Advertisements for Myself Short Guide

Advertisements for Myself by Norman Mailer

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Characters/Techniques

"The Man Who Studied Yoga" concentrates on Sam Slovoda, "an overworked writer of continuity for comic magazines" who never seems able to organize, to find the proper form for the novel he has been meaning to write for some years. The relevance of this story to Mailer's own plight — he spends considerable time in Advertisements for Myself worrying about the big novel he hopes to write — is obvious and humorous. Much of the story's fun is to be found in the confidential yet elusive and reserved tone of the anonymous narrator: "I would introduce myself if it were not useless. The name I had last night will not be the same as the name I have tonight. For the moment, then, let me say I am thinking of Sam Slovoda." Possibly the narrator, whose name constantly changes, is meant to be taken as one of the author's personae. This narrator has an existential identity (no references to his past or future) that Mailer favors in "The White Negro."

There is a wonderful teasing undercurrent in the narrator's comments, which create the fascinating sensation of being immersed in the immediacy of Sam's experience — not by an omniscient intelligence but by a literary mind literally "thinking" of the character at hand. The story is not narrated in the usual first person or third person modes; rather it is the product of a present tense voice that gets into Sam's mind "for the moment," so to speak. "I know what Sam feels," the narrator says matter of factly. One might suspect the narrator is Sam's psychiatrist: "It is just that I, far better than Sam, know how serious he really is, how fanciful, how elaborate, his imagination can be." But the story also contains considerable skepticism of psychoanalysis and of the jargon psychiatrists employ. Perhaps the narrator is Sam's alter ego, since he knows Sam so well and yet must speculate on the other characters and make suppositions about the situations they find themselves in.

The narrator feels superior to Sam but no more than Mailer feels superior to himself by writing in the third person about his failures. "I mock Sam, but he would mock himself on this," the narrator notes in describing Sam's "secret conceit that he was an extraordinary lover." Certainly the narrator has much of Mail er's divided sensibility, for he adds: "One cannot really believe this without supporting at the same time the equally secret conviction that one is fundamentally inept." The narrator is a self-described romantic, as Mailer surely is.

"The Man Who Studied Yoga" is about "middles," about a man in midcareer who questions his accomplishments and his maturity. He has the intellect and the interest to have opinions on most of the subjects Mailer covers in Advertisements for Myself, but his insights never amount to much, and the narrator is sympathetic but disappointed in him. Rather than taking on the subjects that bemuse him — sex, politics, psychology — Sam is reduced to watching a pornographic movie with his wife and friends, and after a second viewing alone with his wife, he makes love with her rather competently but in a passive way that characterizes a life that in the very process of trying to avoid pain succeeds "merely in avoiding pleasure." At the root of Sam's desires are all the radical impulses Mailer tries to express directly and forcefully in Advertisements for Myself.

Social Concerns

Advertisements for Myself is a huge compendium of Mailer's writing from his Harvard years to the late 1950s. He has often pointed to this book as marking the turning point in his career and in his style. Perhaps the most important and most representative piece in the book is "The White Negro." "The White Negro" is akin to another myth Mailer invokes in his article: "the Faustian urge to dominate nature by mastering time." To speak of a "Faustian urge" is to use myth to explain reality, or to imply that the myth speaks for some fundamental set of forces in reality that a "fiction" has profoundly articulated. "The White Negro" is white, or Western man, who sees in the Negro the reverse image of himself. Faustian man has conventionalized existence and made it conform to his rules; he has murdered individuality and has collectivized society; he has, in the twentieth century, created the concentration camp. The Hipster rebels against the atomic universe of instant death and seeks some new source of energy that may provide him with the courage to be unconventional. "So it is no accident that the source of Hip is the Negro for he has been living on the margin between totalitarianism and democracy for two centuries," Mailer concludes. Not having the secure identity most whites have taken for granted, the Negro has had to live in the existential present, and his music, jazz, has expressed an improvisational spirit and distrust of socially monolithic ideas that has attracted generations of white artists to the urban centers of Negro culture.

In order to make his argument flow, Mailer has to visualize the Negro as having essentially no sense of the past or of the future. He lives, instead, in the "enormous present," with no investment in the status quo. Mailer knows all Negroes are not like this and carefully qualifies some of his statements by suggesting that he has in mind those Negroes who want to live most intensely, most freely. He is conceptualizing and symbolizing, as one does in speaking of Faust, of Western civilization, or of any term that is meant for such broad coverage of history and society. The difference in the case of "The White Negro," however, is that Mailer is ambiguously shifting between fact and fiction and is not content with just using Faust in the way that Freud might — as a myth, already established, which describes a more or less fixed reality. In other words, Mailer is approaching a reality that is in flux and is finding a new term or myth that will best organize the innumerable observations that might be made of Negroes and Hipsters.

