

Dear Wm,

3/28/05

Enclosed is the article
by David Costronovo that
I mentioned to you. I hope
you get a chance to read
some Thomas Carlyle —
maybe Heroes and Hero
Worshippers or Sator Resartus

I'm working along
on stuff for Texas.

Hope all is well,

Mike

New England Review

Vol 24, No 1
(2004)

David Castronovo

Norman Mailer As Midcentury Advertisement

Norman Mailer's *Advertisements for Myself* is an act of defiance -- filled with tantrums and inflated rhetoric -- but nevertheless a landmark in our literature of protest. After having put in some profitable time as a literary naturalist with his war novel *The Naked and the Dead* (1948) and with his Hollywood expose *The Deer Park* (1955), Mailer emerged in the late fifties as America's most outrageous rhetorician, someone who adapted the classic idea of instruct-and-delight and turned it into insult-and-shock. His famous essay on the hipster, "The White Negro," and the story "The Man Who Studied Yoga" are the most valuable portions of the book -- if book we can call it. *Advertisements* is a classic in the form of a great wreck -- shards and fragments, junk and short-takes, polished and brilliant prose in the midst of it all. A rag-tag collection of juvenilia, current writing, old and new fiction, the volume is an intermittently inspired mix. But its conception is grand scale -- a cultural history of the 1950s and a story of artistic agony and growth. As a piece of writing it seems most akin to nineteenth-century works about the painful development of the soul. Mailer comes off like the Thomas Carlyle of *Sartor Resartus* or of the early essays such as "Signs of the Times" and "Characteristics" -- the essential preacher of his time, the nay-sayer and diagnostician, Jeremiah, prophet of consciousness, outlandish giver of advice, definer of values, soul-barer, and breathtaking stylist. Like Carlyle he is anti-liberal, anti-establishment, wildly heterodox, sententious, offensive, self-absorbed, and frequently off-the-pier in his judgments. And like Carlyle -- the virulent racist -- he has acted out his violent, indecent impulses. Out of control, he is nevertheless a writer for many seasons because of his total commitment to upsetting his readers, announcing the crises of his time, and taking his own direction in solving them. Scourge of the complacent -- at times scourge of the sane -- he offers the wisdom and

metaphysics of the outlaw, not because he can ever quite claim to embody them, but because he thinks we need lawlessness as a corrective to our perfectly legal but distorted lives. Like Carlyle he shows us the spectacle of his own ardors, depressions, confusions, and nay and yea-sayings.

The idea of *Advertisements* is to celebrate the exemplary drama of Mailer's own consciousness brooding on the spirit of his age. Carlyle said man had grown mechanical in head and heart, that the Enlightenment and the dawning age of industrial progress had deadened the spiritual capacity and awareness of the most intelligent. He offered himself as an exhibit of what cold reasoning had done to one man. In like manner Mailer offers himself as a victim of the post-war Zeitgeist, torn by the conflict of Square and Hip, threatened by tranquillizing conformity, bedeviled by his past success as a naturalistic novelist, set up by the publishing industry to take a fall, pressured to deny the protean life within himself. And on a level of conflict closer to home, Mailer's difficult, turgid, unreasoned, fragmented, uneven book is the tough-guy writer's apologia for his literary life: why I did what I did, what I endured. *Advertisements*, in its way, is Mailer's golden arm held up proudly, a transformation of Nelson Algren's deterministic story into a story of artistic and spiritual development. Like Algren, he had the courage to be brutal and uncompromisingly against mass-produced ideas of the good life and the good middle-class conscience; but unlike Algren, he was a rebel and outsider as social thinker, someone with a message and a program of transgression rather than a stark picture of the transgressor's life.

