

PROVINCETOWN ARTS

us \$10 • canada \$14

volume 17 • annual issue 2002/03

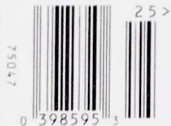
Sports showed me how
not to be afraid of losing.
I learned to lose and not
lose my dignity.

Sebastian Junger



ISBN 0-944254-44-3
ISSN 1053-5012

25 >



Norman Mailer

Novelist or Nonfiction Writer?

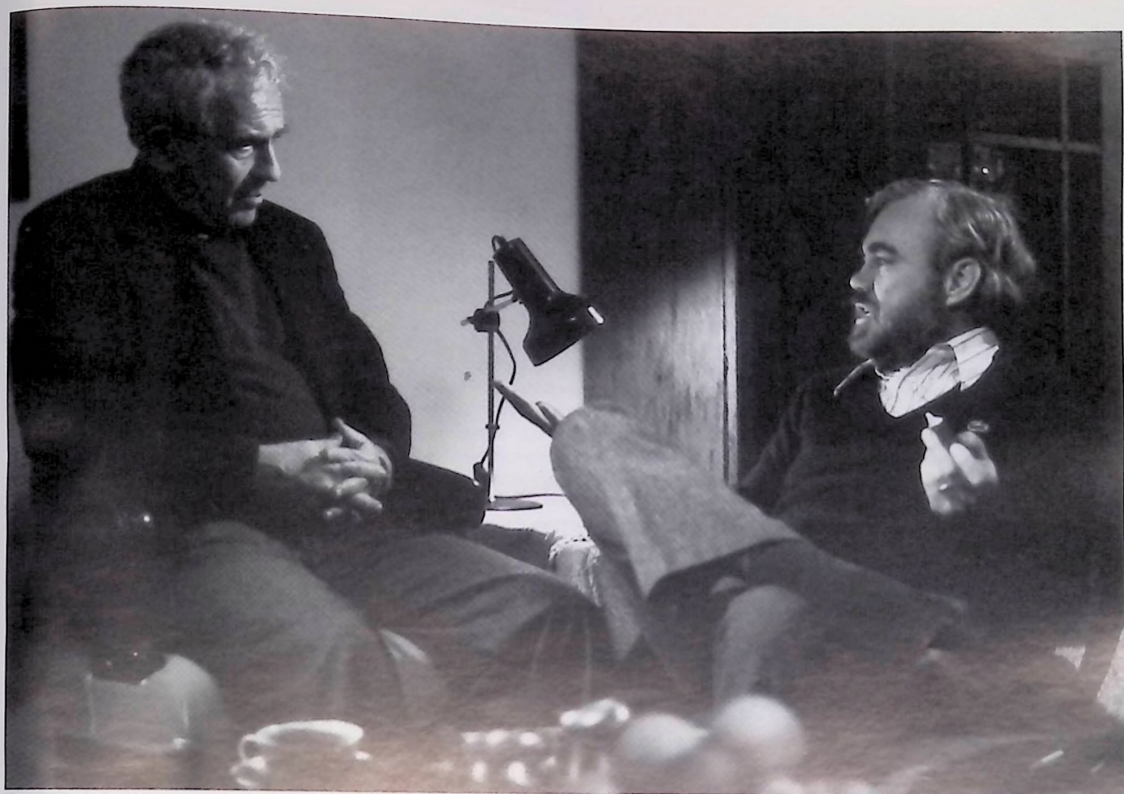
BY J. MICHAEL LENNON

"I
AM A NOVELIST."

If I asked Norman Mailer to answer my title question, there would hardly be a nanosecond of hesitation: "I am a novelist," he would say, while thumping the table for emphasis. And then incredulity would come to his face: "Can one aspire to a greater office?"

