

FIVE NOTES TOWARD
A REASSESSMENT OF
NORMAN MAILER

JONATHAN MIDDLEBROOK

*I had better never see a book, than to be warped by its attraction
clean out of my own orbit – Emerson*

Note #1—**Reassessment**—my assignment had a hook in it, which a smarter fish would have seen at first flyover. *Reassessment* suggests either apostasy or conversion, and neither condition is mine. Over the last fifty years or so my appreciation for Mailer has developed, from adolescent belief (*The Naked and the Dead* was soldiering) and puzzlement (why so little shooting, so much mountain-climbing & what I then called *girlishness* & no *nakedness*?)—my appreciation developed from that *naïveté* to a more advanced one, a tenure-able understanding that Shelley’s Mt. Blanc was avatar of N&D’s Mt. Anaka, and then appreciation became my current, somewhat uneasy sense that Norman Mailer is one of Emerson’s two literary desiderata: “Time and nature yield us many gifts, but not yet the timely man, the new religion, the reconciler whom all things await” (“The Poet”). NM as descendant of Walt Whitman, and Emerson is their prophet.

—& I may have missed him—see Note #5.

Note # 2—**Norman Mailer**—He has almost become only a name, but not yet. As of April 2007, he remains on our side, a working writer, and for many people a kind acquaintance, for some a poker-playing friend, and for some others, still a doughty enemy. But he’s 84; and soon entry to the book of

Shook-His-Hand will be closed, and the strike-throughs on the roll (for example, *Robert Lucid*) will not be replaced by new, glad hands.—That fact suggests one reason for *The Mailer Review*, which will become a record of the *trying out* (I trust NM will like the Melville-inflected whaling term) of his work, by those for whom he can only be a name, a body of work, rather than a resilient old guy with bad knees and the gift of mordant political humor: Rove has figured out that maybe 49% of the American public is too dumb to know what they're voting for, "So we've got to work on that number, get it up to 53–55%, then we'll be in power forever."

Note #3—**Comparisons**—they can be Dogberry-ish because they are the surprise party to which a reader invites a Notable. The guest list is idiosyncratic—perhaps crazed—and it changes in the flickering nano-seconds of a reader's consciousness. The poor Notable has no say in making the list (though he can suggest additions to it). Much less does the Notable have any control over that reader's decision to invest hours in creating a critical moment, the purpose of which is engendering the stuff of legacy, argument, conferences, inner & outer circles, iconoclasts & acolytes, anxiety-producing influence—all the, call it *paraphernalia* of literary worth and endurance.—Here's my guest list in alphabetical order. It suggests that for this moment I read from Mailer the distinctly Victorian project of envisioning middle class salvation (that is, my own):

1. Matthew Arnold—"The future of poetry is immense, because in poetry ... our race will find an ever surer and surer stay...." Highly Victorian, of course (that *race* is more than irritating), but for the reading class of people, he was right, if one takes *poetry* to mean *literature* (or the decision to read literarily). Creative writing programs and Humanities requirements are Arnold's dark institutional shadows. We demand of our serious writers, poor people! that they give us entertaining *truth*. "Mr. Mailer, almost 40 years ago you wondered whether God had withdrawn his blessing from America. Do you still wonder?"
2. Thomas Carlyle—or perhaps it's Dickens—Mailer escapes the true foolishness of levitating the Pentagon ... into the false security of fortunately negotiated arrest. Whatever would Thoreau and Martin Luther King Jr. think?

3. Ralph Waldo Emerson. Let's say that twice the sober-suited Brahmin's evocation called up the spirit of Brooklyn. RWE's recognition of Walt Whitman is the greatest (and truly) meritocratic literary baptism ever. Yet consider how apt most of Emerson's terms are, for NM: "We have yet had no genius in America, with tyrannous eye, which ... saw, in the barbarism and materialism of the times, another such carnival of the same gods whose picture he so admires in Homer...." Then cameth Whitman before Emerson's court. So there is a touch of comedic repetition or second-time around in Mailer's work—but he's a genuine Emersonian item: "The piety of the Hebrew prophets purges their grossness" (I'm quoting RWE's "The Poet.")
4. George Meredith (disinvited by the reader. It was ugly, but "Modern Love" can't be quickly enough summed up as sexual betrayal, guilt, and expiation in relation to NM.)
5. Herman Melville—NM kept asking me to invite Melville to the party. Gracious host, I did so, but Melville's sense that all his books are botches—not to mention his thwarted love for Hawthorne—make him a questionable guest. Melville goes silent, mournful at inconvenient times: "Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!"—of course, that's a character, not autobiography, but NM's own obit will name his major works.—No "Herman Melville, formerly a well-known author, died at his residence...." (Leyda, *The Melville Log*, 2, 837).
6. Walt Whitman. The best comes last: "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry"—done into the media age—is *Advertisements for Myself*:

*That I was I knew was of my body, and what I should be I knew was
of my body*

....

