ENCOUNTERS WITH MAILER

ANDREW GORDON

I. 1972: UNCLE NORMAN AT BERKELEY

"Norman Mailer! How can you waste your time on him? He's just a Male Chauvinist Pig, an asshole." So said some of my friends, consigning him to the trash heap of the totally irrelevant. But Mailer was not your run-of-the-mill MCP; he had elaborated a private metaphysics and arrived at his conclusions by reasoning as tortured and complex as that of a Talmudic scholar.

It was the fall of 1972, toward the end of the Nixon-McGovern campaign. I was a graduate student at the University of California, finishing a doctoral dissertation about Mailer's fiction, a project that had engaged me in a close scrutiny of his work and his volatile public personality. Writing a long study of someone is marriage of a sort; you do not commit yourself to it lightly. At times during those years, Mailer had looked like to me like an existential hero. At other times, he was an arrogant boor, a first-rate genius or a second-rate clown, a modest gentleman or an egomaniacal tyrant; a weird mixture of incompatible extremes, as various and schizoid as Mailer's own portrait of his beloved America. So my feelings toward him alternated between attraction and repulsion, hero worship and total disillusionment. I had never met the man, and I couldn't make up my mind.

So when I heard that the great man was coming to town, Uncle Norman giving a lecture at Berkeley, all the mixed feelings leaped to the surface, like dexedrine warring with seconal in the head. After grappling so long with his shadow, to confront the legend in the flesh—I felt as much apprehension as anticipation.

"There's gonna be trouble," I heard some prophesy gleefully. "Woman's Lib ain't gonna let him get away with it."

THE MAILER REVIEW, VOL. 4, NO. 1, FALL 2010. Copyright © 2010. The Norman Mailer Society. Published by The Norman Mailer Society.

The scene as I approached Zellerbach Auditorium seemed to bear out their warnings. In front of the ticket line, a handful of demonstrators were holding up their placards: "A little bit of rape is good for a man's soul, says Norman Mailer." Surprisingly, the militants were primarily gays, not women. Supermacho meets the army of gays? It seemed to promise a classic contest: Classic Comics, perhaps.

I was surprised to find my instinct was to defend the champ. Couldn't they picket grosser offenders than Mailer? Or was it only that he had the boldness to announce unpopular views and the foolishness to take on all comers?

"Aren't you being silly?" I asked them.

"O, really," they sniffed at me. I was afraid the evening would be spoiled.

The audience settled in their seats, the gays positioned themselves for the battle to come, and the speaker was announced. He strutted up to the lectern, short and swaggering, dressed in black boots, blue jeans, black turtleneck and black blazer, tough but elegant, looking like a hip longshoreman or a punk professor. A schizoid balance, but on him it worked. The blue Levis seemed to say to the Berkeley audience, "I'm with you baby," but the blazer was a touch of sartorial splendor; it put him a notch or two above us. He was looking good under the lights, ready to go fifteen rounds, a presence, close to fifty but could pass for a prematurely white-haired forty. He stood there, a celebrity, star of stage, screen, and the printed page, enveloped in a wave of cheers and boos.

He paused a second after the noise died down, sniffing the air, trying to gauge the mood. "What's the score?" he asked the crowd, like the gangland boss from the East Side ready to parley with the mob from the West. "Are we going to have a good time tonight?"

A flurry of cheers.

"'We're going to have the greatest miserable time tonight! I have the fond hope that my dear friends from the liberation are here?"

One lone female shout: "o, yeah!"

"You sound kind of friendly," Mailer told them. "Hasn't the word reached you?" He is the sort of man who actively seeks out confrontations rather than avoiding them.

The audience was ready to pick up the gauntlet. "Norman, you *shmuck*!" yelled a woman's voice.

"Sweet heckler, all I heard was *schmuck*. I'm sure you don't know the

meaning of the word. The meaning of *shmuck* is *cunt.* And if I'm a Male Chauvinist Pig, I could not possibly be a cunt. God would not so honor me. So *'shmuck you.'"*

Cheers.

"Now I would like those dear ladies in the audience who are in the liberation and have hos-tile feelings toward me to hiss."

