

# Scavenger of eternal truths

Norman Mailer in the 1960s

THOMAS MEANEY

Norman Mailer

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1960S

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Edited by J. Michael Lennon

I went to Wharton with Donald Trump. We were both from praetorian families in Queens – his more martial than mine – in the first line of defense on the crabgrass frontier. We went out one night together to a hotel behind Rittenhouse Square. His date was a wisecracking girl from Philadelphia society who dreamed of becoming a stripper; mine was a retreating waitress, with a hyena body that gave off a whiff of the inquisitive. After the drinks – Don drank seltzer – we took them to a room we'd booked upstairs. My date gashed my face with her high-heel after I tried to shuffle her into one of the bedrooms. There was panting from Don's quarters, the sound of a teetering vase, then mechanical chanting, until a final flesh-on-flesh "Whaa-aap!" A volley of sweet-talk followed. "If you want to be a dancer, there's nobody who's going to stop you, not even your father," Don whispered. "I know some of the best dancers in this town. The finest." He was soft-voiced, clerical; a big papa trainer in her corner. That year Don shoveled his charm around campus and made his attention a rare metal. His mania gathered up the particles of other people's giddy subservience. I didn't see much of him after the night on Rittenhouse. During the final finance exam, I remember him unfurling the answers on small print scroll that he'd fitted inside an extra-bulbous cufflink. I'm now a retired bank manager in Erie, PA. We summer on Lake Michigan and my daughter just graduated from Oberlin.

That's a poor stab at how Norman Mailer's Trump novel might have opened. And there would have been a Trump novel – you could have bet on it – after Mailer finished, or abandoned, his projected three-volume historical novel about Hitler, only the first of which, *Castle in the Forest*, appeared in his lifetime (Mailer abandoned much of his best work midway; the promised sequel to *Harlot's Ghost* never came). The spectacle of celebrity entertainment come home to roost was prime Mailer territory. He lived it, he knew it to the marrow – to use one of his cherished phrases, he was "equal" to it. Did Mailer ever bump into Trump in the arteries of New York society? Of course. He was at Trump's launch party for *The Art of the Deal* (they shared Random House as their publisher), he once rode in Trump's helicopter with Jack Nicholson, and one Mailer biographer reports that he received \$50,000 for appearing alongside Don King



New York City, 1968

in a Trump Air commercial, which left him "feeling absolutely corrupt, I tell you".

Despite all his absurdities, Mailer was the postwar writer who feasted the most off the maggot-diet of American political entertainment – the one who grasped the nature of the exchange between entertainment and politics most firmly. In their very form, his books and pieces, with their exhibitionistic ardour and manic self-preening, dramatized alternative values by exaggeratedly inhabiting the ones already on offer. As his one-time friend Norman Podhoretz put it, Mailer "was trying to prove that the best way for an American to deal with the ambition for worldly success... was to throw himself unashamedly into it in the hope of coming up again on the other side". Mailer might have recognized more than a few impulses of his own in the current American president, though without the special antennae that made Mailer alive to ideas of justice and honour that make the president's gambits low voltage and unforgivably boring by comparison. Mailer believed that demagoguery was the natural political mode suited to Americans. It was only by luck and tenacity that they'd ever managed to switch the setting to various unsatisfactory forms of democracy.

Almost all of the negatives typically thrown at Mailer – if anyone still bothers to throw anything at him – cling awkwardly to their target: that he was a misogynist, that he was venal, that he was a political romantic, that he was morbidly self-absorbed. When your politics are about resuscitating the life-worlds of Edmund Burke and Thomas Aquinas via the methods

of Walt Whitman and Leon Trotsky, your programme is designed to cruise out of range of the expected flak. What's more interesting about the perspective of Mailer's fictional surrogates is less that they're "phallogocentric" (as even one of Mailer's female characters puts it), but they expand into such bloated caricatures of the preoccupations of the mid-century American male formed in Hemingway's shadow (the idea of women as a site of contest, the unceasing fear of homosexual tendencies gurgling within; Mailer once got into a bar fight when someone insulted his dog: "Nobody calls my dog a faggot!") that they undermine the original ideal. Here is Stephen Rojack, the disgraced ex-Congressman war hero of *An American Dream* (1965), who, after defenestrating his society wife, follows the murder with quick sex with their German maid. He then descends into the netherworld of New York where he falls in love with a kept woman of a black gangster whose "stud" status impels his eros forward:

Her ass was indeed a prize – with my hands on her, life came back to me again across all glaciers of my fatigue. But we did not meet as lovers, more like animals in a quiet mood, come across a track of the jungle to join in a clearing, we were equals. So we made love without preliminary – not thirty seconds had gone by before I slipped quietly into her. The separate cheats of her body and her life collected on one scale of justice to match the weight I could on mine – her life up to this moment was the equal of my own, good to good, bad to bad, the submerged vision of my sex moved with a freedom from vanity or

the haste to give pleasure. It was cool in mood, as if we were two professional dancers in a long slow study alone at night on a moonlit floor. I felt I could go on forever.

This kind of scene was replicated ad nauseam in Mailer's novels. The trouble with the writing is less that it eschews the female perspective – do you pick up a Sally Rooney novel to better grasp the mechanics of male desire? – than that Mailer had a habit of over-freighting every encounter with a woman with metaphysical ballast. A scavenger of eternal truths, it never seems to have occurred to him that his macho obsessions might have anything to do with his historical circumstances: he believed there was an ineradicable quantum of violence suppressed in all relations between men and women. Nevertheless, Mailer was probably the last major American writer of the twentieth century who was willing at every turn to risk ridiculousness. When, a few years ago, Elaine Blair observed in the *New York Review of Books* that today's American male novelists have a way of presenting male characters whose loser status is meant to extract a more sympathetic hearing about their sexual proclivities from their female readers, you can appreciate the gulf between them and a novelist who referred to his own member as "the retaliator".

The longtime Mailer consigliere and biographer J. Michael Lennon has squeezed a goodly portion of Mailer's best writing into this double-berth Library of America funeral cortege box set. The book-length works include the novels *An American Dream*, and the nearly unreadable *Why Are We in Viet-*

nam?, along with his two metafictional masterworks, *The Armies of the Night* and *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* (both 1968), in which Mailer tried to conduct an even higher-amped chronicling of his times than John Dos Passos had done for his in *U.S.A.* Mailer's investigations into some of the most raucous political events of the 1960s are somewhat shaming for a younger generation which has not produced (at least not yet) any non-fictional account of the Occupy demonstrations of the early part of this century that compares with *Armies* and *Miami* – with the possible exceptions of a *New Yorker* web piece by Keith Gessen about his own arrest in Zuccotti Park, and the savage, preternatural political economy treatise *Hinterland* by Phil A. Neel.

The essays Lennon has assembled in Volume Two of the LoA set include Mailer's open letters to Fidel Castro, John F. Kennedy, Rich-

ard Nixon and others, in his speak-truth-to-power mode. (Mailer believed that his essay "Superman Comes to the Supermarket" had got Kennedy elected and that this made him, Mailer, responsible for the administration's actions.) There are also some book reviews that resist the time-serving nature of the genre: memorable attacks on Lyndon Johnson's campaign book, on Mary McCarthy's *The Group*, and an extended assault on Norman Podhoretz's *Making It*, a book which was itself in large part an attempt to reckon with and escape Mailer's influence. Lennon's brief was to collect Mailer's writing from the 1960s, which means omitting some important essays, in particular *The White Negro* (1957), but there is more than enough here to make the case that Mailer was – in Robert Lowell's words, which Mailer resented – "the best journalist in America".

The competitive fire behind some of these essays is nearly impossible to conceive of today. Try to imagine any contemporary American writer contemplating a 15,000-word hit piece on *all* perceived peers. It's a reminder that the writers of the immediate postwar period, well into the 1960s, using Edmund Wilson and Malcolm Cowley as their barometers, still measured themselves against the Lost Generation of the 1930s and found themselves wanting.

