

MAILER AND BRESLIN: POLITICS, LITERATURE, AND BIG IDEAS

V I C T O R P E P P A R D

My prompt for writing about Norman Mailer and Jimmy Breslin is that 2019 is the 50th anniversary of their 1969 campaign for the leadership of New York City. Mailer ran for Mayor and Breslin ran for President of the City Council. The campaign slogans of these two anti-politicians, such as “No More Bullshit,” “The Other Guys are the Joke,” and “Vote the Rascals in” brought a whole new spirit to political campaigning designed to capitalize on the public’s dissatisfaction with so many things going on in the city, as well as with the stuffy, stolid and often corrupt pols who Mailer and Breslin hoped to defeat. Although they lost by a large margin, they brought not just a lively, sometimes raw or ribald sense of humor, but also a wealth of ideas to the city’s politics of the day that was bereft of both. These ideas were in fact the centerpiece of their campaign, and even though they lost the elections there were others, including the winning Lindsay administration, who were impressed by them. As Mailer’s son John Buffalo Mailer wrote of his father:

His ideas enflamed, enriched, and deepened the public discourse for the second half of the 20th century and on into the Bush years. Because his point of view didn’t attach to any political extreme, he wielded the double-edged sword of enlightening his audiences while forcing them to contemplate matters uncomfortable to their rigid ideologies. He took great pride in pronouncing himself a Left-Conservative—Left because he believed that desperate times required radical solutions, conservative because he distrusted centralized government (“Summer ’69”).

I dare say that the Mailer-Breslin campaign and its platform of 1969 still have possibilities for New York City and for the rest of the nation, especially with regard to a double-edged sword needed to cut through hard barriers that have formed between and among political factions over the past years. But who can wield that weapon, and has everyone tuned out to everything but their own preconceptions? Since both Mailer and Breslin came to the campaign as anti-politicians whose works were already full of large ideas and continued to be throughout their long and distinguished careers, I cannot resist also exploring some of the significant things they share as writers.

The platform of Mailer and Breslin featured their intention to turn New York City into the 51st state and thereby free the new city-state from what they regarded as the tyranny of the bureaucrats and politicians in Albany. Another tenet of the platform was to give power to the neighborhoods, which would have their own administrations and schools. They were especially keen to give self-rule to the city's blacks who they were convinced had not prospered under the white man's rule, and so it was time to let them govern themselves. In fact, they often proclaimed that the election was all about white v. black. In addition, there would be Neighborhood Housing Banks for the sake of restoring old buildings instead of the city's demolishing them (*Managing Mailer* 167). Schools would be under local control, and teachers' unions could only strike in their own neighborhood schools and not city wide, as had happened recently. Manpower Training Programs would also be created (*Managing* 168).

Rent control would be instituted for all dwellings with two or more families and run by the neighborhoods. Heroin would be legalized in the way the British had done with methadone programs. And measures would be taken to develop a police force that would be respected by those who lived in the neighborhoods. As Jimmy Breslin proposed, draft exemptions—we remember that the Viet Nam War was continuing apace in 1969—would be given to those who performed service in the police force, and those who worked dangerous shifts could receive law school credits (“Summer ‘69”).

Other proposals included turning Coney Island into Las Vegas East, free bicycles in the parks, a Wall Street World Series of Stickball, and recognition of Muhammed Ali as heavy weight champion of the world (*Managing* 168). Ali had been stripped of his title, because he refused to be drafted, and so Mailer meant to correct this injustice. A really serious proposal that in my opinion would have transformed the city's system of transit, based as it was

and is on the metro and buses, was to build a monorail that would have spurs leading into the boroughs. Mailer worked up credible figures for the project—after all, he studied Engineering at Harvard—but as with so many other good ideas this was never adopted (*Managing* 169).

Another attractive idea on the utopian side that had virtually no chance of being enacted was instituting a “Sweet Sunday on the last Sunday of the month when there would be nothing that moved in the City, including cars, planes, and trains, outside of emergency vehicles (“Summer ’69”). Anyone who has spent any time in New York City will know that even if all non-emergency traffic were to be banned on a Sunday they would still be serenaded with the wailing of ambulances and the shrieking of police cars.