Loud hisses, as of a nest of rattlers, or Medusa with her hackles rising. Mailer hunched toward the microphone, and through tightly compressed lips, bit out: "O-bedient little bitches."

Much laughter and prolonged applause.

I could see his strategy: he was warming up the audience, playing them and drawing them out. His mood was genial. Maybe the crowd was his.

After a series of one-line gags, he announced two topics for the evening, and it would be his task to put them together: "Woman's Liberation and Richard Nixon." The conjunction of these wildly disparate topics provoked more laughter. Just like Mailer to try to yoke together incompatible extremes.

But he didn't get far before a man in the balcony moaned aloud with mock weariness, "I'm bored."

"Oh, fuck you," snapped Mailer, annoyed at the interruption. "You aren't even beginning to be bored."

"Fuck you with a telephone pole!" the guy shouted back with verve.

"You're not man enough to hold the telephone pole," responded Mailer.

The crowd roared; they were enjoying the repartee. I couldn't say the same for myself; I had heard better insults in a junior high playground.

Mailer began to talk about the McGovern campaign, but again, they would not let him continue. They baited him, and when he rose to the bait, a voice in the balcony piped out, "Now, now, Norman, that's a very childish way to reinforce your masculinity."

As the interruptions continued, Mailer began to lose patience, like the hard-as-nails principal of a slum school, trying to deliver a lecture to an assembly full or punks while the smartasses in the balcony pelt him with spit balls. "I tell you what, gang," said Mailer, "keep it up and we're gonna have a showdown."

The crowd was vastly amused by these sideshows even as I was finding them more and more tiresome. I resented the protestors for their interruptions and I resented Mailer for encouraging them. Was he only going to play the clown this evening?

Suddenly, a man enveloped from head to toe in a furry pink costume bunny-hopped onto the stage. He was a Bay Area grotesque, a walking phallus, a local character who called himself "The People's Prick." The author strode up to this pink furry outrage—we expected him to start swinging—but he only removed the sign pinned to the ambulatory shmuck. It read, "Mailer than thou." Mailer placed it in front of the lectern. "One down, 8,700 to go."

Applause.

People's Prick was unceremoniously dragged off stage by a bouncer, reverting to the state the media calls "going limp," but in his case could only be called "going stiff." This was turning into bad farce.

Mailer was talking about the women at the Democratic convention and the curse they had put on McGovern, when a curse seemed to descend upon Mailer. A second freak, this one sporting a gigantic blue dildo strapped to the front of his pants—like a demon in a medieval pageant—hurled a burning jockstrap onstage. It sat there and smoldered for a minute, seeming to mirror Mailer's nervous condition.

But the protestors had exhausted their best ammunition early in the spectacle. The evening went on and subsequent interruptions were shouted down by the audience. When they pleaded for aid for the two phallic impersonators who had been busted, nobody cared. For all the justice of their cause, the gays had ambushed themselves with juvenile inanity.

The crowd was Mailer's for the rest of the evening and he began to get good. He read from his new book about the 1972 presidential campaign, *St. George and the Godfather*, he talked about the "totalitarianism" of the woman's movement and of Richard Nixon, he considered the "monstrous disproportions" of the Vietnam war, with its "moral atrocities that bugger the mind," and he spoke of the blight that rests upon the twentieth century, which he called "lividity of the will."

Mailer was warming up now, growing more eloquent and impassioned as he arrived at the core of his ideas, orating in his characteristically rapid, staccato fashion. The extemporaneous words flowed the way his elaborate phrases do in print, in long, elegant sentences that bend and turn and gather momentum. He claimed that the country may be "already afloat on a sea of totalitarianism which is different from any which has ever been visited before on the earth. For this is a species of benign totalitarianism. . . ."

Then he denounced the arrogance and self-righteousness of the New Left,

and said that in the years before us we must begin to question all our motives. "Because finally, all evident before us, is the knowledge that *we are all full of shit*—from top to bottom."

Now the jester had taken on the guise of the revolutionary theorist. And we believed him; perhaps he had the handle on where the truth was hidden. His strategy had been to establish a communality with all of us—he was full of shit, but then, so were we all. He was one leap ahead because he already knew how full of it he was, and we, perhaps, did not.

