

NORMAN MAILER TODAY

JAMES TOBACK

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IN THE LATE 50'S, NORMAN MAILER'S REPUTATION still stood on *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), neither of his subsequent efforts, *Barbary Shore* (1951) and *The Deer Park* (1955), having quite convinced Mailer or anyone else that he was the major novelist he insisted he could become. By his own later account, his head was leaden with seconal, benzedrene, and marijuana: a sense of what he himself has termed passivity, stupidity, and dissipation threatened to overcome him. Only gradually, after returning to New York from Paris and giving up drugs and cigarettes, did he begin to feel that he could write once again. Then, in 1957, Mailer produced "The White Negro," an essay which restored his faith in his literary future and presaged the forms and directions that it would take.

Mailer has always professed an umbilical attachment to the Left, but since "The White Negro" the drift has been unmistakably from political radicalism toward spiritual radicalism, from an obsession with Marx to an obsession with Reich, from economic revolution to apocalyptic orgasm, from the proletariat to heroes, demons, boxers, tycoons, bitches, murderers, suicides, pimps, and lovers. And correspondingly, concern with extreme psychic states has become more important to his work than concern with extreme political states (the center having always been a bore for Mailer in all its manifestations).

It was not that eschatology *replaced* politics, but rather that it came to constitute a new means of diagnosis, both of personal and social plague, and that it promised answers to the crisis in which both the individual and the nation were entrapped. The criteria by which the health of a particular man

(the organ) were to be assessed—his complexity, his bravery, his daring, his capacity for love—were essentially the same as those which measured the salubrity of America (the organism). Similarly, the disease which threatened both individual and state (expressed at once literally and metaphorically as cancer) evinced identical symptoms: mediocrity, uniformity, repression, and security.

Assuming the voice of religious physician, the Mailer of the 60's reveals a vision of malady and possible restoration that is profoundly radical; at the same time the terminology and conceptual foundation of his homily are Puritan to the core. God and the Devil, Good and Evil, Heaven and Hell, History and Eternity are as inescapably real for Mailer as they were for Jonathan Edwards—and he has repeatedly asserted that such ultimate questions are proper and indeed necessary preoccupations for the contemporary novelist. Many would dissent, but even if we do look to the novelist for salvation, can we look to Mailer? There is, at least on the surface, an insistent buffoonery to his self-projected public image that can make it difficult to take him seriously, let alone to believe he can show us the way to redemption. Yet even a cursory examination of his work suggests that he is justified in claiming to be an intellectual adventurer of broad dimension. If he sometimes seems to be more familiar with *Captain Blood* than *Middlemarch*, he nevertheless possesses an uncanny ability to recall and make use of what he has read. If he is sometimes guileful, more often he strives for complete honesty and the subject of his work. If his thinking is occasionally wild and unsound, he is also capable of rigorously logical intellection. And if his emphasis on scatology is at times repugnant, his undeniable charisma excites interest in practically everything he writes or says or does.

Consequently, when a new work by Mailer appears, we turn to it eagerly—expectant and hopeful—especially when, as in the case of his latest novel, *Why Are We in Vietnam?*,¹ the new work also represents a new literary departure. By itself perhaps the most ambitious and the most difficult effort of his career, *Why Are We in Vietnam?* is also a crystallization and an extension of Mailer's other major productions of the 60's. To do justice to its complexity, to make it more accessible, and to place it properly in the perspective of Mailer's development as a writer, one must first look back to *The Presidential Papers*, *An American Dream*, *Cannibals and Christians*, and the dramatic adaptation of *The Deer Park*.

With *Advertisements for Myself* (1959), Mailer showed that whatever

stature he might or might not achieve as a novelist, he was certainly becoming a major essayist. This impression was confirmed by *The Presidential Papers* (1963), in which Mailer took it upon himself to indicate to John F. Kennedy the brave new paths he must follow in order to achieve greatness as a President, heroism as a man, and salvation for his country. In Mailer's view, the only kind of hero who can appear in contemporary American life is the "existential" hero, a man who lives—in his thoughts as in his actions—by daring the unknown. On one occasion, when discussing symptoms of the national disease, Mailer remarks that no one in America is capable of tolerating a question that cannot be answered in twenty seconds. And he finds deeds courageous (and hence potentially heroic) only if there is death, or at least danger, as a possible consequence.

Heroism is the victory over Dread, the sensation that haunts not only *The Presidential Papers*, but the whole of Mailer's work in the 60's. Although doubtless a natural threat to man from the earliest days of his consciousness, Dread has become rather fashionable (to talk about if not to feel) in recent years. It has perhaps been best described by Tennessee Williams. After indicating that the war, the atom bomb, and terminal disease are not really to the point, Williams writes:

These things are parts of the visible, sensible phenomena of every man's experience or knowledge, but the true sense of dread is not a reaction to anything . . . strictly, materially *knowable*. But rather it's a kind of spiritual intuition of something almost too incredible and shocking to talk about, which underlies the whole so-called thing.

