

58 marks

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by J. Michael Lennon

Norman Mailer

(1923-)

One way to understand the amazing diversity of the career of Norman Mailer, its complex relationship with his personal life, and the sharply divided opinion of the merit of his achievements is to see all of these as reflections of Mailer's effort to stay alive spiritually, artistically, even physically. "Repetition kills the soul" is a favored mantra of Mailer's even if, in mid-career, he was guilty of it. But for the great majority of his writing life he has moved back and forth through the literary genres, rotating his crops, so to speak, among the novel (always the favored form), novellas, short stories, every sort of essay, sports and political reportage, screenplays, film and book reviews, the interview, plays, the nonfiction novel, newspaper and magazine columns, a bit of science fiction, a few scraps of memoir, philosophical dialogues, brief and extended biographies and poems. Speaking in the voice of Jesus, he has even re-told the Gospels. He has put his hand to virtually every form, everything but autobiography, which he has avoided in the belief that such a volume would be a tombstone. Mailer's Emersonian belief in the infinitude of the self, a self energized by new ventures, precludes the sort of summing up that a full-scale autobiography demands.

Mailer is the most widely known of living American authors first of all because of the length of his career and his many different and important books. But there are other factors: his forays into public life, his attempts to delineate the art in politics and the politics in art, his fights, causes, underground films, divorces and other legal problems, and his relentless appearances in the media. He has been on the cover of every major American magazine and has appeared on nearly every talk show in existence. It is safe to say that he has been interviewed on radio, television and in print more than any other author, well over 500 times. Although he has little use for the Internet, his presence there is also large. He has been tremendously productive, publishing 40 books from 1948 to 2003, but he has also been a *provocateur*, a performer and a regular in gossip columns. His life, especially after the 1950s, has alternated between monkish labor—when he is working, he writes almost every day—and heralded appearances at literary events, protest meetings, intellectual forums, fund-raising receptions, college campuses, and, of course, on television. He is the prototypical public artist/intellectual of the last half of the twentieth century. In his essay, "Prolegomenon to a Biography of Mailer," collected in *Critical Essays on*

NM's corrections and
suggestions to ms.
late June 2002

Norman Mailer, the dean of Mailer critics, Robert F. Lucid, says Mailer "may seem finally to have embodied our time" (182).

No discussion of the modern American novel would be complete without reference to his novels, several of which have become classics; no record of the "new journalism" and the nonfiction novel (Mailer dislikes the term) could pass over his contributions to the form, which some critics believe he, more than anyone else, invented; no examination of several post-World War II events, movements and phenomena—the Cold War, the rise of feminism, the Kennedy assassination, the moon shot, the great prize fights, presidential campaigns and elections (he has covered six), capital punishment, and the compacted miseries of urban life—could eschew his commentary. In the unlikely event that plastic is ever banned for its ill effects, he will be credited for his strident warnings; any consideration of the role of the post-war author as celebrity hero in opposition to the deadening effects of modern technology, bureaucracy and the corporation will have to begin with Norman Mailer.

EARLY YEARS

His mother's family ran ^{small} resort hotels on the Jersey Shore and he was born there, in Long Branch, on January 31, 1923. But he grew up in Brooklyn where his parents moved in 1925. He was the first child of Isaac Barnett "Barney," who emigrated from South Africa after World War I, and Fanny Schneider Mailer, whose family came from Lithuania a generation earlier. ^{Ch. B. Wasserman} His sister, Barbara Jane, was born on April 6, 1927. His parent had lifelong professional occupations: he was an accountant and she managed a series of small businesses. In 1933 the family moved to Crown Heights, a bastion of the Jewish middle class. Mailer attended public schools, skipping ^{three} two half-year terms, and in 1939, at sixteen, graduated ^{high} with top grades from Boy's High School. He applied to Harvard and M.I.T., choosing the former partly because an older cousin had gone there. Intending to major in aeronautical engineering, he immediately became entranced with his creative writing classes, reviving the interest he had as a young boy. He wrote scores of stories and took every available writing class while at Harvard, and in April 1941, one of them, "The Greatest Thing in the World," won *Story* magazine's college contest. The influence of three writers—John Dos Passos, James T. Farrell and John Steinbeck—was apparent in the story, a fast-paced, naturalistic tale of violence and hustling, set in Chicago. The story's success convinced him that he was launched as a writer and in the summer of 1941 he began his first novel, No Percentage, which is still unpublished. When he graduated in June 1943 with a degree in engineering sciences (with honors), the war was on, and he wondered, as he told the story later in

Advertisements for Myself, whether "a great war novel would be written about Europe or the Pacific" (28). He was already carefully planning his literary career.

THE ARMY AND THE ARMY NOVEL

Before shipping out to the Pacific as an artillery trainee, he married his college sweetheart, Beatrice "Bea" Silverman, and completed a second apprentice novel, *A Transit to Narcissus*, which remained unpublished until 1978. He arrived in Leyte in the Philippines in late December 1944 and shortly after was re-assigned to the 112th Regimental Combat Team, a Texas outfit, serving first as a clerk and then as a rifleman in a reconnaissance squad. Mailer went on patrols, dug foxholes, got into a few firefights and carefully observed his fellow soldiers, the landscape, the weather and the ways in which the Army shaped behavior. His lifelong interest in the permutations of power began with his study of the "fear ladder" of the Army. He also read the books and letters that his family sent him and, in return, send hundreds of fat letters to Bea describing the incidents of the day to be used in the war novel he planned to write after the war. The central action of the novel was to be a long patrol, one that resembled in many ways an actual patrol behind enemy lines that his platoon had undertaken. It ended disastrously, as he later recounted in an interview with Steven Marcus (collected in *Conversations with Norman Mailer*), when someone in his unit kicked over a hornet's nest and half of them ran ingloriously down the mountain. But the incident became a perfect turning point for his novel. "War is disproportions," he told Marcus, "and the hornet's nest seemed a perfect disproportion to me. We were ready to lose our lives but we weren't up to getting stung by a hornet" (89).

After the war ended in August 1945 Mailer was sent to Japan, where he served as a cook. He was discharged on May 2, 1946, and in June began work on what was to become *The Naked and the Dead* in a rented apartment in North Truro, Massachusetts, near Provincetown, the town he would spend most of his summers for the next half-century. In November of the same year, he signed a contract with Rinehart and Company, and in September 1947, he turned in a completed manuscript. Then he and Bea, also a veteran, ^{in which} left for Paris to study at the Sorbonne on the GI Bill. When the book came out on May 6, 1948 Mailer was still in Europe. The reviews were overwhelmingly enthusiastic and one of the most dazzling careers in postwar American literature was launched. *The Naked and the Dead* was aided by timing: immediately after the war readers wanted to forget about it, but then there was a resurgence of interest. Mailer's novel rode the crest of this wave. It jumped to the top of the best-seller list where it remained in first position for eleven straight weeks, aided by continuing

strong reviews, award nominations and praise from Sinclair Lewis who called Mailer "the greatest writer to come out of his generation," a comment ^{publishers} Mailer used on his books for years. All told, the novel was on the *New York Times* best-seller list for 62 weeks from its publication through the summer of 1949.

The novel is set on the fictional Pacific island of Anopopei where an American division commanded by Gen. Cummings seeks to defeat a Japanese force entrenched behind the Toyaku Line. The first thing to be said about this struggle is that it is secondary to the one among the Americans. The key power struggle takes place among the officers and among the enlisted men, and along two different, but related plot lines. The first half of the novel focuses on Cummings's effort to marshal his troops and so rout the stubborn Japanese forces. The division is sluggish and recalcitrant, and he is frustrated by his inability to mold it to his will. The tide of the war in the Pacific is beginning to turn and Cummings (the first of several machiavellian ^{seekers} power-mongers in Mailer's work) knows he must be quickly victorious if he is to rise to the pinnacle in the post-war Army, which, he believes, may have to fight Russia—something that Americans, including Mailer, began to fear in the years right after the war. His aide, Lt. Hearn, is fascinated by the General's intelligence and foresight, but ultimately opposes his semi-fascistic methods, his use of the "fear ladder," on which every officer and soldier must torment the man on the next lower rung, passing down the punishment and looking up for the occasional reward. On the enlisted level, Sgt. Croft, a masochistic, whipcord Texan, leads a fourteen-man platoon of lower and middle-class soldiers from every part of the U.S. This cross-section enables Mailer to juxtapose a member of every major ethnic group (save African-Americans—the Army was still segregated) with every other one, and capture a representative range of dialects, biases and values. His ability to orchestrate so many characters and themes in this 721-page novel foreshadows his later efforts to handle even more complex materials. So Jews and southerners, Swedes, Poles, Irish and Italians, Mexican-Americans and WASPs cooperate and oppose one another even as they fight the Japanese. To illumine the motivations of his characters, Mailer inserts ten "Time Machine" sketches of the soldiers in their pre-war lives, including Cummings, Croft and Hearn. This technique, adapted from John Dos Passos's 1936 novel, *U.S.A.*, gives pace and balance to the narrative by juxtaposing domestic scenes with battle scenes, sex with violence, linkages Mailer will explore many times during his career.

In the early part of the novel, Hearn and Cummings debate the nature and uses of power with Hearn ultimately siding with those on the lower rungs. Their discussions are the beginning of Mailer's life-long study of the totalitarian mentality, and a

notable display of intellect by the 25 year-old author. Indeed, it is clear that Mailer admires the Faustian energies of Cummings, "his unique ability to extend his thoughts into immediate and effective action" (62), as much as he dislikes the half-baked liberalism of Hearn. The discussions lead finally to a confrontation and Hearn is forced to back down, to "crawfish," after which the General reassigns him to lead Croft's reconnaissance platoon. Thus, Hearn becomes the link between officers and enlisted men, as well as between the two major plot lines. The second part of the novel centers on the platoon's long patrol, which is intended to determine if the Toyaku Line can be attacked from the rear, something that Croft believes can only be accomplished by climbing Mt. Anaka, the tallest mountain on the 150-mile long island. The mountain and the assault on it are symbolic—much like Melville's white whale and Ahab—of nature's power and human desire to dominate it. This is especially true for Croft, who "felt a thrill of anticipation at the thought that by the following night they might be on the peak. Again, he felt a crude ecstasy. He could not have given the reason, but the mountain beckoned him, held an answer to something he wanted. It was so pure, so austere" (496). But before the assault can be made two things happen that demonstrate Mailer's ideas about the nature of war. First, Wilson, a member of the platoon, is gut shot in a Japanese ambush. Four soldiers are detailed to carry the suffering, increasingly incoherent Wilson on a litter back to the beach, an exhausting journey down and away from the mountain that parallels the platoon's journey up the flank of Anaka. The second event is Hearn's murder. He is killed by a Japanese machine gun, but only because Croft has suppressed information about Japanese positions. This surprising event has generated much critical comment with some believing that Mailer eliminates Hearn to discredit his ineffectual liberalism, and others seeing it as a realistic event that underlines the disproportions of war. It also reveals that Cummings's power lust is equaled by that of Croft, who Philip Buftis calls the General's "emotional twin" (*Norman Mailer*, 21). Together they dominate the action of the novel, although in the end both are defeated. Croft's unit is driven off the mountain by the hornets, demonstrating that nature has its own tricks and is not easily subjugated. As for Cummings, he is denied the self-aggrandizing pleasure of wielding his division like a fine sword and slicing through the Toyaku Line. When he is away from the island attempting to secure naval firepower to blast the Japanese, his dull understrapper, Maj. Dalleson, unimaginatively penetrates the Line and crushes the Japanese, who are found to be sick, starving and dispirited. It is a fluke victory, not a military masterstroke, and the star of Gen. Cummings will now decline.

Some readers, while lauding Mailer's powerful ability to describe men in action, and to capture the obscene lingo of soldiers (using the word "fug" for the commonest four-letter obscenity), concluded that the string of defeats and defaults in the novel amount to a bleak depiction of the human condition, something that Mailer disputed. He said in an interview with Lillian Ross that the novel "offers a good deal of hope," and that even in the novel's "corruption and sickness" there are "yearnings for a better world" (*Conversations*, 14). Such positive elements can be seen in the portage of Wilson by Goldstein and Ridges, the novel's odd couple, Brooklyn Jew and southern sharecropper. Heroically and stoically, they carry on after the other two soldiers fall away in exhaustion. Wilson groans and hallucinates obscenely as they carry him through jungle, field and stream. When he dies, they never consider leaving him; they labor on only to lose him in a surging jungle stream. This memorable sequence, coming near the end of the novel, balances the cold-blooded murder of Hearn and the novel's other acts of violence and treachery.

In what is generally considered to be the finest essay on *The Naked and the Dead*, Donald Pizer calls it "a work in which Mailer has successfully created a symbolic form to express the naturalistic theme of the hidden recesses of values in man's nature despite his tragic fate in a closely conditioned and controlled world" (92). For the remainder of his career Mailer will continue to show us the most abominable in human nature, while continuing to endorse the merits of courage—the essential virtue for Mailer—leading to growth and a hint of transcendence.

* reaching millions of copies
if one includes foreign and
domestic hardcover and paperback

1 THE CHALLENGES OF FAME

2 In the middle of the twentieth century, American writers were more celebrated than at century's end ,
3 and *The Naked and the Dead* was a huge success, selling millions of copies. This success, Mailer later
4 explained in *Advertisements for Myself*, cut him off from his past; he called it "a lobotomy" (93). He was
5 25 and famous. Microphones were thrust in his face; the option of being a detached observer was gone. In
6 Paris, under the influence of Jean Malaquais, his French translator, Mailer had begun a new novel about
7 leftists and an FBI agent living in a Brooklyn rooming house much like the one where he had finished *The*
8 *Naked and the Dead*. But his success unsettled him, and he shelved his new novel so as to accept an
9 invitation to work on screenplays for Hollywood producer, Samuel Goldwyn. He moved to California with
10 his family (his daughter Susan was born in 1949) and Malaquais, and met the famous actors and actresses
11 who were eager to meet the newly famous author. After a year of accomplishing little in collaboration with
12 Malaquais (but soaking up material about Hollywood), he returned to the East and finished his novel, titled
13 *Barbary Shore*. It came out in May 1951.

14 Mailer wanted his second novel to be a radical novel and radically different from his first and it was
15 both. He shifted from third to first-person narration, worked with a smaller number of characters and all
16 but eliminated descriptions of physical activity of the kind that he was so highly praised for in his first
17 novel. *Barbary Shore* takes place in several closed rooms where the five chief characters talk a blue streak
18 about the collision of the two "colossi," America and the Soviet Union, and about the past and future of
19 Marxism, its mistakes, horrors, promise and ruling ideas. Sometimes the debates are engaging, sometimes
20 not. Mailer was, in a sense, continuing his education with this novel, learning from his characters as he did
21 in the Cummings-Hearn dialogues. The five chief characters are Mrs. Guinevere, the sexy landlady; her
22 husband, McLeod, a former high functionary for the Soviets; his nemesis, Hollingsworth, a sadistic FBI
23 agent; Lannie Madison, a mad Cassandra; and Mickey Lovett, a war veteran who has only fragmentary
24 memories of his youth and war experiences. Lovett is writing a novel and, like everyone else, wants to
25 have sex with the blowzy Guinevere. Besides the tracing of sexual desire, the only discernable plot thread

1 is Hollingsworth's continuing interrogation of McLeod concerning his Stalinist affiliations and secrets.
2 Despite the tedium of much of the talk, there are many bright moments, including Lovett's surreal
3 memories and visions of an Orwellian future, and the very different fantasies of Guinevere and Lannie.
4 Guinevere, the novel's most genuinely felt character, has a hilarious idea for a tabloid-type, murder-love
5 story, which she presents in detail to Lovett (Mailer's comic gifts have not always been appreciated).
6 Lannie's dark, Holocaust visions anticipate Marion Faye, the hipster in his next novel, *The Deer Park*, and
7 show, as Mailer told Steven Marcus, his unconscious interest in "murder, suicide, orgy, psychosis, all the
8 themes I discuss in *Advertisements*" (*Conversations*, 86). Lovett, who is tutored in Marxism and its
9 offshoot, Trotskyism, by McLeod, is both the narrator and the chief protagonist, but except for his dreams
10 and visions, he is a dull tool. McLeod, a pontificator of leftist thought wishes to pass on the remnants of a
11 viable Marxist program, his hope for a just world, to Lovett's generation. Mailer will use this sort of
12 father-son relationship in every one of his future novels to clarify their philosophical underpinnings.
13 McLeod gives Lovett the symbolic but unnamed object sought by Hollingsworth as the novel closes with
14 Lovett's flight and McLeod's murder. The torch has been passed, it seems, but Lovett's future is
15 ambiguous at best. *Barbary Shore* is a bold, claustrophobic, somewhat Kafkaesque narrative that never
16 succeeds in merging a river of abstract argument (which is evidence of Mailer's lifelong admiration for the
17 dialectics of Marxist thought) with the development of characters or plot. One important reason for the
18 lack of integration is that he did not have a line of action to counterpoint the polemical debates, as he did in
19 *Naked*. *Barbary Shore* received the worst reviews of any of Mailer's books, but intellectually represented a
20 genuine advance. The novel also transmitted something of the *zeitgeist*, always one of Mailer's cardinal
21 virtues. As he put it in *Advertisements*, "[I]t has in its high fevers a kind of insane insight into the psychic
22 mysteries of Stalinists, secret policemen, narcissists, children, Lesbians, hysterics, revolutionaries—it has
23 an air which for me is the air of our time, authority and nihilism stalking one another in the orgiastic hollow
24 of this century" (94). Today the novel is seen as a seedbed of ideas, one to which Mailer would return
25 many times.

4 It was expelled! worth a couple
of sentences

1 THE HOLLYWOOD NOVEL

2 One of the commonplaces of Mailer criticism is that his first three novels deal, respectively, with
3 violence, politics and sex. Certainly there is a good deal of sexual content in *The Deer Park*, material
4 considered salacious by the prudish conventional standards of the time. The novel created a stir in the
5 publishing world, and, presented Mailer with a completely new set of narrative challenges and
6 opportunities. * Turned down by Rinehart, he went to six publishing firms before Putnam's accepted it.
7 Originally, Mailer conceived the novel as the first in a cycle of eight interlocking novels that would each
8 explore a different reach of modern life—pleasure, business, crime, church, working class life and so
9 forth—but he gave up the ambitious scheme after he had written the prologue, a long short story titled
10 “The Man Who Studied Yoga,” and the first draft of the “pleasure” novel, *The Deer Park*. (It should be
11 noted that Mailer has on two other occasions projected serial novels but only written the first; it seems to be
12 a method of jump-starting new work.) The story's protagonist, Sam Slovoda, was supposed to have a
13 dream which laid out the eight-part scheme and introduced the hero, one Sergius O'Shaugnessy. But
14 Mailer, as always, followed the new flow he discovered at the point of his pencil. Still, the story, one of his
15 two finest, was a success and Slovoda stands as a negative exemplum, the timid opposite of Mailer's
16 hipster heroes. O'Shaugnessy survived as one of the chief characters of the “pleasure” novel, and later
17 shows up as a Greenwich Village bullfighting instructor and sexual athlete in “The Time of Her Time,” his
18 most erotic, most polished and provocative short story, published in 1959 in *Advertisements for Myself*.

19 The chief protagonist of *The Deer Park* is Charles Francis Eitel. O'Shaugnessy, a former U.S. Air
20 Force jet pilot, stands, roughly, in the same relation to him as Nick Carraway does to Jay Gatsby. He
21 narrates the novel and, as Robert Merrill astutely points out, Mailer “counterpoints Sergius's development
22 and Eitel's moral decline” (45), again, very roughly paralleling *The Great Gatsby*. The novel is set in
23 Desert D' Or, a resort community modeled after Palm Springs where the Hollywood community comes for
24 recreation. Sex and other illicit pleasures are for sale there and a river of booze runs through it. Eitel is a
25 blacklisted director, banned from making films because of his leftist connections in the 1930s, who is

1 unwilling to testify about these associations before a congressional committee. Middle-aged, divorced,
2 handsome and cultivated, he is trying to write an ambitious film script while living on the last of his
3 savings. His former boss, Herman Teppis, the head of Supreme Studios, and Teppis's son-in-law, the
4 producer Collie Munshin (another small comic masterpiece), would like to have Eitel produce more of the
5 money-making, sentimental films he made before the war, but first he must tell what he knows. And he
6 won't. He wants to get back to the kind of honest social realism films he made when he first came to
7 Hollywood, but he misses the action, the fame, the high life. Like *Gatsby*, the novel details the effects of
8 corrupt money. There are other parallels, but Eitel differs greatly from Jay Gatsby in that his goal is not to
9 regain a lost love but to recover his artistic integrity.

10 O'Shaugnessy is young and handsome and has \$14,000 won in a Tokyo poker game, but he is also
11 uncertain and impotent as a result of his war experience, most of which, as he explains in the long,
12 beautiful opening of the novel, was spent dropping firebombs on Korean villages. He becomes part of the
13 bar-party scene at the resort and makes friends with Eitel, a pimp named Marion Faye, and a beautiful, zany
14 movie star named Lulu Meyers, one of the biggest attractions of Teppis's studio. As O'Shaugnessy falls in
15 love with Meyers, Eitel picks up with Elena Esposito, a former mistress of Munshin's. The course of their
16 two affairs, especially Eitel's, make up the heart of the novel. Mailer's clear intention is to show the arc of
17 Eitel's attempt to regain his moral-artistic stature, and the role Esposito (based loosely on Mailer's new
18 love, Adele Morales) plays in this quest. It is one of the most brilliantly depicted affairs in modern
19 literature. As Robert Merrill, one of the finest critics of this novel, notes in his study, *Norman Mailer*,
20 "[N]owhere else in Mailer's fiction is a love relationship developed so fully" (53). Mailer's problem was
21 that by choosing the first-person point of view, he made it impossible to present the most important aspects
22 of the Eitel-Esposito affair. Mailer's narrator can report on the machinations of Teppis and Munshin to get
23 Eitel to testify, return to the fold, and make more sappy films; he can tell us what Faye, the Baudlairean
24 pimp who functions as Eitel's good angel, is saying and doing; he can report the gossip of the bar flies, call
25 girls and flunkies; and he can, of course, give us Lulu Meyer's take on things. He is a marvelous narrator

1 in the first half of the book, far superior to Lovett, but he can't take us into the bedroom, can't be privy to
2 the intimate conversations between the passionate, uneducated Esposito and the older man who is teaching
3 her about life just as she is inspiring him, at least at the beginning of their relationship. Mailer's solution
4 was to use O'Shaugnessy less and less as narrator as the novel progresses, and shift to an omniscient
5 perspective. He does this at the beginning of the novel's third part (of six), noting only that ^(he, Sergius) he will use his
6 "imagination" to present the affair from the inside. The shift is jarring. The narrative focus moves from
7 Eitel and Esposito (she is only seen from the outside) to O'Shaugnessy's parallel affair with Lulu, and later
8 to Faye, a total of some thirty shifts in point of view. Henry James would be appalled, but in truth, the
9 fascinating love affair of Eitel and Elena more than compensates for the split perspective. Readers feel an
10 urgency to return to the private place where the couple struggle with each other in an effort to locate their
11 deepest identities.

12 Some critics believe *The Deer Park* to be a satire of Hollywood Babylon, a not unreasonable
13 position, but others argue that the novel is really about a great, tragic love affair. Both are right, but there is
14 no debating the fact that the rising action of the novel culminates in Eitel's decision to shed Elena, name
15 names to the House Un-American Activities Committee (his name is pronounced "I-tell"), and "make some
16 more crud" (40), as Faye puts it. She is the moral winner in the battle, and her long letter to Eitel is strong
17 evidence of Mailer's power to create character—always his strong suit. She is one of his most memorable
18 characters. Mailer's instinct when revising the novel in early 1955 (it came out in October 1955) was to
19 make O'Shaugnessy stronger, tougher, more believable, even as he worked to make the affair more vibrant.
20 But although O'Shaugnessy develops muscles, as it were, he is unable to lift us into a vantage point on the
21 affair. Eitel's love affair and his battle with the greedy forces of commercialism is the novel's morality
22 play, and O'Shaugnessy's new stubbornness and belligerence, which is, Mailer says in *Advertisements*, "an
23 ^{misleading} implicit portrait of myself" (238), has only tangential importance. Eitel sells his integrity and splits with
24 Esposito, who then is sorely but successfully tested when she moves in with Faye, who ends up in prison. ^{Too abrupt}
25 Sergius goes off to Mexico and later New York to run his bullfighting school and write "this novel" (355),

1 an admission which weakens its pretensions to reality. The novel is, after all, the only form that tries to
2 convince us that it is something else. good!

