NORMAN MAILER AND THE NOBEL PRIZE

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Going through my papers recently I came across the carbon of a letter nominating Norman Mailer for the Nobel Prize in Literature. It probably dates from around 1980 since it refers to The Executioner's Song *as recently published. The PEN American Center no doubt solicited nominations and this was my response. The occasion seemed to demand an exhaustive C.V., a condensed catalogue raisonée, but even in this pedantic format I notice a few phrases I'm moderately pleased to have written, since they evoke his talent in ways I had forgotten. The reference to André Gide particularly surprised me. Of course Mailer was not the only perpetual nominee never to be awarded the Nobel Prize. On this distinguished list he joins writers from Tolstoy and Proust to Graham Greene, Nabokov, and (so far) Philip Roth, some of them blocked by the dogged opposition of a single figure on the committee, others by their presumed failure to be sufficiently upbeat and life-enhancing, as the terms of the bequest officially demand.—MD*

Norman Mailer was born in 1923, attended Harvard University, from which he was graduated in 1943, served with the U.S. Army in the Pacific theater in World War II, and returned to write what is still considered one of the best of all American war novels, *The Naked and the Dead* (1948). Yet Mailer was not content to continue writing in the naturalistic vein of this first novel. One of the hallmarks of his career is his shifts of style and ambition from book to book. His second and third novels, *Barbary Shore* (1951) and *The Deer Park*

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(1955), remain impressive experiments in allegorical and political writing, especially where they touch on sexual themes. During this period Mailer wrote two of the best American short stories, "The Man Who Studied Yoga" and "The Time of Her Time," and began a truly extraordinary career as a writer of nonfiction and journalism with "The White Negro" (1957), later collected with his other shorter writings in *Advertisements for Myself* (1959). Interlaced with a remarkable autobiographical commentary, these writings were truly prophetic and helped usher in the drastic changes in American culture in the 1960s, with their new interest in politics, their fascination with Beat and bohemian countercultures, and their advanced treatment of sex, which was radically new for the still-Puritan American culture of the period.

In 1960 Mailer the journalist, yet in full command of his novelistic skills, wrote the first of a series of reports on American conventions [and] their political personalities, especially the American presidents. These political writings were collected in *The Presidential Papers* (1963), *Cannibals and Christians* (1966), *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* (1968), and *St. George and the Godfather* (1972). Meanwhile Mailer returned to fiction with what may be his best and most original novel, *An American Dream* (1965), and *Why Are We in Vietnam* (1967). During this period he also directed three films and gave a new turn to his career with *The Armies of the Night* (1968), a report on the American antiwar movement which also is the keenest account of a whole generation and a whole turbulent decade in American culture. In books like this Mailer helped invent the nonfiction novel, and pioneered the introduction of novelistic devices and a subjective persona into journalism.

All this was done in style that remains one of the most eloquent, elaborate, and controlled in modern American writing. Not only does Mailer love language and play it as a musical instrument, but he epitomizes the writer as existentialist, trying on new styles, risking new projects, undertaking new adventures in every work. Yet his enormous body of work in many genres forms a *roman fleuve* of continuous though fragmentary autobiography. No writer since Gide has written so obsessively about himself, yet managed to make himself so interesting to other people. Yet for all his introspection Mailer is continuously fascinated with the public world and the nature of power. He writes about politics with humane sensitivity yet acute insight.

Only recently, in 1979, Mailer, who seemed to have completely exhausted the vein of nonfiction, took an entirely different turn and produced yet another

unexpected masterpiece. In *The Executioner's Song* (1979), an enormous *roman-vérité* about a condemned killer, Mailer kept himself scrupulously out of the picture. Instead he gave an unforgettable picture of the American West with its vast spaces and drifting, dissociated people; this is the best book yet produced in the whole genre of the nonfiction novel. These are ordinary people whose lives are scarcely serious enough for quality fiction but Mailer makes us care about them in the course of the book. *The Executioner's Song* confirms the gargantuan size of Mailer's talent, its variety and unpredictability, and adds measurably to the already large body of his work. At present he is the American writer most deserving of the Nobel Prize.