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VOLUME 12 • ANNUAL ISSUE • 1996

"What I do is ceremony.
It would be acting,
if somebody else could do
my performances."

— KAREN FINLEY

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Hart Crane's poem, "Legends," which steps with "the legend of [one's] youth into the noon."

Our current cultural moment has been called "conservative," and it probably is. The value of the articulation (and imaginative exploration) of erotic experience is questionable again: some would say that the presence of *eros* in poetry is narcissistic display. In Liu's poetry the erotic is essential to both the surface of the poem and its depths, so essential that it becomes "unreflecting," to quote Keats, an energy that bonds the speaker to others and to the world. A poem such as "White Moths," in which "the bronzed backs / of men in the park" are adorned with "pale wings / fanning a glitter of dust," shows us that Liu desires to speak humbly, guilelessly, and from within existence, and succeeds in doing so.

The psychic risk which is the price for an undefended and vibrant existence is explored fully in the long poem "With Chaos in Each Kiss." The speaker's love for his partner, a musician, is enriched by pain until the "song slowly composing itself inside [his] body" becomes "the voice / of sadness that is always singing / beneath the visible." He acknowledges that "only love can make us visible," that "without fear, love would lie still," and the sanity of this particular relationship is disclosed when we are shown that his lover is also one who must "deny [his] own face."

Technically, Liu's poetry gains a great deal from his alert comfort with silence. His brief poems are among his best, using implication, nuance, and juxtaposition to convey a compact range. In eight lines, "Manifest Destiny" brings together imperialism, Christianity, the Holocaust, and the tragedy of capitalism:

The gods of this new world
have no honor. A parrot shouts

Christ, perched on a widow's porch,
while dozens of its kind

are shoveled into a furnace. Christ.
A whistle blows its plume of smoke

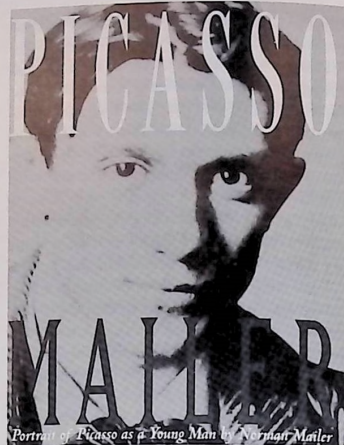
across the land, train after train
pulling out of the empty stations.

The well-timed repetition of "Christ" gives the poem a dramatic fullness of voice. The subtle, yet clear relationships between the details make the poem more than a kaleidoscopic fragment.

Liu often employs a clipped syntax, sometimes creating a kind of ambiguous half-question by beginning an incomplete sentence with the word "How." As in the poetry of Linda Gregg and Jack Gilbert, where similarly staccato sentence patterns result in a powerful stasis, Liu's undefeatable supple rhythms offer a dynamic engagement with life.

—CHRISTOPHER DAVIS

Christopher Davis's first book won the AWP Award in 1988 and his second collection, *A Silent War*, is circulating in manuscript. He teaches creative writing at UNC Charlotte.



Portrait of Picasso as a Young Man: An Interpretive Biography

by Norman Mailer
Atlantic Monthly Press

Stocky, powerful, and libidinous, he was also short, cowardly, and fearful. A rough chunk of primal matter, with dark zones of energy drawn around his eyes, he mesmerized women. He mesmerized men. For the artists who came of age during the '30s and '40s, Norman Mailer's generation, Picasso was God. Mailer witnessed this homage and absorbed it, eventually signing a contract in 1962 to write a biography of the artist and spending some weeks with Picasso's oeuvre in reproduction and two more months writing a series of self-interviews. These inquiries were essentially dialogues between self and soul about the violent act of creating artistic forms.

Published in 1966 as a 200-page conclusion to *Cannibals and Christians*, a collection of occasional pieces, the writing was all the more extravagant for being in the bastard form of journalistic Q & A. Mailer explored his key ideas through the dynamic of an interrogator who was at once sympathetic and hostile, pushing the argument forward with either a pull from the front or a kick in the behind, here with invigorating encouragement, there with questions so challenging as to be damning. A generative concept for Mailer was that "form was the physical equivalent of memory," meaning that the form, say, of a piece of driftwood revealed the history of the wood. The scars and missing knots, knobs and hollows, were evidence of its experience. Its very deformities were telling and embodied time in the same way that Cubism, by playing separate planes onto a flat surface, put past, present, and future into a single dimension. Additionally, if terrors were part of the history of the form, then the form possessed the power of a gargoyle and could function magically to protect the creator from the anxiety it expressed. Mailer expected his meditation to function as a

midwife to his imagination in producing the projected biography, but he found, as he says in the preface to the book finally delivered last year, 30 years later, that Picasso "had stimulated the dialogues in such a way that one had insights into the extremities of one's own thinking but few biographical perceptions about him."