Advertisements -- like Carlyle's work -- is so larded with self-indulgent and all-but-impenetrable prose that we might leave it behind in this new century. We might neglect the brilliant, incisive core passages of a very poorly edited work. We might lose patience with all the radical guff -- the ranting passages about the beauty of rape and murder, the opaque and infantile philosophizing about the necessity of violence. We should be patient, though, and attentive to the diagnosis, because no one was quite like Mailer in pinpointing the problems of the new age of American power and wealth and complacency. Grown older and having acquired new burdens and tragedies, we have not yet outgrown our post-World War II situation -- that of a country on top of the heap, yet threatened from without and troubled within. Each of us could find the usable, readable parts of this miscellany -- and there's something here for all but the most complacent. Anyone with the imagination to wonder about root social and spiritual problems will be engaged -- and perhaps infuriated -- by some part of Mailer's journey. The book is an anatomy of American inertia and social desolation and the anxiety and denial that attend our

condition. It's a panorama of the American 1950s, Mailer-style. The collection is best read selectively -- avoiding the feather-bedding, recycling, and other bulking up that makes Mailer tedious. Read these sections: "The Man Who Studied Yoga"; "The Fourth Advertisement for Myself"; all of section 4, titled "Hipsters." You will experience a symbolic tale of one tormented consciousness in its struggle to stay alive.

Mailer's protagonist Sam Slovoda in "The Man Who Studied Yoga" is an almost unbearably honest portrait of what the liberal soul -- Godless, emptied of high purpose and courage -- was like in the 1950s. He's the exemplary spiritual failure that Mailer needs to portray before he can move us a notch higher. We need to know what despair is before we can appreciate Mailer's bootstraps-and-rhetoric approach to achieving power. We need to know what weakness is before we can appreciate Mailer -- a Rocky Balboa of American letters -- getting stronger. The story unfolds on a long, dreary winter afternoon and evening in Queens. Sam has literary ambitions and Sunday could be the time to get some work done on his novel. But instead he has invited friends over for a bit of excitement -- a viewing of a pornographic movie. The gathering -- uncannily like the awful party in James Joyce's "The Dead" -- is an occasion for pretentious behavior, pettiness, warmed-over political resentments, and regrets about great things that never materialized. Sam, too, is like Joyce's unfulfilled protagonist Gabriel Conroy -- troubled by unrealized literary ambitions, but locked in an uncreative job (in his case as a continuity writer for cartoon magazines). He's well-meaning and has ideals, but like Gabriel he's envious, spiteful, gossipy, contentious -- and yet, as Mailer grimly concludes after enumerating his faults, he's better than most. He's also hungry for sex and deep communion with his wife -- the children are away -- but will suffer disappointment, feelings of desolation, and all the joylessness that came to Gabriel Conroy when he looked at himself in the mirror and saw an unheroic, spiritually impotent middle-aged man. "The Man Who Studied Yoga" is one Jerry O'Shaughnessy, this story's equivalent of a hero; he's not the delicate tubercular boy Michael Furey, the great romantic who captured the heart of Joyce's Gretta in "The Dead" and, from beyond the grave, shamed poor Gabriel. Indeed, he's a parody of the romantic -- an adventurer and later a Bowery bum -- who took charge of his destiny. He has become a subject of conversation for the timorous souls who get their kicks by watching porn and discharging resentful platitudes about what's wrong with American society. Mailer has written the equivalent of Joyce's story about social paralysis -- here the characters are leftovers from the radical 1930s and failed bohemians rather than fanatical Irish Nationalists and limited old folks.