3 NEW YORK CITY AND THE HIPSTER

4 *The Deer Park* made the best-seller list, but it was not the big success Mailer badly needed. Its
5 reception made him angry at the Establishment in a more intense way; an outlaw mentality surged up in
6 him. Now divorced from Bea and living in New York City with Adele (who he married in 1954), he began
7 to soak up jazz and the night life and get involved in new ventures such as *Dissent*, a leftist journal of ideas.
8 With Daniel Wolf and Edwin Fancher, he co-founded *The Village Voice*, which he named. The first issue
9 appeared on October 26, 1955 just as his novel was climbing the best-seller list. He devoted much of the
10 next eight months to the paper and contributed a weekly column, titled "Quickly: A Column for Slow
11 Readers," the first of his many journalistic forays. But Mailer's most important effort immediately after
12 *The Deer Park* was his 1957 essay for *Dissent*, later collected in *Advertisements*, titled "The White Negro,"
13 in which he presents his emerging view of the challenges of life in a post-Holocaust world threatened by
14 the atomic bomb. This dense, beautifully written piece is Mailer's most important polemical essay and one
15 of the most anthologized of the postwar period. In its emphasis on the primacy of inner promptings, it is a
16 key to all of Mailer's later work. The essay presents a prospectus for a new hero, the hipster, an urban, jazz-
17 soaked, sexual adventurer whose closest parallel are the blacks who live on the dangerous edge in
18 America's cities. The hipster believes that "the only life-giving answer is to accept the terms of death, to
19 live with death as immediate danger, to divorce oneself from society, to exist without roots, to set off on
20 that uncharted journey into the rebellious imperatives of the self" (*Advertisements*, 339). The essay's
21 celebration of personal violence, among other things, created a great stir, and it was often linked, with some
22 justification, to the "Beat" Movement, which took off at about the same time. What made Mailer's
23 argument different from those of the Beats and other extreme romantic programs is that the search for
24 growth, aided by a variety of risk-taking ventures, most notably the release of damned-up sexual energy, is
25 never-ending. No one has explained this better than Robert Solotaroff. In his study, *Down Mailer's Way*,

1 he says that Mailer's prescription for growth "in its ideal or natural movement describes a spiral—a man
2 grows by freeing energy, but this energy must be put to the task of freeing still more energy." Mailer's
3 "endlessly spiraling dialectic" is ultimately "the quest for the infinite" (97-98).

4 MAILER'S MISCELLANIES

5 Mailer's next novel, *An American Dream*, would not appear until 1965, over nine years after *The*
6 *Deer Park*. In the work published in the interim, and in interviews, he often referred to the "big novel" he
7 was writing. *Advertisements* contained two excerpts, and *The Presidential Papers*, a 1963 miscellany
8 focused on the Kennedy Administration, offered another. Between these two books came Mailer's only
9 extended foray into poetry, *Deaths for the Ladies (and Other Disasters)* (1962). In 1966 he published his
10 third miscellany, *Cannibals and Christians*, although the great majority of this collection was written
11 before *An American Dream*. The point is that the bulk of Mailer's activity between his third and fourth
12 novels was not directed at the "big novel," but consisted of a series of narrative ventures and experiments in
13 several literary forms, as well as a reconsideration and consolidation of all his previous work. So the
14 content of these ~~three~~ ^{miscellanies} includes a majority of his columns from *The Village Voice*, *Esquire* and
15 *Commentary*, a generous sampling from his second and third novels, short stories, reviews, interviews,
16 dialogues, dramatic fragments, speeches, political commentary, a clutch of essays, a long piece on the
17 Floyd Patterson-Sonny Liston fight (titled "Ten Thousand Words a Minute"), "The White Negro," some
18 poems and literary criticism. Each of the three miscellanies is linked internally by a series of
19 "advertisements," "postscripts" or "arguments" which federate a narrative thrust, especially in
20 *Advertisements*, where they are often more important than the work they frame. Like Henry James in the
21 prefaces to his novels, Mailer broods and muses over the context of each separate piece, telling the story of
22 the story. Together the miscellanies comprise a comprehensive source book of Mailer's wide-ranging
23 concerns. The tone is by turns wry, edgy, angry, sardonic; the content is rich with social observation, now-
24 or-never fulmination, jeremiads, pointed comments on his own career and future possibilities and life in

* need at least a couple
of phrases more, here.

what does very recent mean?

1 these American states. But they contain little new fiction. Nevertheless, the reader gets the sense of a man
2 very much in motion.

3 Now the father of two daughters by Adele (Danielle in 1957 and Elizabeth Anne in 1959), Mailer was
4 considering running for mayor of New York, but after he stabbed Adele with a penknife at a drunken party
5 in November 1960 (an event that continues to ^{*}resonate in Mailer's life), he had to shelve the idea. Adele
6 recovered quickly and refused to press charges, but their marriage was effectively over. They were
7 divorced in 1962 and shortly after Mailer married Lady Jean Campbell, an English woman who gave him
8 his fourth daughter, Kate, also in 1962. This marriage also failed, and they were divorced in 1963. The
9 uxorious Mailer then married Beverly Bentley, an actress, who became the mother of his first two sons

10 (Michael, born in 1964 and Stephen in 1966). Mailer's roiled psychic state is apparent in the miscellanies,
11 especially *Advertisements for Myself*, the most powerful of the three, and the most autobiographical. Many
12 who came of age after WWII shared Mailer's rage at American [moderation, compromise] and conformity.
13 *Advertisements* is where he forged his distinctive style, a fierce, frank, agile, self-reflective and often
14 humorous voice; his angry cry, "the shits are killing us" (19), became a rallying point for a second
15 generation of Mailer readers. *The Presidential Papers* has a similar tone, focusing on the politics of the
16 early 1960s. It includes one of the prototypes of the "new journalism," his report on the 1960 Democratic
17 political convention in San Francisco, titled "Superman Comes to the Supermarket." The tenor of the
18 piece, the first of many profiles of presidential candidates, can be gauged by the fact that Mailer calls JFK
19 the first "hipster" candidate for president. The third in the series, *Cannibals and Christians*, focuses, in
20 part, on the Johnson administration. Among its many items of continuing interest are Mailer's assessment
21 of nine of his novelistic colleagues, "Some Children of the Goddess," two long philosophical dialogues on
22 matters such as form, spirit, beauty and soul, and some strong criticism of the Vietnam War. Mailer was
23 among the earliest and most thoughtful critics of the War.

24 GOD AND THE DEVIL

1 Constantly tempted to write nonfiction about the tumultuous events of the period, Mailer knew he
2 must find a way to commit himself to a new novel, his first in over eight years. His solution was to up the
3 ante by writing a serialized novel, following the same frantic pace of earlier novelists such as Dickens and
4 Dostoyevsky. He announced *An American Dream* in his final "Big Bite" column in *Esquire* in December
5 1963, a magazine that was on the stands when JFK was killed in Dallas. The *Esquire* version appeared in
6 eight parts, January-August 1964, and the final, much-revised version, the following March. Barry Leeds,
7 in his study, *The Enduring Vision of Norman Mailer*, aptly summarizes the novel as "a pilgrimage by
8 protagonist Stephen Richards Rojack from imminent alcoholism, damnation and madness to salvation and
9 sanity" (77). Rojack, a television talk-show host, ex-congressman and professor of existential psychology,
10 says he holds "the not inconsiderable thesis that magic, dread and the perception of death were the roots of
11 motivation" (8). His compromises and failures have made him suicidal; he receives emanations from the
12 moon and smells cancer and carnality in people. In fact, he has perhaps the finest olfactory intuition in
13 modern literature. A war hero like JFK, Rojack met Deborah Kelly, whom he later marries and murders,
14 on a double date with ~~him~~ ^{Donna Douglas} during their term together in Congress after WWII. Rojack's murder of the
15 hateful Deborah (which he claims is suicide), a love affair with Cherry Melanie, the former mistress of
16 Deborah's father, Barney Oswald Kelly, the "solicitor" for the Devil, and a series of physical and psychic
17 confrontations with the police, the Mafia, Shago Martin (Cherry's former lover, a black jazz artist), and
18 Kelly—all taking place within thirty-six hours in New York City—make up the external action of the story.
19 But the novel is really an account of a battle between God and the Devil. Rojack's internal war both
20 mirrors and partakes of the struggle between good and evil. *Dream* is the first fully developed depiction of
21 Mailer's Manichaeic cosmology, which holds that the universe is a dialectical process with the final
22 synthesis unknown. God is limited, imperfect in the same way humans are, and locked into combat with a
23 powerful, wily Devil. Human beings are participants in this war, usually unknowingly, and fight on both
24 sides. The outcome is uncertain; the Devil could win. Rojack is aware of the nature of this struggle, but he
25 doesn't always know which side his actions will benefit. "The moral consequences of this," Mailer said in

1 a 1958 interview with Richard G. Stern and Robert F. Lucid, "are not only staggering, but they're thrilling;
2 because moral experience is intensified rather than diminished" (*Conversations*, 33). As in *The Deer Park*,
3 the primary linkages between the characters are sexual. A web of infidelity and incest links the mob with
4 high society, Harlem with the small-town South, black with white, father with daughter and sister with
5 brother. Cherry, who is murdered at the end of the novel, sleeps with almost every important male
6 character. While it is clear that Mailer intends her love for Rojack to be of a higher order, she is not
7 developed enough for this to be completely convincing.

8 By far the best analysis of the novel is Tony Tanner's in his essay, "On the Parapet," collected in
9 Harold Bloom's *Norman Mailer: Modern Critical Views*. He points out that while initially many critics
10 found the novel to be an outrageous study of how to murder your wife and get away with it, such views
11 miss the deeper moral dimensions of the novel. It is, he says, "a vivid exploration of a man's relationship
12 to the different orders of American reality." Tanner notes the extraordinary use of metaphors of "pre-social
13 reality—the jungle, the forest, the desert, the swamp, the ocean-bed" (41), and how these metaphors
14 contrast with the realistic depictions of New York City. The novel presents a series of oppositions between
15 nature and civilization, the supernatural and the rational, the demonic and the angelic, and ultimately,
16 between the forces of life and death. Rojack must contend among and between these competing and
17 unsymmetrical dualisms, Tanner explains, aided by not much more than the voices he hears in his head, his
18 sense of smell and the talismanic umbrella of Shago Martin, which trembles portentously in his hands. In
19 the novel's climax, high up in the Waldorf Towers, where Rojack has been summoned by Kelly to answer
20 questions about Deborah's death, he resists the carnal temptations of his host, and then, in a self-imposed
21 test, walks the parapet around Kelly's terrace, smashing him with the umbrella when he attempts to push
22 him off the edge, and then throwing the umbrella over the parapet. Tanner concludes his brilliant
23 discussion by noting that Rojack has "to prove that he can negotiate that edge where the worlds meet" (46),
24 succumbing to neither to the fixed and rational nor the formless and irrational. He shows that he can, at
25 least for a time, "hold on to his identity between two threatening realms" (47). Mailer was pleased with the

look like a slap ^{at} Updike. Besides, I
never thought of using Rojack again

1 achievement of *Dream*. He imbued the novel with his dynamic belief system; melded, for the first time
2 with Rojack, the narrative consciousness and the main protagonist, the teller and the chief character; and
3 his style was now fully mature—it has never been more lyrical, energetic and richly metaphoric. The novel
4 sold well and made the best-seller list, although the reviews were mediocre at best. Reviewers have often
5 been unable to appreciate Mailer's bold vision and experiments in form.

6 After *Dream* he was again uncertain which way to move and how much energy to expend on various
7 projects. But he knew, as he says in *Cannibals*, that "repetition kills the soul" (64), and that writing Rojack

8 Redux would be a mistake. In 1967 his solution was to move in several directions simultaneously. His

9 play, "The Deer Park," opened in New York in January and had a successful four-month run. He published

10 four books: *The Short Fiction of Norman Mailer*, *The Deer Park: A Play*, his fifth novel, *Why Are We In*
11 *Vietnam?* and *The Bullfight*, a long nonfiction essay about a Mexican bullfighter. He also made two

12 experimental films, "Wild 90" and "Beyond the Law," (and the following year, "Maidstone," his most

13 ambitious film). ^{off Broadway} appeared at several anti-war protests, including the October March on the Pentagon, where

14 he was arrested. Before the year was over he was at work on his nonfiction narrative on the March, *The*

15 *Armies of the Night*. *Why Are We In Vietnam?*, his most linguistically innovative work, follows a party of

16 Texans hunting big game in Alaska, and is narrated by the son of the party's leader, Ranald Jethroe, an

17 eighteen-year old known to all as D.J. Part Huck Finn and part William Burroughs, D.J. talks, as he

18 himself notes, like a wired disc jockey. His rapid-fire recounting of the high tech hunts in the Brooks

19 Range of Alaska, recollected two years later on the eve of his departure for Vietnam, crackles with obscene

20 merriment. The novel does not directly consider American involvement in Vietnam. Rather, it accounts

21 for American militarism by depicting the Texans as nature-defiling louts. It is Mailer's most extended

22 meditation on nature after *Naked*. But the descriptions in *Vietnam* are superior to those in *Naked* because

23 its natural world is the incarnation of a prodigious and divided anima. The forests and mountains of Alaska

24 vibrate with supersensory messages from heavenly and demonic forces, much as the forests of Lebanon do

25 in his later novel, *Ancient Evenings*. Passages of description of caribou and wolves alternate with

Confusing
connections:

1 unforgiving portraits of the Texans (all employed by a huge corporation) competing for the biggest trophy
2 animals. The rams and grizzly bears are shot, in some instances, from a helicopter. The novel was
3 generally reviewed well and nominated for a National Book Award, the first of five nominations for Mailer.

4 NONFICTION NARRATIVES

5 From 1967 through 1979 Mailer published 22 books. Only one of them—*Vietnam*—was a novel.
6 During this tumultuous period in American life, especially the late 1960 and early 1970s, history seemed to
7 be accelerating. As Mailer put it in *Of a Fire on the Moon*, “the real had become more fantastic than the
8 imagined” (221). In response, Mailer interrupted his novelistic mission in order to chronicle these events,
9 and to challenge them with his imagination. Some of the books he wrote during this period were just
10 sparks from the wheel, but several of them are among his major achievements. Perhaps the most important
11 of these are the five nonfiction narratives he published from 1968 to 1972: *The Armies of the Night: History*
12 *as a Novel*, *The Novel as History* (1968), a depiction of the October 1967 anti-war protest March on the
13 Pentagon; *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* (1968), a report on the violent 1968 political conventions; *Of a*
14 *Fire on the Moon* (1971), a long analysis of the American space program and the first landing on the moon;
15 *The Prisoner of Sex* (1971), an account of his debate with the Women’s Liberation Movement, which
16 earned its enmity; and *St. George and the Godfather* (1972), a report on the 1972 political conventions. In
17 his glowing review of *Armies*, Alfred Kazin concluded by stating, “Mailer’s intuition in this book is that the
18 times demand a new form. He has found it” (*Critical Essays*, 65). Each of the five nonfiction narratives
19 attempts to bridge what Mailer in *The Presidential Papers* calls the “double life” of Americans: “the
20 history of politics which is concrete, factual, practical and unbelievably dull,” and “a subterranean river of
21 untapped, ferocious, lonely and romantic desires, that concentration of ecstasy and violence which is the
22 dream life of the nation” (38). Whether Mailer is writing about astronauts or feminists, athletes or
23 presidents, protestors or FBI agents, he is always attempting to bridge outer and inner, public and private in
24 our national experience. It is his deepest narrative aspiration. To capture the complexities of a nation
25 poised between the malevolent and the heroic, he was obliged to break down the walls between narrative

1 genres. A work like *Armies* accomplishes this by employing the techniques of both the modern
2 psychological novel and the historical narrative. The narrative is divided into two parts. The first
3 "novelistic" part is three times the length of the second "historical" overview, the latter serving as factual
4 ballast for the first, which traces Mailer's involvement in the protest activities, the events leading up the
5 March, his arrest, incarceration and two days later, his release. He does not divide the other four narratives
6 in the same way; instead, he shuttles between outer and inner, the events, his participation and his
7 mercurial, often humorous responses to them. But he does employ the same unusual point of view; he
8 describes himself in the third person, a technique used by some classical historians, and in the twentieth
9 century, most notably, by Henry Adams and Gertrude Stein. Here is an example, a description of the scene
10 just before his arrest at the Pentagon.

11 It was not unlike being a boy about to jump from one garage roof to an adjoining garage roof. The one
12 thing not to do was wait. Mailer looked at Macdonald and Lowell. "Let's go," he said. Not looking
13 again at them, not pausing to gather or dissipate resolve, he made a point of stepping neatly and
14 decisively over the low rope. Then he headed across the grass to the nearest MP he saw.

15 It was as if the air had changed, or light had altered; he felt immediately more alive—yes, bathed
16 in air—and yet disembodied from himself, as if indeed he were watching himself in a film where this
17 action was taking place. He could feel the eyes of the people behind the rope watching him,
18 could feel the intensity of their existence as spectators. And as he walked forward, he and the MP
19 looked at one another with the naked stricken lucidity which comes when absolute strangers are for
20 the moment absolutely locked together (147).

21 It reads like a modern novel, which is precisely what Mailer wanted. In *Barbary Shore* and *The Deer*
22 *Park*, he used first-person narrators who resembled him in some ways, but not too much. It was not
23 permitted; a modicum of distance between narrators and authors was required. Authors were supposed to
24 be invisible and powerful, everywhere and nowhere, like God. But Mailer wanted to use himself, explore
25 himself, watch himself winning, losing, being bold, being a fool, performing, as he says in the quoted

1 passage, as if he were in a movie, and above all searching for congruence between himself and the
2 Republic in peril. So he took the step of describing himself in the third person, which, in effect, divided
3 him into teller and told, narrating and narrative selves. It is only an apparent paradox that this division of
4 self by aesthetic fiat came as a result of his growing awareness of the desirability of no longer attempting to
5 separate the private and public hemispheres of his life. To harness both selves, use them simultaneously,
6 he was, in effect, taking seriously Emerson's injunction in his essay, "Fate": "A man must ride alternately
7 on the horses of his private and his public nature, as the equestrians in the circus throw themselves nimbly
8 from horse to horse, or plant one foot on the back of the one and the other foot on the back of the other."
9 This is Mailer's narrative stance in the five nonfiction narratives, as well as his 1975 account of the
10 Muhammad Ali-George Foreman boxing match in Zaire, *The Fight*. He is even a bit more nimble than
11 Emerson's metaphor allows in that he also explores the many sides and pockets of his character. Here is a
12 list of the names he uses to describe himself: Brute, Ruminant, Reporter, Aquarius (a favorite, used in both
13 *Fire* and *St. George*), Acolyte, Novelist, Director, Prisoner, Prospector and Participant. Besides these
14 formal appellations, Mailer has placed himself over the years everywhere on the political spectrum from
15 the left of Robespierre to the right of William F. Buckley, from Marxian anarchist in *Advertisements* to
16 "grand conservateur" in *Armies* (27). During his quixotic race for mayor of New York in 1969, his
17 campaign literature said he was to the Left and Right of everyone else in the race, and by the time of
18 *Armies*, he regularly described himself as a "Left Conservative" (141). From his cosmology to his politics
19 and everywhere in between, Mailer is a thoroughgoing dualist, but one whose two sides are themselves
20 often divided. Richard Poirier, in perhaps the most intelligent full-length study of Mailer, *Norman Mailer*,
21 pointed out that Mailer "is quite unable to imagine anything except in oppositions, unable even to imagine
22 one side of the opposition without proposing that it has yet another opposition within itself," or "the
23 minority within" (114).

24 FAMOUS AMERICANS

1 Mailer received the best reviews of his career for *Armies*; it won a Pulitzer and the National Book
2 Award, and is generally seen to be one of the finest achievements of the "new journalism." The others
3 fared almost as well, garnering awards, plaudits from reviewers and strong sales. He was widely seen as
4 Aquarius-in-charge-of-construing-America, but he recognized that he had all but used himself up as a
5 reference. There were other problems: his marriage with Beverly Bentley failed in 1969, and he never
6 seemed to earn enough to pay alimony and expenses for his seven children (Maggie, his seventh, was born
7 to Carol Stevens, his fifth wife, in 1971). By the early 1970s, he felt an urgent desire to get back to his first
8 love, the novel. Even before *St. George and the Godfather* appeared in late 1972, he was at work at what
9 was initially called "the Egyptian novel." Shortly after, he signed a contract with Little, Brown for a three-
10 part novel and a large advance. But there were distractions, obligations, opportunities to be dealt with
11 along the way to completing it. All through the seventies—which might be called his biographical
12 decade—Mailer alternated between work on the Egyptian novel and a series of portraits of famous-
13 infamous Americans, twin lines of artistic enterprise that necessarily overlapped. The first biography was
14 of Marilyn Monroe, which was also the first of several collaborative efforts with the entrepreneurial
15 photographer and producer, Lawrence Schiller. *Marilyn: A Biography* was originally to have been a
16 25,000-word preface to a selection of photographs by Schiller and other photographers, but it grew into a
17 95,000-word, full-scale biography, which concluded with the suggestion that she had been murdered.
18 Controversy surrounded the book, which only increased sales; 400,000 copies were in print by the end of
19 1973. It was Mailer's biggest best-seller since *Naked*.

20 His next outing, *The Fight*, is a portrait of Muhammad Ali in Africa. Mailer again complained in the
21 narrative that using himself as a lens, describing himself in the third person, was tedious, and the book is
22 most successful in its depiction of Ali's amazing improvisations in the ring. He then returned to "the
23 Egyptian novel," pausing in 1976 to publish a collection of his political writings, *Some Honorable Men:*
24 *Political Conventions, 1960-1972*, and later the same year, a collection of excerpts from the work of an
25 author he admired. *Genius and Lust: A Journey through the Major Writings of Henry Miller* also contains

sound like he isn't mean

eighty pages of commentary on Miller, making it Mailer's lengthiest piece of literary criticism. The cover drawing of Miller is by Barbara Norris (later Norris Church Mailer), who Mailer met in Arkansas in 1975. He later married her after she and her son from an earlier marriage, Matthew, moved to New York. In 1978 she gave birth to another son, John Buffalo. This marriage, Mailer's sixth and last, brought a large measure of stability to his life. Norris Church Mailer is an actress, painter, novelist and theatrical artistic director in Provincetown, Massachusetts, the Mailer's permanent home since the mid-1980s.

A NEW AUDIENCE

Gary Gilmore was a convicted murderer who gained national attention by insisting that his death sentence by firing squad be promptly carried out. Shortly after his execution in early 1977, Lawrence Schiller contacted Mailer to ask if he would collaborate with him on Gilmore's story, to which he owned the rights. Mailer dropped work on his novel and spent six months in Utah with Schiller interviewing hundreds of people who had known ~~the complex~~ Gilmore, including convicts, lawyers, prison guards, members of the media, his mother and his girlfriend, Nicole Barrett, and poring over 15,000 pages of interviews and court transcripts. He was excited by Gilmore's story; it seemed to embody many of the ideas that had preoccupied him for years, ideas about existential violence, the good in bad people and the efficacy of dying in a state of grace, as well as the whole issue of capital punishment and American's fascination with outlaws. After the relatively quiet years of the middle and late 1970s, Mailer was also eager for another victory; he wanted a new audience. The narrative had several working titles: *Violence in America*, *The Saint and the Psychopath*, and *American Virtue*. He finally settled on *The Executioner's Song*. Choosing a title was a small difficulty. Mailer had larger problems. The first was point of view: inserting himself in the narrative and then describing himself in the third person would not work; he had never met Gilmore and much of his material was secondhand. He needed to be a central eye, but could not be an actor. His second problem was style: the filigreed style of the nonfiction narratives would be cumbersome for the large cast of characters and their unadorned, western way of speaking. It would also be ineffective in handling the huge number of facts and views of Gilmore and tessellating them into a

*I would never use
panoramic as a noun!*

1 narrative mosaic. Finally, he had to create a structure that could handle both Gilmore's dark tale, and how
2 it came to be told, something which involved a struggle among competing journalists, including Schiller,
3 who was both Gilmore's confidante and the accumulator of the vast archive on which Mailer would rely to
4 tell the story.

5 Mailer later told the *Los Angeles Times* that *Song* "was what I'd been looking to do since *The Naked*
6 *and the Dead*. I wanted to do an immense panoramic with a strong narrative thread to it, a sort of collective
7 novel of America" (October 25, 1979, Sec. 4, 30). The solution to his ^{novel? epic? (needed a noun)} point of view ^{of} problem was to revert
8 to the omniscient, anonymous point of view of *Naked*, which appropriately eliminated him from the story.

9 Mailer then chose a style as flat as the Utah landscape and relied heavily on the actual words of those
10 involved. Here and there a careful reader can find some of Mailer's characteristic locutions, but not enough
11 to slow down ^{weird on} the narrative, which accelerates as it progresses. His structural problem was solved by
12 dividing the book into two parts, "Western Voices" and "Eastern Voices." The first part tells the story of
13 Gilmore's life up to his incarceration for two senseless murders, and is told mainly by women, as Joan
14 Didion noted in her highly laudatory review. She continues, saying that "Eastern Voices," Book Two, "are
15 largely those of men—the voices of the lawyers, the prosecutors, the reporters, the people who move in the
16 larger world and believe that they can influence events. The 'Western' book is a fatalistic drift, a
17 tension.... The 'Eastern' book is the release of that tension, the resolution, the playing out of the execution"
18 (*Critical Essays*, 81). Mailer resolves his problem with Schiller by making him the chief figure of Part

19 Two, and after Gary and Nicole the most important in the book. Schiller is both Gilmore's executor and a
20 journalist struggling to assemble the raw materials of the story with integrity. The effort of compiling the
21 massive documentary cache is the main line of action in Part Two, although Gilmore's execution—four
22 bullets through the heart from a firing squad—autopsy and cremation ends the narrative. Mailer subtitled
23 *Song* "a true life novel," even though it was scrupulously factual, out of his debatable conviction that its
24 scope, form, characters and themes made it a novel. ^{The Executioners} *Song*, another best seller, won him another cadre of
25 admirers. The reviews were mainly quite positive and the book was nominated for the National Book

1 Critics Circle Award and won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, bearing out Mailer's belief in its fundamental
2 novelistic identity. He is the only writer to date to win the Pulitzer in both fiction and nonfiction.

