THE BIG BITE

NORMAN MAILER

For fourteen months, November 1962 to December 1963, Mailer wrote a monthly column for Esquire *on a variety of subjects—television, totalitarianism, the astronauts, the Cold War, dread, architecture, the novels of his contemporaries, U.S. Cuba policy, and the deaths of Marilyn Monroe and Hemingway. The most celebrated, his February 1963 column, titled "Ten Thousand Words a Minute," is an account of the first Floyd Patterson-Sonny Liston heavyweight boxing match. It is considered to be a foundation stone of the New Journalism. He reprinted these columns, save one, in three of his miscellanies:* The Presidential Papers *(1963),* Cannibals and Christians *(1966), and* The Idol and the Octopus *(1968). The final column, which contains his comments on the August 18, 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, which he observed (although he missed Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech), is reprinted here for the first time. Why Mailer passed over this column is unknown, especially since his analysis of the meanings of the March is acute and his description of it evocative.*

His valedictory column ends with the announcement that he is embarking on a serial novel, An American Dream, *in the January 1964 issue of the magazine, and doing so in the spirit of Dickens and Dostoevsky. He says that he plans to write the eight chapters in an existential fashion: the first will be published before he has written the third. He kept to this scheme, staying a month or so ahead of deadline, until the final chapter, which arrived late and was 10,000 words longer than planned.* Esquire *literally held the presses for the August issue and then published a portion of the final chapter in seven-point type. This essay originally appeared in* Esquire *(December 1963), 22–26. Reprinted with the permission of The Mailer Estate.*

A final note: Mailer intended President Kennedy to be an important figure in the novel, but had to change his plans when Kennedy was assassinated on

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November 22, 1963, about two weeks after the December Esquire *hit the newsstands. As readers of the novel will remember, the protagonist and narrator, Stephen Rojack, opens the novel with a description of a 1946 double date with JFK. In the final chapter, the President sends his commiserations to Rojack on the death of his wife.—J. Michael Lennon*

NOW, ALMOST THREE MONTHS AFTER 200,000 NEGROES AND WHITES made their March on Washington, the reports I remember best were the ones I read in *The Village Voice* (September 5, 1963). There was a fine piece of journalism by Marlene Nadle; also a political analysis by Robert Levin with which I disagreed, but thought to the point. In fact it established where the point could be found. Let me quote from it:

> "The March almost happened during that brief period when … tens of thousands of people walked down Constitution Avenue, from the Washington Monument to the Lincoln Memorial, singing spirituals. That part was very moving, but it did not last for very long and it did not culminate in anything more than a four-hour platitude. Perhaps one had no right to expect anything else. What the limitations of the demonstration were going to be had been decided by the President and the Negro leaders, and widely publicized, weeks before the fact. The demonstration was neutralized in the very nature and process of its organization.
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> "It was designed and ordered in such a way as to disturb the psyche of no one. How could any mass demonstration the style of which the New York *Daily News* and the *Times* were able to condone have any real significance? It complied with the very terms and standards that had fostered the necessity of revolution.… If the Negro energy is going to make a revolution that would achieve something more than the dubious right to dream the American Dream too—and it must want more than that if this country is going to survive the cost of its hideous ambition—then violence must be risked. Had the demonstrators invaded the halls of Congress in the manner in which many of them had invaded Southern lunchrooms, there might indeed, have been violence. Probably in such a confrontation, there would have been an explosion. But just possibly the fear of confrontation,

> that fear, in effect, of life stuck like a rock in the American gut, severing the nerve and paralyzing the sensibilities, … that fear just might have been exorcised. At least the falling atoms of the consciousness might have settled in a new and different pattern.
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> "So the Congressmen as well as the demonstrators were cheated, and the American air was no less free of the toxic breath of totalitarianism on Thursday morning than it had been on Tuesday… ."

Let me make it clear that one does not argue with Robert Levin's description of the sensuous aspects of the March. The best part was indeed the walk—it was quiet, it was solemn, it was rich. It was the rarest American experience: a fruition. There was a collective emotion which was the magnification of the particular emotion a middle-aged couple of immigrant stock might feel on the day their first son graduates from college. Deeds of abnegation, of selflessness, of thrift, years of planning had resulted in a successful issue. That was the mood of the March—you wished it had been five miles long rather than one.

And the four hours of speeches which followed *were* anticlimactic. The collective mood shifted. While it was pleasant to a point, while it was not inaccurate to say—as nearly everyone did—that the atmosphere was reminiscent of a huge Sunday picnic, a church picnic, there was also an air of subtle depression, of wistful apathy which existed in many—one felt a little of the muted disappointment which attacks a crowd in the seventh inning of a very important baseball game when the score has gone eleven-to-three. The home team is ahead, but the tension is broken: one's concern is no longer noble. It was an agreeable afternoon, but it had a touch of the cancerous to it—"the toxic air of totalitarianism." Because two hundred thousand people had come down, some in fear, some in all courage, but they had come with the memory of the summer behind them, that historic summer of television when revolution for the first time had been created in part by the indignation of all those millions who had seen Bull Connor's police using firehoses on Negro children, yes, a revolution created in part by television, that instrument of social control which had been used since its inception precisely to dull and/or end forever the possibility of revolution. Yes, the seed of dialectics was stirring again, the shade of Marx, the ghost of Lenin. Many, maybe most of those two hundred

thousand people came to Washington expecting danger, looking secretly for an historic issue that day.