The narrator who leads us through Sam's agonizing day is a kibbitzer-cum-judge, commenting on every play and taking brutal stock of Sam's limitations. Sam is someone who thinks of himself as a rebel, but when given half a chance, he opts for disengagement. He's the type who wants to write on the condition of the American working man in the 1950s -- the failure of nerve, the sellouts to commercialism -- but hasn't the guts to argue his points. He believes in Marxist action, but writes an article that talks about the working man's anxiety. Mailer skewers him for his timorousness; without the courage to live, to defy -- especially to defy his smug psychoanalyst -- Sam will never quite be a man. He seems incapable of seizing manly pleasures -- later in the evening he circles his wife like "a sad hound" -- and powerless to express manly aggression. In the 1950s Sam cannot "recapture the pleasurable bitterness which resides in the notion that one has suffered for one's principles." Ironically, he accuses "kids" of living in the aimless world that he himself dismally inhabits; for them, he claims, "there's no revolt, there's no acceptance." That center of indifference -- to borrow Carlyle's phrase -- is what Mailer rails against in this story. The position of no position: the convictionless, gutless world that Sam lives in is all the worse because he knows plenty of radical chic vocabulary with which to describe it. He can talk a blue streak, but can neither act nor feel strongly about his beliefs. He knows about the depredations of the Communist Party, the Moscow Trials, the prison camps, but -- in the damning words of Mailer the narrator -- "he is straddled between the loss of a country he has never seen and his repudiation of the country in which he lives." Elsewhere in *Advertisements for Myself*, Mailer has a nasty but telling remark about the brilliant sociologist David Riesman -- though in the end the crack seems to apply more to parlor radicals like Sam than to incisive writers like Riesman: he "says so little in so many words and like so many sociologists gives little feel or sense of life itself."

"Life itself": the story before us is about nothing less. What should a man mired in opinions, anxieties, Sunday newspapers, children and responsibilities make of his own life? Living in a time after the failure of grand illusions about the classless society, Sam cannot find any comfort in the old Marxist resentments:

. . . Sam is thinking it might be better to live the life of a worker, a simple life, to be completely absorbed by such necessities as food and money. Then one could believe that to be happy it was necessary only to have more money, more goods, less worries. It would be nice, Sam thinks wistfully, to believe that the source of one's unhappiness comes not from oneself, but from the fault of the boss, or the world, or bad

luck.

The role of the artist is equally unconvincing when Sam tries to assume it. A novel that would "lift him in a bound from the impasse in which he stifles, whose dozens of characters would develop a vision of life in bountiful complexity, lies foundered, rotting on a beach of purposeless effort." A "formless wreck" -- a mere collection of pages with no hero -- is all that he has to show. Sam also must admit that no hero seizes his imagination. "One could not have a hero today, Sam thinks, a man of action and contemplation, capable of sin, large enough for good, a man immense." Jerry O., after all, has wound up on the Bowery. What hope is there for the Sams of this world or for any image that they could conjure up? And what hope has there been in the day's adventure, the porno movie? Hideous and dehumanizing, the picture expose the suffering of a young woman whose violation brought back an old memory for Sam. Later, while trying to sleep, he reconstructs and makes connections, recalling that the degraded woman in the movie was a friend from the past. His afternoon of kicks had been someone else's tragedy. And the despair has no outlet -- no book to be written or faith to be embraced or action to be taken. It's like Matthew Arnold's famous pronouncement about modern tragic situations that produce no release: "Everything to be endured, nothing to be done." Or so it would seem for Sam. Mailer, the brooding narrator, understands Sam's anxieties but is not doomed by them. He is no more Sam than Joyce is Gabriel Conroy. "The Man Who Studied Yoga" is a phase in the development of the artist as tough guy: Mailer follows a severely damaged version of himself, a 1950s victim of false consciousness, through a purgatorial Sunday in Queens.

The next significant step for that persona is a leap into the kind of real struggle that Sam has never undergone -- putting one's soul and talent on the line in a win-or-lose situation. Sam has never tested his talent, retreating instead into living-room philosophizing, big plans, and articles conceived in cynical disillusionment. "Mailer" -- with all his braggadocio, complaining, drugs, and neurosis -- nevertheless shows what it's like to be a writer, how even his inferior novel *The Deer Park* defied the dismal side of the 1950s and constituted an act of overcoming inertia. By no means the best section in the book, "The Fourth Advertisement for Myself" is about the bruiser-as-writer, the creative man delivering his insightful punches and taking a terrific beating. If poor ineffectual Sam -- with his fantasies of power and protest -- had no book to offer as a challenge to a complacent society, Mailer had a book that the publishing people found dangerous, a potential court case, and a commercial disaster. The "Fourth Advertisement" is a powerful apologia, intended to explain and

