

Summary Treatment of

A BIOGRAPHY OF NORMAN MAILER

by

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August 31, 1982

File

Mailer Biography

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The Mailer biography is of course to be a life story, and as such will undertake to make the most of those special sources of information available only to an authorized researcher. Autobiographical input in several forms will be extensive: in the form of early Mailer letters, journals and other unpublished documents from along the line of the chronicle, and also in the form of systematic consultation with Norman Mailer now, looking back on the chronicle of events as he remembers them. Similarly, unpublished documents written by others-- in the form of letters, journals, memoranda and memoirs, all of which parallel the chronicle of Mailer's life and which, in various ways, have come into the possession of the family--will serve as primary sources. Presently living people who have personal knowledge of the events in the chronicle have been and are being asked by Norman Mailer to supply interviews for use in this biography, and some family and friends have already supplied these interviews. The materials so obtained, combined with the immense archive provided by the public record, will support at its base what will be the most ambitious kind of life story attempt. Thus centrally the book will try to provide a representation of experience, an invoking of things and places and especially people who, as it were, happened to Mailer and who were happened to by him in turn. A range of

devices from fiction will be employed in this attempt to produce fact, and a rendering of Mailer's inner life will necessarily be attempted as the book moves to answer the questions of who he was and is; how he lived and lives; why things worked out the way they did and do.

In addition to being the story of a man's life, however, this biography will aspire to something more. The culture illuminates Mailer's life, but the argument here will be that Mailer's life in significant measure also illuminates the culture, and thus this book will be about Mailer's times, about the post-war period, about what has come to be called the conclusion of the modern. The relationship between Mailer's life and his work will, quite clearly, be a major concern in this study, but the relationship between his life and the work of other artists, and the relationship between all of their work and the world in which they did it will also figure very importantly. Three strands, then, will splice together into the central narrative: the world of Mailer's self, the world of his work, the world of his time. How these individual entities originally came to be, how their history developed, how they interplay with one another will determine the structure of this book.

The world of Mailer's self ought first to be approached historically. But

the actual narrative will avoid "beginning at the beginning", since of course Mailer's childhood, the backgrounds of his South African father and American mother, the network of powerful family influence from both sides, take on dramatic tension only when examined as partial explanations of what came afterward. So the narrative itself should begin with the moment at which Mailer overtly rejected the conscious heritage provided by his family and school and culture. This was in 1955 when, just finished with what he thought was the final version of his third novel, The Deer Park, Mailer determined radically to change his life.

The chapter will provide a graphic version of what Mailer's life was like at that 1955 crossroads. His marriage the year before to Adele Morales, the new circles of friends, Black music, marijuana--a new life calculated in every repudiating respect to be a counterstatement to the old. Mailer provides a somewhat sanitized version of the experience in "The Mind of an Outlaw," published first in Esquire four years later, and the private records document it in a fuller way. Triggered by the wholesale rejection of his novel in the publishing industry, Mailer's anger reaches much farther out than that: he attacks a way he has had of seeing and understanding himself, a selfhood he has accepted from his early experience in the literary world, from the Army and Harvard, but

especially from his community and his home, the family roots which he was determined now to cut away.

This introductory chapter should send us back to those roots, and the intention is to step back toward them chronologically: 1) the 1948-55 years of first literary prominence; 2) the 1939-47 years of Harvard, the Army and Paris; 3) the 1923-39 years of home and the family.

At the center of each of these periods stands a scaffolding of dramatic structure. In 1948-55 the drama, building toward the explosion of an outlaw mentality, took the form of a series of sharp breaks. The vast success of The Naked and the Dead broke its author off from the ranks of all those anonymous, moneyless young men and women he had lived among and identified with since leaving the Army. At nearly the same time Mailer broke with the Old Left, whose politics had explained the world to him since he had been an undergraduate, and especially since his 1944 marriage to Beatrice Silverman, with whom he had a daughter, Susan, in 1949. The marriage broke in 1951, after the couple returned from a year of screenwriting in Hollywood. The 1951 publication of Barbary Shore caused still another kind of break, for it was widely attacked as a failure, and separated Mailer most violently from such mooring as his success had given him. For that matter, the new marriage to Adele Morales was itself a break with the

conventional past, and constituted an all but formal commitment to a life of emotional danger. By contrast, the preceding period of 1939-1947 contained a dramatic series of unions. Mailer's joining with the world of Harvard in 1939 was hardly an act of rebellion: his family wished for it at least as much as he. This union led to his joining the literary community, where he had his first, encouraging success, and after graduation he married Beatrice Silverman. Deeply radical in her politics, this recent graduate of Boston University was a young reality instructor from the Old Left, and when Mailer joined the Army in 1944 and was sent to the South Pacific, he wrote her letters which for the most part were actually drafts of fiction, much of which fed directly into The Naked and the Dead. After the Army, with which he formed a union of an exceptionally binding sort, Mailer was reunited with his family--parents as well as wife--and settled into a disciplined routine in which he and Beatrice together worked through and completed their separate novels about the war. That done, they travelled together to Paris where, technically affiliated through the G.I. Bill with the Sorbonne, they united with the large postwar American literary colony which was attempting to reestablish itself--unsuccessfully, as it turned out--on the Left Bank. The Mailer that emerged from these unions, the earnest, self-effacing, hard-working, quietly cultured leftist, faithful in