And they were disappointed. Considering the heat and the depressed fury of the history which had created this March, it was probably the most peaceful large assemblage in the history of the Republic. Never had one seen people so polite to one another. The iron word had gone out: No violence today! And there was none. That took its toll. That put the hint of a powerful depression into the agreeableness of the afternoon.

Yet I think the leaders were right to do it the way they chose to do it, and I think Robert Levin, for all the pertinence of his comment, is still wrong. Because a revolution is broken if it cannot move on two feet—one of Lenin's favorite notions—and the Negro had already demonstrated to the collective psyche of America that they had the greatest potential for violence of any political body in our American world; now, on this afternoon, they chose to show that they also possessed the finest capacity for order and discipline in the nation. Could one dream of bringing together two hundred thousand whites steaming with bitterness and the hot heart of injustice on a hot summer day with no riot breaking forth? Impossible. A deep blues went out from Washington in those hours: a revolutionary force existed in the land; it could move with violence, and it could move with discipline. No invasion of congress, no sit-down in the halls could have thrust the message so far into the fifty million or hundred million Americans who are neither for nor against this revolution. Indeed, a violent demonstration could have alienated them. The Capitol Building is one of the altars of the Republic—a sit-down inside Congress on that day would have made Governor Wallace a candidate for President in a new party. To the average American it would have been equal to stomping on the flag. A revolution withers if it is afraid of creating outrage, but it is killed in ambush if it accepts and attacks each and every possibility for outrage presented to it. There was revolutionary genius in bringing off the March on Washington, for it created the second leg of the movement. The price—that air of violence gone deeper, that touch of cancer—may not have been too great. The horror of a revolution is that the brave and the half-brave pay with diseases of the flesh and nausea of the spirit for the compromises, hypocrisy, and evasion of the past.

It is likely this will be the last column I do in *Esquire* for some time. An idea for a novel began to form in Las Vegas, partly as a result of the second

Patterson-Liston fight, and has resulted in an agreement with the editors and publisher of the magazine: I will write a novel of average or slightly less than average length in the form of an eight-part serial. Since it begins next month, the early installments will be in print long before I go to work on the later ones. Indeed it is likely I will be working on each installment up to the day *Esquire* goes to press. It's been a long time since anything of this sort has been tried by an author who takes himself seriously. Of course, *A Farewell to Arms* was serialized in *Scribner's* Magazine, and *Tender Is the Night*. Sinclair Lewis had several of his novels printed first in magazines, and Dreiser as well. J. P. Marquand, John Hersey, and John O'Hara have done this in recent years. Henry James, Kipling, Hardy, Samuel Butler, Thackeray, Trollope, Charlotte and Emily Bronte were all published in *The Cornhill Magazine*. Zola and Balzac used to be serialized in the Paris newspapers, and Gide sometimes published portions of his work in installments for *La Nouvelle Revue Française*.

But the novels of these writers, particularly the modern writers named, were invariably finished before serialization. One need not return to Richardson, but one must probably go back to Dostoevski or to Dickens in order to find novelists of the first rank who put their books together under the exigency of meeting a magazine's publication date each month. Dostoevski indeed wrote some of the greatest of his novels this way, and there are agonizing accounts in his biography of the difficulties in which he found himself. Suffering from epileptic fits, two days past the date he had promised to deliver the manuscript, his baby dying of consumption, he would work on *The Idiot* through the night, using the hours when his mind could function between each epileptic attack. And he, like Dickens, suffered from the severe demand of the serial as a form. His novels—particularly *The Idiot*—are filled with loose ends, characters left dangling in situations the author could no longer come back to since the line of his novel had wandered as he worked far away from his original intent. Dickens, indeed, became a master at tying such loose ends. He succeeded in converting the limitation of the form to a strength.

Well, all proportions kept (please recognize that no comparison is intended to Dickens or Dostoevski) there is a desire to try this form. One wants to see if enough craft has been acquired to bring it off. Besides, it appears to be the only way to write the book now in mind without spending two or three years on successive drafts. But one would also like

to emphasize that there will be no attempt to write a major novel in the next months. The story that is going to appear each successive issue in *Esquire* will not have the huge proportions and extreme ambition of the big book described in *Advertisements for Myself*. No, that work is now to be put aside again. Instead I lay the professional bet in this fashion—I will write eight installments of a novel sufficiently conventional to appear in a magazine. But it will be a good novel. I hope it will be a very good novel. If I fail, the first price to be paid is the large wound to one's professional vanity.

If I succeed, well, we may all know more.

See you next month in the middle of the magazine. One is tempted to call this novel *An American Dream*.