

# MAILER'S GREATNESS: A NOTE

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WAS NORMAN MAILER A GREAT WRITER?

To ask the question suggests that we know what a great writer is, or think that we do. For most of us, I suppose, a great writer is someone whose work will be read well after he or she is gone. The great writer is as physically mortal as we all are, but there is something in the work that is not disposed to die, and maybe it never will. Says Shakespeare in sonnet fifty-five: "Not marble, nor the gilded monuments / of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme." That's perhaps true not only for the sonnet in question, but for much of Shakespeare's work.

How does one achieve literary immortality? It's no doubt a difficult question. Doctor Johnson says that, "Nothing can please many, and please long, but just representation of general nature." The famous sentence comes where you might expect it to, in his preface to the works of Shakespeare. But how does one discover general nature and give it literary form? Indeed, that's another question.

Will Mailer's books please many and please long? And if they do, will it be through just representations of general nature, or by some other means?

If Mailer's works and reputation are to last, it is interesting to ponder which of his books, or which *book*, will pass the test of time. In the opening pages of his splendid book on Mailer, Richard Poirier describes him as being a vastly talented and productive author who has yet to write his masterpiece. In a memorable turn, Poirier says that Mailer in mid-career, the time when Poirier is writing about him, is a little like Herman Melville. But Poirier adds something. Mailer, says Poirier, is like Herman Melville who has not yet written his *Moby Dick*. Just so, he resembles a George Eliot without *Middlemarch* and a Mark Twain without *Huckleberry Finn*. The question is obvious. Will Mailer ever succeed in writing the big book?

Poirier's book is in one dimension a challenge. It is a gauntlet thrown down from one writer (granted that writer primarily a critic) in the direction of another, daring him to write the great work that is in him to write. Melville had *Moby Dick*; Twain had *Huckleberry Finn*, Whitman the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*; Hawthorne *The Scarlet Letter*; James (one might say at a hazard) had *The Portrait of a Lady*. Give us something—one grand something—to remember you by, Poirier seems to be saying to Mailer. And when you do, you will have fulfilled your dreams: you'll be truly major. You'll be what you longed to be, a great American writer.

Did Mailer ever pull it off? Did he ever write his version of *Moby-Dick* or *The Scarlet Letter*? He surely hoped so and may have even believed so. Mailer thought of himself primarily as a novelist: he uses the title to identify himself time after time and he makes no apology for his aspiration to write a (or maybe the) great American novel. He goes for it and he goes for it hard. There's *Ancient Evenings*. There's *Harlot's Ghost*. There's the late-life book about Hitler, which though not long, plays for high stakes: *The Castle in the Forest*. And of course there's the big book that brought Mailer onto the scene, *The Naked and the Dead*.

The present piece is a personal one. I rely only on my own judgment here. But it is hard, almost impossible, for me to imagine any of these books lasting. These are the books Mailer worked hardest on. The Egyptian book and the CIA book were works he kept alive in his mind and his heart too, as he got involved with other projects, often to pay the bills. All the while he was aiming to hit one out of the park. But as a novelist, I fear that he simply never did.

These books have their advocates, to be sure, and one respects them. (One respects any informed reader who continues intelligently to endorse Mailer at a time that is quite inhospitable to him and his work.) But to me the mid-career novels are impossible: slow, turgid, and rambling—chiefly that, rambling. For Mailer seems to have no particular gift for plot. He cannot figure out what is supposed to happen next, so he remains in place dilating on one favorite topic or another, waiting and waiting and keeping us waiting too. Doctor Johnson (him again) suggested that what the fiction writer needs, probably above all else, is a gut feeling about how to shape a story. This Mailer never really acquired.

His remarks about his method of composition seem to me to bear this out. His approach to novel writing was, he indicated, "existential." And what,

to Mailer, was an existential situation? It was one in which you were at a crossroads in life or art and you did not know what would happen next. Mailer suggests that he did not plan very far ahead in his fiction, if he planned at all. If nothing came to mind by way of events, then nothing came. But it seems that when nothing came, he continued to write. Mailer admired Sartre and he was committed to open-endedness, what Sartre like to call being *pour soir*, in art and in life. This made for a savory life, as Michael Lennon's absorbing biography shows us, but I'm not sure it made for anything like enduring novels.

Did Mailer ever outline his novels? There are surely those who do not need to. But Mailer probably did.

Mailer, to my mind, was simply not that good at literary invention. His ability to create something out of nothing was not strong. In the big novels, his mind is constantly stopping, idling, revving, and often sinking slowly deeper and deeper into the dank. What Harold Bloom says of *Ancient Evenings* seems to me by and large true: "*Ancient Evenings* goes on for seven hundred large pages, yet gives every sign of truncation, as though its present form were merely its despair of finding its proper shape. The book could be half again as long, but no reader will wish it so." "There are," Bloom says in the same review, "immense stretches through which the poor reader must crawl with an unrewarded patience" Bloom 34.

