THE TIME OF HIS TIME

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The following remarks served to introduce Norman Mailer's reading at Queens College in 1998. The occasion was the publication of The Time of Our Time, *a fifty-year anthology of his work, assembled not by the year of publication but according to how the times themselves had unfolded, how deeply the public world and its issues had always engaged him. It was a fine rebuff to those who saw him as a self-absorbed, wholly performative writer. He thanked me for the introduction but added that he couldn't hear a word: "Deaf as a doorknob." But he was anything but deaf at the small dinner that followed. In fact I was struck by how responsive he was to the conversation of each of my colleagues, as if to drive home the thrust of his book. Others in his position might simply have offered up a slice of their celebrity persona and held forth. "Is he always like that?" I asked Joe Cuomo, who had organized the reading series. "Well," Joe said, "he really believes in being 'in the moment,' and this happened to be the moment he was in." In the years that followed, I saw him show the same keen faculty of attention on four or five other occasions. It was impressive in itself, but it also explained a good part of what made his work remarkable.*

LAST YEAR I OPENED A BOOK AND OUT DROPPED an aging yellow envelope with an unfamiliar address. It had a 4-cent stamp, which told me how old it was, and inside was a gracious note from Norman Mailer, dated March 1961, citing the pressure of work to explain why he could not come to speak at Columbia. The circumstances came back to me: A bunch of us connected to the undergraduate newspaper had decided to invite our culture heroes to lecture. Well, only one of them came, but Norman Mailer was kind enough to reply, to tell us how busy he was, and tactful enough to make me feel that his *not* coming would make a vital contribution to his work in progress.

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We had invited Mailer not because he was the best-selling author of *The Naked and the Dead*—the second world war already seemed as distant to us as the American Revolution—but because a year or two earlier he had put together a book called *Advertisements for Myself* out of the bits and pieces of his unhappy writing life in the 1950s. The pieces were decidedly uneven, but Mailer had surrounded them with an impassioned autobiographical narrative as vast in its claims as it was mesmerizing in its rhetoric. Sentence by baroque sentence, the safe compromises and circumscribed ironies of the fifties were exploded as Mailer cast himself as an intrepid adventurer plunging recklessly into untried regions of consciousness. Before our very eyes, in his sexual theories, in his hatred of the tame, the tepid, and the conventional, in his vaulting ambition and self-reference, but above all in the unfamiliar rhythms of his prose, the 1960s were born on the page. After three more or less impersonal novels, Mailer had invented his greatest character, himself, as a vehicle for recouping past failures and exploring new dimensions of experience. The voice he discovered there would resonate throughout the next two decades.

Mailer has always been an inspired anthologist of his own work. Now, fifty years after his first success, he has put together an ingenious collection covering his whole career, from his student years at Harvard and his war fiction, through his years of sixties celebrity, up to his 1990s articles on the Gulf War, Madonna, and *American Psycho*. Instead of drawing our attention to his protean self, he reshapes his career to show his continuous involvement with the life of his times, so that the book is as much a collage of American history as it is of one writer's astonishing progress through it. It shows that Mailer wants to be remembered not as a self-centered confessional writer, which he has never truly been, but as a man keenly responsive to the changing world around him, someone who kept his antennae attuned to the deepest recesses of the American psyche, in part by keeping a wary eye on himself. If the earlier book was a bold defensive reaction to a decade's worth of damage and frustration, the new one, in its range and size, makes vaster claims for a man who has been famous so long he might feel taken for granted. It reminds us of us how much he has done, how richly varied it has been, and how unflaggingly he has kept in touch.

Above all the book shows that despite all his extra-literary adventures—his political campaigns, his much-publicized feuds with other writers, his occasional tabloid notoriety, his titanic battles with feminists—Mailer's

arena of adventure has always been the sentence. In *Advertisements* Mailer found a style that reflected the whole sensory range of his restless mind. The new book is packed with sentences that take your breath away with their unexpected wit, daring, and perfect elegance. Mailer once aspired to be the Ernest Hemingway of the second half of the century, and there were moments when he came close, moments of dread that matched Hemingway's sense of hard-edged male vulnerability. But in retrospect, in his sheer relish of the spectacle of American life—from political conventions and public mendacity to the foibles of popular culture—but also in his long love affair with the American language, Mailer instead became our latter-day H.L. Mencken. That great journalist, whose career ended the year Mailer's began, was half in love with the scoundrels and hypocrites he wrote about, and he was incapable of writing a sentence that was not shamelessly entertaining. He too was a character, his own most ingenious creation. If the iconoclastic Mencken had lived on into what Mailer calls *The Time of Our Time*, when cant and bunkum became a way of life, I suspect the Baltimore sage would have had a wonderful time. Mailer has been our witness to the second half of our century, as Mencken was to the first.

So it is my great privilege and pleasure to introduce you to Norman Mailer—who, to my mind, is finally making good on an invitation he foolishly turned down 37 years ago.