

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, 2015. Larry Schiller, founder of The Norman Mailer Center, moderated the discussion, which was published in 2015 in The Mailer Review but did not include final revisions made by the participants. The discussion below is a corrected version.*

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 35 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 Happened*—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'm going to be the opener for the main act here, but we'll have a conversation, and it should be fun. I'm 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 rather lost, especially if it's done by someone not equipped to handle the work very well. When you concentrate on the work, it slows down the story, but 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—for the biography, of course, but also for this collection of letters. I was down in Austin for the opening of the archive, but I really had no idea that it was so huge, that the number of letters was 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, an amazing job of selection. And the writing is good too, exceptionally good. It led me to think about what a collection of letters is, what kind of book it makes up. It's not something the author himself wrote as a book. On the other hand, it is a book that the author did write, especially someone like Mailer, who kept carbons of his letters and knew what their value would be. We also discover from Mike that Mailer kept tapes of his letters. In other words, after 1958, he dictated them, to be transcribed by his secretary, then amended and signed them, so that not only was Mike able to build 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 an extraordinary resource for an editor and biographer.

But what kind of book is it? Last summer, for the TLS, I reviewed the letters of Leonard Bernstein, who would on the surface seem like a very different sort of cultural figure, yet he was in many ways comparable to Mailer, someone tremendously gifted and multi-talented, who could never quite settle into a single groove. But this also led me to consider what kind of book a collection of letters might be. It's something of a biography, but where biography is done retrospectively by a third party, this is a form of autobiography, written by the subject, but by fits and starts. What you lose in the narrative continuity of a biography you gain in the voice, the very self and voice of the author himself, writing in the moment, addressing someone directly. When the author himself is an eloquent writer, you're getting really a special and intimate access to his work, his mind. And if the editor can provide the apparatus so that a reader can read it continuously—and what Mike

provides in this book are wonderful introductions to each section, adding up to a succinct *précis* of his own biography—you can read it as a documentary biography of a writer living his life from day to day, almost moment to moment.

Just the other day on your Twitter feed, of all things, I came across 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: it lays bare the writer’s 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, was part of his Mailer’s own self-portrayal. So I looked for a passage I recalled from one of Mailer’s best books, *Armies of the Night*. From the beginning he talks about himself as having multiple selves yet feels trapped by his public personality. Though “he had learned to live in the sarcophagus of his image,” he detested the “ugly pictures” the media and the literary world had carved “on the living tomb of his legend.” The metaphor is strikingly done, beautifully expressed. Much later, though, I came upon the passage I was looking for, written in the same spirit. Describing some of his adventures in Washington, he remarks that he really didn’t like seeing himself on film, even though a documentary film crew was actually following him around, a small but crucial detail he hadn’t told us until that point. He didn’t like it, he says, because what he saw was “the last remaining speck of the one personality he found absolutely unsupportable: the nice Jewish boy from Brooklyn. Something in his adenoids gave it away—he had the softness of a man early-accustomed to mother love.”

It’s those multiple personalities that we experience in reading this book. The letters to his family, for example, are extraordinarily close and affectionate. At the memorial service for Mailer in Carnegie Hall, each of his many children spoke, all spoke differently, and all spoke eloquently and affectionately. So there are very good family letters, including one that’s not so affectionate to his father admonishing him for his gambling addiction, a stark piece of writing I would compare to Kafka’s long letter of indictment 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, where you can follow his evolving relationship with those 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 exceptionally generous. To the end of his life, he spoke about *From Here to Eternity* as the best World War II novel. Or his warm response to Styron's novel *The Long March* and then to Styron's first long novel, *Lie Down In Darkness*, which I won't read here now. He tells Styron how blown away he is by it and how, just by reading the book, he loves the man. And then there are letters which you can only describe as theoretical, or critical: the multiple correspondences with critics like John Aldridge or Diana Trilling. I knew Diana Trilling quite well. She could be a very difficult woman, determined and opinionated, and it's remarkable 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 opened this book—was a letter about how critics don't really understand writers very well. With great ingenuity, he describes how writers work, not from their strengths, but paradoxically from their weaknesses and how they try to compensate for their weaknesses. He said that Hemingway, for example, couldn't deal with the long sentence and so ended up writing and creating that Hemingway style. It's an extraordinary letter. If an academic had had such an idea he would surely have turned that into a book or at least a lengthy essay. Yet here it is in brief. I wouldn't call it a throw-away, but there it is, purely private yet nicely developed, a fascinating, counterintuitive idea. What we have in this book is really God's plenty.

