

THE ART OF FICTION NO. 32

NORMAN MAILER

The interview took place on the afternoon of Saturday, July 6, 1963. The setting was Norman Mailer's Brooklyn Heights apartment, whose living room commands a panoramic view of lower Manhattan, the East River, and the New York harbor. The living room is fitted out with nautical or maritime furnishings and decorations, and Mailer, his curls unshorn, seemed at odd moments during the afternoon the novelist-as-ship-captain, though less Ahab than Captain Vere, and less both than Captain Shotover in ripe middle age. Mailer had recently stopped smoking, and the absence of nicotine had caused him to put on weight, which he carries gracefully and with vigor; the new amplitude of flesh seems to have influenced his spirit in the direction of benignity.

Shortly after the interviewer arrived, Mailer excused himself for a few moments. He wanted to change, he said, into his writer's costume. He emerged wearing faded dungarees and an open-necked sport shirt. His sharp blue eyes sparkled as he suggested that the interviewer keep this fashion note in mind. Lunch was then prepared and served by Mailer in what must be called lordly fashion. In general, he conducts himself without affectation as a kind of secular prince. The interviewer was repeatedly struck

during the course of a long afternoon's work by Mailer's manners, which were exquisite. The role of novelist-being-interviewed suits him very well.

—*Steven Marcus, 1964*

INTERVIEWER

Do you need any particular environment in which to write?

NORMAN MAILER

I like a room with a view, preferably a long view. I dislike looking out on gardens. I prefer looking at the sea, or ships, or anything that has a vista to it. Oddly enough, I've never worked in the mountains.

INTERVIEWER

Do you need seclusion?

MAILER

I don't know if I need seclusion, but I do like to be alone in a room.

INTERVIEWER

When did you first think of becoming a writer?

MAILER

That's hard to answer. I did a lot of writing when I was young.

INTERVIEWER

How young?

MAILER

Seven.

INTERVIEWER

A real novel?

MAILER

Well, it was a science-fiction novel about people on Earth taking a rocket ship to Mars. The hero had a name that sounded like Buck Rogers. His assistant was called Dr. Hoor.

INTERVIEWER

Doctor . . . ?

MAILER

Dr. Hoor. *Whore*, pronounced *H-o-o-r*. That's the way we used to pronounce "whore" in Brooklyn. He was patterned directly after Dr. Huer in Buck Rogers, who was then appearing on radio. This novel filled two and a half paper notebooks. You know the type, about seven by ten. They had soft shiny blue covers and they were, oh, only ten cents in those days, or a nickel. They ran to perhaps a hundred pages each, and I used to write on both sides. My writing was remarkable for the way I hyphenated words. I loved hyphenating, so I would hyphenate "the" and make it the if it came at the end of the line. Or "they" would become they. Then I didn't write again for a long time. I didn't even try out for the high-school literary magazine. I had friends who wrote short stories, and their short stories were far better than the ones I would write for assignments in high-school English, and I felt no desire to write. When I got to college I started again. The jump from Boys' High School in Brooklyn to Harvard came as a shock. I started reading some decent novels for the first time.

INTERVIEWER

You mentioned in *Advertisements for Myself* that reading *Studs Lonigan* made you want to be a writer.

MAILER

Yes. It was the best single literary experience I had had, because the background of *Studs* was similar to mine. I grew up in Brooklyn, not Chicago, but the atmosphere had the same flatness of affect. Until then, I had never considered my life or the life of the people around me as even remotely worthy of—well, I didn't believe they could be treated as subjects for fiction. It had never occurred to me. Suddenly I realized you could write about your own life.

INTERVIEWER

When did you feel that you were started as a writer?

MAILER

When I first began to write again at Harvard. I wasn't very good. I was doing short stories all the time, but I wasn't good. If there were fifty people in the class, let's say I was somewhere in the top ten. My teachers thought I was fair, but I don't believe they ever thought for a moment that I was really talented. Then in the middle of my sophomore year I started getting better. I got on the *Harvard Advocate*, and that gave me confidence, and about this time I did a couple of fairly good short stories for English A-1, one of which won *Story* magazine's college contest for that year. I must say that Robert Gorham Davis, who was my instructor then, picked the story to submit for the contest and was confident it would win.

INTERVIEWER

Was that the story about Al Groot?

MAILER

Yes. And when I found out it had won—which was at the beginning of the summer after my sophomore year (1941)—well, that fortified me, and I sat down and wrote a novel. It was a very bad novel. I wrote it in two months. It was called *No Percentage*.

It was just terrible. But I never questioned any longer whether I was *started* as a writer.

INTERVIEWER

What do you think were some of the early influences in your life? What reading, as a boy, do you recall as important?

MAILER

The Amateur Gentleman and *The Broad Highway* were glorious works. So was *Captain Blood*. I think I read every one of Farnol's books and there must be twenty of them. And every one of Sabatini's.

INTERVIEWER

Did you ever read any of them again?

MAILER

No, now I have no real idea of their merit. But I never enjoyed a novel more than *Captain Blood*. Nor a movie. Do you remember Errol Flynn as Captain Blood? Some years ago, I was asked by a magazine what were the ten most important books in my development. The book I listed first was *Captain Blood*. Then came *Das Kapital*. Then *The Amateur Gentleman*.

INTERVIEWER

You wouldn't say that *Das Kapital* was boyhood reading?

MAILER

Oh, no, I read that many years later. But it had its mild influence.

INTERVIEWER

It's been said often that novelists are largely nostalgic for their boyhood, and in fact most novelists draw on their youthful experiences a great deal. In your novels, however, the evocation of scenes from boyhood is rare or almost absent.

MAILER

It's difficult to write about childhood. I never felt I understood it in any novel way. I never felt other authors did either. Not particularly. I think the portrait of childhood which is given by most writers is rarely true to anything more than the logic of their novel. Childhood is so protean.

INTERVIEWER

What about Twain, or Hemingway—who drew on their boyhoods successfully?

