

MAILER'S GHOST
THE RECORD OF A CAREER

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by

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America is a didactic country whose people always offer their personal experiences as a helpful lesson to the rest, hoping to hearten them and do them good—an intensive sort of personal public-relations project. There are times when I see this as idealism. There are other times when it looks to me like pure delirium.

Saul Bellow, *Humboldt's Gift*

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Abstract

If Norman Mailer is now remembered at all it is for his vociferous opposition to Feminism, for his dangerous vision of personal violence as the means of salvation as against the claims of a nebulous totalitarianism in American society, and for having made his life an example of these dubious ideals. The neglect finally rests on his image as a frustrated and inconsistent literary artist who failed to fulfil either his early potential or the recklessly bold claims he made for his own work. Without attempting an apologetics on those first three points, this thesis proposes a reading of Mailer's work and career that will reveal their coherence. *The Executioner's Song*—which is normally treated as a brilliant but atypical outlier—will be read as the culmination of a conscious literary effort that had begun two decades previously, with the publication of *Advertisements for Myself*.

The later book will be shown as fulfilling the boast Mailer had made in the earlier anthology to write a great novel predicated upon the philosophy of Hip—the personalised form of American Existentialism that he had devised. Focusing chiefly on Mailer's creative nonfiction, this thesis will chart the evolution of his project to demonstrate that in order to write his vaunted, errant masterpiece he needed to exhaust the language with which he had proclaimed it. With a particular focus on his illeistic journalism it will be shown that Mailer had to deplete himself as a subject before proving equal to the feat of imaginative empathy that *The Executioner's Song* required.

There is no restoring Mailer's lost notoriety, but this thesis argues that he deserves better than both the over-appraisals and the animadversions that have accumulated to his name; that it is his struggles and imperfections that make him the representative writer of his generation.

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Introduction: Through Existentialism to Execution

It was neither true nor false but what was experienced.

André Malraux, *Man's Fate*

Part I: Death and Departure

The author of *Advertisements for Myself*, *The Armies of the Night*, and *The Executioner's Song* died on November 10th, 2007. Norman Mailer was eighty-four years old, and one of the most garlanded artists in America: the only writer to receive the Pulitzer Prizes for both Fiction and General Non-Fiction, he was also the recipient of the National Book Award and the Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters—only the Nobel had eluded his grasp. He had served as the 27th president of the American chapter of PEN, and under his leadership the organisation's 1986 International Congress in New York had brought together the largest ever gathering of foreign writers on American soil. His coverage of the 1996 presidential campaigns anointed him the 'dean of political correspondents on every plane—always the oldest man aboard' (Mailer, 1998 p. 1151). Large books like *Harlot's Ghost* and *Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery* served notice of a mind undimmed and still burning to shine a light into the unilluminated corners of the nation's living history.¹ Whether or not he could heal the country's fissures and still bristling traumas, it seemed that through hard work, good behaviour and the passage of time he had triumphed over the worst excesses of his own past. One remembered dimly the stabbing of his second wife, Adele Morales, as well as his calamitous bid for the New York mayoralty, the febrile public confrontations with Women's Lib, and his bloody entanglement with Jack Henry Abbott—but could anyone still be bothered to persist with these recriminations?

Old age had been kind to him and he had worn it well as he settled into a tender and graceful senescence. His sixth and final marriage, to Norris Church, had been his longest and happiest; with their son, John Buffalo, he had collaborated on *The Big Empty*, a book-length record of their conversations on the old Mailerian obsessions: politics, boxing, America, God, and more besides. Warm, wide-ranging, and easy-going, it's also a celebration of love, a

¹ In his review of the latter text Martin Amis wrote that 'his portrait here of Khrushchev's Russia reproduces the fluid empathy of his other non-fiction monument, *The Executioner's Song*. In late-period Mailer, deep resources are being marshalled' (Amis, 2002 p. 276). These works are covered in Appendix II.

commemoration of paternal and filial devotion. This was fetching form for Mailer, who was the more cherished as his generation began to expire around him. Joseph Heller had passed in December of 1999—‘How terrible,’ said Kurt Vonnegut: ‘a calamity for American literature.’ Vonnegut’s death came eight months before Mailer’s; a mass extinction of the nation’s literary megafauna was unfolding before the public’s eyes. Mailer’s eulogy for George Plimpton, delivered in September of 2003, is memorialised in Philip Roth’s *Exit Ghost*:

Guy’s eighty now, both knees shot, walks with two canes, can’t take a stride of more than six inches alone, but he refuses help going up to the pulpit, won’t even use one of the canes. Climbs this tall pulpit all by himself. Everybody pulling for him step by step. The conquistador is here and the high drama begins. The Twilight of the Gods. He surveys the assemblage. Looks down the length of the nave and out to Amsterdam Avenue and across the U.S. to the Pacific. Reminds me of Father Mapple in *Moby-Dick*. I expected him to begin “Shipmates!” and preach upon the lesson Jonah teaches. But no, he too speaks very simply about George. This is no longer the Mailer in quest of a quarrel, yet his thumbprint is on every word. He speaks about a friendship with George that flourished only in recent years—tells us how the two of them and their wives had travelled together to wherever they were performing a play they’d written together,² and of how close the two couples had become, and I’m thinking, Well, it’s been a long time coming, America, but there on the pulpit is Norman Mailer speaking as a husband in praise of coupledness. (Roth p. 255)

In that same year he published *Why Are We at War?* The demagoguery and adventurism of the George W. Bush years provided a congenial context for the burnishing of Mailer’s image. The book, which at a stroke re-anointed him as doyen of the anti-war movement, made no especial demands upon his time or talent: an unremarkable assemblage of interviews and speeches, it was a convenient way of engraving his opposition to the invasion of Iraq onto his body of work. A book on the second Gulf War could now take its place among his other literary acts of witness, next to the books on World War II and Vietnam, as well as on Marilyn Monroe, Muhammad Ali, Gary Gilmore, and Lee Harvey Oswald. By dint of his

² See Appendix II, Part IV

dogged longevity and unstinting prolificacy—as well as the sheer range of subject matter to which these energies were harnessed—he had become something resembling *the* author exemplar, satisfying the public’s ideal of the American writer as a sort of Zelig of their eponymous century. He was both the vanguard and evangelist of American Exceptionalism, the notion that the nation’s crusades and crises brought forth not only events and figures that were unprecedented but also artists who rose to the occasion and bore unprecedented witness. The nation, after all, was born of what Thomas Paine declared ‘the times that try men’s souls,’ and the challenge to the American writer was to be present upon each occasion that the country renewed itself in this spirit. One thinks of the conflagration of Civil War captured in the elegies of Walt Whitman, and how that Zero Hour of the nation’s history set the stage for the emergence of its first authentically native philosophical school: the Pragmatism of Charles Sanders Peirce, Oliver Wendell Holmes, William James, and John Dewey. Or perhaps one recalls more immediately the lost generations preceding Mailer’s, reeling first from the Great War and then the Great Crash, the trial of whose souls would be forever inscribed in *The Sun Also Rises*, *The Great Gatsby*, *U.S.A.*, *Studs Lonigan*, and *The Grapes of Wrath*. Even a rival like Gore Vidal had to concede that Mailer possessed this ‘eye for the main chance,’ noting that ‘the writer who lacks this instinct is done for in America; excellence is not nearly enough’ (Vidal p. 35).

One of Mailer’s last appearances before the nation was on the February 3rd broadcast of *Charlie Rose*. His old charms and virtues, paraded in aid of his last novel, *The Castle in the Forest*, were on such abundant display that the book-buying public took his word as bond. So confidently and forthrightly did he declare the book one of his major works that by the next day it had surged up the charts. America, still a monolithic media society, bestowed upon him his eleventh bestseller. He had had at least one in each of the seven decades between 1948 and 2007, and the latest could count J.M. Coetzee and Beryl Bainbridge among its admirers. The book was dedicated to his children, grandchildren, and grand-niece—the list runs to sixteen names. On the cusp of his death the quick-change artist had pulled off perhaps the most startling metamorphosis of his career: the wife-stabber and philanderer had become a family man, and the journalist had won acceptance as a novelist. ‘Norman Mailer,’ concludes J. Michael Lennon’s authorised biography, ‘singular, unprecedented and irreplaceable, was prepared for his next voyage’ (Lennon, 2013 p. 763).

But Lennon fails to ask: whither Mailer? Notwithstanding his close friendship with the man (he is also executor of Mailer’s literary estate and editor of *The Selected Letters of Norman Mailer* as well as of volumes like *Conversations with Norman Mailer*) he may have valid

professional grounds for the bathos of his panegyric.³ After all, 2018 saw Mailer's elevation to the Parnassus of *The Library of America*, commencing with two Lennon-edited volumes compiling the writings of the 1960s.⁴ *Collected Essays of the 1960s* should make for bracing if not downright galvanising reading (the best of those pieces are examined in my third chapter). *Four Books of the 1960s* is a less welcome assemblage, forcing the assiduous probity of *The Armies of the Night* and *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* into an unsalutary line-up with the dated scatology of *Why Are We in Vietnam?* and that fantasia of sexual violence, *An American Dream*. Mailer has never wanted for mockery and censure on those fronts. For all the praise that *The Castle in the Forest* received, few probably felt cheated of its planned sequel; Lionel Shriver expressed outright relief.⁵ The novel was also the occasion for the last accolade he ever received: the Bad Sex in Fiction Award, bestowed posthumously by the *Literary Review*. A collegial jab to most of its other recipients, it could not but scan in Mailer's case as yet another brief in a continuing indictment.

And then the obituaries, when not outright hostile,⁶ got straight into the clinical work of clarifying and qualifying Mailer's achievement. 'If he never quite succeeded in bringing off what he called "the big one"—the Great American Novel—it was not for want of trying,' wrote *The New York Times* (McGrath). Another typical assessment was the one published in *The Guardian*: 'The novel was still the contest for which the big awards were given...and to say that Mailer's talent was not suited to fiction was the quickest way to hurt him' (Campbell). The provisional and hopeful status that Richard Poirier bestowed upon him in 1972—'like Melville without *Moby-Dick*, George Elliot without *Middlemarch*, Mark Twain

³ Lennon was also the animating force behind some of the more otiose projects of Mailer's later years: the compilation of *The Spooky Art: Some Thoughts on Writing* was largely his work, and the dialogues in *On God: An Uncommon Conversation* displayed Mailer at his worst. Under Lennon's prodding the old hocus pocus about God and the Devil—which even in Mailer's strongest writing finds him skirting shaky metaphorical ground—hardens into an enervating literalism:

Lennon: Have recent geopolitical events reaffirmed or undercut your theological beliefs? I mean, has the re-election of George Bush confirmed your belief system?

Mailer: I've felt from the word go that George Bush is one of the Devil's clients. And every time he feels that Jesus is talking to him, count on it: Satan is in his ear. One of the Devil's greatest talents could be to speak like Jesus. The war in Iraq has been steroidal for America. So in that sense, yes—I think the Devil may be winning right now in American. But it's still coming down to the wire. (Mailer and Lennon, p. 141)

⁴ In a way, Mailer was always destined for such monumentalization: *Library of America* was the brainchild of Edmund Wilson ('the nearest thing to Jehovah' in the mind of the young Mailer), and eventually brought into being by, among others, Richard Poirier and Jason Epstein, who was Mailer's editor at Random House.

⁵ Such was Mailer's reputation for leaving novels stranded of their promised successors that in 2010 Jay Z could toss out this casual reference to *Harlot's Ghost*: 'To be continued—we on that Norman Mailer shit' (Remix of Kanye West's POWER, released on August 20th of 2010). This history is spelt out in Appendix II.

⁶ As in the case of Joan Smith's opinion piece in *The Guardian*, which denounced him as 'an arch-conservative who pulled off a stunning confidence trick [and] a faux-radical who used the taboo-breaking atmosphere of the 60s as cover for a career of lifelong self-promotion.'

without *Huckleberry Finn*'—now seemed like a preposterously premature counterfactual (Poirier, 1972 p. 11). What seemed to unfold was an accelerated vindication of the fate that Harold Bloom foresaw in 2003:

The Deer Park defies misreading, and *An American Dream* and *Why Are We in Vietnam?* have lost the immediacy of their occasion, and are scarcely less readable. In what is now the Age of Pynchon, Mailer has been eclipsed as a writer of fictions, though hardly at all as a performing self. He may be remembered more as a prose prophet than as a novelist, more as Carlyle than as Hemingway...Mailer, now celebrated, doubtless will vanish into neglect, and yet always will return, as a historian of the moral consciousness of his era, and as the representative writer of his generation. (Bloom, 2003 p. 6)

Almost instantaneously upon his death he was denuded, transformed from the most famous writer of his generation into one uniquely and incredibly at the mercy of what E.P. Thompson called the enormous condescension of posterity. A hostile retrospective, written by Algis Valiunas in 2009, ruled that 'Mailer should be remembered not only in a fool's cap and bells but also in a scoundrel's midnight black' (Valiunas p. 75). The campaign to resuscitate his reputation has reaped its shares of boons and blunders. Lennon's biography delivered all the riches that one expects from inside access but didn't subject them to the interpretative or evaluative—let alone critical—scrutiny that a figure like Mailer demands. Lennon didn't make the case for his friend's greatness so much as he pleaded for it as self-evident, and the sheer comity of the whole affair left Mailer much as Elizabeth Hardwick found him in 1985: a 'spectacular mound of images' and an 'anecdotal pile.'

2014 brought us the *Selected Letters*, which in their quotidian alternating of the spectacular and the anecdotal made for a more compelling and vivid portrait of the life, albeit at a cost. Arguably a line like 'I will invite you to a fight in which I expect to stomp out of you a fat amount of your yellow and treasonous shit' presents both writer and reader with a lose-lose scenario: commanding interest only because it's addressed from one future Pulitzer Prize winner to another (William Styron, charged with slandering the wife Mailer would go on to stab), and the more unedifying for it (March 12th, 1958). 'Once again, words fail Norman Mailer,' as Gore Vidal had the poise to remark while wiping his bloodied lip. The reissue of *Barbary Shore* in the summer of 2015 went completely unnoticed, as did that of *Why Are We in Vietnam?* two years later; in neither case did Random House deign to make the text

available for e-readers—*that* is how confident Mailer’s publishers are of his reaching a new readership. As Louis Menand remarked in *The New Yorker* in October of 2013: ‘The world has long since finished having its Norman Mailer conversation, but few writers in their day received as much attention.’

Part II: The Settling Dust

Can any author’s posthumous reputation be salvaged by the efforts of their votaries? One’s mind turns to those extreme and often ambivalent examples of literary preservation: to Max Brod, our gratitude to whom must ultimately outweigh our reservations; to Dmitri Nabokov, who besmirched his own reputation as warden of his father’s posterity by publishing *The Original of Laura* in 2009. The free-fall of Mailer’s standing in the decade since his death is probably a process which has taken place in complete indifference to Lennon’s stewardship, but his executor’s bromides are unlikely to have converted the agnostic or given pause to the hostile. Lennon emerges in the authorised biography as a parochial thinker and a bland stylist—the more so for the intermittent pretensions of his formulations; what do we gain by his insistence on equating Mailer with Faustus, Proteus, and Falstaff? *A Double Life* lacks the detachment and well-judged asperity of Mary Dearborn’s 1999 account *Mailer: A Biography*. And despite its all-access volubility it doesn’t deliver the same thrilling polyphony as Peter Manso’s *Mailer: His Life and Times*, the 1985 oral history of the man. One feels that the definitive life is still to be written. Future work on Mailer will build on Lennon’s undeniable and self-effacing labours in his capacity as archivist. Unfortunately, too often one’s reading of *A Double Life* is frustrated by the sensation that Lennon’s deep familiarity and palpable affection for his subject is precisely what’s occluding our view of Mailer. A writer like, say, Doris Kearns Goodwin finds no challenge in squaring her duties as biographer with her own ‘appearances’ in the life of Lyndon B. Johnson; Lennon’s solution is homage of the lowest order:

J. Michael Lennon, a young professor at University of Illinois-Springfield, had been working with Mailer to put together his latest essays and interviews for what would become *Pieces and Pontifications*, and when Mailer told him that he was coming to see [Jack Henry] Abbott, he offered to pick him up at the airport. (Lennon, 2013 p. 542)

It is difficult to discern what Lennon thought he was achieving by aping Mailer's illeism—the famous style of third-person narration that he deployed throughout his mature journalism. At best the effect is cute, and nothing approaching Mailerian. For it to be so, Lennon would have to have been at least as famous as Mailer, and at least as truculent in his relationship with the media that had so elevated him. Therein resides the exhilarating displacement that the reader experiences upon first encountering the Mailer of *The Armies of the Night*: 'Mailer had the most developed sense of image; if not, he would have been a figure of deficiency, for people had been regarding him by his public image since he was twenty-five years old' (Mailer, 1968 p. 15). But Lennon the critic is of little help to the curious reader, who is offered a cloying brew of jargon and encomium:

The paradox of his achievement is that in a narrative that sundered the protagonist into Mailer-now and Mailer-then, he was able to unite all the actors, currents, and rich particularities of the March [on the Pentagon—October 21st of 1967], seeing them through the oppositions of his psyche. This division of the self by fiat, the resolution of twenty-five years of point of view uncertainties, was a masterstroke and the most significant aesthetic decision of Mailer's career. (Lennon, 2013 p. 397)

Frank Kermode wrote that there is only one sense in which the word 'definitive' can be applied to a work of criticism: if it has provided the matrix for a generation of comment. It is perhaps a sign of Mailer's unsettled posterity that the closest to a prime candidate for such a work is still Richard Poirier's *Mailer* (published in 1972 by Kermode's Fontana Modern Masters series). Contra its putative commercial positioning as a primer on Mailer it is a daunting work: dense and theoretical, an airtight structure, a breathless performance. The general reader doesn't find herself introduced to Mailer so much as immured in him—at no point does Poirier pause to provide any basic intelligence on the books under examination. The frame of reference is almost fanatically narrow. For all that Poirier alludes to an outside world of political realities—of political dangers that Mailer's work might help us understand and navigate—one wouldn't learn from reading his work that (to take one example) a platform of Mailer's 1969 mayoral campaign was the freeing of Huey Newton, the co-founder of the Black Panthers who had been convicted two years previously of voluntary manslaughter in the death of a police officer. Nor would one find in *Mailer* the attendant

observation that this was a cheap and easy gesture for a public figure who, to be blunt, was nowhere near the crunch during the flashpoints of the Civil Rights Movement, and whose literary record amounts to the appropriation and reinforcing of racial stereotypes—which is the crux of his Hip, or White Negroism.

But the critical voices sounding such and similar notes of obloquy are legion, and Poirier's is manifestly not the sort of criticism that takes account of these externalities. Referring only coyly or evasively to Mailer's 'excesses' and 'dizzying eugenic proposals,' Poirier's mission is to liberate Mailer from out of the tedious quotidian world of social and political literalism and into the freedom of linguistic play. 'Freedom,' wrote Bloom in his contribution to Geoffrey Hartman's pioneering collection *Deconstruction and Criticism*, 'must mean freedom of meaning, the freedom to have a meaning of one's own. Such freedom is wholly illusory unless it is achieved against a prior plenitude of meaning, which is tradition, and so also against language' (Bloom, 2004 p. 4). Poirier's interest lay in Mailer's ability to problematize the language at his disposal, in how he 'gives a certain word the responsibility to absorb and recreate and in turn be enriched by other words that it almost accidentally comes into contact with,' creating an 'area of larger meaning wherein all his words will pulsate in a dialectical interchange' (Poirier, 1972 p. 15). This is why so much energy in his book is expended on castigating critics who haven't embraced such fluidity in their own practice and thus ended up taking Mailer at his provocative and elusive word. The counter-argument to this is that there is an entire world of workaday human and social discourse that subscribes to neither 'a magical theory of all language' nor a 'thoroughgoing linguistic nihilism,' to the constituents of which Mailer's lexical virtuosity is no more than terminological inexactitude, insouciant and even dangerous (Bloom, *ibid.*) Elsewhere Poirier argues that if Mailer is to 'effect a revolution in our consciousness it will not be by making the merely usual kind of sense. It will be by virtue of a style subversive of the ways certain problems are customarily handled' (Poirier, 1972 p. 17). One detects throughout that Poirier is engaged in a form of damage limitation, of finding different ways of letting Mailer off the hook of the most reflexive objections to his style and approach. Ultimately, he ends up being as vague as his subject on the nature and form of the revolution that Mailer wishes to bring about.

Still, when reading Poirier one divines the presence—the ruthless organising logic—of what is for better and worse a rarefied and even singular literary sensibility. If his work on Mailer is frequently cited within these pages it is not only because his praise of the man is the most precise and exacting yet written, but also because he was a truly great critic. The perils

posed by such a honed and particular intellect lies in its ability to baffle, even dismay, by the eccentricity and the blinkered fixity of its preferences and pronouncements. On the one hand Poirier is wholly alive to the shortcomings of Mailer's method: 'A man who offers more than anyone wants is in danger of being taken for granted, even of being resented for forestalling what the reader would like to give of himself' (Poirier, 1972 p. 10). On the other hand, in one passage of astonishing hostility and derision he places the Mailer of *An American Dream* and *Why Are We in Vietnam?* on an even footing with Thomas Pynchon and William Burroughs ('a writer of genius equivalent to Mailer's'), dismisses the books' critics wholesale ('not everyone is qualified for [this] kind of reading...not everyone is capable of caring for the drama of his argument and of his language'), and goes out of his way to dismiss Jorge Luis Borges as 'the kind of writer whose relation to the possibilities of literature is like the relation of a good cookbook to food' (Ibid. p. 123). What a peculiar set of aesthetic and ideological allegiances!

It is in his capacity as a professor at Rutgers University that Poirier declares that 'the reason why most thoughtful and literate young readers prefer Mailer to, say, Updike or Roth or Malamud is that his timing is synchronized to theirs, while the others move to an older beat.' This seems plausible, but what Poirier goes on to state is flatly astonishing: 'It seems no accident that *An American Dream*...finds its most appreciative audience among serious young students of literature who have a surer instinct for what it offers than have most of Mailer's critics' (Ibid. pp. 124-125). One can scarcely imagine a contemporary educator writing about their students having such a relationship with Mailer's writing; this would be the same book that Kate Millett described as 'an exercise in how to kill your wife and be happy ever after. The reader is given to understand that by murdering one woman and bugging another, Rojack has become a "man"' (Millett p. 15).⁷ Mailer now seems quixotically and toxically intent on tilting at the big questions of his day from the wrong side of history. These are questions that, nearly half a century onward, are far from stable or settled, and one cannot imagine where his input would be valued in the large debates engendered by a resurgent Feminist movement or by Black Lives Matter—or at any point of political and cultural rupture. He is too easily dismissed and demonised as a biological determinist and racial essentialist, and neither position is wholly incorrect. Nor is the prevailing academic orthodoxy congenial to Mailer. A fairly representative piece of recent

⁷ Millett straightforwardly identifies Stephen Rojack, the novel's protagonist, with Mailer himself and claims that he is the first of the novelist's characters to function as an outright stand-in. I contest this reading with my analysis of *Barbary Shore*.

criticism is ‘Crises of Masculinity: Homosocial Desire and Homosexual Panic in the Critical Cold War Narratives of Mailer and Coover’ by Michael Snyder:

Whereas [Robert] Coover’s use of homosexual materials empowers his critique of hegemonic discourse, Mailer’s use of these materials, while forming a critique, tend to be a result of his own personal fears over the soundness of his masculinity and heterosexuality. Judging from his writings and actions, Mailer may have spent decades in a homosexual panic. (Snyder p. 264)

Apparently this sort of sneering *ad hominem* and tawdry psychoanalytic speculation is licensed by ‘applying the theories of Guy Hocquenghem, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Louis Althusser,’ and by knowing references to ‘subversive Bakhtinian carnival laughter.’ All this is at the service of outing Mailer as a homosexual: a theme which runs throughout recent writings on the man. Then there’s its theory-refracted opposite, out of which Mailer emerges as attempting to somehow critique or queer hegemonic masculinity.⁸ I recognise Mailer in neither image, but it would seem that he can hardly expect a fair hearing—not while campuses slide into a sort of enlightened and paternalistic censorship, manifested as trigger warnings and the now-routine denial of platforms. Mailer’s two novels of the 1960s have no hope for a sober discussion: *An American Dream* is gleeful in its violence against women and blacks, and *Why Are We in Vietnam?* is its author’s most thorough enactment in fictional form of his controversial White Negroism. The party line on both books hasn’t changed greatly since Kate Millett published *Sexual Politics* in 1970, even though Millett herself fell victim to the internecine conflicts between the Feminist and Gay Rights movements. The former balked at the idea that her prominence would ‘reinforce the views of those sceptics who routinely dismiss all liberationists as lesbians,’ with the latter ‘denouncing her for not coming out sooner.’⁹ It is also reasonable to ask what use for Mailer might be found by a generation now accustomed to ostracising Germaine Greer, his bitterest debating foe, for lagging behind the contemporary orthodoxy on Trans rights.

One might also add the quick observation that Mailer doesn’t do very well on social media, which deserves examination for two reasons. Firstly, for all that it is open to mockery it provides a space which bridges the gap between the grassroots and academic wings of the

⁸ For further examples see the articles by Justin Shaw and Ashton Howley listed in the bibliography.

⁹ From the obituaries for Millett published in *The Guardian* and *The New York Times*, respectively.

various movements that I have mentioned. The kyriarchy, intersectionality, privilege checking, Foucaultian notions of the body—these are extraordinarily potent heuristics which have trickled down from the journals, first at 140 and then 280 characters at a time, and energised and focused activists.¹⁰ Secondly, social media has incubated an outlook and culture around reading that can be broadly characterised as meliorative, hagiographic, and therapeutic. This is anecdotal, but just look at those vast expanses of cyberspace given over to J.D. Salinger, to Kurt Vonnegut, to David Foster Wallace—which is to say nothing of the previously neglected minority writers shared by readers and re-posters with their peers across the globe. The odd quote of Mailer’s does the occasional round—usually one of his painfully accurate observations on the agonies of writing—but on the whole he is too severe, dated, and ‘problematic’ a figure for social media.

