A 25TH ANNIVERSARY TOAST

ALEXANDER HICKS

ON THE MORNING OF SUNDAY, APRIL 10, 1983, an assistant professor of political science who had snuck off to his office to get a little writing done, found himself too distracted by recollections of a wretchedly uncomprehending review of *Ancient Evenings* in the *New York Times Book Review* to get down to his own work. Instead he wrote up and sent off to *Evenings*' author a critique of the review and an appreciation of the slighted work. A full six months later Mailer returned me sentences of a grace equal to those of *Evenings*' and of a graciousness that would establish itself as a hallmark of the Mailer I would know, mainly by post, for nearly a quarter century. "I was delighted to read what you said—the praise was ambrosial and the critique luminous—and I would doubtless have answered you on the instant but was lost in work, and if I don't answer a good letter at once, it always seems as if months go by—I want to go back to a moment when I can respond appropriately and the moments don't arrive," Mailer responded.

Through last year another thirty letters and notes from Mailer would find their moment to complete an exchange. As exchanges with Mailer place one at but three degrees of separation from the major constellations of the American literary universe—indeed at times emboldened me to write directly to one of Norman's peers—events of some possibly small public interest emerged. For example, on one occasion, after brashly notifying Gore Vidal of a best-seller listing in the *Chicago Tribune* that attributed *Lincoln* as well as *Tough Guys Don't Dance* to Norman Mailer, I would receive back word from Vidal stating that Lincoln Kirstein had been a tough guy who had danced.

On another occasion, after I had expressed surprise to Mailer that John Updike, reviewing fiction frequently for *The New Yorker* at that time, had not reviewed *Ancient Evenings*, Mailer would send me the following distillation

THE MAILER REVIEW, VOL. 2, NO. 1, FALL 2008. Copyright © 2008. The Norman Mailer Society. Published by The Norman Mailer Society.

of his experience with *Evenings's* reception: "[N]one of the reviews of *Ancient Evenings* have lifted my old writer's heart very much. It seems a singularly unapproachable book for the critics." (A few weeks later Updike would respond to a question from me about the missed Updike by suggesting that he had not reviewed *Evenings* because [he was] daunted by his perception of "what a mighty job being fair to it and Mailer would be" and by noting that he had found Harold Bloom's recent review for the *NYRB* "admiring and intelligent.")

The great occasion to come my way out of exchanging letters with Norman would follow word from me that I'd soon be spending a weekend in Manhattan, would follow in the form of a phone call from Mailer amanuensis Judith McNally proposing that I meet Norris and Norman at the Algonquin for drinks the Saturday evening of my Manhattan visit. What a pleasure and honor not simply to meet Norman face-to-face for the first time but to meet Norris. Delightful, too, for this amateur's critical pride to learn that Norris's taste in masterpieces and my own converged on *Ancient Evenings*. Having come to see this work as the pinnacle of Mailer's literary invention—a pinnacle of historical writing to rival Mann on Joseph and his brothers, Proust on the evocation of childhood times, Goethe on psycho-spiritual phantasmagoria, and Tolstoy, James Jones, and an earlier Mailer on the depiction of battle—I felt agreeably trumped to hear that *Evenings* was Norris Mailer's favorite of all novels. And charmed as well as trumped—charmed by both luminaries.

Norman and I would go back and forth over more than *Evenings*—the strong pulp inventions and cadences of *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, the Chaucerian variety and vigor, as well as truncation, of *Harlot's Ghost*, the epically extended acuity of *Oswald's Tale*.

However, this year is the twenty-fifth anniversary of *Ancient Evenings*. Moreover, *Ancient Evenings* can stand in amply for the genius of Mailer. In particular, it stands in as the poetics—the DNA—to much of Mailer's work, even at its most ostensibly realistic. (Osiris, dispersed in fourteen pieces by Set, is a cogent icon for the fragmented O'Shaugnessey of much of *Deer Park* and of the fragmented Mailer of the early pages of *The Armies of the Night;* young Meni, mind visitor and traveler extraordinary, realizes all of Rojack and Gilmore's intimations of telepathic powers; Menenhetet's ascendances from Pharaonic abuse to heroic, magical and amorous potency, recapitulates principle elements of increasingly long arcs of Hearn, Croft,

O'Shaugnessey, Rojack, and Gilmore *agonistes*). Further, a tribute to *Evenings*, with its high place in Norris's heart and mind, and several splendid Queens, stands in well for a tribute to Norris Mailer as well.

Accordingly, I wrap up with a simple toast—To *Ancient Evenings*, a mere quarter century young this year for all its lives and centuries to come!