The story of the campaign itself, as told by Joe Flaherty, lays bare the strengths and weaknesses of both the candidates and Flaherty himself. He also shows that for all of their banter and joking Mailer and Breslin were deadly serious about the substance of their proposals and that they were sincerely devoted to the betterment of the City they believed was in a state of deterioration on all fronts. Before the campaign actually began and there were discussions about whether to run and who would run for which office, there was a point at which Breslin exclaimed, “Do you know something—that fucking bum is serious!” (*Managing* 23). Although there were plenty of glitches and gaffs, both of these enormous personalities and egos were able to work out a *modus operandi* that for the most part took advantage of their strengths. In working a crowd, “Breslin would come on first, loosen them up with laughs, and then plunge them into the gutter of despair. Mailer, like the ever reliable cavalry would come to the rescue, his voice a spiritual bugle bearing wings for their abject spirits” (*Managing* 58–59). This is a good place to note that Flaherty was himself a gifted writer who had a knack for metaphor, if sometimes overblown. But after all, the whole campaign was at times larger than life.

Both Mailer and Breslin were masters of the one-liner and punch lines, both in speaking and in writing. In the winter before the election a huge snow storm hit the City whose administration had a long and difficult time clearing. When asked what he would do with such a snowstorm, Mailer said, “I’d piss on it” (*Managing* 58). For his part, Jimmy Breslin had a new line for every day. One of his best lines came on the night that Mailer said to his campaign workers at the Village Gate, “You’re all a bunch of spoiled pigs”

(*Managing* 113) Breslin's reaction was, "Why didn't you tell me that I was running with Ezra Pound?" (*Managing* 119)

Flaherty believes that the best speech Jimmy Breslin gave took place at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, where in his performance he was able to bring the white cops together with workers and blacks who were "getting screwed by governmental institutions (Mailer's dull liberal center), indolent congressmen, wasteful bureaucrats, and indeed, those 'who think they're smarter than us plain folk.'" As Flaherty wrote, "it was the invasion from underneath we had planned, an assault on the soft underbelly of liberalism" (97). This was the kind of rough, tough stuff Breslin was so good at that was at the same time grounded in the campaign's attempts to bring white and black and left and right together.

Near the end of the campaign, Norman Mailer gave one of his best speeches at the Time Life Building where he pushed the idea of New York City as the 51st state. Here he proclaimed that "we run on the notion that politics is philosophy." He also said that he never talked down to his audience and that Left and Right all listened (*Managing* 203). Mailer asserted the following:

We need to know a little more about each other—not through the old-fashioned New Deal governmental methods of tolerance—but through the quality of human experience in societies, small societies and somewhat larger societies founded upon various principles—philosophical, spiritual, economic, geographic, territorial, historical (*Managing* 204).

He concluded with another very large idea and that was to make New York City what it had been before—"the leader of the world" (*Managing* 204). Theodore White, author of the series *The Making of the President*, opined that "one of the most serious campaigns run in the United State in the last five years was Norman Mailer's. I didn't vote for him, but his campaign was considered and thoughtful, the beginning of an attempt to apply ideas to a political situation" (*Managing* 220). White's remark is right on target; however, I am baffled that he did not vote for the campaign he praised so highly.

As John Buffalo Mailer wrote, some of these ideas probably would not have worked, others might have "half worked," but "it is difficult to imagine

that New York would have been worse off” (“Summer ‘69”). Given the intractability of so many urban problems, not just in New York, but throughout the country, bold initiatives and changes in the spirit of Mailer and Breslin still need to be tried in the current day. Waiting and hoping for old dogmas and approaches—be they so-called liberal or so-called conservative—somehow to magically bear fruit has proven futile. However idealistic or even utopian some of the Mailer-Breslin proposals may look, they are grounded in deep affection for New York and often common sense as well. Today, however, doing common sense things, such as those done in the rest of the developed world, will get you labeled as a radical or an extremist, for the mass media love to squelch anyone who steps just outside their narrow range of conventional labels. But let’s follow the example of Mailer and Breslin and say the hell with the tried and true that turned out to be false and try something that might work out.