Part III: Towards a Reassessment

Any new attempt at a critical accounting of Mailer’s work and achievement must begin by acknowledging the sudden and utter diminution of his standing and reputation. Assessments of Mailer that seem factional in their opposition now read as founded on the same category error—that of his greatness. During his lifetime his greatness was pragmatically equal to his prominence, which was his greatest triumph as a performing self and media manipulator. A picayune bit of hackwork like *St. George and the Godfather* is unlikely to be reissued, except perhaps as one component of a future *Library of America* edition. As an example of the New Journalism, as a primary source on the contest between Richard Nixon and George McGovern, it will remain eclipsed by Hunter S. Thompson’s *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail ’72* (much as his lumbering and inconclusive *A Fire on the Moon* will be passed over by those curious about the Space Race in favour of Tom Wolfe’s crowd-pleasing *The Right Stuff*). Thompson, I suspect, will enjoy the embers of widespread fervent admiration before the final collapse of reading as a pastime. So will a number of his contemporaries—the writers who, Poirier concedes, wrote ‘more shapely books,’ and

¹⁰ Or perhaps the dissemination of ‘hot takes’ by bi-directional digital media has merely crystallized the dilemma facing the intellectual described over fifty years ago by Richard Hofstadter in *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*: ‘The large, liberal middle-class audience upon which acceptance depends now brings to the work of the intellectuals a bland, absorptive tolerance that is quite different from a vital response. To the writer who has just eviscerated their way of life and their self-satisfying compromises, readers now saw “How interesting!” or even at times “How true!” Such passive tolerance can only be infuriating to a writer who looks beyond the size of his royalties and hopes actually to exert some influence on the course of affairs or to strike a note in the moral consciousness of his time. He objects that serious thinking is received as a kind of diversion and not as a challenge’ (Hofstadter pp. 418-419).

‘avoided his excesses’ (Poirier, 1972 p. 10).¹¹ However, it must be remembered that Mailer’s book was rushed into publication in the hopes of having some effect upon the 1972 election—such was the cachet attributed to him at the height of his fame.

But that Mailer is gone, and so is the elderly gentleman who took his place. Now the books must speak on behalf of their creator, whose ‘self-explanations and assessments [had been] abundant to a fault,’ who was ‘continually agitated and dissatisfied with his achievements, and always redoing his work by his subsequent commentaries’ (Ibid.). This was an activity carried out in the pairing of occasional writings with new prefatory matter in the anthologies, in the autobiographical depictions in the mature journalism, in the form of illeism itself (in *Rhetoric*, Aristotle’s prescription for escaping a stylistic bind is public self-correction). Even while not writing Mailer engaged in self-promotion without cease or repose, two excellent examples of which are his appearances on the May 28th, 1968 and October 11th, 1979 recordings of *Firing Line* (made available online by the Hoover Institution). In contrast to the confessional mono-logorrhoea of his writings, in his public appearances he seeks out what he would erroneously refer to as some sort of dialectical interchange, by which he simply means the exigencies of a hostile interview (this is the sort of casualness with key terminology that Poirier’s entire system is rigged up to justify). He and William F. Buckley were not just near-exact contemporaries, they had the same killer instinct for thriving in a media culture that was top-down and monolithic. Mailer’s prominence in the cultural landscape of the day—what one might describe as his fame for being famous—was part of the context in which his books must be understood: this has become clearer and clearer as his life recedes into the past. J.G. Ballard said that death is always a career move for a writer; in Mailer’s case it was a bad one.

Barring the unlikely re-emergence of *No Percentage*, the lost early novel predating *A Transit to Narcissus* (written after graduating from Harvard, based on his experiences working at a state hospital in Boston in the summer of 1942—the facsimile of the unpublished transcript appeared in 1978), or possibly a bundling of essays neglected by the 2013 collection *The Mind of an Outlaw*, the Mailerian well has probably run dry.¹² Reflecting his scrupulous curatorship of his occasional writings, the non-canonical

¹¹ One marvels at the huge range of novelistic skills, utterly absent in Mailer, that Poirier is downplaying here. Presumably he’s referring to Kurt Vonnegut, who emerged from the rubble of Dresden to see war through the dust and smoke for what it is: a children’s crusade. Alfred Kazin, in *The Bright Book of Life* (published in the same year as Poirier’s book), writes persuasively that ‘Vonnegut’s total horror of war has endeared him to the young, who find it hard to believe that even World War II had a purpose, and who see themselves as belonging to the universe at large rather than to the country which sends them to fight in Asia’ (Kazin, 1971 p. 89).

¹² The failure by editor Philip Sipiora to include more of the writings on theatre and cinema was a significant disappointment. In the second chapter I speculate briefly on what might be gained by the publication of materials held by the Harry Ransom Centre, such as ‘Lipton’s Journal.’

anthologies that were thrown together to relieve his constantly harried finances—such as *The Idol and the Octopus* and *The Essential Norman Mailer*—have been stricken from the record. So the bibliography is set, and some forty books remain to plead his case. The question is whether they can do so with their author *in absentia*.

Which story do we tell about Norman Mailer? There are two extreme versions. The first is to be found in the hostile obituaries and the Feminist denunciations: that he failed to deliver the great novel he had promised, and that he was the worst of a bad bunch—the arch-misogynist, a chauvinist's chauvinist. The two failures are of course linked, the moral-political waywardness begetting the aesthetic defect. This isn't to say that a writer's wandering from the path of liberal democracy or even outright rejecting its ideals is something easily weighed and accounted for in literary criticism. If it were, then the status of Ezra Pound and, perhaps, Martin Heidegger would be settled. In the case of Céline, a great influence on that generation of American writers, I think Will Self cuts to the quick of evaluation.¹³ Why does the 'indiscriminate abandon' of that paranoid masterpiece *Journey to the End of the Night* present a singular and perversely awe-inspiring vision, and why does the later work repel? Because of 'a bitterness that curdled, becoming specific and prosaic, rather than universal and poetic.' Is there merely a 'tawdry specificity' to Mailer's sexism, his well-meaning racism? Or do his best books achieve 'the unpardonable error of manners that is a literary style'? The lot of women and blacks as conceived of by Norman Mailer was shrunken and benighted, which he made clear in numerous books and essays. This was no 'necessary exaggeration,' to use Oscar Wilde's rhetorical formulation; Mailer's speculations were offered to the reader as 'outrageous literalism, not metaphor,' as Bloom characterised *Ancient Evenings*, his huge 'Egyptian Novel' (Bloom, 2003 p. 33). That book's 'peculiar and disturbing sincerity' is only striking in terms of its content—the completely unironic immersion in mythopoeic phantasmagoria—but absolutely typical of his style.¹⁴ Mailer was a literalist. This heterodox moralist, this gadfly to the totalitarian consensus, demanded that

¹³ George Steiner has written that 'The panoramas of the apocalyptic in Günter Grass, in William Burroughs, in Norman Mailer, and also in the most convincing Vietnam War films and in the journalistic vignettes of black skies over Kuwait all come after Céline' (Steiner, 2009 p. 205).

¹⁴ The long gestation of the Egyptian Novel is outlined in Appendix II, Part II. Further evidence of Poirier's stubborn agenda is his eventual identification of *Ancient Evenings* as 'at once his most accomplished text and his most problematic work...[the only one which] achieves the magnitude which can give a retrospective order and enhancement to everything else' (Poirier, 2003 p. 41). He also compares the novel to the work of William Faulkner and Joseph Conrad, which Bloom's editorial remark glosses as 'not in my judgement an elevation Mailer's novel can sustain.' It is interesting to note that once Poirier embarked on the major work of *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections* (1987) Mailer had more or less vanished from his thinking. Without fanfare, Poirier moved Mailer from a central and representative position in American letters to its margins.

one must acquiesce to the unbending determinations of biology. What is this if not a failure of empathy, of imagination? Offered against this eidolon of privileged improbity is the Mailer not only of Poirier but also of Joan Didion, the opening to whose review of *The Executioner's Song* is properly notorious:

It is one of those testimonies to the tenacity of self-regard in the literary life that large numbers of people remain persuaded that Norman Mailer is no better than their reading of him. They condescend to him, they dismiss his most original work in favour of the more literal and predictable rhythms of "The Armies of the Night"; they regard "The Naked and the Dead" as a promise later broken and every book since as a quick turn for his creditors, a stalling action, a spangled substitute, tarted up to deceive, for the "big book" he cannot write. In fact he has written this "big book" at least three times now. He wrote it the first time in 1955 with "The Deer Park" and he wrote it a second time in 1963 with "An American Dream" and he wrote it a third time in 1967 with "Why Are We in Vietnam?" and now, with "The Executioner's Song," he has probably written it a fourth. (Didion 1986, p. 78)

Such a Mailer—one who had written the big one before he even promised to—would scarcely require anyone's help. His position in literary history would be secure, the posterity founded upon an unimpeachable volume of achievement. Four big ones? And each of a sufficient magnitude to warrant the dismissal of works as accomplished as *The Naked and the Dead* and *The Armies of the Night*? No, the verdict delivered by James Wood rings truer:

Yet one notices all that Mr. Mailer cannot do as a novelist. His grotesques, with their sour mental prosperity, are vivid enough, but never quite alive: There is not in all of Mailer the successful fictional portrait of a busy consciousness. Not being alive, his characters exist with one another but rarely live through each other, that crucial test of a novelist's electrical currents. The early novels have a certain bold, klaxoning power; but they lack the sensitivity, the fine precision, the lyrical delicacy that makes the truly artistic. Indeed, there is a sense in which Mr Mailer—who has never been very interested in the esthetics of the novel, who has been content with sturdy, hand-me-down mid-century realism—is not literary in the highest

sense...Journalism provided the right gladiatorial sand for Mr Mailer to kick up. Journalism was the true medium for a writer possessed of a fabulous prose style but with essentially static powers of description, for journalism proceeds statically, paragraph by glittering paragraph, in a starry shuffle. It is not a dance, but a continually interrupted performance, and this was, and always has been, Mr Mailer's real mode—short flights and circular flights, as T.S. Eliot once said of Matthew Arnold's essays.

Part IV: Chapters of a Career

We find Mailer in much the same position that the poet Robert Lowell had in 1976: the best journalist in America. What follows is an outline of my chapters, and unfolding through them is this book's account of the life of Norman Mailer, a story of ambition abetted by dumb luck, of undeniable talent unleashed by happy accident upon the main chance. The first chapter focuses on the first two novels: *The Naked and the Dead* and *Barbary Shore*. Together they tell the tale of a 'gifted and ambitious writer, who knows that to be what he is determined to be—a successful and respected novelist—it is necessary to write novels' (Mudrick p. 352). It is the story of vertiginous ascent to success followed by a sudden plunge into failure, a reminder of the immense vicissitudes to which young and raw ambition can be subject. In this sense the outlines of Mailer's early career resemble those of William Styron and James Jones, the two contemporaries he regarded with the warmest fondness. All three men exemplify the condition of that generation of American writers reared on the example of Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner and then laid bare, while still young men, to the most grinding scrutiny. Poirier lays out the differences between Mailer and Faulkner:

From the beginning, one must remember, Mailer was a most literary young man, whose career as a writer was formed in his imagination before he had imagined anything very much to write about...The dimensions of such a project called for long and patient siege, accompanied by some probably sobering encounters with literary politicians. Instead, at 25, he found himself the beneficiary of a blitzkrieg achieved with *The Naked and the Dead*, the only one of his works which has ever appealed to a mass audience...Possibly because of its success he was from the beginning watched more carefully than

was Faulkner. Faulkner's first three novels...are if anything more derivative and literary than are the first three of Mailer's but his special genius was given a chance to evolve without his having to be told at these early stages that he had already become a failure. (Poirier, 1972 pp. 46-47).

In 1939 a young man of sixteen arrived at Harvard University to study aeronautical engineering and was quickly beguiled by the siren call of literature. The Brooklyn kid, son of Jewish immigrants, had been no prodigious reader as a youth; pulp had made up the bulk of his literary diet.¹⁵ But the reading requirement for the degree's composition course was his introduction to the contemporary American canon, which instantaneously became the yardstick of his own ambition. Mailer fell into the orbit of the scholar F.O. Matthiessen, whose *American Renaissance* (1942)—like Alfred Kazin's *On Native Grounds*, published the following year—helped articulate and form what Richard Hofstadter described as 'a startling resurgence of literary nationalism' (Hofstadter p. 413). His head became crammed with James T. Farrell, John Dos Passos, John Steinbeck, Thomas Wolfe—and yes, Hemingway. He quickly became freighted with a literary ambition that wouldn't settle for expression on a smaller scale than that which he admired in these writers, and he had to win experience that would sate the gigantism of his conceptions. He would be fortunate enough to serve in the last great mass war to which the entire nation was dedicated, and he knew how lucky he was:

I may as well confess that by December 8th or 9th of 1941, in the forty-eight hours after Pearl Harbor, while worthy young men were wondering where they could be of aid to the war effort, and practical young men were deciding which branch of the service was the surest for landing a safe commission, I was worrying darkly whether it would be more likely that a great war novel would be written about Europe or the Pacific. (Mailer, 1992 p. 28)

After graduating in 1943 he got his wish, he struck the jackpot: the draft, the 112th Cavalry (a Texan unit!), the Pacific—as a rifleman as well as other, less glorious assignments during the Luzon Campaign and the occupation of Japan. Mailer was discharged in 1946; in the

¹⁵ 'Norman Mailer knew little about his grandparents' lives in Lithuania, then part of Russia. The Mailers and the Schneiders lived in three towns, not more than sixty miles apart, in central and northeastern Lithuania: Panevezys, Anykscia, and Utena. Unknown to each other in Russia, the two families emigrated at the end of the nineteenth century to escape economic hardship or persecution, or both, the Mailers settling in Johannesburg [where his father Isaac Barnett "Barney" Mailer was born], South Africa, and the Schneiders in New Jersey' (Lennon, 2013 p. 7). Mailer's major statement on Jewish culture is contained in Appendix I.

summer of that year he began work on *The Naked and the Dead*. The novel's publication in May of 1948 was fortuitously timed. The public was ready to read about the war, and the book went to number one on the *New York Times* bestseller list, where it stayed for eleven weeks; it wouldn't leave the charts for another fifty two. Mailer and his first wife, Beatrice Silverman, were in Europe courtesy of the G.I. Bill. His family dutifully cut out and forwarded each review: rave after rave and, with them, the growing intimation of an impending upheaval. 'My farewell to an average man's experience was too abrupt...and so I was prominent and empty, and I had to begin life again' (Ibid. p. 92). His first use of his public platform was on behalf of Henry Wallace and the Progressive Party, for whom he delivered dozens of stump speeches on the 1948 campaign trail. Wallace would finish with 2.4% of the vote, and Mailer wouldn't cast another ballot until 1960. Disenchanted with fame and American politics, he embraced the thinking of his new mentor, Jean Malaquais.

Malaquais (born Wladimir Malacki), who had been André Gide's amanuensis, was a Polish-French novelist and fellow traveller whom the Mailers had met in Paris in 1948. Their initial meetings had been unsatisfying, with Malaquais scorning Mailer's 'boy scout' enthusiasm for the Progressives. They didn't truly connect until the fall of that year, when Malaquais moved to New York—the writing of *Barbary Shore* seems inconceivable without the Frenchman's presence in his life. Mailer turned to Malaquais after Wallace's rout and hired him to translate *The Naked and the Dead* into French, and their relationship plainly furnishes the model for charismatic induction which gives form to the second novel. As will be seen, if Malaquais is obviously the inspiration for the character of William McLeod, then the protagonist Mike Lovett must stand in for Mailer's predicament. Under his mentor's direction Mailer underwent a crash course in Marxian doctrine and the history of Twentieth Century socialism. The novel poses as an allegory of these elements—as much about the vanquishing of Trotskyism by the Stalinists as it is about the stealthy incubation of totalitarianism in America. It was intended to be a *succès d'estime*, a second bestseller, and a scurrilous act of bad citizenship; in 1951 it 'showed its face in the worst of seasons, just a few months after the Chinese had come into the Korean War and set us off on another of our clammy national hysterias' (Mailer, *Advertisements for Myself* p. 105). Although Sterling North obliged by denouncing 'this evil-smelling novel,' the collective critical move was a wave of dismissal; having done his utmost to antagonise Henry Luce's media empire, his

book was summed up by *Time* as ‘paceless, tasteless, and graceless.’¹⁶ The whole affair prompted Gore Vidal’s observation that ‘to be demoralised by the withdrawal of public success (a process as painful in America as the withdrawal of a drug from an addict) is to grant too easily a victory to the society one has attempted to criticize, affect, change, reform’ (Vidal p. 32). This sudden, early, and utter reversal of fortune is the formative trauma of Mailer’s career.

In 1955 came *The Deer Park*, a more conventional novel—and less interesting than the mess and strife that amassed around its troubled composition. The years 1948 to 1959 were the most difficult of his career and found their vindication and fruition with the publication of *Advertisements for Myself*, which tells the story of these years and is the focus of my second chapter. The book is a singular artefact. In Diana Trilling’s summary:

In 1959, at the not very advanced age of thirty-six, Norman Mailer published what amounted to a grand view of his literary lifetime. In a single big volume, *Advertisements for Myself*, he not only reprinted virtually everything he had written except his three novels—and there are even excerpts from these—but also prefaced, or connected, his stories, essays, and journalism with an extended commentary in which he reported on his states of mind at various stages of his development as an author and public figure, on the reception given his work by the press and by his publishers, and on his present estimate of his earlier performances. (D. Trilling, 1965 p. 175)

The book’s title is apposite in ways that have deepened with the passing of the decades. One of the chief objectives for the anthology was to ‘clear a ground’ for a long novel that Mailer was writing; the collection took its title from its final item, ‘Advertisements for Myself on the Way Out,’ the prologue to that work in progress. After the publication of *Barbary Shore* there would be few periods in Mailer’s life when he wasn’t promising the delivery of some megaton novel—if not a series thereof. The chequered careers of Mailer’s phantom masterpieces and their repeated failures to materialise are the subject of the second appendix, but here are the key facts: *The Deer Park* was originally conceived as the first

¹⁶ We have Mailer to thank for the preservation of these brickbats, in the commentary written for *Advertisements for Myself*.

entry in an eight-novel cycle, modelled on Honoré de Balzac's *La Comédie Humaine*.¹⁷ By the time he abandoned this plan he had written 'The Man Who Studied Yoga' (a short story included in *Advertisements* that had been intended as the curtain-raiser for his octet of novels) and an early draft of *The Deer Park*.

It is the weakest of Mailer's first three novels.¹⁸ It is also the locus of a personal and professional obsession on its creator's part that must chasten even the book's admirers with its intensity. As late as 1967, with the production and publication of *The Deer Park: A Play*, he would persist in his fixation with the story and its two main characters: orphaned flying ace Sergius O'Shaughnessy and the proto-Hipster Marion Faye. Both appear in the extracts of the work-in-progress that round out *Advertisements for Myself*. The pieces are well-placed at that anthology's end, for they read like a fever-dream induced by a binge-reading of the complete works of Norman Mailer—which is more-or-less a correlate of reading the book straight through. The novel never materialised, which might be just as well because one is lead to envision a great nightmare of a text. 'Unquestionably,' Bloom has written, 'Mailer has not fulfilled [the anthology's] many complex promises' (Bloom, 2003 p. 2). How could he have? What Mailer set out to achieve in 1959 was to not only generate a large and violent aesthetic disturbance on the scale of *Ulysses* or *The Tropic of Cancer*, but also to galvanise contemporary thought in the manner of something like *The Decline of the West* or *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*.

One of the young Mailer's most deleterious miscalculations as a novelist was to assume that he had to hitch the cart of his fiction to the oxen of some or another doctrine. He had been well-served by the familiar tropes of the American left's anti-authoritarianism in his first novel; less so by the clichés of the anti-Stalinist left in his second. Among the other roles it plays for Mailer, *Advertisements for Myself* serves notice of intellectual liberty—from Malaquais, from the mid-century naturalist novelists, from the obligations of his own past—by its espousal of Mailer's particular version of 'Hip.' As set out in the essay "The White Negro" and the supplementary material flanking it in the anthology, Hip is a private and heady brew, as high on the acrid fumes of Auschwitz and Hiroshima as it is hopped up on

¹⁷ What seemed to escape Mailer's notice was that Balzac only realised that he had a multi-volume project on his hands after having written several works. While Mailer would eventually become an illuminating commentator on American literature, he seemed to value his preferred European classics for their size of their canvasses.

¹⁸ 'The style of the book lacks the eccentricity and wildness that belong to the world being evoked. There is too much of Fitzgerald...and there is far too little of Nathanael West...And strangely enough there is scant evidence of the talent Mailer had shown in *Barbary Shore* for suggesting the possible nightmares in the commonplace' (Poirier, 1972 p. 41).

second-hand ideas from European Existentialism (Mailer had yet to read any) and Emersonian imperatives towards self-reliance.¹⁹ It dilates upon the marginal figure of the Hipster as the representative personality for an age bedevilled by the twin spectres of the concentration camp and the atomic bomb. The Hipster takes his cue from the urban lifestyle of the African-American male and rejects the technocratic certitudes of a mass society. Scorning the carcinogenic nepenthes of psychoanalysis and plastics, his weapons of choice are jazz, marijuana, and his own wits. The Hipster is attuned to and embraces the deliriously variegated demands of his own sensuality, and lives in a present tense that may end at any moment. In such a medium of existence personal violence becomes a matter of credo and self-preservation.

‘Hip’ would eventually cede its pride of place in the Mailerian lexicon to ‘Existentialism’ but—*mutatis mutandis*—the term served as a catch-all, an endlessly adaptable seal of approbation for whatever individual or entity that displayed the requisite sense of an embattled present. So casual is Mailer’s deployment of the term that even the reader who has only read some of his work could provide examples of this elasticity. Among authors, William Faulkner is allegedly the first American Existentialist, while Henry Miller and Hemingway are claimed as idols and precursors. Boxing and bullfighting are somewhat predictably annexed on behalf of the ethos. John F. Kennedy was somehow going to be a president for the Hipsters. ‘One’s condition on marijuana is always existential. One can feel the importance of each moment and how it is changing one. One feels one’s being, one becomes aware of the enormous apparatus of nothingness’ (Mailer, 1988 p. 93). It’s as though Mailer wishes, by a sustained effort of repetition and reiteration, to offer the idea as a massive trope that will not only bestow coherence upon his own continuing project but also catch the activities of others in its dragnet. One might recall the elderly Salvador Dalí, strutting about as custodian of the Surreal and occasionally deigning to bestow the honorific upon whatever had piqued his interest.

Mailer’s problem, however, is that Hip—at least in his hands—was a shaky foundation for a novel: ‘He was evidently one of those proud sensitive fellows who give so much trouble because they are passionate about internal matters of very slight interest to any sensible person,’ as Saul Bellow writes of the hustler Rinaldo Cantabile in *Humboldt’s Gift*. Mailer fails to convince us otherwise. When read straight through *Advertisements for Myself* fails to

¹⁹ Ralph Waldo Emerson is an adumbrated presence in Mailer’s writing—*The Spooky Art*, for example, only mentions him once, *à propos* of Hemingway’s *Green Hills of Africa*—which is the more troubling for the obvious affinities. Mailer was always more concerned with his contemporary American rivals than he was with his forebears in the national tradition.

clear the way for his work in progress. Having become an expert on Norman Mailer, the reader emerges paradoxically less inclined towards the unfinished material, which reads as too-conscious an enactment of the philosophy that the anthology has laboured to establish. The abiding impression is that Mailer is his own favourite philosopher—an unseemliness that burdens the two novels that we would write between the anthology and *The Executioner's Song*. *An American Dream* and *Why Are We in Vietnam?* have received eloquent praise from not only Poirier and Didion but also Tony Tanner, but this book passes over those texts. In this regard it is allied to the criticism of John W. Aldridge, Robert Solotaroff, Robert Merrill, Philip Rahv, Elizabeth Hardwick, and Tom Wolfe—who all found little to admire in Mailer's novels of the 1960s.

In his essay-review of *Advertisements for Myself*, Vidal expressed a preference for *Barbary Shore* among Mailer's first three novels and noted that the new material was attempting the same 'revelation through distortion' as his second book. Regarding the work in progress he wrote that 'one is curious to see the result' (Vidal p. 34). Vidal may have been alone in that regard. The world took more notice of the anthology's other elements, and this book follows that emphasis by reading *Advertisements for Myself* as a synecdoche for Mailer's ensuing career. The anthology exemplifies the contingent nature of his achievement as a writer and forces questions of evaluative standards upon the reader. Her answers, as we shall see, will probably abide upon encounter with the subsequent works. Bloom is correct that 'the book is much more than a miscellany.' It is a work of uncanny pathos, showing us a man proclaiming himself a great writer but producing his greatest writing in exploration of his predicament. The actual fiction that this writing has been summoned to hymn looks poorer in comparison, lacking the explanatory prose's capacity to thrill, its expressive freedom, its energy and wit.

This bifurcation in Mailer's output is exemplified by the section titled 'Fourth Advertisement for Myself: The Last Draft of *The Deer Park*.' The piece is the account of his enervating struggles not only with the recalcitrant material of the novel but also the obduracy of the publishing industry. The Panther edition of *The Deer Park* included the essay as an appendix, and in the space of twenty-four pages it eclipses the three-hundred and sixty that had preceded it. It is also the constituent of *Advertisements for Myself* which can be said to have determined the success that Mailer enjoyed following the publication of the collection—and it did so independently of its appearance therein. The essay had run in *Esquire* under the title "The Mind of an Outlaw" and sparked the imagination of Clay Felker, the editor who commissioned Mailer to cover the 1960 presidential candidacy of John F. Kennedy.

The third chapter focuses on the journalism that Mailer produced in the period 1960 to 1964, collected in the anthologies *The Presidential Papers* and *Cannibals and Christians*. Neither collection behoves the sort of examination that their predecessor demanded—which it did almost by dint of its sheer tonnage, which Mailer would never be able to replicate. Wives came and went, children were welcomed into the world, and all the concomitant costs added up; the occasional work had to be hastily remortgaged through anthologisation.²⁰ He would never again be at sufficient leisure to allow the slow and steady accumulation of material for another truly expansive miscellany.²¹ Consequently the two volumes which followed *Advertisements* are far less than the sum of their parts. The key writings from this period are the Kennedy essay of 1960, ‘Superman Comes to the Supermarket’; ‘Ten Thousand Words a Minute,’ his 1963 report on the Sonny Liston-Floyd Patterson title fight; and ‘In the Red Light: A History of the Republican Convention in 1964.’

