

Considering Norman Mailer and his work: a letter

19 November 2009

While I find myself in general agreement with Andras Gyorgy's article on Norman Mailer ("The postwar novelist in regression: Norman Mailer (1923-2007)"), I do think the author's second novel, *Barbary Shore*, should be valued somewhat more highly in light of the circumstances under which it was written.

Since Mailer was not in broad favor when I was in school, I came to read his novels only after his death. *Barbary Shore* (1951) strikes me as the most demanding of them. Many details are only fully comprehensible during a second reading of the book.

Much has been made of the book's tendentious character, particularly the latter portion of the novel, which includes the Stalinist agent McLeod's apologia for his political crimes during the Spanish civil war in the late 1930s, an episode that Mailer himself later said did not really belong in the book. While *Barbary Shore* does have this weakness, along with an overall outlook that leans towards demoralization, the contemporary reader finds other virtues in the nearly 60-year-old novel.

In the work, Mailer is seriously addressing, in artistic form, one of the most complex political phenomena of the modern world—the emergence of Stalinism, the schism in the revolutionary movement in the 20th century and the intense toll this took on so many who began their political careers, speaking generally, as idealistic people. How many other novelists at the time—at the height of the anti-communist witch-hunt in the US—were grappling, from the point of view of both a rejection of capitalism and a generally left-wing critique of Stalinism, with these issues?

It is true that there is much in *Barbary Shore* that already expresses political exhaustion. The prominent characters are all broken in various ways. McLeod found himself agreeing with Trotsky's arguments while in Spain, and despising the latter for it. He subsequently facilitated Trotsky's assassination. After finally departing the Stalinist movement, he went to work for the American government. Later leaving politics, McLeod becomes resigned to the hope that socialism might one day emerge out of the bloodbath of a Third World War. Lannie Madison, the onetime Trotskyist, has only fragmentary bits of rational clarity amidst her delusions.

The modern world is presented as hell-on-earth for the international proletariat. This in itself contains elements of truth, albeit one-sidedly. McLeod's final speech does convey a trace of optimism, however. Explaining the reasons for making such a speech at all, rather than simply capitulating to his interrogator, McLeod says: "It is my hope that a revolutionary determination, the like of which has never been seen before will sweep the earth, and these theses, difficult, recondite, and often incomprehensible, will match the experience of even the most inarticulate peasant, so that the socialist theorist will once again find language to reach the many."

In many parts of the novel, one finds the direct prose that Mailer was capable of writing, far more effective than much of his later output. To cite only one passage, delivered by the narrator, Lovett, shortly after arriving at the boardinghouse: "So I lay there that evening while McLeod

across the hall must also have stared at the ceiling, and I dreamed that I was in another room in a vast dormitory for children, and while we slept a fire had begun in the cellar and was sweeping along the dry wood of the walls and through the deep vent of the staircase. Soon it would reach the great open room in which we slept and sear a passage through the door, and we would awake to the sound of children's screams and hear our own voice." The passage is haunting, but not overdone.

I had a similar appreciation of Mailer's first novel, *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), set in the South Pacific during World War II. There are obvious limitations to the book and there are works by other authors that embody a different experience of the war and have greater ultimate weight—Vasily Grossman's *Life and Fate* comes immediately to mind. The second half of *The Naked and the Dead*, containing the futile reconnaissance expedition undertaken by the small US platoon, is drawn out and tedious.

More striking is the fact that Mailer gives the most convincing and powerful arguments to the right-wing characters, such as Sergeant Croft and particularly General Cummings. For some reason, Mailer was able to enter their thought processes more easily than those of Lieutenant Hearn, the politically liberal officer in the story.

But the vignettes of the other soldiers' lives prior to the war and the generally dark view of the American military machine have their impact on the reader. This is all the more impressive in that this was the first of Mailer's works, published when he was twenty-six.

It seems to me that Mailer goes seriously astray after *The Deer Park* (1955), his novel about the film industry and the blacklist. His essay, "The White Negro" (1957) contains, as Gyorgy makes clear, some pretty retrograde political notions. During the late 1950s and 1960s, Mailer's work declines. The political events of that period which Gyorgy recounts clearly took their toll on Mailer, as they did on others.

Mailer's turn away from socialism and toward all sorts of ideological confusion, some of it fairly ludicrous, becomes pronounced during this period. It is interesting that one biographer, Michael Glenday, said of Mailer: "For his critique of postwar America is rooted very largely in his attack upon its secularism; his often-voiced contempt for 'technologyland' is not so much Luddite as evangelical in origin." There is some truth to this.

Why Are We in Vietnam (1967) is a rambling work. The title, combined with the fact that the eighteen-year-old narrator, DJ, is about to be shipped to Vietnam, implies that some significant measure of the war's motivation is to be found in the events recounted in the book—about a hunting party of angry Americans, guns ablaze on a wilderness rampage in Alaska. The Vietnam War thus becomes basically an extension of the barbarity of this group, representative more of the population as a whole than the ruling elite, an emanation of America's collective psychosis that has been exported with destructive impact to Southeast Asia.

I was not surprised to see that Gyorgy passes over the experience of *The Executioner's Song* (1980) and its aftermath. Given the fact that Mailer's literary career spanned six decades, it would be difficult outside of a small

volume at the very least to treat even briefly each of his major works. Nonetheless, some consideration of the novel and the events that followed is merited.

