NORMAN REDUX

MICHAEL SHUMAN

Mailer's America
By Dr. Joe Wenke
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OVER THE PAST TWO YEARS, MAILER STUDIES HAS ENJOYED the publication of an unprecedented number of major works. J. Michael Lennon's biography and Phillip Sipiora's collection of essays will lead the way to the appearance, toward the end of 2014, of Lennon's edition of selected letters and a book documenting Mailer's raucous feud with Gore Vidal, compiled by Mailer's long-time lover, Carole Mallory. Interest in the author seems nearly insatiable, a welcome indication that Mailer is enjoying a renaissance, and that scholars will have even more critical tools to advance our understanding of his work. Do we really need, during this watershed, a reprinted edition of a critical study originally published in 1987?

Joe Wenke's *Mailer's America*, first issued by University of Connecticut press, now reappears with a new preface from Wenke's publishing house, Trans Über, and provides an opportunity to consider the importance of old works beneath new covers. Exactly how do they justify their reincarnation; how do they enrich our discipline?

Wenke's pretext, perhaps not unique but certainly supported here with both reason and passion, is that Mailer's lifelong literary mission was to examine the boundless promise of the American experience and to understand why that promise is never realized in personal or civic life. Employing a close analysis of some of Mailer's most important earlier works, through 1984's *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, Wenke discusses Mailer's politics and philosophy

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and interprets how the author's personal notions inform character and action. As with Donald L. Kaufmann's study, reviewed elsewhere in this number of the *Review*, Wenke maintains that attention to a writer's personality distracts from serious literary analysis, and Mailer's controversial public persona no doubt doubly justifies this exclusion.

Yet Mailer's confrontational, daredevil personality informs one of the most important themes examined in Wenke's study: in the boundless American political and social landscape, perpetually upended by individual complacency and political shenanigans, the courage to take risks is the paramount personal attribute. "At the heart of this drama," Wenke elaborates, "is the importance of risk taking, for which Mailer finds a paradigm in the myths and histories of such American figures as the pioneer, the outlaw, the inventor, the early industrialist, the boxer, and the movie star as well as in the transcendentalist quester of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman" (xxi).

Mailer illuminates the tension between the promise of the American experience and the disappointing reality, Wenke maintains, by revealing the connection between the lives of his characters and the life of the nation. Wenke emphasizes "the depth of Mailer's conviction that there is most certainly a correspondence between the American body politic and the physical, psychological, and moral wellbeing of each American citizen" (10). Such a bond between America and its people demands individual bravery in order to maintain the country's mythic aspirations and to counter the potential for the rise of totalitarianism, a threat for any advanced political system. As Wenke's analysis of individual texts demonstrates, Mailer understands "that ironically most people are participating—whether out of ignorance, fear, or a desire for power—in the very social and political process that will result in the absolute denial of personality" (16).

Mailer's politics, too, emanate from his distinctively self-sustaining and individualistic personality and his reaction to the totalitarian threat. Wenke points out that the author may have been without cohort in his political beliefs, and his spiritual autonomy is directly influenced by nineteenth-century Transcendentalists. Mailer's dedication to the leftist radical movement evolved, during the late 1960s, into an odd hybrid combining a continued commitment to leftist activism tempered by a conservative passion for preserving American traditions. "Mailer's left conservatism," according to Wenke, "represents the political expression of a syncretic philosophy that integrates such disparate elements as existential risk taking, nihilistic rebel-

liousness, and a transcendentalist faith that affirms the primacy of the self and the life of the spirit" (xxv).

In Mailer's inaugural novel, *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), Wenke locates his first attempts to define an alternative to liberalism and to identify a political belief that counters totalitarianism without liberal precepts. While the novel's subtext rejects liberalism, the young author is unable to develop a political vocabulary or advance a suitable plot that would identify a viable alternative. Michael Hearn, the novel's protagonist, struggles with the nature of leadership and the innate human desire for power. He perceives Staff Sergeant Sam Croft's psychopathic actions as a perverted form of control and wonders how to deal with the soldier's coldblooded personality. With Hearn's unfulfilled decision to resign his commission, Mailer effectively abandons his own literary mission as he had "reached the limit of his ability at this very early point in his career to pursue the political implications of his vision" (35). The author instead resorts to serendipity and naturalism, allowing a hornet's nest to interrupt Croft's heavy-handed advance on Mount Anaka. Such a resolution denies human agency and implies that the totalitarian ethos is impeded, or not, primarily by chance and fate.

