

NORMAN MAILER: A REMEMBRANCE

T O M P I A Z Z A

NORMAN MAILER WAS THE WRITER who made me want to be a writer. And when he died, I lost a friend of nearly twenty-seven years. The transformation of a hero into a friend with strengths and failings, and shared memories, is not always easy or natural, but Norman insisted upon it. Famously aware of his fame, of the reputation that always preceded him and created a perimeter around him, he always did what he could in an individual encounter to dismantle the unreality that such preconditioning tends to generate.

Norman was, for me as for so many others, an essential presence, a psychic fact. He was a mind and a spirit in action in the world, a protagonist, and he made sentences and entire books that are themselves protagonists of a sort. *The Naked and the Dead*, *The Armies of the Night*, *The Executioner's Song*, *Miami and The Siege of Chicago*, *Advertisements for Myself*, *An American Dream*, not to mention everything else he wrote.... These books act upon you, whether you like them or not. There was nothing passive about the act of writing for their author, and there is nothing passive about the result. Several decades ago, I spent some weeks in a college aesthetics course examining the question of whether a work of art can be said to be a physical object. Whatever the answer turned out to be in the abstract, Mailer's works are not objects—they are subjects. Mailer's work helped me see that part of the activity of an artist is to transform objects into subjects.

I encountered that work for the first time in 1977. I was just out of college, living in New York and playing jazz piano in bars and nightclubs here and there. I had taken a job as a clerk at the Barnes and Noble Sale Annex, now defunct, on Eighteenth Street and Fifth Avenue in New York City. After

a lackluster career as an English major, reading Sir Philip Sidney and Edmund Spenser, I had begun to think that literature wasn't really my thing. Jazz music was alive in every line—it depended for its rationale on being alive in every line, the sense of bets being entered, and antes increased, as the soloist's thought was spun out. Literature, I thought, couldn't compete. Then one day, bored shelving books, I picked up a hardback copy of *An American Dream*. I recognized the author's name—I had seen him on TV once or twice. The cover didn't look like your standard literary book—it had loud colors and a picture of a beautiful woman imbedded in the design. I turned it over and there was his face—the shag rug of tangled curls, and the look in the eye, as if he had been caught in the middle of something, a weird, violent, charming, slightly crazed light in those eyes.

Reading the book was like stepping on a land mine. Mailer brought you where he was—he didn't just describe the sights and sounds and smells but supercharged those sense realities with the narrator's extreme emotional states. You encountered lust and murderous rage, shrewdness and naiveté, charm and clumsiness, close observation and paranoid projection, all mixed in together, stirred with a willingness, a manic desire, a *need*, to take risks. Wild foreshortenings of language and combinations of unlikely imagery set up constantly shifting holograms of mood. I didn't know it was possible to get that kind of intensity in narrative prose. I started reading everything by him, and about him, that I could get my hands on.

Before long, I began taking walks in the warm months, across the Brooklyn Bridge to Brooklyn Heights, in hopes of running into him. It's a slightly embarrassing admission, but I was cheered later to find that one of Norman's favorite musicians, the saxophonist Sonny Rollins, had done something similar as a young man in the 1940s in Harlem, hoping to catch a glimpse of his hero, the saxophone patriarch Coleman Hawkins. And anyway, just the walk across the bridge was inspiring—the harplike cables rising on both sides of you, the wooden boardwalk, the echoes of Hart Crane and Whitman, old iron and steel New York, the harbor muscle and movement and glinting sun off the water below.

In the late spring of 1980, I went for one of my walks on a bright Saturday. After poking around Montague Street, grabbing a slice of pizza and walking down Hicks Street and back up Henry Street, looking out at the harbor and the downtown skyline across the water, I started to head back to the

bridge, along Columbia Heights from Montague. That was when I saw him from a block away, crossing Columbia Heights toward the row of brown-stones that backed up against the view of the harbor. He was unmistakable—silver-grey hair, denim shirt, looking at the ground as he walked with a rolling gait, plainly deep in thought.