marriage and respectful of the past, was the figure he was eventually so violently to repudiate. But the unions that produced this figure were themselves built upon a foundation laid in an earlier period still. The dramatic action of this period, through Mailer's childhood until his departure for Harvard, was made up of counterpoints. Most broadly, his life inside his home was countered by life outside, in the several Brooklyn communities where he lived. Inside was a support and a love, even a luxurious indulgence that might have "spoiled" him were it not for the world, always just on the other side of the modest apartment door. "The hoot of a bully in the street" was an image that could come back to him forty years later, as could this recollection: "Go out in the street and you know if you didn't have friends you get beaten up. 'It was as simple as that.'" Friends, in fact, those allies with whom one ventures forth outside, were to Mailer crucial from the beginning, and formed a counterpoint to the enemies who loomed so large in the street, the subway and the schoolyard. And of course the outside world was by no means exclusively Jewish, unlike the inside world, so there was in the early years the resonant counterpoint between Jewish and Gentile reality, a reality especially important at the public schools through which Mailer skipped ahead by two years. There were also the contrapuntal relations between Mailer and his younger sister Barbara and between him and his

boyhood hero Charles Rembar, but most deeply and harmoniously of all there was the counterpoint between the world of Brooklyn and the world of Harvard College. As this stage of the drama ends, of course, it is upon that note: Mailer departs for New England not so much to conclude his life in Brooklyn as to realize its dream.

This step by step organization, provides the opportunity not only to track centrally into the world of Mailer's self, but also opens up for preliminary mapping the world of Mailer's work and the world of his time. Between 1948 and 1955 he had published three novels and the equivalent of a volume of shorter writings; between 1939 and 1947 he had written some 30 stories, two never-published novels, and had composed The Naked and the Dead. As he wrote he read and studied, creating for himself models of the world as it had been before the war and as it was after, and he of course consciously tried to imagine where he belonged in relation to that post war world. One here can lay the groundwork for those later sections of the book that will focus upon Mailer's vision of the role of the artist in American culture and particularly of the way in which the "audience" in that culture stood in need of what the artist's imagination could provide. In any case, the first major section of the book, running four

multiplegly sub-divided chapters in length, will conclude with the chapter on family and childhood. Enough context should have been supplied by the start of this chapter so that it can be organized in start-to-finish chronology, beginning with the background of Mailer's parents and concluding with his departure from Brooklyn's Boy's High in 1939, at the age of 16, for Harvard. It was a period about which Mailer later wrote quite a lot (though he published very little of this material) and one's aim in presenting this account will be to show how the experiences and influences of this earliest time apparently struck and shaped him. Structurally, of course, the account will point toward that turning point in 1955 where the narrative began. Part Two of the book returns to 1955, but not to the pages of The Deer Park. It should be said now that the narrative will avoid anything like set critical essays on the novels-- or indeed on the non-fiction--as the book progresses. Most of Mailer's books, before the biography ends, will have been given full critical attention, even to the point of filling in readers who don't know the books with necessary factual information. But this will not be a "critical biography" in the sense of having told the story of Mailer's life as a means of helping readers to understand his work. It may be obvious that the design is, with respect to

Mailer's individual works, closer to the opposite of this. The story of the books will be told to help readers better follow and even participate in the life, and the story of both will aim at an evocation of the post-war American period.

Part Two, at any rate, begins with the foundation in 1955 of the Village Voice, the publication that a year later would furnish Mailer with his first public forum. Part Two concludes, nine chapters later, with Mailer's experience in what in a way is to be his final formal public forum: the campaign for the mayoralty of New York in 1969. Between these two points are certain key stages, and it is a clue that they are not necessarily marked by the publications of books: the first stage concludes in September, 1960, with Mailer's sensational stabbing of his second wife, Adele Morales; the second stage concludes with the release in 1967 of two cinema verite movies, Wild 90 and Beyond the Law; and the third ends, indeed, with Mailer's leaving the political arena and retiring for a year to write Of a Fire on the Moon.

The build of these three stages, both within themselves and between themselves, is climactic. Stage one, climaxing with the September, 1960 stabbing of Adele Morales after a night of wild, surrealistic partying, will follow

Mailer as he drives recklessly toward what he hoped would be self realization. Alcohol, seconal, benzedrine and marijuana, in what he recalls as "modestly promiscuous" quantities, fueled him on his way, as did his intimate relationship with a shifting circle of personal friends and enemies. Two daughters--Danielle and Elizabeth--were born in this period, during which he fell back for a time from the thunder of New York to live in rural Connecticut. Returning finally to the city, he was, on the night of the stabbing, about to announce his candidacy for the office of mayor of New York. The stage which followed the crash of Mailer's plans was climactic in the sense that it built toward the peak of a successful comeback. The marriage to a recovered Adele ended as Mailer was permitted a qualified, probationary freedom under the watchful eye of the Manhattan Court of Common Pleas. Then followed the painful climb back, paced by remarkably increased literary production (including the verse volume Deaths for the Ladies in 1962), and an almost unbroken series of public episodes testifying to what had clearly become a fascination with him on the part of the media audience. In 1962 there was a brief marriage to Lady Jeanne Campbell, granddaughter of Lord Beaverbrook, and the birth of Kate, Mailer's fourth daughter. The next year he married Beverly Bentley, an actress, singer

and friend of Hemingway and his family, who would bear him two sons: Michael Burks and Stephen McLeod. By 1967, this biography will argue, Mailer's comeback was complete. It had become virtually impossible to imagine an American literary world without him in it, and he himself began, in the movies that he attempted in 1967 and 1968, as well as in the pages of The Armies of the Night and Miami and the Siege of Chicago, to split off from himself after a fashion. He began, that is, to talk about himself as if he were not so much a person as a creation, a character or a persona that had been put together in order to be sent out onto a stage. Certainly the period that closed out the decade revealed a Mailer who seemed to be almost totally a public figure: His face looked out from the covers of the big news magazines--Look and Newsweek and Life--he regularly appeared on the television talk shows, his movies (starring himself) were the talk of the in-groups and his play, The Deer Park, ran for 127 performances at the theater DeLys in the village. His private life, structured around a marriage of apparently successful coexistence, divided with some sense of balance between working hours, child-raising hours (many of these, with six children regularly at the table), extensive excursions into the journalistic field, and a social life of something like heroic proportions, In the outside world,

meanwhile, this whole period produced the assassination of JFK, the mushrooming of the counter culture, the development of the Vietnam war, and the assassinations of Martin Luther King and RFK: these were some of the milestones in the chronicle of Mailer's time, and the biography will necessarily focus upon them, and upon Mailer's attempt significantly to engage them.

