THE MARTYRDOM OF MAILER

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Norman Mailer's eyes are old globes of trouble. He bends forward in his chair. "I may be the most successful example of a reformed criminal in American life," he says. He looks out at the water of Provincetown harbor and sighs. The light coming through the window makes a halo of his hair. "And do you feel superior to your younger self, Mr. Mailer?"

"I just look at him," he says, "and I think what a fool he is." Then his old eyes go smiling out past the window again.

There are places in the world that merely stew in their own native atmosphere, off-limits patches of pure attitude and fearful weather. Provincetown is such a place. The smell is something of fish, something of gas stations. Sea salt dries on the tongue. One of America's most easterly places, Provincetown sits on a crooked finger of land in New England, beckoning to the Old World. It was here that the Puritans first landed; they whispered their hard prayers among the sand dunes for a dozen weeks before moving on to Plymouth Rock. The Cape is something of a Gothic-movie landscape: a pallid luminescence over the water, wood-and-brick houses crowding to the shore, an end-of-earth vertigo hanging there. You could feel lonely in all that milky light; the vibe is preternaturally northern, pre-nuclear. Provincetown stands like many a place in the head: every visit is the first visit, and yet none of them is. A town called Déjà vu.

Provincetown has been popular with artists since the Fifties, when it became the evil twin of Greenwich Village, and was well known as a place to

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find good marijuana. The painters Robert Motherwell and Franz Klein had houses there; Henry Geldzahler, the brilliant curator, came as a graduate student; Stan Getz and Zoot Sims would have all-night jam sessions; Kurt Vonnegut wandered around; and a lot of Beat poets came in and out with their bongo drums. It was once a favorite place with Hell's Angels.

There is a special category of American places, a group of territories, that might be seen to have provided the setting for the development of a bohemian consciousness, places that were adequate sites for the testing of hippy idealisms and freedoms, and that then became covens of paranoia and fear at the close of the Sixties. Altamont is one such place, Haight-Ashbury another. You get the feeling Provincetown has always known its own darkness. It still makes a play for outsiders, and it has, in more recent times, developed as a large gay resort. Painters and writers still walk the beach, but they are grey now, their jeans are wide at the wrong end, their wrinkles stand out like old arguments. And yet they all smile the big smile with their unfazed American teeth. Mailer has been coming to Provincetown since the Forties.

The rain had come on like a comedy on Commercial Street. Vast bulbs of water just smashed into the ground all evening. People flew out of their cars, sprinted across the lawn, and found happy sanctuary in the church of St. Mary's. They were all there to see Norman Mailer. You could say there was a comfortable air of civic pride among the pews. Mailer was reading in aid of a benefit to raise money for the Provincetown Library. Large ladies came to and fro with more than a hint of a knitting-bee. They made sure everyone was in their seats. Barbara Norris, the author's wife of 20 years, sat with the family in the front row. There was a hymnal in front of each celebrant, and beside this a book of black gospel songs. The previous day's incense came sharp on the air.

Mailer made his appearance one notch down from the pulpit; he appeared like the old soldier he is, like some 74–year-old prize-fighter, a tremendous shaman, a literary outlaw gone helpful and modest in his later years, but still with a ready spring to his step. He was there with all the quiet grace of one who had traveled recklessly and numbingly, both high and low. You could tell by his face: he knows how good it is to be still standing after all these years. And all in all, it is the sort of face you would seldom see on a writer. On a politician yes; on a show business tycoon maybe. But Mailer is the only writer I've ever seen whose ambition is wreathed pleasantly on his face. He is the only writer in the world, at his age, who smiles. The only one. It is the face of a man who might cheerfully rewrite the Bible.

"I started reading the New Testament for the first time since college," he said to the crowd at St. Mary's, "and, generally speaking, you don't read the New Testament. I read it as a novelist. Novelists read books the way football coaches watch football. He's interested in watching for weaknesses—we novelists read competitively. We read to see if we could improve it or not. I would read parts of the Gospel and think, well, they're not getting the best out of this scene."

He stopped to tell a few jokes. The church crowd was now wishing he was the regular priest.