The speech was over and he fielded questions from the audience, handling them with the aplomb of a politician. He could rattle off a quick reply to every questioner and a snappy rejoinder to every heckler. The only difference between Mailer and a candidate was that Mailer's responses were not memorized. He could take the most prosaic question and weave you an epic poem of an answer.

The protestors went down to defeat a second time. Whereas Mailer was familiar with every argument they could muster, they had never read his books and knew his ideas only as clumsy slogans. "'It is better to rape than to masterbate'—Norman Mailer" one of their placards read. They couldn't even spell it right. So it was no contest. Compared to Mailer, the crowd seemed weak and unfocussed. He was a master of words; everything in him had been concentrated toward the shaping of himself, the honing of his razor-sharp wit. It is the kind of weapon you must develop to survive in the jungle of New York higher culture, but Mailer also used this wit as the sharpest instrument in his literary arsenal.

Finally, I could see the difference between the audience and Mailer: they were amateurs and he was a professional. He'd had his entire life to develop the role of Norman Mailer, and he'd really got his act together. If, at times, the performance verged on the slick, it was always surprising. He gave you more than your money's worth. I thought of Mark Twain playing the lecture circuit (although Twain never had to cope with "The People's Prick").

Mailer moved slowly offstage, passing through the crowd like a politician working a receiving line, pumping hands, giving autographs (the signature was a little shaky), making pleasant small talk.

He clasped the hand of one attractive woman a little longer than usual. I caught the tag end of the conversation. "We must get together when I come back to San Francisco. Where will you be?"

She, smiling enigmatically: "Well, I move around a lot."

Mailer: "Don't worry, I'll find you."

As he walked past me, I got an overdose of the potent Scotch fumes wafting off him. An old admirer jumped in and they mixed it up for a minute, cheerfully mauling each other like two bear cubs at play, while the campus patrol freaked out on the sidelines. Then Jerry Rubin appeared, and the two held an instant reunion, embracing in a hearty bear hug. Mailer was beaming.

We followed the entourage to Solomon Grundy's on the Berkeley Marina ("Magnificent Morsels and Great Grog"), where Mailer sat and worked his way through a series of Tom Collinses, surrounded by a circle of twenty or thirty rapt young listeners. He spoke more casually now, and I began to sense a private Mailer, quiet, polite, and gracious, who was different from the brash, argumentative, and pugnacious image he put forward in public. Perhaps this lion saved his roar for the limelight.

Some of the questions were simple-minded, but his replies were courteous and attentive, and he looked the questioner right in the eye as he answered.

Still, one woman standing near me was less than satisfied. "He talks a lot," she said, "but he doesn't give much of his real self. And he doesn't really care about these people as individuals. Think of the situation Paul Krassner would have made of this round-table discussion!"

Granted, Mailer was not Krassner, but as I listened to his spiel, I could not help being fascinated. Here was Mailer tossing out idea after idea, rapidly and effortlessly. Here was an expert, a professional, a man who had molded his talent and his personality into that species of human magic we call genius. But was he too much the intellectual machine, feeding off his own substance? His ego seemed hidden inside an intricate fortress of metaphor.

I talked with his traveling secretary, a lovely, soft-spoken young woman named Suzanne, who said she was a writer herself. "I read *The Prisoner of Sex* and thought that he must be a terrible man, an awful person. But when I got to know him, I found that he wasn't like that at all. He's really very nice. Sometimes, I feel like I ought to protect him."

Not surprising that Mailer aroused the maternal instinct. By 1972, he had already been married four times (he was to marry twice more). He admitted he could never live without a woman.

I decided to go up and question the great man myself. But my question

was literary, a piece of Ph.D. trivia. Mailer pondered a moment and said, "I can't answer that for you. You'll have to do your own homework." Then he paused and looked me straight in the eye. "There's an old Mafia saying: '*Follow your nose.*'"

There in the perpetual twilight of the bar, I had a momentary flash, an epiphany: Mailer's features suddenly melted into the face of the most voluble Jewish uncle who has ever lived, the kind who would take you aside at a party and say, "So, *nu*, when are you going to wise up, *putz*?", the Spinoza of a drunken Bar Mitzvah. The type of uncle who would regale you at a family gathering, drink in hand, with the story of his life. A nice little guy, better educated than the other relatives, the family philosopher, gregarious, a quick opinion on every topic of the day, always tossing out a joke or a sharp notion, but he spent his days as a traveling salesman.

