

NORMAN MAILER AND THE AMERICAN LITERARY AVANT GARDE

By Robert F. Lucid

Let us build upon two propositions. One is that insofar as the first two decades of postwar American literature produced an identifiable avant garde, Norman Mailer was the most outspoken and visible figure in it. The other is that he is not to be counted among that second wave of postwar avant garde literary artists which has emerged since about 1965.

The standard explanation for Mailer's fall from grace is the geriatric one, and we should no doubt remind ourselves that younger, more vigorous generations do forge ahead into new territories, treading down in the process the aging veterans of other and older campaigns. The change in character and direction of the second wave of postwar writers--especially prose writers--is undeniable, and Mailer's failure to change in accord with it is more undeniable still. For all one knows, things actually have moved too fast and too furiously for the man some critics now call "The Old Advertiser." But in the absence of any genuine causal knowledge it may not be inappropriate to hazard an alternative hypothesis, and it is in fact the present argument that Mailer's absence from the ranks of the currently established avant garde is attributable not to the usual biological causes but to the development of a special and quite different kind of change in his own work. It is a change which emerged after the publication of Why Are We in Vietnam? in 1967, and its character may be most clearly perceived if we dwell for a moment on the composition of that original vanguard of which Mailer was so crucially a part.

The initial wave of new postwar writers was identifiable first by continuity. However different they may have been in their individual work, Mailer, Bellow, Ellison, Salinger, Malamud, and finally, Joseph Heller, resembled such of their dramatic and poetic counterparts as Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams,

Theodore Rothke, Richard Wilbur and Robert Lowell in one basic respect: they were trying all but consciously to complete a search begun by the great generation of imaginers which had preceded them. Fitzgerald, Faulkner, Dos Passos, Hemingway, Henry Miller and Nathaniel West, for the prose writers, had moved not only individually but it seemed almost by consensus toward the creation of an aggregate, if not unanimously shared vision. It was the re-creation and completion of that vision which became the business of Mailer and his contemporaries. Indeed, it was as visionaries and not especially as technical innovators that these artists lay claim to avant garde identification at all, and the envisioning which recruited and defined them was at once synthetic and unrelentingly climactic.

The great prewar writers tended to imagine one of ~~the~~ two worlds in their fiction, the Outer or the Inner. The creators of the Outer world, descendants of Theodore Dreiser, perhaps found their most powerful genius in John Dos Passos, but such other naturalists as Sinclair Lewis, James T. Farrell, Richard Wright and John Steinbeck gave shape to worlds of experience in which the moment of impact between milieu and individual was the climactically important event in that individual's life. The cosmology of the Outer world, the design of its carnivores and machines against the welfare of the beleaguered^e individual, became the study of our naturalists, and the internal cosmos of the human being remained, almost by necessity, a comparatively stable given. Whatever was there, was there to be defended from imminent and mortal external attack. The creators of the Inner world, by contrast, developed a reality in which the climactically central moment in the life of the individual was that individual's discovery of self. The voyage toward--or fearfully away from--that discovery moved the characters in these Inner worlds more and more into the dimension of dream, and most students of their work would now ^{agree} ~~think~~ that Faulkner, and with him Hemingway and Fitzgerald, perceived

reality as at last a geographic place located within the inner universe of the individual imagination.

If Henry Miller and Nathaniel West--in their different and, after all, initially unremarked efforts--strove to provide a synthesis between the Inner and Outer worlds imagined by their contemporaries, it is nevertheless true that the postwar heirs of this generation received almost wholly intact a genuinely polarized fictional legacy. Solving the riddle of the relationship between its poles was the first, the synthesizing task which these younger writers undertook, and they accepted it as if the task carried with it an urgent and dramatically climactic time limit. There had been a bomb-like climactic moment ticking away at the center of each of the poles in the first place; a sense that, if the tensions of the outer world promised explosion into revolution, the strains of the interior threatened implosion into madness. But as the two came, in novel after postwar novel, to be forced together toward fusion, a truly apocalyptic, ~~44th~~² a desperate prophetic urgency came to dominate the voices of the artistic fellowship of which Norman Mailer was a part.

No voice rang more urgently than Mailer's own. In and out of his fiction, indeed both on and off the printed page he waged a campaign designed to win the admiration and loyalty of the individual at large in the culture. Mailer's efforts to proselytize, to evangelize, actually to mesmerize that individual--however deplored as egomaniacal by the mandarin wing of the literary community--were obviously redemptive in their intention. He frequently spoke of wars within the literary community, and certainly he engaged in more than his share, but it was clear that for Mailer, as for most of his contemporaries, the big war was for the possession of the American imagination, and it was being fought between America's artists and her massively powerful institutional system. It was a

system grown colossal on a diet ~~designed~~ to make it burst, and in the red light of this imminent explosion America's ~~artists~~ artists were creating in order to prepare their readers for its coming. Over and over we were shown that if both artist and reader were not to be undone by the blow so clearly about to fall, they needed to mine deep into their inner resources for the strength to sally forth and meet the adversary half way.