"The New Testament had never been told simply told as a story," he said. "My aim was not to enlarge the narrative of the Gospels; I didn't want to show everything I could do to it, because then I'd end up with another 1,000-page book that no one would read. I told my wife what I was thinking about doing—she grew up as a Freewill Baptist—and she said 'You must be crazy!' but I told her my real intention was to write a book that her father could read. My view is: 'You've got to remain a fool at all cost.' I knew that people would say: 'America's Number One Egomaniac can't keep his hands off the Bible!' But I knew it had to be written in the first person. Most of my life, I've been writing about people who are worse than I am; this time I wanted to show I could go the other way."

Only someone with Mailer's chutzpah—and Mailer's brand of innocence—could have made a book like *The Gospel According to the Son*. Pasolini's Christ was grave and touching, Gore Vidal's was camp and useless, Caravaggio's are usually nervous and haunted. All are valuable for reasons of their own. But none of them is as brazenly human as Norman Mailer's. Of the committee of humans who wrote the New Testament, only John can seem to know what it is to be something a little less than purely pure. The Jesus Christ who narrates Mailer's new book is someone who quickly learns how to "care about sinners more than for the pious." It is the basis of Mailer's singular achievement with this novel that his Jesus can seem to know true temptation, and can know how hard it is to be good, how nice sometimes it is to be bad.

This is a Son of God who is not the simple-minded, easily good guy of Christian yore—Mailer's Jesus Lives. He suffers agonies of the usual sort: he drinks too much wine; he gets fed up with people hanging around him; he feels a twinge in his loin cloth at the sight of Mary Magdalene; he is uncertain of the powers bestowed upon him, and unsure if he deserves them. He is a Deity who can stand among men and women and know the true nature

of their earthly trials. He is afraid of being lonely, afraid of being boring, and he is terrified at the thought of his own death. He knows how to be angry as well as petty and pathetic. *The Gospel According to the Son* offers us a much more bearable Jesus: one with the power not to allow his divinity to blot out the man in him.

Despite our objections, Mailer has made a self out of God, not a God out of himself. Once again, it is to his credit that he risked it and, once again, he bears out his favorite sentiment from Andre Gide: "Please do not understand me too quickly."

And the good women of Provincetown appeared to like it well enough. They had made sandwiches and laid them out in the church hall. The wooden tables were covered with tarts and grapes and cantaloupe slices and non-alcoholic punch. Norman Mailer's eye doctor told me his patient was a fabulous part of the world. "Just a great guy," he said, "Norman loves Provincetown." The cherry pie was being doled out like there was no tomorrow. Ladies' perfume rose to the rafters. And Norman Mailer signed for nearly an hour in the corner, stopping only now and then, looking along the line, fiddling with his hearing aid, before the head was down again, scribbling out the letters of his famous name.

Norman Mailer's grandparents came from a Russian town near Vilna. His grandfather on his mother's side was prodigiously brainy; he was made a rabbi at the age of 16. He moved to Long Branch, New Jersey, where he was understood to be the unofficial rabbi. He enjoyed great respect. He was something of a scholar, giving advice to other rabbis, and in the evening he would read to the family in Yiddish. He also had a tendency to lose his temper. The Mailer side of the family had gone from Russia to Johannesburg; Norman's father, Barney Mailer, fought in the South African Army in the first world war, and then he went from England to America. He had earlier trained as an accountant. In 1922, Barney Mailer married Fanny Schneider, and the following January they had a baby, Norman Kingsley Mailer.

The Brooklyn that Mailer grew up in was mainly Jewish, but his family was not strict in that way; they stopped keeping kosher after the death of Fanny's father. The boy Norman simply flourished at school. His mother recalled a teacher offering her a warning: "Mrs. Mailer," she said, "you have to recognize that your son's pleasures in life are going to be solemn ones." In her accounts of her son's younger life, Mrs. Mailer always sounded very adoring of her son's brilliance and fine manners, and he would always feel able to

rely on their closeness. The Mailers, like most people round their way, had a difficult Depression. But Mailer remembers the Brooklyn of his childhood as one of the finer-flowing rivers. "The only thing you really thought about," he said, "was whether you could get the palm of your hand on a girl's breast."

Mailer gave a speech about Spinoza at his own bar mitzvah—this may have shocked people: Spinoza was a no-go area, one of the excommunicated. But people generally remember Mailer as a sweet and kind young man. His sister Barbara thought him considerate beyond measure. Fanny was keen that her son should go to Harvard; she wasn't without social ambition, and she wanted her children to have advantages.

