

ADVERTISEMENTS FOR MYSELF: MAILER'S KÜNSTLERROMAN?

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MY THESIS, BRIEFLY PUT, IS THAT *ADVERTISEMENTS FOR MYSELF* is better appreciated as a novelistic autobiography than as an anthology-like collection of writings. *Advertisements* is more than a “ragtag assembly of rewrites, second thoughts and ramblings, shot through with occasional brilliance,” that Hemingway derided in a 1961 letter to George Plimpton.”¹ It is, I argue, close to Lethem’s 2013 view that “*Advertisements for Myself* is Mailer’s greatest book simply because it frames the drama of the construction of his voice, the thrilling resurrection of his personality as his greatest asset after the public pratfalls accompanying his second and third novels” (Sipiora, p. xiv). *Advertisements* evokes Bloom’s view that “*Advertisements* is perhaps Mailer’s own supreme, perhaps canonical fiction . . . “the author named ‘Norman Mailer’” (2005, 471).

I also argue for the relevance of Northrop Frye’s conception of autobiographical narrative, indeed of his fourth, “confessional” mode of fiction. Frye sees the autobiography itself as quasi-fictional, as “inspired by a creative, and therefore fictional, impulse to select only those events and experiences in the writer’s life that go to build up an integrated patter” (307). Frye’s “confessional” fictional mode has precedents in the confessions of Augustine, Rousseau and Cardinal Newman and in German *Künstlerromanen* like Hesse’s *Demian* (307); also, Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*. For modern exemplars, we are directed to such modern works of introverted focus and intellectualized content as Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as A Young Man*. Confessions emerge in contrast with other modes of prose fiction (303-314), to wit introverted and personal *romances* like *Wuthering Heights* (or, updating, *Mr. Lonelyhearts*), in contrast with introverted and intellectual-

ized Mennippean satires like *Gulliver's Travels* (or *The Public Burning*) and in contrast most familiarly with the extroverted and personal—indeed, highly interpersonal—novels proper like *Emma*, *Portrait of a Lady* or *Song of Solomon*.

Frye sees the autobiography itself as quasi-fictional, as “inspired by a creative, and therefore fictional, impulse to select only those events and experiences in the writer’s life that go to build up an integrated pattern.” Frye’s “confession,” one of his four fictional modes, has precedents in the confessions of Augustine, Rousseau and Cardinal Newman and in the German *Künstlerroman*. Confessions emerge in contrast with introverted and personal romances like *Wuthering Heights* (or, updating, *Mr. Lonelyhearts*), in contrast with introverted and intellectualized Menippean satires like *Gulliver's Travels* (or *The Public Burning*) and in contrast most familiarly with the extroverted and personal—indeed, highly interpersonal—novels proper like *Emma*, *Portrait of a Lady* or *Song of Solomon*). Although Frye speaks of a “confessional” fiction, in doing so he draws a blurry line between fiction and non-fiction, indeed, he traces his fictional subgenre to the confessions of Augustine and Rousseau.

Lennon writes in 2017 (“Norman Mailer, An Introduction”), “*Advertisements* is where he forged his distinctive style, a fierce, frank, agile, self-reflective and often humorous voice.” He writes that in *Advertisements*, *The Presidential Papers* and *Cannibals and Christians*, works he dubs “three miscellanies,” are linked internally by a series of “advertisements,” “postscripts” or “arguments” which federate a narrative thrust, especially in *Advertisements*, where they are often more important than the work they frame.²

For me, the confessional emphasis is not much complicated by *Advertisements*’ non-fictional facet as a work on the borderline between traditional confessions like Rousseau’s and more fictional ones like Joyce’s *Portrait*. This is because *Advertisements*’ range of often non-fictional materials resembles that in more explicit fictions like Dos Passos’ *USA* and Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo* with their ensembles of documentary materials. *Advertisements* is perhaps best regarded as a mix of the classical confession and Frye’s confessional fiction, a mix that documents the young artist’s strivings. It is something like a variation on Joyce’s *Portrait* in which Joyce has substituted his own name for the name “Stephen Daedalus” and inserted samplings from his early lyric poetry and *The Dubliners*.

Advertisements is also an autobiographical narrative. This view is not only

blessed by Bloom and lent support by Lennon on *Advertisements'* autobiographical framing (2017) and "confession interruptus" (2013, p. 247), and given generic status by Frye. It is prefigured by Mailer himself in *Advertisements*, first in a segment of *Advertisements'* "Second Table of Contents" that is entitled "The Biography of a Style, again in the "Sixth Advertisements for Myself, where Mailer refers to "this muted autobiography" (310). It is a narrative of the development of an increasingly complex, flexible and vital style, a style suitable to the expression of such psychologically and socially complex and characters, as Mailer would turn to with Rojack and with the journalist known as "The Reporter," "Aquarius," or simply "Norman Mailer." *Advertisements* is followed by the less original and dynamic but integrated collections of *The Presidential Papers* and *Cannibals and Christians*. Indeed, the Mailerian quasi-*Künstlerroman* continues on in more fictional garb, first submerged within such narratives as those of Rojack and Reporter/Aquarius/Mailer, then more deeply submerged in the tales of Gary Gilmore, several Menenhehets, Tim Madden and Harry Hubbard. But that near *Künstlerroman* is above all *Advertisements*, which is most memorably the thrilling "resurrection" narrative acclaimed by Lethem, the "perhaps canonical fiction" announced by Bloom, the "confession interruptus" lauded by Lennon (2013, p. 247).

