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Carol Iannone

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Middle East. Public opinion does provide a context, however, in which policy is made, and it sets the parameters for change. The fact that the American public remains so sympathetic toward Israel is bound to give policy-makers pause before they consider any shift in Middle East policy.

It is true that the public will turn on Israel when its interests are thought to be contrary to those of the United States, as was the case

during the Beirut hostage affair and during much of the Lebanon war. It is also true that the Arabs have made impressive strides in improving their standing with the public, a trend that coincides with the increasingly intense and sophisticated propaganda effort currently being waged by the Arab states in this country. Unfortunately for the Arabs, however, greater support for their cause has not eroded support for Israel.

Moreover, it will be much harder for the Arabs to go from 10 to 20 percent than it was to go from 1 to 10 percent; sympathy for them has oscillated between 11 and 14 percent for the last six years and is now nearer the low figure. Arab leaders may continue to call on the United States to adopt an "evenhanded" policy in the Middle East, but the American public remains committed to supporting Israel.

"Our Genius": Norman Mailer & the Intellectuals

Carol Iannone

IF THERE is one thing the case of Norman Mailer teaches us, it is that ideas matter, that they shape the common life both of the individual and of the culture. For the ideas propagated by Norman Mailer, along with those of such figures as Norman O. Brown and Paul Goodman, exercised a tangible influence in dragging America out of the Eisenhower years into the Aquarian age of the 60's and beyond. And in advancing those ideas, Mailer had the enthusiastic support of a perhaps surprising number of the major intellectuals of our time.

At this point it may be hard to see just what was so magnetic about Mailer in the first place. To date,

CAROL IANNONE teaches English literature at Iona College in New York. Her articles in COMMENTARY include "A Dissent on Grace Paley" (August) and "The Secret of Mary Gordon's Success" (June).

his prolific but uneven output has yielded a number of notable books, but he can hardly be said to have borne out the ecstatic expectations that many once attached to him (and some still do). The fact is, however, that it was not entirely in terms of literary excellence that he exercised his appeal on people languishing in the supposedly arid air of the late 50's; he spoke, rather, to a hungering need for getting the life of the mind into touch with the life of the instincts. As Irving Howe sums it up for the "New York intellectual group" in Peter Manso's *Mailer: His Life and Times*, a 700-page compendium of reminiscences by family, friends, associates, and colleagues,* "We were essentially rationalistic people for better or worse—he was still able to get at certain things we could not. We admired it, I think even envied it. He was our genius."

Peter Manso, author of three other books (one on Mailer's 1965

campaign for the New York City mayoralty) and a friend of Mailer, has here done a skillful job of editing the interviews he conducted with some 150 people from all corners of his subject's life—Brooklyn childhood, Harvard, the army, New York, European travel, Hollywood, Provincetown, etc. We hear from actors, artists, sports figures, writers, editors, scholars, lawyers, policemen, army buddies, college chums, secretaries, as well as assorted family and friends. Some knew Mailer personally, some professionally, some both. Manso has arranged the reflections chronologically, so that we get a sense of ongoing biography and have the advantage of hearing many (often conflicting) voices describe an incident or period. The book occasionally bogs down in details too small for a reader to care about, and toward the end especially, it degenerates

* Simon & Schuster, 718 pp., \$19.95.

over, it will be much harder for Arabs to go from 10 percent than it was to go to 10 percent; sympathy for us oscillated between 11 percent for the last six years, now nearer the low figure. Readers may continue to call the United States to adopt an "unfettered" policy in the Middle East, but the American public is committed to supporting

Intellectuals

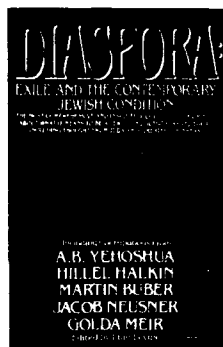
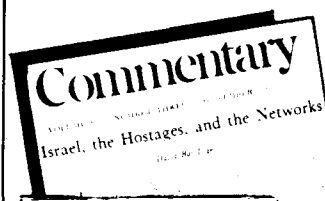
gn for the New York City (City) and a friend of Mailer. He done a skillful job of editing the interviews he conducted some 150 people from all aspects of his subject's life—Brooklyn, Harvard, the army, New York, European travel, Hollywood, Provincetown, etc. We hear of actors, artists, sports figures, editors, scholars, lawyers, army buddies, college secretaries, as well as family and friends. Some Mailer personally, some probably, some both. Manso has edited the reflections chronologically so that we get a sense of autobiography and have the advantage of hearing many (often interesting) voices describe an important period. The book occasionally goes down in details too small for the reader to care about, and, to the end especially, it degenerates

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ates into a breathless advertisement for Mailer's career (apparently still poised at the edge of transcendence). On the whole, however, given the nature of the subject, Mailer is a valuable exercise, if perhaps sometimes against its own intentions.

