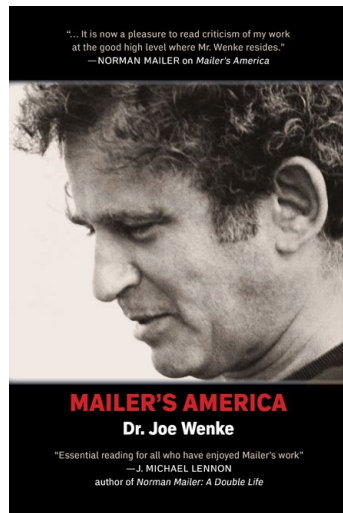


Preface to the new edition



I wrote *Mailer's America* to demonstrate that Norman Mailer's subject is preeminently America and to argue that his brilliant engagement with that subject is one of the primary reasons that he is a great writer. By "America," I mean millennial America, the enduring idea that America is God's Country, that it is "the city upon a hill," that it is exceptional. Mailer understood the mythic idea of American exceptionalism better than any other writer of his generation. He understood that it is central to our character as a nation—character in the Emersonian sense, character as destiny. He understood that the idea of our exceptionalism produces extremes, the extremes of an American Dream and an American Nightmare—at the one extreme, the transformational and regenerative spirit epitomized by the New Deal and the Marshall Plan—or for that matter the post-presidential global humanitarianism of Presidents Carter, George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton—and at the other extreme, the imperialistic and totalitarian spirit epitomized by the Cold War and the wars in Vietnam and Iraq.

Mailer was a man of extremes, and he was passionate about America. In the documentary, *Norman Mailer: The American*, he says, "You know, I love this country. I hate it. I get angry at it. I feel close

to it. I'm charmed by it, and it's a marriage that's gone on let's say for at least the fifty years of my writing life." At the New York Public Library in June 2007, just five months before he died, during what he said might be one of his last public appearances, Mailer reconfirmed the depth and complexity of his relationship with America, saying "I've been angry with America most of the years of my life, but I've always been in love with America in the oddest fashion, which is as if I'm married to America."

Mailer perceived and experienced America as a dialectic, which perfectly matched his complex temperament and his imaginative approach as a writer. Politically, he was a left conservative, radically left and radically conservative. Theologically, he believed that an all-powerful, all-knowing God made no sense. Ironically, if God were both omnipotent and omniscient, he would also be evil since he would then be responsible for everything in his creation. So instead Mailer believed that God was imperfect and embattled, engaged in a perpetual war with the Devil. For Mailer, the universe was a great, epic war novel with the forces of good and evil contending against one another in a continuous series of existential battles. At any point either God or the Devil might have the advantage. Philosophically, Mailer saw a similar dialectic at work in the life of every human being. He believed that every moment we are either getting a little better or a little worse and that growth is possible only through courage and risk taking.

Mailer embodied this existential philosophy in his life and his writing. He was a consummate risk taker, and courage was at the core of his character. Indeed, courage was for him the primary virtue, and it was fundamental to his heroic vision of the writer—a vision that was thoroughly romantic and quintessentially American, for it conceived of the possibility that the writer was capable through an act of the imagination of not only expressing the vast contradictions of American culture but of changing the culture as well.

PREFACE TO THE NEW EDITION

At his best Norman Mailer was better than any other writer of his time, and at his worst he was still more interesting. Brilliant and brave, he was an American original. There will never be anyone like him again.

I n t r o d u c t i o n

There is no better subject for a serious American writer than America itself. “In the beginning,” said John Locke, “all the world was America.”¹ And at America’s beginning the land stretched out like a geographic *tabula rasa* upon which the European mind could write its dreams, having discovered at last a reality that was “commensurate to” its “capacity for wonder.” Out of that limitless capacity for wonder was born the idea of America, “the last and greatest of all human dreams.”² It is an idea that has continued to be expressed throughout American history with an astonishing constancy of vision, for despite significant differences in values and attitudes, conquistadors and Puritans, deists and transcendentalists, liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans have all shared one central belief: in America anything is possible.

Indeed, from the beginning both the light and the dark sides of the questing spirit, at times inextricably bound, have sought to project themselves upon the image of America as millennium so that, for example, in the Spanish imagination the country could represent both the epitome of romantic aspiration that is the land of the heart’s desire and an elusive treasure-trove that could tantalize an insatiable greed for gold. Likewise, from the beginning millennial America has encouraged the identification of religious and political

purposes so that imperialistic expansion might serve the united purpose of God and king (or president) and patriotic addresses seem curiously incomplete without some earnest reference to America's unique place in the divine plan. Thus America was and is the New World ever waiting to be discovered, an unknown territory whose possibilities continue to live in the imagination in the form of countless millennialistic ideas: America as El Dorado, the seventeenth-century "city upon a hill," the eighteenth-century agrarian New Eden, the mid-nineteenth-century embodiment of transcendentalist cosmic democracy, and the late nineteenth-century nation of Manifest Destiny. In the twentieth century, the influence of millennialism is reflected not only in the idea of America as the savior nation of Wilson's Fourteen Points and the redemptionist nation of the Marshall Plan but also in our most notable political slogans, which have conceived of America as a land of power and opportunity that can make the world safe for democracy and promise its citizens new life through participation in the New Deal, the New Frontier, or the Great Society.

