

FROM MONROE TO PICASSO: NORMAN MAILER AND THE LIFE-STUDY

MICHAEL K. GLENDAY

1. "What I have to say about Picasso may not be so dull."¹

Readers of Norman Mailer's *Portrait of Picasso as a Young Man: An Interpretive Biography* (1995) are in the Preface directed to one of the book's main sources, Mailer's 1966 essay collection *Cannibals and Christians*. There, in the quirky, sometimes amusing "imaginary dialogues" that give form to such pieces as "The Political Economy of Time" and "The Metaphysics of the Belly" (from which latter dialogue the opening quotation above is taken), those readers will find an early indication of what was to become a lifelong concern with Picasso. "The Metaphysics of the Belly" was published in *The Presidential Papers* (1963), where, in Appendix B, Mailer tells us that it "is part of a longer manuscript on Picasso which was worked on in June and early July 1962, in Provincetown. It was never submitted for publication" (308). Contracted by Macmillan in 1962 to write a biography of the artist, Mailer in his Preface to *Picasso* yet offers little in the way of an explicit rationale for his eventual failure to complete the project at that time. For though he acknowledges that both of the above dialogues were "done consecutively as two chapters of a projected book on Picasso" (*Cannibals* 261), that book was not to be completed for a further three decades. One main reason may well be that exposure to at least fifteen thousand of Picasso's artworks in the "eight happy weeks" (*Picasso* xi) he spent in the library of the Museum of Modern Art was an experience so radical in its effects upon his own imagination that Mailer found it difficult to achieve any biographical "distance" from his subject. So

much, at least, is suggested by the results of that exposure: “my mind was left one hair unhinged” (*Picasso* xi). If this description suggests the typology of the wild artist, as exemplified by the visionary of Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan” with “his flashing eyes, his floating hair,” then we may not be surprised to find that having absorbed the thirty-three volumes of Christian Zervos’s *Pablo Picasso*, Mailer was indeed released into a fundamental reappraisal of his own relationship with reality: “after such immersion, one can hardly sustain one’s previous view of existence” (*Picasso* xi). The life-studyist was forced to study his own life. Washed clean and able to achieve that frank reorientation, he suddenly felt absolved of any biographical responsibility, even seeming to recollect “giving back my advance to Macmillan” (*Picasso* xi). Yet the new balance sheet had little reciprocity about it, since although “the ambitious dialogues” (*Cannibals* 261) in both *The Presidential Papers* and *Cannibals and Christians* owe much to the stimulating influence of Picasso’s art, still they “contain hardly a word about Picasso.... [O]ne had insights into the extremities of one’s own thinking but few biographical perceptions about him” (*Picasso* xi).

Perhaps not, but the writer found an authority of visual presentment in the artist’s work that gave a new imperative to his own culture-readings. Although he may not at that time have produced any extensive biographic study of Picasso, his writing of those years undoubtedly begins to express a very similar response to reality. In his essay “Eros and Idiom” (1975), George Steiner cites the work of Mailer, along with that of William Burroughs and Jean Genet, as expressions of “the political character of the age” (125). Such writers “have said that the bestialities recounted in their work mirror the crisis of inhumanity through which we appear to be living since 1914. A literature which failed to reflect modern barbarism, the widespread return of torture in political life, the programmatic degradation of the human person in concentration camps and colonial wars, would be a lie” (125). Steiner is right, and in the broken limbs and fractured forms of *Guernica* and Picasso’s autopsical portraits Mailer found more than a glimpse of that dark vision, paintings imbued with what he described as “a sense of *their* authority and *our* horror” (*Picasso* 27). His writing would soon begin to build upon a similar idiom. If he saw in Picasso’s art a determination to “tear apart the world of appearances and leave us with a secret fear that the soul behind the face of each person we meet is more hideous than any tale told by his features” (*Picasso* 243), then in “The Metaphysics of the Belly” he would also

testify that “the modern condition may be psychically so bleak [...] that studies of loneliness, silence, corruption, scatology, abortion, monstrosity, decadence, orgy and death can give life, can give a sentiment of beauty” (*Cannibals* 269). In the honesty of Picasso’s explorations into the “fair and dark psyche” (*Picasso* 255) of humanity—such as appeared in “the great dichotomy” (*Picasso* 260) of *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*—Mailer could still find a statement of hope and possibility.

