

ORAL HISTORY 00-00-07

Norman Mailer & Ralph Ellison

April, 1965

Ralph Ellison commented on Norman Mailer's talk. He talked about consciousness. There is an obligation to live with your own sense of values in spite of people around you. You have to trust yourself and your own experience. Take the very best from the past and those around us.

Norman Mailer commented on Ralph Ellison's remarks. He said beyond writing about what one knows there is also psychic appropriation.

Question from the audience: A question for Ralph Ellison about his theory on myth and reality.

Ralph Ellison said one reason Americans are so willing to accept some of the popular myths of the American experience because it makes it unnecessary for us to confront the implications of our own conduct. We want to forget the past because in memory there is pain. In the conscious there are conflicts between our ideals and our conduct. We don't want to have to do something about this. In the past things would not have been done if we had been very careful such as after the Civil War. As an example, one way we help ourselves to forget is instead of creating a dramatic literature there is Al Jolson singing about not changing law but just singing and being happy. It is the desire to forget about problems which we feel we can't solve in order to go on and get a little bit of money in the bank. The work of the imagination very often will get things in that are ignored by the critic. He talks about the Great Gatsby as an example.

Question from the moderator: Question for Mailer about cultures in emulation.

Norman Mailer talked about major conflict being in many forms and emulation in different cultures.

Question from the audience about people today avoiding involvement.

Norman Mailer talked about the many witnesses to a murder in New York and not doing anything about it. He didn't think something like that could happen in Alaska. He talked about society and justice in New York. He thought that the witnesses in New York did not understand completely what was going on. He thinks this is happening in other cultures.

Question: If we are not lost where are we?

Norman Mailer said if we are not lost where will we be. He said we are in an extraordinary world. He said any country that has advanced like our country has had to leave things behind.

Mr. Ellison talked about living with guilt. In human beings we forget and then try to justify by forgetting. We make scapegoats out of

others who are supposed to take over the burden of our guilt. He talked about his own experience of unfair treatment.

Question: Comment from a member of the audience about individual action.

Ellison said the best form of action is the grouping of individuals.

Conflicts have to be gone through.