

NORMAN MAILER:
AMBUSH AT THE CENTER

NEIL ABERCROMBIE

The danger is palpable and the discovery of the new meaning
may live in the ambush at the center of a primitive fire.

—*Cannibals and Christians*

Raymond Chandler said it best, I think:

In everything that can be called art there is a quality of redemption. It may be pure tragedy ... and it may be pity and irony, and it may be the raucous laughter of the strong man.

But down these mean streets a man must go who is neither tarnished nor afraid.... He is the hero; he is everything. He must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man. He must be a man of honor.

The story is this man's adventure in search of a hidden truth and it would be no adventure if it did not happen to a man fit for adventure.

If the mediating factor between Gesture and Reality is the Symbol, then the mediating factor between Values and Culture is Art.

Provincetown Arts magazine explored that proposition in 1999 celebrating one hundred years of Provincetown as an art colony. In it the painter Hans Hofmann asked, *What is an artist?* He concluded: "The life's work of

an artist is 'the work of art.' ... It is the life's work of an artist that creates a new dimension of the spirit."

On the role of the artist, Norman Mailer said:

I think it is to be as disturbing, as adventurous, as penetrating, as his energy and coverage make possible.

How poor to go to death with no more than the notes of good intention. It is the actions of men and not their sentiments which make history.

The best sentence I've ever written.

In that same one-hundreth anniversary issue he said,

I'm arguing ... that novelists ... occupy the same position that high priests used to have.... I believe it.

I prefer the notion that God is doing the best that He or She can do.... The best that can be done under the circumstances.

Eager to lend God a hand he gave us a world where

Remarks are large, they are grand, they roll off into the murk of the metaphysical storm. Still, there are quick clues to be sniffed and landmarks in the murk.

He hyped us with grandiose imagery and just when we were ready to call him on his hyperbole he yanked the play away from us with genius self-deprecation hauling us through the metaphysical storm grinning all the way.

But, of course, that wasn't all. Scarcely pausing, now that our critical fists were lowered, he counterpunched with a startling hypothesis or two punching holes through the murk. We were sandbagged on the primrose path of curiosity with a verbal timing that would do credit to Richard Pryor.

LAYDEEZ AND GENTLEMEN:

Step right up and witness a modern marvel
Mailer the Magnificent

CHEER!! As he forms a
GRAND DIALECTIC

WEEP!! As he seemingly reneges with a
DISARMING DISCLAIMER

THRILL!! As he neatly recovers and offers an
INVITATION TO THE DANCE

It was next to impossible to resist ribbing Norman's seeming pretensions, if only as relief from the weightiness. Everything was always so HEAVY! But, his pronouncements had a way of being *so* intriguing.

You found yourself practically racing through the words to see how he was going to bring it off—whether he could bring it off. More times than not, upon completion of the argument you went back to the beginning, carefully searching out the key phrases not so much seeking to refute but to absorb the flow of language—letting the rush of words—so often ideas in cosmic contention—arrive in compelling metaphor seizing your imagination.

To the last he was the Mailer of paradox, of contradiction. To the last ready to enter the camp of the enemy seeking confrontation and conversion.

His work is the culmination of a lifetime of agonizing, which has served to bring him to his ultimate conception that God is an Embattled Vision.

God is in danger of dying ... He exists as a warring element in a divided universe, and we are a part of—perhaps the most important part—of his great expression, His enormous destiny ... Maybe we are in a sense the seed, the seed—carriers, the voyagers, the explorers, the embodiment of that embattled version; maybe we are engaged in a heroic activity....

The odor of time and mortality has summoned Norman to the end of the course he set so bravely—his vision of God and Humankind made manifest in a searing bond with his artist's blood.

There's a whiff to bring us up to the mark of history.

His work now ends as it began seeking to sniff out roots of the past and intimations of the future and in this heady fusion, Norman, I remember you said:

I was an outlaw—a psychic outlaw—and I liked it.

And I thought of Jack London and *The Call of the Wild*:

There is an ecstasy that marks the summit of life, and beyond which life cannot rise... This ecstasy comes to the artist caught up and out of himself ... sounding the deeps of nature ... going back into the womb of time, mastered by the sheer surging of life, the tidal wave of being. The perfect joy of each separate muscle, joint and sinew....

A glow and rampart expressing itself in movement, flying exultantly under the stars.

Norman

The Vision is clear
Your battle has ended
God is well pleased and content with you.

Norman

Beloved outlaw and friend
Fly Away!!!