

“Norman Mailer and Truman Capote: A Brief Account of Parallel Lives”

Emilio Cañadas Rodríguez

UNIVERSIDAD ALFONSO X EL SABIO, MADRID

“The reason I write is to reach people and by reaching them, influence the history of my time a little bit” (1959:269). With these words the American novelist and essayist Norman Mailer established his aims in writing. According to Mailer’s obituary in *The Independent*, Norman Mailer intended to be “the Ernest Hemingway of his generation” and as many others stated, he tried to write “the greatest American novel”, three big quests that would indeed mark Mailer’s life and work. Born in 1923 in Long Branch, New Jersey, into a well-known Jewish family, Mailer was brought up in New York where he spent his childhood and teenage years. Months later, in September 1924, Truman Capote was born in New Orleans. Son of two parents who had separated, so to speak, before he was born, Truman Capote spent most of his childhood from New Orleans to the care of three “quarrelsome” aunts in Monroeville, Alabama. He deeply lived that southern environment and moved with his mother to New York when he was eight. Norman Mailer went to Harvard and graduated in 1943 and was drafted in 1944 while Capote could only tolerate Saint John’s Military Academy for a painful year in 1936. For Truman Capote writing was both a “gift” and a “whip” and admitted that writing was “intended solely for self-flagellation”. As in Plutarch, this is the story of “parallel lives”, the story of two of the greatest American writers of the 20th century, a story of rivalry, respect and the story of an uncommon friendship based on plea and competition and as Plutarch says: “I must be permitted to devote myself rather to the signs of the soul in men, and by means of these to portray the life of each, leaving to others the description of their great contests.”

Norman Mailer and Truman Capote were two absolutely different beings. They were simply opposites. And that difference was evident from their physical appearance and their background to their personality and their way of writing. They were evidently unlike even from a mere first sight. A simple and innocent look into their physical image symbolized the difference that characterized them: on the one hand was Norman Mailer: quite tall, quite strong, corpulent, an impressive natural force, defiant and a torrent of words, a born “competitor”. On the other hand was Capote, as defined in Harper Lee’s *To kill a Mockingbird*, “a pocket Merlin”, one so small, so girlish, defendant of his homosexuality, an expert in finding the right words and the stories to be told, an expert in getting the most meaningful expression from a simple word. It was from the second part of the forties that these two opposite characters, personalities and bodies came across. It was especially after the war that both writers were once and again matched by the critics as the most promising writers of the period. From that moment, the literary and personal careers of Truman Capote and Norman Mailer have always been somehow linked.

The American literary critic Bruce Bawer, among others, listed Norman Mailer, Gore Vidal and Capote as “the three most celebrated” out of a “handful of novelists who became famous at a very early age in the years following the Second World War”. It was the same Truman Capote who reinforces that idea and categorized his contemporaries as “talented” and “powerful” when talking about what should be the next step after the unquestionable success of his first novel. On that occasion Truman Capote referred to Norman Mailer and Gore Vidal saying that “to be a good writer and stay on top is one of the most difficult balancing acts ever. Talent isn’t enough. You’ve got to have a tremendous staying power. Out of all those people who began publishing when I did, there are only three left that anybody knows about- Gore, Norman and me. There has to be some “X” factor, some extra dimension that has kept us going.” (Clarke: 163)

Within a two year period of time, from 1946 to 1948, Gore Vidal had published *Williwaw* and *The City and the Pillar* and both Mailer and Capote published their acclaimed *The Naked and The Dead* and *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, respectively. Even though all these works rapidly jumped into the top list of best sellers of the year 1948, Mailer’s book sales clearly outnumbered that of Capote’s but Capote’s was much more discussed and polemic than Mailer’s. According to Bawer, those writers “spent the early part of their careers climbing out of derivative ruts and attempting to find their one voices”.

