THE COMPLICATIONS OF NORMAN MAILER: A CONVERSATION WITH J. MICHAEL LENNON

PHILLIP SIPIORA

J. Michael Lennon's authorized biography, Norman Mailer: A Double Life, *was published by Simon & Schuster on October 15, 2013. This interview took place over two days in late July 2013.*

Sipiora: When and where did you meet Norman for the first time? What were your first impressions of him, both as a person and as a celebrated author?

Lennon: I met Norman in the early fall of 1972 at Western Illinois University in Macomb, Illinois. I had corresponded with him before that. I wrote to him after I saw him on the Dick Cavett show where he got into his famous fight with Gore Vidal, and felt impelled to tell him how much I thought he had been wronged by Vidal on the air. He wrote back and said that he was going to be speaking in Illinois not far from the University of Illinois-Springfield where I was teaching a Mailer seminar. So, several members of the seminar drove up with me to hear him speak. This was just before the election. McGovern was running against Nixon and the country was in ferment. After the speaking event, a lot of us went to a bar, and I introduced myself to him. He remembered who I was, and we stayed in the bar and talked until about 2 o'clock in the morning, talked about everything under the sun. He was filled with energy, amazing energy; he was drinking gin and

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tonics steadily, but was burning right through the booze. At that time, he was 49 and at the height of his powers. He was curious about me, not as curious as I was about him, of course, but he was curious, he was forthcoming, he was funny, he was bawdy, he was angry at Nixon, he was worried about the country. Very easy to get along with, not at all remote or guarded. At the end of the night he asked me where I was from and I said New England, and he said that he lived in Provincetown, and invited me to visit him. A few summers later, my wife and I went to see him, and later we started bringing our three sons, seeing him nearly every summer all through the 70s and 80s, either in Maine or in Provincetown. Those visits forged the relationship, and initiated a long correspondence.

Sipiora: Do you feel that at the beginning of your relationship with Mailer there was some kind of personal chemistry between you and Norman?

Lennon: At the time, I had no idea that he enjoyed Irishmen and liked their bravura, as he put it, their openness and sense of humor. I think what he saw was that I knew a lot about his work. I was writing my dissertation on his work and had written him letters about my ideas. And he'd written back. I was enthusiastic about his work, and I knew many of the obscure things that he had written. I had also ferreted out interviews he had given on talk shows; I used to tape things off the TV and the radio. I still have all those old tapes. I was assiduously collecting everything that he said and everything that was said about him in print, which was the beginning of a huge archive. He was impressed with that, that I liked his stuff, that I knew his stuff. He may have sensed that I was in there for the long run. But the idea of writing his biography never occurred to me, not consciously, at least.

Sipiora: I read the biography in ten days and when I closed the book I felt as if I had gone ten rounds at the gym. My head was swimming and I was exhausted, exhilarated, yet hungry for more. I had the strong feeling that nine hundred pages were not enough for the incredibly roller-coaster life that Mailer led. How did you feel when you finished the first draft? Were you satisfied that everything important was included?

Lennon: The first draft was 90,000 words longer than the one you read. It was 415,000 words, but I still felt that there were more things that could have

been said. But you've got to think about flow and pace. My editor, Bob Bender of Simon and Schuster, told me, "Look, the book will be preposterously long. We're talking about a book of 1400–1500 pages, a real cinder block. No one will buy it and you will defeat your own purposes. You will have fewer readers rather than more. So you've got to slash away." He was right, of course, and I began cutting, and rewriting as well. It took about two months. I cut 70–75,000 words and sent it in and Bob cut another 10–15,000. It's about 325,000 now. I didn't think it could be cut any more when I sent it to Bob, but he did a beautiful job, I must say. I did lose some material having to do with the literary battles that were going on between Lillian Hellman and Mary McCarthy, and Lillian Hellman and Diana Trilling. Mailer was close to them, and was dragged into their feuds. Richard Poirier was also involved. The fights went all the way back to the 1930s and the Red Scare of the 1950s; they were pointing fingers at each other about who was a real anti-communist and so forth. It took a lot of explication and really should be handled in a separate narrative. Mailer saw himself as the grand seignior, the arbiter of the literary world at that time. It's impossible to imagine anybody else playing that role today.

Sipiora: Let's talk a little about the machinery of the biography. When and how did you become the authorized biographer of Mailer?

Lennon: I became authorized biographer after the death of Robert F. Lucid, who had the job for many years, decades. Bob died in December 2006 and I was the understudy. Bob, who was my mentor and friend, was in poor health in his last years, and had for all intents and purposes ceased work on the biography. I knew that if he got ill or incapacitated or died that I would take over. This arrangement was understood by Mailer and Lucid, of course.

Sipiora: When that happened in 2006, did you feel that you had an enormous burden on your shoulders and a challenge, or did you feel as if you were about to soar into flight, energized, particularly after so many years as Mailer's archivist and close friend?

Lennon: I guess neither and both. I knew that it was going to be a real challenge, and that it was going to take the next several years of my life, seven, as it turned out. One part of me realized that this was a rock that I was going

to carry on my back for a long time. But the other part was eager and saw it as the opportunity of a lifetime. I am the only person besides Mailer to have read all of his 45,000 letters, and that gave me a unique advantage. Bob had never read them all. He was reading them piecemeal as he went along, and in his draft of the biography, he had only gotten to 1951 in Mailer's life. Not long after he died, I realized that I couldn't pick up from where he stopped. His style and perspective were too different from my own. So I started from scratch.

Sipiora: How important were the letters to the biography?

Lennon: The letters and Mailer's writing, published and unpublished, are the most important sources. I quote from the letters close to seven hundred times. The interviews that I did with Mailer over a number of years, especially his last years, are also important. We did around a dozen in the year before he died, more in previous years. Those interviews were probably the second most important source. The letters cover a range of years and topics, sixty years of contemporaneous comment. And Mailer was very frank in his letters; he didn't really edit them; sometimes he would clean them up when he got the draft, add a sentence here or there, but usually he just signed the letters after he dictated them. They were very frank; he was not a person who hid many things. He talked about his biggest concerns and private affairs in his letters, and revealed what we might call his mental weather to friends, as well as to people that he barely knew. Some of the letters are quite long. Once he got going he had trouble stopping. There were a number of people with whom he had protracted correspondences. Mickey Knox, an actor Mailer knew since the 1940s was one of them. Eiichi Yamanishi, his Japanese translator, Jack Abbott, Diana Trilling were also important. He had a lengthy correspondence with Susan, his eldest child, because she lived in Mexico. Because many of the letters were to family members, we know about what was going on in the family, births, deaths, illnesses, divorces and breakups, the vicissitudes of family life. We also learn about his publishing career, and the ordeals of completing his longer books. I think Hemingway wrote something like 7,000 letters. Mailer wrote six times as many.

Sipiora: How many interviews did you conduct for the biography?

Lennon: I did interviews with eighty-five people, not counting Norman, his sister, Barbara, and Larry Schiller. With the other eighty-five people, I did maybe 125–130 interviews, because I interviewed some people—his last wife, Norris, and several of the children more than once. So I would say when you count up the interviews I did with Mailer with Barbara and with Larry Schiller, it would be, all told, about two hundred interviews. I was also fortunate enough to have access to a dozen unpublished interviews Larry Schiller did with Larry Grobel. They were very useful for understanding the Mailer-Schiller relationship. Schiller was Mailer's most important collaborator, and these interviews illumined their work on *Marilyn*, *The Executioner's Song*, and other books and films.

Sipiora: That is a staggering number of interviews for any biography. Did some interviews scheduled fail to materialize for one reason or another?

Lennon: I pretty much saw everybody I wanted to see. There were some other people that were on my list, including a couple of writers, I won't mention their names, who indicated they wanted to talk to me, but they were out of the country, or we couldn't get together, whatever. But the writers that I really wanted to talk to—Doris Kearns and Dick Goodwin, Gay Talese, Don DeLillo, Dotson Rader, William Kennedy, Barbara Probst Solomon—were all happy to help me. Ditto for his close friends—Schiller, Mickey Knox, Ivan Fisher, Richard Stratton, Bill Majeski, Jeffrey Michelson—and his editors—Veronica Windholz, David Ebershoff, Jason Epstein. I suppose if I had taken another year, I could have easily racked up another twenty interviews, and they would have added something. There's no end; Mailer knew a lot of people and lived a long public life. Most significant is that everyone in his immediate family spoke to me, all of children, his sister Barbara and her son Peter Alson; I spoke to Sam Radin, his cousin and his chief executor, and of course, Norris, and his living ex-wives. I interviewed his friends, his family, his lovers, and people in the literary world. I'm happy with the spectrum.

Sipiora: Is it fair to say that your detailed interviews with the large Mailer family proved to be strategic in writing the narrative?

Lennon: The interviews with the Mailer family gave me insights that would have been otherwise unattainable. They gave me the feel of what it was like

to spend a summer in Maine with Mailer, what it was like to jump off the deck twenty feet down into the ice cold water of Somes Sound in Maine, what it was like to cross the Knife Edge of Mt. Katahdin, all of the adventurous things, going on raft rides down rivers, sailing, rock-climbing, all the things they did with their Dad and remembered so well. They also told me about the difficulties they had with their father. At times, he was overbearing, insistent and strong-minded. And he pushed them to do things they didn't want to. Often he wasn't there because he was busy writing and traveling, and they missed him, they wanted him around more, and only in his later years did they get all the access to him they wanted. John Buffalo and Matthew were exceptions to that because they grew up in the house with him and Norris (they were together for 32 years), and were always there, while the other kids lived with him off and on.

Sipiora: Were there important surprises for you in some of the interviews, things that jolted you or things that you had been totally unaware of?