Yet if the biographer, like the critic, must maintain the capacity to be both within and without his subject, then Mailer’s role as Picasso’s biographer was at that time seriously compromised. By his own admission he was “not ready to write about Picasso” (*Picasso* xi). Instead, in those years Picasso became the *eminence gris* in Mailer’s own creative life. But this admission leads us to a crucial consideration: must it be that such readiness to write *about* an artist as complex and powerful as Picasso is dependent upon the biographer feeling himself to be free from *active* influence by his subject? If so, does this only apply to biographers who are themselves practicing artists? It is a moot point as to whether Mailer was ever able to achieve that balance between the within and the without, and in any case it may be that writing a life-study ought to be a life-changing experience, involving risk to oneself and one’s beliefs. While we do not find anything like the cool objectivity of a Penrose or a Richardson in the life of Picasso that Mailer did eventually produce, as is sometimes the case with the work of artists who write biographies or appreciations of other artists (Randall Jarrell’s wondrous appreciation of Whitman in his *Poetry and the Age* would be a case in point), there are gratifications of a different order, such as a double helping of genius. In his relationship with the lives of Marilyn Monroe and Pablo Picasso, Mailer gives us an example of what he has sometimes referred to as “an imaginary memoir” (*Of Women and Their Elegance* 293). Readers of those memoirs will either find them legitimate, and will accept, even relish the prospect of encountering not just the memoir, but also the vitality of interaction between Mailer’s imagination and his subject, or on grounds of illegitimacy they will refuse him admission into the academy of biographers.

2. “But why not assume Marilyn Monroe opens up the entire problem of biography?” (*Marilyn* 19).

If in 1962–1963 his first pass at biography writing was deferred, a decade later in *Marilyn: A Biography*, Mailer returned to complete the touchdown with

sovereign ease. The reasons have to do both with the subject as well as his revision of conventional biographic form. Looking back we can now see that Mailer was never more fully centered in the flux and force of American energy than he was by that time, never more completely the voice of its subterranean reaches. In those years of creative flood he was producing what many now regard as his most memorable works, a record of extraordinary absorption in and interpretation of America's cultural revolution. As Hilary Mills states in her biography of Mailer, "the cumulative effect of his life and writing career had brought him to the height of his fame" (Mills 411), endowing him with celebrity and notoriety. Assessing *Marilyn* for the *New York Times Book Review*, Pauline Kael recognized that its author had inherited Hemingway's title as America's "official literary celebrity" (Mills 411). In that celebrity sense he had become as close as he ever would to the condition of his new biographical subject and knew he was fastening onto a figure not only iconic and tragic, but also one who was capable of defining a larger arc of American sensibility. Her death was, he felt sure, a symbol of a more national dying fall. Could it be, as he so much wished, that "she knew better than anyone that she was the last of the myths to thrive in the long evening of the American dream?" (*Marilyn* 16).

Mailer's biography launches itself with a brilliant span of Marilyn's, a spray of colors and forms, "a child-girl, yet an actress to loose a riot by dropping her glove at a premiere ... a lover of life and a cowardly hyena of death who drenched herself in chemical stupors ... she was certainly more and less than the silver witch of us all" (*Marilyn* 16–17). While this expresses the complexity of his subject, it also serves to prepare us for Mailer's engagement with what he takes to be the generic problem that confronts all biographers. In concluding the first section of the first chapter, "A Novel Biography," he must have seized upon Virginia Woolf's words with some pleasure: "A biography is considered complete if it merely accounts for six or seven selves, whereas a person may well have as many as one thousand" (*Marilyn* 18). His next question suggests, however, that the reach of his inquiry will be even larger, and if it fails it will not be because of a reductively factual approach: "But why not assume Marilyn Monroe opens the entire problem of biography? The question is whether a person can be comprehended by the facts of the life, and this does not even begin to take into account that abominable magnetism of facts. They always attract polar facts" (*Marilyn* 18).

