NORMAN MAILER ON JAMES BALDWIN

JAMES CAMPBELL

An Interview conducted in the bar of the Algonquin Hotel, W44 Street, New York, on May 25, 1988.

WHEN I BEGAN RESEARCHING MY BIOGRAPHY OF JAMES BALDWIN in earnest, some months after his death in 1987 at the age of sixty-three, I drew up a list of people who might be approached for an interview. I already knew Bernard Hassell, Baldwin's loyal assistant at his home in St-Paul de Vence, the bijou Provencal village where he lived in his later years, and also his brother David Baldwin, by then in residence. The theatre director Robert Cordier, who had a part in the staging of Baldwin's play *Blues for Mr Charlie* in 1964, was someone familiar to me from unconnected Paris acquaintance. Themistocles Hoetis, with whom Baldwin produced the little magazine *Zero* on the Left Bank in the late 1940s, turned out forty years on to be my near neighbour in London, and a pleasingly eccentric and helpful one. There were other people I wished to talk to, and did: the magazine editors Norman Podhoretz (*Commentary*) and William Shawn (*The New Yorker*), the publicity representative at Knopf William Rossa Cole, the actors Gordon Heath and Engin Cezzar, the Turkish novelist Yashar Kemal, Richard Wright's widow Ellen, among others. A small number of people stated with regret, or defiance, that they would rather not.

Near the top of the list, on my first field trip to New York in 1988, was Norman Mailer. Baldwin's essay about their friendship, "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy," published originally in *Esquire* in May 1961 and later that year in the collection *Nobody Knows My Name*, shows him at the

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peak of his ability. It evinces admiration for Mailer, as well as exasperation. It is funny and fond, but defensive: "Two lean cats, one white and one black, met in a French living room." Mailer's essay "The White Negro," said the darker of those cats, was "impenetrable"—a remark certain to sting the other one.

But he should be able to take it, shouldn't he? In *Advertisements for Myself*, Mailer had dished out criticism in the direction of his most challenging contemporaries—not so funny, in the eyes of those on the receiving end. Baldwin, Mailer had suggested, was incapable of saying "Fuck you" to the reader. "My first temptation," Baldwin wrote in "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy," "was to send him a cablegram which would disabuse him of that notion, at least in so far as one reader was concerned."

Baldwin had spoken about Mailer during my visits to St-Paul de Vence in the 1980s. "Norman has absolutely no sense of humour" was among the remarks I jotted down in my notebook after one of our conversations (an unsound judgement, as the interview that follows proves). And later: "The problem with Mailer and Hemingway is the problem of homoeroticism." When I suggested he might write something about Mailer, a twenty-five-years-on follow-up to "The Black Looks at the White Boy," he seemed uncharacteristically annoyed. Baldwin's standing at the time was low; Mailer's still pretty high. "Why would I write something about Norman?" It was a rhetorical question, requiring no answer. I was young and eager to see him in action more than he was apt to be at the time. I had already published a late-period essay by him in the magazine I edited in Scotland, *The New Edinburgh Review*, "Of the Sorrow Songs". It was the only piece Baldwin ever wrote about jazz, and I was proud that he had done so at my prompting. In the meantime, he was having trouble finding a publisher for his book about the Atlanta child killings, *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, which he gave me to read in typescript (I thought I could see why). His third play, *The Welcome Table*, remained unperformed. Baldwin made out that it was because he insisted on casting his brother David in a leading role. "And no theatre in America will *permit* that!"

I can't remember who gave me Mailer's Brooklyn telephone number, but I can see myself calling nervously from a corner booth near 42nd Street, where I was frequenting the New York Public Library. I got through to Judith McNally who told me that she would put the request to Mr. Mailer, and that I should call again the next day. After one or two repeat performances,

she handed the receiver to Mailer himself, who suggested we meet at the Algonquin Hotel the following evening, a Wednesday. He was coming into Manhattan to see David Mamet's play *Speed-the-Plow*, in the company of his daughter Kate at a theatre on 45th Street. We would have about an hour.