After 1958, as I said, he dictated these letters, often a whole bunch of them at a time. That he could have written some of these exceptionally well-formulated, beautifully written letters orally, *viva voce*, you might say, is quite astounding. It makes me think of what happened to Henry James when he developed what we today would call carpal tunnel syndrome around the late 1890s, and began to write his novels by dictation. Some people feel that they could find the exact spot of the novel where he stopped writing and started dictating. But I had no idea that Mailer did this as well, at least in his letters, and I find it quite extraordinary. Yet at several points Mailer apologizes for being such a bad letter writer. As he explains it, I don't want to waste my

best ideas in letters, or I'm tired at the end of the day when I write them, and so on. Yet 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, Mailer did say on a number of occasions that it would be a mistake for a professional novelist to waste words on a business letter, or a note to a friend, or anything like that. 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 once he got into the act of writing, he forgot all that. He cared so much about language that he could not help doing a beautiful job, and I think that letter you're talking about is a perfect example of it. At the Harry Ransom Center at the University Texas, there are at least 1,300 cassette tapes of Mailer dictating his letters with an hour or more on each one. It's a vast archive. I don't know that there are any other examples in modern literature of the actual composition of so many letters on a cassette. And then, of course, we have the final version, because his secretary would type the letters from the tapes, give them back to him, he would make corrections on it, and they would go out. So you can see the compositional process.

But what I was going to say is that there was even another stage to the process. When he would start dictating, he would say to his secretary, "This is letter number two to Jason," Jason Epstein perhaps, and he would first mutter his reply under his breath. He would give a phrase or a whole sentence, and then he would repeat it altered, just slightly, and improved. That's how he would get himself going on a letter. 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'd nailed, he'd [*slaps arm of chair*] bang the desk twice, for punctuation. He felt good about it, and was all gusto. He could not turn down the flame of his verbal felicity just because it was a business letter. Some of his letters to people that he didn't know at all are some of his gems.

DICKSTEIN: So it's not only oral, but oral involving a process of revision, which is quite revealing. 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 just 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, biographer of Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Conrad, several others, including D.H. Lawrence. He wrote to Norman to ask what Lawrence's influence on him was. Mailer did not know Meyers at all. He 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 Widener 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 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: 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 wonderful piece of literary criticism, except that it doesn't seem like literary criticism at all. It seems more like the delight of one great novelist reading and reflecting and ruminating on the works of another.

DICKSTEIN: It's funny that I had never thought of Lawrence as an influence on Mailer until he wrote that essay. The book was a response to Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*, and I felt it was something of a copout: she had made a strong case against Mailer, and he went ahead and very chivalrously turned the book into defense of Henry Miller and D.H. Lawrence. In *The Armies of the Night* Mailer describes himself as a sexologue—someone who believed in salvation through sex. In some very funny passages attacking Paul Goodman, he portrays the two of them as rival sexologues to explain why they never get along with each other. In this connection he also talks about the sexual attitudes of the young, and this is where Lawrence comes to mind. The book was written in 1967–68, when sexual morals had changed drastically, and it's clear from that book that Mailer can't quite get it down. He says these kids see sex as just the “gymnasium of love,” a terrific phrase for what is little more than a physical workout, guilt-free, of course, something Lawrence too detested. So this letter really nails it in terms of what might have influenced Mailer about D.H. Lawrence. It's an illuminating linkage.

