

HOW MAILER BECAME “MAILER”: THE WRITER AS PRIVATE AND PUBLIC CHARACTER

MORRIS DICKSTEIN

Author's note: This paper served as the keynote address at a conference, “The Sense of Our Time: Norman Mailer and America in Conflict,” held at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas in Austin, November 9–11, 2006. I am grateful to the director, Thomas Staley, and his colleagues for inviting me to participate.

IT'S A PRIVILEGE, THOUGH DAUNTING, for me to take part in a conference that celebrates the opening of what is sure to become one of the indispensable archives in modern American letters, especially with the subject himself in attendance. At the same time this event leaves me uneasy. Norman Mailer has always prided himself on being unpredictable, unsettling. This is after all a living, unruly body of work, virtually unclassifiable in its range and variety. For close to sixty years, Mailer has been our most protean writer, remarkably consistent in his themes yet always surprising in the ways he finds to pursue them, beginning with his own inimitable style. As his early novels were quick to demonstrate, no two of Mailer's books would ever be quite alike. In choosing his subjects he was like a riverboat gambler restless for risk; each new venture depended on bold strokes that could as soon fail as succeed. Strategies that worked well would never be exactly repeated. Invariably he was engaging the moment, never writing for the uniform edition.

It was wise to focus this symposium and the accompanying exhibition not so much on Mailer himself as on his ever-shifting dialogue with his tumultuous times, especially during the first decades after World War II. With the rich mother lode of this archive and his many published works, one could no doubt write the history of the age through Mailer's idiosyncratic involvement in it. We are now distant enough from the fifties and sixties to begin to understand them. For that we need firsthand informants who were also actors on the cultural stage. More than any other writer of his generation, Mailer not only reacted strongly to the public world of his times, often in obscure private ways, but also tried to influence it by descending—sometimes physically, more often textually—into the thick of battle. In doing so he blurred the lines between journalism and literature, fiction and autobiography, writing and acting.

Mailer began with an overweening ambition typical of his generation: no less than to write the Great American Novel. For an undergraduate at Harvard in the early 1940s, the royal road seemed to be a war novel, since the war then carried the whole weight of the national destiny. Mailer's first novel made him famous at 25, but his sudden fame cut him off from the ordinary life of his times. As time went on his talent and ambition led him to riskier kinds of fiction that pleased fewer readers, but also to personal reportage fired by the kind of inwardness and depth that could make fiction so powerful. He would move far afield from where he began.

Mailer's burst onto the literary scene in 1948 with a big novel that was in many ways a realistic treatment of war, telescoped into a single long patrol to capture a key position on a Pacific island. But with its huge cast of characters, their ethnic and geographical diversity, their backstory in the Depression years, and the book's political foreshadowing of the postwar period, *The Naked and the Dead* sketched out a vast canvas of American life in the 1930s and 40s. Mailer later came to believe that book had no style, that it lived on techniques borrowed from the social novelists of the Depression decade, especially Dos Passos, Farrell, and Steinbeck. (This would not distinguish it from most first novels, except in the scale of its ambition.) Though he would always salute the power of these writers whose work had first inspired him, Mailer soon came to believe that he could not write another realist novel, since, as one of his characters (in "The Man Who Studied Yoga") would later complain, the world itself was no longer realistic; it had turned bizarre, improbable, and a new form needed to be found. The only credible viewpoint

was a subjective one. "No one dreams of considering a novel, at least a good novel, as a document," Mailer wrote. "We understand tacitly that its view of the world is a compound of the novelist's prejudices, instincts, and sensitivity." Anticipating later theorists, who drew attention to how preconceptions shape all 'factual' reportage, Mailer described David Riesman's popular study *The Lonely Crowd* "as a fictional conception rather than a sociological analysis." Unfortunately, he insisted, Riesman was simply not a good enough novelist; his sense of society did not cut deep enough. It lacked a feeling for the social unconscious, the undercurrents of fear and desire. But where was such knowledge to be found?

