

THE PASSING OF AQUARIUS

M A R C S . T R I P L E T T

LATE IN THE SUMMER OF 1972, George McGovern had been nominated to be president, but he had already stumbled badly as a candidate as the result of his ill-fated choice of Thomas Eagleton as his running mate. The Republicans had not yet renominated Richard Nixon. I was in Washington on a brief visit with relatives and, as it happened, Norman Mailer was there too, conducting interviews with McGovern, Henry Kissinger, and Senator Thomas Eagleton that ultimately would be included in his book *St. George and the Godfather*, about the political conventions of 1972.

Luck had it that I encountered Mailer in the hallway of the U.S. Senate building after we both watched a debate over the Vietnam War between Senators Barry Goldwater and Alan Cranston. He warmly greeted me and offered a ride in his cab. En route to my destination we discussed the speculation over McGovern's successor on the Democratic ticket. Norman Mailer was interested in my opinion on the subject—Norman Mailer, author of *The Armies of the Night* and *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*, books I eagerly devoured and which provided me with perspectives on politics that I value to this day—that Norman Mailer sought *my* opinion. I've told that story many times in the years since.

Norman Mailer as Aquarius, the narrator whose often metaphorical insights into American politicians and institutions informed my thinking and view of politics, has passed from the scene, and this Aquarius despairs that he cannot pick up *Esquire* or *Vanity Fair* or *Harper's* to learn of Mailer's view of our current political scene as this country heads toward a historic election. Would Norman see Barack Obama as a new Superman coming to the Supermarket? What would he make of Hillary Clinton or John McCain? What would he say of the Democrats in Congress who would not protect their fellow citizens against the invasion of their privacy that tech-

nology presses in the form of unbridled domestic electronic surveillance? I think we know the answer to the last question, at least.

Norman Mailer's novelistic eye examined our politics in a way no other commentator did or could. At a time when most observers neatly fit into the left or the right, Mailer made us look at our candidates and institutions both as reflections of ourselves and as evidence of our worst impulses gone wild. He accurately observed that the natural state of human government, given its tendencies when left to its own devices and worst visceral instincts, is fascism—that democracy is a state of grace, attained only after the hard struggle to establish the institutions of democracy. Would that our leaders in the early twenty-first century had learned this lesson. If they had, perhaps the Iraq war would not have happened. What other commentator of the left of the ideological spectrum was willing to criticize liberalism for not having a new idea in twenty years, or for fostering the strait-jacketed dogma of political correctness? Who else could cast the Nixon-Humphrey race of 1968 as between a “computer” and a “hysterical computer?” Who else will be willing to tell us, as Mailer repeatedly did in his last decade, that our surfeit of patriotism is choking us? Seeing our politicians of every stripe for who they are is but another way of seeing ourselves and our culture for what they are.

At the Carnegie Hall Memorial for Norman Mailer, his son John Buffalo Mailer said that now “It's on us.” What a challenge! I can think of none greater, or more important.