

NO PRE-FABRICATED WORDS:
NORMAN MAILER AND
INVENTIVE BIOGRAPHY

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“The world is not supposed to be reassembled by panels of
pre-fabricated words.”
—Norman Mailer (*Spooky Art* 178)

“The past and history are different things.”
—Keith Jenkins (*History* 7)

CATHARTIC, UNNERVING, BRASH, AND EXPERIMENTAL—Norman Mailer’s *Advertisements for Myself* (1959) stands as one of the most interesting books ever published. Yet, simultaneously it is one of the most perplexing. Picking up the weighty tome, one is disoriented from the start, seeing two tables of contents and items mysteriously given the listing “advertisement.” Looking deeper, it is clear that the book defies categorization, mixing fiction, memoir, journalism, and creative nonfiction essays in a new style that Mailer would continue to shape and sharpen for decades. *Advertisements* is an epic example of Mailer’s sharp wit, wide-ranging mind, and striking fragility. Few written works can match it line-by-line or paragraph-by-paragraph for pure intellectual power.

While Mailer’s tome seemed without precedent, argues Morris Dickstein, F. Scott Fitzgerald had written a somewhat similar model in a series of essays that appeared in *Esquire* magazine in 1936, generally dubbed “The Crack-Up.” Later, in 1945, a handful of years after Fitzgerald’s untimely death, his

friend Edmund Wilson used the essays as the centerpiece of a new anthology of collected works, a key cog in the concerted effort to re-launch Fitzgerald in the public eye. Fitzgerald's essays read like a group of eulogies penned by the author to an ungrateful reading public that has not just deserted him but, in fact, has forgotten that he exists. His mood is despondent, bordering on utterly down and out.

The key difference between Fitzgerald and Mailer is that the latter would use *Advertisements* as a means of shaking off his consternation, thereby launching a rebirth. He would use confessional language, but not let the weight of these words pull him under as they seemed to do with Fitzgerald (also more or less costing him many friendships in the process, including Ernest Hemingway). Fitzgerald's crack-up revealed how far a famous writer could fall, physically and existentially but, in contrast *Advertisements* would demonstrate how high its author could rebound. Mailer had no plans to nosedive like Fitzgerald, but he would openly share his challenges with the reader.

Mailer, for example, frankly outlined his inability to write after weaning himself off drugs, alcohol, and cigarettes, explaining, "Everything was good, except that I could not write; my mind would have fine moments, but its powers of connection were dim; my brain seemed stuffed in cotton" (*Advertisements* 331). But, this is his mindset leading up to the brilliant essay "The White Negro," which appeared in *Dissent* in later 1957. The "advertisement" preceding the reprinted essay enables the reader to make sense of the tragedy/triumph narrative.

Fitzgerald, in contrast, left the reader with no uplifting sentiment. His narrative revealed an author possessing little more than a one-way ticket down. Fitzgerald's mental break in "The Crack-Up," though, had an interesting outcome by getting the attention of Hollywood movie studio heads. Not long after the *Esquire* pieces appeared, Fitzgerald was heading to Los Angeles and a \$1,000 a week paycheck for working on film scripts. While he detested the script-by-committee process and lamented that he had little time or energy to write fiction, the income it generated gave him a boost that he could not have imagined when he wrote the *Esquire* essays.

Mailer's transformation, according to Morris Dickstein, created a new writer with an altered sensibility that he would use to carve out a distinct legacy. Mailer, he explains, "amid the wreckage of his hopes . . . found himself as his own flawed but exemplary protagonist" (152). There were similar-

ities between Mailer and Fitzgerald, but in a more forgiving era than the one the older writer faced, Mailer turned his frankness into an advantage. Showing one's frailties in the Cold War era did not strike readers or critics as savagely as it did in the Depression years of the mid-1930s when Fitzgerald opened a vein. Dickstein astutely points to the shift the nation experienced toward mass media, explaining, "The winds had shifted from a literary culture to a media culture, a celebrity culture in which Mailer would thrive as much as Byron or Hemingway did in their own time" (154). Mailer did not value the transformation to a television age, but realized that it created a new route to fame.

The Mailer that emerges from *Advertisements* is no longer simply a "novelist," but has materialized into something vast: an all-knowing public intellectual whose daunting task is no less than saving the public from the very institutions that conspire to turn them into veritable zombies. What he sees, starkly in front of him, is a way to use journalism and nonfiction as a flashlight, poking into dark myths of the American Dream on a more visceral level than he could via fiction. From this high throne, Mailer begins his journey to illuminate (and sometimes tear down) the mass culture icons that the institutional powers turned into false gods.

