A CONVERSATION WITH NORMAN MAILER

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Jonathan Middlebrook published Mailer and the Time of His Time *in 1976 (Bay Books). This selection is the first chapter of the volume. Permission to reprint has been graciously given by the author.*

SUPPOSE, NEVER HAVING MET HIM, YOU INVITED NORMAN MAILER over for drinks and he accepted. For whom would you be waiting?

My own media-stoked imagination suggested some lurid elaborations on **Wife-Stabber** and **Sudden Violence**: a fistfight and a fanciful headline:

MAILER DROPPED
BY UNKNOWN CHALLENGER!
"MET MY CRITIC"
SAYS CHAMPION

Mailer is a word in the dictionary of popular culture, and it means pugnacity, obscenity, bad manners to nice old ladies like Janet Flanner and gentlemen like Gore Vidal, a glorious or perverse talent for fouling the house of fame. Mailer is the man who found that true liberty consists of the right to say the word *shit* in *The New Yorker,* and nearly everyone discovers that he has some score to settle with him, "Norman Mailer? He's an evil man," asserts my Aunt Jane. "I never read a word he writes." Eleanor Roosevelt once wrote: "I think Mr. Mailer's statement [about black and white sex, not about true liberty] is horrible and unnecessary." One of the most thoughtful men I know says he reads Mailer with pain, "probably because he has a higher threshold of embarrassment than I. He's too close to things I *almost* don't want said." Yet when Mailer came over for drinks he was generous to me,

forthright, and this essay at conversation with him is an attempt to suggest who he is by describing the tones in which he speaks his more-or-less familiar words, by giving their provocation and context a year ago.

Mailer moved, now several years ago, from Provincetown to Stockbridge, Berkshire County, Massachusetts. He bought himself and Carol Stevens a large house on Yale Hill, thus placing himself squarely in literary country. Their house is within eight miles of Arrowhead, the comfortable farmhouse where Melville wrote *Moby Dick,* and within four of the replica of the house where Hawthorne wrote *The House of the Seven Gables* and *Tanglewood Tales.* Mailer's house is within sight on a clear day of Monument Mountain, where Melville, Hawthorne, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and several ladies and publishers all took shelter from a rain squall one afternoon and drank Heidsieck champagne from a silver mug. "They talked prose," a Sedgewick reminisced, "apparently as unconsciously as *M. Jourdain* himself." Printed texts now disagree about whether Hawthorne "wildly" or "mildly" looked for the Great Carbuncle, but it is all suggestive enough to make one wonder whether Mailer moved to the Berkshires seeking inspiration from hallowed ground or for his Great American Novel.

Yet Mailer's own house does not suggest the sort of spare actuality from which Hawthorne escaped into the psychology of sin, nor does it suggest, like Melville's Arrowhead, the world of farming actuality given up for the epic quest and destruction. Mailer's house is a lesser one of those 1890's "cottages" of the sort favored by Stokeses, Sloans, Morrises, by Edith Wharton rather than Henry James. (The "real" Ethan Frome rammed a lamppost which still stands not far from Mailer's house.) Which means that Mailer's house is a thoroughly gracious affair, set back from the road, staffed, imposing. Yet these cottages were never indigenous to the place. My father was in Mailer's house once about 30 years ago and remembers only that it is owned by a dull Canadian. They were built as a *nouveau riche* response to exclusion from the older snobberies of Newport, and by now they have variously burned or become schools, summer camps, museums, resorts. The huge cottages are tax-free or commercial property, which suggest to me outrageous wealth and uncertain tradition, no bad emblem for Mailer's own work so far. Actualities—tax and fashion—drove cottagers from the Berkshires; Mailer, who believes in unseen forces, may find himself driven from this

place by its traditional associations. Could he stay, if he fails to write the book he has already said will be a descendant of *Moby Dick*?

Yet as much among these hills as elsewhere, tradition is a changing thing and variously valued. Stockbridge now is probably as widely known for Arlo Guthrie and Alice Brock as for Norman Rockwell. The Town Offices where Rockwell painted old Mr. Bramin issuing a wedding license are now tricked out as a gallery-boutique, and Bramin's Store itself has become a campy junk store, preying on tourists, contemptuous of them. Seen from the perspective of modern Main Street, there is both anachronism and bravery in Mailer's working toward something as traditional and time-consuming as making a great novel. The place and time seem to want original creation, again.

With some such judgments in mind, I invited Mailer to a more modest house in a different part of town. Its foundation is of local cut and field stone, its walls of hemlock planks, sills and corner-posts and plate beams of adzed chestnut, mortise-and-tenon work. No cottager ever slept here unless it was during a sudden shower, since the place was a well-proportioned barn until 1940 when my parents bought it. It took my father over a decade to make it into an all-year house, and he did most of the long work by himself, though by the early 1950's I began to do a share. I was then apprentice to my father, slowly mastering the many frangibilities in carpentry under his watchful eyes and instruction. It was the best way, I am certain, to have channeled Oedipal rage into constructive work, but I suspect this conversation—my father joined it partway along—reveals a few greying coals of generational fury.

Well, I was waiting for Mailer in a magic spot in traditional landscape. Context alone would guarantee that something would happen. As the actual time approached, I put away my silly though entertaining fantasies of slugfest (and cheeky paragraph in *Time* magazine) by remembering my impression of Mailer's voice on the telephone. I had spoken with him twice in setting this up and found his voice remarkable for two things: first, for its extreme caution. It was not just remembering the telephone roulette Mailer plays at the start of *The Armies of the Night* which made me hear the cautious note. In our brief exchanges I was even less palpable a creature to him than he to me. What threats, hidden and fantastic knives, might I be packing in this age of assassination? The Kennedys, Andy Warhol, Martin Luther King, Schwerner, Chaney, Goodman—no masculine Notability is safe these years. Or if we do not genuinely feel those murders as assaults on our own pulses,

Mailer's caution was still evident in his pragmatic, skillfully inoffensive keeping me out of *his* house: God only knew, he might have worried, when I would leave, once in the door, how much of his liquor I could drink.

The second thing remarkable to me about Mailer's voice is a set of intonations and accents which speak him as Ivy-educated yet audibly not of the Protestant establishment. Mailer is Brooklyn-born and went young to Harvard. His voice suggested to me perfectly learned foreign speech. If he were ambassador to my Renaissance court I would be wary of him because a man who had so well mastered the language would hear more than he should, and on foreign territory, say less than he knew. It is as though, in knowing many languages and choosing to speak a particular one, he makes that language more significant than it is on the tongues of native speakers, but at the cost of innocence. One of his early short stories is titled "The Language of Men." If that language is instinctively foul, it is foul from an innocent shortage of the vocabulary and syntax used to savor ecstasy, anguish, diurnal actuality. A plumber's speech is foul and quickly inaudible, the innocent prattle of a worker rarely up to his elbows in it. He babbles on in the simple faith that the carpenters will clean up after him. For me it follows that Mailer, who knows this foul language better than some of us, cannot innocently say *shit*, simply because when he does say it, he is choosing to do so, like Adam choosing the world's apple because it is the right and timely expression even at the moment that it is transgression of law. It is a point worth emphasizing: Luis 138 can send a spray-painted *shit* down the IRT tubes and all we do is unconsciously check the seat before sitting. When Mailer chooses to report to Harvard '43's fifteenth reunion "The shits are killing us," a more complicated reaction sets in. A wise person will not too quickly dismiss the judgment as simple bad-boying among one's betters. Mailer chooses, succeeds in reviving an oligarchy's confused sense of shame.