Either one knows what Williams is talking about or one doesn't, and Williams implies that only artists and madmen do. Mailer, however, sees no one safe from the possibility of confrontation with the abyss, and he seems to feel a moral obligation to awaken us all to the danger. All roads lead to it, and it is only through the unmanly deceptions of right-wing politics, logical positivism, linguistic analysis, popular journalism, and Freudian psychology that "the terror which lies beneath our sedition [is hidden from us]." The vigilantes of the right wing, like the Un-American Activities Committee, the F.B.I., and the Birch Society, seek to transform metaphysical Dread into Red dread, to give internal emptiness the tangible outer shape of Com-

munism. And Freudians tell us that Dread is merely a recurrence of the fear we feel as helpless infants. But Mailer, like the latter-day hell-fire Puritan preacher he is, asserts that the horrible intimation of Dread is that “we are going to die badly and suffer some unendurable stricture of eternity.” This is no metaphor; it is an expression of Mailer’s belief in the literal existence of hell.

The Maileresque hero—suspecting that his Dread is a real premonition of the agony that awaits him after death, an agony that can be averted only by daring death to come sooner, to come right away—will always put up an ante that amounts to more than he can afford to lose. Here, for example, is Mailer on Hemingway’s suicide:

How likely that he had a death of the most awful proportions within him. He was exactly the one to know that the cure for such disease is to risk dying many a time . . .

I wonder if, morning after morning, Hemingway did not go downstairs secretly in the dawn, set the base of his loaded shotgun on the floor, put the muzzle into his mouth, and press his thumb to the trigger . . . He can move the trigger up to a point [of no man’s land] and yet not fire the gun . . . Perhaps he tried just such a reconnaissance one hundred times before, and felt the touch of health return . . . If he did it well, he could come close to death without dying.

That Hemingway eventually died as a result of his gambling with life is not so important as that he grew by it. By challenging fate he was saving his soul; by refusing to give into his dread of death, he was making whatever life was left for him more noble; and he was fortifying his spirit so that he might transcend the eternity of hell.

If the individual can save himself from madness and the abyss only by ceasing to repress even his most hidden and dangerous impulses and by flirting with death, so, too, with the nation as a whole. Devoted to the illusion of safety and security, it is condemned to mass insanity and an ignoble end, unless it redeems itself by immediate embarkation on a course of “existential” politics. This would involve a complete remolding of national objectives, not only on the large issues involving danger and death, survival or extinction, but also on less apocalyptic matters like urban housing.

For if America is not already incurably insane, she is certainly in a state of plague. Mailer sees the symptoms everywhere: in architecture, frozen food, television commercials, sleeping pills, sexual excess, sexual repression, the deterioration of the language. One has only to look at the kind of people who regulate and set the tone of the nation. Mailer lists them: politicians, medicos, policemen, professors, priests, rabbis, ministers, psychoanalysts, builders, and executives. It has not always been so:

[Once] America was the land where people still believed in heroes: George Washington, Billy the Kid; Lincoln, Jefferson, Mark Twain, Jack London, Hemingway, Joe Louis, Dempsey, Gentleman Jim; American believed in athletes, rum-runners, aviators, even lovers. It was a country which had grown by the leap of one hero past another.

Now, more than ever before, America needed a hero. Was he Norman Mailer? Not yet. For the time being Mailer's faith was in Kennedy, the inspiration for the essay, "Superman Comes to the Supermarket," in which Mailer had expressed his faith in Kennedy's capacity to lead the country in "the recovery of its imagination, its pioneer lust for the unexpected and the incalculable." And yet no sooner had Kennedy won the election than Mailer was possessed by "a sense of awe," an intuition that he had betrayed himself, and, as a result, he began to follow Kennedy's career obsessively, as if he, Norman Mailer, personally "were responsible and guilty for all which was bad . . . and potentially totalitarian." There are suggestions in this abrupt reversal of sentiment of three forces at work in Mailer: serious concern for the fate of the spiritual and political ideals he cherishes; a histrionic penchant for breast-beating; an almost petulant envy of Kennedy's power and possibility, an irrational and vast extension of the simple literary envy he occasionally felt for James Jones.

To be sure, the heroism of which Mailer speaks is a cure which both individual and nation might decide is too hazardous and too painful to undertake. The patient is apt to protest that he does not really feel so sick as Mailer tells him he is and that even if he were, he would rather fade gradually into death than risk the unknown under surgery. If it is the "Establishment" that objects in these terms, Mailer regards it as plain cowardice, the cardinal sin, which should be avoided even if the strictures of eternity were

not waiting as retribution. But with minority groups, the Negro in particular, his urgency is softened. He understands that it would be no small act of presumption on his part to demand that the Negro, who has lived with violence all his life, surrender the goals of security and stability.

