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Norman Mailer’s American dream

by Roger Kimball

The third in a series titled Reflections on a cultural revolution

The sour truth is that I am imprisoned with a perception which will settle for nothing less than making a revolution in the consciousness of our time.
—Norman Mailer, Advertisements for Myself (1959)

Men of great power and magnificent ambition, men who become Presidents or champions of the world, are, if one could look into their heads, men very much like Mailer.
—Richard Poirier, Norman Mailer (1972)

Despite the central importance of truth in his fictional ethic he had the characteristic intellectual’s belief that, in his own case, truth must be the willing servant of his ego.
—Paul Johnson, on Ernest Hemingway

No study of America’s cultural revolution can omit the case of Norman Mailer: novelist, wife-stabber, political activist, sometime candidate for mayor of New York, and perpetual enfant terrible. Born in Long Branch, New Jersey, in 1923, Mailer was brought up in Brooklyn, “a nice Jewish boy,” as he once put it, from a middle-class family of first-generation immigrants. Mailer matriculated at Harvard in 1939, graduating in 1942. In 1944 he married for the first of (so far) six times. From 1944 to 1946, he served with the U.S. Army in Japan and the Philippines.

In 1948, when he was only twenty-five, Mailer’s war novel, The Naked and the Dead, was published. In literary terms, The Naked and the Dead ranks somewhere below the war novels of Herman Wouk and James Jones. It is more pretentious, but less well-crafted, and its narrative develops less momentum. Its heavy-handed psychologizing and use of four-letter words were thought smart in 1948; most contemporary readers will find them quaint if not downright embarrassing. Nevertheless, The Naked and the Dead was an immediate and immense success. It catapulted its young author to an atmosphere of wealth, adulation, and celebrity from which he has yet to descend. Whatever else can be said about
it, the reception of *The Naked and the Dead* is an object lesson in the perils—what it might please Norman Mailer to call the “existential” perils—of early success. Mailer himself has never recovered.

For readers who did not witness his elevation to the role of literary-political culture hero, it is difficult to appreciate the awe with which Norman Mailer was regarded by the literary and academic establishment from the 1950s through the 1970s. A typical paean is Diana Trilling’s convoluted 1962 essay “The Radical Moralism of Norman Mailer,” which concludes by comparing Mailer to the prophet Moses “with a stopover at Marx.” “His moral imagination,” Mrs. Trilling assured her readers, “is the imagination not of art but of theology, theology in action.” Which means … ? Very little, alas, though talk of “theology in action” (as distinct, perhaps, from “theology asleep”?) doubtless sparked interesting vibrations in susceptible souls. As Mailer more or less admitted in what is probably his best-known collection, *Advertisements for Myself* (1959)—a title that could be used again for his complete works—he was a sucker for mystification: “mate the absurd with the apocalyptic, and I was captive.”

No one, not even Susan Sontag, combined critical regard, popular celebrity, and radical chic politics with quite the same insouciance as did Mailer. From the late 1940s on, he showed himself to be extraordinarily deft at inveigling credulous intellectuals to collaborate in his megalomania. Although he modeled his persona on the less attractive features of Ernest Hemingway—booze, boxing, bullfighting, and broads—he managed to update that pathetic, shopworn machismo with some significant postwar embellishments: reefer, radicalism, and Wilhelm Reich, for starters. There was also the matter of royalties. The glittering example of Mailer’s commercial success was obviously the cynosure that many aspiring writers set out to follow: his neat trick being to combine intellectual cachet with large amounts of cash. In 1955, Mailer helped to found The Village Voice, which, though always riven by internal dissension, quickly became a bible of New Left orthodoxy. By the mid-1960s, he had emerged as an established antiestablishment guru. In *Scriptures for a Generation*, a left-leaning synopsis of radical texts from the Sixties, the academic critic Philip Beidler observed that