Enter my man.

Mailer is about 5′9″ and overweight—say about 175–80 lbs. His handshake is sociably firm, his hands small, fingers a bit chubby with blunted fingernails (not bitten). If his right hand is calloused, it will not be on palm or inner thumb. His is a wordsmith's hand, of course, neither a laborer's nor a sportsman's. His hair is curly, frosty grey, and he wears glasses to drive his silver Porsche. His eyes are pale blue and they are clear despite his written evo-

cation of bourbon-ravage. He does not, as habit, fully raise his eyelids, perhaps so he can occasionally stare for effect.

Writing now some months later and with Mailer standing just across the threshold of actuality, I feel a weight of lost time, opening minutes used by each of us initially to try imposing his own rhythm on the evening. The matter of drinks was less than comedy. Gracious county host, I offered "pretty much anything," and then had to fill the unresponsive silence with a specific offer.

"Bourbon?"

Silence. I had the strong impression of his wariness.

I began to chant an offertory of whiskies, gin, liqueurs—it was after dinner—cognac, Campari, sherry. I ground to a halt with Port. Mailer waited a deliberately off-count before starting a safe rhythm of his own: "I'm going to throw you a curve. Have you any rum? I seem to have started drinking rum this evening . . . ."

Well, he pushed it on into what I felt was my actual time with him. "Have you any Schweppes tonic?" I did not; it was Canada Dry. "You don't drink tonic much, do you?" he went on. "Schweppes is really the only one . . . ." There was put-on here: add *wry tone* to my description of his voice. I imagined a quick scene of Canada Dry executives taking pay cuts, getting counter-endorsements from Bellow, Nabokov.

Mailer at last settled for gin-and-water.

Then, having shown this that he might do, he eased up.

Take as hypothesis that he felt safe. We were sitting opposite each other on two couches in front of the fireplace. The women were asleep or reading elsewhere, and the several bottles between us on the coffee table were either minor phalanx or chess pieces. I opened on the safe ground of social obligation. I assume Mailer accepted my invitation because he is an old friend of a fine-looking, sharp-tongued academic acquaintance of mine. Before going East I told her I was writing about Mailer and wanted to meet him. Her response was not wholly encouraging: "He's probably tired of reading things about himself. I know *I* am." Yet she came through for me, as I hope I did for her in telling him that she was looking spectacular. There was sea-blue joy in his eyes—he is now 52 years old and then seemed to be looking back to young and exciting hard times—there was transcontinental and transannual greeting flashed in his "Doesn't she always!"

It was a nice moment of working speech: he was sharing a Yes to a woman

he knew, and her first question when I returned to California was "Is he still with the singer?"

It had not occurred to me to ask. (He was and is.)

He let me pass a pun on how moving my first reading, in 1962, of "The White Negro" had been. "Somehow it seemed exactly right to get out of town, and in the right way too, a graduate student riding the rods. I was standing by a box car before I admitted I did not know what or where the rods were. I rode on top for a while, but it began to rain and I got off at Providence."

"Wasn't that awfully dangerous?" Mailer asked, more paternal than hobo-romantic. "I wanted to ride the rods once, and I didn't even know where the freight yard was."

We found ourselves talking about how he came to Stockbridge. "Were you by any chance hoping, say in relation to Melville, for Blake's good fortune in having Milton enter through his left foot?"

"No," he paused. "Really not. You see, I'd lost Provincetown with a wife, and we'd been looking for another house for quite a while, very particular about it. Then, this one. It was logical. Six bedrooms and there are seven children." He paused. "Terrible way to buy a house. No passion about it. I've never seen a house with so little *to* it."

Provincetown, where he had been for twenty years, had been lost with a wife. It was a Pointed Phrase, said with the tone which can lead to literary interview: *Mr. Mailer, that sounds like the end of* **Of a Fire on the Moon** *or the beginning of* **The Prisoner of Sex,** *and in* **The Armies of the Night** *you wrote that one appropriates a culture with a wife. What culture have you been dispossessed of in Provincetown?* Mailer is often produced as answering that polished kind of question in *The Paris Review,* in *Rolling Stone.* I instead let his tone lead to conversation about wives and places, sharing with him my loss of some California land in divorcing my first wife. "I had built something on it, and it was to have been my daughter Leah's dowry, but there was no accommodation on that score." We had entered a moment of guileless masculine sentimentality, and we did well in it. I doubt that Mailer has a feel for my valuation of building things, but we were together in shared silence and reflection, counterpoint to good conversation.

For my part I was thinking of Gena who, when I told her Mailer was my subject, had unerringly asked the question relevant to us newlyweds: "Why does he marry and divorce so often?" I got too far into an elaborate

explanation about his trying to complete the metaphor of each marriage. My wife suddenly demanded more than the reworked Thoreau in "he finds himself limited to this theme by the narrowness of his experience." I had run on farther: "Mailer's metaphorical citadel of marriage is mined by labyrinthine syntax, its guns spiked with the conditional mood, and . . ."

My wife has eyes as deep as Etna, and they showed it was time to whisper in her ear, "We, my love, are no metaphor."

"Damn right," she clearly said.

I do not know what voices were speaking to Mailer in his half of the genial, short silence, but we found for a moment more some possibly conversational ground in the town of Stockbridge, "so *dense,*" he emphasized, "that I haven't taken it on."

I was suddenly at sea in Mailer's respect for the place which only as a boy seemed all in all to me, for the present-day town of Stockbridge strikes me as a place of growing smugness. I expected Mailer to share my opinion that the town camps on what was the actuality of the place 25 years ago. How can he have been taken in by the place? Stockbridge has built up its back alleys with plywood siding and non-functional batten-strips; it "antiques" sheet glass with Colonial plastic snap-out mullions; its major business is tourism hot and heavy. The actualizing meanness is gone from the air of the place, the sardonic wit which was part of its greater loveliness then than now. "Don't matter what kind it is," said Martin Dooley, Chief Selectman, about schooling, "just so children hate it." The parsimonious actuality of that wit has given way to the nostalgia business as surely as the hardware store now sells "old-fashioned" goods, a few #7 screws in Festival-Paks, and calls itself, self-consciously, a Country Store.

This is what the place has become to me, but it simply is not so to Mailer. His attitude toward the place is modest, even defensive, as though confirming what for me had been the preposterously self-aggrandizing local gossip that he did not like Stockbridge because it had not accepted him. What is Stockbridge to have right of acceptance or rejection in Mailer? What was he getting at, elaborating his *so dense* with gesture –usually his words did not require emphasizing gestures—and with a trite phrase, "so much tradition, history"? I wished I were hearing polite kindness to his neighbors—he still lived there, I never really did—even as I knew I was not. I found myself remembering his writing in *Advertisements for Myself* that it was easier "to write a novel about the Pacific—you don't have to have a feeling for the

culture of Europe and the collision of America upon it." That remark has always struck me as combining an American's exaggerated though becoming modesty before the cultures of Europe with an appallingly innocent lack of suspicion that, in collision, the even older Orient may also have some cultural things for which one must have feelings. The implications of Mailer's comment are that it takes a sophisticated adult like Henry James to draw the portrait of a lady on a European canvas, but that a talented, cocky, lucky, young American can do the portrait of our push to the Far East because there is nothing out there but an empty canvas to fill with American images. Hearing Mailer talk about Stockbridge, I felt him investing that commercialized place with the same cultural solidity which he had vested Europe with, years before, and again he was declining the contest. He wanted to outflank the whole matter with our shapely exchange about Phillips, son of J.P. Marquand.