The value and the significance of both Mailer’s *The Naked and The Dead* and Capote’s *Other Voices, Other Rooms* are rooted in the vital experiences of the writers and, at the same time, these two pieces are the prelude to the style of their future writings. In *The Naked and the Dead*, Mailer presented his vivid experiences serving in the Second World War in, according to *The New York Times*, “the best novel on the Second World War”, his experiences living “in a psychic landscape of assassins and victims”. All the criticism on the novel remarks Mailer’s achievement and compares the relevance of the novel to that of Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* or Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage*. Mailer’s experience at front became the reason of his success when analysing the validity of the American ideals through the story of human beings facing death. The great repercussion of the novel will somehow urge Mailer into the social and political issues and in constant search of the novel of all times. Simultaneously, Truman Capote comes back to the south to re-live his astonishing childhood experiences in order to “exorcise demons” for the Gothic and Poesque *Other Voices, Other Rooms*. In this case, Capote interiorized his whole existential experience and makes a hard and autobiographical introspection of his inner self and the identity of the south. In this sense, these books mark the trend of both writers and their divergence. Furthermore, the experiences and personalities of both writers and their first novels took them to completely different literary terrain at first: Mailer, as we previously said, went to the novel separating from the short story and Capote collected his short stories after the novel. If Mailer’s aims went towards those socio-political and historical narratives, Truman Capote’s, in contrast, was to write about him, himself, the people around and the most personal experiences, which were something that also separated them.

Not only the subject matter separates the initial interests of both writers but also the genre used to communicate their experiences. In this sense, and from the lines of the excellent *Advertisements for Myself*, Norman Mailer recognizes that despite the fact that he wrote in the short story form, he could not keep up with the peculiarities of the short story. His first short stories, he claims, “were influenced by Ernest Hemingway. Although I was more excited by Dos

Passos and Farrell, it was Hemingway I imitated.” (1992:27) Talking about short stories, Mailer recognizes that he “turned to short stories, though dispiritedly of attempting to make some sort of interim career as a writer of short stories- a New York career, so to speak, I would get myself printed in the New Yorker, in Harper’s Bazaar, Mademoiselle- But enough”.

Contrarily, Capote’s short stories have not ever been appreciated enough but he can be considered a master of the genre. From the very first story written at the beginning of the forties, he was capable of creating a tension in two pages in the most “Poesque” sense as in “The Walls Are Call”, among other stories. Capote, as a good southerner, worked, enjoyed and mastered the short story through all his life and he felt quite comfortable dealing with the special features of the genre. He controlled the tempo, the secrets and the language of a short story action writing novels that were large short stories more than anything else. Capote always got away from the powerful and unstoppable effect of the words and its belligerent aspects and became closer to the neatness and the enchantment of the words looking not only to be said but to remain.

From the very early moment of their literary careers, Norman Mailer and Gore Vidal frequented current socio-political affairs that Capote never cared about. The fact was that Norman Mailer was permanently a compromised political activist. He was an anarchist and also belonged to the Progressive party during the Wallace campaign before breaking off in 1949. He defined himself at the age of 32 as a “Marxian anarchist”. Just for the sake of friendship more than for the fact of a conscious political attitude Truman Capote made his only and small contribution to the Kennedy’s campaign. Capote did not want to take part in any confrontation of any kind, except the dialectical one. In this sense, Mailer was more of a straightforward and a strong character and his personality was so direct, powerful and influential. And also because of that, from the beginning Mailer wanted to be heard in any polemic subject that could have mattered to society and, as we said at the beginning, be influential.

However, during the late forties Europe awaited American writers. Most of the best writers of America travelled through Europe after the end of the Second World War and they came across each other in different parts of Europe. Gore Vidal recalls those days in his book *Palimpsest* when he says that “in our youthful innocence, we mistook early evening for morning. In Paris, Bellow and Mailer and Capote and Baldwin and Bowles, while Tennessee and I shared a floor of the small hotel de l’Université” and continue by saying that “we would all be duly admired and known while becoming, simultaneously, mere coda to a more and more irrelevant Western Literature.” Those days after the Second World War were of a great relevance not only for the writers but also for their literature and for culture in general as he recalls “when writing was still central to the culture if not the culture itself” (Vidal: 183). All of them, from Tennessee Williams to Donald Windham, from Bellow to Hemingway were aware of their contribution, they were aware of, as Vidal says, staying at the core of the creation of something relevant and transcendent for the development of culture.

Literary speaking, Lowell’s “tranquilized fifties” brought the publication of two central features in Mailer’s literary career: *The White Negro* and *Advertisements for Myself*. Those were not the only Mailer pieces from the mentioned *The Naked and the Dead*, but they were the two that revitalized and reactivated Mailer’s powerful speech. The way “The White Negro” was conceived was accidental in a moment when Mailer “could not write” and when his “brain seemed stuffed in cotton” (1992:331), as Mailer tells in *Advertisements for Myself*. However,