MAILER

I must admit they created some of the psychological reality of my own childhood. I wanted, for instance, to be like Tom Sawyer.

INTERVIEWER

Not Huck Finn?

MAILER

The magic of Huck Finn seems to have passed me by, I don't know quite why. *Tom Sawyer* was the book of Twain's I always preferred. I remember when I got to college I was startled to find that *Huckleberry Finn* was the classic. Of course, I haven't looked at either novel in thirty years.

INTERVIEWER

Can you say something about your methods of working?

MAILER

They vary with each book. I wrote *The Naked and the Dead* on the typewriter. I used to write four days a week: Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays.

INTERVIEWER

Definite hours?

MAILER

Yes, very definite hours. I'd get up about eight or eight-thirty and I'd be at work by ten. And I'd work till twelve-thirty; then I'd have lunch. I'd get back to work about two-thirty or three, and work for another two hours. In the afternoon I usually needed a can of beer to prime me. But I'd write for five hours a day. And I wrote a great deal. The average I tried to keep was seven typewritten pages a day, twenty-eight pages a week. The first draft took seven months, the second draft—which really was only half a draft—took four months. The part about the platoon went well from the beginning, but the Lieutenant and the General in the first draft were stock characters. If it had been published at that point, the book would have been considered an interesting war novel with some good scenes, no more. The second draft was the bonus. Cummings and Hearn were done in the second draft. If you look at the book you can see that the style shifts, that the parts about Cummings and Hearn are written in a somewhat more developed vein. Less forceful but more articulated. And you can see something of the turn my later writing would take in the scenes between Cummings and Hearn.

INTERVIEWER

What methods did you pursue in your next books?

MAILER

Well, with *Barbary Shore*, I began to run into trouble. I started it in Paris about six months after I finished *The Naked and the Dead*, and did about fifty pages. It was then called *Mrs. Guinevere* and was influenced by Sally Bowles in Isherwood's *Berlin Stories*. *Mrs. Guinevere* never went anywhere. It stopped, just ground down after those first fifty pages. My novelistic tanks ran out of gas. I dropped it completely, thought I'd never pick it up again, and started to work on another novel. Did all the research, went to Indiana to do research.

INTERVIEWER

On what?

MAILER

On a labor novel. There was a union in Evansville with which I had connections. So I stayed for a few days in Indiana, and then went to Jamaica, Vermont, to write the novel. I spent four to six weeks getting ready to begin. I made a great push on the beginning, worked for two weeks, and quit cold. I didn't have the book. I didn't know a damned thing about labor unions. In desperation (I was full of second-novel panic), I picked up *Mrs. Guinevere* and looked at it. And found something there I could go on with. So I worked on it all through the spring of 1949, and then I moved out to Hollywood for the summer. I finished the second half in Hollywood. *Barbary Shore* is really a Hollywood novel. I think it reflected the impact of Hollywood on me in some subterranean fashion. Certainly the first draft is the wildest draft of the three; it's almost insane, and the most indigestible portions were written in the first couple of months I was in Hollywood. I never knew where the book was going, I had no idea where it was going to move from day to day. I'd wake up and push the typewriter in great dread, in literal terror, wondering when this curious and doubtful inspiration was going to stop. It never quite did. It ground along at the rate of three pages, three difficult pages, a day. But I'd get it out. I got a first draft done, and was quite unhappy with it; it was a very bad book at that point. When I rewrote it later, in Provincetown, a summer later, again it went at the rate of three pages a day. This revision was different from the first draft and, I think, much better. But working on *Barbary Shore* I always felt as if I were not writing the book myself, but rather as if I were serving as a subject for some intelligence, which had decided to use me to write the book. It had nothing to do with whether the work was good or bad. It just had to do with the fact that I had absolutely no conscious control of it; if I hadn't heard about the unconscious I would have had to postulate one to explain this phenomenon.

Nor does any one) -5

~~None~~ of the characters novel ~~criticized~~ critically out of her class by

warring drastically up or savagely down. ^{Not one} even exhibits an interesting ^{case of the girls because an interesting}

~~of the world, the cap~~ ^{promiscuity} ~~of the world, the cap~~ ^{existential condition} ~~of the world, the cap~~ ^{Schmittlapp} ~~of the world, the cap~~ ^{then bitch}

~~bested in this~~ ^{By (the) Correlatively, no one} ~~bested in this~~ ^{all out} ~~bested in this~~ ^{of the girls falls deeply and tragically in love. The formal}

heroine, Kay Strong Peterson, ^{entered as evidence} ~~entered as evidence~~ ^{previously by Barrister Barrett,} ~~previously by Barrister Barrett,~~

~~nearest in time to this,~~ ^{Strong} ~~nearest in time to this,~~ ^{indeed} ~~nearest in time to this,~~ ^{she is a suicide by accident}

window in the Vassar Club; ~~an occasional~~ ^{too} ~~an occasional~~ ^{too} ~~an occasional~~ ^{too}

but she is somehow too honest ^{all-but-lyke to buy a single} ~~all-but-lyke to buy a single~~ ^{one} ~~one ^{receives} ~~receives~~~~

instead the impression that she might ^{the feeling she would smell like a locker room of dedicated handball players--gloom,} ~~the feeling she would smell like a locker room of dedicated handball players--gloom,~~

determination, and the void ~~one~~ ^{the} ~~one~~ ^{of a chimney} ~~one~~ ^{Cats}

of the heroine is Polly, but she and her husband are ^{too} ~~too~~ ^{one cannot even} ~~one cannot even~~

~~cast an allusion~~ ^{She is clean, Boston clean,} ~~cast an allusion~~ ^{from Boston}

There is ^{of course} ~~of course~~ ^{of course} ~~of course~~ ^{of course}

her conscience moves with the drilled but never unimpressive groove of a fine ^{hallerine.} ~~hallerine.~~

Indeed she has the grace to come to orgasm on the night she gives her ^{flower} ~~flower~~

~~to still another~~ ^{flower} ~~to still another~~ ^{flower} ~~to still another~~ ^{flower}

loud-talking, drunken, neurotic, crippled and jargon-compensated leutz. Did ~~she~~

our first lady of letters ^{never} ~~never ^{never} ~~never ^{never}~~~~

smells like fertilizer and he ploughs Dottie under - there is a good ^{smell} ~~smell~~

novelistic harvest for the ^{we are given} ~~we are given ^{we are given} ~~we are given~~~~

For the first time I became powerfully aware of the fact that I had an unconscious, which seemed to have little to do with me.