Mailer alternately coaxed, cajoled and bullied his audience, repeatedly asserting the similarity between the task of the artist and the task of the individual at large, indeed conferring the mantle of artist upon the reader, only to argue then for the frightful vulnerability of both. Writing about himself and his fellow artists in the spring of 1963, but writing as well about those readers who clung to the work of those artists, he said that the activity of exploring deep within the self for vision was accomplished at the cost of "exhaustion of talent in the fires on the way, as if a company of young untried men were charging a hill which was mined and laid across with fire lanes for automatic weapons." Yet, he insisted, it was an absolutely necessary exploration, for if we were unable to discover within ourselves the courage to scale the hill of history and look unblinking at the proximate catastrophe which our culture was preparing for itself, we were not only doomed but rightly doomed. Our fate would find us walled up in a dead fort "where the spirit of twentieth century man, frozen in flop and panic before the montage of his annihilation, has collected, like castrated cattle behind the fence." Mailer's was a performance, an unforgettable pyrotechnic display which, if it annoyed a certain sort of critic, unquestionably was successful in mesmerizing a great portion of his audience. The performance continued and developed through 1967 and Why Are We in Vietnam?, but at that point, just as the second wave of avant garde literary artists had become clearly identifiable, something happened.

It happened, of course, in the context of the synthesis which Mailer individually, and his own generation as it were collectively, had brought about in ~~their~~^{his} work. Some of these early postwar writers, to be sure, had seemed to concentrate on the Outer world to the exclusion of any other, but even in INVISIBLE MAN and CATCH-22, where the heroes fix their gaze stubbornly outward, we have isolated for us a new element in that world's chemistry: the element of insanity. To the pre-war naturalists the external world may have been--indeed it was--murderously cruel, endlessly exploitive, relentlessly bent upon the perpetuation of its institutions. But it wasn't crazy. Quite the contrary, the cold, altogether rational intention of our institutions to control the means of production, exploit the labor of the people, and move imperialistically forward toward global conquest was all too clear-headed and coldly efficient. To perceive it, as Ellison and Heller did perceive it, as raving mad, was to ~~identify~~^{identify} a new enemy, but in the work of these two authors the source of society's madness was not so much examined as assumed, and in any case the comparatively simple plight of their heroes was that they were sane men in a mad world. But in Salinger, in Malamud, and most importantly in the fiction of Bellow and Mailer the search led within, and what was being sought was the source of a river. "Up," as Mailer put it, "the Amazon of the inner eye" was to be discovered the nature of the relationship between individual human madness and the insanity of history. If madness was not only outside, in the world, but inside, in the individual, which was the origin of which?

For Mailer at least the answer was clear: the institutions of society, mysterious engines sadistically designed to maddenⁿ their inhabitants, had not been flown in from the moon. They were human creations, and if they were mad at

their center they were so because we had made them so, out of the madness resident in the pits of our own imagination. In An American Dream and Why Are We in Vietnam? it becomes ^a impossible to make those distinctions which had been fundamental to the worlds of Hemingway, Faulkner, Fitzgerald and the others. The operational centers of society's institutions, the umbilical centers of the natural world, and the dead, icy center of the individual's psychic terrain were not polarizable or even separable. They were the same. At the top of history's hill we looked down upon the apocalyptic force which, unless encountered head-on, would destroy us utterly, and we found that the force was ourselves.

The shock of this final recognition coalesced a vision of a single world, synthesizing and subsuming the inner and the outer. Rightly called apocalyptic, it is the vision created by Mailer's generation, and writers of the next wave have, ~~in a sense~~ necessarily, begun to create a vision of the post-apocalyptic. Chronologically, of course, the relationship between the two waves is not a simple one, and such second wave artists as John Hawkes had brought forth major explorations into the afterworld while most of the first-wave work was only on the drawing boards. But if one could go on to name a significant number of writers who pioneered the second avant garde, the truth remains that the greater part of the work and almost all of the recognition of what ^{is being} ~~is being~~ called Post-Modernism in America, emerged only during the past ten years. The phenomenology of this second wave differs from that of the first in almost every way: continuity has dissolved into disjunction; protean atomization replaces synthesis; the stark, poised anticipation of climax gives way either to the musing of aftermath or to systems of strange, totally unpredictable beginnings. If one could name six others with Mailer in his group and be fairly sure of leaving out only two or three, one

could name twenty now and quite probably be guilty of leaving ^{out} twenty five more. Gone is the sense of striving for a cumulatively unified vision--indeed in many cases gone is the sense of striving for vision at all, and with some of the most remarkable of our recent artists an explosion of technical innovation becomes itself a vision, and one through which nothing else can possibly be seen.

