

NORMAN MAILER'S
PIECES AND PONTIFICATIONS:
A NOTE ON ITS ORIGINS

J. MICHAEL LENNON

A special thank you to Suzanna Calev and the Farley Library for providing the image scans of Norman Mailer's editorial comments to the Introduction of Pieces and Pontifications

IN AUGUST OF 1977, MY WIFE AND I DROVE UP TO MT. DESERT ISLAND, MAINE, where Mailer was summering. During our visit, I encouraged him to let me assemble a collection of his interviews. He liked the idea, but at the time was completely absorbed in researching a new book about the murderer, Gary Gilmore, who had been executed in Utah on January 17, 1977. He told me he wouldn't have much time to take a look at what I had put together until the Gilmore book was published. *The Executioner's Song* came out in October 1979, and won Mailer his second Pulitzer. By this time I had located about 30 interviews.

The day after his November 11, 1980 marriage to Barbara Norris (later Norris Church), Mailer and his new, sixth wife went to England where they had roles in Miloš Forman's film *Ragtime*, based on E.L. Doctorow's 1975 novel of the same name. Norris had a bit part as a chorus girl who is with the flamboyant Gilded Age architect, Stanford White, played by Mailer, when he is shot dead by a jealous husband. Mailer had never been in a feature film before, and found the long waiting periods and re-shooting of scenes to be tedious. After completing his acting stint, he flew to Munich to take part in a documentary with me as his interviewer. For the next five days, we enjoyed

the spontaneity of unrehearsed conversation on river boats, beer halls and university classrooms. Edited down, these talks became part of the film, *Norman Mailer: The Sanction to Write*. Back in the States, my wife, Donna Pedro, transcribed our week-long conversation, and then Mailer and I cut out three chunks for the interview collection, which was shaping up.

Around that time, Mailer realized that he had published a number of pieces in various magazines and journals over the previous few years. These included his review of Bernardo Bertolucci's *Last Tango in Paris* in the *New York Review of Books*; a long essay on television, written at the request of an *Esquire* editor, Gordon Lish; a rambling piece, "Rounding Watergate," in *New York*; a touching memoir of his friend and mentor, Jean Malaquais, in *Partisan Review*, and his comic memoir of his time on the *Harvard Advocate*, "Our Man at Harvard," also published in *Esquire*. It would become the lead-off piece in the collection. He had not collected any of his fugitive prose since his 1972 miscellany, *Existential Errands*. As he sifted through the material for what would be his fifth miscellany (*Advertisements for Myself* published in 1959, was the first), he became increasingly selective, dropping the Watergate essay, for example. I proposed including two dozen brief excerpts from minor interviews in the collection, but he felt the spirit of his exchanges with his interlocutors would be damaged by doing this, and vetoed the idea.

The larger editorial problem was that the collection was really two books, one containing 12 essays, some quite long, and the other, 20 interviews, with no apparent bridge between them. Mailer faced the problem directly, writing in his preface that the book was "the work of a divided man," namely, an essayist, who sought "refinement" of his art, and a "street debater," speaking "in the loudest voice," in the interviews. Reflecting his "bicameral personality," he came up with a title for the combined volume, "Spooks, and the Mad Butler," and separate titles for the essays and the interviews: "Sinking in the Seventies," for the former, and "After *The White Negro*" for the latter. All of these were dropped late in the editing process, fall 1982, when he came up with the final title, *Pieces and Pontifications*—one of his most accurate, most memorable titles.

Mailer dashed off his preface and, after much head-scratching and several false starts, I wrote an introduction. I brought it with me to Provincetown, and showed it to him—this would be on July 13, 1981. The large waterfront place at 637 Commercial Street that he'd rented was crammed with family and friends, and there was a lot going on, eating, drinking, roistering, and

water sports out the back door. An editor from *Playboy*, Art Kretchmer, was there, along with Mailer's close friend Buzz Farbar, Norris and most of his children, and at least one ex-wife. There was no possibility of having an editorial chat in this rumbustious venue, so we repaired to the second-floor bathroom. Mailer brought in two chairs, and a small table, which he put over the toilet. Then he locked the door and we sat down to an editorial session, although he did all the work. In 30-40 minutes, with me looking on in wonder, he worked over my prose with a pencil,* trimming it by about 25 percent. He sounded every one of my sentences (his inveterate practice), tweaking or gutting them as need be to capture the missing beat, the rhythm and the roll. It was an amazing bit of literary dexterity. Then we went below and joined the party.