INTERVIEWER

What about *The Deer Park*?

MAILER

For *The Deer Park* I didn't have much of a method. It was agony; it was far and away the most difficult of my three novels to write. The first and second drafts were written with the idea that they were only the first part of an eight-part novel. I think I used that enormous scheme as a pretext to get into the work. Apparently I just couldn't sit down and write a nice, modest Hollywood novel. I had to have something grandiose, in conception, anyway. I started *The Deer Park* with "The Man Who Studied Yoga." That was supposed to be a prologue to all eight novels. It went along nicely and was done in a few weeks. And then I got into *The Deer Park*, and I forget what my methods were exactly; I think they varied. In the revisions of *Barbary Shore* I had started working in longhand; as soon as I found myself blocked on the typewriter I'd shift to longhand. By the time I got to *The Deer Park* I was writing in longhand all the time. I'd write in longhand in the morning, and type up what I'd written in the afternoon. I was averaging about four-five pages a day, I think, three days a week; about fifteen pages a week. But I found it an unendurable book to write because I'd finish each day in the most profound depression; as I found out later it was even a physical depression. I was gutting my liver.

INTERVIEWER

It wasn't alcohol?

MAILER

No, I wasn't much of a drinker in those days. The liver, you see, is not unlike a car battery, and I was draining mine. I was

writing with such anxiety and such fear and such distaste, and such gloom and such dissatisfaction that . . .

INTERVIEWER

Dissatisfaction with what?

MAILER

Oh, everything. My work, my life, myself. The early draft of *The Deer Park* was terrible. It had a few good things in it, but it was slow to emerge, it took years, and was stubborn. It still emerges. I mean, I could sit down today and rewrite *The Deer Park*. Of course, what was happening was that this work, such as it was, was continuing to move in a direction that was completely against the grain of my intellect—insofar as my intellect was developed and had standards and tastes and attitudes toward the novel. I was working toward a novel utterly outrageous to my notion of things.

INTERVIEWER

Say it again?

MAILER

Well, I was a socialist after all, and I believed in large literary works which were filled with characters, and were programmatic, and had large theses, and were developed, let's say, like the Tolstoyan novel. It's as if, all proportion naturally being kept, as if Tolstoy had sat down with the intention of writing *Anna Karenina* and instead came out with *Crime and Punishment*. Obviously, it would have been intolerable for him, and he would have disliked *Crime and Punishment* very much. That was what was going on with me at a much lower level.

INTERVIEWER

How does the idea of a novel come to you?

MAILER

I don't know that it comes. A more appropriate image for me might be that I start with the idea of constructing a treehouse and end with a skyscraper made of wood.

INTERVIEWER

Well, how did the idea of *The Naked and the Dead* come to you?

MAILER

I wanted to write a short novel about a long patrol. All during the war I kept thinking about this patrol. I even had the idea before I went overseas. Probably it was stimulated by a few war books I had read: John Hersey's *Into the Valley*, Harry Brown's *A Walk in the Sun*, and a couple of others I no longer remember. Out of these books came the idea to do a novel about a long patrol. And I began to create my characters. All the while I was overseas a part of me was working on this long patrol. I even ended up in a reconnaissance outfit that I had asked to get into. A reconnaissance outfit, after all, tends to take long patrols. Art kept traducing life. At any rate, when I started writing *The Naked and the Dead* I thought it might be a good idea to have a preliminary chapter or two in which to give the reader a chance to meet my characters before they went on patrol. But the next six months and the first five hundred pages went into that, and I remember in the early days I was annoyed at how long it was taking me to get to the patrol.

INTERVIEWER

Do you keep notes, or a journal, or diaries, or write scenarios? What's your preparatory material?

MAILER

That also varies with each of the books. For *The Naked and the Dead* I had a file full of notes and a long dossier on each man. Many of these details never got into the novel, but the added knowledge made me feel more comfortable with each character.

Indeed, I even had charts to show which characters had not yet had scenes with other characters. For a book that seems spontaneous on its surface, *The Naked and the Dead* was written mechanically. I studied engineering at Harvard, and I suppose it was the book of a young engineer. The structure is sturdy, but there's no fine filigree to the joints. Just spot-welding and riveting. And the working plan was very simple. I devised some preliminary actions for the platoon in order to give the reader an opportunity to get to know the men, but this beginning, as I said, took over two-thirds of the book. The patrol itself is also simple, but I did give more thought to working it out ahead of time.

INTERVIEWER

People have commented on the pleasure you seem to take in the military detail of *The Naked and the Dead*.

MAILER

Compared to someone like James Jones, I'm an amateur at military detail. But at that time I did like all those details. I even used to enjoy patrols, or at least I did when I wasn't sick with jungle rot and viruses or atabrine poisoning. I was one of the few men in the platoon who could read a map. I was the only enlisted man I know who really cared about reading a map, and once I gave myself away. We used to have classes after a campaign was over; we'd come back to garrison—one of those tent cities out in a rice paddy—and they would teach us all over again how to read maps and read compasses, or they would drill us on the nomenclature of the machine gun for the eighth time. One day, very bored, I was daydreaming, and the instructor pointed to a part of the map and said, "Mailer, what are these coordinates?" If I had had a moment to think I would never have answered, it was bad form to be bright in my outfit, but I didn't think: he caught me in a daze, and I looked up and said, "320.017 dash 146.814," and everyone's mouth dropped. It was the first time anybody ever answered such a question thus briskly in the history of infantry map reading. At

any rate, that was the fun for me, the part about the patrol. I suppose it had something to do with Captain Blood and The Amateur Gentleman.

