

MAILER'S LETTERS:
A COLLOQUY AT THE
STRAND BOOKSTORE.

MORRIS DICKSTEIN AND
J. MICHAEL LENNON

*The following discussion of Norman Mailer's recently published letters (J. Michael Lennon, editor, **Selected Letters of Norman Mailer** Random House, 2014) took place at The Strand Bookstore, New York, New York, on January 22, 2014. Larry Schiller, founder of The Norman Mailer Center, moderated the discussion.*

LARRY SCHILLER: Thank you, everybody, for coming. It's almost . . . I think it is a full house. The Mailer Center started in 2008, shortly after Norman's passing, and the reason for it was to encourage young writers, with the vigor of an athlete, to go out there and "punch," as Norman did, but through the written word. Also, to take the issues of today and challenge their readers to think about these subjects in a different way. The Mailer Center, you should know, sponsors fellowships—fifteen fellowships—every year to writers by merit that come from all over the world. One of our mentors, Meena Alexander, is here, who's been working poetry with us for a number of years. We have workshops every summer—very small workshops, six people to a workshop, and usually eight to ten workshops a summer, so we're entertaining another hundred writers from all around the country. We were originally housed in Provincetown, Massachusetts, and two years ago, the board decided to take the Mailer Center on the road to go to those cities around the country where Mailer himself researched or wrote a book. And we've started to do that. Brooklyn Heights was, you know, very close, where he wrote one

of his books or several books. And then we went to Salt Lake City last year, where he researched *The Executioner's Song*. And this year, we'll either be in Palm Desert or in Palm Beach, Florida, where *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* was researched.

Besides our fellowship programs and our workshops, we sponsor events like this evening. Four or five times a year, we're here at The Strand Bookstore, and most times, it's a young writer who is publishing their first book. And we only get turnouts of twenty/thirty people, so we've got a full house tonight because we have really two accomplished authors. I met Mike Lennon, what, thirty years ago, Mike? I was the new kid on the block in Norman's home, bringing some ideas to Norman that he might consider writing about, and, as some of you know, he and I did five books over thirty-five years together. And Mike was this man who was keeping every single fact, every single iota. There wasn't anything that escaped Mike Lennon, and all I can say is that when he wrote Norman's biography, thank God he was kind to me. He didn't put really what he knew about me. So Mike and I have been friends, and he's on the board of the Mailer Center. He helped shape the entire educational program. He's the one that pointed me to the National Council of Teachers of English, where we started the Mailer Writing Awards in high schools and colleges, so, Mike, you're not only here as an author, but you're here as a friend and a dear friend.

Morris Dickstein is somebody who I've just seen in passing and know because I've read some of his reviews and things that he's written. Norman said of him once that he's one of the best and most distinguished American critics of literature that we have, and that speaks a lot. And Morris soon will publish a memoir, which I think is titled *Why Not Say What Happens*—am I right or wrong? Right, very close. I was told it wasn't an autobiography; it was a memoir, because it's not the whole thing. So, Morris has a memoir coming out next month, and I hope that we fill the room again when it's published and, you know, maybe a little bit more. Morris and Mike, I think, are a great duo to entertain us tonight, educate us tonight, and make us think about Norman's letters and the period of time that he lived in maybe a different and interesting way. So I turn it over to these two gentlemen, Morris and Mike Lennon, it's all yours. Thank you very much for coming.

MORRIS DICKSTEIN: Well, I think I'm going to be the opener for the main act here, but we'll have a conversation, and it should be fun. I'm just a huge

admirer of Mike's biography. I think he did it, not only in record time, but just wonderfully. Literary biography is not an easy thing to do. When you concentrate on the life then the work tends to get lost a little bit or sometimes, it's done by someone not equipped to do the work very well. When you concentrate on the work, it slows down the story, and you [*to Lennon*] manage to strike just the right balance. Of course, his subject was a fascinating one, and he knew everything there was to know about it—the biography, of course, a collection of letters. I mean, I had no idea. I was down in Austin for the archive, but I really had no idea that the archive was so huge, that the number of letters was so immense. He tells us that there are some 45,000 letters, of which he was only able to publish about two percent, some 714 letters, just an amazing job of selection. The writing is so good. It led me to think about what is a collection of letters, what kind of book it is. You know, it's not really a book that the author himself wrote as a book. On the other hand, it is a book that the author wrote, especially someone like Mailer, who kept carbons of his letters. Not only that, but we discover from Mike that he kept tapes of his letters. In other words, after 1958, he dictated them, so that not only was he able to research the text through the carbons of Norman's letters, but he was able to actually listen to him making them up as he went along, which must have been a rather extraordinary experience.