offend. The explanation concerns what a writer of Mailer's sort must do: move out of his accustomed mode -- the success of *The Naked and the Dead* -- and try an experiment in form, in this case a murky, scathing story about Hollywood and the death of creativity. Whether you like the book or not, the writing in defense of it is strong Mailer -- better, if truth be told, than what it's defending -- and prepares the reader for the most memorable sections of *Advertisements*: those on Hip, the White Negro, and Beat. The sad hound Sam -- anxious even to his young daughters -- is here replaced by a central figure determined to fight his way out of sadness. The prose is tough, sometimes awkward, but overall quite genuine and honest. Mailer concedes that *The Deer Park*, once finished, didn't seem to him like a masterpiece. But it was a station in his journey, and he did not want what his publisher wanted -- a book picked apart by editors and scared into shape by the obscenity laws. His publisher -- at first willing to take a hit on the advance and let the book go elsewhere -- eventually didn't want to pay. At this point Mailer swung into action, defending his flawed product with some enduring protest.

Mailer's invective is rooted in his sense of the times: "If the years since the war had not been brave or noble in the history of the country, which I certainly thought and do think, why then did it come as a surprise that people in publishing were not as good as they used to be." Or put more wildly, Mailer was left with "the cliques, fashions, vogues, snobs, snots, and fools, not to mention a dozen bureaucracies of criticism." What's a novelist who's restless with old themes and styles to do? His talent had once been marketed very well, but something had gone wrong -- he was unable to keep delivering the predictable goods. And the role of the novelist had changed: the writer was no longer "a figure in the landscape." If you want to talk about the death of the author -- that commonplace of end-of-the-century literary theory -- Mailer was probably the first major figure in our national letters to realize that writers could no longer be writers in that old, rocked-ribbed, self-confident sense. They were ghostly presences on a balance sheet -- or at best personalities in the public relations game. "One had become a set of relations and equations, most flourishing when most incorporated, for then one's literary stock was ready for merger. The day was gone when people held on to your novels no matter what others might say." Mailer's one-man resistance act was a matter of refusing to let his novel be eviscerated and of resisting the temptation to let a mediocre manuscript go into print. He started to rewrite the book in galleys, transforming it into a story of personal responsibility. This is no place to analyze *The Deer Park*: the point is that Mailer in *Advertisements* tells us how he rewrote a half-way decent book about the cruelty of the world and made it into a book about the weakness of his

characters. In short, he avoided the naturalistic clichés about harsh reality and delved into the mysterious territory of damaged selves. In doing so, he faced the central insights of "The Man Who Studied Yoga." The process of getting the manuscript to the publisher is filled with the agony of being Mailer -- of Seconal, Benzedrine, marijuana, bouts of depression and bursts of energy. For all the bluster and swagger and romance in this tale of creative transcendence, there is also a curious honesty in the telling -- the book was not all it could be, not what it would have been with two years more work. Nor had Mailer much hope of achieving a grand plan for an eight-part work. Nor would he ever write a projected book about a concentration camp. This "Fourth Advertisement for Myself" is a strange mix of elements: a glamorous tale of resisting the mediocrity of his age, yet also a rather depressing account of failures. Still, the aggression and determination of this section brace up *Advertisements for Myself*, making all the pain and doubt and struggle invigorating.