These intermediate works of Mailer’s are best read precisely as such: as precursors to the book-length explorations of the types of mass events that these essays examine. The convention pieces anticipate *The Armies of the Night* and *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*; boxing would prove a most fruitful obsession, culminating in the triumph of *The Fight*—surely one of his most permanent successes as a writer. As much as Mailer can be said to have ‘covered’ the war, Felker’s faith in him was incredible. He asked a huge leap of the writer: to exit the shut room of the embattled psyche and enter the world of the spectacular, of the mediatised event. Read against the illeistic journalism he began to write in the late Sixties, these pieces exhibit the formal anxieties of a writer unsure of how to argue for the validity of his experience of such events. The Mailerian ‘I’ that paraded itself in all its beleaguered splendour when reliving the tribulations of *The Deer Park* disclosed itself but sullenly before the spectacles of Kennedy, Liston, and Barry Goldwater.

Cannibals and Christians was dedicated to Lyndon B. Johnson, ‘whose name inspired young men to cheer for me in public.’ The war in Vietnam also provided the occasion for what ought to stand among Mailer’s most enduring achievements as a writer: *The Armies of the Night*—the masterpiece of his political journalism—and the ferociously accomplished

²⁰ When Lennon informs us that ‘like Faust, [Mailer] was greedy for knowledge and ready to trade punishment for it,’ he fails to note that Gretchen doesn’t appear in Part Two of Goethe’s tragedy to gate-crash the Classical *Walpurgisnacht* and slap Faust with an alimony bill and a paternity suit (Lennon, 2013 p. 597).

²¹ By the mid-1990s Mailer needed every penny of his \$750,000 annual income to meet his alimony, child-support, mortgages, agent’s fees and IRS arrears. 1998 would see the publication of *The Time of Our Time*, a thirteen-hundred page, career-spanning anthology in which the each piece was arranged ‘in accordance with the year it refers to rather than the year in which it was written.’ The assemblage provides invaluable clues to Mailer’s self-assessment towards the end of his life, and I make frequent reference to it provide a sense of where he thought the strongest writing resided in each of his books.

Miami and the Siege of Chicago, both of which appeared in 1968. The latter text and the lesser *St. George and the Godfather* (a boring book on a boring election, and Mailer knew it) don't require our close attention—all that is good and vivid in them is on more abundant display in their predecessor. The books arguably form a natural trilogy, and perhaps illuminatingly uneven one. Over the course of those four years we see how quickly Mailer exhausts a literary technique that had previously galvanised his writing—a deterioration that exposes his dependence upon the dramatic potentialities of the material furnished by history.

On October 21st of 1967, Mailer participated in the march on the Pentagon in protest against the Vietnam War. The demonstration, Noam Chomsky would later write, 'which by some estimates involved several hundred thousand people, was a remarkable, unforgettable manifestation of opposition to the war. The spirit and character of the demonstrations are captured, with marvellous accuracy and perception, in Norman Mailer's *The Armies of the Night*' (Chomsky p. 63). While not part of the action's leadership, Mailer was recognised by the organisers as a prominent individual and placed at the front of the crowd—he was among the first arrested. He had been sceptical about the event, and even once engaged as a participant he couldn't suspend his disbelief in the broad coalition that had been united by dissent against the war. The term 'participant' is used advisedly, not only in reflection of the crucial fact that he took part in the march with no prior intention of writing about it, but also because of how he refers to himself throughout the book: Participant, Writer, Historian, Beast, and Norman Mailer.

Third person narration seemed to liberate something in Mailer's prose. Unstinting observations and swashbuckling phrase-making flowed from his pen; he had struck upon a viable dispensation for the priority of his perceptions. Poirier had his reservations about what he described as 'hocus pocus about the degree to which history is really the novel and the novel really history' and Mailer's attempts to escape 'the pressure of his readers' knowing that they are not the same thing, that the material of fiction is altogether more in the writer's control, more subject to the mastery of his style' (Poirier, 1972 p. 18). Still, Mailer hadn't written such unanxious, pleasure-giving prose in years, not since the prefatory matter composed for *Advertisements for Myself*. In matching an open-ended form and stylistic texture to his experience of a unique and unpredictable event, *The Armies of the Night* constituted as much of a breakthrough for its creator as the earlier anthology had.

However, it wouldn't take long for Mailer to reach the point of peril diagnosed by Poirier in 1972:

The present danger is that he is applying to new issues and circumstances methods which he has already worked to exhaustion and, even more, that his achieved self-explanation has come to precede him to experience...if one gets impatient with his habitual mannerisms—the dualisms and mixtures of styles which are meant to catch the contentions at work in the whole culture—part of the reason is that they represent the souring of what was a fresh start. (Ibid. p. 11)

In *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* and *St. George and the Godfather*, we see that the kind of journalistic praxis which Mailer had struck upon was only capable of producing literary forms as dynamic and surprising as the events under examination. *The Armies of the Night* was a singular bounty, the happiest boon in the accidental career of Norman Mailer (at least until *The Executioner's Song*). It won the Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award, cementing his status as perhaps the most famous writer in America. He may never be forgiven for his use of that platform.

It may seem an undue emphasis to devote the entirety of the fifth chapter to a text as slender as *The Prisoner of Sex*, which was published in 1971. Indeed, it would be incorrect to say it is the book as such (among his many infractions, literary and otherwise) that weighs so heavily upon his reputation. Perhaps more so than any other of his mature works it has the aged tint of a period piece. Like some artefact of ancient warfare it was once a missile lobbed in hostility and now constitutes the archaeological record of an armed conflict. But the participants are dead, the terms of engagement have advanced far beyond their ken, and yet the war is still being waged with bitter acrimony upon the same *casus belli*. So despite its dated frame of reference this small book demands close inspection and furnishes a venue in which to discuss Mailer's form on questions of sex and gender as well as the conduct that has corroded his reputation.

The first shot was fired by Kate Millett with the publication of *Sexual Politics* in 1970. In this large and ambitious work of cultural criticism Millett identified three modern writers who embodied the literary dimension of the sexual counterrevolution: D.H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, and Norman Mailer. Lawrence had died in 1930 and Miller hadn't produced a major work since the completion of *The Rosy Crucifixion* a decade previously. Still, Millett had hardly been circumspect in her choice of target; nor did she hedge her tone:

Mailer transparently identifies with his hero [in *An American Dream*], who has little motive for the killing [of his wife] beyond the fact that he is unable to “master” his mate by any means short of murder. The desire for such mastery is perfectly understandable to Mailer and even engages his sympathy. (Millett p. 10)

Goaded on by *Harper's*, who let his reply take up an entire issue (they'd afforded him the same privilege for the first part of *The Armies of the Night*), Mailer's response was to mount a vigorous defence of Miller and Lawrence and the canon they represent. His counterattack was to impugn the entire ideological agenda of Women's Liberation, which he characterised as a Trojan horse for the totalitarian extirpation of biologically-mandated differences between men and women. Stripped of these sacrosanct and crucial components of identity, mass human society was heading for a quiescent and sexless future—the path to which was paved with contraception and abortion on demand. Somehow the bulwark against this was the cultivation of sufficient awe before the mysteries of carnal desire and procreation, of the sort that Lawrence and Miller had achieved. And beyond what even Poirier characterises as these ‘dizzying eugenic proposals’ there's the matter of Mailer's behaviour in propounding and expanding upon the book's proposals in public forums (Poirier, 1972 p. 18). The fifth chapter combines close examination of Mailer's position as laid out in his polemic with a consideration of his fractious record as a public intellectual, which is on stark display in D.A. Pennebaker's documentary film *Town Bloody Hall*. Contra Bloom's confidence in the inevitability of Mailer's return, it may be that his posthumous reputation will continue to be determined by this aspect of his life, work, and thought. He may be doomed to be remembered, if at all, as a wayward and violent man—Public Enemy Number One to the Feminists—and it may be by his own writ that will be remembered as such.

Part V: Mailer's Killing Machines

The critic sympathetic to Mailer may find his erasure to be the necessary foundation to a palatable defence of his work; one might say that in order to save Mailer it is necessary to destroy him. Mailer himself may have arrived at a similar evaluation—that the style of self-reflective journalism that saved his career from one dead-end had now become its own sort of tomb. The working method required a new disruption. The sixth and final chapter plots the

route of Mailer's retreat from self-representation: from *The Fight* to *The Executioner's Song*. The books form a natural pairing as in both cases Mailer is presented with material that might redeem the promises of his personal brand of Existentialism, which in his hands is a psychological, rather than philosophical, demand for unfiltered immediacy—a ceaseless oversight of a fragile yet demanding inner self, one continually threatened by indolence and compromise. And yet the approaches of each book to this potential seem so opposed as to suggest that the writer had experienced either a crisis or an epiphany.

The Fight, which appeared in book form in 1975 after running in *Playboy*, is Mailer's report on the Rumble in the Jungle, Muhammad Ali's upset victory over George Foreman for the World Heavyweight Boxing Championship in Zaire. It may not have scanned as such at the time, but within the final disposition of the Mailerian bibliography the book now reads as a sort of final outing and victory lap, a farewell to a particular way of conducting business. It would be the last book that Mailer wrote in the illeistic vein of *The Armies of the Night*. Interestingly, it was also the first time since that signal work in which the central Norman Mailer character was designated as simply as that: 'Still, as Norman drove home to the Inter-Continental and breakfast, he measured Ali's run', and so forth (Mailer, 1975 p. 94). In *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* it was 'the reporter' who took centre stage; the Moon landing and the '72 election were covered by 'Aquarius'; over the course of *The Prisoner of Sex* he assumed a variety of guises, not just the titular Prisoner but also the Acolyte and the Prizewinner. For the purposes of the era's biggest sporting event, 'Norman Mailer' would do just fine.

As a man, Mailer's obsession with boxing was that of an ardent fan and enthusiastic amateur; as a writer his fixation was on black fighters. His literary output in this capacity reminds us of the racial dimension to his Existentialism, which was really his old Hip, or White Negroism, by a different name. And yet, for all that a figure like Ali seems the original and ideal of black masculinity, of integrity and self-expression through a productive form of violence, there is something essentially inconclusive about Mailer's explorations of this terrain. For all its vigour and geniality as a literary performance, the serene breeziness of *The Fight* suggests that boxing is mere entertainment—and that Mailer knew it. The maladies of life that Mailer's Existentialism identifies are not to be resolved by the spectacle of young men beating one another into delirium.

Besides, Mailer's search was always for a *white* figure of violent alienation. The producer Lawrence Schiller presented him with one when he hired Mailer to write the book on Gary Gilmore, the rights to whose life story he had secured. The facts of the matter in the Gilmore

case must have struck Mailer as an uncanny aggregate. To murder two people for no obvious motive, and then to accept the verdict of the state and demand one's own execution by firing squad—the truth was wilder, and closer to the uncompromising prescriptions of 'The White Negro' than anything Mailer had dreamt up. Observers and commentators at the time noted Schiller's brilliance in choosing Mailer. They expected the Dostoyevskian cannons to roar and anticipated the antic unfurling of Mailer's long sentences—a verbose journey around Gary Gilmore, with Mailer as guide.

Instead, what occurred was the most unexpected feat of literary suicide. Mailer was nowhere to be seen; in fact, it seemed he was nowhere to be *read*. From horizon to horizon one looked for him in vain across the flatlands of prose like

As she crossed the street between the parking island and the main door, Gary saw her and picked up his satchel. Pretty soon they were running towards each other. As they met, Gary dropped his bag, looked at her, then encircled her so hard she could have been hugged by a bear. Even Johnny had never gripped Brenda that hard (Mailer, 1998 p. 960).

It seemed that Mailer was nowhere to be found in the book's Utah panoramas; one might say he was otherwise engaged. During the work on *The Executioner's Song* Mailer received the most extraordinary letter from a man named Jack Henry Abbott. Like Gilmore, Abbott was a violent criminal who had spent most of his life in state and federal prisons—countless years of his life had passed by in solitary confinement—and he wanted to tell Mailer what prison was really like. As Mailer subsequently wrote:

I felt all the awe one knows before a phenomenon. Abbott had his own voice. I had heard no other like it. At his best, when he knew exactly what he was writing about, he had an eye for the continuation of his thought that was like the line a racing car driver takes around a turn. He wrote like a devil, which is to say (since none of us might recognize the truth if an angel told us) that he had a way of making you exclaim to yourself as you read, 'Yes, he's right. My God, yes, it's true.' Needless to say, what was true was also bottomless to contemplate. Reading Abbott's letters did not encourage sweet dreams. Hell was now clear to behold. It was Maximum Security in a large penitentiary. (Mailer, 1981 p. x)

That was from the introduction he wrote for *In the Belly of the Beast*, the 1981 book that was compiled from Abbott's letters. Mailer considered it one of the great works of prison literature and its author a hidden genius. He sponsored Abbott's parole, which took effect in June of that year. He enjoyed a few weeks as the toast of the New York literary scene until July 18th when a disagreement in a Manhattan café led to Abbott's assaulting a twenty-two year old waiter named Richard Adan. Abbott stabbed him to death. Mailer came to Abbott's defence with the infamous phrase 'Culture is worth a little risk.' 'A characteristic irrationality,' wrote James Wood: 'Not that culture, and not that risk.' While Abbott's influence on the composition of *The Executioner's Song* can be overstated, the same cannot be said for the shadow he casts over Mailer's character and reputation, which will be examined in the conclusion. Gilmore and Abbott—what did Mailer see in these men? What example did they make of their lives that he found so compelling, and how much did his own project rely on the violence that they wrought upon those around them?

Perhaps the question can be put in another way: did Mailer consider himself a Hipster—a White Negro—or did he view his enterprise as essentially explanatory and taxonomic? Maybe the world at large would see Gilmore and Abbott only as lost and violent souls but for the probity of Mailer's testament; so maybe Hip must be bestowed—or at least pointed out. But to whom does the austere and abeyant voice of *The Executioner's Song* belong? One strains to hear within its narrow modulations some echo of the familiar Mailerian tone. That style had been first conjured out of a desire to shape a great work of fiction out of precisely this sort of material. It is this style's disappearance which is of final interest. Mailer's career ought to be read as a series of transformations, of self-inflicted disruptions of working methods that had grown stale and thus precipitated new crises in his writing. This book proposes to answer the following questions:

—How and why did the conventional and self-consciously literary young author of *The Naked and the Dead* produce the radical self-representation and examination of *Advertisements for Myself*?

—How did this new persona metamorphose in the twenty years that followed?

—Why was this method so abruptly jettisoned when the time came to write *The Executioner's Song*?

The examination of these issues will lead us to the following assessment of Mailer's career: that he did write the great novel promised in *Advertisements for Myself*; that it took him two decades of hack work, false leads, displacement activity, and undirected growth as both man

and writer; and that *The Executioner's Song* is that great novel. The preconditions for Mailer's achieving a work of that magnitude involved first the cultivation of himself as a subject, and then the exhaustion of that material. Perhaps any attempt to offer a critical evaluation of Mailer's work must contend with judgements on his character, and must formulate its own verdict on the man. The illeistic journalism seems to demand that criticism take an evaluative—even moral—stance on the matter of personality; *The Executioner's Song* poses a far simpler challenge. Back in 1959, Mailer promised to 'hit the longest ball ever to go up into the accelerated hurricane air of our American letters,' to 'write a novel which Dostoyevsky and Marx; Joyce and Freud; Stendhal, Tolstoy, Proust and Spengler; Faulkner and even mouldering Hemingway might come to read, for it would carry what they had to tell another part of the way' (Mailer, 1992 p. 477). He plainly did not succeed in this, but he achieved a triumph of a different sort: whether or not its author continues to moulder in neglect, readers will forgive *The Executioner's Song* for having been written by Norman Mailer.

Chapter One: “Odd dreams and portents of power.”

Mark Twain is said to have felt that his existence was all pretty much downhill from his adventures as a Mississippi riverboat pilot. Mr. Heller's two novels, when considered in sequence, might be taken as a similar statement about an entire white, middle-class generation of American males, my generation, Mr. Heller's generation, Herman Wouk's generation, Norman Mailer's generation, Irwin Shaw's generation, Vance Bourjaily's generation, James Jones's generation, and on and on—that for them everything has been downhill since World War II, as absurd and bloody as it often was.

Kurt Vonnegut, review of *Something Happened*

The year 1948 saw not only the publication of *The Naked and the Dead* and the electoral victory of President Harry S. Truman but also the appearance of *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Male* and the failure in the Senate of the Subversive Activities Control Act. Indeed, so immediate was the report's impact on the culture at large that one reviewer dubbed the foul-mouthed soldiers in Mailer's novel 'Kinsey's Army.'¹ The legislative measure, known as the Mundt-Nixon Bill (after U.S. Representatives Karl E. Mundt and Richard Nixon), proposed requiring all members of the American Communist Party to register with the Attorney General. Viewed alongside American intervention in the Greek Civil War and the near confrontation with the Soviet Union over the Berlin Airlift in the same year, the signs of the nation's slide into expansionism abroad and authoritarianism at home were plain to see.

But there was hope: thousands marched on Washington to protest the Mundt-Nixon proposals, and former Secretary of Agriculture and Vice President Henry A. Wallace left his position as editor of *The New Republic* to contest the presidency as candidate for the newly formed Progressive Party. The magazine was an organ of American Liberalism as articulated by editor and co-founder Herbert Croly in his 1909 book *The Promise of American Life*. As a doctrine it took as its historical purpose the salvation of Alexander Hamilton's centralist vision of government as guarantor of property rights from the cynicism of the Jeffersonian faction, which in Croly's revisionary telling maintained and exploited the Hamiltonian structure under democratic pretensions. As Edmund Wilson (also of the publication)

¹ Lionel Trilling's essay on the Kinsey Report serves as a reminder that Foucault's ideas on bio-politics were not the first articulation of the political function of the human sciences: 'Whatever the Report claims for itself, the social sciences in general no longer pretend that they can merely describe what people do; they now have the clear consciousness of their power to manipulate and adjust. First for industry and then for government, sociology has shown its instrumental nature. A government which makes use of social knowledge still suggests benignity; and in an age that daily brings the proliferation of government by police methods it may suggest the very spirit of rational liberalism' (L. Trilling p. 123).

summarised the liberal vision: ‘The American democratic ideal was thus more or less disingenuous from the beginning: the actual purpose of the government was one thing and the rhetoric of politics was another’ (E. Wilson p. 421). The New Deal measures that Wallace had helped enact under the governments of Franklin Roosevelt were seen as the culmination and vindication of an American liberal-progressivism that had previously seemed electorally unviable.

What changed, according to Edmund Fawcett, was ‘a massive upward shift in expectations of government’ precipitated by the Wall Street Crash of October 1929, eight months into the presidency of Herbert Hoover. In his *Liberalism: The Life of an Idea*, Fawcett argues that the folk legends of the Great Depression—a ‘moral drama, a contest between virtue and vice led by heroes and villains’—gave birth to that ‘local twist of language’ by which rival factions in American politics are known as ‘conservatives’ and ‘liberals.’ This obscures the extent to which Hoover and Roosevelt were both adherents of liberal democracy: ‘believers in social progress, as well as in the legal coinage of civic respect’ (Fawcett p. 266). As we shall see, the sort of liberalism against which Mailer animadverts in his early fiction is less the big government Rooseveltian sort than the wider vision of the liberal democratic consensus. Against a historical background in which ‘liberalism was again renegotiating terms in its compromise with democracy,’ Mailer’s intuition was that totalitarianism was coming to America, and that it would be abetted by weaknesses in the liberal ideology and temperament (Fawcett p. 270). The avatars of liberalism in his early work, Captain Hillard and Lieutenant Hearn, seem modelled less on the self-made man Hoover than they are on the aristocratic Roosevelt—or even Woodrow Wilson, after whom one character in *The Naked in the Dead* is named.

Wallace had been ousted from the 1944 Democratic ticket by the machinations of party bosses against the ailing Roosevelt and then removed from government under Truman’s purge of the rump New Deal cabinet. Having predicted that the Truman Doctrine would usher in ‘a century of fear,’ Wallace positioned his candidacy as not merely the preservation of the Rooseveltian New Deal ethos but its extension. The Progressives campaigned for universal government health insurance, the de-escalation of the Cold War, and an end to segregation in the South as well as the complete enfranchisement of African Americans. Against the Republican idea of non-interventionist voluntarism Wallace expounded a vision of government as the guarantor of two of liberalism’s foundational principles: the primacy of civic respect, and the incremental perfectibility of human nature.

This partly sets the scene onto which Mailer made his entrance upon his return from Europe as a newly minted celebrity. It also braces us for the political and ideological stupor into which he fell after Wallace's nugatory showing at the polls, and for his brief turn to Marxism. With the partial exception of Nigel Leigh, who is probably the best commentator on the early novels, there is little to be found in the critical or biographical literature on Mailer's early political thought.² This is understandable to an extent—the more heterodox positions that begin to emerge in 1957's 'The White Negro' and subsequently develop throughout *Advertisements for Myself* and the following essays and journalism pose sufficient interpretative and evaluative challenges. However, reading Lennon—whose impatience in sending his subject off to Harvard is palpable—one wouldn't know that Mailer, born in 1923, grew up amidst a vanquished progressivism, during the dire illiberalism of the period following the presidency of Woodrow Wilson, which had ended two years previously.

Extreme *laissez-faire* Republicans held the presidency and both houses of Congress until 1932. As Fawcett lays out, governmental abuse was met with civic dissent and litigation, exemplified by Roger Baldwin and the American Civil Liberties Union:

In a postwar climate of revived white racism and anti-foreigner prejudice, authorities were rounding up radicals and deporting aliens. Federal courts backed the state's unchallenged authority in national security. State criminal courts if they chose could ignore constitutional guarantees of defendants' rights. Legal protections for trade unions, for sexual privacy, and for free speech were weak or non-existent. Against that background, Baldwin and the ACLU provided counsel and help for countless liberal causes célèbres. (Fawcett p. 229)

Lennon mentions nothing of the watershed Loray Mill Strike of 1929—'the first major labour battle conducted by a Communist union'—or the Bonus Army march of 1932 (E. Wilson p. 404). During that latter crisis President Hoover directed General Douglas MacArthur, then Army Chief of Staff, to disperse a crowd of some forty thousand World War I veterans and their families, who had gathered to demand the payment of pensions as per their service certificates. Following a cavalry charge led by future general George S. Patton,

² Among Mailer's contemporaries, Diana Trilling is correct when she writes that 'Mailer has always carried the burden of social actuality of the intellectual thirties,' and describes his first novel as 'the testimony of a young Marxist, or proto-Marxist, whose experience of war confirms his worst reading of history' (D. Trilling, 1965 p. 180; p. 184).

MacArthur dispersed the crowds using tear gas and was subsequently proclaimed by elements of the Republican right as having saved America from mass Communist insurrection. The chain of command between civilian government and military leadership during this emergency was murky at best.³ Five years earlier the farcical trial of anarchists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti on the charges of murder and armed burglary had resulted in their execution and was decried nationally and worldwide as a judicial lynching; the American body politic seemed spasmodic with not just the fear but the outright exercise of violence.

These events lurk in the social and historical background of *The Naked in the Dead*, as in the wanderings of Red Valsen—a drifter from out of the pages of John Steinbeck—and Sam Croft’s initiation into violence:

The first time Croft ever killed a man he was in a National Guard uniform. There was a strike on at Lilliput in the oil fields, and some scabs had been hurt.

They called the Guard. (The sonsofbitches started this strike come up from North, New York. They’re some good boys in the oil fields but they got their heads turned by Reds, an’ next thing they’ll have ya kissin’ niggers asses.) The guardsmen made a line against the gate to the plant and stood sweating in a muggy summer sun. The pickets yelled and jeered at them.

[...]

Croft feels a hollow excitement.

The lieutenant is cursing. Goddam, who shot him, men? (Mailer, 1980 p. 125)

In this chapter we will see how Mailer’s apprehension of the political situation in America shifted across the period spanning his Harvard juvenilia and his second published novel, *Barbary Shore*. The progression can be summarised as one that began with his youthful identification with the legacy of the inter-war American novelists and ended in an uncomfortable and eccentric form of Marxianism. Mailer’s earlier anti-totalitarian progressivism had been lucid, deeply felt, and literarily productive. His understanding of

³ On April 11th of 1951, at the height of the Korean War, MacArthur would be relieved by President Truman as commander of United Nations forces following his unprecedented public advocacy for the use of nuclear weapons. This was a perilous moment in the history of civil-military relations. During the Vietnam War Lyndon Johnson is reported to have told General William Westmoreland: ‘I have a lot riding on you. I hope you don’t pull a MacArthur on me.’

what he had seen while at war shall be shown as aligning with Michel Foucault's ideas about discipline and bio-power, about the military models which inform the regulation of civic society. His turn towards extreme left-wing esotericism shall be understood as the effect of a crisis in his career as a novelist, a panicked experiential anxiety. Arising from and succeeding an ordinary man's experience of the naked workings of power, the life of the writer—civilian life itself—must have seemed turbid and recalcitrant.

Part I: Mailer's War

The Naked and the Dead takes place on the fictional Pacific island of Anopopei—seemingly during the 1943-45 'leapfrogging' stage of the Allies' encroachment upon Axis-held territory—and tells the story of the battle between American and Japanese forces for control of the uninhabited, ocarina-shaped body of land. The book is almost exclusively a portrait of Americans at war; aside from the glimpse the reader is given into the life of one Ishimara ('whoever he was. The Americans had looted his corpse, and some noncom had brought his diary back'), Mailer makes no imaginative leaps into the enemy camp (Mailer, 1980 p. 189). His intuition had been that the Pacific War would sanction a ruthless bracketing—a tactical circumscription of his novelistic ambit—for it had 'a reactionary overtone which my young progressive-liberal nose smelled with the aid of *PM* editorials' (Mailer, 1992 p. 28).⁴

The Pacific theatre of operations was not just where America sought its revenge for Pearl Harbour; it was also the arena in which two competing imperial powers strove for expansion, having at each other by sea and air—on territories that had been European holdings until the utter rout of those old powers by the Japanese in early 1942. 'It's an imperialist tossup,' says the novel's Lieutenant Hearn.⁵ 'Either we louse up Asia or Japan does' (Mailer, 1980 p. 243). Mailer had understood that this war wouldn't be fought amongst or against local populations, like the European war (from an Anglo-American perspective) would once combat spilled over into Italy in 1943, France in '44, and Germany in '45. No: this would be an island war, a jungle war, a return to those lands upon which the gaze of Manifest Destiny

⁴ *PM* was a New York daily newspaper which ran from 1940 to 1948. During its run it endorsed liberal positions, fought accusations of Communist influence, and counted Hemingway, Malcolm Cowley, and Dorothy Parker among its contributors.