But what kind of book it is? I mean, last summer, for the *TLS*, I reviewed the letters of Leonard Bernstein, who would seem on the surface like a very different sort of figure, but in many ways similar to Mailer, someone tremendously gifted in all sorts of different ways. It led me to think about what kind of book a collection of letters is. It's sort of a biography, but, whereas the biography is something that's done retrospectively by someone else, this is a kind of autobiography written by the person himself. But it's by fits and starts, you know. What you get in the letters that you don't get in the biography as much is the voice, the very voice of the author, and when that author himself is extraordinarily eloquent as a brilliant writer, you're getting really a very special piece of his work. And if you can provide the apparatus so that a reader can read it continuously—and what Mike provides in this book is wonderful introductions to each section, which are like little *précis* of his own biography—you're able to read it as almost like a kind of documentary biography of the person living his life as the life goes along.

I came across just the other day on your Twitter feed, of all things, the short reviews from *The Guardian* and the BBC. One of the things on the

BBC note struck me as really close to my feeling about the book. The BBC recommendation said, “Mailer’s correspondence offers an intimate look at the author in all his variety: filial, pugnacious, collegial, spiteful, affectionate, defiant, and generous by turn.” And that was exactly my impression of the book: the kind of multiplicity of moods, the multiplicity of relationships—family relationships, relationships to other writers, relationships to critics, relationships to cultural figures. That multiplicity was, of course, something that for Mailer was part of his own self-portrayal. And so I looked for a passage that I remembered in what is certainly one of Mailer’s best books, *The Armies of the Night*, where he talks about himself as having multiple selves, and therefore, someone who he says, “is trapped in the sarcophagus of his own image.” It’s beautifully done, beautifully expressed. I came upon the following passage, that’s the one I was looking for. Very late in the book, he talks about while he’s having his adventures in Washington. He says he really didn’t like seeing himself on film, even though a documentary film crew was actually following him around, something he hadn’t told us until that point. And he said the reason he didn’t like seeing himself on film is that on film, what he saw was the one personality that, of all these personalities that he described, he found absolutely unsupportable: the nice Jewish boy from Brooklyn. He said something in his adenoids gave it away. He had the softness of a man early-accustomed to mother love.

And of course, it’s those multiple personalities that we experience in reading this book. As I said, the letters to his family are extraordinarily close and affectionate. I mean, I was just saying to Mike that at the memorial service for Normal Mailer in Carnegie Hall, each of his many children spoke, and all spoke differently, and all spoke just incredibly eloquently and affectionately. And there are very good family letters, including one that’s not so affectionate to his father about his father’s gambling addiction, which is an amazing piece of writing that I would compare to Kafka’s letter to his father, except that Mailer obviously sent it and Kafka was convinced by his mother not to send it.

Then there are the letters to his fellow writers, and you see the evolving relationship he has to people of his own generation, who are also just starting out as he was, too. You see his generosity towards other war novelists. What he says, for example, about *From Here to Eternity*, which came out three years after *The Naked and the Dead*, is so generous. And to the end of his life, he spoke about *From Here to Eternity* as the best World War II novel.

Or his incredibly warm response to Styron's novel *The Long March* and then finally to Styron's first long novel, *Lie Down In Darkness*, which I was going to read, but I think I won't bother to read it. It's just a beautiful passage of how blown away he is by it and how, reading the book, he just loves the man. And then there are the letters that you can only describe them as theoretical, I mean, there are multiple correspondences with critics like John Aldridge or Diana Trilling, of all people. I knew Diana Trilling quite well and a very difficult woman, and the fact that Mailer was able to sustain a quite intimate fifty-year or more relationship with her. She elicits some of his most interesting ideas about friendship, about writing, about his own work. One letter that almost every review cited—it was one of the first things I looked at when I first opened this book—was a letter about how critics don't really understand writers very well, and he talks about how writers work, not from their strengths, but from their weaknesses and how they try to compensate for their weaknesses. He said in the way they write that Hemingway, for example, couldn't deal with the long sentence and that he ended up writing and creating that Hemingway style. That is an extraordinary letter that an academic would've not have had the idea, but he would have turned that into a book or would have made an extraordinary essay. And here it is. I wouldn't call it a throw-away, but there it is, a beautifully developed, fascinating, counterintuitive idea. I think what we have in this book is really God's plenty.