It was a shock. I'm not sure that I ever truly expected to encounter him, but there he was. I had no idea what I would say, but I assumed I'd think of something. I quickened my steps to catch up with him and, as I drew nearer to him, and then abreast of him, I could see that he was indeed looking at the ground, following some idea along some deep corridor of thought. I felt instantly unqualified to interrupt him. Yet what was I there for, if not to interrupt him? My heart was pounding. As I started to walk past him, I looked at him, with the moment sliding through my fingers, and at that moment, from the depths of wherever he was, he looked up at me, like someone briefly assessing a possibly developing situation through a pair of binoculars, and gave me a short, preemptive nod of acknowledgment. Stunned, I could do no more than nod back and say, "Hi." That provoked a secondary, smaller, nod, and he descended back into his thoughts, and I continued walking.

Do I need to say that I kicked myself all the way home to the Upper West Side? I consoled myself with the notion that I truly did not want to interrupt him if he was working something out in his head, and this may even have been partly true. In any case, I wrote him a letter that afternoon, the kind of letter you can only write when you are in your early twenties, telling him about what had just happened, and that I hadn't wanted to interrupt him but had been kicking myself anyway, that I had read his books and was trying to write fiction, that I had written about jazz but I wanted to write novels, that I had taken a job as a messenger at *The New Yorker*, and I was writing a long nonfiction account of a jazz festival I'd attended in Senegal—the letter must have been three pages long—and I closed by telling him that I wanted him to know how much his work meant to me and that I was going to be a writer and I wanted him to know about me. I mailed the letter to him at his address on Columbia Heights, which I had somehow found out.

A month later I received an answer—brief, but not too brief, and full of characteristic flourishes. He told me he had "of course" enjoyed reading my letter, and that he appreciated the fact that I hadn't interrupted him, that he

probably was in fact in the middle of a thought. He wrote that answering mail was a periodic “comedy,” that it all went into a bag to be answered at regular intervals. He said that he would look forward to reading my article and would write to me about it then. No piece of mail, before or since, has ever made me as happy.

Over that summer I finished writing the article about the jazz festival in Senegal, and William Shawn himself bought it for *The New Yorker* in October of that year, paying what I thought was an astonishing sum, and then never published it, and that is a story for some other occasion. In any case, I sent the manuscript to Norman, reminding him of our exchange of letters earlier in the year. I never heard back from him.

Winter came, and went, and in the spring of 1981, as luck would have it, I met Peter Alson, Norman’s nephew, at a party. I had started work on a novel and was planning to use my *New Yorker* money to move to New Orleans and write the book. Peter was writing his first novel, too, and we became instant best friends. After we had known each other for a few weeks, he invited me to his mother, Barbara Wasserman’s, house on Eleventh Street for a family gathering. Norman was there, and when Peter introduced us, Norman’s face opened up and his eyes focused in, simultaneously.

“Oh ... Tom, hey ...” he said, slapping himself lightly on his stomach and then chopping the air with his hand, “Listen, I haven’t had a chance to read your piece yet.” Crinkles formed around the sides of his eyes as he looked up at me with a seriocomic, faintly appraising look. “But my assistant has. And she liked it. And her pride would be that she doesn’t suffer fools gladly.” On that last sentence he kind of arched his eyebrows, holding my gaze and nodding slightly and deliberately toward me to let me know this was no small compliment. Later, when I met Judith McNally, I knew it was not. But at the time I wondered how in the world he had remembered that envelope that he got in the mail nearly six months earlier. Yet another smoke signal from yet another Young Writer In The Wilderness, among all the similar letters and manuscripts he received.... But there it was. Norman took it all seriously, and the list of writers who can report similar experiences is long.

That afternoon he invited me to join him and Peter and José Torres and the rest of the gang at the Gramercy Gym the next Saturday morning for their boxing club, which I did, and which I kept doing for three years. And if I were to start telling the stories, detailing the kindnesses, the laughs, the

visits to Maine and P-town, the insights and, later, the help I received from Norman, there would be room for nothing else in this issue of *The Mailer Review*. I will say that because of that meeting I did not move to New Orleans as planned. I stayed in NYC for another ten years, until I left town in 1991 for the Iowa Writers' Workshop (with a recommendation from Norman). In 1994 I finally did move to New Orleans.

