MY FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH NORMAN MAILER

MASHEY BERNSTEIN

LITTLE DID I KNOW WHEN I DECIDED TO WRITE ON NORMAN MAILER AS PART OF my PhD dissertation that one day we would meet and become friends—a friendship that lasted for nearly thirty years. What is it like to meet your literary idol? It was, without a doubt, one of the most exciting times of my life. Looking back, I can see how this entry reflects my sense of awe in being in his presence and how he loomed large in my imagination as an almost mythical figure. I doubt that it had the same import for Norman and was one of many such encounters with a fan, to whom he was always generous, but since it was, as the line goes, "the beginning of a beautiful friendship," maybe I am wrong in that assumption. Over the years, we wrote regularly, met whenever I was in New York or he in Los Angeles, and the relationship extended to other family members, especially to Norris and John Buffalo. It continues to inspire me. I consider myself one of the luckiest people in this respect.

Below is my journal entry written the next day. I have only made a few minor changes for the sake of clarity and added some in text notes indicated in italics.

In the entry, I included some background information. Did I sense that 35 years later someone might be interested in publishing it?!!

My first encounter with Norman Mailer. Thursday Night April 27th 1978. Frankie and Johnny's Bar, 47th and 7th, NYC. 6:30 PM.

BACKGROUND

The events leading up to the meeting can be briefly chronicled. In May 1975, I took my Ph.D. orals at the University of California, Santa Barbara, intending to write on some aspect of the American-Jewish novel and possibly

THE MAILER REVIEW. VOL. 6, NO. 1, FALL 2012. Copyright © 2012. The Norman Mailer Society. Published by The Norman Mailer Society.

Edward Lewis Wallant (*The Pawnbroker.*) I had at the time read very little of Mailer—other than *The Naked and the Dead* way back in 1964 while still in High School in Ireland and *Why Are We in Vietnam?* in 1969 when I had wrangled with the Irish Censor who wanted to ban it; maybe I was enamored of Mailer before I even knew it! *C*ompared to other American-Jewish authors in the field (Bellow, Malamud, Roth) Mailer was not considered a major figure in that genre but in the interests of covering the field as much as possible I decided to add him to my list. As I read him, I became more and more fascinated, eventually making him the central focus of my thesis.

A few months later, I wrote to him—A friend had his home address—about my ideas for the thesis; that is, tying him into the Puritan tradition and also to the idea of *mitzvah*, "holy action," in Judaism. About a week later, he replied saying that he thought the idea was "interesting" but did not want to "say something casually in a letter which then becomes to a small degree institutionalized." Nonetheless, I was ecstatic that he had taken the time to respond! The following Spring he visited California for the Oscars and I suggested we get together. He wrote afterwards to apologize for not meeting with me but that he couldn't wait to leave California, especially Los Angeles. In November of 1976 I visited New York City and wrote to him again but he was away. He told me to keep trying, even though he was as short of time "as an asthmatic is of breath." (Comment 2012: *Looking back at these exchanges, I am struck by how, for all intents and purposes, he really had no idea who I was and yet he took the time to respond to my brief letters. Dwayne Raymond in his book* Mornings with Mailer *talks about this dedication to anyone who wrote to him!)*

Somewhere in this time span I sent him the finished thesis but he did not respond.

In April 1977, I again wrote to him about a planned trip to New York to spend Passover with my family. It was a rather sprightly letter and his secretary Judith McNally called me to say that he would meet with me but that time was short. We spoke during the following weeks but nothing could be settled and I feared that I was being put on the long finger, even though I was assured that "Norman wants to meet you." His wife, (I had assumed that Norris at that time was his wife) had just given birth to his eighth child (John Buffalo) and he was busy on a book on Gary Gilmore. We finally managed a mutually convenient time. It was to be brief and I suspect a scouting trip to see how we connected.