He went to the college in 1939. Enrolling as a student of engineering, he surrounded himself with friends (and disciplinarians, such as Caspar Weinberger, who would later be Reagan's defense secretary) and he soon made a splash in the English class. Mailer had a serious passion for the writing of James T Farrell, who wrote *Studs Lonigan*, and he was tempted at the time towards a Hemingwayesque manner of description. But even his earliest pieces show originality and promise. One of his short stories, "The Greatest Thing In the World," won a national prize in *Story* magazine.

Harvard in those days was a place of vague anti-Semitism, and much-admired cliques of brilliant, young, Hellenised figures who weren't much like Norman Mailer. But he soon managed to bloom in his own way among them. "It was a wonderfully subtle place," he says, "incredibly structured. It takes four years even to begin to get a little Harvard under one's fingernails." Some of the Class of '43 would later describe him as being a bit subversive at college, a bit risky with booze and women, and also, in some ways, intellectually seductive and charming and keen to further himself. During one of the summer vacations, he took a job at the Boston State Hospital. He saw the attendants beat up a poor, mad black boy, and he watched a troop of geriatrics stirring by their bedpans. He lasted only a week. But the experience got him writing a play about the asylum called "The Naked And The Dead." He didn't go very far with the play, though the title was kept for later. Around the same time, he got married for the first time; five more wives would follow.

Mailer went into the war with the notion that he might write the Great War Novel. A rifleman with a reconnaissance platoon, he went to Luzon: he was with a Texan unit, they saw several skirmishes together, and the young writer found burning, live character everywhere he looked. His young talent

was itching in the heat of the Pacific. "Just about the time I was becoming some sort of ersatz Harvard man," says Mailer, "I go to the army, and I'm with this Texas outfit, with a bunch of guys overseas for a year and a half, two years. Their marriages have all broken up, they're all slightly crazy. We used to drive through Filipino towns and look at the whorehouses, and they'd look up there, cause the light was on, and one of them would say, 'Gawd dammit, my girl's gettin' fucked right now!' and he'd take out his tommy gun and would start spraying the window. And then they go laughing into the night. Brooklyn, Harvard, and then that! It's a good thing I was a novelist. I don't know how else I could have put it all together."

An early draft of *The Naked and the Dead* was rejected by a publisher worried at the "profanity and obscenity" of its language. "It didn't even occur to me to use fuck," he says, "I just knew that it was going to be impossible. Maybe I was making it easier for myself, but it occurred to me they never used to say "fuck" (in the army), they would say "fug." What hurt my feelings afterwards was that people said, 'Oh, he wanted to use fuck but then lost his nerve and used fug,' and that is not true. I have many vices, many faults, but that is not one of them." The publisher Little, Brown couldn't handle it either way. Mailer signed a contract instead with Rinehart and the book was published in September 1947. It was an impossible and international success.

Mailer's friendship with the French intellectual and Trotskyist Jean Malaquais was the bedrock of the second novel, *Barbary Shore*. The two had met in Paris just before *The Naked and the Dead* came out, and Mailer would later come under his wing. He is Mailer's oldest friend. To some people—the long-necked grebes of the New York intellectual scene such as Irving Howe and Alfred Kazin—Malaquais was a sloganeering boor, a bad egg, a man without substance. He was blamed by many for misdirecting the young celebrity novelist.

Mailer had scored big with his naturalistic account of the good war, but it was the second book, and its reception, that would determine the sort of writer he would be over the next 20 years. *Barbary Shore* was about the kind of country—and what you might call the psychic territory—that American war heroes were returning to. It was about the threat of the bomb, the poisons of power. In *Advertisements For Myself*, his ground-breaking book of personal bits and pieces, Mailer wrote that "*Barbary Shore* was really a book to emerge from the bombarded cellars of my unconscious, an agonized eye of a novel which tried

to find some amalgam of my new experience and the larger horror of that world which might be preparing to destroy itself. I was obviously trying for something at the very end of my reach, and then beyond it."

