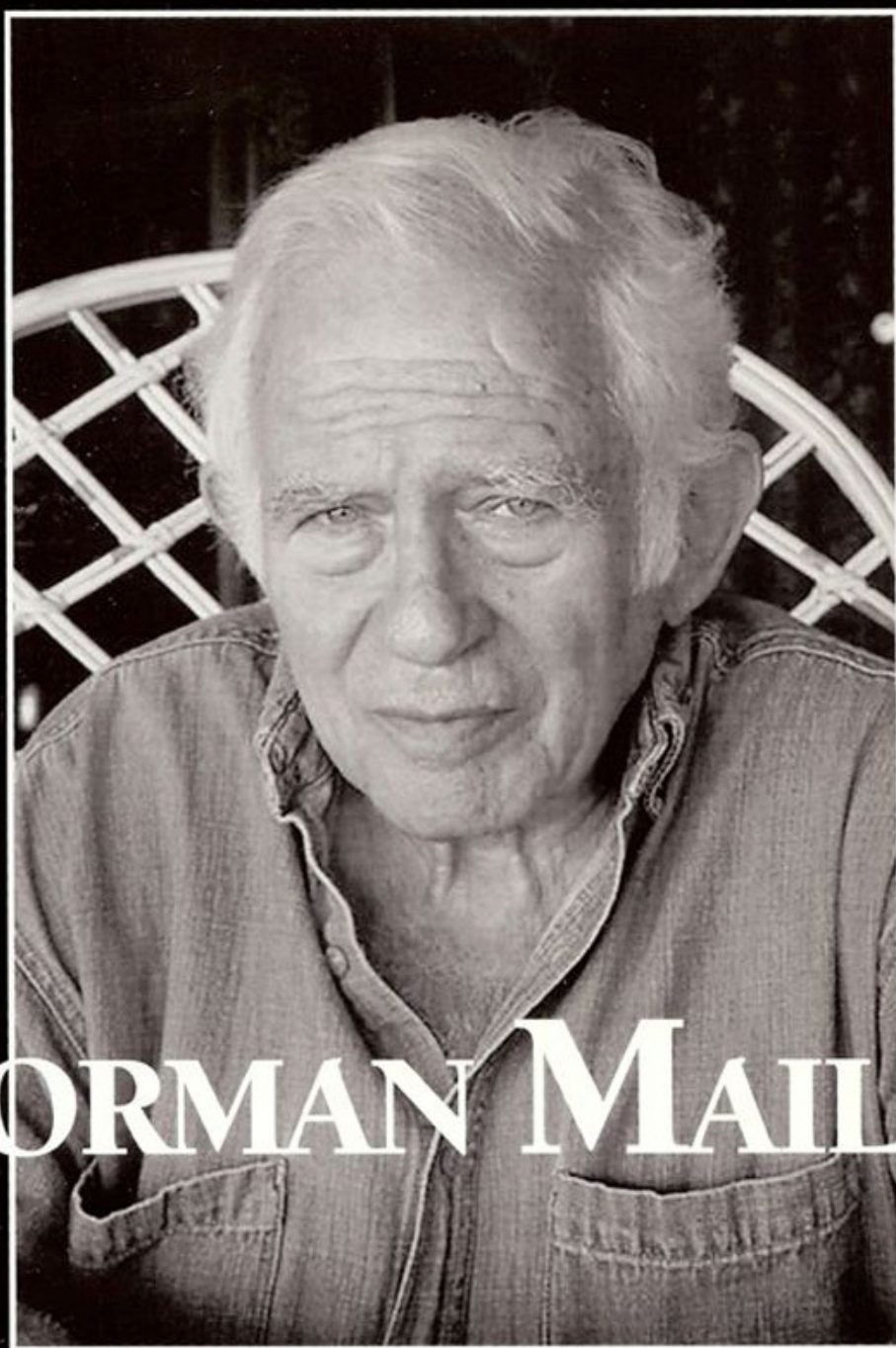


T H E E N D U R I N G V I S I O N O F



NORMAN MAILER

Barry H. Leeds

The Enduring Vision of Norman Mailer

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Chapter 1 Mailer and Marilyn: Prisoners of Sex