Since the beginning of his career he has believed that the novel provides ingress to history, and can, by dint of visionary style, alter it even as it records its main currents. Indeed, the novel and history seem to circle endlessly in Mailer's vision, undercutting and borrowing from each other for primacy, like rival siblings in a Eugene O'Neill play. By aspiration, his deepest identity is novelist. By achievement and accolade, it may not be, although several of his novels must be considered to be among the major achievements of the form. Sorting out aspiration and achievement in Mailer's brilliant narrative career, and unraveling—or at least loosening the knots—of the attendant generic conundrums, is a complex task. Drawing on Mailer's 50 years of commentary on the art of narrative, including several key interviews, I would like to delineate the ways in which he has been a central figure in the postwar cross-fertilization of fiction and nonfiction writing modes.

In 1959 in *Advertisements for Myself* he said, "I feel that the final purpose of art is to intensify, even, if necessary, to exacerbate the moral consciousness of people. In particular, I think the novel is at its best the most moral of the art forms because it's the most immediate, the most overbearing, if you will. It is the most inescapable." Twenty years later, when asked why he thought fiction was so important, he said, "Oh, because it's the place where art and philosophy and adventure finally come together . . . To me a novel is better than a reality." In 1981, he hit the same note: "My idea finally is that fiction is a noble pursuit, that ideally it profoundly changes the ways in which people perceive their experience." It would be no work to find 20 additional complementary quotes in his essays, interviews, and prefaces. Mailer is in the vanguard of American



NORMAN MAILER & MICHAEL LENNON, 1980

writers of the past half-century who have reviewed, tested, stretched, and reshaped the novel form in an attempt to capture what the great Russian theorist, M. M. Bakhtin (1895-1975) calls the "unfinalizability" of contemporary culture.

Perhaps the most pointed of Mailer's comments comes in his preface to his 1976 collection, *Some Honorable Men: Political Conventions, 1960-1972*. He begins with a shot at Tom Wolfe. "Ever since Tom Wolfe began to write those self-serving encomiums to the New Journalism, it has been a literary reflex to point to . . . [my] convention pieces . . . as objects of the new art, and it is possible I received more praise as a new journalist than ever as a novelist. That is an irony that tempts me to spit to the wind: I never worked as a journalist and dislike the profession." After launching a few more barbs into the hide of contemporary journalism, culminating in a comment that his own literary heritage reminded him "that the world is not supposed to be reassembled by panels of prefabricated words," he gives his novelistic credo: "It was expected of me to see the world with my own eyes and own words. See it by the warp or stance of my character. Which if it could collect into some kind of integrity might be called a style. I was enlisted then on the side of an undeclared war between those modes of perception called journalism and fiction. When it came to accuracy, I was on the side of fiction. I thought fiction

could bring us closer to the truth than journalism, which is not to say one should make up facts when writing a story about real people."

While we can quibble with Mailer's comment about never having worked as a journalist—he has written columns and/or assigned articles for a number of popular periodicals (*Esquire*, *Playboy*, *The Village Voice*, others)—it is true that he has never worked as a daily deadline journalist. But he is one of the leading *magaziners* in American literary history; up there with Poe, Crane, Fitzgerald, Oates, and Updike. His comment about receiving less praise for his novels than his nonfiction has become, however, in the quarter of a century since then, even more true. There is much less favorable comment about his novels than his nonfiction by academic critics, with a few exceptions. In the popular press, Mailer's nonfiction has been much better received. A survey of reviews in national publications, including the *New York Times Book Review*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, and some of the major regional newspapers—*Boston Globe*, *Washington Post*, *Chicago Tribune*—a total of 25 publications in all, shows that Mailer's novels have not been nearly as well-received as his other narratives. Of his 27 major books, nine are novels: *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), *Barbary Shore* (1951), *The Deer Park* (1955), *An American Dream* (1965), *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (1967), *Ancient Evenings* (1983), *Tough Guys Don't Dance* (1984), *Harlot's Ghost* (1992), and *The Gospel according to the Son*

(1997). In order to get a sense of the overall tenor, I rated each review of the 27 books appearing in the 25 publications from 1 to 5, negative to positive. Not every book was reviewed in every publication, but a total of 412 reviews were rated, which I concluded after some further investigation was at least 95 percent of the total possible.