"His first novel," Mailer said, "is *The Second Happiest Day* or some such. A good book. But when he heard that I'd bought a house here, he was certain I'd raided him, taken over his material. Imagine that! As though there weren't enough material here for a dozen novels!"

"Ah, the poor man. Suppose Faulkner were afraid someone were going to take over Yoknapatawpha by moving to Oxford?"

"Exactly."

I was not ready to understand what I was hearing in Mailer's attitude toward Stockbridge, though I could sense its relevance to his own writing. Overall in his writing he is less taken by the collisions of cultures than by the voyagings of tentative, threatened ego in an old world. EGO, he apostrophizes in an essay, is "that extraordinary state of the psyche which gives us authority to declare we are sure of ourselves when we are not." Think of Huck Finn at his tentative best. The white woman comes at him, smiling, and says:

> *"It's you, at last! – ain't it?"*
> *I out with a "Yes'm," before I thought.*

Huck is committed to a certain world before he has a chance to think, and his comic desperation grows to a punch line:

> *I was getting so uneasy I couldn't listen good. I had my mind on the children all the time; I wanted to get them out to one side and pump them a little, and find out who I was.*

Huck's survival skill—again and again he defends himself with an increasingly fine ear for the verbal context he find himself in—that skill is precisely the street skill Mailer uses in "The White Negro," as an example of the Hipster's sense of rhythm and definition of knowledge:

> *Being unable to read or write, he could hardly be interested in ideas nearly as much as in lifemanship, and so he eschewed any attempt to obey the precision or lack of precision in the girl's language, and instead sensed her character (and the values of her social type) by swinging with the nuances of her voice.*

Mailer's own preference in fiction is for orphan and amnesiac protagonists, man-sized children whose innocent reactions reveal a sort of Brownian motion which is determined by that existing set of relations which is called America. Mailer does as American romance of initiation, does it in modern, urban accidental garb of hipsterism and melodrama. Roberts' interrogation of Rojack in *An American Dream* gives us a debased Grand Inquisitor matched with a tarnished Huck Finn, yet the verbal stakes in the precinct house are the same as the stakes in the interrogation Huck undergoes downriver at Phelps's.

Even supposing that my thoughts were as orderly as these, they were at the time hardly the stuff of conversation. We poured our drinks in separate silences.

My father imploded on us, filling vacancy with Berkshire night air and the improbably combined joys of Kutuzov and his youngest cossack. He had for the first time in four years' engagement beaten his vastly competitive tenant, a man who plays chess the way Guderion waged Blitzkrieg. The victory—one sensed it as total—had its resemblance to Borodino: gambits declined, declined, yet again declined, then the mortal wound and rapid but not immediate collapse—a rook lost, a queen and a knight to lose before mate.

This oral history overwhelmed introduction, handshake, and reinforced my father's obvious sense that there was a Senate just barely adequate to

grant his triumph. (He and I are about equal at chess, and Mailer said enough to suggest competence if not competition.) Details, feints, captures—my father's rush of description carried all before it, swamped Mailer's formal handshake and "How do you do, sir?" and hid my own rage, for I was in these opening moments detailing the various forms of Oedipal murder I would have to re-enact, having just lost the house to its rightful owner. There seemed an awful blandness about the old man's smiling at me as I let him pour himself some Campari: he had lately been asking me to carve the dinner roasts, reminding me that Chaucer's *curteis Squier biforn his fader at the table.* He sat down, drink poured, awaiting his just entertainment.

"*Try* moving me out, boy!" a son might read in the genial opacity of his father's eyes, though actually he was seeing the countenance of a graceful man, seventy years old, expecting nothing, ready for anything including unannounced Notability.

So there we were, an evening's stable triangle where before Mailer and I had been only intermittently a pair of synchronous talkers. He may well have felt subterranean motions.

I started things up with something easy. "I do have an academic question for you. Did you name *Barbary Shore*'s Hollingsworth as a reference to Hawthorne's Hollingsworth in *The Blithedale Romance*?"

"No," he replied in his best interview tone. "No. I can answer that directly because I haven't read the book. At Harvard I did read F.O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance*, so I might have had Hawthorne vaguely in mind, but nothing specific. Is his Hollingsworth anything like mine?"

I was analyzing the tone of a phrase even while answering Mailer's question. "They are almost exact opposites, which is why I wondered, but I'm delighted *you* meant nothing, since it's my job to make connections." These were spongy words and pauses to make time for ordering impression.

Mailer says *at Harvard* the way 50 years ago Fitzgerald might have said *at Princeton*, and, intoned that way, the phrase both collects and distances. It says "one of us" to the few and draws ambiguous regard from the world of outer dark.

Place had told on Mailer even as I had been making light of it in my plainchant of Berkshire authors. (Part of it runs: Jonathan Edwards, William Cullen Bryant, W.E.B. DuBois, Edward Bellamy.) For an hour or so I had been recreating for him a sense of traditional place powerful in direct

proportion to his expressed ambition to write "a descendant of *Moby Dick* . . . which will call for such time, strength, cash and patience that I do not know if I have it all to give." Walking into the house that night he may well have been genuinely unaware of local and literary history, but at least for our time together he no longer was. I had served him that history in the somewhat goading terms of the acolyte assuming that he, Mailer, was taking his own place in the Berkshires, redeeming them, say, from late James Gould Cozzens and Arlo Guthrie. His reaction was to acknowledge the company in which I placed him with a modesty unknown to his television watchers and with the suggestion that he needed institutional support for his claims.

Mailer's modesty before the fact of Harvard startled me. Ishmael, saying a whale ship was his Yale college and his Harvard, has the sounder American populist position about old school ties, and the democrat in each of us applauds his *Summa* and youthful promise of self-reliant success, but Mailer's defensive use of Harvard also has its claims on us in this late century. Ideally we want Emersonian action from ourselves and from Mailer—self-reliant belief in self, a refusal to quit the belief that a popgun is a popgun though the ancient and the honorable of the earth affirm it to be the crack of doom, but at least for these bad times—and remembering Melville's career after *Moby Dick*, perhaps for all American times—a more actualized grounding of the imagination seems to be fearful Man surprised by achievement, not certain of his authentic possession of it. Mailer's protagonists are never quite heros (sic). Instead they are men who find themselves having innocently done some extraordinary act (Rojack, an ambidextrous Zen archer wiping out a German machinegun nest) who must then return, challenged by their own records to try conscious recapturing of unconscious grace.

Talking with Mailer, pressing him as I now realize I must have been, I could sense in him the human source of this imagination of valor: can he yet write so well as Melville in *Moby Dick*, a book which is his code word for achievement? I could also feel him implicating Harvard in his uncertainties. The class of '43 may well ponder their prizewinning classmate's career as a representative one. Ishmael is uncertain whether he will ever deserve any real repute in that small but high hushed world which he might not reasonably be ambitious of. So much less certain is Mailer a century and more later.

