NORMAN MAILER:

GENRE BENDER

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GIVEN THE PREVALENCE OF SOPHOMORE LITERATURE SURVEYS IN OUR COLLEGES and universities, courses whose primary purpose is to provide an historical overview of major writers' works and times, the anthologies assigned in such courses play a role in establishing and revising the canon, a process reflected in their shifting tables of contents over multiple editions. To cite one example, as recently as 1979, the *Norton Anthology of American Literature* included excerpts from Norman Mailer's *The Armies of the Night* (Part I, Chapters 5–6, and Part II, Chapters 2–3), as well as his story, "The Man Who Studied Yoga," and a critical essay, "The Dynamics of American Letters," but subsequent editions contain fewer and fewer selections. As of 1998, *Norton* editor Jerome Kilinkowitz chose no longer to feature anything by Mailer—no novel excerpts, no short stories, no essays, no journalism. By excluding and thus marginalizing Mailer, the *Norton* has ignored one of the most popular, prolific, relevant, and controversial American writers of the post-WWII era, as well as one of the most versatile and accomplished across a range of genres: from novels as diverse as *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), *An American Dream* (1965), and *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (1967); to literary journalism like *The Armies of the Night* (1968), *Of a Fire on the Moon* (1970), and *The Executioner's Song* (1979); to short stories, "The Man Who Studied Yoga" (1956); to essays, most notably "The White Negro" (1957); to literary criticism, *The Spooky Art* (2004); to biographies, *Picasso* (1995); to a collection of poems, *Deaths for the Ladies* (1962); to a drama, *The Deer Park: A Play* (1967); to sportswriting, *The Fight* (1975); not to mention letters and lectures, reviews and interviews.[1] Just as importantly, Mailer was a writer who consistently challenged the traditional distinctions between and among genres, a practice I have previously

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described in the *Mailer Review* as genre-bending,[2] and it is within this context of the fusion of genres, especially fiction and journalism, that Mailer so vitally matters and within which his absence from the anthologies is most profoundly felt.

Mailer's genre bending was nowhere more evident than in his literary journalism, specifically the New Journalism of the post-WWII era, a hybrid genre created by some of the most important formal and stylistic innovators of the 1960s and beyond, figures some of whom have also been omitted from the current edition of the *Norton*. Tom Wolfe, whose *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968) and other early reporting revolutionized American journalism, is excluded entirely. So is Truman Capote, whose *In Cold Blood* (1965) introduced the genre bending phrase "nonfiction novel." The *Norton* excerpts Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1972) but, first, *Vegas* is largely fiction, as Thompson has freely admitted in interviews; moreover, the *Vegas* selection, Thompson's carnivalesque description of the Circus-Circus Hotel, is curiously included in a section called "Postmodern Manifestos." Also excerpted is Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005), but that text is a memoir dealing with the death of her husband, writer John Gregory Dunne. By these exclusions, the *Norton* has de-canonized a form of literary rebellion that mirrored the larger political, social, and cultural revolutions of the 1960s counterculture.[3] New Journalism emerged at a tumultuous period in American history, when reporters were becoming increasingly skeptical of official news sources, the pretense of journalistic objectivity, and the role of journalists as tools of corporate and governmental elites. In the current media climate of polarized punditry and partisan spin, of cable news networks and internet blogs, the New Journalists' critique of practices still adopted by the mainstream media remains a valuable resource for the teaching of media literacy. As a journalist, Mailer was also frequently a media critic who, like Noam Chomsky, exposed how the dominant culture asserts its hegemony through a corporatized media whose credibility derives from its pretense of objectivity.

Moreover, New Journalists questioned the traditional distinctions between fiction and journalism, literature and non-literature. They sensed that a new kind of post-modern reality required new literary forms. As early critics like John Hellmann and John Holloway have observed, the meanings of events such as political assassinations, the war in Vietnam, the birth of the counterculture, and the first moon landing were too complex to be revealed