From the start then, this book provides a determinedly innovative approach to its methods, and in so doing it shows Mailer overcoming much of the resistance he encountered at the time of the Picasso biography in 1962. The resistance is overcome by finding the common ground between biography and art and so developing a rationale for himself as an artist-biographer. The “entire problem of biography” is located in this province, and once he has moved life-study away from its dependence upon the factual record alone, he is free to occupy the ground of a psychohistory that leaves room for both romantic and magical explanations of human behavior. Liberated from procrustean strictures he is able to insist on the distinction between biography as a species of reportage and the higher ground of “great biography.” This superior form is capable of exploring the depths of personality which are essentially mysterious: “the facts live, but Marilyn does not” (*Marilyn* 19). The lives of exceptional people demand exceptional biographers to interpret them and, moreover, biographers who are not afraid to enter the realms of the irrational, since those same “exceptional people (often the most patriotic, artistic, heroic, or prodigious) had a way of living with opposites in themselves” (*Marilyn* 19). Facts can only get us so far. Great biography must be capable of transcending that record, since like the astronauts (“what had a movie star like Monroe in common with an astronaut?” [*Marilyn* 19]), exceptional people were themselves capable of transcending dualisms, and of coexisting with opposites within themselves, such as, say, nobility and evil. Moreover the factual archive is especially limited in the case of an actor like Monroe, “for an actor lives with the lie as if it were truth” (*Marilyn* 18). Faced by these impediments the biographer may become a type of secret sharer with his subject, since “by the logic of transcendence, it was exactly in the secret scheme of things that a man should be able to write about a beautiful woman” (*Marilyn* 19). Finally, “there is no instrument more ready to capture the elusive quality of her nature than a novel. Set a thief to catch a thief, and put an artist on an artist” (*Marilyn* 20).

Here then is the ultimate rationale for Mailer’s life-studies. Biography in his hands has passed into the repertoire of grand imagining, becoming not so much one further window in the house of fiction as one further room; the question is whether the result can pass for anything other than the most liberal assimilation of biographic norms. In a period when most of the energies of prose fiction were being assimilated by documentary forms,

Mailer invested the documentary form of biography with a new poetics capable of exploiting the classic divisions between narratives of fact and fiction. Part metaphysics, part memoir, part reverie, *Marilyn* gives us a life whose resonance deepens and multiplies as we read; it tries for an integrity of human response and remembrance, as do most considerable works of art. Biographers will commonly seek to explain a life by attending, for instance, to the childhood of their subject, and so too does Mailer, though along with other specific energies in the tragic drama. Modern biography has accepted the possibilities of post-Freudian psychology, but *Marilyn* goes further to incorporate metaphysical influences such as karma and reincarnation,² insisting that “we must question the fundamental notion of modern psychiatry—that we have but one life and one death” (*Marilyn* 22). Conventional biography and perhaps the contemporary imagination might be skeptical of such notions, but in working the ground of the possible Mailer insists that “the reductive voice speaks with no more authority than the romantic” (*Marilyn* 23) and his biography frequently asks readers for reorientations of rational consciousness. “There are a million dumb and dizzy broads with luck and none come near to Monroe, no. To explain her at all, let us hold to that karmic notion as one more idea to support in our mind” (*Marilyn* 23).

