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NORMAN MAILER:  
THE ANGRY YOUNG NOVELIST IN AMERICA

BY CHARLES I. GLICKSBERG

NORMAN MAILER'S latest production, *Advertisements for Myself*, is a painful book to read not because the author is so grimly determined to unburden himself of all his grievances and resentments but because he reveals an aspect of himself as a writer that is not pleasant to contemplate. With vindictive fury he attacks all those who have misunderstood his work or slighted his talent or offended him in any way. Snarling fiercely at his enemies, he chalks up on a private (now public) scoreboard the grudges he will some day pay back with interest. Let his foes beware of him; the day of reckoning will come. Thus, despite his repeated asseverations that he will not abandon his integrity, he transforms his struggle for literary fame into a free-for-all literary brawl.

Another glaring weakness he betrays is his belief that literature in our time, if it is to be incorruptibly honest, must engage in a crusade of radical negation. After the failure of *Barbary Shore* and the mixed critical reception accorded *The Deer Park*, he came increasingly to feel that the unique identifying mark of the dedicated writer is his courage in running counter to all the established values. He who refuses to say Nay in tones of thunder is a miserable time-server, a slave of expediency, a vile poltroon, a huckster, a literary harlot. In the extremity of his disillusionment, Mailer has learned to cultivate a rabid vocabulary of abuse. He will release his pent-up rage and fear no evil, for his genius is with him, and his daimon bids him violate all the taboos of the literary marketplace. He will be the Promethean rebel, the American Existentialist, the philosopher of the liberating gospel of Hip. In short, it is the experience of relative failure, after the resounding success of *The Naked and the Dead*, which transformed him into "an enemy of the people," the Cain of American culture.

This position of alienation on Mailer's part does not, however, represent a sudden, radical shift of sensibility. From the start of his career, he had plunged into battle as a minority of one. When he encountered opposition later on, his fighting instinct was aroused and he was resolved to give no quarter in his battle with the Barabbases of the publishing world. Henceforth he would ally himself with the rebels, those who were engaged in a quest, outside the law, for the redemptive forces of

life. A formidable polemicist, he denounces all those movements he regards as false and harmful. In his present stage of revolt, as he furiously castigates the absurdities and abominations of American life, he apparently feels that it is more desirable to curse than to bless, to deny than to affirm. Certainly he seems to be happy in his self-chosen role of Satanic adversary, prophet of Hip, leader of the hosts of the damned.

*The Naked and the Dead* deserved the high acclaim it received. It is unmistakably the work of a young man, but a remarkably gifted young man, one who has reflected deeply on war and sex, life and death, above all, one who can write with imaginative power. His naturalistic method is pessimistic in its conclusions and unsparing in its exploration of the turbulent depths of passion and desire in a platoon of men assigned the task of capturing an island in the Pacific. Each of these soldiers is the product of his environment, his family conditioning, his social milieu, but instead of riding a naturalistic thesis hard Mailer seeks to view these soldiers—they are of all types—with compassion as well as objective understanding. But he consistently refrains from passing judgment, so that even the most cowardly and sadistic and depraved are delineated with luminous insight and come fully alive. Each one knows that he is a failure, that his desires will never be consummated, that his life has been a series of wretched mistakes, a fruitless quest. Even General Cummings, an extremely complex character, is stricken with the feeling that he has failed. These men in *The Naked and the Dead* begin to perceive that their range of freedom is cruelly limited; there is a malice in fate. Red with his determination not to be caught in the trap of love and marriage; Brown who harps on the infidelity of women; Goldstein with his choking resentment of anti-Semitism; Roth who repudiates Judaism and announces that he is not a Jew; Wyman with his crawling ambition to rise in the ranks; Hearn with his caustic comments directed against the stupidly conservative officers among whom he is thrown and their caste-ridden prejudices; the loneliness of General Cummings, who must bear his own cross; Gallagher with his suppurating bitterness and his search for a scapegoat—each of them feels he has been condemned to failure. By revealing these dimensions of their being—their hurts and hatreds, their fears and fantasies, their dreams and the trauma of disillusionment as they fight the Japs in the jungle and know that death may come suddenly—by revealing all this the novel manages to communicate the tragic sense of life.