His primary method of engagement was through his writing, and in the pages of the Village Voice in 1956, when for seventeen weeks he wrote, "Quickly: a Column for Slow Readers," one can see the new Mailer coming together. He was on the track of disruption, and he pursued it by manufacturing, for the first time in his career, provocative public versions of his own personality. Attacking his audience, affecting postures of personal arrogance and disputatiousness, he in effect exhorted his readers to form together into an effective counterforce in the culture. The hostility with which some of the audience responded should not be allowed to conceal the fact that a counter culture was indeed in the process of formation, and that Mailer served in many ways as its midwife. The three chapters that will take Mailer from 1955 through "The White Negro" (1957), Advertisements for Myself (1959), the Democratic nomination of JFK (summer, 1960) and the stabbing (fall, 1960) will trace in the worlds of Mailer's

self, his work and his time the rise of a kind of messianic imperative. The crash of that imperative in his life and his work, in 1960, sets the stage for the two things that will dominate the next stage of the biography: Mailer's own comeback, and the visitation of catastrophic assassination upon the country.

The comeback, both on the printed page and in the great snowballing of media representations of him in action between 1961 and 1967, added up to an argument, and the argument was that the imagination was redemptive. It had to be, went the logic of Mailer's public display, for imagination, formal imaginative creativity, had rescued Mailer, and if anyone had ever buried himself beyond recovery, had irredeemably counted himself down and out, it was he. If imagination could rescue Mailer it could rescue anyone, and rescue, after all, or some resource of buried strength to be called upon in the face of catastrophe, came soon to be needed by the individual at large in the culture nearly as much as it had been needed by Mailer in his time of private trouble. This will be the argument of the biography: the course of Mailer's internal drama, where he pursued certain confrontations with himself, paralleled in an almost uncanny fashion the course of public events. His initial rise to a feverish height, where virtually the last thing he wrote was a Nietzschean testimonial of support

for Jack Kennedy, can be said to foreshadow the rise in the post-Eisenhower years of the New Frontier. The reckless, brilliant, sexually daring duration of the Kennedy years was like Mailer's initial ascent, and the conclusion of both in violence and horror did not seem, at least to Mailer and in fact to many others, to be merely coincidental. Note the staggered relationship between the private and public chains of events. Mailer's movement toward an intensely heightened vision of himself, which in turn leads to a shattering fall, precedes, in an almost algebraic way, the analogous movement toward disaster in the public arena. Mailer's efforts to recover from his collapse of course also precede the post-assassination efforts, culture-wide, to recover stability, and of course the form of Mailer's recovery was different. But in the wake of both catastrophes there did form a massive effort at recovery, a summoning up of reserves of energy and imagination which, with a certain desperation, aimed at turning destruction into creation, defeat into victory. In the life and work of Mailer this comeback, dramatic in its apparent success, took the form of massive productivity: a book a year from 1962 to 1968 (when there were two), and a blizzard of periodical pieces that blanketed the medium. In the culture at large the effort at recovery was undertaken by an increasingly broad coalition of counter-cultural

elements--Black power, New Left, Anti-War, Drug and Youth Cultures--which at their zenith sought virtually to apotheosize the country and thus change its "consciousness" forever. Both comebacks peaked, paused, and then fell steeply away into a decade that would engulf and all but obliterate them. Part Two of the biography will conclude with the movement of Mailer into the Seventies.

Part Three begins a stage of the story so different from what has gone before as to require some introduction. For all of its inner pattern of ascent, collapse, and comeback, the whole tale of Mailer's life, his work, and the historical continuum in which both were developed, had about it up to now the directional clarity of a vector. The story moves always along a line that points toward climax, toward conclusion--whether victorious or catastrophic--toward some form of what came popularly to be called apocalypse. Just as the pre-war period pointed toward the climax of the war itself, the postwar period embraced as its great axiom the proposition that our lives were being lived in the face of an impending explosion incalculably greater than anything we had seen in the war. What form the explosion would take, and whether it would be rejuvenative or unqualifiedly destructive were points that gradually came to seem moot, as year after anxious year accumulated and we began to act on the assumption that the termination of our world would always be waiting just ahead, hare

to the hounds of our historical imagination. In the Armies of the Night and Miami and the Seige of Chicago Mailer's whole historical scheme had been based on the assumption that the struggle between a powerful and repressive institutional system and the insurgent underground that formed the American Resistance would go on for decades, and that the outcome might remain perpetually and dramatically in doubt. As it was in his work so it was in his life: however chaotic the atmosphere might appear, Mailer was always basically on track, and the track pointed toward the apocalyptic moment. Indeed, a comprehensive argument could be made that the modern period itself should be defined in terms of its preoccupation with climax, and that the main business of its art was climactically to anticipate the explosive moment both in the internal search for self and in the external movement toward historical denouement.

In these terms we must see the seventies, and Mailer's life and work in their context, as postapocalyptic; as presenting an historical and personal spectacle in which the explosion has already happened. To observe this is to go far in explaining why the seventies were a period of such wholesale intellectual and imaginative confusion, for not only was the country anachronistically attempting to understand the new situation in the old terms, but only most gradually

did it dawn upon us that the great change had come about at all.