The demand for courage may have been exorbitant. Now as the Negro was beginning to come into the white man's world, he wanted the logic of the white man's world: annuities, mental hygiene, sociological jargon, committee solutions for the ills of the breast. He was sick of a whore's logic and a pimp's logic.

And yet the paradox here is only too obvious to Mailer. Believing that he must turn his back on the values of the ghetto, the Negro seeks recovery through assimilation into the moribund world of white liberal America. In reality, he is abandoning a way of life which is founded on those extreme states of human feeling and action which for Mailer constitute the only true possibility for spiritual rehabilitation. Mailer regrets that

there is no one to tell [the Negro] it would be better to keep the psychology of the streets than to cultivate the contradictory desire to be . . . a great, healthy, mature, autonomous, related, integrated individual.

This problem is crystallized in the eleventh (and perhaps best) essay in *The Presidential Papers*, "Death," which focuses on the proceedings before, during, and immediately after the first Floyd Patterson-Sonny Liston heavyweight championship fight. Most Negroes wanted Patterson to win, a fact which Mailer explains by identifying Patterson as the symbol of security. Patterson was polite, quiet, humble, diligent, and Catholic; he was, in short, "White." Liston, on the other hand, personified "the old torment," the darker, dangerous side of life that the Negro had known only too well. Liston was surly, unpredictable, mob affiliated, and an ex-convict; he was "black."

Most Negroes, then, wanted to see Liston beaten by Patterson for much the same reason that they would not react warmly to proposals that they seek out violence, danger, and the unknown. But if Mailer cannot blame them, he is nevertheless distressed by the insidious assimilation of Negroes (and Jews as well) into Anglo-Saxon America. For a Negro or a Jew, to stifle the rich unique-

ness of his potential contribution to American life is to betray himself and to withhold the transfusion that might save this bloodless land.

Mailer likes Patterson—his loneliness, his pride, his persistent struggle against the odds. But just as the Fascist Croft had stolen Mailer's interest from the liberal Hearn in *The Naked and the Dead*, so Mailer's real fascination here is not with Patterson but with Liston, whose inexorable toughness makes him the kind of Negro other Negroes refer to (sometimes in fear, sometimes in praise, sometimes in disapproval, but always in awe) as "a *bad* cat." Liston takes on mythic proportions in Mailer's mind, a mind which by nature tends to intensify, to exaggerate, and to think in terms of extremes. He is "near to beautiful" and one can think of "very few men who have beauty." But that is in no way all.

Liston was voodoo, Liston was magic . . . Liston was the secret hero of every man who had ever given mouth to a final curse against the dispositions of the Lord and made a pact with Black magic. Liston was Faust.

He was the kind of Negro that any white man who imagined himself hip would have to come to terms with—either as model or as rival. Predictably, Mailer chooses the latter course, and does battle with Liston. Not physical battle, but psychic warfare that could have erupted into violence.

Liston's incredibly fast knockout of Patterson left Mailer in a state of feverish frustration, a condition aggravated by a conscience which taunted him for his own recent failures—for too much alcohol and too little discipline. It was out of this sense of despair and defeat that another of Mailer's obsessions was born.

I began . . . to see myself as some sort of center about which all that had been lost must now rally. It was not simple egomania nor simple drunkenness, it was not even simple insanity: it was a kind of metaphorical leap across a gap. To believe the impossible may be won creates a strength from which the impossible may be attacked.

The essence of Mailer's claim was that he was "the only man in the country" who could build the gate of a second Patterson-Liston fight into the pro-

portions of an epic. The insistence with which he promoted his proposal the next day, the rude insults he hurled at Liston, and his petulant refusal to leave the dais (where he did not belong) all indicate that what Mailer wanted above everything was some kind of direct confrontation with Liston, some chance to prove to himself that he was still a possible hero, that he was larger than the myth into which his own mind had transformed the new heavy-weight champion.

After the series of humiliations which gave reporters, detectives, bystanders, and Liston himself ample opportunity to laugh at him, Mailer finally got his chance. While obviously intoxicated, he approached Liston.

"You called me a bum." I said . . . "Well, you are a bum," he said. "Everybody is a bum. I'm a bum too. It's just that I'm a bigger bum than you are." He stuck out his hand. "Shake, bum," he said Could it be, was I indeed a bum? I shook his hand . . . "Listen," said I, leaning my head closer, speaking from the corner of my mouth as if I were whispering in a clinch, "I'm pulling this caper for a reason. I know a way to build the next fight from a \$200,000 dog in Miami to a \$2,000,000 gate in New York." . . . "Say," said Liston, "that last drink really set you up. Why don't you go and get me a drink, you bum."

