at *The Lion's Head* as did perhaps another of his early greatest hits, "Stoney" (a song, I confess, that is about me). I don't know if my old road-buddy Jerry Jeff knew Mailer at all, but the next time we talk I'll ask him. Just the other day, as I was composing this essay, I was at the Guthrie Center in the Berkshires for a concert by Tom Paxton, one of the most

celebrated folksingers and songwriters of the '60s. Talking to Tom after the show, he confirmed that he regularly saw Mailer at *The Lion's Head* for a number of years; Norman had his own roundtable there where he held forth, and "he was a good guy." I forgot to ask Paxton if Mailer liked folk music. Maybe he did. In any case, I went to *The Lion's Head* for the folk music the first night I shook hands with Mailer. He was not at his roundtable; he was standing at the bar talking with Pete Hamill, Jimmy Breslin, and some other regulars, a loud raucous conversation about New York politics and personalities. I was drawn into the conversation and eventually introduced myself and shook hands with them. I liked them all and it was the good real old talking and I wanted to stay but I had to get up to Grand Central and catch the last train to Poughkeepsie. I had to teach *The Naked and the Dead* the next morning. It was the first (and last) time I taught Mailer. That course was called Contemporary Literature (*contemporary* then meant everything after 1945). The professor who usually taught the course was hospitalized for the rest of the term and I'd been asked to take over the course, called up from the Southern League. It was also the first (but not the last) time I taught Hemingway.

The next few times I was in the Village I stopped in at *The Lion's Head* but I did not see Mailer there. I did hear some good folksinging. Then I went off for a year's stint as Visiting Professor at the University of Paris (Faulkner & Southern Lit of course), and I lived in the Latin Quarter and Montparnasse. Just as New Orleans and the French Quarter had erased my early love of the Village, Paris now became my magical palimpsest. Nobody in Paris that year (1973–74), French or American, talked about Mailer as Hemingway's heir. Nobody talked about Mailer at all, except James Jones at one memorable long lunch we had on the Boulevard Raspail. Discretion may be the better part of memoir, so it must suffice to say here that Jones thought *From Here to Eternity* was a far, far better book than *The Naked and the Dead*.

By the 1980s nobody at my university, nobody that I knew around the country, was teaching Mailer. When I did a senior Fulbright year in China—now hired to teach both Faulkner and Hemingway—at Peking University, I was much involved in translation projects initiated by Chinese scholars and translators who wanted to get all of the best twentieth-century American fiction rendered into Chinese. On several occasions, I was formally consulted on this matter, and once I was asked to comment on a very long list of writers and works that were under consideration. Mailer's name was not on the

list. I suggested that they should add his name. I do not know if they did or if he was ever translated into Chinese. One translator, roughly my age, who knew the names of many lesser American writers, said he had never heard of Mailer. But then he had never heard of Elvis Presley either.

* * *

And that brings me to my most important encounter with Mailer—at the legendary 1986 PEN meeting in New York. My original intent here was simply to record that encounter. I had hoped to locate the careful notes I took at all the meetings and sessions where Mailer presided, but they seem hopelessly lost among the trunks and closets full of pre-computer writing in my vast wreck of a house. Still, it is a story worth telling, and to tell it properly I have felt it necessary here to record my long involvement at the periphery of Mailer's life and work. So I offer this anecdote, this record of my newfound admiration for Mailer, as a kind of atonement for my own long neglect.

The 48th Congress of International PEN in January 1986, when the nation's and the world's leading writers came to New York at the invitation of Norman Mailer, president of PEN's American Center, to discuss the theme of the gathering—"The Writer's Imagination and the Imagination of the State"—was the most extraordinary literary event I have witnessed in a lifetime of participation in remarkable literary conferences and parliaments worldwide. Only Mailer could have created and presided over such a happening. I was not an invited participant, just a bystander, an observer who was present at most of the events as I stayed at the St. Moritz Hotel on Central Park South for the duration of the Congress. For a week I sat next to and rode the hotel elevator with and exchanged passing remarks with the likes of Brodsky, Coetzee, Gordimer, Grass, Milosz, Oz, Rushdie, Soyinka, Vargas Llosa, and of course the Americans such as Bellow, Carver, Doctorow, Morrison, Sontag, Styron, Updike, Vonnegut and many others I had seen or met or talked with at previous literary occasions. It is hard to believe that a detailed account of the event does not exist in print, but if it does I am not aware of it. I have heard, in conversation, the event referred to as "Mailer's Disgrace." But I prefer to think of it as "Mailer's Triumph." Since I have been unable to locate my detailed contemporaneous notes taken at the meetings, I can only sketch here a few of the most memorable moments.