In the review-essay "Some Children of the Goddess" – the "Goddess" is the Great American Novel, which, being a bitch, cannot, by some special Mailer logic, attract the ambitions of women – Mailer rounds on the talent around him: William Styron ("Styron was trying to write a book about good and evil, and his good was as vacuous as the spirit of an empty water bag"); James Jones ("Jones's book is

better remembered as satisfying, as if one had studied geology for a semester and now knew more"); James Baldwin ("He knows what he wants to say, and that is not the best condition for writing a novel"); William Burroughs ("one gets intimations of a mind which might have come within distance of Joyce, except that a catastrophe has been visited on it, a blow by a sledge hammer, a junkie's needle which left the crystalline brilliance crashed into bits"); Joseph Heller ("what makes one hesitate to call his first novel great or even major is that he has only grasped the inferior aspect of Hell"); John Updike ("there are long over-fingered descriptions in exacerbated syntax, airless crypts of four or five pages, huge inner exertion reminiscent of weight lifters, a stale sweet sweat clings to his phrases"); Philip Roth ("Roth's short stories in *Letting Go* just dig little holes in many suburban lawns until finally the work of reading it becomes almost as depressing as must have been the work of writing it"); J.D. Salinger ("*Franny* and *Zooey* and *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters* seem to have been written for high-school girls"); Saul Bellow ("he creates individuals and not the relations between them").

There is a reliable balm self-pitying North American writers can turn to when they wish to confirm their despair and prove that the glory days of literary New York are gone forever: you go on YouTube and watch the last pirated upload of D. A. Pennebaker's documentary *Town Bloody Hall*. The scene is 1971: a group of four women on a panel – including Germaine Greer and Diana Trilling – along with other assorted worthies in the audience (Susan Sontag and Elizabeth Hardwick) have been assembled to discuss women's liberation, or to discuss Norman Mailer's views on women's liberation. The stage set-up with Mailer as the authoritarian moderator was built for comedy, which the novelist Cynthia Ozick exploited to notorious effect:

Ozick: Mr Mailer, in *Advertisements for Myself* you said, quote, "A good novelist can do without everything but the remnant of his balls". For years and years I've been wondering, Mr Mailer, when you dip your balls in ink, what color ink is it?

Mailer: Ozick, if I don't find an answer in a hurry, I think we're going to have to agree the color is yellow. I will cede the round to you. I don't pretend that I've never written an idiotic or stupid sentence in my life.

To watch the film from the other side of the #MeToo movement is very nearly surreal: a group of second-wave feminists is treated as if they were bloodthirsty sans-culottes bent on exterminating humour and pleasure. What is perhaps more strange is how alternately vindictive and generous Mailer could be, in the midst of his predictable contrarianism, in defending a series of untenable positions. And how a writer whose first editions today sell for 90 cents at the Strand, is unquestionably considered the central writer of the central city of the literary world, the American Balzac – as visitors such as V. S. Naipaul conceded. When Jacqueline Ceballos in *Town Bloody Hall* refers to Mailer as "the establishment", you can see, in multiple senses, what she means.

He lived as if literature were only one, though possibly more vital and complex, dimension of a life full of other pursuits: he founded the *Village Voice*, ran for Mayor of New York and the Harvard Board of Overseers,

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Historians have always considered moments of revolutionary change to be central objects of study. These moments do not necessarily involve politics, and are not limited to the modern world. The word "revolutionary" itself may be a relatively recent coinage (dating from the early modern period), but the sorts of change that it denotes have taken place in every area of human activity, and in every time and place. Revolutionary change is rapid and destabilizing. It is also dynamic, in the sense that it does not simply reflect or extend the forces which originally generated it, but builds on itself in original and often wholly unpredictable ways. It can be both destructive and creative. It can entail a frightful human cost, but it can also open up new human possibilities and freedoms. It can take place on many different spatial and temporal scales—and at the same time, it can radically transform human understandings of the scales themselves.

