
MODERN · NOVELISTS

Norman



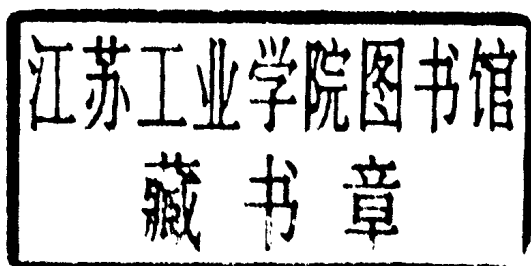
Mailer

MICHAEL K. GLENDAY

MACMILLAN MODERN NOVELISTS

NORMAN MAILER

Michael K. Glenday



© Michael K. Glenday 1995

All rights reserved. No reproduction, copy or transmission of this publication may be made without written permission.

No paragraph of this publication may be reproduced, copied or transmitted save with written permission or in accordance with the provisions of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, or under the terms of any licence permitting limited copying issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency, 90 Tottenham Court Road, London W1P 9HE.

Any person who does any unauthorised act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.

First published 1995 by
MACMILLAN PRESS LTD
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 2XS
and London
Companies and representatives
throughout the world

ISBN 0-333-52261-3 hardcover
ISBN 0-333-52262-1 paperback

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
04 03 02 01 00 99 98 97 96 95

A catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library.

Typeset by Nick Allen/Longworth Editorial Services
Longworth, Oxfordshire

Printed in Malaysia

Series Standing Order

If you would like to receive future titles in this series as they are published, you can make use of our standing order facility. To place a standing order, please contact your bookseller or, in case of difficulty, write to us at the address below with your name and address and the name of the series. Please state with which title you wish to begin your standing order. (If you live outside the United Kingdom we may not have the rights for your area, in which case we will forward your order to the publisher concerned.)

Customer Services Department, Macmillan Distribution Ltd
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, RG 21 2XS, England.

Acknowledgements

I gratefully acknowledge the financial assistance of the University of Liverpool Board of College Studies which awarded me a Research Grant for this study. I am also grateful to the Liverpool Institute of Higher Education for a period of study leave. Thanks are also due to the Library of LIHE, and particularly to the Inter-Library Loans staff for their efficient assistance in obtaining research material. In the Department of American Studies at LIHE, I am grateful to Gail Redmond for her secretarial assistance. I acknowledge a general debt to my colleagues and students, and it is a pleasure to have this opportunity to thank my colleague Dr William Blazek, who read several chapters of the work with the keenest eye. For his generous interest in the project I am most grateful.

General Editor's Preface

The death of the novel has often been announced, and part of the secret of its obstinate vitality must be its capacity for growth, adaptation, self-renewal and self-transformation: like some vigorous organism in a speeded-up Darwinian ecosystem, it adapts itself quickly to a changing world. War and revolution, economic crisis and social change, radically new ideologies such as Marxism and Freudianism, have made this century unprecedented in human history in the speed and extent of change, but the novel has shown an extraordinary capacity to find new forms and techniques and to accommodate new ideas and conceptions of human nature and human experience, and even to take up new positions on the nature of fiction itself.

In the generations immediately preceding and following 1914, the novel underwent a radical redefinition of its nature and possibilities. The present series of monographs is devoted to the novelists who created the modern novel and to those who, in their turn, either continued and extended, or reacted against and rejected, the traditions established during that period of intense exploration and experiment. It includes a number of those who lived and wrote in the nineteenth century but whose innovative contribution to the art of fiction makes it impossible to ignore them in any account of the origins of the modern novel; it also includes the so-called 'modernists' and those who in the mid- and late twentieth century have merged as outstanding practitioners of this genre. The scope is, inevitably, international; not only, in the migratory and exile-haunted world of our century, do writers refuse to heed national frontiers – 'English' literature lays

claim to Conrad the Pole, Henry James the American, and Joyce the Irishman – but geniuses such as Flaubert, Dostoevsky and Kafka have had an influence on the fiction of many nations.