3 FROM AMERICA TO EGYPT

4 As soon as Song was completed Mailer returned to "the Egyptian novel," although he broke from the
5 effort twice more: in 1980 for a novella titled *Of Women and Their Elegance*, which is narrated entirely by
6 Marilyn Monroe, his only female narrator; and in 1982 for *Pieces and Pontifications*, his ^{Sixth} ~~sixth~~ miscellany.

7 The first half consisted of his essays from the seventies; the second half of twenty of his most important
8 interviews, 1958-1981. There was one other interruption. In 1981 Mailer supported the parole request of

9 Jack Henry Abbott, and then wrote the introduction to Abbott's book, *In the Belly of the Beast: Letters*
10 *from Prison*. Abbott was released and Mailer hired him as a researcher and supported him generally. But

11 within a month of his release Abbott killed a waiter in a New York restaurant during a petty dispute.

12 Mailer was accused of being blind to Abbott's violent nature, and was pilloried in the tabloid press, while
13 others who had helped Abbott out of prison went relatively unnoticed. Mailer admitted his culpability, but
14 the tragic situation haunted him. Abbott was convicted and, after his later parole attempts failed,
15 committed suicide in 2002.

16 *Ancient Evenings* was published with unusual fanfare in April 1983. It is Mailer's most ambitious,
17 complex work, and by his estimate, his finest. Set in Egypt over a 180-year span (1320-1100 BCE), it is
18 also his most unread major work. Readers for two decades have complained of getting bogged down in
19 what one critic, Michael Glenday, in his study, *Norman Mailer*, called the novel's "involutions," its
20 memories of memories of the magical moments of Menenhetet I, who has learned from a Jewish slave how
21 to father himself and lives four lives in the course of the novel. The process of re-creating himself, like
22 much of the magic in the book, is obscure. Glenday goes on to say that the critical community, not to
23 mention the common reader, remains baffled by the novel because it "is still regarded as both *outré* and so
24 resistant to category as to subvert any substantial critical appraisal of it" (117). The violent, carnal and
25 magical religiosity of the Egyptians is not presented in any symbolic or metaphorical way, as Robert

1 Begiebing points out in his study, *Toward a New Synthesis*. When Mailer chose ancient Egypt, a time and
2 place saturated in magic, he was automatically released from "the restrictions of fictional realism," as well
3 as from "twentieth-century rationalism and scientism" (98). Mailer was free to indulge his gnostic
4 impulses to the fullest, free to re-create a society unaffected by Western culture's ruling beliefs—Judaic
5 monotheism, Christian compassion and distrust of the body, Faustian progress, romantic love and Freudian
6 guilt. Mailer attributes telepathy and reincarnation to the Egyptians, but apart from these, he does not
7 depart from the available evidence on the nature of Egyptian culture, including its burial customs, which
8 Mailer savored. Unable to narrate a novel except in the first person, Mailer uses telepathy as a substitute
9 for omniscience; reincarnation allows him to explore Menenhetet's four very different lives as charioteer-
10 general and harem master, high priest, wealthy businessman, and, finally, tomb robber—note the
11 trajectory—thus providing views of different levels and corners of Egyptian life without shifting from one
12 consciousness to another, and then two more (Menenhetet remembers his previous lives). The first of his
13 lives is the most impressive by far; depiction of the others, according to Harold Bloom in his review, gives
14 "every sign of truncation" (*Norman Mailer: Modern Critical Views*, 194). Almost all reviewers and critics
15 agree that the account of the Egyptians' great chariot battle against the Hittites at Kadesh—an actual
16 battle—is one of the strongest expositions in Mailer's work and, for many, in modern literature.
17 Menenhetet fights alongside his Pharaoh, Ramses II (who is as important a character in the book as is
18 Meni, as the Pharaoh calls him), and the Pharaoh's ferocious lion, Hera-Ra. The aftermath of the Egyptian
19 victory is perhaps even more impressive than the battle itself. Perhaps the high point of the novel is his
20 account of the rape and butchery during the drunken celebration before the gates of the Hittite capital,
21 which he contrasts with the majestic aplomb of Ramses receiving through the long night the severed hands
22 of slain Hittites from thousands of his troops. The Pharaoh deftly tosses each hand ^{no!} ~~behind~~ him into a
23 perfectly pyramidal pile, never moving his feet, as his scribe records the soldiers' names and gory trophies.
24 In addition to this luminous account, there are other wonderful runs of prose in the novel. The opening
25 offers a remarkable re-telling of the myths of the Egyptian gods by Menenhetet I to his grandson,

forward
and
to the
side.

Menenhetet II after their deaths, one ghost to another, inside the great pyramid of Khufu as they prepare for a final journey and final judgment. Meni II is the actual narrator, although he is displaced from most of the action, much like O'Shaugnessey in *The Deer Park*. Between the marvelous retelling of the stories of the gods and the ending when the spirit of Meni I dies but passes on, like McLeod to Lovett, a blessing to Meni II, comes the long middle, which is an account of Meni I's four lives, as told to another pharaoh, Ramses IX, by Meni I during one ^{give me a break!} interminable ancient evening. The narrative's involuted provenance is often confusing, but the chief criticism of the novel centers on the languorous Book of the Queens, a 130-page account of Meni I as harem master. Future consideration of the novel may focus on its complex epistemology, its spiraling narrative skeins and inlaid perspectives, and their relationships with the four narratives he wrote during the same period as *Ancient Evenings*, narratives focusing on Marilyn Monroe, Muhammad Ali, Henry Miller and Gary Gilmore. Certainly the blend of their cardinal vices and virtues are manifested in both Menenhetet I and Ramses II.

BACK TO THE COLD WAR

Mailer's next book was an "entertainment," to use Graham Greene's phrase, a murder mystery set in Provincetown. It was published in 1984, the same year Milder was elected President of the international writers' organization, PEN, and inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters. *Tough Guys* ^{1985?} *Don't Dance* is notable mainly for its evocations of the drear winter landscapes of lower Cape Cod, and its portraits of the eccentrics, artists and ^{drug dealers} criminals who live there. It was written in sixty-one days to fulfill a contract with his publisher at the time, Little, Brown, although ultimately published by Random House, his continuing publisher. It was also a way of winding down after the decade-long effort to complete *Ancient Evenings*. Milder went on to direct a feature film based on the novel, a film that has gained something of a cult reputation. But the bulk of his effort during the 1980s was focused on a very long novel that deals with the Cold War. The novel's length may be an American record. *Harlot's Ghost* is 1310 pages long and ends with the words "To be continued." The sequel, Milder said when the novel was published in October 1991, will continue the story of Herrick "Harry" Hubbard, his father "Cal," both CIA agents, his godfather Hugh

1 Montague (code name "Harlot"), and Montague's wife Kittredge, also CIA agents. After she divorces
2 Harlot, she marries Harry, who is Harlot's ghost, or one of them. He ghostwrites spy novels favorable to
3 the CIA and shadows Harlot in several ways, most notably with Kittredge. But Harlot's ghost also refers to
4 the spirit of the dead Harlot, if he is indeed dead. A body resembling his washes up on the shores of
5 Chesapeake Bay with the face blown away and finger tips missing. Mailer's eighth novel is crammed with
6 questions uncertainties about the CIA, the Cold War, the cosmic war of God and the Devil and the fundamental
7 loyalties of all the characters, including Harlot, who is loosely based on American master spy, James Jesus
8 Angleton. One critic of the novel, John Whalen-Bridge, in his essay, "Adamic Purity as Double-Agent,"
9 calls it an "obsessively dualistic novel," where "the coexistence and interdependence of good and
10 evil...receive supreme expression" (118).

11 *Harlot's Ghost* is of course divided into two parts, "Alpha" and "Omega," both manuscripts written
12 by Harry, who narrates the story from Moscow in 1984. "Omega," about 100 pages, begins the novel and
13 is set in Harry's island home in Maine on a day in 1983. It is a riveting opening, replete with sex, murder,
14 an icy road and a stormy sea, double agents, a dank cellar and, of course, ghosts. It ends with the
15 revelation of the body washed ashore, the disappearance of Kittredge (with Dix Butler, a bisexual
16 professional rival of Harry's), and Harry's flight from his burning house. "Alpha," at 1200 pages, is the
17 story of Harry's early life, and includes his youth in the 1930s and 1940s, Yale education, and tours of duty
18 abroad and the U.S., up to 1965, where the narrative ends. Presumably, the period between 1965 and 1984
19 dealing with Vietnam, Watergate, the impending collapse of the Soviet Union and the marriage of Hubbard
20 and Kittredge, will be in the sequel, although Mailer seems to have abandoned it. While the novel cannot
21 be justly called an all-encompassing picture of American life, it does provide a privileged perspective on
22 some of the most cataclysmic events and fabled figures of the American scene in the 1950s and 1960s.
23 Like a long freight train, Mailer's story of WASP agents at the center of intrigues at home and abroad
24 (Berlin, Uruguay, Russia and Cuba), picks up speed as it snakes through postwar America life,
25 accelerating tremendously as it moves through the CIA's failed invasion of Cuba, attempts to assassinate

*This
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? Harlot was washed ashore in Chesapeake Bay,

1 Castro and the Cuban missile crisis. Kennedy's assassination is treated almost cursorily, but his affair with
2 Judith Exner (which also involves Frank Sinatra and Mafia boss Sam Giancana), comprises another strand
3 of the Byzantine plot of clandestine operations, double-dealing and heroism. Mailer bends over backward
4 to fairly present the CIA, making clear the contradictory impulses of selfless patriotism and Faustian
5 arrogance that motivate its agents and leaders.

6 *Harlot's Ghost* was Mailer's eighth best-seller, although reviews, as usual, were mixed. Praised for
7 the interleaving of fiction and fact, his extraordinary anatomy of the agency, and the authoritative portraits
8 of so many prominent figures (Kennedy, Castro, Allen Dulles, J. Edgar Hoover, Kim Philby), the novel
9 was also criticized for the length of some episodes, especially the nearly 300 pages devoted to Hubbard's
10 years in Uruguay, and for his protracted correspondence with Kittredge. In an attempt to reveal
11 Kittredge—who never comes completely into focus—within the limitations imposed by a first-person
12 narrator, Mailer was forced to create an awkward, epistolary relationship. Finally, many reviewers
13 contrasted the fast-paced opening with the tedium of some of the South American material. This
14 counterpoint, like that in *Ancient Evenings*, not to mention *Moby-Dick* and other ambitious novels, was
15 undoubtedly intentional; Mailer has always believed that the parts of a narrative should clarify and
16 complicate other parts. Given the novel's length and ambition, and its saturation in the horrors and glories
17 of the American Century, it seems more likely than any of Mailer's other works to be measured by his 1959
18 statement in *Advertisements* that he wanted to "try to hit the longest ball ever to go up into the accelerated
19 hurricane air of our American letters" (477).

20 MORE BIOGRAPHIES AND A CONSOLIDATION

21 No event in twentieth-century American life has resonated longer or stronger for Mailer than JFK's
22 assassination. Yet until *Oswald's Tale* he never considered it directly, but in several earlier books circled
23 or erected a scaffolding around the event, almost as if he felt it could be approached but never dominated.
24 This is the case in *Harlot's Ghost*, where the assassination occurs offstage, as it were. In 1992 he decided to
25 tackle it head on via a biography of the much-despised, but poorly understood Lee Harvey Oswald, the man

Mike, I love the ~~transcribed~~ letter,

1 arrested for shooting the president and then executed by a small-time Dallas mobster, Jack Ruby. The
2 opportunity was presented to him by his collaborator on ~~Song~~ and Marilyn, Lawrence Schiller, who had
3 ~~exclusive~~ ^{gained} access to KGB archival material and operatives in Belarus, where Oswald had lived in 1960 after
4 marrying Marina Prusakova. Mailer and Schiller spent six months there, 1992-93, interviewing everyone
5 available who had known ~~them~~ ^{Lee or Marina}, or spied on them (seventeen current or former KGP officers), and poring
6 over the verbatim transcripts of the couple's dreary life in the bleak city of Minsk. Characteristically,
7 Mailer divides the resulting 828-page narrative, *Oswald's Tale*, into two parts. The first, "Oswald in Minsk
8 with Marina," is devoted to Oswald's two-and-half years in Russia; the second, "Oswald in America,"
9 moves back to his childhood and Marine service, skipping his Russian years and moving to the dark day in
10 Dallas when the world changed. Mailer's subtle analysis of Jack Ruby's enigmatic motives follows his
11 unmatched re-creation of the assassination, which he concludes ^{75% likely to be} was the sole work of Oswald. The full
12 narrative, equal if not superior to *The Executioner's Song*, ends with wrenching portraits of three widows:
13 Jacqueline Kennedy, Marina Oswald and her mother-in-law, the nattering, narcissistic Marguerite Oswald,
14 who Mailer says "is worthy of Dickens" (790).

15 The portrait of Oswald is the fairest hearing he might ever receive. Mailer attempts the Herculean
16 task of generating, if not sympathy, then understanding of the dyslexic, nerdy Oswald. A failure at almost
17 everything to which he put his hand, but possessed of the ambition of the young Hitler or Lenin, Oswald
18 comes across as much victim as monster. Reviewers favored the first part of the narrative, which presented
19 fascinating material theretofore unavailable on the domestic life of Lee and Marina. For the second part of
20 his narrative, Mailer relied on the twenty-six volume *Warren Commission Report* and a large number of
21 biographies and investigative reports. Many readers are still not ready to fully appreciate Mailer's portrait
22 of Oswald, but one hundred years from now it might stand as definitive, worthy in its severity and
23 compassion of Tolstoy.

24 Never one to let the grass grow, Mailer had all but completed a biography of Pablo Picasso by the end
25 of 1992, but because of various difficulties in obtaining permissions, *Portrait of Picasso as a Young Man*

1 was not published until after late 1995, some months after *Oswald's Tale*. Without referring to himself,
2 Mailer uses his own fifty years of artistic success, failure and experimentation to measure Picasso's career
3 from his birth in 1881 to the end of his early manhood and the flowering of cubism at the beginning of
4 World War I. Mailer's biography is premised on the notion that Picasso was a self-created artist who
5 "gambled on his ability to reach into mysteries of existence that no one else had even perceived" (357).
6 His insights in this rather comradely biography vibrate with fellow-feeling. Picasso was "doomed," Mailer
7 says, "to relive his obsessions through all ninety-one years ^{of} ^{his?} ~~of~~ life" (352), to continue to paint until the end
8 "as if work itself could hold death off" (367). Mailer, who turned eighty in 2003, is still writing furiously.
9 Set a thief to catch a thief.

10 *Picasso* received terrible reviews, especially from members of the professional art community, ~~which~~ ^{who were}
11 ~~was~~ not eager to sanction a somewhat iconoclastic portrait of the central figure of twentieth-century art.
12 Mailer toyed with the idea of publishing his next book, *The Gospel according to the Son*, anonymously, but
13 finally did not. When it appeared in 1997, it fared only slightly better than *Picasso*, with some reviewers
14 castigating Mailer for daring to speak in the first person as Jesus. Others saw his gospel-as-autobiography
15 as another example of his brilliance at integrating narrative forms. His motive, he explained in various
16 interviews, was to improve on the committee prose of the Gospels, to place the wisdom and agony of Jesus
17 in a narrative without the contradictions, lacunae and weak transitions of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.
18 As Mailer put it in an interview with Sean Abbott in *At Random*, "If I can write about Isis and Osiris and
19 Ra, then certainly the New Testament is not going to be that difficult to do" (No. 17, spring-summer, 1997,
20 51). With his plot in hand (always a worry for Mailer), he expended his creative energies on depictions of
21 Judas, Pilate, Mary, John the Baptist and, especially, Satan, who comes across as a devious, Middle Eastern
22 playboy-prince. Mailer's other important achievement in *Gospel* is the voice of Jesus, who according to
23 John Updike in his *New Yorker* review, speaks in "a direct, rather relaxed English that has yet an eerie, neo-
24 Biblical dignity" (May 12, 1997, 92).

1 On May 6, 1998, fifty years to the day after the publication of *The Naked and the Dead*, Mailer
2 published *The Time of Our Time*, a massive consolidation of all his previous work. Searching for an
3 organizing principle for the 1286-page anthology containing 139 excerpts from 26 previous books, Mailer
4 decided that each piece would appear "in accordance with the year it refers to rather than the year it was
5 written" (x). So it opens with a short sketch describing a 1929 boxing match between Hemingway and
6 Morley Callaghan and works its magnificent way, event by chronological event, to the 1996 presidential
7 race between Clinton and Dole, although Mailer then violates his own scheme ~~some what~~ by ending with
8 several excerpts from *Ancient Evenings* and *The Gospel according to the Son*. The true heart of the
9 collection, however, are those pieces which treat World War II and the Cold War, taken from both the
10 fiction and nonfiction. All of his portraits of major figures of the last half of the twentieth century—JFK,
11 Robert Kennedy, Eugene McCarthy, Castro, Oswald, Henry Kissinger, Mayor Daly, Nixon, Carter, Bush
12 and Clinton—are included, as well as movie stars, athletes and writers. Mailer rigorously excluded his own
13 presence from the book, however, in order to focus on the major events and figures of the time. Besides the
14 preface and acknowledgments, the only original piece in the collection is "The Shadow of the Crime: A
15 Word from the Author," a one-page reflection on the 1960 stabbing of his second wife Adele. The
16 collection sold well and was generally praised by reviewers.

17 Besides collaborating with Schiller on television scripts dealing with O.J. Simpson and FBI spy
18 Robert Hansenn in the years immediately following *The Time of Our Time*, Mailer began work on a new,
19 unnamed work, and in 2003 published a compilation of his comments and insights on being a professional
20 writer for more than fifty years. Titled ^{the} *Spooky Art: A Book about Writing*, the collection also includes
21 most of his literary criticism. It was published on his eightieth birthday.

22 It is difficult to sum up a career of such length and achievement, so full of awards and arrests,
23 mistakes and masterpieces. Mailer has challenged, angered and amazed three generations of readers
24 worldwide. Perhaps no life in our literature has been at once so brilliant, varied, controversial, public,
25 provocative and misunderstood. When asked by the *New York Times* to describe himself in one word, he

1 answered "improvisational" (February 13, 1994, Sec. 9, 1), providing a key to his protean identity and
2 achievements. But he is improvisational by design rather than by default or happenstance. Metaphorically
3 speaking, he always keeps a bag packed on the chance he will hear the train whistle of new opportunity that
4 may result in new energy, new success, new growth. Consequently, he is pre-disposed—sometimes
5 erroneously—to sense turning points and sea changes in America's health and identity, and his own.
6 Constant anticipation of a new plot for American lives is for him the price, and the reward, of the liberty of
7 his consciousness. Unprecedented and perhaps irreplaceable, Norman Mailer can lay fair claim to being
8 the chief narrative chronicler and interpreter of the American Century.

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J. Michael Lennon

Didn't use their screen

Norman Mailer

Scribner's Great Writers Series

J. Michael Lennon

Spring 2003

*Published copy,
edited after publication
by Mailer*

Changes in form
from N.M.

1

Norman Mailer

(1923-)

One way to understand the amazing diversity of the career of Norman Mailer, its complex relationship with his personal life, and the sharply divided opinion of the merit of his achievements is to see all of these as reflections of Mailer's effort to stay alive spiritually, artistically, even physically. "Repetition kills the soul" is a favored mantra of Mailer's even if, in mid-career, he was guilty of it. But for the great majority of his writing life he has moved back and forth through the literary genres, rotating his crops, so to speak, among the novel (always the favored form), novellas, short stories, every sort of essay, sports and political reportage, screenplays, film and book reviews, the interview, plays, the nonfiction novel, newspaper and magazine columns, a bit of science fiction, a few scraps of memoir, philosophical dialogues, brief and extended biographies and poems. Speaking in the voice of Jesus, he has even re-told the Gospels. He has put his hand to virtually every form, everything but autobiography, which he has avoided in the belief that such a volume would be a tombstone. Mailer's Emersonian belief in the infinitude of the self, a self energized by new ventures, precludes the sort of summing up that a full-scale autobiography demands.

Mailer is the most widely known of living American authors first of all because of the length of his career and his many different and important books. But there are other factors: his forays into public life, his attempts to delineate the art in politics and the politics in art, his fights, causes, underground films, divorces and other legal problems, and his relentless appearances in the media. He has been on the cover of every major American magazine and has appeared on nearly every ^{guilty} talk show in existence. It is safe to say that he has been interviewed on radio, television and in print more than any other author, well over 500 times. Although he has little use for the Internet, his presence there is also large. He has been tremendously productive, publishing 40 books from 1948 to 2003, but he has also been a *provocateur*, a performer and a regular in gossip columns. His life, especially after the 1950s, has alternated between monkish labor—when he is working, he writes almost every day—and heralded appearances at literary events, protest meetings, intellectual forums, fund-raising receptions, college campuses, and, of course, on television. He is the prototypical public artist/intellectual of the last half of the twentieth century. In his essay, "Prolegomenon to a Biography of Mailer," collected in *Critical Essays on*

Norman Mailer, the dean of Mailer critics, Robert F. Lucid, says Mailer "may seem finally to have embodied our time" (182).

No discussion of the modern American novel would be complete without reference to his novels, several of which have become classics; no record of the "new journalism" and the nonfiction novel (Mailer dislikes the term) could pass over his contributions to the form, which some critics believe he, more than anyone else, invented; no examination of several post-World War II events, movements and phenomena—the Cold War, the rise of feminism, the Kennedy assassination, the moon shot, the great prize fights, presidential ^{conventions} campaigns and elections (he has covered six), capital punishment, and the compacted miseries of urban life—could eschew his commentary. In the unlikely event that plastic is ever banned for its ill effects, he will be credited for his strident warnings; any consideration of the role of the post-war author as celebrity hero in opposition to the deadening effects of modern technology, bureaucracy and the corporation will have to begin with Norman Mailer.

EARLY YEARS

His mother's family ran small resort hotels on the Jersey Shore and he was born there, in Long Branch, on January 31, 1923. But he grew up in Brooklyn where his parents moved in 1925. He was the first child of Isaac Barnett "Barney," who emigrated from South Africa after World War I, and Fanny Schneider Mailer, whose family came from Lithuania a generation earlier. His sister, Barbara Jane, was born on April 6, 1927. His parent had lifelong professional occupations: he was an accountant and she managed a series of small businesses. In 1933 the family moved to Crown Heights, a bastion of the Jewish middle class. Mailer attended public schools, skipping ^{three} two half-year terms, and in 1939, at sixteen, graduated with high grades from Boy's High School. He applied to Harvard and M.I.T., choosing the former partly because an older cousin had gone there. Intending to major in aeronautical engineering, he immediately became entranced with his creative writing classes, reviving the interest he had as a young boy. He wrote scores of stories and took every available writing class while at Harvard, and in April 1941, one of them, "The Greatest Thing in the World," won *Story* magazine's college contest. The influence of three writers—John Dos Passos, James T. Farrell and John Steinbeck—was apparent in the story, a fast-paced, naturalistic tale of violence and hustling, set in Chicago. The story's success convinced him that he was launched as a writer and in the summer of 1941 he began his first novel, *No Percentage*, which is still unpublished. When he graduated in June 1943 with a degree in engineering sciences (with honors), the war was on, and he wondered, as he told the story later in

Advertisements for Myself, whether "a great war novel would be written about Europe or the Pacific" (28). He was already ^{anticipating} carefully planning his literary career.

THE ARMY AND THE ARMY NOVEL

Before shipping out to the Pacific as an artillery trainee, he married his college sweetheart, Beatrice "Bea" Silverman, and completed a second apprentice novel, *A Transit to Narcissus*, which remained unpublished until 1978. He arrived in Leyte in the Philippines in late December 1944 and shortly after was re-assigned to the 112th Regimental Combat Team, a Texas outfit, serving first as a clerk and then as a rifleman in a reconnaissance squad. Mailer went on patrols, dug foxholes, got into a few firefights and carefully observed his fellow soldiers, the landscape, the weather and the ways in which the Army shaped behavior. His lifelong interest in the permutations of power began with his study of the "fear ladder" of the Army. He also read the books and letters that his family sent him and, in return, send hundreds of fat letters to Bea describing the incidents of the day to be used in the war novel he planned to write after the war. The central action of the novel was to be a long patrol, one that resembled in many ways an actual patrol ^{into unexplored territory} behind enemy lines that his platoon had undertaken. It ended disastrously, as he later recounted in an interview with Steven Marcus (collected in *Conversations with Norman Mailer*), when someone in his unit kicked over a hornet's nest and half of them ran ingloriously down the mountain. But the incident ^(NM went up) became a perfect turning point for his novel. "War is disproportions," he told Marcus, "and the hornet's nest seemed a perfect disproportion to me. We were ready to lose our lives but we weren't up to getting stung by a hornet" (89).

