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Norman Mailer’s Fiction and Nonfiction Characteristics

Abstract

This article deals with Norman Mailer’s creative work and provides a brief analysis of his books. In its creative shaping of factual material into literary art, Norman Mailer’s work represents a third mode between the conventional categories of fiction and nonfiction, which might be called “mailerism”. My paper proposes that Mailer’s blender of genres, literary forms, and conventions constitutes a complex literary fiction, which blurs and merges the distinctions between fact and fiction and between fiction and non-fiction. His narration has got peculiar characteristics, specific rhetorical techniques and aims; I will try to delineate these specific means and particular effects in his fiction and non-fiction through my presentation.

Introduction

Norman Mailer is considered as an innovator of the nonfiction novel and a towering figure in American literature for nearly 60 years. He developed in the 1960s and 1970s a form of journalism that combined actual events, autobiography, and political commentary with the richness of the novel. Mailer’s works always stirred controversy, because of both their stylish nonconformity and his controversial views of American life.

Characterised by imagination and originality in facing the world’s problems, Norman managed to make his art part of his life and his life an inseparable part of his books. The world of his books and the reality that they display is permeated by conflicts or struggles, a conflict between good and evil, between God and Satan, between human being and nature, between love and hate, so it is a universe where the balance between life and death is easily changeable and reversal. He is considered to be a romantic hero and like all romantics he is overcome with pathos. He tried to find a better fate for the human being and refused to accept the original sin and the fall of the mankind, intending to carry the human being back to the Garden of Eden.

Mailer’s literary career has been varied, controversial, public, prolific and
misunderstood. Few American writers have had their careers on the anvil of public inspection for a long period. During these years Mailer not only published 39 books (including 11 novels), written plays (and staged them), screenplays (and directed and acted in them), poems (in The New Yorker and underground journals), but also attempted every sort of narrative form, including some he invented. No record of “new journalism” is complete without mention of his 1960s Esquire columns, essays and political reportage.

The Fiction of Mailer

Norman Mailer appeared in the literary scene in the end of the 1948 with a series of novels and books (fiction and nonfiction) which detailed agony, ideological void and the illusions of the decade. The intensity of his books, the modern topics, the experiments in form, helped American literature to renovate and escape from the mediocrity and the exhaustion of the existent literary form.

In his first novel, The Naked and the Dead (1945), it is widely treated the theme of regimentation. Artistically speaking, this novel is based on the conception and the interlacing of two elements: socio-biological causality and the analysis of the inner world of the characters. Historically speaking, this book is a document of World War II and it is also a panorama of the epoch where the fate of the individual is determined by circumstances and the development of events.

The beginning of the ‘50s coincides with the Cold War, the new conflict with Korea, but also with the influence of modernism and technology in everyday life. This atmosphere highlights the lack of communication and alienation in America. According to a survey American people were criticized for losing individuality, becoming materialistic, and being victims of the false illusions of the decade. These allusions are easily found in Mailer’s novels Barbary Shore (1951) and The Deer Park (1955). In these novels he abandoned the naturalism of his first book. The abandonment of naturalism was considered “a non-American inclination toward ideology” which blemished the purity of the fiction, but there were these two novels that marked the beginning of Mailer’s experimentation in fiction.

In his books Mailer tried to penetrate to the dark side of the human mind and the mystique of sexuality. These attempts are obvious in his novels but also in his nonfictions books. Another permanent peculiarity of his fiction is the interweaving of ideological and psychological elements in the treatment of his characters. According to Mailer, this mixture is done on purpose to create a bridge between Marx and Freud.
In 1957 a biographical study described Mailer as “self-confident but modest”\textsuperscript{1} who abhorred personal publicity. But in *Advertisements for Myself* (1959) autobiography and self publicity became the only way of analyzing life, so Mailer writes in a satiric way: “Let others profit by my unseemly self-absorption, and so look to improve their own characters”. *Advertisements for Myself* turned his life and his literary career in a laboratory for scrutinizing life in America. Even in his later books he continued the analyzing of himself as an American model. These harsh self-analyzes are attenuated not only by the mocking irony but also the mature thoughts which reached their peak in *The Armies of the Night*.