And then the fact that after 1958, as I said, he dictated these letters and he wrote them, often, a whole bunch at a time, and the idea that he could have written some of these extraordinarily well-formulated, beautifully written letters orally, *viva voce*, you might say, is quite astounding. I mean, it makes me think of the famous thing that happened to Henry James when he developed what we today would call carpal tunnel syndrome around the late 1890s, and he began to write his novels by dictation. Some people feel that they could find the exact spot of the exact novel where he stopped writing and started dictating. But that Mailer did this was something I had no idea of, and it's quite amazing. And yet we come across passages like this: at several points, Mailer apologizes for being such a bad letter writer. He said, I don't want to waste my ideas in letters or, you know, it's just that I'm tired at the end of the day when I write them and so on and so forth. And even that letter saying how bad his letters are is a beautifully written letter.

So, Mike, how did this come about?

J. MICHAEL LENNON: Well, he did say on a number of occasions that it would be a mistake for a professional novelist whose words were the coin of the realm to waste any of them on a letter, on a business letter, to a friend, or anything like that. It would be a silly thing to do. It would be like a marathoner who has just run a marathon then goes out and runs another 500 yard dash just to show that he could do it, and he felt that would be a terrible mistake. But yet, once he got into the act of writing, he was such a professional. He cared so much about language that he could not help himself but do a beautiful job, and I think that letter you're talking about is a perfect example of it. If you listen to the tapes in Texas, and there are at least 1,300 cassette tapes with an hour and a half on each one. It's a vast archive. But I don't know where there is any other example in modern literature of the actual composition, the first draft of an important piece of writing, that is down on a cassette. And then, of course, we have the final version, because his secretary would type it, give it back to him, he would make corrections on it, and it would go out. And so you can see the compositional process. But what I was going to say is that there was even another stage in it. When he would start doing it, he would say to his secretary, "This is letter number two to Jason," Jason Epstein perhaps, and he would go [*muttering*] and he would mutter it under his breath. He would give a phrase or a whole sentence, and then he would repeat it altered, just slightly, and improved. And he would get himself going like that. He'd move through—sometimes, he'd do a paragraph like that. He'd get the topic sentence of a paragraph, mutter it, then utter it, and then when he nailed it, he'd [*slaps arm of chair*] bang the desk twice, which showed that he nailed it. He felt good about it. So, he could not help himself. He could not turn down the flame of his verbal felicity because it was a business letter. So, some of his most ordinary letters to people that he didn't know at all are some of his gems.

DICKSTEIN: Well, so, it's not only oral, but oral involving a process of revision, which is quite amazing. But I was going to ask Mike to read one of the letters aloud, so that we can get a sense of his style—not that there's one style. There are many styles with many people, but let's just hear some of the writing.

LENNON: This is a letter that Norman wrote in 1985 to Jeffrey Meyers, who was a biographer and had written a number of biographies—on Heming-

way—but he also wrote two or three volumes on D.H. Lawrence. He was writing to Norman to ask what Lawrence’s influence on him was. And so, Mailer did not know Meyers at all and wrote this letter back to him.

Lawrence’s main influence on me was *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*. I had the pleasure and privilege of reading it back in 1941 in the unexpurgated edition. This was in the treasure room of Wagner Library at Harvard. Harvard in those days used to have its perks, and one of them was precisely that you could read the unexpurgated version of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*. In any event, it changed my sex life, or rather, accelerated it into a direction it was proceeding on nicely by itself. I accepted Lawrence’s thesis about untrammelled and illimitable rights and liberties and pleasure of sexual love and the union between the two. I don’t think anyone had ever before, whether in literature or personal life, had stated it so forcefully for me, that one could not have sex without love, or love without sex, period. Now, as we know from the other side over the intervening 40-plus years, that is an extraordinary thesis, and can be half-right, or all-wrong, as well as absolutely so. For that reason, Lawrence’s hypothesis has lived with me as my own, with all the excitement of the ongoing hypothesis that you can never quite confirm or deny (hypotheses are so much more life-giving than obsessions!).

At any rate, that is my essential debt to Lawrence. His other works I admire, and I think he was a great writer, for even among the most important of the writers in our lives, certain of their books stand out more than others, obviously.

