THE CURRENTS AND OCEANS OF FAME

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Norman Mailer: A Double Life
By J. Michael Lennon
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NORMAN MAILER'S LIFE WAS LIVED THROUGH A PERIOD OF UNPARALLELED RATE of change as it affected his homeland. If the life of a political leader such as Churchill was extraordinary in that as said by George Steiner, it 'covered the span from a battle fought at Omdurman on horseback with swords, in a manner almost Homeric, to the construction of the hydrogen bomb' (98), Norman Mailer's 84 years were also ones that spanned the fast-paced American century, and J. Michael Lennon's new biography, *Norman Mailer: A Double Life,* is an essential access to that life. The biography's 'Prologue' is titled 'The Riptides of Fame', an early indication of Lennon's discriminating approach, which often transcends the flow of chrono-biography and flat documentary to select incidents and moments which, like riptides, intruded into that flow to shape and shift Mailer's existence.

Among the explorations of the main currents, we are invited to consider the view that 'from one perspective, [Mailer's] sixty years of writing can be seen as an untrammelled examination of all things sexual—a long list'. Or in the early three-act, eight-scene play Mailer wrote while still at Harvard, 'The Naked and the Dead', Lennon proposes that we can see the clear signs of one of Mailer's most abiding themes: 'the ways powerful regimes and administrations at all levels of American society created what he called in his first

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published novel a "fear ladder" . . . for the maintenance of control'. These are augmented by Lennon's perception of Mailer's less headline themes, bright streams that contribute to the main current, for 'although he grew up in cities, his sensitivity to nature's resonances must be counted as one of his most commanding skills', so that in *The Naked and the Dead*, Mailer can be seen to present 'a natural world that is uncaring, unyielding, implacable, and, occasionally, beautiful'. He also reminds us that while *Moby-Dick* was, as Mailer acknowledged, the primary influence upon his first novel, in the longer term making of Mailer's aesthetic, the influences of the Russian masters were profound. In Dostoyevsky and particularly in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, Mailer found a consolidation of his deepest intuitions, so that their work reminded him 'that life is like a gladiator's arena for the soul, and so we feel strengthened by those who endure, and feel awe and pity for those who do not'.

The near-800 pages of Lennon's biography fairly zing along in a style that pleases and whets the reader's appetite. We learn more about those we thought we knew as major influences upon Mailer's thinking in the early years, such as Jean Malaquais who Mailer met in Paris as he was drafting *Naked*—'proud and severe as only a stateless, formidably cultured Marxist intellectual could be, he had worked for years as a manual laborer'. Or Charles Devlin, 'who became the model for McLeod, one of the chief characters' of *Barbary Shore*. Devlin, 'a saturnine Irishman' in Mailer's words, was hired by him in 1948 to edit *Naked*. The two became firm friends when they first met at 20 Remsen Street in Brooklyn and Devlin there brought Mailer to a knowledge of language as metaphor, telling him 'to the degree that you have no metaphor, you are an impoverished writer, and have lived no life'.

Lennon sees that Devlin energised Mailer in such ways—'he never forgot Devlin's lecture and worked hard on his tropes ever after', as is clear in Lennon's treatment of Mailer's essay 'Ten Thousand Words a Minute', on the Sonny Liston-Floyd Patterson fight of 1963, in which Liston's Mob connections are revealed in metaphors 'surprising but precise . . . the Mob bosses are "hawks and falcons and crows, Italian dons looking like little old shrunken eagles, gulls pelicans, condors"', or perhaps most memorably in his fourth novel *An American Dream*, which 'shows Mailer at the height of his metaphoric power'.

Remsen Street in Brooklyn Heights indeed became the New York nu-

cleus of Mailer's world in those early years. Around the corner on Pierrepont lived the formidable matriarch Fan Mailer and Mailer's father Barney- who 'looked a bit like Donald Rumsfeld' or 'an elegant, impoverished figure out of Chekhov'--a lifelong gambling addict, who emerges from this biography as a clearly defined presence. Mailer believed that in one respect at least, 'he was exactly like his father: he was also a secret addict, not to gambling, but to women'. Indeed this biography's subtitle, 'A Double Life' can be traced at least partly to that context, as 'Barney's double life gave Mailer a model and even sanction for his own' As he reached the end of his own life Mailer could acknowledge his father's large influence upon it, another riptide indeed: 'whatever value my works have comes from my Dad going against the tide. My mother was in the center of the current'.