Mailer's phrase, his learned language of the courtier, his deference to the town, even the handshake and formality with my father—add to these a tone

I am willing to call *naively* sincere. I am trying to record my impression of Mailer's unconsciously performing a timeless American ritual.

Start with a given: all bright boys from Brooklyn want to go to Harvard, the College if possible, to avoid the nigh-irresistible temptation to try passing with a mere graduate degree. Yet even while they attend the College, none so crisply as they enact the American drama of the individual new Adam confronting the old world of privilege. The end of this cliché we all love so much is always in the same demonstration: jump over all the right sticks –Gatsby is really an Oxford man—play the game hard, wear the right shirts (or the wrong ones) and it still just does not matter since the final reward is always denied. There is no rebirth, just a history of exclusion. Watching Mailer, thinking along these lines, I found myself recalling his own idiom in *The Armies of the Night*: "not unlike some poor fellow who strains his very testicles to bring in emoluments for his wife yet is never favored with carnal knowledge of her" and remembering how consistently his characters find themselves with the goods of American life but no easy possession of them or even desire for their materiality. The goods—Gatsby's shirts—are supposed to stand for a spiritual election, *lost*, Mailer would say, localizing a familiar Protestant theology in his homely metaphor of presidential politics. It is a race perpetually well lost, in Mailer's work and elsewhere. "You're worth the whole damn bunch put together," Nick yells to Gatsby, which in retrospect makes Nick feel glad. We have no record of Gatsby's feelings.

For Nick, for Mailer, no social intractability changes as a result of this drama. In *The Great Gatsby* the encompassing action turns out to be Nick's perception, after two years' brooding, of inevitable tragedy. Gatsby's struggle has virtually no liberating or revolutionary potential because its protagonist, the outsider, makes an honorable investment in the caste he aspires to. Since he thinks these people clean, his hands don't stink after touching them. Since he has chosen the combat, Gatsby's individual worth to some extent legitimizes his carelessly brutal opposition, gives the Buchanans some of the cosmic unkindness of fate. Similarly, there ought to be the ideal Harvard which Mailer's tone invoked, a place, say, of Emersonian American scholars "free even to the definition of freedom." His conversational tone, for the time, legitimized an actuality which too often is the grand name without the grand thing, a place of careful decency and arrogant certainty about whence cometh "the best and the brightest."

The man's conversational tone was an American moment, and in his

work, actual Harvard is a goad to his imagination. Lieutenant Hearn of *The Naked and the Dead* is a *magna* Harvard graduate, thesis on Melville, a confused, irrelevant and rather clubbable chap who dies easily by a quick machinegun bullet which does not undeceive. Mailer opens *Advertisements for Myself* with a double-edged and self-ironic report to Harvard '43's fifteenth reunion: it seems to be the appropriate national agency to require and receive such accountings, but *Alma Mater* may feel discomforted by her son's tone. Rojack is in some ways Hearn resuscitated as well as possible avatar of Mailer himself. He is Harvard, PBK, *summa* in government a year behind Jack Kennedy. *Quel alumnus!*

Yet in writing them out, in naively speaking them, most Americans' claims to visible establishment or history become absurd in the vast transplantation of our places compared to European places they imitate. The Berkshires' "Shadowbrook"—bought from Stokes by Carnegie—was an English parish complete with manor house, parsonage, curate's residence, outbuildings which might have housed Lawrence's Mellors and "Shadowbrook" was a complete importation by sudden wealth. Like the Hearst Castle or Hudson River mansions, it was the culmination of the bourgeois habit which buys complete sets of things all at once since there has been no time for miscellaneous, tasteful collection, for expression through time. A brewer might have built "Shadowbrook" though Carnegie bought it from a banking family which included an Episcopal bishop. Yet such pleasurable—and liberating—discovery of triviality is also most frequently an outsider's revenge. Melville was the poor relation of an established family when he fashioned Ishmael's jaunty crack about Yale College and Harvard. Mailer—in print—can chide Fair Harvard's moral establishment ("Where are the chaplains from Harvard?" he wonders in *The Armies of the Night*) but that salutary dismission is conscious art, a return in print to a set of actual events in the midst of which he felt himself uneasy before the cultural solidity of Robert Lowell and the claims that name possesses.

In his writing Mailer can never finally place a character in the way an English author can, just as he may not place himself in The Berkshires. (He wants to sell his house.) At the end of *An American Dream* Rojack wakes to judge himself vaguely sane and starts out on a long trip. *Barbary Shore* is a book of temporary, boarding-house locale and ends with Lovett, after a narrow escape, in some other meaningless room, writing and watching the door. The actual event of *The Armies of the Night* is a march which does not end

"for we must end on the road to that mystery where courage, death, and the dream of love give promise of sleep." *Why Are We In Vietnam?* ends with a traveler's exit line, "Vietnam, hot dam."

Mailer's imaginative place is the American open road, or more exactly the spiritualized late 20th century road whose actuality both mocks Whitman and sells Kawasakis. In print, when Mailer finds himself accidentally placed, say in Miami, he lets the writing of the place give no rest: there "the sensation of breathing, then living, was not unlike being obligated to make love to a 300-pound woman who has decided to get on top. Got it? You could not dominate a thing. That uprooted jungle had to be screaming beneath." The classic American figures have no houses –"Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me and I can't stand it. I been there before." The implications are that no one place is worth one's time. Place—anyplace—is prison to such folk, and we Americans require of our writers that they create for us imaginations of escape. "It is a way I have," says Ishmael, "of driving off the spleen, and regulating the circulation."

But such fictional insouciance often is symptomatic of the writer's disease before an old world which yields no miracles of rebirth. Conversation with Mailer gives an actual foundation for his written creation of escapees. There, fortuitously placed in the Berkshires, Mailer shows himself with the outsider's yearningly high valuation of what he feels he has not been born to. Hearing the man do Harvard, do Stockbridge, even thinking about presenting him with the Anglo-American double dactyl which is my own name, I found myself thinking "For God's sake, man, you own the places if you want them!" and having his whole demeanor assert that he feels himself in dubious battle for such piquant sweets as I have evoked.

By this time we were talking about a current production of *Desire under the Elms* at the Berkshire Playhouse. Characteristically, my father was telling an anecdote of the founding of the Playhouse by some of his friends and Mailer was asking what we thought of the play, since "I had no chance to judge it. The director is a friend of mine and invited me to see it" and "I find I always tell an actor something good about his work." We had a nice exchange, I saying that Eva-Marie Saint's Abbie did not have enough energy to fuse property lust with child-murder and love. Mailer was saying that it was an impossible play to stage because of the infanticide. For him Abbie is possessed of love for

an idea, and the idea can ease her transfer from child loved to child hated and Eben loved. After a while I was talking of property-madness in the play and saying it was a Freudianized, New York view of New Englanders.

Mailer said, "I have a lot of prides, but I've never pretended to understand New Englanders and their craving for property."