The collection was published on June 21, 1982. To address the bifurcation of the text, Little, Brown issued it simultaneously as a 400-page hardback, and as two 200-page soft cover volumes, one titled *Pieces*, and the other, which contained his preface and my introduction, as *Pontifications*. The reviews were generally good, although the tragic murder of a waiter the previous year by Jack Abbott, an ex-convict sponsored by Mailer, Robert Silvers of the *New York Review of Books*, Jason Epstein of Random House, and other literary figures, dampened its reception. Michiko Kakutani, later Mailer's *bête noire*, but then a fledgling reviewer for the *New York Times*, interviewed him and wrote a warm pre-publication profile, with comment on the collection, in the *New York Time Book Review* two weeks before publication day.

The following document is in the E. S. Farley Library at Wilkes.



Sangamon State University

From the Desk of

MIKE LENNON

edited by Norman
Maier in the second
floor bathroom of his
rented summer home
at 637 Commercial St. Permittance,
Mass, on July 13, 1981 — a
30-40 minute job.

INTRODUCTION

By J. Michael Lennon

I think Gertrude Stein ^{may have been too sweeping} was wrong when she said to Hemingway, "Remarks are not literature." It depends. Hemingway's remarks in his 1958 interview in The Paris Review certainly qualify, ^{and} ~~According to Norman Mailer, it is~~ the best thing Hemingway published after World War II. Several of the interviews with Mailer collected here are of ^{the same stature} ~~the same stature~~. Collectively, these nineteen interviews constitute a marvelous abridgement of his views on every subject close to his concern for the past quarter of a century. If these selected conversations with friends, journalists, academics and students are not literature, not certifiably a formal part of Mailer's ^{large} ~~large~~, multigeneric canon, they are at the ~~very~~ least, an indispensable adjunct to it.

Mailer is, among ~~many~~ ^{an unfractured prophet, full of foreboding about} other things, the ~~great foreboder of~~ contemporary American culture, and this collection shows how he has gone about this business, ^{as} ~~as~~ well as any of his five collections of assorted prose except Advertisements For Myself (1959), which, because of its brilliant intimations and outright predication of the upheavals of the sixties, stands alone.]

Mailer's questioners also invite him to revisit portions of the ground covered in his earlier books, and he does, although he calls the order of the march. In the earlier interviews, especially, he barnstorms through familiar territory: the sexual revolution, drugs, technology, violence, the media, God and the Devil, the death of the romantic spirit, American politics, existentialism and the various forms of totalitarianism.] "almost as if to teach us," as Robert F. Lucid once noted of Mailer's nonfiction in general. "There is indeed something distinctly pedagogical," Lucid said, "about the way he]

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invades so many areas for us, displaying a hundred different moods and attitudes when he is in them, above all trying always to evoke the essence of the moment through his endless conjuring of metaphor."

In the later interviews Mailer's range is even greater, and he is just as concerned to refine his metaphors, but he is less pedagogical and more conjectural. His ideas have changed over the years, of course, significantly in some cases, but then so has the country. Mailer is nothing if not barometric. Yet the modulation of his tone, the modifications of his pace and the changes in his emphases have never been purely reflexive. Mailer chooses his targets, and his arrows, with care. If he has no idiosyncratic insight or perspective, he passes, which partly explains why his most controversial remarks are often his most serious. His goal always is to tell us how the world works and he won't provoke if he cannot inform. In this sense, he is still a realist in the tradition of Zola and Dos Passos.

In the late Eisenhower period Mailer billed himself as a "psychic outlaw." Thirteen years later during the Nixon-McGovern campaign, a "modest and half-invisible Aquarius" vibrated in the winds of the Zeitgeist. These are the extremes that are represented in these interviews. Compare for example the ~~exchange~~ ^{on a matter} exchanges with Krassner in 1962 with the reflective conversation he had with McElroy and a group of writing students at Columbia University in 1981. In the earlier interview "the subjects grind by like boxcars on a two-mile freight," as Mailer later put it. In the Columbia interview, he proceeds with Jamesian deliberation, lingers actually, in his discussion of the lore and craft of novel-writing, admitting uncertainties, offering suggestions and making subtle forays into an area at the edge of the word system: the mysterious powers of ego and identity that have sustained him in his life.

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as a writer, Mailer is considerably more intrigued with questions of craft and style in ~~the~~ recent interviews than he was, for example, in the 1963 interview with Marcus, perhaps for no better reason than he has now lived the writer's life for twice as long, over forty years. [His short story, "The Greatest Thing in the World," won first prize in Story magazine's 1941 college contest.]