⁵ As a concession to Winston Churchill, who had been profoundly shaken by the Fall of Singapore (the greatest rout in British military history), American forces were placed under the purely nominal aegis of Lord Mountbatten and the South East Asia Command. American officers quickly dubbed the SEAC 'Save England's Asiatic Colonies'; General MacArthur and Admiral Nimitz were left to their own devices.

had dilated when first turning beyond the shores of the nation. ‘Long before Americans completed their conquest of a continent and its aborigines, they had reached out to the Orient’ wrote Alfred Kazin, referring to the securing of whaling routes during the Nineteenth Century (Kazin, 2003 p. 352). In his commentary on *The Naked and the Dead*, Kazin proposed in a footnote that ‘Mailer ten years later might have attempted Douglas MacArthur’ as the main character of the novel—and there may be something in that supposition (Kazin, 1971 p. 74).

Even in a hortatory narrative of American hegemony like Niall Ferguson’s *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire* one can glean the revenant spirit which animated the Pacific counterattack. Much of this was embodied by the figure of General MacArthur and enacted in the Philippine Campaign in which Mailer participated, which were entwined: the general’s father, Arthur, had been the American commander in the Philippines during the height of the Spanish-American War, which culminated in the islands becoming an unincorporated U.S. territory. ‘Rudyard Kipling’s notorious poem “The White Man’s Burden” [was] written in 1899 as an exhortation to the United States to turn the Philippines into an American colony’ (Ferguson p. 5).⁶ MacArthur himself, who eventually governed Japan during the allied occupation, was something of an exemplar of American imperialism—perhaps the closest that the American Century produced to the British Empire’s Sir Garnet Wolseley, the Victorian trouble-shooter and military modernizer who crushed the Asante, occupied Egypt, and avenged Charles Gordon at Khartoum. In 1914 MacArthur had been among the junior officers who participated in the occupation of Veracruz, Mexico, following the Tampico Affair. He had been in charge of American forces in the Philippines when the Japanese invaded in 1941 and only narrowly escaped capture; somewhere between five to eighteen-thousand American and Filipino POWs perished in the ensuing Bataan Death March. Who would have foreseen that Commodore Perry’s opening of Japan in 1852-53 would have ushered in this reversal of fortune? Japanese expansionism was the prodigal child of Nineteenth Century Euro-American liberal imperialism, by which the demands of capital were realised by the warship and the Maxim gun. The liberal stricture of civic respect had yet to be extended to non-white populations.

Kazin’s casually proffered counterfactual helps us apprehend both the context of *The Naked and the Dead* and what the novel excludes. Removed from the geographic and historical specificities of its inspiration by Mailer’s wartime experiences, it is less explicitly interested

⁶ ‘The anti-guerrilla campaign of 1899-1902 by the United States in the Philippines cost the deaths of an estimated twenty-thousand independence fighters. Around four thousand American soldiers died, most from disease, while thousands of women and children perished in American concentration camps. Contemporary liberal outrage was fierce but rare’ (Fawcett p. 205).

in the revanchist and expansionistic nature of the American war effort than it is in the verticalization of American military authority. The imagined island of Anopopei furnishes the novelist with a Naturalist's literary laboratory in which he can dispassionately observe his sample, and with a cast of named and speaking characters numbering in the dozens Mailer takes the *Pequod* approach: nearly all of America is contained within his expeditionary force. In this concatenation we are shown a society whose 'vacuum as a nation is filled with released power,' awakening to the unbounded potential of its men and resources. Through the masterful manipulation of omniscient third person narration (his only use of the form in fiction until *The Executioner's Song*), Mailer organises his *dramatis personae* by a dual focus. As Randall Waldron noted, 'the dramatic and ironic power of the novel comes from its double view of the battle...we see the campaign from afar as it is directed...and, with the ironic shock of abstraction converted to immediate reality, how it is carried out in the field' (Waldron p. 247). The narrative is stratified along extremes of rank, with the God's eye view of the campaign's broad strategic ebb-and-flow zooming in to focus on two groups: the bivouac court of General Edward Cummings, and the platoon led by Sergeant Sam Croft.

As revealed through long dialogues with Lieutenant Robert Hearn—his aide and foil, completing the novel's trio of central characters—Cummings sees himself as the prophet of an incipient American totalitarianism: 'I can tell you that we've come out of the backwaters of history now.' His vision is of a nation that has mobilized for total war and will remain obedient to the ferocious imperatives of permanent war footing. Hearn, a *bien pensant* Harvard liberal, makes his futile stand in debates with the General, who sardonically meets the lieutenant's platitudes with the confidence of his vatic pronouncements. These scenes amount to a *pas de deux*; surrounded by the feckless hooligans who make up the General's staff, all Cummings and Hearn seem to have is each other and the cold comfort of their colloquies—for one of the great themes of *The Naked and the Dead* is loneliness, the desperate solitude of each man as he fights his own war.

A more cramped frame is the world of the platoon, and it teems with an approximation of life, with what Gore Vidal dismissed as the 'smudged carbons of a Dos Passos work' (Vidal p. 32). Sergeant Croft—'efficient and strong and unusually empty and his main cast of mind was a superior contempt towards nearly all other men. There was a crude unformed vision in his soul but he was rarely conscious of it'—presides over a gallery of stereotypes (Mailer, *The Naked and the Dead* p. 122). There's the Bostonian Gallagher, with his 'long Irish nose'; Martinez, 'a small slim and very handsome Mexican'; Goldstein and Roth, the put-upon and long suffering Jews. Rustic southerners, preening Italian-Americans, and other war-movie

archetypes make up the rest of the unit. Besides Croft (a monstrous and unforgettable creation), only the dignified and reticent Valsen retains a hold on the reader's imagination. It is in the rough handling of this manly parade that Mailer's apprenticeship as a novelist most explicitly announces itself, in his most egregious stylistic affectation: the 'Time Machine' segments which, in the style of John Dos Passos's *U.S.A.*, provide the reader with intelligence of the soldiers' pre-war lives.⁷

Describing the function of these chapters, Michael Glenday writes that 'as we become more familiar with the platoon members we find that what they most despise and fear is rooted in their prior experience of life in America' (Glenday p. 200). Less explicitly than James Jones in *From Here to Eternity*—a text whose tough-minded naturalism is even more deeply felt than that of *The Naked and the Dead*—Mailer offers these soldiers as 'a judgement on a society whose men have no real work' (Kazin, 1971 p. 79). In more expansive remarks Nigel Leigh notes that in the Time Machine sections 'detailed profiles of the soldiers introduce massive amounts of background material, which appears as blocks of unrefined societal research, seemingly assembled rather than written, and still in a crude, unexpanded note form.' Mailer draws upon the formulas of naturalism, with its fixation upon material conditions, to argue for the determining effect of environment upon worldview. His quasi- or proto-Marxist vision of the pre-war United States is one of 'rigid class, racial and ethnic differentiation' (Leigh, 1987 p. 427).

Leigh is correct about the rudimentary execution of the Time Machine chapters, as is Vidal. Take as an example Valsen's segment: 'The Company owns everything...The wages skid out of the shafts and end up in a company hopper; what with the drinking in the company saloon, buying food and clothing, and paying the rent, there is nothing left over. All the horizons end at the mine elevator' (Mailer, 1980 p. 171). The idea is to provide some sense of the origins of Valsen's defiant nature, of what Glenday describes as his struggle to 'preserve his private vision,' but Mailer's own vision is anything but private. The tone is unmistakably Steinbeckian, from the minatory references to the Company and the somewhat pat grace note about horizons ending at the mine elevator. It all feels more borrowed than lived-in. It's presumably this tendency in the book to which Charles Devlin—one of its dedicatees and editors—was referring when he berated Mailer: 'You have no gift for metaphor. Metaphor reveals a man's character, and his true grasp of life. To the degree that you have no metaphor, you are an impoverished writer, and have lived no life.' Lennon reports that Mailer was

⁷ Both of the quotations on Croft are taken from his Time Machine passage, and give a sense of Mailer's self-conscious diction in that mode—note the present tense and deliberately choppy rhythms.

greatly chastened by this censure (Lennon, 2013 p. 95). Let us compare the above passage with one from *From Here to Eternity*:

The cluster of shacks, growing up on the hills on both sides of the road, might have been his home in Harlan, except for the absence of the soot and coaldust. The back porch with its rusty pump, the chipped sink with its zinc pail and granite dipper, it all was of the fabric of his life, and he moved through the thick air of this poverty with the ease that only a man who has been intimate with it can have. (Jones p. 93)

This is the more achieved piece of writing—so much so that the final detail about Private Prewitt’s intimacy with poverty is somewhat redundant, if not slightly too pleased with itself. It might also be a touch too insistent upon precise numeration and qualification of the tactile details of the scene, but it’s the absence of soot and coaldust which gives pathos to Prewitt’s observation of the scene. Even from a minor passage like this it’s plain to see why Mailer was at once so attracted to and threatened by Jones: ‘the only one of my contemporaries who I felt had more talent than myself...*From Here to Eternity* has been the best American novel since the war, and if it is ridden with faults, ignorances, and a smudge of the sentimental, it has also the force of few novels one could name’ (Mailer, 1992 p. 463). In his *Esquire* essay “Norman Mailer versus Nine Writers,” he would describe his first novel as ‘concerned more with characters than military action,’ which is a rather evasive characterisation (Ibid. p. 101). It might be more precise to say that Mailer is interested in the tension between his characters’ sociological and temperamental diversity, no matter how crudely rendered, and the grinding demands of military organisation. In a Foucaultian sense one could say that where Jones writes about warriors, Mailer writes about soldiers.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault lays out the replacement of *l’homme de guerre* by *le militaire*—that is, the replacement of the soldiery of the early seventeenth century by the emergence of a technocratic, professional military during the classical period (the translations offered above are my own, offered by way of analogical best fit). The former figure was associated with a ‘bodily rhetoric of honour,’ ‘his body was the blazon of his strength and valour’ (Jones’s Private Prewitt is known for his prowess as a boxer), while the latter was ‘something that can be made; out of a formless clay, an inapt body,’ a machine that can be constructed according to the required specifications. Mailer understood this aspect of military discipline, and his exhaustive attempts to establish the social differences between his

soldiers pay off in his set-pieces of combat. His jungle war is a waking nightmare of indiscriminate torment. His men's shared tribulations make mulch of their individual humanity, and his writing is most excited by the fever dreams of this trembling mass:

The heat had left their bodies; they shivered and trembled in the damp night, and everything about them was sodden and pappy; they stank but no longer with animal smells; their clothing was plastered with the foul muck of the jungle mud, and a chill dank rotting smell somewhere between leaf mould and faeces filled their nostrils. They knew only that they had to keep moving, and if they thought of time it was in so many convulsions of nausea. (Mailer, 1980 p. 106)

Here we see one of Mailer's favourite themes: the subjective experience of time—how its empirical flow is fractured by physical strife and replaced by a personal and incremental sensation. At these junctures his writing surges and acquires a visceral and elegiac force that seems denied to him when writing about his individual recruits. He is most inspired by their plurality, when he can write about them as a unit. A perceptive critic of his own work, he was aware of this; *The Time of Our Time* excerpts the passage above and the death of Mary Gallagher. The latter sequence is not particularly distinguished, playing like many other scenes of home front calamity befalling soldiers at war, with Roy's grief expressing itself in maudlin commonplaces: 'The softer gentler memories of Mary were coming back to him. He recalled the sweltering liquid rhythms of their bodies against each other in heat and love; he felt dumbly the meaning of her smile when she handed him his lunch box as he went to work in the morning' (Mailer, 1998 p. 47). Gallagher remains a cipher; Mailer does his finest work in describing the reaction of his comrades:

The men tried to feel sorry for him, but the event had given a variation to the monotonous sweep of their days on the road. For a short time they sustained a quiet compassion when he was near and spoke in soft voices, uncomfortable in his presence. They ended by feeling merely uncomfortable and were resentful when he sat by them, for it inhibited their speech and made them acutely uneasy. (Ibid. p. 42)

Again, Mailer is at his happiest when writing about a 'they,' rather than a 'he,' when he has the opportunity to suggest that groups are bound more deeply by the experience of strife and even boredom than they are by fellowship and solidarity. As Slavoj Žižek has written, 'The only way to introduce passion...to actively mobilise people, is through fear...bio-politics is ultimately a politics of fear' (Žižek p. 34). We will examine the manner in which Mailer's novel demonstrates an understanding of war as an aspect of bio-politics and see that this apprehension of military organization emerges as the book's strongest and most enduring aspect. It is in contention, however, with all that is dated and egregious about the work, and at this point we shall examine Mailer's literary heritage and development.

Part II: A Literary Apprenticeship

Mailer put everything into his first novel: not just the greatest thing that had happened to him but also the greatest of what he had read. In an extraordinary excoriation of Mailer and William Styron written in 1964, Marvin Mudrick itemised the origins of each point of style in *The Naked and the Dead*, and he did so with a hostile exhaustiveness: 'in this simulation of Hemingway deadpan, the style is characteristically synthetic and derivative, an echo chamber of identifiable influences.' The prosecutorial Mudrick produces fingerprints and positive I.D.'s amounting to a murderer's row of American letters: James T. Farrell's Chicago-Irish vernacular; F. Scott Fitzgerald's threnodic swooning; John Dos Passos's eye for those representative faces among the historical masses; Thomas Wolfe's expansive disquisitions on natural panoramas; and out of John O'Hara (a nice period touch) we get the 'image of sex as the quotidian bourgeois alternative to murder' (Mudrick pp. 348-439). Mailer never made any efforts to conceal his borrowing: 'With such help, it was a book that wrote itself...[but] it was no literary achievement. I had done a book in a general style borrowed from many people and did not know what I had of my own to say. I had not had enough of my own life yet' (Mailer, 2003 p. 74).

Nevertheless Alfred Kazin abided by the novel, considering it the best book of Americans at war to have come out of the conflict. While recognising its derivative elements he praised the *whole* of the book as working to expose war itself as a form of organisation: 'war may be the ultimate purpose of technological society.' However, Mailer can only articulate this using what Leigh identified as the 'language of naturalism'; similarly, Kazin notes that the novel

‘lives up to the old naturalist edict that a novel’s form and language should duplicate the social unit it describes’ (Kazin, 1971 p. 74).⁸

In *The Anxiety of Influence*, Harold Bloom quotes Kierkegaard’s ‘He who is willing to work gives birth to his own father,’ and Nietzsche’s ‘When one hasn’t had a good father, it is necessary to invent one’ (Bloom, 1997 p. 56). Perhaps in the study of visionary poetry, which is Bloom’s subject, it is proper to speak of a single over-determining precursor, but in the case of an apprentice novelist like Mailer it seems more correct to speak of multiple fathers. The family trees that are drawn up by the study of influence are *ex post facto* phenomena, with the epigone finding something common in each of his masters. It is the occasion of examining *The Naked and the Dead* that leads us to unite these authors under the banner of anti-totalitarian dissent. Concurrently to this, we can question the degree to which the politics of the novel are Mailer’s own, or a rhetorical and temperamental stance absorbed from his reading. As Lord Henry Wotton says in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (again, quoted by Bloom): ‘To influence a person is to give him one’s own soul. He does not think his natural thoughts, or burn with his natural passions. His virtues are not real to him. His sins, if there are such things as sins, are borrowed. He becomes an echo of someone else’s music, an actor of a part that has not been written for him’ (Ibid. p. 6). We shall return to this idea when examining the extremity of Mailer’s schism with his early political positions.

Hemingway is the forebear most associated with Mailer, but a true emulation of Papa’s taciturn precision wouldn’t even be attempted until *The Executioner’s Song* and its vistas of flat affect.⁹ Mailer may have praised *Studs Lonigan* as his Damascene conversion—Farrell had shown him that the stuff of his life as had known it in New York could provide the basis for fiction—but he didn’t attempt to do for his Jewish Brooklyn milieu what Farrell had done

⁸ From *Axel’s Castle*: ‘In the middle of the nineteenth century, science made new advances, and mechanistic ideals were brought back into fashion again. But they came this time from a different quarter—not from physics and mathematics, but from biology. It was the effect of the theory of Evolution to reduce man from the heroic structure to which the Romantics had tried to exalt him, to the semblance of a helpless animal, again very small in the universe and at the mercy of the forces about him. Humanity was the accidental product of heredity and environment, and capable of being explained in terms of these’ (E. Wilson p. 648).

⁹ Hemingway imparted the warrior spirit to James Jones, while Mailer’s intelligence leant itself to an understanding of the mass soldiery. Still, in ‘A Calculus at Heaven’ we see the young Mailer yearning to be ‘tall, strong, and excruciatingly wounded’ like a Hemingway hero. Notice how the ending of the novella aims towards an echo of Hemingway’s famous attitude and cadence—‘You and me we’ve made a separate peace’—from *In Our Time*:

The captain came back and felt at the gun. “The sun’s starting to show,” he said “We really ought to get the trench mortar out.” As he spoke, the Jap gun fired at them again, and they both ducked. The captain peered around the side of the window. “It’s going to be one hell of a sun,” he said.

“Yes,” the Indian answered slowly, “sometimes you want to look pretty carefully at it.” (Mailer, 1992 pp. 69-70)

for Chicago's South Side.¹⁰ And while Fitzgerald's honeyed rhythms would prove a troubling earworm during the writing of *The Deer Park*, it's Dos Passos who emerges as Mailer's most determining influence, not just stylistically but politically. Mailer saw the same thing in Dos Passos as that which Kazin described as central in the older writer's work: 'not merely the fascination with the total operations of society, but his unyielding opposition to all its degradations' (Kazin, 1942 p. 342). Lionel Trilling characterised Dos Passos as

Not at all assured of the eventual triumph of good; he pins no faith on any force or party—indeed he is almost alone of the novelists of the Left...in saying that the creeds and idealisms of the Left may bring corruption quite as well as the greeds and cynicisms of the established order...in short, his novel issues in despair. (L. Trilling p. 5)

It was under a putatively liberal president, during and in the wake of the previous Great War, that the American security state had attained an egregious size and reach. The 65th Congress passed Wilson's Espionage and Sedition Acts of 1917-18 after curbing only their most severe provisions. 'You shall not criticise anything or anybody in the government any longer or you shall go to jail,' said the progressive senator Hiram Johnson. 'For dedicated liberals it was all very puzzling. A terrible war that peaceable liberalism largely brought on itself contributed to a great expansion of that liberal bugbear, unchallenged state power' (Fawcett p. 226). It fell to the dissident wing of the Supreme Court, led by Oliver Wendell Holmes and Louis Brandeis, to stand up for those persecuted by Wilson's Committee on Public Information. Brandeis, it must be said, had to endure the anti-Semitic innuendo of former president and future chief Justice William Howard Taft. Trilling—who had been denied tenure on the unabashed grounds that a Jew wasn't fit to teach English Literature—would have brought his own experience to bear upon this. Mailer seems to arrive at a similar evaluation in Roy Gallagher's Time Machine segment, which implies that passionate involvement with the cause of organised labour is no inoculation against the turpitude of anti-Semitism; in the novel's present day that same character is the most egregious harasser of the

¹⁰ This is with the partial and mysterious exception of the lost early work *No Percentage*, which allegedly did precisely that. Mailer's later fiction would find him casting his eye over New York cityscapes curiously empty of Jews in *Barbary Shore* and *An American Dream*. Roth and Goldstein would be the last Jewish figures in his work until Rosen, a minor character in *Harlot's Ghost* who is most memorable for the outburst of hate-speech he inspires in Mailer's protagonist. Last male Jewish characters, that is. The short story "The Time of Her Time" is notorious for the sexual humiliation and anal violation of Denise Gondelman: 'You dirty little Jew' (Mailer, 1992 p. 502).

unit's Jewish members. But Roth and Goldstein are minor characters, and Mailer also looked beyond the shores of his own nation for inspiration. The identification of literary influence is all too often a parlour game, and those who play it to discredit Mailer could scarcely have been dealt a better hand than his youthful admiration for André Malraux.

Malraux was the kind of fashionable European writer whom Wilson tried to urge upon Vladimir Nabokov in their correspondence, and whom Mailer would have read under the tutelage of F.O. Matthiessen, who was instrumental in guiding his student towards progressive politics. Mailer read *Man's Fate* in his senior year, and quickly found his new ambition: 'I'd like to be another Malraux' (Mailer, 1992 p. 29). Christopher Hitchens described Malraux as 'one of the most prolific self-inventors of the twentieth century... Like all supreme con artists, he did possess the knack of being in the right place at the right time, and of scraping acquaintance with the great' (Hitchens, 2011 p. 595-596). Malraux's initial claim was that he had participated in the Shanghai Insurrection of 1927, and that the book had essentially been written on the barricades between bursts of fighting. In point of fact: Malraux had never even been to Shanghai; he made no apology upon the exposure of his mendacity. Such chutzpah the young Mailer must have admired—this must have seemed a sanctified assurance that one's artistic and imaginative potential is not necessarily delimited by one's circumstances. From the Frenchman Mailer drew an ethos that would suffice until he had won genuine experience. In this sense it is the Malraux of *Man's Fate* rather than the Hemingway of *A Farewell to Arms* who would have inspired Mailer as he dreamed of service in the Pacific and spun a novella out of these fantasies.

Part III: The Imagining and the Experience of War

I refer to *A Calculus at Heaven*, a novella that Mailer wrote while still at Harvard and finished in 1942. It caught the attention of the influential editor Theodore Amusen and was published in the 1944 anthology *Cross Sections: A Collection of New American Writing*. Mailer later included it in *Advertisements for Myself*. Tellingly, its original title was "The Foundation," taken from a passage in *Man's Fate*: 'All that men are willing to die for, beyond self-interest, tends more or less obscurely to justify that fate by giving it a foundation in dignity: Christianity for the slave, the nation for the citizen, Communism for the worker.' Mailer was sufficiently taken by this sentiment to annex it as the motivational principle of his main character, the bookish and sedulous Captain Bowen Hillard. Hillard is plainly Hearn's

forerunner: both are the liberal progeny of the intellectually-complacent officer class; both are almost indolent in their moral certitudes—yet neither is without pathos. Hearn, as we shall see, is dealt with far more bitterly by their creator. Hillard, and the fiction housing him, are the product of an imagination that the older Mailer dismissed as ‘warped by books, movies, war correspondents and the liberal mentality’ (Mailer, 1992 p. 28).

Note that last item in his list: it seems that in this early stage of his career he saw liberalism less as a coherent political programme and more as a temperamental inclination. Hillard and Hearn don’t seem to stand so much for the Social Security Act of 1935 as they do a vaguely rote sense of rectitude and *noblesse oblige*. In the preface to *The Liberal Imagination*, which was published in 1950, Lionel Trilling was able to declare the ideology ‘not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition [in the United States]. For it is plain fact that there nowadays there are no conservative or reactionary ideas in general circulation,’ and ‘that there is no such thing as a liberal idea, that there are only liberal sentiments’ (L. Trilling pp. 543-544). We can both expand upon and critique Trilling’s point from the left, by quoting *The Arcades Project* of Walter Benjamin: ‘The ideologies of the rulers are by their nature more changeable than the ideas of the oppressed. For not only must they, like the ideas of the latter, adapt each time to the situation of social conflict, but they must glorify that situation as fundamentally harmonious’ (Benjamin, 1999 p. 364). While at war the author of *The Naked and the Dead* had come to suspect that it was the war-galvanised authoritarian right that had the most developed idea for the nation’s future, as well as the will to realise it—that while liberalism ossified into a hesitantly incremental meliorism and a finicky style of manners, fascism had stealthily become ‘the most coherent and dominant force in American society’ (D. Trilling, 1965 p. 181). The Harvard student who wrote the novella still believed that the experience of war could validate the pieties of a young intellectual:

[Hillard] had entered the army, because at the end of this recapitulation of himself, he had come to the conclusion that to justify his life, to find some meaning in it would be possible only when he faced death. He remembered Malraux’s foundation in dignity. It might be necessary for him to die to find that dignity. Certainly, he thought, life and death and violent action were the fundamentals, and he would find no lie there. (Mailer, 1992 p. 51)

Conspicuously, both nature and physical strife are excluded from *A Calculus at Heaven*. Lennon observes that ‘only brief and tentative descriptions of combat are provided; Mailer is

much more at home in giving the texture of American life in capsule biographies of the characters' (Lennon, 2013 p. 53). One senses the hesitancy of an inexperienced young writer in the evasiveness of a line like 'Across from them the bushes were beginning to change from black to green'; we have yet to read the writer whose feeling for topography, 'for the look of the natural scene,' will be praised by Diana Trilling as an advance even over Hemingway's in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. 'The most dramatic moments in *The Naked and the Dead* are precipitated by intensities in nature. Indeed, this loyal delight in physical truth is what gives *The Naked and the Dead* its extraordinary distinction' (D. Trilling, 1965 pp. 184-184). That the experience of combat changed Mailer as a writer is immediately evident from the juxtaposition of even brief passages from the apprentice novella and the achieved novel:

He'd been trading bursts with the Japs every ten minutes or so, feeling it was the slack season. Naturally, he'd been fighting so long in so many places, he had gotten to the point where if he had wanted to think he could do it while he fired a gun. And he had been telling himself with pride that of the Japs that had been killed, he had knocked off thirteen out of fifteen as near as he could admit...And he knew that your accuracy went down when you were tired. (Mailer, 1992 p. 66)

A machine gun lashed at him from across the river, and he ducked in his hole. In the darkness, it spat a vindictive white light like an acetylene torch, and its sound was terrifying. Croft was holding himself together by the force of his will. He pressed the trigger of his gun and it leapt and bucked under his hand...the noise, the vibration of his gun, calmed him...The handle pounded against his fist, and he had to steady it with both hands. The hot metallic smell of the barrel eddied back to him, made what he was doing real again...Some dirt snapped at his face from the ricochets. Croft was not conscious of feeling it. He had the surface numbness a man has in a fight. He flinched at sounds, his body tightened and loosened, his eyes stared, but he was oblivious to his body. (Mailer, 1980 p. 118) ¹¹

¹¹ Mailer would make yet another advance—one to which he wanted to draw readers' attention with the ordering of items in *The Time of Our Time*, where the river skirmish from his first novel is followed by Rojack's recollection of his wartime heroism in *An American Dream*: 'Then it stopped between us. The light was going out of his eye. It started to collect, to coagulate into the thick jelly that forms on the pupil of a just-dead dog, and he died then, and fell over. Like a noble tree with rotten roots' (Mailer, 1998 p. 36).