INTERVIEWER

How much of a plan did you have for *Barbary Shore*?

MAILER

None. As I indicated earlier, *Barbary Shore* just birthed itself slowly. The book came out sentence by sentence. I literally never knew where the next day's work was coming from.

INTERVIEWER

You don't mention (in your description of writing *Barbary Shore*) any relationship to politics. Wasn't your *engagement* at the time a considerable part of the plan?

MAILER

I think it was the unspoken drama in the working-up of the book. I started *Barbary Shore* as some sort of fellow traveler and finished with a political position that was a far-flung mutation of Trotskyism. And the drafts of the book reflected these ideological changes so drastically that the last draft of *Barbary Shore* is a different novel altogether and has almost nothing in common with the first draft but the names.

INTERVIEWER

Did Jean Malaquais (to whom the book is dedicated) have much to do with this?

MAILER

Yes. He had an enormous influence on me. He's the only man I know who can combine a powerfully dogmatic mind with the keenest sense of nuance, and he has a formidable culture, which

seems to live in his veins and capillaries. Since he also had a most detailed vision of the Russian Revolution—he was steeped in it the way certain American families are imbued with the records of their clan—I spent a year living more closely in the history of Russia from 1917 to 1937 than in the events of my own life. I doubt if I would even have gone back to rewrite *Barbary Shore* if I didn't know Malaquais. Certainly I could never have conceived McLeod. Malaquais, of course, bears no superficial resemblance whatsoever to McLeod—indeed Malaquais was never even a communist, he started as an anti-Stalinist, but he had a quality when I first met him which was pure Old Bolshevik. One knew that if he had been born in Russia, a contemporary of Lenin's, he would have been one of the leaders of the Revolution and would doubtless have been executed in the trials. So his personality—as it filtered through the contradictory themes of my unconscious—inhabits *Barbary Shore*.

INTERVIEWER

Would you care to discuss what you mean by the “contradictory themes” of your unconscious? Is that related to what you said a little while ago about becoming aware of your unconscious while writing *Barbary Shore*?

MAILER

Barbary Shore was built on the division that existed then in my mind. My conscious intelligence, as I've indicated, became obsessed by the Russian Revolution. But my unconscious was much more interested in other matters: murder, suicide, orgy, psychosis, all the themes I discuss in *Advertisements*. Since the gulf between these conscious and unconscious themes was vast and quite resistant to any quick literary coupling, the tension to get a bridge across resulted in the peculiar feverish hothouse atmosphere of the book. My unconscious felt one kind of dread, my conscious mind another, and *Barbary Shore* lives somewhere between. That's

why its focus is so unearthly. And of course this difficulty kept haunting me from then on in all the work I did afterward. But it was a book written without any plan.

INTERVIEWER

And *The Deer Park*?

MAILER

That was different. There I had an idea of what I was going to do. I knew it was going to be a story about a most unhappy love. The problem was getting to the affair: I could hardly wait to reach it, especially because the early parts of the novel were so difficult to write. It is truly difficult to trap Hollywood in a novel. Only in the last draft did I finally get the setting the way I wanted it. I think now the setting is probably the best part. In fact, I would judge that the first fifty pages of *The Deer Park* are the best writing I have ever done in fiction. But they were the hardest fifty pages of the book to write and certainly took the longest time.

INTERVIEWER

Do you have any superstitions about your methods of work?

MAILER

I wouldn't call them superstitions, exactly. I just think it's bad to talk about one's present work, for it spoils something at the root of the creative act. It discharges the tension.

INTERVIEWER

What writers have you learned the most from, technically?

MAILER

E. M. Forster, I suppose. I wouldn't say he is necessarily one of the novelists I admire most. But I have learned a lot from him. You remember in *The Longest Journey* somewhere about the fourth chapter, you turn the page and read, "Gerald was killed that

afternoon. He was broken up in the football match.” It was quite extraordinary. Gerald had been very important through the beginning of the book. But now that he was suddenly and abruptly dead, everyone else’s character began to shift. It taught me that personality was more fluid, more dramatic and startling, more inexact than I had thought. I was brought up on the idea that when you wrote a novel you tried to build a character who could be handled and walked around like a piece of sculpture. Suddenly character seemed related more closely to the paintings of the new realists. For instance, I saw one recently that had a painted girl reclining on a painted bed, and there was a television set next to her in the canvas, a real one that you could turn on. Turning on the literal factual set changes the girl and the painting both. Well, Forster gives you something of that sensation in his novels. I played with such a concept a great deal in *Barbary Shore* and I began to play with it in *The Deer Park* in an altogether different way. I suppose the concept was parallel to the *Alexandria Quartet* in its preoccupations. When you tell the same story through the eyes of different characters, you have not only a different novel but a different reality. I think I could sit down today and write *The Deer Park* through Charles Francis Eitel’s eyes, and if I changed the names and the place, no one might know the new book had anything to do with *The Deer Park*. I suppose what I realized, after reading Forster, was that a novel written in the third person was now impossible for me for many years.

INTERVIEWER

Forster has never written a novel in the first person.

MAILER

I know he hasn’t, but in some funny way Forster gave my notion of personality a sufficient shock that I could not manage to write in the third person. Forster, after all, had a developed view of the world; I did not. I think I must have felt at that time as if I would never be able to write in the third person until I

developed a coherent view of life. I don't know that I've been able to altogether.

INTERVIEWER

You know, Thackeray says at one point that the novelist knows everything. He is like God, and this may be why he could write in the third person.

MAILER

God can write in the third person only so long as He understands His world. But if the world becomes contradictory or incomprehensible to Him, then God begins to grow concerned with his own nature. It's either that, or borrow notions from other Gods.