LENNON: Yes it's a wonderful linkage. I think Lawrence rivals Hemingway among the novelists that influenced Mailer, and there were many others—Fitzgerald, Steinbeck, Stendhal, Malraux. He always listed Tolstoy, but you can't see the influence clearly, but you can see the links to Lawrence: the fascination or obsession with sex and love in all of its aspects. I've always felt that the Hemingway influence was a drum people beat on a bit too much, while they forgot about Lawrence and Henry Miller, who also had a strong influence. Mailer once wrote a screenplay with Miller as the protagonist.

DICKSTEIN: You know, it may well be that Hemingway as a figure may have influenced him more than Hemingway as a writer, because you can't really see any reflection of Hemingway in his style. It's more the figure of Papa and his self-destructiveness that may have gotten to him, along with his fame. Mailer became just such a public figure, comparable to Hemingway. He must have been aware that fame ultimately did very bad things to Hemingway's

writing, that Hemingway began to believe his own press clippings. You see this in some of Mailer's comments in the letters on *The Old Man and the Sea*. It was much acclaimed in the early '50s and had a great commercial success—it probably got Hemingway the Nobel Prize—but Mailer was very down on that book. Most critics are, though I'm not, but I can see why they dislike it.

LENNON: Mailer felt Hemingway's style was very powerful. Mailer said it changed literature, you could not ignore Hemingway's style. It was so powerful that he knew he could never equal it. But what impressed him the most about Hemingway was the fact that Hemingway had a life apart from writing—that he lived an active, vigorous life, and that he was involved in wars. He was in the Spanish Civil War, in World War I, in World War II. He fought in all the great wars in the first half of the twentieth century, and he did all kinds of other things, fishing, sailing hunting, and getting into literary battles and what have you. Mailer liked the idea of a writer moving from the quiet writing room, out into the public, back and forth. Indeed, if you look at the places where Mailer did his writing, they were either New York City or out of New York City. When New York City drove him crazy, he had to go somewhere else—Provincetown, of course, but also to Maine. He lived in Vermont and New Hampshire. He once rented a place in Bucks County, Pennsylvania when he was married to Jeanne Campbell. He went there to escape the craziness of the city for a period of time. When he got bored and the country 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 Merv Griffin or William Buckley or Dick Cavett—whoever was running a television talk show. Norman never turned down many invitations. Even more than Hemingway, he pushed himself out into the world, and he felt he learned from it. But 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 exposure, and after that, it's going to be a negative. It's going to hurt you." More than once he said, "Look at Updike, look at Roth, look at Bellow, look at Pynchon. Are they out there? Is it doing you any good to be on television all the time?" A part of him felt that it was a terrific mistake to get so involved the media circus, 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 involved there. One of them is the writer as activist, like Malraux or even Byron, fighting for Greek independence. But the other, of course, is the writer as celebrity. I think of what Gore Vidal, who was his friendly rival, his "frenemy," often said: that no one should ever turn down a chance to have sex or be on television. On one occasion Vidal suggested that the goal 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 takes him back and forth; once you get into the public spotlight, as he sees it, you feel you need to pull back and pull away. There's all that wonderful comedy at the beginning of *Armies of the Night* about not wanting to be drawn down to the Pentagon march, and yet feeling he had to; he plays the game of circling back and forth . . .

LENNON: That's the perfect example of the tension there between being the public figure, and being used. Ralph Ellison once told him, "Look, we're expendable. We're supposed to get out there and do this kind of stuff." Robert Lowell, on the other hand, had great reservations about getting involved in the anti-war movement, but he felt that he had a duty to do so.

You gave me the great line 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 about the letters—I mentioned this to you when we were talking before—is Mailer's much more explicit treatment of Jewishness and his own 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," I thought that was 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 here I was surprised to read the letters to Jack Henry Abbott. He was the prisoner that Mailer helped get released from

prison and publish a collection of his letters, who, within six weeks after he got out, killed a waiter downtown in the city. What amazed me is that Mailer continued this relationship, even after this terrible event. He continued to write to him and, apparently, it turned out that Abbott was thinking of converting to Judaism—

LENNON: He did convert.