The most criticized aspects in his literary composition are the autobiographical elements in his nonfiction and the ideological disputation in his fiction. The attack of the critics against the excessive autobiographical elements in his books is supported by the fact that “the self” or “the ego” was considered by them as less important and an inferior topic, if compared with the social life which was the focal point of the main writers of the nineteenth century.

After the publication of the *Barbary Shore* (1951), Mailer didn’t stop experimenting with the narrators’ point of view, which he considered as “the most powerful lever in literature”. In his prose we find different kinds of view-points and different narrators. His attempts to create a new, personal voice, which was independent and different from the previous book, characterized each novel.

Mailer’s seminal essay “*The White Negro*” (1957), casts a long shadow over the entire body of his work, as well as his life. It provides an armature, upon which *Advertisements for Myself* (1959) is built, it defines the peculiarity of American existentialism which permeates his later work, the development of his personal and fictive philosophies; politically, it marks the fusion between Freud and Marx in his vision; philosophically, it codifies the existential concepts which will be fleshed out in Stephen Rojack’s question for personal salvation in *An American Dream* (1965). (Leeds 2002: 35)

Mailer’s existentialist, which has its roots in *The White Negro* (1956), took as a model the intuitive responses and rhythms of the black music and his sense of immediate present.

“It is on this bleak scene that a phenomenon has appeared: the American existentialist - the hipster, the man who knows that if our collective condition is to live with instant death by atomic war, relatively quick death by the State . . . or with a slow death by conformity with every creative and rebellious . . .
instinct stifled, . . . why then the only life-giving answer is to accept the terms of death, to live with death as immediate danger, to divorce oneself from society, to exist without roots, to set out on that uncharted journey into the rebellious imperatives of the self” (Advertisements for myself, 339)

Mailer’s existential hero, the hipster, exists between its being an individual human being and a force of nature. According to George Alfred Schrader, he “represents a curious blending of nihilism (demonic defiance) and a pagan faith in the essential goodness of elemental power [. . .] (and) the White Negro symbolizes the opposition between civilization (White) and the instinctual passion (Negro).” (Braudy 1972: 93) This hero is perfectly fleshed out in Rojack and the black singer Shago, in the novel An American Dream.

At the end of The White Negro (1956), Mailer suggests that the hipster/existentialist, articulated by the downtrodden groups as poor woman and blacks, are the only hope for the redemption of America and they present the best in an American character. He idealised them by seeing them as the only hope for the nation.

Violence is another permanent motif in his work. It permeates every cell of his prose. From his first book The Naked and the Dead (1948) to Harlot’s Ghost (1991), it remains the most criticized motif, but it is never gratuitous violence. In an interview in 1987 Mailer said: “. . . You know I’ve been saying from the beginning, of course, there is individual violence versus the violence of the State. It takes different forms” (Leeds 2002: 50). Mailer considers violence significant in personal confrontation in a ring and outside it, between male adversaries, between sexual partners. This motif is easily turned into a fundamental theme in his fiction: “the most terrible themes of my own life: the nearest of violence to creation, and the whiff of murder just beyond every embrace of love. . .” The darkest side of this vision is disturbingly revealed in The Armies of the Night (1968), The Deer Park (1955), and Advertisements for Myself (1959). This fighting metaphor reaches its peak in An American Dream (1965).

Another important topic and element in his fiction is the “the American dream”. According to Braud: “Man’s generic need, to thrust toward a consciousness, knowledge, and a self-realization that lies beyond the boundaries of permitted and understood experiences, is a need symbolically embodied in the very nature of America’s historical experiment, and variously expressed by its chief writers from the beginning of American literature to the present. It is Emerson’s theme, and it is Melville’s, Dickinson’s, and Whitman’s. It emerged as the life-energy,
too, of Henry James’s imagination. And after James it is Fitzgerald’s.” (Braud 1972:141). Then it is Mailer’s and he writes:

“To believe the impossible may be won creates strength from which the impossible may indeed be attacked [. . .] to believe the impossible may be won. . .”

This idealistic pattern and its contemporaneous American subject matter, puts Mailer in the main stream of American writers for whom the ambiguities of the “American dream” has been impossible to avoid.