But of all the multitudinous ~~various~~ differences between the first and the second of America's postwar avant gardes, perhaps the most central is the difference in their historical contexts. One way of perceiving the role of the culture's artistic community during the Modernist³ period culminating in the apocalyptic, is as the articulator of counterstatement. The statement which Mailer and his fellow artists countered came, of course, from an institutional system which not only said but passionately believed that through the war we had put adversity behind us, that our society was sane and healthy, and that with us history had at last come under society's rational control. It was a statement uttered with full-throated resonance from an establishment of immense power and, for all the individual at large could necessarily see, immense stability. It was a statement to be believed, and for exactly that reason it can be regarded as having generated the artistic counterstatement. In a way the very power and force of the adversary gave strength to the artists who fought with that adversary for the imaginations of the culture's inhabitants. By contrast, the second wave of America's literary vanguard must find itself facing ^a totally different relationship with its audience. Few would deny that the historical events of the past decade have informed that audience, literate and otherwise, of the truth of the initial Mailerian vision, and clearly the task of our new writers is to engage an audience which knows full well that it inhabits a system built hopelessly upon quicksand.

It is not the business at hand to analyse the strategy or the tactics,

let alone the success of these new writers, but only to mark the divergence of Norman Mailer and his work from the network of tracks which those writers are breaking. Various though these tracks are, they are properly identifiable as avant-garde in that they are at measurably distant remove from the audience which, mayhap, will ultimately follow. However composed, an avant-garde is always in some kind of polar opposition to the institutional system within which its audience necessarily dwells, and thus, it is always by definition at some remove from its audience.

Mailer has rejected the opportunity to join ranks with an avant-garde which--of all the writers of the first wave--he most easily could have joined. He rejected it in order to call off the institutional war and close up the once measurable distance between himself and the cultural audience. Why? If we infer from his work we must conclude that the change in historical situation of both institution and audience led Mailer to reappraise the role of the postwar--call it the postmodern--artist. In a series of cinema-verite movies and non-fictional, topical narratives, Mailer bet his literary capital on the proposition that the reader needed no more mesmerizing, and that the artist could serve him well by reminding him of that fact. Apart from such reminders, what the reader--what the individual at large in the culture needed from the artist was--company.

The reminding was accomplished as simply as a card sharp removing his coat and revealing the apparatus in the sleeves which hid those magically inevitable aces. As both movie director and quiet, self-effaced narrator, the artist took his audience by the arm and stepped back, so that together they could have an analytical look at the public performance of an actor they both called "Norman Mailer." He was a performer, who, when he was a first-person character all those

years, had mesmerized his share of dream-hungry watchers. Now, in the third person, he made us see that we in fact had been dreaming before, that if it had once been appropriate to imagine ourselves surging up a hill to at all costs see the psychic truth, it was neither appropriate nor necessary any longer, and it might actually be dangerous for us to go on playing that game. Marches on the pentagon, mysterious intrigues at political conventions, astronauts blasting for the moon, women whiplashing in sexual mutiny while the ship was going down, old movies--prize fights--time was when these events could have served high apocalyptic purpose. But in Mailer's work now they served instead to show us what actors we been during the days of that first, receding wave. This massive change in Mailer's work did not reject what had gone before, but with ironical distancing made clear that the past was past. It was our job then to come to knowledge. It was our fate now, having come to it, to live with it.

A different complaint, it invited a different relief, and Mailer's new prescription was comradeship. As the new avant-garde offered the postmodern reader the hydroglyphic of unfamiliar charts, navigational instruments so perverse they insisted on our achieving to a whole new set of heights, and a distance between art and audience vast enough, in some cases, to wring from us a perfect sob, Mailer was saying to hell with it. What do you do when the ship upon which you fought for survival and even command, comes apart at the seams? For Mailer the answer has been that you organize a friendly raft. Attend at all those spectacles, go to the fights, remember those movies--make a few movies for that matter. Why not? In any case, keep one another company, because we may be floating like this for a long time to come. Together, the onetime Jerimiah of the avant-garde and the reader who had been so hotly striven for by both artist and omniverous ~~make a pair~~ Neither now seems to matter much to either avant-garde institution, ~~with together was half blinded by the glare of all that envisioning~~ or institution, and together--eyes half blinded by the glare of all that envisioning ~~selections, or more~~

all those years--the pair sits and turns over the reminders of an earlier campaign like pages in an old journal, recollecting the emotion now in an altogether necessary calm.

What Mailer has done, as the historical context of his time shifted on its axis, has been to return to his roots, not commanding an audience from on high but joining with it in what is quite simply the rankless comradeship of shared ignorance. What Mailer and his clarion generation knew is now received truth in the culture at large. What the new avant-garde knows, time will tell. In the meantime, the true relationship of Norman Mailer to both avant-garde and cultural audience is succinctly discovered in the closing line of a speech he made in 1969. "Bless us all," he said, embracing the affectionate plural, "as we explore the night."

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