Norman Mailer has been fascinated with the life and death of Marilyn Monroe for decades, although he has always said he never met her. According to Shelly Winters, he did meet her in 1948 in Hollywood at a rally for Henry Wallace, but Mailer doesn't remember this (Manso, 131–133). From his tangential references to her in *An American Dream*, to his two books about her, *Marilyn* and *Of Women and Their Elegance*, to his one-act play "Strawhead," he has treated her as a paradigmatic figure in the overheated world of the American sexual imagination. In a paradoxically complementary way, Mailer unwittingly found himself a similarly paradigmatic figure as the perceived antagonist of the Women's Movement in the late 1960s, a phenomenon he dealt with at some length in his 1971 book, *The Prisoner of Sex*. The issues, themes, and palpable tensions of heterosexual relationships illuminated there can ultimately be seen to inform much of his work and his own life. Even when dealing with the work of Henry Miller, in *Genius and Lust*, Mailer reveals his own artistic and personal predilections in these matters. Thus, a reading of these works reveals the coherence of Mailer's vision of Monroe, of women, and of heterosexual love.

Throughout his career of almost half a century in literature and the public eye, Mailer has candidly aired his developing views on women and on heterosexuality. For almost as long, they have been misinterpreted, perversely or unwittingly: rewritten and obscured to suit the preconceptions and prejudices of his readers and critics. If this controversy reached a peak in the early seventies with the publication of *The Prisoner of Sex* (and the notable New York Town Hall symposium with Germaine Greer, Diana Trilling, and other prominent feminists), it began as early as *The Naked and the Dead*.

In this, his first published novel, Mailer touched repeatedly, if sometimes simplistically, on the attitudes of men towards women. These range from the predatory and irresponsible view of the syphilitic Private Woodrow Wilson of women as purely sexual objects who are "no fuggin' good," to the more sophisticated affectations of Lieutenant Robert Hearn, a liberal who doesn't like people (men or women) very much. As one of his sexual partners vitriolically accuses him:

Hearn, she says, in her deep husky voice, you're a shell, you're nothing but a goddam shell. After you've had fifty thousand of us up here, you'll probably cut it off and hang it up to dry. You learned an acceptable wiggle somewhere along the line, and you think that's all you need to get by. You've got a faeces complex, haven't you, you can't stand being touched. You get me so goddam mad, a million miles away aren't you, nothing ever hits you. Nothing's worth touching. (274)

The corrective to these cynical assessments is that of Joey Goldstein, the nice Jewish boy from Brooklyn, an utterly faithful husband. Gently reassuring the ambivalent Stanley, he reveals his own kindness and decency:

Stanley deliberated a moment, seeking a way to phrase it. "Do you ever get ... well, you know, jealous? He spoke very softly so that Brown could not hear them.

“Jealous? No I can’t say I ever do,” Goldstein said with finality. He had an inkling of what was bothering Stanley, and automatically he tried to soothe him.

“Listen,” he said, “I’ve never had the pleasure of meeting your wife, but you don’t have to worry about her. These fellows that are always talking about women that way, they don’t know any better. They’ve fooled around so much ...” Goldstein had a perception. “Listen, if you ever notice, it’s always the ones who go around with a lot of, well, loose women who get so jealous. It’s because they don’t trust themselves.” “Listen, you’ve got nothing to worry about. Your wife loves you, doesn’t she? Well that’s all you got to think about. A decent woman who loves a man doesn’t do anything she shouldn’t do.” (421)

As early as 1955 in *The Deer Park*, Mailer was fascinated with, and adeptly portraying, the mercurial moods and ineffable psychology of the movie star in Lulu Meyers, a blonde actress with the “voice of a child,” and the interpersonal transactions between an intellectual man and a sexually charged woman in the relationship of Charles Francis Eitel and Elena Esposito. Mailer would later write in *Marilyn*: “An old sultan with a thousand curses on his head is capable of smuggling anything into the mind and body of a young woman—less is known about the true transactions of fucking than any science on earth” (71). Nonetheless, Mailer has taken it upon himself to inherit the fallen mantle of Henry Miller and become the foremost professor of this sexual science.

In *An American Dream*, the “transactions of fucking” form the primary controlling metaphor of the novel. The infernal fornications of the Ruta passage introduce the essentially Manichaean vision which informs this novel and most of Mailer’s subsequent work. The procreative love scene with Cherry that forms the novel’s true center looks ahead to a vision of equality between lovers that would become central to the American consciousness later in the 1960s.

