FROM GOD'S ATTIC TO BOOM-BOOM SLANG: LOOKING FOR MAILER'S LQ

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Norman Mailer: Legacy and Literary Americana
By Donald L. Kaufmann
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DON KAUFMANN IS SUN-HOT. Standing in front of a crowd in a small room at the Holiday Inn, he leans forward, his arms swaying from side to side and reaching out, as though to embrace each person in the audience. He radiates ebullience. Kaufmann is now a spare, athletic man, stooped with the weight of years, but his gossamer-thin aspect seems to focus the energy as a convex glass concentrates daylight. It is the 2010 Norman Mailer Society Conference in Sarasota, Florida, and Kaufmann is speaking of one of his great life experiences. He is talking about his long relationship with the writer Norman Mailer, and the one time he witnessed his friend's indignation.

Mailer, Kaufmann recounts, was attending a writer's conference in 2004, a scant two years or so before his death. The literary icon was then eighty-one, the movement of his former boxer-body constricted by the limits of twin canes. His spirit, however, still sparked, especially when his self-reliance was in question:

> Mailer was near exhaustion. I was walking alongside him and he and his canes were barely making it up a steep ramp. Near the

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> top, I either saw or thought I saw that he was falling. My instincts took over and I grabbed him, momentarily held him. He roared: "Get off me. Leave me be." His eyes momentarily flashed anger, even near-hatred, and I let him go. He regained his balance, opened the heavy door and I followed, in full knowledge that I have violated his untouchable independence. Norman would stay alive strictly on his own terms. (61)

Later, alone, Kaufmann would consider his friend's desire for autonomy and wonder if that aging independence had more relevance than any other trivial event that day. He wondered about Father Time.

Personal stories such as this one, retold with passion and insight, are the emotional core of Kaufmann's new book. We see Mailer, at home in Provincetown during one of Kaufmann's visits, tempering his macho public persona by revealing a domesticized family man, devoted to his mother Fanny. We share Kaufmann's surprise at Mailer's genial welcome when the young scholar visits the author at his summertime Maine retreat, Fortune Rock, and shares a pot-luck dinner while inscribing copies of his books.

We learn, too, of Kaufmann's hard work and persistence when, in 1965 as a faculty member at the State University of Alaska, he nudges politicians to invite Mailer for a visit to "God's Attic," the northernmost state. The author, obviously not keen on the idea, had imposed nearly impossible conditions on the trip, including a tarmac greeting by the Governor and an opportunity to address both Houses in legislative session. In late 1964, Kaufmann explains, Mailer began a period of active political involvement. He no doubt had summarily decided not to go the frigid state, and the governmental pomp of these stipulations was just a bit of incorrigible tomfoolery. Through circuitous political connections and a well-funded English Department, Kaufmann and his cohorts prevail, however, delivering the better part of Mailer's quirky perks. The visit turns out to be an epiphany: Mailer debates National Book Award winner Ralph Ellison, flies over Mount McKinley, buzzes Mount Denali, and quiets a drunk and belligerent attorney through a bout of mock fisticuffs. "There are one or two places a man can visit in his lifetime," Mailer later maintained during an interview in London, "that affect him as an existential experience. Alaska was one of those places for me" (13). Kaufmann speculates about the influence of Mailer's visit on his later novels, *An American Dream* (1965) and *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (1967): "Would there have

been a Mailer Vietnam novel without us being there? . . . My belief that [Mailer's visit] was the genesis of Mailer's Vietnam novel causes me to wonder how Stephen Rojak . . . would have behaved had Mailer created him after—and not before—his five-day Alaskan visit" (22).

While these first-person accounts are engaging and illuminate Mailer's personality, Kaufmann's foremost intent is to examine the author in relation to his influences and the comparative tapestry of his contemporaries, to evaluate Mailer's place in the cultural context of the American intellectual landscape. Kaufmann at first struggled to find "a prototype of any large-scale compact 'legacy book' about any notable American author." Finding no models, he resigned himself to being "an octogenarian primal seeker" expanding the type of literary perspective normally found in "obits, and otherwise, random sporadic commentary" into a full-length attempt to understand Mailer's artistic legacy (vii).

