Wilkes University
Commencement, May 27, 1995
Citation for the Honorary Degree of Doctor of Humane Letters

NORMAN MAILER

By aspiration, achievement and accolade, your deepest identity is novelist. And as novelist, your deepest urge has been to explore American identity and American society, the twin obsessions of your writer's life. In so doing, you have illumined our dreams and our nightmares and given us the courage to wrestle with both. Your urgent utterances on the American psyche have led you to breach the walls between literary genres and, more than any writer of this century, enlarge the definition of the word novelist. While refusing to relinquish your first identity, you have nevertheless become a connoisseur of literary forms and styles and won countless awards, including two Pulitzer Prizes, a National Book Award, and an Emmy nomination. The sum of your achievements in biography, literary criticism, poetry, history, drama, essays of every kind, political analysis, sports reportage, newspaper and magazine columns, the philosophical dialogue and, of course, the novel is without equal. This amazing list gives no hint of the ways you have joined and refurbished these forms, nor of the dazzling range of rhetorical approaches and voices you have employed.

In more than forty books over fifty years, from your 1948 novel, The Naked and the Dead, based on your experience as a rifleman in World War II, through your chronicle of the moon shot, Of A Fire on the Moon (1970), to your biographical studies of Marilyn Monroe, Muhammad Ali and Gary Gilmore, to your just-published study of the Kennedy assassination, Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery, you have, as one critic stated, tried "to position yourself so as to stand face to face with the true identity of our time, our time in America." Your works are as brilliant and varied as the post-war American culture you have chronicled, criticized and helped create.

Your career has not been a slow and steady ascent to the higher reaches of eminence. Elected in 1984 to the 50-member American Academy of Arts and Letters and appointed State Author of New York in 1991, your career still resembles a Stendhal novel, that is, dramatic gains canceled out by ironic reversals and sharp defeats. Often when you have had a literary success, you have doubled the stakes and flung your winnings on the gambling tables of still greater achievement. Your risk-taking as a writer has kept you in our public eye and kept your books in our libraries and hearts. Your motto is "Repetition kills the Soul".

It has been said that if we could combine the literary sensibilities of D. H. Lawrence, Andre Malraux, Herman Melville and Henry James, we would have another you. Kin to these writers you are, but there is only one, singular, unprecedented, irreplaceable Norman Mailer. Romantic quester, artificer, shapeshifter and storyteller of the American Century, we salute Norman Mailer!

By the power vested in me by the Board of Trustees of Wilkes University and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, I hereby bestow upon you, Norman Mailer, the degree Doctor of Humane Letters, Honoris Causa, with all the rights and privileges appertaining thereto.