This is only to say that I'm not sure that the books that Mailer most assiduously built to last ever will. Who knows, of course? Somewhere in the depths of *Ancient Evenings* there may lie embedded some quotient of Johnson's just representations of general nature, or the kind of prophetic power that Bloom favors and finds in, for instance, Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*. Maybe in time to come critics will come along to make a case for the staying power of Mailer-the-novelist, and the existing class of common readers (if any exist) will second the motion. Maybe, but I doubt it.

However I persist in thinking that Mailer was a great writer. Though I think he was great (and potentially *is* great) in a fashion that is perhaps all his own.

My view of Mailer's work is almost the opposite of his. He loved those rambling novels, thought they were profound, hoped they would last. But I think that Mailer's novels are the gymnasium where he worked out, sweated, strained and got in shape to do the work of his that really mattered. I mean

the work that's generally catalogued as non-fiction and even journalism: *Advertisements for Myself*, *The Armies of the Night*, *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*, *The Presidential Papers*, *Pieces and Pontifications* and even the late talk-talk-books, *The Big Empty* and *God: An Uncommon Conversation*.

These really are the works of a novelist, full of vivid language, fresh perceptions, lively asides, and brilliant and brilliantly illustrated theories. From all of the practice creating character and honing description in the novels, Mailer made himself strong and quick. He developed his instincts the way a boxer working in a gym would do. From all the sparring and rope jumping and work on the speed bag, Mailer got strong. He got strong enough, say, to write the brilliant story of himself and Robert Lowell at the anti-war rally featured in *The Armies of the Night*. There he offers a portrait of Lowell as the spoiled, gifted scion of a dying, distinguished line, achingly self-aware, exquisitely sensitive despite his considerable height and strength, and impossibly attractive to women. When Lowell, exasperated by the goings-on at the theater, falls back from where he is sitting and smashes his pumpkin of a head on the ground, Mailer is there ready to evoke it so one will not forget. He inhabits the mind of Lowell the way Balzac might one of his more complex artist-snob-social climbers.

Here's Lowell (Mailer's Lowell) in action: "And Lowell with a look of the greatest sorrow as if all this *mess* were finally too shapeless for the hard Protestant smith of his own brain, which would indeed burst if it could not forge his experience into the iron edge of the very best words and the most unsinkable relation of words, now threw up his eyes like an epileptic as if turned out of orbit by a turn of the vision—and fell backward, his head striking the floor with no last instant hesitation to cushion the blow, but like a baby, downright sudden, savagely to himself, as if from the height of a foot he had taken a pumpkin and dropped it splat on the floor. 'There, much-regarded, much protected brain, you have finally taken a blow,' Lowell might have said to himself, for he proceeded to lie there, resting quietly, while Macdonald went on reading from 'The White Man's Burden.' Lowell seeming content as if he had just tested the back of his cranium against a policeman's club. What a royal head they had all to lose!" (p. 55)

Mailer's mind has no doubt been sharpened by the bitter and sweet juice of competition. He's steaming a bit internally because Lowell has referred to him as surely the best *journalist* in America. Sometimes, Mailer says, I think

I just may be the best writer. It doesn't seem to occur to Mailer that one might be able to be both.

Mailer's mind may be sharpened by competitiveness with Lowell—he once said that it was ambition that helped him take the measure of any given room, study it fast and well and render it to his satisfaction if he needed to do so. But what lets Mailer do such a splendid job with Lowell, at the liberal cocktail party, at the Pentagon demonstration and indeed through much of *Armies* is, I would suggest, his training and self-training as a novelist. Mailer had all the qualities of a fine novelist except for one, I think: he could not figure out what would happen next. He could not create action that was, as Aristotle suggested literary action should be, something that's both (splendid paradox here) surprising and inevitable.

But reality could do exactly that. If Mailer wasn't always great at concocting plots, life was constantly sending arresting plots, or at least absorbing series of events his way. And then, after his long hours in the gymnasium called fiction, Mailer went at it.

The results were sometimes amazing. In *The Armies of the Night*, Mailer manages to render events that had only just transpired with the texture, intelligence and brio that it might have taken another author a decade to create, if he could create them at all. Mailer turned history into a novel: that's what he said he was doing in *Armies*, and that's what he did. The problem from his point of view—for he dearly wanted to write fiction—was that he never quite managed to turn an aspirational novel into a real one. The damned things just never grew wings and took off. They feel labored. They feel like long marches over rough but uninteresting terrain. *Armies* feels like it was written in a single draft, and in a way it was, as long as you don't count *Barbary Shore* and *The Deer Park* and others as its rough drafts.