The more deeply an imaginer had been committed to the pre-apocalyptic vision, the more difficult was it for his imagination to take in the post-apocalyptic, and Mailer's commitment had been absolute. It dawned on him slowly indeed that he had missed it, that the end of anticipation had arrived, and that its form had been so magnificently masked that it had entered in among us quite unremarked.

One way of putting it might be to say that Mailer's life and the life of his times began to part company. But it would be far more accurate to suggest that our historical ship had seemed to slip into an almost impenetrable fog bank, forcing even such people as Norman Mailer to navigate their lives without reference to its main movements. Mailer separated quietly from Beverley Bentley in 1970 and set up a household with singer Carol Stevens, with whom he had a daughter--Maggie Alexander--in 1971. He had for years maintained a residence in Provincetown but now, as if in search of a new orientation, he bought a home in Stockbridge and began summering, with crowds of his and other children, in Maine. Always unable to live alone, he devised a domestic system in which he kept all of his children with him some of the time, and some of them with him all of the time. The financial obligations connected with what now amounted to five spouses

and seven children were becoming the stuff of legend, and Mailer's public identity became the legend's product. His detractors said he wrote mainly for money, and that in the process he betrayed the artist's calling. His defenders--men like Alfred Kazin and women like Diana Trilling--saw him as securing himself against the sedentary, and argued that in the process he kept his imagination vital and fecund. His first book of the new decade, Of a Fire on the Moon, was ballyhooed as a million dollar superproject, financed by Life magazine, and though the narrative account of the first Appolo flight to the moon was actually nothing like so profitable, the air of big money and colorful adventure was what the public had come to associate with Mailer's life. But the decade, after all, was not to be a time of either prosperity or adventure: rather it would emerge from the fog that initially concealed it as a time of institutional collapse and individual retreat, and Mailer's life was to a significant degree to be mirrored by these facts. The main point, perhaps, is that for a very long time he remained unaware of the parallel between the new, and largely adverse set of forces that began to dominate his own life and those that dominated the culture. He thought the country was, by comparison, stable, and that the emergence of deteriorating change was idiocyncratic to his own situation. Certainly he began

to see that his own situation was changing. Of a Fire on the Moon had everything going for it, and it was indeed a powerfully executed narrative of the first NASA moonshot. But despite its internal force and its external timeliness it somehow failed to engage in the deepest way the imagination of its audience. Everyone acknowledged that of course the book was very good, but some final coalescing element nevertheless seemed missing. Perhaps to understand what it was we had finally to come awake to the fact that the book's assumption (which was everyone else's assumption as well) was what was wrong: the book assumed that the 1970s, both literally and metaphorically, would be the decade in which mankind went to the stars.

Mailer's audience started slipping away. It was strange. He began an essay for Harper's that grew into the book-length The Prisoner of Sex. The choice of writing about the burgeoning new feminist movement seemed perfect, and Mailer--who had been from the outset identified as the great foe of feminism--did indeed compel very great journalistic attention with this project. But despite some tremendous features the book failed to accomplish what even Mailer-haters had simply assumed it would do: it did not stand as the center for a really serious controversy. It caused trouble, to be sure: Willie Morris and

most of the Harper's editorial staff resigned their jobs in an argument over it with the magazine's publisher. But the nature of the feminist movement and its relationship to the historical context into which it emerged were not subjects powerfully explored either by the book or the debates to which the book gave rise. But The Prisoner of Sex was a success compared to St. George and the Godfather, Mailer's two part analysis of the 1972 national conventions that produced President Richard Nixon and George McGovern as that year's presidential candidates. A major part of Mailer's reputation as an analyst of national affairs rested on the often stunning power of his analysis of earlier national conventions: Kennedy's nomination in 1960, Goldwater's in 1964, Miami and the Seige of Chicago in 1968. But his response to the events of 1972 (the last conventions he was to cover) fell extraordinarily flat. The book, originally published in Look, never even appeared in hardback, and its paperback circulation was perfunctory.

The first chapter of section three will trace out these developments, less as an attempt at critical assessment of the books than as an introduction to the analysis of Mailer's life during this period. As chapter two will indicate, by far the most significant focus for that life during the evolution of the decade was the deterioration of Mailer's personal fortunes. As a founding partner of

the Village Voice he had been issued a substantial block of stock in the newspaper, and as it grew from a modest area weekly into the most powerful counter-cultural journal in the country the stock grew proportionately and dramatically in value. In addition, at the peak of his career in the late 60s Mailer had developed not a bank account, his lifestyle prevented that, but a tremendous line of credit in the publishing world: he could negotiate major advances against future work. Mailer drew heavily against all of these resources in his attempt to launch himself as a cinema producer. The 1968 film Maidstone, two years in the cutting, brought about the establishing of Mailer's own production and film company, Supreme Mix: his gambler's risk was that the enterprise would hugely succeed, and in the process consolidate and firmly assure his fortune. When the film and the company failed, in effect wiping Mailer out, his only hope for recovery lay in the possibility of an explosive literary success, and this he was not to achieve during the decade. Under these circumstances his life was being lived in a pressure cooker: the relationship with Carol Stevens gradually deteriorated, debts piled up as books produced only modest sales, the famed brownstone apartment house in Brooklyn Heights had to be sold, leaving him only his private apartment. His children began reaching college age just as the