Once inside the bar, we were directed to a table in the middle of the floor. The place was busy with a pre-theatre crowd, convivial but noisy. Drinks were ordered and small talk began. I was about to suggest getting down to business, when Mailer made a move that has remained with me ever since, seemingly trivial but essential in situations like the one we were in. "This is all wrong," he said. His drink was lacking in the proper ingredients. We were badly placed. The vibe was off-key. He called the waiter—they knew him, of course—and a quieter table was found. The wrong drink was righted. My little tape recorder was placed on the table and the red button pressed.

The other thing I recall with gratitude is that Mailer played the game. He seemed to understand intuitively the role he was expected to perform in this playlet in which we were both actors, "The Interview." He spoke generously when he felt generous, and admiringly where he admired. Likewise, he didn't hesitate to express adverse sentiments. He was courteous and considerate to his interlocuter throughout.

I offer an edited transcript of our conversation, in the hope that the reader will enjoy it as much for its expression of Mailer's personality as for what he has to say about James Baldwin.

* * *

Norman Mailer: I can't remember when I first met him. In the Village, I think. If not, then it would have been at Jean Malaquais's apartment in Paris in the summer of 1956. I was in Paris. I may have met him once before, casually, because I think we sort of knew about each other, but anyway let's assume that's the case. And we probably got along better then, in Paris, than at any other time. After that, there was always something in the air between us that didn't quite work. I was living with my wife Adele then and we were travelling through Europe, and I had just kicked marihuana, so I was feeling—had just kicked Seconal, hadn't kicked marihuana, just kicked Seconal which had left me depressive. It was a very depressive trip through Europe.

He was living with a boy named Arnold, who was a young musician, I think, and I remember that Jimmy said: "It's hell living with another man,

because of the problem of ego." He was obviously not anticipating women's liberation! (laughter)

In 1956, the feeling was that we were embattled, there was anger in the air, the feeling that fascism was coming into America. The feeling of the mid-50s—it was a brief, bad time. We didn't know that '56 was the turning of a tide. That it had come already. To me, the '60s really began in 1956, though I did not know it then. We felt that we were fellow revolutionaries without a cause, and that it was all going to be bad, and we were both very gloomy. It was a few of us against the world.

Jimmy, I think, had an even deeper sense of it than I did, because of the black situation. And at that time it seemed to me that he was only—and this is probably a lack of perception on my side—incidentally black. That is, he was a wonderful, talented artist who happened to be black. I didn't feel it had any particular importance in our friendship. And he was very much, and quite deservedly, beloved by white people. The irony of it!—because he was full of outrage because of the condition of his people. But there was never anyone more civilized than Jimmy. He had the loveliest manners. And he had these extraordinarily artful moods, between merry and sad. He walked around with a deep mahogany melancholy when he was unhappy; and when things amused him it was wonderful to watch him laugh because it came out of this sorrow he had . . . so he had an absolutely wonderful personality in those years. I don't think there was anyone in the literary world who was more beloved than Jimmy. And that's saying a lot. And he had this ability to make everybody feel that they were his absolutely special friend, more than any other.

JC: Did you see him often back then?

NM: In '56, after I came back from Europe, I started living in the country, up in Connecticut, for two years, and I didn't see him much. And then after I came back to the city, in '58, '59, I would run into him now and again. We never ran together, though we were always glad to see each other. One difficulty in '56 was, I think, *Giovanni's Room* hadn't come out yet but it was in manuscript at that point. Maybe I had read the galleys. And I didn't like it much.

JC: And you told him that?