My father picked him up on this. "That's more Irish than New England. A New Englander wants out. I was born on a Connecticut rock farm, and I remember when I got to Illinois to teach. I walked on that earth, thinking about topsoil which was teen feet deep and no rocks." He paused a bit—what memories? His Irish mother? Blighted Connecticut potatoes? Hazlitt saying Wordsworth seemed not to know that country people hated each other? "Not, it's Irish, after years of dispossession to lust for such boney stuff as that farm." There were tones of unquestionable ease in his voice, of certainty which came from his having withdrawn from a place yet enjoying still its most valuable part. Fresh from O'Neill's New England, I was now doing time near Thoreau's Concord as the crusty farmer who supposed the poet had gotten a few wild apples only. My old man was the poet who had put the place in rhyme, fairly impounded it, milked it, skimmed it, and got all the cream. Could Mailer have felt what was going on? Certainly not in these allusive terms, since his preferred comparisons are to politics, sex, sports, and war, but he must have felt some of what was between my father and me. This much at least was clear from my couch: my father was not going to let me play New Englander any more. I could do that well enough in San Francisco, in Frost's home town, but not here, not in Stockbridge, in *his* house.

All right.

I asked Mailer a question in the California idiom: "Here's Rumor from the West Coast saying Patty Hearst put you—put printers and book designers—out of business. So much more sex, generation, race, father and daughter, violence, guilt than even you can ever imagine, with wider circulation. She wrote it all direct on the airwaves." It is an easy mode of speech for him to play in, the familiar style of underground interviews and the reason they are like midtown IRT exits in August. Mailer rolled it into nice elaboration. "Yes, but nobody says she's proved herself a Hearst. King Lear, you say, and daughters. No. It's Blood, and what Lawrence could do with that Blood submerged for a generation or two, the it comes up again, in a girl. She's kidnapped and takes over the entire gang." It was nicely done, and we were all laughing together and trying to figure out whether William R. was her grandfather or

great-grandfather. "You know the story," my father began as cover for the time he was taking with an encyclopedia, "you know the story that he was expelled from Harvard because to demonstrate his opinion of one of his professors he had the man's picture put in the bottom of the chamber pot and given to him as a present?" Mailer: "My bookmaker's sense says now it might be the professor to go." We talked along inconsequentially for a while—a bit of off-hand shoptalk about blacks in colleges. I recall his trivial question about whether blacks are now taking over the classroom as they took over the athletic fields. Then, about Patricia Hearst again: "but I can't forgive her for the style, for the decay of language in her mouth."

It was another moment.

We had moved from California sportiveness to an anguish in the living wordsmith. Every modern writer fears in his soul that the only well he really draws on—English undefiled—may be polluted past purification by advertising, by bureaucracy, by party-line humorlessness, by his own laziness and use of cliché, by the mechanical functioning of acronyms: "What a fall for the ego of the artist," Mailer muses in the Apollo VAB. "What a climb to capture the language again!"

In his fear for the common language, Mailer shares W.H. Auden's civilized creed and vindication of the critic but with a difference. Auden wrote:

> *There is one evil that concerns literature which should never be passed over in silence but be continually publicly attacked, and that is corruption of the language, for writers cannot invent their own language and are dependent upon the language they inherit so that, if it be corrupt, they must be corrupted. But the critic who concerns himself with this evil must attack it at its source, which is not in works of literature but in the misuse of language by the man-in-the-street, journalists, politicians, etc. Furthermore, he must be able to practice what he preaches. How many critics in England or America today are masters of their native tongue as Karl Kraus was a master of German?*

Mailer, thinking of Patricia Hearst's style—and probably of that style as expressing her outright *power* as a young, rich, female and ordinary enough to be called pretty—allows himself no poet's belief in a linguistic sanctuary. The essential difference between Mailer's fear for language and Auden's

dictum is in the men's relation to the largely urban lexicon of the streets we all walk on. *For Poetry*, Auden wrote in obsequy for Yeats,

> *makes nothing happen: it survives*
> *In the valley of its saying where executives*
> *Would never want to tamper . . .*

Auden, urbane poet, could give up the mass market, and not reluctantly. He found imaginative rest as a civilized, call him *non*-patriate with an American kitchen in a Bavarian farmhouse, the best to be done out of the Cold War. Mailer, urban novelist and journalist, cannot so thoroughly give up the language to that calculating spirit who anonymously changed the War Department to the Defense Department at costs no one could accurately project at the time. Mailer's verbal world—like Orwell's—is precisely the one where executives and others have tampered with the delicate, almost ecological balance in language between actual reference and narcotic evasion: how large an appropriation could a Presidential hopeful push for a Department of Offense? Mailer lives in no poet's exile from his imagination of America, and the essential drama of it—now from a writer's technical point of view—is the struggle of speech to express rather than to conceal enormity. The former Governor of California once asked the scientific community to develop a more humane form of capital punishment.

What I have written thus far does not so much create the sense of three men's conversation as it does the impression of me lurking in wait for a special word said, even tone used, *let slip* by Mailer, and then my pouncing on it for a good, brooding meditation. There are various things to be said in favor of such a method, the appropriate one at this point being that it is Mailer's own journalistic method turned on himself. Here he is as "the reporter" early in *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*:

> *Unless one knows him well, or has done a sizable work of preparation, it is next to useless to interview a politician . . . To surprise a skillful politician with a question is then approximately equal in difficulty to hitting a professional boxer with a barroom hook . . . Interviewing a candidate is about as intimate as catching him on*

> *television. Therefore it is sometimes easier to pick up on the truth of his campaign by studying the outriggers of his activity.*

As a subject for report, Mailer himself very much presents the same problems a seasoned politician like Nixon did to Mailer. Talking with Mailer, listening to him talk with my father, I was very much seeking clues—*moments* and *times* I have been calling them—when I was certain I had reached to the man and not just his written expressions.

The rhythm of what actually went on is better carried by an exchange like this. The subject is Crime in the Streets. Mailer has been easily holding a chatty corner of a three-way conversation, and then he gracefully shifts us to argument: "Let's start with a hypothesis or two—that the rise in crime rate may not necessarily be a bad thing. It may encourage the police to deal more creatively with situations." He is leaning forward a bit and now drinking Black Label, as I have been more steadily than he.

My father for his part looks actively sceptical.

"I guess I really don't know what you mean when you say something like that," I said. "It seems to me the only response we can realistically expect from police is overmatching violence and legally sanctioned. They love it. Jesus! did you *see* the creative response to the SLA in Los Angeles?" I wanted to rush on to my sense of the murderous joy conveyed in the acronym S.W.A.T. and the TV show which followed, but Mailer was leaning forward, taking the floor and launching into a polished anecdote about Junior Riordan, "a tough cop on the take"—100,000 a year, but fair in his own lights. He finally got caught and did three in Sing Sing. It was hard time for him in there. Lots of people he'd sent up, and he didn't do it nicely. But he read Kafka inside, and he came out still sounding like a cop, but a little like Kafka, too. He went into the wholesale meat business, selling good steaks to restaurants like Mike Manuche's and Manny Wolf's. When drunk, Junior Riordan had a line to cast, and here Mailer gave me a good shot with a delivery I had too soon stopped expecting. "You intellectuals!" he hissed, leaning forward, blue eyes open and staring for effect, engaging me now. "Being a cop is fucking hard work, and I'm good at it. I'm tough and I'm on the take and *fuck you!* if you want to do anything about it."