At this late date cynicism is virtually an intellectual birthright. So it would seem in the light of Vietnam, Watergate, and increasing economic polarization that such political promises have proven empty. It would seem, in short, that the reality of America has failed to live up to the dream. Yet, as Milton R. Stern has noted, this view expresses only part of the truth. For "America, in the fantastic quality of its actualities, has always outgrown those who envision it, just as, equally, it has never been as great as the vision."³ As our most powerful works of literature suggest over and over again, the crucial problem of American experience emerges out of the relationship between vision and actuality, for what is most remarkable about America, the belief that we are God's Chosen People engaged in realizing in our own lives a vision of ever-expanding possibilities, has actually inspired much of what is most dangerous. As Melville knew, when transcendent vision becomes absolute, the

questing spirit takes the shape of an Ahab, and everything is lost. Indeed, there is nothing more inimical to morality or more threatening to humanity than the unquestioned assumption of one's own moral supremacy. What is self-righteousness in a person manifests itself as cultural chauvinism in a nation, and this attitude on the part of some Americans has fostered a debased millennialism that has transformed the belief that God's Country, America, is the New Jerusalem into the knowledge that God's Country, America, is The-Greatest-Little-Ol'-Country-In-The-World.

The relationship that I am describing between American myth and American history establishes the proper context for discussing Norman Mailer's work. For Mailer's subject is preeminently America: throughout his work he is involved in trying to discover our identity as a nation by relating the promise and the debasement of the millennial idea of America to the complexities of the contemporary American scene. In so doing, he has pursued through his writing what he believes to be the highest purpose of literature, which is to "clarify a nation's vision of itself."⁴ In the case of America, clarity is possible only through a continuing engagement of ambiguities, for, as Mailer has stated, "America is the most dialectical of nations . . . and the best of our history is coupled as in no other nation with much of our worst."⁵

Mailer dramatizes both the best and the worst of American life by connecting the lives of his characters to the life of the nation. At the heart of this drama is the importance of risk taking, for which Mailer finds a paradigm in the myths as histories of such American figures as the pioneer, the outlaw, the inventor, the early industrialist, the boxer, and the movie star as well as in the transcendentalist quester of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman. The ethic that Mailer derives from these figures is quite clear: when a person thrusts himself into a situation in which the "end is unknown"⁶ rather than planned or routine, he enters into conflict with himself and the world and tests the limits of his personality. If he is able to meet

the challenge, he extends his freedom in an act that is an exercise of moral courage and redeems himself from being little more than a manifestation of biological and social forces. In other words he grows: he becomes capable of greater expression and more intense experience, a capability that will allow him in the future to exert his will in situations of increased danger and complexity. Thus risk taking is the means to achieving psychological, social, and political power. On the other hand, failure of nerve in the risk taking situation can have the gravest of consequences. When one's nerve fails, when one shrinks from the bold and heroic assertion of oneself, one actually becomes less like oneself, a personality that says I choose to be what I am and nothing else, and more like an impersonal embodiment of moral cowardice, which constitutes the lowest common denominator of twentieth-century "mass man" (PP 38). Mailer believes that such cowardice is perverse. It goes against nature, because according to Mailer, growth is a natural imperative, and conflict is the fundamental condition of existence. Thus moral courage is an absolute necessity, while cowardice is a fundamental violation of the self that literally causes one's body to rebel against itself in an insane multiplication of cancerous cells.

That these are Mailer's beliefs will not be news to anyone familiar with Mailer's work. In fact, it is Mailer's insistence on the importance of risk taking and his preoccupation with the idea of growth through conflict, which is an existential idea precisely because it describes a dynamic that expresses the nature of existence, that have led to so much discussion of Mailer's existentialism as a subject in and of itself.⁷ Unfortunately, more than a few critics have used Mailer's existentialism, his notoriety—whether sought after or not—or his inclusion in his works of various personae of himself as justifications for placing a great deal of critical emphasis on Mailer's life.⁸

I believe that such an approach is misconceived. A critic should not unreflectively take his cues from an artist on how to perform

the act of criticism, and he should never argue that an artist ought to be judged "by his own standards,"⁹ for those standards must also be subject to a critic's judgment. Establishing a focus is the first and most crucial critical judgment. By now it should be clear that far too much space and ingenuity have been devoted to discussing Mailer's personality. Certainly Mailer's importance depends ultimately upon his art rather than on the force of his personality. And in the final analysis, what Mailer does in his own life to enable him to write better is really beside the point when it comes to the consideration of his work.¹⁰ Just as insisting that language is self-referential and that art has no relation to life trivializes language and art, overemphasizing the importance of a writer's personality can distract that writer's audience from seriously considering his work. In the case of Norman Mailer, it is time to concentrate on that work and treat his existentialism as a conceptual preoccupation and a mode of action rather than as an end in itself. Indeed, as Samuel Hux has argued, and as I am arguing here, the source of Mailer's existentialism is actually traceable to Mailer's own absorption of American myth.¹¹ Mailer's Americanness therefore subsumes his existentialism while providing him with both a locus of values and a purpose that are outside the limits of the self.