there is no doubt that Mailer as a literary intellectual wished to assume the mantle of ’60s youth-illuminatus, at once existential prophet and pied piper. Accordingly, his career across the decade revealed a relentless, almost obsessive wish to be the voice of ’60s adversarial culture in its broadest sense: a voice uniting the radical intelligentsia and dissenting youth in a new project of revolutionary consciousness spilling over from
The spectacular success of works like *The Armies of the Night* (1968)—Mailer’s bloated, quasi-fictional account of the 1967 march on the Pentagon and his own role in the demonstration—bore witness to his gifts for literary demagoguery. Subtitled *History as a Novel, the Novel as History*, the book deliberately blurred fact and fiction, a procedure gratefully seized upon by a public eager to sacrifice truth to the demands of ideological zeal. Indeed, it was a procedure that characterized the intellectual—or, more accurately, the anti-intellectual—temper of a generation battened on mind-altering drugs and taught to regard any appeal to facts as an unacceptably “authoritarian” gesture. Among anti-Vietnam War radicals—which is to say, among nine out of ten establishment intellectuals—Mailer’s exercise in narcissistic psycho-history was greeted with ecstatic hosannas, and duly picked up both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. (Sample from the critic Richard Gilman: “Mailer has opened up new possibilities for the literary imagination and new room for us to breathe in the crush of actuality.” From Nat Hentoff: “Mailer has won clear claim to being the best writer in America.”)

In fact, like almost all of Mailer’s books, *The Armies of the Night* is almost preposterously badly written. It has often been observed that Mailer’s early literary heroes were Hemingway and John Dos Passos. But his own writing totally lacks Hemingway’s lapidary craftsmanship and Dos Passos’s cinematic control. When *The Armies of the Night* was serialized in *Harper’s*, to the great excitement of the editor, Willie Morris, a young copy editor complained about Mailer’s prose and, as one witness recollects, asked, “I wonder what he writes like when he’s sober?” The unfortunate copy editor was promptly fired. But she was right: *The Armies of the Night* is a hyperbolic, self-indulgent mess that looks sillier and more naïve with every year that passes. Its famous third-person narrative strikes one now as a bad gimmick: “Mailer discovered he was jealous. Not of the talent. [Robert] Lowell’s talent was very large, but then Mailer was a bulldog about the value of his own talent. … Nonetheless, to Mailer it was now *mano a mano*.” “*Mano a mano*” is about as close to Hemingway as Mailer gets.

The adulation that greeted *The Armies of the Night* underscores an important fact about Mailer’s success. It is part of Mailer’s genius—unconscious, perhaps—to have been able to calibrate his deficiencies precisely to the deficiencies of the moment. His clichés have been celebrated as brave insights because they have mirrored exactly the defining clichés of the time. Well into the 1970s, anyway, Mailer instinctively knew exactly what register of rhetorical excess would galvanize the left-wing intellectual establishment. It has proved to be a profitable talent. By the time he came to write *The Prisoner of Sex* (1971), he was widely rumored to be up for a Nobel Prize, a rumor that absorbed his full attention for the first thirty pages of that execrable book.

This is not to say that Mailer has escaped criticism. Far from it. His second two novels, *The Deer Park* (1955) and *Barbary Shore* (1961), were widely attacked, as indeed was *An American Dream* (1965). This was the infamous novel in which the hero, Stephen Rojack, a savvy, tough-guy
intellectual—just like Norman Mailer, you see—starts out by strangling his wife. He then walks downstairs and buggers his wife’s accommodating German maid (buggery—another b—was to become an obsession with Mailer), a former Nazi who declares, “I do not know why you have trouble with your wife. You are an absolute genius, Mr. Rojack.” There are numerous Mailerian fingerprints in the novel. President Kennedy (“Jack”) calls to convey his condolences; Rojack’s wife is rumored to have had affairs with men high up in the British, American, and Soviet spy agencies; even Marilyn Monroe—who was to become one of Mailer’s more notorious obsessions—makes a posthumous cameo appearance when Rojack fantasizes having a telephone conversation with a dead character: “the girls are swell. Marilyn says to say hello.” But the chief point of the book is that Rojack gets away with the murder. Such, Mailer wants us to believe, is the real if unacknowledged “American dream.”