Mailer's career is indebted to this piece and its publication in the mentioned book. Up to those days, Mailer and Capote's relationship was calm as their careers travelled "parallel" ways; they "respected each other and were on friendly terms" (82) as Robert Emmet Long states in his book *Capote: Enfant Terrible* published earlier 2008. In this climate of mutual respect and mutual observation, Capote continued shaping his reportage techniques in the fifties; first, it was the travel sketches in *Local Color* offering visions and stories of their travelling experiences, later the autobiographical *The Grass Harp* and, finally, the two excellent *The Muses Are Heard* and *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. Even though *Breakfast at Tiffany's* got the fame, it must be said that *The Muses Are Heard* is a brilliant book and a remarkable exercise on reporting. In fact, without the reporting of *Porgy and Bess* expedition to Russia in the mid-fifties, the outcome of the posterior *In Cold Blood* could have been extremely different.

Around 1957, Norman Mailer and Truman Capote were successful, their careers were solid and their writings were not invading. It also helped the fact that they turned out to be neighbours living in Brooklyn, living a block away when Capote was living on Willow Street. They were neighbours, they met in the street from time to time, they drank together from time to time, and in the top of the relationship Mailer admitted that Capote "wrote the best sentences of anyone in our generation. He had a lovely poetic ear" (Plimpton: 238). Even after the publication of *Breakfast at Tiffany's* in 1958, Mailer mentioned, to give an idea of how awkward their relationship was, that "If you want to capture a period in New York, no other book has done it so well. So, in that sense he is a bit like Fitzgerald." and insisted saying that "I would not have changed two words in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, which will become a classic-. Those years were immediately previous to the killing of the Clutter family in Kansas and the fight for the fatherhood of the non-fiction novel. Mailer insisted at that moment that he "had a lot of respect for him as a writer and I was very competitive with all of them. "Are they any better than me? Was all I ever lived with in those days. But with Truman I had a different feeling-mainly because I felt that what we were interested in and the way we wrote was so different. We really weren't ever to compete one on one" (Plimpton:238-239). However, they fiercely did, eventually.

"Wealthy Farmer, 3 of Family Slain; H.W. Clutter, Wife and 2 children Are Found Shot in Kansas Home."

This is the very same headline that Truman Capote read in a 1959 November morning on page 39 of the New York Times. That was the beginning of the most serious aspect of the Mailer-Capote dispute with the years: the anxious fight to be self-considered the father of "a new literary form". From that moment on, Truman Capote together with his colleague and friend Harper Lee travelled to Holcomb, Kansas in order to gather all the information about that cruel crime. They arrived in Holcomb causing a shock, they lived with the people of the area, they suffered the tense atmosphere caused by the killing, they were part of the investigation, and later on, they met the criminals who incidentally were hanged in April 1965. The result of all that was a four part publication in the New York Times under the global title of *In Cold Blood: A true account of a multiple murder and its consequences*".

Truman Capote published *In Cold Blood* in book format at the turn of the year and proclaimed himself the father of non-fiction novel, something that author himself would define as "a narrative form that employed all techniques of fictional art, but was nevertheless immaculately factual"

(Plimpton:198). The glory and celebrity Capote got with the book were remarkable, the literary world was astonished with the book and most of the reviews confirmed the mastery of the book. Furthermore, Norman Mailer also was impressed up to the point of arguing that Perry Edward Smith, one of the killers appearing in Capote's book, was "one of the best characters of literature". One way or another, everybody praised the various narrative achievements that *In Cold Blood* contains. Norman Mailer was one of the special guests who Truman Capote invited to one of the social events of the year, for some social critics "one of the social events of the century: The Black and White Ball. On November 28, 1966 all the celebrities of the moment were invited to that "bal masque" at the luxurious Plaza Hotel. And as it can be seen in the graphic report of the event, Mailer and Capote were having a good time, they even got along well. Before and immediately after the publication of the Capote's masterpiece, they were some concessions for good times in their relationship. They even had time to sign a kind of manifesto together or to praise the other.

