

Rollyson review

## Norman Mailer's Eckermann

Lennon knew Mailer for decades, interviewed him relentlessly, appeared in Mailer productions, edited and archived him, wrote his biography, and is probably as close to a modern Eckermann as we can get.



Norman Mailer at the New York Public Library on June 27, 2007. AP/Diane Bondareff



**CARL ROLLYSON**

Wednesday, November 30, 2022

05:46:42 am

*'Conversations with Goethe In the Last Years of his Life'*

*By Johann Peter Eckermann*

*Translated by Allan Blunden with an Introduction and Notes by*

*Ritchie Robertson*

*Penguin Books, 752 pages*

*'Mailer's Last Days: New and Selected Remembrances of a*

*Life in Literature'*

*By J. Michael Lennon*

*Etruscan Press, 312 pages*

Eckermann's "Goethe" has often been compared with Boswell's "The Life of Samuel Johnson." In both cases, an ambitious younger writer attaches himself to an aging literary genius. We are privileged to see, in intimate settings, great men being great as well as operating on planes less lofty than the pages of their work — if not ever really ordinary.

Boswell and Eckermann have their skeptics, especially those who wonder how much we are reading about Boswell and Eckermann rather than their more famous contemporaries. Ritchie Robertson is especially insightful in analyzing how Eckermann put together his "conversations," and the extent to which we get Goethe filtered through another sensibility. Eckermann himself, more than the boastful Boswell, often confesses that he had to rely on memory and his own writer's technique.

While Eckermann is less flashy than Boswell, his Goethe is less eccentric than Boswell's Johnson, which means that Eckermann is devoid of the hilarious set pieces that Boswell delights in. Eckermann surpasses Boswell, though, in creating a sense of the diurnal polymath, planning his work and returning, for example, to the nature of the demonic that drove figures like Lord Byron and Napoleon.

When I told Norman Mailer's biographer, J. Michael Lennon, that I was reviewing a new edition of Eckermann, he wrote: "Mailer was a fan of the Eckermann conversations, and once said that he had a lot in common with Goethe, whose writings he read. I think he meant that he, like the old Master, was interested in politics, science and literature. They were both, after a fashion, public intellectuals."

There is more to it than that. In "Mailer's Last Days," Mr. Lennon quotes a Mailer friend, the writer Gay Talese, who said Mailer was "the most accessible major writer in the country." Like Goethe, Mailer had a huge range of friends but was also open to scholars and all sorts of people — high and low, so to speak — whose lives he devoured with a relish that might be called demonic.

Goethe keeps returning to this sentiment: "I can't help thinking that the demons, in order to taunt and mock mankind, sometimes set up individuals who are so charismatic that everybody strives to emulate them, and so great that nobody can equal them."

Eckermann adds: "[M]y private thought, however, was that the demons might have intended something of the kind with Goethe, since he too is a figure too charismatic not to want to emulate, and too great to be equalled."

In Mailer's case, demons and the demonic could be literal: "He had a medieval world view," Mr. Lennon observes. "You know he told me once that he had been oppressed by a succubus."

I disparaged the supernatural in Mailer in a review of “The Castle in the Forest” (New York Sun January 17, 2007): “As soon as the SS man explains he is a devil on assignment from the E.O. [the Evil One], my interest in his story slackened. Making Hitler a product of evil, rather than an originator of same, is troubling — because it denies the force of evil any human agency.” But now I’m not so sure.

Both Goethe and Mailer see the demonic as a way of showing how the human will can be perverted by forces beyond an individual’s control. In Napoleon’s case, Eckermann’s Goethe observes: The “demons keep on tripping him up and he finally succumbs.” Some of Mailer’s characters, like Stephen Rojack in “An American Dream,” seem similarly demon driven — and that unsettles a modern consciousness.

Mr. Lennon knew Mailer for decades, interviewed him relentlessly, appeared in Mailer productions, edited and archived him, wrote his biography, and is probably as close to a modern Eckermann as we can get. More than Eckermann’s Goethe, Mr. Lennon’s Mailer emerges with significant weaknesses — even if, in the end, he remains indispensable.

As Mailer said in an interview, he will always, like the mad butler, return to serve the meal.

*Mr. Rollyson is the author of “Norman Mailer: The Last*

*Romantic” and “A Private Life of Michael Foot”*

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Mr. Rollyson is the author of *The Life of William Faulkner* and *The Last Days of Sylvia Plath*. He has published fourteen biographies and has written about biography for *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *The New Criterion*, and other publications.

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