Lennon: I guess in that category would be some of the women that he had long-term affairs with. I knew he had had many affairs, but several women told me about their relationships in detail. I got a good sense of how they saw him at a particular moment in time, and getting to know what he was like in the 50s, as opposed to the 80s and 90s, charting the changes in his life by reference to the interviews with his lovers, was quite valuable. Another surprise was how he felt about the Jack Abbott affair, how excruciating it was for him. Getting a 360-degree view of his stabbing of his second wife, Adele, and the aftermath, what his friends called "The Trouble," by talking to him and various people was also important. But there was no hidden door that opened up to reveal something I had no inkling of at all. I knew the basic contours of the mosaic, but the tessellations were not complete; I was adding tiles all over the place. So there were a hundred, two hundred, five hundred little surprises, but was there no one gigantic surprise, no, I don't think so.

Sipiora: You have indicated that you read carefully the other Mailer biographies. Did you look at biographies of other writers before you started, beyond what you had already been familiar with in your career as an English professor?

Lennon: Yes, I did. In my bedroom I have a bookcase and it must have sixty or eighty different biographies. Many of them were contemporaries of Mailer, people like Cheever, Hellman, Vidal, the Trillings, James Jones, Plimpton, Capote, Styron, Baldwin, the important contemporaries. I also had classic biographies of D. H. Lawrence, Hemingway, Tolstoy, Chekhov, Stendhal, Marion Meade's bio of Dorothy Parker, people like that—the great writers who influenced Mailer. I am a great fan of Leon Edel's biography of Henry James, five volumes. I was always looking at biographies to get ideas of how to proceed, tactical tips. But this was early on, during the research period. When I began writing the book in the third year, I stopped reading other biographies except to check facts. For example, I looked at Gerald Clarke's biography of Truman Capote's biography for an account of Capote's Black and White Ball in 1966, but I stopped reading bios wholesale. I didn't want to pick up anybody else's tropes or tics. The letters of the same people were often consulted, too: Rose Styron's edition of her husband's, George Hendrick's of the letters of James Jones, Saskia Hamilton's collection of Robert Lowell's correspondence, and so on. I must have twenty or thirty collections of letters. Carlos Baker's Hemingway books—the letters and the biography—were also useful. Hemingway was a critical figure in Mailer's life, vying with JFK, Marilyn Monroe and Muhammad Ali.

Sipiora: Is there one specific biography that served as a sort of guiding light for you, one that you would hold up above the others?

Lennon: There were four biographies that were models for me—make it five—in the ways they integrated various kinds of material. Crudely put, the brunt of biography writing is braiding the public and the private life, the love affairs with the literary business, the prose and the passion of a life, as E. M. Forster put it. The five would be Richard Ellmann's Joyce, Henri Troyat's Tolstoy (which Mailer told me was the best biography he had ever read), Justin Kaplan's Walt Whitman, Michael Millgate's Thomas Hardy, and Edel's Henry James. I looked at a number of Hemingway biographies. Kenneth Lynn's also meant a lot to me; I think he was influenced by Mailer's ideas on Hemingway's essential personality, if there is such a thing. Also, Fred Kaplan's biography of Vidal, James West's of Styron. I could name more, but those were the most important. Oh, and James Campbell's biography of James Baldwin,

which has a nice portrait of Mailer in it. Ellmann's and Troyat's are the two most glorious biographies to my mind, the best two biographies I've read.

Sipiora: Speaking of your background as an English professor, your academic training is most evident in your copious attention to careful record keeping and meticulous documentation of sources. Such careful work is usually referred to as a "definitive edition" in bibliography. Were there times when you wished that you could perhaps write a little more freely, open throttle, without the mindful scrutiny of an academic guardian angel over your shoulder?

Lennon: One of the challenges for me was to break away from academic writing. I wanted my bio to resemble a novel a bit, and therefore had to eliminate the kind of sourcing and hat-tipping that one does in critical essays. At one point John Buffalo Mailer read an early chapter and said, "Mike, you keep telling me what your sources are in the middle of the text, and it's kind of irritating. Why don't you put that stuff in the footnotes?" When I went back and read what I had written I realized he was right. I was being too academic in the way I was nesting the material, and had to jettison the nests, the attributions and so forth. It is an obligation to be well-sourced, but I wanted the story to move the way a river runs at different speeds. I was trying to write a book that would appeal to both academics and non-academics.

Sipiora: How difficult of a balancing act was it writing a book for both academics and non-academics? In my view, the biography is clearly written in an accessible style yet it is also clearly a very scholarly book, by which I mean that it is carefully researched, the documentation is professional and precise, and as a reader I felt that objectivity and accuracy were two fundamental principles in your work.

Lennon: Thank you. It was difficult at first. It took me a while to get on the right track. I did a lot of backtracking in the first six months of writing. Chapters one and two and three were written and re-written a number of times in order to get the right tone, the right balance as you put it, between academic writing and writing that's accessible to the common reader. So it took me a while, and the suggestion of John Buffalo, to figure out how to do it. I know when I go back and read the 10,000 words that I wrote for my ini-

tial proposal, which I thought was exactly what I was going to do in the text, I find out that it was a bit too academic, too concerned with what other people had said and done instead of just roaring right ahead and letting Mailer race through his own life. By the time I get Mailer out of the army and he goes to Paris in chapter four, I had found my rhythm. A careful reader might see that the tone changes just a bit at that point, but I hope not. I tried to make it seamless.

Sipiora: Very few readers know that your wife, Donna, has been enormously important in writing the biography. Can you tell us what Donna did and explain how it made a difference?

Lennon: Sure. Donna's first task was to transcribe the interviews. Initially, we had a person transcribing who had worked for Larry Schiller, and this person did, I don't know, maybe five or six of the early interviews. The person was very good, but didn't know the names of all the people, wasn't familiar with the names of books, and so forth. Donna had read most of Mailer's books, and she's quite well-educated and well-read, so it really helped that she transcribed the interviews. Plus, she lived with the interviewer. She knew a lot of the people too, the Mailer kids, and most of Mailer's friends. So that was her first job, and it continued for several years. She also read the raw chapters. She and Barbara Wasserman were the two people who would read the chapters right after I would finish them. Donna knew when something sounded false, opaque, or over-written. As time went on she got involved in research. She took all of the clippings and files that I had on Mailer's public appearances, when he gave a reading, when he went to a movie opening, when he appeared on a television show—any time he was in the public eye. I gave her all those materials and she constructed a chart of his public life that in some cases went day by day. She'd give a citation and a little explanation of what he did, and as I was writing about a particular period, I would have her charts for reference. His private life I had to trace out from his letters and interviews and things like that. But she put together the public record. There was another person, Matthew Hinton, who was a graduate student at Wilkes, and he went through and gave me a timeline of events in Mailer's life as recorded in the other four biographies, so I could check my work against them, make sure my dates were correct. If three out of four agreed on the date I had, I felt safe in using it. I had another half-dozen

Wilkes students researching discrete areas of his life. They filled in a lot of gaps for me. Donna did a lot of other stuff, including a detailed chronology on the whole Gilmore-Jack Abbott business. She was indispensable. Finally, she took over the task of assembling the photos, and communicated with the photographers, negotiated the rights, did it all. In fact, today she's looking at the final proof sheets on the fifty-four photos in the book.

Sipiora: The Advanced Readers' Copy of the biography that I read contained no precise indication of quotations to sources. How many sources, overall, did you have?

Lennon: At the end of the book there are 130 pages of notes, and those pages contain about 3400–3500 different citations, some of which refer to several sources. How many different sources, I couldn't tell you. I know that I have 700 different citations to probably 600 different Mailer letters, and then you've got my interviews, and material from the earlier Mailer bios, especially the one by Hilary Mills. She was Mailer's first biographer and did a lot of pioneering research and interviews. I used the other biographers—Mary Dearborn, Peter Manso, and Carl Rollyson—as well, but she was the most important of the four. Then there is the public record—all the stuff that appeared in books, newspapers and magazines, television programs—must be over a thousand sources there.

Sipiora: That's quite a number. Did you locate many facts, rumors, etc. that could not be verified in your investigation?

Lennon: Yes, I would run into a blind alley on occasion. There were an awful lot of rumors about Mailer and unless I could get some verification, I didn't use them. If he got into all the fights people remembered, he would be a lot more battered than he was. People were always telling tall stories about Mailer, and they gained a life of their own, becoming what Mailer called factoids. Once in a while I would find an item on a page torn from a magazine, a page with no date or title of the magazine. I could only date it approximately. If you look through the sources you will see maybe twenty different citations where there's a question mark for either the month or the day in which the event took place. These are the small mysteries all biographers face, but such items are a small percentage of my sources. I think the one

that I spent the most time on and never found was a John Updike quotation. After Kennedy was assassinated, he said that it seemed that God had removed his blessing from the U.S. I had a research librarian at Wilkes University, Brian Sacolic, trying to track that down, but we never did find the source. And Brian is a masterful researcher. But it's quoted all over the internet.

Sipiora: I once asked you about something that I had heard from a good source, for me at least, but you could not corroborate it and therefore I could not use it in my book, which leads me to ask about Barbara Wasserman, Mailer's younger sister, as a critical source of information.

Lennon: Barbara is a shrewd editor as well as an irreplaceable source. She was the only person to read all of Mailer's books before they came out in manuscript. No other person in publishing read them all because he moved from publishing house to publishing house over the decades, so she really had a first-hand account of his career, and of course she grew up in the same house as him. She and Donna were the first two people who read my chapters. I had a few other people who read them, my brother Peter, and a friend named Bob Heaman, who is a colleague of mine at Wilkes. Both have sharp eyes and know literary lore, and were a great help. And course my agent, "Ike" Williams, and Bob Bender, my editor read everything with a careful eye. Barbara was terrific because she would say, "You're wrong, it wasn't that aunt who made that remark, it was another aunt." Or, "We didn't live at that address in 1943; we lived at such-and-such." She had detailed knowledge, and she had a sense of nuance on how her brother would act in certain situations. So, she was both a fine editor and an impeccable source, and that's why in the notes I do not even try to date the material she provided. I had hundreds of emails and phone conversations with her. I cite her in the text and readers will know that she is the source, but that's it, that's all I can provide.