After the war ended in August 1945 Mailer was sent to Japan, where he served as a cook. He was discharged on May 2, 1946, and in June began work on what was to become *The Naked and the Dead* in a rented apartment in North Truro, Massachusetts, near Provincetown, the town in which he would spend most of his summers for the next half-century. In November of the same year, he signed a contract with Rinehart and Company, and in September 1947, he turned in a completed manuscript. Then he and Bea, also a veteran, left for Paris to study at the Sorbonne on the GI Bill. When the book came out on May 6, 1948 Mailer was still in Europe. The reviews were overwhelmingly enthusiastic and one of the most dazzling careers in postwar American literature was launched. *The Naked and the Dead* was aided by timing: ^{the war} immediately after the war readers wanted to forget about it, but then there was a resurgence of interest. Mailer's novel rode the crest of this wave. It jumped to the top of the best-seller list where it remained in first position for eleven straight weeks,

aided by continuing strong reviews, award nominations and praise from Sinclair Lewis who called Mailer "the greatest writer to come out of his generation," a comment publishers used on his books for years. All told, the novel was on the *New York Times* best-seller list for 62 weeks from its publication through the summer of 1949.

The novel is set on the fictional Pacific island of Anopopei where an American division commanded by Gen. Cummings seeks to defeat a Japanese force entrenched behind the Toyaku Line. The first thing to be said about this struggle is that it is secondary to the one among the Americans. The key power struggle takes place among the officers and among the enlisted men, and along two different, but related plot lines. The first half of the novel focuses on Cummings's effort to marshal his troops and so rout the stubborn Japanese forces. The division is sluggish and recalcitrant, and he is frustrated by his inability to mold it to his will. The tide of the war in the Pacific is beginning to turn and Cummings (the first of several machiavellian power-seekers in Mailer's work) knows he must be quickly victorious if he is to rise to the pinnacle in the post-war Army, which, he believes, may have to fight Russia—something that Americans, including Mailer, began to fear in the years right after the war. His aide, Lt. Hearn, is fascinated by the General's intelligence and foresight, but ultimately opposes his semi-fascistic methods, his use of the "fear ladder," on which every officer and soldier must torment the man on the next lower rung, passing down the punishment and looking up for the occasional reward. On the enlisted level, Sgt. Croft, a ^{sarcastic} ~~masochistic~~ whipcord Texan, leads a fourteen-man platoon of lower and middle-class soldiers from every part of the U.S. This cross-section enables Mailer to juxtapose a member of every major ethnic group (save African-Americans—the Army was still segregated) with every other one, and capture a representative range of dialects, biases and values. His ability to orchestrate so many characters and themes in this 721-page novel foreshadows his later efforts to handle even more complex materials. So Jews and southerners, Swedes, Poles, Irish and Italians, Mexican-Americans and WASPs cooperate and oppose one another even as they fight the Japanese. To illumine the motivations of his characters, Mailer inserts ten "Time Machine" sketches of the soldiers in their pre-war lives, including Cummings, Croft and Hearn. This technique, adapted from John Dos Passos's 1936 novel, *U.S.A.*, gives pace and balance to the narrative by juxtaposing domestic scenes with battle scenes, sex with violence, linkages Mailer will explore many times during his career.

In the early part of the novel, Hearn and Cummings debate the nature and uses of power with Hearn ultimately siding with those on the lower rungs. Their discussions are the beginning of Mailer's life-long study of the totalitarian mentality, and a

notable display of intellect by the 25 year-old author. Indeed, it is clear that Mailer admires the Faustian energies of Cummings, "his unique ability to extend his thoughts into immediate and effective action" (62), as much as he dislikes the half-baked liberalism of Hearn. The discussions lead finally to a confrontation and Hearn is forced to back down, to "crawfish," after which the General reassigns him to lead Croft's reconnaissance platoon. Thus, Hearn becomes the link between officers and enlisted men, as well as between the two major plot lines. The second part of the novel centers on the platoon's long patrol, which is intended to determine if the Toyaku Line can be attacked from the rear, something that Croft believes can only be accomplished by climbing Mt. Anaka, the tallest mountain on the 150-mile long island. The mountain and the assault on it are symbolic—much like Melville's white whale and Ahab—of nature's power and human desire to dominate it. This is especially true for Croft, who "felt a thrill of anticipation at the thought that by the following night they might be on the peak. Again, he felt a crude ecstasy. He could not have given the reason, but the mountain beckoned him, held an answer to something he wanted. It was so pure, so austere" (496). But before the assault can be made two things happen that demonstrate Mailer's ideas about the nature of war. First, Wilson, a member of the platoon, is gut shot in a Japanese ambush. Four soldiers are detailed to carry the suffering, increasingly incoherent Wilson on a litter back to the beach, an exhausting journey down and away from the mountain that parallels the platoon's journey up the flank of Anaka. The second event is Hearn's murder. He is killed by a Japanese machine gun, but only because Croft has suppressed information about Japanese positions. This surprising event has generated much critical comment with some believing that Mailer eliminates Hearn to discredit his ineffectual liberalism, and others seeing it as a realistic event that underlines the disproportions of war. It also reveals that Cummings's power lust is equaled by that of Croft, who Philip Buftis calls the General's "emotional twin" (*Norman Mailer*, 21). Together they dominate the action of the novel, although in the end both are defeated. Croft's unit is driven off the mountain by the hornets, demonstrating that nature has its own tricks and is not easily subjugated. As for Cummings, he is denied the self-aggrandizing pleasure of wielding his division like a fine sword and slicing through the Toyaku Line. When he is away from the island attempting to secure naval firepower to blast the Japanese, his dull understrapper, Maj. Dalleson, unimaginatively penetrates the Line and crushes the Japanese, who are found to be sick, starving and dispirited. It is a fluke victory, not a military masterstroke, and the star of Gen. Cummings will now decline.

Some readers, while lauding Mailer's powerful ability to describe men in action, and to capture the obscene lingo of soldiers (using the word "fug" for the commonest four-letter obscenity), concluded that the string of defeats and defaults in the novel amount to a bleak depiction of the human condition, something that Mailer disputed. He said in an interview with Lillian Ross that the novel "offers a good deal of hope," and that even in the novel's "corruption and sickness" there are "yearnings for a better world" (*Conversations*, 14). Such positive elements can be seen in the portage of Wilson by Goldstein and Ridges, the novel's odd couple, Brooklyn Jew and southern sharecropper. Heroically and stoically, they carry on after the other two soldiers fall away in exhaustion. Wilson groans and hallucinates obscenely as they carry him through jungle, field and stream. When he dies, they never consider leaving him; they labor on only to lose him in a surging jungle stream. This memorable sequence, coming near the end of the novel, balances the cold-blooded murder of Hearn and the novel's other acts of violence and treachery.

In what is generally considered to be the finest essay on *The Naked and the Dead*, Donald Pizer calls it "a work in which Mailer has successfully created a symbolic form to express the naturalistic theme of the hidden recesses of values in man's nature despite his tragic fate in a closely conditioned and controlled world" (92). For the remainder of his career Mailer will continue to show us the most abominable in human nature, while continuing to endorse the merits of courage—the essential virtue for Mailer—leading to growth and a hint of transcendence.

1 THE CHALLENGES OF FAME

2 In the middle of the twentieth century, American writers were more celebrated than at century's end ,
3 and *The Naked and the Dead* was a huge success, selling millions of copies. This success, Mailer later
4 explained in *Advertisements for Myself*, cut him off from his past; he called it "a lobotomy" (93). He was
5 25 and famous. Microphones were thrust in his face; the option of being a detached observer was gone. In
6 Paris, under the influence of Jean Malaquais, his French translator, Mailer had begun a new novel about
7 leftists and an FBI agent living in a Brooklyn rooming house much like the one where he had finished *The*
8 *Naked and the Dead*. But his success unsettled him, and he shelved his new novel and moved to
9 Hollywood where he eventually worked on screenplays⁹ for Hollywood producer, Samuel Goldwyn. He
10 moved to California with his family (his daughter Susan was born in 1949) and Malaquais and met the
11 famous actors and actresses who were eager to meet the newly famous author. After a year of
12 accomplishing little in collaboration with Malaquais (but soaking up material about Hollywood), he
13 returned to the East and finished his novel, titled *Barbary Shore*. It came out in May 1951.

14 Mailer wanted his second novel to be a radical novel and radically different from his first and it was
15 both. He shifted from third to first-person narration, worked with a smaller number of characters and all
16 but eliminated descriptions of physical activity of the kind that he was so highly praised for in his first
17 novel. *Barbary Shore* takes place in several closed rooms where the five chief characters talk a blue streak
18 about the collision of the two "colossi," America and the Soviet Union, and about the past and future of
19 Marxism, its mistakes, horrors, promise and ruling ideas. Sometimes the debates are engaging, sometimes
20 not. Mailer was, in a sense, continuing his education with this novel, learning from his characters as he did
21 in the Cummings-Hearn dialogues. The five chief characters are Mrs. Guinevere, the sexy landlady; her
22 husband, McLeod, a former high functionary for the Soviets; his nemesis, Hollingsworth, a sadistic FBI
23 agent; Lannie Madison, a mad Cassandra; and Mickey Lovett, a war veteran who has only fragmentary
24 memories of his youth and war experiences. Lovett is writing a novel and, like everyone else, wants to
25 have sex with the blowzy Guinevere. Besides the tracing of sexual desire, the only discernable plot thread

1 is Hollingsworth's continuing interrogation of McLeod concerning his Stalinist affiliations and secrets.
 2 Despite the tedium of much of the talk, there are many bright moments, including Lovett's surreal
 3 memories and visions of an Orwellian future, and the very different fantasies of Guinevere and Lannie.
 4 Guinevere, the novel's most genuinely felt character, has a hilarious idea for a tabloid-type, murder-love
 5 story, which she presents in detail to Lovett (Mailer's comic gifts have not always been appreciated).
 6 Lannie's dark, Holocaust visions anticipate Marion Faye, the hipster in his next novel, *The Deer Park*, and
 7 show, as Mailer told Steven Marcus, his unconscious interest in "murder, suicide, orgy, psychosis, all the
 8 themes I discuss in *Advertisements*" (*Conversations*, 86). Lovett, who is tutored in Marxism and its
 9 offshoot, Trotskyism, by McLeod, is both the narrator and the chief protagonist, but except for his dreams
 10 and visions, he is a dull tool. McLeod, a pontificator of leftist thought wishes to pass on the remnants of a
 11 viable Marxist program, his hope for a just world, to Lovett's generation. Mailer will use this sort of
 12 father-son relationship in every one of his future novels to clarify their philosophical underpinnings.
 13 McLeod gives Lovett the symbolic but unnamed object sought by Hollingsworth as the novel closes with
 14 Lovett's flight and McLeod's murder. The torch has been passed, it seems, but Lovett's future is
 15 ambiguous at best. *Barbary Shore* is a bold, claustrophobic, somewhat Kafkaesque narrative that never
 16 succeeds in merging a river of abstract argument (which is evidence of Mailer's lifelong admiration for the
 17 dialectics of Marxist thought) with the development of characters or plot. One important reason for the
 18 lack of integration is that he did not have a line of action to counterpoint the polemical debates, as he did in
 19 *Naked*. *Barbary Shore* received the worst reviews of any of Mailer's books, but intellectually represented a
 20 genuine advance. The novel also transmitted something of the *zeitgeist*, always one of Mailer's cardinal
 21 virtues. As he put it in *Advertisements*, "[I]t has in its high fevers a kind of insane insight into the psychic
 22 mysteries of Stalinists, secret policemen, narcissists, children, Lesbians, hysterics, revolutionaries—it has
 23 an air which for me is the air of our time, authority and nihilism stalking one another in the orgiastic hollow
 24 of this century" (94). Today the novel is seen as a seedbed of ideas, one to which Mailer would return
 25 many times.

1 THE HOLLYWOOD NOVEL

2 One of the commonplaces of Mailer criticism is that his first three novels deal, respectively, with
 3 violence, politics and sex. Certainly there is a good deal of sexual content in *The Deer Park*, material
 4 considered salacious by the prudish conventional standards of the time. The novel created a stir in the
 5 publishing world, and, presented Mailer with a completely new set of narrative challenges and
 6 opportunities. Turned down by Rinehart, he went to six publishing firms before Putnam's accepted it.
 7 Originally, Mailer conceived the novel as the first in a cycle of eight interlocking novels that would each
 8 explore a different reach of modern life—pleasure, business, crime, church, working class life and so
 9 forth—but he gave up the ambitious scheme after he had written the prologue, a long short story titled
 10 "The Man Who Studied Yoga," and the first draft of the "pleasure" novel, *The Deer Park*. (It should be
 11 noted that Mailer has on two other occasions projected serial novels but only written the first; it seems to be
 12 a method of jump-starting new work.) The story's protagonist, Sam Slovoda, was supposed to have a
 13 dream which laid out the eight-part scheme and introduced the hero, one Sergius O'Shaugnessy. But
 14 Mailer, as always, followed the new flow he discovered at the point of his pencil. Still, the story, one of his
 15 two finest, was a success and Slovoda stands as a negative exemplum, the timid opposite of Mailer's
 16 hipster heroes. O'Shaugnessy survived as one of the chief characters of the "pleasure" novel, and later
 17 shows up as a Greenwich Village bullfighting instructor and sexual athlete in "The Time of Her Time," his
 18 most erotic, most polished and provocative short story, published in 1959 in *Advertisements for Myself*.
 19 The chief protagonist of *The Deer Park* is Charles Francis Eitel. O'Shaugnessy, a former U.S. Air
 20 Force jet pilot, stands, roughly, in the same relation to him as Nick Carraway does to Jay Gatsby. He
 21 narrates the novel and, as Robert Merrill astutely points out, Mailer "counterpoints Sergius's development
 22 and Eitel's moral decline" (45), again, very roughly paralleling *The Great Gatsby*. The novel is set in
 23 Desert D' Or, a resort community modeled after Palm Springs where the Hollywood community comes for
 24 recreation. Sex and other illicit pleasures are for sale there and a river of booze runs through it. Eitel is a
 25 blacklisted director, banned from making films because of his leftist connections in the 1930s, who is

unwilling to testify about these associations before a congressional committee. Middle-aged, divorced, handsome and cultivated, he is trying to write an ambitious film script while living on the last of his savings. His former boss, Herman Teppis, the head of Supreme Studios, and Teppis's son-in-law, the producer Collie Munshin (another small comic masterpiece), would like to have Eitel produce more of the money-making, sentimental films he made before the war, but first he must tell what he knows. And he won't. He wants to get back to the kind of honest social realism films he made when he first came to Hollywood, but he misses the action, the fame, the high life. Like *Gatsby*, the novel details the effects of corrupt money. There are other parallels, but Eitel differs greatly from Jay Gatsby in that his goal is not to regain a lost love but to recover his artistic integrity.

O'Shaugnessy is young and handsome and has \$14,000 won in a Tokyo poker game, but he is also uncertain and impotent as a result of his war experience, most of which, as he explains in the long, beautiful opening of the novel, was spent dropping firebombs on Korean villages. He becomes part of the bar-party scene at the resort and makes friends with Eitel, a pimp named Marion Faye, and a beautiful, zany movie star named Lulu Meyers, one of the biggest attractions of Teppis's studio. As O'Shaugnessy falls in love with Meyers, Eitel picks up with Elena Esposito, a former mistress of Munshin's. The course of their two affairs, especially Eitel's, make up the heart of the novel. Mailer's clear intention is to show the arc of Eitel's attempt to regain his moral-artistic stature, and the role Esposito (based loosely on Mailer's new love, Adele Morales) plays in this quest. It is one of the most brilliantly depicted affairs in modern literature. As Robert Merrill, one of the finest critics of this novel, notes in his study, *Norman Mailer*, "[N]owhere else in Mailer's fiction is a love relationship developed so fully" (53). Mailer's problem was that by choosing the first-person point of view, he made it impossible to present the most important aspects of the Eitel-Esposito affair. Mailer's narrator can report on the machinations of Teppis and Munshin to get Eitel to testify, return to the fold, and make more sappy films; he can tell us what Faye, the Baudlairean pimp who functions as Eitel's good angel, is saying and doing; he can report the gossip of the bar flies, call girls and flunkies; and he can, of course, give us Lulu Meyer's take on things. He is a marvelous narrator

in the first half of the book, far superior to Lovett, but he can't take us into the bedroom, can't be privy to the intimate conversations between the passionate, uneducated Esposito and the older man who is teaching her about life just as she is inspiring him, at least at the beginning of their relationship. Mailer's solution was to use O'Shaugnessy less and less as narrator as the novel progresses, and shift to an omniscient perspective. He does this at the beginning of the novel's third part (of six), noting only that Sergius will use his "imagination" to present the affair from the inside. The shift is jarring. The narrative focus moves from Eitel and Esposito (she is only seen from the outside) to O'Shaugnessy's parallel affair with Lulu, and later to Faye, a total of some thirty shifts in point of view. Henry James would be appalled, but in truth, the fascinating love affair of Eitel and Elena more than compensates for the split perspective. Readers feel an urgency to return to the private place where the couple struggle with each other in an effort to locate their deepest identities.

Some critics believe *The Deer Park* to be a satire of Hollywood Babylon, a not unreasonable position, but others argue that the novel is really about a great, tragic love affair. Both are right, but there is no debating the fact that the rising action of the novel culminates in Eitel's decision to shed Elena, name names to the House Un-American Activities Committee (his name is pronounced "I-tell"), and "make some more crud" (40), as Faye puts it. She is the moral winner in the battle, and her long letter to Eitel is strong evidence of Mailer's power to create character—always his strong suit. She is one of his most memorable characters. Mailer's instinct when revising the novel in early 1955 (it came out in October 1955) was to make O'Shaugnessy stronger, tougher, more believable, even as he worked to make the affair more vibrant. But although O'Shaugnessy develops muscles, as it were, he is unable to lift us into a vantage point on the affair. Eitel's love affair and his battle with the greedy forces of commercialism is the novel's morality play, and O'Shaugnessy's new stubbornness and belligerence, which is, Mailer says in *Advertisements*, "an implicit portrait of myself" (238), has only tangential importance. Eitel sells his integrity and splits with Esposito, who then is sorely but successfully tested when she moves in with Faye, who ends up in prison. Sergius goes off to Mexico and later New York to run his bullfighting school and write "this novel" (355).

1 an admission which weakens its pretensions to reality. The novel is, after all, the only form that tries to
 2 convince us that it is something else.

3 NEW YORK CITY AND THE HIPSTER

4 *The Deer Park* made the best-seller list, but it was not the big success Mailer badly needed. Its
 5 reception made him angry at the Establishment in a more intense way; an outlaw mentality surged up in
 6 him. Now divorced from Bea and living in New York City with Adele (who he married in 1954), he began
 7 to soak up jazz and the night life and get involved in new ventures such as *Dissent*, a leftist journal of ideas.
 8 With Daniel Wolf and Edwin Fancher, he co-founded *The Village Voice*, which he named. The first issue
 9 appeared on October 26, 1955 just as his novel was climbing the best-seller list. He devoted much of the
 10 next eight months to the paper and contributed a weekly column, titled "Quickly: A Column for Slow
 11 Readers," the first of his many journalistic forays. But Mailer's most important effort immediately after
 12 *The Deer Park* was his 1957 essay for *Dissent*, later collected in *Advertisements*, titled "The White Negro,"
 13 in which he presents his emerging view of the challenges of life in a post-Holocaust world threatened by
 14 the atomic bomb. This dense, beautifully written piece is Mailer's most important polemical essay and one
 15 of the most anthologized of the postwar period. In its emphasis on the primacy of inner promptings, it is a
 16 key to all of Mailer's later work. The essay presents a prospectus for a new hero, the hipster, an urban, jazz-
 17 soaked, sexual adventurer whose closest parallel are the blacks who live on the dangerous edge in
 18 America's cities. The hipster believes that "the only life-giving answer is to accept the terms of death, to
 19 live with death as immediate danger, to divorce oneself from society, to exist without roots, to set off on
 20 that uncharted journey into the rebellious imperatives of the self" (*Advertisements*, 339). The essay's
 21 celebration of personal violence, among other things, created a great stir, and it was often linked, with some
 22 justification, to the "Beat" Movement, which took off at about the same time. What made Mailer's
 23 argument different from those of the Beats and other extreme romantic programs is that the search for
 24 growth, aided by a variety of risk-taking ventures, most notably the release of damned-up sexual energy, is
 25 never-ending. No one has explained this better than Robert Solotaroff. In his study, *Down Mailer's Way*,

1 he says that Mailer's prescription for growth "in its ideal or natural movement describes a spiral—a man
 2 grows by freeing energy, but this energy must be put to the task of freeing still more energy." Mailer's
 3 "endlessly spiraling dialectic" is ultimately "the quest for the infinite" (97-98).

4 MAILER'S MISCELLANIES

5 Mailer's next novel, *An American Dream*, would not appear until 1965, over nine years after *The*
 6 *Deer Park*. In the work published in the interim, and in interviews, he often referred to the "big novel" he
 7 was writing. *Advertisements* contained two excerpts, and *The Presidential Papers*, a 1963 miscellany
 8 focused on the Kennedy Administration, offered another. Between these two books came Mailer's only
 9 extended foray into poetry, *Deaths for the Ladies (and Other Disasters)* (1962). In 1966 he published his
 10 third miscellany, *Cannibals and Christians*, although the great majority of this collection was written
 11 before *An American Dream*. The point is that the bulk of Mailer's activity between his third and fourth
 12 novels was not directed at the "big novel," but consisted of a series of narrative ventures and experiments in
 13 several literary forms, as well as a reconsideration and consolidation of all his previous work. So the
 14 content of these three miscellanies includes a majority of his columns from *The Village Voice*, *Esquire* and
 15 *Commentary*, a generous sampling from his second and third novels, short stories, reviews, interviews,
 16 dialogues, dramatic fragments, speeches, political commentary, a clutch of essays, a long piece on the
 17 Floyd Patterson-Sonny Liston fight (titled "Ten Thousand Words a Minute"), "The White Negro," some
 18 poems and literary criticism. Each of the three miscellanies is linked internally by a series of
 19 "advertisements," "postscripts" or "arguments" which federate a narrative thrust, especially in
 20 *Advertisements*, where they are often more important than the work they frame. Like Henry James in the
 21 prefaces to his novels, Mailer broods and muses over the context of each separate piece, telling the story of
 22 the story. Together the miscellanies comprise a comprehensive source book of Mailer's wide-ranging
 23 concerns. The tone is by turns wry, edgy, angry, sardonic; the content is rich with social observation, now-
 24 or-never fulmination, jeremiads, pointed comments on his own career and future possibilities and life in

1 these American states. But they contain little new fiction. Nevertheless, the reader gets the sense of a man
2 very much in motion.

3 Now the father of two daughters by Adele (Danielle in 1957 and Elizabeth Anne in 1959), Mailer was
4 considering running for mayor of New York, but after he stabbed Adele with a penknife at a drunken party
5 in November 1960 (an event that continues to resonate in Mailer's life), he had to shelve the idea. Adele
6 recovered quickly and refused to press charges, but their marriage was effectively over. They were
7 divorced in 1962 and shortly after Mailer married Lady Jean Campbell, an English woman who gave him
8 his fourth daughter, Kate, also in 1962. This marriage also failed, and they were divorced in 1963. The
9 uxorious Mailer then married Beverly Bentley, an actress, who became the mother of his first two sons
10 (Michael, born in 1964 and Stephen in 1966). Mailer's roiled psychic state is apparent in the miscellanies,
11 especially *Advertisements for Myself*, the most powerful of the three, and the most autobiographical. Many
12 who came of age after WWII shared Mailer's rage at American moderation, compromise and conformity.
13 *Advertisements* is where he forged his distinctive style, a fierce, frank, agile, self-reflective and often
14 humorous voice; his angry cry, "the shits are killing us" (19), became a rallying point for a second
15 generation of Mailer readers. *The Presidential Papers* has a similar tone, focusing on the politics of the
16 early 1960s. It includes one of the prototypes of the "new journalism," his report on the 1960 Democratic
17 political convention in San Francisco, titled "Superman Comes to the Supermarket." The tenor of the
18 piece, the first of many profiles of presidential candidates, can be gauged by the fact that Mailer calls JFK
19 the first "hipster" candidate for president. The third in the series, *Cannibals and Christians*, focuses, in
20 part, on the Johnson administration. Among its many items of continuing interest are Mailer's assessment
21 of nine of his novelistic colleagues, "Some Children of the Goddess," two long philosophical dialogues on
22 matters such as form, spirit, beauty and soul, and some strong criticism of the Vietnam War. Mailer was
23 among the earliest and most thoughtful critics of the War.