Why did it take Mailer so long to develop the biographical perceptions offered now? How could it be otherwise? The occasion to imagine Picasso as a young man had to wait until Mailer was an old man, partly, no doubt, because of the tremendous research involved in mastering the drama of Picasso's growth as an artist. In his robust voice, Mailer shows why mistresses often start out as models and are discarded when they no longer serve as muse. Mailer brings out Picasso's artistic competitiveness, his sexual jealousy (Picasso would no more let his mistress model for other artists than he would allow them to put a stroke on his work-in-progress), and his clairvoyant regard for the tyranny of his own hand-eye coordination. Hundreds of Picasso's works are reproduced, the photographs woven into the text as in a well-timed slide presentation. Mailer's descriptions of Picasso's paintings and drawings are full and convincing, a model of how to say something important about visual art and say it without the tedious jargon of the expert. And, keeping in mind that Mailer never met Picasso, one could compare Mailer's portrait to those of several biographers of Picasso, including John Richardson, Françoise Gilot, and James Lord, and maintain that Mailer's book is as vivid as those by his intimates. It is true Mailer has been criticized for stating abundantly from primary sources, but it is obvious that a work of scholarship would not be competent without a utilization of established references. Indeed Mailer translates several of the sources himself, and what would be an editorial coup for an obscure scholar becomes the failing of a major author. The real resentment must arise from knowing that Mailer worked with material available to all, yet was able to animate it by refracting it through his own consciousness.

As a 19-year-old Spanish painter in Paris, Picasso could not speak French, but he learned, as Mailer says, that the curve of a line proved to be the equal of a turn of phrase. This link between the visual and verbal is the fulcrum of Mailer's insight into Picasso. Mailer discusses a portrait of Casagamas, Picasso's friend who committed suicide in late adolescence. In this small oil, 11 by 14 inches, a thick, phallic candle burns beside Casagamas in repose under a sheet, his bearded face exposed to a lurid flame. Mailer is not the first to remark that the flame, its brightness gaping from within, looks like a vagina, even as it seems to mean something luminous about the boundary between life and death. The early work hints at Picasso's future progress, through psychological description to rough, primitive, carved expressions of form, and Mailer says, "It could be argued that there will be a direct line of development over the next decade from the Blue Period, soon to appear, into the vast aesthetic

range of Cubism. Picasso had entered the world of visual equivalents."

Mailer continues, "One can ponder the concept. An artist's line in a drawing can be the equivalent of a spoken word or two. The bend of the fingers can prove equal to a 'dejected hand,' or the outline of the upper leg muscles speak of an 'assertive thigh.' Form is also a language, and so it is legitimate to cite visual puns—that is, visual equivalents, and visual exchanges. No matter how one chooses to phrase it, artists, for centuries, have been painting specific objects, only to discover that they also look like something else."

Picasso was born during an earthquake. He was witness to an autopsy of a woman killed by lightning, performed with a saw on her skull in order to examine her brain. Picasso was himself the groundbreaker who split the faces of the women he loved, dividing by dissection, deforming savagely, and doubling the face by exposing the profile. Mailer writes of the portraits of Olga, Picasso's first wife, his mistress Dora Maar, and his second wife, Jacqueline, that "we can see that he lived, nonetheless, with these women in a manner that some men never do: He was in each relationship—he saw the women as his equal. No matter how hideously he presented these three women, he would never have delineated them so if he had not entered into a depth of revulsion for what their relationship had become, and that, in turn, disclosed how hideous were his own spiritual sores. The physiognomy of his psyche is present in each of these portrayals."

Mailer's portrait focuses on Picasso as a young man as he undergoes the profound transition into the creator of "Les Femmes d'Alger," and an important portion of the book—leading through the urchin melancholy of the Blue Period and the opium-like bliss of the Rose Period and through the cubist collaboration with Braque—is told through the eyes of Fernande Oliver, Picasso's first serious mistress with whom he lived for seven crucial years, 1905-1912, in the bohemian squalor of the dilapidated "Bateau Lavoir" in Montmartre. "A strange and sordid house," she writes of their residence, "the most diverse noises sounding from morning to night, discussions, songs, exclamations, cries, the racket of slop pails being emptied and dropped to the floor, the noise of pitchers being set down on the stone of the fountain, doors slammed, and the most questionable groans which passed right through the closed doors of these studios." Large portions of her second set of memoirs, never published in English, have been translated by Mailer, and her voice, so present in feeling, sustains Mailer's running commentary on space and time, form and creativity.

