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A FOUR-SQUARE MAILER

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In 1961, at a time when Norman Mailer was being written off by almost everyone, the literary critic George Steiner called him one of the most promising writers of our time. He did so in a review of Mailer's Advertisements For Myself (1959), a book that publications like the New York Times Book Review slighted or savaged. In an attempt to get a fix on Mailer, Steiner said that he was "by origin a Jew, and by vocation a Socialist, Hipster and Writer." While Steiner's categories are still suggestive, they were already somewhat dated when he proposed them. Mailer shed his socialism in the late 1950's and became a staunch supporter of John F. Kennedy in the 1960 election. He claimed that his 1960 Esquire article on the Democratic political convention, "Superman Comes to the Supermarket," was one of the final key factors in J.F.K.'s election. He remains close to the Kennedys to this day. His latest piece, on the 1996 conventions, was the lead article in John Kennedy's magazine, George.

Mailer is, of course, a Jew by origin, although he has never embraced Jewish culture as warmly as his contemporaries Bernard Malamud, Saul Bellow or Philip Roth. Although several of his major characters, including the hero of his most recent novel, Harlot's Ghost (1991), are partly or wholly

Jewish, Mailer has been called "a non-Jewish Jew" by Allen Guttman, in his study, The Jewish Writer in America; and Leslie Fiedler has accused him for years of trying to become "the Golden Goy." Mailer's Jewishness is most evident in his concern for family and family lore, and in his range of reference, from corny Jewish grandmother jokes, to a fascination with the mystical Hasidic tradition, to a belief that "I come out of a tradition of people who are born to dominate life with their minds. The Jews are the greatest intellectual machines of any species of man on earth. I think that's the reason... why they are next to universally detested by people who don't understand their fine warm, tender, loving sides." Mailer often describes his Jewishness in terms of another ethnic group he grew up with, the Irish. "The Irish have always had what the Jews didn't have, and the Jews have always had what the Irish didn't have. The Jews have this funny knowledge that if you respect life enough, it's going to respect you back. The Irish have never understood that. On the other hand, the Irish have this great bravura, a style, an elegance."

One reason Mailer is so often left out of studies of American-Jewish writers, surely one of the dominant trends in post-WWII literature, is his fascination with the body (in sport, in sex, in war), and the mind-body continuum, an obsession that Bernard Malamud would find unattractive. Another reason is that Mailer's religion is a variant of Manicheanism. His

God, far from being an all-powerful Jehovah, is a limited, suffering deity locked into a cosmic struggle with a principle of evil equal in strength. The outcome is unknown. Mailer also believes in reincarnation, emotional telepathy, human freedom and progress and the intervention of both God and the Devil in human affairs. His heroic cosmology, perhaps the mirror image of Thomas Pynchon's, is a bulwark against the void, a species of theological brinkmanship which affirms Gnostic perception without falling into cosmic optimism.

It is Mailer's concern with physicality, risk-taking and radical individualism that Steiner was thinking about in calling him a hipster, a term Mailer himself used through the late 60's. His 1957 essay, "The White Negro" (perhaps the most anthologized essay since WWII) is the place where his preoccupation with sex, violence, power, marginality and courage came together. But it is hard to be a hipster and a celebrity at the same time, and while Mailer continues to evince interest in all of these things, his centrality to American culture, mutatis mutandis, forced him to jettison the term hipster. Another reviewer of Advertisements For Myself, Gore Vidal, described Mailer in a way that the term hipster, with its connotations of jazz, drugs and bohemianism, misses to a great extent. Vidal said Mailer is "a Bolingbroke, a born usurper." The "angel-headed hipsters" of Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg are no Bolingbrokes. Mailer was then and remains today

an unfrocked prophet, a provocateur, a Jeremiah whose most controversial remarks are usually his most serious.

Steiner could hardly have been wrong in arguing for a writerly core to Mailer's identity. From the time Mailer was ten and wrote "The Martian Invasion," a story based on Buck Jones and Flash Gordon, he has been scribbling away furiously. He wrote two novels before The Naked and the Dead was published in 1948, and won a national short story contest when he was 19. Except for Joyce Carol Oates, whose productivity will probably equal Balzac's and Trollope's, Mailer is the most prolific American writer since Henry James. By the most generous estimate, his recently published Portrait of Picasso as a Young Man is his 38th book, although several of these are really long essays or collections. He has published ten or eleven novels, nine, ten, or eleven non-fiction narratives, three screenplays, two or three plays, a book of poems, five miscellanies, several long essays and six or seven biographies including his 1995 biography of Lee Harvey Oswald, titled Oswald's Tale. The difficulty of arriving at an exact count resides in the fact that Mailer is a connoisseur of narrative forms, styles and perspectives and is continually breaching the walls between genres. So while The Executioner's Song (1979) is scrupulously factual, he calls it "a true life novel" and it won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. The Armies of the Night (1968), a report on the 1967 March on the Pentagon, and Miami and

the Siege of Chicago, a report on the 1968 political conventions, are both told in the third person, although Mailer is the central character. Mailer subtitled the former "fiction as history, history as a fiction," but Alfred Kazin, who compared Armies with the writings of Melville, Whitman and Thoreau, called it a "diary-sermon-essay-tract." Mailer's reportage is autobiographical; his novels are not (except for one that is). All of his works are meditations on American identity and his own identity—which he finds to be "damvably congruent"—even those forms that I haven't mentioned, including sport chronicles, newspaper and magazine columns (in The Village Voice, Commentary, Esquire, and Vanity Fair), science fiction, the short story, the interview (over 350), literary criticism, the debate and philosophical dialogues (of the sort written by Poe), and every sort of essay. This apples-and-oranges list gives no hint of the way he has combined and reconstituted these forms, nor of the dazzling range of rhetorical approaches he has employed.