I would like to make a few observations about the considerable common ground that I find in the writing of Norman Mailer and Jimmy Breslin, both New Yorkers and Brooklynites who got to many places around the world and had a keen sense for events that were worthy of special attention. Some of these were connected with famous or influential individuals, such as the death of President John Kennedy they both dealt with in different ways. In *Oswald’s Tale*, Mailer is concerned with the assassin—more on that later—whereas Breslin wrote arguably his most brilliant journal article about JFK’s burial. He describes Jacqueline Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson with his usual deft touch, but his main focus is on Clifton Pollard, the man who dug the grave. Pollard was not allowed to be at the funeral itself on the ground there was no room left for him by the time he got there, but nevertheless he said that digging Kennedy’s grave was “an honor” (*Herald Tribune*). This article, rightly much noted and quoted, is the prime example of Breslin’s penchant for writing about common people the public knows nothing about. Just as Breslin simply had to be at the burial of JFK, he made a special journey to England for the funeral of Winston Churchill where he spoke with local people in the pub. During the “Time of Troubles” he traveled to Ireland and lived in Northern Island for a while, visited Viet Nam during the war, and was in Alabama, both Selma and Montgomery, when Martin Luther King was there for the March.

As an Irishman, Jimmy Breslin’s writing about the Irish in New York, Ireland, and Northern Island is particularly passionate. As Michael J. O’Neill

puts it, Breslin was “in happy collision with three governments, with the four horsemen of American-Irish politics, and also, as usual, with the editorial board of his newspaper.” O’Neill adds that Breslin’s writing created the impression that he was “on the ramparts in the fight against British tyranny” (*The World According to Breslin* 185). He also made pithy and prescient comments about the situation in the Middle East after the Israeli-Egypt treaty, such as “No Israeli leader ever will allow the Palestinians to have a country of their own in Israel’s border” (*According to Breslin* 231).

Norman Mailer was also particularly assiduous in conducting research for his writing, and this led him to Zaire for the Ali-Foreman Heavyweight Championship fight, and also to the Soviet Union twice to do research on Lee Harvey Oswald during the time he spent there in Belarus. Mailer was also in Moscow in 1984, and this trip had the added benefit of his seeing central Moscow and staying in a hotel not far from the infamous Lubyanka prison, where as Michael Lennon points out, Harry Hubbard assumes Harlot could have been in 1984 at the end of *Harlot’s Ghost* (*Double Life* 648).

Jimmy Breslin and Norman Mailer were greatly interested in sport as a vital, revealing aspect of the wider culture. For Mailer, boxing was not just a great spectacle on the level of Ali and his rivals, but it was also a testing ground for a man’s mettle. In Mailer’s *The Fight*, which is about the battle for the Heavyweight Championship between Muhammed Ali and George Foreman in Zaire, Mailer is earnestly in favor of Ali winning, because, as Michael Lennon writes, a victory by Ali would be “A triumph for everything which did not fit into the computer: for audacity, inventiveness, even art” (*Double Life* 481).

Mailer was also a baseball fan, first of the Brooklyn Dodgers and later of the Boston Red Sox. In discussing baseball with Phillip Sipiora Jr., Mailer said he couldn’t be a Yankee fan “Baseball Man” 183–4). I assume that his preference for the Dodgers—known forever as “Dem Bums”—over the pinstriped Yankees had a lot to do with Mailer’s love of underdogs. Jimmy Breslin was a baseball fan as well who wrote a book called *Can’t Anyone Here Play this Game* about the New York Mets and their manager Casey Stengel, whose words Breslin uses for his title. Breslin’s attraction to the Mets and their manager stemmed, as I see it, from his own love of underdogs and various oddball characters. I should add that the often quoted Stengel was a tremendously successful manager of the New York Yankees in their reign as one of the winningest teams in the history of professional sport in the US

with seven World Series Championships and three American League Pennants for years they did not win the World Series. As for the Mets players, the word underdog is in fact a large understatement in that they set a record by losing 120 games in their fabled 1962 season. Among them was the fans' favorite "Marvelous Marv" Thornberry, whose nickname was of course ironic on account of his many blunders and boo boos. He, too, had had some success with the Yankees, although nothing like Stengel, who was his manager once again in 1962.