As for the rest, you may be interested in a chapter I once wrote about Lawrence in my book *The Prisoner of Sex*. I think it’s one of the best pieces of literary criticism I ever did, and if you’re not familiar with it, you might find it useful to your purposes.

I hope this is again useful to you.

Yours sincerely,
Norman Mailer

LENNON: And indeed, for those of you who remember that 40-page section on D.H. Lawrence in *The Prisoner of Sex*, if you haven't looked at it recently, take a look at it. It's a piece of wonderful literary criticism, except it doesn't seem like literary criticism at all. It seems like just the delight of one great novelist reading and reflecting and ruminating on the works of another.

DICKSTEIN: Well, funny the thing is that I had never thought of Lawrence as an influence on Mailer until he wrote that. And even then, I felt that book was a response to Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*, and I felt it was a little bit of a copout that she had made a case against Mailer, and he went ahead and very chivalrously made the book in defense of Henry Miller and the defense of D.H. Lawrence. You know, when you think about it, Mailer, in *The Armies of the Night*, talks about himself as a sexologue—you know, someone who really felt good about salvation through sex. And in those very funny passages attacking Paul Goodman, he says they're two rivaling sexologues, and they never get along with each other. And then I remembered that, I think it was very relevant to Lawrence, he talks about the kids, of course. The book was written in about 1968, and of course sexual morals had changed very drastically in recent years, and it's clear from that book that Mailer can't quite get it down. He says he talks about these kids who see sex as really just the gymnasium of love, a wonderful phrase. So this letter really nails it in terms of what might have influenced Mailer about D.H. Lawrence. It's a wonderful linkage.

LENNON: Yeah, it's a wonderful linkage. I think Lawrence rivals with Hemingway as among all the novelists that influenced Mailer, and there were many. I mean, he always claimed Tolstoy and so on, but you can't see the obvious links there, but you can see the links to Lawrence. The fascination or the obsession with sex and love in all of its aspects and obviously, you can see many influences—but I've always felt that the Hemingway influence, that was a drum people beat on a little bit too much, while they forgot about Henry Miller and D.H. Lawrence, who had just as much of an influence on Mailer.

DICKSTEIN: You know, it may well be that Hemingway as a figure may have influenced him more than Hemingway as a writer, because you don't really see his style as a reflection of Hemingway's. But I think it's the figure of Papa and the self-destructiveness. One of the things about Mailer was that he be-

came such a public figure comparable to Hemingway, and he must have been aware that it ultimately did very bad things to Hemingway's writing, that Hemingway began to believe his own press clippings. In some of his comments in the letters on *The Old Man and the Sea*, which was being very acclaimed in the early '50s and had a great commercial success and probably got Hemingway finally the Nobel Prize, Mailer was very down on that book as most critics are, though I'm not, but I can see why.

LENNON: I think from Hemingway, what Mailer felt was most important—the style was very powerful. Mailer said it changed literature, and you could not ignore Hemingway's style. It was so powerful, but he knew he could never equal it. But what impressed him the most about Hemingway was the fact that Hemingway had another life—that he lived an active, vigorous life, and that he was involved in war. He was in the Spanish Civil War, in World War II, in World War I. He fought in all the great wars in the first half of the twentieth century, and he had a public life out there—sailing, fishing, doing all kinds of other things, getting into literary battles and what have you. And Mailer liked that image of a writer that was moving from the quiet writing room, out into the public, went back and forth. Indeed, if you look at the places where Mailer did his writing, it was either New York City or it was out of New York City. When New York City would drive him crazy, then he had to go somewhere else—Provincetown, of course, but also to Maine. He lived in Vermont. He actually rented a place in Bucks County with Gene Campbell for a period of time where he was going to go to write. And then when he got bored and the city got tedious, then he had to go back and get involved, and as soon as he did get back, he was on television shows with Mike Lawrence or whoever was running a radio or a television talk show. Norman could never turn down any invitation. Even more than Hemingway, he pushed himself out into the world like that, and he felt he learned from it. But on the other hand, there was one part of him that said, "This isn't doing you any good. You better get back to Provincetown and do some writing. You can only use so much of this and after that, it's going to be a negative. It's going to hurt you by being out there too much. Look at Updike, look at Roth, look at Bellow, look at Pynchon. Are they out there? Is this doing you any good to be out on television all the time?" And a part of him felt that it was a terrific mistake, which didn't stop him from continuing to do it!