NM: I think I did. I think I must have told him. But I probably didn't tell him the degree to which I didn't like it. I thought it was the wrong book for him to write. You could say I was pretty narrow minded about it: I thought he should be making major efforts to write about his people, and I thought this was sort of a walk on the side, that didn't really count. I have a hunch that if I were to read it again today I might like it better. It probably is a more interesting book than I thought. Anyway I didn't like it. And, in fact, I never liked any of his novels after that. His essays, of course, are another matter. He probably was the best essayist of our time—not for the depth of what he said but for the beauty with which he got it out.

JC: Where did that style come from?

NM: Black people always impressed me with their elegance. Ralph Ellison had a great deal to offer in terms of style, and I wouldn't say he was without elegance . . . but Jimmy was *all* elegance, in a way. His was possibly the most elegant style that English could muster. Certain rare people in a minority group end up being the mirror of their time. And in a sense I don't think Jimmy ever felt altogether black. It's presumptuous of me to say so, but none the less I think there was a part of him that felt he was a citizen of the world. And as such he picked up the best bits of style and manner all over the place and built a nest of style. Because everything he writes is nested.

JC: Nested?

NM: Well, the style is not a perambulatory style. It's as if—even in an essay like "The Fire Next Time"—it's as if it's all part of this fabulous nest. The style is a reflection of what he's saying. It contains every word of what he's saying. There aren't sentences running off the sides, or going out for a little walk down the street.

What he had was this extraordinary sensitivity, the way he dealt with people. And precisely because he was so poor and small—in Harlem, where size was important—or the Bronx, where he went to high school—I think elegance became enormously important to him. Early in the 60s . . .

JC: Just before you get to the '60s. He thought a great deal of you, but he was disappointed in what you wrote about him in *Advertisements for Myself*. He talked about how he and William Styron and James Jones are sitting around in Paris, having just received a copy of the book . . .

NM: Oh yes, I heard about that.

JC: And they said: we thought this was our friend.

NM: Well, he could have hardly have thought that then. We were not friends at that time. Jones and I were not friends. We had had a falling out. Styron and I were having a feud of several years' duration. Jimmy and I were friends, but my feeling was: he's running with them . . . if he's friends with them, he's not friends with me. So I didn't think of it as being three friends at that point. And he never was innocent. I think the idea that this came as a great shock to him is very hard to accept.

JC: But he was annoyed that you made some rude remarks.

NM: Well, I never wrote anything that was invidious. I may have made some *sharp* remarks.

JC: "Perfumed style."

NM: What?

JC: You said he had a perfumed style.

NM: Well, he did have a perfumed style. By the way, I don't think a perfumed style is bad if you're saying important things. He hadn't written "The Fire Next Time" at that point. That is a perfumed style—and what a perfume! What a powerful piece. You know, if you have perfume with power, you got a phenomenon on your hands. By the way, do you recollect which of his books I did write about in *Advertisements for Myself*?

JC: *Giovanni's Room*, and I think you mentioned the essays. You said you liked the essays but he was incapable of saying "Fuck you" to the reader.

NM: Well, he sure made up for that later on! (laughter) Maybe I had a helping hand. Well, he was too nice to the reader for a long time. I wish I could locate the year. I hate being vague, but I'm damned . . . of all the people I've known over the years. Jimmy is the one I can locate least in time. I suppose it's because we never really had a relationship with episodes. It was more a relationship of airs. We had injured airs. We'd like each other or we'd dislike each other, or like each other a little less, but there was never anything much that ever *happened* with us. Probably the most extended time we had together, two or three days, was at The Fight, which I wrote about. I remem-

ber my father being furious at the remark I made when I said to Jimmy: Why don't you marry my sister, why don't you marry her? Because he was going on about my sister.

JC: Your father was furious?

NM: My father came from South Africa.

JC: After *Advertisements*, there must have been a change in the tenor of the friendship.

NM: When did he write "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy"?

JC: 1961.

NM: There was a change after that, for sure. I was hurt, slightly, by the piece. I thought it was outta whack. He had me strong where I wasn't strong, and he had me weak where I wasn't weak. Those things are more annoying than maliciousness. It wasn't malicious. It was condescending.