"I'm not your flunky," I said. It was the first punch I'd sent home. He loved me for it. The hint of corny old darky laughter, cottonfield giggles, peeped out a moment from his throat. "Oh, sheet, man!," said the wit in his eyes. And for the crowd watching, he turned and announced at large, "I like this guy."

Three phrases in this most revealing passage are particularly significant. First, Mailer views the dialogue in the terms of a fight; he speaks to Liston as if they were "in a clinch." Secondly, Mailer's "first punch" ("I'm not your flunky") is delivered while he is behind on points and trapped in a corner. When he finally makes this move, he risks taking a (literal) punch in the mouth from Liston, who is not, one imagines, in the habit of being told off in public by inebriated reporters. Then, there is Liston's remarkable reaction ("I like this guy") to Mailer's thrust, a totally unexpected profession of feeling for the writer that amounts to admiration, and the even more remarkable response that Liston's concession generates in Mailer's mind. For Mailer, Liston's grunt

becomes “a chuckle of corny old darky laughter, cottonfield giggles”: not only has Mailer taken final honors in his combat with the “Supreme Spade,” but he has metaphorically reduced him to his (ancestrally) original condition of servitude. From king of the Northern urban jungle where the white man is afraid to meet him on the street at night, Liston has been deported to a Southern cotton plantation where he knows his place and recognizes his master.

Liston is at once Mailer himself and Mailer’s alter ego. When he is the latter, Mailer becomes Patterson: “The fighters spoke as well from the countered halves of my nature.” Mailer even conjectures that perhaps Patterson is God and Liston the Devil, an idea which emanates from a conviction that every man is a potential agent for either of the two great warring cosmic powers, and that by one’s actions one affects the outcome in their ultimate struggle for control of a Manichean universe. On that night in Chicago, Liston, in his demonic role, “had shown that the Lord was dramatically weak.” Was it possible that Mailer’s press-conference comeback had restored some of the Deity’s strength? No negative answer could be given with full assurance.

In *An American Dream* (1964)—his first novel since *The Deer Park*—Mailer is again concerned with the themes that inform the essays: danger, death, and heroism. The pattern of the novel, one might say, is designed on intercourse—with God, with the Devil, with voices from the inner recesses of the mind, with the vagina, and with the anus: intercourse leading to oceanic climax, coming variously in waves of love, lust, or pure aestheticism. The center of all this activity, the narrator and hero, is Stephen Richards Rojack, the embodiment of Mailer’s unrealized fantasies and of his radical Puritanism as well. A Harvard graduate *summa cum laude*, he is also a war hero (“the one intellectual in America’s history to win a distinguished service cross”), an ex-congressman, a television personality, a professor of existentialist psychology, an author, a boxer, and an unsurpassed stud. He lives in contemporary New York amid people who, in Mailer’s view, personify the cancerous totalitarianism of our age.

The action is generated by Rojack’s murder of his wife, Deborah, a great bitch, beautiful, extremely rich, and secretly involved in international intrigue as a spy. The love he once felt for her has withered into a sense of dependence so paralyzing that she has now become the very structure of his ego. Without her, he fears he “might topple like clay.” In such a condition

Rojack, who expresses Mailer's eschatological vision, knows he is unprepared to face eternity. The first step toward reconstruction of self is to exorcise the demon that possesses him—and to exorcise Deborah is to kill her. The act of strangulation is committed with sexual passion, which is true to Mailer's insistence that sex, love, and murder are inseparable and cathartic:

Some blackbiled lust, some desire to go ahead (and kill her) not unlike the instant one comes in a woman against her cry that she is without protection came bursting with rage from out of me and . . . crack I choked her harder . . . and *crack* I gave her payment.

With Deborah's death begins the arduous process of Rojack's rebirth; he realizes that if murder is sometimes necessary, it is never simple. The gods, like furies, haunt him; he is acutely conscious of everything he thinks or says or does, for now cowardice or weakness or smallness will bring swift retribution—Dread, insanity, and the abyss. To strengthen himself, and to find, once again, something he can honestly call love are the ends of Rojack's quest, but fulfillment of it and freedom from these new furies can be attained only through heroism, through seeking danger and daring death.

. . . I believed that God was not love but courage. Love can come only as a reward . . . A voice said in my mind: "That which you fear most is what you must do."

The very phrasing of the passage is related to the nature of the punishment that will accrue if the command goes unheeded. Rojack's mental life is split into a "voice" and "mind," a separation dangerously close to the empty panic of schizophrenia.

But if madness looms as the penalty for prudence and cowardice (Mailer uses the two as almost indistinguishable), it is also possible that Dread will overwhelm even the bold Promethean. Rojack knows that "if man wished to steal the secret of the gods . . . they would defend themselves and destroy whichever man came too close." With so narrow a chance of escape from insanity and an eternity in the abyss, suicide quite naturally presents itself as an alternative. What is to hold one back?