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This essay builds on Michael K. Glenday's insightful interrogation of Mailer's biographies of Marilyn Monroe and Pablo Picasso, which he dubs "life-studies" (362) by exploring the notion of "inventive biography." Inventive biography for Mailer signifies two interconnected meanings: reimagining the way one writes biography and refashioning oneself in the process. Probing Mailer's unique twist on biographical and journalistic writing demonstrates its development and significance within his extensive oeuvre.

As Mailer shaped ideas about creative nonfiction, the move toward inventive biography offered innovative avenues for harnessing his deep and broad intellect. According to Phillip Sipiora, "the complexity and heterogeneity of his vast, deep interests are best represented in his essays . . . even more than his fiction, (the essay) provided a forum in which he could unrelentingly confront the social, political, and cultural crises of the day" (xvii).

Arguably as important or perhaps even more critical, the work in journalism and nonfiction gave Mailer a way to quickly harness his talent to

make money. The Mailer machine hummed along like a family-owned business that necessitated the patriarch serve as both creator and seller. According to J. Michael Lennon, “When he received an advance or large royalty check, he rarely escrowed a portion for taxes. The money went out immediately for mortgages, tuition payments, alimony, and child care” (*Double* 472). The author had accumulated a mountain of financial responsibilities that needed incessant feeding, including the IRS.

Understanding Mailer as he fashioned and shaped this new category as uber-writer is critical in grasping his place within contemporary American literary history, even as he continued to use the term “novelist” to describe himself. What Mailer realized is that there is no better way to assert one’s uniqueness than to simply construct a new classification that no one else can occupy.

Getting at Mailer in this way is particularly vital for readers and critics who did not grow up or come of age at the height of his power and influence. He cast a bombastic shadow on popular culture for many decades, yet that impact diminishes over time, as it does for all but a few icons that seem to transform to fit in any era. Imagine the confidence (or as detractors might levy: arrogance) it takes to build such a stage, and then fulfill the role.

In essence, Mailer’s true “advertisement” in *Advertisements* and later works are not really ads at all in the traditional sense of the word. The author is not selling himself or his consumer products. Rather, Mailer craftily creates a place for himself—if enough of the public will accept it—that amounts to a kind of land grab that places him at the top of a new literary category. His enterprise is not selling a new or different kind of toothpaste—he is defining a new category that he will alone occupy.

TURNING TO INVENTIVE BIOGRAPHY

With the publication of *Advertisements*, Evan Brier explains, “Mailer in 1959 became a performer who unabashedly marketed himself in order to sell his literary output” (135). Simultaneously, Brier astutely indicates, the amorphous *Advertisements* turned the author into a rebel, since book’s “rhetoric positions Mailer against and outside the book trade in an explicit effort to revive his flagging literary career, it embodies an authorial strategy for working within that trade” (136). The critical relationship that Brier highlights is Mailer as artist versus (or perhaps in sync with) Mailer as both a producer and product of consumer goods.

Mailer is taking deliberate steps to reinvent himself at 36 years old and well into his professional career. Although he favors the label “novelist,” he will actually assume a position above and beyond that title. As a career move, the focus on nonfiction and away from novels (although he continued to label himself that and write about novels-in-progress) kept him from the dreaded “has-been novelist,” a potential tag given the disappointing sales of his second novel, *Barbary Shore* (1951), and Rinehart & Winston’s ensuing refusal to publish *The Deer Park*, a widely-publicized feud that pointed to the corporatization of publishing in the mid- to late 1950s and early 1960s.

Advertisements—a book without a genre or category—changes everything for Mailer. The book propels his outlaw persona and solidifies his role as a public intellectual. The move is critical, because it enables Mailer to stake out a commentator’s role far beyond what he might have achieved merely as “novelist.” The new book and the Mailer it celebrates (allowing him to cleverly celebrate himself) turned him into the nation’s cultural observer, as if the United States is one long sporting event and Mailer is its lone color commentator.

Mailer stakes the high ground in *Advertisements* by first burying himself deep within the literary community, grinding himself into dust, and then rising like a phoenix to new heights that will mix Hemingway’s cult of personality, his outlaw persona, and the manic insight drawn from his experience at the top of the heap after he gained international celebrity following *The Naked and the Dead*. Mailer tells the reader: “I am your sacrifice, the literary Christ, willing to die for your truth.” He knows the outcome and relishes it, exclaiming:

There may have been too many fights for me, too much sex, liquor, marijuana, Benzedrine and seconal, much too much ridiculous and brain-blasting rage at the minuscule frustrations of a most loathsome literary world, necrophilic to the core—they murder their writers, and then decorate their graves. (22)

By offering up his modicum of talent on a public altar, Mailer both grants and appoints himself to a position above the rest of the “literary world.”