Each volume in the series is intended to provide an introduction to the fiction of the writer concerned, both for those approaching him or her for the first time and for those who are already familiar with some parts of the achievement in question and now wish to place it in the context of the total *oeuvre*. Although essential information relating to the writer's life and times is given, usually in an opening chapter, the approach is primarily critical and the emphasis is not upon 'background' or generalisations but upon close examination of important texts. Where an author is notably prolific, major texts have been made to convey, more summarily, a sense of the nature and quality of the author's work as a whole. Those who want to read further will find suggestions in the select bibliography included in each volume. Many novelists are, of course, not only novelists but also poets, essayists, biographers, dramatists, travel writers and so forth; many have practised shorter forms of fiction; and many have written letters or kept diaries that constitute a significant part of their literary output. A brief study cannot hope to deal with all these in detail, but where the shorter fiction and the non-fictional writings, public and private, have an important relationship to the novels, some space has been devoted to them.

NORMAN PAGE

Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	viii
<i>General Editor's Preface</i>	ix
1 Introduction: The Shaping of Personality	1
2 The Hot Breath of the Future: <i>The Naked and the Dead</i>	46
3 Ambush in the Alley: <i>Barbary Shore</i> and <i>The Deer Park</i>	62
4 A Plunge into the Age: <i>An American Dream</i> and <i>Why Are We in Vietnam?</i>	84
5 From Egypt to Langley: <i>Ancient Evenings, Tough Guys Don't Dance</i> and <i>Harlot's Ghost</i>	115
<i>Notes</i>	144
<i>Select Bibliography</i>	158
<i>Index</i>	162

1

Introduction: The Shaping of Personality

In a piece of middlebrow mischief, the *Guardian* newspaper recently awarded Norman Mailer his latest title, that of 'greatest literary bore of the 20th century'.¹ The anonymous columnist considered that Mailer had been challenged very closely by two other Americans, Henry James and Ernest Hemingway, but that finally Mailer's ability to bore his readers was without true rival. 'While critics have remained respectful the public is beginning to rumble Mailer. His latest book, *Harlot's Ghost*, sold very poorly indeed.'² I offer this more as an instance of Mailer's enduring ability to remain situated provocatively in public view than as any ultimate judgement. Yet it would be irony indeed if Mailer – once dubbed 'the Bore Buster' by journalists following his New York City mayoralty campaign in 1969³ – could now be dismissed as a writer on the tedious margins. Perhaps in England particularly, his grandstanding approach has fitted all too easily into a stereotype of ugly Americanism. Yet by refusing the quietism and mannered detachment of the old-time writer, Mailer also prepared himself for the emerging culture of post-modernism. 'The first art work in an artist is the shaping of his own personality'⁴ would soon be his conviction, and more than any writer of his age his personality was a radical element in the cultural battlegrounds of America in the postwar years. For Mailer, personality would be one crucial weapon in the struggle to matter, to intervene in the age. As Richard Gilman remarked of him, he was prepared to 'go to the end, to the other side of

personality and coherent being, to be *pertinent*, literally to figure in⁵ the making of cultural history.

As a young student of aeronautical engineering at Harvard in the early 1940s, Mailer did strike some who knew him as 'a bore', because he insisted they acknowledge his cultural origins – 'everybody found him boring because he spent most of his time claiming that he was just a poor Jewish boy from Brooklyn'.⁶ In later years he consciously refused the security of typecasting himself as anything so singular, preferring instead a fluidity of persona, a protean self very much in keeping with his later self-definition as an American existentialist. 'I suppose there are two recurring subjects in my life that just fascinate me over and over again. One of them is the establishment. The other is identity.'⁷ Mailer might have added that the relationship between the two subjects has also been an abiding fascination for him, as for so many fellow Americans writing in the years since 1945. Certainly his own career as a writer has been rightly described as 'a personal index of American history since the Second World War',⁸ a career styled by diversity, unpredictability, and an unfailingly bold approach to his great and epic subject: American reality in all its concern with the embattled relationship between individualism and power.