In a classroom here at the University of Virginia, I once discussed *Armies* with a group of undergrads. It was a summer class, a money-maker for me, a credit-collector for most of the students. But I was able to get very jazzed about *Armies* and especially about the velocity with which Mailer had turned experience into—well, why not say it?—into literature. One of the students in the class was an aspiring writer. He was hyper-intelligent, hyper-articulate. He claimed to have two or three novels “up on blocks”; he'd been working on them for a few years. Soon they'd be tooled up and ready for the road. He became suddenly incensed about *Armies*. Mailer couldn't have pulled that

off. He must have had notes long-cultivated on Robert Lowell and Dwight McDonald and DeGrazia and the rest of the crew. He must have had essays in the drawer about the draft resisters and Doctor Spock and the blacks on hand for the demonstration. When I told him that I thought not, and that Mailer had gotten ready for this encounter with history the way you'd get ready for a fight or a championship game of football, the young writer was incensed. He knew he'd never be able to do that. He knew he could not bring his faculties of perception and expression to a perfect pitch, so that he could turn actual events into a book as exciting and immediate as most any splendid novel. But Mailer could. He just couldn't, for the life of him, concoct events on his own. But when those events came his way fresh out of the mold of the real, then look out.

Randall Jarrell once observed, more or less, that a novel is an extended narrative written in prose, with which something is wrong—usually more than one might add. We might extend him. A writer is a literary artist who can usually do some things and not others and has got to learn how to hide what he cannot do and play up what he can. In Mailer's case, I'd speculate, it was trying to do what he could not do and failing and failing and partly succeeding (see *An American Dream* and *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, not quite novels but fine *sui generis* books) that made him write at his best at other moments.

Did it make him a *great* writer?

To use the lingo of academia for a moment, Mailer's best writing (or at least what I take to be his best writing) was radically historicist. Not only was it of his moment, reflecting on the historical and political situation in which he found himself. The writing was also steeped in a sense of the uniqueness of his present. Mailer didn't work with a lot of historical background. He didn't employ grand theories—though he wasn't averse to referring to Sartre and to Marx and to what he had learned from Jean Malaquais, a Marxist, whom Mailer often called his mentor. But part of what makes Mailer so vivid a writer in *Armies* and other, similarly aimed books, is his implicit sense that there has never been a time like the present. To grasp the present in its full complexity, glory and grief is what he's shooting for and he often succeeds.

But how far this is from the kind of writing that we usually think about as great literature. Then we start talking about Johnson and general na-

ture, and pleasing many and pleasing long. Then we start talking, with Ezra Pound, about news that stays news. Mailer's best journalism is news, alright: it's stunning, smart, and amazingly immediate. But will it stay news?

I doubt it. The writing makes no claims to universality, no claims to transcendence: it's buttressed by no theory, and usually connects tangentially, if at all, to any notion about the patterns of history. Mailer's devotion to the present that he is writing into existence helps him create astonishing works that probably will not last, at least on the large scale. A historian of the Sixties will be surprised and delighted to find *Armies*, in the midst of lumps and lumps of respectably historical narratives, documents, letters and editorials in the *Times*. But the common reader? The common reader is bound to be disoriented by Mailer's best work. Who the hell was Dwight McDonald? And, come to think of it, who was Adlai Stevenson, really?

But I think that makes Mailer's achievement all the greater. Mailer, as I understand him, is a writer who, maybe without fully knowing it, sacrificed his claims to future distinction by committing himself passionately to the present. He did this personally, by taking time to debate with William F. Buckley, by running for mayor of New York, by making movies, and by generally embroiling himself in every significant political and cultural issue of the day. But he also did it by writing books that were nothing short of stunning in their power to cut to the core of his particular moment in time. His novels, which I cannot see as having any great value by and large, were perhaps the sphere in which he honed qualities that he brought to a new and different kind of writing, a writing that managed to penetrate the news of the day with the eye of a superb artist.

Mailer's greatness, which I fully believe in, probably does not lie in any individual work. *The Executioner's Song* remains too much a period piece, a brilliant book about a white America and a Mormon America too far from our current dispensation to qualify as universal.

But what's left is the image of a certain kind of writer. This is a writer who trains and trains, who reads and thinks and writes and writes. His implicit goal is not to make his work live forever. Rather his aim is to illuminate his moment as no else can do. He probably knows on some level that his work is born to die and to die pretty soon. But his example? I'm not sure any writer has ever gone as far as Mailer did in making his moment come to

life. Will other younger writers have the wherewithal to follow Mailer's example—sacrificing the future, as it were, to the present? I'm not sure. I hope so. For, as a writer and as an individual, Mailer inaugurated what I think we might dare to call a new form of literary greatness.

#### WORK CITED

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