tultion explosion occurred (leaving him with the impression that the decade was a period of prosperity for the academic world) and, with a perversity consistent with his 1960s worldview, he kept calling very questionable shots. On his fiftieth birthday, at a ghost-haunted Four Seasons restaurant party, Mailer announced to a furiously hostile audience the formation of the Fifth Estate: an organization of scholars, journalists and other volunteers, whose aim would be to uncover and contravene attempts by the federal government to undermine the constitutional guarantees of the individual at large in the culture. Subsequently, Mailer toured the country in an unsuccessful attempt to get this counter-movement under way, and his failure to see that the time for such activity was passed, that it was an almost medically unacceptable transplant into the new body politic, contributed still more to the mood of the post climactic in his public life. He explored the past in a number of shorter pieces he was writing-- sketches of his Harvard days, reminiscences of what it had been like to write Advertisements for Myself and Why Are We in Vietnam?--as if to rekindle the old anticipatory mood, and more and more one could trace his growing interest in the absolute value of style, not simply as an end in itself but as a substitute for an historical certainty that had almost shockingly disappeared. Even the once

potent literary feud, a staple during the apocalyptic years, lost the sharpness it once had had, and Mailer's widely publicized jousts with Gore Vidal seemed directionless; without dramatizable beginning or middle or end. Mailer was in motion, lazering out in many directions to find the once readily available fixed point, but chapter two of Part Three will emphasize how difficult it was for him to manage this new beginning. The chapter will also present the argument that Mailer, though he seemed not clearly to know it, was altogether representative in his unmoored condition. His fellow writers, the country's institutional leaders, and above all the people themselves seemed to be afloat in a historical solution from which they were powerless to emerge.

"Every time I get into the newspapers I injure myself professionally," Mailer remarked during this period, and much of chapter three will confirm, or at least test out this proposition. Mailer was claiming that whenever aspects of his personal life became public, the result undermined his relationship with the reading and book-buying public, and in the 70s he was quite possibly correct. It had not always been so: in the 60s, one could argue, his newspaper notoriety enhanced his professional appeal, even though his private life was immensely more unconventional than it became in the 70s. The truth seems to be that

the public recollection of the earlier Mailer was what kept getting into the newspapers in the later decade, and it scarcely mattered that Mailer's current private life was comparatively unremarkable. His tolerance for alcohol remained good and he liked to drink at a party, but he drank very moderately otherwise and he went to far fewer parties than before. He had been quick, in the earlier days, to fight when he felt challenged, but now he tended to forego such confrontations and boxed mostly with gloves, for exercise. His love life, after the final break with Carol Stevens, became notably monogamous, as he formed a relationship which led (after much legal storminess) to marriage with Barbara Norris, a tall, strikingly beautiful model, actress and painter who worked under the name of Norris Church. From an earlier marriage she brought to the household her small son Matthew, and together she and Mailer produced his eighth child, John Buffalo. Through the earlier two decades Mailer had always surrounded himself with a circle of male friends who served if not as an entourage at least as a tight inner circle. But as the 70s moved forward this phenomenon began noticeably to fade and Mailer, while still entirely clubable and pleased to stay in touch with friends, moved socially in a less structured way than he had before. What is remarkable is that while all of this was true, and

while he was addressing himself to his fiscal burden in very much the way a furniture mover, short of helpers, addresses a grand piano that needs somehow to get to the top of a townhouse, he was represented in the media quite differently. It was as if a totally wrong-headed press agent had set out to confirm that though our times may have changed one thing remained constant: we still had with us the same old Norman Mailer. It was not an identity likely to win him new friends, and to a considerable extent he played the part of the wrong-headed press agent himself: he agreed to box with Jose Torres on a television talk show; he quarreled with Gore Vidal on the Dick Cavett Show, and actually punched Vidal at a Boston cocktail party sometime later; he published a poem in The New Republic which began with the line, "All hail fucking;" and, in what turned out to be his most controversial act of the decade, he published a biography of Marilyn Monroe. Somehow, the idea of an apparently unregenerate Mailer going back in time and addressing the life and death of the most celebrated movie actress of the 1956-1962 period seemed to drive everyone nearly crazy with anger. The need of the 1970's audience to let Marilyn Monroe "rest in peace," undisturbed by the diggings of an iconoclast like Mailer, showed itself in very vigorous ways. The book itself, after all, turned out to be a decently

respectful tribute to a colleague, and its questioning of the coroner's verdict of death by suicide turns out to have been an inspired piece of quesswork. So the corrosively hostile reception of the book, and indeed the hostility at the simple announcement of the book's coming publication, forces one to conclude that it was not really the book that caused the anger. It had to be Mailer, Mailer himself, and the cause of the anger was almost surely to be discovered in the new historical circumstances both author and audience were experiencing. Mailer had exhorted that audience since at least 1956 to face up to the twin realities of self and history. In doing so, in hammering away like a piledriver at the certainty of pre-apocalyptic anticipation, he had absolutely identified himself with this frame of reference, and he was identified with it still. No matter that it was actually absent from the pages of Marilyn, where the once dominant theme of inextricability between interior self and exterior history had been replaced by a far more static analytic structure. The fact remained that Mailer seemed to his audience to be woefully unsynchronized with the reality of his time, and for this he quite clearly was not to be forgiven. The fact that a small army of others had become unsynchronized as well, that in reality the whole culture, caught flatfooted, had been imaginatively immobilized by the change of decades, served to create no common bond. Mailer had said the

most and had said it most forcefully: he was therefore most culpable.

All this tended, as he put it, to injure him professionally. In the professional arena he spent the decade on two parallel lines of endeavor. The first, and the most apparent, consisted of the steady production of a series of volumes, all of which clearly had been written as part of a process of re-assessment and reunderstanding (not to speak of the process of earning a living.) The second line of activity began around 1972 and received formal acknowledgment in 1974 when Mailer signed a million dollar contract with Little, Brown to write a multivolume novel. He has been writing on the first volume, the now famous "Egyptian novel" since that time, with breaks to produce his third-world oriented account of the Muhammed Ali championship fight in Zaire, The Fight, in 1975, and his anthology of the work of Henry Miller, Genius and Lust, in 1977. These last showed genuine, even very exciting power, and it was striking to see how the old count-down vocabulary, now so inappropriate to the American scene, fit beautifully into the context of the third world. But it was plain that his major commitment of imagination was not to be discovered here, and that some important portion of the real fruits of his efforts in the 70s would appear in the fiction.