The novel carried an additional frisson. A few years before, at a party he threw to announce his mayoral candidacy on the “Existentialist” ticket, Mailer got drunk and stabbed his wife Adele (number two), nearly killing her. (In 1969, Mailer ran for mayor again, this time on the “Secessionist” ticket, which proposed that New York City become the fifty-first state.) Adele declined to press charges, and so Mailer escaped with a fortnight in Bellevue for observation. This episode seems to have titillated more than it repelled Mailer’s circle of friends; in any event it brought very little condemnation. As Irving Howe put it, “Among ‘uptown intellectuals’ there was this feeling of shock and dismay, and I don’t remember anyone judging him. The feeling was that he’d been driven to this by compulsiveness, by madness. He was seen as a victim.” Readers who wonder how stabbing his wife could make Mailer a “victim”—and who ask themselves, further, what Mailer’s being a victim would then make Adele—clearly do not have what it takes to be an “uptown intellectual” in the Irving Howe mold.

If Mailer’s attempted murder of his wife met with little censure, An American Dream did not escape so easily. It had its admirers. But the critic Stanley Edgar Hyman, in a devastating review called “Norman Mailer’s Yummy Rump,” spoke for many when he judged it “a dreadful novel,” “infinitely more pretentious than the competition,” whose “awfulness is really indescribable.”

Something similar, in truth, can be said about all of Mailer’s books. It is hard to say which is the most pretentious. In absolute terms, the palm must probably go to his most recent novel, The Gospel According to the Son (1997), Mailer’s effort at rewriting the Gospel story in the first person. It is a tall order to write not simply about but as Jesus. But Ancient Evenings (1983), a phantasmagoric tale featuring reincarnation and set in Egypt around 2000 BC, is a close runner up. Mailer really indulges his fondness for buggery in this “novel,” picturing it—along with various other sex acts taking place between and among various characters as they mutate in and out of existence. Actually having a body does not, for Mailer, seem to be a prerequisite for any form of sexual congress. The one thing that can be said for Ancient Evenings is that it displays Mailer’s not inconsiderable gifts for unintentional comedy, which are on a par with those of Margaret Dumont. Mailer is funniest when
“Let me tell you again. There is the magic we invoke, and the magic that calls upon us. Do you recall that Isis dropped the fourteenth piece of the body of Osiris in the salts of Yeb, and saw battles to come between Horus and Set? That was a warning to find a proper sacrifice or there would be no peace. She heard Her own voice tell Her to slaughter a bull, but as she killed the beast, Her voice also told Her that the sacrifice was not great enough to compensate for the evil powers of Set. She must add the blood of a more painful loss. She must cut off her own head, and replace it with the bull’s face.” Menenhetet now giggled.

And who can blame him?

*Ancient Evenings* illustrates why readers who came to Norman Mailer in the 1970s and 1980s have a difficult time understanding the reverence with which he was once regarded by chic intellectuals. Who could take this man seriously? The truth is that Norman Mailer very quickly became a parody of himself. Since the Sixties was itself a ghastly caricature of political radicalism, few people at the time seemed to notice just how ridiculous Mailer’s preening exhibitionism and blustering pronouncements were. But as the years passed and Mailer became more and more indiscriminate in his enthusiasms, Mailer the sage was gradually revealed as Mailer the buffoon.