Mailer's midcentury self expands to its full size -- bursting out of the limits of Sam Slovoda's life, moving beyond the muzzy tentativeness of the "The Fourth Advertisement" -- in the justly famous essay "The White Negro." This is Mailer's Everlasting-Yea, his twentieth-century equivalent of Carlyle's cry of exhilaration, insight, and personal redemption. It shows Mailer facing the opposing temptations of his generation -- the allure and slickness of Madison Avenue, the whining and nostalgia of the Old Left. He cobbles together his homemade philosophy of Hipness. As he expounds that philosophy, it comes to resemble a book of directions for overcoming inertia, an owner's manual for a newly formed self. Now whether we want to own such a self is another matter, and Mailer is far from being a salesman here. This is a manifesto with a sense of its own dangers, a persuasive how-to essay that has its doubts about its own doctrines. Veering away from the broad tradition of American books about how to improve yourself, "The White Negro" contains explicit warnings. Those who want to knock Mailer's sincerity may even detect a hint of caginess and detachment from the outrageous beliefs expressed. At one point hipsters are referred to as "them," with all their psychopathology, but with all their life. Squares are static; hipsters are vectors. To try on the hipster self, you have to be prepared for risks, awful side effects -- going crazy, losing touch with others, becoming a fascist, being an ignoramus. (Mailer the intellectual points out that hipsters "swing" and seem to understand complex ideas, but are often illiterate.) But one thing you won't have to worry about is the horror of non-being, of floating wraith-like in the air of other people's values and ideas. (The hipster, like Yeats's "worst" in "The Second Coming," is filled with passionate intensity -- and Mailer forthrightly envisions the coming era as a time of violence.) The essay is perhaps the last

great testament of self-making in our literature -- later books on personal determination are all about success and happiness, being a woman or an executive or a member of a minority group. This one's in direct line with Emerson: he who would be a man must be a hipster. Like Emerson, Mailer is prepared to take brilliant shots at the world as we know it: at every kind of square, conformist, and tradition-bound type in view; like Emerson, he enjoys being outside the city of sense and reason. And like Emerson, he is proudly rude and often grandly above it all.

Mailer's Emersonianism is a prescription for his generation: an exhortation to his contemporaries "to create a new nervous system for themselves," rejecting the "antiquated nervous circuits" of society, parents, and the past. And Mailer's version of life-giving power -- sexual, aggressive, rhetorical -- is everywhere at odds with the social wisdom of the past. He describes his ethic this way: "what makes it radically different from Socratic moderation with its stern conservative respect for the experience of the past is that the Hip ethic is immoderation, childlike in its adoration of the present . . ." The "lifemanship" of Mailer's essay is intuitive, not learned or inherited -- it's about the discovery of inner energy and "the burning consciousness of the present." Emersonianism is at the root of this consciousness, informing its urgency, impatience, and irrationality: "Great men . . . have confided themselves childlike to the genius of their age, betraying their perception that the absolutely trustworthy was seated at their heart, working through their hands, predominating in their being." It's a dangerous way to live. Emerson says it has "edge"; Mailer admits it's close to self-destructiveness -- but both find that the alternative, some accommodation to past models, is a form of suicide. Emerson says so flat out; Mailer goes into lengthy descriptions of what it means to kill off the vital self.

Mailer's hipster -- seizer of the moment, creature of impulse, disbeliever in "the socially monolithic ideas of the single mate, the solid family and the respectable love life" -- is a kind of psychopath, which is to say an adventurer who refuses to sublimate his sexual and aggressive instincts. Now if Ralph Waldo Emerson sounds far from such experimentation, consider the passages in "Self-Reliance" that hold up the boy or the fractious child or the rude nay-sayer as a model. Emerson's "nonchalance of boys" disdains, refuses to conciliate, to calculate consequences. "A boy is in the parlor what the pit is in the playhouse; independent, irresponsible . . ." Infants also impress Emerson with their force and freedom from the burden of divided purpose. They have no sense of "the strength and means" opposed to their wills: "infancy conforms to nobody; all conform to it; so that one babe commonly makes four or five out of the adults who

