

MAILER AMONG THE INTELLECTUALS

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Moral Agents: Eight Twentieth-Century American Writers

By Edward Mendelson

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IN 1959, NORMAN MAILER PUBLISHED HIS COMMENTS on twenty-one of his contemporaries, “Quick Evaluations of the Talent in the Room.” Only four of his subjects by my count were Jewish. And James Jones and William Styron, the writers in the essay he clearly wishes to be measured against, were neither Jewish nor New Yorkers nor the sons of immigrants. Mailer ignores these differences in background. Instead he treats them as competitors for the honor of writing a novel good enough and representative enough of American culture to anoint its author as the next Ernest Hemingway. Given Mailer’s “mainstream” stance and desire, there is no reason why more than a few of Mailer’s readers in the 1950s would know that he was Jewish and still fewer that would attach much importance to it. At the same time in New York City there were a group of writers and critics who were Jewish, leftist in their politics, but decidedly anti-communist. They were mostly, like Mailer, second-generation New Yorkers, fiercely intellectual and, in terms of literature, fiercely judgmental. (One of their “home journals” was *Partisan Review*.) Collectively, this loose association of talented individuals came to be referred to as the “New York Intellectuals.” Murray Kempton, the brilliant New York journalist (born in Baltimore and Episcopalian), preferred to call them “The Family.” Not surprisingly, Mailer was friendly with various

members of The Family, probably knew most of them by name, and perhaps, over time became a sort of quasi-member in the eyes of some of his public.

In any case he had enough contact with The Family or whatever one wants to call it for some students of Mailer to benefit from consulting Edward Mendelson's *Moral Agents: Eight Twentieth-Century American Writers*, a collection of essays on several of the dominant figures of the group. Those studied include Lionel Trilling, Dwight Macdonald, Alfred Kazin, William Maxwell, Saul Bellow and, of course, Mailer. Maxwell was a Protestant from the Midwest and a writer who also became an editor of fiction at the *New Yorker*. It is hard to believe Mailer never heard of him, since the magazine was one of his *bête noirs*, and he despised the so-called " *New Yorker* short story" (defined below) that Maxwell allegedly championed. But Maxwell's name is not in the index of Michael Lennon's biography. The other five, however, were all known to Mailer and all played at least some part in his life. (Mendelson extends the count to eight by including two poets: W. H. Auden and Frank O'Hara. Mailer had to be aware of both, but seems to have had no significant contact with either.)

So Mendelson's book is potentially interesting to the student of Mailer not only for what he says about Mailer as a "moral agent" (more about that later) but as a glimpse into one intellectual corner of Mailer's world during the first two or three decades of his career. Mendelson claims, in the very first sentence of his introduction, that the book is about "writers, morality, and power." The "power" the writers allegedly had was "to shape American literary culture." "All had mixed feelings about their own power, and each confronted moral tests and temptations that were inseparable from it." Thus each chapter is actually a chapter on the moral life of the individual writer.

Perhaps the strengths and weaknesses of Mendelson's approach can best be seen by examining his treatment of Lionel Trilling, the first writer he deals with. Trilling was the first tenured Jewish member of the English department at Columbia, and his 1950 collection of essays, *The Liberal Imagination*, was certainly well known, throughout the fifties and sixties. But, in keeping with his claim about The Family's "power," Mendelson makes extraordinarily exaggerated claims for Trilling's popularity. *The Liberal Imagination* may very well have sold seventy thousand hardback copies and over a hundred thousand paperback copies, but that was over a two-decade span when both hardback and "quality" paperbacks were relatively cheap and

teaching-assistant stipends relatively generous. That it was on a lot of shelves is undeniable, but one must keep in mind that Mailer wrote book after book during this period that sold multiples of these figures.

At least in the 1960s, I can see very little evidence of the “public eminence and adulation” that Mendelson claims was Trilling’s after the book was published. I spent almost all of the sixties in either undergraduate or graduate literature programs. I owned a copy of the book and read it. But with the possible exception of Columbia, graduate literature departments in those days were not especially interested in the cultural, political, and social implications of literature which Mendelson admits were *The Liberal Imagination*’s main focus. And even though academic literature programs and literary culture may not be identical, in most of the country literature programs were just about the only literary culture there was. Although one of my graduate professors had undoubtedly been a student of Trilling at Columbia, the only time I ever heard Trilling’s name mentioned in a lecture was in connection with his essay on Austen’s *Mansfield Park*, an essay written later in the fifties. (I did have a friend who, as an undergraduate at Notre Dame, wrote Trilling and asked him to have lunch at the Oak Room of the Plaza Hotel. Trilling graciously obliged. But my friend was more of a dandy than a political activist, and he was attracted by Trilling’s suave, cosmopolitan persona, not by any authoritative literary stance.)

