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The Last Page

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THE PUBLICATION in the October 6, 2008, *New Yorker* of a selection of the more than fifty thousand Norman Mailer letters that have been archived reminds us of what a vacuum he left when he died in November 2007 at the age of eighty-four.

As Philip Roth and Christopher Hitchens remind us, we have no shortage of literary bad boys these days. But Mailer was a special kind of bad boy—generous, self-mocking, and always on the lookout for the joyous in a situation.

Here, for example, is Mailer in 1960 letting Jacqueline Kennedy know that he intends to vote for her husband but that he has great reservations about his policies: “I do not agree with your husband about Cuba. I think he is moving into a serious error, but I will vote for him anyway,” Mailer promises, then adds, “It is just that I have now lost much pleasure in my ballot.”

Five years later in a 1965 letter to the conservative *National Review* editor, William Buckley, Mailer is just as measured in gently telling him that their political debates have gotten dull: “I think our public debates are probably over—for a time at least. . . . As writers we are not both villains, and that excites no proper passions.”

But it isn’t just when he is making putdowns that Mailer’s letters are fun to read. At his most serious, there is always an edge and a self-deprecating quality to his writing. Defending his most famous *Dissent* essay, “The White Negro” (Fall 1957), Mailer writes his friend Jean Malaquais, “I was trying to fumble my way forward toward a theory of energy, human energy, which some genius following behind us may be able to pick up and use in order

to become the new Marx,” and two years later, in a letter to Irving Howe, Mailer, anticipating the direction the sixties will take, writes of his eagerness for *Dissent* “to begin a dialogue with the psycho-anarchists (wherever they are?)” in order to become “the center of a radical generation which may be coming into existence.”

Mailer makes clear in his letters, as he did in his personal essays, that he thinks the worst sin for a writer or a politician is piety. Nobody, left or right, is immune from his judgment. “You read *politics* and *Partisan Review* today,” he writes in 1949, and there are no longer ideas in them, just canapés, and despite the brilliance of all their people and their erudition, etc. etc they no longer think, they merely hate.”

What would Mailer have said about our current troubles? It is hard to know, but a letter that he wrote in 2003 about George W. Bush gives us a strong indication of the direction in which he was headed. “It seems to me,” Mailer observes of Bush, that “the best argument you can present is that he’s a total, shallow, manipulative shit, but that he’s got the luck of the devil working for him.”

Not bad for an early assessment, and more than enough to make anyone pleased that Mailer saved so many of his letters. As a *Dissent* writer, I found, however, my pleasure in the care Mailer took with his letters dimmed by the thought that the only record we will have of the Mailer-Howe correspondence will depend on Mailer. Sadly, Irving Howe found making copies of his letters and postcards a nuisance, and all too many of his friends shared his devastating modesty, taking their cues from his example.

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