Like diving on a cold winter day back to a warm pool, I was back in her, our wills now met, locked in a contest like an exchange of stares which goes on and on, wills which begin at last in the force of equality to water and to loose tears, to soften into some light which is shut away again by the will to force tears back, steel to steel, until steel shimmers in a mist of dew, is wiped, is wet again. I was passing through a grotto of curious lights, dark lights, like colored lanterns beneath the sea, ... and a voice like a child’s whisper on the breeze came up so faint I could hardly hear, “Do you want her?” it asked. “Do you really want her, do you want to know something about love at last?” and I desired something I had never known before, and answered; it was as if my voice had reached to its roots; and, “Yes,” I said, “of course I do, I want love,” but like an urbane old gentleman, a dry tart portion of my mind added, “Indeed, and what has one to lose?” and then the voice in a small terror, “Oh, you have more to lose than you have lost already, fail at love and you lose more than you can know.” “And if I do not fail?” I asked back. “Do not ask,” said the voice, “choose now!” and some continent of dread speared wide in me, rising like a dragon, as if I knew the choice were real, and in a lift of

terror I opened my eyes and her face was beautiful beneath me in that rainy morning, her eyes were golden with light, and she said, “Ah, honey, sure,” and I said sure to the voice in me, and felt love fly in like some great winged bird, some beating of wings at my back, and felt her will dissolve into tears, and some great deep sorrow like roses drowned in the salt of the sea came flooding from her womb and washed into me like a sweet honey of balm for all the bitter sores of my soul and for the first time in my life without passing through fire or straining the stones of my will, I came up from my body rather than down from my mind, I could not stop, some shield broke in me, bliss, and the honey she had given me I could only give back, all sweets to her womb ...

“Son of a bitch,” I said, “So that’s what it’s all about.” And my mouth like a worn-out soldier fell on the heart of her breast. (127–28)

But the novel also looks ahead to *Marilyn*, providing a glimpse of Mailer’s lengthy fascination with her as an exemplar of the American sexual experience. He describes Cherry singing at a nightclub: “There was a champagne light which made her look like Grace Kelly, and a pale green which gave her a little of Monroe. She looked at different instants like a dozen lovely blondes ...” (97). And at the novel’s conclusion, when Rojack hallucinates one last telephone conversation with Cherry in heaven, she tells him, “Marilyn says to say hello” (269).

This brings us to *The Prisoner of Sex*. When Mailer learned that he was viewed as the archenemy of the women’s liberation movement, he was, purportedly, surprised. As the story goes, Gloria Steinem revealed this distinction to him at lunch one day. When Mailer asked the reason, she said, “You might try reading your books someday” (19).

Mailer has always described himself as a counterpuncher, and this may be the most applicable metaphor for his responses to the women’s movement. He begins by explaining the circumstances (notably the disintegration of his fourth marriage) which render the problems of heterosexual love more central than ever to his consciousness, then examines the central treatises of the movement. He discusses various factions, quoting at length from such documents as “The SCUM (Society for Cutting Up Men) Manifesto,” “The NOW (National Organization for Women) Bill of Rights,” and Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch*. But central to Mailer’s discussion is Kate Millet’s *Sexual Politics*, not least because a large portion of her work is devoted to an attack on his *American Dream*.

Mailer has written perceptive literary criticism before, but in the case of Millet his task is almost too easy. He shows her position to be virtually untenable, not only in regard to Mailer himself, but in her treatments of Henry Miller and D. H. Lawrence as well. By demonstrating the cavalier manner in which Ms. Millet quotes these authors out of context, Mailer calls into question the integrity of her methods as well as the rigidity of her doctrinaire line.

The technology of women’s liberation is Mailer’s next subject. An excerpt from an article by Ti-Grace Atkinson, dealing with extrauterine conception as a desirable goal, provides him an opening for digression upon one of his favorite subjects. For some years, Mailer has dealt in extramedical theories of his own (e.g., his often expressed belief that

cancer can be caused by the repression of one's rage), which in turn bear upon his essentially Manichaeian religious views. He likes to see things in terms of clear (if often complex) polarities, and the technology of conception lends itself much more readily to such treatment than did the Apollo 11 project, subject of *Of a Fire on the Moon*.