Kaufmann, ever the logician, invents a "Legacy Quotient (LQ) Derby" as a critical tool for quantifying Mailer's literary longevity. The classification is an ordinal scale intended to compare all the varied aspects of Mailer's work with that of other influential American authors and with mercurial intellectual and cultural trends influencing Western literature. Kaufmann perceives this attempt to calculate comparative legacy as a focused argument, one that ultimately values canon over evaluations of character and ever present media hype. He emphasizes the futility of including public image in the assessment by wandering into whimsy: "For example, a 'wife stabbing' equals two major novels, or five public brawls eliminate *The Naked and the Dead*" (64). Legacy is tenuous, Kaufmann suggests, and parsing the elements affirming literary reputation is never a simple process, especially for Mailer, who upended both personal and artistic convention so often and for so long.

The importance of canon over character is clear in Kaufmann's comparison of Mailer with other innovative American authors, a matrix of talent forming the "seed womb" of creativity maturing to produce Mailer's *oeuvre*. Unlike Jack London, for example, Mailer's literary megalomania "was expressed only secondarily through his character, personality, and career—but primarily through his protean canon." Mailer's singular engagement with the media, along with an ability to adopt and even to dominate social trends, is for Kaufmann an explicit sign of his place in American letters. "Mailer, both in the ring and on the page, was a singular battler with the media and

a controller and survivor. These qualities will play an important role in determining the Mailer legacy" (13).

Kaufmann implies that media, in the mid-twentieth century onward, was a more formidable challenge for artists compared with the primitive news and promotional outlets of earlier times. A major advance in Mailer's LQ comes from the author's ability to adapt to new media trends and confront them on equal terms. "American education relapsed into elementary classroom audio-visual entertainment," Kaufmann complains. "Mass media became ubiquitous entertainment, ignoring issues of truth. The prevailing refrain was, Goodbye Print, Hello Digital Reality. Some felt America was developing a lifestyle void of reason and individuality, a dead end culture. But the Mailer legacy express kept moving" (345).

Mailer's status is further advanced, in Kaufmann's evaluation, by his unique reaction against prevailing philosophical, political, or moral doctrines. He notes nearly ten different "isms," including Romanticism, Realism, Naturalism, and Colonialism, to which Mailer either reacts against or appropriates into a personal system of belief during his long career. "During all this stylish literary Postmodern goings-on," Kaufmann writes, "there, at the fringe, Norman Mailer was doing his own noisy, protean literary thing." While Mailer eventually adopted a characteristically quirky form of "Existentialism" as his own, pointing to any one common approach to these conflicting, formal notions proves problematic. Kaufmann gives one example: "Back then, what did Mailer hear, write down, and believe about Postmodernism? The answer might either intrigue or bore any future judgmental 'ism.' In other words, how Postmodern, rather than Existential, was the intellectual Mailer? Was he truly avant-garde or was he a dropout—as he was during the Jewish American renaissance of 1950–1970" (153–154).

Mailer abdication during the rebirth of Jewish literature is of special interest to Kaufmann, who suggests that this particular literary trend gained momentum due to America's sustained sense of guilt and horror over the Holocaust. "So, why not bring Jewish-Americans out of literary mothballs, showcasing their arts and letters as living reminders of the recent 'ethnic cleansing,' as ethnic harbingers of America's new Empire with its fully-beating heart? America's global sensitivity, in no time, became a worldwide Humanism" (155). For Mailer, however, Jewish authors responded to this opportunity by adopting an exhausted, effete attitude, a literary bearing having little to do with the individualism and character represented in his own

works. "If Jewish-American Literature had sold out," Kaufmann maintains, "it was part of a trend in minority groups to turn 'average,' which provoked Mailer to shift to a sheer Existential stance. . . In mid-career, the Mailer canon exhibited beliefs and accomplishments seemingly at odds with the assumed superiority of homegrown Jewish arts and letters. Mailer's most imposing rivals—Miller, Malamud, Bellow, and Roth—must have been perplexed" (167).

Ultimately, Kaufmann establishes ten categories appropriate for assessing Mailer's LQ, including authorial singularity, command of the American vernacular, diversity of artistic accomplishment, and awards and public acclaim. The case for Mailer's high LQ is particularly strong for the latter two criteria:

> Consider the conspicuous Mailer canon with two Pulitzer Prizes and other major awards—except for the Nobel Prize. There are over forty books, some truly weighty novels, stories and poems, and much nonfiction, including . . . essays, articles, literary criticism, stage and screenplays, TV and film ventures (actor, director, critic) and much of ephemera. There is also, perhaps, the age's most voluminous letter writing, many of which are astonishingly creative and revealing. (64)

Kaufmann's identification of the top ten books assuring Mailer's legacy demonstrates the author's wide-ranging imagination and literary diversity. He admits that the list is highly speculative, but is resolute that the selections display Mailer's diverse talent.

