

SIXTY-SEVEN WORDS A MINUTE

B A R R Y N . M A L Z B E R G

Editor's Note: The Laxian Key, mentioned in Malzberg's article, is the central plot device in a short story by Robert Sheckley, an American author known for combining humor with science fiction. In Sheckley's short story, the owners of AAA Ace Interplanetary Decontamination Service find a device that produces an unlimited supply of Tangreese, the main food source for the population of the planet Meldgen. The two businessmen turn on the machine, thinking they will sell the Tangreese for a fortune, only to find that turning it off requires a Laxian Key, an apparently unattainable object. "The Laxian Key" was originally published in Galaxy Science Fiction, vol. 9, no. 2, November 1954, pp. 59–69.

—Michael Shuman

MY TITLE MIGHT HAVE BEEN "ADVERTISEMENT FOR MYSELF" but Mailer would have sneered at that, the obviousness, the self-serving, the self-induction into faked comparison which would have led Mailer to the kind of disdain which he shows in the famous Vidal-Flanner panel on Cavett, a disdain which led him into the ruin of reminiscence; let me try this, then, a swipe at or recollection of his title for the *Esquire* article on the first Patterson-Liston fight. Which should have been the last Patterson-Liston fight but Patterson, closer to Mailer in this regard than either could have admitted, was embarked upon a self-immolation both profound and subtle and he really would not have fully paid that debt to himself, made the course, if he had not taken the second fight with the first result. Mailer called his essay "Ten Thousand Words A Minute" and was writing of what he called "The Goat," that

agglomeration of journalists and other human reference who followed fighters, politicians, actors, disasters in clumps of observation and necessity. The Goat consumed with avarice and its farts drifted as invisible as farts above the polity, “What is that stink?” observers might ask uncomfortably but the source was as invisible as the morality of the journalists. The journalists would consume everything, expel everything, in that explosive expulsion of stink disguised as insight, perception would be shaped and reshaped. The goat in the aggregate was the goat in the singular, sixty-seven words a minute on the Royal portable unless you were Red Smith “and it came out like little beads of sweat on your forehead.” Mailer would never miss a metaphor that he could not misuse.

Nor could he misuse a metaphor in that final, chilling way which would end a conversation or a love affair; that was the lure and allure of his prose in the sixties as he tantalized himself by coming ever closer, then in a synchrony of motion and emotion moving ever further from that object: like Ruta after the murder in *An American Dream* the object of his attention could be moved further and nearer, ever deadlier in closer focus and yet less deadly because it could be enveloped. In the summer of 1960, having encountered and then inhaled *Advertisements for Myself* I sought his address in the Manhattan phone book and in that sacrosanct era was able to find it with ease; “I would like to meet you” I wrote, having found, I thought, the Laxian Key itself in “The Man Who Studied Yoga” which managed in that early apprehension of his full style (deliberately abandoned with a smirk for *The Executioner’s Song* but only because a real-life murderer had a greater effect upon him, always, than his own goat-farts) to hint at a solution for the ultimate mysteries of passage, Sergius the Observer had the formula and he just might release, it might take him six or seven novels in the wildest, most dangerous, most furiously ambitious shot at the cosmos than anyone had ever attempted, even Big Ernie had quailed but he would do it. Mailer answered me promptly, small courtesies were not beyond him nor did they intimidate, it was the big stuff like Vidal which could shatter his rhythms the way that Ali had broken down Foreman piece by piece, “I would like to see you but in the presence of admiration I tend to become either nasty or over-articulate and this would do neither of us any good.” So I settled for losing that letter and did not meet him for twenty-three years; that would be in the hallway outside the offices of Scott Meredith, his agent, by whom I was like him in the truest sense employed and I found myself, 44 then, inarticulate

in the presence of this Holy Grail as I had never in a scattershot life been rendered silent. I had shaken Harry Truman's and Averell Harriman's hands in a long line of supplicants and had done so with graceless dignity but Mailer floored me. I stammered my admiration and he nodded. On the elevator a woman behind us poked her companion and whispered "Is that Norman Mailer?" Well, I knew I wasn't. Mailer stood with the rigidity that Sonny Liston had brought to that post-bout press conference. Mailer commented in his print on Liston's mother-wit of which I had shown none. Mailer's last two decades, mostly influenced by or in the service of Lawrence Schiller must have been difficult, but he served them with dignity.

I never wrote "The Other Man Who Studied Yoga" or "In The Red Light" (the greatest of all his or anyone's political essays; another job, just a job for Big Norman who knew he would never be Big Ernie and as Holden Caulfield would write, "That just killed him") but I managed a few pyrotechnics or at least technics of my own and if there had been a *Mailer Review* in 1961 or even 1983 I would have fantasized finding a way into it. Here I am attempting to find a way into it. Norman, I hardly knew ye, but you were the Engine of my Night.

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