



February 19, 1994

Mr. Norman Mailer
142 Columbia Heights
Brooklyn, New York 11201

Dear Norman:

I am finished reading "Oswald in Minsk," or "Oswald's Ghost," as you prefer. The sheaf of enclosed pages are xeroxes of those with typos, glitches or what I perceive to be narrative problems of one sort or another. Nothing of consequence. As I said on the telephone a week ago, the only things I recommend for the main corpus are 1) a glossary of names and brief identifications; 2) the removal of the authorial intrusion found on pp. 399-403 (or changing it so as to deflate the expectation it now raises of Mailer-coming-on-gangbusters); and 3) the imposition of some clarity regarding the two Mishas and perhaps Ilya from 283-304. These are tiny things and hardly get in the way of the great narrative merits of the first 763 pages. These are: a view of ordinary Russian life from the 40s to the 60s such as few Americans have ever had, how it was like our life, but different in that it went on beneath the overhang of fear created by the KGB, the MVD and even the hint of being found less than totally patriotic. And this view of the Soviet State of 30 years ago comes simultaneously with and even through revelations of the life of the man who probably committed the most atrocious murder since Booth shot Lincoln. The daily life in Minsk with Marina, a Dreiserian picture of their cheesy, banal, battling, sweet, odd life together, and how each of these waifs found something rich and strange and loving in the other, while all the time the hourglass to November 1963 was running down. The Gogolesque surround of friends, relatives and colleagues eking out a sort of life under the Gulag's overhang buttresses the Oswald's story. The multiple perspectives: KGB surveillance documents, transcripts of conversations in the apartment (complete with radio static), the letters and telegrams from all parties, the excerpts from the Warren Commission Report, Oswald's strange diary--all these tessellate into a very compelling, extremely coherent mosaic. It is made more compelling by the fact that we know, in rough terms, its provenance. But this reality did not exist before, even then. You created it. This is documentary art at its very highest pitch; indeed, it transcends the genre all over the place and could only have been constructed by you, drawing on the arts you have developed over 50 years and more. You have again made narrative do more work, wielding it like a broadsword, giving us a privileged view we never thought to have: of Alik and Marina in love.

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It is my respectful but considered view that all of your narratives going back to The Executioner's Song's (excepting Tough Guys Don't Dance) would have fared better, because they would have been better, if they had been divided into two or three parts. I would be the first to admit that this point of view is least tenable when considering The Executioner's Song, but I think that this "non-fiction novel" succeeds despite its length. It is so good that it gets away with being two books bound together. The Victorians--Hardy, Melville, Thackeray, etc.--cut up their books for market considerations. Now they have been reassembled. I wonder, not altogether idly, if at some future date a couple of your narratives might not be divided for mirror-opposite reasons. Which is neither here nor there. I think that Ancient Evenings should be 2,000 pages in length--easy for me to say--with each of Menenhetet's four lives given the same scope. We have talked about how and why Harlot's Ghost could be three books. I think I have some inkling as to why you did not divide these books, but to explain it would take a full critical biography. Suffice to say that it relates to your ambition and your destiny as an artist and your refusal to fit happily into comfortable-old-loafer categories.

"Oswald's Ghost" ends perfectly at page 763 (about 460 book pages?). Alik sleeps in the moonlight and Marina thinks he may be dead. But he lives and goes to work in the morning, and the next day, and soon he is back in the U.S.A. And then the last grains run out of the hourglass and we have never been the same since. I don't know how you can end it any better, although some kind of coda is necessary. The 763 pages are as organic a story as Macbeth. All in Russia, all in the same time frame with the exception of the opening reach back to the 30s and the war horrors of Valya (inspired opening), and the penultimate material (some of the best in the whole narrative) consisting of the shocks of recognition and non-recognition felt by the couple's Russian friends upon hearing of the assassination.