Genuine sights, sounds, sensations; the exhausted ebb and flow of concentration and attention—here we find what was flatly evoked if not simply missing from his collegiate imaginings. Smells are an ontological prime in Mailer, and while the ‘hot metallic’ scent of the gun barrel may not be the most imaginative rendering of Croft’s olfactory perception it is notable for its bracing effect on the character. It reorients him, grounds his being within the scene of the struggle; in later Mailer, scentlessness is one of the perversions of technological society.¹²

The recent publication of the selected letters has been a boon to our understanding of Mailer’s development and early ambition—the wartime correspondence with Beatrice, his first wife, essentially constitutes the novel’s first draft. This posthumous exposure is entirely within the spirit of full disclosure that he cultivated in his lifetime. When he included *A Calculus at Heaven* in *Advertisements for Myself* he did so in the spirit of completeness, knowing that it would be read most keenly, if at all, by those with a professional interest in his work. (As we shall see in the next chapter, part of his purpose in assembling that anthology was to inculcate his ideal readership by making them experts on Norman Mailer.) Still, the idea was plain enough: the reader was invited to think what she might of the early work, but she was ultimately expected to emerge from the experience with an enhanced sense of Mailer’s achievement in *The Naked and the Dead*, of his growth as a writer. Reading the letters confirms the implied narrative—and unlike his hero Malraux, Mailer can genuinely be said to have written a novel while at war, between bursts of rifle fire. Small details from the letters to Beatrice turn up in the novel, where they are rigged into a coherent scheme by the novelist’s sense of the aleatoric, which is the faculty that discriminates between the options offered up by experience before incorporating them into his design. See how a detail from his letter written on May 4th of 1945 (note the smell) is later arrayed within the novel’s abattoir hellscape:

¹² We know that Mailer read his Freud, whose influence on this aspect of his thought is unmistakable—even if Freud, in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, looks much deeper into history, long before the inception of plastics: ‘A social factor is also unmistakably present in the cultural trend towards cleanliness, which has received ex post facto justification in hygienic considerations but which manifested itself before their discovery. The incitement to cleanliness originates in an urge to get rid of the excreta, which have become disagreeable to the sense perceptions. We know that in the nursery things are different. The excreta arouse no disgust in children. They seem valuable to them as being a part of their own body which has come away from it. Here upbringing insists with special energy on hastening the course of development which lies ahead, and which should make the excreta worthless, disgusting, abhorrent and abominable. Such a reversal of values would scarcely be possible if the substances that are expelled from the body were not doomed by their strong smells to share the fate which overtook olfactory stimuli after man adopted the erect posture.’

I remember we passed along a bushy creek bed, and I stumbled from stone to stone. There was a dead Jap lying athwart the brook, and to keep from toppling into the stream, I stepped on him without realizing it. It started a bad stench which clung to us till we'd scrambled up the opposite bank into the paddies again. (May 14th, 1945)

Another Japanese lay on his back a short distance away. He had a great hole in his intestines, which bunched out in a thick white cluster like the congested petals of a sea flower. The flesh of his belly was very red and his hands in their death throes had encircled the wound. He looked as if he were calling attention to it. He had an anonymous pleasant face with small snubbed features, and he seemed quite rested in death. His legs and buttocks had swollen so that they had stretched his pants until they were the skin-tight trousers of a Napoleonic dandy. Somehow he looked like a doll whose stuffing had broken forth. (Mailer, 1980 pp. 162-163)

Notice the fastidious, even fusty, literariness of the letter—'lying athwart the brook'—this is the holding action of a young man who is determined to translate his sensory perceptions into copy. The bad smell of that first corpse clung to him, stuck with him through the process of reworking those letters into *The Naked and the Dead*. The metaphoric imagination at work in the latter passage is promiscuous; Mailer nearly achieves a nice continuity between the corpulent dandy and the ravaged doll, but soft-pedals the development with that fussy 'somehow.' His prior likening of the lethal wound to a sea flower muddies the imagistic taxonomy, which is of a piece with his seeming inability to tether this tableau of disfiguration to the minds of the G.I.'s whose gazes are passing over the scene. This might have convinced as an instance of free-indirect discourse—Hugh Kenner's ventriloquistic 'Uncle Charles Principle'—if the refined Hearn had born witness, rather than the brutish Croft and his cohorts. They'd be lucky to think in such rarefied flashes. Mailer can't resist the urge to embellish, can't forebear from imposing the euphony of what he imagines is a literary style upon these men and their sufferings. Earlier, during the unit's delirious struggle to push heavy artillery through two agonizing miles of churning mud, the author briefly casts a spotlight on their misery:

Once or twice a flare filtered a wan and delicate bluish light over, the light almost lost in the dense foliage through which it had to pass. In the brief moment it lasted, they were caught at their guns in classic straining motions that had the form and beauty of a frieze...Even the guns had a slender articulated beauty like an insect reared back on its wire haunches. Then darkness swirled about them again, and they ground the guns forward blindly, a line of ants dragging their burden back to their hole. (Ibid. p. 105)

More mixed imagery, more of what James Wood calls American ham: a ‘kind of vatic histrionic groping, in which the prose plumes itself up’ in grimly sonorous affectation.¹³ This register—grasping greedily at resemblances drawn from classical architecture and entomology—belongs less to the inarticulate world of the enlisted men than to the command-centre dialogues of Cummings and Hearn, where the main line of the book’s political argumentation unfolds. Until the narrative climacteric, which we will come to, Mailer keeps this domain of educated debate separate from the simpler concerns and perils of the soldiers’ lives. Mailer had gone into the war as a Harvard man. Much as he wrote as a soldier, from the ranks, how many could count someone like Matthiessen as a mentor? How many treated the war as an occasion to catch up on the classics, as though in penance for their late start as a reader? During the Luzon Campaign he read Oswald Spengler and Lytton Strachey; when the time came to write *The Naked and the Dead* he put that education to work through Cummings and Hearn, his spokesmen for the novel’s competing ideologies.

Sullen, spiny, friendless Hearn has been condemned to critical treatment almost as severe as the fate to which his author leads him, dismissed by critics like Robert Solotaroff as ‘empty and without any dynamic animus to control the future, like liberalism itself’ (Solotaroff, 1967 p. 13). The breed of aristocratic liberalism represented by Captain Hillard in *A Calculus at Heaven* is twice disowned by Mailer. He denies Hearn the drive of Hillard’s enthusiasm; one could scarcely imagine the Lieutenant quoting Malraux in the talismanic way the Captain does. Hearn has seen the artefacts of his education as cold comfort; the only stand he can make is to debate Cummings and then to resign his commission. But Mailer must make Hearn pay for his indolence, and contrives a dispassionate extermination for him.

¹³ From his review of Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*. Wood’s incriminating citation: ‘Then they set out upon the road again, slumped and cowed and shivering in their rags like mendicant friars sent forth to find their keep.’

Part IV: The Ashes of Victory

In his handling of Hearn, Mailer wages war against his own past. 'Our liberalism,' wrote Edmund Wilson in 1931, 'seems to have little to offer beyond a discreet recommendation of public ownership of water power and certain other public utilities, a cordial feeling that labour ought to organize in a non-social-revolutionary way' (E. Wilson p. 429). In *The Naked and the Dead* history is coming for Hearn and what he represents, and the reckoning is embodied in the figure of General Cummings:

Historically the purpose of this war is to translate America's potential into kinetic energy. The concept of fascism...merely started in the wrong country, in a country which did not have enough intrinsic potential power to develop completely. In Germany with that basic frustration of limited physical means there were bound to be excesses. But the dreams, the concept was sound enough...America is going to absorb that dream, it's in the process of doing it now. When you've created power, materials, armies, they won't wither of their own accord. (Mailer, 1980 p. 244)

Mailer is most excited by his villain, by the opportunities he affords him to compose such grim *pronunciamentos*. A conservative critic like Norman Podhoretz can't help taking this quickening dramatic pulse as the waxing of Mailer's true sympathies. The spirit of the novel, for Podhoretz, is the search for an expansion of the human spirit by an animating vision of life which summons forth heroism and 'values the qualities of courage, daring, and will'—which liberalism cannot offer. No, Mailer's quest 'is not so much [for] a more equitable world as a more exciting one, a world that produces men of size and a life of huge possibility' (Podhoretz pp. 67-68). This reading captures some of the dark ambivalence of the novel's ending while underrating the scale of his vision. Podhoretz would claim Mailer's allegiance in a culture-fight between liberalism and conservatism when in fact Mailer takes a grander view. 'It must not be forgotten,' wrote Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*, 'that "politics" has been conceived as a continuation, if not exactly and directly of war, at least of the military model as a fundamental means of preventing civil disorder.' As we saw in Croft's *Time Machine*, Mailer was aware of the use of military power within the homeland. Interestingly, nowhere in his glimpses of pre-war America does he show the New Deal at work; it's as

though he anticipated the revisionist histories which attribute the nation's economic recovery almost solely to the war effort. What the war has unleashed, as Cummings understands, is what Foucault called the 'military dream of society; its fundamental reference not to the state of nature but to the meticulously subordinated cogs of a machine, not to the primal social contract but to permanent coercions...not to the general will but to automatic docility.' What the General fails to understand is that these forces and processes also contain the mechanisms of his own undoing. The would-be dictatorial Cummings ultimately proves too imaginative, too much of an individual, too much of *l'homme de guerre* to have a place in the technologized near-future.

The third of the novel's four parts, "Plant and Phantom," brings together the worlds of the officers and the enlisted men, and the coming together of these previously disparate elements brings the story to its climax. Cummings devises a plan to break the stalemate by outflanking General Toyaku's forces. While he leaves the island to directly petition his superiors for the naval support necessary for the manoeuvre, he tasks Hearn with leading a reconaissance up Mount Anaka to assess the possibility of moving men and materiel through its forbidding passages. It is Croft's platoon—its numbers brought low by operational attrition and therefore ideally suited to the demands of the mission—that is put under Hearn's command. With Cummings off the scene it is Croft who seizes control of the novel and leads Hearn into an ambush. So eager is Mailer to foreswear the gutless Lieutenant and his asinine politics that he keeps his end brief and unsensational: 'As they recovered, the Lieutenant's death bothered them only slightly. It had been too abrupt, too disconnected for them to feel very much, and now that he was gone they found it difficult to believe he had ever been with the platoon' (Mailer, 1980 p. 453).¹⁴ As Gabriel Miller writes: 'Resented both by the commanders and by the soldiers, he is eventually killed for no purpose; such is the fate of liberalism in Mailer's universe' (Miller p. 69).

How does Hearn represent Mailer's judgement on and prognosis for liberalism? He seems to encapsulate the haplessness of a ruling class which has gone to war to defend the liberal

¹⁴ There are at least two occasions on which Mailer recorded his debt to E.M. Forster. In a 1964 interview with Steven Marcus he spoke of how 'in *The Longest Journey* somewhere about the fourth chapter, you turn the page and read, "Gerald was killed that day. He was beaten to death in a football game." It was quite extraordinary...now that he was suddenly and abruptly dead, everyone else's character began to shift. It taught me that personality was more fluid, more dramatic and startling, more inexact than I had thought' (Mailer, 1988 p. 86). A year earlier he had written to David E. Gerard: 'Perhaps the most existential influence was E. M. Forster for I read all of his novels the winter after I finished *The Naked and the Dead* and it seemed to me then as indeed it does now that he had hold of something other novelists were not trying—which is that character can dissolve in one stricken event and re-form in startling new fashion' (June 14th, 1963). It seems that the 'Existentialism' that Forster imparted to Mailer was a sense of the perilous contingencies to which every human life is subject, whether directly or peripherally.

order but is completely unable to master the monstrosities which that effort has brought into being. This would be the liberalism in the Wilson-Roosevelt line, which engorged the security state and interred over a hundred thousand Japanese-Americans citizens.¹⁵ Though they have never met, Cummings and Croft have worked in uncanny concert to bring about the destruction of Hearn. ‘From the very beginning [Mailer] saw America as a corporate enterprise controlled by forces which are apparently at odds but secretly—and unknowingly—in alliance...[a vision] which is to become still more articulated in *Barbary Shore*’ (Poirier, 1972 pp. 32-33). Reverting to Foucauldian terminology, from *The History of Sexuality*, one could say that the General and Sergeant represent the two components of the great bipolar technology of control—albeit both imperfectly and incompletely, in ways which presage their failures. Croft fulfils the function of discipline: *an anatomo-politics of the body*, ‘centred on the body as a machine: its disciplining, the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls.’ In thrall to the numinous imperatives of his innermost being, the increasingly driven Croft pushes his men to the limits of discipline, dragging them up Mount Anaka in terror. ‘They were afraid of Croft and this fear had become greater as they grew more exhausted; by now they waited for his voice...A numb and stricken apprehension had settled over them, an unvoiced and almost bottomless terror of him’ (Mailer, 1980 p. 493). In this he is the vindication and execution of Cumming’s espousal of regulatory controls: *a bio-politics of the population*, ‘focused on the species body, the body imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of the biological processes: propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity, with all the conditions that can cause these to vary.’ The General’s vision is of an army that derives its authority from the promise of improved quality of life, as its soldiery’s only avenue of escape from the benighted material conditions of civilian life: ‘There are just two main elements. A nation fights well in proportion to the amount of men and materials it has. And the other equation is that the individual soldier in that army is a more effective

¹⁵ A genuine libertarian where Mailer was a confused liberal (or ‘left conservative,’ in his preferred appellation), William Burroughs saw the entire New Deal—to say nothing of Roosevelt’s attempted packing of the Supreme Court—as a form of totalitarianism. *Vide* his chapbook *Roosevelt After Inauguration and Other Atrocities*: ‘Hoodlums and riff-raff of the lowest calibre filled the highest offices of the land. When the Supreme Court overruled some of the legislation perpetrated by this vile route, Roosevelt forced that honest body, one after the other on threat of immediate reduction to the rank of congressional lavatory attendants, to submit to intercourse with a purple-assed baboon so that venerable honoured men surrendered themselves to the embraces of a lecherous, snarling simian while Roosevelt and his strumpet wife and veteran brown-nose Harry Hopkins, smoking a communal hookah of hashish, watched the immutable spectacle with cackles of obscene laughter. Justice Blackstaff succumbed to a rectal haemorrhage on the spot. Roosevelt only laughed.’

soldier the poorer his standard of living has been in the past' (Ibid. p. 135). Even once the enemy has been vanquished the army will continue to play its part as a government work project.

However, 'Mailer saw the General as also a victim of the military machine that absorbs everything—even generals—into itself' (Kazin, 1971 p. 72). Both he and Croft are undone by ironies. In an episode straight out of Mailer's own experience, Croft's men disturb a hornet's nest and the unit is sent fleeing in a farcical rout. 'No matter what your panic, there are limits to how fast you can climb with a machine-gun. They couldn't—they had to retreat. Only what a ludicrous retreat it must have been, falling down a mountain-side with a fun,' wrote Mailer in his letter of May 14th, 1945—barely a week after VE Day. This was clearly too resonant to omit from the novel—so much so that Mailer even finds a narrative analogue for the incident. The absurdity of Croft's flight before the hornet swarm is compounded by the parallel collapse of Cumming's design. While the General is off on his supplicatory rounds—and while Croft's men struggle and stagger through jungle thickets and mountain terrain—Major Dalleson is left in charge of operations. On his watch a gap opens up in the Toyaku line, and the stiffly unimaginative career officer begins to panic.

The Major felt like laughing. He had the involuntary stupid merriment of a man who has pitched a pebble down a hill and watched it magnify itself into an avalanche. Why couldn't the General be here?...Everything was getting out of control. The Major felt as if he were holding a dozen packages in his arms and the first few were beginning to work loose already. How much would he have to juggle?...He groaned. The machine was coming apart, gears and springs and bolts were popping out at every moment. He hadn't even thought of artillery. (Mailer, 1980 p. 489)

The Major needn't fear, for the machine is a fine-tuned engine; his own function within it is technological rather than human. Even under his hare-brained direction it springs into efficient life and exploits the weakness in the Japanese position. Victory is achieved not by West Point cunning nor by natural ferocity but by the proper observation of managerial procedure, by what Leigh enumerates as 'timetables, crosswords, switchboards:' the emblems of Dalleson's 'closed mechanical mind' which limit his 'exposure to a reality that is perilously unpredictable ([Cummings and Croft] are frustrated by chance), unscheduled and unschematic' (Leigh, 2003 p. 87). Robert McNamara—Kennedy and Johnson's Secretary of

Defence, and an architect of the Vietnam War—had, as civilian advisor to General Curtis Lemay, reduced body counts among bomber crews to the status of metrics in a statistical accounting of the firebombing of civilian targets in Japan.¹⁶ Following the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the Japanese surrender, Mailer would inveigh in another letter against sailors and airmen as the storm troopers of the machine age to come: ‘Theirs is an uneventful routine life, filled with the bondage and benefits of serving a machine...They have not experienced death as a daily element...They fight in an abstract way in an abstract fluid’ (August 8th, 1945). The poet and critic Randal Jarrell, who served in the Army Air Force, was thinking along the same lines he wrote “The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner” (1945):

From my mother's sleep I fell into the State,
And I hunched in its belly till my wet fur froze.
Six miles from earth, loosed from its dream of life,
I woke to black flak and the nightmare fighters.
When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose.

Do we not read into Mailer’s letter the jealous anxiety of a young man whose part in the victory was absurd and negligible? When war is conducted in this manner, what can an enlisted man like Private Mailer claim to have contributed towards V.J. Day? This anxiety about impact, of personal valence, is paradigmatic of the concerns which will dog Mailer throughout the rest of his career. As we shall see in the examination of *Barbary Shore*, Mailer’s frustration at his peripheral position during the war led him to question the authenticity of his wartime experience. His insight into the machine nature of modern warfare wasn’t enough—he needed to transcend it personally, to make himself a locus of change. He was no longer content to prognosticate; he needed to proselytize. This required not only a new ideological framework but also a narratological shift from the objective and collective to the subjective and the personal. In his second novel he attempted to find both.

¹⁶ ‘The Secretary of Defence is by all reports a complex man, a reader of poetry,’ Mailer writes of McNamara – “does he have a secret admiration for the works of Robert Lowell as he stands by the window?” (Mailer, 1968 p. 278)

Part V: The Soldier's Return

The bulk of *The Naked and the Dead* was composed while Norman and Beatrice Mailer resided in an apartment on Remsen Street in Brooklyn Heights, by where the Hudson curves north of Governors Island into the East River:

My arms resting on an iron railing, I stared out across the docks and across the harbour to the skyline of New York deepening into the final blue of night. Among the skyscrapers, windows here and there were lit, the charwomen had started their work, and throughout those pinnacles of stone the fires were banked, the offices bare.

The ferryboat to Staten Island had begun its trip. From where I stood the boat looked very small, its deck lights twinkling across the water to form the endless flickering legs of a centipede. An ocean freighter nosed across the harbour seeking anchorage, and in the distance bridges arched the river, supporting in a stream the weight of automobiles. Through the summer night, ships sounded their warnings, clear and unmuffled.

I looked at the water and my thoughts eddied aimlessly. (Mailer, 1998 pp. 107-108)

It was there that Mailer first made the acquaintance of Charles Devlin, and it was to this address that he returned with Beatrice from Europe just before the election of '48 and where he reconnected with Jean Malaquais, who had moved to the area from Paris. After the frostiness of their initial encounters Mailer was open to re-education—the whiplash of his novel's success and Wallace's electoral annihilation had left him shaken—and Malaquais was prepared to render it. As Leigh writes, the ensuing novel 'exploits both Mailer's own experience of conversion and the sacred story of initiation told and retold in the literature of radicalism,' although even Leigh seems to miss the full autobiographical resonances of the book (Leigh, 2003 p. 86).

Malaquais set Mailer reading: *Report of Court Proceedings in the Case of the Anti-Soviet "Bloc of Right" and Trotskyites* (1938), and *Stalin: A Critical Survey of Bolshevism* (1939). Between these assignments and Malaquais's disdain for the politics of *The Naked and the Dead* (which he had been contracted to translate into French) his epigone was purged of any

lingering admiration for the Soviet Union. Mailer had graduated to the anti-Stalinist left. Worried that he had emptied his own past as a theme, he subsumed himself into the collective history of Trotskyism's rout by the Stalinists. Mailer was six years old when the Loray Mill strikers elevated Gastonia, North Carolina into the folk memory as a site of the universal labour struggle; he was fourteen when the Commission of Inquiry into the Charges Made against Leon Trotsky in the Moscow Trials was convened under the chairmanship of John Dewey. Full of second-novel panic, Mailer toyed with several ideas before finally fusing them: a character named William McLeod appears as a union leader in the twenty pages he produced of a 'strike novel'; this was combined with *Mrs Guinevere*—a novel he had commenced in the vein of Christopher Isherwood's Berlin stories—to provide some of the basic materials of *Barbary Shore*, which was published in 1951.¹⁷

'Probably I was in the war' begins the testament of Mike Lovett. His face and skull bear the marks of traumatic injury and transformative surgery, both of mysterious provenance. 'There is nothing I can recognise, not even my age. I am certain I cannot be less than twenty-five and it is possible I am older'—Mailer's age upon the publication of his first novel (Mailer, 1998 p. 3). Lovett recalls nothing of his past. In bed he is visited by nightmarishly fragmented images from out of the European charnel house. Intimations that he may have fought in the last war alternate with murkily recollected episodes suggesting some sort of affiliation with organised labour. And yet he is sanguine about his disadvantage, even strangely optimistic: 'The legends from a decade of newsprint were as intimate and distant as the places in which I must have lived. No history belonged to me and so all history was mine' (Ibid. p. 4). Outrageously—and the novel and its constituents all decline comment on this point—Lovett resolves to write a novel. What should a man in his predicament write about?

I intended a large ambitious book about an immense institution never defined more exactly than that, and about the people who wandered through it. The book had a hero and a heroine, but they never met while they were in the

¹⁷ The novel's enigmatic title discloses its resonances if one looks deep into the history of American power. Ferguson, in his survey of the nation's burgeoning naval strength, writes that 'the United States had already mounted a number of small-scale naval expeditions in the period before the Civil War, little forays like the wars of 1801-1806 against the Barbary Pirates' (Ferguson p. 41). Granted, this may be a false echo; Christopher Hitchens, in his essay on the Barbary Wars, notes the paucity of readily-available historical material on the subject—until, that is, the Middle Eastern conflicts of the post-9/11 period engendered a more general interest in them. Still, Hitchens goes on to make the intriguing argument that 'the Barbary question had considerable influence on the debate that ratified the United States Constitution in the succeeding years' and led to the formation of the permanent U.S. Navy and Marine Corps (Hitchens, 2011 pp. 14-15). Across his first two novels Mailer shows an historical understanding of both the horizontal and the vertical expansion of American hegemony.

institution. It was only when they escaped, each of them in separate ways and by separate methods, that they were capable of love and so could discover each other...I knew as a whole that the concept was sentimental, and that I hardly knew where I was led. (Ibid. p. 58)

One detects shades of *A Transit to Narcissus*, the unpublished novel that Mailer had written in 1943.¹⁸ Subletting a flat in a Brooklyn Heights brownstone from an acquaintance, the playwright Willie Dinsmore, Lovett settles down to work. He is introduced to the landlady, Beverly Guinevere, an overbearing and slatternly wanton. Dinsmore has her pegged as a nymphomaniac, while Lovett's own turn of phrase is pure hardboiled: 'she was a house whose lawn was landscaped and whose building was on fire' (Ibid. p. 17). The register proves appropriate, for as in detective fiction one gets the feeling that the characters have been waiting on the arrival of the protagonist before springing to life. Guinevere is mother to Monina—a three year-old prone to unprompted attacks of nervous hysteria—and wife to some unseen cuckold. 'I don't believe I've met the gentleman' chuckles William McLeod, another tenant; an almost surreal quip in so sparsely populated a boarding house and novel (Ibid. p. 73). McLeod is a gregarious loner in menial employ, a mordant and formidable autodidact: 'I'm not a joiner...One might call me a Marxist-at-liberty' (Ibid. p. 35). Lovett finds his company congenial, his conversation compelling even at its most abstruse and frustrating. They bond, in part, over their bemused distaste for the other resident, an unctuous backwater epicene named Leroy Hollingsworth: 'he was obviously from a small town: the talk about the weather, the accent, the politeness were unmistakable signs. The simple small-town boy come to the big city'—a square with an obscure office job (Ibid. p. 37).

Compared to the wide vistas and massed ranks of *The Naked and the Dead*, this is a smaller and less crowded canvas. Where the first novel's plotting was fettered to Daniel Defoe's general maxim—'Where is the Enemy? Let us go and fight them: Or, on the other Hand, if the Enemy was coming, what was to be done?'—the second is content to unfold at a more enigmatic and deliberate pace, playing like an off-kilter comedy of the demobbed soldier's lot.¹⁹ At first, like many a fictional writer, Lovett seems doomed to do anything *but* write. He

¹⁸ Before writing that novel Mailer had used his experiences in the Boston Mental Hospital as the basis for an unperformed play entitled *The Naked and the Dead*. 'A Transit to Narcissus' was later used as the title of his review of the movie *Last Tango in Paris* when it ran in *The New York Review of Books*.