The above comment asks us to consider Monroe as the particular case that transcends the generic type, yet throughout this book Mailer very often uses the particular case to support the generic, allowing him to build towards what he calls “a working hypothesis” of American cultural dysfunction (*Marilyn* 27–28). So as Della Monroe Grainger—Monroe’s grandmother—turns to accelerating psychosis and attempts to murder the baby Marilyn (at least according to Marilyn herself), Mailer can intimate the presence of a larger malaise in the culture. *Marilyn* suggests that America, and particularly West Coast America, is but precariously situated in the land of sanity:

If a void in one’s sense of identity is equal to a mental swamp where insane growths begin, then America is an insane swamp more than other lands ... Los Angeles had to be the focus within such focus, the deepest swamp of the national swamp, the weed of weeds ... And there in Hawthorne in 1927, the weed Della Hogan Monroe Grainger, festering in the psychic swamp life of quiet Hawthorne, is believed to have crossed the street one after-

noon, picked up the baby, taken her to her home, and there begun to suffocate her with a pillow. (*Marilyn* 27–28)

In Mailer's analysis, the dramatic plot of Monroe's life becomes a lucid shorthand for American neurosis and breakdown. And if Della Grainger in her psychotic behavior "was as American as most" (*Marilyn* 29), so Ida and Wayne Bolender, who fostered Marilyn for the first seven years of her life, were not only "hymn and fundament, flesh and spine" of middle-America's Silent Majority, but also exemplified its characteristic weakness, being "absolutely terrified of the lividity of the American air in the street outside." This "Silent Majority [that] lives in dread of the danger which lies beneath appearances" (*Marilyn* 30) may have a premonition of its own demise, its silence a fluent outpouring of bad faith, of frontier dreams running to seed on suburban lawns.

Amongst the horrors of Monroe's childhood, Mailer counts the shooting of her pet dog as one of the most traumatic, a horror that blighted any notion of being at home in "the other world outside the Bolender house":

In 1932, when Norma Jean was almost six, Tippy began to get out of the house on spring evenings and make his run in the dark. One night a blast rolled down the street, and the milkman found the dog's body in the dawn ... a neighbor, sitting on his porch, had waited for Tippy with a shotgun. For three nights running Tippy had rolled in the neighbor's garden. On the third night the neighbor shot him. We can sense that man. There is dog heat and dog body, dog funk leaving its odor on his new greens, rolling dog lusts on the garden crop. That's one night for you, dog, he counts to himself; two nights for you, dog; on the third night—with what backed-up intensity of the frontier jammed at last into a suburban veranda we can only hear in the big blast—the dog is dead. The fears of the Bolenders have stood on real ground. And their timidity also stands revealed. For there is no record of confronting the neighbor and his shotgun. So to the child, a catastrophic view of history must have begun. (*Marilyn* 32–33)

Throughout the biography Mailer gives priority to such decisive vignettes and cumulatively provides a devastating critique of a culture in collapse. For

behind the white picket-fence and “at the end of every sweet and quiet passage of love, amputation or absurdity is waiting” (*Marilyn* 33). Again he shows here the influence of Picasso, master of semblances. In the brief essay “An Eye on Picasso,” published as early as 1959 in *Advertisements for Myself*, there is already recognition of the moral necessity of the painter’s combative assaults on the form and appearance of the conventional world:

For the last fifty years ... Picasso has used his brush like a sword....Up and down the world of appearances he has marched, sacking and pillaging and tearing and slashing, a modern-day Cortez conquering an empire of appearances. It is possible that there has never been a painter who will leave the intimate objects of the world so altered by the swath of his work ... He is the first painter to bridge the animate and the inanimate. (*Advertisements for Myself* 461)

The first painter perhaps, but soon followed by a writer, for certainly this is also Mailer’s bailiwick. We have only to think of “The White Negro” to realize his espousal of a similar approach. Of course that essay and a great deal of his thinking at that time is also rooted in an existential ethic of necessary confrontation with one’s own weakness, and with the individual’s challenge to the postwar consensus in American culture. This had all but succeeded in placing its brand on a population who existed in a state of clammy cowardice and totalitarian control— “[a] stench of fear has come out of every pore of American life, and we suffer from a collective failure of nerve” (“The White Negro” 338).