The huge success of *The Naked and the Dead* was a bad thing for Mailer. It gave a great lift to his ego but it made him wonder whether he had written himself out. He had to live up to the reputation he had

established. He would aim high, but what excuse would he have if he experienced the ignominy of failure? He would have to make a clean start. He turned to the writing of *Barbary Shore*, in which he sought to shadow forth the horror of a world that was preparing to destroy itself, but the theme fails to achieve imaginative realization, and the author acknowledges in retrospect that toward the end it bogs down in a morass of political speechifying and loses its unity of design. It is structurally as well as intellectually confused, a slow-moving, cumber-somely contrived work of fiction, but it serves to throw a searching light on the ideological and political obsessions of a young American novelist in 1951. It is the first example of Existentialist dialectics in fiction that analyzes with detachment the soul of a native Communist, with all his casuistry and masochistic compulsions. Unfortunately *Barbary Shore* suffers when it is compared with a poignant, tightly organized novel like *Darkness at Noon*. Such ingredients as dialectics, sex, alcoholism, and Existentialism, when combined with excessive argumentation and discussion, are hardly calculated to produce a memorable novel.

Yet *Barbary Shore*, though a failure, represents a serious and sincere attempt to clarify and interpret the world of political experience. McLeod, after a startling career in revolutionary activity, has broken away from the movement and is now being hunted down. He has been wedded to the Party for nineteen years and is still in sympathy with Communism, despite the Munich Pact, the purges, the necessary political murders, the forced labor, the periodic orgies of "liquidation." The novelist in the story, who is largely the mouthpiece of the author, feels that the age of revolution is over. He too recalls, as in a dream, the revolutionary visions he had nourished in his adolescence, his ardent belief that Marxist-Leninist salvation would come on the morrow, but the revolution had come and had betrayed its promise. The past that he tries to understand fails to make sense, and to the question of the future there is always the same destructive answer: war and preparation for war. He feels bitter and disillusioned as he envisages how the workers will be exploited when state capitalism is installed. The main emphasis of the novel is on McLeod, the disenchanting revolutionary apologist, who feels a deep sense of guilt for all the crimes he had committed in the name of the Marxist eschatological idea.

The message Mailer is seeking to communicate weighs the novel down too heavily. Today, he is convinced, the masses cannot work for peace, only war. Two world powers face each other in a coming death struggle, and both represent systems of exploitation. Humanity is now saddled with a permanent economic crisis. War is the enduring condi-

tion, concentration camps will come into being. It is small wonder that Mailer was unable to assimilate this heterogeneous mass of material. The theme is left too abstract. It is not surprising that *Barbary Shore* was a comparative failure.

Norman Mailer seems to have a relish for punishing himself. He quotes the damaging reviews that appeared and describes the effect they had on his ego, and yet he regards it, apart from the work of Faulkner, as the first Existentialist novel published in the United States. He consoles himself with the thought that the reading public was naturally irritated by what he was obscurely struggling to express, a vision that was moving in the direction of the orgiastic. It was his first intimation, as he declares in *Advertisements for Myself*, that he was potentially an outlaw, drawn to themes that the world proscribed as taboo. Hence he would strive to live up to this faith, and he got to work on *The Deer Park*, a nightmarish satire of characters caught in the corrupt world of Hollywood, a study of corruption.

All the characters Norman Mailer introduces are infected by this spirit of corruption: columnists, movie producers, script writers, actors and actresses, hangers-on, pimps, call girls. With the exception of Sergius O'Shaugnessy, not a single one of them has any decent impulses or moral courage. Craven, pitiful, depraved creatures, each of them can be bought for a price. Even the gifted Charles Eitel is brought to his knees by a Senate Investigating Committee. This is the modern Sodom and Gomorrah which Mailer paints on a broad canvas: the nightly bouts of drinking, the carnality, the perversions, the degeneracy, the nihilism. That is the reiterated and oppressive motif this novel sounds: its leading characters are defeated in life, spiritually lost.