Meanwhile, many of my fellow students, especially those who wanted to be writers, were very much aware of Mailer. At the end of the sixties, when I became an instructor, at least two of my colleagues were writing dissertations on him. My point is that if one wants to call Trilling a “celebrity,” one must remember that the word has a far different meaning when used for Mailer. (For an example of an English professor in the 1950s who came closer to being a celebrity, I suggest looking up the Wikipedia entry on Bergen Evans, a professor of English at Northwestern and no stranger to network television.)

Exaggerated notions of popularity aside, however, the chapter on Trilling is truly excellent and all the chapters provide worthwhile background information on one part of Mailer’s literary environment. But often the “moral tests and temptations” only became public after the writer died and the environment in question had changed considerably. Thus Trilling’s suave, cosmopolitan persona and Arnoldian even-handedness were shown, after his death, to be a façade hiding the most painful self-doubt. And by the time

the all-revealing diaries were published, the literary culture Trilling may or may not have influenced had morphed into something he would hardly have recognized. It is the same with Alfred Kazin, perhaps the liveliest and most appealing critic and essayist of the group. His personal life was something of sordid mess. But his admiring readers knew nothing about this. Saul Bellow's rather distressing misogyny and parenting were similarly unknown to his readers until very late in his life.

With two lesser-known figures, Maxwell and MacDonald, other cautions have to be voiced. Maxwell was not the only fiction editor of *The New Yorker*, as Mendelson seems to imply, "from the nineteen-thirties to the seventies," but merely one of several on staff. (Katherine White, the wife of E. B. White, was another.) He is usually given credit for the "New Yorker" style of fiction, described by Mendelson as "plotless, undramatic, quietly nuanced, faultlessly phrased." But among the writers he edited were Frank O'Connor, Eudora Welty, and Isaac Bashevis Singer, none of whose stories exactly conform to the above description.

Neither Maxwell nor Macdonald was Jewish, and Maxwell was not really a member of The Family. But Macdonald definitely was. He had participated with the older members in the political infighting of the thirties—Marxist versus Trotskyite versus Democratic Socialist versus anarchist. He had also edited his own anarchist/pacifist journal in the forties called simply "*Politics*." He was not a novelist but a social and literary critic and a polemicist. And he was a long-time friend of Mailer. Like Mailer, he also ventured into less hermetic outlets. For years he wrote for the *New Yorker*, and in the fifties and sixties, he was film reviewer—among other things—for *Esquire*. Mendelson points out that in his monthly reviews, he "demonstrated that aesthetic pleasure can coexist with moral intelligence." And indeed he did, but there was more aesthetic displeasure than pleasure because aesthetically Macdonald was totally caught up in a Golden Age complex. For film the Golden Age was the age of D. W. Griffith and Sergei Eisenstein. (He even wrote once that silent films were inherently more aesthetic than sound films.) The reason why Macdonald, despite his brilliance, is not highly regarded as a film critic today is that by insisting that Hollywood had ruined everything, that the only film theory/aesthetic worth anything was Eisensteinian montage, he completely missed the "critical turn" in France to Andre Bazin's notion of *mise-en-scene* and the subsequent rehabilitation of all those Hollywood directors of the thirties and forties that Macdonald despised.

The contrast with Mailer is obvious, but Mendelson does not make it. Mailer has been accused—by Mendelson, among others—of having dated and discredited notions about gender, sexuality, and the unconscious. But he was not tied to a conviction that the past was always better than the present. Indeed, during the same time that Macdonald was writing his backward-looking film reviews, Mailer was watching young and ambitious writers less inclined to be the next Ernest Hemingway than to be the next Joseph Heller. (He picks up Heller immediately and writes approvingly of *Catch-22* in “Punching Papa.”) By the end of the sixties, most bright young literary types wanted to be film directors—and Mailer was notoriously ahead of the crowd there.

Macdonald, like Trilling, left behind private papers that showed his unhappiness. Mailer left few private diaries when he died. With the exception of one early journal entry, Mendelson must turn to incidents in Mailer’s life to find “moral” events pertinent to his thesis. Needless to say, the stabbing of his second wife, Adele Morales, and the John Henry Abbott catastrophe loom large. In the case of the stabbing of Adele, Mendelson wants to point back to *The White Negro* (1957) published three years before the stabbing. In explicating the work he confuses Mailer’s definition of the Hipster, who can achieve some apocalyptic insight through drugs and “apocalyptic violence” with his notorious example of two hoodlums killing a shopkeeper. The hoodlums’ daring—such as it is—has some redeeming psychic value, according to Mailer, but it is devoid of insight. In any case, the stabbing of Adele had very little to do with any apocalyptic insight of the Hipster or daring of a hoodlum. It was an act of someone “drunk and stoned,” as Mendelson admits, and clearly delusional. (He told Adele later that night in the hospital that he had to cut her to save her from “cancer.”)