The book was loathed by the critics ("it has a monolithic flawless badness," "this evil-smelling novel") and the die was cast. Mailer became a slave to the torments of the ego. "I was startled by how bad those reviews were," he says now. "In a way, it was wonderful shock-therapy. One of them said it was 'paceless, tasteless, graceless.' I was written off. It felt pretty real. And I thought maybe they were right, maybe I had nothing left."

He made for Hollywood. Writers who go to Hollywood tend to remember two names, Scott Fitzgerald and William Faulkner, and the young Norman Mailer thought he might do better than both on the West Coast. The movie business in 1948 had an oppositional group, a Leftist collocation, never quite a "Communist cell," as it was later flagged by the Clan McCarthy. John Huston and Gene Kelly and Charles Chaplin were involved, but the majority were screenwriters, and people from the New York theatrical community, or expatriate bigwigs such as Thomas Mann and Bertolt Brecht. They were people in the industry who thought of themselves as progressive.

The actress Betsy Blair, who was married to Gene Kelly at that time, remembers going to pick Mailer up at the airport. "He had a shy and diffident face," she says. "Once in a while, you still see a trace of that whimsical side. When he came to Hollywood, he was overwhelmed by the success of *The Naked and the Dead*, yet he wasn't cocky about it. Everybody wanted a piece of him. I can see him smiling and shrugging his shoulders at those parties; he had an East Coast sharpness about him, and though the room would be full of movie stars, he was surely determined not to be impressed."

Mailer got a book out of it all, *The Deer Park*, which was rejected by seven different publishers. Mailer seemed increasingly paranoid to his friends, and to his new wife, Adele Morales, and he was increasingly hooked on booze, pot and Seconal. There was a big existential twist to *The Deer Park*—the central notion is that sex brings wisdom—and the book was understood to be obscene.

The critics wasted him again. His experiences in the early Fifties made Mailer feel every inch the cultural outlaw, the existential hero, the subterranean warrior with his own dig on current America.

"I wish to attempt an entrance into the mysteries of murder, suicide, incest, orgy, orgasm and Time," he wrote. It has probably never been recognized

how much pain the young man who wrote that famous sentence was in, after all that success and all that failure, and all in such a short time.

The bombardment of a novelist's self-confidence can have the effect of turning him into a journalist. You might see this most grandly in the case of Norman Mailer; only in his case, that effect would be, in the long run, to the enrichment of both callings. Mailer saw it early, and he saw it clearly, that reportage would have a new role in bringing forth the spirit and the culture of the age. He saw that the counterculture would not just be a rejection of the Luce-dominated world of *Time* magazine, it would eventually constitute a sort of replacement of the old, unchecked certainties. It would offer a lesson in taste. At any rate, the America of established facts would never be the same one again. Mailer was one of the three people who founded the *Village Voice*—one of the most effective of New York's hip newspapers—and he began to invest the bigger part of his energies at that time into writing columns and essays.

In 1957, Mailer sat down with a fear that he had lost his writing power. He wrote an essay called "The White Negro." It was considered a direct assault on established morality and the codes of civility. The essay seeks to explain how there might be a measure of truth, and perhaps even of the beautiful and the courageous, in the image of three young hoodlums stomping an old man to death. Better for single, nihilistic psychopaths to roam the streets than for the "murderous liquidations of the totalitarian state" to rule the world. It was, I suppose, a call for individuals to face up—in the style of Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov—to the meaning of everyday violence and death. The essay caused one of those storms that can reverberate over a writer's work for years. It would always be seen by many as some sort of personal manifesto. As if to agree, Mailer had embarked on his own dark night of the soul.

"Those first summers in Provincetown were an important part of my life with Norman," writes Adele Mailer in her recent book, *The Last Party*: "That special light illuminating a bit of happiness against the dark background of his shifting moods. The same light that darkened and flickered out during that last psychotic summer of 1961, the year a part of me died." Adele's account of her marriage to Mailer is full of anger. "At different times," she says, "I had to deal with God, Svengali, Ivan the Terrible, Rocky Marciano, Jesse James, Miles Davis the cool, and Scott Fitzgerald the drunk." It is obvious—and should not be unexpected—that Adele Mailer looks back on those times with some considerable dread.

