Mailer Atones For His TV Sins

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Norman Mailer's recent article in Esquire, "Of a Small and Modest Malignancy, Wicked and Bristling With Dots" is a wry "confessional" of how, in spite of his moral loathing for television, he has continued to appear on it in the clear knowledge that the medium had proved useless as a means of selling either his ideas or his books. The important thing was that (and this is something Mailer does not confess) TV had given good exposure to Mailer's public image and that his subsequent reporting on his TV capers has contributed further to his campaign of self-advertising, something he has been doing in and out of literature for the last 20 years.

The article, really another item in the long series of Mailer's autobiographical reminiscences, is also a good example of the paradox that, while attacking the mass media as the propaganda arm of the "totalitarian" technological super-state, he has had little compunction in exploiting these very media to promote his public legend as "Mailer-the-nailer"--a machismo image of a mod pseudo-Hemingway.

Once more cast in the third-person (a device masking the "private" Mailer who acts as narrator), the "public" Mailer speaks to us from what he calls "Limbo"--his present state of consciousness symbolized, naturally, by a television screen. It is "a clean and well-lighted place whose appurtenances were suggestive of the interior of a picture-tube on a black-and-white set."

This image echoes the title of the well-known Hemingway story, "A Clean Well-Lighted Place" which deals with the confrontation with meaninglessness (perhaps a kind of "limbo"), and it is pertinent to recall that in Advertisements for Myself (1959), Mailer modelled himself on the public persona of Hemingway as a writer-hero who built up a media legend. Hemingway was thought by some to have committed suicide because he could no longer live up to the "tough-guy" image he had created. Maybe Mailer, now in "Limbo", was aware of
the same danger.

The *Esquire* piece in fact contains more than one wry comment on Mailer as victim rather than victor in his love-hate affair with television as he explains how a season in Limbo has forced him, as a drowning man reviews his past, to "mediate at length on the yaws and palls of his life that had passed through TV." Mailer continues with his characteristic self-irony:

"Nausea Machine As Christ Killer Of The Ages\n
He was going to be obliged to look back on his wretched collaboration with the multimillion-celled nausea machine, that Christ-killer of the ages--television. (Let us say it takes a Jew not wholly convinced of the divinity of Christ to see that is whom the tube is killing.)\n
(quotation is from *Esquire* article as are others in italics without footnotes).

This echoes the ending of the first section of Mailer's *The Armies of the Night,* where Mailer, who had joined the 1967 march on the Pentagon mainly to keep his public image in the media picture (there is even a movie about him)§ and manages to get arrested. Released from custody and surrounded by reporters, he carries out a preposterous piece of self-advertising, declaring that "They are burning the body and blood of Christ in Vietnam." This attempt at what Mailer called salience, a way of producing quotable quotes, backfired. "A few days later," he recounts, "he saw his immortal speech on Christ as it was printed in The Washington Post. The Post story ended: "Mailer said he believed that the war in Vietnam will destroy the foundation of this republic, which is its love and trust in Christ. Mailer is a Jew." Mailer's comment was that "he had much to learn about newspapers, reporters and salience." But it was all grist to the publicity mill. Like the *Time* magazine hatchet-job on his recent stage high-jinks at the Ambassador Theatre in Washington, ("grandstanding, but barely standing") it had "stimulated his cause."

In the same way, even the bad publicity Mailer sometimes got on TV worked in his favour in the long run, just as scandals and divorces serve only to heighten the charisma of well-known film stars (or the Watergate mob, for that matter).

In *Esquire,* however, Mailer leans heavily, but one wonders how sincerely, on the guilt arising out of his long collaboration with that most "repellent" of the media, TV:
So he was obliged to brood over the nature of television. 
As soon brood over the nature of cancer gulch! Might they not be the same? There was a malignancy present in the bowels of communication, and it was video...He would not be obliged to trace the leaching of his soul through fifty--or was it a hundred? or two hundred? TV appearances...and extract from the memory of these outings a way to absolve the excrementitiousness of his TV past.