Thus one realizes that in order to establish a proper focus for an extended study of Mailer's work, one must first make the necessary connection between Mailer's existentialism and his continuing attempt to define the meaning of America and then concentrate on that attempt, which has always been his central purpose as a writer. One also realizes that Mailer's books are "best considered" not as "one large work"¹² in progress but as separate, finished works that try to dramatize through the relationship of American myth and history what America was, is, and may soon become. In other words, his books try to relate "the American image to American experience."¹³ As works of literature they are, of course, involved in the attempt to enlarge the possibilities for expression in America.

And undeniably Mailer would like his books to influence thought and action. But placing too great an emphasis on the possible influence of the books has the disadvantage of making them seem to be primarily the polemical instruments of a visionary existentialist. Though Mailer does say in *Advertisements for Myself* that he is “imprisoned with a perception which will settle for nothing less than making a revolution in the consciousness of our time,”¹⁴ there is no reason why a critic must be imprisoned by this statement. After all, Mailer has not been. His revolutionary persona is only one of several fictive creations of himself, very different, for example, from the comic Mailer of *The Armies of the Night* or the Acolyte of *The Prisoner of Sex*, who wonders “whether the revolution” is “the most beautiful or diabolical idea of man,”¹⁵ very different too from Mailer as Aquarius, the detached observer in *Of a Fire on the Moon* and *St. George and the Godfather*. Nor is the attempt to revolutionize consciousness the most compelling aspect of any of his works of fiction or his impressive and disturbing nonfiction novel, *The Executioner’s Song*. Clearly, the revolutionary potential of Mailer’s work does not suggest the most accurate or fruitful critical approach.

Concentrating on the possible influence of Mailer’s books succeeds paradoxically in exaggerating the effect that Mailer’s work can have on life while at the same time shifting attention from that work to Mailer’s personal ambitions.¹⁶ On the other hand, in discussing America as Mailer’s subject, one goes right to the center of Mailer’s work. Nevertheless, no critic has yet chosen to develop the implications of this material in anything approaching rigorous detail throughout the course of a book-length study. In doing so myself, I will, in fact, be involved in writing a thematic analysis of Mailer’s individual major works. But my purpose will not be to focus primarily on Mailer’s existentialism as an autonomous body of thought, his personality, or his revolutionary persona. Instead I will show that Mailer’s ideas and self-creations derive ultimately from his Americanness and that this Americanness is manifested

most significantly in his continuing concern with the relationship between the idea and the actuality of America. It is this concern that identifies the dimensions and energies of his existentialism, his sense of his books as public acts, and his belief in the revolutionary power of his work.¹⁷

Mailer's American focus also reveals the close relationship between his philosophy and his politics, a relationship that previous thematic studies of Mailer's works have not closely examined.¹⁸ This relationship is evident, however, throughout his career, and it is especially striking from the time of *The Armies of the Night* onward. During the late 1960s, Mailer's left radicalism evolved into what he has termed left conservatism, a paradoxical ideology that combines a commitment to leftist activism with a deeply felt conservative concern for preserving dialectical distinctions and culturally nourishing traditions. Mailer's left conservatism represents the political expression of a syncretic philosophy that integrates such disparate elements as existential risk taking, nihilistic rebelliousness, and a transcendentalist faith that affirms the primacy of the self and the life of the spirit. Clearly, in view of the close relationship between Mailer's philosophy and politics, it is only by studying both that one can truly understand either. In the course of this book, I will try to provide such an understanding while extending the discussion of Mailer's work to his most recent books, including *The Executioner's Song*, *Ancient Evenings*, and *Tough Guys Don't Dance*.

Throughout this book I hope to show that, in making America his subject, Mailer is following in the best tradition of American literature, and I will attempt to define his place within that tradition and so demonstrate the ways in which Mailer is truly original. I will also suggest a possible direction not only for Mailer's work but for the contemporary American novel as well and conclude by evaluating Mailer's place among American prose writers.

1

The Threat of Totalitarianism

The threat of totalitarianism sits like an evil presence over Norman Mailer's early work. Throughout his career Mailer has written much about what he considers to be the totalitarian aspects of American life, and in forthcoming works he will no doubt continue to brood upon this problem. But it is clear that until Mailer was able to write "The White Negro," totalitarianism was a particularly intimidating and intimate enemy of his art. In addition to representing an external political threat, it presented itself to Mailer as an immediate, almost insuperable aesthetic problem that insinuated itself into the very creation of his first three novels. What is more, the problem revealed itself in two separate stages, the second stage proving to be even more perplexing and debilitating than the first.