through the narrow lens of conventionally factual reporting. A fusion of genres, journalism and fiction, especially, was required. Responding to Michael Lennon's observation that in the 1960s Mailer found that the novel was an inadequate medium to record a new reality (94), Gerald Lucas writes that Lennon "seems to suggest that the narrative order of the novel and the waves of history were connected inextricably and dynamically, that even 'facts' became like fiction" (255). The blurring of distinction between fact and fiction lies at the heart of the controversy that surrounded literary journalism, but New Journalists did generally write factually accurate accounts, often based on lengthy, painstaking research, what Wolfe called "Saturation Reporting" ("Introduction" 52); the reporter's total immersion into his or her subject, like Wolfe travelling "on the bus" with Kesey's Merry Pranksters or Capote camping out in Holcomb, KS, scene of the Clutter killings; and even Thompson, despite his flagrantly obvious fabrications, tended to maintain a fidelity to factuality when he shifted into straight reportorial mode. Nevertheless, Lucas's observation does suggest that in literary journalism facts become "literary" or aestheticized, woven into the fabric of a compelling narrative that reads like good fiction. The first important theorist of the emerging genre was Wolfe, whose introduction to the 1973 anthology *The New Journalism* was a genre-bending manifesto (3–52), situating New Journalism in the tradition of the documentary fiction of the European and American Realists and Naturalists while blasting the experimental Meta-fictionists of his era for abandoning the novelists' traditional role as chroniclers of the morals and manners of their age.

Wolfe argued that what elevated New Journalists as literary artists above conventional journalists was their adoption of fictional techniques like scene-by-scene construction, realistic dialogue, selective point of view, and symbolic details. Like Wolfe, Mailer's innovative journalistic practice was heavily theorized, both in terms of his adoption of style and of point of view. His writing on style is a kind of meta-commentary on his own stylistic experiments. In a self-interview published in *Cannibals and Christians*, Mailer says that the form or style of literary work is "the record of a war" between the writer and his environment (370), opposition being, as Lucas argues, Mailer's "own aesthetic approach to literature" (256). A distinguishing feature of the New Journalists' narrative strategy was to dramatize characters as protagonists and antagonists in the theater of American politics, demonstrating their post-modern awareness that history is inherently dramatic.

Mailer's stylistic and generic innovations were partly driven by his epistemology: his use of writing as a medium of discovery, his existential awareness of his role in creating the reality he reported, and by extension his construction of his ethos as a direct participant. As a stylist, among his contemporary literary journalists, if not novelists, Mailer was the most experimental and innovative. His literary journalistic contemporaries each developed distinctive styles, and each is associated with that particular style: Wolfe's plastic, elastic, stream-of-consciousness experiments, Capote's tightly-controlled elegance and lyricism, or Thompson's manic, Gonzo screeds. Didion's style evolved from the minimalism of her earlier journalism and fiction like *Slouching Toward Bethlehem* (1968) or *Play It As It Lays* (1970) to the syntactic complexity of her later work in both genres, *Salvador* (1983) and *The Last Thing He Wanted* (1996), for example; yet she always maintained, in her reporting as well as her fiction, that archly ironic tone. Mailer, on the other hand, both as journalist and as novelist, worked not just in different genres but developed multiple styles, from the documentary realism of *The Naked and the Dead*, to the Joycean wordplay of *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, to the loose, improvisational *tour de force* of *The Armies of the Night*, to the sparse, laconic style of *The Executioner's Song*. Mailer also contributed to literary journalism an important formal innovation in his adoption of point of view. Wolfe and Capote adopted a conventional journalistic attitude of detachment toward their subjects, reporting primarily in the third person while they imaginatively recreated the actions, thoughts, and feelings of their characters (Wolfe's Ken Kesey or Capote's Perry Smith, for example), while other New Journalists like Thompson and Didion foregrounded their direct participation in their narratives, assuming a first-person perspective which served to construct their now iconic literary personae, but Mailer, writing about himself in the third person as "Mailer" or "Aquarius" or "the reporter," achieved both engagement and detachment simultaneously, a fusion of his imaginative ability to recreate the thoughts and feelings of the characters in his narratives and his finely-tuned, self-conscious awareness of his own. As a literary theorist, Mailer made the case in his tower/telescope metaphor in Book 2, Chapter 1 of *Armies* for a kind of higher objectivity through the open acknowledgement of the writer's own biases as a necessary component of reporting on events, the candid admission that the reporter's choice of words, selection and omission of details, and recording of dialogue are always subjective, even in conventional reporting, and yet, when rendered

vividly, as in the best literary journalism, evocative and "true," if not factually, then in the sense of verisimilitude.