When I spoke to her about Mailer, she mentioned the words "OJ Simpson" half a dozen times. The last year of their marriage is the time that his friends call The Trouble. Mailer got bombed one night and stabbed Adele with a penknife. The wounds were pretty serious, it was all touch and go for a while, and it took many years for her to recover. On arraignment, the doctor sent Mailer to Bellevue, the psychiatric hospital. "In my opinion," wrote the MD in a note to the hospital psychiatrist, "Mr. Mailer is having an acute paranoid breakdown with delusional thinking and is both homicidal and suicidal. It is felt that he had committed a felonious assault on Sunday, Nov 20 and his admission is urgently advised."

But the doctors at Bellevue found it impossible to break through his assembled armor. Mailer recently told Christopher Hitchens how proud he was that he had never succumbed to psychoanalysis. People say, however, that he was never the same person after The Trouble; for some, he even looked different. And yet that terrible episode did not harm Mailer's career. It certainly took its toll—it may have blasted away the remainder of his nice Jewish boyishness—but it failed to wreck his ambition or his moral force. The incident did not reduce Mailer the way Chappaquiddick would reduce Edward Kennedy, nor did it de-glamorize him in the manner of Mike Tyson's personal brutalities.

"I've been living with it ever since," Mailer says, "and my children have paid for it. A lot of the animosity in the reviews comes from the fact of people saying, 'That son of a bitch—he got away with it. He doesn't deserve anything after that.'" I say leave it to heaven. There are nothing but third acts in American life. Norman Mailer had been at the center of the most ludicrous success in his early twenties, and by his early forties he was up to his neck in the sands of psychosis. But America's most surprising writer had a clear and retentive eye. At that point in time, some of his greatest trials, a few of his greatest triumphs, lay somewhere out in front of him. Soon, there would be awards and greater fame and money.

But something of past griefs would long seem to shadow Norman Mailer. In 1981, he started receiving letters from a convict called Jack Henry Abbott. He was an amateur writer who touched something in Mailer. He seemed to know about the true miseries of crime and punishment in America. Some of his letters were published in the *New York Review of Books*, and Mailer decided he was a great artist, a serious writer, and campaigned for his release. Abbott eventually got out of prison. He killed again, stabbing a struggling

actor in New York. Mailer was accused of having blood on his hands; at a press conference, he didn't realize he was living in the wrong society to use a phrase like "Culture is worth a little risk."

But between The Trouble with his second wife and the trouble with Abbott, Mailer would earn his stripes as sole chief among the liberal whipping boys of the Moral Majority. Even up to the present time, his work is willfully misapprehended, despite all its breadths, and people find it easy to dismiss him on account of these bad episodes. But a lot happened before and between these two acts, and a lot has happened since. It might be possible that his work demands more than the worst of us.

When I arrived at Mailer's house, I nearly fell over the grandkids. There was any number of them clattering up and down the stairs. And something occurred to me. The smell of freshness in many American houses does not match the smell of freshness anywhere else. It is not like the smell of a clean house in France, or of one in Mallorca, or of one in Hull, but the smell will be a facsimile of the smell in any clean house in America. It might simply be a products thing, but in the Mailer house I had made up my mind it was a lots-of-Hoovering thing and a punitive, non-smoking thing. But the house is lovely all the same. Mrs. Mailer's paintings are all over the walls; they are good and generous paintings, the sort that put a smile on your face. Above the fire, there is one of herself and Norman drinking tequila with a Mexican poet. Another one has Mailer looking like a Catholic icon, trapped for a laugh in an elaborate Romanesque frame.

It might be that Mailer has been tempting the devil since his first book. But he has grown to know the person he has been before. "I laugh at the way I was in those days," he says in his dumbbell-crowded study. "I remember saying to an editor then: 'Do you know that if you're not successful in selling *The Naked and the Dead*, I might have to start writing historical novels!' I was so serious. But I hadn't expected it to be so successful. The time was just right. That sort of thing happens to a writer maybe once in his career." "Is it true," I asked him, "that your father carried around for years a duplicate copy of the initial publishers' report on that book?" "Yes. He probably carried it in his wallet. You know he was a writer manqué? He used to write me these 18 page letters, and the first ten pages would be, 'How can I dare write to my son, such a good writer, and here am I . . .'" "Could he write?" "He wrote rather well. He didn't have a literary culture; I mean, he'd read a few good books, but he was a typical middle-class, South African, English-type guy;