In all of these endeavors, Mailer's constant self-admonition has not simply been, as often claimed, to find ways to advertise himself, but also to see himself "as a piece of material, as a piece of yard goods. I'd say, 'where am I going to cut myself?' It's a way of getting a psychoanalysis, I think," as he once said in an interview. Sometimes he reduces his presence to an Alfred Hitchcock walk-on; sometimes he comes on like a one-man Zeitgeist

juggling an array of metaphors; sometimes he is "nothing but a conveyor belt," which is how he described his narrative function in The Executioner's Song. Roughly speaking, these three quantities of presence—slight, tremendously expanded, and radically diminished—mark sequentially his development as a narrative artist: from his cameo as Private Roth in Naked, through Aquarius (in the non-fiction narratives) with his "bustling, manic, intrusive voice," to the disembodied narrator of The Executioner's Song and Oswald's Tale.

I know that it will be said that Mailer, more often than not, exposes more rather than less of himself. Agreed, but only if we look at the middle of his career, from Advertisements through The Fight (1975). It is usually forgotten that at the beginning of his career he felt strongly that his personal and artistic lives should be separate. He told an interviewer in 1948 that it is "much better when people who read your book don't know anything about you, even what you look like. I have refused to let Life photograph me." This attitude is not surprising when his quiet, even sheltered life before the publication of Naked is recalled. He was born on 31 January 1923 in Long Branch, New Jersey, but grew up in a Jewish bastion of Brooklyn, Crown Heights, where his family moved in 1927. His father, Isaac Barnett "Barney" Mailer, was an accountant from South Africa who served as a supply officer in the British army in World War I and later emigrated to the United States.

His mother, Fanny Schneider Mailer, a powerful figure in Mailer's life until her death in 1985 (his father died in 1972), came from a family that ran a hotel in Long Branch.

After graduation from Boys High School in Brooklyn in 1939, where he excelled, Mailer entered Harvard in the fall of that year as the German army stormed into Poland. Enrolled as a student in aeronautical engineering, Mailer received his B.S., with honors, four years later, although most of his electives were in English. He was drafted in March 1944 and served with a combat unit in Leyte and Luzon in the Philippines, and later in Japan. Discharged in May 1946, he returned to Brooklyn and wrote Naked. Its publication on 6 May 1948 launched one of the most celebrated and controversial careers in American literary history.

His career, however, has not been a slow and steady climb to the higher reaches of eminence. Partly because of events in his personal life and partly because of his determination not to repeat himself (he said he didn't want to write The Naked and the Dead Goes to Japan), Mailer's career resembles a Stendhal novel, that is, dramatic gains canceled by ironic reversals and sharp defeats. Whenever he has had a literary or financial success his tendency has been to double the stakes and fling his winnings on the gaming tables of larger achievement. Mailer has a great capacity for work but caution and the patient husbanding of his resources have never

appealed to him. So except for the string of nonfiction narratives he wrote from 1968-1972, he has rarely written successive books in the same genre. A novel will be followed by sports writing or political essays, a play, or biography. The sign on the wall of his writing den reads, "Repetition kills the soul."

All of this variety makes it hard to get a handle on Mailer. Indeed, he may be what Henry James Sr. called Ralph Waldo Emerson: a "man without a handle." Nevertheless, I'd like to propose a four-square Mailer, a conceptual framework rooted in Steiner's four categories of Jew, socialist, hipster and writer (see diagram).

Mailer's Crown Point origins anchor him in the communal-personal realm. In this corner resides Mailer the rationalist, the hyphenated American, the counter-puncher, the believer in social realism, the work ethic, the family and the neighborhood. When Mailer ran for mayor of New York in 1969 he ran on a platform of Neighborhood Power and promised Sweet Sundays when all cars would be banned from the streets; this was evidence of his familial-communal roots. His progress in this area mirrors that of other ethnic groups: from marginality in the first half of the century to leadership in the second. Mailer the Brooklyn schoolboy and stickball player of the kind written about by James T. Farrell has become a mainline figure, if not a pillar

of the establishment. He continues to live in Brooklyn, however. Lately, he has been spending nearly half the year in Provincetown, Massachusetts.