The Nonfiction of Mailer

The Nonfiction novel and the New Journalism represent a specific kind of literary response to the critical, social and cultural phenomena of the American sixties and seventies, to events like the civil rights movement, political assassinations and political conventions, the drug culture and the counter culture, Women’s Liberation, the space program and the moon flight, and the War in Vietnam. The practice of writing both fiction and journalism was not new or unknown. It has been a part of many American writers’ careers, especially those writers who have excelled in the realistic mode. In fact, an attempt to apply the techniques of novel-writing to journalism or other nonfiction was not a new practice in American writing of the sixties, as we may find reading works like Mark Twain’s Life on the Mississippi (1883) or writings by other journalist-novelists following Twain, such as Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser, Ernest Hemingway and John Dos Passos. (Lehtimaki 2002: 123).

Why nonfiction books are considered novels?

It is not easy to define what the novel is: Bakhtin argues that “the novel has no definite form or shape, but it is constantly seeking its form” (Bakhin 1981: 39) and according to Brink “there is no singular Great Tradition, no Ideal Form, no Definitive Shape”(Brink 1998: 6). According to Gérade Genete “genres can perfectly change norms – norms that after all [. . .] were imposed on them by no one but themselves” (Genete 1993: 83). By recognizing its density, its range, its complexity, its conventions, the novel always turns towards itself and its own ways of making. To sum up, the novel is a flexible and transforming genre which has always included different modes of writing in it, combining epic, imaginative, historical, biographical etc., so it is fluid and indeterminate by nature.
The first-person novel borrows narrative features of an authentic autobiography, memoir, diary and the heterodiegetic fictional narrative\(^2\), which is a mimesis of factual forms such as history, newspaper accounts and chronicles, predated the modern novel. So we may speak of reciprocal exchange and relationship between fictional and factual modes. This idea is also supported by Linda Hutcheon. For her “the nonfictional novel” is a natural outgrowth of the old realistic tradition and its origin may be found in the early journal and epistolary novel.

The term “nonfiction”, in the context of literary studies, is used as a negative term, connoting non-literary texts, legal, scientific, journalistic, etc. Gérade Genete and Lubomir Doležel prefer the term “factual narrative” to avoid the negative expression “nonfiction”. I shall use the term “literary nonfiction” to denominate this mode of writing, but I have to precise that this term is not the same as “New Journalism”. “Literary nonfiction” is used to characterise such writing which foregrounds both its poetic and referential aspects. This term may sound complicated, but it has been essential to “convey the hybrid nature of the texts and thus their paradoxical, threshold, problematic nature.”\(^3\) (Anderson 1989: ix)

Mailer’s journalism, which was often defined as “new”, “artistic” and “literary”, starts with three important pieces of reportage in the early sixties, “Superman comes to the Supermarket” (1960), “Ten Thousand Words a Minute” (1962), and “In the Red Light” (1964). These essays help us “to trace the growth of Mailer’s unique approach to nonfiction” (Merrill 1992: 93). Mailer’s autobiographical “I” of these essays is transformed into an apparently more novelistic “he” or “Mailer” in his book-length nonfiction narratives of the late 1960s and 1970s. In *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* (1968) and its sequel *St. George and the Godfather* (1972), but also in *The Armies of the Night* (1968), Mailer uses a third-person storytelling based on first-person participation. Although all of them express a “genuine bewilderment as to which role this writer should assume: that of the passive and observing reporter or that of the literary man who participates in several of the events he witnesses” (St. George 1979: 101)

Mailer (as a character), in his nonfiction books, usually adopts a detached position and observes media people, reporters, politicians, and tries to find the best form for his complex narrative nonfiction. His journalistic techniques foregrounds literal and metaphorical vision but also convey the subjective atmosphere of these experiences, that’s the reason why his books are read more as novels. In his nonfiction books it is as if he was replacing his temporary assignment as a
journalist with his permanent profession as a novelist. In his book *The Prisoner of Sex* (1971), Mailer reflects that “obviously, no journalist could have done the job, it was work which called for a novelist” (PS 30).