DICKSTEIN: Well, I think that's interesting, because there are two really different kinds of projects there. One of them is the writer as activist, sort of like Malroux or even Byron, fighting for Greek independence. But the other, of course, is the writer as celebrity, and there I think of things that Gore Vidal, who was his friendly rival and a "frenemy" really said. Once Gore Vidal said that no one should ever turn down a chance to either have sex or be on television. Another point Vidal said was that the role of the writer should be to seize the spotlight and to hold onto it forever. But I think Mailer . . .

LENNON: He was of two minds on it.

DICKSTEIN: His description of back and forth, it's plus and minus; once you get into it, you get out there, and then feel you have to pull back and pull away. And all that wonderful comedy at the beginning of *The Armies of the Night* about not wanting to be drawn down to the Pentagon march, and yet feeling he had to, and carpooling back and then so on and so forth . . .

LENNON: That's the perfect example of the tension there between being the public figure, being used. He and Ralph Ellison said, "Look, we're expendable. We're supposed to get out there and do this kind of stuff." And Lowell had great reservations about getting involved in it, but he felt that he had to do it.

You gave me the great lines from Gore Vidal. The other one—do you remember what he said when Capote died? He said, "Good career move." That was Gore. Of course, Gore was the most cynical of all cynics.

DICKSTEIN: One of the things that really struck me—I mentioned this to you just when we were talking before—about the letters is Mailer's much more explicit treatment of his Jewishness and his Jewish background. I got to know him a little in his last ten years or so, and once I asked him, "How come you've never written anything about your life before, say, the age of twenty-one?" And he said, "Well, I felt there were all these really good Jewish-American writers who had done it so well, and there was nothing more for me to say," and I felt that's an interesting answer, but . . .

LENNON: I think there's more to it than . . .

DICKSTEIN: What I really felt is that he didn't want to be "that nice Jewish boy from Brooklyn." But hearing the letters and to read the letters to Jack

Henry Abbott, where Jack Henry Abbott—first of all, I was surprised that Jack Henry Abbott was the prisoner that Mailer helped get released from prison and helped him publish a collection of his letters, whom he corresponded with, and who, within six weeks after he got out of prison, killed this waiter downtown in the city. And what amazed me is that Mailer continued this relationship, even after this terrible event, and continued to write to him and, apparently, it turned out that Abbott was thinking of converting to Judaism—

LENNON: He did convert.

DICKSTEIN: And he did convert to Judaism, and Mailer became his instructor in Jewish history and religion. I was astounded at the stuff that he knew and the patient explanation of the relation of the Talmud and the Zohar and the Jewish history and some of the classics of Jewish history and religion and so on and so forth. I thought, Mailer was much more involved in this stuff than I would have ever guessed from any of his books. What's your sense of that?

LENNON: Well, I think you nailed it when you said that Norman was interested in being the quintessential American, not the quintessential Jew. He never denied his Judaism, you know. Many Jewish commentators would say, "Oh, Norman Mailer, you know, he doesn't want to be Jewish. He's writing off his Jewish . . .," but that was not the case. He always had a Jewish identity. He was always reading about Jewish culture and Jewish life. He knew the whole story about how Russia was converted to Judaism, this great story about the Czar, sending three people off.

DICKSTEIN: Yeah, he tells that one about the Czars, yes.

LENNON: It's a terrific story, whether it's true or not, I don't know, but it's wonderful. Why Russia became orthodox, rather than Catholic or Jewish or Muslim. So he knew all those stories. He assimilated all of that stuff, and he never . . . I know toward the end of his life, a book came out called *Born to*—how do you say?—*Born to Kvetch*? I'm not very . . .

DICKSTEIN: Yes, yes, yes, it's . . .

LENNON: It's a wonderful book. He read it, he told Norris, he said, "If you really want to understand me, read this book." And I read it, and, of course,

it was a funny, funny book. And I think what Norman did like about Jewish culture was its humor. I mean, the Yiddish humor and the curses and the jokes and the funny stuff that was in there. And if you spent any time with him at the dinner table, there were always these Jewish . . . I learned more Jewish /Yiddish terms from Norman Mailer than anywhere else because they would always pop in, and his kids would know them as well. You would hear all these.

DICKSTEIN: Well, I keep coming back to *The Armies of the Night*, which is certainly one of my favorite books. I always felt that one of the keys to the success of that book is the fact that he's comical about himself. That it really is essentially . . . I mentioned Byron before. Byron, early in his career, became famous for all of these dark, brooding narrative poems, but late in life, he began to write about the same material in a satiric and funny way, and his great poem *Don Juan* is a send up of himself and his own image. I thought that in *The Armies of the Night* and some of those late books where he makes himself a character, they're so good because he's so funny about himself.