24 GOD AND THE DEVIL

1 Constantly tempted to write nonfiction about the tumultuous events of the period, Mailer knew he
2 must find a way to commit himself to a new novel, his first in over eight years. His solution was to up the
3 ante by writing a serialized novel, following the same frantic pace of earlier novelists such as Dickens and
4 Dostoyevsky. He announced *An American Dream* in his final "Big Bite" column in *Esquire* in December
5 1963, a magazine that was on the stands when JFK was killed in Dallas. The *Esquire* version appeared in
6 eight parts, January-August 1964, and the final, much-revised version, the following March. Barry Leeds,
7 in his study, *The Enduring Vision of Norman Mailer*, aptly summarizes the novel as "a pilgrimage by
8 protagonist Stephen Richards Rojack from imminent alcoholism, damnation and madness to salvation and
9 sanity" (77). Rojack, a television talk-show host, ex-congressman and professor of existential psychology,
10 says he holds "the not inconsiderable thesis that magic, dread and the perception of death were the roots of
11 motivation" (8). His compromises and failures have made him suicidal; he receives emanations from the
12 moon and smells cancer and carnality in people. In fact, he has perhaps the finest olfactory intuition in
13 modern literature. A war hero like JFK, Rojack met Deborah Kelly, whom he later marries and murders,
14 on a double date with him during their term together in Congress after WWII. Rojack's murder of the
15 hateful Deborah (which he ^{tells the police} claims is suicide), a love affair with Cherry Melanie, the former mistress of
16 Deborah's father, Barney Oswald Kelly, the "solicitor" for the Devil, and a series of physical and psychic
17 confrontations with the police, the Mafia, Shago Martin (Cherry's former lover, a black jazz artist), and
18 Kelly—all taking place within thirty-six hours in New York City—make up the external action of the story.
19 But the novel is really an account of a battle between God and the Devil. Rojack's internal war both
20 mirrors and partakes of the struggle between good and evil. *Dream* is the first fully developed depiction of
21 Mailer's Manichaean cosmology, which holds that the universe is a dialectical process with the final
22 synthesis unknown. God is limited, imperfect in the same way humans ^{put in St. Augustine} are, and locked into combat with a
23 powerful, wily Devil. Human beings are participants in this war, usually unknowingly, and fight on both
24 sides. The outcome is uncertain; the Devil could win. Rojack is aware of the nature of this struggle, but he
25 doesn't always know which side his actions will benefit. "The moral consequences of this," Mailer said in

1 a 1958 interview with Richard G. Stern and Robert F. Lucid, "are not only staggering, but they're thrilling;
2 because moral experience is intensified rather than diminished" (*Conversations*, 33). As in *The Deer Park*,
3 the primary linkages between the characters are sexual. A web of infidelity and incest links the mob with
4 high society, Harlem with the small-town South, black with white, father with daughter and sister with
5 brother. Cherry, who is murdered at the end of the novel, sleeps with almost every important male
6 character. While it is clear that Mailer intends her love for Rojack to be of a higher order, she is not
7 developed enough for this to be completely convincing.

8 By far the best analysis of the novel is Tony Tanner's in his essay, "On the Parapet," collected in
9 Harold Bloom's *Norman Mailer: Modern Critical Views*. He points out that while initially many critics
10 found the novel to be an outrageous study of how to murder your wife and get away with it, such views
11 miss the deeper moral dimensions of the novel. It is, he says, "a vivid exploration of a man's relationship
12 to the different orders of American reality." Tanner notes the extraordinary use of metaphors of "pre-social
13 reality—the jungle, the forest, the desert, the swamp, the ocean-bed" (41), and how these metaphors
14 contrast with the realistic depictions of New York City. The novel presents a series of oppositions between
15 nature and civilization, the supernatural and the rational, the demonic and the angelic, and ultimately,
16 between the forces of life and death. Rojack must contend among and between these competing and
17 unsymmetrical dualisms, Tanner explains, aided by not much more than the voices he hears in his head, his
18 sense of smell and the talismanic umbrella of Shago Martin, which trembles portentously in his hands. In
19 the novel's climax, high up in the Waldorf Towers, where Rojack has been summoned by Kelly to answer
20 questions about Deborah's death, he resists the carnal temptations of his host, and then, in a self-imposed
21 test, walks the parapet around Kelly's terrace, smashing him with the umbrella when he attempts to push
22 him off the edge, and then throwing the umbrella over the parapet. Tanner concludes his brilliant
23 discussion by noting that Rojack has "to prove that he can negotiate that edge where the worlds meet" (46),
24 succumbing to neither to the fixed and rational nor the formless and irrational. He shows that he can, at
25 least for a time, "hold on to his identity between two threatening realms" (47). Mailer was pleased with the

1 achievement of *Dream*. He imbued the novel with his dynamic belief system; melded, for the first time
2 with Rojack, the narrative consciousness and the main protagonist, the teller and the chief character; and
3 his style was now fully mature—it has never been more lyrical, energetic and richly metaphoric. The novel
4 sold well and made the best-seller list, although the reviews were mediocre at best. Reviewers have often
5 been unable to appreciate Mailer's bold vision and experiments in form.

6 After *Dream* he was again uncertain which way to move and how much energy to expend on various
7 projects. But he knew, as he says in *Cannibals*, that "repetition kills the soul" (64), and that he must tackle
8 new projects. In 1967 his solution was to move in several directions simultaneously. His play, "The Deer
9 Park," opened in New York ^{at the Broadway} in January and had a successful four-month run. He published four books: *The*
10 *Short Fiction of Norman Mailer*, *The Deer Park: A Play*, his fifth novel, *Why Are We In Vietnam?* and *The*
11 *Bullfight*, a long nonfiction essay about a Mexican bullfighter. He also made two experimental films,
12 "Wild 90" and "Beyond the Law," (and the following year, "Maidstone," his most ambitious film). Mailer
13 also appeared at several anti-war protests, including the October March on the Pentagon, where he was
14 arrested, and before the year was over he was at work on his nonfiction narrative on the March, *The Armies*
15 *of the Night*. *Why Are We In Vietnam?*, his most linguistically innovative work, follows a party of Texans
16 hunting big game in Alaska, and is narrated by the son of the party's leader, Ranald Jethroe, an eighteen-
17 year old known to all as D.J. Part Huck Finn and part William Burroughs, D.J. talks, as he himself notes,
18 like a wired disc jockey. His rapid-fire recounting of the high tech hunts in the Brooks Range of Alaska,
19 recollected two years later on the eve of his departure for Vietnam, crackles with obscene merriment. The
20 novel does not directly consider American involvement in Vietnam. Rather, it accounts for American
21 militarism by depicting the Texans as nature-defiling louts. It is Mailer's most extended meditation on
22 nature after *Naked*. But the descriptions in *Vietnam* are superior to those in *Naked* because its natural world
23 is the incarnation of a prodigious and divided anima. The forests and mountains of Alaska vibrate with
24 supersensory messages from heavenly and demonic forces, much as the forests of Lebanon do in his later
25 novel, *Ancient Evenings*. Passages of description of caribou and wolves alternate with unforgiving

1 portraits of the Texans (all employed by a huge corporation) competing for the biggest trophy animals. The
 2 rams and grizzly bears are shot, in some instances, from a helicopter. The novel was generally reviewed
 3 well and nominated for a National Book Award, the first of five nominations for Mailer.

4 NONFICTION NARRATIVES

5 From 1967 through 1979 Mailer published 22 books. Only one of them—*Vietnam*—was a novel.
 6 During this tumultuous period in American life, especially the late 1960 and early 1970s, history seemed to
 7 be accelerating. As Mailer put it in *Of a Fire on the Moon*, “the real had become more fantastic than the
 8 imagined” (221). In response, Mailer interrupted his novelistic mission in order to chronicle these events,
 9 and to challenge them with his imagination. Some of the books he wrote during this period were just
 10 sparks from the wheel, but several of them are among his major achievements. Perhaps the most important
 11 of these are the five nonfiction narratives he published from 1968 to 1972: *The Armies of the Night: History*
 12 *as a Novel*, *The Novel as History* (1968), a depiction of the October 1967 anti-war protest March on the
 13 Pentagon; *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* (1968), a report on the violent 1968 political conventions; *Of a*
 14 *Fire on the Moon* (1971), a long analysis of the American space program and the first landing on the moon;
 15 *The Prisoner of Sex* (1971), an account of his debate with the Women’s Liberation Movement, which
 16 earned its enmity; and *St. George and the Godfather* (1972), a report on the 1972 political conventions. In
 17 his glowing review of *Armies*, Alfred Kazin concluded by stating, “Mailer’s intuition in this book is that the
 18 times demand a new form. He has found it” (*Critical Essays*, 65). Each of the five nonfiction narratives
 19 attempts to bridge what Mailer in *The Presidential Papers* calls the “double life” of Americans: “the
 20 history of politics which is concrete, factual, practical and unbelievably dull,” and “a subterranean river of
 21 untapped, ferocious lonely and romantic desires, that concentration of ecstasy and violence which is the
 22 dream life of the nation” (38). Whether Mailer is writing about astronauts or feminists, athletes or
 23 presidents, protestors or FBI agents, he is always attempting to bridge outer and inner, public and private in
 24 our national experience. It is his deepest narrative aspiration. To capture the complexities of a nation
 25 poised between the malevolent and the heroic, he was obliged to break down the walls between narrative

1 genres. A work like *Armies* accomplishes this by employing the techniques of both the modern
 2 psychological novel and the historical narrative. The narrative is divided into two parts. The first
 3 “novelistic” part is three times the length of the second “historical” overview, the latter serving as factual
 4 ballast for the first, which traces Mailer’s involvement in the protest activities, the events leading up the
 5 March, his arrest, incarceration and two days later, his release. He does not divide the other four narratives
 6 in the same way; instead, he shuttles between outer and inner, the events, his participation and his
 7 mercurial, often humorous responses to them. But he does employ the same unusual point of view; he
 8 describes himself in the third person, a technique used by some classical historians, and in the twentieth
 9 century, most notably, by Henry Adams and Gertrude Stein. Here is an example, a description of the scene
 10 just before his arrest at the Pentagon.

11 It was not unlike being a boy about to jump from one garage roof to an adjoining garage roof. The one
 12 thing not to do was wait. Mailer looked at Macdonald and Lowell. “Let’s go,” he said. Not looking
 13 again at them, not pausing to gather or dissipate resolve, he made a point of stepping neatly and
 14 decisively over the low rope. Then he headed across the grass to the nearest MP he saw.

15 It was as if the air had changed, or light had altered; he felt immediately more alive—yes, bathed
 16 in air—and yet disembodied from himself, as if indeed he were watching himself in a film where this
 17 action was taking place. He could feel the eyes of the people behind the rope watching him,
 18 could feel the intensity of their existence as spectators. And as he walked forward, he and the MP
 19 looked at one another with the naked stricken lucidity which comes when absolute strangers are for
 20 the moment absolutely locked together (147).

21 It reads like a modern novel, which is precisely what Mailer wanted. In *Barbary Shore* and *The Deer*
 22 *Park*, he used first-person narrators who resembled him in some ways, but not too much. It was not
 23 permitted; a modicum of distance between narrators and authors was required. Authors were supposed to
 24 be invisible and powerful, everywhere and nowhere, like God. But Mailer wanted to use himself, explore
 25 himself, watch himself winning, losing, being bold, being a fool, performing, as he says in the quoted

1 passage, as if he were in a movie, and above all searching for congruence between himself and the
 2 Republic in peril. So he took the step of describing himself in the third person, which, in effect, divided
 3 him into teller and told, narrating and narrative selves. It is only an apparent paradox that this division of
 4 self by aesthetic fiat came as a result of his growing awareness of the desirability of no longer attempting to
 5 separate the private and public hemispheres of his life. To harness both selves, use them simultaneously,
 6 he was, in effect, taking seriously Emerson's injunction in his essay, "Fate": "A man must ride alternately
 7 on the horses of his private and his public nature, as the equestrians in the circus throw themselves nimbly
 8 from horse to horse, or plant one foot on the back of the one and the other foot on the back of the other."
 9 This is Mailer's narrative stance in the five nonfiction narratives, as well as his 1975 account of the
 10 Muhammad Ali-George Foreman boxing match in Zaire, *The Fight*. He is even a bit more nimble than
 11 Emerson's metaphor allows in that he also explores the many sides and pockets of his character. Here is a
 12 list of the names he uses to describe himself: Brute, Ruminant, Reporter, Aquarius (a favorite, used in both
 13 *Fire* and *St. George*), Acolyte, Novelist, Director, Prisoner, Prospector and Participant. Besides these
 14 formal appellations, Mailer has placed himself over the years everywhere on the political spectrum from
 15 the left of Robespierre to the right of William F. Buckley, from Marxian anarchist in *Advertisements to*
 16 *"grand conservateur"* in *Armies* (27). During his quixotic race for mayor of New York in 1969, his
 17 campaign literature said he was to the Left and Right of everyone else in the race, and by the time of
 18 *Armies*, he regularly described himself as a "Left Conservative" (141). From his cosmology to his politics
 19 and everywhere in between, Mailer is a thoroughgoing dualist, but one whose two sides are themselves
 20 often divided. Richard Poirier, in perhaps the most intelligent full-length study of Mailer, *Norman Mailer*,
 21 pointed out that Mailer "is quite unable to imagine anything except in oppositions, unable even to imagine
 22 one side of the opposition without proposing that it has yet another opposition within itself," or "the
 23 minority within" (114).
 24 FAMOUS AMERICANS

1 Mailer received the best reviews of his career for *Armies*; it won a Pulitzer and the National Book
 2 Award, and is generally seen to be one of the finest achievements of the "new journalism." The others
 3 fared almost as well, garnering awards, plaudits from reviewers and strong sales. He was widely seen as
 4 Aquarius-in-charge-of-construing-America, but he recognized that he had all but used himself up as a
 5 reference. There were other problems: his marriage with Beverly Bentley failed in 1969, and he never
 6 seemed to earn enough to pay alimony and expenses for his seven children (Maggie, his seventh, was born
 7 to Carol Stevens, his fifth wife, in 1971). By the early 1970s, he felt an urgent desire to get back to his first
 8 love, the novel. Even before *St. George and the Godfather* appeared in late 1972, he was at work at what
 9 was initially called "the Egyptian novel." Shortly after, he signed a contract with Little, Brown for a three-
 10 part novel and a large advance. But there were distractions, obligations, opportunities to be dealt with
 11 along the way to completing it. All through the seventies—which might be called his biographical
 12 decade—Mailer alternated between work on the Egyptian novel and a series of portraits of famous-
 13 infamous Americans, twin lines of artistic enterprise that necessarily overlapped. The first biography was
 14 of Marilyn Monroe, which was also the first of several collaborative efforts with the entrepreneurial
 15 photographer and producer, Lawrence Schiller. *Marilyn: A Biography* was originally to have been a
 16 25,000-word preface to a selection of photographs by Schiller and other photographers, but it grew into a
 17 95,000-word, full-scale biography, which concluded with the suggestion that she had been murdered.
 18 Controversy surrounded the book, which only increased sales; 400,000 copies were in print by the end of
 19 1973. It was Mailer's biggest best-seller since *Naked*.
 20 His next outing, *The Fight*, is a portrait of Muhammad Ali in Africa. Mailer again complained in the
 21 narrative that using himself as a lens, describing himself in the third person, was tedious, and the book is
 22 most successful in its depiction of Ali's amazing improvisations in the ring. He then returned to "the
 23 Egyptian novel," pausing in 1976 to publish a collection of his political writings, *Some Honorable Men*:
 24 *Political Conventions, 1960-1972*, and later the same year, a collection of excerpts from the work of an
 25 author he admired. *Genius and Lust: A Journey through the Major Writings of Henry Miller* also contains

1 eighty pages of commentary on Miller, making it Mailer's lengthiest piece of literary criticism. The cover
 2 drawing of Miller is by Barbara Norris (later Norris Church Mailer), who Mailer met in Arkansas in 1975.
 3 He later married her after she and her son from an earlier marriage, Matthew, moved to New York. In 1978
 4 she gave birth to their son, John Buffalo. This marriage, Mailer's sixth and last, brought a large measure of
 5 stability to his life. Norris Church Mailer is an actress, painter, novelist and theatrical artistic director in
 6 Provincetown, Massachusetts, the Mailer's permanent home since the mid-1980s.

7 A NEW AUDIENCE

8 Gary Gilmore was a convicted murderer who gained national attention by insisting that his death
 9 sentence by firing squad be promptly carried out. Shortly after his execution in early 1977, Lawrence
 10 Schiller contacted Mailer to ask if he would ^{write} collaborate with him on Gilmore's story, to which he owned
 11 the rights. Mailer dropped work on his novel and spent six months in Utah with Schiller interviewing
 12 hundreds of people who had known Gilmore, including convicts, lawyers, prison guards, members of the
 13 media, his mother and his girlfriend, Nicole Barrett, and poring over 15,000 pages of interviews and court
 14 transcripts. He was excited by Gilmore's story; it seemed to embody many of the ideas that had
 15 preoccupied him for years, ideas about existential violence, the good in bad people and the efficacy of
 16 dying in a state of grace, as well as the whole issue of capital punishment and American's fascination with
 17 outlaws. After the relatively quiet years of the middle and late 1970s, Mailer was also eager for another
 18 victory; he wanted a new audience. The narrative had several working titles: *Violence in America*, *The*
 19 *Saint and the Psychopath*, and *American Virtue*. He finally settled on *The Executioner's Song*. Choosing a
 20 title was a small difficulty. Mailer had larger problems. The first was point of view: inserting himself in
 21 the narrative and then describing himself in the third person would not work; he had never met Gilmore and
 22 much of his material was secondhand. He needed to be a central eye, but could not be an actor. His second
 23 problem was style: the filigreed style of the nonfiction narratives would be cumbersome for the large cast
 24 of characters and their unadorned, western way of speaking. It would also be ineffective in handling the
 25 huge number of facts and views of Gilmore and tessellating them into a narrative mosaic. Finally, he had

G's mother

1 to create a structure that could handle both Gilmore's dark tale, and how it came to be told, something
 2 which involved a struggle among competing journalists, including Schiller, who was both Gilmore's
 3 confidante and the accumulator of the vast archive on which Mailer would rely to tell the story.

4 Mailer later told the *Los Angeles Times* that *Song* "was what I'd been looking to do since *The Naked*
 5 *and the Dead*. I wanted to do an immense panoramic novel with a strong narrative thread to it, a sort of
 6 collective novel of America" (October 25, 1979, Sec. 4, 30). The solution to his point of view problem was
 7 to revert to the omniscient, anonymous point of view of *Naked*, which appropriately eliminated him from
 8 the story. Mailer then chose a style as flat as the Utah landscape and relied heavily on the actual words of
 9 those involved. Here and there a careful reader can find some of Mailer's characteristic locutions, but not
 10 enough to weigh on the narrative, which accelerates as it progresses. His structural problem was solved by
 11 dividing the book into two parts, "Western Voices" and "Eastern Voices." The first part tells the story of
 12 Gilmore's life up to his incarceration for two senseless murders, and is told mainly by women, as Joan
 13 Didion noted in her highly laudatory review. She continues, saying that "Eastern Voices," Book Two, "are
 14 largely those of men—the voices of the lawyers, the prosecutors, the reporters, the people who move in the
 15 larger world and believe that they can influence events. The 'Western' book is a fatalistic drift, a
 16 tension.... The 'Eastern' book is the release of that tension, the resolution, the playing out of the execution"
 17 (*Critical Essays*, 81). Mailer boldly resolves the problem of how to situate Schiller by making him the
 18 chief figure of Part Two, and after Gary and Nicole the most important in the book. Schiller is both
 19 Gilmore's executor and a journalist struggling to assemble the raw materials of the story with integrity.
 20 The effort of compiling the massive documentary cache is the main line of action in Part Two, although
 21 Gilmore's execution—four bullets through the heart from a firing squad—autopsy and cremation ends the
 22 narrative. Mailer subtitled *Song* "a true life novel," even though it was scrupulously factual, out of his
 23 debatable conviction that its scope, form, characters and themes made it a novel. *The Executioner's Song*,
 24 another best seller, won him another cadre of admirers. The reviews were mainly quite positive and the
 25 book was nominated for the National Book Critics Circle Award and won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction,

1 bearing out Mailer's belief in its fundamental novelistic identity. He is the only writer to date to win the
2 Pulitzer in both fiction and nonfiction.

3 FROM AMERICA TO EGYPT

4 As soon as *Song* was completed Mailer returned to "the Egyptian novel," although he broke from the
5 effort twice more: in 1980 for a novella titled *Of Women and Their Elegance*, which is narrated entirely by
6 Marilyn Monroe, his only female narrator; and in 1982 for *Pieces and Pontifications*, his sixth miscellany.

7 The first half consisted of his essays from the seventies; the second half of twenty of his most important
8 interviews, 1958-1981. There was one other interruption. In 1981 Mailer supported the parole request of
9 Jack Henry Abbott, and then wrote the introduction to Abbott's book, *In the Belly of the Beast: Letters*
10 *from Prison*. Abbott was released and Mailer supported him generally. But within a month of his release
11 Abbott killed a waiter in a New York restaurant during a petty dispute. Mailer was accused of being blind
12 to Abbott's violent nature, and was pilloried in the tabloid press, while others who had helped Abbott out of
13 prison went relatively unnoticed. Mailer admitted his culpability, but the tragic situation haunted him.
14 Abbott was convicted and, after his later parole attempts failed, committed suicide in 2002.

15 *Ancient Evenings* was published with unusual fanfare in April 1983. It is Mailer's most ambitious,
16 complex work, and by his estimate, his finest. Set in Egypt over a 180-year span (1320-1100 BCE), it is
17 also his most unread major work. Readers for two decades have complained of getting bogged down in
18 what one critic, Michael Glenday, in his study, *Norman Mailer*, called the novel's "involutions," its
19 memories of memories of the magical moments of Menenhetet I, who has learned from a Jewish slave how
20 to father himself and lives four lives in the course of the novel. The process of re-creating himself, like
21 much of the magic in the book, is obscure. Glenday goes on to say that the critical community, not to
22 mention the common reader, remains baffled by the novel because it "is still regarded as both *outré* and so
23 resistant to category as to subvert any substantial critical appraisal of it" (117). The violent, carnal and
24 magical religiosity of the Egyptians is not presented in any symbolic or metaphorical way, as Robert
25 Begiebing points out in his study, *Toward a New Synthesis*. When Mailer chose ancient Egypt, a time and

1 place saturated in magic, he was automatically released from "the restrictions of fictional realism," as well
2 as from "twentieth-century rationalism and scientism" (98). Mailer was free to indulge his gnostic
3 impulses to the fullest, free to re-create a society unaffected by Western culture's ruling beliefs—Judaic
4 monotheism, Christian compassion and distrust of the body, Faustian progress, romantic love and Freudian
5 guilt. Mailer attributes telepathy and reincarnation to the Egyptians, but apart from these, he does not
6 depart from the available evidence on the nature of Egyptian culture, including its burial customs, which
7 fascinated him. Unable to narrate a novel except in the first person, Mailer uses telepathy as a substitute for
8 omniscience; reincarnation allows him to explore Menenhetet's four very different lives as charioteer-
9 general and harem master, high priest, wealthy businessman, and, finally, tomb robber—note the
10 trajectory—thus providing views of different levels and corners of Egyptian life without shifting from one
11 consciousness to another, and then two more (Menenhetet remembers his previous lives). The first of his
12 lives is the most impressive by far; depiction of the others, according to Harold Bloom in his review, gives
13 "every sign of truncation" (*Norman Mailer: Modern Critical Views*, 194). Almost all reviewers and critics
14 agree that the account of the Egyptians' great chariot battle against the Hittites at Kadesh—an actual
15 battle—is one of the strongest expositions in Mailer's work and, for many, in modern literature.
16 Menenhetet fights alongside his Pharaoh, Ramses II (who is as important a character in the book as is
17 Meni, as the Pharaoh calls him), and the Pharaoh's ferocious lion, Hera-Ra. The aftermath of the Egyptian
18 victory is even more impressive than the battle itself. Perhaps the high point of the novel is his account of
19 the rape and butchery during the drunken celebration before the gates of the Hittite capital, which he
20 contrasts with the majestic aplomb of Ramses receiving through the long night the severed hands of slain
21 Hittites from thousands of his troops. The Pharaoh deftly tosses each hand into a perfectly pyramidal pile,
22 never moving his feet, as his scribe records the soldiers' names and gory trophies. In addition to this
23 luminous account, there are other wonderful runs of prose in the novel. The opening offers a remarkable
24 re-telling of the myths of the Egyptian gods by Menenhetet I to his grandson, Menenhetet II after their
25 deaths, one ghost to another, inside the great pyramid of Khufu as they prepare for a final journey and final

1 judgment. Meni II is the actual narrator, although he is displaced from most of the action, much like
 2 O'Shaugnessey in *The Deer Park*. Between the marvelous retelling of the stories of the gods and the
 3 ending when the spirit of Meni I dies but passes on, like McLeod to Lovett, a blessing to Meni II, comes
 4 the long middle, which is an account of Meni I's four lives, as told to another pharaoh, Ramses IX, by Meni
 5 I during one extended ancient evening. The narrative's involuted provenance is often confusing, but the
 6 chief criticism of the novel centers on the languorous Book of the Queens, a 130-page account of Meni I as
 7 harem master. Future consideration of the novel may focus on its complex epistemology, its spiraling
 8 narrative skeins and inlaid perspectives, and their relationships with the four narratives he wrote during the
 9 same period as *Ancient Evenings*, narratives focusing on Marilyn Monroe, Muhammad Ali, Henry Miller
 10 and Gary Gilmore. Certainly the blend of their cardinal vices and virtues are manifested in both
 11 Menenhetet I and Ramses II.