'I think he's our greatest writer. And what is unfortunate is our greatest writer should be a bum.'⁹ So wrote Pauline Kael of Norman Mailer, echoing the judgement of Richard Poirier who, a year earlier in 1972 had also remarked the central contradiction in him: 'on the one hand the marvellously fastidious stylist, a writer almost precious in his care for phrasing and cadence, and, on the other and seemingly at odds, the boisterous, the vulgar actor'.¹⁰ These roles were ones present from college days; when confronted by the Harvard establishment, the Harvard *Advocate* staffers, Mailer began to fashion one of his most notorious personas, 'a sort of literary tough guy, something like a Hemingway knock-off'¹¹ as one of his Harvard roommates remembered. Though the two men never met, Hemingway would later describe Mailer as:

probably the best postwar writer. He's a psycho, but the psy-

cho part is the most interesting thing about him. Chances are he won't be able to throw another fit like *The Naked and the Dead*. But if he does . . . I better watch out.¹²

The two writers are often compared, yet beyond superficial similarities they are separated by more profound differences. As one critic remarked, 'unlike Hemingway with his one-man style, Mailer has turned into an everyman'.¹³ Mailer's sub-Hemingway persona was to become only one part of a quick-changing repertoire of contemporary address.

Yet anyone attempting a fix on Mailer's life and career will soon enough confront a further paradox – that for all his public exposure, his life as one of the very few writers of distinction to have also existed as a celebrity, his private life, apart from a few lurid incidents, has escaped the media spotlight. He has shown skill in achieving celebrity for his ideas, dramatising the public personae, while remaining essentially private. According to Alfred Kazin, Mailer has 'an ability to make his imagination public. One somehow knew not Mailer himself . . . but Mailer's fetishes, his drive, his necessary plunge into events, his ability to make connections between his psyche and American life.'¹⁴ Even while a young student at Harvard, Mailer was regarded as in control of his private as much as his public personality:

He was a self-defined loner. . . . He was training himself quite explicitly, and anyone who knew him thought of him as *sui generis*, always an individual with a sense of mission. He was thought of as exceptional but too controlled, *too* disciplined. . . . He was an enigma. He had a secret life in the sense that you knew only so much about him and there was an aura you couldn't penetrate.¹⁵

Mailer's self-discipline, his commitment to a career as a writer, was evident at an early age. His aspirations were encouraged by his parents. As he remembers, 'I didn't have to convince my parents that I should be a writer. . . . They were soon pleased that I wanted to be a writer. They loved reading my work, as only parents can.'¹⁶ He wrote what he called his 'first half-decent

story' in the summer of 1940, while on vacation after his first year at Harvard.

Mailer is the only son of a second-generation immigrant family, and by far the most significant influence in his early years was that of his mother, by all accounts a dominating personality who believed fiercely in her son's abilities:

Two formative currents of personality came together to make my nature. . . . One of them is being Jewish. I'm not a Holocaust hustler, I'm not asking for pity, but every Jew alive feels his relationship to the world is somehow more tenuous than other people's, and so to affirm his existence is somehow more important. The second current was that I had a mother who spoiled me out of sight, with all that's good and bad about that, so I was accustomed to having attention paid to me, and that is probably the key to my personality.¹⁷

Fanny Mailer 'completely took over' in the domestic scene and 'nursed all of Norman's narcissism, and made him feel that whatever he did was okay'.¹⁸ In comparison the father, Isaac Barnett (Barney) Mailer was a minor influence. Mailer was named Nachum Malech, his middle name meaning 'king' in Hebrew. Although this was subsequently altered to 'Kingsley', for Fanny Mailer the original choice was more meaningful, for to her and her family, 'that's what he was, our little king . . . he was like a little god'.¹⁹ This 'terribly tough, strong woman' instilled in her son an unshakeable sense of his having a special destiny, even though – perhaps unsurprisingly – this had to wait until after he had left home to acquire a specific shape. When Mailer failed on one occasion to achieve the expected 'A' grade on one of his school report cards (though he later made up for the lapse, graduating from the Boys High School in Brooklyn with an IQ of 165, this being what his school principal called 'the highest IQ we've ever had'),²⁰ Fanny Mailer rushed to the principal, demanding that the grade be changed to an 'A' on the grounds that Norman was 'a superior person'. The offending teacher was remembered by Fanny Mailer as 'a big fat Irish-woman' who had failed to recognise that if Mailer 'didn't pay