The economic effects of a complacent American populace, Wenke suggests, also supports advancing totalitarianism and subverts the diversity of the nation's entrepreneurial spirit. His analysis of *Barbary Shore* (1951), Mailer's second novel, reveals an American market nearly paralyzed by plenty:

> The novel's fundamental argument is that, as world markets have become 'glutted' with commodities and as developing nations have turned increasingly to some form of state capitalism or nationalization, it has correspondingly become more and more difficult for American monopoly capitalism to invest its profits. As a result, the United States has begun to resort to all but unlimited military production as an economic alternative: "for there was a new consumer and new commodities, and every shell could find as customer its enemy soldier." (40)

The novel's hero, Michael Lovett, may have the opportunity to develop a new social identity and thereby an effective political commitment, but he is severely limited in his choices by the dark, restricting landscape of

ambiguity and crisis. "Unfortunately," Wenke writes, "Lovett remains little more than a shadowy figure on the periphery of society, for his commitment to risk begins precisely as the book ends" (46).

Mailer continued his insistence on the importance of individual courage and the necessity of taking risks in "The White Negro," an essay first published in a 1957 issue of *Dissent* and later issued as a separate volume by City Lights Press. The author's relative maturity and mastery of the essay form may have assured a more coherent argument, unencumbered by the challenges of characterization and narrative. In any case, Wenke notes that this work successfully articulates Mailer's unique political notions. Society, ostensibly intended to protect the individual, ironically nurtures self-destructive impulses, and the proper personal response is a "romantic rejection of society and a liberation of instinct in order to regain for oneself an identity of Adamic innocence" (73). The hipster emerges as a courageous adventurer and social physician, "since his status as outsider liberates him from the security of convention and routine and transforms his life into a series of existential situations in which the 'end is unknown' and danger is ever present" (74).

Mailer's 1983 novel *Ancient Evenings*, from Wenke's perspective, is Mailer's most ambitious novel, illustrating not only the tension between American myth and history but also successfully defining the character of the left conservative ideal that he had attempted so many years before. Mailer at last has the background and resources to present his political vision in a fictional context. In this novel Menenhetet One and Two, struggling for survival in the Land of the Dead, transcend the conventions of romantic literature to reveal a tough, individualistic ideal. "Because they are paradoxically the posthumous survivors of an eclipsed culture," Wenke writes, "they become perfect embodiments of Mailer's left-conservative protagonist, who must work out his commitment to social relationship with the very society that has superseded the values of his cultural heritage" (226).

The book ends in the spirit of anticipation, an upbeat conclusion for his readers in 1987 but now a poignant reminder of Wenke's limited historical perspective. "In the meantime," he writes, citing 1966's collection of essays *Cannibals and Christians*, "assuming continued health and vigor, Mailer will no doubt extend his body of work, producing books that deepen our understanding of the relationship of American myth and American history while attempting to stand as creations 'equal to the phenomenon of the

country itself'" (245). Mailer, in fact, would go on to produce the controversial novels *Harlot's Ghost* (1991) and *The Gospel According to the Son* (1997), as well as the triumphant *The Castle in the Forest* (1997), his last completed novel. *Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery* (1996) similarly displays Mailer's fine work as a narrative journalist. All of these books, and more, are outside the historical scope of Wenke's study. What, then, is the value of this reprinted edition?

The question is pretty easily answered. Wenke's book presents a compelling argument for Mailer as a preeminent political and social critic during a tumultuous time in our nation's history. His explication of Mailer's vision of American potential undermined by American reality, and of the necessity of the individual risk-taking spirit to combat the advancement of totalitarianism, remains as illuminating today as it was in 1987. In gracious and accomplished prose devoid of academic gobbledygook, the study makes a compelling case for the primacy of Mailer's work in contemporary literature. This edition, while not extending the body of Mailer studies, adds Wenke's voice, an echo from the past, to the diverse new conversation proclaiming Mailer's unique thought and spirit. That Wenke got so much so right about an author in the autumn of his career is impressive enough. That *Mailer's America* is still around and still influential at a critical point in Mailer studies is, at the very least, at act of intellectual will by a scholar reminding us of the debt we owe to this singular American author.