12 BACK TO THE COLD WAR

13 Mailer's next book was an "entertainment," to use Graham Greene's phrase, a murder mystery set in
 14 Provincetown. It was published in 1984, the same year Mailer was elected President of the international
 15 writers' organization, PEN, and inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters. *Tough Guys*
 16 *Don't Dance* is notable mainly for its evocations of the drear winter landscapes of lower Cape Cod, and its
 17 portraits of the eccentrics, artists and criminals who live there. It was written in sixty-one days to fulfill a
 18 contract with his publisher at the time, Little, Brown, although ultimately published by Random House, his
 19 continuing publisher. It was also a way of winding down after the decade-long effort to complete *Ancient*
 20 *Evenings*. Mailer went on to direct a feature film based on the novel, a film that has gained something of a
 21 cult reputation. But the bulk of his effort during the 1980s was focused on a very long novel that deals with
 22 the Cold War. The novel's length may be an American record. *Harlot's Ghost* is 1310 pages long and ends
 23 with the words "To be continued." The sequel, Mailer said when the novel was published in October 1991,
 24 will continue the story of Herrick "Harry" Hubbard, his father "Cal," both CIA agents, his godfather Hugh
 25 Montague (code name "Harlot"), and Montague's wife Kittredge, also CIA agents. After she divorces

1 Harlot, she marries Harry, who might be seen as Harlot's ghost, or one of them. He ghostwrites spy novels
 2 favorable to the CIA and shadows Harlot in several ways, most notably with Kittredge. But Harlot's ghost
 3 refers chiefly to the spirit of the dead Harlot, if he is indeed dead. A body resembling his washes up on the
 4 shores of Chesapeake Bay with the face blown away and finger tips missing. Mailer's eighth novel is
 5 crammed with questions about the CIA, the Cold War, the cosmic war of God and the Devil and the
 6 fundamental loyalties of all the characters, including Harlot, who is loosely based on American master spy,
 7 James Jesus Angleton. One critic of the novel, John Whalen-Bridge, in his essay, "Adamic Purity as
 8 Double-Agent," calls it an "obsessively dualistic novel," where "the coexistence and interdependence of
 9 good and evil...receive supreme expression" (118).

10 *Harlot's Ghost* is of course divided into two parts, "Alpha" and "Omega," both manuscripts written
 11 by Harry, who narrates the story from Moscow in 1984. "Omega," about 100 pages, begins the novel and
 12 is set in Harry's island home in Maine on a day in 1983. It is a riveting opening, replete with sex, murder,
 13 an icy road and a stormy sea, double agents, a dank cellar and, of course, ghosts. It ends with the
 14 revelation of the body washed ashore, the disappearance of Kittredge (with Dix Butler, a bisexual
 15 professional rival of Harry's), and Harry's flight from his burning house. "Alpha," at 1200 pages, is the
 16 story of Harry's early life, and includes his youth in the 1930s and 1940s, Yale education, and tours of duty
 17 abroad and in the U.S., up to 1965, where the narrative ends. Presumably, the period between 1965 and
 18 1984 dealing with Vietnam, Watergate, the impending collapse of the Soviet Union and the marriage of
 19 Hubbard and Kittredge, will be in the sequel, although Mailer seems to have abandoned it. While the novel
 20 cannot be justly called an all-encompassing picture of American life, it does provide a privileged
 21 perspective on some of the most cataclysmic events and fabled figures of the American scene in the 1950s
 22 and 1960s. Like a long freight train, Mailer's story of WASP agents at the center of intrigues at home and
 23 abroad (Berlin, Uruguay, Russia and Cuba), picks up speed as it snakes through postwar America life,
 24 accelerating tremendously as it moves through the CIA's failed invasion of Cuba, attempts to assassinate
 25 Castro and the Cuban missile crisis. Kennedy's assassination is treated almost cursorily, but his affair with

1 Judith Exner (which also involves Frank Sinatra and Mafia boss Sam Giancana), comprises another strand
2 of the Byzantine plot of clandestine operations, double-dealing and heroism. Mailer bends over backward
3 to fairly present the CIA, making clear the contradictory impulses of selfless patriotism and Faustian
4 arrogance that motivate its agents and leaders.

5 *Harlot's Ghost* was Mailer's eighth best-seller, although reviews, as usual, were mixed. Praised for
6 the interleaving of fiction and fact, his extraordinary anatomy of the agency, and the authoritative portraits
7 of so many prominent figures (Kennedy, Castro, Allen Dulles, J. Edgar Hoover, Kim Philby), the novel
8 was also criticized for the length of some episodes, especially the nearly 300 pages devoted to Hubbard's
9 years in Uruguay, and for his protracted correspondence with Kittredge. In an attempt to reveal
10 Kittredge—who never comes completely into focus—within the limitations imposed by a first-person
11 narrator, Mailer was forced to create an awkward, epistolary relationship. Finally, many reviewers
12 contrasted the fast-paced opening with the tedium of some of the South American material. This
13 counterpoint, like that in *Ancient Evenings*, not to mention *Moby-Dick* and other ambitious novels, was
14 undoubtedly intentional; Mailer has always believed that the parts of a narrative should clarify and
15 complicate other parts. Given the novel's length and ambition, and its saturation in the horrors and glories
16 of the American Century, it seems more likely than any of Mailer's other works to be measured by his 1959
17 statement in *Advertisements* that he wanted to "try to hit the longest ball ever to go up into the accelerated
18 hurricane air of our American letters" (477).

19 MORE BIOGRAPHIES AND A CONSOLIDATION

20 No event in twentieth-century American life has resonated longer or stronger for Mailer than JFK's
21 assassination. Yet until *Oswald's Tale* he never considered it directly, but in several earlier books circled
22 or erected a scaffolding around the event, almost as if he felt it could be approached but never dominated.
23 This is the case in *Harlot's Ghost*, where the assassination occurs offstage, as it were. In 1992 he decided to
24 tackle it head on via a biography of the much-despised, but poorly understood Lee Harvey Oswald, the man
25 arrested for shooting the president and then executed by a small-time Dallas mobster, Jack Ruby. The

1 opportunity was presented to him by his collaborator on *The Executioner's Song* and *Marilyn*, Lawrence
2 Schiller, who had gained access to KGB archival material and operatives in Belarus, where Oswald had
3 lived in 1960 after marrying Marina Prusakova. Mailer and Schiller spent six months there, 1992-93,
4 interviewing everyone available who had known Lee and Marina, or spied on them (seventeen current or
5 former KGP officers), and poring over the verbatim transcripts of the couple's dreary life in the bleak city
6 of Minsk. Characteristically, Mailer divides the resulting 828-page narrative, *Oswald's Tale*, into two
7 parts. The first, "Oswald in Minsk with Marina," is devoted to Oswald's two-and-half years in Russia; the
8 second, "Oswald in America," moves back to his childhood and Marine service, skipping his Russian years
9 and moving to the dark day in Dallas when the world changed. Mailer's subtle analysis of Jack Ruby's
10 enigmatic motives follows his unmatched re-creation of the assassination, which he concludes was seventy-
11 five percent likely to be the sole work of Oswald. The full narrative, equal if not superior to *The*
12 *Executioner's Song*, ends with wrenching portraits of three widows: Jacqueline Kennedy, Marina Oswald
13 and her mother-in-law, the nattering, narcissistic Marguerite Oswald, who Mailer says "is worthy of
14 Dickens" (790).

15 The portrait of Oswald is the fairest hearing he might ever receive. Mailer attempts the Herculean
16 task of generating, if not sympathy, then understanding of the dyslexic, nerdy Oswald. A failure at almost
17 everything to which he put his hand, but possessed of the ambition of the young Hitler or Lenin, Oswald
18 comes across as much victim as monster. Reviewers favored the first part of the narrative, which presented
19 fascinating material theretofore unavailable on the domestic life of Lee and Marina. For the second part of
20 his narrative, Mailer relied on the twenty-six volume *Warren Commission Report* and a large number of
21 biographies and investigative reports. Many readers are still not ready to fully appreciate Mailer's portrait
22 of Oswald, but one hundred years from now it might stand as definitive, worthy in its severity and
23 compassion of Tolstoy.

24 Never one to let the grass grow, Mailer had all but completed a biography of Pablo Picasso by the end
25 of 1992, but because of various difficulties in obtaining permissions, *Portrait of Picasso as a Young Man*

1 was not published until after late 1995, some months after *Oswald's Tale*. Without referring to himself,
2 Mailer uses his own fifty years of artistic success, failure and experimentation to measure Picasso's career
3 from his birth in 1881 to the end of his early manhood and the flowering of cubism at the beginning of
4 World War I. Mailer's biography is premised on the notion that Picasso was a self-created artist who
5 "gambled on his ability to reach into mysteries of existence that no one else had even perceived" (357).
6 His insights in this rather comradely biography vibrate with fellow-feeling. Picasso was "doomed," Mailer
7 says, "to relive his obsessions through all of ninety-one years of life" (352), to continue to paint until the
8 end "as if work itself could hold death off" (367). Mailer, who turned eighty in 2003, is still writing
9 furiously. Set a thief to catch a thief.

10 Picasso received terrible reviews, especially from members of the professional art community, which
11 was not eager to sanction a somewhat iconoclastic portrait of the central figure of twentieth-century art.
12 Mailer toyed with the idea of publishing his next book, *The Gospel according to the Son*, anonymously, but
13 finally did not. When it appeared in 1997, it fared only slightly better than *Picasso*, with some reviewers
14 castigating Mailer for daring to speak in the first person as Jesus. Others saw his gospel-as-autobiography
15 as another example of his brilliance at integrating narrative forms. His motive, he explained in various
16 interviews, was to improve on the committee prose of the Gospels, to place the wisdom and agony of Jesus
17 in a narrative without the contradictions, lacunae and weak transitions of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.
18 As Mailer put it in an interview with Sean Abbott in *At Random*, "If I can write about Isis and Osiris and
19 Ra, then certainly the New Testament is not going to be that difficult to do" (No. 17, spring-summer, 1997,
20 51). With his plot in hand (always a worry for Mailer), he expended his creative energies on depictions of
21 Judas, Pilate, Mary, John the Baptist and, especially, Satan, who comes across as a devious, Middle Eastern
22 playboy-prince. Mailer's other important achievement in *Gospel* is the voice of Jesus, who according to
23 John Updike in his *New Yorker* review, speaks in "a direct, rather relaxed English that has yet an eerie, neo-
24 Biblical dignity" (May 12, 1997, 92).

1 On May 6, 1998, fifty years to the day after the publication of *The Naked and the Dead*, Mailer
2 published *The Time of Our Time*, a massive consolidation of all his previous work. Searching for an
3 organizing principle for the 1286-page anthology containing 139 excerpts from 26 previous books, Mailer
4 decided that each piece would appear "in accordance with the year it refers to rather than the year it was
5 written" (x). So it opens with a short sketch describing a 1929 boxing match between Hemingway and
6 Morley Callaghan and works its magnificent way, event by chronological event, to the 1996 presidential
7 race between Clinton and Dole, although Mailer then violates his own scheme by ending with several
8 excerpts from *Ancient Evenings* and *The Gospel according to the Son*. The true heart of the collection,
9 however, are those pieces which treat World War II and the Cold War, taken from both the fiction and
10 nonfiction. All of his portraits of major figures of the last half of the twentieth century—JFK, Robert
11 Kennedy, Eugene McCarthy, Castro, Oswald, Henry Kissinger, Mayor Daly, Nixon, Carter, Bush and
12 Clinton—are included, as well as movie stars, athletes and writers. Mailer rigorously excluded his own
13 presence from the book, however, in order to focus on the major events and figures of the time. Besides the
14 preface and acknowledgments, the only original piece in the collection is "The Shadow of the Crime: A
15 Word from the Author," a one-page reflection on the 1960 stabbing of his second wife Adele. The
16 collection sold well and was generally praised by reviewers.

17 Besides collaborating with Schiller on television scripts dealing with O.J. Simpson and FBI spy
18 Robert Hansenn in the years immediately following *The Time of Our Time*, Mailer began work on a new,
19 unnamed work, and in 2003 published a compilation of his comments and insights on being a professional
20 writer for more than fifty years. Titled *The Spooky Art: A Book about Writing*, the collection also included
21 most of his literary criticism. It was published on his eightieth birthday.

22 It is difficult to sum up a career of such length and achievement, so full of awards and fights, mistakes
23 and masterpieces. Mailer has challenged, angered and amazed three generations of readers worldwide.
24 Perhaps no life in our literature has been at once so brilliant, varied, controversial, public, provocative and
25 misunderstood. When asked by the *New York Times* to describe himself in one word, he answered

32

1 "improvisational" (February 13, 1994, Sec. 9, 1), providing a key to his protean identity and achievements.
2 But he is improvisational by design rather than by default or happenstance. Metaphorically speaking, he
3 always keeps a bag packed on the chance he will hear the train whistle of new opportunity that may result
4 in new energy, new success, new growth. Consequently, he is pre-disposed—sometimes erroneously—to
5 sense turning points and sea changes in America's health and identity, and his own. Constant anticipation
6 of a new plot for American lives is for him the price, and the reward, of the liberty of his consciousness.
7 Unprecedented and perhaps irreplaceable, Norman Mailer can lay fair claim to being the chief narrative
8 chronicler and interpreter of the American Century.

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NORMAN MAILER:

A comprehensive essay with primary & secondary bibliography

April 2003
to Norm,
raison d'être,
and friend
Mike

By J. Michael Lennon

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2003



Norman Mailer

1923–

ONE WAY TO understand the diversity of the career of Norman Mailer, its complex relationship with his personal life, and the sharply divided opinion of the merit of his achievements is to see all of these as reflections of Mailer's effort to stay alive spiritually, artistically, even physically. "Repetition kills the soul" is a favored mantra of Mailer's even if, in mid-career, he was guilty of it. But for the great majority of his writing life he has moved back and forth through the literary genres, rotating his crops, so to speak, among the novel (always the favored form), novellas, short stories, every sort of essay, sports and political reportage, screenplays, film and book reviews, the interview, plays, the nonfiction novel, newspaper and magazine columns, a bit of science fiction, a few scraps of memoir, philosophical dialogues, brief and extended biographies and poems. Speaking in the voice of Jesus, he has even retold the Gospels. He has put his hand to virtually every form, everything but autobiography, which he has avoided in the belief that such a volume would be a tombstone. Mailer's Emersonian belief in the infinitude of the self, a self energized by new ventures, precludes the sort of summing up that a full-scale autobiography demands.

Mailer is one of the most well-known living American authors; his renown is due first of all to the length of his career and his many different and important works. But there are other factors: his forays into public life; his attempts to delineate the art in politics and the politics in art; his fights, causes, underground films, divorces, and other legal problems; and his relentless appearances in the media. He has been

on the cover of every major American magazine and has appeared on nearly every talk show in existence. It is safe to say that he has been interviewed on radio, television, and in print more than any other author, well over five hundred times. Although he has little use for the Internet, his presence there is also large. He has been tremendously productive, publishing forty books from 1948 to 2003, but he has also been a provocateur, a performer, and a regular in gossip columns. His life, especially after the 1950s, has alternated between monkish labor—when he is working, he writes almost every day—and heralded appearances at literary events, protest meetings, intellectual forums, fund-raising receptions, college campuses, and, of course, on television. He is the prototypical public artist—intellectual of the last half of the twentieth century. In his essay "Prolegomenon to a Biography of Mailer," collected in *Critical Essays on Norman Mailer* (1986), the dean of Mailer critics, Robert F. Lucid, says Mailer "may seem finally to have embodied our time." 

No discussion of the modern American novel would be complete without reference to his novels, several of which have become classics; no record of the "new journalism" and the nonfiction novel (Mailer dislikes the term) could pass over his contributions to the form, which some critics believe he, more than anyone else, invented; no examination of several post-World War II events, movements, and phenomena—the cold war, the rise of feminism, the Kennedy assassination, the moon shot, the great prize fights, presidential campaigns and elections (he has covered six), capital punishment, and the compacted miseries of urban life—could eschew 

his commentary. In the unlikely event that plastic is ever banned for its ill effects, Mailer will be credited for his strident warnings; any consideration of the role of the postwar author as celebrity hero in opposition to the deadening effects of modern technology, bureaucracy, and the corporation will have to begin with Norman Mailer.

EARLY YEARS

Mailer's mother's family ran small resort hotels on the Jersey Shore, and he was born there, in Long Branch, on January 31, 1923. He grew up in Brooklyn, where his parents moved in 1925. He was the first child of Isaac Barnett "Barney" Mailer, who emigrated from South Africa after World War I, and Fanny Schneider Mailer, whose family came from Lithuania a generation earlier. His sister, Barbara Jane, was born on April 6, 1927. His parents had lifelong professional occupations: he was an accountant, and she managed a series of small businesses. In 1933 the family moved to Crown Heights, a bastion of the Jewish middle class. Mailer attended public schools, skipping two half-year terms, and in 1939, at sixteen, graduated with high grades from Boys High School. He applied to Harvard and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, choosing the former partly because an older cousin had gone there. Intending to major in aeronautical engineering, he immediately became entranced with his creative writing classes, reviving the interest he had had as a young boy.

Mailer wrote scores of stories and took every available writing class while at Harvard, and in April 1941, one of them, "The Greatest Thing in the World," won *Story* magazine's college contest. The influence of three writers—John Dos Passos, James T. Farrell, and John Steinbeck—was apparent in the story, a fast-paced, naturalistic tale of violence and hustling set in Chicago. The story's success convinced him

that he was launched as a writer, and in the summer of 1941 he began his first novel, "No Percentage," which is still unpublished. When he graduated in June 1943 with a degree in engineering sciences (with honors), World War II was raging, and he wondered, as he told the story later in *Advertisements for Myself* (1959), whether "a great war novel would be written about Europe or the Pacific." He was already carefully planning his literary career.

anticipating

THE ARMY AND THE ARMY NOVEL

Before shipping out to the Pacific as an artillery trainee, Mailer married his college sweetheart, Beatrice "Bea" Silverman, and completed a second apprentice novel, *A Transit to Narcissus*, which remained unpublished until 1978. He arrived in Leyte in the Philippines in late December 1944 and shortly after was reassigned to the 112th Regimental Combat Team, a Texas outfit, serving first as a clerk and then as a rifleman in a reconnaissance squad. Mailer went on patrols, dug foxholes, got into a few firefights, and carefully observed his fellow soldiers, the landscape, the weather, and the ways in which the army shaped behavior. His lifelong interest in the permutations of power began with his study of the "fear ladder" of the army. He sent hundreds of letters to Bea describing daily incidents that would be used in the war novel he planned to write after the war. The central action of the novel was to be a long patrol, one that resembled in many ways an actual patrol behind enemy lines that his platoon had undertaken. The patrol ended disastrously, as he later recounted in an interview with Steven Marcus (collected in J. Michael Lennon, *Conversations with Norman Mailer*, 1988), when someone in his unit kicked over a hornet's nest and half of the men ran ingloriously down the mountain. "War is disproportions," he told Marcus, "and the hornet's nest seemed a perfect disproportion to

me. We were ready to lose our lives but we weren't up to getting stung by a hornet."

After the war ended in August 1945 Mailer was sent to Japan, where he served as a cook. He was discharged on May 2, 1946, and in June began work on what was to become *The Naked and the Dead* (1948) in a rented apartment in North Truro, Massachusetts, near Provincetown, the town in which he would spend most of his summers for the next half-century. In November of the same year, he signed a contract with Rinehart and Company, and in September 1947, he turned in a completed manuscript. Then he and Bea, also a veteran, left for Paris to study at the Sorbonne on the GI Bill. When the book came out, on May 6, 1948, Mailer was still in Europe. The reviews were overwhelmingly enthusiastic, and one of the most dazzling careers in postwar American literature was launched. *The Naked and the Dead* was aided by timing: immediately after the war readers wanted to forget about it, but then there was a resurgence of interest. Mailer's novel rode the crest of this wave. It jumped to the top of the *New York Times* best-seller list, where it remained in first position for eleven straight weeks, aided by continuing strong reviews, award nominations, and praise from Sinclair Lewis, who called Mailer "the greatest writer to come out of his generation," a comment publishers used on his books for years. All told, the novel was on the *New York Times* best-seller list for sixty-two weeks from its publication through the summer of 1949.

The novel is set on the fictional Pacific island of Anopopei, where an American division commanded by General Cummings seeks to defeat a Japanese force entrenched behind the Toyaku Line. The struggle against the Japanese, however, is secondary to the one among the Americans. The key power struggle takes place among the officers and among the enlisted men, and along two different, but related, plotlines. The first half of the novel focuses on Cummings' ef-

fort to marshal his troops and so rout the stubborn Japanese forces. The division is sluggish and recalcitrant, and he is frustrated by his inability to mold it to his will. The tide of the war in the Pacific is beginning to turn, and Cummings (the first of several Machiavellian power-seekers in Mailer's work) knows he must be quickly victorious if he is to rise to the pinnacle in the postwar army, which, he believes, may have to fight the Soviet Union—something that Americans, including Mailer, began to fear in the years right after the war. His aide, Lieutenant Hearn, is fascinated by the general's intelligence and foresight but ultimately opposes his semi-fascistic methods, his use of the fear ladder, on which every officer and soldier must torment the man on the next lower rung, passing down the punishment and looking up for the occasional reward.

On the enlisted level, Sergeant Croft, a masochistic, whipcord Texan, leads a fourteen-man platoon of lower- and middle-class soldiers from every part of the United States. This cross-section enables Mailer to juxtapose a member of every major ethnic group (except African Americans—the army was still segregated) with every other one, and capture a representative range of dialects, biases, and values. His ability to orchestrate so many characters and themes in this 721-page novel foreshadows his later efforts to handle even more complex materials. So Jews and southerners, Swedes, Poles, Irish, and Italians, Mexican Americans and WASPs cooperate and oppose one another even as they fight the Japanese. To illuminate the motivations of his characters, Mailer inserts ten "Time Machine" sketches of the soldiers—including Cummings, Croft, and Hearn—in their prewar lives. This technique, adapted from John Dos Passos's 1936 novel *U.S.A.*, gives pace and balance to the narrative by juxtaposing domestic scenes with battle scenes and sex with violence, linkages Mailer will explore many times during his career.

In the early part of the novel, Hearn and Cummings debate the nature and uses of power, with Hearn ultimately siding with those on the lower rungs. Their discussions are the beginning of Mailer's lifelong study of the totalitarian mentality and are a notable display of intellect by the twenty-five-year-old author. Indeed, it is clear that Mailer admires the Faustian energies of Cummings, his "unique ability to extend his thoughts into immediate and effective action," as much as he dislikes the half-baked liberalism of Hearn. The discussions lead finally to a confrontation, and Hearn is forced to back down, to "crawlfish," after which the General reassigns him to lead Croft's reconnaissance platoon. Thus Hearn becomes the link between officers and enlisted men, as well as between the two major plotlines.

The second part of the novel centers on the platoon's long patrol, which is intended to determine if the Toyaku Line can be attacked from the rear, something that Croft believes can only be accomplished by climbing Mount Anaka, the tallest mountain on the 150-mile-long island. The mountain and the assault on it are symbolic—much like Herman Melville's white whale and Ahab—of nature's power and human desire to dominate it. This is especially true for Croft, who "felt a thrill of anticipation at the thought that by the following night they might be on the peak. Again, he felt a crude ecstasy. He could not have given the reason, but the mountain tormented him, beckoned him, held an answer to something he wanted. It was so pure, so austere."

But before the assault can be made two things happen that demonstrate Mailer's ideas about the nature of war. First, Wilson, a member of the platoon, is gut shot in a Japanese ambush. Four soldiers are detailed to carry the suffering, increasingly incoherent Wilson on a litter back to the beach, an exhausting journey down and away from the mountain that parallels the platoon's journey up the flank of Anaka. The

second event is Hearn's murder. He is killed by a Japanese machine gun, but only because Croft has suppressed information about Japanese positions. This surprising event has generated much critical comment, with some believing that Mailer eliminates Hearn to discredit his ineffectual liberalism, and others seeing it as a realistic event that underlines the disproportions of war. It also reveals that Cummings' power lust is equaled by that of Croft. Together they dominate the action of the novel, although in the end both are defeated. Croft's unit is driven off the mountain by the hornets, demonstrating that nature has its own tricks and is not easily subjugated. As for Cummings, he is denied the self-aggrandizing pleasure of wielding his division like a fine sword and slicing through the Toyaku Line. When he is away from the island attempting to secure naval firepower to blast the Japanese, his dull understrapper, Major Dallason, unimaginatively penetrates the line and crushes the Japanese, who are found to be sick, starving, and dispirited. It is a fluke victory, not a military masterstroke, and the star of General Cummings will now decline.