prattle and play to it." And further compare Emerson's put-down of maturity, "the man is as it were clapped into jail by his consciousness," with Mailer's look at the unhip compromiser in the age of conformity: "A man knew that when he dissented, he gave a note upon his life which could be called in any year of overt crisis. No wonder then that these have been the years of conformity and depression. A stench of fear has come out of every pore of American life, and we suffer from a collective failure of nerve." The unmaning of the individual -- Emerson's "Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members" -- is the focus of Mailer's screed. Listen to that note repeated in his cry for orgasm -- a sometimes poignant, but more often ridiculous demand for improved selfhood through enhanced intercourse. Perverse, truculent, flying high above the superego -- into some realm beyond manners, sense, artistic order, and decency -- "The White Negro" is one of our most stubborn and unusual protests against being a mature adult. All you ever needed to know you learned not on an analyst's couch, in a family, at a school, on a committee, but listening to jazz, raging, or having sex. And what you don't need to know is the wisdom of 1950s intellectuals -- Freudian ideas of renunciation, Lionel Trilling's ideas about moral complexity and maturity. "The White Negro" is a gateway to a kind of mad autonomy, a royal road to self-absorption. And like many important and self-consciously subversive works of thought -- Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Marx's *The Communist Manifesto* -- its life and breath are contained in its outbursts, its illogic, its offensiveness. A small essay that follows "The White Negro" is meant to draw some distinctions between Hipsters and Beatniks and in so doing separate the mild-mannered coffeehouse Beat and his roots in old bohemia from the dangerous hipster "with that muted animal voice which shivered the national attention when first used by Marlon Brando." Mailer, in his own talky way, was attempting to produce similar shivers.

In a coda to Part 4 of *Advertisements*, Mailer reproduces a 1958 interview with Richard Stern titled "Hip, Hell, and the Navigator." The piece -- given Mailer's patchwork, ramshackle structure -- is part of the kind of book he is writing. It stands as a summation of his ideas about Hip -- and a refutation of those who say that *Advertisements* is all rant and doubletalk. Stern asked Mailer a provoking question: is Hipness a pose of some sort, a kind of play-acting and adventurism, or is it a serious aspect of a writer's life? This gave Mailer his chance to explain how the hipster's experiences -- the drugs, music, sex -- relate to expression. He argues that the hipster "lives in a state of extreme awareness," and, far from being the scattered, random, detached drug-head, he is actually a man with intense powers of concentration. In Mailer's words, "His page becomes more filled." He

is the supercharged observer. What he observes is our civilization's descent into deadness, the steady erosion of our sensual life by our organizational life. And before long Mailer has made this decline into a cosmic struggle -- with God and the hipster struggling to preserve life itself and civilization pointing the way to death.

The attack on powerful civilizations is of course nothing new in modern thought -- its line runs from Jean-Jacques Rousseau (with his hatred of cities) to the young Marx (with capitalism drowning all values in "the icy water of egoistical calculation") to D. H. Lawrence (with his "vivid and fresh," small-is-beautiful Etruscans set against his imposing, monument-building Romans). But Mailer had his say at a time when most Americans were dependent on the organizational powers of civilization and when most had arrived at the feeling that the life of the senses is no more than a private business. Mailer insists that sense experience is damaged by the very logic and mental construction that have made us a powerful nation. And it now seems that he has lasted longer with his message -- the message of the uninhibited hipster waging a "noble" (one of his favorite words) battle with the civilized square -- than others of his era. The anti-repression message was the master theme of Norman O. Brown's scholarly study *Life Against Death*: man must find a way out of the cage of life-denying forces that seem to constitute his reality. But Brown's discourse -- fine as it is -- does not have the urgency of Mailer's work. Mailer's *Advertisements* is the poetic expression of this argument -- metaphoric, slangy, breathless, filled with memorable phrases. He warns us that we may destroy ourselves in "the cold insensate expression of due process of law and atomic radiation." He writes of the "teleological" drive of the senses; that drive is our "navigator" in a world where we are otherwise caught in the drift of technology. His core prose in *Advertisements for Myself* is a classic achievement in a long tradition of literary discontent. And it is unusually bracing in that the rhetoric represents a one-man performance, not the echoing voice of an identifiable power block.

[Home](#) | [News and Notes](#) | [Current Issue](#) | [Archives](#) | [Order](#)

W W W