DICKSTEIN: He converted to Judaism and Mailer became his instructor in Jewish history and religion. I was surprised at all the stuff that Mailer knew—his patient explanation of the relation of the Talmud and the Zohar, of Jewish history and some of the classics of Jewish history and religion. Mailer was much more involved in this material 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, 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 to help him pick a religion.

DICKSTEIN: Yeah, he tells that one about the Khazars, 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. Mailer knew all those stories. He assimilated all of that stuff, and he never . . . I know toward the end of his life, a book by Michael Wex 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 said, "If you really want to understand me, read this book." And I read it, and it is a funny, funny book. 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, you heard Yiddish words like *bupkis*. I learned more Yiddish terms from Norman Mailer than anywhere else.

DICKSTEIN: Well, I keep coming back to *The Armies of the Night*, certainly one of my favorite books. One of the keys to the success of that book is that he's so comical about himself. I mentioned Byron before. Byron, early in his career, became famous for dark, brooding narrative poems, but late in life began to write about the same material in a satiric and funny way. His great poem *Don Juan* is a send-up of himself and his own image. I thought that *Armies of the Night* and other late books, where Mailer makes himself a character, are so good because he's so funny about himself, sending up his own public image while also developing it.

LENNON: The same is true of *The Fight*, his book about the 1974 Muhammad Ali-Foreman fight in Africa, where Norman is 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 all of a sudden, he hears the roar of a lion, and it was a real lion. He said it was an awesome 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 went on, "there's a bright side to this, because who could not imagine what will be said of me, that a lion out there in Africa has been waiting down all the years for the flesh of Ernest Hemingway, and now disappointed, finds that a suitable substitute has arrived, and that Norman Mailer was eaten by Hemingway's lion."

Which made him recall the 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 M's and L's! And wouldn't that be a terrific footnote." He had that wonderful sense of himself as a comic figure, and was never afraid to play the fool. Never. 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 Nor-

man Mailer selves. 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? We agree that there are all these multiple Mailers. We might then ask, 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 a protean figure who did this and that but never settled into one groove? What do you think? You've been living with him for so long.

LENNON: I put together a bibliography of him, years ago, and the first line was, "Mailer is Proteus." Reading the reviews of my biography and of the letters edition, it seems that everyone has their own Mailer, have their own slant. They all say, "This is the true Norman Mailer." If you read all the reviews, you find there are as many different Norman Mailers as you can imagine.

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 way. And in other ways, he's going to charm us, beguile us. He's going to impress the heck out of us with his style and his great intelligence. That's one of the reasons that it's difficult to read the literary journals and magazines without somebody making a reference to him, but it's always a reference to one aspect of his protean self. Hemingway, we've got our arms around. But we don't have our arms around Norman Mailer.

DICKSTEIN: I like the idea that he was a protean figure. Wasn't he protean in his style as well? There's not a single Mailer style, and one of the interesting things in the letters 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. He had great hopes for the book, hoping that it would help him recover from the bad reviews he'd gotten for *Barbary Shore*. We know from *Advertisements* that the style of that novel contracted and expanded—that it became more like Hemingway, then less like Hemingway. Certainly one of the extraordinary things about that book I keep mentioning, *Armies of the Night*, is how he went from that austere, contracted Hemingway-like style to, really, a much more baroque style.

Part of the genius of Mailer, in that great late '60s period and soon afterwards, was in those incredibly complicated sentences. I mean the . . .

LENNON: Melvillean.

DICKSTEIN: If you try to read them aloud, as I've tried to do, it's not easy to get your tongue around them. Once or twice I participated in a marathon reading of *Moby-Dick* in Sag Harbor. When you try to get your tongue around Melville's elaborate sentences, or Mailer's sentences, it's hard work, like tightrope walking, but they always land exactly right. They take a long trajectory, but they find their safe harbor at the end.