Some readers, while lauding Mailer's powerful ability to describe men in action, and to capture the obscene lingo of soldiers (using the word "fug" for the commonest four-letter obscenity), concluded that the defeats and defaults in the novel amount to a bleak depiction of the human condition, something that Mailer disputed. He said in an interview with Lillian Ross that the novel "offers a good deal of hope," and that even in the novel's "corruption and sickness" there are "yearnings for a better world." Such a yearning can be seen in the portage of Wilson by Goldstein and Ridges, the novel's odd couple, Brooklyn Jew and southern sharecropper. Heroically and stoically, they carry on after the other two soldiers fall away in exhaustion. Wilson groans and hallucinates obscenely as they carry him through jungle, field, and stream. When he dies, they

never consider leaving him; they labor on, only to lose him in a surging jungle stream. This memorable sequence, coming near the end of the novel, balances the cold-blooded murder of Hearn and the novel's other acts of violence and treachery.

In what is generally considered to be the finest essay on *The Naked and the Dead*, Donald Pizer calls it "a work in which Mailer has successfully created a symbolic form to express the naturalistic theme of the hidden recesses of values in man's nature despite his tragic fate in a closely conditioned and controlled world." For the remainder of his career Mailer will continue to show us the most abominable in human nature, while continuing to endorse the merits of courage—the essential virtue for Mailer—leading to growth and a hint of transcendence.

THE CHALLENGES OF FAME

In the middle of the twentieth century, American writers were more celebrated than at century's end, and *The Naked and the Dead* was a huge success, selling millions of copies. This success, Mailer later explained in *Advertisements for Myself*, cut him off from his past; he called it "a lobotomy." He was twenty-five and famous. Microphones were thrust in his face; the option of being a detached observer was gone. In Paris, under the influence of Jean Malaquais, his French translator, Mailer had begun a new novel about leftists and an FBI agent living in a Brooklyn rooming house much like the one where he had finished *The Naked and the Dead*. But his success unsettled him, and he shelved his new novel and went to Hollywood, where he eventually worked on screenplays for the Hollywood producer Samuel Goldwyn. He moved to California with his family (his daughter Susan was born in 1949) and Malaquais and met the famous actors and actresses who were eager to meet the newly

famous author. After a year of accomplishing little in collaboration with Malaquais (but soaking up material about Hollywood), he returned east and finished his novel, titled *Barbary Shore*. It came out in May 1951.

Mailer wanted his second novel to be radical and radically different from his first; it was both. He shifted from third- to first-person narration, worked with a smaller number of characters, and all but eliminated descriptions of physical activity of the kind that he was so highly praised for in his first novel. *Barbary Shore* takes place in several closed rooms where the five chief characters talk a blue streak about the collision of the two "colossi," the United States and the Soviet Union, and about the past and future of Marxism, its mistakes, horrors, promise, and ruling ideas. Sometimes the debates are engaging, sometimes not. Mailer was, in a sense, continuing his education with this novel, learning from his characters as he did in the Cummings-Hearn dialogues.

The five chief characters of *Barbary Shore* are Mrs. Guinevere, the sexy landlady; her husband, McLeod, a former high functionary for the Soviets; his nemesis, Hollingsworth, a sadistic FBI agent; Lannie Madison, a mad Cassandra; and Mickey Lovett, a war veteran who has only fragmentary memories of his youth and war experiences. Lovett is writing a novel and, like everyone else, wants to have sex with Guinevere. Besides the tracing of sexual desire, the only discernible plot thread is Hollingsworth's continuing interrogation of McLeod concerning his Stalinist affiliations and secrets. Despite the tedium of much of the talk, there are many bright moments, including Lovett's surreal memories and visions of an Orwellian future, and the very different fantasies of Guinevere and Lannie. Guinevere, the novel's most genuinely felt character, has a hilarious idea for a tabloid-type, murder-love story, which she presents in detail to Lovett (Mailer's comic gifts have not always been appreciated). Lannie's

+ Galy (wife)

dark, Holocaust visions anticipate Marion Faye, the hipster in his next novel, *The Deer Park* (1955), and show, as Mailer told Steven Marcus, his unconscious interest in "murder, suicide, orgy, psychosis, all the themes I discuss in *Advertisements*." Lovett, who is tutored in Marxism and its offshoot, Trotskyism, by McLeod, is both the narrator and the chief protagonist, but except for his dreams and visions, he is a dull tool. McLeod, a pontificator of leftist thought, wishes to pass on the remnants of a viable Marxist program, his hope for a just world, to Lovett's generation. Mailer will use this sort of father-son relationship in every one of his future novels to clarify their philosophical underpinnings. McLeod gives Lovett the symbolic but unnamed object sought by Hollingsworth as the novel closes with Lovett's flight and McLeod's murder. The torch has been passed, it seems, but Lovett's future is ambiguous at best.

Barbary Shore is a bold, claustrophobic, somewhat Kafkaesque narrative that never succeeds in merging a river of abstract argument (which is evidence of Mailer's lifelong admiration for the dialectics of Marxist thought) with the development of characters or plot. One important reason for the lack of integration is that he did not have a line of action. *Barbary Shore* received the worst reviews of any of Mailer's books but intellectually represented a genuine advance. The novel also transmitted something of the zeitgeist, always one of Mailer's cardinal virtues. As he put it in *Advertisements*, "It has in its high fevers a kind of insane insight into the psychic mysteries of Stalinists, secret policemen, narcissists, children, Lesbians, hysterics, revolutionaries—it has an air which for me is the air of our time, authority and nihilism stalking one another in the orgiastic hollow of this century." Today the novel is seen as a seedbed of ideas, one to which Mailer would return many times.

THE HOLLYWOOD NOVEL

One of the commonplaces of Mailer criticism is that his first three novels deal, respectively, with violence, politics, and sex. Certainly there is a good deal of sexual content in *The Deer Park*, material considered salacious by the prudish conventional standards of the time. The novel created a stir in the publishing world and presented Mailer with a completely new set of narrative challenges and opportunities. Turned down by Rinehart, he went to six publishing firms before Putnam's accepted it. Originally, Mailer conceived the novel as the first in a cycle of eight interlocking novels that would each explore a different reach of modern life—pleasure, business, crime, church, working-class life, and so forth—but he gave up the ambitious scheme after he had written the prologue, a long short story titled "The Man Who Studied Yoga," and the first draft of the "pleasure" novel, *The Deer Park*. (Mailer has on two other occasions projected serial novels but only written the first; it seems to be a method of jump-starting new work.)

The protagonist of "The Man Who Studied Yoga," Sam Slovoda, was supposed to have a dream that laid out the eight-part scheme and introduced the hero, Sergius O'Shaugnessy. But Mailer, as always, followed the new flow he discovered at the point of his pencil. Still, the story, one of his two finest, was a success, and Slovoda stands as a negative exemplum, the timid opposite of Mailer's hipster heroes. O'Shaugnessy survived as one of the chief characters of the "pleasure" novel and later shows up as a Greenwich Village bullfighting instructor and sexual athlete in "The Time of Her Time," Mailer's most erotic, polished, and provocative short story, published in 1959 in *Advertisements for Myself*.

The chief protagonist of *The Deer Park* is Charles Francis Eitel. O'Shaugnessy, a former U.S. Air Force jet pilot, stands, roughly, in the same relation to him as Nick Carraway does to

Jay Gatsby. He narrates the novel, and, as Robert Merrill astutely points out, Mailer "counterpoints Sergius's development and Eitel's moral decline," again, very roughly paralleling *The Great Gatsby*. The novel is set in Desert D'Or, a resort community modeled after Palm Springs where the Hollywood community comes for recreation. Sex and other illicit pleasures are for sale there, and a river of booze runs through it.

Eitel is a blacklisted director, banned from making films because of his leftist connections in the 1930s, who is unwilling to testify about these associations before a congressional committee. Middle-aged, divorced, handsome, and cultivated, he is trying to write an ambitious film script while living on the last of his savings. His former boss, Herman Teppis, the head of Supreme Studios, and Teppis' son-in-law, the producer Collie Munshin (another small comic masterpiece), would like to have Eitel produce more of the money-making, sentimental films he made before the war, but first he must tell what he knows. And he will not. He wants to get back to the kind of honest social realism films he made when he first came to Hollywood, but he misses the action, the fame, the high life. Like *Gatsby*, the novel details the effects of corrupt money. There are other parallels, but Eitel differs greatly from Jay Gatsby in that his goal is not to regain a lost love but to recover his artistic integrity.

O'Shaugnessy is young and handsome and has \$14,000 that he won in a Tokyo poker game, but he is also uncertain and impotent as a result of his war experience, most of which, as he explains in the long, beautiful opening of the novel, was spent dropping firebombs on Korean villages. He becomes part of the bar-party scene at the resort and makes friends with Eitel, a pimp named Marion Faye, and a beautiful, zany movie star named Lulu Meyers, one of the biggest attractions of Teppis' studio. As O'Shaugnessy falls in love with Meyers, Eitel

picks up with Elena Esposito, a former mistress of Munshin's. The course of their two affairs, especially Eitel's, make up the heart of the novel. Mailer's clear intention is to show the arc of Eitel's attempt to regain his moral-artistic stature and the role Esposito (based loosely on Mailer's new love, Adele Morales) plays in this quest. It is one of the most brilliantly depicted affairs in modern literature. As Robert Merrill, one of the finest critics of this novel, notes in his study *Norman Mailer Revisited*, "Nowhere else in Mailer's fiction is a love relationship developed so fully."

Mailer's problem in the novel was that by choosing the first-person point of view, he made it impossible to present the most important aspects of the Eitel-Esposito affair. Mailer's narrator can report on the machinations of Teppis and Munshin to get Eitel to testify, return to the fold, and make more sappy films; he can tell us what Faye, the Baudlairean pimp who functions as Eitel's good angel, is saying and doing; he can report the gossip of the barflies, call girls, and flunkies; and he can, of course, give us Lulu Meyer's take on things. He is a marvelous narrator in the first half of the book, far superior to Lovett, but he cannot take us into the bedroom, cannot be privy to the intimate conversations between the passionate, uneducated Esposito and the older man who is teaching her about life just as she is inspiring him, at least at the beginning of their relationship. Mailer's solution was to use O'Shaugnessy less and less as narrator as the novel progresses and shift to an omniscient perspective. He does this at the beginning of the novel's third part (of six), noting only that Sergius will use his "imagination" to present the affair from the inside. The shift is jarring. The narrative focus moves from Eitel and Esposito (she is only seen from the outside) to O'Shaugnessy's parallel affair with Lulu, and later to Faye, a total of some thirty shifts in point of view. Henry James would be appalled, but in truth, the fascinating love affair of Eitel

and Elena more than compensates for the split perspective. Readers feel an urgency to return to the private place where the couple struggle with each other in an effort to locate their deepest identities.

Some critics believe *The Deer Park* to be a satire of Hollywood Babylon, a not unreasonable position, but others argue that the novel is really about a great, tragic love affair. Both are right, but there is no debating the fact that the rising action of the novel culminates in Eitel's decision to shed Elena, name names to the House Un-American Activities Committee (his name is pronounced "I-tell"), and "make some more crud," as Faye puts it. She is the moral winner in the battle, and her long letter to Eitel is strong evidence of Mailer's power to create character—always his strong suit. She is one of his most memorable characters. Mailer's instinct when revising the novel in early 1955 (it came out in October 1955) was to make O'Shaugnessy stronger, tougher, more believable, even as he worked to make the affair more vibrant. But although O'Shaugnessy develops muscles, as it were, he is unable to lift us into a vantage point on the affair. Eitel's love affair and his battle with the greedy forces of commercialism comprise the novel's morality play, and O'Shaugnessy's new stubbornness and belligerence, which represent, Mailer says in *Advertisements*, "an implicit portrait of myself," have only tangential importance. Eitel sells his integrity and splits with Esposito, who then is sorely but successfully tested when she moves in with Faye, who ends up in prison. Sergius goes off to Mexico and later New York to run his bullfighting school and write "this novel," an admission that weakens its pretensions to reality. The novel is, after all, the only form that tries to convince us that it is something else.

NEW YORK CITY AND THE HIPSTER

The Deer Park made the best-seller list, but it was not the big success Mailer badly needed.

Its reception made him angry at the establishment in a more intense way; an outlaw mentality surged up in him. Now divorced from Bea and living in New York City with Adele (whom he married in 1954), he began to soak up jazz and the nightlife and get involved in new ventures such as *Dissent*, a leftist journal of ideas. With Daniel Wolf and Edwin Fancher, he cofounded the *Village Voice*, which he named. The first issue appeared on October 26, 1955, just as his novel was climbing the best-seller list. He devoted much of the next eight months to the paper and contributed a weekly column, titled "Quickly: A Column for Slow Readers," the first of his many journalistic forays.

But Mailer's most important effort immediately after *The Deer Park* was his 1957 essay for *Dissent*, later collected in *Advertisements*. Titled "The White Negro," the essay presents his emerging view of the challenges of life in a post-Holocaust world threatened by the atomic bomb. This dense, beautifully written piece is Mailer's most important polemical essay and one of the most anthologized of the postwar period. In its emphasis on the primacy of inner promptings, it is a key to all of Mailer's later work. The essay presents a prospectus for a new hero, the hipster, an urban, jazz-soaked sexual adventurer whose closest parallel are the blacks who live on the dangerous edge in America's cities. The hipster believes that "the only life-giving answer is to accept the terms of death, to live with death as immediate danger, to divorce oneself from society, to exist without roots, to set off on that uncharted journey into the rebellious imperatives of the self."

The essay's celebration of personal violence, among other things, created a great stir, and it was often linked, with some justification, to the Beat movement, which took off at about the same time. What made Mailer's argument different from those of the Beats and other extreme romantic programs is that the search for growth, aided by a variety of risk-taking ventures, most

notably the release of damned-up sexual energy, is never-ending. No one has explained this better than Robert Solotaroff. In his study *Down Mailer's Way*, he says that Mailer's prescription for growth "in its ideal or natural movement describes a spiral—a man grows by freeing energy, but this energy must be put to the task of freeing still more energy." Mailer's "endlessly spiraling dialectic" is ultimately "the quest for the infinite."

MAILER'S MISCELLANIES

Mailer's next novel, *An American Dream*, would not appear until 1965, over nine years after *The Deer Park*. In the work published in the interim, and in interviews, he often referred to the "big novel" he was writing. *Advertisements* contained two excerpts, and *The Presidential Papers*, a 1963 miscellany focused on the Kennedy administration, offered another. Between these two books came Mailer's only extended foray into poetry, *Deaths for the Ladies (and Other Disasters)* (1962). In 1966 he published his third miscellany, *Cannibals and Christians*, although the great majority of this collection was written before *An American Dream*. The bulk of Mailer's activity between his third and fourth novels was not directed at the "big novel" but consisted of a series of narrative ventures and experiments in several literary forms, as well as a reconsideration and consolidation of all his previous work.

The content of these three miscellanies includes a majority of Mailer's columns from the *Village Voice*, *Esquire*, and *Commentary*, a generous sampling from his second and third novels, short stories, reviews, interviews, dialogues, dramatic fragments, speeches, political commentary, a clutch of essays, a long piece on the Floyd Patterson–Sonny Liston fight (titled "Ten Thousand Words a Minute"), "The White Negro," some poems and literary criticism. Each of the three miscellanies is linked,

respectively, by a series of "advertisements," "postscripts," and "arguments" that federate a narrative thrust, especially in *Advertisements*, where they are often more important than the work they frame. Like Henry James in the prefaces to his novels, Mailer broods and muses over the context of each separate piece, telling the story of the story. Together the miscellanies comprise a comprehensive sourcebook of Mailer's wide-ranging concerns. The tone is by turns wry, edgy, angry, sardonic; the content is rich with social observation, now-or-never fulmination, jeremiads, pointed comments on his own career and future possibilities and life in these American states. But they contain little new fiction. Nevertheless, the reader gets the sense of a man very much in motion.

Now the father of two daughters by Adele (Danielle in 1957 and Elizabeth Anne in 1959), Mailer was considering running for mayor of New York, but after he stabbed Adele with a penknife at a drunken party in November 1960 (an event that continues to resonate in Mailer's life), he had to shelve the idea. Adele recovered quickly and refused to press charges, but their marriage was effectively over. They were divorced in 1962, and shortly thereafter Mailer married Lady Jean Campbell, an Englishwoman who gave him his fourth daughter, Kate, also in 1962. This third marriage also failed, and they were divorced in 1963. Mailer then married Beverly Bentley, an actress, who became the mother of his first two sons (Michael, born in 1964, and Stephen, in 1966). Mailer's roiled psychic state is apparent in the miscellanies, especially in *Advertisements for Myself*, the most powerful of the three, and the most autobiographical. Many who came of age after World War II shared Mailer's rage at American moderation, compromise, and conformity. In *Advertisements* he forged his distinctive style, a fierce, frank, agile, self-reflective, and often humorous voice; his angry cry, "the shits are killing us," became a rallying point for a second

generation of Mailer readers. *The Presidential Papers* has a similar tone, focusing on the politics of the early 1960s. It includes one of the prototypes of the "new journalism," his report on the 1960 Democratic political convention in San Francisco, titled "Superman Comes to the Supermarket." The tenor of the piece, the first of many profiles of presidential candidates, can be gauged by the fact that Mailer calls John F. Kennedy the first "hipster" candidate for president. The third in the series, *Cannibals and Christians*, focuses, in part, on the Johnson administration. Among its many items of continuing interest are Mailer's assessment of nine of his novelistic colleagues, "Some Children of the Goddess," two long philosophical dialogues on matters such as form, spirit, beauty, and soul, and some strong criticism of the Vietnam War. Mailer was among the earliest and most thoughtful critics of the war.

GOD AND THE DEVIL

Constantly tempted to write nonfiction about the tumultuous events of the period, Mailer knew he must find a way to commit himself to a new novel, his first in over eight years. His solution was to up the ante by writing a serialized novel, following the same frantic pace of earlier novelists such as Charles Dickens and Fyodor Dostoyevsky. He announced *An American Dream* in his final "Big Bite" column in *Esquire* in December 1963, a magazine that was on the stands when John F. Kennedy was killed in Dallas. The *Esquire* version appeared in eight parts, from January to August 1964, and the final, much-revised version, the following March. Barry Leeds, in his study *The Enduring Vision of Norman Mailer* (2002), aptly summarizes the novel as "a pilgrimage by protagonist Stephen Richards Rojack from imminent alcoholism, damnation and madness to salvation and sanity."

Rojack, a television talk-show host, former congressman, and professor of existential psychology, says he holds "the not inconsiderable thesis that magic, dread and the perception of death were the roots of motivation." His compromises and failures have made him suicidal; he receives emanations from the moon and smells cancer and carnality in people. In fact, he has perhaps the finest olfactory intuition in modern literature. A war hero like John F. Kennedy, Rojack meets Deborah Kelly, whom he later marries and murders, on a double date with Kennedy during their term together in Congress after World War II. Rojack's murder of the hateful Deborah (which he claims is suicide); a love affair with Cherry Melanie, the former mistress of Deborah's father, Barney Oswald Kelly, the "solicitor" for the Devil; and a series of physical and psychic confrontations with the police, the Mafia, Shago Martin (Cherry's former lover, a black jazz artist), and Kelly—all taking place within thirty-six hours in New York City—make up the external action of the story. But the novel is really an account of a battle between God and the Devil. Rojack's internal war both mirrors and partakes of the struggle between good and evil.

An American Dream is the first fully developed depiction of Mailer's Manichaean cosmology, which holds that the universe is a dialectical process with the final synthesis unknown. God is limited, imperfect in the same way humans are, and locked into combat with a powerful, wily Devil. Human beings are participants in this war, usually unknowingly, and fight on both sides. The outcome is uncertain; the Devil could win. Rojack is aware of the nature of this struggle, but he does not always know which side his actions will benefit. "The moral consequences of this," Mailer said in a 1958 interview with Richard G. Stern and Robert F. Lucid, "are not only staggering, but they're thrilling; because moral experience is intensified rather than diminished."

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As in *The Deer Park*, the primary linkages between the characters are sexual. A web of infidelity and incest links the mob with high society, Harlem with the small-town South, black with white, father with daughter, and sister with brother. Cherry, who is murdered at the end of the novel, sleeps with almost every important male character. While it is clear that Mailer intends her love for Rojack to be of a higher order, she is not developed enough for this to be completely convincing.

By far the best analysis of the novel is Tony Tanner's in his essay "On the Parapet," collected in Harold Bloom's *Norman Mailer: Modern Critical Views* (1986). He points out that although initially many critics found the novel to be an outrageous study of how to murder your wife and get away with it, such views miss the deeper moral dimensions of the novel. It is, he says, "a vivid exploration of a man's relationship to the different orders of American reality." Tanner notes the extraordinary use of metaphors of "pre-social reality—the jungle, the forest, the desert, the swamp, the ocean-bed" and how these metaphors contrast with the realistic depictions of New York City. The novel presents a series of oppositions between nature and civilization, the supernatural and the rational, the demonic and the angelic, and, ultimately, between the forces of life and death. Rojack must contend with these dualisms, Tanner explains, aided by not much more than the voices he hears in his head, his sense of smell, and the talismanic umbrella of Shago Martin, which trembles portentously in his hands. In the novel's climax, high up in the Waldorf Towers, where Rojack has been summoned by Kelly to answer questions about Deborah's death, he resists the carnal temptations of his host and then, in a self-imposed test, walks the parapet around Kelly's terrace, smashing Kelly with the umbrella when Kelly attempts to push him off the edge and then throwing the umbrella over the parapet. Tanner

concludes his brilliant discussion by noting that Rojack has "to prove that he can negotiate that edge where the worlds meet," succumbing neither to the fixed and rational nor to the formless and irrational. He shows that he can, at least for a time, "hold on to his identity between two threatening realms."

Mailer was pleased with the achievement of *An American Dream*. He imbued the novel with his dynamic belief system; melded, for the first time with Rojack, the narrative consciousness and the main protagonist, the teller and the chief character; and his style was now fully mature—it has never been more lyrical, energetic, and richly metaphoric. The novel sold well and made the best-seller list, although the reviews were mediocre at best. Reviewers have often been unable to appreciate Mailer's bold vision and experiments in form.

After *An American Dream* he was again uncertain which way to move and how much energy to expend on various projects. But he knew, as he says in *Cannibals*, that "repetition kills the soul" and that he must tackle new projects. In 1967 his solution was to move in several directions simultaneously. His play *The Deer Park* opened in New York in January and had a successful four-month run. He published four books: *The Short Fiction of Norman Mailer*; *The Deer Park: A Play*; his fifth novel, *Why Are We in Vietnam?*; and *The Bullfight*, a long nonfiction essay about a Mexican bullfighter. He also made two experimental films, *Wild 90* and *Beyond the Law* (and the following year *Maidstone*, his most ambitious film) and appeared at several antiwar protests. In October at the March on the Pentagon, Mailer was arrested, and before the year was over he was at work on his nonfiction narrative about the march, *The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, The Novel as History* (1968).

Why Are We in Vietnam? his most linguistically innovative work, follows a party of Texans hunting big game in Alaska and is narrated by

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the son of the party's leader, Randal Jethroe, an eighteen year old known to all as D. J. Part Huck Finn and part William Burroughs, D. J. talks, as he himself notes, like a wired disc jockey. His rapid-fire recounting of the high-tech hunts in the Brooks Range of Alaska, recollected two years later on the eve of his departure for Vietnam, crackles with obscene merriment. The novel does not directly consider American involvement in Vietnam. Rather, it accounts for American militarism by depicting the Texans as nature-defiling louts. It is Mailer's most extended meditation on nature after *Naked*. But the descriptions in *Vietnam* are superior to those in *Naked* because its natural world is the incarnation of a prodigious and divided anima. The forests and mountains of Alaska vibrate with supersensory messages from heavenly and demonic forces, much as the forests of Lebanon do in his later novel, *Ancient Evenings*. Passages of description of caribou and wolves alternate with unforgiving portraits of the Texans (all employed by a huge corporation) competing for the biggest trophy animals. The rams and grizzly bears are shot, in some instances, from a helicopter. The novel was generally reviewed well and was nominated for a National Book Award, the first of five nominations for Mailer.

NONFICTION NARRATIVES

From 1967 through 1979 Mailer published twenty-two books. Only one of them—*Vietnam*—was a novel. During this tumultuous period in American life, especially the late 1960s and early 1970s, history seemed to be accelerating. As Mailer put it in *Of a Fire on the Moon* (1971), "the real had become more fantastic than the imagined." In response, Mailer interrupted his novelistic mission in order to chronicle these events and to challenge them with his imagination. Some of the books he wrote during this period were just sparks from

the wheel, but several of them are among his major achievements. Perhaps the most important of these are the five nonfiction narratives he published from 1968 to 1972: *The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, The Novel as History* (1968), a depiction of the October 1967 anti-war protest March on the Pentagon; *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* (1968), a report on the violent 1968 political conventions; *Of a Fire on the Moon* (1971), a long analysis of the American space program and the first landing on the moon; *The Prisoner of Sex* (1971), an account of his debate with the women's liberation movement, which earned the movement's enmity; and *St. George and the Godfather* (1972), a report on the 1972 political conventions.