I remember the grand opening event at the Library, for which Mailer had arranged the star speaker George Schultz, Reagan's Secretary of State. I remember the protests made by many writers, the denunciations to the effect that Mailer was making all of the assembled writers appear to be Reagan stooges. That seemed laughable to me, since the occasion seemed to exemplify one of Mailer's finest traits, his taste for free and open debate, at the highest level. Besides, I rather liked Schultz—the man—ever since I'd talked to him at some length during Reagan's state visit to China in 1984. I talked with him both at the State Dinner and at a private cocktail party, and it seemed extraordinary that he actually knew who I was—a *leading young Hemingway scholar* he called me. He knew that I was the Senior Fulbright Scholar at Peking University, China's most prestigious institution, and without any clue from me, he said it was a very good thing that I was teaching Hemingway to China's future leaders. That earned him some credit with me and not just because he was a man who did his homework and actually read advance briefings. (Conversation with Schultz was certainly more focused and illuminating than the interview I did with Diane Sawyer on network news later that week.) In any case, amidst all the protests, I approved of Mailer's choice of Schultz as speaker, and I made a point of telling him this after the occasion. He seemed very pleased, as if no one else had expressed approval.

I remember the confrontation between Günter Grass and Saul Bellow, and how Bellow handled the situation with poise and grace. I remember the denunciations of Bruno Kreisky, the Chancellor of Austria, and how he came across as the exemplar of graceful lucidity. I remember many readings by so many fine writers, including Updike's near mystical celebration of mailboxes as a medium of the free and open movement of thought and feeling. And I remember, of course, the women's protests over the lack of women on the various session panels. They had a point, but it was probably Susan Sontag (not a part of the rebellion) who had the last word on that score: "Literature is not an equal opportunity employer."

It was after the major session of the women's revolt that I had my most memorable Mailer moment. With Mailer presiding, many women occupied the front rows of the auditorium and proceeded to interrupt him persistently with hisses, catcalls, and other audible forms of disapproval and disorder. Many in the audience clearly felt a sense of chagrin, a deep embarrassment over the way things were going. I was sitting next to Günter

Grass and Salman Rushdie and their sense of discomfiture was evident. Behind me a writer I did not recognize said in heavily accented English: "This is shameful. It does not matter what he has said and done and written about women in the past—this is about this moment, this occasion, and they must cease their rudeness." But the hissing and interruption continued; although it seemed that most in the audience were appalled, no one, as I remember things, rose to the floor in defense of Mailer. I thought—and many others agreed—that Mailer handled an impossible situation well, mostly with even-tempered wit. On the elevator that night, crowded in with Bellow and Amos Oz and other writers, I recall that someone said: "Norman handled that mess with poise and uncharacteristic grace." But that was later.

Right after the heated session I was walking through the crowded lobby next to Mailer. We were squeezed in tight by the crowd, hardly able to move. I had just told him that I thought he'd handled the difficulties like some tough field commander conducting a battle against terrible odds. The PEN events, especially the protests, had captured the attention of the media, and there were reporters asking questions on all sides and television news cameras pointed in our faces. I remember thinking *isn't it nice that literature is news*. Then, as the TV cameramen backed away from Mailer and me and the crowd around us, clearing a space in front of us to improve camera angles, a young man pushed into that open space, got in Mailer's face and said: "You're such a tough guy Mr. Mailer. May I have this dance?" He was either flamboyantly gay or pretending to be. With Mailer's left arm pressed against me by the crowd, I could feel him tensing up. Then the young man said: "Oohh Normie—you're sooo Hemingway." Immediately, I felt Mailer's left arm tense and saw his fist then his tight left uppercut started toward the young man's chin. I put my right hand firmly on Mailer's wrist and said: "It's not worth it." I do not know whether I stopped the uppercut or he pulled his punch but the cameras were rolling and I was later told that there was a sound bite, a brief sequence of this moment on the 11 o'clock news that night and I could be heard clearly saying "It's not worth it." They told me that the TV clip—I never saw it—ended with the young man on the floor in front of Mailer, apparently out cold. Simultaneous with the stopped punch, the young man fell to the floor and seemed to be unconscious for a few seconds. All of us, including Mailer, pushed the crowd back to give him more breathing room and summoned emergency aid. When the cops showed up

immediately, the young man got up and ran the other way, and with a high shrieking laugh he disappeared in the crowd.