Marilyn, in addition to being a great biography, is a seminal chapter in Mailer’s lifelong critique of American mores. It presents Monroe both as a victim of those values and as one who, in her courage and all but Faustian ambition, offered a challenge to them. For when “the luminous life of her face grew ten feet tall” on the movie screen, then to her audiences “Marilyn was deliverance” (*Marilyn* 15, 16). Yet that image was also “the magnified mirror of ourselves, our exaggerated and now all but defeated generation” (*Marilyn* 17). As a girl she witnessed men like her “Uncle” Wayne Bolender, who did nothing to defend against the cruel abrasions of the world beyond domesticity; her life would often show the scars of exposure to those moments of catastrophe and cowardice: “Whole washes of the apathy that

would sit upon her in later years, that intolerable dull and dead round she passed through in the year after her marriage to Miller was over, “is probably sealed in the reflex of sorrowing for Tippy” (*Marilyn* 33). If “psychosis, like death, move[s] back into the past” (*Marilyn* 213), then this life-study provides us with a harvest of possibilities from which to choose. Little wonder that in his final paragraph as he writes “Goodbye Norma Jean,” Mailer above all wishes that her spirit finds its resting place and that it “be rather in one place and not scattered in pieces across the firmament; let us hope her mighty soul and the mouse of her little one are both recovering their proportions in some fair and gracious home.” (*Marilyn* 248)

3. **“God, catastrophe, and the language of form were all manifests to Picasso of another world beneath the world of appearances.”³**

Portrait of Picasso as a Young Man: An Interpretive Biography was eventually published in 1995 and its subtitle is a clear indication that since 1962 Mailer had learned that in writing biographies the approach of “no original scholarship, much personal interpretation” (*Picasso* xii) was the way forward. Once again, as with *Marilyn*, his prefatory pages promise a life-study based upon an imaginative and idiosyncratic reconstruction of his subject. Yet in his interpretation of Picasso’s work, readers will find much that is central to the thinking of Norman Mailer:

[T]he desire to make Picasso as real as any good character in life or in art has been the literary virtue sought after here. Which is equal to saying that the interpretation of Picasso’s life and work as a young man is my individual understanding of him, and I will rest on such a claim. (*Picasso* xii)

It is mainly this willingness to foreground the personal view that marks the contrast with his first attempt more than 30 years earlier. And though he tells readers of the Preface that in this biography very little survives from his early attempt, only “a page of notes I had written back in 1962,” still “[I]t was nice to know that a part of oneself was still playing the same tune three decades later” (*Picasso* xiii). There is, however, a good deal more than that single page of notes that links the two projects. Above all, both in *Picasso* and in the dialogue “The Political Economy of Time,” published in *Cannibals and Christians* (this dialogue itself being one of

those works which, according to Mailer, had been “stimulated” by his earlier, unfinished book on Picasso’s art), we find his abiding interest in the nuances of form. This interest is remembered in the second paragraph of the Preface to *Picasso*: “I spent the summer writing a dialogue between an imaginary interviewer and myself dealing with such questions as ‘What is the distinction between soul and spirit?’ and ‘How do we decide on the nature of form?’” (*Picasso* xi).

Writing in 1972, Richard Poirier found that Mailer’s responses to this question were so various as to be well-nigh incoherent. He was exasperated by Mailer’s use of the term “form” arguing that it is “like others that are used repeatedly by Mailer, meanderingly in motion” (Poirier 15). It is true that in the dialectic of forces that define Mailer’s theology the term is given a good deal of work to do, but this is very far from rendering it meaningless. For instance, in the following passage from “The Political Economy of Time” we are given a complex, but lucid explanation of the relationship between a culture and its expressive form. That relationship is the physical sign of the culture’s spiritual health and it may not be surprising to find Mailer arguing that in the mid-twentieth century this has been subordinated to a totalitarian imperative:

Form is the deepest clue we possess to the nature of time in any epoch, to the style of the time, to the mode by which reality is perceived in the time, to the way time moves in the consciousness of man, where it possesses grace, where it is hobbled, how strength addresses itself to weakness. Time is all but equal to creativity, for time is the potential to create as it resides in each of us. So form is the clue to the vitality or lethargy of time, and the most pervasive forms of the modern world now speak of an absence of invention, a pall upon good spirit, an erosion of memory. Only in the corners is there preoccupation with complexity of form, with those interruptions of time we comprehend in the absurd. Full of feverish creativity and feverish destruction are the forms in the corners and the edges—in the center is nothing but an aesthetic desert, those pillars of salt which rise out of ... the triumph of that totalitarian spirit whose impulse is to betray form, to abstract form, until the meanings in its creation are lost. (*Cannibals* 304–305, 367–368)

It is surely significant that in this essay, widely recognized as a key to Mailer's thinking (even by Poirier, who allows that it "is one of three pieces that are probably indispensable to any understanding of Mailer's *oeuvre*" [Poirier 15]), Picasso is the only artist mentioned. His special significance is further highlighted in that the citation appears not only in the essay's final paragraph, but is also one of the very few references to the book's title throughout *Cannibals and Christians*: "Cannibals are Christians. And forms which look alike are alike. In some mysterious way. Or at least they are alike until the souls which create them become the spirit of treachery. So says Picasso, I suspect" (*Cannibals* 375).

Mailer's lifelong concern with the necessary probity of form finds in Picasso the perfect artist. Far from being obtuse, the preamble to "The Political Economy of Time" has admirable clarity: "a future to life depends on creating forms of an intensity which will capture the complexity of modern experience and dignify it" (*Cannibals* 311). The image of "capture" recalls the earlier essay, "An Eye on Picasso," in which the painter is hailed as a victorious commander who has achieved a "conquest of form so complete that all modern painting including the relative emancipation from form of such artists as Hofmann and Pollock derive from his Napoleonic marches"⁴ (*Advertisements for Myself* 461). Mailer's Picasso is all of that as well as a demiurge (*Picasso* 83), subordinate only to God but invested with His supreme power. This is made even clearer in the biography, wherein the artist and the deity are shown to be in deep collaboration:

We have to assume that he is not only God-driven in his ambitions ... but that he feels an uncomfortable intimacy with the Deity ...

When Picasso draws, the line that delineates a limb seems to spring up out of some graceful collaboration between his hand and the power that conceived the design of that limb—God may be as amorphous as a cloud, but God is also as clear as a well-defined form....

The key is to be found in form. Form is the language that God has decided to share with a few painters, the very best painters. They are apostles serving the mystery of form. (*Picasso* 205–206)

If Picasso “saw his mission as coming ever closer to the mind of God,” it was specifically with regard to “neither His spiritual secrets nor His pain but His engineering ... Picasso was ... looking to discover how God might have put it all together” (*Picasso* 273–274). Mailer also presents Picasso’s fundamental revision of form as a part of his growing mutual rivalry with Matisse whose passionate, explosive use of color reached apotheosis with his painting *Le Bonheur de Vivre* (1905–1906), hailed by the Paris art world as a bold embodiment of the modern (it was bought by Leo Stein who regarded it as “the most important painting done in our time” [Flam 163]). If Picasso’s ultimate aim was to “depict the savagery of the form beneath the form,” then spurred on by Matisse’s success he would insist on doing this “with considerable independence from color” (*Picasso* 243).