*I am he who knew what it was to be evil
I too knitted the old knot of contrivety,
Blabbed, blush'd, resented, lied, stole,¹ grudge'd
Had guile, anger, lust, hot wishes I dared not speak,
Was wayward, vain, greedy, shallow....*

....

Play'd the part that still looks back on the actor or actress,

¹Not established as fact

*The same old role, the role that is what we make it, as great as we
like,
Or as small as we like, or both great and small.*

And so on

—Didn't Milton enter Blake through his big toe?

Note #4—**Voice.** All writers' actual voices are interesting, though most are disappointing. They lack the *timbre* of prophecy (see Arnold note, above) and are merely individual whines or rants or parodies of their primary form or scripture. The biblical prophets, songsters, and Savior had it easier than post-Edisonians, whose recorded and broadcast voices haunt their texts, usually subversively. *Howl* reads silently better than Ginsberg speaks it. But Mailer has a voice worth listening to. Years ago I characterized it as the "perfectly learned foreign speech" of a man who would hear more than he should & say less than he knew. (Lower my tone: Simon Suggs says, "It pays to be shiftily in a new country.") I'm now more willing to let myself think that the *timbre*, the centeredness of Mailer's voice validates a (yes) clear vision (usually sexual and snarling and rapacious) of good and evil at play for the universe.—Less elevatedly, Mailer's speaking voice is adequate to anything he wishes to say. When he contrasts Hitler and Stalin, for example, he makes Stalin knowable by having him say of his enemies (pretty much everyone), "I know you motherfuckers! Kill them!" The audience smiles and gently laughs, in appreciation.

—He has also made it possible to write *shit* (poetically at least) in *The New Yorker*. (Philip Levine, "Of Love and Other Disasters," 5 February 2007, if not earlier, by someone else.)

Note #5—**The Communicant That Failed.** I met NM 30+ years ago, entertained him several times at my father's house and at my own, went to a wonderful, Gatsby-like party at NM's (Berkshire County, MA) house. In my memory, the party featured the great boxing trainer, Cus D'Amato, holding court and NM greeting his guests with a small dog on his arm—a really small dog. It takes real confidence to be a man with a small dog. Over the years Mailer and I fell out of touch—I doubted I could interest him for very long.—Still, when I heard that he was coming to San Francisco on 5 February 2007, it seemed important to me to see him again. I put a number of

people to considerable trouble, so I could get in touch with him. We made arrangements to meet after his public conversation with my friend and local Notable, Michael Krasny. Their on-stage conversation was a delight—a kind of Mailer-guided tour of Mailer, with Krasny doing a graceful job of steering him along familiar monuments of NM’s magnificence: here is Left Conservative, there is Strong Ladies, here is Liberal (concealed) Power Grab, here is Petty Annoyance at a cougher in the audience, there is Sparring 40–50 times with Jose Torres (if you lead with your right, you’ve used a hand, & your opponent has 2 hands left). Torres was a defensive ace, in 10 yrs, NM hit him 3 times with leading right.... Oh, there’s Philip Roth, a very good writer, and Faulkner starting the fight. The draped monument is the Next Life: NM wants to return as a black athlete, dreams it will be as a cockroach.

—After the conversation, Krasny re-introduced me to NM. “Of course I know you, but I wouldn’t have recognized you,” NM said, with smile and firm handshake. Quoth I, “But I certainly recognized you, my man. The voice. Your voice. 30 years in a moment gone!” I squeezed his shoulder, probably inappropriately, but it was an involuntary gesture, the kind Emerson says are *true*. There was a crowd & general agreement that we’d all meet at a bar, after the book signing, which was to be conducted according to certain rules of commerce: “Mr. Mailer will sign up to 3 purchased books, so long as one of them is *The Castle in the Forest*.” The line, which seemed to be two parallel lines, was 150’ long, and lengthening.

—Feeling somewhat abashed by that *My Man!* And the shoulder squeeze, I took the F-car to the appointed bar, nursed a beer for somewhat more than an hour. More time passed. I should have lingered, but by midnight I was feeling my age, so I walked home, leaving NM a grateful message on his hotel voicemail.

—I hope he gets it.