It may have been payback, for me being condescending to him. I think if life had brought us together more often, we probably would have ended up having a friendship anyway, no matter what he had said, because it was very exciting to see him. I always loved seeing him, and I think I had the same effect on him. He'd get very keyed up. But we saw each other so seldom.

Now, of course, authors have a special relation. You can see an author seven times in your life, and because you read their books you know them, in a way you don't know a friend, often, whom you see every day. So in that sense we had a relationship, but we were so far apart at the end, it was kind of sad. I remember when I was in Cannes last year . . . I was talking to someone and he said, you know Jimmy's just over in St-Paul de Vence. So I called and he was sleeping. I'd heard he wasn't well.

JC: That would have been in May 1987, six months before he died?

NM: A year ago. So an assistant said, I know he'd want to talk to you. And I said, Oh well, I'll get back. But I happened to be a judge at Cannes . . . you see something like 24 movies in 12 days, plus there are various functions—and you're not even earning a living doing it.

JC: Did you read his last books?

NM: No. But I wasn't singling him out, to not read his books. I've read less and less over the years. I suffer from eye strain, for one thing, and for another, when I'm working on a book I don't like reading a good author, because I find it's unsettling. They open up too many possibilities. When you're working on a book, it's important to think that this book is terribly worth writing, and you just don't want to think of all the things you're not writing about. And Jimmy was good enough, so I was paying him a sort of compliment by not reading him. And then I heard the last books were not good, and I didn't want the depression of realizing they were not good, because there's something terrible about a contemporary whose powers are evaporating.

I'm sure he had good reasons for what he wanted to criticize me for, and I felt he was wasting his substance in Europe. I felt the same way about Jones. I thought that both of them spent much too much time in Europe. There was so much to write about in America. If they'd gone to Europe and written great books about Europe or great books about America, it would have been all right. But they didn't. They solved problems in their lives. And I think Jimmy's problems were enormous.

One parallel, or one affinity, I've always felt with him is that I think each of us spent much too much time solving our personal problems. You know? I wrote a book called *The Prisoner of Sex*, and the more I think about it the more I think that title has a lot to say for itself. (laughter) And Jimmy was the prisoner of sex. And finally his talent went to that, I would assume, or at least went to romantic relationships rather than the monastic discipline of writing. And I used to feel that he was such a great writer, potentially, why the hell doesn't he *write*? We're all hard on each other and very forgiving of ourselves.

JC: When was the last time you saw him?

NM: To my recollection, the last time I saw him was about 12 years ago, at a party in the Village—where I first met him. The last place I saw him was the first place I saw him. But it was a kind of wild, dumb party—I don't mean "wild" in a big, interesting way. Wild is probably too strong a word. It was just a party . . . lot of people, bringing their own booze, stand-up party, typical Village party with about 150 people in three or four rooms, and everyone was standing. And it was that half-life of the Village, half-bohemian life, writers, painters, musicians, a mix, a few psychopaths; not a bad party, but not a good one either. We looked at each other like old war veterans. There

wasn't any great desire to get together, let's go and have dinner, talk over old times and new times.

The other thing was, there was nothing going on in the country. In a certain sense, Jimmy and I might have come together over a common cause at a given moment, if we had happened to be at the same stage at the same time, and working on a cause together.

JC: In "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy," he said something about "the toughest kid on the block looks at the toughest kid on the block" . . . and I guess you turned out to be the toughest in some ways.

NM: It's meaningless to be tough unless you also keep your talent more or less intact. If you do that, then that's fine, that's your prize for being tough. Or you can be the weakest kid on the block and if you keep your talent intact, then that's worth more. You know, in those days machismo was still a going industry. I always thought that Jimmy wrote that piece to show how tough *he* was, to change people's idea of what *he* was like. And I also didn't like the piece because I felt it was essentially dishonest; that is, he was saying two things at once: he was saying I was the toughest kid on the block, but he wasn't saying that. He was saying I wasn't tough at all and he was really much tougher. I think I wrote one thing about it somewhere or other.