The stabbing is a painful incident but it hardly seems to be a moral crisis that affects his career. Afterwards, he certainly thought less of himself, but he does not repudiate “The White Negro.” Oddly, Mendelson denigrates Lennon’s judicious and lengthy rehearsal of Mailer’s recovery process that ends with a simple, “[h]e was mending.” Instead he favors Norris Church Mailer’s more melodramatic notion of a man pulling himself back from the abyss “by an act of willpower.”

Mendelson probably prefers Norris Mailer’s version because he wants to rely on her for the John Henry Abbott episode twenty years later. For Mendelson, Mailer had finally found his Hipster—a man whose superior

writing ability meant he obviously stood far above the crowd, whose violent behavior was both a reaction to the terribly oppressive penal system where he had spent most of his life and a path to some superior insight into the universe. Of course, Abbott was out of jail for less than a month when he fatally stabbed a waiter outside a Manhattan restaurant. Lennon documents in some detail how Abbott was released from jail as a reward for being a stool pigeon—not because of Mailer’s letter written on his behalf, as the press and hence everyone else believed at the time. Mendelson repeats this evidence. But what he does not say is that Mailer never used the evidence to build a case for his own innocence in the matter and that he was pained by the murder for the rest of his days.

What he does say is that “Mailer never wrote” again about “psychotic hipsters.” But exactly what implication does this statement of fact carry? I suspect that Mendelson wants us to conclude that Mailer dropped the whole idea of unusual psychic states leading to apocalyptic insights. But that is not the only possible conclusion. After all, he never repudiated “The White Negro.” Could his silence have been strategic—that is, born of the realization that given the bad press his participation had produced, he would never be heard above the din of adverse reaction any statement would generate? Or perhaps he thought whatever he was working on at the time was more pertinent to his and our current predicament than irrationally obtained knowledge.

Mendelson ignores another item as well. Mailer and Abbott had talked by telephone after he was convicted of manslaughter and they concluded that men like Abbott were “both too strong and too weak to handle the world.” “Too strong” sounds as if Mailer is not abandoning the special attraction of the Hipster and “too weak” suggests that Mailer now sees that art or literary talent is not of itself redemptive. (To sound more like a member of the Beat generation than Mailer ever would, not every hipster is an angel hipster.)

Mendelson is especially good on the mythic qualities of Mailer’s journalism. But there are three annoying instances—perversities, I should say—that should be noted. The first is a judgment of Mailer as a novelist. Even the best of Mailer’s novels go wrong “because he imagined his characters more as embodiments of impersonal forces than as persons.” Anyone remembering Mailer’s incredible ear for realistic dialogue must find this judgment extremely peculiar, but I would suppose the best response would be that many

novelists, and Mailer on occasion, choose not to write with absolute allegiance to realism.

The second is Mendelson's strange appropriation of something Mailer said in a journal kept for a short time. Mendelson turns this fragile piece of evidence into an essential insight into the man. The quotation is, "I who am timid, cowardly, and wish only friendship and security am the one who must take on the whole world." Since the sentence Mendelson quotes begins with a reference to Mailer's "later novels," one might assume that the quotation is equally late. Actually, it is from the so-called "Lipton Journal" of 1954–55. (Lipton was code for marijuana, which Mailer often smoked before addressing his typewriter.) Moralistic critics often seem to be searching for the one defining statement that sets a whole career in the proper ethical perspective. But can anyone look at Mailer's output and his public behavior and not think that the statement is a pure aberration—possibly a bit of self-pity and/or self-delusion aided by too much pot?

Finally, there is the somewhat absurd over-determining of what Mailer said to Norris when she found out he had been having affairs in several cities behind her back. The women, he told Norris—and she says she confirmed the truth of his claim—were far from attractive. He slept with them because sometimes "he needed to be the good-looking one." One might conclude that Norman was thinking fast on his feet, but Mendelson seems to want to draw the conclusion that most of Mailer's conquests were unattractive and that his sex life was pathetic. Given the number of attractive women Mailer hit up, the mathematical probability of Mendelson being right approaches zero. If I am being slightly unfair to Mendelson's somewhat more nuanced view, he is being slightly more than cavalier in his use of the evidence very publicly at hand.