Given the intense interest of Norman Mailer and Jimmy Breslin in everything civic, it is natural that they should have been among the most proficient practitioners of the hybrid genre that comes from marrying documentary journalism with devices of fiction, such as narration and character portrayal. There are a number of other things they have in common that are noteworthy. They both had a penchant for striking punch lines, and their writing is loaded with them. I believe that the current vogue of political correctness will still allow me to say something positive related to an ethnic trait. In the case of Jimmy Breslin, I claim that his frequent use of punch lines stems from his irrepressible Irish wit. As I read them, they often come along in the course of a mundane description and deliver an unexpected hammer blow that takes us by surprise. My favorite example is one in *The Gang that Couldn't Shoot Straight*, where Breslin's narrative impersonator is describing how the younger generation of Mafiosi replaces the older one. If enough people tell a young aspirant to Mafia leadership that, "Old men, they better off they die," he knows he has the go-ahead. He then "invites his boss to dinner, and on the way home he drops the boss off in the nearest sewer" (130).

Mailer is also a master at catching us off guard. In the course of a very short article called "On Sartre's God Problem," he employs one punch line after another. Perhaps the most pungent of them is the following on one of his favorite subjects, namely, the nature of God: "What a gargantuan oxymoron—All-Good and All-Powerful. It is certain to maroon any and all formal theologians who would like to explain an earthquake. Before the wrath of a tsunami, they can only break wind" (*Mind of an Outlaw* 578).

Some of Norman Mailer's best known works stand out for their combination of journalistic and novelistic techniques, in particular, *Oswald's Tale*, *The Executioner's Song*, and *The Armies of the Night* (1968), are prime examples of this genre. For *Armies*, Mailer received the Pulitzer Prize for Non-

Fiction 1969. This took place in the middle of the campaign described above and caused Jimmy Breslin to declare he was leaving the campaign, ostensibly on the grounds that he would look silly in tandem with a luminary of Mailer's now enhanced stature—until Mailer talked him out of it over many drinks (*Managing* 93). Breslin won his own Pulitzer for Commentary in 1985.

Much criticism has, of course, been written on *Armies*, most of it laudatory and a great deal of it about Mailer's bringing journalism to the level of fiction. Here, I would like to underline that the book has had remarkable staying power in its ability to inspire a number of critical responses, as witnessed by Adam Gopnik's reassessment in 2018, when he writes that "*The Armies of the Night* is not a journalistic account of a protest so much as a satiric poem of fathers and sons. It tells of how one generation of American radicals confronted and comically misunderstood the next." The difference between the generations is that Mailer's believed in the Word, whereas the younger generation believed in Music. Gopnik further avers that critics, and perhaps Mailer himself, did not understand that he had not raised journalism to the level of fiction, but that he had rather "raised confession into poetry" in *Armies* (*New Yorker*, 11 July 2018.)

Gopnik's astute reading of *Armies* as ascending into the realm of poetry does not, of course, negate elements of novelistic technique in Mailer's work, particularly character portrayal. As Gopnik describes it, "the back-and-forth, at once mutually admiring and desperately competitive, between Lowell's Bostonian abstraction and Mailer's New York Jewish caginess is the material of high comedy, expertly analyzed even as it is experienced" (*New Yorker*). That sentence alone says so much about Mailer's ability to portray both his own character and that of Robert Lowell, however we may want to describe *Armies*' generic or formal properties.