general education. But he was a private man, and he wrote well." And the grandparents? "Well," he said, "it's impossible to be an American without recognizing that every immigrant who came over here, and the immediate descendants of that immigrant, had an identity crisis. You know: Who am I? It's equal to that awful moment when you look into the mirror, and suddenly the reality of your own existence comes over you, and it's frightening, the oddest moment of dislocation. Anyone who emigrates has that, and everyone in this country has it. As a country, we are probably one of the most vulgar, powerful nations in the history of Christendom because, well, when was there time to develop quiet standards?" American success has always fascinated Mailer. If coming to the New World was the first great shock to one's sense of identity—"Who am I?" obtaining the sudden answer "An American"—then life on that continent was set to provide no end of shocking opportunities for self-enlargement.

A great deal of Mailer's writing since the Sixties has travelled inside the world of people who are caught up in forces larger than themselves and who want to find definition through glamour and power. There has always been a large part of Mailer himself in each of these excursions. John F Kennedy became, for Mailer, a sexual, existential hero of his time, and Mailer later believed that the influential piece he wrote about Kennedy must have won him his narrow victory. Mailer admitted that for years he had been running for President in the privacy of his own mind.

The Sixties was a time of retrenchment and experiment for Mailer. He was deeply into the mood of the age: he continued to brood on the mysteries of American power, and the meaning of sex, and published his first novel in ten years, *An American Dream*. The book was written in monthly installments for *Esquire* magazine. It might be the best novel ever written about psychosis in America.

The critics looked again at Mailer and saw a punch-drunk boozer with a tight prose style and no subject. Mailer told me that literary criticism often floats on spite. "In 20 to 40 years, there won't be novelists who can live the way we have lived and publish serious books. The same thing happened earlier with criticism. Maybe there were ten who were really worth something. But it was a life. Now it is not. I can't conceive of a young critic coming along who is so good that everyone reads his or her work all the time, like Trilling or Kazin. First, the emphasis moved from literature to film, which was bad, but at least film has its own mysterious dimensions, but then, once we moved to

TV, it was all over." I asked him if he thinks there is something hysterical about the culture of rubbish-or-rave—of everything being either brilliant or terrible.

"Oh, there's so many people I want to kill," he says. "That is where the punishment comes. I think your organs get old. Every time we want to kill someone and we can't, our organs pay the price . . . Well, I've asked for it, to a degree. I remember, when I was young, attacking Hemingway. I once wrote that for years he hadn't written anything that would bother an eight-year-old, or one's grandmother. I still think the line was crude. Looking back on it, I think it would bother Hemingway immensely, and quite rightly. There was the beginning of a lack of respect then. I might have felt what I said, but, after all, the man had been working in the vineyard all his life, and you wouldn't say that of an old grape-picker. Looking back, it makes me wince a little. But now it's my turn in the barrel." Mailer produced an excellent little novel in the Sixties, *Why Are We in Vietnam?* and an even better one, *The Armies of the Night*, a book fairly bursting with honesty and ideas, in which Mailer followed himself on the day of the march on the Pentagon. *The Armies Of The Night* was a very precise intrusion upon much of the conventional thinking around the Vietnam war. It might be viewed as a highpoint in the development of reportage.

He called the book a non-fiction novel, and it won a Pulitzer. "The major legacy handed down to us from Vietnam," Mailer says, "is swine-ishness. I said that every horror would come out of that sewer. It was hideous, and any attempt to paper over it won't work. One has to finally look into one's guilt. Part of the meanness that exists nowadays comes from the fact that people have lost the focus of where their guilt is." Since the Seventies, Mailer's reputation—the good part of it and the bad—has been made to stand over his every public act. At the close of the Sixties he had written book-length pieces about the Democratic Convention in Chicago and about the moon landing. He also ran for Mayor of New York, on a platform that advocated, among other things, gladiatorial combat for convicted murderers. Mailer had wanted to win. "He would have his hand on the rump of History," he wrote, "and Norman was not without such lust." He came in fourth on a list of five.

Mailer had built up a fairly daunting backlist of wives and children by that time (all in all, he has had six wives, nine children) and he needed to make money for them. A number of the books he wrote in the Seventies were written to service this demand. His two books on Marilyn Monroe were

written quickly and haphazardly, though not completely without feeling or insight.