> Of the ten, eight are fiction—mostly weighty and mindful novels—and only two are nonfiction. Such top-sided fictive preference suggests more canon permanency. Factual prose, centered on "momentous happenings," is prone to be ephemeral. Fiction, instead, suggests "starting from scratch." In a Mailer context, that means a greater probability of creativity aligned with literary atmospherics. That reveals Mailer, at times, at his protean, operatic best. (308)

The ninth volume on the list is *Harlot's Ghost*, Mailer's 1991 novel that is at once a CIA thriller, a biography, and a critical evaluation of America's fight

against Communism, engagement with Russia during the Cuban Missile Crisis, and heartbreak with the assassination of President Kennedy. This accomplished work falls to the bottom of the register, Kaufmann implies, because Mailer never wrote the anticipated sequel. Calling the project "short-circuited," *Harlot's Ghost* nevertheless makes the list based upon its social relevance and diversity of concerns. "The 'cliffhanger' left us with as many questions as answers—a common Mailer *motif*. At rare times, Mailer's historic and linguistic future reality was too 'protean' for words. But not entirely. There remained Mailer's literary master versatility" (311–312).

Why Are We in Vietnam?, the 1967 *tour de force* that deals with America's military involvement in Southeast Asia by implication rather than direct action, earns the rank of number six on the book's qualitative chart. Kaufmann, early on, notes Mailer's decades long "kaleidoscopic search for authorial voices," and decides that modern literary language, for Mailer, must be confrontational. "Words must echo history," Kaufmann writes. "Instead of the Hemingway sound of disengagement, Mailer's language leads to a confrontation with the stuff of American culture, past and present. Since culture continues to undergo shock, language as communication is pushed to its limit" (25). Mailer's slim novel is the primary exhibit for his engagement with words in transition, becoming "a pop-hit mosaic of the American language in a wartime crisis. In turn, phenomena enabled the basic Baroque Mailer prose to splinter into a diction resounding with a radical mix of Texan boom-boom slang, Rock 'n' Roll' Hippie language, and graffiti street poetics. The American language seemed to be gagging on death row" (316). Kaufmann thus sidesteps his own involvement in the novel's development in favor of a direct analysis of one of Mailer's considerable artistic distinctions—his ability to criticize emerging culture while emulating its effects through sensibility and language.

Mailer's account of the first American manned moon landing in 1969, first serialized in three long installments in the iconic *Life* magazine, is Kaufmann's perhaps surprising choice for the number one slot, the ultimate work typifying elements of Mailer's legacy quotient. True to Kaufmann's criteria joining personality and reputation with artistic diversity, *Of a Fire on the Moon*, published in book form in 1970, "surmounted traditional creativity by linking world-historical and literary history. Imagine, a global event being communicated by a seminal literary presence—Columbus with Cervantes on board, Jamestown bringing Shakespeare on shore, the Puritans landing

near Provincetown, with Milton as witness—then why not Mailer lighting a 'fire on the moon'" (333)? Kaufmann's insistence on the rarity of Mailer's genius, the longevity and value of his art, is given physical form in the 2009 publication of *MoonFire*, a $112,500 edition, aluminum-housed and crater-pocked, complete with moon-themed coffee table. Such opulence bordering upon kitsch assures at least the legacy of artifact, a permanence, of sorts, for a significant artistic account of perhaps the most important historical event in modern times. Mailer, who did not live to see this *objet de vertu* reach consumers, would have been gratified as well as bemused.

Kaufmann's personal perspective gives Mailer's work a sense of flesh and blood, the substance of a body of literature still with us and still influencing culture as it did five decades ago. Along with Michael Lennon's authorized biography, *Norman Mailer: A Double Life*, and Phillip Sipiora's edited collection, *Mind of an Outlaw*, both published within the past year, the book is a valuable beginning point for defining and categorizing the author's legacy. Kaufmann, after the meticulous analysis and patient consideration documented in this book, finally resolves the puzzle of Mailer's legacy with logic tempered by emotion. "He remains, in my judgment, his literary generation's best bet at explaining America—at its best and worst—with his ambidextrous mirror and his generation's best literary intellect" (358).

A true believer, Kaufmann is as passionate about Mailer in print as he was just a few years ago in that meeting room in Sarasota. He is now older than Mailer was at that writer's conference. Older, too, than Mailer at his passing. In 1969 Kaufmann wrote one of the first book-length critical studies of Mailer's work. That he still shares his experiences and insights is a witness to both his intellectual courage and his physical endurance. Father Time, for once, has been deferential. Mailer studies could use a few more books from this devoted scholar.