In this sense, at the beginning of the sixties, and even though we have assured that Capote's political involvement was scarce, we have to note here that Truman Capote, Norman Mailer and other American intellectuals sponsored and signed a full-page advertisement in the New York Times "exhorting Washington to adopt a more conciliatory attitude toward the Castro regime" in the so called Fair Play For Cuba Committee in 1961. In an interview with Eric Norden, Capote regrets ever being involved with this Committee and having signed the advertisement but recognizes that at the very beginning "I honestly thought Castro was an admirable young insurgent who was being unjustly abused in the American press" (Inge:145). Later, in August, 1962, and as another token of the fluent and respectful era of the writers' relationship, Truman Capote writes a letter to Newton Arvin from Palamós, Spain. In that letter, Capote furiously attack critic John Aldridge for his July 29 article titled "What became of our postwar hopes" in *The Times Book Review*, which toughly criticizes all those writers that were promising in a close after war time. "An attack on me, Norman Mailer, etc...? It made me furious (needless to say) but also seemed to me a lot of shit. Just blanket statements backed up by no evidence whatsoever..." (Letters: 359). Years later, when Capote was on top and he was a kind of god and when Mailer had not already published *The Armies of the Night* in an interview with Jerry Tallmmer Capote said that he would "like to have a marvelous house somewhere," he said, "and make Norman come there six month and really make him work. Because he's a fantastic talent... with an unfortunate lack of discipline."

On October 27, 1967 *Time Magazine* published under the title "A Shaky Start" the account of how Norman Mailer had participated in the March on the Pentagon protesting for the Vietnam War. It is precisely that very same page that Mailer uses for the beginning of the first part of his novel *Armies of the Night* published in mid 1968 and called "Pen Pals", which ends with Mailer's voice: "Now we leave Time in order to find out what happened" (1968:13). And what happened is that with this journalistic-type story Norman Mailer won not only the National Book Award but also the Pulitzer Prize. Mailer's "History as Novel, The novel as History" found itself in the same field as Capote's *In Cold Blood* and then it was when the bitter episode of confrontation started. Capote's words in March 1968 talking about Mailer's as a "fine" and "commendable" writer turned into bitter accusations after Mailer's publication in the month of June.

Capote called his own achievement "non-fiction novel" and always reproached Mailer for the fact of not recognizing him as the one who started the genre. Truman Capote, then, complaint that

if “his old friend and rival had been honest, he would have added: “Variations on a Theme by Capote”. Mailer refused to admit Capote as father of anything admitting that Lillian Ross’s *Picture* was pioneer to open this field in fiction writing. Although there were significant differences between *The Armies of the Night* and *In Cold Blood*, that is, the immediacy of the event instead of years of investigation or the presence of the author as main character in the book, among others, we agree with Robert Long when he affirms that “the reportage of Mailer and Capote tended to be self-centred, but each author was self centred in different ways” (82).

In 1973, Tom Wolfe and E.W. Johnson edited an anthology of *The New Journalism* with four basic ideas: first that, the new journalism does not have a manifesto or anything but that, at the same time, somehow it is representative of a changing époque. Second, that, at that time, “the most important literature being written in America is in nonfiction” (Wolfe: 11) ; that the new journalism was not a brand new way of writing but that, finally, everything is rooted in a “new notion, just hot enough to inflate the ego” that “was in the nature of the discovery” “This discovery... was that it just might possible to write journalism that would read like a novel”. In their anthology, Wolfe and Johnson estimated both the works of Truman Capote and Norman Mailer: Wolfe, on the one hand, enlightens Capote’s “feats of reporting that were extraordinary, spectacular” (41). On the other hand, Wolfe recognizes that Mailer’s best work was on the journalistic side and although *The Armies of the Night* did not get any success in audience numbers, it did in the literary circles reinforcing the idea that Mailer’s best works were always in his nonfiction. For Wolfe, Mailer’s contribution was “a tremendous success d’estime” (42). He concludes gathering Mailer and Capote in a final thought: they were writers that had turned to some form of accursed journalism, no matter the name you gave it”(42) . Despite Wolfe’s opinion, it seems that the authorship and the label mattered and, in fact, provoked the break between both writers. Capote accused Mailer of intellectual piracy and Mailer complaint that Truman Capote never got credit to his achievement.

Mailer’s *The Executioner’s Song* in 1979 provided him with a new Pulitzer prize. In that book, Norman Mailer makes an account of criminal Gary Gilmore, who was “the first man to be executed after the Supreme Court countenanced a new era of judicial retribution by allowing states to inflict death penalty”. This publication confirmed the quality of Mailer’s reportage and, as it could not be otherwise, provoked Capote’s wrath. Truman Capote was still thinking about a conspiracy theory against him and with some irony he criticizes Mailer’s prize saying that “now I see that they only prizes Norman wins are for that very same kind of writing. I’m glad I was of some small service to him.”. Literary speaking, Capote emphasized his “aversion” to Mailer’s book in 1982. He said he had found objectable every single aspect of the book from its philosophy to the writing process including the fact that, for Capote, *The Executioner’s Song* and *In Cold Blood* are not the same because “it was a matter of living with something day in and day out” and “he didn’t live through it day by day, he didn’t know Utah, he didn’t know Gary Gilmore, he never even met Gary Gilmore, he didn’t do an ounce of research on the book.” Eventually, Mailer in his book *The spooky art: Thoughts on writing* Mailer says that “Obviously, I’ll be the first to state that if he hadn’t done *In Cold Blood*, it is conceivable that I wouldn’t have thought on taking on “The Executioner’s song” (2004:98) .However, the relationship was “chilly” up to Capote’s death in August 1984.