The incident of the fake fainting spell, the pulled or stopped or phantom punch, has haunted me off and on over the years. Was it the “sooo Hemingway” remark hissed in his face, after all the hissing at the women’s revolt session just before, that made Mailer seem to lose his composure for a second? Or was it the “Oohh Normie”? Maybe both. Or maybe he didn’t lose his composure at all, and the near-deed was the sure sign of a cool equanimity. I remember standing there, as the cops cleared the crowd away, seeing Doctorow sitting at the bar across the lobby and the expression on his face, and then as the cops escorted Mailer toward the Central Park South sidewalk his turning back and looking at me and saying “Thanks.” The whole sequence of events, I stood there thinking, seemed to signify some terrible primordial cultural misappropriation of both Hemingway and Mailer, calamitously emblematic of the deep confusions of our culture.

After that night in 1986 I saw Mailer on several other occasions. He gave the keynote address at the 1990 International Hemingway Conference at the Kennedy Library in Boston. I remember that I defended some things Mailer had said against the objections of my Hemingway colleagues. I do not remember what those things were since I do not have a copy of that speech, necessary as a corrective to what Mailer had said about Hemingway over the years. After the speech I spoke with Mailer, who was sitting with Jackie Onassis. He was jovial and relaxed and he made some coded humorous reference to the 1986 PEN encounter in the lobby. Something about Cassius Clay and Sonny Liston and a phantom punch. Both Mailer and Jackie Onassis were pleasant and charming that night.

Sometime in April 1991 I drove up to Albany for the “Telling the Truth Symposium” put on by the New York State Writers Institute. I particularly wanted to see Gay Talese again and to hear the “Is Fiction Truer than Truth?” panel with Mailer, Mary Gordon, and William Kennedy. I knew all three of them and it seemed like a fine mix for some fireworks or at least lively discussion, with Gordon and Mailer, and Kennedy’s *politesse* between them. It wasn’t exactly fireworks, but after Gordon held forth at length on the Catholic novel, it was Mailer’s turn to say something about the Jewish novel. When Mary kept interrupting Norman, even on the subject of Jewishness, he said what he said. Suffice it to say that Mailer won the debate, scoring top points in the categories of literary acuity and wit. When I talked to Mailer

after the program, he again made a reference to the phantom PEN-punch at the St. Moritz.

One last encounter germane to my Hemingway-Mailer motif here was a night at the Lotos Club in the early 1990s that stands sharply at attention in memory. The Lotos Club, in New York off Fifth Avenue in the East 60s, is one of America's oldest and most elegant private literary clubs. Mark Twain was a member, as were many other literary and arts luminaries—a long list. And I have been a member for over thirty years; in the period when Bill Kennedy chaired the Club Literary Committee I went to nearly all the literary evenings he organized at the club—for example, the occasion that Kennedy writes about in his piece, “Norman Mailer: An Eavesdropper at the Lotos Club” (in *Riding the Yellow Trolley Car*). But the night I am remembering here was a different occasion (if I remember rightly) in the early 1990s when William Styron was being honored, not long after the publication of *Darkness Visible*. After the program I went downstairs to the famous Grill Room with Kennedy, Mailer, and Styron, where a fascinating literary conversation ensued, crystallizing certain key points regarding the state of twentieth-century American literature.

It started out genially enough in the almost deserted Lotos Grill Room, in the company of the famous nudes hanging on the walls around us. Kennedy and Mailer discussed other writers, and I talked with Styron about Robert Penn Warren. He had died a few years before, and we both said how much we loved and missed Red. I mentioned that Warren had been my sponsor for Lotos membership in 1978. We then talked about how Eleanor and the children were doing. At some point, I mentioned that my other sponsor for Lotos membership was Mary Hemingway. Mary and I had been friends for several years and I was pleased that the first woman member in the long history of the Lotos had been my co-sponsor with Warren. At this point, Styron made some crack about Hemingway—I don't remember precisely everything he said but it had to do with how vastly over-rated Hemingway was and how his work “was inimical”—this I recall exactly because I always remember when somebody uses words like *inimical* or *eschew*—“to good writing by all the writers who followed after him.” I remember thinking *uh-oh I hope Norman didn't hear that* but he did and immediately abandoned his other conversation and entered what instantly became the fray. It did seem rather graceless for Styron to say such a thing in the presence of Mailer. But