LENNON: The same is true of *The Fight*, his book about Muhammad Ali-Foreman fight in Africa, where Norman is out running with Ali. He has many comic episodes in that, but he's out running with Ali in the middle of the night. They're jogging, and Ali is a younger man, of course, in much better shape. Norman has been eating and drinking before the run, and he runs for about, I don't know, a mile and a half or two miles. He says, "Champ, I've got to go home now. I can't handle it anymore," and Ali said, "You did pretty good, Norm. You did pretty good, but you're a writer. I say, you go home and get some rest."

So Norman started walking back to where he was staying, and as he was walking along, all of a sudden, he heard the roar of a lion, and it was a real lion. He said it was really a terrible sound. It was loud, it was powerful, and he thought, "This could be the end. Here I am. It's the middle of the night. I'm in the middle of Africa. There's no one around, and I could be eaten by a lion," but he said, "There's a good side. There's a bright side to this, because who could not imagine what would be said that there, a lion out there in Africa waiting down all the years for the flesh of Earnest Hemingway and being disappointed, and now a suitable substitute had finally arrived, and that Norman Mailer was eaten by a lion."

Which made him recall a time he was out on the boat off in Provincetown with one of his editors and a whale went by, and he thought, “Oh, God, if a whale would swallow me, just imagine! You know, Melville and Mailer . . . the consanguinity of the vowels! And wouldn’t that be a terrific footnote.” And so, he had that wonderful sense of himself as a comic figure, and he was never afraid to play the fool. He was never afraid to do that. He could be pompous, he could be pretentious, he could be overbearing. But he was also willing to laugh at himself and occasionally to play the fool. It was very hard for a lot of commentators to this day to get their arms around all of the different Norman Mailer selves to find. Is there one core there? I don’t think there was. I think everything is bifurcated in Norman, and I know you’re never going to get your arms around what was the essential Norman Mailer.

DICKSTEIN: Well, do you think, in the end, that’s a strength or a limitation or both? I mean, that there’s all of these multiple Mailers and will he, in the end, be seen as one of the great novelists of the post-war period? Or will he be seen more as this kind of protean figure that did this and that and the other, and never settled into one groove? What do you think? You’ve been living with him for so long.

LENNON: I wrote a book, a bibliography of him, years ago, and this first line was, “Mailer is Proteus,” because he is a protean figure, and I think just reading all the reviews of the biography and of the letters that have come out, everyone has their own Mailer. Everybody has their own Mailer. They have their own slant on him. They all say, well, this is the true Norman Mailer. And if you read them all, you find out you’ve got just as many different slants on Norman Mailer as he presented himself.

I don’t think that we have come to the point where we can sum up Norman Mailer in a sentence or two. He’s always going to befuddle us. He’s going to anger us. He’s going to piss us off. He’s going to irritate in some ways. And then in other ways, he’s going to charm us. He’s going to beguile us. He’s going to impress the heck out of us with his style and his great intelligence. So I think that’s one of the reasons that you can’t read anything in the literary journals and the magazines and the reviews without somebody making a reference to him, but it’s always a reference to one aspect of him. And then you read another one, it’s another aspect of him, because there is no one . . .

Hemingway, we've got our arms around. But we don't have our arms around Norman Mailer, so it's a plus and a minus.

DICKSTEIN: I like the idea that he certainly was a protean figure. And also, wasn't he protean in his style as well? There's not a single Mailer style, and one of the interesting things in the book is to see him wrestling with some of the books, wrestling with *The Naked and the Dead*, or particularly wrestling with a book like *The Deer Park* that he wrote again and again and again and had great hopes for, hopes that it would recover from the bad reviews he'd gotten for *Barbary Shore* and so on. And we know from *Advertisements* that the style of that book contracted and expanded—that it became more like Hemingway, less like Hemingway. Certainly one of the extraordinary things about that book I keep mentioning, *The Armies of the Night*, is that he went from that very contracted Hemingway-like style to, really, a much more baroque style. The genius of Mailer, that great late '60s period and soon afterwards, was incredibly complicated sentences. I mean the . . .

LENNON: Melvillean.