Despite all his frenetic activity, it is not merely a sensual lust for experi-

ence that keeps Rojack going. On the contrary, while his senses are irrepressibly active (especially his sense of smell), his mind persists relentlessly in observation, commentary, and criticism. Any physical sensation is immediately subject to conscious analysis. In Rojack, sex is the effort of the body to rape the mind, to pulsate in waves of ecstasy transcending consciousness. But even here he fails. Whether it is with the German maid, Ruta, or with the Southern chanteuse, Cherry, Rojack's concern is with power rather than with pleasure, with the psychic domination he achieves after *her* orgasm rather than with the physical rapture of his own. Like his creator, Rojack is far more a Puritan than a hedonist; life is struggle rather than joy.

So the question remains: why go on? It is true that Rojack puts his life on the line more than once. The murder of his wife, the competition with mafia goons, the insults to a former boxing champion in an unfriendly bar, and, especially, the nocturnal walk on the parapet of a windy terrace thirty stories above the ground—all could easily have resulted in his death. But rather than misguided suicide attempts, these acts are a part of Rojack's supreme effort to prepare himself for death. The goal in life is finally religious—to make oneself as fit as possible to meet the unknown after life is done, to face the judgment of eternity; and Rojack is possessed by the faith of the gambler. Like a poker player who is convinced that his next hand is bound to be the lucky one, Rojack acts on the assumption that the longer he lives, the more heroic he may become.

And the assumption is not unfounded, for Rojack's heroism is boundless. He argues with demonic voices and then dispels them, he outwits and outfights his indomitable tycoon father-in-law, and, above all, he humiliates and beats up a sexually magnetic Negro hero, Shago Martin. Not only does Rojack cause Cherry to have her first sexual explosion, after Shago had failed with her for months, but through a combination of psychic intuition and physical power he changes a situation where Shago is standing over him with a knife to one in which he is standing over Shago, who is now writhing pulp at the bottom of a staircase (and all in the space of ten minutes).

Practically everything Rojack says or does suggests parallels to his creator's personal life, and the episode with Shago Martin, recalling the Mailer-Liston confrontation, is perhaps the richest example. If Liston was a large part of Mailer, Shago's ode to himself is easily applicable to the dark sides of both Rojack and Mailer.

“I’m a lily-white devil . . . I’m just the future, in love with myself, that’s the future. I got twenty faces, I talk the tongues, I’m a devil . . . I’m cut off from my own lines, I try to speak from my heart and it gets snatched.”

If Mailer’s encounter with Liston faintly suggested repressed homosexuality transformed into manly fortitude, Rojack’s encounter with Shago positively smacks of it. Like Shago, he has Cherry, and his immediate concern after intercourse is in comparison. He can hardly hide his elation when she implies that he was better, a predictable response when one recalls his reaction the night before to Cherry’s paean to Shago’s sexual prowess. Her emphasis on the word “stud” had made Rojack uneasy.

The word went in like a blow to the soft part of my belly. There was something final in the verdict as if there were a sexual round robin where the big people played. All the big Negroes and the big whites.

Like Mailer, Rojack lives his life as if it were some dark experiment which has gradually but relentlessly gained the upper hand so that he is free to act only within its prescribed limits. Again like Mailer, Rojack is paying the price for a lifelong habit of thinking in metaphor; image (like God and the Devil, Heaven and Hell) has become reality, and that reality has become a master demanding undivided attention. It is a reality of dreams, and the dreams in *An American Dream* are endless: the sexual dreams of Don Juan, the Alger dream of the self-made man, the outsider’s dream of the inside, the Mafia’s dream of money and power, the square’s dream of the life of the hipster, and the hipster’s dream of death. None of these dreams has turned entirely into nightmare, but each has gone sour, like the soul of the nation which fabricated them. But the saddest dream of all is Stephen Rojack’s (and perhaps Mailer’s) dream of sanity.

I was caught. I wanted to escape from that intelligence which let me know of murders in one direction and conceive of [love] from the other, I wanted to be free of magic, the tongue of the devil, the dread of the Lord, I wanted to be some sort of rational man again . . . But I could not move.

But what if, unlike Mailer and Rojack, one is *not* obsessed with psychopathic extremes? What if one's patience expires at exhibitions of braggadocio? What if one appreciates wit (of which there is some) but loves humor (of which there is none)? Probably one would call *An American Dream* a joke, and a bad joke at that. The infantile demand for intermediate and complete attention; the insistence on being taken seriously, literally, and on his own terms at all times; the inability to treat his agony with even a suggestion of laughter or a trace of irony; the sloppy inconsistency of much of the dialogue; and, finally, the sheer loudness that informs the whole novel, a tone alternating between agitation and hysteria—all this works to tire, frustrate, and, at times, infuriate even the most sympathetic reader.