Ironically, the first part of the problem actually had its source in one of Mailer's great strengths. From the beginning of his career Mailer has understood the workings of power and violence and enjoyed a talent for dramatizing them. Unfortunately, the very nature of these subjects suggested that they were available as prerogatives only to characters who embodied totalitarian attitudes

and objectives, a suggestion that left Mailer with rather limited access to two of his most attractive subjects. As a result, in *The Naked and the Dead* the totalitarians, General Cummings and Sergeant Croft, prove to be the novel's most dynamic characters. Their essential amorality frees them from considerations that might inhibit them from taking risks to gain more power, while their understanding of the weaknesses of human nature makes them the only characters in the novel who are capable of vision: because they know the power of evil and are able to use fear to manipulate men, they can often succeed in altering present circumstances to move closer to achieving an ideal, which for each of them is total power.¹ On the other hand, much of what is interesting about Mailer's protagonist, Lieutenant Hearn, derives from his immersion in the question of how to formulate a significant response to Cummings and Croft in particular and to totalitarianism in general, a question that neither Hearn nor the novel satisfactorily answers.

In noting these aesthetic problems, I am not pursuing the argument, familiar to Mailer critics, that *The Naked and the Dead* is a novel that fails to provide a satisfactory conclusion to a liberal thesis or that the conclusion is an attempt to salvage such a thesis. As I will show, the novel clearly rejects liberalism as an adequate response to totalitarianism. But Mailer's inability to dramatize an alternative political response confirms the aesthetic problem that I am describing, a problem that sets Mailer's talent for creating powerful and violent characters at odds with the thematic necessity of placing some limits on the success of totalitarians. After all, one does not have to be a liberal to want to avoid writing a first novel in which ruthlessness is rewarded with total power. Unfortunately, Mailer's aesthetic dilemma forces him in the conclusion of the book to fall back upon the resources of his naturalistic heritage to thwart the totalitarians, with the result that he overdramatizes the extent of human impotence. And as we should all know by now, impotence is not the theme with which Mailer would finally wish to be identified.

The conclusion of the novel does succeed rather nicely, though, in suggesting Mailer's view of the kind of bureaucratic world that will emerge after the war. For there is a species of revolution and counterrevolution within totalitarianism itself. Though a totalitarian movement may well have its origin in a powerful and charismatic personality committed to risk taking as a way of achieving power, totalitarian institutions gravitate inexorably toward a consolidation of power and an elimination of personality. Cummings believes that "for the past century the entire historical process has been working toward greater and greater consolidation of power."² Accordingly, he sees the purpose of World War II as "power concentration" (177) and the subordination of man to machine. But he initially fails to understand that he will also become a victim of this process.

One realizes then that war is Cummings' only element. Only in war can he give full play to his talent for daring, eccentric manipulations of men. Without war Cummings loses his chief reason for being. He becomes an anachronism and a liability to an institution that thrives on orderly process and lack of imagination. Correspondingly, it is only in a war that Croft's murderousness can find sanction. His brutality is the essentially apolitical force that impels totalitarianism. And his is the face behind the facelessness of the institution. Consequently, nothing is more important to the institution than denying its implicit connection with Croft. After the war, he too becomes the outsider, as alienated from the source of real power as anyone on the political left, his violence apparently limited to expressing itself in acts of criminality.

Thus, in transforming itself from a movement into an institution, totalitarianism rejects dynamism and becomes less interesting as novelistic material. And in this way the second stage of Mailer's aesthetic problem begins. As the bureaucratic Major Dallsen, with his relish for routine and his talent for banality, is elected by Mailer's view of American history to inhabit the seat of power,

Mailer is deprived by the logic of that history of any credible foundation for creating dynamic totalitarian characters. Having dramatized the right wing's bureaucratic masking of evil while he was as yet unable to create a significant literary expression of commitment on the left, Mailer arrived at an impasse in characterization and in his treatment of America as a subject. Undoubtedly, the most serious aspect of this problem involved Mailer's characterization of his protagonists, for they would have to carry the greatest part of the thematic burden in his treatment of America.

Both *Barbary Shore* and *The Deer Park* reflect this fundamental problem. As many critics have noted, the novels' respective protagonists, Mikey Lovett and Sergius O'Shaugnessy, are remarkably undefined. Of course, it is important to point out that the protagonist's lack of definition is an assumption of both novels. Each of the young men is a would-be writer who is trying to discover a way of writing and acting that would represent a significant response to the totalitarian aspects of American life. Correspondingly, each is educated in great part through his relationship to an older man so that finally each protagonist restores through his sense of vocation something of the original integrity of the badly compromised idealism of the previous generation.

Unfortunately, neither Lovett nor O'Shaugnessy is able to hold the dramatic center of his story. In *Barbary Shore* such elements as the shabby, claustrophobic setting and the odd, airless atmosphere, which help create the paranoid sense of a strangely skewed world always verging on the openly sinister, are certainly more compelling than Mailer's characterization of Lovett. Indeed, as I will argue, despite the fact that he is considerably less interesting than his totalitarian counterparts in *The Naked and the Dead*, the undercover agent Hollingsworth comes much closer to working as a character than does Mikey Lovett. Similarly, in *The Deer Park*, almost everyone else is more interesting than Sergius O'Shaugnessy; Charles Francis Eitel, Elena Esposito, and Marian Faye are the most notable examples.