INTERVIEWER

Have you ever cribbed anything from other writers?

MAILER

Oh, you know, I have such a—what shall I say?—such a stuffy view of myself that I could never *conceive* of cribbing. But I have been *influenced* by—well, Farrell to begin with. Dos Passos, Steinbeck (I am trying to do it chronologically), Hemingway, and later Fitzgerald—much, much later. And Thomas Wolfe, of course.

INTERVIEWER

But back to cribbing. Shakespeare cribs, for example. He never invented a plot.

MAILER

No, but my plots are always rudimentary. Whatever I've accomplished certainly does not depend on my virtuosity with plot. Generally I don't even have a plot. What happens is that my characters engage in an action, and out of that action little bits of

plot sometimes adhere to the narrative. I never have to worry about lifting a plot, because I don't conceive of a book that way.

INTERVIEWER

In connection with plot, when did the idea of using a hornet's nest to thwart the climbers in *The Naked and the Dead* come to you?

MAILER

That idea was there before I wrote the first sentence of the book. Actually, that incident happened to my reconnaissance platoon on the most ambitious patrol I ever took with them. They sent out thirty of us to locate and destroy one hundred Japanese marines who had gotten behind our lines. Well, we never found the marines, but we did get stuck climbing one hell of an enormous hill with a mean, slimy trail, and when we were almost up to the ridge, somebody kicked over a hornet's nest. Half the platoon went tearing up the hill, and the machine-gun squad went flying down to the valley. We never did find each other again that day. We just slunk back to our bivouac.

INTERVIEWER

Apart from the fact that it happened, do you think in fact it was a satisfactory device? It seems to have bothered some people.

MAILER

I think I'd do it the same way again. War is disproportions, and the hornet's nest seemed a perfect disproportion to me. We were ready to lose our lives, but we weren't up to getting stung by a hornet.

INTERVIEWER

Would you say something about style, prose style, in relation to the novel?

MAILER

A really good style comes only when a man has become as good as he can be. Style is character. A good style cannot come from a bad, undisciplined character. Now a man may be evil, but I believe that people can be evil in their essential natures and still have good characters. Good in the sense of being well-tuned. They can have characters that are flexible, supple, adaptable, principled in relation to their own good or their own evil—even an evil man can have principles—he can be true to his own evil, which is not always so easy, either. I think good style is a matter of rendering out of oneself all the cupidities, all the crippling, all the velleities. And then I think one has to develop one's physical grace. Writers who are possessed of some physical grace may tend to write better than writers who are physically clumsy. It's my impression this is so. I don't know that I'd care to attempt to prove it.

INTERVIEWER

Well, how would you describe your own style? I ask this question because certain critics have pointed to deficiencies in it, or what they think of as deficiencies. Didn't Diana Trilling, for instance, criticize certain flatnesses in your style?

MAILER

I think that flatness comes out of certain flatnesses in me. And in trying to overcome that flatness I may push too hard in the other direction. Alfred Kazin once said something very funny about the way I write: "Mailer is as fond of his style as an Italian tenor is of his vocal cords."

INTERVIEWER

Have you ever written merely to improve your writing, practiced your writing as an athlete would work out?

MAILER

No. I don't think it's a proper activity. That's too much like doing a setting-up exercise; any workout that does not involve a certain minimum of danger or responsibility does not improve the body—it just wears it out.

INTERVIEWER

In writing your novels, has any particular formal problem given you trouble—let's say a problem of joining two parts of a narrative together, getting people from point A to point B?

MAILER

You mean like getting them out of a room? I think formal problems exist in inverse proportion to one's honesty. You get to the problem of getting someone out of the room when there's something false about the scene.

INTERVIEWER

Do you do any research or special reading to prepare for writing a novel, or while you're writing a novel?

MAILER

Occasionally I have to look something up. But I'm always unhappy about that and mistrust the writing which comes out of it. I feel in a way that one's ignorance is part of one's creation, too. I don't that quite how to put it, but for instance if I, as a Jew, am writing about other Jews, and if my knowledge of Jewish culture is exceptionally spotty, as indeed it is, I am not so sure that that isn't an advantage in creating a modern American Jew. Because *his* knowledge of Jewish culture is also extremely spotty, and the way in which his personality is composed may be more in accordance with my ignorance than with a cultivated Jew's immersion in the culture. So in certain limited ways, one's ignorance can help to buttress the validity of a novel.

INTERVIEWER

Have you ever written about a situation of which you have had no personal experience or knowledge?

MAILER

I don't know. Let's see . . . *Barbary Shore*, for example, is the most imaginative of my novels. But I did live in a rooming house for a short period while I was writing *The Naked and the Dead*. I certainly didn't live in it the way Lovett lived in it. I never met an FBI agent—at least I had no sense of having met one at the time I was writing *Barbary Shore*. I am sure I have met a great many since. They didn't necessarily introduce themselves to me. I had never met an Old Bolshevik, either, although ironically, writing about FBI agents and Old Bolsheviks in *Barbary Shore*, the greatest single difficulty with the book was that my common sense thought it was impossible to have all these agents and impossible heroes congregating in a rooming house in Brooklyn Heights. Yet a couple of years later I was working in a studio on Fulton Street at the end of Brooklyn Heights, a studio I have had for some years. It was a fine old studio building and they're tearing it down now to make room for a twenty-story building, which will look like a Kleenex box. At any rate, on the floor below me worked one Colonel Rudolph Abel, who was the most important spy for the Russians in this country for a period of about eight or ten years, and I am sure we used to be in the elevator together many times. I think he literally had the room beneath me. I have always been overcome with that. It made me decide there's no clear boundary between experience and imagination. Who knows what glimpses of reality we pick up unconsciously, telepathically.

INTERVIEWER

To what extent are your characters modeled on real people?