The point of no return was probably *Marilyn* (1973), a picture-book-cum-biography of Marilyn Monroe. It is difficult to say with confidence which of Mailer’s books is really his worst: he has managed to be truly awful in several distinct ways. But *Marilyn* is certainly his silliest book. Over the years, Mailer’s fascination with the Starlet Who Slept with the Kennedys developed into an unhealthy obsession. As the critic John Simon observed in his review of the book, what Mailer had given us with *Marilyn* was “a new genre called transcendental masturbation or metaphysical wet dreaming.” In real life, Marilyn Monroe was an unhappy sexpot, a sometimes amusing but distinctly mediocre comic actress. But for Mailer she is Aphrodite and Ellen Terry rolled into one. On the one hand, he says, Monroe was a “superb” actress who “possessed the talent to play Cordelia”; she was “Madame Bovary and Nana all in one”; “one might literally have to invent the idea of a soul in order to approach her.” On the other hand, she was “a very Stradivarius of sex,” “the angel of Sex”: “she had learned by Mind,” Mailer writes, “to move sex forward—sex was not unlike an advance of little infantrymen of libido sent up to the surface of her skin. She was a general of sex before she knew anything of sexual war.” If he were still here, Menenhetet would be convulsed with the giggles.

No one in our sex-obsessed culture is likely to underestimate the importance of sexual gratification in the lives of most people. But Mailer is monomaniacal on the subject. It is not only the center of his universe, it is also the periphery and everything in between. In *Marilyn*, he remarks in passing that “it is a rule of thumb today: one cannot buy a Polaroid in a drugstore without announcing to the world,
one chance in two, the camera will be used to record a copulation of family or friends.” One chance in two? As the critic Joseph Epstein observed, “it is a sign of the deep poverty of Norman Mailer’s imagination that the only climax he can imagine in any human relationship is really just that—a sexual climax.” It is all the more ironic, then, that Mailer should display such a profound misunderstanding of sex. It is his one true subject, but he has got it all wrong.

Indeed, if Marilyn Monroe is “the angel of Sex,” Norman Mailer is its Walter Mitty. He constructs absurd melodramas of sexual conquest and then casts himself as the inevitable hero. His ubiquitous descriptions of sex are wince-makingly embarrassing. In “The Time of Her Time,” for example—a fictional sketch that concludes *Advertisements for Myself* of which Mailer was particularly proud—the hero refers to his penis as “the avenger” and is taken to saying things like “For her, getting it from me, it must have been impressive.” In *The Prisoner of Sex*, which Mailer intended as an answer to Kate Millet and the women’s lib movement, we read about “the power of the semen going over the hill” “and the ovum [that] in its turn would be ready as any priestess to greet the arcane and dismiss the common, ready as a whore to welcome a wad or get rid of a penniless prick, ready as an empress to find a lord or turn her face to the wall.” The moral being, perhaps, that an egg’s work is never done.

Mailer’s penchant for bombast makes him a difficult writer to parody; one can never be sure that he hasn’t said something even more outrageous than one’s caricature. Still, Elizabeth Hardwick caught something essential about Mailer in the parody she wrote (under the pseudonym Xavier Prynne) of *The Presidential Papers* (1963) for *The New York Review of Books*:

This 6th note was ignored by LBJ, but attacked by the Black Negroes and the FBI. One admits that a lot of it is lousy—I was having personal troubles at the time—but I still think it lousy but good. The Bitch Goddess didn’t quite get into bed with me this round, but at least she didn’t get into bed with Bill Styron either, up in his plush Connecticut retreat. All the Bitch did was blow into my ear—one of those mysterious pre-psychotic Jackie Kennedy whispers. My answer to the FBI would run this way: *The existential orgasm would make atomic war and even atomic testing impossible* …

The problem with this virtuoso performance is that it is virtually indistinguishable from the writing it set out to spoof. Its perfection as a piece of mimicry renders it void as parody.

... he comic dimension of Mailer’s writing is large though unwitting. But its humorous potential should not be allowed to obscure its many sinister elements. Norman Mailer is funny unintentionally; he is knowingly repulsive. He is an important figure in America’s cultural revolution not because people found him ridiculous but, on the contrary, because they took this ridiculous man seriously.