Norman was a profoundly generous friend. He read my early stories and articles and discussed them with me seriously. He wrote letters of recommendation, to Iowa and to arts colonies. Eventually he wrote a beautiful and heartfelt cover quote for my first book of fiction. He counseled me about literary agents and editors and reviewers, and once—most wisely and comfortingly—about a lost love that was tearing my life up two decades ago. He took me out for a drink in the late afternoon, and he listened to me talk about it, and he didn't give me direction or advice, merely let me know, by an anecdote here, a metaphor there, that he had been through it too, and had (obviously) survived, and that one's work was, ultimately, what got one through.

After I moved out of New York I saw him less frequently, but we would usually manage to have lunch at the Chinese restaurant by the St. George Hotel in Brooklyn Heights on my visits back from Iowa or New Orleans. After my novel *My Cold War* was published, in 2003, Norman invited me to visit in Provincetown. There were some things he wanted to say to me about being a novelist. Of course I went, and in January 2004 we spent three days talking, talking, talking, once well past midnight—about novels, about the war in Iraq, about the nature of God and whether He existed, about Tolstoy and Chekhov, but mainly about what it means to be a novelist and what one should strive for. It was a gift beyond measure, really. I visited Norman and Norris again in P-town several times, and it always counted. Even when he must have known there wasn't a lot of road left, Norman was brilliant, funny, cranky, unself-pitying, generous, and utterly committed to the craft at which he had spent his life.

When Norman was in the hospital for the last time, I was at the MacDowell Colony, in New Hampshire, trying feverishly to finish the first draft of my novel *City of Refuge*. My editor at HarperCollins was audibly drumming his fingers on his desk, and I was riding the novel through the chutes and rapids of its final playing-out. I wrestled with the question of whether to drive down from MacDowell and visit him in the hospital. If I had been able to ask

him directly, my guess was that he would have told me to stay where I was and finish my fucking book. I was hearing guarded optimism from some family members, even the possibility that he might be discharged, and I let myself believe it. I sketched out a day-to-day schedule of work for two weeks, ending on November 10, the date on which I would write the book's final scene. Then I would go wherever Norman was and visit him.

I worked like a demon in those weeks, and I thought about Norman every day, about the terrible deadline pressure under which he so often wrote, about many of the things I had learned from him about work, about what was necessary when you were up against the wall and needed to call on your reserves. I worked harder than I had ever worked in my life. The two weeks went by and I was all but done. The morning of November 10 arrived, and I went to my studio to write the final scene of the book. By this time I knew essentially how this scene was going to go, and I was ready. I got to the desk around 7 a.m., and for some reason I checked my e-mail before starting work, which is something I never do, and there, in my in box, was the short e-mail from Norris, telling me that Norman had died and she thought I'd want to hear it from her before I heard it on the news.

I left the studio and walked around the beautiful grounds of MacDowell, trying to digest this indigestible fact, and realizing that it would be a long time, if ever, before I could. I thought about whether I should have gone to see him instead of pushing to finish the novel. And maybe I should have. But what would I have said? "Goodbye?" That would have been intolerable. "Thank you?" Norman had once told me, "Friends don't say thanks." I didn't agree with him then, and I think I told him so, but anyway I'd already said "thank you" in a lot of ways, and he knew what I thought. I knew he was surrounded toward the end by a lot of love from family and friends, and he hated overly dramatic or demonstrative scenes. I walked around MacDowell for an hour or so, then went back to my studio and finished my novel.

I did go to see him, several days later, in Provincetown. Along with Larry Schiller, Dick and Doris Kearns Goodwin, Peter Alson, Mike Lennon, Doug Brinkley, and several of Norman's children, I was honored to speak at the small graveside ceremony; I read a brief passage from *The Armies of the Night*, the extraordinary description of his night journey on a bus through the Virginia countryside en route to his brief jail stay after the 1967 March on the Pentagon. The passage is so full of his sense of mystery, his love for the

poetry of the landscape of the United States, his tenderness. He was off, now, on a journey about which he had been very curious, where awaited, perhaps, some answers to the questions he lived with, about God and karma and the afterlife. Or maybe, knowing Norman, not answers but more extraordinary questions.

I miss him, badly, and I miss him every day.