In *The Armies of the Night* (1968) he is present as a character, as the narrator and as the author of the text. While we (the reader) read this book, we have glimpse of the real writer, of his character as an arrogant and self-conscious egoist, but also of his public duties as a journalist, as a movie-maker and as a public celebrity. The reader has glimpse of the writer who has produced the text and whose image is constantly being described ironically and even analyzed by the narrator. So while he (Mailer) produces the text, the text produces him. The narrative of this novel is based upon the playful distinction between the visionary artist writing the book and the clumsy character acting in the story.

Olsen notes that the theme is “the essence of literature and the literary appreciation necessarily involves the recognition of theme”. Mailer’s main works of nonfiction are quite different from each other and they are often read as stylistic experiments in connection with personal performances. However, the thematic aspect of his nonfiction is not limited to *topical themes* (social or political concerns of the time), which are easily found in *The Armies of the Night* (1968), *The Executioner’s Song* (1979), *Of a Fire on the Moon* (1970) etc, but they also contain ontological, philosophical, religious themes (in a word ‘perennial’ themes). Perennial themes are universal, that’s why his books belong to the field of poetry.

Mailer’s nonfiction constantly deals with well-known public events and it employs rhetoric as a style whereas his favourite figure of speech is paradox. His work can be contextualized in the framework of existentialism, Manichaeism and romanticism, but also in the literary tradition of realism, naturalism, romance and postmodernism. At the centre of Mailer’s universe is a creative human being (a painter, a journalist, a writer, a professor, a boxer etc). His most effective way of defining himself and his character is found in the *personal courage and style*.

Mailer’s philosophy and mythology, as it is presented in his books, has a clear connection with the Jewish tradition. This context alludes to a conflict and a masculine attitude. According to the Jewish mysticism and kabbalistic tradition “the male” as a human being embodies the idea of inspiration, struggle and “creation”, whereas “the female” is seen as an evil or an enemy to this inspiration, but she is the only one who can accomplish this act of “creation”. This division and
attitude toward men and women, explains the patterns on which *An American Dream* (1965) and *The Prisoner of Sex* (1971) are built. This conflict is obvious in the novel *American Dream*, Rojack (a man), is always struggling to change his life, till he reaches salvation through the killing of his wife (Deborah) and the beginning of a new love affair with Cherry: Deborah, his wife, is presented as the “Devil’s daughter” and allied with spiritual corruption and power. This act of murdering his wife is the only way to redemption (Gerson 1982: 167-168).

The connection between history and literature, fact and fiction has been a focal topic and preoccupation in his fiction and nonfiction from 1960-1980. In the majority of his books he presented the conflict of his epoch by trying to give to the people a new point of view which often caused shock and raised disagreements.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, we may say that Norman Mailer’s work represents a third mode between the conventional categories of fiction and nonfiction, which I might call “mailerism”. His blender of genres, literary forms, and conventions constitutes a complex literary fiction, which blurs and merges the distinctions between fact and fiction, between fiction and non-fiction. His narration has got peculiar characteristics and specific rhetorical techniques. Although there is autonomy between Mailer’s fiction and nonfiction, at the same time there is a deep connection among them. The narrative forms, the imaginary worlds, the mythology, the images, the figures of speech, the repeated topics, form a strong base upon which his fiction and nonfiction is constructed.

**Endnotes:**


2 In a homodiegetic narrative, the story is told by a (homodiegetic) narrator who is present as a character in the story. The prefix ‘homo-’ points to the fact that the individual who acts as a narrator is also a character on the level of action.

In a heterodiegetic narrative, the story is told by a (heterodiegetic) narrator who is not present as a character in the story. The prefix ‘hetero-’ alludes to the ‘different nature’ of the narrator’s world as compared to the world of the action. Heterodiegetic narrators typically assume the
power of omniscience -- knowing. When inclined to speak overtly, heterodiegetic narrators can speak directly to their addressees, and they can liberally comment on action, characters, and storytelling itself.


4 Kabbalah (Tiberian: , Qabbālāh, Israeli: Kabala) literally means “receiving”, and is sometimes transliterated as Cabala, Kabbala, Qabalah, or other spellings. Kabalah refers to a set of esoteric beliefs and practices that supplement traditional Jewish interpretations of the Bible and religious observances.

References


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