In building up his metaphor of TV as the ubiquitous brainwashing force in which the medium outweighs the content, Mailer quotes from a letter to him by former Esquire fiction editor Gordon Lish who tells how, in the middle of the Utah desert, he found a family hypnotically glued to the TV set in their isolated shack. Lish advises Mailer to:

...treat television...as purest phenomenon, purest form...
Open the eye onto television without comment, without attitude, without the particularities that constitute the content of the thing as it is...Television will be displayed wholly in terms of its existence as the all-pervasive environment, the universally-felt national experience...an awesome omnipresent force...a revelation of TV as gestalt, form, power.

As early as 1954, Mailer had been studying the form of television, using a subliminal style of analysis made fashionable at a much later date by W.B. Key. Sitting in his Brooklyn flat at some unearthy hour, he would make "monumental connections on pot," amazing his friends who "thought him mad":

He examined automobile commercials and saw they were no longer selling the car by way of the pretty girl sitting on the fender, as once they did; now they were selling the car itself. The car was the fuck. "Dynaflow does it in oil..."

In Advertisements for Myself, Mailer had included an article on this theme, "A Note on Comparative Pornography," in which he declared: "Talk of pornography ought to begin at the modern root: advertising," and in the Esquire article he plays tribute to Vance Packard for having done the job of explaining motivation research in The Hidden Persuaders.

In the early fifties, however, Mailer was divining a metaphysical evil inherent in TV technology, a kind of anti-human power equal in force to his own stifled rage. This was at a time when he was struggling to produce a
novel which would equal the success of his 1948 best- seller, The Naked and the Dead:

Something...was also present, some malignancy to burn against his own malignancy, some onslaught of dots into the full pressure of his strangled vision. Often, when the stations went off the air and no programs were left to watch, he would still leave the set on. The audio would hum in a tuneless pullulation of unlabeled forces. The hiss and the hum would fill the room and then his ears...it was nearer to anti-noise dancing in eternity with noise...He discovered at last that such use of TV was a tranquilizer to deaden the sharpest edge of his nerves...

Clearly this tranquilizer was a potent force in the hands of the establishment's mind managers; if the message is irrelevant, then anything goes and a licence is given to purvey pap to the millions. The narrator, known by all to be a lover of Melville, tells us that:

A few years later, when McLuhan would torment the vitals of a generation of American intellectuals with the unremovable harpoon that "the medium is the message," Mailer could give his consent.

In pursuing his theme that TV is a mind-numbing medium, Mailer takes Richard Nixon as the prime example of its material (he had once compared Nixon's "featureless personality to a TV screen that is lit when nothing is on the air") and comments:

If Nixon did not make anyone happy, neither did the TV set. Its message was equal to Nixon's: I am here to deaden you -- you need it!

It is typical of Mailer's system of hypothesis-juggling that later he would see the repentant post-Watergate Nixon as a great actor on TV.

Turning his own debut as TV performer in the fifties, Mailer views in ironic retrospective the callow young hopeful "building dreams of future power in the darkness" thinking that "the first TV show on which he would ever appear would be a call to the first battle, and he would fire a shot to ring around the global village."

His appearance on Mike Wallace's Night Beat show in 1956 was looked on by Mailer as a rite of passage, and he
...got ready like a Depression fighter going into the main bout...he had to win...But first he must be able to hold his own with Mike Wallace, and given Mailer's massive in-capacity to stay cool, that was not automatic.

At that point, a novice on TV, Mailer came on "hot" and was no match for the "humorless" Wallace. It took him some time to learn that the inner condition for projecting a firm and agreeable presence on TV was to be bored.

As it turned out, however, Mailer discovered his future modus operandi--be aggressive and disagreeable. The result, stemming from a resolve to embark on an existential course of wickedness, was to bring him "the first happiness he was ever to know on television." This was the remark, "not a great deal less daring than deciding Jesus Christ had something wrong with," that "President Eisenhower is a bit of a woman."