At first in *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* and then through that portal into cubism, Mailer shows Picasso’s determination to explore the revelations of form. The stress is always upon freedom, for as Picasso said, “If we give spirits a form, we become independent ... I understood why I was a painter” (*Picasso* 258). Cubism developed into an ultimate expression of the freedom to translate the deep structures of reality, eventually sculpting both landscape and human shape as related, intimate. Yet Mailer is right to find that Picasso’s dense cubist paintings of 1912 (such as *The Aficionado*, *Sorgues*, summer 1912) are also exemplary as *memento mori*, their “coalescence of forms” (*Picasso* 271) a striking play on the meaning of death—another theme that links *Picasso* with *Marilyn*. As Monroe’s death was “covered over with ambiguity” (*Marilyn* 15), so for Picasso, the forms of “[a] tree, a plant, a nude, a mountain ... draw toward one another” even as he “lives in all-but-constant fear of his own death” (*Picasso* 272). Both are on familiar terms with what Mailer calls “Mr. Dread” (*Marilyn* 248), and both perhaps used such knowledge as a means of artistic stimulation. “[I]n fear and trembling [and] [i]n dread” (*Marilyn* 17), Monroe wrote in her own dressing room notebook, “What am I afraid of? Why am I so afraid? Do I think I can’t act? I know I can act but I am afraid. I am afraid and I should not be and I must not be” (*Marilyn* 17). And amidst some of “the most miserable days of his life” Picasso also “had a gift for making use of his own dread” (*Picasso* 87–88). But whereas he “could live with dread” and “[c]on-trolled amounts encouraged him to work in order to exorcise the sensation” (*Picasso* 88), Monroe had in the end been living too long “in fear of some unnamed disaster to come” (*Marilyn* 248). In contrast Picasso was

able to confront such dread by objectifying it; his heroic cubist masterpieces of 1910–1912 are uncompromising in their descent to the heart of death. So Mailer is absolutely right to find in those paintings “an exploration of death” and to see in them “the appearance of corpses, their flesh in strips and tatters, organs open” (*Picasso* 311).

4. Attacking Reality

While cubism may be seen as “an exploration of death” (*Picasso* 311), this is very far from Mailer’s total reading of Picasso’s work. Years ago in *Advertisements for Myself* he demanded that American novelists “dare a new art of the brave” (473), and throughout his own life it is precisely this capacity to set himself such challenges that has kept his own career so exuberantly engaging. It should not surprise us therefore that Picasso is Mailer’s hero, protean and courageous, a genius of energy and reach who contrived a bold art of the possible, always “looking to paint stasis and motion, growth and decomposition, the perceptions of infancy and the dissolutions of death, and do them all at once and in each painting” (*Picasso* 312). The accolade is complete:

The twentieth-century artist who conceivably had the most influence on my work was not a writer but Picasso. He kept changing the nature of his attack on reality. It’s as if he felt there is a reality to be found out there but it’s not a graspable object like a rock. Rather, it is a creature who keeps changing shape. And if I, Picasso, have been trying to delineate this creature by means of a particular aesthetic style and have come only this far, then I am going to look for another style altogether. And off Picasso goes into a new mode of attack on reality ... In line with Picasso, what I find most interesting in writing at this point is to keep making a new attack on the nature of reality. (*The Spooky Art* 156)

This is the rationale for life-study: which is the life of art, and which can be, as in the case of *Marilyn: A Biography* and *Picasso: An Interpretive Biography*, the art of life. Both Mailer and Picasso may have returned to a central circle of themes as most artists do, but always with new intimations of how the centre may be approached. This essay has therefore focused on the form

of such approaches, for just as “[i]t was not like [Picasso] to use a model over and over in the same pose” (*Picasso* 205), so for Mailer style is always provisional, always driven by the demands of the subject. In a 1995 interview he divided American writers into two camps, those who write “with an air that is inimitable” such as “Faulkner, Fitzgerald, and Hemingway, Melville and James,” and others “who go along in a variety of modes. I’m in the latter camp.” He quickly followed this with a comparison between himself and Picasso, noting that “Matisse painted in one recognizable vein, while Picasso entered a hundred before he was done. Style was the cutting tool by which he could delineate a reality. He saw it as a tool rather than as an extension of his identity. I’ve found his attitude to be useful for myself” (*The Spooky Art* 78).

