

A BRITISH VIEW: MAILER'S AMERICAN LANGUAGE

B A R R Y H . L E E D S

Norman Mailer: An American Aesthetic

By Andrew Wilson

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In this intelligent book, the first volume-length critical study of Mailer since 2002, Andrew Wilson (who trained at the University of Essex) sets out to define from a British perspective the peculiarly American qualities in the work. In building his central thesis of “[Mailer’s] crafting of various American voices ... to define American identity during the post-war period,” he chooses to do a close exegesis of ten representative major works, from *The Naked and the Dead* (1948) to *Harlot’s Ghost* (1991). In the process, he cites (and appreciates) much of the body of Mailer scholarship that has emerged over the past forty years and sets Mailer within the context of American literary antecedents (Henry Adams, Hemingway, Dos Passos) and contemporaries (Didion, Burroughs, Capote).

Wilson’s primary goal is to delineate the American language of Mailer’s novels, from the New York vulgate of *Barbary Shore* (1951) to the Texas argot of *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (1967) to the flat westernisms of *The Executioner’s Song* (1979). In his Introduction, he sets forth the criteria by which he has established the parameters of his study: “This book is an analysis of the American vernacular in Norman Mailer’s literature. Mailer’s bid to carve out an American language or idiom is central to each chapter...” He goes on to define the reasons for choosing the works to be discussed and for omitting others. Of those published by 2007, he dismisses the four biographies and

five omnibus collections of various genres. "Nor does work set beyond the borderlines of the United States ... receive an extended analysis." These are, of course, *Ancient Evenings* (1983), *The Gospel According to the Son* (1997) and *The Fight* (1975). The rationale behind not considering the first two is obvious, as they have non-American characters, and hence voices; but *The Fight*, though set in Zaire, is populated principally by American characters. So, too, are *Tough Guys Don't Dance* (1984) and *The Deer Park* (1955) relegated to peripheral consideration. We are, then, presented with substantive chapter-length treatments of the ten books which he discusses in chronological order of publication, interspersed with pertinent references to some of the other works.

Wilson begins his treatment of *The Naked and the Dead* with a pointed reminder of how one of Hearn's statements about the neo-fascist officers on Anopopei anticipates the first lines of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* by eight years, and thus firmly plants Mailer in alignment with the Beats: "By their very existence they had warped the finest minds, the most brilliant talents of Hearn's generation into something sick. . ."

He goes on to pay the usual attention to the naturalistic bias of the novel, although he hazards the statement, difficult to defend, that Mailer wrote in a naturalistic rather than modernistic vein for years afterwards: "His preference for naturalism over modernism made Mailer, in critical quarters, an outmoded figure throughout his career." I would suggest that every novel after *Naked* was a step toward the fully formed modern and existential vision of *An American Dream* and all successive work.

Barbary Shore (1951) presents the opportunity for Wilson to consider the New York idiom of this novel and *An American Dream*. He points out that one third of Mailer's works are set in the "North East and Mid-Atlantic states ... " and the two aforementioned in New York. He gives Mailer the credit and stature of being "a universal or representative American beyond a regional writer," but continues with the reservation that "his journeys across the country and among its people were relatively short-lived," a position supported only by the fact that "Large areas of the country are neither described nor referred to in his books—the Pacific North West, the Rocky Mountains, the Great Plains and the South." Aside from the fact that William Faulkner structured a Nobel Prize-winning body of work upon Yoknapatawpha County in every work but *A Fable*, I would suggest that Mailer's treatment of the American continent is comprehensive as well as paradigmatic.

In *Barbary Shore*, Wilson sees Mikey Lovett as “a model of the isolated, anonymous New Yorker ...” provided by Mailer with existential choice, but hamstrung by a paranoia that echoes the novelist’s own. To Wilson’s credit, he segues into a discussion of Sergius O’Shaughnessy and California in *The Deer Park* (1955), despite his own earlier disclaimer about not treating the latter novel at length.