Sipiora: Was Barbara born four years after Norman?

Lennon: Yes, she was born in 1927, April 6. She is four years and two months younger than he.

Sipiora: I suspect that questionable information came to you as you were doing your research.

Lennon: Many of the things that are out there are tall tales or the product of imperfect memory. Mailer's second wife Adele wrote a memoir from memory and may not have done a lot of background checking. There are no footnotes in her book. And so sometimes she got dates and event sequences wrong. But her book, *The Last Party*, is a terrific resource as far as the mood of certain events was concerned, and the Zeitgeist. So whenever I quoted from her, and a few others, I usually had another source for dates.

Sipiora: Notwithstanding limitations of space, what would be the one battle or one issue that you would liked to have included but was left out?

Lennon: I guess the hardest one to cut was the battle between Lillian Hellman and Diana Trilling. They were both great friends of Mailer, and he told his secretary, when she told him about the fight, that he was going to lose two great friends. They both appealed to him to intercede, to mediate. He did, and pleased neither. For a time, he lost both of them as friends. Later on they came back, but it was never quite the same. But it is a very complicated story, because you really have to go back to the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop nonaggression pact between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany to understand the roots of their argument, back to the Russian Revolution, in fact. The pact is when profound disenchantment with Russia began. To tell the story properly took a lot of pages, and such a long digression hurt the flow of the book. Telling it would add to our understanding of Mailer's stature at the time, but his stature is pretty well established without it.

Sipiora: The biography contains so much detail, yet it is simultaneously rich in its articulation of what so many life fragments mean. You provide a comprehensive arc of interpretation that is systematic, cogent, and penetrating. Did you set out to give your readers a comprehensive interpretation of Mailer—your story telling his story—or did it just work out that way without deliberate architecture on your part?

Lennon: It wasn't a conscious thing—and thank you for your kind remarks. I had spent so long thinking about Mailer, talking about Mailer, meeting with Mailer, meeting with his family, and discussing Mailer, that the shape of the narrative, willy-nilly, cohered in my unconscious. I knew what I wanted to emphasize and what I didn't and never questioned it as it un-

folded, for better or worse. I did want to emphasize his inner life, his sense of himself, his mental weather, his preoccupations (the largest was his own identity), and how they impinged on his work. There is an unspoken superstructure (as Barry Leeds has so well explained) behind everything he wrote. Revealing it, in all its permutations, was my main goal. I also wanted to talk about his life as a womanizer, delineate it, and bring in some of the women he was involved with. No one had really done that before, not to the extent I have. The womanizing almost destroyed his marriage with Norris. She told a lot of it in her fine memoir, *A Ticket to the Circus*, but she didn't know the women he was involved with in any detailed way, and I did. I had interviews with them. It was new material.

Selection of material, the incidents of his life, is half the game. Another of my constants was to present Mailer's lifelong struggle to find suitable points of view, different narrative perspectives for different situations. He struggled with how to use himself and his experience from start to finish, from *The Naked and the Dead* onward. This endless wrestling with the deployment of self, or selves, culminated, but did not end, in *The Armies of the Night*. He modulated self-presentation in *An American Dream*, in *Marilyn*, in *Picasso*, and certainly in *Ancient Evenings*. He was always trying to find a new way to use himself in narrative, and was reshaping narrative forms to do so. I think that's one of the great things about American literature. We're constantly reinventing narrative in this country, ways to tell stories. And Mailer was right at the forefront of that for many, many years. I was pretty certain beforehand that I wanted to explore that reinvention because it had been a preoccupation in the critical essays I've written about him.

Sipiora: Let me jump back to something you said about his extramarital affairs when he was married to Norris. What struck me was that the Norman Mailer I knew was exceptionally loyal to friends. Indeed, his loyalty to the principle of loyalty was a critical value in his system. Yet, as you point out, he continuously carried out affairs throughout six marriages. How do you reconcile Mailer's affairs with his strong sense of commitment to those close to him?

Lennon: Mailer wanted it both ways. He wanted Norris as the foundation of his family, somebody holding his family together, somebody that he did love dearly. They had a great partnership. They enjoyed each other's company;

they had a child, John Buffalo; Norman informally adopted Norris's son, Matthew, from her first marriage; they worked together very well, and she connected with all the children. But at the same time, as he said many times, he felt something burning inside him: the need for relationships with other women. He felt something would die in him if he didn't have them. To exercise different parts of his personality, he had affairs with dozens of women over the course of his lifetime. It created a huge crisis, and when push came to shove, he gave up the private life. Not entirely, but almost entirely after 1991. There were a few forays here and there, but nothing much after that because, finally, he recognized that he did not want to lose Norris.

Sipiora: After the 1948 publication of *The Naked and the Dead*, you quote NM as saying that he is depressed. Mailer says, "I feel trapped. My anonymity is lost." How did Mailer's loss of anonymity shape his life as a public intellectual for nearly six decades? Surely there was a positive, creative component to being a celebrity.

Lennon: Of course. But he started out as a shy young man, not reclusive or anything like that, and he still liked to have a good time and always enjoyed life, but he dearly loved being an observer. His sinecure as a sharp-eyed observer, he initially believed, was being threatened by his celebrity. People were watching him, and he couldn't stand in a corner and watch things at a party any more. This bothered him deeply. He felt that he was losing one of the pillars of his ability to write. That was how he was able to write *The Naked and the Dead*, by watching those soldiers all through the war—he had a list of 161 soldiers, and he had their traits written down. He observed them out of the corner of his eye, and when he couldn't do that anymore it seemed that his entire *modus operandi* had been compromised, his observation tower was leaning like Pisa. But as time went on, he realized that there was a beneficial aspect to his situation, that there were good things about being a celebrity, because it gave him access to a lot of extraordinary people. People like Jacqueline Kennedy, people like Mohammed Ali. He was able to meet Lillian Hellman, William Buckley, Madonna, people that interested him deeply. He recognized eventually that the shy young man in a corner would never meet those people. He struggled with the issue for years, but by the early 60s, he found that he relished being in the middle of things, he loved being talked about, he loved being a sensation. He recalled that when he married Jeanne

Campbell, he found that she also loved being in the center of things. What a team they were! But that was 1963. Before 1960 he didn't feel that way at all—he felt like he was just a quiet young man cut off from his material. Not many writers understood the benefits of celebrity so well, or used them more creatively than Norman Mailer.

Sipiora: It sounds as if you're saying that Mailer had, simultaneously, a desire and distaste for fame throughout his career, and he used it when he could, willing to pay the price when one was exacted. Would that be a fair assessment?

Lennon: He was of two minds about fame. But he was of two minds about everything. That's where the title of the biography came from—for Mailer everything was double. One of the reasons he liked Provincetown so much was that nobody made a fuss about him. They had known him for many years and it was just, "Hi ya Norman, how ya doin." They weren't going to tip their hat to him or make a fuss, which enabled him to watch things in the town. I have a description of him going into a bar with Fred Ambrose and people would say, "Oh, there's Norman Mailer," but then in fifteen minutes they would forget about him, and he could just sit in the bar and observe. For him, that was wonderful, and was one of the things he loved about Provincetown; it was very democratic he said. And so, yes, he wanted it both ways—he wanted to be a celebrity and he wanted to be an observer.

Sipiora: You mention being a celebrity alongside Norman's fascination with observation. Do you think that's one of the reasons why he was so attracted to filmmaking as an art form?

Lennon: Yes, I do. I think that he learned a great deal about narrative perspective from film. He said that one of the ways that he learned how to describe himself in the third person was by looking at the raw footage of himself in his experimental films. He had to figure out how to cut himself, how to present himself, when to put his foot forward, when to pull his foot back. Filmmaking was an adjunct to his writing—they bled into each other. He was fascinated with theatre in the same way, and himself as an actor on the stage of the Johnny Carson show, the Dick Cavett show, the Charlie Rose show. He loved to watch those shows and critique his own performance and

he got very good at it. He was a wonderful presence on those shows, but when he started he was disastrous, he made all sorts of errors. He was pompous, he was longwinded, and he got undercut by people like Gore Vidal and Truman Capote, who knew how to handle the media. But he mastered it, and then became a celebrated public intellectual and bon vivant. He always seemed so spontaneous, but it came from much practice and cogitation.

Sipiora: You describe Mailer as an "actor on the American stage." I assume that you are referring to presence, access, and performance. Are there other dimensions of this notion of actor writ large?

Lennon: I think that it's going to be a long time before we have people like Robert Lowell, Gore Vidal and Norman Mailer commenting with authority on people like Nixon and Kennedy and Johnson and Gen. Westmoreland, treating them as equals and being listened to by the media as public intellectuals whose opinions and insights on what's happening on the American stage are indisputably important. We just don't have anyone of that stature any more in American life. We have people like Newt Gingrich. Christopher Hitchens was one of the last persons of Mailer's ilk. During the same period in the 1960s and 1970s that Mailer was at his best, Robert Lowell was writing poems about the American Caesar, comparing Napoleon to LBJ, doing things like that. Nobody now is as informed and assured as when Lowell and Mailer were commanding the stage. It's no surprise that they liked each other. They could cross swords with Henry Kissinger, with Orson Welles, with Jack Kennedy. Mailer had dealings with four or five presidents. They were angry about things he said on television or wrote, and wanted transcripts of what he said. So that's part of what I mean about being a player on the American stage—you have to go back to Mark Twain, Henry Adams, or H. L. Mencken to find predecessors of their stature. Hemingway was a major figure, of course, and was lionized in the media, but he wasn't an arbiter of opinion; he wasn't talking about world events in the same way, with the same knowledge and historical perspective that Mailer and Lowell had.

Sipiora: You quote Mailer as saying that he has avoided writing about "crystals"—childhood experiences because they are "endlessly fruitful." Hemingway has said something similar in referring to gems of incidents in his life

that continued to give. Do you think that Mailer was identifying with Hemingway on this issue?