Mailer’s relentless self-deprecation, for instance, calling some of his recent work: “superficial, off-balance . . . not very agreeable” or admitting that he is showing “this worst of my work,” provides a balance to the covert ground

he immodestly claims (219). The self-deprecation is subterfuge, a strategy to get closer to the reader and ask for the public's sympathy. His sacrifice is justified because Mailer claims that he is leading the counterattack against "the shits" who are "killing us" with "little institutional lies from the print of newspapers, the shock waves of television, and the sentimental cheats of the movie screen" (23). It is as if Mailer discovers his own island within the vast continent, declares himself ruler of that domain, and then surreptitiously uses that self-appointed title to take over the nation.

In essence, one might see *Advertisements* as the bum's rush on the sanctified powers controlling the literary world and what remained of the reading public. Mailer tells the reader that the "Republic is in real peril," even though the people have dipped into an obsession for "chasing after a good time" (23). Their fascination with decadence without payment for such sins necessitates that he rise up from the muck to help the nation recapture its "heroic destiny" (24). Once again, he is hero and ruler of a land that he carved out of thin air.

The grandiose language of *Advertisements* shocked and attracted readers and commentators who perceived Mailer's grand plan. Dickstein, for example, labels the book, "egotism and mythmaking" (19), but calls its author a "hip adventurer" and "existential legend" (101).

The product Mailer constructs is Norman Mailer as public intellectual. The role provides a number of alluring opportunities. First, he realizes that nonfiction is the fastest way to monetize himself. Next, Mailer senses that mass culture is moving away from novels and novelists at precisely the same time he begins to have doubts about his ability to produce fiction. Finally, Mailer later concludes that nonfiction provides him an opportunity to have consequence on a national and international scale.

What Mailer could have only imagined in the late 1950s as he wrote and edited *Advertisements* seemed to come to life in the weeks leading up to the 1960 presidential campaign between John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon. His essay "Superman Comes to the Supermarket" appeared in *Esquire* just before the election and highlighted the excitement the young JFK might bring to the nation, but also his hipster tendencies and youthful vigor. Mailer breezily moves among the mood of the nation, the Democratic convention center in Los Angeles, and the initial appearance of young Kennedy, revealing, "Of necessity the myth would emerge once more, because America's politics would now be also America's favorite movie, America's first soap

opera, America's bestseller." Kennedy is Mailer's "first hipster," representing "cool grace" with "the poise of a fine boxer" (127–28).

Mailer, for his part, looked back on the essay and its consequences in *The Presidential Papers*: "I was forcing a reality, I was bending reality like a field of space to curve the time I wished to create . . . distorting reality in the hope that thereby I could affect it. I was engaging in an act of propaganda" (60). Many commentators, as well as Mailer himself, felt that the "Superman" essay helped elect the new president.

For a moment, it seemed that Mailer's turn to nonfiction would have the outcome that he desired, until, that is, he sabotaged his opportunity by stabbing his wife Adele shortly after the election. He became a liability that the cautious Kennedy clan could not abide.

Within a handful of years, however, Dickstein explains, Mailer "soon emerges less as the scrapper than as the distinguished gentleman of American letters, a writer who would carve his own niche by sheer intelligence and self-projection, outside accepted literary categories" (155). Edward Mendelson points to Mailer's tactical use of personas that stood above the crowd, including "some other avatar of the writer-hero with a thousand faces," such as labeling himself in the third person: reporter, observer, and other distinct classifications (131). Mailer worked diligently to achieve this level of success, carefully crafting an image that placed him both inside and outside the masses. The reporter, for example, concurrently writes about events at the scene, often within the fray, but also from a position of authority.

INVENTIVE BIOGRAPHY

Mailer's inventive biography—at the core of his new persona as America's premier public intellectual—bent both traditional history and biography to his new reality, essentially knocking them both off-kilter. In an interesting twist on the old adage "all publicity is good publicity," the criticism Mailer endured for playing around with these norms only further fueled his notoriety.