So the 1970s will be handled in the book as a rite du passage both for Mailer as artist and for the individual at large in the American culture as well. The passage from the pre-apocalyptic vision of the 1960s through to a clearly post-apocalyptic state of consciousness at the start of the 1980s was, in a sense, the business of the period, as in very large part it was the business of Mailer's work. It can hardly be mere coincidence that at decade's end the two tracks of Mailer's imaginative endeavors converged into a fictional work of tremendous power, power altogether comparable in its magnitude to that generated by The Armies of the Night, but as different from that apocalyptic testament as a lonely full moon is different from a bursting sunrise. The new book was The Executioner's Song, and from a biographical point of view the most immediately relevant thing that it did was get Mailer out of debt.

Coping with this debt, organizing his life so as to keep it from growing worse while still keeping up with his vast array of financial obligations, had been the actual story of his life during most of these years. It was a story not without interest, to be sure: his discovery that his system of keeping accounts was not satisfactory to the IRS cost him many thousands of unpayable dollars; the reorganization of his cash flow by Norris Church and a new accountant accomplished real wonders in savings; his total abstinence from alcohol

for an extended period provided him with a hitherto unsuspected new method for much-needed weight control. But there was a distinct absence of glamour in all this, and as chapter three is brought to a close it will be on a note of diminished intensity in terms of the life story. Strategically, this should set the stage for the next and final section of the book, where we will encounter a new vitality--different from the frantic urgency of the early years, but a clear turning around of what some had begun to see as an irreversable personal decline.

Part Four of the book will show us a Mailer we had not seen before producing a body of work we had not anticipated before, and the design will be to infer from these two phenomena the emergence of a cultural or historical period, previously inexplicable to us, which we can only now begin to understand. Right after the publication of The Executioner's Song, in September of 1979, Mailer left for England to perform his feature spot in the cinema version of Ragtime, and while he was there he went to Germany to promote his book and to cooperate in the shooting of a documentary film devoted to the story of his life. The Ragtime episode introduces a kind of retrospective or nostalgic glamour into his life, and the documentary (which turns out to be a good and successful film) provides the opportunity for a retrospective with regard to the whole

life story. The intention here will be to produce a kind of portrait of the artist as survivor of the cataclysm: not the mushroom-cloud explosion he had spent so many years anticipating, but the actual slow sinking into the imaginative swamp which in the 1970s really did engulf almost all of the rest of his artistic generation. The concrete proof of his survival, indeed of his prevailing, will be shown to be The Executioner's Song, and the focus of the discussion of that book will be upon the figure of the outlaw. We after all began with that figure in the first chapter of the biography, and there Mailer claimed the identity for himself. In his 1979 recreation of the figure he of course separates himself off, declining the gambit of simple self identification or even of self characterization in the narrative, and this tells us something about how he has pulled back from the idea of the omnipotence of the individual presence, imaginatively speaking. But more important than this distinction is the change in the concept of what an outlaw is, and how one comes to be created. Originally, this whole book will have argued, Mailer rang a big bell in the cultural imagination when he struck that imagination with the figure of the artist-outlaw. By combining the presentation of this figure with the argument that the artist was really only the writ-large representative of the individual

at large in the culture, he gave his audience the opportunity to share the experience of rebellion. What the rebellion was directed against, in this first incarnation, was the suffocating smother of an authority which could be identified in many ways, but which at bottom was the authority of parental supervision. The first outlaw was getting rid of the threat of being embraced into permanent immobility by a social and institutional establishment which was fundamentally parental. The figure was resonant not only because Mailer delineated it brilliantly, but because historically it seemed to his audience to be true.

But in 1979 an in many ways different audience, in a profoundly different historical situation, was presented by Mailer with a very different kind of outlaw, and this one rang the bell again. Gary Gilmore, so far from exploding against parental smother, was the ultimate orphan, murderously rampant in the face of parental desertion. Mailer presents him not clinically, but through the voices and consciousnesses of all of the non-violent, non-murderous people around him, and the biography will argue that in doing so Mailer entangles the imagination of his audience in its own historically orphaned situation. When Mailer went one step further, and brought forward Gilmore's living, presumably

redeemable counterpart, Jack Henry Abbott, he set the stage for a much wilder and apparently terrifying entanglement. The drama created by the appearance of Abbott's book, of Abbott himself, and then of the killing of Richard Adan by Abbott in July of 1981 will be given full treatment in the first chapter of Part Four. Even the most furious indictments of Mailer's role in this drama reveal, the argument will assert, that Mailer had been terribly on target with this new outlaw conception. Gone were the lofty dismissals of, say, James Atlas in the New York Times Magazine profile published just before the appearance of The Executioner's Song. The attacks on Mailer now were directed at an imaginer too intolerably powerful to be countenanced in this dangerous time. If we measure a man by the curiously respectful fury of the attacks his enemies deliver, we must conclude from the Abbott episode that Mailer has more than returned to the position of major cultural imaginer. The next chapter will address a different Mailer, living a different life, creating a different body of work in the context of a deeply different time, but what remains the same is the magnitude of his presence. Indeed one could argue that the Mailer figure is more deeply with us than ever, having proved with this last long comeback that he is, in the historical sense, evidently indestructable.