¹⁹ J.D. Salinger's "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" appeared in *The New Yorker* in the same year that *The Naked and the Dead* was first published and shows the suicide of Seymour Glass, who shares his creator's wartime experiences. *Soldier's Pay* (1926), William Faulkner's first novel, deals with the homecoming of a World War I veteran who has been stunned into silence by a head injury. *Let There Be Light*—John Huston's 1946

lusts after the fickle Guinevere; he entertains her logorrhoea and is palmed off with Monina. He puzzles at the shards of his memory's broken mirror. He burns the midnight oils with McLeod and tries to ignore Hollingsworth, who intrudes upon their debate—seemingly in some provincial effort at self-improvement. 'I've noticed political discussions have a way of becoming very long and drawn out if you know what I mean...Well, you're a Bolshevik, aren't you, Mr. McLeod?' (Ibid. p. 78) Neither McLeod nor Lovett, thinks the reader, is sufficiently perturbed by Leroy's line of questioning—a catechistic exchange which produces the following list:

- Admits to being Bolshevik.
- Admits to being Communist.
- Admits to being atheist.
- Admits to blowing up churches.
- Admits to being against free enterprise.
- Admits to encouraging violence.
- Advocates murder of President and Congress.
- Advocates destruction of the South.
- Advocates use of poison.
- Advocates rise of the coloured people.
- Admits allegiance to a foreign power.
- Is against Wall Street. (Ibid. p. 81)

McLeod assents to signing the list, after which Hollingsworth tears it up and leaves. 'Which team does he come from?' wonders McLeod, while Lovett falls into a reverie: 'From some recess of my mind leaped again the image of the stranger, the door opening, the obscured face hovering above my bed' (Ibid. p. 83). The cast of characters is rounded out by the arrival of Lannie Madison—a disturbed young woman, 'her slender body balanced awkwardly, much as though she would leap into flight if I stirred too quickly'—and with the addition of this combustible element the collective coalesces and discloses its symbolic *Gestalt* (Ibid. p. 93). Mailer's patient work with his characters pays off in a remarkable sequence commencing in the tenth chapter and wrapping up in the fifteenth: nearly a fifth of the book's length is taken

documentary about the army's treatment programme for veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress—was suppressed by the military until the 1980s, and inspired Paul Thomas Anderson's *The Master* (2012), which puts its own peculiar spin on the old narrative of charismatic induction.

up by this long day's journey into revelation. To telescope a dizzying succession of unveilings: McLeod is not only Guinevere's errant husband but also a former Stalinist apparatchik—one of the regime's most prolific torturers. We learn that he had defected to the Americans and, while in the employ of the State Department, absconded with a certain 'little object'; Hollingsworth, who will savagely take Guinevere as his lover, is a G-Man tasked with retrieving the mysterious item. Then there is Lannie—a discarded pawn, cast aside by the sweep of history—broken by institutionalisation and bellowing against the murder of Leon Trotsky, which she lays at McLeod's feet. She allies herself with Hollingsworth while Lovett feels old allegiances stirring anew. He takes his stand with McLeod.

However, there still remains more than half the novel—and Mailer fails to reward the reader with a satisfying conclusion. The 'little object' which is the cause of so much strife and double-dealing is abstrusely implied to somehow represent—if not outright constitute—Trotsky's moral and intellectual legacy. The characters spin their wheels; they coruscate in injury and animosity without really changing. Once their covert allegiances are declared narrative tension goes slack because no one will yield or relent. This isn't to say that implacability forecloses on drama, but Mailer finally swerves from the nightmarish tale of hunter, hunted, and haunted that he seemed to have been writing. He fatally confuses his brief as a novelist, and subordinates the resolution of his fictive material to the self-appointed duty to reconstitute Trotskyism by abstract thought and to conciliate fissures within Marxist doctrine—a preview of the lofty goals he would set for future fictions of his imagining. The notorious climax of this promising and finally infuriating novel is an exhaustive peroration on this theme by McLeod—a reader-annihilating tract of scorched-earth sermonizing, delivered to Hollingsworth in the hopes of forestalling his arrest:

The state, sole exploiter capable of supporting the ultra war economy and the regimentation of the proletariat, absorbs monopoly either peaceably or by a short internal conflict. There is no alternative. The historical imperative is to reduce to the minimum the production of consumer goods in order to expand the critical needs for armament. Such a change occurs against the background for military losses and military destruction. To a people who depended upon

commodities as the opium which gave meaning to their lives, the last of the luxuries is inexorably wiped from the board. (Ibid. p. 278)²⁰

And so on and so forth over *bien pensant* desert miles does Mailer frogmarch the dumbfounded reader. The suspension of disbelief—already blisteringly taut—snaps and brings the scrim crashing down, revealing the drabness of a lecture hall.²¹ ‘The great battle of history,’ wrote Diana Trilling, ‘is now fought out not on the wide “proletarian” front...but on the intellectual left flank where Mailer had been isolated by his inability to maintain his trust in Stalin’s revolution’ (D. Trilling, 1965 p. 185). It makes for poor theatre; the audience cannot forgive Mailer for filibustering, nor buy into his magical thinking, nor avoid arriving at Irving Howe’s conclusion, that the theory-addled author ‘has come to his radicalism a little late: he does not really know in his flesh and bones what has happened to the socialist hope in the era of Hitler and Stalin...his relation to his material, like his presentation of it, is not authentic. Otherwise he would not seem so sure’ (Howe p. 46).²²

Part VI: The Failure Examined

Leigh finally concedes that ‘*Barbary Shore*’s problem is [that] the theme overwhelms the flimsy fictional structure erected to support the book,’ but not before proposing that Mailer had anticipated both the Korean War and ‘the worst excesses of McCarthyism between 1953 and 1955’—a critical manoeuvre that looks like an exercise in damage limitation (Leigh, 2003 p. 103; p. 87). The most resonant and poignant praise for Mailer’s second novel has issued from the pens of his contemporaries, writers whose huge gifts tended towards the essayistic

²⁰ ‘Mailer’s precise position with regard to the ideological perspectives evoked in the novel remains unclear, unstable and changing. At certain points in the text he is broadly Marxist in sympathy; at other points a narrow Trotskyist viewpoint is endorsed; and towards the end it is strongly implied through symbols that he favours a post-Marxist radical position’ (Leigh, 2003 p. 67).

²¹ In a 1964 interview with Steven Marcus, Mailer admitted that ‘the greatest single difficulty with the book was that my common sense thought it was impossible to have all these agents and impossible heroes congregating in a rooming house in Brooklyn Heights.’ Mailer then goes on to share a remarkable anecdote: some years later he kept a studio on Fulton Street in the same area; one occupant of the building was Rudolf Abel, the Soviet spy arrested in 1957 and eventually exchanged for the U-2 pilot Gary Powers. ‘I’m sure we used to be in the same elevator together many times...I have always been overcome with that. It made me decide there’s no clear boundary between experience and imagination. Who knows what glimpses of reality we pick up unconsciously, telepathically’ (Mailer, 1988 p. 90).

²² Contemporary with the establishment of the Soviet Union, ‘the short circuit in the capitalist system which Karl Marx had so confidently predicted had actually taken place in Germany, but with results very different from those he expected. Instead of the processes of capitalism giving rise automatically to a crisis in which a dispossessed proletariat was left facing a small group of capitalists, with nothing to do but to expropriate the expropriators, a new kind of middle class, as in Russia, came out of the petty bourgeoisie and did not find the slightest difficulty in enlisting ambitious members of the working class’ (E. Wilson p. 598).

rather than the fictive: not just Vidal but also James Baldwin, who believed that it deserved ‘far more serious treatment than it has received’ (Baldwin p. 277). The ‘revelation through distortion’ noted by Vidal is to be found in Mailer’s shift to first-person narration, which he would use for all future novels—*The Executioner’s Song* excepted. In his next novel, *The Deer Park*, Mailer repeatedly violates the circumscribed perspective of the first-person by essentially dismissing his narrator for the vast swathes of the story from which he is absent—all while persisting with the charade of the nominal form. Absent the productive pressure of keeping faith with his narrator’s epistemological straitjacket he achieves nothing like Lovett’s Conradian vision of McLeod’s remorse:

So he continued on and on, expressing at last outwardly the total of all the nights he must have lain in his bed, all nerves alive, limbs aching, while in relentless turmoil each thought birthed its opposite, each object in the darkness swelled with connotation until a chair could contain his childhood, and the warm flaccid body of Guinevere slumbering beside him expanded its bulk to become all the women he had ever known, but in their negative aspect, so that whatever pleasure he might have felt was not felt now, and he was rooted in all the sweating and lurching of unfulfillment until the flesh of his wife had become just that, and as flesh was the denominator of meat and all the corpses he had ever seen and some created. (Mailer, 1980 pp. 239-240)

Here we see a rudiment of the high Mailerian tone; he is attempting the sort of long sentence which will allow him to leap beyond the self-imposed narratological ambit. In a preview of the method that will serve him so well in his non-fiction, we get a sense of passionate speculation, of restless plunging through depths of imagined detail. In his handling the long sentence, with all its ability to coil around and release detail, is a device for the marshalling of information and then the management of its flow to the reader—all at the pace and in the sequence set by the author. There’s an entirely appropriate resemblance with the effect, identified by critic and translator Michael Hofmann, of Kafka-time: those ‘exquisitely geared sentences in which complex events are shown to be made up of diverse things happening at different speeds, with different motivations and effects, at the same time.’ Above we witness the ‘the Zeno moment’ of McLeod’s overwhelming rush of associative guilt, ‘the infinite possibility of infinitesimal change’ when it is already too late and the end is not in sight (Hofmann pp. x-xi). Here as in his future writing, the vessel of the long Mailerian sentence is meant to contain a vast array of

concepts linked together by the author's insisting upon their interconnectivity. It's as though, to draw upon cinematic imagery, he wishes to combine the seeming empirical temporality of the long-take with the suggestive discontinuity of Sergei Eisenstein's montages.²³ Against what Walter Benjamin called 'the thoroughgoing permeation of reality with mechanical equipment,' prose is the medium which allows Mailer to achieve this effect. His inchoate existentialism is a plea for a 'reality which is free of all equipment. And that is what one is entitled to ask from a work of art' (Benjamin, 2001 p. 1179).

Charles Glickberg described *Barbary Shore* as 'the first example of Existentialist dialectics in fiction that analyses with detachment the soul of a native Communist, with all his casuistry and masochistic compulsions' (Glicksberg p. 27). This is praise that does Mailer the courtesy of approbation within his own preferred terminology, and gets at the heart of what is most compelling in his second novel. McLeod is the most successful characterisation in Mailer's early fiction, and his relationship with Lovett its deepest and most affecting portrait of a human connection. Although to call the Mailer of *Barbary Shore* an Existentialist (even on his own idiosyncratic terms) is as over-determining as calling the Mailer of *The Naked and the Dead* a Marxist.²⁴ The critics who have been fairest to *Barbary Shore* are those who have done it the courtesy of taking seriously its symbolic array as well as the political argumentation which is that system's concomitant and yield. Diana Trilling, who is Leigh's precursor among these sympathetic readers, presents Hollingsworth as 'the representative of a social force that is already licensed to execute the political dreams of a Cummings [and who] has none of the human attributes of a mere novice in tyranny like Mailer's general' (D. Trilling, 1965 p. 185). This is more-or-less the reading of the character proffered by the book itself; Trilling is more illuminating on Mrs. Guinevere, where she almost succeeds in saving Mailer's creation—not only from her vulgarity but also from the intellectual portentousness of the structure housing her:

It is only at the last, when McLeod's wife chooses to run off with Hollingsworth, that we begin to understand her place in the ideological

²³ A practitioner-critic like John Updike is able to replicate the effect of Kafka-time through passionate re-description: 'Kafka epitomizes one aspect of this modern mind-set: a sensation of anxiety and shame whose centre cannot be located and therefore cannot be placated; a sense of an infinite difficulty within things, impeding every step; a sensitivity acute beyond usefulness, as if the nervous system, flayed of its old hide of social usage and religious belief, must record every touch as pain' (Anderson p. 83).

²⁴ It must be said that Mailer himself encouraged that reading, and in so doing established the term's plasticity in his lexicon. At a time when he had yet to read any formal European Existentialism he declared *Barbary Shore* the 'first of the existentialist novels in America...Unless one labels Faulkner correctly as an existentialist' (Mailer, 1992 p. 106).

scheme of the novel. Greed, cupidity, sloth, a sporadic and wildly misdirected energy, spiritless lust, stupidity, and mean ambition – these, Mailer is telling us, are what today define democratic man, or woman; and in a society in which the masculine principle is reduced to an automaton like Hollingsworth, a woman perhaps best symbolizes our deteriorated situation. Guinevere is the civilization—or, if you will, the American masses—with whom the revolutionary idealist has perforce had to align himself, and to whose partnership with fascism his death must be witness. (D. Trilling, 1965 p. 187)

Trilling's exegesis makes for more convincing reading than the material from which she produced it. Where her criticism departs from Leigh's—and where her contemporaneity with Mailer discloses itself—is in the dispensation she grants the novel, by which the intensity of his political vision overrides his shortcomings as a novelist. But to a reader less excitedly invested in the occasion of Mailer's pronouncements the tiresome Mrs. Guinevere must seem less like the author's judgement on the American electorate and more like his diatribe against housewives—the wavering sweethearts of *The Naked and the Dead* a few years on. Guinevere's sexual congress with Hollingsworth is just one example of how Mailer's characters resist arrayal within his politico-symbolic scheme, which doesn't so much arise out of the plot as it is jury-rigged and erected by authorial edict.²⁵ The novel is ultimately a failure of nerve, of the courage to embrace the aleatoric; it is warped by what James Wood, in an essay on J.M. Coetzee, described as 'tricky camber of allegory, insisting on pulling one's step in certain directions.' In Mailer we encounter the pathos of a writer whose sight is so trained on the big chance that he either misses the small details or misprizes the aggregation of those he does notice. The overdetermined structure of *Barbary Shore*—the fatal miscalculation of McLeod's soliloquy—ultimately impugns his instincts as a novelist. Mailer didn't write in obeisance to the exhortations of his characters and thus embrace the pressures of the situation that had brought them all together. If he had, he might have made good on the enigmatic allure of the book's initial promise. He might have written a worthy Cold War successor to E.E. Cummings's *The Enormous Room*.

Unfortunately, the author 'leads our readings, organises our impressions, assails us with interpretations...that prevent all but the stoutest reader from responding at his own pace, or

²⁵ 'Sophomorically diagrammatic in its treatment of sex, *Barbary Shore* is even more important as a clue to Mailer's puritanical reading of the sexual act. The act is allegorized because he simply cannot read it, then or now, as having a meaning in and of itself. To do so he would have to accept its legitimacy on the grounds simply of pleasure' (Poirier, 1972 p. 36).

with free enthusiasm to things that are on the periphery of Mailer's organizational formulas' (Poirier, 1972 p. 10). The allegory of *Barbary Shore* does not survive the reader's tabulating the double-dealings of Mailer's characters against her own understanding of the relevant history. For example, it makes obvious dramatic sense for Guinevere to forswear the defeated windbag McLeod for the vicious Hollingsworth. We may even grant that seedy coupling its intended allegoric weight as some sort of statement on the American public's acquiescence to state authority, but even this concession to Mailer's abstractions begets the wrong kind of questions. When—we feel compelled to ask—did the American public ever take Communism into its bed? To suggest that it did (or to seem to suggest by the waywardness of the book's metaphorical logic) bespeaks the cliquishness of Mailer's reading and associations.

Turning to the other side of that pairing, Hollingsworth fails to bear close scrutiny as a representative of the sort of state control that Mailer palpably fears. Leigh argues for Hollingsworth as the descendent of Major Dalleson from the previous book, representing 'a post-war future that is essentially bureaucratic and authoritarian: rule by the officer class. Reinforcing this insight, *Barbary Shore* heralds the emergence of an American version of the police state' (Leigh, 2003 p. 87). This is a satisfying reading to the degree that it shows Mailer building on the most uncomfortable—and most convincing—aspects of his first novel's conclusion, but it misses out on the shortcomings of Hollingsworth as such a representation. Hollingsworth's allegiance may be to the institutions of technocratic authoritarianism presaged by Dalleson's victory, but the dandiacal redneck is too vivid a grotesque—too obviously the finicky contrivance of a young author with 'literary' ambitions—to stand in for the sort of self-effacing company man that will impose totalitarianism upon America. There is too much of Cummings in him, too much of the naïve suggestion that the nation will know it is in crisis by the calibre of the gargoyles who have been summoned from out of hiding. J.M. Coetzee, in his review of *The Castle in the Forest*, noted the argument against Hannah Arendt's idea of the banality of evil which Mailer carried out not only in that book, but to varying degrees of explicitness throughout the preceding career. Coetzee quotes and responds to Mailer: "If Hannah Arendt is correct and evil is banal, then that is vastly worse than the opposed possibility that evil is satanic" -- worse in the sense that there is no struggle between god and evil and therefore no meaning to existence.' This is not only a mischaracterisation of Arendt's position but also, in a Bloomian sense, a weak misreading; for as Coetzee notes, this weakens the moral force of Mailer's position:

"The Devil made him do it" appeals not to the understanding, only to a certain kind of faith. If one takes seriously Mailer's reading of world history as a war between good and evil in which human beings act as proxies for supernatural agents—that is to say, if one takes this reading at face value rather than as an extended and not very original metaphor for unresolved and irresolvable conflict within individual human psyches—then the principle that human beings are responsible for their actions is subverted, and with that the ambition of the novel to search out and speak the truth of our moral life.

America should have been so lucky as to have the preening monstrosities of Mailer's early fiction announce themselves as the votaries of the coming plague. As much as Mailer would continue to yearn to have evil announce itself in the charismatic form of a Cummings or a Hollingsworth, he would realise that it was the anonymity of a Dalleson that was most to be feared—and he would render this insight through the forms of history and the essay, rather than the novel. For *Barbary Shore* ultimately fails as the political novel that its author wanted to write, and is best—if incompletely and tendentiously—read as an allegory of Mailer's predicament in the period after 1948, after the phenomenal success of *The Naked and the Dead* had acted as a lobotomy upon his past.

Part VII: Mailer Among His Contemporaries

Vidal wrote that 'most of our generation was in the war, usually ingloriously...The war to most of us was a profound irrelevance; traumatic for some, perhaps, but for most no more than an interruption' (Vidal pp. 35-36). The writers who immediately spring to mind are Saul Bellow—who was in the merchant navy—and William Styron, whose service with a lieutenant's rank in the Marines was forestalled by the Japanese surrender; they are not grouped with those authors who, even if they didn't experience combat, then at least served in a military unit in a theatre of operations. Those criteria would admit less than nine per cent of the total US population of the time: the victors of the Good War, arguably the inner core of the Greatest Generation. It is both astonishing and—in an American way—entirely predictable that from this sliver of the populace there should step forth no less than five major

writers: Norman Mailer, Kurt Vonnegut, Joseph Heller, James Jones, and JD Salinger.²⁶ Of course, the Class of '45 did not graduate and step out into the world as one. This was no school, there were no salons. Its most affectionate members, Mailer and Jones, terminated their friendship in 1958. Heller flew 60 bombing missions over Italy—a record that, statistically speaking, killed him thrice over; the average personnel loss was 5% per mission, by which metric the comedy of the dead man in Yossarian's tent discloses its baleful rationale. *Catch-22* wouldn't appear until 1961, and Kurt Vonnegut wouldn't gain widespread notice until the publication of his sixth novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, eight years later.²⁷

By these standards one might say that Gore Vidal, who served as first mate on an army freight-supply ship and was stationed in Alaska, drew the short straw—he hardly thought so. He found Mailer's continual reference to his inconsequential service deployment 'startling,' for when 'Mailer reminds us that he was a rifleman on Luzon, I get embarrassed for him and hope he is not going back to his first role to get the attention he wants' (Vidal p. 36).²⁸ Jones alone among his generation knew the army already during peacetime with the bitter intimacy of the 'thirty-year man,' and wrote about the common soldiery with a savage authenticity. Perhaps Mailer's hostility towards Salinger, 'the greatest mind ever to stay in prep school,' arose from a similar but even more frustrated sense of experiential envy (Mailer, 1992 p. 467). When he writes that '*The Catcher in the Rye* was able to change people's lives [while] the new books are not even likely to improve the conversation in college dormitories,' he is talking about a writer who landed on Utah Beach and participated in the liberation of Dachau (Mailer, 1979 p. 119).

All of which is to say that Mailer—first among them to explode onto the scene—must have felt like a fraud; probably he was in the war. The situation of the amnesiac Lovett is the closest he ever came to candour about the dimensions of his experience in the Pacific, although one might include that underrated gem of a short story, "The Language of Men": 'In the beginning, Sanford Carter was ashamed of becoming an army cook' it opens, and takes its

²⁶ To these might be added not only Jarrell but any of the writers mentioned by Vonnegut in his review of *Something Happened*.

²⁷ 'The spirit of competition, once so keen among writers of "war novels" that Mailer knew the Pacific would be more useful to him than old Europe, now turns on which writer *knows* more about the real nature of war...The real massacre will never get into the books. But Vonnegut was there' (Kazin, 1971 pp. 35-36).

²⁸ 'I remember thinking meanly: So somebody did it. Each previous war had had its big novel, yet so far there had been none for our war...I had debated doing one myself and had (I still think) done something better: a small cool hard novel about men on the periphery of the action. *Williwaw* [1946] was written when I was nineteen and easily the cleverest fox ever to know how to disguise his ignorance and make a virtue of his limitations. (What an attractive form the self-advertisement is: one could go on forever relighting one's image!)' (Vidal p. 31).

inspiration from a humiliation that Mailer underwent while on KP duty during the occupation of Japan (Mailer, 1992 p. 122). But the autobiographical resonances of *Barbary Shore* have gone unremarked upon in the critical literature; the standard line is still the one set down by Kate Millett in *Sexual Politics*, whereby Mailer's first fictional stand-in is *An American Dream's* Stephen Rojack. As we shall see in the fifth chapter, in that exchange it is Mailer's counter-critique of Millett's method that holds up to scrutiny: her approach is opprobrious and prejudicial, proceeding by truncation and weaponisation of the material under examination. But in fairness, even as sympathetic a reader as Leigh—who draws heavily upon the biographical record, particularly in delineating the Malaquais-McLeod analogue—misses out on the degree to which Mailer enacted his own situation through Mike Lovett:

Towards the end [Lovett's] novel is forgotten, no more significant than Guinevere's banal script ideas or Lannie's crazed experimental poems, a symptom of the malaise of non-connection rather than a critical tool for dealing with it. Mailer associates Lovett with Narcissus,²⁹ and his fragments of literary self-reflection suggest alienation without transcendence... Lovett's personal emancipation comes only with the selling of his typewriter, the abandonment of his novel and the dissipation of literary ambitions. (Leigh, 2003 pp. 90-91)

Leigh reads no particular significance into Lovett's work-in-progress, even dismisses it alongside the novel's other and admittedly picayune and irritating instances of literary *mise en abyme*. Leigh makes nothing of the fact that the unpublished *A Transit to Narcissus*, just like Lovett's novel, is set in a mental institution—or that Lannie's experience of institutional violence seems to come straight out of the early work.³⁰ Perhaps it takes a fellow novelist to divine Mailer's insecurity and attempts at mitigation through imaginative transmutation—and maybe the novelist best placed to do so would be motivated by an ambivalent mixture of lingering affection and abiding rivalrousness. In 1978—with the long-gestating *Ancient Evenings* still far from complete and the expenses of a large family accruing—Mailer published a facsimile of the manuscript of *A Transit to Narcissus* in an expensive limited

²⁹ Or, to be more precise, Guinevere does.

³⁰ 'Scarr [*Transit's* protagonist] is distraught but also strangely exhilarated by the regular and condoned brutality... As the novel proceeds, Scarr becomes emotionally calloused and finds that violence beguiles him more and more. The methods employed to cow the inmates eventually turn nearly all of the employees into little fascists. The hospital scenes and routines (including an elaborate, fiendish system of distributing discarded cigarette butts among the inmates), based on Mailer's experience, ring true' (Lennon, 2013 p. 57).

edition; the following year saw the appearance not only of *The Executioner's Song* but also William Styron's *Sophie's Choice*.

Stingo, Styron's narrator and alter ego, is an exception to the general rule about fictional writers and somehow finds the time to write a considerable portion of his creator's first novel, *Lie Down in Darkness* (while also making mental notes towards *The Long March* and *The Confessions of Nat Turner*)—all while residing in a Brooklyn boarding house where he will be brought face to face with the wounded human legacy of the European conflagration. With the two texts forced into such a line-up, it becomes difficult to quell the notion that with his opus Styron saw an opportunity to challenge his most turbulent friend and competitor at the site of his first and arguably most conspicuous failure.

At any rate, nothing in Mailer's subsequent writing does the slightest to encourage this heavily autobiographical reading—perhaps it would have left the most vulnerable salience in his corpus even more exposed to scorn and derision. To have served in a war, attained great fame as a writer, and yet know that you have lived no life—what must that feel like? *Barbary Shore* provides us with not exactly an answer to that question, but rather a feeling for the psychic terrain. *The Deer Park* would proffer yet another tale of an alienated veteran who would write a book but for the intrusions and demands made on his time by another rabble of eccentrics. That novel is a lesser achievement than Mailer's second, but the agony of its composition and publication would provide the occasion for Mailer to truly explore the condition of the embattled writer: not a fictional writer—no authorial avatar—but himself.

Mailer's own kind of existentialism, as we shall see, is best understood as a rejection of *a priori* structural certitudes in favour of verification by psychological immediacy, to break the Procrustean moulds of ideological narratives. His famous distaste for plastics can be seen as a general revulsion at anything prefab. The distrust is understandable: a youthful and perhaps overhasty form of systematic thinking had served him extremely well in *The Naked and the Dead*, in which broad intuitions about the modern network of permanent coercions found the confidence of their verification. Mailer's desultory experience of combat, the variety of support assignments he undertook—perhaps they placed him at the ideal remove from which to contemplate the workings of military authority. It wasn't just that civilian life couldn't offer him anything on the *scale* of the war; the crisis was as much about a loss of clarity. Marxian doctrine seemed to offer a beacon but turned out to be a marsh-light. The dissatisfactions of his third novel went to show that merely shucking off systematic thinking wasn't enough. He needed to form his own schema, and began to develop them alongside his understanding that

What is most unendurable is not the military world of total frustration so much as the midnight frustration of the half world, Baldwin's other country, where a man may have time to hear his soul, and time to go deaf, even be forced to contemplate himself as he becomes deadened before his death. (Much as Hemingway may have been.) That is when one becomes aware of the anguish, the existential *angst*, which wars enable one to forget. It is that other death – without war – where one dies of a failure of nerve, which opens the bloodiest vents of Hell. And that is a novel none of us has yet come back alive to write. (Mailer, 1979 p. 110)

Mailer's problem lay in his twofold nostalgia for the war, which had not only been a goldmine of copy (already strip-mined) but also a crucible of clarity. But the yearning of nostalgia is always tinged with pain—one cannot go home again—and Mailer could not regard his wartime experience without the paranoia of an imposter. In a way, he had lived the war thrice over: first in the moment, then in his letters, then in the writing of *The Naked and the Dead*. His memories must have taken on the dubious sheen of an overly-polished anecdote, and civilian life must have seemed the murkier by contrast. *Barbary Shore* goes some way to articulating this profound disquietude, for what's best in the novel seems to come from deep within its author. If this flirts with the autobiographical fallacy, then it shall be seen in the next chapter that this is precisely the sort of reading that Mailer himself wished to encourage—the turn to illeism is already implicit in this refraction of personal experience. Mailer's particular conception of the author function helps reconstitute meaning to *Barbary Shore*, but at great cost. It diminishes the autonomy of the text, assimilates the first-person narrative into the biographical narrative of the author, and condemns the novel to a thematic parasitism by which it attains pathos almost purely from its specific spot in the bibliography. *Barbary Shore* coheres only when we remember that it is Mailer's second novel, and respect the author for having suffered over it. This is the yield of Mailer's passionate arguments on behalf of the life of the author; it is also indicative of the limitations of the Mailerian author function.