I am convinced that Mailer found Lovett and O'Shaugnessy to be of sufficient dramatic interest at least partly because of his own attraction to the idea of the alienated romantic hero, an attraction that is evident in his characterization of Hearn and indeed even earlier in his portrayal of Bowen Hilliard in *A Calculus at Heaven*, the war novella that he wrote when he was nineteen years old. Moreover, the posture of the romantic hero, who stands as "the simple genuine self against the whole world,"³ might also have suggested that Lovett and O'Shaugnessy were satisfactory literary expressions of political engagement. It is as if the romantic tradition itself had *a priori* charged with meaning the fact of a protagonist's opposition to society and made it necessarily compelling. Actually, the tradition places the greatest possible demands on the characterization of the alienated protagonist, who must embody in his own identity and through his own actions the values denied by the culture that he opposes. Otherwise, his act of protest is empty, announced, as it were, in a narcissistic vacuum. Perhaps this dependency on tradition in the absence of personality is what Richard Poirier is suggesting, with some exaggeration in the case of Hearn, when he writes that Mailer's early heroes display only "a rhetoric of engagement."⁴

In making these criticisms, I have been emphasizing Mailer's belief in his characterizations of Mikey Lovett and Sergius O'Shaugnessy. But paradoxically, balanced against that belief, there must have been an undeniable dissatisfaction with them and the novels in which they appear. One thinks not only of Mailer's own criticism of *Barbary Shore* but also of his self-advertised obsession with the materials of *The Deer Park*, particularly the character of Sergius, which suggest the situation of a writer who is involved with materials that refuse to fulfill their ultimate promise.⁵ And, of course, Mailer's decision in *Advertisements for Myself* to commit himself to a radical departure from the narrative techniques of his earlier books bears dramatic testimony to a deep-seated dissatisfaction with the points of view of those works. But perhaps it is only by

examining some of Mailer's later statements on the nature of totalitarianism that one can get an adequate sense of exactly what he felt he was up against in trying to solve the aesthetic problem that I am describing.

For Mailer, totalitarianism is not limited in its expression to despotic governments and dictatorial leaders such as Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin. Instead it is a "*geist*, a spirit, which takes many forms" (PP 126). It is manifested in any attempt at reducing complexity, minimizing expression, or eliminating differences in personality and culture. For the "essence of totalitarianism is that it beheads. It beheads individuality, variety, dissent, extreme possibility, romantic faith, it blinds vision, deadens instinct, it obliterates the past" (PP 184). Thus for Mailer, women's liberationists are totalitarians when they insist with a "dull, moral, abstract force" (PP 126) that there is no essential difference between men and women and demand that women be liberated from their wombs. And liberal technologists assume a similar totalitarian position when they act and speak as though the machine were now the quintessential work of art and language purely functional.

One might say then that for Mailer the perfect metaphor for totalitarianism is the monolith, the single undifferentiated stone face that insists in its blankness of expression on the absolute importance of its own existence while at the same time concealing precisely what its specific function or ultimate purpose is. As Mailer notes, much of the architecture of contemporary America is a manifestation of the totalitarian mentality that intentionally divorces form from function. We do indeed "design edifices which reveal no more than the internal structure of a ten-million-dollar bill" (PP 181). "So we have housing projects which look like prisons and prisons which look like hospitals which in turn look like schools, schools which look like luxury hotels, luxury hotels which seem to confuse themselves with airline terminals, and airline terminals which cannot be told apart from civic centers." And as a sign

of our confusion of purpose and our disdain for definition, “even the new churches look like recreation centers at large ski resorts” (PP 179).

The immediate effect of such architecture and one of the major objectives of totalitarianism, as Mailer defines it, is to divorce human beings from their connection to the past. Both history and the myths that would express the culture’s origin, values, and purpose are denied, reduced to cliché, or turned into forms of nationalistic propaganda, leaving all of us rootless, our attention fixed only upon the ephemeral pleasures and pains of the present. In fact, because of our passion for mobility and expansion and our addiction to the fast and the new, “the plastic shacks, the motels, the drive-in theatres, the highway restaurants and the gas stations proliferate year by year until they are close to covering the highways of America with a new country which is laid over the old one the way a transparent sheet with new drawings is set upon the original plan” (PP 178).

In this way experience itself is rendered discontinuous; life appears to be inconsequential, and, as we become separated from our actions and their effects, responsibility disappears. This attempt to avoid responsibility is manifested most dramatically in the totalitarian denial of the eschatological view of death. For if death is nothingness, if death is simply extinction rather than the divine revelation of the moral value of one’s life, then the conduct of one’s life does not finally matter. Morality becomes both subjective and passé, a quaint human construction whose purpose—maintaining a semblance of order in social relations—is now superseded by the amoral exercise of power. According to Mailer then,

the crucial characteristic of modern totalitarianism is that it is a moral disease which divorces us from guilt. It came into being as a desire to escape the judgments of the past and our responsibility for past injustice—in that sense it is a defense against eternity, an

attempt to destroy that part of eternity which is death, which is punishment or reward. . . . In our flight from the consequence of our lives, in our flight from adventure, from danger, and from the natural ravages of disease, in our burial of the primitive, it is death the Twentieth Century is seeking to avoid. (PP 176).