There is a danger in the use of such vocabulary as "major cultural imager" in connection with Mailer, however, because it calls to mind visions of an artistic pantheon, an Olympus populated by imaginations so much more powerful than those of normal people as to suggest a race of gods. Such a view of artists and their art is quite common, after all, and in its context Mailer must be seen not as a divine but as an essentially Promethean figure: no god himself he steals their fire, infuriating the devout by the profane uses to which he often puts it. Thus he follows The Executioner's Song, for which even the most mandarin critics were prepared to welcome him into the pantheon, with Of Women and Their Elegance, a narrative as-told-by Marilyn Monroe and a book which in some places is very nearly as recklessly bad as the consensus of furious reviewers has held the whole thing to be. Why does he do such things? The question echoes and re-echoes like some tremendous symphonic refrain not just at this comparatively late point in his life but all through it--certainly since the great personal attempt at emancipation in 1955. Directed not only at certain pieces of writing but at all kinds of things--the marriages, the episodes, the recklessness, all the rest of it--the question might perhaps occupy us for a space as we drive in conclusion toward a consideration of what is, by all presently

reliable accounts, the most powerful imaginative accomplishment to which he has achieved so far. If the Egyptian novel marks Mailer's artistic outer limit (at this writing), what is the specific relationship between that achievement and the life that led up to it?

Let us be quite clear about what we mean. Critics differ about what the things are in Mailer's life that he should not do or should not have done, but rare is the Mailer watcher who will not identify some area of enormous error, some symptom of inner inadequacy but for which the artist might have done himself full justice. Some see it in what they call his lesser work, the things indeed like Of Women and Their Elegance or the Esquire columns of 1962-64 or the periodic attempts at poetry or many, many other pieces said to have been written only for the money. (The profit motive supplies a subsumptive metaphor: in the early 70s a prominent Stalinist critic, speaking before a large audience, denounced Mailer's action in having followed up the best-selling The Naked and the Dead with the commercially hopeless Barbary Shore as a classic example of "selling out.") Others identify Mailer's mistake as megalomania: an inability inside his work to get off the subject of himself, and an even more serious inability to in any case stay inside his work, avoiding that media spotlight

which it seems has always been the nemesis of the true artist. ("Silence, exile and cunning," is the standard medicine prescribed for this condition, which Mailer once jokingly described himself as too gregarious to stomach.) Still others, citing the stabbing, the fascination with combat, with violent actions and with psychopathic personalities, see Mailer simply as a dangerously unstable personality (Time magazine recently proposed that he be indicted as an accessory before the fact in the Jack Abbott murder prosecution.) Less relentless critics, conceding Mailer's basic emotional stability, nevertheless identify him as almost hopelessly immature, salving a sexual insecurity by piling up wives, children, girl friends, outlandish escapades--like running for the office of mayor of New York in a campaign that cost an incredible amount of money and generated more publicity than the plague--and in effect not being a serious person. (In fact McGeorge Bundy, during the most intense American military effort in Vietnam, accused Mailer at a party of not being a serious person. Mailer invited him outside.) It is this kind of criticism, the range of which is only suggested here, that gives such resonance to the question: Why does he do such things?

A way of answering, of course, would be to enter the assorted arenas:

argue about whether Mailer's potboilers are really potboilers; about whether he is really wasting his substance in self-advertisement; whether media exposure is actually bad for the artist's creative energy; debate the question of how destructively he relates to violence; make the case that Bundy is both more violent and more immature than Mailer could ever imagine being. Some such discourse is appropriate and will indeed occur in the course of the narrative overall, but the point here is a different one. Whether his extra-artistic activities, whatever they may be, are sensible or nonsensical Mailer certainly knows that he is engaging in them and has in fact provided us with an important explanation for why he does what he does. He once shaped the answer in response to a question by Steve Marcus in a Paris Review interview. Marcus was asking specifically about why Mailer bothered to write non-fiction (this was in 1962), but Mailer's reply clearly anticipated the broader inquiry. He said that he did the things that he did outside his fiction writing so that he could "keep in shape" as a novelist, but "in a peculiar way." To illustrate, he told a story about the fighter Harry Greb, who had his own highly unconventional training methods:

Harry Greb, for example, was a fighter who used to keep in shape. He was completely a fighter, the way one might wish to be completely a writer. He always did the things which were necessary to him as a fighter. Now some of these things were extremely irrational, that is, extremely irrational from a prize-fight manager's point of view. That is, before he had a fight he would go to a brothel, and he would have two prostitutes, not one, taking the two of them into the same bed. And this apparently left him feeling like a wild animal. Don't ask me why. Perhaps he picked the two meanest whores in the joint and so absorbed into his system all the small, nasty, concentrated evils which had accumulated from carloads of men.

One notes the lines: "He was completely a fighter, the way one might wish to

be completely a writer. He always did the things that were necessary to him..."

In the final analysis, the thesis of this life story of Norman Mailer is that

his life has been lived out of his wish to be completely a writer, and that

he always did, or at least always tried to do, the things that were necessary

to him as a writer. One does not mean that he planned it all, clear and cal-

culating--though a very considerable amount of clear calculation certainly did

go on--but that he came, just about in the middle of the journey, to see that

this was, beneath it all, what he was really doing. Identifying the things

that were necessary to him as a writer--finding his two whores, to use the

blunt terms of the Greb parable--was clearly a hit and miss process, more than

once nearly costing him the whole game, but he proceeded with a kind of a plan.

The plan was to find the things necessary to allow himself to be wholly a writer through the operation of his unconscious--through the use of what he called his navigator. As early as 1958, in trying to explain the radical, destructive lifestyle of the figure of the Hipster, he explained himself as writer still better. "The unconscious, you see, has an enormous teleological sense," he said, "it moves toward a goal, it has a real sense of what is happening to one's being at each given moment--you see--the messages of one's experience are continually saying, 'Things are getting better,' or 'Things are getting worse.' For me. For that one. For my future, for my past."