THE MEETING:

Mailer arrived promptly, wearing a three-piece blue pin-striped suit, with his son Michael, a good looking boy of about 14, polite and well-mannered. I had arrived earlier and had a drink (a tequila sunrise) under my belt to calm my nerves. I had quizzed the bartender about Mailer and he said that he was "intense" (which he was with piercing blue eyes) and with a sharp temper that tolerated no bullshit. I wore blue jeans and a blue turtleneck sweater—neat but dressed down. I didn't wear a tie as I have a tendency to be stuffy and I wanted to make the atmosphere as casual as possible. I had rehearsed all sorts of conversations but realized that the event would generate its own atmosphere.

The bar was crowded but such was the nature of our conversation that I had hardly noticed another soul. All others vanished into the wallpaper.

We spoke of many things:

He began by asking me what I was doing in NYC. I explained that my parents were visiting from Ireland and that my brother had just moved here from London. He liked the fact that I was Irish and he mentioned how he was taken for Irish in his younger days, remarking how he went to an Irish bar and they asked him what county he was from. He talked of being on a Chicago TV show with Robert Briscoe (*2012: Briscoe was very well-known at the time. In 1959, he was named the first Jewish Lord Mayor of Dublin and made a tour of America.)*

I mentioned that I had read his piece on TV in *Esquire* and he remarked how few people had really got his message. He included me in those few and I was flattered. The flattery went further. He said that he had the "mind of an old man" going by feeling and that he got a good feeling about me from my letters and now from our conversation and he hoped that we would meet again and shoot the bull! "Maybe go to a boxing match with his friend Jose Torres." (2012: *I had always thought he said "we will be friends for life" which is how it turned out but maybe I am romanticizing the past? BTW, we never went to a bout.*)

We then talked about the Gilmore book. He explained the problems, the amount of data, how it grew and the style he was using. He said the "simple style" was easier now than it would have been ten years before. He had wanted to do a play about Gilmore but his literary agent wouldn't let him. We laughed as he described the play being pushed away. I asked about the novel he was planning and he explained its three parts, how he had written

800 pages and was only in the first part, which was set in Egypt. The second part was set in space and the third in the present. "But the book was 2/3 years away."

We discussed Judaism. I asked him if he had read [Rabbi Abraham Joshua] Heschel and he said only the quotes in my chapter and he apologized for having mislaid it. I mentioned how Father Ong at the Modern Language Association Convention considered him and Arthur Koestler as the most religious of American-Jewish writers. Mailer conceded the possibility but that it was like being "a champion bowler in a land of people with no arms." He said that in his younger years he had detested Judaism but when I said that I had wanted to include that idea in my thesis I could not find a quote to verify my feeling, he said that "out of delicacy for his mother, he had never put it in print." He described how the class would drive the Hebrew schoolteacher to tears; how he loathed Jewish ritual but was attracted to Chassidism–thru Black Magic.

He included Michael in the conversation when he told me about his grandfather, a rabbi who had died when he was 4. He said that he had never brought up his children as Jewish. When I mentioned that his daughter had attended a seder at Rabbi Wolfe Kellerman, he said like any proud father, "which daughter? I have five." He talked of Norman Podhoretz and the idea of Judaism as the "mirror of man"—an idea he still pondered. He said that my dissertation might have borne fruit as he was now included in the Reform Temple Prayer book. We discussed Mormonism as an ideal faith but he did not monopolize the conversation or go on for long on any one topic. At this point, the maître d' told them their table was ready but Mailer asked for a little longer. I guess that I finally relaxed at that point. I had been scared in case I blew it!

I then asked him some pointed questions: What did he think of Bellow? "A dull novelist, good with language" and can write things that Mailer confessed he couldn't but "dull," "too much outrage." Pynchon? A "phony." He disliked *Crying of Lot 49* as Pynchon did not resolve it. Joyce? A "master," along with Proust. I then said I was beginning to sound like an academician and dropped that approach. I asked if he had ever been to a Seder and he said, "not in fifty years" but if I gave one he would come and he again asked me to call him when I next came to NYC. On that note, we parted.

It was 7:10.