If death is annihilation, there would seem to be no recourse but to desire more life, whatever the cost. As Mailer insists, however, the cost has been very great. For the attempt to deny the eschatological view of death expresses an utter contempt for mystery and a callous disregard for the sacredness of organic growth through the natural cycle of death and rebirth. In attempting to eliminate death, we are actually revealing our opposition to life and nature. And in our desire to discover simple solutions to complex problems, we are succeeding only in creating problems which are more complex and which threaten the very balance of nature, a process demonstrated, as Mailer points out, in the fact that our dependency on antibiotics to avoid “the natural ravages of disease” actually produces contagious diseases without definition.

According to Mailer this predicament is a result of our perverse relation to both life and death. In trying to avoid death, we spread it, while in attempting artificially to prolong life, we deaden it. For Mailer then, totalitarianism is essentially opposition to nature: human beings and institutions become totalitarian when they try to subvert the sacred relation between life and death, substitute inorganic growth through duplication for organic growth through conflict, or seek to limit the existential freedom of others for the sole purpose of gaining more power. If, as Mailer believes, organic growth through conflict is the way that one creates an identity that can give coherence to the conflicting parts of one’s personality for at least as long as one can continue to act with courage, then the totalitarian rejection of risk represents a cowardly denial of identity. This cowardice and the need to deny identity suggest yet another

reason for totalitarianism's debasement of American myth, for the necessity of questing and risk taking is implicit in the millennialistic idea of the American as the New Adam who contains within himself unlimited possibilities for expression. The idea is, in fact, a mythic expression of what Mailer believes must go on in each person's life if he is to create his own identity. Within this context, the essential difference between the totalitarianism embodied by Cummings and Croft and institutional totalitarianism is clear: unlike the institution they at least are capable of courage. And so despite the fact that they would deny it to others, they maintain in their own lives a connection to American myth.

Thus one realizes that, in describing institutional totalitarianism as plague or cancer and in saying that America is schizophrenic, Mailer is being quite literal. In an attempt at anticipating critics who would accuse him of projecting his own obsessions upon the nation, Mailer suggests that while he wishes the problem were merely personal, he is convinced that his frequent references to the sickness of life in America resulting from the repudiation of risk actually represent "insight into the nature of things" (CC 2). For the "essence of biology seems to be challenge and response, risk and survival, war and the lessons of war. It may be biologically true that life cannot have beauty without its companion—danger" (PP 167). One can, of course, accept or reject both Mailer's view of nature and his critique of America, but in any event, one must grant that he intends to describe objective conditions. In fact, Mailer is always insisting that his descriptions of American life have validity precisely because they are rooted in reality. From Mailer's point of view, the power of plague, cancer, and schizophrenia as metaphors for the totalitarianism and cowardly conformity of American life depends upon the contention that they may function in other rhetorical contexts as direct descriptions of the perverse effect that such conditions have on us once they begin to dominate. According to Mailer, totalitarianism and cowardly conformity actually produce cancer.

Similarly, a nation that separates action from responsibility and past from present while denying the millennial heritage that has throughout history given it a unique identity, inevitably becomes schizophrenic. Aside from constituting a serious ontological and political statement, such a contention has decided rhetorical advantages. First of all, it strengthens the sense of equation in Mailer's use of illness as metaphor, as, for example, when he writes of the cancerous spread of totalitarian architecture. Secondly, it broadens the associative frame of reference since no careful reader of Mailer can note his application of cancer or schizophrenia to the political sphere without thinking of these conditions in human beings and vice versa. In the final analysis, one is impressed over and over again with the depth of Mailer's conviction that there is most certainly a correspondence between the American body politic and the physical, psychological, and moral well-being of each American citizen.

The existence of this correspondence is one of Mailer's fundamental assumptions, and the aesthetic corollary of this assumption is quite clear: since each American is implicated in the problems that beset America, the details of anyone's life, when rendered with sufficient imagination and craft, can represent the life of the nation. The individual life may be fictional or real, and the setting of the action may even be quite limited, as limited, for example, as the Brooklyn boardinghouse of *Barbary Shore* or the town of Provo, Utah, where Gary Gilmore committed two murders. Furthermore, as Mailer notes in *Cannibals and Christians*, there exists "the probability that society partakes of the plague and its critic partakes, and each wars against the other" (2-3). In fact, virtually all of Mailer's work implies that totalitarian influences in society to a great extent shape both the structure and the content of one's own thoughts and language. Indeed, the fear that one's expressions are not one's own may well constitute the crucial factor in politicizing the romantic imagination, and I strongly suspect that such is the case with Norman Mailer. As Mailer knows, the cost of failing to find one's own

voice is repeating the forms of expression which have imposed themselves on one and which may partake of the plague that one is attempting to combat.