Lennon: Not that I know of. I think that there were experiences that were burned so deeply into Mailer when he was young that he never wrote about, never talked about, but were used to interpret and present later experiences. He was able to hold them up and shine a light through them and get a different angle on things. But he read a lot of Hemingway, so it's possible. But I think it was his own early experiences that he treasured, experience that he stored in memory and pondered, but didn't want to write about because he didn't want to dispel the magic of moments held in amber.

Sipiora: You've led me to think about Mailer's father, Barney Mailer, who certainly led a complicated life as father, accountant, serious gambler, womanizer of sorts, and so forth. Do you see Barney's prodigious "double life" as a considerable influence on Mailer, especially in regard to money, women, and family?

Lennon: Absolutely. Mailer said to me, "Everything adventurous in me comes from my father." It was Bob Lucid (who knew Barney Mailer), who first told me about Barney's importance. Bob had read Mailer's letters to his father, letters about his father. He was absolutely right—Barney led a prodigious double life and Mailer was fascinated by the secrecy of it, the daring of it, how it went against the grain of family security. It gave sanction to Mailer to do exactly the same, but for different reasons. Barney's secret life was mainly gambling, which caused all kinds of problems. He had some affairs, here and there, even at the end of his life, but they were not nearly as extensive as his son's. Barney gave Mailer the clue about following deep motivations, strong impulses. This is crude, but he believed that if you weren't following those impulses, you were repressing or sublimating them, and Mailer was against any type of repression. He was Freudian in that sense—you've got to be alert to these impulses, study them. But Mailer wanted to do more than merely ponder these promptings; he wanted to act on them. He saw Barney do it successfully for years. When Barney died, a woman showed up at Fan's mother's apartment with a notarized loan document for $26,000 that she'd lent to Barney and he gambled it away. The family paid it. Mailer's mother said, "I don't know if we should pay it," but Mailer said we have to pay it, and they did.

Sipiora: And that "payment," in more ways than one, revealed Mailer's loyalty to family and loyalty especially to his father.

Lennon: Mailer was deeply loyal to his parents, to his sister, to his children, to his friends. He was very much of a stand-up guy, who could be counted on when the going was tough.

Sipiora: You quote Mailer as describing himself in his 1939 "Harvard Journal" as "a leftist & an advocate of free love." Is it fair to say that this description characterizes Mailer throughout his life?

Lennon: Not exactly. He was always a man of the left, but he became much more—he was not an uncomplicated man of the left. He was going to join the Young Communist League at Harvard. But that changed. He had reservations about communism, but had unending warm feelings for socialism. He was always angry at the excesses of the wealthy; he always was steamed about people earning a thousand times more, or five thousand, than the lowest worker in the organization; he thought that was dreadfully wrong. Those feelings persisted. As far as free love, no, I think that free love was something of his youth. It was much more complicated later on, as you might expect. He knew that you pay for everything you get, which he always attributed to his Jewish roots. There's no free lunch and there's no free love. But those ideas were the starting point of his way of looking at the world, and while they modulated, something of them persisted for the length of his life—his outrage at the disparity of wealth in the U.S., in particular.

Sipiora: You mention paying a price, and that was one of Hemingway's beliefs throughout his life's journey. Life is utilitarian and experience is good—but you always paid for what you learned. And it sounds as if you are saying that this *modus operandi* was a Mailerian principle also.

Lennon: Very much so. He identified with Hemingway in so many ways. The notion of the value of experience, and the fact that experience was always fraught with some kind of a bill at the end—I think that Mailer got a lot of that from Hemingway; he certainly said he did. Hemingway is one of the tutelary spirits of Mailer's life. You can add them up, list them—there's Hemingway, there's Jack Kennedy, and there's Marilyn Monroe and Mohammed

Ali. Jean Malaquais was certainly a very important figure in his life. And Mailer always said that he learned a great deal from Jeanne Campbell. Tolstoy meant a lot. There's a long list after that. Certainly Hemingway would be listed on the first page of people that Mailer identified with and learned from.

Sipiora: Throughout his writing life, Mailer was a consummate rhetorical tactician with a rich arsenal of linguistic tools in his skillset. I am reminded of Aristotle's statement in the *Poetics* that "metaphor is the mark of genius." Was the ability to create metaphor Mailer's most important language talent (in writing)?

Lennon: It's one of the most important. Charles Devlin, who helped him edit *The Naked and the Dead*, told him that he needed to work on his metaphors, and Mailer took the advice. But he had a natural gift for metaphor. His were often very carnal, earthy, sexual metaphors. But he had all kinds of metaphors. I think his genius was manifested in his metaphorical language. He had tropes for almost everything—it was impossible for him to look at a thing directly. He always had to see a thing through the lens of something else, thus pointing out its inner meanings, its similarities with other things, all the things that metaphors do. He would say, "Oh, it's like the Chinese peasant who's growing things on the side of the mountain and always has one leg always higher than the other and when he comes to walk on flat ground, he says, "There something wrong here." He would invent metaphors like that all the time. It was one of the great marks of his style, and it never ceased, from the beginning to the end.

Sipiora: And, unlike lesser writers, Mailer's metaphors were consistently powerful and penetrating, yet rarely catachretic.

Lennon: Absolutely. And they were carnal. What does he say at some point, he was talking about taking on a delicate subject and he said, "I shouldn't do this, but I've got to do it, because that's the thing about free speech, it's like an unused dick—if you don't use it, it's going to shrivel." That's a perfect Mailer metaphor; everything is there—the idea that you've got to let it out, you can't repress it, free speech is so important, and the comparison to a shriveled penis.

Sipiora: You say that Mailer's sixty years of writing "can be seen as an untrammeled examination of all things sexual." Did Mailer pay an exorbitant price for this lifetime of examining carnality? You are quite frank in your treatment of Mailer's infidelity, beginning with his sex time with a prostitute in Tateyama: "Unfaithful in all of his marriages, Mailer was a serial philanderer. His affairs caused him and his family much misery over the next fifty years." What is your sense of Mailer's sexual behavior? Was he hypersexual and simply wired to continually seek carnal satisfaction? Was there a powerful psychological component? Do you feel that you understand the significant factors that might explain, however incompletely, Mailer's sexual obsessiveness?

Lennon: For Mailer, sex was magic, transcendental. He says something in one of his *Village Voice* columns about the magical sexual parts of our body, and he accepted the notions of primitive cultures, that sex was a link to something powerful and creative outside of us. He thought that women were special because they had a link to the future in their wombs; they were creating the future inside themselves. Men were just tools who provided seeds. Remember that he was deeply versed in Freud, Jung, Theodore Reik, Wilhelm Reich, he read all of those psychologists. Mailer never really escaped Freud, you might say, in regard to the centrality of sexual experience. He was also a highly sexed person. He was very sensual. He gave it off, Doris Kearns Goodwin told me. That sexual tension was always there. He also believed that sex was the moment of truth—that you really learned about the other person in the sex act, which is not a new idea, of course. The sexual revolution of the late 1950s and 1960s was a wave he rode and promoted and, arguably, led. So everything conspired to make sex pivotal in his life and work. He was also a leader in eliminating literary censorship, and testified in major court cases. From the use of "fug" and all the sexual descriptions and sexual language in *The Naked and the Dead*, to the first description of anal intercourse in *An American Dream*, to the discussion of every kind of sexuality—homosexual, sadistic, masochistic, orgiastic—Mailer was a leader. He felt that he was bound to reveal the hidden secrets of sexuality that people had never been able to write about, and he was going to be the guy that did it, and in many ways he was. Sexual freedom and sexual openness, the struggle to create it in our society, was a burning issue for him. He also felt that after Jack Kennedy the sexual revolution accelerated in this country because Kennedy

was such a sexy guy, and Mailer showed this side of Kennedy in his writings about him. So there were so many forces tending to make him interested in, fascinated by sex, all of his life.

Sipiora: Perhaps Mailer, Kennedy, and Hefner were three fathers of sexuality in the 1960s that changed the landscape of American culture in some way. An accurate characterization?

Lennon: And Dr. Kinsey too. Reviews of Mailer's books in the 1950s would bring up Kinsey and the Kinsey Report, which came out the same year as *Naked*. It was the first major quasi-scientific survey of sexuality in the country, and everybody was fascinated by it. Before that, sex was something you whispered about, back-alley brothels and what have you, and Mailer wanted to change all that. It should be said that D.H. Lawrence was another of his heroes. He said that reading *Lady Chatterley's Lover* changed his life.

Sipiora: And Henry Miller.

Lennon: And Henry Miller. Those were his heroes. The free expression tide was rising all through the first half of the century and finally in 1965, sexual censorship ended with the famous trial of Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* up in Boston. Mailer testified and later said, in effect, "It's over now; that was the trial that made history, now you can write freely about anything sexual. I kind of miss the old days when it was James Joyce and D.H. Lawrence and Henry Miller fighting the lonely, heroic battle. They were the pioneers and I always felt like I was carrying on their work."

Sipiora: After the publication of *The Naked and the Dead*, you state that "Mailer was having an identity crisis. There were two Norman Mailers" (one of them enjoyed the attention of being a celebrity and the other suspected ploys of phonies). Can you elaborate further? Is this characterization one dimension of the "double life" of the title of the biography?

Lennon: It's one dimension of it. There are many others. For every stance Mailer took, there was an anti-stance. The celebrity-observer opposition was one of the first. He felt he was to an extent, a phony as a celebrity; he hadn't really earned it he felt. It was thrust upon him, it was given to him by the

huge success of *The Naked and the Dead*, a book he felt to be essentially a transcription of his experience in the war, with a few flourishes. On one level, it's a documentary novel. So at first he felt he hadn't really earned this celebrity. He got rid of that idea as he got more notches on his belt, as he had more achievements. Then he began to take it for granted that he was a major player on the literary scene. By the 60s, he was one of the top players. By the time of *The Armies of the Night*, it was very clear he was perhaps the most important literary figure in the country.

