WHY MAILER MATTERED, WHY MAILER MATTERS

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IN MY FIRST SEMESTER OF COLLEGE I RECEIVED A PAT ON THE HEAD FROM JOHN Abbott, one of two professors who made me feel like I might someday be able to know something. His introduction to literature course included a non-fiction text, *Of a Fire on the Moon*. This would have been in the early 1980s, after *The Executioner's Song* but before *Ancient Evenings*. Who was Mailer at that moment? Maybe he would soon publish his *Moby-Dick*. In class I remember the beginnings of the sort of feminist attack that presumed you do not even have to read this particular writer to know he is the worst of the worst, and one student hijacked a presentation to talk about the picture of Norman and Norris in which she has her hair up in a towel and they stand in front of a trailer in a trailer park. It was the beginning, that is, of the New Humorlessness. There was no attention to the weird camp of the trailer park, only attacks on the age difference and her cynicism in putting up with Mailer in order to be a quasi-celebrity, "Mrs. Norman Mailer." I loved the book. Arrogantly, perhaps picking up a word-virus from the text itself, I thought: I could have written this. O, youth.

My father was a high school English teacher who was ABD from Columbia, and my grandfather had been a Classics professor at City College who lost his job in 1954 because he refused to name names. There are three family versions of what really happened, just as there are three postmodern endings to *The Book of Daniel*. My father said that he could not get job interviews because of what had happened to his father, even though he had served in the Marine Corps in the interim. I suppose that these conditions account for my having become a political junkie, the sort of person who waits up at night to learn about a Supreme Court decision—and the sort of person who

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goes to war over the idea that Art and Politics are different realms. Although I insist that we have to understand motives distinctly, however much a brilliant author may mix them, I have become a person who teaches courses on "Politics and Literature" and who hopes to push the quixotic idea that the refined cultivation practices that we call Literature, practices which involve both reception and construction, can push the world in a certain direction, if just slightly. Orwell claims this as his most important motivation in "Why I Write." Every Mailer reader knows how much this idea mattered to Mailer, whatever his varied results.

Having read *Of a Fire on the Moon*, and having realized in this course that I didn't really know how to read, I set out during the summer to learn how to read. My grandfather had become an antiquarian book dealer after getting cashiered from City College, and my father was a paperback-revolution bookstore addict. We all were, even my friends who majored in pot smoking. We shared books on the Russian revolution, lucid dreaming and astral projection, science fiction, and whatnot. I'm not talking about the bright kids, the AP class kids, but rather my neighborhood friends who listened to Queen and smoked pot and played a kind of samurai Frisbee game in which you threw so hard that you tried to injure the fingers on the opposing team, making them drop the disk: Frisbee dodgeball. We played without mercy. And people read books. Biographies of rock stars, *Rolling Stone*, Hunter S. Thompson. No one knew who Norman Mailer was, though. So I went up into the attic of my parent's house, where all the yellowing paperback books were piled into a pyramid, so that the columns wouldn't fall. (Minor chord on the mention of "pyramid," please.)

The raid in the attic: I selected books to read. Bertrand Russell's essays were helpful because the moral was as clear as the one at the end of an Aesop's fable—I was insecure about my ability to assimilate texts and wanted to build up, so the non-ambiguity was helpful. I found books by Mailer that I still have on my shelves. Having lived in Asia for two decades, I have had to ditch books. If I had a big house in America, I would have a library like my friends, but mine is more selective. Anyway, I found *Presidential Papers*, *Existential Errands*, *Cannibals and Christians*—the alliterative collections. Yellowing paperbacks that cost twenty-five cents or seventy-five cents or a dollar-twenty-five. I acquired everything else and read Mailer through.

As with Russell, you knew where Mailer stood. But the *voice* was also astonishingly clear, and not just the ideas. I have had that experience with *The*

Woman Warrior and *The Handmaid's Tale*—it has nothing to do with gender. There is a voice to which you have to listen, and I listened. At that age, I began to worry about whether or not birth control is bad, and I look back and think of those ideas as kind of stupid, but that is not what matters. What mattered to me was that I knew my nervous system would not sustain me properly through life, and here was an author telling me that a nervous system, or one's "being," or whatever you want to call it could be changed. The work was transitive—it was meant to shift one's direction. As for "art for art's sake," one remembers lines from books like *Why Are We in Vietnam*—I have to paraphrase—such as, "Well, are you going to do something, or do you want to finger-fuck your ass?" In retrospect, the arguments about productive vs. non-productive sex are merely Norman's obsessions of the time, his focal devices. As policy, they are stupid. Using a condom does not cause Totalitarianism. But the idea that you could change your Way, but that it required risk and cost, that idea was essential to my life.

That does not mean that I think Stephen Richards Rojack was in any sense right to kill his wife in the novel *An American Dream* or that I think Mailer's knife attack on his second wife had anything to do with the Cuban Missile Crisis, as Mailer suggests in his placement of documents in *The Time of Our Time*. Those are wrong ideas, and they cost Mailer greatly. But the model of someone who could experiment and who would try very hard to make something happen that seemed impossible to his community of interpreters—*that* was valuable. In the Zen Buddhist Rinzai tradition, *kÿans* are used, and people erroneously think these slices of experience are irrational. (Mailer misunderstood Buddhism completely, despite frequent efforts by Larry Shainberg to set him straight, and one drunken conversation with myself to do the same. See *God: an Uncommon Conversation*, a set of dialogues between Mailer and Mike Lennon, for some of Mailer's misunderstandings of Buddhism.) Anyway, the word *kÿans* actually means "public record," and the language is weird, one learns with enough study and insight, because it cuts through the delusory dualisms through which we live our lives. All sentences need subject and object, but the world isn't organized that way. The point, though, is that the *kÿans* are public records that don't wait for the community of interpreters. As language pieces, they seem, Norman might say, "courageous." They are certainly full of heart in the way they are willing to go public with what will seem strange to many. Norman gave us a public record of the struggles to rework a psyche or a being or what have you.

Menenhetet in *Ancient Evenings* returned from death three times, but I am not sure how many times Mailer did. He came back from *Barbary Shore* and *The Deer Park*. Hemingway wrote to Plimpton that *Advertisements for Myself* was the last free lunch. Mailer was dead, then he came back. He stabbed his wife and was lunatic enough to not claim temporary insanity on the grounds that it would damage his reputation to do so—I would certify him on the basis of that sentence alone. But he came back from that and wrote his best narrative, the morally flawed novel, *An American Dream*. He came back again and again. He adapted and survived.

This is why he mattered to me, and I felt deeply loyal because of what he gave me. I wrote my undergraduate honors thesis about his novels, and I constructed my dissertation, later rewritten as *Political Fiction and the American Self*, such that it would include Mailer's work in a prominent way. I resisted any efforts to censor or rationalize discussion of Mailer's problems, and I was delighted by Jesus's idea in *The Gospel According to the Son* that the disciples didn't have enough confidence to stop at the truth. I have always had enough confidence to talk about Mailer in a warts-and-all way, and I believe that great writers do not have to be perfect. My personal motivation has to be translated into communal terms when I write criticism, since that act is a way of saying, "Here's why *you* should like Mailer" rather than "Here's why *I* liked Mailer." Except this time. It gives me great pleasure to acknowledge my debt to Mailer's body of work, this time in a more personal way.