Continuing to speak of the whole class of people who shape their lives according to these principles, but clearly referring centrally to himself he concludes: "It is with this thing that they move, that they grope forward--this navigator at the seat of their being."

Navigation, of course, is the means by which we get where we want to go, and if we accept the proposition that where Norman Mailer wants to go is that place where he can have become "completely a writer" then we understand, to some useful degree, the course that his navigator has plotted. The Harry Greb parable implies that literary commentators, critics, kibbitzers of various

persuasions, are like prizefighter managers: they think they know what will keep the fighter in shape, what kind of life he should lead and what kind avoid. Clearly, Mailer's life challenges this set of assumptions, and in its risk-taking, consequence-accepting, and in many ways punishing struggle adds up to a kind of practical argument for playing close to the line. Certainly it adds up to the argument that such a life can produce not simply the major effort but perhaps even the extraordinarily major achievement which is Ancient Evenings, the very conception of which argues for the soundness of the navigator principle. In 1972, after all, Mailer's conscious mind didn't have a historical clue. Consciously he still thought in apocalyptic historical terms, in which individual personality stood at the center of impehding historical climax. Yet at the same time he was following his navigator toward a novel which he himself found bewildering: a novel set so far back in time as to be out of history altogether; a narrative in which climax was perceived as inconsequential; a fictional world where separate, individual identity and even individual consciousness was brushed aside as the most transparent kind of illusion. The Egyptian novel may make it or it may fall short, but simply the radical character of its design, the scope of its ambition, and the still more ambitious scope

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and the radical plan of which it constitutes only the first phase, must give the world pause. Such a spectacle must, indeed, lead us relentlessly back to contemplate the life that made its production possible.

For one thing, it is a life that vigorously goes on. Mailer's robust state of health, indeed, is a fact that is more annoying than any other to a certain kind of Mailer critic: All those years of all those vices, and as he turns sixty his greatest physical affliction is that once in a while he gets a mild case of the gout. In his association with others in his personal life--men, women and children--with the reading and watching audience, with his work and with himself the present Mailer is a man of whom, as a recent reviewer has remarked, the firey young Mailer of 1955 would not be ashamed. Which is saying a good deal, considering the angry impatience of that young man, and the vaulting ambition that drove him forward into his life. It is perhaps not too much to say now that Norman Mailer, young and old, will for some considerable time to come occupy a special place within the collective imagination of his culture. Figures that the cultural imagination fix upon, in its need for nourishment and a kind of energizing iconography, can come and go very quickly. At the start there are the mere celebrities, the presences that satisfy certain short

term needs--and Mailer has certainly been a celebrity. A celebrity hero is one that lasts a little longer than usual, that comes to seem more necessary than the short term figure--and Mailer has certainly been a celebrity hero.

A legend, one supposes, is what emerges when a celebrity hero starts to accumulate a real lore: written stories, images with some claim to relative permanence, books even come into being, and if all this lasts long enough a legendary hero is born. Certainly Norman Mailer, feet of clay, warts and all, is a legend now, and a hero of his own legend. There is, of course, a final stage beyond this: it is the stage in which apotheosis takes place, and a legend becomes permanent in the cultural imagination. We call such a thing a myth, and when the thing comes to that it becomes inseparable from us, like one's childhood, or like the culture's past. Mailer is no myth, to be sure. A figure becomes a myth, if ever, only after death: indeed that act of apotheosis is probably a rebuttal to death, a denying of it. But Norman Mailer's life story, like his work, belongs to us as much, now, as it belongs to him, and as the shape of his time becomes clear and comprehensible to the historians who follow us it may well turn out that he will seem in some mythical way to have gone beyond his own legend at last. He may seem finally to have embodied his time.

Book One

chap. I: The Mind of an Outlaw: 1955

chap. II: 1948-1955: Early Success and Reversal

chap. III: 1939-1947: Harvard, The Army & Paris

chap. IV: 1923-1939: Heritage, Family, Home

Book Two

Part One: The Messianic Imperative

chapter I: 1956-1967: The Village Voice + "The White Negro"

chapter II: 1958-9: Advertisements and After

chapter III: The nomination and the stabling: 1959-60

Part Two: The Comeback

chapter I: 1961-1963: Ten thousand words a minute and the Death of JFK

chapter II: 1964-⁶⁵~~66~~: An American Dream, cannibals & x'tians
and the Legend

chapter III: 1966-67: "Hollolypoon" + why
are we in Vietnam?

Part Three: The Third Person

chapter I: 1967-68 Three films & a play: The Idea of Performance

chapter II: ~~1967-68~~ 1967-68: The Pentagon, America and Chicago

chapter III: 1968-69: Maidstone, The Mayanist, the Race and the Manhattan

World, Space, Motion

~~Book A Navigator Without Compass or Chart~~

Book Three

Chapter I: 1970-1972: What Time is this Place? of a
Fire = R. Mann, The Prisoner 1 Sea, St. George & R.
Godfather

Chapter II: ~~1970-1974~~ 1970-1974: Post Climactic Disasters;
Supreme Mix, R. Fifth Estate, Gore Vidal &
Other Disasters

Chapter III: 1973-1978: Digging Out from Under;
Marilyn, Seniors + Lust, The Fight

Book Four

1978-1980

Chapter One: Making It: Norman Mailer Among
R. Postmoderns

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1978-82

Chapter Two: The Mind of an Outlaw: Gilmore,
Abbott & ~~the~~ R. American Audiences

Chapter Three: 1983: R. Egyptian Novel