

NORMAN MAILER: A MEMORIAL GESTURE

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I FIRST BECAME INTERESTED IN MAILER during the academic year of 1956–57, when—as a British student of American Studies—I was spending a year at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, teaching Freshman English, taking a graduate course or two, and finding myself persistently distracted by the combination of an emotionally charged presidential election with such troubling world events as the Suez crisis and the Hungarian uprising. In that fall of 1956 I enrolled in a course in contemporary American fiction that was being offered by Malcolm Cowley, the distinguished critic, poet, and essayist of distinctly unfashionable (i.e., moderately left-leaning) political views, who was teaching at the university as a single-semester visitor. The friendship I formed with Cowley during and after the course was of great importance to me, and among the many things for which I owe him particular thanks was his assigning early in his course an essay on Mailer’s *The Deer Park*, then only recently published and thus requiring to be addressed without the benefit or distraction of critical books or articles. It was a revelatory experience that took me in directions quite different from the elegant pastiches I had written as an undergraduate at Cambridge.

I went on to read the few other books that Mailer had then written—notably *The Naked and the Dead*—and kept them actively in mind when, back in England, I began working towards the doctoral thesis of which a revised version was, in 1964, published on both sides of the Atlantic as *American Social Fiction*. I cannot pretend to be especially proud of the segments of that book devoted to *The Deer Park* (under the heading of “Hollywood novels”) or *The Naked and the Dead* (under the heading of “Military novels”), but they do at least rank among the earliest academic references to

Mailer's work. My subsequent career brought me to Canada even as my studies took me away from Mailer, Dreiser, Edith Wharton, Dos Passos, and other American novelists of society, initially in the direction of William Faulkner and then, altogether away from the United States, in the direction of Thomas Hardy. But I continued to register the presence and importance of Mailer, consistently purchasing the new volumes as they appeared, and reading as many as I could find time for, *The Armies of the Night* being particularly admired and re-read.

Then, about ten years ago, I became friendly with J. Michael Lennon, known to us all as Mailer's friend, bibliographer, and collaborator, and was able to draw upon my own experience as an editor of Thomas Hardy's letters when discussing with Michael the work he was doing in preparation for an eventual edition of Mailer's letters. Michael told Mailer of these and other discussions and subsequently encouraged him to read *Testamentary Acts*, my book about the posthumous consequences of the career- and life-endings passively experienced or actively engineered by a number of major writers. Mailer, I'm happy to say, thought well of *Testamentary Acts*, and although he and I never met (even after I had become an early member of the Norman Mailer Society) he became sufficiently aware of me as a shadowy but friendly and sometimes helpful figure to write me an excellent letter and send (generally via Michael Lennon) inscribed copies of most of his later books. I am, I confess, keeping the letter for the time being, along with two or three of the inscribed volumes, but in the meantime I have given myself the pleasure of donating to the Fisher Rare Book Library of the University of Toronto a virtually comprehensive collection of Mailer's book-length publications, sometimes signed or inscribed by Mailer himself, and often including the first English as well as the first American editions. It seemed an appropriate memorial gesture, reflective of my admiration for Mailer's work and my sense of its enduring importance, and it is of course my hope and indeed my expectation that the collection will, over the years, receive frequent and discriminating use.