*The Deer Park*, for all its naturalistic objectivity, is written in a mood of unrelieved disgust. The realism with which the picture is drawn is part of the author's intention to tell the truth about this sector of reality. He reveals the perverse moods of his characters, their thirst for power, their betrayals, their lusts, their love that turns into hate, their capacity for wallowing in the sink of corruption. This weird, phantasmagoric delineation of evil induces a cumulative sense of horror, but it is not redeemed by any vision of higher values. What we get is a panorama, etched in depth, of rottenness and putrefaction, the lowest hell of degradation to which people can sink. Sergius is the only one in pursuit of a meaning, a writer trying to find himself, and he still has his pilgrimage to make, his search for fulfillment. Preparing himself for his mission as a writer, he explores the mystery of the unknown,

the insoluble complexities of life, whereas Eitel, for his part, had become a failure because he weakly compromised, and lost "the final desire of the artist, the desire which tells us that when all else is lost, when love is lost and adventure, pride of self, and pity, there still remains that world we may create, more real to us, more real to others, than the mummery of what happens, passes, and is gone." Sergius will not sell out, and it is for this reason very likely that Mailer intends to make him the hero of his next Hip novel.

The composition of *The Deer Park* marked a turning point in the career of the embattled Mailer. The novel was for obvious reasons turned down by a number of publishers and the experience of rejection led him to experiment with marijuana. The novel had been accepted by Rinehart and been put in page proofs, but he was told that he would have to excise six lines. When he refused to do so, publication was stopped. He sought to find a new publisher but that was not easy. Then G. P. Putnam's agreed to take it, without demanding a single change. But Mailer had learned his lessons; he was being rejected as a menace to society; his view of life was being condemned as nasty and perverted. It was then that he opened the floodgates of his wrath and became God's angry man. Only by fighting more recklessly for the things he believed in would he be able to survive as a writer. Gradually he became convinced that he was by nature a psychic outlaw, and he accepted the challenge. "I mined down into the murderous message of marijuana, the smoke of the assassins, and for the first time in my life I knew what it was to make your kicks." Marijuana, he found, possessed the wonderful power of opening his senses, but it weakened the mind—an interesting example of the moral economy that governs a functional "vice," what Emerson would probably point to as illustrating the working out of the principle of compensation.

When the page proofs from Putnam's began to come in, Mailer found that the novel did not please him, it would have to be changed drastically, but only to satisfy his artistic conscience. He set about the task of revision, his unconscious controlling the process, and before long he discovered he was in reality shaping a new novel, sentence by sentence. He wrote it in the first person, imbuing Sergius O'Shaugnessy with greater vitality, so much so that the protagonist was more and more taking on the lineaments of the author.

Mailer dwells on these details with such minute particularity because he wishes to show how he fought the good fight and kept the faith as the champion of freedom of expression in the United States. His

revised version had made no concessions to social convention. In fact, the new version accentuated the sexual motif; he had not muted the underlying theme but conscientiously heightened it. Now *The Deer Park* represents a dangerous indictment of a guilty society. Nevertheless, when the book came out, he was charged with having watered down the original version. The novel, though it sold fairly well, enjoyed no sensational success. Though he was depressed by all this, Mailer now had the strength to face his detractors. He resolved to remake himself, for he was convinced that the life within was more important for the spiritual survival of the writer than his work itself. He would write a fourth novel, with O'Shaugnessy as one of his three heroes, and this time he would not hold himself back. He would keep the rebel in his nature more truly alive instead of trying to stifle it. In that way he hopes to reach people and influence the history of his time. He does not deny that *The Deer Park* is concerned overwhelmingly with sex, but it is also seriously preoccupied with the question of moral values. In this country the writer cannot deal with one without having to call in the aid of the other.

