ACCEPTANCE SPEECH FOR NATIONAL BOOK FOUNDATION AWARD

NORMAN MAILER

Norman Mailer received the Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters from the National Book Foundation. The Medal was presented by Nobel Prize Winner Toni Morrison on November 16, 2005.

IN THESE YEARS I AM FEELING the woeful emotions of an old carriage-maker as he watched the disappearance of his trade before the onrush of the automobile. The serious novel may soon be in danger of being adored with the same poignant concern we feel for endangered species, endangered before the devastations of television with its clusters of commercials as well as by way of the critics of the mass media. There is an all but unspoken shame in the literary world today. The passion readers used to feel for venturing into a serious novel has withered. Indeed how many of you, even in this audience, do not obtain more pleasure from a review of a good novel in the *New York Times* than from the ardors involved in reading that good, but serious book?

Meanwhile, we are told that literacy is improving and more novels are being read than ever before. That may be true. It is just that the vast majority of such successful fiction is all-too forgettable. The reader has been given the equivalent of a massage. The purpose of a great novel, however, is not to cater to one's passing needs but to enter one's life, even alter it. So, the great novel will kill no time on airplane trips. Rarely are good novels good page-turners. Ergo, they are in danger of becoming a footnote to our technological, cybernetic, and advertising worlds. Yeats' rude-beast has appropriated the marketplace. The good serious novel, and most certainly the rare great novel, is now

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inimical to the needs of this market-place. So, the most dedicated novels of the future are likely to have the same lack of relation to the ambitions and greed of the world as fine poetry offers today. So, too, will the serious novel be seen as doing little harm, provided it is kept on that high shelf we save for family what-nots. If these gloomy predictions are correct, let us look at least at what we may be losing. Civilization has become a dangerous vehicle, hurtling toward a fate that could be dire. Is it not by now a giant who can no longer see? The giant is blind in its ambitions, blind in its wars. Its great limbs do not coordinate with each other. Theology, as one of those limbs, is helpless before the unanswered questions of the Holocaust even as formal religion insists on an All-Good and All-Powerful God. While fundamentalists are gung-ho in their manic rush to Godly judgment, liberals are in a state of woe before their increasing powerlessness. The great light of the Enlightenment which fortified their sense of entitlement over the last three centuries is now a flickering light. And the military would do well to become familiar with the works of Max Ernst or Salvador Dali since war has become surrealism.

What, then, can a great novel possibly offer such a world? Is it possible that the novelist, if his or her talent is deep, may even unravel enigmas that major disciplines are not ready to approach? Our field, our ground, our illumination does not derive from disciplines which have hardened over the centuries through advancing one chosen field of inquiry at the expense of others. We are bound to no discipline but the development of our own experience, our—if we are fortunate enough to find it—our vision. So a gifted few may even be ready to explore experience that is not available to other professions.

On the other hand, novelists are rarely heroic. Gawky, half-formed, shy, perverse, spoiled, vain in their youth, so, too, can their vision be astigmatic. Nonetheless, the best of them do look to honor the profound demands of their profession by offering insights with which good readers can enrich themselves the meaning of their lives. Whose comprehension of society is not more incisive after reading Proust, who does not know more about language once James Joyce is encountered, whose sense of compassion has not been deepened by living in Tolstoy's novels?

So, here is to future Tolstoys, future Joyces, Dostoevskys, Prousts. In the interim let me salute the award-winners who are yet to be honored on this evening. May they startle us with the breadth and power of their vision. May there be a Theodore Dreiser or a Herman Melville among them. Thank you for the award you are giving me tonight.