

THE WRITER IN OPPOSITION

D O N D E L I L L O

WHEN THE FUTURE WRITER, Norman Mailer, was seven years old, the famous novelist, Sinclair Lewis, spoke about American writing of that era.

Generous praise for young Hemingway, for Thomas Wolfe in *Look Homeward, Angel*. For Dos Passos, Wilder, Faulkner and others. Young writers, he said, “who refuse to be genteel and traditional and dull.”

These writers gave to America, he said, “a literature worthy of her vastness.”

Mailer would become such a writer, of course. In his case the vastness wasn’t “mountains and endless prairies and enormous cities,” in Lewis’ words, but the great spill of the culture itself—the rich, crazed, spacious and dangerous times in which he lived and wrote.

A novelist is supposed to be an individual alone in a room. But Mailer seemed to be everywhere, writing everything—novels, poems, plays, stories, essays, journalism, movies and advertisements for himself.

He was the writer in opposition, the individual who confronts power, and in his case reaches for a handful himself—“running for President,” he said, “in the privacy of my mind.” And of course running for Mayor as well, not so privately, a spectacle in three dimensions, or maybe four or five.

In those converging tides of war, politics, protest, liberation, assassination, conspiracy, sex and death, God and the Devil, Mailer was not just a voice but a force—chronicler, participant, and provocateur.

But finally a novelist. A novelist of history as lived and imagined. And one of the interesting things about his later fiction is the way in which it expanded—grew and deepened in subject and conviction. He wrote novels of sweeping range, books that overwhelm the pale gaze of readers not fully prepared for the breadth and intensity of this work.

And he engineered, at the end, a kind of reverse chronology. From World War II, the first novel, he built an epic career that draws to a close with the birth of Hitler, roughly thirty-five books later.

Here's the first one—*The Naked and the Dead*. I've had this book, hard to believe, for fifty years. A Signet book. Complete and Unabridged. Seventy-five cents. "Over two million copies sold." "Now a major motion picture."

America's vastness, now diminished—America and beyond—here was the challenge that Mailer had no choice but to accept. This was his pulse beat, a great novelist working his themes, figuring out the world, sentence by sentence.

This is what gives a writer something to do after breakfast every morning.