DICKSTEIN: Really, you know. And if you try to read them aloud, you know, it's not easy to get your tongue around them. Once I participated actually in a marathon reading of the whole of *Moby-Dick* in Sag Harbor, and when you try to get your tongue around Melville's sentences a little bit, Mailer's sentences are a little bit like that, and they always land exactly right. They take a long trajectory, but they find their safe harbor at the end, so . . .

LENNON: He had a great ear, but what you were saying about the different styles. He said years ago—in fact it was an interview I did with him around 1980—that there really were only two kinds of writers. There were writers that had the same style. He said, "You know, you could pick up anything by Hemingway, and you're always going to know it's Hemingway." You can—it's very hard to find—you can always identify Faulkner. But he said, "Can you identify Steinbeck?" Steinbeck wrote all different kinds of books in different modes and with different styles. And he said, "That's another kind of writer." He said, "I'm in that class. I'm like that. I don't have one style."

Now, if there is an ur-style, I'm thinking it is the style that he created in *Advertisements for Myself*. He always said that's where he really found his

voice in a way. But then he went on, once he had found it, to drop it and to go in different directions. For example, the style of *The Executioner's Song*, which is the non-style in many ways. It's Hemingway. It's more like *The Naked and the Dead* and anything else. It's closer to . . .

DICKSTEIN: It's a documentary style.

LENNON: It's a documentary style. There are some beautiful, beautiful sentences in it. Joan Didion picked out some real gems from that book. But basically, it's a freight train that's moving a lot of baggage, and it does it with great ease and facility, and its perfection. But after he wrote that, and while he was writing that, he was writing *Ancient Evenings*, which was another style that I don't think exists anywhere else in his works.

DICKSTEIN: Well, one of the things that I loved about *The Executioner's Song* was that he had taken this whole business starting with *The Armies of the Night* and about after four or five books after that, of creating himself as a persona, writing in the third person like Henry Adams and writing about himself as a character—Aquarius or whatever he called himself. And then he gets to *The Executioner's Song*, and he says he's become less interested in himself. And he felt that at least for that moment, he had exhausted himself as a fictional character.

LENNON: It was a brilliant decision, one of the great aesthetic decisions. It ranks right up there with writing about himself in the third person. I'm getting a note that we should probably—

DICKSTEIN: Yes, a few questions.

LENNON: Here's one.

FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER: You mentioned before this relationship or similarities about Hemingway and Mailer. Hemingway, having a very wide, very active, outside of literature life, and Mailer having a similar one. It's interesting because I think Mailer did see himself as a progressive person. Liberal . . .

LENNON: Don't say liberal! Don't say liberal!

FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER: OK, I won't say liberal.

LENNON: Don't say liberal. He hated the word liberal. He said don't ever call me a liberal.

FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER: I hate it too. But certainly progressive, and I guess what people would say left-leaning. I wouldn't say the same for Hemingway. Hemingway went to the frontier of the Spanish American war, but he stayed in a hotel for three weeks, and he said that most the time he was there with various prostitutes and drunk. And he was also supposedly a spy and didn't play a very honorable role in Cuba. So I just find it very interesting that when you think about how their outside political life was and contrast that to . . .

LENNON: Well, there's obviously some differences between them. Hemingway was not an intellectual in the way Mailer was. He was not read in history, in culture. He didn't read Marx and Freud and so on. He was not that kind of a person, so yeah, he was involved in a lot of progressive causes, and he was certainly a notable anti-fascist, Hemingway was. He had some pretty active stuff in World War II, but I'm not here to defend Hemingway. I don't think there's an exact difference, and Mailer always said there were a lot of things he loved about Hemingway, that he admired him, and it was this sensuous ability to create sensuous experience and describe it. It was one of the things he loved the most in his style. But their politics were opposite, I would say. Yeah.

MALE AUDIENCE MEMBER #1: I read the book and it's a wonderful book of letters . . .

LENNON: Thank you.

MALE AUDIENCE MEMBER #1: I think probably one of the best books up there with the best books of letters by any American writer. But one of the things that struck me was how often, over many, many years, Mailer bitterly complains, to whomever he's writing to, about the long novel he's at work on at the time. And how he describes it, over and over again, as being in a prison—that it's torture. That he's let out once in a while for some air and sun, and he has to go right back in, and he has no inner life. He's chained to this thing for years to come. And finally, when the book is finished and he's relieved, he goes right back to writing another long-long novel.

LENNON: Well, you know, the letter you're talking about. Mailer felt that he was freed from the burdens of writing when he started making movies.