It has been a decade since a man I take seriously has spoken so direct a challenge to me, and, anecdote be damned, in the moment I was taking Mailer's shot and feeling my counter-punch coming, I knew exactly the lay of every weapon—bottle, poker, ashtray, stemmed glass—and the reach of my arm.

A crossroads.

If I wanted provocation for my fantastic headlines of earlier in the evening, this was it. Yet in such moments character does prove to be destiny.

"Look, that's a nice story, and well told, too, but how can you project it from what we *know* about police?" I was loud and emphatic and it was Mailer's turn to sit back a bit. Perhaps my knuckles were white on the glass, though his own danger was long past in the instant of my talking. "Have you ever read," I went on, "a book by Jonathan Rubenstein called *City Police*?"

"No," Mailer said. "Is it a good one?"

The pace of things was momentarily chatty.

"Amazingly so. It's sociology—Goffman style—the only thing I've read which makes me at all able to feel empathy with cops. It's not polemics; just the stuff of their daily lives, the importance of the squad car, the radio, their limitations by it, their techniques of putting hands on citizens, their own senses of themselves as untouchable while knowing that they can touch anyone . . . ." The book is every bit as good as I was telling Mailer, and he was genuinely interested in information, saying in a kind of colloquial courtliness, "Tell me more. I'm learning from everything you say."

I was up and rummaging around various books while saying, "I'm delighted. Look here, take it, I like giving away good books." It was the moment to inscribe it to him, but I ran through it, wanting to keep on the track of talk. As I sat down I kept on talking, "On the violence business, though. Rubenstein's whole point is that the conditions of modern policing deny any individuality to cops. They're all wired into Central Station, by radio. Fifteen minutes even, off the air, and the Dispatcher is on them." I was heating up again. "Creative possibility? They're robots now. The cooping cop, the man with free time? From New York days I remember the viaduct north of Grant's tomb and the squad cars parked under it and dozing cops. That's anachronism, an urban scene about as actual today as Norman Rockwell's paintings of Stockbridge. You hate transistors and mechanical men, but cops even *walk* transistorized today! Rubenstein tells a story of the old creative

way—gone with the radio—of cops shaping up a rough bar, sticking it over on their free time . . ."

Mailer checked me with the offence, intense stodginess of his interruption: "I don't admire that sort of policing, thuggery."

I was being a rude host, badgering my guest, and this particular outburst seems trivial enough, but it is part of the pattern of the later evening. I have now the impression of my brooding silence while Mailer and my father moved into the shared entertainment of politics. They were talking about Kennedys and sounded more like each other than either sounded like me. *The New York Times Magazine* had just redone Chappaquiddick, and while I was nursing irritation about romanticized police, the two of them went on.

"I think it's destroyed his presidential chances," my father said. "Someone like Mondale will get it." Mailer: "If so, I just wish he'd bow out now." Father: "Yes, let him keep on being a damned fine senator, as he is."

That one was a conscious or unconscious shot at me.

My family and I have always fought our battles with political clubs. They say Kennedy and think of a rich man not prey to the low thievery of Agnew Nixon. I hear Kennedy and think of Bay of Pigs, Camelot, the disgusting appeal to give up self to country. Even this summer of our late time had had its hot moment for my father and me during a radio interview with a constitutional lawyer whose theory was that Nixon was perpetually immune to prosecution. "Christ!" I had exploded, "it sounds as though all we can do is shoot the bastard!" My father came back at me, sharp enough to startle my young daughter, "I heard you say that once before and I think it's vicious, immoral." Well, I never know what issues we thrash out in guise of political debate, but I was peeved now that my father and Mailer were enjoying their chat about Kennedy.

"Is Nixon still a hipster?" I interrupted.

"I never said that!"

"Well, in *Advertisements* he was hip as opposed to square John Foster Dulles."

Mailer turned back to my father who was smiling on us both, perhaps thinking that a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds. "Ted's always been the best of the Kennedys," Mailer said. "I've only just met them all, but he's the most solid of them."

Police and Kennedys were still rankling, but I decided to try the decent

thing and told my own Kennedy story of the time when Senator John visited *The Berkshire Eagle's* newsroom where I was working in the summer of 1958. His flack was introducing him around the desks, and when they got to me I gave him a bit of boarding-school snippishness. As he put out his hand I said, "You probably don't want to shake hands with me. I'm from out-of-state, underage, and it can't do you any good." The senator looked for a moment and casually gave much better than he got: "You're right!" and a precise, not overhasty turning away.

Mailer and my father shared the heartiest laugh I earned that evening, which did not altogether please me.

As I remember it, my next question cracked into their pleasure at Kennedy's graceful job. "You know, one of the things I see in all your work is that your idea of worth—the analogy for it, your pleased sense of yourself as ex-rifleman who, surprisingly, stood his patrols in the war—is military valor. Are there any civilian virtues for you? Can you raise a metaphor from a shanty, like Thoreau? From the foulest civilian industry, like Melville?" It was more thinking aloud than questioning. "I'm not saying Thoreau likes capitalism or Melville whaling—he jumped ship from the *Acushnet* after a couple of months—but both men's writing suggests that human labor, *civilian* labor is a basic analogy for their transcendental travels."

My tone may well have been aggressive, though I doubt it. More likely, the question was simply incomprehensible. Certainly at the moment of asking, it garroted conversation. It was not clear enough for exploring reply and it stank of oratory. We went on to other things, but in waiting out the conversation, my unanswered question has become the time of my time with Norman Mailer.

I want to try explaining.

Reading *Marilyn* last year, I startled myself with a contemptuous snort when I got to "She is the general of sex, but like other generals she does not feel the excitement and fear of the infantryman." Mailer's war and warfare had been one of my early imaginative refuges from a father who knew and could do nothing else. I first read *The Naked and the Dead* when I was working on his house, long before I had learned to see novels as *novels* rather than as true accounts of braver, more fascinating places than the world I live in. I suppose for me then, the book, with its sexy-sounding title and violent action—and minor female roles—was simply a part of what I knew was true even though, like most things, not yet part of my experience. I know that it

was escape from my father's authoritative knowledge of how things actually work. He had never been a soldier. I was not yet a good carpenter.

Yet, two decades later, this imagination of bravery—Mailer's infantryman appears again and again—causes in me sarcasm, irony, wistfulness, and a measure of plain envy for men who shared in every American's God-given right to have a foreign war, to come back to VA benefits and the sense of a great and significant rite enacted, over there. As Mailer and I talked that evening under the bemused watch of a thorough civilian, I began to articulate the critical foundations for the essays which follow in this book.

There is at the center of Mailer's imagination a soldier, heroic in terrifying circumstances. That soldier is both certain that his experience could have been a valid rite of passage and that, in his incomplete performance, it was not. The initial failure within heroic endeavor generates an imperative to return, to make good what was not wholly good before. The fearful, knowing return to deadly and exciting combat is the subject of Mailer's completed novels, and that return can well be called the time of his times.