All that happened "out there" was that Eisenhower's powerful press secretary, James Hagerty asked for a transcript and Mailer was not invited back on a TV show for more than a year. Even this sense of anticlimax, from hero to anti-hero, in his fortunes was to be turned to advantage later by a Mailer "possessed of all the innocence of a protagonist who had never been on TV", for in Armies of the Night, his most successful piece of reportage, Mailer plays out the role of "...the actor who believes he is becoming a protagonist, when he is only turning into a comedian."

Another TV putdown came for Mailer in 1958 on David Susskind's Open End show with Dorothy Parker and Truman Capote. The latter had assured him, "What I can do is very special, it's very literary, and I shouldn't attempt to intrude my personality. I'm not good at that like you, Norman. Television is good for you."

Mailer discovered to his chagrin that everyone was talking about Capote's authoritative presence, but decided to take the whole thing as a further lesson in media machinations:

It became his introduction to our hypothesis that television is not a technological process that reproduces images, but is, rather, a machine (more or less cosmically operated) to anticipate the judgment and/or anathema of Limbo; technicians collaborate by the use of camera angles.

Mailer claimed he was "relegated...to medium shots"
which made him appear "fatuous"; maybe salience was the answer: "From now on, thought Mailer, he would not try to show how intelligent he was; he would look for pearls..."

Still, he could not give up the TV addiction, feeling that "television might be a way to express ideas that would otherwise never reach an audience, not if they had to wait for the writing." The irony was that Mailer had to wait (he claims) until 1971 to discover that TV was useless as a medium for his ideas and that "he was incapable of learning how to be a success and get rich on TV." Again, however, Mailer capitalizes on this by writing about it--part of his ongoing strategy of self-reportage in which he views an earlier version of himself with an ironic eye.

A few successes were scored on TV in the interim however. Mailer's attack on J. Edgar Hoover on the Irv Kupcinet At Random show in 1960 got him into the FBI files as a subversive. Obtaining his (censored) dossier 18 years later under the Freedom of Information Act, Mailer also discovered, as he reports with some glee, that the FBI man thought Mailer had "made an ass of himself on the program".

Around this time, Mailer was developing the hypothesis, one of his favourite activities, that he might well be "telegenic" and be able to "have bio-electric relations with the tube." He managed to convince himself of this "insanity" in 1967 when he "screamed" his boxer-friend, Jose Torres to victory by talking back to this TV set. This was "true communication":

Norman was never able to get over the impression that somewhere in the depths of Torres' attention the message had come through the tube: "Stick him!" A miracle in communication had occurred. A TV set, that malign corporate mechanism of valves that allow communication to pass in one direction only, had been transcended for half an hour and managed to take messages back...

Mailer himself became the brawler, with no-one it seems either at home or in the audience ready to "scream him home" to victory, on what was perhaps his most notorious TV appearance on the Dick Cavett Show in 1971. Here, he lost on points to Cavett and his guests, the "formidable" journalist Janet Flanner and writer Gore Vidal who, according to Mailer had gone sour in public following Mailer's success with The Armies of the Night. Smarting from a reference to the "Miller-Mailer-Manson man (or M3 for short)" in an article Vidal had recently published, Mailer had butted Vidal in
the head in the dressing-room but found himself getting a goring "in the face of Cavett's wit and Flanners' deft interruptions."

Mailer, however played his by now characteristic tough-guy-outsider role, almost deliberately provoking the audience--something he has made into an art:

Mailer turned his chair away from his guests and toward the audience: "I want to ask all of you something... Are you all really, truly idiots, or is it me?" The audience replied: You. "Oh, that was an easy answer," said Cavett.

Mailer's diatribe, which ended the session, climaxed in the declaration: "I'm going to be the champ until one of you knocks me off." This was image-making and self-advertising in the Listerine way: "the taste you love to hate, twice a day" and thus, concludes Mailer, it contained the cardinal virtue of television... which was that it kept attention to himself.