The Executioner's Song is another example of a mixed genre work in which, unlike *Armies*, Mailer does not play a central role. However, his presence is important in the Salt Lake area where he and Larry Schiller worked on ferreting out the circumstances surrounding Gary Gilmore's double murder and eventual execution. This exhaustive research, which is typical of virtually all that Mailer wrote, included extensive contact with the people who knew Gilmore best, among whom Gilmore's girlfriend, Nicole Baker stands out. Mailer's rich characterization of Gilmore cannot help but provoke reactions to Gilmore of various types. In discussing this issue with a good colleague, I found that Mailer was inclined to find Gilmore to be sincere in his

desire to be punished for his actions as his execution approached, whereas I found him to be insincere, as witnessed by his scheming to run away at the very last moment. For me, Gilmore's true duplicitous character emerged before that in his dual pseudo-suicide pact with Nicole Baker the object of which was ostensibly for them to meet in the hereafter. Nicole played her part with the full intention of taking her life and she very nearly died in the process from her overdose of sleeping pills. Gilmore, on the other hand, took a much smaller dose and suffered virtually no ill effects.

Oswald's Tale has been told by a number of people from various points of view, including those who believe the murder of President John Kennedy to be part of a CIA plot. Mailer does not give credence to these theories of conspiracy, but instead portrays Oswald as acting on his own personal motivation for killing Kennedy. In order to do that, much as with Gilmore in *Executioner*, Mailer spent a great deal of time in the places where Oswald lived, such as Belarus, Moscow, and Dallas. He also conducted interviews with Oswald's widow Marina, who was often resisted discussing the whole matter. As a reflexive non-believer in conspiracy theories, I am inclined to believe more in Mailer's depiction of Oswald's motives and actions than I do in some of the more elaborate conspiracies that have been advanced. Mailer shows that both Oswald himself and his mother believed he was a special agent of history whose role was to assassinate Kennedy. Oswald's marksmanship has been questioned, but his very near miss in attempting to murder General Edwin Walker speaks both to his ability as a marksman and his desire to kill someone of much greater prominence than himself. For me, Oswald was a person of meager talents, basically a no-account nonentity, who wanted to elevate himself by shooting big shots. That at least is the conclusion that I draw based on Mailer's account of him and his life.

Jimmy Breslin, Mailer's partner in politics, was also akin to him in his employment of novelistic devices in his own non-fiction. Among the books that he wrote in this manner are two that stand out for me. The first is the *Short Sweet Dream of Eduardo Gutiérrez*, and the second is *The Gang that Couldn't Shoot Straight*. *Short Sweet Dream*, an in-depth work of investigative journalism that incorporates elements that are characteristic of fiction. *Gang* is actually a novel that Breslin is able to write on the basis of his work as a journalist with an intimate knowledge of how things worked in New York and particularly in the Brooklyn Mafia. It is filled with commentary on the ins and outs of the city's life, and much of it based on Breslin's expe-

rience with and/or in its different ethnic communities, such as the Irish, Italians, and Puerto Ricans. Breslin's own heritage is both Irish and Italian. He spares none of these groups his acerbic criticism where he deems warranted, so much so that he would be hard pressed to get past the current day's political correctness patrol without incurring their wrath and opprobrium.

In *Short Sweet Dream*, Breslin develops the story of Eduardo Gutiérrez, a young Mexican who pays a "coyote" to help him cross the border into the US to Los Angeles, where he is given a ticket for New York City. There he winds up working in the construction business, which is controlled by a Hasidic run company with close ties to Mayor Giuliani. Breslin, the meticulous investigative journalist, is exhaustive in his exposure of the corruption that thrived between the builders and the city administration. He brings the two strands of his plot together when a building in which Eduardo Gutiérrez is working, the second floor collapses due to short cuts on the use of materials, and he crashes head first in a cement mixer to his death. Meanwhile, his girlfriend Silvia has made her own harrowing attempts at a border crossing the last one of which is successful and she, too, gets to Brooklyn. However, Silvia decides she cannot risk going back home for Eduardo's funeral, lest she is never able to return to New York again.

Breslin's description of the funeral for Eduardo is tremendously touching to the point of heartbreaking. The ceremony has elements of a wedding, for nine young women friends of Eduardo carry the casket: "Their faces were determined. Soon, however they cried as they made Eduardo's casket dance. Sway forward on the left leg, sway back on the right foot, sway forward, sway back, sway, sway, sway, dance the young man to his grave" (*Short Sweet Dream* 198).

In *Short Sweet Dream* Breslin is at the peak of his powers as a writer who commands the whole range of emotions from outrage at the building industry and the bureaucrats who were bribed not to check its work to the pathos of Eduardo's funeral.