attention' in her class 'it was because he already knew it all'.²¹ Under this kind of matriarchal influence, it may not surprise that Mailer is best remembered by his boyhood friends for being 'on a shorter leash, more obedient, kind of quiet'²² compared to them, and for spending most of his free time building model airplanes. Mailer, for his part, returned the mother's devotion throughout his life, a fact remembered somewhat ruefully by Lady Jeanne Campbell, his third wife. After their separation, she remarked, 'here I married this terrific, powerful, dynamic, romantic literary man, and he turned out to be a guy who had to go see his mother every Friday night for dinner'.²³

Of the two 'formative currents' of his personality noted above, Mailer's acknowledgement of the Jewish influence is the more problematical. His maternal grandfather was a Talmudic scholar who, though without his own congregation, was regarded as the unofficial rabbi of his locality of Long Branch, New Jersey. Yet though he was born into a very Jewish community, and appeared sensitive to his Jewish origins while at Harvard, his work (with the exception of *The Naked and the Dead*, which exposes the anti-Semitic bigotry aimed at characters such as Roth and Goldstein) shows few explicit signs of a self-conscious Jewish sensibility at work. In an interview of 1963, he admitted that his 'knowledge of Jewish culture is exceptionally spotty',²⁴ and for some of his Jewish contemporaries, such as Norman Podhoretz, Mailer's relationship to Jewishness remains problematical:

That a man of his curiosity and energy should show so little interest about something so close to him, something that is in his blood, is extraordinary. Just the fact that he's never gone to Israel is in itself suspicious.²⁵

Yet it is possible also to see Mailer as most Jewish even in this apparent rejection of traditional ties. For Alfred Kazin, Mailer belongs rather to another Jewish tradition, that of radical individualism:

Jewishness Mailer disliked because it limited and intellectualized. . . . With his contempt for knowledge-as-control, his

desire to leave all those centuries of Jewish tradition (and of Jewish losers) behind him, Mailer represents the unrelenting effort and overreaching of the individual Jewish writer who seeks to be nothing but an individual (and if possible a hero).²⁶

Mailer, then, perpetuates a line of Jewish individualism of which his rabbi grandfather would have approved, for he was the unofficial rabbi who 'never wanted a congregation because he said that rabbis were *schmorrers* and he wouldn't live that way'.²⁷

Mailer is one of the most politically engaged writers to have emerged in the United States after the Second World War, and one of his greatest achievements is to have translated political crisis into moral and spiritual terms. His first two novels, *The Naked and the Dead* (1948) and *Barbary Shore* (1951), reveal a vision of the world which assumes the awesome march of political power, be it fascism, totalitarianism or Stalinism. In his anthology *Advertisements for Myself* (1959) and the novel *An American Dream* (1965), we see him fashioning his own idiosyncratic response to American politics, advocating in his famous essay 'The White Negro' a new form of existential heroism mediated through violent dissent. Together with his political journalism – his 'informal histories' of American political conventions such as those taking place in 1968 and published as *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* – these are the writings to be foregrounded in a life of political radicalism and vision. Indeed Norman Podhoretz saw Mailer, along with Paul Goodman and Norman O. Brown, as one of this trio of 'prophets' who ensured 'that the radicalism of the sixties was born'.²⁸