MAILER

I think half of them might have a point of departure from somebody real. Up to now I've not liked writing about people who are close to me, because they're too difficult to do. Their private reality obviously interferes with the reality one is trying to create. They become alive not as creatures in your imagination but as actors in your life. And so they seem real while you work but you're not working *their* reality into your book. For example, it's not a good idea to try to put your wife into a novel. Not your latest wife, anyway. In practice, I prefer to draw a character from someone I hardly know. Hollingsworth came from someone I met in Paris, a vapid young American who inveigled me to have a cup of coffee with him in a café and asked a lot of dull questions. *The Naked and the Dead* had just come out and I think he was impressed with that. Yet, there was something sinister about him. I had met him at the Sorbonne a week or two before and I saw him again just for this afternoon for no more than an hour, but he stayed in my memory and became Leroy Hollingsworth in *Barbary Shore*.

INTERVIEWER

How do you name your characters?

MAILER

I try to let the name emerge, because I've found out that the names of my characters usually have roots in the book. I try to avoid quick or cheap symbolisms. Although I contradict myself, for much is made in *The Deer Park* of the way the name "Eitel" is pronounced Eye-tell.

INTERVIEWER

I-tell?

MAILER

Eye-tell. But I became aware of that, believe it or not, only when the book was half done. The original title of *The Deer Park* was *The Idol and the Octopus*. The book was going to be about Charles Francis Eitel, the director, and Herman Teppis, the producer, and the underlying theme was the war between those who wished to make an idol out of art, the artists, and the patron who sued art for power, the octopus.

INTERVIEWER

You also called him “Idell.”

MAILER

Frankie Idell in “The Man Who Studied Yoga,” yes, but there again, I was obviously getting ready for some, shall we say, hanky-panky, in the eight novels.

INTERVIEWER

Can you describe how you turn a real person into a fictional one?

MAILER

I try to put the model in situations that have very little to do with his real situations in life. Very quickly the model disappears. His private reality can't hold up. For instance, I might take somebody who is a professional football player, a man, let's say, whom I know slightly, and make him a movie star. In a transposition of this sort, everything that relates particularly to the professional football player quickly disappears, and what is left, curiously, is what is *exportable* in his character. But this process, while interesting in the early stages, is not as exciting as the more creative act of allowing your characters to grow once they're separated from the model. It's when they become almost as complex as one's own personality that the fine excitement begins. Because then they are not really characters any longer—they're beings, which is a distinction I like to make. A character is someone you can grasp as

a whole, you can have a clear idea of him, but a being is someone whose nature keeps shifting. Like a character of Forster's. In *The Deer Park*, Lulu Meyers is a being rather than a character. If you study her closely you will see that she is a different person in every scene. Just a little different. I don't know whether initially I did this by accident or purposefully, but at a certain point I made the conscious decision *not* to try to straighten her out, she seemed right in her changeableness.

INTERVIEWER

Is Marion Faye a character or a—

MAILER

No, he's a being. Everybody in *The Deer Park* is a being except the minor characters like Herman Teppis.

INTERVIEWER

Do specific characters reappear in different guises as the novels appear?

MAILER

To a mild degree. Actually, it's easier for me to create a new character than to drag along one of the old ones. No, I think it's more that certain themes reappear in my novels, but I'd rather not get into this just yet.

INTERVIEWER

How did Marion Faye emerge?

MAILER

The book needed something, which wasn't in the first draft, some sort of evil genius. One felt a dark pressure there in the inner horizon of the book. But even as I say this I know it's not true to the grain of my writing experience. I violate that experience by talking in these terms. I am not sure it's possible to describe the

experience of novel-writing authentically. It may be that it is not an experience.

INTERVIEWER

What is it, then?

MAILER

It may be more like a relation, if you will—a continuing relation between a man and his wife. You can't necessarily speak of that as an experience because it may consist of several experiences that are braided together; or it may consist of many experiences that are all more or less similar; or indeed it may consist of two kinds of experiences that are antagonistic to one another. Throughout all of this I've spoken of characters' *emerging*. Quite often they don't emerge; they fail to emerge. And what one's left with is the dull compromise that derives from two kinds of experiences' warring with one another within oneself. A character who should have been brilliant is dull. Or even if a character does prove to be first-rate, it's possible you should have done twice as much with him, three times as much.

INTERVIEWER

You speak of character as emerging, and I gather by that that you mean emerging from yourself and emerging from your idea?

MAILER

They are also emerging from the book. A book takes on its own life in the writing. It has its laws, it becomes a creature to you after a while. One feels a bit like a master who's got a fine animal. Very often I'll feel a certain shame for what I've done with a novel. I won't say it's the novel that's bad; I'll say it's I who was bad. Almost as if the novel did not really belong to me, as if it was something raised by me like a child. I know what's potentially beautiful in my novel, you see. Very often after I've done the novel, I realize that that beauty which I recognize in it is not going to be

recognized by the reader. I didn't succeed in bringing it out. It's very odd—it's as though I had let the novel down, owed it a duty that I didn't fulfill.

INTERVIEWER

Would you say that there was any secret or hidden pattern being worked out in your novels?

MAILER

I'd rather leave that to others. If I answer the question badly, nothing is accomplished. If I answer too well, it's going to discourage critics. I can imagine nothing more distressing to a critic than to have a writer see accurately into his own work. But I will say one thing, which is that I have some obsession with how God exists. Is He an essential god or an existential god; is He all-powerful or is He, too, an embattled existential creature who may succeed or fail in His vision? I think this theme may become more apparent as the novels go on.

INTERVIEWER

When did this obsession begin?

MAILER

I think it began to show itself while I was doing the last draft of *The Deer Park*. Then it continued to grow as a private theme during all the years I was smoking marijuana.

INTERVIEWER

You have spoken so often of the existential view. What reading or individuals brought you to this?