Only one novel is in the top third of the list: *The Naked and the Dead*, which occupies the second spot. It follows his immensely successful (Pulitzer, National Book Award, best seller) first-hand narrative on the 1967 March on the Pentagon, *The Armies of the Night* (1968), subtitled *History as a Novel; The Novel as History*. The bottom third of the list of 27 contains six novels, and the middle third has two: *Why Are We in Vietnam?* at number 11, and *Harlot's Ghost* at 15. The average rating for Mailer's nine novels is 2.602. For his 10 nonfiction narratives (leaving aside the other eight—the miscellanies, a book of poems, a play, etc.), the average is 3.307. The average for all 27 of Mailer's major books is 2.947. This is the record of the literary marketplace over the last half-century. With the tremendous exception of *The Naked and the Dead*, which has sold over five million copies, readers have admired Mailer's non-fiction more than his fiction, and so have literary critics.

Qualifications, serious ones, immediately fickle. What is elevated today is forgotten tomorrow (when was the last time Nobel laureate John

Galsworthy's *Forsythe Saga* was taught in an American university?), and the poor initial showing of books such as Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* or Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* seems inexplicable now. Mailer's *An American Dream* was poorly reviewed, although some perceptive critics rate it as one of Mailer's finest narratives. For my money, it compares favorably with *Gatsby*. It displays Mailer's rich, evocative style at its energetic peak, while Mailer's Hollywood novel, *The Deer Park* trumps Fitzgerald's *The Last Tycoon*. Mailer's sixth novel, *Why Are We in Vietnam?* is a critical favorite, more for the linguistic inventiveness of its narrator, D. J., than for its narrative line. When it appeared in 1967, it seemed that Mailer had retrieved the novelistic thread, and was ready to re-commence his project, announced in *Advertisements for Myself*, "to make a revolution in the consciousness of our time" with a grand novel, one that ranked with the best of Hemingway, Dreiser, or former Provincetown resident John Dos Passos, whose 1936 novel, *U.S.A.*, Mailer has called "the most successful portrait of America in the first half of the twentieth century." Implicit in Mailer's encomium is his ambition to match *U.S.A.* in the second half of the century, to be the sort of major novelist, as he once said of these three writers, "who puts you through a wringer, changes your life."

MAILER TURNED FROM THE NOVEL

But then Mailer turned from the novel. From 1968 to 1983, in an amazingly long sprint, he published 21 books. Some of these were just sparks from the wheel, of course, long essays like *The Faith of Gruffiti* (1974), or the re-packaged columns in *The Idol and the Octopus* (1968), but 11 of his 27 major books came during this period, including at least one masterpiece, *The Armies of the Night*, and his brilliant recreations of the 1968 conventions, the Apollo 11 flight to the moon, and the beginnings of the Women's Liberation Movement in, respectively, *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* (1968), *Of a Fire on the Moon* (1971), and *The Prisoner of Sex* (1971), and in 1979, *The Executioner's Song*, his huge Western epic about the life and death of Gary Gilmore, which he subtitled "a true life novel." The point bears repeating, except for *The Executioner's Song* (which in Mailer's view is a novel), not one novel from 1967 until 1983, when *Ancient Evenings*, his novel of ancient Egypt, appeared.