Sipiora: You mention Mailer's interest in the double life in terms of generating ideas. Would it be reasonable to say that he had a strong, intrinsic sense of dialectic—but not in the traditional sense, that the dialectic produces anything like wisdom or truth—but rather that dialectic can provide a kind of productive conflict that hones and sharpens one's thinking on contemporary issues, whether they be literary, cultural, social, political, whatever?

Lennon: You put it very well. He felt that conflict was fruitful. The conflict between his public and private selves, between being a philanderer and being a family man, between hanging around in bars and getting in fights and then doing nothing but write for six months or a year—those were wonderful extremes for him, creative extremes. Notice that wherever he lived, he always had a retreat. He was constantly moving to the country. He moved to Vermont, he moved to Connecticut, to Bucks County, Pennsylvania. He always had Provincetown, he had Maine. He had all of those places outside of New York City. The city was the magnet, the red-hot center; he couldn't stay away from it for long. Only at the very end of his life did he lose his desire to go to New York. He would say, "I've got to get away, I've got to write, I've got to get out of here. New York is cancerous; it's driving me nuts." He let it drive him nuts, then escaped to the country or the sea shore, and when he got bored he went back to the frenetic city. This rhythm was creative; it helped him. There were assets to be gained from every swing of the pendulum.

Sipiora: Let me ask you about the other coast. Mailer's time living in LA, "Lotus Land," was short but apparently both packed with seminal personal experiences as Mailer moved about amidst Hollywood's most notable film

stars, directors, and producers. What do you think that Mailer learned about himself and life from those halcyon California months?

Lennon: He learned that his success as a writer (and he was a large figure in 1949 when he went to L.A.) wasn't transferable. He thought he could write screenplays; he thought he could use his celebrity to gain access to the power centers in Hollywood, but it didn't work that way. He was a failure. He went out there thinking he was going to be like Fitzgerald, like Faulkner, like Dreiser—they all went to Hollywood. Dorothy Parker. So many American writers. Nathanael West. They all went to Hollywood and had varying experiences, some of them more successful than others. But ultimately Mailer realized the most successful screenwriters in Hollywood weren't American novelists. But, after he left, he realized he could use the experience, his own failed experience out there as a screenwriter, and meeting people like Sam Goldwyn and Charlie Chaplin, Burt Lancaster and Brando and so forth—that it was terrific experience for him. It enabled him to write what you might say is the book that he never stopped writing about Hollywood—*The Deer Park*—and about the collision between the American dream and the corruptions of Hollywood. He was writing that book in 1952, and a half century later in 2007 when he was dying he was rewriting the dramatic version of it for the umpteenth time. He was planning to make a film of it with Michael Mailer. So he never really got over that Hollywood experience. It was the best kind of experience for him because it didn't work out the way he thought it would; things happened to him that he didn't plan; his scheme didn't work, but he gained valuable insights because new experience had been thrust upon him, and for Mailer that was always the finest experience.

Sipiora: As we talk about Mailer, it seems that we never stray too far away from Hemingway, who as you've noted was clearly a major, influential figure in Mailer's life. Yet, early in his career, Mailer's letter to Lillian Ross, parts of which you include in your biography, reveals some strong negative feelings about Papa. In "self-describing" Hemingway, Mailer writes in Hemingway's voice: "I am a great man who happens, incidentally, to be a great writer. I know that all of you will be interested in my noble, strong, and beautiful attempts to exercise myself as a great man, and will be happy when I succeed except for professors, other writers, and assorted cocksuckers." You mention elsewhere that Mailer is inconsistent, socking Hemingway in one place and

lauding him elsewhere. Is there a bottom line on Mailer's sentiments toward Hemingway, or does it always depend upon the context and circumstances of the immediate time?

Lennon: It never stopped evolving. Maybe in the last ten to fifteen years of his life, he had a mature sense of Hemingway's achievement. No matter where he was in his own life, he was always looking at Hemingway's. Those things he wrote to Lillian Ross he contradicted completely six or seven years later in *Advertisements for Myself*. He was constantly engaging with Hemingway intellectually and psychologically and artistically, constantly gauging himself against Hemingway. He did know that he was not going to be the same kind of writer as Hemingway, that he was going to be grappling with ideas more than he was grappling with the sensual world. His intellectual ambitions were much vaster than Hemingway's. And he knew he'd never match Hemingway's style; it would never have the same impact. He never stopped admiring Hemingway's ability to apprehend the sensuous world. Nevertheless, the edgy, self-referential style he created in *Advertisements for Myself* was influential. I think anyone who's writing a memoir today can't help but be moved by what Mailer did in *Advertisements*. Even Hemingway seemed to admire it, and called Mailer "so articulate." One of the major concerns of the biography is Mailer's relationship with Hemingway, how he was always going in and out of phase with him, admiring him here, getting mad at him there, but always seeing Hemingway as a tremendous figure in American literature. There was never any doubt about that; it goes all the way back to Harvard.

Sipiora: What can you tell us about Mailer's interest in and use of Hemingway that is not common knowledge among serious Mailer readers? Is there anything left behind the curtain?

Lennon: No. Everything I know is there. I think it culminates in the place where I examine what Mailer wrote about Hemingway's death, where Mailer takes on Leslie Fiedler. He talks about the dirty, sadistic ape that lived inside Hemingway, a demon that forced him to continually test himself, and led to his suicide. I think it's a brilliant insight into Hemingway's psyche. It also explains a lot about Mailer. I tried to parse what Mailer said, and to relate it to what he said about "The Beast" inside himself, using Fiedler's last interview with Hemingway, and Mailer's comments in *Cannibals and Christians*.

If I've added anything new to the Hemingway-Mailer connection, it's in that section of the biography.

Sipiora: Mailer has written about his extensive drug use and you refer to it extensively in your biography, particularly his use of marijuana. Do you feel that Mailer's drug use enhanced his creative processes, as so many writers have maintained?

Lennon: Marijuana was a useful tool for him at a certain point; it enabled him to get to the bottom of himself, or close. The experiences he wrote about in his drug journal were pivotal. He was on the edge of insanity. But he gained some real insights out of it, and then he backed away from it and started smoking less and less. But it helped him understand jazz; it gave him his vision of a divided universe. It was essential in creating his whole cosmology. So I think you could say Mailer got more out of marijuana than a lot of other people, and he didn't become a pothead. He realized he couldn't write very well if he smoked weed all the time, so he backed off. He was shrewd enough to get in, get what he could out of it, and then drop it.

Sipiora: You quote Mailer as saying that his use of marijuana was his "secret weapon against 'the shits' running the country." This statement sounds like a description of personal behavior as a generic analgesic for political, cultural, and psychological pain. Does that assessment make sense to you?

Lennon: It was all those things in the 1950s, and it continued through the 1960s. But by the time Mailer became a leading literary figure in the country in the late 1960s, his use of marijuana had greatly diminished. It was something he did when he was young. When he got older, he didn't need it as much. It gave him a little boost, it loosened him up, helped him get his guns free.

Sipiora: You refer to Mailer's "dictionary of dualisms," his strong belief in the "indubitable doubleness of all nature." This topic is riveting, rich in implication. I have always thought of it as a philosophical ignition switch that catalyzed Mailer's deepest recesses of creative energy. You note that Richard Poirier said that Mailer was "locked into a system of dualisms and needs to escape." Specifically, how might Mailer's dualistic worldview have

shaped his fiction, not necessarily in terms of individual works but rather in terms of his total creative output.

Lennon: I never agreed with Richard Poirier on this, although he was a brilliant interpreter of Mailer. Mailer never gave up his dualistic views, his dualistic view of the universe. His belief was profound. His cosmology, his view of the universe at war, undergirded all of his writing from the mid-1950s on. All the key conflicts of his novels have wires going back to that struggle of good and evil in the universe. It's the essential moral, cosmological, metaphysical framework behind his writing. You can't overestimate how important it is. Most commentators have not realized how rooted was his perception that many, if not most, human situations are part of this vast war—angels and the demons are on our shoulders all the time, he believed. There are few neutral situations. Everything is charged with morality. You can even see a little bit of it in *The Naked and the Dead*. He talked about it, but no one paid much attention. All of his philosophy, all of his literary techniques, his personal life, everything really, was related to that cosmology.

Sipiora: Forecasting the legacy of a major writer is often a dangerous enterprise, yet I have to ask about your sense of Mailer's legacy because his stature in the near future and beyond is so critically important for those who admire his thinking and writing. What is your view of Mailer's standing near term, particularly in comparison to his contemporaries like Bellow, Roth, Updike, etc.?

Lennon: I think the jury is out on all of them. I was recently asked what young people should be looking for in Mailer. You have this surveillance-spying controversy, the Snowden affair, right now, and with it this sense of a creeping totalitarianism, Big Brother redux. Well, Mailer wrote about this for fifty years, warning us about insidious, soft authoritarianism, not jack boots and gulags, but eavesdropping and subtle incursions on our liberty. And now the country is debating it like crazy. Mailer was very sensitive to all varieties of incipient totalitarianism, of Uncle Sam turning into Big Brother. He was very worried about that, and if he were alive today, he would be all over the issue. I have to believe that he would have some sympathy for Snowden, but he would have a complex view of it. Mailer was very worried about the dangers of technology, the dangers of creeping totalitarianism, the dan-

gers of industrial sludge, environmental decay. He was troubled by the internet revolution and did not see it as an unmitigated good. Mailer was probably more cognizant of such things than Updike or Bellow. Philip Roth is still around, and I think he is very sensitive to these issues in the way that Mailer was. I see Roth as being barometric in the way that I see Mailer as being barometric. Updike and Bellow, great writers, but I think that they portrayed different, smaller worlds.

Sipiora: And they are primarily literary artists more than public intellectuals. Doesn't that difference seem to offer a real distinction between Mailer and his contemporaries?