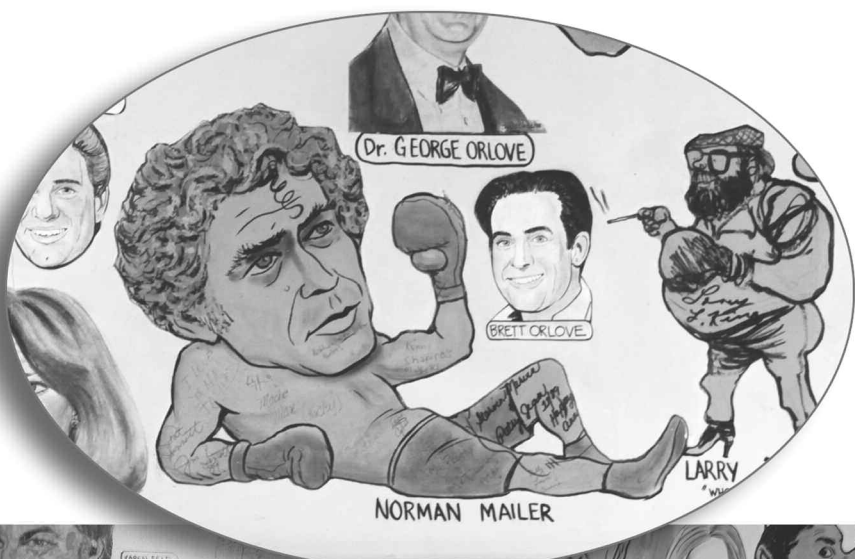
Styron looked very frail that night, his visage showing signs of fragility from his recent illness, so I gave him a pass. At first.

Styron insisted on Faulkner's primacy and Hemingway's insignificance. It seemed odd for him to do so, since he had so long borne the Faulkner-acolyte label, ever since the *derivative-Faulknerian* charges that were made against his early work. It also seemed odd since Styron's close friend Warren always said, as he often did to me, that Faulkner and Hemingway were the two indispensable writers, and we all must write in their joint commingled shadow. At any rate, Styron and Mailer went at it: Hemingway's famous understatement was a cover for what he didn't know, Faulkner in saying too much said nothing; Hemingway's sentences were sometimes baby-talk, Faulkner's sentences were often over-stuffed verbosity; and so forth. At first Kennedy, always in my experience a calmly reasonable gentleman, said little. I also mostly listened at first. I was then, as far as I could tell, one of two or three Hemingway scholars in the country who was also a Faulkner scholar and firmly believed that we needed to know and love both of them. Most Faulknerians I knew were either ignorant or disdainful of Hemingway; and vice-versa. And I think that is the peace-making position that both Kennedy and I cultivated—we needed both Faulkner and Hemingway. But at some moments, when Styron said some of his harder things against Hemingway, it was clearly three against one. Mailer's voice got louder when he said things like "Bill, I can't allow that to go unchallenged" and Styron's voice got softer and smaller. I was a little worried about him. But it was all just good tough literary talk among people who knew many things about writing. We eventually said goodnight amicably. It was the last time I saw Mailer. And Styron.

Since I thought it had been an evening of the best of all talking, I was very surprised when sometime later a fellow Lotos member, who had been in the corner of the Grill Room drinking alone that night, mentioned to me what he called Mailer's ungentlemanly conduct. "Rude, loud and offensive," he said. "Boorish and pugnacious as always." I reckon that was just one of those labels that you can't get unstuck. I disagreed genially and said maybe we should call a panel of Great Lotos Members who knew about good literary talk to sit in judgment—chaired by Mark Twain maybe. But I did wonder as I composed this essay if I had given Mailer a pass based on my newfound PEN-based personal fondness. So I recently asked the only other witness to that conversation if he thought Mailer was rude and unpleasant and pugnacious that night. He is a scientist and thus presumably a somewhat

detached observer of the occasion. Now, almost two decades later, he remembered the occasion as invigorating literary debate, intense and informed argumentation, some of the best literary talk he ever heard. And he thought Mailer was gracious and civilized. That's how I remember it, too.

All that has been recorded here may be a useful chapter in the history of Mailer's reputation according to *oral tradition*. It is also a reminder to me that we all have our literary sins of omission to atone for. I think I will now go back and finish *Harlot's Ghost*, take it off the shelf where it has been ignored for eighteen years with the bookmark on page 133, where I stopped reading in 1992. I might get a new copy of *Advertisements for Myself* and reread it, bringing full circle this exercise in *temps perdu* and *temps retrouvé*. I might even teach *The Naked and the Dead* again. This Mailer prelude and postlude has made me aware, far more so than I realized when I agreed to write this piece, that Norman has always been there, at the center of *my* literary life, just as he was—as Tiny insisted long ago in Michigan—at the center of American literary life. I salute Norman Mailer: the writer for his work, and the man for his wit and for, on those occasions when I was in his presence, his decency and graciousness. And I miss him.



Thomas Jacomo and the Mailer caricature at the Palm Restaurant. Photo by Mark Olshaker.