

baptism to be baptized with. In water baptism, says Thomas,¹ the passion of Christ works through a sort of figurative representation; in the baptism of blood it works through the imitation of the deed itself. And so martyrdom is the highest form of being baptized. In being baptized with water, a man trusts himself to the community of those who, he expects, will make him welcome, will love and care for him; and through them he trusts himself to their God. In being baptized with his own blood, a man trusts himself to God in trusting himself to those who he knows will not love him and care for him but will do all they can to destroy him both body and soul. That is what makes martyrdom function not only as the sacrament of faith but as faith itself in its supreme manifestation, the most incarnate way in which the dying and rising of Jesus still occurs to reveal the reality of other ways of living, to disclose that the world that now is is both dead and death-dealing.

Male, Mailer, Female

by David Lodge

The Reviewer approached *The Prisoner of Sex*² with a quickened heart-beat of keen expectation, but warily, unsure whether he hoped to find it a triumph or a failure. Norman Mailer was for his money one of the most interesting and entertaining of contemporary American writers, a man who had recovered from that direst of literary fates, the best-selling first novel followed by a string of failures, and by sheer effort and character remade himself as an artist in middle age. In particular the Reviewer admired semi-confessional, semi-documentary works, like *The Armies of the Night* and *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* in which Norman wrote about himself in the third person, as the Novelist, the Historian, the Journalist, thus achieving a delicious ironic detachment from his own ego without which indeed his matter and manner could become tiresomely pretentious and irresponsibly extreme.

Peeking into the opening pages of the new book, the Reviewer was glad to see that it was written in the ironic third-person mode, but he was well aware too of what polemical purpose it in this case served. The same cultural trade-winds that had brought across the Atlantic tidings of the growing strength of the movement for Women's Liberation, and the growing fame of its chief prophet, Kate Millett, had also conveyed whiffs of the excitement greeting Norman's counterblast, originally rushed to the public in a single issue of *Harper's* magazine, to Women's Lib in general and Kate

¹*Summa Theologica*, 3a. 66. 12c.

²*The Prisoner of Sex*, by Norman Mailer. Weidenfeld & Nicolson. £2.

Millett in particular. For Kate, in her monumental study of man's oppression of woman, *Sexual Politics*, had singled out Norman, along with D. H. Lawrence and Henry Miller, as prime examples of male chauvinism in modern literature. The prospect of Mailer counter-attacking was one to make the mouth water—but with an ambiguous flow of sympathies. After all, many of the Reviewer's best friends, including his wife, were in Women's Lib. He had read his Kate Millett, his Germaine Greer, his Eva Figs, etc., and while inclined to pick holes in the arguments here and there, to yawn a little over Millett and to skim Greer for the jokes, while deploring some of the planks (like abortion on demand) in the Women's Lib platform, and doubting some of their claims (such as that all sexual role-differences were behavioural, not structural, the reversible results of conditioning), while being unhappy about the way imaginative literature was used as evidence in the denunciation of male chauvinism (raising the spectre of a new kind of critical police-state to rival those already created by Marxists and Leavisites), though curious to know how many women first heard about the vaginal orgasm when it was denounced as a myth and a wicked masculine conspiracy, and wondering whether the freedom to leave one's infants in a 24-hour nursery, or at home with an obliging husband, in order to go out to work, was necessarily a liberation, given the nature of work for most people in a modern industrialized state—when all these reservations and qualifications had been made (the Reviewer, finding Norman's penchant for the long sentence infectious, drew a deep breath) the fact remained that the Movement was more right than wrong—women *were* on the whole oppressed, exploited and underprivileged *qua* women, and not just *qua* human beings.

Not the least persuasive support for this conclusion was the Reviewer's observation that women touched by the breath of Lib became more interesting *qua* women than they had been before. Some, indeed, became visible to him for the first time. He witnessed remarkable transformations among his female acquaintance, and if it all seemed at times like a wave of religious revivalism—initial scepticism and resistance in the unliberated woman suddenly giving way to a total conversion, public confession of former sins, eloquent witness to the grace of liberation and zeal in passing on the good news to others—well, that did not necessarily invalidate it, but rather suggested that orthodox religion had a formidable new force to reckon with. Not least the Roman Catholic Church, chief custodian of the two female archetypes (or stereotypes) most odious to the Liberationists: Eve and Mary—woman as sexual seductress, source of all man's troubles, and woman as meek and mild mother, man's submissive better-half. The Church might be compared to an army in which all the officers were men and all the other ranks women (was not the definition of a good Catholic in many countries

a man whose wife went to Mass?)—imagine then the consequences of a mutiny of the troops. Well, there was a certain relish in that prospect. The celibacy of the clergy would seem a minor issue when the case for a female priesthood was properly opened; and the best hope for resolving the tiresome anomalies of the Church's teaching on birth control was for Catholic women to take the matter (which after all concerned them most) into their own hands.