The 1950s was scarcely a happy period for Mailer or his work, as he shows us repeatedly in *Advertisements for Myself*. The times, he felt, resisted the well-worn techniques of older kinds of fiction because they had undermined the agency and autonomy of the individual. Fiction had achieved its greatest effects by portraying the ambitions, desires, and mad frustrations of individuals and the social arena in which they played out their lives. Mass society and massive violence had kicked out the pins that supported this structure. The army itself, under conditions of total war, might be a grim foretaste of our dystopian future. In the exercise of naked power by Sergeant Croft and General Cummings, in their sheer impulse to domination, Mailer had felt the shadow of some form of postwar fascism. But what actually happened after the war, as he observed during the 1950s, was somehow worse—a soft totalitarianism of conformity, McCarthyism, middle-aged timidity, and intellectual compromise. This was the subject of "The Man Who Studied Yoga," where it leads to unsatisfying jobs, scaled-down ambitions, and sexual frustration for intellectuals who once hoped to set their mark on the world. On a larger scale, the specter of the death camps and the menace of the Bomb, which mobilized technology in the service of impersonal killing, had further eroded the scope for individual action, let alone heroism. The individual, that appealing figment of ancient epic and the nineteenth-century novel, that essential unit of liberal theory, now seemed out of date.

Enlightened liberalism, with its faith in rationality, progress, and bureaucratic forms of organization, had blinded itself to the irrational forces now exposed in the psyche and set loose in the world. Mailer's work in the 1950s is closely linked to the critique of the liberal imagination by tough-minded political thinkers like Reinhold Niebuhr, Arthur Schlesinger Jr., and Lionel

Trilling. They argued that the progressivism descended from the 1930s had little sense of the darker instincts revealed by the war and by the perversion of socialist dreams into totalitarianism. But where Niebuhr and company saw these unconscious forces as threats to be resisted—and thus remained hard-nosed cold war liberals—Mailer was drawn to them in a more ambivalent way, even as he rejected the cold war as a psychological nightmare.

Mailer had always been attracted to violence as a subject—physical violence, violence of the will, psychological manipulation. In *The Naked and the Dead* he writes from the left, officially critical of coldly domineering characters like Croft and Cummings but secretly intrigued by the Nietzschean depths of human nature they reveal to him. This fascination with personal power inspires some of his best writing. By the time of “The White Negro” in 1957, he can see even the brutality of murderous thugs as a perverse form of courage, a way of turning outlaw and “daring the unknown,” as if obeying Nietzsche’s admonition to “live dangerously.” A few years later Mailer pursued this identification with violence in one of his most controversial yet challenging novels, a Dostoevskyan pulp fantasy called *An American Dream*, whose protagonist describes himself as “a professor of existential psychology with the not inconsiderable thesis that magic, dread, and the perception of death were the roots of motivation.”

When Mailer wrote *An American Dream* he had grown less interested in using fiction as a way of entering imaginatively into the minds of people very different from himself. It could be argued that *The Naked and the Dead* was his only “real” novel. Instead he had begun to shape his fiction and his forays into personal journalism around projections of himself—around his own fear of failure and stale compromise in “The Man Who Studied Yoga”; his self-projection as stud and sexual missionary in “The Time of Her Time”; his own travails as a once celebrated, now struggling writer in the interstitial prose of *Advertisements for Myself*; and finally his adventures as a new kind of participatory journalist. Mailer began to find his voice as a reporter in essays on the 1960 Democratic convention that nominated Jack Kennedy, on the 1962 championship match between the thuggish Sonny Liston and one of boxing’s beloved gentlemen, Floyd Patterson, and in other pieces collected in *The Presidential Papers* (1963). It goes without saying that Mailer was much more engaged with the unexpected victor, Liston, than with the popular Patterson, to the point of offering either to promote Liston’s next match (or even, suicidally, to get into the ring with him). In es-

sence Mailer rewrote "The White Negro" around this much-publicized match, with Liston as the violent street Negro and Patterson as the establishment liberal, the gentleman, yet also a kind of underdog, the Rocky-figure with whom fans could identify.

