

TWO NOTES ON MAILER

E . L . D O C T O R O W

1.

Norman Mailer came out of World War II with his dukes up. He would battle social proprieties, received ideas, mass culture, dishonest wars, dangerously dimwitted presidents, but also critics, book reviewers, feminists, and, as if by necessity, fellow writers of his own generation.

His deep attraction to criminality, its theory and practice, along with his politically incorrect views of women and proudly admitted history of self-advertising accounted for most of his battle scars.

One of his shrewder combative ploys was to pass Olympian judgments on his colleagues, to number them as one of the three or four best, or five or ten best, if they qualified for his attention.

It was the critic Lionel Trilling, who coined the term *writer-figure* to describe those authors who behave so as to command the public's notice. It is not a necessary condition of literary achievement. Hemingway was a writer-figure, Faulkner was not. Fitzgerald was a writer-figure, Dreiser, the author of *Sister Carrie*, the greatest first novel ever written by an American, was not.

Given his celebration of masculinity, his maturation as a writer in war, Mailer is said to have modeled himself on Ernest Hemingway—not as a stylist (Hemingway is the ultimate plain speech writer, Mailer is a rhetorician), but as a moralist: To put one's body at risk is philosophically meaningful. Life at its best tests one's substance as a man—do not ask for whom the bell tolls, it tolls so that I can be me.

But Jack London—a writer from an earlier age with a capacity for hard living, for self conscious and often reckless acts of courage—is the writer to whom Mailer should be compared.

London marched with Coxey's Army of the unemployed to Washington. He covered the Russo-Japanese war for the Hearst papers. He went to

ground in the slums of the city of London's East End, and in seven weeks produced *The People of the Abyss*, a classic of investigative reporting. He was a fervent believer in the physical life, even training his wife to put on the gloves and box with him. A man of contradictions, he was both a socialist and a Social-Darwinist, which made him something of a left conservative. He was the first American to write a road novel, the first to deal with boxing as a serious subject for fiction, and the first to use the press to promote himself into celebrity so as to sell his books.

Hemingway, with a narrower range of interests, is the decadent ritualized version of London. Mailer with London's wider range of interests and the ability to get up and dust himself off after this or that heedless misadventure—is more like the true heir. Like London, Mailer rises instinctively to the story, as the spirit commands, and to do it as non-fiction as readily as fiction. So we have *The Armies of the Night*, *Of a Fire on the Moon*, *The Executioner's Song*—actually a hybrid—the national Democratic and Republican convention reports, the iconic studies—Marilyn Monroe, Muhammad Ali, Picasso—a meditation on graffiti ... these examples pulled from a huge output, another characteristic of these prolific authors.

But there is a price to be paid by the writer who becomes a public figure: Social judgments of the writer attach to the work. At times it seems as if the work cannot be clearly understood or assessed, the writer having gotten in the way. Mailer's output is still to be measured in true critical fashion, the dross stripped away, and the gold left to shine. It will happen, and when it does he may be seen as having put together from our political events, our celebrities, our murderers, our technological achievements, our intellectual movements, our foreign adventures, our carcinogenic culture, an enormous and invaluable chronicle of the last half of the American 20th century, something akin, were he a painter, to a vast mural of his times,

2.

Norman touched down in many a publishing house, and he alighted for a while in the 1960s at the Dial Press where I happened to have set down myself as editor in chief. And so I found behind this celebrated warrior, this prince of truculence, a soft-spoken, courteous, and terribly responsible writer, who listened to an editor some years younger and carefully considered his editorial advice.

One day after a lunch, we were walking back to my office and Norman said that he thought time had passed him by. It was an astonishing moment. I was hearing not the public man's intent to make a revolution in the consciousness of his time, but a normally worried writer. I say normally because self-doubt rides with us all our lives and, however painful, is a necessarily productive state of mind. It is generative, it leads to the next thing. We don't move on from complacency, from self-satisfaction. So I had to smile as I assured Norman that time wouldn't dare to pass him by. And of course it was this particular concern attached to a fortuitous event, the 1967 anti-war march in Washington in which men of draft age made a bonfire of their draft cards, that led him to write *The Armies of the Night*... if not his greatest work surely among the best three, or top five, certainly in the top ten.