To be sure, not all the members of the "New York intellectual group" that adopted Mailer as "our genius" were blind to the morally disturbing aspects of his work, the state of the instincts being notorious for disrupting more ordinary dependencies. Specifically, his now legendary essay, "The White Negro" (1957), celebrating what he called "hipsterism," offered as an example the courage that might drive two young eighteen-year-old hoodlums to beat in the brains of a middle-aged candy-store keeper, thereby attacking the institution of private property and "daring the unknown." This was greeted at the time by Norman Podhoretz as "one of the most morally gruesome ideas I have ever come across, and which indicates where the ideology of hipsterism can lead." But a year later Podhoretz expressed sympathy "with Mailer's latest effort to maintain a sense of huge possibility, even if one is totally out of sympathy with some of the doctrines he has recently been preaching." And William Phillips, the editor of *Partisan Review*, observes of Mailer that "while 'The White Negro' was considered intellectually unacceptable, it was still acceptable for purposes of fictional exploration." Thus, although no one really ignored the ugliness of some of Mailer's ideas, he seemed to operate under a kind of extrajudicial extenuation. The reprehensible notions advanced in "The White Negro" could be understood somehow as a necessary element in the dissection of the world of the instincts that it was Mailer's assigned mission to undertake.

For his part, Mailer was glad enough to assume this public role of "genius" of the irrational, which he may have recognized as his ticket to greatness. After the tremendous success of *The Naked and the Dead*, according to Barbara Solomons in the Manso book, Mailer had panicked at getting



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"caught short being a leftover Dreiser or Dos Passos." And as Mailer himself comments here:

Writing "The White Negro" emboldened me to raise more questions. . . . It gave me the courage to make remarks of the order of "I shall attempt to answer the question of"—the oft-quoted sentence in which I list all those things—"murder, suicide, orgy, orgasm, incest," and so forth. My true purpose as a writer, I recognized, might be to tackle questions like that. They were going to be my frontier, and if I had any chance at all of becoming a great writer it was to move in that direction.

Not long after "The White Negro," however, Mailer's real-life flirtations with violence (which had to that point found outlets in drinking and brawling), passed over into the nearly fatal stabbing of his second wife, Adele, and it began to be clear just how much the public and private selves had fused. Mailer's lawyer, Joseph Brill, declared at the time that "This is a talent that must be protected," and Mailer himself pleaded his own cause by telling the judge, "If you put me in Bellevue, it will be an indictment of my work as the work of a crazy man" (emphasis added).

While not everyone went so far as the friend who felt that Mailer "finally did to Adele what should've been done years earlier," or as his mother, who reflected, "If Norman would stop marrying these women who make him do these terrible things . . .," there were many who believed he could not be held responsible for his deed, who saw him as a victim of uncontrollable forces, who worried less over the state of his soul than over the state of his career. In *Mailer*, playwright Maria Irene Fornes seems alone to have glimpsed how profoundly Mailer's public role had superseded ordinary moral considerations:

Norman I saw about two months after the stabbing. I wasn't close to them anymore, but he told me that at first they said that Adele had fallen on something, on broken glass, but then he'd decided the next day, "After all I couldn't hide behind a woman's skirt." To me that was really so

sad and ugly. I mean, he stabbed her. An ordinary person commits a stabbing, he doesn't have this choice, whether to hide behind this or that. I'm talking about Norman's privilege, that even in a moment of despair he is reacting in a privileged manner. . . . It's like saying "I won't go to jail in Alabama, I'll go to jail in West Newport."

Fittingly, however, the entire episode—which did indeed include some time in Bellevue—failed to put even a dent in Mailer's career; on the contrary, it helped to solidify his reputation as a fearless explorer of the self. Yet from the vantage point of today it must be said that as his sense of himself as a public figure grew stronger, his understanding of himself seems to have grown ever fainter. Although many in this book speak of his courage, perhaps the most important act of courage, that of genuine self-discovery, seems to have remained beyond him, and the various autobiographical reflections gathered in such works as *Advertisements for Myself*, *Cannibals and Christians*, and so forth, while full of self-revelation, appear devoid of self-insight. Even his famous autobiographical style, in which he speaks of himself, dissociatedly, in the third person, tends to feed this escape from self-confrontation.

IT SHOULD thus scarcely have been surprising that some two decades after he stabbed his wife Mailer found himself involved in another, oddly similar, legal and moral imbroglio. For some time since the late 70's he had been in correspondence with a prisoner named Jack Henry Abbott who had spent twenty-five of his thirty-seven years behind bars, in part for having killed a man. Thanks largely to a letter written by Mailer attesting to the prisoner's literary talent, Abbott was set free on parole despite psychiatrists' warnings about his tendency to violence. During Abbott's first weeks out of prison, he lived in a halfway house on the Bowery—in his words, "the most violent and bombed out area in New York City." But his life was not confined to the Bowery; a book of his prison memoirs, *The Belly of the Beast*, was published to great

acclaim, and he was a frequent guest at the Mailer home in New York and at least once in Provincetown. He was, however, also growing more hostile and restive, and one day he carried a knife. One night outside a Greenwich Village restaurant, he plunged it into the heart of a twenty-two-year-old man named Richard Adan—an aspiring actor and playwright, a newlywed working part-time as a waiter in his father-in-law's restaurant. Adan's last words were, "You didn't have to kill me."