JC: You responded to *Another Country*, which was published the following year.

NM: Oh, that's where it was, in *Cannibals and Christians.* Where I said something like, "In 'The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy,' James Baldwin spends nine-tenths of the time talking about himself and only talking about me for one-tenth of the time," and I applied that principle to something or other. But I remember it came back to me through the grapevine that he was very upset by that.

Jimmy didn't have the equipment to write a big novel. You know, I think it can kill you. And he wasn't all that well, ever. He had a delicate constitution. Also he didn't have the right kind of brain for a big novel. A big novel always demands a sense of proportion, and Jimmy had that sort of grace that always had him living slightly off balance. Nothing would have surprised me more if he had come out with a big, great novel. *Another Country* is maybe the closest he came to it . . . and it was a bad novel.

JC: Is Jean Malaquais still alive?

NM: Yes, very much so. Malaquais must now be in his late 70s or early 80s, but he's in Paris and in Switzerland. He knew Jimmy. They weren't close.

JC: Jimmy sort of dismissed him, in this way that he had with intellectuals.

NM: Yeah, well that irritated me, too, because in those days Malaquais was an enormously powerful intellectual, not in the sense of wielding power, but you could learn an awful lot by listening to him and arguing with him and being his friend. He had a wonderful, powerful, and learned mind. I thought the way Jimmy dismissed him was part of the whole "black" stance that Jimmy had in that piece. In a sense, he didn't know what he was writing about.

JC: He had a way of saying things like: So-and-so had a fixation with the really rather obvious doctrine of existentialism. It was mostly instinctive. But the instinctive intelligence was phenomenal.

NM: Phenomenal. But like all instinctive intelligences it's phenomenal until it encounters something it can't solve by instinct alone. Like "civilization." (laughter) Culture is always the enemy of instinct.

JC: Do you think his artistic sensibility suffered in the '60s when he got involved deeply with the civil rights movement? Do you have a feeling about that?

NM: The *last* of my admirations for Jimmy is that I think he violated himself in order to be loyal to his people. Jimmy used to have this extraordinary facility to be with whites. He was extremely comfortable with whites, and had a deep understanding of them vis-à-vis their relation to blacks. So he was holding all the aces to whites' queens. He gave that up because of the identification with the movement.

I remember he used to go around with his brothers . . . At a certain point Jimmy used to move around the village like a little gunman with his gang. And he'd have five or six black kids, two of whom at least would be true hoods. And he's walk around with these little gangsters. This is maybe in the early '60s. And he loved it, of course. They performed for him.

I remember meetings with him where he'd be very condemnatory of himself. I'd be like, Come one, Jimmy, I mean you wanted it and you know you

could get out of it. And there'd be that sudden flickering in his eyes, like: Yeah, but we've got to play these roles, and let's play them out, and don't embarrass me, accept my new role. I never wholly believed in it, and I think the proof of the falseness of the thing was the flight to Europe. There was too much to stand and solve and live with being here. I think he would have been dead fifteen years earlier if he'd stayed in America, because he wasn't built for that kind of struggle. And it was largely his own struggle, along with everything else. I mean there was an early excitement to it, before a lot of things went wrong, and in the early '70s it peters out into a lot of dull factionalism.

He was a delicate artist, and for every delicate artist who becomes a Proust there are a hundred who are victims of the war. For me, the wonder is that he did the work he did do. I'm still mad at him because once they do that sort of work you want more and more and more, you get greedy, but I would not say that I don't admire him, because I think to have been able to do it in the first place was remarkable. Europe was probably his medicine.

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This interview is included as an appendix to the new edition of *Talking at the Gates: A Life of James Baldwin* by James Campbell, published in February 2021 by University of California Press at $19.95.