Lennon: Bellow would get out there occasionally. He was a public intellectual. A little more recessive than Mailer, but he was willing to get out there and swing at times. If you look at the fiction of Don DeLillo and Roth, you can see similar concerns, all three of them have the same brooding premonitions. So you could argue that Mailer, Roth and DeLillo will have more staying power, but this is pretty speculative. As I say, the jury's still out. Mailer believed it would be thirty years before we would know whose work will last. I was just telling Gerald Lucas (Webmaster of the Mailer Society) that I think that your collection of Mailer's essays (*Mind of an Outlaw: Selected Essays)* that's coming out will be a book that people will be able to read in college classes because it gathers together his formal statements on so many things. You could build a good class around your book—"Issues in Contemporary American Society."

Sipiora: Thank you, Mike. Speaking of influence, one name that jumped out of your pages was Heidegger. You said that Mailer was interested in Heidegger and had a long run with existentialism. What was Heidegger's influence on Mailer? Was it applied philosophical theory, particularly the importance of context?

Lennon: It was the idea of dread, the idea of dread and the idea of courage**.** Mailer felt the dominant feeling we get when we're looking at manifestations of modernity, is a feeling of dread, a feeling of everything collapsing, sinking. Bad things are going to happen. Nobody wrote more powerfully, if obscurely, about that than Heidegger. Opposed to dread is the artist as a

courageous figure. It's all in the excerpt from Heidegger on existentialism in the book Mailer read when he was in Bellevue, Walter Kaufmann's anthology, *Existentialism from Dostoyevsky to Sartre*. It had a large influence on Mailer, the idea of the artist as a courageous figure, confronting the forces of dread, life-destroying forces. And the idea of living dangerously Heidegger derives from Nietzsche. Mailer at one point wanted to learn German just so that he could learn Heidegger, so that he could read *Being and Time*. He could read Sartre in the original, but his German was never good enough to read Heidegger. Mailer is like Bellow in his reading; Mailer read Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre. He read all the great twentieth century philosophers. As did Bellow. You're not going to find Updike talking too much about these philosophers. But Don DeLillo will have some Heidegger and Nietzsche on his shelf, I'll bet.

Sipiora: You devote a fair amount of space to Mailer's work as a filmmaker and he has said that he once had a serious interest in turning to filmmaking as his life's work, describing the life as a director as "the best life you can have." How would you summarize Mailer's work as a filmmaker and do you think that he could have made a successful career out of it?

Lennon: I think that it was an interesting sidebar in Mailer's life as a writer. He made some small contributions to avant-garde filmmaking. What his film work really did was give him respite from the drudgery of writing every day. It allowed him to think on his feet, to see himself as a general. It was a wonderful escape. He hoped that it would turn into something permanent, that he could become as important a director as he was a novelist. But he didn't. While he did some very interesting things, and showed that he could make experimental cinema vérité films—*Beyond the Law* is his best—and direct a feature film, his talents lie elsewhere. He was also a fine critic, good at talking about how film has invaded modern life, and seeing the impact of film on our lives. He is not going to go down in history as a great filmmaker, however, but he will be an important footnote in film history.

Sipiora: In my view, many of the best sections of Mailer's fiction are written in cinematic scene structures. It seems to me that there is a natural flow in Mailer's stream of creativity between the cinematic world and the prose fiction world, and that he was particularly talented in that way.

Lennon: I think he was too. The scenic, dramatic moments in his fiction are terrific film material. But then you have all this other stuff in there, the attempts to render interior states of mind and feeling. The weakness of *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, the film, derives from the fact that the book has a first-person narrator, and much of it is remembering and speculating and surmising and imagining. It is very difficult to translate that stuff. Mailer doesn't quite pull it off, although the film has great moments, and some wonderfully horrible characters. So much of Mailer's writing is psychological exploration of one kind or another, and this does not translate well. When Mailer wrote the screenplay, he couldn't bear parting with this material.

Sipiora: Let's talk about Mailer's standing with some feminists. You recount Mailer's memorable comment to Orson Welles: "women are sloppy beasts, they should be kept in cages." This remark lived with Mailer for a long time, nourishing the feminist collective against him. As you note, Mailer felt that he became a scapegoat. Did feminist outrage ever settle down in the sense that there was some kind of a soft truce with the more strident wing of feminism? (I am not referring to Gloria Steinem or Diana Trilling). If the answer is no, how might you characterize Mailer's standing, in general, among today's feminists?

Lennon: I don't think they're as angry at him as they were in the 1970s. There is a residual feeling that he didn't embrace and cheer feminism; instead he was constantly questioning it. He did embrace all the economic demands of feminism, and I believe was on record as supporting the equal rights amendment. But he wasn't a cheerleader for feminism, and he made several ill-considered sexist remarks about women, the remark that you quote, certainly. Later on, he said that he made the comment for idiocy and sheer fun, but admitted it was a stupid remark made at the wrong time. He saw it as the kind of thing you say to stimulate argument, but it was deeply hurtful. He said it at the worst possible time, and it was repeated everywhere. And then he threw fuel on the fire, getting women to hiss at him and stuff like that. So he was his own worst enemy. He thought it was just a good clean fight and then it would be over and people would forget about it, like his debates with William Buckley. But the Women's Liberation Movement didn't see it that way, and he became the piñata of the movement. I think that as time has passed, a lot of that has mellowed out. Feminists today don't see him as quite

so bad. He can't be compared to the people in Texas who are trying to prevent women from having abortions. He was always in favor of a woman's right to choose. He agreed with feminists on a lot, but he just didn't handle himself very well in the clinches.

Sipiora: The subject of Mailer and Monroe is nearly as interesting to me as Hemingway and Mailer. I found this chapter to be one of the most intense parts of the biography. Although Mailer never had a relationship with Marilyn, he was clearly infatuated with perhaps the most universalized American female celebrity of the Twentieth Century. Can you summarize Mailer's feelings toward Monroe and her status as icon—the quintessential sexy woman—or is Mailer's sexual, emotional, and intellectual embrace of her too complex (and perhaps contradictory) to articulate?

Lennon: Well, it's both simple and complex. On the simple level, Mailer felt that identity and ambition defined Monroe. And identity and ambition defined him, and he felt a great kinship with her. He felt that he could look at his own life, his own burning ambition, his careerism, his desire to be numero uno in the literary world, as equivalent to what she wanted to be in Hollywood. That's the simple part of it. The complex part of it is his estimates of her films and what her real achievements were—was she really a great comedian, for example. He had ideas about her acting that are debatable. Then there is the question of whether she committed suicide. He felt it was probable, but he kept raising questions and casting doubt on it. Let's say that he was uncertain about how her life ended; he was uncertain about the wisdom of the way she lived some of her life, but overall his attitude toward her was sympathetic, fellow feeling. He believed that he had something special to offer in understanding her, and I believe he did. Those were the key things I was trying to say. He was also half in love with her although he saw her in person only twice or three times in his life. I only mentioned one of them; the others were inconsequential. But when he thought about it later, he realized he would have tried to remake her and that's what everybody was trying to do. She used Hollywood, but she was also a victim of Hollywood. He had great compassion for her and how Hollywood misunderstood her and mistreated her and over-sexualized her, and how she was forced to become the sexpot when she wanted to be a great actress. *Marilyn* is his first full-scale biography, and it encouraged him to write several more. It was a

major career turn. I think that it will stand up as one of his best books. It was deemed sensational when it came out, but since that time a few important biographers have talked about it and said that it is an extraordinarily deep and penetrating exploration of her psyche. Carl Rollyson, one of Mailer's biographers, wrote a wonderful piece about it in his book, *Female Icons.* I just got his book and read it and wished I had read it before, because it's a tremendous tribute to Mailer and a really fine appreciation of what he did in that biography.

Sipiora: Do you think that Mailer was upset when Marilyn married Arthur Miller, his Brooklyn neighbor? Perhaps he saw this union as some sort of incongruity?

Lennon: No, it would be unfair to say that. He understood why they were attracted to each other. Miller was very upset about the book, angry that Mailer called him a tightwad and things like that. But Miller comes across as a noble, latter-day Abe Lincoln-integrity-kind-of guy. Monroe was drawn to that for a time until she got everything out of it that she could, and then she left him. She had a lot of men in her life, just as Mailer had a lot of women. There's that similarity. I'd say that Mailer was ultimately sympathetic to why Monroe married him and why it worked for a while, and why it didn't work after a while: their worlds were too far apart and she was too wed to her career and she had to drop him just as she did Joe DiMaggio.

Sipiora: You write that Mailer felt that "people overlooked his playfulness, missed his wink." I interpret this assessment to mean that there was an explicit, overwhelming theatricality and rhetoricity to the public Mailer—and surely perhaps to the private Mailer as well, or at least I thought so. Can you take this point further—if it holds up—and perhaps offer an illustration or two?

Lennon: I think some of the things he said about feminists were said with a wink. Others were said in anger because he was striking back. That's when he was at his weakest and it's hard, impossible, to defend some of the things he said. Mailer was always trying to up the ante, always trying to work the dialectic. I think that's what he meant by the wink. He would say things that were a little more outrageous than necessary. Or a lot more outrageous than neces-

sary. He was not a fan of dull debates. He wanted discussions that were meaty and real and dug deep into the heart of things. Around the dinner table, I saw him do it a hundred times, he would say something that was challenging, and he would make it sound like he was looking for an argument. And he was. He did it to my wife. She's a tough person to anger, but he got her going at a certain point. I can't remember what the issue was, maybe something about the nature of women. And she shot back at him. He believed that life comes out of the meaning of opposites, and that's how we grow, through conflict. You can learn from such exchanges, he believes, and growth was the sine qua non. It was better than sitting around talking about the weather.

Sipiora: I felt a sense of sadness in reading the biography. I sensed that I understood, at least in a small way, the ever-present crises and pain that Mailer always seemed to be going through, whether in dealing with his wives, kids, mistresses, money problems, creative spurts, and so forth and it made me a little gloomy. Were you sad, too, as you probed the inner depths and recesses of the incredibly complex Mailer life?