In terms of history, Mailer realized—and as put forth in the Jenkins' epigraph above—that the past and history are not synonymous. Examining Mailer's thinking about history and journalism, J. Michael Lennon concludes, "He has reservations about historical narrative because he believes it to be neither unbiased nor comprehensive" ("Novelist" 98). As a result, Mailer finds creative license within historical narrative, particularly in de-

claring: “Objective reporting is a myth” (*Spooky* 187). Mailer hit historians, biographers, and other fact-based writers where they hurt the most by doing the unthinkable: elevating his own ideas and impressions to the level of materials professional historians and journalists used to formulate content. Mailer’s work undermined the long-held sanctity of archival materials, first-hand accounts, and interviews.

In this vein, Mailer produced explicit examples of inventive biography in *Marilyn: A Biography* (1973) and *Portrait of Picasso as a Young Man: An Interpretive Biography* (1995). “I know an awful lot about living with one’s legend,” Mailer explained. “And I know an awful lot, as a result, about the sort of separation of mind that goes on . . . to live a little bit on the edge of schizophrenia” (qtd. in Lennon, *Double* 463). In each, Mailer felt akin to the subjects, so he drew on his own interpretations to derive meaning about them as artists and individuals.

Yet the style remained controversial, even wielded by Mailer. According to Michael K. Glenday, it served as a kind of barometer:

Readers of those memoirs will either find them legitimate, and will accept, even relish the prospect of encountering not just the memoir, but also the vitality of interaction between Mailer’s imagination and his subject, or on grounds of illegitimacy they will refuse him admission into the academy of biographers. (350)

Mailer probably did not care a whit about the “academy of biographers,” but messing with the form created debate. For instance, the Monroe biography is a classic Mailer think piece that offers no original research, but posits that Monroe may have been killed by the FBI or CIA because of her connection to Robert F. Kennedy. The controversial elements led to Mailer and Monroe on the cover of *Time* magazine and a tough interview with Mike Wallace on *60 Minutes* in a segment titled “Monroe, Mailer and the Fast Buck.” As Lennon reveals, Wallace pushed Mailer hard on the writing-for-money angle, as well as the lack of research that would have made it “a good biography” (qtd. in *Double* 467).

Actually, the Monroe biography is a classic example of how Mailer the artist and the celebrity intersected. Larry Schiller, in charge of packaging the book, played into the notion that Mailer had transcended any specific title to become almost a symbol of “the writer” by emphasizing that he really just

wanted the Mailer name to attach to the project. “It was Mailer’s name and what he stood for that he [Schiller] wanted,” Lennon explains (*Double* 264).

Schiller and Mailer fought incessantly over the text, especially its length, and who would exert final control over the book. Mailer, though, may have felt used by Schiller, but he also had a rationale for writing the profile beyond the simple desire to work on an iconic figure that deeply fascinated him for many years. “Enter Norman Mailer,” says Carl Rollyson, “genuinely interested in Monroe but also weighted down with the urgent need to produce a big picture book and sensational copy that would yield significant royalties to be applied to his prodigious alimony payments” (11). The “sensational copy” would attain that lofty standing through Mailer’s unique inventive biography style, but it would be applied for the crass purpose of making money to pay the author’s bills.

Mailer’s gambit paid off. Despite the controversy (or more likely fueled by it), *Marilyn* sold more than one million copies in hardback and paperback. The biography also received more reviews than any book Mailer had written since *The Naked and the Dead* (Lennon, *Double* 468). Quite a success for a book, Mailer described, as “no immense job on Monroe by himself, no, rather a study like this, bound to stray toward the borders of magic” (20).

The critical reaction to Mailer’s ability to weave in and out of journalism, biography, history, and fiction was mixed and provided intense debate among commentators and scholars. “To the frustration of some critics,” Lennon explains, “he has refused to confine himself to one room in the house of narrative” (“Novelist” 98).

From a different viewpoint, a contemporary critic might assert that the exclusivity of Mailer-as-biographer is perhaps actually nothing more than what is currently labeled creative nonfiction or autoethnography. For example, Jimmie Manning and Tony E. Adams write, “To be an autoethnographer and to do autoethnography means recognizing that personal experience cannot be easily or definitively separated from social and relational contexts . . . personal experience becomes a valid, viable, and vital kind of data from which to make meaning” (190).

The emphasis on “personal experience” is what set Mailer apart from many of his contemporaries. Glenday explains, “Mailer invested the documentary form of biography with a new poetics capable of exploiting the classic divisions between narratives of fact and fiction. Part metaphysics, part memoir, part reverie” (353).

