

**H**IS INVOLVEMENT with *Dissent* was, so to speak, one of Norman Mailer's more improbable marriages, and by no means the shortest. A member of the founding editorial board, he was on this journal's masthead for most of four decades. The first half dozen years or so were the honeymoon phase—a time when Mailer published a number of essays and short items blending anti-Stalinist Marxism with his own existentialist intuitions.

By the mid-1960s, the couple would still be seen in public together, on occasion; but the relationship had cooled into a formality. Irving Howe's landmark essay on "The New York Intellectuals" in 1968 identified Mailer's psychopolitical musings as an important source for countercultural sensibility and New Left sloganeering. (Mailer's "The White Negro," appearing in the Summer 1957 issue, managed to imitate the Fanonian theory of therapeutic violence even before Fanon had written *The Wretched of the Earth*.) Nor would readers have failed to pick up the allusion when Howe remarked that the adjective "existential" had enjoyed its vogue mainly by communicating "the sensation of depth without the burden of content."

And yet Mailer was listed as a contributing editor up through the Spring 1991 issue. His departure generated no public comment, it seems, and was in any case a matter of space rather than of ideological conflict. New names were being added to the masthead, and nobody could remember the last time Mailer had attended an editorial meeting; so all bonds were dissolved, *sans* drama.

But to revisit those early issues is a reminder of how ardent the connection once was. Indeed, it even predated the creation of *Dissent* itself.

"For years," wrote Mailer in an essay called, "What I Think of Artistic Freedom" (Spring 1955), "I have been alternately attracted to Marxism and Anarchism, and in the tension between the two I suppose I have found the themes for my novels." The effort to synthe-

size them had been unmistakable in Mailer's rather hallucinatory second book, *Barbary Shore* (1951), a sort of hybrid of Arthur Koestler and Franz Kafka. One of the characters delivers long, quasi-Trotskyist statements analyzing the violent conflict and convergence between Soviet and American forms of "state capitalism."

Those speeches must have given *Dissent's* editors-to-be déjà vu. Mailer's novelistic pamphleteering was at points almost indistinguishable from the ideas of the Johnson-Forest Tendency, which Howe and Lewis Coser had encountered in the mid-1940s. The Johnsonites, led by the West Indian historian and theorist C.L.R. James, were an oppositional faction within the Workers Party—and Howe, in particular, had crossed polemical swords with them in internal debates. The echoes of those arguments in *Barbary Shore* were no coincidence: Mailer's French translator and sometime tutor in marxist theory was Jean Malaquais, a close friend of James.

Reviewing *Barbary Shore* for the *Nation* in 1951, Howe judged it a bad novel, though a brave one, given the cold war climate. He sounded no more enamored of Mailer's fictive gauchisme than he had been about its Johnsonite prototype. But they were, after all, speaking a common Marxian language. Barely a year later, both Howe and Mailer participated in the *Partisan Review* symposium "Our Country and Our Culture"—finding themselves among the handful of contributors disinclined to think that American intellectuals never had it so good.

The aftermath, of course, was complex—with *Dissent* shedding the *bolshevisant* manner for an American idiom, even as Mailer transformed himself into a vanguard party of one (also a very American thing to do). Well, so it goes. It's the old story. You meet in circumstances that look, with hindsight, like fate; and you create together a little socialism of shared meaning, for as long as it may last. Arguments? Misunderstandings? They are part of it. The world is a wedding.

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