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Book Review

The Spooky Art: Some Thoughts on Writing by Norman Mailer (2003). 330 pages. Available from Random House.

Paul Levine

"One characteristic of the very ambitious writer is that he becomes a theoretician of his own work," observed the American critic Richard Poirier. "In being so, he manages to set the terms for the criticism subsequently written about him." Poirier was describing Norman Mailer in 1972, when he was still the most ambitious writer in America. Earlier, in 1958, Mailer had said, "I am imprisoned with a perception that will settle for nothing less than making a revolution in the consciousness of our time. Whether rightly or wrongly, it is then obvious that I would go so far as to think it is my present and future work which will have the deepest influence of any work being done by an American novelist in these years. "

From the beginning, Mailer established himself as a writer who always swam against the current, placing himself outside postwar American culture and above the writers and intellectuals who merely described it. In the early 1950s, at the height of the Cold War, when others were celebrating the national consensus about American values, Mailer demurred. Instead he found the postwar period with its snug prosperity and its smug conformity a particularly dangerous time for American writers. "I would propose that the artist feels most alienated when he loses the sharp sense of what he is alienated from," he wrote. "In this context, I wonder if there has been a time in the last fifty years when the American artist has felt more alienated." It was this early self-portrait that defined Mailer as an embattled and heroic writer for a generation of readers and critics. Not surprisingly, Mailer took as his literary model Ernest Hemingway.

Mailer had burst on the literary scene in 1948 with the publication of his first and most famous novel, *The Naked and the Dead.* He was twenty-five years old. In *The Naked and the Dead,* Mailer set out to explore the possibilities — and impossibilities — of individual heroism in a modern world

dominated by mass movements and new concentrations of power. His hero, Lieutenant Hearn, is a liberal intellectual who, like the author, has gone to Harvard. In the novel, he leads a squad of Marines on an ill-fated mission to liberate a Japanese-held island somewhere in the Pacific. Confronted with an apocalyptic global war and the promise of a reactionary world order to follow, Hearn discovers that the liberal imagination is too weak to understand the new uses of power unleashed by the world war and too ambivalent to offer any heroic alternative to the reactionary irrationalism which he opposes. Thus Hearn's rejection of his liberal past closes the circle of alienation around him and brings him to the point of indecision which leads finally to his own death. Shortly before he dies, Hearn rehearses the options left open to him and discovers there is no way out. "There were no answers you could find," he thinks, "but perhaps there were epochs in history which had no answers."

After the success of *The Naked and the Dead,* Mailer was famous but he soon felt the pressure experienced by young writers blessed—and cursed—with early celebrity. Instead of trying to repeat his early success by writing another war book, Mailer moved in a different direction in his next two novels. Both *Barbary Shore* (1951) and *The Deer Park* (1955), were brave but unsuccessful attempts to combine his sense of radical politics with the traditional form of the novel. At the same time he abandoned Marxism for more heroic forms of existential and sexual politics that often bordered on the bombastic. By the end of the decade, Mailer was in danger of becoming more famous for what he said than for what he wrote.

As his fiction became more diffuse, Mailer moved in the direction of the New Journalism. During the 1960s he addressed cultural issues such as the Vietnam War, the Space Program and the Presidential candidates from Kennedy to Nixon. The high point was his marvelous account of the 1967 March on the Pentagon when half a million Americans descended on Washington to protest against the Vietnam War. In *The Armies of the Night* (1968) Mailer played the dual role of demonstrator and witness and became the author's most memorable character, a combination, he later said, consisting of one quarter hero and three quarters clown. Moreover, Mailer described the conflict between young anti-war radicals and their middle-aged parents as a new "civil war" from a new political perspective. "Mailer was a Left Conservative," he wrote. "So he had his own point of view. To himself he would suggest that he tried to think in the style of Marx in order to attain certain values suggested by Edmund Burke."

For over half a century Mailer has remained in the spotlight because of his writing and his actions. He started a newspaper, made movies, ran for

Mayor of New York, and was even arrested for stabbing his wife. Despite these distractions, he continued to publish books on a wide variety of subjects ranging from murderers like Gary Gilmore and Lee Harvey Oswald to cultural icons like Marilyn Monroe, Pablo Picasso and Jesus. But at some point in the 1980s it became clear that Norman Mailer, the youthful rebel of unbounded ambition, had become a solid citizen and literary elder statesman.

Now for his eightieth birthday, Mailer has just published a compendium on writing called *The Spooky Art*. It is presented as a book of advice to youthful writers from an avuncular mentor. Some of the advice is amusing, for instance, when he compares a poem to a one-night stand, a short story to an affair, and a novel to a marriage. Some is bogus: "If you can, I think it's a good idea to rotate your crops. Once you've written a novel that's factual and realistic and big, awfully close to what happened, then it's probably a good idea that your next novel be as fanciful as possible. Yes — if you can, rotate those crops." But here and there are reminders of what an insightful writer Mailer can be.

Finally, there is the pleasure of watching a true professional at work, revealing how he has managed to publish more than thirty volumes in his long career. He explains quite simply, "Over the years, I've found one rule. It's the only one I give on those occasions when I talk about writing. It's a simple rule. If you tell yourself you are going to be at your desk tomorrow, you are by that declaration asking your unconscious to prepare the material. You are, in effect, contracting to pick up such valuables at a given time. Count on me, you are saying to a few forces below: I will be there to write."