The occasion was coming to a close. It was two in the morning. As Mailer rose from the last Tom Collins like Moby Dick surfacing from the deep, he swam over to a bearded chap in the stygian gloom of the bar and wrapped a comradely arm around his shoulder. "Ah, Jerry!" Mailer intoned. He had located a familiar face in this sea of strangers.

But the fellow replied with a smile, like an actor graciously refusing a supporting role, "Thanks very much, Norman, but I'm not Jerry."

Mailer pulled back, startled, removing his arm as if he had just received a small electric shock. "O, pardon me, you're not Jerry Rubin."

"That's OK, Norman," said the man who was not Jerry Rubin. "I've been mistaken for him before. It's really dark in here."

Mailer grinned, super-polite and chagrined, the apologetic, chastened grimace of a man who has a little too much booze under his belt and has committed a strategic blunder. If the light had been better, I could have said if he was blushing.

"Well, now you know how near-sighted I am." Mailer is a past master at the art of self-deprecation as a saving gesture.

The blunder was resolved with tact; each had saved face for the other. And that was how the evening ended, Uncle Norman proving himself human after all, neither genius nor fool nor boor, just a mild-mannered gentleman who had the small vanity not to wear his glasses. Had some bullies in a long-distant Brooklyn schoolyard taunted him once too often with the humiliating cry "Four-eyes"? A sensitive, friendly, slightly vain middle-aged

man who had committed a *faux pas* at a party and, courteous to a fault, made his amends and returned to grace.

II. 1986: UNCLE NORMAN AT THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

Norman Mailer came to the University of Florida in Gainesville on February 25, 1986, sponsored by a student organization called Accent. He was paid $14,000 to give a talk entitled "The Art of Writing." I was asked to introduce him. As he took the stage in the O'Connell Center, a huge, multi-purpose hall built for major speeches and sporting events, both Mailer and the mostly student crowd of several hundred seemed dwarfed by this cavernous arena built to seat thousands.

I reflected on how much had changed in the fourteen years since I had last seen him. It had been 1972; I was a bearded graduate student in ragged jeans at the University of California, Berkeley when Mailer spoke there. Now I was a bearded Associate Professor of English in a jacket and tie, courtesy of Mailer; I had turned my dissertation about his fiction into a book. I never sent Mailer the book, afraid he would punch me in the nose. After all, would you want your works psychoanalyzed in public?

In 1972, it was the tempestuous Nixon years: the Vietnam War was still raging, the country was facing an election, and Mailer faced vociferous protest at Berkeley from both women's liberation and gay liberation. In 1986, it was the quiescent Reagan era. It was as if the Gipper had force-fed America a massive dose of valium, and everybody was living in Fantasyland, trying to pretend the 1960s never happened. Robert Lowell once wrote, "These are the tranquilized *Fifties*, and I am forty" ("Memories of West Street and Lepke"). Well, these were the tranquilized Eighties, and I was forty.

The times were tamer, and Mailer too had aged and mellowed. He was dapper in a double-breasted blue blazer, white, open-collared shirt, and grey slacks. No more blue jeans for his public performances. At sixty-three, he looked stouter and more wrinkled and his hair thinner and whiter then when I had last seen him–but, then, I was fourteen years older too. And this bored Florida student crowd was a far cry from the Berkeley rebels who had alternately cheered, booed, and heckled and disrupted Mailer's speech in 1972. Some of these UF students had actually been required to attend by a journalism professor. The headline in the Florida student newspaper the next day told the tale: "**Meet Mailer the lamb: Dry audience dampens author's**

rhetoric" (Jim Hagy, *The Independent Florida Alligator*, February 26, 1986, p. 1).