But what is *Advertisements* as a fiction-like, autobiographical narrative? In brief, it is a narrative of the developing Mailer, as writer and literary persona, as well as stylist, that is bookended by an opening on Mailer's hopes for a very great novel in the book's first "Advertisement" and a postscript in the form of "Advertisement for Myself on the Way Out," a first chapter to a projected long novel—perhaps the "very great" one envisioned in the book's first "Advertisement"—Mailer spirals ahead from the masculine insecurity and political radicalism like "The Language of Men" and "The Man Who Studies Yoga." But what is *Advertisements* as a fiction-like narrative? It is a narrative of the developing Mailer that is suggested by an opening on Mailer's hopes for a very great novel in the book's first "Advertisement" and a postscript in the form of "Advertisement for Myself on the Way Out—a first chapter to a projected long novel—perhaps the "very great" one envisioned in the book's first "Advertisement," Mailer spirals ahead from the masculine insecurity and political radicalism like "The Language of Men" and "The Man Who Studied Yoga," the bits from *Barbary Shore*, and "The Origins of Western Defense" to the philosophical vitalism and sexual

bravado of “The White Negro,” “The Time of her Time,” “Notes Toward a Psychology of the Orgy,” and the De Sadean “Advertisements for Myself on the Way Out.”

The “fiction-like, autobiographical narrative” is, of course, not the sole variety of Confession. Besides the more iconic non-fictional confessions like Augustine’s and a straightforward *Künstlerroman* like Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as A Young Man*, there are near confessions like Miller’s *Tropic of Cancer* and *faux* confessions like Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time* and Roth’s *Sabbath’s Theater*.

As for the “Advertisements,” I view it as, *seen at its best*, a narrative. This is partly because I am less impressed by the merits of particular elements—whether taken one-by-one or cumulatively—of what Hemingway termed an “assembly.” This view holds steady for me even in light of the possibly enduring merits of such strong elements of the assembly as those Mailer acutely judged the “cream” of the work: “The Man Who Studied Yoga,” “The Time of her Time,” “Dead Ends,” “Advertisements for Myself on the Way Out,” and even the widely discussed and influential “The White Negro” (*pace*, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin and Lorraine Hansberry). Yes, I am more impressed by Lethem’s “drama of the construction” of Mailer’s voice than I am by the sum of the drama’s many striking parts.³

As essay filled narrative, *Advertisements* suggests some limitations in the differentiation of Mailer’s writings among his output as “Novelist, Journalist or Historian” (Lennon, 2006, p. 91), for it is a history of Mailer as young novelist and journalist.

For writings less categorically combined, *Advertisements* suggests a division of Mailer’s non-fiction between essayist and event journalist (or, more accurately of less elegantly, (non-narrative essayist and narrative event journalist). The “journalist” category is troublesomely broad as it contains works with and without out what strikes me as Mailer’s strongest talent, his narratively expressed apprehension of events, however rich the apprehension in observations by the participant narrator. The “historian” text seems flawed because it seems to reach out mostly to accounts of events, like those of *The Armies of the Night* and *Miami* and *The Siege of Chicago*, which historians term occurrences of *current* history—events too recent to be seen with adequate perspective and grounding in an ample and available archival base. But this topic is different from *Advertisements for Myself as Künstlerroman*.

NOTES

1. Quoted by Bloom (2003, p. 3).
2. I stress *Advertisements* over *The Presidential Papers* and *Cannibals and Christians* not only in line with Lennon as noted and in his *A Double Life* on *Advertisements* as a “confession interruptus” (247), but also in line with Mailer’s own self doubt about the first latter works when he wrote of *The Presidential Papers* in his preface to it “Should I have a vice in writing, it is to be over-mannered when uncertain, and I was not close to large portions of this book.”
3. Ellison strikes his negative note when he paraphrases Mailer, writing that “all hipsters are cocks-men in possession of great euphoric organisms and out to fuck the world into peace, prosperity and creativity” and that Mailer is recycling “old primitivism crap” about African-Americans in “a new package” (Murray and Callahan, 2000, 197–198). Hansberry strikes a milder but similar note when she writes that “The White Negro” is built upon the word “orgasm” and suggests that “the Negro builds his philosophy on the existential moment of “orgasm” when it is in fact a good idea for everyone . . . to spend at least some hours of everyday out of bed” (1961, 14–15). Similarly, the largely admiring Baldwin writes that, in “The White Negro,” Mailer breaks with the “sexual responsibility” and “even . . . morality” of earlier works like *The Deer Park* to “malign the sorely menaced sexuality of Negroes” and, going further, that this picks up an “infantile *mystique*” of “inferiors” like “Kerouac and all other Suzuki rhyming boys” that “could only be extended into violence” (1961, 104). Moving on to White bohemians, Kerouac wrote that Mailer’s hipster figure was “well intentioned but poisonous, in the sense that it encouraged an image of violence” and Ginsberg wrote that Mailer, despite a sense of the historical importance of late 1950s bohemians, was being an “apocalyptic goof” delineating his Hipster figure (Manso, 1987, 259–260). A review of responses to “The White Negro” that is rich on pros as cons can be found in McKinley (2017, 35–38).

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