In 1952 Mailer participated in the *Partisan Review* symposium "Our Country and Our Culture," which proposed that 'most writers no longer accept alienation as the artist's fate in America; on the contrary, they want very much to be a part of American life.' Mailer's contribution is included in *Advertisements for Myself*, and serves notice of the very ordinary

sort of writer and public figure he was still at risk of becoming. And yet it must be noted that out of twenty-five contributors he was one of only four who found themselves at odds with the editorial position—the others were Irving Howe, C. Wright Mills, and Delmore Schwartz. In his *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* Richard Hofstadter wrote that ‘what seemed to the older intellectuals...a willingness to abandon an oversimplified commitment to alienation into which they had once been misled appeared to somewhat younger men as an incomprehensible moral failure’ (Hofstadter p. 395). This stubborn moral commitment found its deleterious climax in the Beats, who ‘have created a new paradox: a conformity of alienation.’ By the end of the decade Mailer would put forward ‘the most forthright case for a really solid kind of estrangement’ in “The White Negro,” of which Hofstadter could only remark that ‘Certainly the earlier prophets of alienation in America had never had this much imagination’ (Ibid. pp. 422-423).

Chapter Two: “The torture chamber of the overburdened American conscience.”

He joined the army of vets who believed they had earned the right to invent their lives. He entered a tranced decade of abstract love, of the exhilarations of type and gossip and nights spent sitting up waiting for the literary renaissance that would surely surpass that of the twenties by just as much as this war had surpassed, in nobility and breadth and conclusiveness, its predecessor.

John Updike, *Bech: A Book*

Edward Said, in his “Notes on the Characterisation of a Literary Text,” wrote that ‘the displacement of empirical time by artistic time is one of the happier results of the displacement of the normal human life by the writing career’ (Said p. 777). This is the phenomenon in which it is the growth of the bibliography, item by item—rather than the passage of years with its attendant milestones—that marks the passage of time’s onward course. Poirier, who is quoted in Said’s article, was able to reciprocate when he excitedly endorsed the notion and pointed at Mailer’s efforts ‘to give his work the shape and drama of history...to make a form out of what otherwise would be a mere accumulation of writings, to turn what he has written into a sequence of intelligible development’ (Poirier, 1972 p. 31). It was as the anthologist of his own writings that Mailer pursued this goal, and his greatest achievement in that capacity is *Advertisements for Myself*.

In his essays Martin Amis is fond of saying that ‘the most significant page in any novel precedes the text and is traditionally headed “By the Same Author.”’ The joke wears thin with repetition but is given a suggestive extension in a 2001 essay on Philip Roth, who ‘has recently been tampering with his introductory CV.’ Noting the ‘corralling’ of the texts into different sections, named for the author’s various recurring protagonists and stand-ins—Zuckerman, Roth, Kepesh, and Other—‘it strikes you that Roth has done away with chronological order. His fiction, and his talent, are defying time’ (Amis, 2017 p. 286). At the age of thirty six, eleven years after the publication of his first novel, Mailer set out to not only displace empirical time but to usurp it, to efface its lapidary writ and engrave his own story. Norman Mailer—or, rather, the author we talk about when we talk about Norman Mailer—first appears in the pages of *Advertisements for Myself*. He isn’t alone in there. He exists alongside the ghosts of prior selves, fragments and rudiments of aborted attempts at self-invention. He moves among them, presides over them, conducts their spectral parade for the

reader's inspection, for her education in the history and destiny of Norman Mailer. If nothing else, she must be convinced that he can fulfil the latter by exerting control over the former—and that both stages of this process will be achieved by his mastery of literary style. As the Spanish Existentialist José Ortega y Gasset wrote:

Man invents for himself a program of life, a static form of being, that gives a satisfactory answer to the difficulties posed for him by circumstance. He essays this form of life, attempts to realize this imaginary character he has resolved to be. He embarks on the essay full of illusions and prosecutes the experience with thoroughness. This means that he comes to *believe* deeply that this character is his real being. But meanwhile the experience has made apparent the shortcomings and limitations of this experience of life. It does not solve all the difficulties, and it creates new ones of its own.

Mailer might have eventually recognised himself and his programme in these words when he read them in Walter Kaufmann's anthology *Existentialism from Dostoyevsky to Sartre*. But Mailer hadn't even read *that* little before he impulsively claimed himself an Existentialist. It wouldn't be until his seventeen-day detention in the Bellevue Hospital after his assault on Adele Morales in late 1960 that he would read the basic writings. He must have felt an affinity of context: the legacy of the Holocaust and the atomic bomb was universal. The similarities between European Existentialism and his strange ideas about the substance of authorship will be explored in this chapter, and it will be seen that Mailer's confusions of thought on one subject are usually highly revealing of his thinking on other matters. This is perhaps unavoidable when an author uses as loaded a term as 'Existential' with such huge elasticity, with what some would deem a foggy casualness. That Mailer had previously assigned all the duties carried out by that word to the term 'Hip' suggests an eagerness to distance himself from his American contemporaries. It was not so much a return to Malraux and Malraux as it was a shunning of the Beats. Mailer's large novel was killed by Burroughs, who doomed Mailer to a belatedness that was not only artistic but also experiential.

Perhaps we could propose something like experientialism as the catchall of Mailerian catchalls, one that defines the assumptions and practices that are shared by his various overlapping identities and artistic periods: the left-leaning literary Naturalist shading into the heterodox Marxist—both belated identities—the Hip, the Existentialist, and the emerging

illeist of the high Mailerian style. Experientialism in this context is not the third way in religious philosophy between evidentialism and fideism. Mailer, despite his vivid flights of fancy about God and the Devil, is not interested in the role played by experience in justifying religious belief. Rather, what we might term his experientialism is his on-going attempt to justify the ways of Norman Mailer to the readers and critics who first erred when declaring him a one-book author.

As we shall see, it is a project which satisfies the demand for psychological immediacy by making itself a continuing report on the difficulties that the writer has discovered inhere within his enterprise. Anyone who writes a book named *Advertisements for Myself* and opens it with the confession that he has 'been running for President these last ten years in the privacy of my mind' has come to view his celebrity as his Existential given. Throughout, Mailer offers up this vicissitudes of his fame as something like Heidegger's thrownness: a being-in-a-world into which he is thrown without personal choice or previous knowledge. The perennial attempt of his various kinds of experientialism is to repurpose his very public dissatisfactions as an imaginative novelist as the prelude to his vindication in that capacity. In *Advertisements for Myself*, as in the later journalism, Mailer seeks to be both *in medias res* and *sub specie aeternitatis*: both writing to save his soul and assured of his guaranteed success.

The anthology is a manor of many rooms and a chimera of architectural discontinuities. Mailer himself provides two floor plans, two paths with the same end: the big novel he was preparing to unleash upon the reading public. From this point his blockbuster would remain perpetually imminent, more heralded and truant than Godot.¹ 'There are two Tables of Contents,' writes Mailer, and it is worthwhile to quote generously from his Note to the Reader in order to gain a sense of his wry comity in proffering this *bricolage* to the public:

The First lists each piece in sequence, and anyone wishing to read my book from beginning to end may be pleased to hear that the order is roughly chronological. The author, taken with an admirable desire to please his readers, had also added a set of advertisements, printed in italics, which surround all of these writings with his present tastes, preferences, apologies,

¹ *Advertisements for Myself* contains Mailer's review of the original Broadway production of Beckett's play, written after he had previously dismissed the work sight-unseen in his *Village Voice* column. His take is dependably eccentric: 'Two men, two vagabonds...a male and female homosexual...they are beyond sex, really neither old men nor old women but debilitated children looking for God, looking for the Life-Giver...they desire not only sex and rebirth into life, but worldly power as well. They are looking for the potency of the phallus and the testes' (Mailer, *Advertisements for Myself* p. 322).

prides, and occasional confessions. Like many another literary fraud, the writer has been known on occasion to read the Preface of a book instead of a book, and bearing this vice in mind, he tried to make the advertisements more readable than the rest of his pages.

Since such a method is discursive, and this is a time in which many hold a fierce grip on their wandering attention, a Second Table of Contents is offered to satisfy the specialist. Here all short stories, short novels, poems, advertisements, articles, essays, journalism, and miscellany are posted in their formal category. (Mailer, 1992, p. 7)

Note this early example of illeism, which opens up an implied distance between the Mailer who has assembled the collection and the later intelligence that has presumably arisen from out of the experiential grist of that effort. *Advertisements for Myself* is probably less than the sum of its parts, for the reader who strikes out to traverse it from cover to cover will pay a toll of considerable boredom, even torpor. It is also a manifest failure on its own ambitious terms. Whatever Mailer meant by the proposal that the collection should ‘clear a ground’ for his big novel, he clearly did not succeed. If anything he was engaged in an elaborate act of deferral and premature self-congratulation, and presented his artistic victory over empirical time as guaranteed.² But Mailer’s ‘By the Same Author Page’ would finally be defined by its absentees as much as by its constituents, no matter how distinguished the latter. For greater information on the novel that Mailer thought he was writing the reader is referred to Appendix II. This chapter passes over the excerpts that Mailer places in the anthology’s final section. This book is largely unconcerned with the travails and metamorphoses of Sergius O’Shaughnessy and Marion Faye, and takes from Mailer’s own words sanction to focus upon certain components of the anthology to the exclusion of others. The juvenilia of “Part 1—Beginnings,” the intermediate short stories and crude political commentary of “Part 2—Middles,” and the marginalia of “Part 5—Games and Ends” are all elided. The focus of this

² ‘We intend to hold ourselves responsible for our existence,’ wrote Nietzsche; ‘consequently we also want to submit to our being’s true steersmen and not allow our lives to seem a thoughtless accident.’ In the interview “Hip, Hell, and the Navigator” (collected in the anthology), the critic Robert Lucid expresses his reservations about Mailer’s comments to the effect that while the novelist ‘consciously makes decisions and accepts the moral consequences,’ the hipster is ‘unconscious of risks of this kind.’ Mailer’s responds by expounding his belief that the unconscious ‘has an enormous teleological sense,’ which he terms the Navigator. ‘It is with this thing that they move, that they grope forward—this navigator at the seat of their being.’ (Mailer, *Advertisements for Myself* p. 386)

chapter lies in the collection's third and fourth parts, evocatively titled "Births" and "Hipsters."

Specifically, this chapter examines "Fourth Advertisement for Myself: The Last Draft of *The Deer Park*" (also known as "The Mind of an Outlaw"), and "The White Negro." It will be seen that these items constitute the core of Mailer's achievement in assembling the anthology. They provide the blueprint of his subsequent development as a writer of creative non-fiction, 'a passionate and heterodox moralist,' and a *sui generis* public personality (Bloom, 2003 p. 4). *Advertisements for Myself* was an accidental success, and paradigmatic of the career that followed. Poirier credited the book with saving its author from the career of literary respectability that his first three books seemed to promise; in 1972 he wrote that Mailer

Is still relying on the persona of the perpetually embattled writer which he began to create in the pieces (particularly the prefatory comments) collected in *Advertisements for Myself*, in 1959. The degree to which this persona was invented for literary purposes and the degree to which it is a necessity of his life is doubtless a mystery even to Mailer. I suspect that without it he would not have given us the work that followed his first three books...What he would have written, if anything, would have belonged, as does the last of these novels, to the literary time of Faulkner, Hemingway, and especially Fitzgerald. (Poirier, 1972 pp. 11-12)

'The novelist,' writes Amis, 'cowers in the boiler-room of the self, where he works in his stinking singlet, his coccyx-baring jeans. In the autobiography he takes you back down there on an official tour or PR walkabout, dressed in a foreman's crisp rompers' (Amis, 2002 p. 375). As much as autobiographical insights are scattered throughout the advertisements, Mailer offers no such imposture. In fact, this haphazard aggregation was the closest he ever came to writing an autobiography; in the second table of contents they are grouped under the suggestive heading "Biography of a Style," which encapsulates their artful evasiveness. The material dealing with the completion of *The Deer Park* forms the narrative core of the anthology, and what becomes abundantly clear is that this was the nadir of his early career.

This chapter is primarily concerned with two aspects of Mailer's work during this period. First is the constitution of a distinct identity as an author and public personality. After a close examination of Mailer's description of his own writing process, I will draw on Foucault to

examine how Mailer's worship of Ernest Hemingway—his misprision, in Bloomian terms—lead to an eccentric notion of the author-function. And then, with an eye towards trauma theory and signification in African-American vernacular, we will see the unholy miscegenation from which Mailer's White Negro derives.

Part I: Mailer at Bay

Originally conceived in March of 1952 and reminiscent of superior and more enduring novels by F. Scott Fitzgerald and Nathanael West, *The Deer Park* takes us into a world of sybaritic cruelty. Set in the fictional resort of Desert D'Or (a stand-in *à clef* for Palm Springs), it is the story of Sergius O'Shaughnessy, an orphaned air force pilot and Korean War veteran who finds himself among Hollywood power-brokers, postulants, and poseurs. Most prominent among these is the disgraced filmmaker Charles Eitel (an analogue for Elia Kazan), the pimp Marion Faye, the producer Carlyle Munshin, the actress Lulu Meyers, and the dancer Elena Esposito. Sergius, despite the putative monopoly of first-person narration, emerges as essentially the story's deuteragonist alongside Eitel. While the outsider finds himself on the make and in and out of Lulu's bed we also follow the narrative of Eitel's redemption, as he struggles between his love for Elena and the opportunity to revive his career by rolling on his colleagues to the House Un-American Activities Community. Alfred Kazin memorably characterised *Barbary Shore* as a 'dark, sad testament of a book [and] only distractedly a novel'; *The Deer Park*, on the other hand, is only distractedly about the McCarthy witch hunts. Mailer was much more interested in what was brewing at the novel's edges, in the figure of Marion Faye: the proto-Hipster and sardonic *consigliore* to both Sergius and Eitel.

On June 10th of 1954 Mailer delivered the manuscript to Rinehart & Company. It is at this point that the Fourth Advertisement strikes up its tale, even if much of the germane intelligence is to be found elsewhere in the anthology or, failing that, in Lennon's biography (which declines the opportunity to tabulate Mailer's omissions and elisions). Mailer then decamped to Mexico for the rest of the summer, where he began smoking marijuana on a daily basis. It was during this period that he truly 'connected' with the drug for the first time—an experience made the more epiphanic for bringing about a sudden understanding of and appreciation for jazz. This is a development worth noting because Mailer's subsequent writings and conduct as a public figure are contextualised by his generating raw material

while under the influence. Then there is his identification of ‘tea’ and jazz as some of the signifying accoutrements of the hipster. In November Rinehart demanded the excision from the novel of a passage depicting fellatio. Mailer refused, and the book was adrift. It was rejected by six other publishers until he agreed to make the edit for Alfred A. Knopf, whose lawyers then blindsided him by demanding further cuts. Mailer despaired of the novel’s chances until it was finally accepted by Putnam.

Exhausted and chastened by this ordeal of literary-industrial panhandling, Mailer retreated into the locked room of the self. On December 1st he commenced work on a deeply private project: “Lipton’s Journal,” which was conceived as a repository for his thoughts in the wake of the rupture with Rinehart. By March 4th of the following year—fuelled not only by weed and alcohol but also amphetamines and barbiturates—he had written 689 entries: 248 typed pages containing 110,000 words. The longest entry, of ten thousand words, was written on January 31st—his thirty-second birthday. We see him plot further elaborate novels, fixate upon the sexual potency of the blacks, and foreswear atheism in favour of a highly personal notion of an ‘existential God.’³ This *Nachlass* is accessible at the Harry Ransom Centre in Austin, Texas, and to read it is to be granted access to the unmistakable foundry of Mailer’s style. It provides a sense of the stages of his development that were withheld from the anthology. Its publication seems unlikely—a pity, for even something as simple as making facsimiles of the typed pages available online would constitute a salutary contribution to the wider understanding of Mailer’s evolution as a writer. It is in those passages where Mailer reminds himself of the journal’s rationale that we begin to recognise the author of the mature works. Articulate observations about the minute fluctuations of mood, an achieved sensitivity to the exhortations of his soul—these are to be found in Entry 160, for example:

I’m depressed, the fear that my manic mood was a prelude to insanity seems to have gone. The world is around me again, problems, distastes, small worries, small revulsions, and mainly depression. But even as I’m writing this, my mood is picking up. For I had too much Lipton’s last night, and by now I

³ ‘An exception to his rule of self-discovery happened one night in June 1953 when he was at the Handy Colony in Illinois. [James] Jones had just given him a brief tutorial in Eastern religions, karma, and reincarnation. Mailer, then a hard-shell atheist, was somewhat incredulous. “You believe in that?” Mailer asked. Jones answered, “Oh, sure. That’s the only thing that makes sense.” Jones’s answer, he said, “rang in my head for years.” It opened a shaft to deep waters’ (Lennon, 2013 p. 191).

should know that too much leaves me with a bad hangover, and disgust at all the psychopathy I uncover in myself. ⁴

Perhaps the wider public is not owed access to Lipton's Journal. In Joan Didion's formulation on her own private work, it is not 'for public consumption, a structural conceit for binding together a series of graceful *pensées*; we are talking about something private, about bits of the mind's string too short to use, an indiscriminate and erratic assemblage with meaning only for its maker.' Mailer paid a considerable psychic and physiological toll for Lipton's yield, and had to set the journal aside to revise *The Deer Park* for Putnam—not at the publisher's urging but out of his own newfound dissatisfaction. This process is described in the Fourth Advertisement. Buttressed by chemicals, he toiled throughout a broiling New York summer to make his revised August deadline. The novel was published in October, and he was left vitiated not only by his labours but also by the anti-climax of the book's indifferent reception. Seeing the appeal in exercising different faculties, he directed his energies into the newly-established *Village Voice*, of which he was co-founder. Commencing on January 11th of 1956 his segment "QUICKLY: A Column for Slow Readers" ran for seventeen weeks until he vacated his position in acrimony over typographical errors. That wasn't until he had humiliated himself before the magazine's readership—an experience he recreates for a much larger audience by including the columns in the anthology. We shall now examine the mind of an outlaw.

Part II: *The Deer Park* Revised

In the context of the anthology the Fourth Advertisement is only one among many italicised passages of explanatory material that had been composed between the autumn of 1958 and the spring of '59. It constitutes less than a seventh of the writing that had been undertaken for the assembly of *Advertisements for Myself* but is feasibly the most famous and successful component of the collection—more so, perhaps, than "The White Negro," which we will come to. "The Mind of an Outlaw," as it was dubbed when it ran in *Esquire* before the publication of the anthology, is a forerunner of Mailer's contributions to the so-called New Journalism. That movement and phenomenon was, among other things, an ideological and rhetorical revolt against the authority of the remote and opaque institutional voice in

⁴ Norman Mailer Papers, Folder 011: Lipton's journal, typed manuscript, photocopies, typed note card index, and handwritten notes, 1954-1955

traditional journalism. In a variety of styles and approaches, its practitioners stressed and embraced the subjectivity which inheres in any journalistic undertaking. One might be reminded of Søren Kierkegaard's splenetic 'collision' with the Copenhagen periodical *The Corsair* in the 1840s. The truth, wrote Kierkegaard in *The Point of View*, 'cannot work by means of the fantastical means of the press, which is the untruth; the communicator of the truth can only be a single individual.' Elsewhere in that work he inveighs against anonymity—like that of the unsigned editorial—as 'the most absolute expression for the impersonal, the irresponsible, the unrepentant' and 'a fundamental source of the modern demoralisation.'

The New Journalism can also be seen as the product of a nascent culture of confession. Yuri Slezkine, in *The Jewish Century*, described as the post-war American adaptation of Freudianism as the psycho-therapeutic inculcation of a productive citizenry of happy capitalists. 'The pursuit of individual happiness—like the maintenance of a decent society—turned out to be a matter of managing imperfection, of imposing fragile checks and balances on ineradicable internal pressures' (Slezkine p. 319). Wasn't the stifling conformity of the Eisenhower years inaugurated by such a vulgar idea of 'humanising' self-disclosure, with Vice Presidential candidate Richard Nixon's 1952 "Checkers Speech"?⁵ Tom Wolfe, in his proprietorial remarks *qua* spokesman for the New Journalism, provides a clue to the dialectical link between this maudlin political climate and the movement's emphasis of their subjects' '*status life*' (his italics). Around the same time that public figures were offering up a sanitised version of their emotional reality to the voting public, the New Journalists were availing themselves of a novelist's armoury in order to capture 'the entire pattern of behaviour and possessions through which people express their position in the world or what they think it is or what they hope it to be' (Wolfe p. 47). When politicians found it necessary to present some sort of psychological self-portrait to their constituents, the New Journalists could push back: not only with counter-portraits of public personalities, but with the pointed chaos of their own self-portrayals.

Advertisements for Myself can be retroactively proclaimed as something like a proto-Gonzo stunt, or perhaps—in light of the subsequent career—a sort of *détournement*. That term, which translates from the French as 'rerouting' or 'hijacking,' derives from its usage by the

⁵ 'We did get something—a gift—after the election...It was a little cocker spaniel dog in a crate sent all the way from Texas. Black and white spotted. And our little girl—Tricia, the 6-year-old—named it Checkers. And you know, the kids, like all kids, love the dog and I just want to say this right now, that regardless of what they say about it, we're gonna keep it.' Nixon biographer Stephen Ambrose called this 'one of the most sickening, disgusting, maudlin performances ever experienced' (Ambrose p. 289).

Situationists and in Psychogeography. The writer Nick Papadimitriou once characterised his ‘Deep Topography,’ his own brand of that latter praxis, as a sort of Dadaist pointlessness. I took this remark, offered in passing, to suggest an antic dissatisfaction with readily-available avenues of knowledge and an experiential and associative preference for the aleatoric.⁶ As a means of happening upon categories of information that might be found, if at all, at the periphery of more commonly used media it overlaps with Hunter S. Thompson’s idea of ‘Gonzo Journalism’ in its spirit of playful excess and elaborate distractedness, of both exceeding and rewriting the bounds of the brief. Wolfe calls this ‘a curious form of autobiography,’ in which ‘the writer has put himself in the situation for no other reason than to write something. The supposed subject becomes incidental; and if the writer has the wit to make his own reactions that fascinating, the reader doesn’t care’ (Wolfe p. 184).⁷ (In the specific case of Thompson, Wolfe notes that he ‘usually casts himself as a frantic loser, inept and half-psychotic, somewhat after the manner of Céline’.) In Mailer’s case the nominal assignment—self-imposed rather than a matter of editorial mandate—was to prepare some imagined readership for the socio-aesthetic disruption of the big novel; instead, in David Castranovo’s approbation, Mailer delivered ‘a landmark in our literature of protest...its conception is grand scale – a cultural history of the 1950s and a story of artistic agony and growth. As a piece of writing it seems most akin to nineteenth-century works about the painful development of the soul’ (Castranovo p. 179).

Synecdochically, “The Mind of an Outlaw” succeeds on almost every count except as an advertisement for *The Deer Park*, although Mailer is too canny to entirely subordinate his self-irony to the purely acclamatory impulse. It is the chronicle of a personal and professional crisis, a dim portrait of the publishing world in the mid-Fifties, and a Beat confession of drug dependence—all rendered in the full disclosure of a first-person narration that is unique in the corpus. When read against the more straitened explorations of the form in *Barbary Shore* and *The Deer Park* it is indisputably a breakthrough, and yet in his subsequent non-fiction Mailer

⁶ ‘In a *dérive* [literally ‘drift’ or ‘drifting’] one or more persons during a certain period drop their relations, their work and leisure activities, and all their other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there. Chance is a less important factor in this activity than one might think: from a *dérive* point of view cities have psychogeographical contours, with constant currents, fixed points and vortexes that strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones’ (Debord, 2006).