As an aside, I must remark that no character in Mailer’s work is more shuffled about temporally than Sergius, who of course was a pilot in the Korean War before gravitating to Desert D’Or, California. When Mailer produced *The Deer Park: A Play* in New York in 1967, many critics assumed that Sergius’s war experience with napalming civilians was a blatantly cheap reference to Vietnam. Wilson, instead, describes him as a World War II pilot. This I will place in a minor file of errors Wilson makes (as do we all): Croft, not Red, kills the captured Japanese soldier in *Naked*, Hennessy is killed not by a grenade, but artillery shrapnel, etc. But these minor factual errors are negligible in light of the perceptions Wilson casts upon Mailer’s total body of work.

The end of Chapter Two on *Barbary Shore* is portentous, for it introduces the language and vision of Mailer’s most autobiographical novel, *An American Dream*: “Although the New York vernacular is only one of several regional dialects in Mailer’s fiction, it is the most recurrent, and the most identifiable with the man himself.” Thus, In his third chapter, on *An American Dream* (1965), Wilson continues in his distinction between a Brooklyn and Manhattan vision and idiom, and pays the usual attention to the distinction between *The American Dream* and *An American Dream*. I won’t belabor that dead horse further here. But Wilson is forceful and largely correct (if a bit harsh) in his judgement that “In *An American Dream*, Mailer foregrounds his life, as Whitman had, through an inflated version of his life in the character of Rojack.” Wilson goes on to insist that “The dream of the title is Mailer’s dream world.” and that this explains the use of the indefinite article in the title. The implication, as Wilson catalogs parallels between Mailer and Rojack, plus “fantasies” by and “salutations” of the latter, is that the book is an exercise in self-aggrandizement or, insofar as Wilson sees it as a parallel to the 1960 stabbing of Adele Morales, “This lends the novel a defiant spirit rather than a mood of expiation.” Further, in comparing Rojack to Camus’ Meursault and Didion’s Maria Wyeth, Wilson claims that “Rojack is not presented with their general indifference. Mailer pleads not for readers’ understand-

ing but rather their approval of his protagonist's stance, morality and acts." This claim of authorial intention is a tall order to substantiate, especially in light of the eloquently disarming 1998 statement by Mailer, "The Shadow of the Crime: A Word from the Author," in *The Time of Our Time*.

As to the language of *Dream*, Wilson fairly quotes John Aldridge and Richard Poirier in their position that the novel "represented a landmark in American literary speech," then disagrees strongly with them. He accuses Mailer of "anti-intellectualism," compares aspects of *Dream* to "a 1960s b-movie or comic strip," and concludes that it "devises an interior universe, at an advanced level, where nothing is valued beyond the self, nothing applies." Although he quotes Mailer as calling *Dream* his best work "sentence for sentence" in *The Spooky Art* (2003), Wilson discounts this assessment. Needless to say, I and many others would strongly concur with Mailer.

In Chapter Four on *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (1967), "Mailer's most Freudian novel," Wilson explains how "Mailer characterises a lawless hunting trip as an alternative to anarchic warfare," and calls the novel "Mailer's version of the virgin land reduced to a wasteland." Drawing parallels to Thoreau, Horatio Alger, and most importantly, William Burroughs, Wilson draws the usual conclusions about Mailer's intent to discredit the political reasoning behind the Vietnam War. As to language, he deals with D.J.'s black and Texan alter egos, and concludes that his "speech is a hybrid of well-defined regional voices and technologies." He considers the intentional disregard for conventional grammar and syntax "an act of literary anarchism." As few would disagree, he perceives that "Mailer considers the hunt and war as obscene, and as a consequence, aligns rather than differentiates obscene-war from obscene-language." In short, the chapter cogently recapitulates the most common readings of the novel, but breaks little new ground.

In Chapter Five, *The Armies of the Night* (1968), Wilson points out the obvious indebtedness in point of view to Henry Adams and more strikingly refers to Mailer's "literary nod to Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*." He goes on to analyze the style Mailer chose for *Armies*:

... he began to structure inordinately long sentences ... containing clause after clause after clause [which] are more in keeping, however, with the spirit of the event than with any direct literary predecessor. They are improvised, spontaneous outpourings, a marriage of metaphors, formal images and adjectival pile-up.