Two years later, in the wake of Kennedy's assassination, the protagonist of *An American Dream* brings home Mailer's conversion from a bloodless liberalism to a death-haunted existentialism, something already writ large in the boxing essay. Its hero, touched by an exalted conception of himself, walks a dangerous line. Risk and challenge become his reasons for being. From the beginning, he is linked with both Kennedy and the war. Chastened by combat, they had entered Congress together. But Mailer's Rojack had somehow been transformed by the war, which had given him a glimpse of what Conrad's Kurtz called "The horror! The horror!" He cannot forget the eyes of a man he killed:

His eyes had come to see what was waiting on the other side, and they told me that death was a creation more dangerous than life. I could have had a career in politics if only I had been able to think that death was zero, death was everyone's emptiness. But I knew it was not. I remained an actor. My personality was built upon a void.

Harboring such knowledge, Rojack cannot believe in his own public career or hide behind the conventional personality he needs to project. He flirts with suicide. Instead, he goes on to murder his hateful wife, which readers could not help but link to a notorious event in Mailer's own life, and then buggers her German maid, very much the way his stud-hero brings a frigid Jewish princess to orgasm in "The Time of Her Time." In the course of his hallucinatory adventures, Rojack passes through madness, outwits the law, and manages to emerge "something like sane again" in the book's final lines.

Some notable critics were morally outraged by this book. They saw it as dime-store Dostoevsky, a megalomaniacal account of "crime without punishment," and, moreover, a tasteless, misogynistic play on Mailer's own brush with murder and madness a few years earlier. (Mailer had already compounded his sin with levity in a collection of poems called *Death for the Ladies and Other Disasters*.) Other critics, myself included, saw *An American Dream* as an exorcism, a nightmarish fantasy in the black comic vein

of Céline and Burroughs. Despite its references to Kennedy and the war, it seemed to be a highly internalized work, a dark parable with a deeply ironic title. But Mailer's dialogue with his age can be gauged not simply in relation to public events like the Vietnam War, the 1967 protest march on the Pentagon, the moon shot, or the feminist movement. Mailer tangled with each of these in turn, as he had engaged with the second world war, the cold war, the Hollywood blacklist, and the Kennedy campaign. What was more important was how his work, as keenly attuned to the *Zeitgeist* as to his own obsessions, reflected the inner turmoil of his times. Mailer's novel is drenched in the paranoia and conspiracy-mongering of the early and mid-1960s, especially following JFK's assassination, which turned conspiracy theory into a booming industry.

Mailer's writing could be trendy, riding the latest wave, or relentlessly oppositional. He could position himself as a radical, a minority of one, roasting conventional liberals as mechanics of the social order, or he could situate himself as a curmudgeonly conservative, cherishing his social life and his creature comforts over any political cause. Either way he was never out of touch. His writings on sex or boxing or Hollywood belonged as much to the spirit of the age as his regular reports on political conventions and personalities, which were always written from an unexpected vantage point. Mailer had a genius for description, for evoking atmosphere, but these reports were leavened with a kind of novelistic speculation about character and motive that was alien to most political journalists. Mailer's worldliness fired his insight. Only Balzac could have done justice to the varied social circles in which he moved, high and low, earthy or urbanely literary. He socialized with ex-cons, heiresses, and intellectuals. He saw himself at times as an outcast, befriending troublemakers like Jack Henry Abbott along with clowns and radicals like Abbie Hoffman. But he was also attracted to the rich and powerful for the punch they packed in the great world. More than once I noticed that when others spoke he actually listened and responded. Though he prided himself on his skills as a performer, he rarely hit the mark when speaking in public; *The Armies of the Night* records one such disaster. His ego, the ego of a novelist, was more receptive than performative. In short, he was (and is) a complicated man, not to be filed away in any known literary category.

Mailer prided himself on nurturing not one but many personalities—the ex-soldier who might one day take up combat, the counterfeit south-

erner with an acquired Texas drawl, the wordsmith pursuing the grail of literary immortality, the sexual utopian, the would-be hipster, the much-married *père de famille*, the seasoned political observer, the party animal, the swaggering Irishman, the introspective Jew, the perfect gentleman in a three-piece suit, the seriously driven intellectual, and so on. Some might see this shifting spectrum of identities, like the divergences among his books, as the failure of his restless intelligence to find an enduring form; others might salute his refusal to settle for any of the ready-made forms handed down to him.