Yet particularly in the later years. Mailer seems to be moving toward what I would call a civilian or historical imagination. In his third novel, *The Deer Park*, Mailer created a demon-devotee who finds himself praying as he overlooks the Nevada atomic bomber:

> *So let it come, Faye thought, let this explosion come, and then another and all the others, until the Sun God burned the earth. Let it come, he thought, looking into the east at Mecca where the bombs ticked while he stood on a tiny rise of ground trying to see one hundred, two hundred, three hundred miles across the desert. Let it come, Faye begged, like a man praying for rain, let it come and clear the rot and the stench and the stink, let it come for all of everywhere, just so it comes and the world stands clear in the white dead dawn.*

It is a moving, unanswered prayer for apocalypse (and perfectly imagines the adolescent military thinking which destroys villages to "save" them: Faye is a pimp, but suppose he were President?). Yet in the later years, the apocalypse of war seems to me to be losing ground in Mailer's imagination to the growth in time of family and generativity. Where the early work explores the self in the late American world, and it is a self driven to the hipster's

sleights of survival, the journalism (particularly) draws much of its authority from Notability, from work in time, from fathering.

I read Mailer with a civilian bias. His later work particularly suggests to me an imaginative movement from the simplicity of apocalyptic warfare—my end is the end of the world—to the complex transactions of actual aging. Time is passing through him to his children, and one of the pleasures in talking with him is swapping Daddy stories. He has a young daughter of his later years, and I suspect that she has anchored him more than the others in actualized creativity and adult life.

Increasingly, Mailer's infantryman seems a romance from which he himself departs to try imaginations of civilian enterprise. Mailer's romance of the rifleman is something he shares with millions of Americans—not necessarily all of them in their fifties—and it must be one of the reasons they read him with delight and horror. He is, spiritually, *one of them* as he completes, or more typically explores the lack of completeness in their common time of bravery. Here is his Armstrong, man for the moon: "When he stopped to think, six tired parallel lines stood out on his forehead, and his hair was very straight, small-town hair-colored humorless straight, his pupils were very small, hardly larger than buckshot, you could believe he flew seventy-eight combat missions off the *Essex* near Korea." Mailer's journalistic scepticism is here, a bit of urban contempt, but there is also imaginative lust for those missions, those *combat* missions which prove the man's worth. Mailer is the wordsmith of those generations which may not want precisely to say that war is the time of their time.

Yet in my time the landscape for bravery so much changed that Mailer's familiar military analogies—despite, I am willing to say, his intentions—do not convey bravery any more. They are ironic renderings of what once may have been brave; they are negative images of bravery in a time when there may be no other. None of this is Mailer's fault. The language and perhaps our psychic grammar have changed around him as our War works an unfair, ex-post-facto trivializing of *his* war. War in Vietnam did not start in the grand illusion which can lead to such battered, humane figures as Jake Barnes and Nick Adams. Honest, plain-spoken Michael Williams in *Henry the Fifth* is their ancestor. ("But if the cause be not good, the king himself hath a heavy reckoning to make when all those legs and arms and heads chopp'd off in a battle shall join together at the latter day and cry all 'We died at such a place'—some swearing, some crying for a surgeon, some upon their wives

left poor behind them, some upon their children rawly left.") This judgment—the cause was not good—is judgment of more than one modern politician.

In contrast, one corner of hell for an American Vietnam veteran is that he participated in the shabby will which put him under fire. The dramatic issue of war in our time is still, not the many thousands who went and suffered, but the few thousand who did not go and are still enacting their ritual of resistance. In such a time, Mailer's ex-rifleman is becoming for me a VFW, an older fellow who now wisely holds his conventions in the smaller cities.

Some of this, perhaps, more than I can bear to admit, is simply my darkling whistle, writing *peace* in hopes of making it happen. Certainly it has to my ears the uncertain, pious tone of Melville's poetry:

War shall yet be, and to the end;
But war-paint shows the streaks of weather;
War yet shall be, but warriors
Are now but operatives; War's made
Less grand than Peace,
And a singe runs through lace and
feather.

This may not yet be, however I vote for no candidate who includes his war record as a reason for my doing so. And as Mailer says in a somewhat similar situation, I suppose that what is true for me is true for many of you in the class of '61.

If Mailer—and many men younger than he—lived their experience of courage in Army uniform, some others lived theirs in a few American cities, in Jackson, Hattiesburg, Laurel, Biloxi and their connecting highways, in 1963. Not so very many did, and I almost believe there will appear no writer to transmute that brief time into the truth it was. Yet what incomparable material in the time! We were innocents coming South, idealists every one, driving nonstop 1000 miles, outraged by the vote. If departure had a sentimental military flavor—I essentially ran away to enlist without thought of wife and despite my mother's tears—the discoveries were home and civilian truths. The citizenry, goaded by race and sex and politics and youth, turn murderous, and they stalk as skilled assassins, not as random-firing soldiers in uniform. There is official connivance in their work, and there was no

psychic rear area in the South in 1963. Walking the mundane street was a matter of lively interest. One's looks and words with passers-by were immediately important: nervous bravado could cause beating or worse, but to Tom through a crowd was a destruction of self. A white boy I was with broke into tears, and the crowd's mood changed from pre-lunch fury to amused contempt, contempt which I had to bear along with my private senses of regional betrayal and even security within that southern contempt. I had not chosen the refuge myself, but at the moment I was relieved to be in it. And the Blacks gave me no easy time about my compeer.

It is hard to write of those days. My own role in it all was slight, and I was lucky, surviving arrest, even having a brief unsettling sense of security in Hattiesburg jail: booking was not very much different from registering for the draft, though some of the truth of my situation came in the blows of a white drunk-tank—"A nigger-lover for y'all." Schwerner, Chancey, Goodman. They were not lucky.

My point is that what happened to us was nothing so easy as state-supported warfare. Naked in a nightmare landscape of the familiar—Hattiesburg, Mississippi, is not so very much different from Pittsfield, Massachusetts, though it has more black citizens—we did not style ourselves guerillas or Weather Underground bomb-planters. There is no military analogy for such decent exposure, walking Main Street and dirt road risking life, urging others in their return to risk being civilians, and there was little immediate triumph in the work. Imagine, in such circumstances, hearing an old black man's response, "Yas, suh, I sho'ly does heah yuh, suh!" Again, many and many were braver than I, heroic even, and heroic in precisely the manner Mailer imagines in his fiction, defines in *Of A Fire On The Moon*: "The real heroism, he thought, was to understand, and because one understood, be even more full of fear at the enormity of what one understood, yet at that moment continue to be ready for the feat one had decided it was essential to perform." (Mailer and I are kin in our sense of courage if not in our sense of setting and exemplar.) A symbol of nightmare in Hattiesburg: the firemen, not the police, were the most visible agents of state anarchy—assault and battery by high-pressure hose. I scarcely know the frightened, still witty youth who staged a slow looking-up as firemen in full regalia—helmets, rubberized coats, axes, boots—hauling the hose, burst into an organizing office, filled as it always was with curious children, old people, and a few workers:

"Where's the fire? We have a fire here!"

The youth held up a single cigarette in no trembling hand, daring the awful force of that hose to extinguish civilian example.

It was an American passage.