What happened? Mailer said in 1979, "I'm not sure the Great American Novel can be done anymore. Everything's gotten so complicated, and you have to know so much by now. I think John Dos Passos came as close as anyone with *U.S.A.*" He continues, saying that Dos Passos's "method's fine so long as people are more the prey of social forces than the active element that changes society." His method "won't work for books where you really have to create the consciousness of terribly complicated people." In another interview the same year, he says that the '60s scene "was beyond our imaginations, it was more dramatic, more surrealistic, more vivid, than anything we would have dared to write

about," a notion that echoes comments by Philip Roth and Tom Wolfe. Not only was the material good, Mailer found, it was also much less demanding. In 1981 he said that journalism "was vastly easier than trying to write novels, and I was discouraged with the difficulty of writing them at that point. I had run into this business [in novel writing] of trying to tell a good story and yet say wonderful things about the nature of the world and society, touch all the ultimate, and yet at the same time, have it read like speed. There are so many pitfalls to this. I always had a terrible time with the story. My stories were always ending up begrounded. There I'd be, in the middle of the dunes, no gas in the tank. I loved journalism because it gave me the story, which I'd always been weakest in. Then I discovered the horror of it. Audiences liked it better... critical faculties they wanted interpretation... critical faculties were being called for, rather than one's novelistic gifts. Under all those temptations, I must say I succumbed, and I spent a good many years working at the edge of journalism."

"It is possible I received more praise as a new journalist than ever as a novelist. That is an irony that tempts me to spit to the wind: I never worked as a journalist and dislike the profession."

In a July 1983 interview, Mailer explained that he got into journalism by accident when Harold Hayes of *Esquire* asked him to cover the 1960 political conventions. "I discovered," he said, "that I had a flair for this kind of thing, and lo-and-behold I was now in journalism. I think I react to situations rather than make decisions... I've always found it comfortable to do journalism, but I've also always felt that it was not the high road." Despite this distaste for journalism, it should be noted that of his five books nominated for the National Book Award, only one, *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, is a novel. As noted, he received his first Pulitzer for *The Armies of the Night*, and his second for *The Executioner's Song*. But the Pulitzer for *Song* was awarded in the fictional category, an amazing circumstance in that Mailer has stated over and over that he never deviated from the known facts of the Gilmore saga. Nevertheless, he has always held that *Song* is a novel. He told William Buckley, Jr. shortly after it was published that he

wanted "to give the readers the feeling that they are participating in the life of the characters they're reading about. They shouldn't necessarily understand everything that's going on any more than we do in life. The moment we understand everything in a book, it can't possibly be fiction... [not] the way I'm defining it." Yet he concedes that the plot of *Song* was not an invention, but a gift. His instinct when writing it, as he noted in a 1985 interview, was to speed up narration, change dialogue here and there, "until," he said, "it dawned on me that the story was as good as it could be. I realized God is a much better novelist than the novelist."

Mailer reinforced his generic independence when speaking at a *New York Times* panel: "I think a writer has the right to call his work whatever he wants to call it. You might say I'm being confusing, but a writer has certain inalienable rights, and one is the right to create confusion." "You try to write," he said in 1987, "something that defies—no, not defies—that straddles categories. Categories are just critics' attempts to bring order to a complex aesthetic universe... These are all forms to be explored, not obeyed." As Bakhtin has noted, "the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction, between literature and nonliterature and so forth are not laid out in heaven."

Before laying out an implicit generic taxonomy that might help explain why novelist Mailer has spent huge chunks of his career on non-fiction (Mailer has again teamed up with Larry Schiller, his partner on *Executioner's Song* and several other books, on a new project: a CBS mini-series on accused FBI spy Robert Hanssen, a Bakhtinian stretch of the novel if there ever was one), I'd like to present three of Mailer's metaphors for the relationship of the novel and nonfiction narratives.

The first came in the 1979 interview with William Buckley, Jr., who asks a simple question: why did Mailer call *Executioner's Song* a "true life novel" (a sub-title dropped from later editions, it is worth noting). Mailer says: "I think of nonfiction as living on two stomachs, like the cow. In other words, the material is eaten, it's partially digested, it's regurgitated and then it's digested again." Mailer continues, "[The author] literally digests the material... to make a difficult passage more simple. And the one thing that nonfiction calls for is understanding—clear understanding of what's being said. It's hard to think of a good book of nonfiction whose waters are not clear. Whereas in fiction, what we want to do is we want to create life."