The first of these received forms, as I have suggested, was the novel itself. The quest for some ultimate novel as a defining act of imagination was typical of Mailer's postwar generation. Mailer has never retracted his reverence for the power of fiction to illuminate our dreams and desires as well as our infinitely complex lives in society. But soon after *The Naked and the Dead* he realized that this quest put him in a false position—that of the author who, like the unmoved mover of Creation, could take in the whole picture, see the world objectively and disappear behind his work. But both the intellectual currents and the brutal politics of the first half of the twentieth century—from the pragmatism of William James and the existentialism of Sartre and Heidegger to the genocidal horrors perpetrated in the name of high ideals—had deprived the writer or thinker of such objective authority. Mailer found he could no longer fit himself into this impersonal mold. There were no absolute values to which he could appeal. He was not even sure that the writer still mattered. In his struggle to complete and publish *The Deer Park*, brilliantly chronicled in *Advertisements for Myself*, he discovered “that there was no room for the old literary idea of oneself as a major writer, a figure in the landscape.” He chose a more irregular path. “All I felt then was that I was an outlaw, a psychic outlaw, and I liked it, I liked it a good night better than trying to be a gentleman.” Gradually he found his own angle of vision and came to trust it. In the fiction and nonfiction that began with *Advertisements*, Mailer realized that the writer could rely only on his own subjectivity, his particular stake in the world around him. Mailer's first-person journalism was thus grounded in a grandiose idea of the self but also the more modest conception of truth that had evolved with the twentieth century.

Political radicalism, in the form of revolutionary Marxism or American-style progressivism, was another ready-made template that had attracted Mailer early in his career. But as the postwar world, including its intellectu-

als, grew more conservative, he made it his business, as a contrarian, to become more radical. In 1948, as a newly famous young author, Mailer had campaigned vigorously for the Progressive Party candidate, Henry Wallace. But at the famous Waldorf conference in March 1949, which was the last gasp of American Stalinism and the prewar Popular Front, Mailer broke with the fellow travelers who had been the mainstays of the Wallace campaign. While still considering himself a socialist, he threw in his lot with the modernist intellectuals at *Partisan Review*, upholding their commitment to alienation even as their belief in it waned and they made their peace with American life. Mailer's anti-Stalinist radicalism, developed under the tutelage of a new mentor, Jean Malaquais, was reflected in the obscure revolutionary parable of *Barbary Shore* (1951). In the 1952 *Partisan Review* symposium "Our Country and Our Culture," Mailer spoke out as one of the few unreconstructed radical voices. He saw an America dominated by the twin evils of a tepid welfare-state liberalism and a deeply reactionary conservatism.

The 1950s, beginning with the disappointing reception of *Barbary Shore* and his difficulties in finding a publisher for his next novel, *The Deer Park*, proved to be an unhappy period in Mailer's life, for personal as well as cultural reasons. Partly, this came from his sense that a cold gray fog had descended on the country, not only conformity and compromise but the loss of any spirit of risk or adventure. The answer for Mailer by the mid-fifties was the philosophy of Hip, which proved to be the advance guard of the coming counterculture. The Beat scene and the jazz scene offered him an alternative to familiar literary paths and blocked political hopes. The new underground of Hip invested its utopian dreams in the psyche rather than society, in the power of sex, drugs, and music to create altered states, breakthroughs into new regions of consciousness. If politics no longer provided an arena for testing one's manhood and changing the world, the way out could be some form of moral risk and adventure. "At bottom," Mailer wrote in "The White Negro," "the drama of the psychopath is that he seeks love. Not love as the search for a mate, but love as the search for an orgasm more apocalyptic than the one which preceded it." But this is also the psychopath who beats in the brains of a 50-year old candy-store owner; it is the drama of a man flirting with violence, even madness, in some unholy search for salvation. This became the most notorious passage in Mailer's work, perhaps because so many critics were eager to remind him of it. The expansion of consciousness could lead downward as well as outward.