As is evident from so many of their works, Norman Mailer and Jimmy Breslin were fascinated by outlaws and their mentality. Here I cannot resist noting that Mailer starred as an Irish cop(!) in his own movie, *Beyond the Law*, 1968, shot in four days with a cast that was "a haphazard olio of writers, actors, lovers, poets, gamblers, and boxers" (*Double Life* 380). Mailer's treatment of Gary Gilmore described above and in his involvement with Jack Abbott have to do with criminals of a much higher order. In the latter

case, it seems to me that Mailer overestimated his ability to guide a murderous mind to another plane. Mailer, like Breslin, was interested in the doings of the mafia. He once wrote a screenplay for Sergio Leone based on a novel by Henry Grey called *The Hoods* about some Jewish gangsters in New York during Prohibition. It was to be called *Once Upon a Time in America*; however, Leone rejected Mailer's screenplay and wrote one himself with help from other writers for a film with the same name (*Double Life* 492).

Breslin's *The Gang That Couldn't Shoot Straight* is, of course, about the mafia in Brooklyn and, as the title suggests, the ineptitude of this branch of the mafia was so great that it eventually collapses in on itself. Breslin also wrote about a merrier bunch of outlaws who were perfectly suited to his special brand of humor. As far as I know, Breslin never attempted to reform or change his favorite outlaws, such as Fat Thomas the Bookie and Marvin the Torch. Far from it, he rather reveled in their exploits, if that is what you might call them. Here I need to make my own confession with regard to these two partly apocryphal, partly real outlaws. In my undergraduate days, my mates and I eagerly waited for the next episode in his heroes' often bizarre adventures that Breslin wrote for the now long defunct *New York Herald Tribune*. I still can recall the one about Fat Thomas stuffing paper evidence of his activities down the toilet while the cops were banging on the door. As it turns out, Fat Thomas was the bookie with principles, for he joined Breslin in Alabama, as he had gone there to learn about what the local people thought about the March on Montgomery and about integration in general. Jimmy Breslin was definitely on the side of the blacks who were—and still are—struggling for full equality in America (*The World*). This, then, is one of the large ideas that Jimmy Breslin stood for both in the 1969 campaign and in his writing.

Norman Mailer was a veritable fountain of big ideas, one of which is that we need to stop polluting the planet in so many ways, especially by spreading radiation all over it. As he was wont to do with so many others, he took this idea to its radical extreme in "The Last Story," in which the earth and the rest of the universe are so permeated by radiation that the people who were left attempt to take a rocket ship into another universe. Mailer, who was accustomed to thinking and imagining on a cosmic level had what amounts to an idea fixed in his belief that God and the Devil were engaged in a battle for control of our lives. He developed this notion in his fiction as early as *An American Dream*, 1964, where Kelly says to Rojack, "I was taken by your dec-

laration—did you really make it on television?—that God’s engaged in a war with the Devil, and God may lose” (*Dream* 236). This theme is also part of *The Gospel According to the Son*, 1999, where Yeshua is troubled to think that his father may be losing out to the Devil and even wonders whether the Devil is able to good as well as evil. What is more, Mailer portrays God as far from omnipotent, an imperfect artist who is in so many ways like the human beings who believe in him—or not. In *The Castle in the Forest*, the Maestro and the Dummkopf are cast in the roles of the Devil and God, and it appears that the Dummkopf is losing to the Maestro. Mailer introduces an even more tantalizing possibility that flies in the face of the traditional portrayal of this eternal battle by suggesting that the Dummkopf and the Maestro may actually be part of the same team.

Jimmy Breslin, as far as I am aware and for all of the things he shares with Norman Mailer, does not conduct such a debate with himself and among his characters. He is rather concerned with the specifics of the down to earth struggles of people, often the least fortunate among us, to cope and survive in the morass of moral and mendacious corruption found in the City and the world outside it. Both in life and in letters, Mailer and Breslin were fearless rule breakers, saying and writing what they believed in ways that challenged accepted norms and expectations, often in shocking but persuasive fashion.

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