And yet somehow exasperation yields to the suspicion that Mailer's is a mind which understands as much about the quality of contemporary American life as any now active, a mind which could well represent the last intellectually significant and articulate thrust of an eschatological and religious fervor that may be sorely missed once it is gone. So one is willing to indulge Mailer further, even to thank him once again. And one is willing to accept Rojack's vision of himself as a fair description of Mailer:

I had leverage; I was one of the more active figures of the city—no one could be certain finally that nothing large would come to me.

In 1960 there was reason to hope for a dramatic rebirth of energy and heroism; even the darkest passages of *The Presidential Papers* were balanced by intimations that America was not yet doomed. A man could function in society and still find opportunity to grow. By 1966, dream had at last soured into nightmare. *Cannibals and Christians*, a collection of essays, "poems" (or, more accurately, epigrams and graffiti), and interviews (both real and imaginary), is a sermon whose vision of hell has become dire and inevitable. From Mailer's pulpit comes a most disconcerting premonition:

The sense of a long last night over civilization is back again; it has perhaps not been here so intensely in thirty years, not since the Nazis were prospering, but it is coming . . . The world is entering a time of plague.

Totalitarianism has suffocated individuality; the Hilton in San Francisco is emulated before the Plaza in New York; housing projects look like nurseries and nurseries look like hospitals; appliances are plastic rather than metal; vile bully tactics in Vietnam have developed from simple occupation of Southeast Asia; the psychotic has taken over from the psychopath; pornography has gained another step on sexuality. In a word, Lyndon Johnson has replaced John Kennedy.

Johnson, Mailer tells us, is the archetypically alienated figure—a fact which can be observed in his prose (perhaps “the worst ever written by any political leader anywhere”), in his boorish manners, in his deceitfulness, in his voracious ego, and in his almost arrogant lack of style. If a President has a profound effect on the quality of life during his era—and Mailer is convinced that he does—then hope is indeed dim. And the consequences may be far worse than possible loss of prestige, power, or land; for there is the unknown to face after death, and the possibility that there is no absolution for cowardly sins.

But Mailer’s exhortations against the insanities of the age of Johnson do not come from one whose own tensions—between radicalism and Puritanism, heroism, and buffoonery, the playboy’s life and the intellectual’s vocation—are anywhere near control. And there is a further complication in Mailer’s complex personality, an unmistakably reactionary streak, not unrelated in impulse to his intense religiosity, which challenges his natural and professed political radicalism. Apart from the kind of conservatism that is common property among many contemporary radicals—a quasi-isolationism that urges America to terminate involvement in practically all foreign countries and a profound distrust of the liberal establishment—Mailer holds positions on matters not directly political which fall neatly into line with the conservative spirit (he is, for example, strongly opposed to birth control and abortion, and he speaks of homosexuality as a “vice”). But two pieces of evidence (both from the essay on the 1964 Republican Convention) are particularly striking. First, Mailer confesses to a buried urge to see Barry Goldwater elected:

I knew Goldwater could win because something in me leaped out at the thought; a part of me, a devil, wished to take that choice.

Secondly, Mailer's ambivalence toward Negroes, manifested earlier only in the individual cases of Sonny Liston and Shago Martin, is now explicitly broadened. His reaction to James Baldwin's suggestion that there may be no remission for the white man's sins against the Negro is violent:

I had to throttle an impulse to . . . call Baldwin, and say, "You get this, baby. There's a shit storm coming like nothing you ever knew. So ask yourself if what you desire is for the white to kill every black so that there be total remission of guilt in your black soul."

If the relief of such tensions and conflicts and the consequent fortification of the self can come only from bold action, then Mailer's primary means of personal salvation lies in his work. It is in the very act of creating the artistic sermons which he claims will show us the way to redemption that Mailer redeems himself. His influence has given rise to several "cults." At one extreme there is a segment of the underground hipster community, closely involved with drugs, which worships him as the high priest of God and Sex. At the other end is that increasingly large group of liberal and radical intellectuals, centered in New York and comprised of such critics as Norman Podhoretz, Steven Marcus, and Richard Poirier who see in Mailer, as Marcus once put it, the embodiment of extraordinary literary talent, personal honesty and loyalty, and penetrating social criticism. And yet, in the last analysis, Mailer's influence is limited, for the Word has hardly reached, let alone changed, the heart of the land he is trying to transform.

From the first three sermons of the 1960's, the congregation is likely to walk away interested and, sometimes, excited, rather than transformed. Entertainment overshadows eschatology. And in Mailer's fourth effort of the 60's, *The Deer Park*, a stage adaption of his novel of 1956, religion gives way completely to comedy (both intentional and unintentional).²

This is not to imply that Mailer has abandoned his urgent message; practically all his obsessions of the 60's are here: sex, love, lust, heroism, cowardice, power, God, and the Devil. If Mailer has added anything new to his philosophy, it lies in the expansion of his idea as sexual freedom and it is expressed through the pimp Marion Faye, who "follows sex to the end, turns queer, bangs dogs, and sniffs toes." But in the figure of Herman Teppis (or "H.T."), a Hollywood mogul in the tradition of Louis B. Mayer and Harry

Cohn, genuine humor replaces heavy rhetoric and caustic wit. In the desert of endless debates over who is—and who is not—a genius in bed, Teppis's pronouncements are oases.