But the detail in Marilyn was thought to be plagiarized: two biographers of the film star, Maurice Zolotow and Fred Guiles, complained of the heavy borrowings. Mailer admitted that he had written the book against too tight a deadline. But the money came in. Muhammed Ali was impressed that Mailer was the sort of writer who was rumored to snag a million dollars a book.

But the Seventies presented Mailer's ideal of masculinity with new challenges. He would appear on television talk shows, mouthing off and making himself hated, and the feminists soon decided he was a major target. Norman Mailer: chauvinist pig. His long essay, "The Prisoner of Sex"—which he supported with outrageous claims in debate with the likes of Germaine Greer—sold more copies of *Harper's* magazine than any other single article in its history. He went to Zaire for *Playboy*, and wrote on the great Foreman-Ali fight, and put it all together as a book, *The Fight.*

Barbara Norris Church, the Arkansas model and painter (soon-to-be novelist) and Mrs, Mailer for the past 20 years, met Norman just as he was being drawn into the strange story of Gary Gilmore. An ex-con from Provo, Utah, Gilmore had killed two local men in 1976 for no easy-to-understand reason. Lawrence Schiller, uber-producer, deal-maker, the guy who had brought big money to Mailer before, drew him again into the picture. The Gilmore story was a sensation. Schiller interviewed everybody who had ever known Gary Gilmore, and eventually supplied Mailer with 16,000 pages of interviews.

Mailer embroiled himself in the Mormon spirit of Utah. He became massively interested in the prison system. He seemed to lose himself in the research. Not, perhaps, since *The Naked and the Dead* had he so relied on documentable fact. The result was a plain-spoken American classic, *The Executioner's Song*, and another Pulitzer prize. The terrible Jack Henry Abbott affair was not long on the heels of this success, and Mailer was once again on the front of the papers, for all wrong reasons, mistaken again for a handmaiden to brutality.

Mailer has been at the forefront of his troubled times, as far as a writer can be. Those who know him feel sure he has tried to do the right things, for the right reasons, and if he has sometimes been foolish then he has paid the price. But his readers have not. For 50 years now, he has barged his way into the middle of those storms that seemed to matter to the post-war western

world: war, communism, movies, promiscuity, feminism, civil rights, penal reform, spies, stardom, revolt, and now, Christian spirituality.

Since the Marilyn book, he has set himself the task of reading as far into modern iconography as possible. If he made himself the central personality of so much of his writing in the Sixties—playing the Karmic outlaw, the intellectual assassin, the colorful genius and the upholder of the spiritual against the material life—then it might come as no surprise that he has spent this latter period of his career writing about Gary Gilmore, Lee Harvey Oswald, Pablo Picasso and Jesus Christ.

Mailer's gift has been dangerous and immodest and it has sometimes been self-defeating, but it has never been boring or phony or unwilling to suffer the testing of its own strengths. He has never been afraid of ill wind. There is perhaps something of himself in all these characters he has found interesting.

Mailer's favorite short poem of this century is Yeats's "The Second Coming." He feels it has meant something to him. "It gives me a feeling of the prodigious disruption that has lived at the heart of the 20th century," he says. "There is something wrong, something unbalanced about this century; we all have a sense of dread about the future. People I know who have profited from this time—in fact, people who have done well and people who have done badly; people who wanted to change the century—they have a sense of unease about where the future is going."

"And these public characters you've written about—are they partly you?"

"A small part," he says. "It's like the small part that an actor has. Increasingly, I think that an actor and a writer are similar beings. Robert De Niro has a piece of himself in every part he's played. Brando the same. Sometimes there's more of yourself in one part than in another. You need to have the facts. But, funny, you know you don't need to have too many. I felt as if I understood Gary Gilmore better before I started *The Executioner's Song* than I did after it. He was so complex, he had so many contradictions. In the beginning, I had a theoretical notion of him—clear and simple and strong—and if I'd written a novel, he would've conformed to this idea I had of him, and there would have been more of me in him. I loved the notion he had that the soul can die before the body. As you get older, you become aware of it—you don't have that certainty of soul that you had when you were younger."