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Mailer's turn toward inventive biography as a way to harness his intellectual talents, make money, and fashion for himself a position above other writers and thinkers resuscitated his flagging career at a point where he feels that he had lost his way. "I did not know what I was doing," he recalls. "I had my own particular problem, a beauty—I did not know my *métier*" (*Spooky* 74). *Advertisements*, Mailer says, "was a book whose writing changed my life" (*Spooky* 76). His new style went hand-in-hand with the growing importance of mass media, particularly television, which took center stage in the 1950s and 1960s.

The performative elements appealed to Mailer, allowing him to demonstrate both his intellectual depth and quick wit. According to Edward Mendelson, the disparate aspects of Mailer's life on stage grew into one: "He spent much of his life reporting facts as if he were writing fiction, and performing—for an audience of gossip columnists and shockable reviewers—a fictional version of his life as though it were fact" (128). From photo-journalists to autograph-seekers, an eager world lapped up Mailer's output, whether a guest-starring, barb-filled appearance on *The Dick Cavett Show* or a gossip page report of his drunken brawling in a New York newspaper.

Some critics might write Mailer off for his marketing antics or assume that his focus on nonfiction drained his energies and time from the more important task of writing fiction. Despite such reproach, there are lessons learned from Mailer's journey that provide insight into biography and history writing.

The challenge for contemporary biographers and historians is breaking the mold formed to produce the kind of fact-based studies that dominate the field. Leon Edel, one of the most prominent biographers and biography theorists, outlines a major tenet of the field, saying, "the mind and inner world of the subject is unique and cannot be fashioned by anyone else. The biographer may not substitute his mind or fantasy for that of the subject" (16). While Edel often mentions biography as artistry, his practical application is archival and fact-based work, though he does advocate employing "devices" that give "narrative strength to fiction" (31). Mailer's inventive biography, however, created a new path for biographers to journey down, yet the field resists this innovation, even as biography itself is a staple of film, television, documentary filmmaking, in addition to the many popular television sta-

tions that are driven by biographical narratives. All told, we might venture that we live in the age of biography. Audiences simply cannot get enough.

Granted, while most biographers might not have the confidence or the level of fame and experiences necessary to replicate Mailer's method, they can push back at the edges of the discipline by utilizing the pedagogical tools he employed. The longstanding controversy regarding the use of psychological tools and theories when writing history and biography is one example of a potentially useful tool that is criticized because it falls outside typical historical methodology.

Carl Rollyson, an accomplished biographer and historian of the genre, rightly points to Mailer's critical role as a biographer, even though Mailer himself may have bristled at that title, explaining, "To date, Mailer has been the only American writer ever to explore the problems of biography seriously as a genre while actually writing one" (11). The explosion of biography in the last twenty-five years makes it seem reasonable that some superstar biographer—such as David McCullough, A. Scott Berg, and Ron Chernow—might have attempted to expand the genre beyond its "more is best" mentality. Instead, these biographers are known for writing thick, brick-sized books that catalog the subject's every move over the course of long lives. This is not to say that such fact-based works do not have a place in contemporary letters, just that an expansion of what constitutes a biography might add value.

Mailer knocked down the boundaries between fact and fiction, which upset traditionalists and specialists who established their careers based on these typical parameters. In contrast, Rollyson includes Mailer under the category "innovative biography" in his book *Biography: A User's Guide*. He outlines Mailer's dual purpose "to faithfully measure and evaluate the obstacles that bar the biographer's . . . full understanding of his subject's life" and put forth a methodology that "aims to recreate the whole person while conceding that the search for wholeness is elusive and problematical" (145–46). Loosening the standards of "biography" as a discipline would essentially recast the entire enterprise. As Rollyson demonstrates, Mailer is not the lone entrant in the innovative category, but he stands as the most famous of the pack, which includes Ronald Reagan's biographer Edmund Morris and Ian Hamilton, in his erstwhile *In Search of J. D. Salinger*.

As a fitting conclusion, we might expand Mailer's declaration against "pre-fabricated words" that began this essay to include no pre-fabricated

methodologies. Across the decades, Mailer crafted innovative variations on biography, historical studies, and journalism. One could surmise that only a writer possessing Mailer's arrogance and bluster would challenge the status quo, but looking back, it is clear that his nonfiction style could be employed in a significant manner today beyond the New Journalism style that he helped formulate. Mailer fought against pre-fabricated words and styles, shaping a unique approach that showcased his fierce intellect and broad grasp of American society.

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