There's a striking difference in Mailer's stance between *Of a Fire on the Moon* and *The Prisoner of Sex*. In the former, Mailer finds himself torn, puzzled. The polarity he has drawn in the past between sterile, satanic American technology and the fertile, God-oriented humanism he subscribes to, is blurred by Apollo 11. Repelled by the odorless, crew-cut world of NASA, Mailer is nonetheless awed by the massive achievement of the moon landing. Add to this the fact that Mailer has, for some years, appropriated the moon as one of his own favorite symbols, and the duality of his response assumes major proportions. Toward the end of *Of a Fire on the Moon*, Mailer, irritated by the drunken behavior of his good friend Eddie Bonetti in a restaurant, looks around at the vacuous, smug middle Americans at adjoining tables, and silently, dismally, thinks of his friend, "You've been drunk all summer ... and *they* have taken the moon" (441).

The situation presented Mailer in *Of a Fire on the Moon* is not a happy one for him. He is forced to confront the possibility that the technology oriented people of the establishment may, finally, have won the moon because in their dogged, unimaginative way they have earned the right to, while artists, intellectuals, and dropouts have submerged themselves in a life style which has a sterility of its own.

No longer ambivalent, Mailer is unequivocal in *The Prisoner of Sex*: technology in sex and conception is, to him, utterly out of place. Sex must be funky, natural, unfettered. Puckishly, he proceeds to establish his credentials in treating contemporary scientific treatises. He recoils in mixed amusement and horror from the prospect of extrauterine conception and incubation, with their obvious *Brave New World* implications. He reacts with eloquent and poignant pain to the suggestions that machines are superior to men as sexual partners for women, and that every woman who ever claimed a vaginal orgasm was lying. (All those wives, all those mistresses, lying?):

What of his own poor experience? All lies? if there were women who came as if lightening bolts had flung their bodies across the bed, were there not also women who came with the gentlest squeeze of the deepest walls of the vagina, women who came every way, even women who seemed never to come yet claimed they did, and never seemed to suffer? yes, and women who purred as they came and women who screamed, women who came as if a finger had been tickling them down a mile-long street and women who arrived with the firm frank avowal of a gentleman shaking hands, yes, if women came in every variety...even the most modest of men could know something of that — then how to account for the declaration that vaginal orgasm was myth... . Women, went the cry, liberate yourselves from the tyranny of the vagina. It is nothing but a flunky to the men (77–78).

But it is when he objects to experimentally demonstrable scientific fact on purely emotional, even mystical grounds, that Mailer is most compelling. After quoting at length from various works on the feasibility of determining in advance the sex of one's child by artificially creating an alkaline or acidic environment in the uterus, he reiterates strikingly

his fundamental belief that the quality of the act of conception determines the quality of the offspring:

One could make a boy or a girl if one was ready to swab vinegar or baking soda up one's love ... if one believed a child begun in the juices of an unencumbered fuck was in no way superior to a baby made with eye on the alkalinity factor ... (214)

The difference between unencumbered conception and technologically monitored conception becomes for Mailer a crucial one, for it is symptomatic of a larger political crisis:

It was the measure of the liberal technologist and the Left totalitarian that they exhibited the social lust to make units of people... . (129)

There's a totalitarian simplicity to the assumption that all people are the same, a totalitarian method to the attempt to "make units of people." Perhaps *Brave New World*, as it is made to appear less outlandish by each new technological and social "advance," no longer frightens us.

What, finally, is Mailer saying in *The Prisoner of Sex*? After the autobiographical background, the exercises in literary and scientific criticism, the elaborate digressions on suicide, homosexuality, cancer, what does he come out for? Ultimately, this book, egocentric as any he's ever written, is an uncompromising, powerful, and often poignant statement of Mailer's belief that if men and women are not to lose their individual souls, the irrational magic in heterosexual love must be carefully guarded. What many people seem to have forgotten, and what Mailer helps us to remember, is that there are differences between men and women, and that in these differences, in the tension, intensity, lust and love which depend upon them lie much of the beauty of the human experience.

Towards the end of *The Prisoner of Sex*, Mailer, writing of D.H. Lawrence, says:

Whoever believes that such a leap is not possible across the gap, that a man cannot write of a woman's soul, or a white man of a black man, does not believe in literature itself. (152)

He himself fleshes out this conceit in *Elegance*, a fictitious "autobiography" presented from the first person point of view of Marilyn Monroe, as though it were one of those "as told to" celebrity "autobiographies": Doris Day's story as told to A.E. Hotchner, or Marilyn's as told to Mailer. Apparently unable to leave his subject alone, Mailer subsequently wrote "Strawhead," a one-act play based on *Elegance* but conceived in an experimental mode strangely reminiscent of his 1967 off-Broadway dramatic adaptation of *The Deer Park*. "Strawhead" was staged for two weeks in 1986 at the Actors Studio theater in New York to an appreciative audience of theatrical professionals. Ironically starring Mailer's daughter Kate, the play takes place entirely in Marilyn's mind, as she relives her memories in a virtually cinematic manner.