The present Iraq war, the intricate CIA scenario, Hitler’s life and a compendium of Mailer’s thoughts about writing completed Norman Mailer’s novels since 1984. However, in the last

moments, as in a daring strategy in their last books they somehow predicted what was coming and they dealt with the same matter: God. Last year, months before his death, Norman Mailer wrote the provocative and shocking *On God: An Uncommon Conversation*. Mailer wrote his final book talking about God and Devils and how they “were working”, especially God, understood as an artist, as Mailer, a “fallible” deity much like Mailer. Meanwhile, Capote, in “Nocturnal Turnings or How Siamese Twins have Sex”, published in 1979, talks and presents his relaxed death in a shocking “short story” having a kind of conversation with himself and in farewell attitude. There, as Mailer, Capote, and maybe as most of the humans, thinks of God and rests:

TC: “It’s not that simple. I did believe in God and then I didn’t”...

TC and TC: Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. And if I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take. Amen.

TC: Good Night.

TC: Good Night.

TC: I love you.

TC: I love you, too.

TC: You’d better. Because when you get right down to it, all we’ve got is each other. Alone. To the grave. And that’s the tragedy, isn’t it?

TC: You forget. We have God, too.

TC: Yes, we have God.

TC: *Zzzzzzzz*

TC: *Zzzzzzzzzz*

TC and TC: *Zzzzzzzzzzzz* (1993:707)

Norman Mailer and Truman Capote were/are two of the most important writers of the 20th century and they lived parallel lives from the very beginning to the very end of their days. They had a relationship based in respect and rivalry, based in competition and admiration, based in mastery and self-improvement. Based in details that as Plutarch says: “a slight thing like a phrase or a jest often makes a greater revelation of character than battles when thousands fall, or the greatest armaments, or sieges of cities.”

Bibliography

CAPOTE, T. *Other Voices, Other Rooms*. New York: Random House Pub, 1948.

— *Local Color*. New York: Random House, 1950.

— *The Grass Harp*. New York: Random House, 1951.

— *Breakfast at Tiffany’s; A Short Novel and Three Stories*. New York: Random House, 1967.

— *In Cold Blood: A True Account of a Multiple Murder and Its Consequences*. New York: Random House, 1966.

— *A Capote Reader*. London: Penguin, 1993

CLARKE, G. *Capote: A Biography*. London, Hamish Hamilton, 1988.

- (ed.) *Too Brief a Treat: The Letters of Truman Capote*. New York: Random House, 2004.
- GROBEL, L. *Conversations with Capote*. New York: New American Library, 1985.
- INGE, M.T (ed). *Truman Capote: Conversations*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1987
- LONG, R.E. *Truman Capote: Enfant Terrible*. New York: The Continnum International Publishing Group, 2008.
- MAILER, N. *The Naked and The Dead*. New York: New American Library, 1948.
- *The Armies of the Night*. New York: Signet Books, 1968.
- *The Executioner's Song*. London: Vintage Books, 1991.
- *Advertisements for Myself*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992.
- *The Spooky Art: Thoughts on writing*. New York: Random House, 2004.
- PLIMPTON, G. *Truman Capote: in which various friends, enemies, acquaintances, and detractors recall his turbulent career*. New York: Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, 1997.
- VIDAL, G. *Palimpsest: A Memoir*. New York: Penguin, 1996.
- WOLFE, Tom and JOHNSON, E. (Eds.). *The New Journalism*. New York: Harper and Row, 1973.

*“Ultimately a hero is a man who would argue with the gods,
and so awakens devils to contest his vision.
The more a man can achieve, the more he may be certain
that the devil will inhabit a part of his creation”*

Norman Mailer

*“America is a hurricane, and the only people who do not hear the
sound are those fortunate if incredibly stupid and smug White
Protestants who live in the center, in the serene eye of the big wind.”*

Norman Mailer