It was the realization that he had "failed to dramatize his ideas but had dramatized himself" that gives us further insight into the meaning of what Mailer called his Limbo. As an artist, writing in journalistic form about the soul of America in agony, suffering through Vietnam, riots, Watergate and other traumas, Mailer has attacked the mass media as mouthpiece for the government-military-industrial complex. The Media have foisted a pseudo-reality on a tranquilized populace. Yet, as a public actor displaying a "performing self", to adopt Richard Poirier's apt phrase, Mailer has himself become dependent on the media. He has also become a media practitioner--TV performer, journalist, film-maker. Mailer seems to be asking himself in this article for Esquire if he can continue to maintain a balance between the roles of creative writer and public performer, or has the price paid for promoting his public image been too high?"

...he had crossed over to the other side on this night of the Dick Cavett show, and now that television was an addiction... it would exact, like any drug, its own cruel price. That took many a form, but for our purposes the price may be equal to the power to destroy the virility and fecundity of ideas. TV was not with us to make history but to leach the salts of history right out of our cells.

There is a sense that Mailer, in an age where artists must sell their personalities before they can offer their
creations, has become, to some extent, a captive of his media image:

It was evil to come to know the good and defy it, and the good, in this case, was to keep the hell off TV, which he did not. So he came to know his place in Limbo before he was even there.

Yet Mailer, with his usual flair for converting debacle into triumphs, is able to find a way out of Limbo, paradoxically through television itself. His release from "the curved walls" of limbo-consciousness came from Nixon's performance on the David Frost interviews:

In recent years, his detestation of TV close to complete, ninety minutes had become an immense dose of video...Yet Nixon's ninety minutes were of another order; on the scale of video they were alchemy itself: the American with the least charismatic personality of the century, the American most ready to be emitted from the tube and infiltrated into your pores, had become for a few minutes, a personality capable of moving multitudes, and had done it by the refractory art of the actor...yes, Nixon now went to the root of good acting, where before he had lived in the center of bad acting.

One good actor had recognized another, and this "shock of recognition" of the "new" Nixon provided Mailer with the proof that TV could work miracles:

The impact upon Limbo was immense. Limbo had many mansions and took many shapes, but on the rock that was its foundation were the words: Men like Richard Nixon are not redeemable. Nixon had shattered that rock.

Perhaps Mailer, getting out of the prison of Limbo had come to terms with having collaborated with TV--at least he had created yet another piece of subjective reportage out of his own experiences. Also he might have been thinking of the munificent advance received for his long-promised blockbuster novel--enough to get anyone out of Limbo. In any event:

Mailer did not have time to care...he was getting ready to move...to go on--where he did not know...He hoped only that tomorrow...would lead to autumnal places where the record of his sins might reek of woodsmoke rather than the insulation of all those TV wires charring the night.
POSTSCRIPT

Mailer of course did not "keep the hell off TV," but put on a display of reluctance earlier this year when Dick Cavett asked him to tape a reply to an interview he (Cavett) had done with Gore Vidal. In that interview, Vidal, who was by then engaged in a public feud with Mailer, accused Mailer of not only being a bad writer ("failure has gone to his head") but of having stabbed his second wife, Adele, in the back, as well as the front, in an infamous domestic incident in 1960. He also accused Mailer of assaulting him at a recent party. Mailer at first threatened a libel suit but finally agreed to do a tape with Cavett (in which he defended himself against Vidal's charges) which was played back-to-back with the Vidal tape on a Cavett special show on PBS, January 2, 1978.

To add spice to the programme, Cavett prefaced the show, on which the two men never met face-to-face, with a replay of the old 1971 show with Janet Flanner.

The inescapable conclusion to the whole affair was that both men were interested in publicity-mongering, although it must be said that Mailer came off somewhat better than Vidal in appearing to be disgusted with the whole business. Cavett, who had engineered this media event--or pseudo-event--asked if the two writers wouldn't be better off back at their typewriters. Of course by that time, he had filled his programme hour!

FOOTNOTES

2. "Limbo": Lat. limbus--edge, border of hell; abode of souls barred from Heaven through no fault of their own; place of restraint; transitional state. (Webster's International Dictionary, Third Edition)
5. "Will The Real Norman Mailer Please Stand Up?" (D. Fontaine, Dir. 1968)
6. *Armies*, p. 240
7. Ibid., p. 241