Mailer began apologetically, saying his reputation had been exaggerated. They seemed to expect a wild man like Hunter S. Thompson: "I couldn't carry Hunter Thompson's water pail," he said modestly. He referred to the last lecture he had given at the University of Florida, in 1975, when the audience heckled him; he felt he had laid an egg that night and seemed to want to make up for it. But his opening anecdote about the boxer Sonny Liston, intended to warm them up, received no response. "That's the first time I've told that story without getting a laugh," he said. "I can see we're going to have a lot of fun tonight." With that, the audience finally laughed, and Mailer smiled for the first time that evening.

He read a passage about Muhammad Ali from *The Fight,* speaking with a Southern twang, holding the book in his right hand while making short jabs with his clenched left fist. He also read from "The Art of Writing," which had recently been published in *Michigan Quarterly Review.*

Afterwards there were the inevitable questions about Mailer's reputation as a male chauvinist. "I've been called a sexist. I've been called macho. . . . Women don't know what they're talking about. . . . Women have been telling men how to live in New York for the last century." Some in the audience groaned; others laughed.

The evening had been neither triumph nor disaster for Mailer, but there was no way it could compare with the absurdist warfare that had taken place during his speech at Berkeley in 1972.

At the reception, I asked Mailer about his projected trilogy. When his novel *Ancient Evenings* (1983) appeared, it was announced as the first of a fictional trilogy beginning in ancient Egypt and stretching into the far future. Mailer said the trilogy was now "on ice." He said that he spent eleven years on the Egyptian novel, that it could stand by itself, and that he felt no great impulse to continue. He also admitted he was hesitant about writing about the future because science fiction was not his genre. He didn't know enough about computers, for one thing. I said I taught science fiction, and he asked, "Is it really close to magic?" I mentioned Arthur C. Clarke's remark: any sufficiently advanced technology is close to magic. Although Mailer majored in engineering at Harvard and wrote *Of a Fire on the Moon* about the Apollo astronauts, he had always deeply distrusted technology and preferred magic.

He said he was working on another novel but didn't want to talk about it.

The past year he'd mostly been writing screenplays, for money. He had six kids in school and had to pay the bills. Every month he met with his accountant and was "$10,000 down or $10,000 up." That's also why he spoke at Florida. He was working on Godard's adaptation of *King Lear* (which was eventually made, but not a good film). Mailer spoke admiringly of Kurosawa's *Ran*, an adaptation of *Macbeth*. He was also researching the life of Jewish racketeer Meyer Lansky for a possible film.

By strange coincidence, Joshua Weinstein, the student assigned to chaperone Mailer at UF, said he was a nephew of Lansky. Mailer prompted him for details about "Uncle Meyer" Lansky as family man. It was interesting to observe Mailer's journalistic technique: he was looking to confirm observations about Lansky's character he'd gleaned elsewhere.

After the reception, Mailer and I went to Bennigan's restaurant and bar with some students and journalists. He had refrained from eating or drinking before his talk, wanting to arrive onstage in peak condition. Now he ordered a hamburger and a drink called a "Rum Presbyterian," a concoction he instructed them how to blend. His mood was genial. The chef was so excited at making a hamburger for Norman Mailer that he asked for his autograph on a napkin. The author complied.

As Mailer drank, he began to unbend and talked freely in response to the students' questions. I was impressed by his graciousness, his candor, and his curiosity. He was willing to engage with the students, so long as they spoke about subjects that interested him. The conversation ranged from his recent trip to Russia, to his screenplays, boxing, flying, rock climbing, and journalism.

He said he had studied Russian for several months but gave up because he couldn't speak it and was having trouble with the Cyrillic alphabet: "I couldn't visualize the sound of the words." This suggested to me that his imagination is highly visual, or that he has to find a link between the audio and the visual.

Mailer said he liked the Russians: "They are deeper than Americans. I thought they all looked Jewish." He met and admired the poet Yevtushenko and twice viewed a movie Yevtushenko had made. I said Russian poets were like rock stars or opera singers; Mailer agreed.