The problem of violence—the “religion of blood,” as he later called it—would haunt Mailer’s life and work for the next thirty years. He himself acted it out in the stabbing of his second wife, Adele, in 1960. He wrestled with the subject in *An American Dream* and *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, in his writings on boxing and his fascination with Gary Gilmore, and later in his support for the convict Jack Henry Abbott, a strikingly intelligent writer who turned out, like Gilmore, to be psychotically violent and completely out of control. Mailer’s embrace of Hip in *Advertisements* proved to be little better than a short-term solution to his cultural problem—the gray mood of the 1950s, which, as he once put it in a public conversation, felt like a slow drip-drip-drip on the brain. But *Advertisements* did solve his *literary* problem by creating a character—himself, yet not himself—edgy, ambitious, competitive, and endlessly self-aware, a supremely cautious adventurer, the virtuoso of ambivalence, who took most of his chances in the high-wire act of the sentence. This half-invented character would carry him through the next decade and beyond—in short, the most brilliant period in his career, the one in which he was most fully in tune with the larger public world.

Within a year after *Advertisements* came out, Mailer discovered that the political frustrations that paralleled his sense of literary blockage were beginning to break up. The nomination and narrow election of JFK in 1960 was followed by the emergence of a new generation. The kids were campaigning for civil rights, putting their young bodies on the line, protesting the Vietnam War, and taking up the very lifestyle that Mailer and the Beats had been encouraging. In this radical turnabout, Mailer’s new literary personality found both a subject—the carnivalesque conflicts of the 1960s—and a vehicle, which came to be called the New Journalism. Mailer also developed a baroque new style, far from the terse, hard-boiled manner of *The Deer Park*, a style that gave full play to his gift for metaphor and his complicated feelings about these momentous changes in American culture and politics.

Where older intellectuals reacted to the resurgence of radicalism as if Stalin had reared his ugly head again, the new Mailer—or at least his alter ego—was fired up, not as a cheerleader but as an ambivalent participant alive to every seismic shift in the social and moral terrain. In an age when authors and politicians were giving way to celebrities, when the precinct politics of the clubhouse and the machine was replaced by the media politics of presidential debates, TV advertising, and carefully crafted telegenic personalities, Mailer turned himself into a semi-famous, semi-notorious figure who

could both play the political game and transform it into matchless prose. Improvising deftly on his own celebrity, feeding his notoriety, he became someone whose mere presence could subtly alter the chemistry of an occasion, besides providing him with a unique angle of observation.

Mailer had always been something of a contrarian, a socialist when others were turning conservative, a naturalistic writer when others had turned inward and Freudian, the author of elusive moral parables when readers were expecting more conventional fiction. But in the 1960s a whole segment of the culture turned contrarian, though not always in ways he could sanction. The sexual revolution, for example, was not a moral shift he would take lightly; as a "sexologue," as he once described himself, he had too much riding on it. Like so many postwar thinkers, he had something of a religious temperament. For him sex was a means of salvation that was also indelibly associated with transgression, even a sense of sin. Guilt-free sexual freedom, along with gender-blind sexual equality, was a metaphysical error, no matter how superior they were to the repressions that preceded them. In an old-fashioned way, he was committed to *love*, not simply to sex, and could scarcely abide the kids who "conceived of lust as no more than the gymnasium of love." As he says in *The Armies of the Night*, "sex to Mailer's idea of it was better off dirty, damned, even slavish! than clean, and without guilt. For guilt was the existential edge of sex. Without guilt, sex was meaningless." Mailer's views of homosexuality, masturbation, and even birth control were just as conservative, rooted in the experience of his generation, which had grown up in the trammels of repression, priding itself on the barriers to be breached and the battles hard won. Mailer understood how much the new freedoms had descended from the therapeutic liberalism of the postwar years, which he detested as mere hygiene of the soul.

It might be imagined from such dissenting views that Mailer's was no great fan of the cultural radicalism of the 1960s. Its moral outlook, its happy focus on sex, drugs, politics, and music, were close enough to his own to look like a caricature. Mailer felt similar discomfort with the Old Left political types who organized the protests against the war, which came to a head in the march on the Pentagon. They bored him; he found them well-meaning, virtuous, and dull. Worst of all, he complains, their character was better than his, lacking the speck of wildness that gave spice to personality, much the way guilt gave spice to sex. In his account in *The Armies of the Night*, no doubt dramatized for the sake of the book, Mailer became a reluctant par-

ticipant in these rituals of protest. But he shares their goals, much as he prefers to be elsewhere—at a party, perhaps, rather than a protest march. This ambivalence helps make the book both a great self-portrait and a remarkable snapshot of the historical moment, one taken at a curiously tilted angle. It is at once a book about nothing (in the *Seinfeld* sense)—digressive, meandering, self-indulgent—and the best portrait of the times, pitched at the peculiar nexus between the trivial and the transcendent, between the small, selfish world of daily life and the great world of affairs.