Mailer's probing instinct for the motives, noble and base, that drive the great artist might seem to offer the famous author an opportunity to expound on his own motives, but, no, to expound on his own motives for Mailer's Picasso's egotism is an occasion for Mailer's modesty. The book's strength is that its author does not compete with his subject—could Mailer as a young man have been as modest? Mailer seems to make no assertion, however provoca-

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tive, that cannot be substantiated by a discussion of some work of Picasso's. My favorite is the idea that the cubist search for universal form may have been driven by a desire to transcend sex. "Not all love affairs are carnal," Mailer writes. The four-subject portrait that is "Les Femmes d'Alger" was never resolved by Picasso. The artist could not satisfy himself. One feels in the dichotomies of the painting the tortured blending of the rock-like manliness of Gertrude Stein and witch-like femininity of Fernande. Mailer's meditation on form thus leads him to a meditation on gender, inspired by Gertrude Stein, whom he says represents "the most monumental crossover in gender" that Picasso had ever encountered. With Fernande, Picasso "had entered the essential ambiguity of deep sex, where one's masculinity and femininity is forever turning into its opposite, so that a phallus, once emplaced within a vagina, can become more aware of the vagina than its own phallitude—that is to say, one is, at the moment, a vagina as much as a phallus, or for a woman vice versa, a phallus just as much as a vagina: At such moments, no matter one's physical appearance, one has, in the depths of sex, crossed over into androgyny."

—CHRISTOPHER BUSA

Christopher Busa's interview with Karen Finley appears elsewhere in this issue.

forever, later discovers that Millett lied, having secretly lived with Jaycee while in England. Millett fights for 25 years, sometimes desperately, for forgiveness, but receives only contempt from A.D. Second, the impetus and imprimatur for the memoir, Aunt Dorothy dies, destroying any hope for reconciliation.

Knowing pieces of Millett's biography—important icon of early feminism upon publication of *Sexual Politics* in 1970; founder of The Farm, a self-supporting colony for women artists and writers; prolific artist and writer herself—it is difficult to accept that someone necessarily of such fortitude could wither so under the condemnation of an aunt of dubious merit. Then, knowing pieces of Millett's work, one recalls that her strength lies in never shying away from sore spots and monsters, and that she tackles them always through art.

In A.D., Millett's art is revealed most beautifully in her agile handling of chronology and balanced presentation of contradictory emotions. Sifting through 50 years of what could be called, albeit simplistically, a love-hate relationship, Millett grounds us to time on the paths of remembrance worn as she mourns A.D.'s death. As a child Millett lived in two discordant familial circles, the maternal side characterized by "sturdy peasant honesty," the paternal by "implacable aristocratic gaiety and distance, snobbery and playfulness." At her mother's house, there was reality, not least economic, while at Aunt Dorothy's lakeside estate there were first editions of the classics, paintings by great artists, a Han horse statue, Haydn at dinnertime, lofty friends. A highlight of the book, for its exceptional joy, comes when young Kate, Aunt Dorothy and Elsa Schiaparelli, the European fashion designer, gather in A.D.'s basement, the adults drunk on champagne and Kate on ginger ale, and all of them fingerpainting and playing and laughing late into the night.

But things get complicated as life goes on. Dorothy's standards are rigid and narrow and Kate falls outside the boundaries in every way. Millett imagines Aunt Dorothy's summation: "Problematic offspring: first she is queer, then turns artist and throws away her education, writes those dreadful books, and now it appears she is mad as well." Until her death, Aunt Dorothy scorned Millett, initially for the deception and "sinful" union, but overall to rub in her disgust with Millett's chosen life and work. Millett attributes her becoming an artist and writer, to a large extent, to the example A.D. set as the connoisseur of culture, the pinnacle of intelligence and womanhood. So how did Millett's formation of herself go so wrong in the eyes of the ideal that inspired her?

When the inquiry comes this far, the memoir reaches its deepest level, focusing beyond what happened to explore how what happened contributed to the making of the author. Upon visiting A.D.'s house after the death, Millett notes to herself, "here was formed your . . . templates of behavior, your primary sources and examples . . . a certain kind of moral perception and the knowledge you have fallen short of it

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A.D.

by Kate Millett
W.W. Norton & Company

Little is more frustrating than listening to a friend lament love unrequited by someone everyone else knows is no good anyway. It's even worse when this friend acknowledges the beloved's downfalls, yet remains in a state of uncontrollable longing. Reading Kate Millett's latest memoir, which recounts her life-long love for, and anguish over, her Aunt Dorothy—A.D. of the title—you might find yourself groaning, "Oh come on, Kate, she was cruel and cold as ice, you said so yourself!" But listen and nod for awhile, be a patient companion. Millett indeed emerges from the cycle of "woe is me's" and "if only's" that, if you've been there, you know, can swallow you up. Resolution arrives, and she finally can, in the last words of the book: "let go."

Millett's success in letting go is especially honorable given the confluence of vital roles A.D. played in her life. Aunt Dorothy is: the first love, as a childhood crush; the lasting love, with passion never diminished; the symbol, as a wealthy St. Paul "aristocrat," collector and patron of the arts, of all that is great and beautiful in life; and the primary link, as sister to Millett's father, to the man who abandoned Millett and her family. Two circumstances darken the shadow cast by Dorothy's figure. First, an old betrayal. Aunt Dorothy, who financed Millett's Oxford education on the condition that she sever all ties to girlfriend Jaycee and swear off her lesbian urges