But the true story of the meshing of their minds was told in *Marilyn*, in which Mailer found in Monroe an American symbol, a mass of paradoxes:

She was the last of the myths to thrive in the long evening of the American dream ... She was a cornucopia. She excited dreams of honey for the horn.

Yet she was more. She was a presence. She was ambiguous. She was the angel of sex, and the angel was in her detachment. For she was separated from what she offered. “None but Marilyn Monroe,” wrote Diana Trilling, “could suggest such a purity of sexual delight. The boldness with which she could parade herself and yet never be gross, her sexual flamboyance and bravado which yet breathed an air of mystery and even reticence, her voice which carried such ripe overtones of erotic excitement and yet was the voice of a shy child—these complications were integral to her gift.” ... We heard her speak in that tiny tinkly voice so much like a dinnerbell, and it tolled when she was dead across that decade of the Sixties she had helped to create, across its promise, its excitement, its ghosts and its center of tragedy ... [She was] a giant and an emotional pygmy; a lover of life and a cowardly hyena of death who drenched herself in chemical stupors; a sexual oven whose fire may rarely have been lit ... She was certainly more and less than the silver witch of us all. In her ambition, so Faustian, ... her noble democratic longings intimately contradicted by the widening pool of her narcissism (where every friend and slave must bathe), we can see the magnified mirror of ourselves, our exaggerated and now all but defeated generation. (16–17)

Does any of this sound familiar? In an interview with Lenore Hershey in the *Ladies' Home Journal*, Mailer said:

I've always wanted to enter a woman's mind. For some reason, though I never met her, I felt close to Marilyn Monroe. I feel the obvious identity with her because she came out of nothing and achieved such notoriety. In a less embattled way, the same is true for me.

There are clearly similarities to be seen between Mailer and Marilyn, despite their obvious differences in gender, intellectual achievement, family background, and above all, the ability to survive the American celebrity experience. Both lived the tarnished Horatio Alger myth. Mailer was able to criticize it effectively, as in *An American Dream*, where the simplistic myth of external success is rejected in favor of the existential quest for self-definition; or in *Naked*, where Joey Goldstein's blind acceptance of it is sad and faintly ridiculous. Marilyn could never divorce herself wholly from it. And both were indeed prisoners of sex, that essential element of the twentieth century American dream. For Marilyn, it was her stock in trade, the trap she laid that became her own trap. For Norman, it led to six marriages, nine children, and one of the primary themes of more than thirty books.

Perhaps the most obvious way in which Mailer is linked to Marilyn is in the supposition that she represents the ultimate sexual fantasy for a man who has loved so many women: the one he can never have, never meet. In response to a question asked at the Miami Book Fair in November, 1988, Mailer said of Monroe's marriage to Arthur Miller, “I always thought I could have taken her from him because I would have understood her better. She needed understanding. But she hurt him badly; she probably would have killed me” (*Orlando Sun-Sentinel* 1E). On a more sophisticated and positive level, Mailer's *identification* with Monroe suggests, especially in *Elegance*, the announcement of a certain healthy androgyny by Mailer, a more successful one than that

perceived by E.L. Doctorow in Hemingway's abortive attempt to remake himself in mid-life by the writing of *The Garden of Eden* (1986). Thus, of Mailer's fanciful conjectures in *Marilyn* and *Elegance*, we may say what Ken Kesey's narrator Chief Bromden says at the outset of *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*: "It's the truth even if it didn't happen."

Perhaps this sense of kinship is what most informs the poignance of Mailer's farewell to Marilyn on behalf of us all:

... Let us hope her mighty soul and the mouse of her little one are both recovering their proportions in some fair and gracious home, and she will soon return to us from retirement. It is the devil of her humor and the curse of our land that she will come back speaking Chinese. Goodbye Norma Jean. Au revoir Marilyn. When you happen on Bobby and Jack, give the wink. And if there's a wish, pay your visit to Mr. Dickens. For he, like many another literary man, is bound to adore you, fatherless child. (*Marilyn* 248)

Ultimately, the complex series of factors that have linked and continue to link Mailer and Marilyn has been persistently rendered simplistic by critics and admirers alike. They are at once improbable, ineffable, and paradoxically inevitable.

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