Mailer has written a great deal about political matters. But in the end, Mailer regards politics the
way he regards everything else, as a coefficient of sex. As he put it in *Advertisements for Myself*, “the only revolution which will be meaningful and natural for the twentieth century will be the sexual revolution one senses everywhere.” Even his identity as an “existentialist” is filtered through sexual anxiety: “a man is in a more existential position than a woman,” Mailer assures us: “he has to get an erection.” (In fact, in Mailer’s writing the term “existential” and its cognates are little more than positive epithets, devoid of content: “we find ourselves in an existential situation,” Mailer writes in one typical passage, “whenever we are in a situation where we cannot foretell the end”—which is hardly more illuminating than Delmore Schwartz’s sly observation that existentialism means that no one else can take a bath for you.) It is in his ideas about sex, especially as he relates them to the rest of life, that Mailer has been most influential and most destructive. It would be difficult to overstate the crudeness of his position. In 1973, in one of the countless interviews he has given, Mailer was asked for his opinion about legalized abortion. This was his answer:

I think when a woman goes through an abortion, even legalized abortion, she goes through hell. There’s no use hoping otherwise. For what is she doing? Sometimes she has to be saying to herself, “You’re killing the memory of a beautiful fuck.” I don’t think abortion is a great strain when the act was some miserable little screech, or some squeak oozed up through the trapdoor, a little rat which got in, a worm who slithered under the threshold. That sort of abortion costs a woman little more than discomfort. Unless there are medical consequences years later.

But if a woman has a great fuck, and then has to abort, it embitters her.

It is possible, of course, that Mailer was being deliberately outrageous. Nevertheless, this is the statement of a moral cretin.

It is one of the peculiarities of Mailer’s writings about sex that he seems barely to distinguish it from violent physical conflict. His depictions of lovemaking are almost always cast in terms of struggle and domination. There is scarcely any room for warmth or tenderness. Desire reveals itself first of all as a desire for conquest. No doubt this is one reason forced buggery features so prominently in his writings. Sex in Mailer is not so much an act of union as brute subordination. This is part of what makes it, for Mailer, so “existential.” As a macho existentialist, Mailer sees, or pretends to see, everything as a battle, a “war.” Indeed, despite his virulent anti-Vietnam War stand, “war” is one of Mailer’s abiding obsessions. It’s part of his Hemingway pose: he likes to bluster about life being a continual struggle—*mano a mano* as he might put it—with the void. In “A Public Notice on Waiting for Godot,” in which Mailer tells us that he regards Samuel Beckett as “a minor artist,” he writes that “man’s nature, man’s dignity, is that he acts, lives, loves, and finally destroys himself seeking to penetrate the mystery of existence, and unless we partake in
some way, as some part of this human exploration (and war) then we are no more than the pimps of society and the betrayers of our Self.” Destroys himself? Pimps of society? Mailer is clearly the captive of a debased, self-aggrandizing Romanticism. He manufactures little melodramas to ventilate the tedium of his comfortable, bourgeois existence. It is a familiar adolescent gambit. But Mailer has managed to prolong his pubescent rage into his seventies. It is what has made him so productive of comic relief. It is also what underlies his fascination with violence.

Many critics believe that The Executioner’s Song (1979) is Mailer’s best book. Subtitled A True Life Novel, it tells the In Cold Blood–type story of the arrest and execution by firing squad of Gary Gilmore, a psychopathic killer who had spent most of his thirty-odd years in jail. Written in a clipped, unembellished style, the book contains some of Mailer’s most urgent and compelling prose. Considered as a moral document, however, The Executioner’s Song is profoundly repulsive. For Mailer does not simply delve into and display the humanity of the tortured killer he writes about: he in effect offers him up as a kind of hero, a courageous “outsider” who deserves our sympathy as a Victim of Society and our respect as an implacable rebel.