He said that the American government had been lying to us about Russia throughout the Cold War to exaggerate the threat. He found Russia in 1985 not to be a great power but a sad place, a Third World country, like the

United States if it had been devastated by war and then run by the Army. He called it more "an Army state" then a police state: "In the Army, everyone gets drunk as a way of saying, 'I don't give a shit about your institution.'" That, he claimed, accounts for the appalling rate of alcoholism in Russia.

Talk shifted to boxing: the fraternities at the University of Florida had recently held a "Slugfest" of amateur boxing. Mailer was fascinated; he wanted to know the details about the weight classes and the time of the rounds. He said, "If these guys are going in the ring for the first time, they must be terrified." The students said this was generally true. He talked about boxers psyching themselves up for weeks before a fight, and the pressure and terror with which they lived.

Aging and death seemed to be on Mailer's mind. He discussing upcoming fighters and mentioned the death of trainer Cus D'Amato. Mailer said he gave up boxing in 1985: "My knees gave out. If you can't jog, you can't box." He had last seen Muhammad Ali in 1984 and said that, despite Parkinson's disease, Ali's mind was in much better shape than that of many alcoholics. Ali joked with Mailer's wife: "You still with that old man?"

The topic switched to skydiving. Mailer said he once flew a glider but didn't like it: too noisy, you had to concentrate on the instruments, and he got nauseated. Some students at a college he visited had once invited him skydiving. He was terrified all night at the prospect and relieved the next morning when it rained and they couldn't go up. I admired Mailer's honesty about his fears and incapacities, something he confronts in all his fiction. The terror he said boxers lived with was deeply familiar to Mailer.

I asked him about the scene of climbing the monument in Provincetown in his novel *Tough Guys Don't Dance* (1984). He said it was based on his experience rock climbing and on the experience of a guy who actually climbed the monument. We began to mentally cast the film of *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, which Mailer was about to direct. For Timothy Madden, I suggested William Hurt; Mailer said his name had been mentioned (the part was finally played by Ryan O'Neal). The part of Regency was tougher to cast. Mailer said there weren't many big, tough guys who can act. I mentioned Brian Dennehy (Wings Hauser ended up playing Regency). Then I described in detail to Mailer the plot of the Coen brothers' film *Blood Simple* (1985), a murder thriller I had recently seen. Mailer was momentarily taken aback, saying, "Jesus! That plot is better than mine." He was dissatisfied with the ending of *Tough Guys* but didn't yet know how to change it. (*Tough Guys*

[1987] had its moments, but it failed at the box office and became Mailer's first and last try at directing a Hollywood film. He was right: *Blood Simple* was a better thriller.)

Because I'd never boxed or gone skydiving or rock climbing, I talked about running with the bulls in Pamplona, which I had done in 1974. I said the real danger of running was not so much from the bulls but from fellow runners who tripped or stumbled, causing a human pileup or *montón.* Then many people could be gored or trampled by the bulls or the steers. Mailer said, "What a humiliating way to go: trampled by a steer!" I said, "To the guy getting trampled, it would make no difference which animal killed him." But Mailer was concerned about dying a noble death.

A student journalist asked him if journalism was good training for a writer. Mailer said no, "Journalism is a whorehouse." I disagreed, citing Twain, Crane, Dreiser, and Hemingway. But Mailer would not change his mind. The student journalists were disappointed.

Finally, Joshua Weinstein demonstrated a drinking trick with a straw; he claimed Florida Governor Bob Graham had taught it to him. It involved twisting and compressing the drinking straw, then popping it with a fingernail. It went off like a pistol shot. Mailer was game but couldn't make it work.

On the way back, we drove past Graham Pond on campus, where one evening in 1975 Mailer had given a speech outdoors that had been heckled by the students. I pointed out that right across the street was the campus sewage plant. Mailer said, "The sewers must have been rumbling the night I gave that speech." So he had not come to the University of Florida just for the money. He could have gone to many campuses, but he was trying to make up for what he perceived as his failure of eleven years before. And he seemed satisfied, if not with the bland reception to his speech that evening in 1986, then with his conversation with the students at the bar.

I drove him back to the Hilton. Mailer asked the time; it was 11:45 pm. "Omigosh, I've got to call my wife!" And he excused himself to use the phone.

I thought to myself: this is wife number six. I figured she would also be his last.