The second corner belongs to Mailer the hipster and centers on his personal-radical traits. This is where the mystical, provocative, bull-fighting, existential, sexual-athlete Mailer lives. His heavy flirtation with the Beat movement comes from this cluster of traits, as does his co-founding and naming of The Village Voice in 1955. The transition here is from Greenwich Village to the upper east side where Rojack, the hero of An American Dream (1965) had his apartment. Like Allen Ginsberg, Mailer went from obscurity to the National Institute of Arts and Letters and the Dick Cavett and David Frost shows, from the Village Voice to the cover of the New York Times Sunday Magazine.

Mailer entered politics as a speechwriter and campaigner for Henry Wallace, the Progressive Party candidate in 1948 who was believed by many to be a dupe of the Communist Party. Mailer endorsed Clinton in 1992 and attacked President Bush in more than one magazine. This year he will vote for Clinton, but only reluctantly, and is interested in some of the ideas of Pat Buchanan, who he profiled for Esquire this past August.

The radical-political contains that portion of Mailer's sensibility that didn't vote in the Fifties, wrote for Dissent, called Eisenhower unflattering names, refused to go into an air raid shelter during a drill in New York City,

took on the Women's Liberation movement, and earned the ire and interest of the FBI for these and other activities. In 1973, Mailer the reformer and muckraker created The Fifth Estate, a government watchdog group, announcing its formation at his 50th birthday party. While Mailer resists and is tempted by establishment celebrity, his progress in the radical-political realm is quite clear. From Marxian anarchist to socialist to candidate for mayor of New York in the 1969 Democratic primary to New Journalist in Harpers and pundit and prognosticator in the New Republic and the New York Times. Mailer the longtime friend of the Kennedys and author of Harlot's Ghost and Oswald's Tale is a far cry from the Trotskyite who wrote Barbary Shore in 1951.

The final corner is the key corner and is in several ways closer to the Romantic core of the diagram than the others. Mailer decided he was going to be a writer in this sophomore year at Harvard and has never wavered in his decision. His total commitment to his art is perhaps equaled only by that of Henry James, a writer he comes more and more to resemble. In this corner Mailer has changed the least and the most. Least because his devotion to a novelistic mission has never been seriously threatened; the novel is still the main event in his life. But after his first three novels he shifted gears and wrote Advertisements for Myself, a miscellany that contained "The White Negro," political essays, short stories, interviews,

poems and dramatic fragments all stitched together by a running commentary that was also a direct address to the reader. This unusual volume, which, as I have noted, received mainly negative reviews, signaled to Mailer that he could and should become a restless experimenter and belletrist as much influenced by James Joyce and Jorge Borges as by John Dos Passos and John Steinbeck. His screenplays and plays, his stints as Hollywood writer and director are extensions of his literary activities in the same way as Henry James's theatrical excursions were. Mailer's experiments, however, are almost always in the service of some urgent utterance. Like Melville, he is not concerned about the divisions between various forms. The form he chooses for a particular project is rehabilitated or refurbished as necessary to accommodate the utterance. Yet over the years Mailer has become more and more interested in questions of craft and point of view for their own sake. This shouldn't be too surprising given the range of forms with which he has worked. Indeed, his total body of work comprises a veritable museum of narrative forms.

In the center of my four-square diagram is what I believe to be the armature of Mailer's identity, the sum of the four corners. Of course, this armature whirls and whirls; Mailer is full of surprises. "People," he says, "think they've found a way of dismissing me, but, like the mad butler--I'll be back serving the meal." Earlier in his career he put it another way. In

Advertisements for Myself he said, "I became an actor, a quick-change artist, as if I can trap the Prince of Truth in the act of switching a style." But I have gone on too long. Let me sum up Mailer's central romantic identity by repeating the penultimate paragraph of the citation accompanying his 1995 honorary degree from Wilkes University, where I now work. "It has been said that if we could combine the literary sensibilities of D.H. Lawrence, Andre Malraux, Herman Melville and Henry James, we would have another you. Kin to these writers you are, but there is only one, singular, unprecedented, irreplaceable Norman Mailer. Romantic quester, artificer, shapeshifter, and storyteller of the American Century, we salute Norman Mailer!

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KINDRED SPIRITS

Blake
Lawrence
Hemingway
Ginsberg
Thoreau
Faust
H. Miller

(media
celebrity)

HIPSTER
personal-radical

Beats
Hasidim
mystic
provocateur
existentialist

KINDRED SPIRITS

Baldwin
The Kennedys
Malraux
Didion
Lessing
A. Hoffman
Wm. Buckley
Vidal

(Democratic
supporter-pundit)

SOCIALIST
radical-political

politician
reformer
Fifth Estate
muckraker
debater
New Journalist

Romantic quester,
gnostic, sage,
usurper, storyteller

outsider
counter-puncher
rationalist
family &
community roots
the neighborhood
work ethic

filmmaker
belletrist
fabulist
obsessed stylist
novelist
litterateur
poet
playwright
magazinish

communal-personal
JEW

(mainline
Jewish figure)

political-artistic
WRITER

(writer-filmmaker-
playwright-magazinish)

KINDRED SPIRITS

I.B. Singer
Bellow
Roth
Farrell
Dos Passos
Steinbeck
James Jones

KINDRED SPIRITS

Whitman
Borges
Marquez
Warhol
Stendhal
Sontag
Henry James