91 Remsen Street had once been Henry Miller's home in 1924 (he and his wife June were evicted after only a year for not being able to meet the rent payments; Mailer would first meet him many years later, in Scotland at the Edinburgh Festival in 1962), and we find that at the same time as Mailer and his first wife Bea Silverman were renting their apartment at 49 Remsen Street, Arthur Miller 'lived in the same brownstone as Fan and Barney and was writing a new play—*The Death of a Salesman*'. In terms of New York literary neighbourhoods, Remsen Street was fast being inducted to the Hall of Fame. The Mailers soon moved to another rental there, a one-room garret studio at 20 Remsen Street, owned by poet, playwright and novelist Norman Rosten. In that room, both Mailer and his first wife Bea were able to work on their respective novels-in-progress. It was bohemia come home. As a student Rosten had been in the same playwriting class as Arthur Miller at the University of Michigan, and he was eventually named Brooklyn's poet laureate in 1979. The coalescence of Rosten, Miller and Mailer would come of course in their later involvement with Marilyn Monroe. As Lennon notes, 'Miller married her; Rosten became a confidant; Mailer wrote her biography'.

The gathering and expression of Lennon's research across this biography is remarkable. The result is a gripping display, as we see the enacting of many relations and relationships in a complex of cultural energies that all contributed to the making and vitality of Mailer's art. The text's deep research is unobtrusive and the reader is made to feel interested and involved. The conventions of biographical form have been subject to increasing revisions over the most part of the last 100 years, at least since the subversions

to it launched by Virginia Woolf in her mock-biography, *Orlando,* of 1928. Indeed Mailer himself in *Marilyn: A Biography* (1973), cites Woolf with some enthusiasm as an illustrious forerunner in the biographical arts: 'a biography is considered complete if it merely accounts for six or seven selves, whereas a person may have as many as one thousand'. The words are by Virginia Woolf. In its wake, the materials of any biographer come begging with his credentials. In such terms, and in subtitling his biography 'A Double Life', Lennon may be thought by some to have been conservative in the counting of Mailer's many selves, but he achieves nevertheless a flourishing rendition of a life lived to maximal intensity. If J. Michael Lennon is one twentieth-century version of James Boswell to Mailer's Samuel Johnson, a conclusion is that Norman Mailer was either very lucky, very savvy, or both, in his selection of his biographer.

In 1962, Mailer appointed Anne Barry his first full-time secretary. From the start she recognised that she was working with what she called 'a particularly intense man'. In the context of tracking the sources as well as the expressions of that intensity this biography sheds much new light. After his committal to Bellevue Hospital in 1960 at one of the lowest points of his life following his knife assault upon his second wife Adele Morales, Lennon finds that while there he read an anthology edited by Walter Kaufmann, *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, which contained excerpts from the writings of ten existential writers. 'It is no weak supposition to conclude that the title of the Nietzsche chapter, "Live Dangerously" and the Nietzsche quote from which it is taken, rang a big bell for Mailer: "For believe me, the secret of the greatest fruitfulness and the greatest enjoyment of existence is: to *live dangerously!* Build your cities under Vesuvius! Send your ships into uncharted seas! Live at war with your peers and yourselves!"'

Also there in the same volume Lennon finds that 'an excerpt from Kierkegaard's influential work *The Concept of Dread* . . . appears to be the source of Mailer's oft stated notion that "the saint and the psychopath were united to one another"'. He concludes that 'the extent to which Mailer's conception of the artist's role was invigorated by the writings in the Kaufmann collection is uncertain' but some will believe they can be regarded as, at the least, major contributions to the philosophical mix that informed and buttressed the meaning of his emerging romantic heroism in those years. These were manifest not only in his actions and debates (most famously with

William Buckley and Gore Vidal) throughout the 1960s but also apparent in his influential essays as that period began. 'The White Negro' and *Advertisements for Myself* (1959) show much of the hunger for new shapes of existence, new possibilities of nervous discovery, that must have been consolidated by Mailer's reading of the essays in Kaufmann's volume. Existential heroism became for him a quintessential and defining attitude in the face of societal repression and inauthenticity. In that discourse, human integrity meant the bravery of confronting the ideological forces that were guilty of causing American instability. Following the assassination of JFK, Mailer saw that the ensuing national grief was taking a downward turn into madness and psychic breakdown, writing a rangy critique of the national *weltanschauung* in an essay such as, 'In the Red Light: A History of the Republican Convention in 1964' which was published in *Cannibals and Christians* (1967): 'our national love was a corpse in Arlington . . . Yes, our country was fearful, half mad, inauthentic. It needed a purge'.