Note here Mailer's emphasis on how the reader works through a novel's serpentine and surprises with the author, a joint operation that he endorses. The novels Mailer admires most are compounded of possibility, mystery, confusions, and evocations. A long-time communicant in the church of organic form, Mailer dislikes novels that are too schematic, and prefers suggestiveness to objective description. In a 1980 *Washington Post Book Review* interview, Mailer says that he wanted *Executioner's Song* to "read like a novel, to feel like a novel, to smell

like a novel." He continues saying that if you "don't know what is going to happen next, and you want to know what happens next, then you are in the presence of a novel."

FICTION: IMAGINED OR REAL?

The second metaphor emerges in this discussion and is also gastronomic. "Nonfiction," he says, "bears the same relationship to life as vitamin pills bear to food. In nonfiction, there's a tendency to digest the material, absorb it, and return it to you as vitamin pills."

The essence is gotten out of the various experiences, compressed and delivered to the reader. The reader can then digest the nonfiction and convert it back to living reality." He then makes what at first seems to be a puzzling remark: "Fiction," he says, "can have two modes, imagined and real. Ideally, fiction gives you the feeling that life is going on, that we are encountering life as we are living it. Nonfiction treats life as if the vividness of experience is over, and now the meaning of it will be presented to you." It is not crystal clear, at this point, whether Mailer is favoring the imagined or real mode of fiction. But in a 1981 interview, Mailer says that historians are "dealing with 10,000 facts and they select 300 very careful ones to make their case. And they call that stuff history when we all know it's fiction. The mark of a great historian is that he's a great fiction writer." In the next breath, Mailer provides the novelistic counterpart to the pure, objective historian. He states baldly, "Very few novels are ever true works of the imagination—I mean, how many Kafkas have there been?" I take from that for Mailer "real" novels have recognizable historical settings, imaginary toads in real gardens, whereas successful fabulists such as Kafka or Borges are rare birds. In the same interview, Mailer says that one of the reasons for the success of *Executioner's Song* is that it didn't have what he calls the "paranoid perfection" of writers who don't know how the world works—he may be thinking of Pynchon's brilliant but cold and closed system in *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973). *Song* succeeded, in part, he says, because "it had all the rough edges of reality. If I had conceived that book in my imagination, it would have been much more perfect and much less good." The old Coleridgean notion of imagination as the faculty that transcends reason and unifies the various mental faculties is not one that Mailer subscribes to.

Tom Wolfe's claim that journalism has usurped the place of the novel, prompts Mailer to present his third and finest metaphor for the issue: "I've said 100 times that I think journalism is easier than novel writing because you know the story . . . The difficulty of writing a truly impressive novel is equal to asking a singer of the stature of Pavarotti to compose his own music. Journalism makes opera singers out of us. We've got the story, and all we've got to do is go in and show our vocal cords."

WHERE DOES THIS LEAVE US?

I'd like to argue that Mailer's unspoken narra-

tive taxonomy depends on a fundamental dichotomy between the novel and nonfiction. The novel is spontaneous, resonant and intended to illumine questions; nonfiction is digested, concrete, and intended to provide answers. Novels are open, immediate, overbearing and intensify consciousness; nonfiction is safe, organized and buttresses pre-determined conclusions. In the novel, everything is slightly murky, swirling; when meaning does emerge, it does so in a flash of color and intuition. Nonfiction is like a trial where evidence is presented systematically. At the end of the day, the accretion of linked facts is overwhelming. Fiction is the high road and its plots are demanding; nonfiction is the low road and its plots are known ahead of time. Time in the novel ebbs and flows. Time in nonfiction has already been consumed.

