

INTRODUCTION TO NORMAN MAILER'S TALK AT THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN 1986

ANDREW M. GORDON

WHEN THE TRUE LITERARY HISTORY OF AMERICA SINCE WW II IS WRITTEN, Norman Mailer is certain to be a key figure in that story. For almost forty years, since the 1948 publication of his classic war novel *The Naked and the Dead*, Mailer has stood at or near the top of the heap in American letters, a figure to contend with. In a time of rapid and tempestuous change, he has been one of the writers most capable of change. Mailer has an astonishing ability to renew himself and to constantly surprise his audience. His career has been wildly uneven, but characterized always by risk and change. Over the years, he has made himself into a man of letters, a literary artist equally at home in the novel, journalism, the essay, the play or the screenplay.

Throughout the decades, he has remained a model of the committed writer, responding with all his wit, character, wisdom, and talent to the intellectual and political pressures of the time. In the cowardly years of the 1950s, he boldly announced, "I am imprisoned with a perception which will settle for nothing less than making a revolution in the consciousness of our time." In the heat of the 1960s, when such a revolution appeared for a while to be underway, Mailer became a culture hero to many of the young, an example of the writer who, like Ken Kesey or Allen Ginsberg, broke down the boundary lines between art and life and attempted to live out his ideals. In the 1960s, Mailer seemed to be everywhere, speaking out against the war in Vietnam at Berkeley, getting arrested at a protest at the Pentagon, reporting on the political conventions in Chicago and Miami, on the trail of the astronauts in Houston and Cape Canaveral, and running for Mayor of New

York City. All the while, he was writing essays, novels, and plays, making movies, getting married and divorced, siring children. His gargantuan appetite for life and art provided a new role model, expanding the possibilities for many of us. In the 1970s and 80s, Mailer has continued to experiment and change and move into new territory, most notably with his Pulitzer prizewinning “true life novel” *The Executioner’s Song*, and his massive Egyptian epic, *Ancient Evenings*, the first novel of a projected trilogy. His most recent role has been as President of the American center of PEN, the international writer’s organization.

What continuity can we find in the many changes of this chameleon career? If the central question of Saul Bellow’s fiction could be stated as “How should a good man live?” then the central question of Mailer’s might be posed as “How should a bad man live?” Mailer would probably agree with the complaint of Philip Roth’s Portnoy: “Because to be *bad*, Mother, that is the real struggle: to be bad—and to enjoy it! That is what makes men of us boys, Mother.” Mailer’s heroes tend to be bad boys like Gary Gilmore, and Mailer himself for a long time was the official Bad Boy of American letters. He has staked out as his territory the extremes of experience, including murder, rape, orgy, suicide, and psychosis. His persistent themes have been sex, violence, and power, and the interconnections between all three in American life.

But behind his radicalism is a conservative, moral, proselytizing (one might even say rabbinical) streak. He sermonizes because he believes that we can be better than we are, that America may still have a heroic destiny to fulfill. What gives his work continuity, despite its many radical changes in form and style, is a continuing quest for a hero fit for our times. The protagonist of his story “The Man Who Studied Yoga,” a failed novelist turned comic book writer, thinks of the impossibility of heroism in the compromised and diminished postwar world of the 1950s, “One could not have a hero today, a man of action and contemplation, capable of sin, large enough for good, a man immense. There is only a modern hero damned by no more than the ugliness of wishes whose satisfaction he will never know. One needs a man who could walk the stage, someone who—no matter who, not himself. Someone who reasonably could not exist.” Mailer has continued to search for this hero or heroine in all his writing, and even attempted to become such a figure himself. In his writing and in his life, he has the courage

to take risks, even if he sometimes fails or makes a fool of himself, and the courage to try again.

In the course of his controversial career, he has come in for extravagant praise and also more than his fair share of flack. He has at various times been called egotistical, male chauvinist, or simply *messhugeneh*, but when we consider that similar charges were once leveled against Poe, Whitman, and Hemingway, then Mailer is in good company.

Versatility, ambition, risk, and courage—these are among the terms that define the complex writer Norman Mailer, a literary hero for our times. His latest novel is entitled *Tough Guys Don't Dance*. Well, they may not dance, but some tough guys sure know how to write. Ladies and gentlemen, Norman Mailer.