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wrote endless letters to editors, campaigned for causes high and low, made some silly movies, appeared constantly on television, and digested all of these experiences into prose. Mailer even went to the trouble of reviewing reviews of his own television performances and carrying the arguments he had had on air onto the page, where he could better corner his enemies. In "A Television Show with Nelson Algren", which Lennon has shrewdly included in the volumes, Mailer spends his entire piece trying to convince Algren that he didn't really mean it when he said on a talk show that William Styron was his favourite writer.

**T**he *Armies of the Night* seems set to remain Mailer's most enduring book. The premiss is very funny: Mailer, the arch-egotist – "condemned to be an individual", in Thom Gunn's fine phrase – is determined to meld his unalloyed ego into a compound greater than himself: the 1967 march against the Vietnam War in Washington. It is a fusion that Mailer ardently wills, but cannot quite bring off. First there is the issue that the friend who has asked him to join the march is not a fellow winner:

Mailer hated to put in time with losers. Like many another man of varied affairs considered worthy by some, worthless by others, there had been all too many years when he had the reputation of being a loser; it had cost him much. While he could hardly, at this stage of his career, look back on a succession of well-timed and generally established triumphs, his consolation in those hours when he was most uncharitable to himself is that taken at his very worst he was at least still worthy of being a character in a novel by Balzac, win one day, lose the next, and do it with a boom!

When he gets down to Washington, there are also distractions that divert our hero from his quest:

New York had not spoiled him, because it had not chosen to, but New York had certainly wrecked his tolerance for any party but a very good one. Like most snobs he professed to believe in the aristocracy of achieved quality – "just give me a hovel with a few young artists, bright-eyed and bold" – in fact, a party lacked flavor for him unless someone very rich or social was present.

Mailer could be politically romantic about all sorts of things – he was stubbornly, stupidly opposed to birth control; when he ran for mayor in New York he thought juvenile delinquents should solve their disputes in jousting pageants in Central Park. But when it came to the main foreign policy question of the time – the Vietnam War – Mailer's diagnosis was much more on point than that of any foreign policy mandarin on offer. Here he is, in *The Armies of the Night*, laying out how America had made a mistake by fighting communism when it could have sat back and toasted the various nationalisms popping up across the decolonizing world:

No, Asia was best left to the Asians. If the Communists absorbed those countries, and succeeded in building splendid nations who made the transition to technological culture without undue agony, one would be forced to applaud; it seemed evident on the face of the evidence in Vietnam, that America could not bring technology land to Asia without bankrupting itself in operations ill-conceived, poorly comprehended and executed in waste. But the greater likelihood was that if the Communists prevailed in Asia

they would suffer in much the same fashion. Divisions, schisms, and sects would appear. An endless number of collisions between primitive custom and Marxist dogma, a thousand daily pullulations of intrigue, a heritage of cruelty, atrocity, and betrayal would fall upon the Communists. It was not difficult to envision a time when one Communist nation in Asia might look for American aid against another Communist nation. Certainly Russia and China would be engaged in a cold war with each other for decades. Therefore to leave Asia would be precisely to gain the balance of power. The answer then was to get out, to get out any way one could. Get out. There was nothing to fear – perhaps there never had been. For the more Communism expanded, the more monumental would become its program, the more flaccid its preoccupation with world conquest. In the expansion of communism was its own containment.

That is Mailer in 1967, casually dispensing clairvoyance that it would take the US foreign policy elite another few decades to cotton onto. It is the kind of thing heterodox sages of International Relations such as John Mearsheimer are celebrated for realizing fifty years later.