Mailer's marriages and relationships are given their proper place in this study of his life and work—and that is a place of considerable importance, since he himself regarded them as in no way separable. The creative life and the married life were intimates—any breakdown in or destruction of the latter led to creative crisis. Lennon selects Mailer's interview with Harvey Breit as an important expression of this 'absolute funk', the anguish that ensued from tying 'one's creativity to one's mate' so that in a marital breakdown (the interview was given at the time of his separation from Lady Jeanne Campbell in 1963) 'one's killing part of the creativity in oneself . . . I've lost three wives, and there was something large to lose in each of them, but I also lost three large chambers of the talent' (325).

Lennon's judgements upon Mailer's novels are almost always authoritative and valid, as when in a single sentence he sums up the author's 'deepest beliefs': 'namely a distrust of pure reason, faith in the authority of the senses, psychic growth achieved by risk taking, courage as the cardinal virtue, anger at the greed and corruption of American life, and fear that fascism may be rooting'. Those novels were sometimes burdened with a comparatively lengthy form, most flagrantly evident in one of his last, *Harlot's Ghost* (1991), which concludes with the troubling words 'to be continued', a promise Mailer unfortunately never kept. He was an author who sometimes 'struggled to tie the plot threads together neatly, always difficult for him'. In

his discussion of *An American Dream* (1965), a novel first published in serial installments for *Esquire* magazine, Lennon edges close to the view that this imposed a necessary discipline upon Mailer's tendency to overwrite, noting that 'it was fortunate the book was written under deadlines [since] . . . given the wherewithal to wander leisurely through the alleyways of plot possibility, he might have written a novel twice as long but perhaps only half as good'. If not fully verifiable, such judgments are persuasive, based as they are upon Lennon's precise evaluations of the Mailer corpus. Brevity may sometimes be a virtue, and in a narrative such as that of Steven Rojack in *An American Dream*, the enforced brevity (at least as compared with that of, say, *Harlot's Ghost* or *Ancient Evenings*) certainly contributes to its extraordinary power, allowing for a much more focused concentration upon the darkening moods that afflict Rojack. As Lennon writes, 'subtly shifting states of consciousness, punctuated by the corporal, the sensuous, the bloody, became Mailer's hallmark with *An American Dream*', and are set more centrally in a shorter narrative, something the author himself may have recognised when, in 2005, Lennon remembers Mailer signing the novel for a friend, and saying 'I'll never write that well again'.

There is then much to applaud in this biography of Norman Mailer, his 'double life' making him 'the preeminent insider-outsider of American culture'. The book's many strengths only make us wish for even more in for instance the relatively brief attention given to a novel such as *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (1967) or perhaps some greater balance in the assessment of *Harlot's Ghost*, which although described as perhaps 'his finest novelistic achievement', is also judged to contain sections 'reinforcing the criticism that his worst sin . . . is redundancy. This tendency . . . seriously damages the novel'. The same tendency is evident in what Lennon later describes as 'the bloated Uruguayan episode in *Harlot's Ghost*' as well as manifesting in the optional 'Russian excursion' of Mailer's final novel, *The Castle in the Forest* (2007).

'J. Michael Lennon, a young professor at the University of Illinois' (542) who would soon become Mailer's friend, confidant, archivist, editor and elected biographer, has accomplished in this biography a multifaceted reckoning which will please the Mailer cognoscenti and increase the landscape of awareness of those as yet uninformed. When he first learned of the sales and success of *The Naked and the Dead*, Mailer knew that his life would change forever. 'I'd always seen myself as an observer. And now I knew, realized, that I was going to be an actor. An actor on the American stage, so to

speak.' It was said of Mailer at his penultimate public appearance, 'if we can keep him on stage, he'll live forever'. With the publication of *Norman Mailer: A Double Life,* that prospect has become no less likely.

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