MAILER

The experience came first. One's condition on marijuana is always existential. One can feel the importance of each moment and how it is changing one. One feels one's being, one becomes

aware of the enormous apparatus of nothingness—the hum of a hi-fi set, the emptiness of a pointless interruption, one becomes aware of the war between each of us, how the nothingness in each of us seeks to attack the being of others, how our being in turn is attacked by the nothingness in others. I'm not speaking now of violence or the active conflict between one being and another. That still belongs to drama. But the war between being and nothingness is the underlying illness of the twentieth century. Boredom slays more of existence than war.

INTERVIEWER

Then you didn't come to existentialism because it was a literary influence?

MAILER

No. I'd hardly read anything by Sartre at this time, and nothing by Heidegger. I've read a bit since, and have to admire their formidable powers, but I suspect they are no closer to the buried continent of existentialism than were medieval cartographers near to a useful map of the world. The new continent, which shows on our psychic maps as intimations of eternity, is still to be discovered.

INTERVIEWER

What do you feel about the other kinds of writing you have done and are doing? How do they stand in relation to your work as a novelist?

MAILER

The essays?

INTERVIEWER

Yes: journalism, essays.

MAILER

Well, you know, there was a time when I wanted very much to belong to the literary world. I wanted to be respected the way someone like Katherine Anne Porter used to be respected.

INTERVIEWER

How do you think she was respected?

MAILER

The way a cardinal is respected—weak people get to their knees when the cardinal goes by.

INTERVIEWER

As a master of the craft, do you mean?

MAILER

As a master of the craft, yes. Her name is invoked in an argument. “Well, Katherine Anne Porter would not do it *that* way.” But by now I’m a bit cynical about craft. I think there’s a natural mystique in the novel, which is more important than craft. One is trying, after all, to capture reality, and that is extraordinarily and exceptionally difficult. I think craft is merely a series of way stations. I think of craft as being like a Saint Bernard dog with that little bottle of brandy under his neck. Whenever you get into *real* trouble, the thing that can save you as a novelist is to have enough craft to be able to keep warm long enough to be rescued. Of course, this is exactly what keeps good novelists from becoming great novelists. Robert Penn Warren might have written a major novel if he hadn’t had just that little extra bit of craft to get him out of all the trouble in *All the King’s Men*. If Penn Warren hadn’t known anything about Elizabethan literature, the true Elizabethan in him might have emerged. I mean, he might have written a fantastic novel. As it was, he knew enough about craft to—

INTERVIEWER

To use it as an escape hatch?

MAILER

Yes. And his plot degenerated into a slam-bang of exits and entrances, confrontations, tragedies, quick wits, and woe. But he was really forcing an escape from the problem.

INTERVIEWER

Which was?

MAILER

Oh, the terror of confronting a reality which might open into more and more anxiety and so present a deeper and deeper view of the abyss. Craft protects one from facing those endless expanding realities of deterioration and responsibility.

INTERVIEWER

Deterioration in what sense?

MAILER

The terror, let's say, of being reborn as something much less noble or something much more ignoble. I think this sort of terror depresses us profoundly. Which may be why we throw up our enormous evasions—such as craft. Indeed, I think this adoration of craft, this specific respect for craft, makes a church of literature for that vast number of writers who are somewhere on the spectrum between mediocrity and talent. But I think it's fatal for somebody who has a large ambition and a chance of becoming a great writer. I know, for myself, if I am going to make this attempt—that the only way to do it is to keep in shape in a peculiar way.

INTERVIEWER

Can you explain what you mean by that?

MAILER

It's hard to talk about. Harry Greb, for example, was a fighter who used to keep in shape. He was completely a fighter, the way one might wish to be completely a writer. He always did the things which were necessary to him as a fighter. Now, some of these things were extremely irrational, that is, extremely irrational from a prizefight manager's point of view. That is, before he had a fight he would go to a brothel, and he would have two prostitutes, not one, taking the two of them into the same bed. And this apparently left him feeling like a wild animal. Don't ask me why. Perhaps he picked the two meanest whores in the joint and so absorbed into his system all the small, nasty, concentrated evils which had accumulated from carloads of men. Greb was known as the dirtiest fighter of his time. He didn't have much of a punch, but he could spoil other fighters and punish them; he knew more dirty tricks than anyone around. This was one of his training methods, and he did it over and over again until he died at a relatively early age of a heart attack, on an operating table. I think he died before he was thirty-eight or so. They operated on him, and bang, he went. Nothing could be done. But the point I make is that he stayed in training by the way he lived his life. The element that was paramount in it was to keep in shape. If he were drinking, you see, the point was to keep in shape *while* drinking. I'm being a touch imprecise about this.

INTERVIEWER

Well . . . what?

MAILER

He would not just drink to release his tension. Rather, what went on was that there was tension in him that was insupportable, so he had to drink. But reasoning as a professional, he felt that if he had to drink, he might as well use that, too. In the sense that the actor uses everything which happens to him, so Greb as a fighter used everything which happened to him. As he drank he

would notice the way his body moved. One of the best reasons one drinks is to become aware of the way his mind and body move.

INTERVIEWER

Well, how do you keep in shape?

MAILER

Look, before we go on, I want to say a little more about craft. It is a grab bag of procedures, tricks, lore, formal gymnastics, symbolic superstructures—methodology, in short. It's the compendium of what you've acquired from others. And since great writers communicate a vision of existence, one can't usually borrow their methods. The method is married to the vision. No, one acquires craft more from good writers and mediocre writers with a flair. Craft, after all, is what you can take out whole from their work. But keeping in shape is something else. For example, you can do journalism, and it can be terrible for your style. Or it can temper your style . . . in other words, you can become a *better* writer by doing a lot of different kinds of writing. Or you can deteriorate. There's a book came out a few years ago, which was a sociological study of some Princeton men—I forget the name of it. One of them said something that I thought was extraordinary. He said he wanted to perform the sexual act under every variety of condition, emotion, and mood available to him. I was struck with this not because I ever wanted necessarily to have that kind of sexual life, but because it seemed to me that was what I was trying to do with my writing. I try to go over my work in every conceivable mood. I edit on a spectrum that runs from the high, clear, manic impressions of a drunk, which has made one electrically alert, all the way down to the soberest reaches of depression where I can hardly bear my words. By the time I'm done with writing I care about, I usually have worked on it through the full gamut of my consciousness. If you keep yourself in this peculiar kind of shape, the craft will take care of itself. Craft is very little finally. But if you're continually worrying about whether you're growing or