Mailer presented himself in all of his journalism as a marginalized figure, a rhetorical stance that provided him with a unique perspective, a refusal to align himself with political parties or factions. Mailer's reference to himself in *Armies* as a "Left Conservative" suggests his rejection of either/or ideological perspectives, a characteristic shared by other literary journalists (208). Mailer's unique contribution to what was sometimes called personal or autobiographical journalism (another genre-bending phrase) was to blur the lines between the first person and the third, not literally, but through the reader's simultaneous interaction with the rhetorical persona on the page and with his or her identification with the famous, even infamous narrator/protagonist, Mailer, whose presence in the mass media as an important voice on the American literary and political scene was prominent. Adopting the perspectives of physics and of anthropology, and anticipating post-structuralism, Mailer's journalism deconstructed the binary oppositions between observer and observed.

Synthesizing Mailer's own pronouncements about narrative genres, J. Michael Lennon concludes that Mailer sees "a fundamental dichotomy between the novel and forms of narrative nonfiction, history and journalism especially" (94). True, and yet, if not in theory, then certainly in practice, Mailer seems more of a non-Aristotelian, a poststructuralist who rejected binary oppositions between or among genres, either/or distinctions between the fictional and the nonfictional, the novelistic and the journalistic, the persuasive and the aesthetic, in favor of a both/and approach, as in the subtitle to *Armies*: *The Novel as History, History as a Novel*, in which, as Kathy Smith has demonstrated, each genre metaphorically contains each (191). "It is specifically the expansiveness of the novel genre," Katharine Westaway writes, "that Mailer finds useful," understanding "the great potential of the genre" (490). Mailer's narratives again and again exemplify Bakhtin's theory of the novel as an almost infinitely flexible and assimilative form, a genre always in process of becoming. As I argue in my book on New Journalism, Mailer's journalism is dialogic not monologic, open not closed. In his critique of the mass media and his oppositional stance toward the status quo, Mailer's discourse is heteroglossic, expressing the author's intentions refracted through the discourse of others, whether those others are Vietnam War protestors or Pentagon officials, astronauts or aerospace engineers, cops or serial killers.

His journalistic texts of the 1960s and early 1970s dramatized the struggle among dominant corporate and government voices and the voices of the counterculture that were often repressed or marginalized by the mainstream media. Dialectically, however, Mailer made no attempt to resolve the political conflicts presented in his journalistic narratives because the history his texts reflected was still in progress, the conflicts unresolved. Mailer's refusal to impose closure is exemplified by the birth metaphor that concludes *Armies* in which he asks whether America, "once a beauty of magnificence unparalleled, now a beauty with leprous skin" will give birth to a totalitarian future or a countercultural utopia (320). As historiographer, Mailer worked instinctively toward putting into practice theories later promulgated by the New Historicists, sharing their assumption that history is subjective, a plethora of competing discourses and subjectivities, and that an era's *episteme* will not reveal a monological view, a perspective Mailer anticipated and embodied in the open-ended conclusions to his literary journalism. This lack of narrative closure is now gendered by feminist critics as a "feminine" trait, ironic when one considers Mailer's fractious relationship with second-wave feminists like Kate Millett who lambasted him in *Sexual Politics* (1970). Is it possible that Mailer was all along ahead of his time in ways we are only now beginning to appreciate? Consider how he transgressed generic boundaries, bending journalism into fiction, fiction into history, history back into fiction, and all three into autobiography, surely a feminized rhetorical strategy. Mailer's mind, like Whitman's, was large—it contained multitudes. As one of the most artistically accomplished and politically engaged voices of his time, Mailer's greatest accomplishment was, like Orwell's, "to make political writing into an art" (314), the ultimate genre bender.

NOTES

1. Most recently among Mailer's critics, Michael Lennon writes, "Mailer is Proteus. Perhaps no career in American literature has been at once so brilliant, varied, controversial, improvisational, public, productive, lengthy and misunderstood." "Introduction." *Norman Mailer : Works and Days.* Ed. J. Michael Lennon and Donna Pedro Lennon. Shavertown: Sligo Press, 2000. xi-xiii.
2. "Genre-Bending in *The Armies of the Night*." *The Mailer Review*. Vol. 3. No. 1 2009. 307–321.
3. For comparison's sake, it is noteworthy that while *The Heath Anthology of American Literature: Contemporary Period (1945 to The Present)*, ed. Paul Lauter, Vol. E, 6th ed., 2009, excerpts Mailer's *The Armies of the Night* and Michael Herr's *Dispatches* in a section on the Vietnam War, *The*

Bedford Anthology of American Literature: 1865 to Present, eds. Susan Belasco and Linck Johnson, Vol. 2, 2008, contains no selections by any of the New Journalists discussed in this article.

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