Themes

At bottom, Mailer wants to abolish moral categories not because he is against morality but because he rejects categorical thinking of the type exemplified by the social worker Louise Rossman in "The Man Who Studied Yoga," one of the best short stories in Advertisements for Myself. Louise "is a touch grim and definite in her opinions." People like Louise devour and deaden the world by categorizing it, by listing its contents and reducing it to what can be catalogued. Mailer as a novelist and social thinker, on the other hand, wants to create his own fluid context and believes there are individuals in society, white and black alike, who are attempting (not always consciously or consistently) to subvert the status quo. Occasionally he quotes these anti-authoritarians, since it is in their style, their feeling for nuance, that they are liberated from stultifying societal norms. "That cat will never come off his groove, dad," is as close as Mailer can come to the "Hip substitute for stubborn." Stubborn, however, implies fixity, and there is nothing static or staid about the Hipster or about his world view, which implies (Mailer believes) a dynamism that the categorical Squares cannot compete with. "Even a creep does move — if at a pace exasperatingly more slow than the pace of the cool cats," he concludes.

Literary Precedents

None of Mailer's novels equals such classics as The Great Gatsby (Fitzgerald, 1925) and The Sound and the Fury (Faulkner, 1929), but the integrity and unity of much of his fiction and nonfiction make him inimitable, for he has explored an esthetic, a nexus of fact and fiction, that Faulkner and Fitzgerald hardly approached, and that Hemingway, Dos Passos, and Steinbeck barely adumbrated. Certainly John Barth, E. L. Doctorow, Robert Coover, and others have brilliantly explored the terrain upon which history and fiction intersect, but Mailer alone has dominated that terrain in work after work by pursuing the junctures between the journalist and the novelist, and between the historian and the literary figure. No American novelist has engaged politics, sports, and the arts or the engineering of modern civilization more directly, and no American writer has come near to Mailer's use of his own suggestive character to encompass themes of American identity that cut across the boundaries of fact and fiction. Advertisements for Myself is the seminal work that explains how the author contrived to fashion such a unique career.

Related Titles

In Marilyn (1973), Mailer suggests that American identity has been built over a chasm, a void. For all its seeming robustness the country has a hollow core and is forever in search of its roots. Similarly, Marilyn Monroe constructs a successful career upon a questionable base and is constantly in pursuit of a stable source of inspiration and strength. The person and the nation are self-made but vulnerable because neither feels quite legitimate.

America and Monroe grow up invalidated; each is an experiment, an invention that has to supply its own reasons for existence.

The author explores what happens when publicity is not enough, when the subject feels he has merely aped the style of his predecessors. This was Mailer's plight after the phenomenal popularity of The Naked and the Dead, and it may be partly responsible for his attraction to Marilyn Monroe's dilemma of having to perpetuate the popular blonde stereotype before she could be sure of her talent for doing other, more complex, roles. The literary, biographical, historical, and autobiographical tendencies of Mailer's talent all come into focus in Marilyn, where he must deal with art and life, with fact and fiction. In this "novel biography" Mailer explodes the notion that these seeming dichotomies (fact vs. fiction) can be handled separately.

Literary forms, no less than human personalities, have holes in them; facts, in truth, are porous and have to be filled with an individual person's perceptions. Mailer is one of those rare writers who is anxious for readers to identify the missing pieces in his arguments. In Marilyn, he often operates in the language of approximation, since the solidity of an idea is always open to challenge.

Marilyn Monroe ranks with Mailer's other major characters, such as General Cummings in The Naked and the Dead.

Just as Cummings works to make himself an instrument of his own policy, so Monroe paints herself into the camera lens as an instrument of her own will.

She is Napoleonic and yet divided against herself, a Dreiserian character who traverses the continent in quest of her true self in much the same way as Mike Lovett in Barbary Shore, Sergius O'Shaugnessy in The Deer Park, and Steven Rojack in An American Dream do — detecting voids in themselves and voyaging to find their genuine identities. Much of Mailer's work in film, and his discussions of it in "Some Dirt in the Talk" and "A Course in FilmMaking" (both collected in Existential Errands, 1972), leads directly to his perception of Monroe's disrupted sense of self. While Monroe takes on many of the aspects of Mailer's fictonal characters, he is scrupulous about underlining the areas of her life that are subject to debate. He carefully sifts through conflicting accounts, notes points where he thinks she may have exaggerated or otherwise distorted the truth, and clearly announces when he is speculating. In other words, he respects the facts of her life to the extent that they can be known. To a large extent, the controversy his book

engendered among feminists seemed to arise out of the very fact that his narrative appropriates a woman's life, and that Norman Mailer — often attacked as a male chauvinist — would dare to fathom the mind of a woman. Yet other feminists, such as Gloria Steinem, have professed respect for his sensitive handling of Monroe, and his biography has inspired many subsequent efforts to grapple with Monroe as fact and symbol. His view that she quite consciously shaped her career and was nothing so simple as a victim of Hollywood has been largely adopted by later biographers.

Marilyn has a twofold purpose: to measure faithfully and evaluate the obstacles that bar the biographer's way to a full understanding of his subject's life, and to suggest tentatively a biographical method aimed at re-creating the whole person even though conceding that the search for wholeness is elusive and problematic. The balance Mailer maintains between himself and Monroe, so that one is subtly shifted back and forth between the biographer and his subject, makes Marilyn his most self-aware and yet objective work.

Copyright Information

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