You know what an artist is? He's a crook. They even got a Frenchman now, you know what, he picks people's pockets at society parties. They say he's the greatest writer in France. No wonder they need a dictator, those crazy French. I could never get along with the French.

But Mailer pays a price for his success in the comic mode. One laughs so hard at Teppis that one keeps right on laughing, even at the tortured, self-searching characters—spokesmen all for traditional Maileresque values—one is meant to take seriously. If there is a lesson to be learned from this play, it is that comedy may be suitable to many dramatic modes, including tragedy, but that it has no place at all in eschatological homily.

After a pop play perhaps one should have expected, or at least have been prepared for, a pop novel from Mailer's pen. Nevertheless, *Why Are We in Vietnam?* comes as a shock. Radical as the ideas contained in them may have been, Mailer's earlier novels were more or less conservative in form: except for *Barbary Shore*, they were all clearly in the mainstream of the realist-naturalist tradition. But in *Why Are We in Vietnam?* ordered syntax has yielded to the total liberation of the word; intricate plot structure has given way to hallucinatory fantasy; fully realized characters living in what we know as the real world have been replaced by the protean apparitions in Mailer's mind; the last trace of ratiocination has been obliterated by a relentless bombardment of sensual impressions and apocalyptic utterances. Dreiser and Farrell have disappeared in favor of Joyce, Faulkner, Burroughs, McLuhan, and Norman O. Brown.

At one point or another virtually every theory Mailer has ever had appears—but now with an important difference. Rather than preaching his messages baldly as in the past, Mailer drops them mockingly. And the mockery is directed both at himself and at those he would edify.

The world is going shazam, hahray harout, fart in my toot, air we breathe is the prez, present dent, and god has always wanted more from man than man has wished to give him. Zig a zig a zig. That is why we live in dread of god.

Even the seminal concept of Dread is translated into the pop language of rock-and-roll. A vast chasm of culture and sensibility separates the tone of Rojack's agonized monologues from the narrative voice of the present novel.

... Mr. Sender, who sends out that Awe and Dread is up on their back ... because they *alone*, man, you dig? They all *alone*, it's a fright wig, man, that Upper silence alone is enough to bugger you, whoo-ee.

Indeed, the very claim to a prophetic stance in *Why Are We in Vietnam?* is established in a similarly (and intentionally) ambiguous tone.

This is your own wandering troubadour brought right up to date, here to sell America its new handbook on how to live ... We're going to tell you what it's all about.

Although there is a bare minimum of dramatic tension or external conflict, *Why Are We in Vietnam?* has several "characters," each significant primarily on a symbolic plane. D.J. (Disc Jockey, Dr. Jekyll), the adolescent hero narrator of patrician Texas blood, is sometimes convinced that he is really a "Harlem Nigger," and since "there is no such thing as a totally false perception," perhaps he is. Not literally, of course, but rather in the same way that Mailer recognized Sonny Liston in himself and in the same way that the white hipster of "The White Negro" is, in his psychic makeup, black. If D.J. is the hipster, Rusty, his father, is the square, a corporation tycoon in Dallas—coarse, selfish, and, at heart, a coward. Tex (the Mr. Hyde to D.J.'s Dr. Jekyll) is part Indian, manly, bisexual, and the son of an undertaker.

The three go bear hunting in Alaska, but the most important action takes place in D.J.'s mind. At one point he has an urge to turn his gun on his father and "blast a shot, thump in his skull." Although he resists, he soon commits the act symbolically by contradicting his father's warning and courageously approaching a wounded bear, putting his life on the line, while his father lies hidden, waiting for the bear to become helpless before firing the fatal shot. Thus liberated from paternal authority, D.J. finds his instincts for love and battle shifted to Tex, D.J. encounters nakedly for the first time his other self. And through a mutual awareness of their mutual desire for

both intercourse and fratricide, D.J. and Tex finally achieve a sense of purification and personal integration.

... Tex Hyde ... was finally afraid to prong D.J., because D.J. once become a bitch would kill him, and D.J. breathing that in by the wide-awake of the dark with Aurora Borealis jumping to the beat of his heart knew he could make a try to prong Tex, there was a chance to get in and steal the iron from Texas' ass and put it on his own ... now it was there, murder between them under all friendship, for god was a beast, not a man, and god said, "Go out and kill—fulfill my will, go and kill," and they hung there each of them on the knife of the divide in all conflict of lust to own the other ... Killer brothers, owned by something, prince of darkness, lord of light, they did not know; they just knew that telepathy was on them, they had been touched forever by the North and each bit a drop of blood from his own finger and touched them across and met blood to blood ...