In his first novel, politics are embodied in a group of main characters, in the struggle between the liberal Lieutenant Hearn, the sado-fascistic General Cummings and the similarly drawn Sergeant Croft. The novel's climax sees Hearn effectively murdered by Croft, and both Croft and Cummings reduced by the triumph of the military bureaucracy, itself a version of the totalitarianism which Mailer saw as already widespread throughout American society. The novel's political plot and Mailer's concerns about American politics are closely linked. Since the late

1940s, his politics have travelled along the spectrum from far left to right, but in those early years his Marxist sympathies were unequivocal. While in Paris where he had been staying with his first wife, Bea, just prior to the publication of *The Naked and the Dead*, Mailer had met Jean Malaquais, who became something of a mentor in his political education. Although Malaquais was attracted by the intellectual energy of the young Mailer, he also saw him as 'naive, a kind of Boy Scout intellectually and politically'.²⁹ Malaquais was a Polish immigrant who occupied a position on the enlightened left; in common with many other writers and artists in Europe and America, he had repudiated Stalinism after the Moscow show-trials. He was not only a political sophisticate but had already expressed his politics artistically in the novels *World without Visa* and *The Man From Nowhere*, which had won him the prestigious Prix Renaudot. With Malaquais to guide him, Mailer quickly came to regard political engagement as a *raison d'écrire*. As Hilary Mills notes, 'Mailer had . . . adopted the European idea that a writer does not exist in a vacuum.'³⁰ Mills is right, but Mailer had already absorbed an earlier influence which saw art as politically rooted. While at Harvard he had been exposed to a leftist intellectual model in the form of the first American Studies programme, initiated by the great Americanist, F. O. Matthiessen:

Begun at Harvard . . . and already gaining acceptance at other universities, the program emphasised that literature should not be considered in isolation but be studied as part of the country's political and economic history. The program . . . was strongly dependent on the new Marxist view of literature, if not as narrow or dogmatic.³¹

Mailer later acknowledged that 'Harvard changed me profoundly',³² for his education both there and in Paris with Jean Malaquais had prepared him for political activism. It was to the American left, and specifically to the anti-Cold War Progressive Citizens of America (PCA) that he gravitated in 1946. This group, which became the Progressive Party in 1948, was led by former Vice-President Henry Wallace. It is this politician who provides

a crucial link with Mailer's first novel. Immediately after 1945 the American left was dividing between the PCA and the Americans for Democratic Action (ADA). Both groups criticised President Truman's foreign policy which they believed was responsible for inaugurating and perpetuating the Cold War. The PCA, however, was very much on the left, favouring a *rapprochement* with the Communists, while the ADA took a firm anti-Communist stance. Mailer joined the PCA and in 1948 became a party worker for the Wallace presidential campaign. According to his wife, Bea, also working for the Wallace bid, 'Norman and I wanted better relations with Russia, and we wanted to stop the Cold War. . . . Truman wasn't about to do it, and [Governor Thomas E.] Dewey would have been worse than Reagan. So Henry Wallace seemed like a viable alternative.'³³ Mailer visited Hollywood, making eighteen speeches for Wallace. According to Nigel Leigh, 'at least two years before the 1948 campaign, Mailer took seriously the Wallacite prediction that America was in danger of becoming fascist'.³⁴ It was this conviction which informed the political context of *The Naked and the Dead*.

Mailer's politics were to play an even more prominent role in his next novel, *Barbary Shore* (1951). With Malaquais as the *eminence gris* once more, he had begun to move away from Stalinism to embrace by 1949 a new revolutionary programme, summed up here by Norman Podhoretz:

he soon lost faith in Marxism altogether. But here he diverged onto a track of his own. Whereas most ex-Trotskyist intellectuals of the thirties wound up in the fifties as enemies of the revolutionary idea altogether, Mailer in giving up on revolutionary socialism proclaimed himself the leader of a new revolution: a cultural rather than political revolution, a revolution that would 'move backward toward being and the secrets of human energy' instead of forward toward the struggle for control over a more and more highly industrialized world. In his own eyes, in other words, he was still a radical – indeed more of one than ever before.³⁵

Barbary Shore is, however, a politically confused text. At various points in it Mailer can be seen to be broadly Marxist, Trotskyist, while 'towards the end it is strongly implied through symbols that he favours a post-Marxist radical position'.³⁶ According to Mailer, he 'finished the novel with a political position which was a far-flung mutation of Trotskyism'.³⁷ The grim surrealistic city of fear depicted in the novel is a reflection of Mailer's own artistic and political crisis at the start of the 1950s.