Mailer is thus committed to the experiment of ushering in a revolutionary change in the consciousness of man. He is confident that the work he is now composing and the fiction he produces in the future will have the deepest influence of any work being done "by any American novelist in these years." Here is prophecy charged with the dynamism of a faith that is by no means modest, but this is perfectly in keeping with the dominant tone of *Advertisements for Myself*. In this volume he presents his writings in chronological order, essays, early stories, reviews, political analyses, bits of journalism, interviews, excerpts from his novels, poems, together with a set of "advertisements" which judge the contributions of the past in terms of the author's present tastes, insights, and beliefs.

The tone is arrogant as well as confessional. Not that these naked "advertisements" for himself do not make him uneasy, but he is determined to look back on the past decade and trace the direction in which he has been moving. Intransigent in his non-conformity, he will prove his creative usefulness by continuing the essential work of demolition. He knows the obstacle race a writer must run in order to test his strength and power of endurance, but he also knows that this atmosphere of bitter rivalry is bad for the development of the creative mind. Mailer draws the depressing moral that in order to get ahead the young writer in America must enter the lists and strenuously advertise himself.

This is the logic which one is forced to question. The fate of the writer in America has never been an easy one, but what is the solution? Shall he strive for the fruits of success by becoming his own press agent? Did Hawthorne and Melville, despite all the reverses they suffered, ever stoop to advertise themselves? Mailer is outraged by the control that publishers and critics exercise in the world of letters, but the enemies he conjures up are largely of his own making. He is of the opinion that he is blackballed because he is a dangerous, disruptive force, but is that really the issue? Should not the question be differently worded? Has he produced work that would entitle him to belong to the major order of literature? He has been his own worst enemy. As he himself confesses: "There may have been too many fights for me, too much sex, liquor, marijuana, benzedrine and seconal, much too much ridiculous and brain-blasting rage at the miniscule frustrations of a most loathsome literary world, necrophilic to the core—they murder their writers, and then decorate their graves."

That may well be the case, but what speaks most eloquently for a writer who is dedicated to his calling is his work, not his brain-blasting rage. He must, as Rilke advises, delve into himself for a deep answer and build his life in accordance with his creative necessity. He must put his talent religiously to use and not reproach the world for its crass worship of mediocrity, its hostility to genius. He must stick patiently to his post and carry out his mission as effectively as he can to capture the truth of reality. America may murder its original writers, but it is his duty—and his privilege—to speak out while he is still alive.

What does Mailer do? He relies on what he calls his secret weapon: marijuana. It will serve him in his campaign to become the leader of Hip. In a column, "The Hip and the Square," he wrote for *The Village Voice* he composes a fervid eulogy of the intuitive knowledge the hipster gains: his insight that every desire, however abnormal, is part of the dynamic urge of life. Here is an American Existentialism, profoundly different from Sartrean Existentialism, which is based on a mysticism of the flesh. Its origins, according to Mailer, "can be traced back into all the undercurrents and underworlds of American life, back into the instinctive apprehension and appreciation of existence which one finds in the Negro and the soldier, in the criminal psychopath and the dope addict and jazz musician, in the prostitute, in the actor, in the—if one can visualize such a possibility—in the marriage of the call-girl and the psychoanalyst." This is the orgiastic philosophy, the new revolution in consciousness, that will have its vindication in the future.

Such prophetic pronouncements in *Advertisements for Myself* will add little, if anything, to Mailer's stature as a novelist. In fact, it may provoke legitimate doubts as to his rank in the hierarchy of American fiction. He would have been better off in his new role as creative prophet of Hip if he had followed Camus' example and written his projected "orgasmic" Existentialist novels first and then produced books on the order of *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel* to justify his own work. Mailer argues too much; he uses up in the passion of polemics precious energy that should enter into his creative struggle. In the end, when he is called up before the tribunal of the judgment seat, it is only his work, and not his angers and "advertisements," that will save him.