MALE AUDIENCE MEMBER #1: Right.

LENNON: And he said it was so wonderful to get up in the morning and be a movie director. He said you ate standing up. You made decisions on the run. You rode around in cars. People were always asking you questions like, "Do you like this hairdo on this actress?" And he goes, "This is good. Oh, move the curl." And he said it was wonderful. He said all of his decision-making and all this activity were very pleasing to him, and I think in one of the same letters, he said, "Anything is easier than writing."

So writing was tough for Norman Mailer, but he did it. He was dogged about it, but then, once the book was finished, he was looking for relief. He said, "I always got into a lot of trouble between books, waiting for the book to come out, going through the parties and all that, and trying to get started on a new book." That was when he got into a lot of scrapes and jams and problems. And so he kind of fled back to writing when he had had enough and he had gotten into enough trouble in the world, then he would go back and start writing again. But there's no doubt about it that he felt that making movies was much more a happy activity than writing.

DICKSTEIN: Well, let's face it. Writing is very lonely, bordering on torture you know. I once introduced a reading by John Updike in which he said you know, he didn't know what he was doing there. When he started out, around the time Mailer started out, he said the function of the writer was to write the book, and the function of the publisher was to publish it. And writers are people who are able to stay for twelve hours alone in a room. And the nature of writing has changed. I mean it, it's a function of the writer to probably complain about the writing life.

MALE AUDIENCE MEMBER #2: Hi. Given what you said at the beginning about Mailer's worry about giving too much away in the letters instead of writing it in the books, I'm interested to know how much of what was in the letters showed up in the books.

LENNON: A lot of it did. He would say that, but he could not repress himself, so he would talk. At a certain point when he got into the writing of a

book, he would begin to talk about it. He tried to hold it back down at the beginning. And the same thing would be in the letters. He would hold it back and hold it back, but then he would say, “I whisper this to you,” and he would tell a friend a little bit. He could not keep it in. He wanted to very much. It was part of his routine like: don’t talk about a book too early when you’re writing it, because you don’t want to get your problems solved in the living room over a drink. You want to be able to solve the problem yourself when you’re writing. And he had a great debate with John Aldridge about that. Aldridge said, “You’re talking to too many people about *Deer Park*. You’re crazy. Don’t do this.” And Mailer said, “A writer can do whatever he wants!” But, ultimately he took Aldridge’s advice, and he did not talk about it for a long time.

But there was a certain point that he reached that he needed to talk about it. He needed to show it to people like his sister, who read all of his manuscripts—who’s sitting right here—to his children, to some of his friends and editors who were able to read his books. He needed that feedback, and he would listen . . . not that he would take all the advice. But if, let’s say, 99 out of 100 people told him that he should shorten the chapter on Uruguay in *Harlot’s Ghost*, he would try to do it, because he realized that he was getting some good advice. So he was not solipsistic to the point that he would not listen. He didn’t have that kind of arrogance, but there was a point when he would do it. So you will see a lot of “I can’t talk about it now” in the letters. “I’m not willing to tell you about it yet.” And then, six months later, he’s spilling the beans.

MALE AUDIENCE MEMBER #3: It’s just a quick question about the relationship between Mailer and Jack Abbott. I was working for him when he was doing a showcase of a play at the American Place Theatre in ’86 about Marilyn Monroe that was going to be called *Strawhead*, and then Jack Abbott murdered that waiter at the Binibon. I wondered if he wrote about how he felt, because that was a pretty difficult situation at that time.

LENNON: Well, wait a minute. Abbott killed the guy back in ’81. There are, oh, twenty letters to Abbott in the book, and there are a number of reflections about the Abbott case in the book. There’s a good deal of discussion with Abbott, and if you read all the letters to Abbott—and I wish we could read all the letters that Abbott wrote back because Abbott was deep into

paranoia in the later part of his life—you would get a much fuller description. There is somebody right now named Jerome Loving who's writing a book about the Mailer/Abbott relationship, and I think he's going to illuminate it more than I was able to, because it's one of the great tragedies and one of the great turning points in Norman's life.

MALE AUDIENCE MEMBER #3: Because Abbott disappeared for a period of time.

LENNON: He was gone for six weeks. They finally caught him down in Louisiana after six weeks. Bill Majeski tracked him down and caught him, and they brought him back.

CLOSING SPEAKER: All right, that's all we have time for tonight. Did you have something to . . .

LENNON: No, I just wanted to say thank you.