deteriorating as a man, whether your integrity is turning soft or firming itself, why then it's in that slow war, that slow rear-guard battle you fight against diminishing talent that you stay in shape as a writer and have a consciousness. You develop a consciousness as you grow older, which enables you to write about anything, in effect, and write about it well. That is, provided you keep your consciousness in shape and don't relax into the flabby styles of thought which surround one everywhere. The moment you borrow other writers' styles of thought, you need craft to shore up the walls. But if what you write is a reflection of your own consciousness, then even journalism can become interesting. One wouldn't want to spend one's life at it, and I wouldn't want ever to be caught justifying journalism as a major activity (it's obviously less interesting than to write a novel), but it's better, I think, to see journalism as a venture of one's ability to keep in shape than to see it as an essential betrayal of the chalice of your literary art. Temples are for women.

INTERVIEWER

Temples are for women?

MAILER

Temples are for women.

INTERVIEWER

Well, Faulkner once said that nothing can injure a man's writing if he's a first-rate writer.

MAILER

Faulkner said more asinine things than any other major American writer. I can't remember a single interesting remark Faulkner ever made.

INTERVIEWER

He once called Henry James a "nice old lady."

MAILER

Faulkner had a mean, small, Southern streak in him, and most of his pronunciamientos reflect that meanness. He's a great writer, but he's not at all interesting in most of his passing remarks.

INTERVIEWER

Well, then, what can ruin a first-rate writer?

MAILER

Booze, pot, too much sex, too much failure in one's private life, too much attrition, too much recognition, too little recognition, frustration. Nearly everything in the scheme of things works to dull a first-rate talent. But the worst probably is cowardice—as one gets older, one becomes aware of one's cowardice, the desire to be bold which once was a joy gets heavy with caution and duty. And finally there's apathy. About the time it doesn't seem to be important anymore to be a great writer you know you've slipped far enough to be doing your work now on the comeback trail.

INTERVIEWER

Would you say that is where you are now?

MAILER

Let others say it. I don't know that I choose to. The hardest thing for a writer to decide is whether he's burned out or merely lying fallow. I was ready to think I was burned out before I even started *The Naked and the Dead*.

INTERVIEWER

What kind of an audience do you keep in mind when you write?

MAILER

I suppose it's that audience which has no tradition by which to

measure their experience but the intensity and clarity of their inner lives. That's the audience I'd like to be good enough to write for.

INTERVIEWER

Do you feel under any obligation to them?

MAILER

Yes. I have a consciousness now which I think is of use to them. I've got to be able to get it out and do it well, to transmit it in such a way that their experience can rise to a higher level. It's exactly . . . I mean, one doesn't want one's children to make one's own mistakes. Let them make better mistakes, more exceptional mistakes.

INTERVIEWER

What projects do you have for the future?

MAILER

I've got a very long novel I want to do. And beyond that I haven't looked. Some time ahead I'd like to be free of responsibilities so I could spend a year just taking on interesting assignments—cover the World Series, go to report a war. I can't do that now. I have a feeling I've got to come to grips with myself, with my talent, with what I've made of it and what I've spoiled of it. I've got to find out whether I really can write a large novel or not.

INTERVIEWER

What have you spoiled?

MAILER

All sorts of potentialities. I've burned them out—squandered them, wasted them. I think everybody does. It's a question of whether I've spoiled more than my share.

INTERVIEWER

You once said that you wished to become consecutively more disruptive, more dangerous, and more powerful, and you felt this sentence was a description of your function as a novelist. I wonder if you still think that?

MAILER

I might take out “disruptive.” It’s an unhappy word to use. It implies a love of disruption for the sake of disruption. Actually, I have a fondness for order.

INTERVIEWER

Do you enjoy writing, or is such a term irrelevant to your experience?

MAILER

Oh, no. No, no. You set me thinking of something Jean Malaquais once said. He always had a terrible time writing. He once complained with great anguish about the unspeakable difficulties he was having with a novel. And I asked him, “Why do you do it? You can do many other things well. Why do you bother with it?” I really meant this. Because he suffered when writing like no one I know. He looked up in surprise and said, “Oh, but this is the only way one can ever find the truth. The only time I know that something is true is at the moment I discover it in the act of writing.” I think it’s that. I think it’s this moment when one knows it’s true. One may not have written it well enough for others to know, but you’re in love with the truth when you discover it at the point of a pencil. That, in and by itself, is one of the few rare pleasures in life.

INTERVIEWER

How do you feel when you aren’t working?

MAILER

Edgy. I get into trouble. I would say I'm wasting my substance completely when I'm not writing.

INTERVIEWER

And to be writing . . . to be a writer?

MAILER

Well, at best you affect the consciousness of your time, and so indirectly you affect the history of the time which succeeds you. Of course, you need patience. It takes a long time for sentiments to collect into an action and often they never do. Which is why I was once so ready to conceive of running for mayor of New York. I wanted to make actions rather than effect sentiments. But I've come to the middle-aged conclusion that I'm probably better as a writer than a man of action. Too bad. Still it's no little matter to be a writer. There's that god-awful *Time* magazine world out there, and one can make raids on it. There are palaces and prisons to attack. One can even succeed now and again in blowing holes in the line of the world's communications. Sometimes I feel as if there's a vast guerrilla war going on for the mind of man, communist against communist, capitalist against capitalist, artist against artist. And the stakes are huge. Will we spoil the best secrets of life or will we help to free a new kind of man? It's intoxicating to think of that. There's something rich waiting, if one of us is brave enough and good enough to get there.