Joan Didion once said that people had been looking for years at Norman Mailer and feeling disappointed, feeling sorry that he never produced the

"big novel" he always seemed to be promising. But by 1979, the time of *The Executioner's Song*, she felt he had already written the "big novel" at least four times. And since then he may well have written it a couple more times.

The opening to his Egyptian saga, *Ancient Evenings*, the first 100 pages, is among the very best things in contemporary writing; his gigantic novel *Harlot's Ghost* is beautifully packed with America and the interior life of the CIA; *Oswald's Tale*, his attempt on the life of the "First Ghost," Lee Harvey Oswald, is one of the most interesting examinations of character to have appeared in some time. Sure, among his 30 publications he has written some bad books too. But so what?

"The attempt is all of it," he says. "I've never really written about my own life directly, because I feel there are things that happened to me—good and bad—and they are there, I can always go back to them. And if my imagination comes into that stuff at this angle, I get one sort of book, if I come through the crystal at another angle, I get another book. Once you know that, you can work on a flicker. In *Harlot's Ghost*, I knew I had made my CIA. It's not the CIA, but it is mine; just as good. Now I've written my own Christ."

The world of Mailer's new novel—the Holy Land of Jesus's day—is a place where miracles can occur. Mailer has created a Jesus with much human doubt in him, much desire in him, with a quiet sense of how individuals relate to the State.

"Could this be cause for hope?" asks his doubting Christ, "That I did not wish to be a leader of a revolt? Already my limbs had begun to brood upon their misery, and the bruises on my face were swollen. The dungeon was blacker than the night." This is the Jesus who feels bad that he cannot meet Judas's call to become a true revolutionary, to embrace his role as an overthrower of the Romans. Mailer the Jew felt the need to tell the Christians what open secrets lay in their central narrative.

He gives them a Holy Land of ripe consequence for these times.

"As far as the Gospel book goes," Mailer says, "you can have a dark, political motive and not be aware of it. I don't like to work too consciously. Whenever I know exactly what I'm going to do with a piece of writing, it is almost always less good, but if I just have a feeling, then it can become much more exciting. Of course, I knew, with this book, where the story was going to go, but I didn't know my motives, and that became a subject. Why am I writing this book? Why am I writing it in the first person? You know the devil is the most beautiful creature God ever made. And I have lived with that line over the years."

"Are you on the devil's side?"

"No. The devil is on the side of Mammon. He resides in the unconscious of the most powerful global capitalists. I mean, I wouldn't want everyone in society to have the same amount of money. Political correctness is a clue to what tyrannies are there in egalitarianism, with no free play at all. But given our human tendency to be greedy—people making more money than they will ever need—they turn from their shame by putting the blame on the poor. And when Shaw spoke of the 'deserving and undeserving poor,' I'm sure he thought that would put an end to it, but all of us writers end up being much more feeble than we'd ever care to be in terms of influence."

Mailer believes that the next great human battle will be between global capitalists and some as-yet-unformed coalition of Judeo-Christian socialism. "Socialism always failed, I think, because of the implicit arrogance of atheism. Having been an atheist, I realize that it has an implicit egoism in it, and it tends to keep them from modesty, without which socialism cannot begin to function. Socialism up to this point has been too rational."

In *The Gospel According to the Son* there is a moment when Jesus, about to be crucified, suddenly and quite gently comments on the shoddy nature of the cross he is going to die on. These are words spoken by a carpenter's son. Only a good novelist would write such a line. Mailer's latest book is full of such lines, and such sensibilities, and there is much about it that brings one back to his earlier books. Diana Trilling once chose to call Norman Mailer a "moral radical." You could say that Mailer has managed to remain such a thing, both in spite of his celebrity, and because of it.

"I want to give you a whisky," he said at the end of our day. We sat by the windows downstairs as the sky began to darken. Mailer remembers a time when this place was almost medievally dark—during the blackout. Now, he has long, slow walks on the beach with the best wife he has ever had. And his grown-up children seem busy and happy around them.

Next year will be the 50th Anniversary of the publication of *The Naked and the Dead*. Each book in Norman Mailer's long journey from wisdom to foolishness and back again—from one self to another—will be published at the same time. Mr. Mailer drew me a map showing the way to the best bars in Provincetown. Mrs. Mailer gave me an umbrella. There was a torrent going on outside. On the way down the street, I thought of all this water turning into wine.