In Mailer's work it is characteristically the protagonist's responsibility to discover authentic forms of expression that represent significant opposition to the prevailing tendencies of society. Ironically, it was Mailer's assumption of the protagonist's representativeness through his embodiment of the nation's ills that undoubtedly made it so difficult for him in his first three books to create strong protagonists who would be capable of expressing significant opposition. For the protagonist would have to embody both the plague and a possible solution. He would have to be capable of engaging in a dialectic between apparent contradictions in value, an engagement that would be possible only if he were able to represent all that the society expresses through its institutions and all of the possibilities for expression that those institutions outlaw or deny.

Of course, both the aesthetic and the ethical implications of creating such a protagonist are complicated. As his characters' actions range over the field of human possibility, the writer must be able to sustain a clear moral focus while abandoning all traditional moral categories in confronting the conflicts and paradoxes of each dramatic situation. The reader should then be able to evaluate the actions of the dialectical protagonist while nevertheless understanding that there are no *a priori* standards for making judgments and that values are constantly shifting with the ambiguities of the moment. Both writer and reader must therefore be able to accomplish a transvaluation of values such that a particular action in any given situation may not only change in value from being good to being evil but may actually be both good and evil at the same time.

Mailer was able to elaborate this existential ethic in "The White Negro," and as a result, he freed his characters from the vulnerability of their passive relationships to institutional violence.⁶ In Mailer's first three books, violent behavior was dramatic and

therefore attractive. But in the first two books, it seemed categorically wrong, and in *The Deer Park*, only Mailer's characterization of the proto-hipster Marion Faye suggests that the expression of violence might be necessary to maintain one's personal integrity. In writing "The White Negro," however, Mailer realized that the stance of nonviolence was often no more than an abnegation of personality and that the real question was how the irremediable human capacity for violence would be expressed. Indeed, he would discover that the same instinctive energy that might issue in the violence of a character such as Croft could likewise manifest itself in the inspired manic rap of D. J. Jethroe. Just as any particular action might undergo significant transformations in moral value, so might the instinctive energy that impels violence assume a thousand different forms.

The ability to sustain this dialectic and thereby represent both the plague and a possible solution distinguishes Stephen Rojack, D. J. Jethroe, and the various personae of Mailer himself from the relatively weak protagonists of the first three books. At the beginning of *An American Dream*, Rojack is a self-proclaimed failure who fears for the extinction of his soul as the result of a life in which he has wasted his talent and compromised his ideals for the opportunity of acquiring wealth, prestige, and social power. Rather than remain a victim and acquiesce to the cancer which he believes has literally begun to grow within his body and which he, as well as Mailer, views as a sign of spiritual extinction, he extricates himself from the society that has seduced his soul. As the first step in this process, Rojack murders his wife, Deborah. For marriage to her has been both the center and the circumference of his life of compromise, at once his most expensive prostitution of self and the one compromise that in its scope implies the motivation for all of the others. Rojack's unpunished murder of Deborah has driven critics who read the book as traditional realism to cry foul and fault its lack of verisimilitude. On the other hand, as Robert Merrill

notes, more sympathetic critics have either defined the work as a romance, viewed its “extravagant events” as “the literary creations of its narrator-protagonist,” or hastened to place the book within the less threatening confines of the “dream-vision” so that the murder is only metaphorical, literary, and not really wrong at all.⁷ As I will show, however, the novel insists that the metaphorical significance of the murder depends upon its being interpreted realistically while at the same time suggesting that the act itself is not simply good or evil but both good and evil—undeniably murder and undeniably necessary to the survival of Rojack’s soul.

In *Why Are We in Vietnam?* Mailer’s characterization of D. J. likewise balances opposing values. As Robert Solotaroff suggests, D. J. is both a critic and a victim of American society.⁸ For his unrelenting disc jockey rant is both a critique and an embodiment of the electric insanity of corporate America: the very diction and syntax that D. J. uses to criticize the corporation have been imposed on him by it, but the brilliance and energy of D. J.’s switched-on mind enable him to communicate an odd sense of the most eccentric individuality emerging out of the domination of the collective.

In *The Armies of the Night*, Mailer uses a comic persona of himself to contain cultural contradictions. The “Mailer” of this book is a character of “monumental disproportions,”⁹ by turns courageous or cowardly, egomaniacal or humble, wise or foolish. He is both a participant and an observer whose idiosyncratic point of view becomes the centered consciousness of an ironic third person narration that succeeds in establishing a standpoint of detachment and objectivity.

The most significant and fascinating political implication of Mailer as a dialectical protagonist is undoubtedly his self-professed left conservatism, which advocates a radical social critique and political activism as ways of protecting “the welfare of the nation” (Arm. 185), which, he believes, depends in part upon preserving America’s connection to history and myth and reaffirming

the value of personal and cultural differences. Mailer's left conservatism also informs the observations of "the reporter" in *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* and Aquarius in *Of a Fire on the Moon* and *St. George and the Godfather*. In each of these books the dialectical protagonist continues to represent the strengths and weaknesses of the American character, but finding a significant form of activist expression or even discovering a way of participating in events of national importance now becomes a crucial problem. Paradoxically, by integrating important elements of the ideologies of both the left and the right, Mailer's protagonists have made it difficult for themselves to identify with either side or to have either side identify with them, despite the fact that they have defined a position that suggests a comprehensive point of view that can transform political polarization into dialectic.