No reader will fail to notice that in *The Armies of the Night* Mailer writes about himself in the third person. It's hard to say why this proves such a momentous shift. An unsympathetic observer might say that he turns himself into a personage, propelling himself into the center of public events in which he played only a peripheral role. The third person may have sounded less grandiose or self-absorbed. But today, some forty years later, we would barely recall the Pentagon march if not for Mailer's book. So in a sense, at least for purposes of literary history, he *was* at the center of what was after all a media event, though it was also a concrete political act, a gesture of witness and dissociation. Until that point, Mailer had no evident embarrassment about using the first person: he had already projected himself into the forefront of nearly everything he'd written since *The Deer Park*. But this new device claims continuity with his fiction, not with his journalism. It enables the writer to detach himself from "Mailer," as if he were a fictional character, shaped by a novelist's imagination, which in most respects he is.

With this detachment comes a more relaxed attitude toward his own image, especially the fame he had sought so avidly, with such mixed results. He knows that this public image is shaped in part by forces he cannot control—the way journalists write about him, the way reviewers respond to his books. *Armies* is a meditation on celebrity as much as on the sixties and the war. "He had in fact learned to live in the sarcophagus of his image," he writes early on. With this show of detachment comes a new spirit of comedy. Mailer's first sketch of himself as a comic figure, an inept scene-stealer, had come five years earlier in "Ten Thousand Words a Minute," his very long report on the very brief heavyweight championship match between Sonny Liston and Floyd Patterson. Since the fight had ended precipitously, with a knockout little more than two minutes into the first round, Mailer's essay really had no subject: he had committed himself to cover what turned out to be a non-event. Mailer's essay is all flashback, preparation, digression, reflection. He

begins with a long attack on journalists who are forced to parrot received wisdom rather than write what they actually know and believe, and he goes on to a frighteningly stark account of the death in the ring of another boxer, Benny Paret. This may be the best single piece of prose Mailer ever wrote, exploring the appeal of boxing as a primitive blood-sport that confounds the enlightened hopes of liberals and progressives. Boxing brings out something feral and existential in Mailer's writing, a fascination with risk, with balletic skill and the proximity of death. In a quieter vein he writes about Patterson in lithe metaphoric prose that mimics the action, the existential improvisation, that it describes:

When he was good, he seemed as fast as a jungle cat. He was the fastest heavyweight I had ever seen. Watching these movies [of Patterson fighting], it was evident he could knock a man out with a left hook thrown from the most improbable position, leaping in from eight feet out, or wheeling to the left, his feet in the air, while he threw his hook across his body. He was like a rangy, hungry cat who starts to jump from a tree at some prey, and turns in flight to take an accurate, improvised swipe at a gorilla swinging on a vine.

The match itself, over almost as soon as it began, comes almost as an afterthought, but the essay concludes on a subjective note: with Mailer's slightly buffoonish attempts to hold his own press conference, to challenge the new champion, and generally to relocate himself near the center of the action. Mailer takes a transitory sporting event—a dud, really—and gives it a weight of significance around his amusingly self-inflated role as a participant-observer. Ever the professional, he fulfils his assignment in an unexpected way, weaving a web of boisterous egotism and evocative writing around the very lacunae of his story. This essay is the embryo of *The Armies of the Night*, which also begins with an attack on old-style journalism; the later work unfolds within a much larger historical frame.

In *Armies*, as in the Liston piece, the would-be hero of the earlier writing turns antihero; the war novelist becomes the reluctant warrior who must rouse himself to a different kind of battle. As a stylist he leans on the rolling cadences he had been developing all through the previous decade—a style as far from Hemingway's flat, declarative manner as possible—without falling

into the sometimes overheated rhetoric of *Advertisements for Myself* or the pulp fantastic of *An American Dream*. And writing about “Mailer” rather than about himself, he can sail off into whatever comes to mind—his protagonist’s very difficult, very American fourth wife, for example, and how his feeling for her runs parallel to his troubled, uneasy love for his country at a difficult juncture, when it is ablaze with protest and cultural conflict.