But there are further divisions, subtler, and less remarked on by Mailer. These are the splits within both the novel and nonfiction, the minority within each form, which I suggest, make the first dichotomy a reversible dualism. Mailer holds that there are two kinds of novels: those based in history and those that are imagined. Dos Passos and Tolstoy vs. Kafka and Borges. He often calls the former the panoramic novel; the latter, the kind with "paranoid perfection," are often fables or allegorical. The first type, although grounded in reality, is more open-ended; the latter, although unfettered from the everyday, is closed. Mailer favors the former, but does so in part because history has provided him the plots. Each of Mailer's novels, even *Why Are We in Vietnam?* and *Ancient Evenings*, clearly demarcates an historical period. He clearly prefers the novel as history. Yet even though Mailer favors the historically based novel, he finds historical writing to be suspect because he believes it to be neither unbiased nor comprehensive. Historians marshal their evidence selectively, Mailer feels, thus fictionalizing it. All of this reveals a certain oblique, if unintended, contradiction in Mailer's argument. On the one hand, he endorses novels stretched on historical frames, using plots that are known. Yet on the other, he states emphatically that most historians don't really write history at all. "Most people learn," he said in 1980, "somewhere between . . . graduate school and life . . . that history is not history, but a series of immensely sober novels written by men who often don't have large literary talents, and have less to say about the real world than novelists . . . The desire to make these facts glow as facets in a mosaic that will enable us to perceive the past is not often done. Once we come to realize that no historians do it more closely than novelists, then all history becomes a novel."

Mailer's reversible dualism may be confusing, but it is, perhaps, the result of his unwillingness fully and formally to endorse any generic scheme. He is a great polemicist, a street debater, and scores points at will in assessing narrative form. But he will never certify any one form—except some Platonic notion of the novel—with finality. As a long-time connoisseur of these forms, he will not willingly jettison anything from his tool

kit. He will continue to surprise us with his forms, bringing new variants out every few years and confounding those who would consign him to one room in the house of narrative. Yet if we look at Mailer's achievements, if we run a provisional line of merit through the dozen or so narratives upon which his reputation will rest, we may find some congruence between his critical utterances and his most successful projects.

Let's cross off poetry, drama and film, the short story and the essay (with whatever private regrets), and agree that Mailer's greatness does not reside in these forms. I would run a silver line of high achievement through the following: *The Naked and the Dead*, *The Deer Park*, *Advertisements for Myself*, *An American Dream*, *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, *The Armies of the Night*, *Of a Fire on the Moon*, *The Fight* (1975), *The Executioner's Song*, *Ancient Evenings*, *Harlot's Ghost*, *Oswald's Tale*, and *The Gospel According to the Son* (1997). Pressed hard, I would trim the list to those surprising, elating narratives which augment narrative possibility in the service of the historical mosaic: *The Naked and the Dead*, *Advertisements for Myself*, *An American Dream*, *The Armies of the Night*, *The Executioner's Song* and *Oswald's Tale*. Six narratives of embattled Americans, two of whom are Norman Mailer (in *Advertisements* and *Armies*), and one, Stephen Rojack, in *An American Dream*, who is a fictional cousin. Mailer's finest works are evenly divided between those that present the authorial self and those that shroud it. Each of these texts is centered in an emblematic American moment. And each created more or less consternation—much of it generic—when it appeared.

As Mailer said in 1983, "I don't think it's an accident that I'm a novelist. Novelists have a wicked point of view—wicked as opposed to evil. They are interested in upping the ante. They are interested in more happening, not less." Mailer has the same huge regard for the novel as Bakhtin, who called it "a genre that is ever questing, ever examining itself, and subjecting its established forms to review." It's too bad that Bakhtin did not live to read the narratives of the wicked Mr. Mailer.

J. MICHAEL LENNON is the author or editor of four books about Norman Mailer, including his latest, *Norman Mailer: Works and Days* (with his wife Donna Pedro Lennon), and is the editor of Mailer's new collection, *Reflections on a Spooky Art*, which will be published by Random House on Mailer's 80th birthday, January 31, 2002. (Quotations in this article will be included in the book.) He is Professor of English and Emeritus Vice President of Academic Affairs at Wilkes University, and serves with his wife as Mailer's archivist. The Lennons have resided part-year in Provincetown for five years.