The technique is again a manifestation of Mailer's existential outlook.

Making the easy segue from *Armies* to *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* (1968) in Chapter Six, Wilson makes the unequivocal and certainly defensible statement that "Beyond any religious, philosophical or aesthetic standpoint, Norman Mailer is a political writer and political figure." After a brief, cogent recapitulation of the political contexts of the first two novels, he concludes that "The critical backlash against *Barbary Shore* and *The Deer Park* ... hastened Mailer's move from literature to politics." Wilson continues with a history of Mailer's political writings from *The Presidential Papers* (1963) through *Miami* and *Chicago* and *Saint George and the Godfather* (1972), giving him due credit for pioneering the New Journalism. Yet, true to his subtitle to Chapter Six: "Confessional Prose," he goes on to focus on this aspect of *Miami*, *Armies*, and *Advertisements for Myself* (1959). After drawing the obvious (and hardly new) parallel between the latter and Fitzgerald's "The Crack-Up," he makes some perceptive judgments on Mailer as confessional writer, as in this comparison of Mailer and Robert Lowell in *Armies*:

His confessional literature depended in part, as Lowell's poetry, on dissolving, through self-revelation, the boundaries between the public figure/public facade and the private person/private truth. Mailer's confessional voice, to a lesser degree than Lowell's ... sustained itself through the extent of his public stature. . .

Yet it is in his seventh chapter, on *Of a Fire on the Moon* (1971) that Wilson brings the vectors of several literary sub-genres together: the political, the confessional, the novelistic. To begin with, he sees *Armies*, *Miami* and *Fire* as a "trilogy" of "documentary novels." Despite Tom Wolfe's charges that Mailer concentrated on the external aspects of NASA's spectacular achievement and on their resonance within Mailer himself, rather than exploring "the points of view... of the astronauts themselves," (which, by the way, I believe he did), Wilson sees a major achievement here:

Of a Fire on the Moon marks another chapter in the history of American autobiography. [It] is second only, in respect of the depth of its autobiographical detail, to *The Armies of the Night* as a testament to Mailer's frontier-minded exploration of the self. . .

Wilson, who goes on to draw parallels to Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and yet again to *The Education of Henry Adams*, is clearly not slow to

praise Mailer any more than he is to denigrate him (as in the *Dream* chapter) but I am frankly surprised at the profound admiration expressed in this case, since *Fire* is, it seems to me, dwarfed by many of Mailer's other works. As to the language of *Fire*, Wilson feels that "Mailer's confidence in his use of an American vernacular marks a summit in *Of a Fire on the Moon*."

Yet it is on the heels of such praise, in the conclusion to Chapter Seven, that Wilson signals the disparagement he sees in Mailer's books of the 1970s, which he believes "clarify the change in his literary role, no longer a participant... in the history of his country, his political commitment... lessened, a sign of defeat, or apathy replacing energy... ."

And it is in Chapter Eight: *The Prisoner of Sex* (1971) that he begins to flesh out this judgment. If there is a chapter in this book, a critical opinion, a targeted text, on which I disagree with Wilson, it's on *The Prisoner of Sex*, second only to those on *An American Dream*. Despite Wilson's conviction that *Prisoner* signals the beginning of an artistic decline by Mailer in the 1970s, despite his assumption that it exemplifies "Mailer's narcissism," I remain convinced that the book is an eloquent statement of Mailer's commitment to the irrational but soul-sustaining magic in heterosexual love, presented with frequent self-deprecating humor. Consider this passage regarding "The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm."

What of his own poor experience? All lies?... If there were women who came as if lightning bolts had flung their bodies across the bed, were there not also women who came with the gentlest squeeze of the deepest walls of the vagina, women who came every way, even women who seemed never to come yet claimed they did, and never seemed to suffer? Yes, and women who purred as they came and women who screamed, women who came as if a finger had been tickling them down a mile-long street and women who arrived with the firm frank avowal of a gentleman shaking hands, yes, if women came in every variety ...even the most modest of men could know something of that—then how to account for the declaration that vaginal orgasm was myth Women, went the cry, liberate yourselves from the tyranny of the vagina. It is nothing but a flunky to the men.