It is, in fact, this standpoint of lonely comprehensiveness that defines the narrative viewpoint of *The Executioner's Song*, a book in which the central theme is estrangement. Indeed, the most disturbing aspect of the book, apart from the brutality and horror of Gary Gilmore's two murders, is its dramatization of the incredible separation between America's western and eastern voices: between the morally chaotic lives of such people as Gilmore, Nicole, and April, who seem stranded in the vast emptiness of the great American West, and the lawyers, judges, and media people, who are connected to the mainstream of American life and who act with a well-defined and at times ruthless sense of purpose dictated by professional commitments and ambitions. At the same time, however, the book is able to suggest that an exhaustive, naturalistic rendering of the details of a representative group of Americans can, without the aid of explicit commentary, imply a radical critique of American society and that such a critique has a sufficiency of its own, as if finally perceiving, imagining, and writing were indeed significant political acts, true expressions of Man Thinking. In this way, the act of imagination itself, the capacity to comprehend multiple and

apparently contradictory perspectives, becomes a form of activism. For it is limited imagination—demonstrated in the inability of one segment of society to live inside the point of view of another—that is to a great extent responsible for the contemporary crisis of estrangement in America.

Thus in *The Executioner's Song*, the complexities of a comprehensive point of view, which is capable of both criticism and sympathy, provide a tentative solution to the question of how to participate in the public life of the nation when the very nature of national events would seem to deny personal involvement. The great advantage of such a response is that it identifies the synthetic imagination as the source of the expression of significant political protest. And certainly this is the ultimate implication of Mailer's left conservatism. But it should not be surprising that it would take Mailer so long before he could depend with equanimity upon the resources of the synthetic imagination as a way of responding to both the schizophrenia and the totalitarianism of American life. Perhaps he was able to do so in *The Executioner's Song* partly because he had no other choice. Mailer agreed to write the story of Gary Gilmore after Gilmore's death. As a result, there was no possibility for Mailer to become involved, even indirectly, in the issue of whether or not Gilmore should be executed. Certainly if Mailer had been on the scene, *The Executioner's Song* would have been a very different book, and it is not altogether impossible that the question of how to participate would have again seemed critical as it does in much of Mailer's nonfiction. For there remains in Mailer's work an unresolved conflict of loyalties. On the one hand, the ultimate implications of Mailer's left conservatism, with its emphasis on maintaining a dialectic between the conflicting segments of society, would seem to suggest that he must create a protagonist who can continue to live within a standpoint of lonely comprehensiveness at the center of the society that he opposes. On the other hand, Mailer's deep commitment to the tradition of the romantic hero

would apparently demand that he continue to create charismatic characters who are capable of strong action that confirms their alienation from society. Suggestions of this conflict are retrospectively apparent at the very beginning of Mailer's career, even before he conceived of the possibility of creating dialectical protagonists. For Mailer's naturalistic technique in *The Naked and the Dead* succeeds in establishing a standpoint of comprehensiveness that anticipates a commitment to dialectic. By the end of the novel, however, it is clear that the omniscient narrator shares Hearn's need to find a way to act to express opposition to totalitarianism and partakes of Hearn's despair over the apparently limited range of choices so that finally the book identifies itself with the plight of its alienated romantic hero.

In a 1964 *Paris Review* interview with Steven Marcus, Mailer associates the ability to write in the third person with having "a coherent view of life," by which he means a world view that paradoxically has its foundation in a satisfactory expression of the fluid¹⁰ nature of personality. Unless the novelist can make sense of the apparent contradictions of a personality that is changeable, protean, now and always in motion so that the sense he makes is itself the expression of an identity, then his view of the world does not cohere even if he is able to describe in detail the operation of social and political institutions. In Mailer's first three novels, there is certainly an implicit explanation of the relationship between American social and political institutions and the lives of individual Americans. Each book suggests that there is a conflict between the totalitarian aims of social and political organizations and the desire of each person to pursue his own particular idea of fulfillment. Nevertheless, the books show that ironically most people are participating—whether out of ignorance, fear, or a desire for power—in the very social and political process that will result in the absolute denial of personality. Those few who would protest find it extremely difficult to discover significant means. In fact, they even have difficulty in avoiding

THE THREAT OF TOTALITARIANISM

outright complicity in the power structure that they oppose. For Mailer, such impotence makes no sense. He refuses to accept it as final, but as long as there is apparently no way to express a solution to the problem, experience remains fragmented. At the same time, in searching for a solution, Mailer came increasingly to see that realistic descriptions of the fragmented surfaces of life may yield only surface reflections and that it may be necessary in the absence of “a coherent view of life” to abandon traditional realism to uncover the truth about ourselves and our society.