Each interview illuminates some moment of his career and most cover a multitude of topics (the 1967 interview with Carroll and the ^{Much conversational} ~~series~~ he conducted with me in 1980 come closest to being synopticons of his views). Even those with similar ^{substantive} ~~topical cores~~ (with ^{for example,} Farber in 1973, Medwick in 1980 and Michelson/Stone in 1981 on sex, love and marriage; and with Stern in 1958, Stratton in 1974 and Adams in 1975 on God and the Devil) are markedly different. Some of the interviews, ^{moreover, offer} ~~however,~~ contain Mailer's ~~most important or only~~ ^{ideas} ~~substantial~~ ^{utterance} on a major topic and so have ^{few} ~~a~~ ^{to interest} ~~claim~~ ^{to uniqueness}. His long discussion of pornography in the Michelson/Stone Interview is one of these; the portions of the 1970 Young interview in which he explores the primitive sensibility is another. A third is his conversation with Stratton on Charles Manson and rock music. Several of the interviews contain unrehearsed and incisive comment on writers, or "fellow racketeers," as he calls them, that he has discussed little or not at all before: Borges, Márquez, Hannah Arendt, Doctorow, Tom Wolfe and Ann Beattie. There are also some surprising remarks on writers he has had on his mind for decades: Marx, Freud, Hemingway, Faulkner, Fitzgerald and Sartre. ~~And~~ ^{quick} ~~Speckled~~ throughout are asides and references to many more: Kafka, Forster, Burroughs, Penn Warren, Steinbeck, Graham Greene, Heller, Nin, Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, Styron, Porter, Capote, Durrell, Fowles and Raymond Chandler. ^{Capsule} The 1981 interview with Attanasio is notable for its discussion of writers. [So there is likely to be the same measure of agreement on an]

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order of merit among the interviews as there is on Mailer's books, which is to say, little. Claims for the preeminence of several of his books have been advanced, from The Naked and the Dead (1948) to The Executioner's Song (1979).

In the earliest interview presented here, his 1958 dialogue with Stern on his unique theology, Mailer begins by saying, "I started as one kind of writer and I've been evolving into another kind, ^{of} ~~of writer~~." Over the 24-year period (1958-81) from which these interviews are drawn, Mailer has become another kind of writer at least three times. The first metamorphosis came a year after the Stern interview with the publication of Advertisements. There he dropped all pretense of separating his personal and creative lives and candidly dissected his achievements, failures and ambitions to "hit the longest ball ever to go up into the accelerated hurricane air of our American letters."¹ The second was revealed nine years later in Armies, ^{the of the night} ~~his corrosive diatribe against the Vietnam~~ ~~War~~ in which he describes his former self in the third person, thus casting his outspoken public persona into sharp relief. Mailer used this unusual point of view in the four nonfiction narratives he published after Armies, all of which are personal testaments of the public life of the nation during the period from 1967-72. If the sixties could be considered Mailer's autobiographical decade, the seventies may fairly be called his biographical period. After the 1972 elections he all but lost interest in himself as a protagonist and devoted the rest of the decade to a series of works on famous-infamous Americans: Marilyn Monroe (Marilyn: A Novel Biography, 1973); Muhammad Ali (The Fight, 1975); Henry Miller (Genius and Lust, 1977); Gary Gilmore (The Executioner's Song, 1979); and Marilyn again in Of Women and Their Elegance, published in 1980. These four figures, and their narcissistic obsessions, are discussed in several of the interviews from 1974 on.

For the first time, we perhaps will encounter a Mailer who has tried to get outside of both history and personality--to get so far back in time as to strip it, to imagine himself simply at a time and place where historical meaning cannot reach. Lennon/5

Mailer is now poised for another change, by his own estimate perhaps the largest. From reports, ~~admittedly fragmentary~~, of his public readings from the huge novel set in ancient Egypt that he has been working on since 1971, it seems likely that its publication in a year or two will reveal still another kind of writer. Mailer makes a number of tantalizing comments on this long-awaited work in several of the later interviews, and also explains why he is usually unwilling to discuss his fictional, as opposed to his nonfictional, work-in-progress.