After Gilmore had been executed, Mailer’s attention was captured by Jack Abbott, a violent convict and self-declared Communist who began writing Mailer long “existential” letters about life in prison. Mailer loved them. He helped Abbott have them published, first in The New York Review of Books and then as a book, called In the Belly of the Beast (1981). In his introduction, Mailer described Abbott as “an intellectual, a radical, a potential leader, a man obsessed with a vision of more elevated human relations in a better world that revolution could forge.” It seems clear that Mailer’s interest helped to expedite Abbott’s release from prison: “Culture,” Mailer declared at one point, “is worth a little risk.” Abbott had scarcely set foot in New York when he stabbed and killed Richard Adan, a twenty-two-year-old waiter. Mailer testified on Abbott’s behalf at the ensuing murder trial.
Mailer’s flirtation with criminals like Gary Gilmore and Jack Abbott must be seen as the fulfillment of his celebration of the “psychopath” as an existential hero. In his notorious essay “The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster,” first published in Dissent in 1957, Mailer definitively articulated an ethic that underlies not only his own view of the world but also the view that would inform the cultural revolution of the 1960s. In tone, “The White Negro” is a panoply of “existentialist” rant. In content, it is a manifesto on behalf of moral nihilism. Mailer speaks casually of “the totalitarian tissues of American society” and invokes “the psychic havoc of the concentration camps and the atom bomb upon the unconscious mind of almost everyone alive in these years.” The only authentic response to this situation, he says, is “to divorce oneself from society” and “to encourage the psychopath in oneself.” This is the strategy of “the hipster,” who has “absorbed the existentialist synapses of the Negro, and [who] for practical purposes could be considered a white Negro.” (Mailer’s stereotypical portrayal of blacks as beastlike sexual athletes is one of the many distasteful things about the essay.)

The rest of “The White Negro” is a glorification of the hipster and his ethic of promiscuous sex, drug-taking, and criminal violence. The hipster, Mailer explains, is part of “an elite with the potential ruthlessness of an elite, and a language most adolescents can understand instinctively, for the hipster’s intense view of existence matches their experience and their desire to rebel.” Mailer conjures the image—it is what made the essay infamous—of eighteen-year-old hoodlums who “beat in the brains of a candy-store keeper.” For Mailer such behavior is acceptable, even laudable, because the psychopath, by murdering, demonstrates his “courage” and “purge[s] his violence.” To the objection that it does not take much courage to kill someone older and weaker, Mailer explains that “one murders not only a weak fifty-year-old man but an institution as well, one violates private property, one enters into a new relation with the police and introduces a dangerous element into one’s life.” Mailer goes on to explain that “at bottom, the drama of the psychopath is that he seeks love.” Not, however, “love as the search for a mate, but love as the search for an orgasm more apocalyptic than the one which preceded it. Orgasm is his therapy—he knows at the seed of his being that good orgasm opens his possibilities and bad orgasm imprisons him.” This is one reason that the hipster adores jazz: “jazz,” Mailer tells us, “is orgasm.” The hipster’s quest “for absolute sexual freedom” entails the necessity of “becoming a sexual outlaw.”

It is not only sexual morality that the hipster discards. “Hip abdicates from any conventional moral responsibility because it would argue that the results of our actions are unforeseeable, and so we cannot know if we do good or bad. … The only Hip morality … is to do what one feels whenever and wherever it is possible, and … to be engaged in one primal battle: to open the limits of the possible for oneself, for oneself alone, because that is one’s need.”

“The White Negro” adumbrates practically everything that went wrong with American society under the assault of left-wing radicalism in the 1960s, from the addiction to violence,
drugs, pop music, and sexual polymorphism, to the moral idiocy, jejune anti-Americanism, and mindless glorification of narcissistic irresponsibility and extreme states of experience. Although many critics took issue with Mailer’s exoneration of violence, the real message of the essay—if it feels good, do it!—was just then beginning to sweep the country with irresistible force. “The White Negro” represented an important opening salvo in the war on convention, restraint, and traditional morality. This, not his literary accomplishment, was the ultimate secret of Mailer’s broad appeal. Mailer, as Joseph Epstein observed, “was one of the key men responsible for releasing the Dionysian strain in American life.” He promised his readers what they longed to hear: that ultimate, self-centered ecstasy was theirs for the taking. Mailer once said that he would “settle for nothing less than making a revolution in the consciousness of our time.” He did not make the revolution, but he assuredly became one of its most egregious emblems.

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