Mailer's approach to a problem is to run to extremes, as in his advocacy of Hip. In "The White Negro," which he feels is one of the best things he has written, he openly espouses the cause of the rebel and identifies himself with the underworld of the hipster, the man who welcomes the psychopathic element in his being as a means of liberating himself from a society that has surrendered to the death instinct and is thereby enabled to return to life, even if he has to resort to criminal actions in order to achieve his end. The hipster, who has taken over the code and the responses of the outlawed and oppressed man, the Negro, knows the full intensity of his desires, whatever they be, and takes measures to satisfy them, without being deterred by conventional notions of good and evil. In rapport with the imperatives of his unconscious, he takes his stand on what he experiences, rooted in the final truth of subjectivity, his living consciousness of the present.

But how does Mailer deal with the patent fact that the hipster is a psychopath? Mailer argues that the hipster, by leading the kind of life he does, negates and transcends his psychopathological handicaps; he rebels against the repressions imposed by a diseased social order with its own mad contradictions. Thus he rises above the neurotic sickness and reactionary terrors of his age. Mailer estimates that there are probably ten million Americans who are more or less psychopathic in this sense, though of that number only one hundred thousand consciously look upon themselves as hipsters, the elite of the underworld, with their own secret language and ritual of rebellion.

Mailer then comes to the crux of his argument, the most controversial and astonishing part of his Hip manifesto: he formulates the Existentialist philosophy of the orgasm as therapy, the apocalyptic orgasm that is the essence of life and the soul and seed of art. This is the proclamation of sexual freedom that Mailer sends forth, a negative

“theology” in which the marginal Negro plays a messianic role. What Mailer never comes to grips with (he is, after all, a novelist, not the founder of a sexual cult) is the fundamental question of how Hip provides a viable aesthetic for the writer of fiction. It is begging the question to maintain that orgasms help to release creative energy that would otherwise be frustrated or rendered impotent. Mailer, in short, is calling for a sexual, not a literary, revolution. The hipster may be, as Mailer contends, the Faustian hero of the twentieth century, the outlaw in search of life, wrestling with the destiny of his nervous system and gambling with death, but one fails to see what all this has to do with Mailer’s own development as a writer or how it will help fructify American literature and art. Why should a serious novelist affiliate himself with a psychopathic, lawless group like the hipsters? Hip may lead (though one is inclined to doubt it) to the discovery of deeper insights and greater intensity of experience, but this constitutes a promise of pseudo-religious salvation. It is not the same thing as opening the road to creative fulfillment. Whether the writer is a philosophical anarchist, a Zen Buddhist, a beat like Jack Kerouac, a prophet of Hip like Mailer, a mystic like Aldous Huxley, a Catholic like Graham Greene, a humanist like Alex Comfort, an Existentialist like Sartre, a nihilist groping toward the light like Kafka, an atheist like George Orwell, he must still wrestle with the furies of form and seek to impose cosmos on chaos. Mailer’s negative and confused “theology” will not serve to promote his career as a novelist, for Hip has no direct bearing on the problem the writer faces when he settles down to the task of composing fiction. There is no such mythical creature as a Hip novelist; the fact that he takes marijuana in order to induce revelations direct from the heart and mind of God will not give him the inspiration and the control he seeks. The moral complexities and contradictions which he must explore, the dark night of the soul through which he must pass, the inner conflicts he must overcome, are substantially the same as those that such novelists as Dostoevski and Tolstoy experienced in the past. Mailer declares that his philosophy of fiction is designed to deepen the moral consciousness of people; but how does the novel, if it is an important agent in this process of transformation, achieve its effect and communicate its meaning? By exalting the nihilistic gospel of Hip or by mastering the form of the novel? If he chooses the former alternative, he will impose mystique in the place of craft. It will then be difficult to understand why he should confine himself to the writing of novels. He will be more at home drawing up orgasmic sermons or penning further advertisements for himself. That is the choice which now confronts him.

The selection that he includes, "The Time of Her Time," from his novel in progress arouses little hope that this will be an improvement over *The Deer Park*. The Hip movement may have gained an impassioned and superbly talented spokesman, but it may hasten the death of Mailer's career as a novelist.

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