LENNON: He had a great ear. Let me say something about the different styles. He said years ago—in fact it was an interview I did with him in 1980—that there really were only two kinds of writers. There were writers who had the same style in every book. He said that you can pick up anything by Hemingway, and you're always going to know it's Hemingway. You can always identify Faulkner. But he said, "Can you always identify Steinbeck?" Steinbeck wrote several different kinds of books in different modes and with different styles. Mailer 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. 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 a non-style almost. It's more like the style of *The Naked and the Dead* than 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 in her *Times* review of it. But basically, it's a freight train that's moving a lot of baggage, and it does it with great ease and facility, does it to perfection. But while he was writing that, he was writing *Ancient Evenings*, which is 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 its shift from the style of *Armies of the Night* and four or five books after that, the technique of creating himself as a persona, writing in the third

person like Henry Adams and treating himself as a character—Aquarius or whatever he called himself. He gets to *The Executioner's Song* and says, to his own surprise, that he's become less interested in himself. At least for the moment, he felt he had exhausted himself as a fictional character.

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

DICKSTEIN: Yes, a few questions.

LENNON: Here's one.

FEMALE AUDIENCE MEMBER: You mentioned before this relationship or similarities between 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!

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

LENNON: 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: Hemingway was not an intellectual in the way Mailer was. He was not read in history, economics, philosophy. He didn't read Marx and Freud the way Mailer did.¹ He was involved in a lot of progressive causes, and he was certainly a notable anti-fascist, Hemingway was. But I'm not here to defend Hemingway. Mailer said there were a lot of things he loved about Hemingway, and one of them was his ability to describe sensuous experience. It was one of the things Mailer loved about Hemingway's style. But their politics were quite different, I would say.

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: Yes, I 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: He said it was wonderful to get up in the morning and be a movie director. 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?" He'd answer, "This is good." Or, "Move the curl." He said all of his decision-making abilities were exercised and this activity was very pleasing to him. I think in the same letter, he said, "*Anything* is easier than writing."

Writing was hard work for Norman Mailer, but he did it. He was dogged about it, but then, once the book was finished, he looked 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. You might say that he fled back to writing when he had gotten into enough trouble. But there's no doubt that he felt that making movies was much more of a happy activity than writing.

DICKSTEIN: Well, let's face it. Writing is very lonely, bordering on torture at times. I once introduced a reading by John Updike in which he said he didn't know what he was doing there, in front of an audience, plugging his book. When he started out, not long after when 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. Writers were loners, people who are able to stay for twelve hours alone in a room. Now the nature of the writing life had changed. It may also be a function of the writer to 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. At a certain point when he was deep in the writing of a book, he would begin to talk about it. He tried to hold back at the beginning. 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. But he believed it was a mistake to talk about a book too soon, 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 when you're actually writing. 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 work-in-progress until close to the finish line.

At a certain point, he needed to talk about his work, to show it to people like his sister, who read all of his manuscripts—she is sitting right here—to his children, to some of his friends and editors who were able to read his books. He needed 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. He was not so solipsistic that he would not listen. So you will see a lot of "I can't talk about it now" in the letters. 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. If you read all the letters to Abbott, who was deep into paranoia, in the later part of his life—you would get a much richer description. Right now Jerome Loving is writing a book about the Mailer/Abbott relationship, and I think he's going to illuminate it more than I was able. It's one of the great tragedies and one of the great turn points in Norman's life.

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

LENNON: He was on the run. They finally caught him down in Louisiana after six weeks or so. Detective Bill Majeski tracked him down and they brought him back.

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

LENNON: I just want to say thanks to all of you.

NOTE

1. A bridge between Freud and Marx: Mailer discusses the need for "a radical bridge from Marx to Freud" in *Advertisements*, 365. Mailer's second novel, *Barbary Shore* (1951), contains his most extended comments on Marx and his followers. See his essay, "Freud," written around the time of "Lipton's," in *Mind of an Outlaw*, ed. Phillip Sipiora (2013).