MISSING THE CONTRADICTIONS

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Norman Mailer: The Self-Appointed Messiah
By Gwendolyn Chabrier
Bangkok: Orchid Press, 2008
224 pp. Paperback $21.95

IN *THE TENTH PRESIDENTIAL PAPER—MINORITIES,* MAILER WRITES THAT "MINORITY groups are the artistic nerves of a republic . . . they are both themselves and the mirror of the culture as it reflects upon them." Needless to say, Mailer could just as easily have been talking about himself, Jewish and hence an outsider to Protestant American ideals, and yet someone beholden to many of these same notions. It is this idea—of a man who while drawing on the traditions of the past, nationally and religiously, was also a severe critic of their respective flaws and failings—that Gwendolyn Chabrier pursues in her book, *Norman Mailer: The Self-Appointed Messiah.* The text looks at Mailer from a number of perspectives, first discussing his place in American Literature, more particularly his outsider status in the American-Jewish subset. Unlike Bellow, Roth and Malamud, Mailer did not set out to be included in their ranks, although at the same time his writing never fully excluded characters that mentioned their Jewish roots. Chabrier then paints a portrait of the artist as someone who always took the contrarian view: his attitude to women riled many feminists, his take on "the negro" was seen as playing on stereotypes, and his attitude to politics was also colored by his early feelings on Communism, as well as according to Chabrier, the anti-Semitism he encountered. (Mailer often denied this.) While Chabrier ostensibly comes to praise Caesar, she ends up with a very bitter, if not negative, picture of a man who, she argues, was often ill at ease professionally and privately. I think she gets it all wrong.

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Indicative of this misunderstanding is the claim, made several times, that Mailer became more conservative as he grew older. I am baffled by this assertion. His final essays and attacks on George W. Bush and the incursion into Iraq show no mellowing of his antipathy to war and are in line with his take on the Vietnam Conflict. Furthermore, when I heard him speak in Los Angeles on his book tour for *A Castle in the Forest* some months before his death, his trenchant comments on the state of American society would not have made Norman Podheretz (or Rush Limbaugh) happy. Mailer's approach, born and bred from Reich and Wallace, still was the lens through which he perceived and critiqued. To call him a conservative is both erroneous and misleading.

Also, her take on his attitude to Judaism never quite comes into focus. Chabrier overcomplicates the nature of this argument. I squirmed over lines like "with his eight children, Mailer is in keeping with his Jewish roots." Does she actually think that Mailer's progeny has to do with the biblical injunction to "be fruitful and multiply"? I am surprised that she did not examine his dietary habits to question their conformity to the laws of kashrut. She seems driven to drag in every Jewish thinker she can, even though the relevance to Mailer's work is not always apparent. It is like trying to prove that Emerson is an American writer by quoting the Constitution. Really? In truth, Mailer had a decidedly ambivalent attitude to Judaism. He had no time for ritual but welcomed a seder in his home and spent time going over Hebrew. He owned a set of the Talmud and knew his way around many of the texts. I venture to say that he might even know more of Judaism than Malamud, or Phillip Roth or even Saul Bellow. While she justifies her reading with judicious support from the texts, the author is drowned out amid the voices of others. (There are 650 citations for a book that barely runs 200 pages.)

Especially egregious is her depiction of Norman's mother, Fanny, who comes across as a sort of Sophie Portnoy. Like the notorious Mrs. Portnoy, Fanny is seen as someone whose adoration of her son drove him to sexual excess (although of course, at the same time, made neurotic by Jewish inhibitions about sex) and attractions to the shiksa stereotype. While Roth's depiction is comedic and ironic, one would be a little dense not to see that it only contains a soupcon of truth. Yes, Jewish mothers tend to adore their bright (and not so bright) sons and, yes, Mailer had a strong bond with his mother and, yes, he had great respect for her but to say that this adoration hindered and crippled his relationship to women in general and his wives in

particular is a bit of a stretch. One would do well to counter this contention with Norris Church Mailer's far more sympathetic portrait of her mother-in-law in her autobiography, *A Ticket To the Circus.*

To write well on Mailer, of all people, requires a certain understanding of the protean and contradictory way that his mind works, and those who have tackled him best, for example, Richard Poirier and Barry Leeds, reflect an ability to live in these ambiguities and ambivalences which were part and parcel of his intellectual make up. Like Emerson, Mailer eschews a "foolish consistency" and like Whitman, he may contradict himself "because he contains multitudes." Chabrier, *au contraire*, sees contradiction as confusion and inconsistency as a failing. She wanders from novel to novel and essay to essay not enjoying the variety of their contradictions but all too earnestly trying to make them into one fabric and despairing when the strands unravel.

She also takes him far too seriously. Bubbling under many of Mailer's writings is an acute self-awareness and sense of the comic, if not the absurd. (Look at his movies, for example. I was surprised that although she interviewed Mailer personally she offers no sense of his wit, his humor, or his own sense of the twists and turns of the human mind. It is all deathly serious to her. Many a time while talking to Norman, I could make a joke at his expense and he would laugh and nod in agreement. She makes the mistake of taking Mailer too much at his word, when that word was only worth something for the moment it was uttered. His utterances were not always cast in stone. He could get angry, exaggerate for effect, or brag for amusement. She never gets between the notes, so to speak, and more disappointingly has a tin ear for Mailer's nuances.

Certainly, Mailer can be considered a Jeremiah railing against the evils of our society, trying to make us aware of the dangers of consumerism that deadened our brains, of wars that were fought not for the reasons we were led to believe but for other more nefarious reasons; he might look on sexuality, gender and race with somewhat "unmodern" theories but all is forgiven as he is a Jeremiah with genuine warmth and humanness, not like the poor prophet of the Bible. (The prophet he is closest to is Hosea.) He may view homosexuality as a less than desirable *modus vivendi* but his letters to me when I came out to him are warm and accepting. (Also read Dwayne Raymond's far more perceptive book *Mornings with Mailer* to understand the real Mailer.) This is no Jonathan Edwards railing against the sinners in the hands of an Angry God but a Jeremiah who tries to cajole through his

own self-abnegation. He understands that many of his heroes, from Rojack to Harlot, comprehend their own weaknesses all too well, a quality which gives them their humanity. No wonder that most of those who argued so vehemently with him (Buckley, Vidal) were also guests at his table and even those who were nonplussed by some of his actions enjoyed his company. He never suffered the fate of Capote, isolated and deserted by those whom he loved, or Baldwin unable to find a place in America or even Hemingway and Faulkner driven to suicide and drink respectively. Mailer by dint of his sheer brilliance (and undoubted self-aggrandizement) was stronger than most American writers of his stature. Mailer, like so many prophets of old, was often misunderstood by his own generation. There is so much missing from this book, so much misrepresented, so little of the real Mailer, that it is obvious that Ms. Chabrier falls into that camp.