In short, being a liberal or progressive Catholic, it seemed to the Reviewer, necessarily entailed a goodly measure of support for Women's Lib. But being a literary man, too, he didn't doubt for a moment that he would rather read Norman Mailer than Kate Millett any day of the week, including Sundays. Indeed, the early chapters of *The Prisoner of Sex* (delivered to the vacationing Reviewer by an unsuspecting Connemara postman whose hair would surely have stood on end had he known what a ticking time-bomb of four-letter words he held in his hands) were so brilliantly written, so funny, so eloquent, so artfully self-deprecating in defence, so metaphorically inventive in attack, that the Reviewer seriously began to think that Norman was going to carry the day and win a famous victory over General Millett and her indignant regiment of women. But gradually it became evident that even Norman did not believe he could win. It was Henry Miller he was referring to, but it might well have been himself, when he said about half-way through the book: 'But the men moving silently in retreat all pass the prophet by. It is too late to know if he is right or wrong. The women have breached an enormous hole in the line, and the question is only how far back the men must go before they are ready to establish a front. Confusion is at the crossroads. Will D. H. Lawrence have to be surrendered as well?'

Actually (if I may drop the pastiche and speak directly) Mailer makes some good points on the level of literary criticism in defending Henry Miller and D. H. Lawrence against the strictures of Kate Millett. But when it comes to defending himself he chooses, with characteristic recklessness ('better to expire as a devil in the fire than as angel in the wings') not to take cover behind the fictiveness of his writings, but to develop discursively and at length his idiosyncratic and highly vulnerable philosophy of sex. This includes such quaint notions as that women once possessed the power of 'natural contraception'—an ability to conceive or not conceive according to their deepest needs and instincts (which might however—neat escape clause!—be opposite to their conscious wishes), an ability lost with the invention of artificial contraceptives which are in fact (because of the biological and psychological disturbance they cause) less reliable than the mysterious art of the past. Thus Mailer reaches the splendid paradox that contraception is responsible for the population explosion! Clearly the hardliners in the Catholic anti-contraception lobby (the *real* hardliners, not weak-kneed

defenders of the Rhythm Method, 'no more than a torturing of the egg' as Mailer vividly describes it) have found a surprising, and no doubt embarrassing, new ally.

Norman Mailer, indeed, in the most heterodox possible way, is a religious fellow, a fervent believer in the devil and very apt to drop the name of the Lord in conversation. It is not the death of God that worries him, but the prospective death of Nature—killed by technology; and it is this sense of looming ecological disaster that provides the dynamic of his argument in *The Prisoner of Sex*. He equates the technological destruction of nature with the ideological destruction of male-female differentiation, likening Kate Millett to 'a technologist who drains all the swamps only to discover that the ecological balance has been savaged', and himself proudly adopting the stance of a sexual Luddite. He highlights those passages in Millett and others which invoke the powers of science, especially in the field of genetic engineering, to liberate woman from her biology, discerning in this brave new world only a totalitarian nightmare: 'the end-game of the absurd is coitus-free conception monitored by the state.'

Polarized between Millett and Mailer, the debate over the liberation of women thus begins to fall into familiar patterns of utopian and anti-utopian speculation. And for those to whom the concept of Original Sin is still a meaningful one, there must be a deep appeal in Mailer's matter, however offensive his Rabelaisian manner may prove. For it is basically the idea of original sin that explains his title and justifies his obsession with sex as a novelist and as a man. 'No thought was so painful [to the modern Enlightenment] as the idea that sex had meaning: for give meaning to sex and one was the prisoner of sex—the more meaning one gave it, the more it assumed, until every failure and misery, every evil of your life, spoke their lines in its light, and every fear of mediocre death.'

But, for all the rhetoric he musters to assert the heroism required to be fully a man, it is clear that the suffering and danger which Mailer cherishes as guarantees of human authenticity are, in the field of sexuality, mostly to be borne by women. That sex was existentially more meaningful when every act of love (for all the partners knew) might result in conception and/or the death of the woman in childbirth, is easily said (Mailer says it) because impossible to disprove; but it would be surprising if women were nostalgic for such good old days.

Norman Mailer, in other words, succumbs to the special temptation that waits upon anti-Pelagians: to accept the imperfections and evils of human life on behalf of others rather than of oneself. The liberation of women is something for women themselves to decide. Norman Mailer has the consolation of knowing that his book on the subject will survive most of theirs.