Lennon: You can't help but feeling sad about some of the jams he got into, whether it was with his publishers, his critics, or his family. But as Barbara pointed out, and I quoted it in the book, even at the worst of times he always enjoyed life. He savored it. He was fun to be with. He was not a gloomy person. When he was down and depressed, you could tell that he was down and depressed, but he could rise out of it very quickly. Give him a drink, give him some stimulating people, and the next thing you know he was creating a whole new mood and everything was fine. So, yes, it was difficult to watch him go through some of his miseries, the financial problems he had, for example. Some of these were his own doing. On some deep level, he needed a life with a certain amount of anguish and stress, a large, woolly, Byronic life with difficulties and jams and triumphs, up today and down tomorrow. That was the life he wanted. When he was down, it usually did not trouble me that much, because I knew that he was going to get himself up and dust himself off, and triumph the next year. At certain points he was really suffering, especially when a book, *Portrait of Picasso*, for example, which was a solid book, was jumped on unfairly. The professional art critics savaged that book, and it was unfair. They beat him on the head with all kinds of scholarship, but that wasn't the kind of book he was writing. He wasn't an art critic; he

was trying to write about Picasso's inner life. I felt very bad for him because I think it was unjust, and I think the book will stand up.

Sipiora: You knew Mailer up close for more than three decades. Before you ever began the biography, you may have known more about Mailer's life and his work than any person alive, and you certainly do now. What was the biggest surprise for you in the course of writing the biography? What I mean by surprise could be personal, cultural, intellectual, etc., something that caught the attention of someone who knew Mailer so well.

Lennon: The extent of his erotic life. I knew that he had numerous affairs. But I didn't realize how long some of them were and how profound some of them were. So I learned quite a bit about his philandering. He took his relationships with women quite seriously. In other words, they were not just one-night stands. He certainly had some of those. But he tended to stay involved with several women whom he had known for a long period. That was one thing. The other was the journals that he kept. They proved to be invaluable sources. They told me a lot about what he was thinking in his early years. I knew where and when he published everything. I knew when his children were born, and all the places he lived. I knew what was in the public record. I had those down in a fairly detailed way in the bio-bibliography I did with my wife, *Norman Mailer: Works and Days*, but I didn't know the tenor or texture, the particular emotional richness of his inner life in his early years; I didn't know how passionate he got about some ideas. One of the things I found was that he never really gave up on socialism. He remained a believer in socialism, and very angry about aspects of capitalism, right until the end of his life. I was only dimly aware of this initially, but soon realized that he was writing about socialism (his variety of it) from 1940–2007. He was always hoping for an economic system that would be much more equitable than American capitalism.

Sipiora: Let me try the question from a little different angle. Was there a significant disappointment or negative surprise for you in researching the biography?

Lennon: I never thought that Norman was perfect—I didn't find out that he tortured animals or anything like that. I knew that he had warts, that he had done things he was ashamed of or unhappy about, that he had been distant from his children at times, that he had been overbearing or selfish. I knew

all that; indeed, he was candid with me about his warts. But no negative surprises, as you put it.

Sipiora: Random House is publishing a collection of Mailer's essays, *Mind of An Outlaw*, and the theme of this volume projects Mailer as a "public intellectual and an Outlaw." What were Mailer's two or three most strategic contributions as a public intellectual?

Lennon: "The White Negro" was his most important essay. Only an essay by James Baldwin in *Notes of a Native Son*, according to a recent report, has been reprinted more frequently. His assessments of other writers, which are so candid and incisive, in *Advertisements for Myself* and *Cannibals and Christians*, are very important. He was quoted today in the *New York Times*, lines from "10,000 Words a Minute," a sports essay about boxing and the ring death of Benny "Kid" Paret. That essay changed the way that sports were written about. "Superman Comes to the Supermarket" is another of his finest. Pete Hamill said that politics were never written about in the same way after that. Those would be the four essays I would pick. Mailer had ideas on everything from plastics to reincarnation, but it was the way that he approached events like politics and literary criticism and sports—a new way of depicting them—that makes these canonical. In them, the reporter moves onto the stage of the story in a highly personalized way, using the techniques of fiction. And in "The White Negro," Mailer may have been the first person to link the situation and suffering of blacks in America with the atomic bomb and the Holocaust. No one put those three miseries together in such a trenchant way before him.

Sipiora: It's interesting to me that you have noted major texts on politics, sports, race, and culture, and I can't imagine four larger niches of American life than those particular categories.

Lennon: The other one would be technology. Technology and plastics and the environment. He wrote about them many times, but *Cannibals and Christians* was perhaps the finest treatment. Also in *Of a Fire on the Moon.* But those are not stand-alone essays.

Sipiora: You devote considerable attention to Jack Abbott. Was befriending

him Mailer's biggest mistake? If so, why did Mailer continue to befriend Abbott until he committed suicide?

Lennon: No, I don't think that it was a mistake at all. I think Mailer was doing what he had done with Eldridge Cleaver, he wrote a letter for him and said, this guy can write. I don't think that was a mistake. In Mailer's view, his mistake was that he didn't stay close enough to Abbott, who needed a lot of help on the outside. Mailer was busy, and he would see him a couple nights a week. He would take him to lunch and do this and that, and Norris was helping Abbott out all the time as well. Mailer faulted himself for not being there more often. He felt that Abbott obviously did a horrible thing and killed an innocent in cold blood, but it wasn't just Abbott. The prison system had a lot to do with it.

Sipiora: Fair enough. "Mistake" is the wrong word. Perhaps "regret" would be more accurate?

Lennon: He regretted that he did not put in enough time with Abbott, and that was contributory to the tragedy that occurred. It was one of the great crises of Mailer's life because it ended with the death of an innocent young man, and Mailer was deeply upset, depressed, by the situation. Many people thought he put too much blame on himself. But certainly he played a role in it, and he had deep regrets about it. It was one of the three great crises of his life; the stabbing of Adele, being the first, the Abbott affair, and the third being the near-breakup of his marriage to Norris.

Sipiora: Mailer clearly considered Abbott a writer with talent. Do you share that view?

Lennon: Anyone who reads *The Belly of the Beast* will see that he was a very talented writer. The reviews that came out before the murder were terrific, and called it a great addition to prison literature; they compared him to Solzhenitsyn and Jacobo Timerman. Abbott was a talented writer. Very narrow, very tendentious, very polemical. But nevertheless, writing out of his experience—you know, they beat him half to death in prison a number of times—and he was a very angry person. Finally that bottled-up anger boiled over and he killed someone. It was a horrible tragedy. Abbott didn't

try to foist the blame on anyone else, I'll say that. A series of forces that came together, plus his own stupidity and anger, that resulted in a horrible loss of life.

Sipiora: I share your assessment. How important was Richard Stratton in Mailer's life? I knew that Mailer knew Stratton years before his legal troubles began.

Lennon: Norman knew Stratton back in the early 1970s. He met him in Provincetown. Stratton read "The White Negro" and he realized that he wanted to be one. He grew up in the Boston suburbs in a privileged community, but he didn't like that life; he wanted to live life on the edge. He wasn't a drug dealer; he was a marijuana dealer, and had some tremendous experiences. He has written a fine manuscript about his marijuana years called "Smuggler's Blues." But the Feds caught up with him and he went to prison. Mailer always liked Stratton, was always close to him; he visited with him and wrote many letters to him. Mailer knew him and his wife, and testified at his trial. They both believed in a life of risk-taking, and believed the federal government was unfairly intimidating people who smoked weed and so forth. Rick's a great guy, and knew Mailer well; he did a very useful interview with me.

Sipiora: Everyone who knew Mailer seemed to be well aware that he liked to live on the edge of society, befriending and communicating with a wide range of individuals. Much more so than any other contemporary writer that I can think of. Surely one reason was that Mailer was always a keen observer of humanity, examining divergent behavior. Were their other reasons involved in Mailer's eclectic choice of friends?

Lennon: Somebody asked him about friendship, and Mailer said, "I don't plan who I'm going to be friends with. It's who I feel comfortable with, who I enjoy being with, who I enjoy sitting down with at my table." He said that it was a big mistake to question this too closely and embargo the friendship. If you like the person, don't start asking yourself a lot of questions about why you like them and why they like you. Just go with it, enjoy it. It's like falling in love, you can't quantify it, you can't boil it down to six reasons. So Mailer just followed his instincts when it came to friends. He liked people

who were up front, he liked people who were stand-up, who would be on your side if you need them, who were very much involved in ideas and literature. So he had a huge variety of friends, poker-playing friends and boxing friends and literary friends, intellectual friends. He also liked people who were different from him, people on the right, like Pat Buchanan and William Buckley. He liked street people; he liked Portuguese fishermen in Provincetown. He had a voracious appetite for understanding all of humanity. He was Balzacian in that sense. My editor noted that Mailer had quite a few Irish friends, and I said, well, he enjoyed them; he thought they had a certain gusto that he appreciated.

Sipiora: Years ago I had the honor of having lunch at the Mailer house in Provincetown. Ed Doctorow and Richard Stratton were also there and it was a stimulating foursome. Doctorow had been Mailer's editor at *Dial* in the mid-1960s and they had not spoken in years because of a disagreement over *An American Dream*. My point is that Mailer was an exceptionally conscientious host, making sure that each of us was continually included in the flow of conversation. We were very different personalities, but Mailer made sure that the air was lively with discussion. Is it fair to say that Mailer, throughout his life, engaged the stories and lives of people who were unlike himself?

Lennon: Yes, he wanted to learn from them, he was always questioning them. He didn't know much about the navy; he was in the army and would ask me questions when I first met him about my time in the navy. What was it like to be a naval officer, what was the relationship with enlisted men, how did the ships operate? He was as curious as hell. There was nothing he enjoyed more than having a group of people around his dinner table who were quite different from him and from each other so that they could all benefit from the interaction. That was his bread and butter, the bread and butter of a novelist.

