GALLERY TALK:
THE MAILER ARCHIVE

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Norman Mailer and America in Conflict
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IN 1974, A COLLECTION OF ESSAYS titled *Will the Real Norman Mailer Please Stand Up,* edited by Laura Adams,[1] appeared. She borrowed her title from a 1969 film[2] documentary about Mailer. The book and the film share the conviction that Mailer is a whirligig whose only identity was the lack of a dominant one. He has been, on different days (and sometimes the same one) a novelist, actor, movie director, pugilist, political candidate,[3] political gadfly, public intellectual, sexual warrior, street debater and White Negro. At various times, he has also been a tightrope walker, barroom brawler, bourbon drinker, and guest on nearly every television talk show on the air: from Mike Wallace's *Night Beat* to David Susskind's *Omnibus* to the talk shows of Johnny Carson, Merv Griffin, Mike Douglas, Dick Cavett, Bob Cromie, Milt Rosenburg, Oprah, the *60 Minutes* Wallace, David Frost, and Charlie Rose. And, of late, O'Reilly. And thirty others. For a period in the fifties and sixties, Mailer was part owner of the *Village Voice,* which he named and cofounded in 1955. Notably uxorious, he has wed six times, divorced five, and for over a quarter of century has been happily married to his sixth wife, Norris Church Mailer.

Among his other occupations, in no particular order, are: infantryman (his only full-time salaried job), existential philosopher, unpaid presidential adviser, amateur theologian, boxing consultant to Russell Crowe,[4]

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screenplay writer for Sergio Leone[5] and Jean-Luc Godard,[6] Jeremiah, journalist (old and new), poet, playwright, lecturer, interviewer and interviewee (a thousand times), essayist, biographer, sports reporter, and connoisseur of literary forms, some of which he invented, and from 1984 to 1986, president of the American chapter of P.E.N. He has been a regular contributor to the *Voice*, *Dissent*, *Esquire*,[7] *Partisan Review*, *Paris Review*, *Playboy*, *Harper's*, *Life*, *The NYRB*, *The New Yorker*, *Vanity Fair,* and *Parade* (and has written for over 100 periodicals, all told). At different moments in his life he has done impersonations of Brendan Behan, Marlon Brando, Broderick Crawford, Lord Beaverbrook, Truman Capote, Ernest Hemingway, LBJ, and Tony Soprano. Over the decades he has transmogrified from collegiate atheist, to foxhole agnostic to Marxian anarchist to existential hipster to left conservative to Gnostic panjandrum. He has nine children and ten grandchildren, but he is also the spiritual father to a generation, perhaps two, and is still our hero, our man out on a limb talking a blue streak, telling off presidents, challenging experts, fulminating against technology, worrying about our fragile democracy and, at the age of 83, still taking on all comers, as attested to by the title of the wonderful exhibition here in the HRC.

Perhaps no career in American literature has been so brilliant, varied, controversial, public, productive, lengthy and misunderstood. His imbroglios, generosities, litigations, and loyalties are numerous, notorious, and complex. Few American writers have had their careers on the minds of contemporary critics and on the anvil of public inspection for such a lengthy, unbroken span of time. No writer (save Edgar Allan Poe) has been so often or simultaneously celebrated and reviled. Can we be surprised that Norman Mailer told the *New York Times* that his favorite word is "improvisational"?[8] Or that his favorite card game is Texas Hold 'Em?

My subject today is the nature and extent of the Norman Mailer Papers, now housed in this building and in the process of being cataloged by Steve Mielke and his team, and also to suggest some ways the Mailer Papers might be used by researchers. The work of cataloging has been going on for about a year and has a year to go. It is a massive archive, about 500 cubic feet when it arrived.[9]

Is the Archive commensurate with the protean figure I have just described? Yes. Do the papers reflect Mailer's many identities? Certainly. Every occupation, pursuit, passion, and hobby named earlier is manifested in the Archive. But I hasten to add that his identity as a novelist subsumes all

the others; it colors all of Mailer's other selves. It can be seen in the earliest material, his juvenilia, "The Adventures of Bob and Paul," written when he was about 8, and "The Martian Invasion," when he was 11. In a notebook begun a few days after Pearl Harbor when Mailer was 18, he laid out a plan for what he called "The Trilogy of the Schneiders [his mother's family] and Myself." They are: "The Founders of the City," "The Clitorine Cove," and "The Pestle and the Mortar." He never tackled this trilogy, but a few months earlier he had completed a 90,000-word novel based on a hitchhiking trip to Virginia and North Carolina titled "No Percentage." The unpublished ms. is in the Archive. Chronologically, the Archive inventory goes on like this, containing multiple drafts of his eleven published novels. Soon, ten or twelve more boxes containing the foul papers, research materials, and drafts of his twelfth, *The Castle in the Forest*, will be added.