I remarked inwardly when I came to the end of page 763, "Mailer has done it again; it's the old narrative magic, the understated last sentence, and that preceded by Marina's fragile memory of her young husband, and that ladled out of the mass of the interviews by the old master." The epilogue reads fine, but it is another world, another book, I think. It tramples on the evocations of that lost pre-assassination world. Oswald's miserable childhood, adolescence and U.S.M.C. career don't dovetail with the previous 763 pages, not well. Of course, a tactical narrative jarring like this can work, but I don't think the epilogue material transcends its second-handedness the way the earlier stuff does. A lot of it, from Epstein and the Warren Commission, has been kicked around, I gather, by other writers, and quite a bit. One never gets this sense with the Minsk material. It is lost history and has that odd brightness of a tomb just opened to the light; we know we are in the hands of the narrator who gave us that wonderful narrative pie (a pie made from new and old, borrowed and

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p. 137
St. George
p. 6. ed.

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original), The Executioner's Song. (Sorry for the metaphoric jumble.)

Now I have only read what you have sent me--up through page 127 of the epilogue to the remark about Robert E. Lee--so it may be that what is to come will change my view. You have told me that this epilogue is unfinished and that it will be followed by what happens to Oswald during the year after his return from the U.S.S.R. I can conceive of a book that begins with him walking off the ship, goes on for a short time and then flashes back to his youth before going on the assassination and concluding comment. I have a hard time seeing how all this can be tacked on to the marvelous Minsk material. I would be happy to read all that follows page 127 of the epilogue if you will send it on.

I wish that I could say that it doesn't make any difference how you finally configure the material, but I think it does. If you go for the roundhouse, knockout punch, I fear you may miss the mark, but if you go with the square, clean hit you have already made, you may have a knockout.

I am teaching a course in the contemporary American novel and we'll do The Executioner's Song next week. A few years ago when I did a Mailer seminar you answered a few questions for the class. Would you be willing to answer one brief question for my class? It will be about narrative, no doubt, or perhaps one of the characters. I'll make no promises to the class but send it on for your consideration. Thanks.

And thanks for that letter for Joe. He was very pleased. You will hear from him.

Finally, I'd like to get in to NYC sometime in the next month. I'll call in some dates to see how they fit your schedule. I'd like to meet your agent, Andrew Wiley, if you still think it is a good idea. Love to Norris.

All Best,



Mike

cc: Bob Lucid

Enclosure

P.S. Are you aware of the character "Marina of the moated grange" in Shakespeare's "Measure for Measure"? Another lost love.



WILKES-BARRE • PENNSYLVANIA 18766 • 717/831-5000

June 19, 1994

Mr. Norman Mailer
627 Commercial Street
Provincetown, MA 02657

Dear Norman:

Let me go through some of the teensy problems with the Oswald manuscript before addressing the narrative as a whole. Most of the pencilled comments on the enclosed sheaf of pages deal with typos, and most of these will be corrected by the Random House style editor. But not all of them--some are lacunae in the prose, double-negatives, a dangler, or the substitution of "by" with "be." In one case, Oswald is referred to as an "ex-Marina." There are a few cases where I (humbly) question your metaphor. For example, you refer to the pope's throne with the word immaculate, a term reserved for the Virgin Mary. You can dispose of all I say about such peccadillos in a few minutes.

More important are the pages where I find you to be too defensive: page 4 where you seem to call yourself a minimalist writer of the second rank, and pp. 548-52 where methinks thou dost protesteth too much, way too much. I understand the need for direct authorial address as a tool of sharp pacing, but these pages undercut your narrative poise.

On page 341 the memory of Barbary Shore came like a banshee. Is some off-putting reference to your second novel needed? To anticipate those reviewers who will point out that Mickey Lovett, like his creator, had views on the superpowers that were, in one sense, similar to Oswald's.

On page 360, you end a chapter by noting that there are no answers, only questions, "no facts--only the mode of our approach to them." You said it somewhat differently in The Presidential Papers: "We live out our lives wandering among mysteries," our only guide being "the instinctive logic our inner voice tells us is true to the relations between mysteries." You go on to say that we cannot trust the individual fact because it "is invariably a compression of nuances which alienate the reality." Not the fact, but "the root from which the fact may have evolved" is what should preoccupy us. It is one of your early transcendental statements. Most Emersonian.