I so far only suspect that for the class of '61 and some others, the landscape of heroism has changed, that we are proof against merely martial vigor and self-exculpation. A measure of my own falling from an ideal—or of my cowardly decadence—is my feeling that Yeats's Irish airman myopically foresees his own death in the clouds:

> *Nor law nor duty made me fight,*
> *Nor public men, nor cheering crowds,*
> *A lonely impulse of delight*
> *Drove to his tumult in the clouds.*

For 26 of 27 registered readers, this is Yeats at his most accessible best, a glorious and existential affirmation of the moment of intensest life. Yet I can share the lily of it all only in the moment before I begin to think about the machine-gun bullets the chap will existentially fire, perhaps to fall with lethal momentum on people below. The conceptually endless repetition of *Catch-22* is my war poetry, but because of Dunbar the teacher, not Yossarian the Christ-figure. It is Dunbar who first feels the connections among his bombs, his own desire to live and the foreigners below. He acts bravely according to his feeling. (If this sounds like an attack on Mailer, which I do not mean it to be, it's right for me to say here that the narrator of *The Deer Park* has very much the same feelings about military flying.)

The end is of course not yet, and the class of '61 has so far not changed things very much. Certainly our wrecks are on every shore. The hardest-working person in the Jackson SNCC office is now in the depths of loneliness in a Meridian mental hospital. Stephen Bingham, who was also in Jackson and working for equal suffrage, apparently has given up civilian decency and gives interviews in Canada. It is likely enough that the Weather Underground has members who braved the roads of Mississippi more than a decade ago. The time of my time was savagely brief, barely a year when at least there existed a dangerous high road where, if the worst were often filled with their passionate intensity, the best had all conviction and a fair share of wit to match. Some one of those walkers said, in a moment of stress, that he

believed in the right to discriminate without regard to race, creed, color, or national origin. That movement offered an American initiation matched by no foreign war, no civil *war* or undiscriminating bomb left in a men's room.

There is not much more to record of what Mailer and I actually said to each other that evening now more than a year ago. Following out his unfeigned interest, I made a tentative date with him to go on a literary tour of the Berkshires if he were back from a trip before I myself had to leave. I was going to take him to some places redolent of Hawthorne's "Ethan Brand," of Holmes's *Elsie Venner*—and to a quiet bar or two. He and my father exchanged their farewells, then I walked him out to his car and we shook hands.

"Jonathan," he said, "you write a good letter. I must have gotten a thousand asking for the same thing in the last 20 years, but I decided to answer yours. If I'm back before the 27th [he was remembering the day I was leaving from the letter, not from our talk] I promise I'll look you up. I'd like that tour."

He did not make it back to Stockbridge in time, though his secretary phoned his regrets with a skill which disarmed my fears that I had been a bore. I may yet see him again, though I doubt that I shall need to write about it if I do: the time of my time with him is this writing and the rest can be private good fellowship. Both for accidental reasons (I read him young) and professional ones (I am a critic), Mailer is a figure in my imaginative landscapes, private and public. What now seems to have emerged in this recreation of conversation is two older men who, like Chaucer's Wife of Bath, have had the world as in their time, a third and younger man with variously empathetic and sympathetic perceptions of them both. Thoreau says that one generation abandons the enterprises of another like stranded vessels, making the operation sound instinctual, and ignoring salvage values, the bravery of the coast guard. A Harvard graduate, Thoreau believes in neither history nor teaching: "I have lived some thirty years on this planet, and I have yet to hear the first syllable of valuable or even earnest advice from my seniors. They have told me nothing, and probably cannot tell me anything, to the purpose." It is a glorious and liberating poem he makes of two years, two months, two days yet, at last, it does not suggest the form of the three men's transaction at Stockbridge more than a year ago. There, hedged round

by cautions, propriety, reputation, place, they themselves were repeating or creating some of the history of their different times.

Say that the younger man looks on Mailer in a spirit of creative jealousy. He feels the clarity of the older man's central martial metaphor, how thoroughly its romance seems to make imaginative sense of chaos in time. Along with the fascination of the sexual unknown, Mailer imagines a familiar titanic struggle and inevitable whoring on the home front. It is Camelot, in short, less debased Tennyson than it is home as found by a minority reporter to a generation. Mailer is no pure delight to his less imaginative classmates. What a blow to romantic propriety if Rojack's plugging of a Nazi, with scatology in punning assault on a generation's marksmanship, becomes the dominant image of a momentous time!

Opposed to such phallic romance and black humor, is there a possible civilian imagination of my time? Perhaps as yet no such imagination, but some signs of critical intelligence? "I had better never see a book than to be warped by its attraction clean out of my own orbit, and made a satellite." Emerson's American Scholar—class of 1837 or 1961—ought to be reading with a lively sense of risk: "The writer was a just and wise spirit. Henceforward it is settled, the book is perfect; as love of the hero corrupts into worship of his statue. Instantly the book becomes noxious. The guide is a tyrant. We sought a brother, and lo, a governor." It strikes me as cowardly not to write about Mailer and his work even though I can offer only a few broken images of countervailing civilian virtue. Civil Rights seem to me life not yet—still Emerson!—transmuted into truth, no complete metaphor for my generation unclear in its imagination of liberation. Eliot wrote in a note on war poetry, "It seems just possible that a poem might happen/To a very young man: but a poem is not poetry." Some such is my own situation, feeling in my own as yet unimagined experience the ground on which I stand apart from such gloriously recreated familiar stuff as Mailer's fine rhetorical delivery of Manichean strife. So in making this conversation I have emphasized my unspoken reservations, allowed a wide run of association, disordered actual time, all as ways of having some critical distance from Mailer's charm, actual and literary.

Back in California, my lady of introductions had a second question about Mailer:

"Did he *do* Croft for you? He *likes* to do Croft; he can do him for hours!" She had clearly been a delighted audience, and her sense of Mailer as actor—

doing roles, not being any one—should be a real *caveat* to my claims of giving the man's actuality.

Yet as I answered, "No, no. He did Junior Riordan," I was at last expressing my discontent with Mailer on creative policing. Sergeant Croft, the murderous and forceful platoon leader in *The Naked and the Dead*, is a character who, discovering that everybody dies, enlists as executioner. To my mind he has his resemblances to Junior Riordan. Which means simply this: Mailer—in this sentence I doubt that he read Rubenstein's book—romanticizes police work, perhaps out of unacquaintance with the gear of it, and then imaginatively signs up on the side of the authorities. In my lady's terms, he *does* authority and status, likes doing them, in actuality can do them for hours even while aspiring to freedom. Like so many of us, his soul may be Tom Sawyer who wishes he were Huck Finn.

There is a last good-night.

My father and I had a way to go before we slept. I pointedly passed over the apologetics in his sense that he could not simply have come in, chatted a while, and left. I poured us final drinks while asking what he thought of our guest.

"An extraordinary, gracious man, not at all what I might have thought. I'll go back now and read a lot more of his things than I have. I've seen him on television of course, but I never expected to see him here."

Any overall impressions, summations?

"Well, he's not what you'd call a learned man in any formal sense—the Matthiessen compliment was touching, though the book is out-of-date—but he obviously has a novelist's ear for information. And a kind of voracious patience: he listens well (you were certainly *telling* him a lot of the time) and remembers." He paused. "I also think you were a writer's ideal audience, giving the flattery of precisely knowing so much of his work."

"It's what you call his graciousness which stays with me now," I said. "A courtesy which extends . . . . Look, you know it must be awfully hard for him to break the bonds of that graciousness and create D.J. Have you read *Why Are We In Vietnam?*"

My father had not, and conversation ended around 2 or so.