Wilson, too, sees the “self-lacerating humour” evident in *Prisoner*, but dismisses it as a calculated tactic to “[gain] the reader’s confidence.” Yet as to the language of the book, “Even those who opposed Mailer’s standing in *The Prisoner of Sex* agreed that the prose, to use a term applied repeatedly, ‘sung.’”

Ultimately, Wilson’s problem with *Prisoner* may lie in Mailer’s identification with Hemingway’s literary predilections, with the result that they both “glorify, in the cases of *The Fight* or *The [sic] Green Hills of Africa*, the place men could occupy over women in their homeland.” and the consequent creation of a “male vernacular.” But even here, Wilson looks ahead to the great work to be discussed in his next chapter: “... Hemingway coveted an authentic speech which Mailer later found in his narration for *The Executioner’s Song*, a prose that does not break with the spoken word of the working man or working woman...” In Chapter Nine, Wilson concurs with virtually every literate person (including the Pulitzer Prize Committee) that *The Executioner’s Song* is to be acknowledged as a masterpiece, bringing a close to Mailer’s works of the 1970s:

After ten consecutive autobiographical works, Mailer rid his prose of every discernable feature of his earlier narrative presence. His previous voices, idiom, favoured vocabulary and polemical strategies disappear in *The Executioner’s Song*. He is neither a character, nor a thinly veiled narrator.

Another issue discussed in this chapter is the comparison between *Executioner* and *In Cold Blood*: “Capote charged Mailer with having ‘stolen’ his non-fiction novel technique ...” and Capote may have incorporated a greater implied judgment on the death penalty itself. Ultimately, however, Wilson lauds the fact that “Mailer’s lean prose is a representation of the minimalist, purifying tendencies in American society. . .”

In Chapter Ten, Wilson deals with *Harlot’s Ghost*, the massive novel which Mailer considered his best (a judgment which I frequently disputed with him in favor of *An American Dream*). It is clear to Wilson, as to everyone (including Mailer) that the book is flawed in its very lack of completion and hence resolution. The novel grew out of a 1983 trip to Russia to gather material for a contracted autobiography. It comes as no surprise to anyone who knew Mailer’s insistence on changing direction as his subconscious led him, that the novel rather than the autobiography resulted.

With the exception of few critical studies (Michael Glenday’s among them), there is little available as yet in the way of extended analysis of

Harlot's Ghost. Wilson sees it, since it is narrated/written in defiance of Harry Hubbard's CIA contract, as "[defining] itself as a defiant literature." Further, as in the cases of the Bible and the Torah, the epic-sized manuscript is the word of the ruling powers in the universe, a novel of the political right, an authoritarian literature, produced for an obedient faithful.

Wilson points out that given the omissions left to be dealt with in the projected second volume: seventeen years to cover, incorporating the unification of the Omega and Alpha files, Watergate, Harlot's crippling rock-climbing accident, Hubbard's role in Vietnam and so on, the book as envisioned was "potentially veering to an unmarketable two-thousand pages." Accepting, as we all must, the structural limitations of the novel, Wilson again presents useful perceptions about the language of the book: a "New England vernacular" reminiscent of Fitzgerald, "steeped in English literary mannerisms."

In his Conclusion, Wilson summarizes what he has repeatedly proven throughout his close critical study of Mailer's work: that the major historical events and the various vernaculars of America have provided the novelist with his subject matter and language, and above all with the inspiration, rage, love and language of an American: "Mailer has an American writer's sense of self—the song of the self as a verdict on the condition on national life. To intervene, to debate, to channel the national life ... is the source of his success in writing 'America.'"

I would agree, and add that Wilson has succeeded in illuminating this, the sometimes ineffable quality of Norman Mailer's American identity. This book, then, is a welcome addition to the existing body of Mailer criticism.