But before saying more about the presence of the novelist in the Archive, let me take note of some of the other items in it, and what purposes they might serve. A full record of Mailer's personal life is in the Archive: his grade school report cards, birthday cards, cancelled checks, tax returns, telephone bills, car repair bills, tuition statements (for him and his nine children), thousands of photographs and movie stills, and scores of videotapes and audiotapes of his radio, television, and film appearances. The files of his accountants, lawyers, and literary agents are part of the papers, including contracts, royalty statements, wills, divorce papers, his FBI file, and copyright records. Future biographers will be interested in this material, and also, perhaps, researchers attempting to clarify how a major writer in the twentieth century made a living from his books, periodical work, public speaking, and media appearances. But, of course, we cannot predict all uses of such material.

There are also many address books and appointment calendars among the papers, and one old Rolodex file. The other day I jotted down some of the names in it. Test your knowledge of the cultural scene, circa 1971: James Jones, Emmett Grogan, Charlie Mingus, Murray Kempton, Hugh Hefner, Richard Goodwin, Allen Ginsberg, Cus D'Aamto, Edwin Fancher, Willie Morris, David Dellinger, Lillian Hellman, Diana Trilling, Gloria Steinem, Ed Doctorow, Monique Van Vooren, Stella Adler, Irving Howe, Elaine's Restaurant, Jimmy Breslin, Michael McClure, the Lion's Head, Sidney Lumet, Robert Lowell, Nat Hentoff, Joe Flaherty, Diane Arbus, Jules Feiffer, Truman Capote, and Casey's Bar. Biographers of some of these individuals—certainly

Capote, Ginsberg, Trilling, Hellman, Lowell, and Willie Morris—will find much of interest in the papers. And anyone researching a literary or intellectual history of New York, something akin to Dan Wakefield's *New York in the 50s*,[10] or Anatole Broyard's *Kafka Was the Rage: A Greenwich Village Memoir*,[11] or Deborah Davis's recent book, *Party of the Century*,[12] an account of Truman Capote's 1966 Black and White Ball, or any one of several books about the *Partisan Review* intellectuals of the postwar period,[13] will find ample material to be sifted.

Mailer's candidacy in the 1969 Democratic primary for mayor of New York generated a lot of paper, and much of it is here in the HRC. This file includes his position papers on air pollution, decentralization, transportation, and education, among others. Two Mailer proposals that just won't die are detailed in the campaign materials: one to make New York City the 51st state, and another to establish "Sweet Sunday," a day each month when all cars and trucks, save emergency vehicles, would be banned from the city's streets. Urbanologists will relish these and other Mailer proposals for a better New York. There is also a full file of speeches, press releases, posters, and campaign buttons, some of which are displayed in the wonderful exhibition behind me.

Two of Mailer's nonfiction narratives, *Of a Fire on the Moon* (1970) and *The Executioner's Song* (1979), required an extraordinary amount of research and interviewing. For *The Executioner's Song* Mailer and Lawrence Schiller conducted hundreds of interviews with individuals associated with Gary Gilmore; the tapes of many of those interviews are in the Mailer Papers and comprise a brilliant example of extensive and innovative interviewing. Historical researchers and journalists could learn much from a careful study of them. If I remember correctly, a half-dozen archival boxes of material associated with the moon shot book, and 23 with *The Executioner's Song,* were among the papers shipped here last year. Both books were nominated for the National Book Award, and *The Executioner's Song* won a Pulitzer in 1980. Besides the obvious interest they will hold for interviewers of the future, and for students of the nonfiction novel, the audiotapes, research notes, court documents, and psychologists' reports should intrigue those interested in the space program, capital punishment, and our contradictory legal system.

Several of Mailer's books, fiction and nonfiction, deal with the Kennedy assassination and his presidency, the cold war, and the Vietnam War. I refer to *The Presidential Papers* (1963), *An American Dream* (1965), *Cannibals*

and Christians (1966), *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (1967), *The Armies of the Night,* (1968), *Miami and the Siege of Chicago,* (1968), *Harlot's Ghost* (1991), *Oswald's Tale* (1995), as well as his unpublished screenplay, "Havana," and his work with Schiller on the story of the FBI spy, Robert Hanssen, which resulted in both a TV docudrama and a book.[14] No event in American history has reverberated as long and hard for Mailer as Kennedy's assassination.[15] Its powerful influence on his imagination is well documented in the Archive. Future cultural historians of the 1960s, Vietnam, and the cold war may well come to Austin to examine Mailer's decades-long engagement with them so as to better understand their enduring influence on the nation.