Sipiora: Switching gears, Mailer's contempt for George W. Bush was known to everyone, particularly for his invasion of Iraq. And Mailer knew of Barack Obama as a senator in 2007, the year of Mailer's death. How do you think Mailer would judge Obama today, particularly in light of Obama's handling of both Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as maintaining Guantanamo as a detention installation, in spite of campaign promises to shut it down?

Lennon: It's usually a mistake to try to predict what Mailer would say about anything, I learned that a long time ago. So I can't really say. I think he would have had a mixed opinion about Obama. I think he would recognize that while Obama would like to get out of Guantanamo Bay, Congress has passed laws forbidding him to do it. His hands are tied. But would he be critical of Obama? Absolutely. One of the last political contributions he made was to Obama the year before he died (he made another to Hillary Clinton). The idea of a black president certainly appealed to him. I can remember being at dinner with him and Dick Goodwin and my agent, "Ike" Williams up in Boston, and we had a long discussion about Obama. Mailer liked him because his candidacy was gaining momentum; Dick was worried whether it would disunite the Democratic Party. It was a few months before Mailer died. He was intrigued with the idea of a black president. But I can tell you that there's been no American president all the way back to FDR that Mailer did not have criticisms of. He felt it was the duty of American citizens to have a dialogue with presidents. He would have done the same with Obama.

Sipiora: *The Castle in the Forest*, the first part of the planned Hitler trilogy, was on Mailer's mind for many years. Do you know why he did not first write Volume Three, the Bunker book? Was it an early or late decision to write the novel chronologically?

Lennon: The first time that he wrote *The Castle in the Forest*, he called it *The City of God*. This was back in the early 1950s, and he only wrote a few pages of it. He began it at the end of WWII with the opening of the concentration camps. Mailer's novel, the 2007 version, retains some of that in the epilogue, the conversation between D.T. and an American captain with a gun. He wanted that scene at the concentration camp. As he did his research for *Castle*, he found that there was less research done on Hitler's childhood, much less than on the war. He felt that this part of Hitler's life was relatively untouched, and he preferred focusing on Hitler's youth and coming to power. He also wanted to write about Hitler's relationship with his niece, the woman he had a love affair with and who died mysteriously. He had many ideas about how he was going to finish it. He was going to make it three volumes, he was going to make it five volumes, but that's typical of him. His plans rarely turned out the way he thought they would. He never laid down a scheme and stuck to it. I do know that he was thinking very seriously about shifting a lot

of the action of the next volume to Russia, and writing about Rasputin. He said he was a bit tired of Hitler, and more interested in Rasputin. I think if he had lived, there was a very good chance volume two would have dealt with the whole European situation, including the rise of Hitler, from the vantage point of Moscow, Rasputin, and the Tsar and Tsarina.

Sipiora: Many Mailer quotations in the biography intrigue me, but perhaps none more so than this one: "Every man is a marriage within himself. The saint and the psychopath." Mailer's view of two people cohabitating inside one body, once again, echoes the master metaphor of doubling. Would it be fair to say that there was much more than simple doubling in Mailer? That there was doubling and then doubling of doubling, *ad infinitum.*

Lennon: Yes, it was sort of like a parade of doubles marching like a column of soldiers, two by two. And they changed over time, and through the phases of Mailer's career as a writer, as an activist, as a philanderer, as a family man, as a journalist, etc. All the different selves that he had, had a double. He was incapable of seeing anything except in opposed terms, as Richard Poirier noted. It wasn't like he had a public life and a secret life and that was it. That was only part of it. Sometimes it was apparent and sometimes it was not apparent, but the double was always there because he wanted it to be there. He came to the realization in the mid-1950s that he had two people inside of him, and they had complete and separate personalities. He said more than once, "When I have a good motive for doing something and a bad motive for doing something and I know my two sides inside me are in agreement, one for an altruistic reason and one for a selfish reason, it makes it very certain that I'm going to do that thing."

Sipiora: This question may be too transcendent to address, but I'll try anyway. You note that on February 25, 1955 Mailer rejects atheism, never again to embrace it. How important was this decision in shaping Mailer's life, not only as a writer but in personal ways also?

Lennon: It was a defining moment. His atheism withered, and a new vision of the cosmos emerged. As he said later, all of my ideas flow from that decision and that day. It is important to say that the idea of a divided universe recapitulated the doubleness he perceived inside him. He had a very large and complex vision of what the universe consisted of, the one we talked

about in *On God*. That day in February 1955 was one of the big days of his life, no doubt about it.

Sipiora: There have been approximately two dozen biographies of Hemingway and every year or two another one turns up. After you, is there significant unplowed ground in the life of Mailer? Are there areas of fact and history that might warrant another serious biography in the future. (I know that at least one biography is in the works.)

Lennon: Phil, you've examined the Mailer papers at the Harry Ransom Center of the University of Texas. You know the size of the archive down there, and there's a lot of material to be sifted and examined and pondered and written about. I was lucky enough to be the first one into that quarry. I'm sure that there will be other biographies and they will bring in material that's not in mine. I tried very much to give full measure, but I'm sure that subsequent biographers will have new perspectives. It will probably take some time, because all those letters will have to be read, and those files of notes and drafts will have to be examined. To be more specific, the multiple drafts of some of his big books will have to be studied to cast light on why a draft was revised, or rejected in favor of another draft—I get into some of that, especially in *The Deer Park*, but I don't give all the nuances of composition for all his books. There are boxes and boxes of *Harlot's Ghost* material, and *Ancient Evenings* material; you could write a little book on the composition of both. I was the first person fortunate enough to have total access to everything. Somebody else will go through that material and write a different biography. I don't know when that will be. I hope mine will stand up for a while.

Sipiora: I certainly think that it will. On another track, you are known as a very experienced interviewer. If you were on this side of the interview, what else would you ask yourself?

Lennon: I think you've hit the key questions. But you haven't asked me about the stabbing.

Sipiora: Go ahead, let's do it.

Lennon: The stabbing of Adele was a critical event, and the first great crisis

of Mailer's life. And, it came after a triumph. If you look at the three great crises of his life, you'll see that each one followed a triumph. He had the great success of "The White Negro" in 1957, and with "The Mind of an Outlaw" essay in 1959, and with "Superman Comes to the Supermarket" in 1960, and before that, of course, *Advertisements for Myself* (1959), which reprinted the first two essays. Between *Advertisements* and "Superman," Mailer was feeling, as he said, Napoleonic. He was greatly influenced by Kennedy's success and he wanted to have a life in politics that paralleled it. That was the impetus for running for mayor of New York, and the night he stabbed his wife was the night he was going to announce his candidacy. Not many people took him seriously. Maybe if everyone had crowded around him and told him that they thought he'd make a great mayor and his ideas were terrific, things might have turned out differently. But his ideas were wild and woolly and no one really understood what the Existential Party meant. The idea that the majority of New Yorkers would vote for someone on the Existential Ticket in 1960 is hilarious. And his family, as Barbara told me, were not enthusiastic. Adele was appalled by it. He was trying to accomplish in the public sphere what he had accomplished in the literary sphere, and it didn't look like it was going to happen, and that was contributory to the tragedy. There were several other factors, of course. It was the event that most deeply marked him in his personal life. It had more sadness and misery and guilt connected with it than anything else he ever did. Somehow he managed to grow out of it, after a year of depression and heavy drinking, managed to bounce back. His belief in himself was still strong. He went on to his greatest decade after that, on the rebound. So Mailer was a great rebounder, he bounced back all the time.

The same pattern occurred with the Jack Abbott affair and his near-breakup with Norris. The Abbott tragedy came after he won the Pulitzer for *The Executioner's Song*, and his problems with Norris came hard on the heels of his achievement with *Harlot's Ghost*. The three great crises of his life came after moments of triumph, and in each case he was able to rebound. It is not quite as neat as I make it in summary, not quite as procrustean, but the triumph-crisis-rebound pattern is there and gives a sort of shape to his life. I think readers will see it.

Sipiora: I have always thought of the stabbing incident as a sort of fatal flaw

in Mailer—I hesitate to say a tragic flaw—but certainly it was momentous and life changing and never went away.

Lennon: Yes, all of those things. On the other hand, he wasn't trying to murder his wife. If he had wanted to kill her, he would have killed her, but he wasn't trying to kill her at all. So in one sense it was a terrible mistake—he was trying to hurt her, he was striking back at her, I'm tougher than you, you're going to do something to me, I'm going to do something to you, because they had been playing that game for a long time, but the notion that he was trying to kill her was wrong.

Sipiora: And did not Mailer use a penknife with a dull edge, rather than a steak or butcher knife?

Lennon: He used it to clean his fingernails, open letters, things like that. A penknife like a lot of people carry. Now if you look at my notes, you'll see I list those who say that he stabbed her with a big kitchen knife, or with scissors; one person even says that he shot her. There's a series of mistakes about the weapon. Evelyn Waugh said that he cut her throat. The event is encrusted with factoid barnacles. It was bad enough, it was really horrible, but some people made it worse.

Sipiora: Where does Mike Lennon go after the biography? Surely there are two or three other projects in gestation. Many people know about your letters book, but beyond that is there anything that you can mention?

Lennon: Well, there is the edition of Mailer letters that I hope to have done by the end of the year; Random House is going to publish it. There is my "Mailer Log," a Boswellian kind of record of Mailer's last three years. It's 150,000 words, and is quite personal. I've thought about doing something with it, maybe a long essay, but I've not figured it out. I've also thought about a book that my brother Peter and I have talked about for years, called *Ten Handshakes to Shakespeare*, which would depict a series of personal meetings, beginning with Norman Mailer and Ezra Pound, and then going handshake by handshake all the way back to Shakespeare and Ben Jonson at the Mermaid Tavern. It would be a series of historical and biographical vignettes

about those meetings. We've started talking about it, and my son Joseph is interested in it too.

Sipiora: Thank you, Mike. I feel that we now know much more about the complex, enigmatic lives that were Norman Mailer.