Soon after publication of *The Naked and the Dead* Mailer realised that, at the age of twenty-six, he had exhausted his existing store of life experience necessary for novel writing. In *Advertisements for Myself* (1959), in the 'Second Advertisement for Myself: Barbary Shore', he explains how his first novel had used up his biographical reservoir, saying:

there was nothing left in the first twenty-four years of my life to write about; one way or another, my life seemed to have been mined and melted into the long reaches of the book. And so I was prominent and empty, and I had to begin life again.³⁸

Years later he was to look back on *Barbary Shore* as 'the most imaginative of my novels',³⁹ though he has also said that 'what nobody has ever understood is that *Barbary Shore* is my most autobiographical novel'.⁴⁰ The novel is dedicated to Malaquais who influenced its futuristic *mise-en-scène*. This debt is also acknowledged in the 'Second Advertisement', but the novel's more important source lies beneath the surface, for as Mailer admitted, '*Barbary Shore* was really a book to emerge from the bombarded cellars of my unconscious.'⁴¹ Mailer's exit from the cul-de-sac he faced after writing *The Naked and the Dead* was indeed 'to begin life again', though this regeneration would now be accomplished through the previously unexplored reaches of the psyche. The novel marks an important new departure then, and Mailer has always insisted on it as a key not only to the psychic climate of the 1950s, what he called 'the air of our time',⁴² but also to his later work, which is also often alive to the unconscious sources of experience. *Barbary Shore* was a crisis in Mailer's development which he overcame, and in so doing he was party to the 'cultural

cycle' of the 1950s, a generic feature of the decade in which, according to W. T. Lhamon, 'singly and collectively, people [in America] converted their crises to opportunities'.⁴³ In his own crisis of personal and artistic blockage, Mailer shared something with the broader mood of cultural flux in the United States. This was partly evident in 'the intense divisions troubling people at the time – the new cast of delinquency, the rights and suffrage struggles, the fears of communism and radioactive fallout'.⁴⁴ In the novel's vision of America's estate at this time, instability and anguish are at the centre. For Mailer *Barbary Shore* may be considered as 'the richest of my first three novels for it has in its high fevers a kind of insane insight into the psychic mysteries of Stalinists, secret policemen, narcissists, children, Lesbians, hysterics, revolutionaries'.⁴⁵ Perhaps the most enduring feature of *Barbary Shore* will be its evocation of mood, the mood of the American 1950s, manifest in the novel's plot of conspiracy and paranoia. As Norman Rosten put it, 'the book was a little confusing – you didn't quite know who or what anything was. But it had a magnetic, mysterious appeal at the time because in '51 everyone was screwed up that way'.⁴⁶

While writing *Barbary Shore*, Mailer and Bea had moved to Hollywood. In so doing they were treading a path taken by previous American writers, most famously F. Scott Fitzgerald and William Faulkner. The year in Hollywood was later to contribute a good deal to Mailer's third novel, *The Deer Park* (1955), but while he was there the experience of writing film scripts proved no more fruitful and in some ways as damaging for him as for his literary predecessors. There was certainly a destructive effect on the Mailers' marriage, with one friend remembering Mailer's admission that Hollywood had 'corrupted' him – 'he was young, suddenly very famous, and he was wined and dined . . . people just fell over him. He also talked about this in the context of his break-up with Bea, how the time he was out there had been very bad for their marriage'.⁴⁷ Jean Malaquais, who with his wife had lived with the Mailers in Hollywood, also tells a similar story of marital discord caused by Mailer's new celebrity:

At first we lived in the house Norman and Bea had taken ear-