In his glowing review of *Armies*, Alfred Kazin concluded by stating, "Mailer's intuition in this book is that the times demand a new form. He has found it." Each of the five nonfiction narratives attempts to bridge what Mailer in *The Presidential Papers* calls the "double life" of Americans: "the history of politics which is concrete, factual, practical and unbelievably dull" and "a subterranean river of untapped, ferocious lonely and romantic desires, that concentration of ecstasy and violence which is the dream life of the nation." Whether Mailer is writing about astronauts or feminists, athletes or presidents, protestors or FBI agents, he is always attempting to bridge outer and inner, public and private in the national experience. It is his deepest narrative aspiration. To capture the complexities of a nation poised between the malevolent and the heroic, he was obliged to break down the walls between narrative genres. A work like *Armies* accomplishes this by employing the techniques of both the modern psychological novel and the historical narrative.

The narrative is divided into two parts. The first "novelistic" part is three times the length of the second "historical" overview, the latter serving as factual ballast for the first, which

traces Mailer's involvement in the protest activities, the events leading up the march, his arrest and incarceration, and, two days later, his release. He does not divide the other four narratives in the same way; instead, he shuttles between outer and inner, the events and his participation and his mercurial, often humorous responses to them. But he does employ the same unusual point of view; he describes himself in the third person, a technique used by some classical historians and, in the twentieth century, most notably, by Henry Adams and Gertrude Stein. Here is an example, a description of the scene just before his arrest at the Pentagon.

It was not unlike being a boy about to jump from one garage roof to an adjoining garage roof. The one thing not to do was wait. Mailer looked at Macdonald and Lowell. "Let's go," he said. Not looking again at them, not pausing to gather or dissipate resolve, he made a point of stepping neatly and decisively over the low rope. Then he headed across the grass to the nearest MP he saw.

It was as if the air had changed, or light had altered; he felt immediately more alive—yes, bathed in air—and yet disembodied from himself, as if indeed he were watching himself in a film where this action was taking place. He could feel the eyes of the people behind the rope watching him, could feel the intensity of their existence as spectators. And as he walked forward, he and the MP looked at one another with the naked stricken lucidity which comes when absolute strangers are for the moment absolutely locked together.

It reads like a modern novel, which is precisely what Mailer wanted. In *Barbary Shore* and *The Deer Park*, he used first-person narrators who resembled him in some ways, but not too much. It was not permitted; a modicum of distance between narrators and authors was required. Authors were supposed to be invisible and powerful, everywhere and nowhere, like God. But Mailer wanted to use himself, explore himself, watch himself winning, losing, being bold, being a fool, performing, as he says in the quoted passage, as if he were in a movie, and

above all searching for congruence between himself and the republic in peril. So he took the step of describing himself in the third person, which, in effect, divided him into teller and told, narrating and narrative selves. It is only an apparent paradox that this division of self by aesthetic fiat came as a result of his growing awareness of the desirability of no longer attempting to separate the private and public hemispheres of his life. To harness both selves, use them simultaneously, he was, in effect, taking seriously Ralph Waldo Emerson's injunction in his essay "Fate": "A man must ride alternately on the horses of his private and his public nature, as the equestrians in the circus throw themselves nimbly from horse to horse, or plant one foot on the back of the one and the other foot on the back of the other." This is Mailer's narrative stance in the five nonfiction narratives, as well as in his 1975 account of the Muhammad Ali-George Foreman boxing match in Zaire, *The Fight*.

He is even a bit more nimble than Emerson's metaphor allows in that he also explores the many sides and pockets of his character. He uses many names to describe himself: Brute, Ruminant, Reporter, Aquarius (a favorite, used in both *Fire* and *St. George*), Acolyte, Novelist, Director, Prisoner, Prospector, and Participant. In addition, Mailer has placed himself over the years everywhere on the political spectrum from the left of Robespierre to the right of William F. Buckley, from Marxian anarchist in *Advertisements to "grand conservateur"* in *Armies*. During his quixotic race for mayor of New York in 1969, his campaign literature said he was to the left and right of everyone else in the race, and by the time of *Armies*, he regularly described himself as a "Left Conservative." From his cosmology to his politics and everywhere in between, Mailer is a thoroughgoing dualist, but one whose two sides are themselves often divided. Richard Poirier, in perhaps the most intelligent full-length study of Mailer, *Norman*

Mailer, pointed out that Mailer "is quite unable to imagine anything except in oppositions, unable even to imagine one side of the opposition without proposing that it has yet another opposition within itself," or "the minority within."

FAMOUS AMERICANS

Mailer received the best reviews of his career for *Armies*; it won a Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award and is generally seen to be one of the finest achievements of the "new journalism." His other nonfiction narratives fared almost as well, garnering awards, plaudits from reviewers, and strong sales. He was widely seen as Aquarius-in-charge-of-construing-America, but he recognized that he had all but used himself up as a reference. There were also personal problems: his marriage with Beverly Bentley failed in 1969, and he never seemed to earn enough to pay alimony and expenses for his seven children (Maggie, his seventh, was born to Carol Stevens, his fifth wife, in 1971). By the early 1970s he felt an urgent desire to get back to his first love, the novel. Even before *St. George and the Godfather* appeared in late 1972, he was at work at what was initially called "the Egyptian novel." Shortly thereafter, he signed a contract with Little, Brown for a three-part novel and a large advance. But there were distractions, obligations, opportunities to be dealt with along the way to the novel's completion.

All through the 1970s—which might be called his biographical decade—Mailer alternated between work on the Egyptian novel and a series of portraits of famous and infamous Americans, twin lines of artistic enterprise that necessarily overlapped. The first biography was of Marilyn Monroe, which was also the first of several ^{collaborative} efforts with the entrepreneurial photographer and producer Lawrence Schiller. *Marilyn: A Biography* (1973) was originally to have been a 25,000-word preface

to a selection of photographs by Schiller and other photographers, but it grew into a 95,000-word, full-scale biography that concluded with the suggestion that Monroe had been murdered. Controversy surrounded the book, which only increased sales; 400,000 copies were in print by the end of 1973. It was Mailer's biggest best-seller since *Naked*. ?

His next outing, *The Fight* (1975), is a portrait of Muhammad Ali in Africa. Mailer again complained in the narrative that using himself as a lens, describing himself in the third person, was tedious, and the book is most successful in its depiction of Ali's improvisations in the ring. He then returned to the Egyptian novel, pausing in 1976 to publish a collection of his political writings, *Some Honorable Men: Political Conventions, 1960–1972*, and, later the same year, a collection of excerpts from the work of an author he admired. *Genius and Lust: A Journey through the Major Writings of Henry Miller* contains eighty pages of commentary on Miller, making it Mailer's lengthiest piece of literary criticism. The cover drawing of Miller is by Barbara Norris (later Norris Church Mailer), whom Mailer met in Arkansas in 1975. He later married her after she and her son from an earlier marriage, Matthew, moved to New York. In 1978 she gave birth to their son John Buffalo. This marriage, Mailer's sixth and last, brought a large measure of stability to his life. Norris Church Mailer is an actress, painter, novelist, and theatrical artistic director in Provincetown, Massachusetts, the Mailers' permanent home since the mid-1980s.

A NEW AUDIENCE

Gary Gilmore was a convicted murderer who gained national attention by insisting that his death sentence by firing squad be promptly carried out. Shortly after his execution in early 1977, Lawrence Schiller contacted Mailer to ask if he would collaborate with him on

Gilmore's story, to which he owned the rights. Mailer dropped work on his novel and spent six months in Utah with Schiller interviewing hundreds of people who had known Gilmore, including convicts, lawyers, prison guards, members of the media, ^{Gilmore's} mother, and his girlfriend, Nicole Barrett, and poring over 15,000 pages of interviews and court transcripts. He was excited by Gilmore's story; it seemed to embody many of the ideas that had preoccupied him for years, ideas about existential violence, the good in bad people, and the efficacy of dying in a state of grace, as well as the whole issue of capital punishment and Americans' fascination with outlaws. After the relatively quiet years of the middle and late 1970s, Mailer was also eager for another victory; he wanted a new audience. The narrative had several working titles: "Violence in America," "The Saint and the Psychopath," and "American Virtue." He finally settled on *The Executioner's Song*. Choosing a title was a small difficulty. Mailer had another problem: point of view. Inserting himself in the narrative and then describing himself in the third person would not work; he had never met Gilmore and much of his material was secondhand. He needed to be a central eye but could not be a character in the story himself. Mailer's solution was to revert to the omniscient, anonymous point of view of *Naked*, which appropriately eliminated him from the story. He chose a style as flat as the Utah landscape and relied heavily on the actual words of those involved. Here and there a careful reader can find some of Mailer's characteristic locutions, but not enough to weigh on the narrative, which accelerates as it progresses. He divided the book into two parts, "Western Voices" and "Eastern Voices." The first part tells the story of Gilmore's life up to his incarceration for two senseless murders and is told mainly by women, as Joan Didion noted in her highly laudatory review (reprinted in J. Michael Lennon, *Critical Essays on Norman Mailer*). In

contrast, the "Eastern Voices" in book 2, Didion states, "are largely those of men—the voices of the lawyers, the prosecutors, the reporters, the people who move in the larger world and believe that they can influence events. The 'Western' book is a fatalistic drift, a tension. . . . The 'Eastern' book is the release of that tension, the resolution, the playing out of the execution." Mailer boldly resolves the problem of how to situate Schiller by making him the chief figure of part 2 and, after Gary and Nicole, the most important in the book. Schiller is both Gilmore's executor and a journalist struggling to assemble the raw materials of the story with integrity. The effort of compiling the massive documentary cache is the main line of action in part 2, although Gilmore's execution (four bullets through the heart from a firing squad), autopsy, and cremation ends the narrative.

Mailer subtitled *The Executioner's Song* "a true life novel," even though it was scrupulously factual, out of his debatable conviction that its scope, form, characters, and themes made it a novel. Published in 1979, the book became another best-seller and won Mailer another cadre of admirers. The reviews were mainly quite positive, and the book was nominated for the National Book Critics Circle Award and won the 1980 Pulitzer Prize for fiction, bearing out Mailer's belief in its fundamental novelistic identity. He was the only writer in the twentieth century to win the Pulitzer in both fiction and nonfiction.

FROM AMERICA TO EGYPT

As soon as *The Executioner's Song* was completed Mailer returned to the Egyptian novel, although he broke from the effort twice more: in 1980 for a novella titled *Of Women and Their Elegance*, which is narrated entirely by Marilyn Monroe, his only female narrator; and in 1982 for *Pieces and Pontifications*, his sixth miscellany. The first half consisted of his essays from

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the 1970s; the second half of twenty of his most important interviews from 1958 to 1981. There was one other interruption. In 1981 Mailer supported the parole request of Jack Henry Abbott (who had been imprisoned for a series of robberies) and wrote the introduction to Abbott's book, *In the Belly of the Beast: Letters from Prison*. Abbott was released and Mailer supported him generally. But within a month of his release Abbott killed a waiter in a New York restaurant during a petty dispute. Mailer was accused of being blind to Abbott's violent nature and was pilloried in the tabloid press, while others who had helped Abbott out of prison went relatively unnoticed. Mailer admitted his culpability, but the tragic situation haunted him. Abbott was convicted and, after his later parole attempts failed, committed suicide in 2002.

The novel *Ancient Evenings* was published with unusual fanfare in April 1983. It is Mailer's most ambitious, complex work and, by his estimate, his finest. Set in Egypt over a 180-year span (1320–1100 B.C.E.), it is also his most unread major work. Readers have complained of getting bogged down in what one critic, Michael Glenday, called the novel's "involutions," its memories of memories of the magical moments of Menenhetet I, who has learned from a Jewish slave how to father himself and lives four lives in the course of the novel. The process of re-creating himself, like much of the magic in the book, is obscure. Glenday goes on to say that the critical community, not to mention the common reader, remains baffled by the novel because it "is still regarded as both *outré* and so resistant to category as to subvert any substantial critical appraisal of it."

The violent, carnal, and magical religiosity of the Egyptians is not presented in any symbolic or metaphorical way, as Robert Begiebing points out in his study *Toward a New Synthesis* (1989). When Mailer chose ancient Egypt, a time and place saturated in magic, he was automatically released from "the restrictions of fictional real-

ism," as well as from "twentieth-century rationalism and scientism." He was free to indulge his gnostic impulses to the fullest, free to re-create a society unaffected by Western culture's ruling beliefs—Judaic monotheism, Christian compassion and distrust of the body, Faustian progress, romantic love, and Freudian guilt. Mailer attributes telepathy and reincarnation to the Egyptians, but, apart from these, he does not depart from the available evidence on the nature of Egyptian culture, including its burial customs, which fascinated him. Unable to narrate a novel except in the first person, Mailer uses telepathy as a substitute for omniscience; reincarnation allows him to explore Menenhetet's four very different lives as charioteer-general and harem master, high priest, wealthy businessman, and, finally, tomb robber—note the trajectory—thus providing views of different levels and corners of Egyptian life without shifting from one consciousness to another, and then two more (Menenhetet remembers his previous lives). The first of his lives is the most impressive by far; depiction of the others, according to Harold Bloom in his review, gives "every sign of truncation." Almost all reviewers and critics agree that the account of the Egyptians' great chariot battle against the Hittites at Kadesh—an actual battle—is one of the strongest expositions in Mailer's work and, for many, in modern literature.

Perhaps the high point of the novel is Mailer's account of the rape and butchery during the drunken celebration before the gates of the Hittite capital, which he contrasts with the majestic aplomb of Ramses receiving through the long night the severed hands of slain Hittites from thousands of his troops. The pharaoh deftly tosses each hand into a perfectly pyramidal pile, never moving his feet, as his scribe records the soldiers' names and gory trophies. In addition to this luminous account, there are other wonderful runs of prose in the novel. The opening offers a remarkable retelling of the myths of

the Egyptian gods by Menenhetet I to his grandson, Menenhetet II, after their deaths, one ghost to another, inside the great pyramid of Khufu as they prepare for a final journey and final judgment. Meni II is the actual narrator, although he is displaced from most of the action, much like O'Shaugnessy in *The Deer Park*. The narrative's involuted provenance is often confusing, but the chief criticism of the novel centers on the languorous Book of the Queens, a 130-page account of Meni I as harem master. Future consideration of the novel may focus on its complex epistemology, its spiraling narrative skeins and inlaid perspectives, and their relationships with the four narratives Mailer wrote during the same period as *Ancient Evenings*, those on Marilyn Monroe, Muhammad Ali, Henry Miller, and Gary Gilmore. Certainly the blend of their cardinal vices and virtues are manifested in both Menenhetet I and Ramses II.

BACK TO THE COLD WAR

Mailer's next book was an "entertainment," to use Graham Greene's phrase, a murder mystery set in Provincetown. It was published in 1984, the same year Mailer was elected president of the international writers' organization PEN and inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters. *Tough Guys Don't Dance* (1984) is notable mainly for its evocations of the drear winter landscapes of lower Cape Cod and its portraits of the eccentrics, artists, and criminals who live there. It was written in sixty-one days to fulfill a contract with his publisher at the time, Little, Brown, although it was ultimately published by Random House, his continuing publisher. *Tough Guys* was also a way of winding down after the decade-long effort to complete *Ancient Evenings*. Mailer went on to direct a feature film based on the novel, a film that has gained something of a cult reputation.

But the bulk of Mailer's effort during the 1980s was focused on a very long novel that

deals with the cold war. The novel's length may be an American record. *Harlot's Ghost* is 1,310 pages long and ends with the words "To be continued." The sequel, Mailer said when the novel was published in October 1991, will continue the story of Herrick "Harry" Hubbard; his father, "Cal"; his godfather, Hugh Montague (code name "Harlot"); and Montague's wife, Kittredge, all CIA agents. After Kittredge divorces Harlot, she marries Harry, who might be seen as Harlot's ghost, or one of them. He ghostwrites spy novels favorable to the CIA and shadows Harlot in several ways, most notably with Kittredge. But Harlot's ghost refers chiefly to the spirit of the dead Harlot, if he is indeed dead. A body resembling his washes up on the shores of Chesapeake Bay with the face blown away and fingertips missing. Mailer's eighth novel is crammed with questions about the CIA, the cold war, the cosmic war of God and the Devil, and the fundamental loyalties of all the characters, including Harlot, who is loosely based on the American master spy James Jesus Angleton. In *Harlot's Ghost*, Mailer bends over backward to present the CIA fairly, making clear the contradictory impulses of selfless patriotism and Faustian arrogance that motivate its agents and leaders. One critic of the novel, John Whalen-Bridge, in his essay "Adamic Purity as Double-Agent," calls it an "obsessively dualistic novel," where "the coexistence and interdependence of good and evil . . . receive supreme expression."

Harlot's Ghost is of course divided into two parts, "Alpha" and "Omega," both manuscripts written by Harry, who narrates the story from Moscow in 1984. "Omega," about 100 pages, begins the novel and is set in Harry's island home in Maine on a day in 1983. It is a riveting opening, replete with sex, murder, an icy road and a stormy sea, double agents, a dank cellar, and, of course, ghosts. It ends with the revelation of the body washed ashore, the disappear-

ance of Kittredge (with Dix Butler, a bisexual professional rival of Harry's), and Harry's flight from his burning house. "Alpha," at 1,200 pages, is the story of Harry's early life and includes his youth in the 1930s and 1940s, Yale education, and tours of duty abroad and in the United States, up to 1965, where the narrative ends. Presumably, the period between 1965 and 1984 dealing with Vietnam, Watergate, the impending collapse of the Soviet Union, and the marriage of Hubbard and Kittredge will be in the sequel, although Mailer seems to have abandoned it. *Harlor's Ghost* was Mailer's eighth best-seller, although reviews, as usual, were mixed. Praised for the interweaving of fiction and fact, his extraordinary anatomy of the agency, and the authoritative portraits of so many prominent figures (Kennedy, Castro, Allen Dulles, J. Edgar Hoover, Kim Philby), the novel was also criticized for the length of some episodes, especially the nearly 300 pages devoted to Hubbard's years in Uruguay, and for his protracted correspondence with Kittredge. In an attempt to reveal Kittredge—who never comes completely into focus—within the limitations imposed by a first-person narrator, Mailer was forced to create an awkward, epistolary relationship. Finally, many reviewers contrasted the fast-paced opening with the tedium of some of the South American material. This counterpoint, like that in *Ancient Evenings*, not to mention *Moby-Dick* and other ambitious novels, was undoubtedly intentional; Mailer has always believed that the parts of a narrative should clarify and complicate other parts. Given the novel's length and ambition, and its saturation in the horrors and glories of the American Century, it seems more likely than any of Mailer's other works to be measured by his 1959 statement in *Advertisements* that he wanted to "try to hit the longest ball ever to go up into the accelerated hurricane air of our American letters."

MORE BIOGRAPHIES AND A CONSOLIDATION

No event in twentieth-century American life has resonated longer or stronger for Mailer than John F. Kennedy's assassination. In 1992 he decided to tackle it head on via a biography of the much-despised but poorly understood Lee Harvey Oswald, the man arrested for shooting the president and then executed by a small-time Dallas mobster, Jack Ruby. The opportunity was presented to him by his collaborator on *The Executioner's Song* and *Marilyn*, Lawrence Schiller, who had gained access to KGB archival material and operatives in Belarus, where Oswald had lived in 1960 after marrying Marina Prusakova. Mailer and Schiller spent six months there, interviewing everyone available who had known Lee and Marina or spied on them and poring over the verbatim transcripts of the couple's life in the bleak city of Minsk. Characteristically, Mailer divides the resulting 828-page narrative, *Oswald's Tale* (1995), into two parts. The first, "Oswald in Minsk with Marina," is devoted to Oswald's two and a half years in the Soviet Union; the second, "Oswald in America," moves back to his childhood and U.S. Marine Corps service, skipping his Russian years and continuing up to the day of Kennedy's assassination in Dallas. Mailer's subtle analysis of Jack Ruby's enigmatic motives follows his unmatched re-creation of the assassination, which he concludes was 75 percent likely to be the sole work of Oswald. The full narrative, equal if not superior to *The Executioner's Song*, ends with wrenching portraits of three widows: Jacqueline Kennedy, Marina Oswald, and her mother-in-law, the nattering, narcissistic Marguerite Oswald, who Mailer says "is worthy of Dickens."

The portrait of Oswald is the fairest hearing he might ever receive. Mailer attempts the Herculean task of generating, if not sympathy, then

understanding of the dyslexic, nerdy Oswald. A failure at almost everything to which he put his hand but possessed of the ambition of the young Hitler or Lenin, Oswald comes across as much victim as monster. Reviewers favored the first part of the narrative, which presented fascinating material theretofore unavailable on the domestic life of Lee and Marina. For the second part of his narrative, Mailer relied on the twenty-six-volume *Warren Commission Report* and a large number of biographies and investigative reports. Many readers are still not ready to fully appreciate Mailer's portrait of Oswald, but one hundred years from now it might stand as definitive, worthy of Leo Tolstoy in its severity and compassion.

Never one to let the grass grow under his feet, Mailer had all but completed a biography of Pablo Picasso by the end of 1992, but because of various difficulties in obtaining permissions, *Portrait of Picasso as a Young Man* was not published until late 1995, some months after *Oswald's Tale*. Without referring to himself, Mailer uses his own fifty years of artistic success, failure, and experimentation to measure Picasso's career from his birth in 1881 to the end of his early manhood and the flowering of cubism at the beginning of World War I. Mailer's biography is premised on the notion that Picasso was a self-created artist who "gambled on his ability to reach into mysteries of existence that no one else had even perceived." His insights in this rather comradely biography vibrate with fellow-feeling. Picasso was "doomed," Mailer says, "to relive his obsessions through all of ninety-one years of life," to continue to paint until the end "as if work itself could hold death off."

Picasso received terrible reviews, especially from members of the professional art community, which was not eager to sanction a somewhat iconoclastic portrait of the central figure of twentieth-century art. Mailer toyed with the idea of publishing his next book, *The*

Gospel According to the Son, anonymously, but finally did not. When it appeared in 1997, it fared only slightly better than *Picasso*, with some reviewers castigating Mailer for daring to speak in the first person as Jesus. Others saw his gospel-as-autobiography as another example of his brilliance at integrating narrative forms. His motive, he explained in various interviews, was to improve on the committee prose of the Gospels, to place the wisdom and agony of Jesus in a narrative without the contradictions, lacunae, and weak transitions of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. As Mailer put it in an interview with Sean Abbott in *At Random*, "If I can write about Isis and Osiris and Ra, then certainly the New Testament is not going to be that difficult to do." With his plot in hand (always a worry for Mailer), he expended his creative energies on depictions of Judas, Pilate, Mary, John the Baptist, and, especially, Satan, who comes across as a devious, Middle Eastern playboy-prince. Mailer's other important achievement in *Gospel* is the voice of Jesus, who, according to John Updike in his *The New Yorker* review, speaks in "a direct, rather relaxed English that has yet an eerie, neo-Biblical dignity."

On May 6, 1998, fifty years to the day after the publication of *The Naked and the Dead*, Mailer published *The Time of Our Time*, a massive consolidation of all his previous work. Searching for an organizing principle for the 1,286-page anthology containing 139 excerpts from 26 previous books, Mailer decided that each piece would appear "in accordance with the year it refers to rather than the year it was written." So it opens with a short sketch describing a 1929 boxing match between Ernest Hemingway and Morley Callaghan and works its magnificent way, event by chronological event, to the 1996 presidential race between Bill Clinton and Bob Dole, although Mailer then violates his own scheme by ending with several excerpts from *Ancient Evenings* and *The Gospel According to the Son*. The true heart of the collection,

however, is those pieces that treat World War II and the cold war, taken from both Mailer's fiction and nonfiction. Mailer rigorously excluded his own presence from the book. The preface and acknowledgments make up the only original material apart from "The Shadow of the Crime: A Word from the Author," a one-page reflection on the 1960 stabbing of his second wife, Adele. The collection sold well and was generally praised by reviewers.

In the years immediately following *The Time of Our Time*, Mailer collaborated with Schiller on television scripts dealing with O. J. Simpson and the FBI spy Robert Hanssen. He continued to write, and a compilation of his comments and insights on being a professional writer for more than fifty years, titled *The Spooky Art: A Book about Writing*, was scheduled to be published on his eightieth birthday.

In a career of length and achievement, full of awards and fights, mistakes and masterpieces, Mailer has challenged, angered, and amazed three generations of readers worldwide. Perhaps no life in modern American literature has been at once so brilliant, varied, controversial, public, provocative, and misunderstood. When asked by the *New York Times* to describe himself in one word, he answered "improvisational," providing a key to his protean identity and achievements. But he is improvisational by design rather than by default or happenstance. Metaphorically speaking, he always keeps a bag packed on the chance he will hear the train whistle of new opportunity that may result in new energy, new success, new growth. Consequently, he is predisposed—sometimes erroneously—to sense turning points and sea changes in America's health and identity, and in his own. Constant anticipation of a new plot for American lives is for him the price, and the reward, of the liberty of his consciousness. Norman Mailer can lay fair claim to being the chief narrative chronicler and interpreter of the American Century.

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