It is axiomatic that characters in any kind of enduring fiction represent something larger than themselves: they are irreducibly individual yet signify something in the general order of things. This larger meaning, beyond the particular yet embracing it fully, is why Aristotle considered art superior to the writing of history. In *The Armies of the Night*, Mailer tries to kidnap history by harnessing it to his personal story, and to an astonishing extent he succeeds. This is not a book about the Old Left and the New Left, or even about the protest movements that challenged the Vietnam War and would eventually force a president to step down. Rather, it evokes the more amorphous spirit of discontent, the indefinable malaise, the sense of a spoiled love affair, that roiled the minds of many Americans as the decade wore on. As a book by an aging war novelist about patriotism and protest, about revulsion against a misconceived war, the book still feels surprisingly contemporary. The writer does a brilliant comic turn on his own celebrity, his outsized ego, his loathing of the press, his competitiveness with other writers, even his exaggerated unwillingness to get involved. No doubt disastrous as a public speaker, more likely to annoy or offend his audience than to persuade them, he is able to recoup in prose what he failed to ignite as a man of action. Even more than in *The Naked and the Dead*, set during a war two decades earlier, Mailer gives us a national portrait by way of a self-portrait, substituting introspection and personal observation for the lapsed authority of the “objective” novelist.

In 1998 Mailer put together an immense fifty-year anthology of his own work, *The Time of Our Time*. Since critics had long made an issue of his egoism he decided to put the emphasis elsewhere, as we are doing at this conference—on his dialogue with his times over an extraordinarily long period. Instead of positioning the pieces by when they were written, he organized them around the sequence of historical moments—from the war and the cold war through Kennedy and Oswald, Johnson and Vietnam, Nixon and Watergate, right up through the Clinton era. Whether anyone noticed or not, he made his point: what looked at times like sheer ego repeatedly

proved to be a form of witness—in Whitman’s words, “I am the man, I suffered, I was there.” In fact, Whitman’s vaunting “Song of Myself” may have been the seed from which *Mailer’s Advertisements* sprouted, beginning with its title. And Whitman too had gone on to subdue himself in his great but chastened prose and poetry about the Civil War, confronting the troubles of history with becoming modesty as but one individual witness.

One final note: the title of our symposium, “The Sense of Our Times,” echoes the title and subject of Mailer’s own anthology, which in turn played upon the subject of his most controversial story, “The Time of Her Time,” without question the work that did the most to make Mailer notorious to feminists. In context, of course, “the time of her time” refers to a woman’s orgasm, and the psychic dividends reaped by the man who first brings her over the line. Whatever its sexual politics, it is one of the most daring and explicit treatments of sexuality in the 1950s. It has little or nothing to do with history. For Mailer to use a slightly altered version of his own phrase for his 1998 anthology suggests either self-exploitation or (if I am not overreading) the underlying unity of his outlook, especially his refusal to cordon off the private from the public, the sexual from the political.

When I was in Austin in the fall of 2005 to help plan this program and exhibition, it made me uncomfortable to be shown some random folders of Mailer’s correspondence. I felt at first that I was invading his privacy. He is not, after all, a writer born in the eighteenth century, a classic safely consigned to the libraries, but a man still very much with us. Deliberately, he has not tried to embargo anything—awkward beginnings, love affairs, exchanges with other writers, intermittent failures and disappointments. Michael Lennon is editing a large selection of his letters for publication in 2008, and they are bound to be tremendous. By setting down a record of his thoughts and feelings as extensively as Montaigne, Rousseau, or Casanova, Mailer provided us with an inimitable account of both his Time and his times. It is a record of conflict in America but also of a writer’s conflict *with* America, as the subtitle of this symposium suggests. We have other documents of the public life of the age, but only the keen imagination of the novelist can testify to the inner ferment of thought and feeling, fear and desire, greed and ambition, around which our collective history has unfolded.