The detective assigned to the case, William Majeski, had "seen a lot of bodies," but he found that

this was different. Although Adan was twenty-two, he looked younger, and his face, the expression, was angelic. Also there was a tremendous amount of blood. The knife had gone to the heart, and apparently just about every drop of blood in his body had been pumped out. There was literally a pool going from the body across the sidewalk to the curb and out into the gutter.

Claims by Abbott that Adan had intended him harm turned out to be quite false; as this book makes clear, Abbott was filtering even that through a prison paranoia. Indeed, according to Abbott's lawyer Irvin Fisher, Mailer himself said to Abbott over the phone, "Look, I don't care what you say, you killed a decent guy. You keep talking about what a crazy he was, but I checked him out. That kid was sweet as hell. Admit you did a lousy thing, admit you're gonna have to pay for it. . . . Stop lying to yourself."

Perhaps a little like Voltaire, however, who reportedly refused to discuss his free moral views at the dinner table lest his servants overhear and rob him, Mailer spoke one way to Abbott in private while in public his story was different, relying heavily on the principle of literary extenuation. "Culture is worth a little risk," he asserted, adding, "I'm willing to gamble with a portion of society to save this man's talent." Nor did he neglect to mention the extenuating circumstances springing out of America's "capitalist" heart—an *idée fixe* for Mailer—in particular the prison conditions Abbott had suffered and

general the "violence" of our state and our institutions.

Mailer did issue enough statements of self-blame—if none of self-shame—to satisfy a number of his admirers, from Liz Smith to George Plimpton. Others among his erstwhile supporters had fallen away over the years, in varying degrees of disgust and disagreement, and the Abbott episode merely confirmed their more sober view. Disturbingly, however, some still seem caught in the Mailer mystique. Thus, Irving Howe's remark on the Abbott affair—"My guess is that I wouldn't think Abbott's as talented as Norman does, but it's not criminal to make a mistake"—almost makes it sound as if Mailer's crime here were one of literary judgment.

At another point, Howe castigates Mailer for not having fought with the storekeeper passage in "The White Negro" (first published in Howe's magazine *Disparities*—actually, this is not the celebratory passage on violence in the essay—and wonders aloud, "Would he still defend that violence about the eighteen-year-old 'daring the unknown' by murdering a fifty-year-old storekeeper? That seems to me crucial. That's where it begins, you see." Similarly, Mrs. Trilling muses, "What are we allowed to get away with by treating it literature rather than life? Is Norman's hipster, his 'White

Negro,' entirely a figure of speech? I'm not at all sure, and I don't think Norman himself has quite figured that one out either."

WHY do Howe and Mrs. Trilling still trouble themselves over this issue? It would seem that more than enough evidence has accumulated to show that Norman Mailer has trafficked in ideas that are evil, and that have borne fruit after their own kind. Too, Mailer has had ample opportunity to repudiate "that sentence" and others like it; the fact that he has not done so hardly entitles him to the continuing benefit of the doubt. It would seem to suggest not that he isn't "sure," or that he hasn't "quite figured that one out," but that he is, and that he has.

Mrs. Trilling's perseverance seems especially baffling since she emphatically observes of the infamous sentence that it was "bad writing because it was bad thinking because it was bad being." But she was apparently impressed with Mailer's behavior on the Dick Cavett show during the Abbott affair, feeling that he had come a long way from his "hipster" days. (A transcript of the interview reveals that despite obligatory breast-beating, Mailer withdrew nothing and in fact reiterated his views on individual violence being in many ways a natural response to the "violence of the state.") Mr. Trilling's words

close this book; in them she terms Mailer "the best writing artist of our time" and expresses encouragement for his "excursions into dissidence." Although she is careful to call for balance—"My superego friends could use the correction in Norman just as Norman needed the principle of control which they might teach him"—her position depressingly suggests that nothing at all has been learned since the 50's.

One of the women recorded in this book reveals a great deal about Mailer's life and times when she remarks: "We were all terribly Scott Fitzgeraldish, very dramatic and romantic . . . having high times. It didn't occur to me that anybody was really going off the wall." Yet Fitzgerald saw through his own boozy romantic destructiveness, while Mailer seems less to resemble Fitzgerald than he does one of Fitzgerald's fictional characters, the ones who break and smash things and then retreat unreflectingly back into money and privilege. To Jack Henry Abbott, after the Adan stabbing, Mailer confided that he had felt the same "compulsion of fate" when he stabbed his wife Adele, "that it was irreversible, the logic of events" (in Abbott's words). This, presumably, is the same logic according to which playing with fire means that someone will get burned. Yes, ideas do matter. Even, or perhaps especially, bad ones.

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