In one eternal moment the Manichean polarities that have obsessed Mailer are at last synthesized—God and the Devil, heaven and hell, nature and man, Negro and white, Dallas and Harlem, phallus and anus.

But why *are* we in Vietnam? What relation does the title have to D.J., Tex, Rusty, bear-hunting, Harlem, Dallas, liberated syntax, or Maileresque eschatology? In the strictest sense, nothing at all. But in a broader, metaphysical sense, the title can be explained as another urgent warning to America. We are in Vietnam because we, as a nation, are going, or have already gone, insane. Mailer's development from politics to meta-politics is complete. The world—and especially America—is now viewed as an expression of Mailer's own most extreme longings and fantasies. Subject and object, chaos and order, internal imagination and external reality are united in a fusion of creator and creation. In an ultimate sense Mailer is claiming not only *relation to* America but *identity with* her. It is likely that he has himself in mind when he writes of Rusty:

His secret is that he sees himself as one of the pillars of the firmament, yeah, man—he reads the world's doom in his own fuckup. If he is less great than God intended him to be, then America is in Trouble.

One cannot help wondering whether *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, unruly and overwhelming, is not at least as much a symptom of our “Trouble” as a cure for it.

Throughout the past decade Mailer has made the world of the hipster the stuff of his sermons—novels, essays, and plays—as well as the style of his personal life. He calls it “a muted cool religious revival,” and a better description (at least of his *intentions*) would be hard to find. He is Zarathustra coming down from the mountain with his vision of the hero; he is Dostoevsky reminding us that “God and the Devil are fighting, and the battleground is the heart of man!”; he is a Puritan minister informing us that pain may be good, for to suffer is to be given the opportunity to grow and prepare for the mystery of death and the perils of hell; he is a preacher frustrated by his congregation’s blind faith in innocence at a time in history when innocence is not only a lie but a crime; he is a seer trying to jar complacent men into an awareness of the despair that lies beneath their conventions; he is Toynbee telling us that if a civilization stagnates, it will die, that if a nation is to survive, it must respond to the reality of challenge; and he is Jonathan Swift couching his eschatological message in the language and imagery of scatology.

It is true that Mailer’s own faith in the validity of his message is not absolute. He has admitted that “the hipster gambles that he can be terribly, tragically wrong, and therefore be doomed to Hell.” But Mailer is a gambler, and so he continues to preach, to reiterate the old verities with a new twist, opening himself to the charge of anachronism, refusing to accept the “modern,” the valueless objectivity of the novels of Robbe-Grillet, the impersonal detachment of the music of Milton Babbitt, and the faceless hotels of Conrad Hilton. He will not give up like Hemingway’s Lieutenant Henry, who trusts only in the names of bridges, cities, and battles; Mailer chooses instead still to believe in God, Love, Heroism, Courage, and Death. His life and work are a contradiction of the message contained in one of his own poems:

*Never
contemplate
nothing
said
the saint.*

History is a nightmare from which Mailer is still trying to awaken; but he will not take the easy way out in his struggle.

And yet if he is singleminded in his determination to view life in terms of ultimate battle, his desire for victory is not without ambivalence. His involvement in the pop world has become more than peripheral with his play, his new underground movie (where he is cast as a Mafia gangster), his new novel, and his own life style (where he tries to enact simultaneously the roles of writer, fighter, celebrity, lover, and messiah); and like most of the major figures in this eclectic pop world, he is flirting with psychosis. To live on the edge of so many different scenes is to belong truly to none; and to act like so many different people is to endanger the self. The sign of surrender, the indication that the battle has been lost, is the sense of succumbing to Dread. It is not impossible that Mailer's Dread is essentially the fulfillment of his own unacknowledged *desire* for that Dread, the intuition that all those "psychotic" ideas and actions he lives by are simply the expression of a profound longing for madness and extinction.

Mailer holds himself together, however, by virtue of his work. Through creation he is able to come closer to the unattainable goal of total victory in the struggle which is the metaphor for his vision of life. Even if we do not believe in it ourselves, even if we are impatient with the intellectual naivete of a man who only a decade ago speculated that perhaps he was the first person to state that God was in danger of dying, and even if we are annoyed by the heavily flawed style of his prose, we can still learn from, and be moved by, this belligerent prophet. At the end of the stage version of *The Deer Park*, he speaks of debates about God and Time and Sex as constituting "part of the poor odd dialogues which give hope to us noble humans for more than one night." If Mailer has done this in his own work even a small part of the time, he is one Puritan our age can ill afford to lose.

NOTES

1. Putnam, 208 pp., \$4.95
2. One ignores, for Mailer's sake as much as for one's own, *Deaths for the Ladies*, a collection of words which the author extravagantly describes as poetry.