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On p. 711 you make the statement that your approach in this work is not evidentiary, but novelistic. I would submit that these are not mutually exclusive. It will be very hard, at this point, for a reader to accept all that he has read as being non-evidentiary. It is much more, of course, but it is indubitably concerned with evidence.

Ruby: I think that your supposition that the Mob is pulling his string is leaned on too heavily. It is as if you are so fair-minded, so balanced, so unwilling to (excuse this) rush to judgment on Oswald that you let fly with Ruby. I also found this section to be too lengthy.

The epilogue is very powerful. I remembered some of the material from other books or articles--the time in New Orleans, the final job at the Book depository, the minute-to-minute details of the murder day--but didn't know that much about de Mohrenschildt or the other Texan emigres, or about Mrs. Paine, who is a fine character. She is not as good as Lee's mother though--who could be? Or Marina. Your last 150 pages are superb. No one has ever done the aftermath so well. Indeed, no one has ever told the whole assassination story so brilliantly, so completely. I see now that the material on the early years and the USMC is very important. The prisoner-General cannot be understood without reference to the ignominies and occasional victories of the young Oswald. The pattern is there.

All this being said, I still feel that the epilogue is (1) too long, (2) not as powerful as the first 763 pages. Oswald at home is not as compelling as Oswald in Minsk. I said in my letter on the first 763 pages something to the effect that Part 1 had the strange brightness of a tomb just opened to the light. But most of what is in the epilogue has been worked over by Time, Hollywood, television and dozens of books. It is a feat to have wrested all that you have from those old grooves of journalism, hype and sentimentality. To your readers 50 years from now, it might be different. Those who did not live through the assassination will not have the kind of undying memories as someone of my age or older. (I was 21, living in Boston and waiting to go to OCS. I was having adventures, good and bad ones. I worked about a half-mile from the Kennedy family home in Brookline. My grandmother took down the Light of the World from her living room wall and replaced it with JFK's portrait right after the assassination.)

You may remember that I questioned the material on Igor, Stepan and Gen. Marov, pp. 128-37, when we spoke the other night. At the time, it seemed out of sequence. I have been thinking about it ever since. It finally came to me earlier today that the temporal line of the entire narrative is, like the Homeric epics, out of

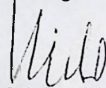
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sequence. You begin in the middle of things, in medias res, and then loop back. I know this is obvious, but bear with me. Because you began the book with the notion that it would consist of the Russian material, and not much else, you made the main corpus the story of Oswald abroad. But then the so-called epilogue grew like Topsy, until it is 20 percent longer than what was intended to be the main narrative. And because Part 2 is not as fresh, not as compelling as Part 1, you cannot issue them as separate volumes, which leaves you with the prospect of publishing a second thousand-pager, another chest crusher.

Isn't the simple, Occam's razor answer to recast the narrative so that the first 130 pages of the epilogue becomes the opening of Part 1, and the spilt between volumes comes when Oswald meets Marina, or sometime thereafter? But before the trip home. Why not begin Oswald's story at the beginning of his life? This would remove 130 pages immediately from Part 2 and add them to Part 1. If you cut out Odio (I can see why this section troubled you) and some of Ruby and trim some of the emigre socializing, you might have two 400-450 page volumes. Please understand that I am operating from the premise that two consecutive 1,000-page books are not desirable, not at all. I know that bridging from Oswald's early years to the Valya material on WWII (which is very powerful) will not be easy, but I think it can be done.

Beginning in medias res is often the best way, but not always. I'll call you in Provincetown in a couple of weeks. Best to you as you wrestle with the Gordian knot of narrative length. Love to Norris.

Best Regards,



J. Michael Lennon
Vice President,
Academic Affairs

cc: Robert F. Lucid