~~The larger metamorphoses I mention do not come near to accounting for all the sides of his personality which come forward in the interviews, which span the period from the reach back almost to the 1952 publication of his still amazing, still controversial essay, "The White Negro." This essay, a prospectus for a new hero, the urban adventurer seeking new energy in "the Wild West of American night life," foreshadows several of the overlapping avatars which ~~make appearances~~ in the interviews: hipster, theologian, left theorist, sexual philosopher, architectural critic, war protestor, filmmaker, mayoral candidate, new journalist, literary critic, actor... like the best of actors--Brando--we can never predict what Mailer will do next, but after he has surprised us, it seems right.~~

~~So the interviews fill in dozens of gaps in our knowledge of the man who has called "the Lon Chaney of American Letters."~~

On some subjects--pornography, drugs, marriage, his books, his career, his theology and the psychological stances involved in writing a novel--the interviews ~~must~~ ^{may even} be accorded the status of ~~the~~ ^{biographical} major sources. But they are to be recommended for more than ~~such~~ ^{the} exportable information ~~as~~ ^{that} they provide. As a literary form, the interview has much to offer someone of Mailer's

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temperament. As sensitive to mood as Hemingway, he has been more willing than his old mentor to exercise that portion of himself most serviceable for the occasion. The chemistry between Mailer and his different interlocutors stimulates him to a variety of conversational gambits: elucidative, admonitory, quasi-confessional, speculative and, of course, forensic. Since Hemingway's death Mailer has been the literary world's finest counterpuncher, although he displays none of Hemingway's archness (or Faulkner's sullenness). He does unload a few good, solid antipathies though; corporate America, plastics, the FBI, ^{and} modern architecture, ~~Time and Ronald Reagan~~ are a few of his targets. His method is more dialectical than peremptory, however. Indeed, the interviews bear some resemblance to a 25-year chess match, new players (most of whom are aware of the games of their predecessors) succeeding old, and Mailer adapting his tactics for each. A great part of the pleasure the interviews provide lies in the opportunity to savor the various gambits Mailer employs, and to ~~further discriminate between tactical shifts and the edges~~ ^{watch for the signs of change} ~~of the larger changes in his ideas, that crop up in his answers.~~ Even when an interviewer appears to have summed up some aspect of Mailer's thought or art, he resists in favor of a more subtle formulation. Occasionally he asks the questions; at other times he plays devil's advocate and notes the weakness of his own position, stating it earlier or more firmly than his interviewer, a tactic he mastered in Armies. He enjoys a fast, tough exchange (the one with Anita Eicholz on the question of the Women's Liberation movement, for example, which is the perfect pendant to The Prisoner of Sex); it seems to notch his own thinking higher. His ego, which he once compared to an egg, is like a golf ball--the harder it is hit, the more lively it becomes.

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Mailer is a generally genial interviewee, however, which surprises some. He finds artful ways to answer uninformed questions and can usually find a decent peg on which to hang an answer to imprecise ones. *An excellent interview.* He seems to deploy just enough acumen to raise the discussion one rung higher and he never tries to embarrass. So he will answer dull questions with a modicum of wit, turn intellectual batteries on academics who know his work well and use his knowledge of old-friend interviewers where it will be helpful. In sum, he is a great talker, ~~who works to maintain the life of the discussion~~ at its highest possible level. ~~Advancing the argument is more important than making points.~~

Paradoxically, the ^{real worth} ultimate excellence of these interviews may reside in the fact that Mailer is suspicious of the form. Because he believes that there is an umbilical relation between good thinking, good writing and mild depression, his first instinct is to be skeptical of any idea that comes too easily, ^{or too enthusiastically.} The more Napoleonic he feels, the less likely he is to say anything memorable. The insight has been well-endowed by experience. Imagine then his mistrust of ideas that arise in casual conversation. *Consequently, he works to maintain the life of the discussion at its highest level.* ~~that he will turn off the machine before he will chat.~~ *Advancing the argument is more important than making points.*

"Give me a moment," he would say, not to think, but to not think, to empty his mind of all the butt-ends of chit-chat that had accumulated. Sometimes he would leave the room for ten minutes. Returning, he would give the sign to hit the button and then he'd be off, drawing inspiration from some other ^{fact} talk, talking unsolemnly, urgently about politics, plastics and books, manifesting again his belief that words can change lives--in novels, nonfiction, even in interviews.

No later than

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Novelists, Mailer says, must be good at "the art of becoming." ^{believe that words can change lives--} Agreed; ^{if they are good enough, so words are not devoted to novels} and our chief interest will be in the resulting novels. ^{and there is where our chief interest will be} But if we wish to glimpse the process as well as read the product, these conversations may be the best place to look.