The Archive, as I have said, is massive, the largest single author holding in the HRC, and therefore difficult to characterize with precision. One way to get a quick sense of its diversity is to name some documents that will, I believe, attract very different kinds of researchers. Here are a few items:

- A 113-page unpublished play, dated August–September 1942, set in an insane asylum and titled "The Naked and the Dead";
- Approximately 30 short stories, all but 3 or 4 unpublished, from his years at Harvard, 1939–43;
- A hand-written essay on Freud, circa 1956;
- An unpublished review of James Baldwin's second novel, *Giovanni's Room,* 1956;
- Notes for a projected novel, *City of God,* late 1950s;
- Typed note cards of comment on Sir James Frazier's study of magic and religion, *The Golden Bough,* 1960s;
- Typed notes and early drafts of an unpublished essay on the Patterson-Liston fight in Las Vegas in September 1963;
- A hand-written draft of "Alimony Blues," lyrics and music by Mailer, undated;
- Fragments and notes for an essay on William Burroughs's *Naked Lunch,* early 1960s;
- His written comment on *In Cold Blood,* mid-1960s;
- Typed drafts of comments on E. L. Doctorow's *Welcome to Hard Times*, 1966;
- Transcript of "A Dialogue on Women's Liberation" at Town Hall, 1971;

- Transcript of conversation among Mailer, Gore Vidal, Janet Flanner, and Dick Cavett on Cavett's TV program, 1971;
- Correspondence from Arthur Miller offering corrections to Mailer's biography of Marilyn Monroe, 1973;
- A screenplay for Mailer's *King Lear,* Mafia version, mid-1980s;
- Mailer's marked-up script of *Don Juan in Hell*, in which he appeared with Gore Vidal, Susan Sontag, and Kurt Vonnegut, 1993;
- Marked-up copies of Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* and *Marina and Lee* by Pricilla Johnson, mid-1990s;
- Marked-up copy of *The Holy Bible,* 1995;
- An unpublished screenplay, written with Norris Mailer, *The Last Night,* based on Mailer's 1963 story with the same name, 1995;
- Shooting schedules, scene outlines, for Matthew Barney's *Cremaster II,* in which NM appeared as Harry Houdini, 1998;
- Script for "Zelda, Scott and Ernest" by Tom Quinn and George Plimpton (Mailer played Hemingway), 2002;
- "The Art of the Epigram," an unpublished book-length ms., 2004.

After the literary works in the Archive, the second-largest block of material is the letters, which run from the 1930s to the present. Mailer's family saved all of his college and wartime letters and from the 1950s on his secretaries invariably kept a carbon. Some hand-written letters without carbons have turned up, including some in the HRC's collections, but the originals or carbons of the great majority, perhaps 95 percent, are in the Mailer Papers. My original estimate of the total number of letters was 25,000, but after reading all of them over the past five years while preparing a selected edition,[16] and after making some calculations, I have concluded that the total is more like 40 or 45 thousand, or about 650 a year for 70 years, on average. From the late-1960s to the present Mailer dictated many of his letters and the audiotapes of the dictation sessions are also in the Archive. It is possible that Mr. Mailer and Random House will approve the idea of including a CD of one session in the forthcoming edition, which is scheduled for publication on Mailer's 85th birthday in January 2008. He often begins a letter by complaining of the chore of dictating 70 or 80 letters at a time, but when he gets going he is all gusto, slapping the table and laughing at some of his own lines.

All of the incoming letters to him, perhaps twice as many as the outgoing, are also in the Archive. There is no need to explain that having both sides

of a correspondence solves many riddles, especially in protracted and intense exchanges over a lengthy period. Mailer had this kind of epistolary relationship with family members, of course, and especially in the 1950s and 1960s with a number of writers, including James Jones, Don Carpenter, William Styron, Gore Vidal, Lillian Hellman, Diana Trilling, Vance Bourjaily, and to a lesser extent with James Baldwin, Henry Miller, Terry Southern, Truman Capote, Lillian Ross, and Allen Ginsberg. He corresponded with several literary critics, most notably Robert F. Lucid, Dwight Macdonald, Donald Kaufmann, Richard Poirier, John W. Aldridge, and Laura Adams. His long-time friend, the actor Mickey Knox, received more Mailer letters than anyone else, wonderfully frank, funny letters. Second place, as far as numbers go, is a tie between Jean Malaquais, his early intellectual mentor who translated *The Naked and the Dead* into French, and his Japanese translator Eiichi Yaminishi, to whom he wrote detailed and formal letters over a 40-year period explaining his literary intentions and language. They never met. There is also a vast number of letters to aspiring writers, several of whom Mailer encouraged for years, and quite a large number to his daughter Susan who lived in Mexico and Chile for many years. Here are some of the other people he corresponded with: Alfred Kazin, Jacqueline Kennedy, Gordon Lish, Joyce Carol Oates, Philip Roth, Abbie Hoffman, George Plimpton, Dotson Rader, Jack Abbott, John Erlichman, Jason Epstein, Carol Holmes, Don DeLillo, William F. Buckley, LeRoi Jones, Seymour Krim, Ken Kesey, Adeline Lubell, Elsa Lanchester, and Michael McClure.