In 1976, the US Supreme Court reinstated capital punishment after a four-year interlude during which it had been ruled unconstitutional. On January 17, 1977, the first victim of the renewed death penalty, Gary Gilmore, was executed in Utah. Gilmore had been convicted of the murder of two men, one a hotel clerk, the other a gas station attendant, in 1976. Gilmore evinced serious mental instability before and after the crimes, and far from appealing his sentence, actually demanded that it be carried out.

In *The Executioner's Song*, Mailer seems unduly impressed with Gilmore's stance, which appears to him as a type of moral courage. The reader comes away from the book with not much more understanding of Gilmore and what produced him than he or she had beforehand—and, I suspect, little, if any, greater revulsion for the barbaric death penalty. What is more, it is hard to fathom precisely why Mailer believed Gilmore's life and death merited an 1,100-page novel.

While writing *The Executioner's Song*, which was awarded the Pulitzer Prize, Mailer began an ill-fated correspondence with a prisoner named Jack Abbott. Abbott had been initially jailed for forgery and was later convicted of killing a fellow inmate while in prison. Mailer was impressed by what he saw as Abbott's literary gifts and encouraged him in his writing. In time, Abbott's letters to Mailer were published as *In the Belly of the Beast* (1981). It received considerable critical acclaim, including a positive review in the *New York Times*. Six weeks after being paroled in 1981, an event facilitated by Mailer's promotion of Abbott, the latter stabbed and killed a 22-year-old waiter, Richard Adan.

One wonders: what was it that drew Mailer to Gilmore and Abbott? Gyorgy points to Mailer's fascination with supposed great individuals, including criminals, among whom he presumably counted Gilmore and Abbott. I believe there is a disoriented and reckless political dimension as well. Mailer, one suspects, and he was hardly alone in harboring such conceptions at the time, considered the prisoners as rebels and genuine, left-wing "men of action" (individual action specifically).

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With the subsiding of the radicalization of the late 1960s and early 1970s, not a few erstwhile radicals and socialists turned, with a growing loss of confidence in the working class, to "strong" individuals with guns in their hands, regardless of their program or ideas. This was also the period of the Baader-Meinhof group in Germany and other "left" terrorist operations, further symptoms of increasing demoralization. Abbott, moreover, claimed to be a Marxist. This fascination with the lumpen personality would fit in with what Mailer had written in "The White Negro" about "a morality of the bottom," found in "perversion, pimpery, drug addiction, rape, razor slash, bottle-break, what-have-you."

The silver lining in *The Executioner's Song* is the style of many of its descriptive passages, far simpler and more restrained than the ranting and bombast of the books that preceded it.

In *Oswald's Tale* (1996), Mailer turns his attention to another "man of action" (and claimed, falsely, to be "left-wing" by some), Lee Harvey Oswald, the alleged assassin of John F. Kennedy in 1963. Here there is enough subject matter for a thousand-page manuscript (which Mailer once again delivers). Unfortunately, the book strikes one as far less compelling than the much shorter contemporary work of fiction written on the same subject by Don DeLillo, *Libra*. Mailer's lengthier treatment of Oswald adds little and leaves much out. Large extracts of the Warren Commission report are introduced verbatim.

The author comes to the conclusion that there is a "3 in 4" chance that Oswald was the lone gunman in the Kennedy assassination, and that if a shot was fired by another individual, it was likely a second Oswald, a basically deranged person *acting on his own!*

The personal—especially sexual—lives of Oswald, his Russian-born wife Marina, and those close to them are probed at great length, as were those of the protagonists in *The Executioner's Song*. The implication is that these passages somehow help explain the individuals' ultimate fates. They fall flat because the reader is not convinced that necessary connection exists. In the graphic depictions of sex one senses, besides the author's showing off and stalling for time, that he is aiming at a supposedly gritty reality. Unfortunately, only a crude and therefore fairly simplistic portrait emerges from such episodes.

Even after having said all of this, however, one is still obliged to see Mailer as a tragic literary figure, one with undeniable talent and intelligence, but who was not able to find the internal and external wherewithal to withstand the pressures bearing down on American intellectuals in the postwar period (but then, very few, if any, did). His first novels, in particular, are bold, engaging and imaginative.

There is another side to Mailer's development that has not been made the subject of a great deal of study—his time in the military in World War II and the toll it took on him. I have yet to read of it in Mailer's own words (except by implication in his novels), but another biographer, Peter Manso, quoted his mother, Fanny Mailer, as saying that her son's experience in the Pacific had changed him: "It scarred him.... When he came back something was lost. A certain kindness, his softness." Perhaps it is best appreciated by looking at the episodes in *Barbary Shore* where the narrator, Mike Lovett, a war veteran with partial amnesia, has flashbacks of nightmarish conditions and events. Mailer did state that this was his most autobiographical work.

Mailer stumbled about while searching for his bearings after the war and ultimately did not find them. His adult personal life had its fair share of difficulty and sorrow, masked somewhat by his consumption of vast quantities of alcohol. I find that even in his famous declarations of self-importance—the comparisons to Tolstoy, the description of himself as one of the great modern writers, etc.—there is more than a hint of the opposite: self-doubt, dissatisfaction, disappointment. Under more hospitable conditions, Mailer's literary output would probably have taken a different form and thereby come to possess a greater enduring significance.

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