It still feels premature to hazard a verdict, but, meta-fiction aside, it's the journalism that seems more permanent and alive than most of the straight fiction in these twin volumes. I would nominate Mailer's 1964 *Esquire* piece, "In the Red Light", about the Republican National Convention that year, as the best single piece of American political reportage of the period, possibly rivalled only by Garry

Wills's freakishly lucid *Nixon Agonistes*. The stakes in the Goldwater campaign were, as usual for Mailer, existential. Try not to think about the present as you read this:

Goldwater was a demagogue – he permitted his supporters to sell a drink called Gold Water, twenty-five cents a can for orange concentrate and warm soda – let no one say it went down like piss: he was a demagogue. He was also sincere. That was the damnable difficulty. Half-Jew and blue-eyed – if you belonged to the breed, you knew it was manic depressive for sure: a man who designed his own electronic flagpole to raise Old Glory at dawn, pull her down at dusk – he had an instinct for the heart of the disease – he knew how to bring balm to the mad, or at least to half the mad; Goldwater would have much to learn about Negroes. But one thing was certain; he could win. He would be breadwinner, husband and rogue to the underprivileged of the psyche, he would strike a spark in many dry souls for he offered release to frustrations deeper than politics.

If Mailer saw brutish, impish thuggery to his right, he sensed a kind of political nihilism on, or within, his left in figures like his friend and competitor James Baldwin. In *The Armies of the Night*, he registers a fit of impatience with Baldwin's occasional backsliding towards a theologically inflected vision of cosmic justice:

Then came a memory of James Baldwin and Diana Sands on a show called *Night Line* where television viewers could make a telephone call to the guests. Baldwin had received a call from a

liberal which went, "I'd like to help, and I'm asking you how." "Don't ask me, baby," said Baldwin, "ask yourself." "You don't understand," said the liberal, "I know something about these matters, but it's getting confusing for me. I'm asking you in all sincerity where you think my help could be best offered." "Well, baby," said Baldwin, "that's *your* problem." And Diana Sands, pinky extended in total delicate black-lady disgust, put the receiver back in the cradle. "You see," said Baldwin, talking to Les Crane, the master of ceremonies, "I remember what an old Negro woman told me once down South. She said, 'What the white man will someday learn is that there is no remission of sin.' That I never forgot," said Jimmy, "because you see it's perfectly possible the white will not be forgiven, not for a single cut or whipping or lynch mob or rape of a black woman," his voice now as soft and reminiscent of the wind as some African man of witchcraft. And I had to throttle an impulse to pick up the phone and call Baldwin, and say, "You get *this*, baby. There's a shit-storm coming like nothing you ever knew. So ask yourself if what you desire is for the white to kill every black so that there be total remission of guilt in your black soul." And the mind went out still again.

This passage gets at some of Mailer's more pragmatic side: that well-meaning whites and oppressed blacks had to band together against the bad whites (Diana Sands had recently played the female lead in Baldwin's play *Blues for Mr Charlie*). In one decade, the bad white was Goldwater, trigger-happy with nuclear weapons; in another, it was George W. Bush, trigger-happy in the face of dictators. What Mailer delivered in pieces such as "In the Red Light" was something more than what goes by "New" or "Gonzo" journalism: he wanted to blast the present with his own passions and record what ricocheted back at him. In this respect at least, if not in others, the literary political writers who covered campaigns and right-wing protests after him – Hunter Thompson, Martin Amis, David Foster Wallace, John Jeremiah Sullivan, Patricia Lockwood, George Saunders, Joshua Cohen, Christian Lorentzen – are all his heirs. For Mailer, literary-political reportage had to transcend the analytical and play in a prophetic register. It was not the first draft of history but his own time comprehended in its full psychic delirium.

I encountered Mailer once at a *Paris Review* party at George Plimpton's townhouse, when I was twenty and he must have just cleared eighty. He was like an incandescent leprechaun, beet red, singed white hair, arctic eyes, almost a caricature of the *romantic* writer, with Inspiration running through his body like an electrical current. He penguin-stepped around a pool table and asked me to bring over a small stool so that he could stand on it above the assembled guests. "Well, we have fight heading toward us. The trouble with Kerry" – it was a political speech – "is that he's a wind-surfing man ..." Mailer exhorted us all to keep the demagoguery in its present incarnation at bay. You suspect he would have been among the first to recognize that the present Republican dispensation is the advance of the same blight. Yet in the current part-time occupant of the White House, he would at least have found something to work with, something made of the same material, a phoney from another outer borough, working in an adjacent racket, dead set on making it.

## 'A true priest is never loved, remember that'



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