Mailer's literary manuscripts comprise the largest block of material in the Archive, approximately 200 cubic feet. And novels take up the largest portion of the literary manuscripts. For example, Mailer's 1991 novel, *Harlot's Ghost,* filled up about 16 cubic feet when it arrived, which is ten times more, roughly, than the bulk of either *The Armies of the Night* or *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*, not only because *Harlot's Ghost* is a very long novel, but because Mailer wrote many more drafts of it. Generally speaking, his novels generated a lot more paper than his nonfiction, which was usually written in comparatively smaller periods of time.

When both the letters and manuscripts have been chronologically ordered and identified by Steve and his colleagues, researchers will be able to move between and among them to cross check and enrich their understanding. Starting from the germ of a novel idea in a notebook or letter, one will be able to move through Mailer's wide-ranging research, false starts (those

for *Ancient Evenings* [1983] and *The Executioner's Song* are quite instructive), to hand-written drafts (Mailer typed his first two novels, but has written the rest by hand, usually in pencil), revised typescripts, marked-up galleys and page proof to the final published copy. In many instances, Mailer published excerpts from forthcoming books in periodicals, and in one case, *An American Dream,* published the entire novel as a serial in *Esquire* prior to book publication.[17] Most of these periodicals are in the HRC, and often differ in interesting ways from the final product. Mailer recast some of his books as plays or films, which were also followed by a wave of interviews, reviews and critical estimates. For example, his 1973 biography of Marilyn Monroe was followed in 1980 by a fictional account of a short period in her life, published as *Of Women and Their Elegance,* which in turn was mined for an unpublished play titled *Strawhead,* which was staged in 1986 at the Actors Studio in New York with Mailer's daughter Kate as Marilyn. All this material is in the Mailer Papers. The HRC has first editions of all Mailer's books, and many foreign editions, as well as fat files of reviews from U.S. and foreign periodicals, and dozens of volumes of critical estimates of his work. Thus, the flow and fruits of Mailer's creative process over 60-plus years will soon be available for examination by scholars working in what can accurately be called the comprehensive archive that constitutes The Mailer Papers of the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center of the University of Texas at Austin. Thanks to Mr. and Mrs. Mailer, his original archivist, the late Dr. Robert F. Lucid, my co-archivist Donna Pedro Lennon, and Dr. Thomas Staley and his staff for making this Archive available—in a year's time—to the world.

NOTES

1. Laura Adams, *Will the Real Norman Mailer Please Stand Up* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat, 1974).
2. Allen King, Director (1968).
3. In 1969 Mailer ran for the Democratic nomination for mayor of New York City; he came in fourth in a field of five.
4. For the film *Cinderella Man,* produced by Ron Howard (2005).
5. In 1976 Mailer wrote a script for Leone based on Harry Grey's 1953 novel, *The Hoods.* It was never produced.
6. Mailer wrote a script for Godard based on *King Lear.* He did not use the script, but Mailer and his daughter Kate have cameos in the film that was made, *King Lear* (1987).
7. Mailer's writing has appeared over 40 times in *Esquire* from 1953 to the present.

8. Quoted in James Baron, "Who Are You?" *New York Times* (February 13, 1994), Section 9, 1, 7.
9. The Archive arrived at the Ransom Center in the late summer of 2005. All the items referenced in this essay are housed there.
10. Dan Wakefield, *New York in the 50s* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992).
11. Anatole Broyard, *Kafka Was the Rage: A Greenwich Village Memoir* (New York: Crown, 1993).
12. Deborah Davis, *Party of the Century: The Fabulous Story of Truman Capote and His Black-and-White Ball* (London: Wiley, 2006).
13. See for example, Alexander Bloom, *Prodigal Sons: The New York Intellectuals and Their World* (New York: Oxford, 1986).
14. *Master Spy: The Robert Hanssen Story*, produced by Lawrence Schiller, appeared in two parts on CBS, November 10 and 27, 2002; the print version, *Into the Mirror: The Life of Robert Hanssen*, published by HarperCollins, appeared in April 2002.
15. See J. Michael and Donna Pedro Lennon's *Norman Mailer: Works and Days* (Shavertown, PA: Sligo Press, 2000), where Kennedy is cited in 35 entries, more than any other person.
16. Approximately 700 letters will be included in the Random House edition.
17. It was serialized from January through August 1965.