These two life-studies portray Marilyn Monroe and Picasso as narcissists, and again, perhaps only those who could be so described have the freedom to inhabit a variety of personae and voice. Certainly, Mailer has often argued that modern society will always tend towards a monolithic utterance, and in the logic of totalitarianism Picasso’s dissidence was anathema. During the Second World War Picasso had “a bad record with the Nazis, and could be interned, deported, taken hostage,” his works condemned as “degenerate” and “Bolshevik” (Brassaï 89). There may even be little to dismay us in the news that recently discovered Paris police files (returned to France after 55 years in Soviet KGB archives) show that Picasso (who continued to live his life as a Catalan patriot) was refused French citizenship on the grounds of being an anarchist and a threat to the state.⁵ After that war ended many beat a path to his door since “his courageous attitude made him a standard-bearer, and the whole world wanted to salute him as the symbol of recovered freedom” (Brassaï 205).

And indeed it is their freedom and courage that Mailer admires most of all in his two subjects. In Monroe’s case, he represents it as a freedom constrained, but part of an innate complex, “her liberation and her tyrannical desires” (*Marilyn* 17) together driving an ambition described on several occasions as Napoleonic (*Marilyn* 210, 226), an adjective he applies also to Picasso. In Picasso it was also freedom that shone through, a native idiom in which his genius found expression. Indeed the epigraph to *Picasso* presents freedom as existential high-wire and artistic necessity. There Mailer chooses the artist’s own words: “Painting is freedom. If you jump, you might fall on the wrong side of the rope. But if you are not willing to take the risk of breaking your neck, what good is it? You don’t jump at all. You have to wake peo-

ple up. To revolutionize their way of identifying things.” Substitute writing for painting and in Picasso’s statement we have the Mailer aesthetic too. His own art was also famously committed to the possibility of bringing about “a revolution in the consciousness of our time.”⁶ For if, as Kahnweiler put it, “in seeking his own mode of expression, [Picasso] daringly breaks new ground in every process and brings it to perfection” (Brassaï 347), so too should biographic form entail such freedom, and the biographer venture a relationship with his subject which is both seminal and unique. And when we read that Mailer recognizes in Picasso “the embodiment of a mighty ego” (*Picasso* 304), we are reminded that writing biographies can also be a species of self-recognition and self-approval. In a life-study that exploits a primary bond of interaction between author and subject, there is palpable awe for this artist whose youthful self-belief would eventually become Promethean, until finally he could see himself as a dynamic link between humankind and the forces that created the world as well as those that kept it in convulsive disarray. *Picasso* joins with *Marilyn* and Mailer to become life-study, enlarging the repertoire of purist biography and liberating its strictures.

NOTES

1. “The Metaphysics of the Belly,” in *Cannibals and Christians*. New York: Dial, 1966, 261.
2. Mailer’s belief in reincarnation is reiterated in his recent book *Why Are We at War?*, 21.
3. Norman Mailer, *Portrait of Picasso as a Young Man: An Interpretive Biography*, 83.
4. Mailer also applies the personification to Monroe: “She is a female Napoleon.” *Marilyn*, 210, 226.
5. The details of Picasso’s unsuccessful 1940 request for citizenship emerge from Paris police dossiers covering four decades of his life in France. They have been published by Pierre Daix and Armand Israel as *Pablo Picasso: Dossiers de la Préfecture de Police 1901–1940* (Lauzanne: Acatos, 2004). “The times of his comings and goings are very irregular ... Sometimes he even stays out all night ... As a result of all the information which has been gathered, this foreigner has no qualification for being naturalised ... He must be considered as a suspect from the state’s point of view.” *The Times*, 16.
6. Norman Mailer, “First Advertisement for Myself,” 71 in *Advertisements for Myself*.

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