⁷ Another point of comparison would be the participatory sports journalism of George Plimpton. At any rate, Thompson’s errancy was entirely encouraged (often at great operational expense) by his editors, who might also be said to have hijacked or rerouted the standard practice of magazine journalism. A proper theoretical attempt to marry Gonzo to the Situationism of Guy Debord would reveal how quickly a critique of the media establishment becomes absorbed into the Spectacular, ‘the sun which never sets over the empire of modern passivity’ (Debord, 2013 p. 7).

resiled from such self-revealing candour. As will be seen, the journalistic works of the 1960s up to *The Armies of the Night* are problematized by questions of form which aren't resolved until that book's adoption of illeism. For now, let it suffice to say that Mailer would never again write with such unfiltered directness, nor provide the reader with such disconsolate domestic intelligence as

I've tried to water this account with a minimum of tears, but taking *The Deer Park* into the nervous system of eight publishing houses was not so good for my own nervous system, nor was it good for getting to work on my new novel. In the ten weeks it took the book to travel the circuit from Rinehart to Putnam, I squandered the careful energy I had been hoarding for months; there was a hard comedy at how much of myself I would burn up in a few hours of hot telephone calls; I had never had any sense for practical affairs, but in those days, carrying *The Deer Park* from house to house, I stayed as close to it as a stage-struck mother pushing her child forward at every producer's office. I was amateur agent for it, messenger boy, editorial consultant, Macchiavelli of the luncheon table, fool of the five o'clock drinks, I was learning the publishing business in a hurry, and I made a hundred mistakes and paid for each one by wasting a new bout of energy. (Mailer, 1992 pp. 231-232)

There is an element of unanticipated comedy to this, arising from the sensation that 'whether you like the book or not, the writing in defense of it is strong Mailer—better, if truth be told, than what it's defending' (Castranovo p. 183). Mailer evokes the pathos of expended energy, of the sapping of finite and indispensable existential resources at the line which W.H. Auden described as 'dividing *the tender who value* from the tough who measure.' To this must be added the black comedy—the joke he can't be in on—of the trifling status of the book for which he has been scalded by his tears and sweat. Mailer allows some room for such self-awareness by the deprecation of the various beggarly roles he assigns himself (the stock figure of the show business mother is particularly suggestive of perspective fractured by prideful devotion), but this is undone historically by the baffling doggedness with which he kept at the project.⁸ It could be argued that his perseverance lay in his belief in the potential of the themes and the O'Shaughnessy and Faye characters. After all, the excerpts at the end

⁸ This is laid out in Appendix II, Part I.

of the anthology show that he had moved far beyond the basic situational set-up of *The Deer Park*—but he would return to that by adapting the novel for the stage. But in the even shorter term there is the matter of what follows the essay: a side-by-side comparison of passages from the Rinehart page proofs and the final Putnam edition of the novel.

To this, little more need be appended other than assent with Poirier's ruling: that 'Mailer accomplished far less with his revisions of *The Deer Park* than he still persists in imagining. Here as elsewhere he proposes that the style has been made less derivatively literary. But as a consequence it has only been made more plodding' (Poirier, 1972 p. 41). The lengthy section of the essay in which he outlines his rewriting process combines heady insights with self-intoxicated displays of pedantry. However, it is indicative of the emerging Mailerian virtues at play that these qualities are blended, with both arising out of the sober recollection of a chemically-enhanced subjectivity. Even as Mailer tickles the reader with the orotundity of the pleasure his past self took in his own writing he is also issuing a dire warning about the Faustian calculus of writing sustained by drug use. Crucially, the present writing is the product of a later and sober authorial intelligence. 'He treats the self that existed in the past as another soul or spirit with which the present self can contend, and his work is at last a record of his continuous wars among the selves that are Mailer' (Ibid. p. 23). Whatever Mailer's opinion on the final draft of *The Deer Park*, the war in this instance is against an untenable approach to the business of writing; the implied advertisement is for the new ethos which has produced the fine writing and diligently assembled anthology currently under the reader's scrutiny. It is presumably this new ethos and intelligence which will deliver the rest of the Big One previewed at the end of the anthology. Mailer's work—arguably from as early as the adumbrated autobiography of *Barbary Shore*—abounds in this sort of cabalistic circularity, in which the story turns out to have been all about the writing of the very book that you, dear reader, have just finished reading. While reading the Fourth Advertisement it strikes us that we're witnessing not just an origin story but also an act of re-appropriation and reconstitution. The events and action described in the essay were more than simply a source of copy: they were the tribulations he had to undergo in order to evolve from the author of the first three novels into the author of the present advertisements. These new writings, in turn, are to be understood as a way station on the path to his delivering the Big One. Did any other major writer make so much of their apprenticeship, submit this much of their homework for the reader's consideration? It's as though Jonathan Franzen, following the success of *The Corrections*, had published the essays in *How To Be Alone* and the memoir *The Discomfort*

Zone in a single volume and padded them out with extracts from *The Twenty-Seventh City* and *Strong Motion* and previews of the forthcoming *Freedom*.

Mailer is funniest—and perhaps therefore most edifying—when expounding upon the perceptual hazards of narcotics. The objective correlative in these passages resides in how he undercuts a scrupulous performativity with whiplash shifts in perspective: the snap of sobriety puncturing the reverie of inebriation. One moment of sardonic self-portraiture stands out: Mailer recounts that he had revised a line in the novel from ‘And she gave a sisterly kiss’ to ‘And she gave me a sisterly kiss. Older sister.’

Just two words, but I felt as if I had revealed some divine law of nature, had laid down an invaluable clue...and I thought to give myself the Nobel Prize for having brought such illumination and division to the cliché of the sisterly kiss.

Well, as an addition it wasn't bad fun, and for two words it did a bit to give a sense of what was working back and forth between Sergius and Lulu, it was another small example of Sergius' hard eye for the world, and his cool sense of his place in it...But if anyone was in a hurry, the little sentence “Older sister” was like a finger in the eye, it jabbed the unconscious, and gave an uncomfortable nip of rhythm to the mind. (Mailer, 1992 p. 239)

This is the starkest juxtaposition between his past and present states that Mailer sets up in the essay: the paragraph break takes us suddenly out of chemically-enhanced self-satisfaction and into a more even-headed self-assessment. In this instance the passage of time is implied by the typographical layout; the comedy arises from the image of a later, more sober Mailer (one who has already suffered the anti-climax of publishing *The Deer Park*) passing a more disinterested eye over the material and finding himself estranged from his prior enthusiasm. It is in his depiction of that anterior state of intoxication that Mailer scores some of the essay's best points: ‘I saw so much in some sentences...since I was receiving so much emotion from my words, I assumed everyone else would be stimulated as well, and on many a line I twisted the phrase in such a way that it could read well only when read slowly’ (Ibid. p. 238). Mailer's present sobriety is evidenced in his success in depicting a state of mind under the influence of drugs. Aided by his own paper trail, he is savvy enough to capture the fugue-like rhythms of marijuana, by which even the most effulgent pride he took in his work was psychically coterminous with the fear that others wouldn't be sufficiently excited by his

labours. During his revisions the novel ‘now seemed overcharged to me...In my mind it became a more dangerous book than it really was, and my drug-hipped paranoia saw long consequences in every easy line of dialogue’ (Ibid. p. 242). We are to understand that Mailer had to extricate himself from such psycho-chemical self-abuse in order to write so well about it as a state of being, to render with such mimetic clarity its deleterious effect not only on self-image but also on the scepticism which is absolutely necessary to its fine-tuning. We also see that Mailer’s is a sort of Emersonian anxiety that neither writing nor reading is an activity ever carried out under ideal conditions.

Though Mailer may have cleaned up his act and made copy of his misadventures, an enduring *bêtise* is his keening plaint against the publishers and readers who have failed to pay him sufficiently close attention. No amount of fine and witty writing about the tragicomedy of drug dependency or the self-absorption of a writer thus fortified can assuage the reader’s feeling that here—as elsewhere in both the anthology and the subsequent decades—he is making claims for his work that no reading of it can corroborate. Throughout the essay Mailer frets that his newly-achieved style will not receive the slow and attentive readings necessary to its full appreciation; ‘you had best have the cartel of a Hemingway, because in such a case it is critical whether the reader thinks it is your fault, or is so in awe of your reputation that he returns on the words, throttles his pace, and tries to discover why he is so stupid’ (Ibid.pp. 238-239). And it is to Hemingway that we will now turn our attention, to the pressure that his influence exerted upon Mailer. Harold Bloom characterises their relationship as an anxiety of influence, and Mailer’s innovations in the form of autobiographical creative nonfiction can be understood as an attempt to both swerve away from and complete the example of his precursor.⁹ The emerging Mailerian style, as characterised in the previous discussion, shall be understood as both challenging Hemingway by annexing the territory where he is weakest and as an attempt to arrogate the benefits of Papa’s great notoriety.

Part III: The Example of Hemingway

Mailer never met Hemingway, who declined to provide an endorsement for *The Deer Park*. The author of *The Sun Also Rises* is ‘a strong influence on Mailer’s sense of the writer-as-

⁹ “‘The burden of government,’ [Samuel] Johnson brooded, “is increased upon princes by the virtues of their immediate predecessors,” and he added: “He that succeeds a celebrated writer, has the same difficulties to encounter.” We know the rancid humour of this too well, and any reader of *Advertisements for Myself* may enjoy the frantic dances of Norman Mailer as he strives to evade his own anxiety that is, after all, Hemingway all the way’ (Bloom, 1997 p. 28).

public-personality but less a stylistic one than he likes to suggest' (Poirier, 1972 p. 54), and 'a superb storyteller and an uncanny prose poet; Mailer is neither' (Bloom, 2003 p. 6). The epigone's misprision, formulated upon the example of his master, had to do with what critical theory terms the author function. In Bloom's usage, 'misprision' refers to the deliberate misreading or erroneous valuation by a writer of his precursor: the identification of some lack or flaw in the source of inspiration as the basis for bettering the example. The hope is to find sufficient latitude for a 'swerve' away from the writing father—a term Bloom takes from the physics of Democritus as elaborated upon by Epicurus and Lucretius as a solution to the problems of free will and determinism.¹⁰ For Mailer it is the fundamental character of the author that serves as final guarantor of a text's worth. Works of both fiction and creative non-fiction are understood less as autonomous entities, capable of generating—and thus being understood in terms of—their own formal literariness, and more like the paper trail of an author's struggle to individuate himself and thus to be judged by the moral categories raised by that struggle. At his most extreme, Mailer seems to doubt literature's ability to mean or denote anything unless it is underwritten by the publically-lived example of an author's experiences. His canon seems to consist of men whose writing is somehow epiphenomenal to the activity of living. Mailer's various stances on Hemingway have to be examined in order to get an idea of the rules by which he understood the operations of a major author.

If *Advertisements for Myself* is a house then Hemingway haunts it. As Mailer wrote to Diana Trilling in September of '59: the anthology, 'as you will see, is a bit obsessed with Hemingway—I'm afraid he crops up in the book the way an old lover appears in the conversation of a woman who insists that the man could not now mean less to her' (September 23rd, 1959). Hemingway's presence in the text is synecdochic of his pervasion of the entire corpus. Here, as throughout his subsequent career, Mailer's mood on Hemingway swings widely. At times he is not only the exemplary American writer, he is the embodiment of an ideal ethic. In a 1967 interview Jean-Paul Sartre stated his belief that writers 'are under obligation to live as we write. I could no longer allow myself to go on writing as I do if for example something happened in my private life to give me a feeling of guilt reaching a

¹⁰ Anthony Gottlieb, in *The Dream of Reason*, subtly argues that the anxiety of influence is also the condition of scientific innovation: 'If atoms sometimes swerved unpredictably, as Epicurus and Lucretius believed, then the "bonds of fate" could be snapped. The "everlasting sequence of cause and effect" was not so everlasting after all, and could be interrupted. Thus, by allowing room for atomic swerves in his physics, Epicurus thought he could avoid the inhumanly deterministic aspect of Democritus' theory. Some physicists of the twentieth century said much the same thing about the liberating possibilities of quantum mechanics. With the discovery of indeterminacy, wrote Sir Arthur Eddington in 1928, "science thereby withdraws its opposition to freewill"' (Gottlieb p. 315).

certain level. This is a case of strict necessity' (Sartre, 1973 p. 72). At times Hemingway is the avatar of this ideal; at others he is the hollow sham of Key West, descanting platitudinously in *A Moveable Feast* upon the search for that one perfect sentence. *That* Hemingway had been enabled by a culture that was happy for him to franchise out the lustre of his reputation in book after shabby book. This told Mailer everything he needed to know about the entropic forces that worked upon American writers.¹¹ In this sense his perception of Hemingway was typical of his generation.

Two crucial assessments were published during Mailer's youth: "Letter to the Russians about Hemingway," Edmund Wilson's 1935 *New Republic* piece, and "Hemingway and His Critics," Lionel Trilling's 1939 review of *The Fifth Column and the First Forty-Nine Stories*. Both identify a decline in Hemingway's talent, and both blame a critical establishment that had failed in its duty towards the talents it scrutinises. Trilling, quoting from and elaborating upon Wilson, is eager to convince the reader that a particularly American form of deterioration has taken place. He quotes Wilson's famous line on Hemingway; I present a lengthier passage:

For reasons I cannot attempt to explain, something dreadful seems to happen to Hemingway as soon as he begins to write in the first person. In his fiction, the conflicting elements of his nature, the emotional situations which obsess him, are externalized and objectified; and the result is an impersonal art that is severe and intense, deeply serious. But as soon as he speaks in his own person, he seems to lose all his capacity for self-criticism and is likely to become fatuous or maudlin. The artist's ideas about life, or rather his sense of what happens and the way in which it happens, is in his stories kept deep below the surface and conveyed not by argument or preaching but by directly transmitted emotion: it is turned into something as hard as a crystal and as disturbing as a great lyric. When he expounds this sense of life, however, in his own character of Ernest Hemingway, the Old Master of Key West, he has a way of making himself ridiculous. (E. Wilson p. 505)

¹¹ In her novel *Fates and Furies* Lauren Groff calls this 'Great American Artistitis...Ever bigger. Ever louder. Jostling for the highest perch in the hegemony. You don't think that's some sort of sickness that befalls men when they try to do art in this country?...works about war always trump works about emotions, even if the smaller, more domestic plays are better written, smarter, more interesting. The war stories are the ones that get the prizes' (Groff p. 342).

Seeing evidence of an increasingly disturbing decay since the publishing of Wilson's "Letter," Trilling proposes a 'difference of essence' between 'man' and 'artist,' one that he cautions is unfruitful when applied to most authors but instructive in the case of Hemingway: the 'artist' has a perfect medium and tells the truth even if it be only *his* truth, but the 'man' fumbles at communication and falsifies (L. Trilling p. 11). As Mailer might have it: the 'artist' Hemingway 'occupies the very centre of American writing...someone who writes so well that your wits are keyed afterwards to the flaws in the bad writing of others, and, worse, yourself' (Mailer, 2003 p. 261). Hemingway the 'man,' conversely, for years 'has not written anything which would bother an eight-year-old or one's grandmother...He's no longer any help to us, he's left us marooned in the nervous boredom of a world which finally he didn't try hard enough to change' (Mailer, 1992 pp. 20-21). As when describing his own work, Mailer is infuriatingly vague on the powers he attributes to Hemingway, on how he could have changed this world, and how he could have worked harder. Bloom would identify this evasive and personally-motivated censure as the revisionary ratio of *Tessera*, which is taken from the term used for broken fragments of mosaics, by the reunion of which the members of the ancient mystery religions would know their brother initiates. 'A poet antithetically "completes" his precursor, by so reading the parent-poem as to retain its terms but to mean them in another sense, as though the precursor had failed to go far enough' (Bloom, 1997 p. 14). In this case, the parent-poem is equivalent to the parent himself, a melding of the aesthetic and the experiential within the anxiety of influence which Bloom allowed for in the case of Mailer: 'He is the author of "Norman Mailer," a lengthy, discontinuous, and perhaps canonical fiction' (Bloom, 2003 p. 2).

But what seems most unjust to the young Mailer is the size of Hemingway's cartel—he can't conceal the degree to which he wishes his books were given as easy a ride as Hemingway's. It seems a strange illustration of René Girard's mimetic theory of desire, by which Mailer's drive to emulate Hemingway would be explained by a desire to usurp the salient features of the older writer's fame. Really, what Mailer wants is the respect he feels he is due for having suffered so much for his books. His misprision of the author function is most evident in this passage:

Still, I give credit to the man, he's known the value of his own work, and he fought to make his personality enrich his books. Let any of you decide for yourselves how silly would be *A Farewell to Arms* or better, *Death in the Afternoon*, if it had been written by a man who was five-four, had acne, wore glasses, spoke in a shrill voice, and was a physical coward...such a man would

never have been able to feel the emotions of the man who wrote that early prose...That cowardice would have given a nasty joy to half the literary world, and ridicule would have followed to empty the breath of his books. Without a sense of the big man who wrote the prose, all the later work would be only skeletons of abstraction, the flesh gone (Mailer, 1992 p. 21)

David Castranovo praised Mailer for intuiting the death of the author, for being the first major American writer ‘to realize that writers could no longer be writers in that old, rocked-ribbed, self-confident sense. They were ghostly presences on a balance sheet – or at best personalities in the public relations game’ (Castranovo p. 183). This underplays the sheer eccentricity of what Mailer seems to think is designated by the idea of an author and the role it plays in imputing some sort of substance to its associated texts. The first objection to Mailer’s argument is, I would argue, instinctive rather than theoretical: Wouldn’t *A Farewell to Arms* or *Death in the Afternoon* be even more impressive if they had been written by the weakling of Mailer’s imagining? Doesn’t Mailer seem to suggest that fraudulence inheres in any imaginative leap beyond the author’s experience or capabilities? The demand for some sort of alignment between author and text, as we have seen, is far older than Mailer; but Kierkegaard raged against anonymity under the guise of various pseudonyms. Compared to the infinitely disturbing and paradoxical Dane, Mailer can only offer a ferocious literalism and a baffling prescriptivism which exposes his own anxieties, and refer us relentlessly to the author.

Of course, Mailer’s literalism is of a piece with his biological determinism and masculine essentialism. His idea of the author function makes all ‘real’ fiction a species of autobiography, written by ‘real’ men. Once he has abandoned his first novel’s collective and objective third-person narration for each subsequent novel’s personal and subjective third person, pretty much all of his narrator-protagonists are writers: *Barbary Shore’s* Lovett, *The Deer Park’s* O’Shaughnessy, *An American Dream’s* Rojack—these are just the novels published in the period covered by this book. Tim Madden in *Tough Guys Don’t Dance* takes his place in this gallery, while the bulk of *Harlot’s Ghost* is a massive *mise en abyme*: Harry Hubbard’s memoir of his time in the CIA. So in at least one case did Mailer present his novel as a literal case of the man then sitting down to write the book that we have just read, which is what he seemed to think was the definition of literary production. ‘I was the man, I suffered, I was there,’ wrote Walt Whitman. The writing will stand as proof of that.

As will be discussed in greater detail in Part V of this chapter, it has been argued—not without justification—that Mailer is incapable of irony. Whether or not irony is, as some have claimed, the condition of literary language itself, the writer who is without it is likely to prove insensate to criticisms of his privilege. More than that, as in Mailer’s case, he is likely to be blind to his own blindness—all he could see were his failures, which were a matter of public relations. *Advertisements for Myself* is, among other things, an attempt to consolidate and leverage his fame, which is an effort that will continue through the Sixties and up to the public confrontation with Women’s Lib. As shall be seen in Chapter Five, Mailer’s most damaging critical blindness in *The Prisoner of Sex* is the failure of his experientialism (which lies behind both the form of the self-advertisement and of illeistic narration) to make a universal character out of the author. He couldn’t see how this style—which he had cultivated to explore the tribulations of fame—placed him in the centre of the literary-patriarchal complex he claimed to be disinterestedly defending. That would have required a sense of irony.

The resemblance with Kierkegaard’s campaign against anonymity helps us see a resemblance with the European Existentialists whom Mailer still hadn’t read. What Mailer shares with them—particularly Sartre and Ortega—is a demand for some sort of integrity, located in ‘a consciousness that the core of life cannot be cheated. Every moment of one’s existence one is growing into more or retreating into less. One is always living a little more or dying a little bit’ (Mailer, 1992 p. 385). In the Sartrean sense—as in the case of the waiter laid out in *Being and Nothingness*—Mailer catches the older Hemingway playing at his part: ‘All his behaviour seems to us a game...[he] plays with his condition in order to *realize* it.’ But Sartre also contains the objection to Mailer’s approach, which is that he is guilty of believing that he must play the tough guy in order to write the kind of literature he values—again, the muddled thinking around the nature of literary inspiration seems Girardian. Mailer leaves himself open to this sort of circular *reductio* because he is maddeningly hazy about Hemingway’s strength and value. Looked at from a Foucauldian perspective, it seems like Mailer sets out to complicate the already complex problems raised by the author’s name. As Foucault writes in “What Is an Author”?:

It would seem that the author’s name, unlike other proper names, does not pass from the interior of a discourse to the real and exterior individual who produced it; instead, the name seems always to be present, marking off the edges of the text, revealing, or at least characterising, its mode of being. The

author's name manifests the appearance of a certain discursive set and indicates the status of this discourse within a society and culture.

Throughout his essay Foucault takes pains to problematize our idea of what constitutes 'works,' the aggregate of which is designated as the achievement of an author. 'How can one define a work amid the millions of traces left by someone after his death? A theory of the work does not exist.' To Foucault's categorical disruptors—which include shopping lists, lost and misattributed works, and eponymous –isms—Mailer seems to make a plea *avant la lettre* for including the reputation of the author. For rather than a literary critic in any conventionally understood sense, Mailer is an invigilator of literary reputation, weighing his chosen authors according to their own ledger book. And why not? Foucault's language allows for the necessary adjustments to be made when examining the meaning of the author function in any particular society. In a way, Mailer anticipated the values and appetites of a declining literary culture. As Gore Vidal wrote in 1990: 'The Text as object of interest has little or no interest for readers, while the Author as subject has come into his terrible own, [when] even the idlest of half-serious readers will turn to a biography of Hemingway. The phenomenon of the past twenty years has been the replacement of Text by Author's Life' (Vidal pp. 252-253).

To Mailer's credit, he is anxious to stress that his has been a life of writing, rather than that series of Quixotic attempts to match Hemingway which he might lead one to imagine. The abiding image is of a grinding diligence, and the author often seems most eager to urge upon the reader that, if nothing else, he has not made things easy on himself over the preceding decade. Take as an example the huge tonal difference between his starchy contribution to "Our Country and Our Culture" and his *Village Voice* column. As much as Mailer's participation in the Symposium was carried out in the spirit of dissent, it still arrived for the occasion sporting the era's crew cut and clubman's tie, its briefcase stuffed with 'the worst sort of Max Lernerish liberal junk' (Mailer, 1992 p. 186).¹² If nothing else, the reader will be relieved by the recklessness of the columnist. Take a line like: 'Society, I will argue, on the day I get the wit, is the assassin to us all' (Ibid. p. 312). Disorganised and inconclusive though the columnist may be, he isn't boring. These pieces all work together to make their didactic point, to inculcate Mailer's readership with sufficient awe in his progress as a writer

¹² Max Lerner was a syndicated columnist associated with *The Nation*, *PM*, and *The New York Post*. An influential spokesman for social and economic liberalism, he would eventually earn a place on the master list of Richard Nixon's political enemies.

since even before the publication of his first novel. How could a writer who had started out with “A Calculus at Heaven” and ended up with “The White Negro” and the advertisements fail to command the cachet of a Hemingway?

We must consider the perspective of Roland Barthes, whose proclamation of “The Death of the Author” is the counterpoint to Mailer’s conception. Written a decade after the appearance of *Advertisements for Myself*, Barthes seems to catch Mailer in the act when he writes about ‘men of letters anxious to unite their person and their work through diaries and memoirs’ (Barthes p. 1466). This is because for Mailer

The Author, when believed in, is always conceived of as the past of his own book: book and author stand automatically on a single line divided into a *before* and an *after*. The Author is thought to *nourish* the book, which is to say that he exists before it, thinks, suffers, lives for it, is in the same relation of antecedence to his work as a father to his child. (Barthes p. 1468) ¹³

Mailer would deny none of this. As we have seen, a belief in the primacy of the author as the *fons et origo* of literary meaning pervades his entire project. It’s the foundation of his undertaking as an anthologist, and is the site of his anxiety of influence. It could be argued that his insistence upon this sort of authority intensifies the legitimacy of the death that Barthes calls for, but I believe that Barthes’s bloody-mindedness only takes us so far in the case of a writer like Mailer. How can we ignore the line between *before* and *after* which is not only alluded to but enacted within its language? Where Foucault’s more open-ended investigation of the author function helps us apprehend the anxieties which fuel Mailer’s misprision, Barthes’s prescriptions would strand us in contemplation of teeming randomness. ‘The reign of the Author has also been that of the Critic,’ Barthes laments, before looking towards a more ideal dispensation which embraces ‘the multiplicity of writing, [in which] everything is to be *disentangled*, nothing *deciphered*’ (Barthes p. 1469). But Mailer the anthologist exists as the fusion of the author and the critic. As I have been attempting to demonstrate, he depicts throughout the anthology an author in flux, and to decipher the accumulation of his writings is to disentangle them, to find the dividing line which separates past endeavours from more recent attempts at interpreting them. Foucault, rather than

¹³ This is why insisting upon the autobiographical fallacy restitutes meaning and pathos to *Barbary Shore*, which takes its firmest grip on our imagination if we remind ourselves that Mailer thought, suffered, and lived the book, not just *for* it. It is this sort of retroactive realignment of the corpus that Mailer achieves with *Advertisements for Myself* if we grant him the various premises he advances throughout the anthology.

Barthes, provides us with an understanding of Mailer's productively elastic interpretation of what constitutes an author's 'works' and how they contribute to the public perception of the entity responsible for them all. And as we shall see, the pathos of Mailer's entire undertaking lies in his insufficient attendance upon the multiplicity of language; his attempts to appropriate the linguistic vitality of African-American speech reveals his incapacity to survive the authoricide called for by Barthes. This is the crux of my argumentation in Part V of this chapter, but for now we shall persist with the necessary fiction of the life of the author.

By parading his development as a public-facing writer, Mailer set an example and format that is still followed by authors who would present their own variegations of opinion and temperament—which emerge most starkly and suggestively through anthologisation—as a bellwether for the body politic. A recent text that in this sense reveals itself as Mailerian is Ta-Nehisi Coates's *We Were Eight Years in Power: An American Tragedy*. A bundling of his essays on race relations spanning the Obama years, the collection justifies its existence by adding prefaces to pieces that anyone can access for free at *The Atlantic's* website.¹⁴ Such an assemblage inevitably makes itself felt as an Internet era plea for the medium as message, for the necessity of reading the author-anthologist's own selections from his extensive catalogue, separated from their editorial neighbours and liberated from the graphical layout of the magazine and website where the pieces first appeared. The hope is to sufficiently command the reader's attention as to be read straight through, so that what might seem a simple bundling-together of occasional writings should achieve its *Gestalt* as the chronicle of one man's journey through a period of political turmoil. The dream is to achieve something like that proclaimed by Philip Buftithis:

It is the theme of the artist in the modern world that is central to *Advertisements for Myself*. For essentially what one comes away with after reading this book is an experiential sense of what it was to be a writer in America at mid-century and, by extension, what it is to be a man. For Mailer intends us to conclude that the artist's plight is an intensification or

¹⁴ Beyond this matter of presentation the implied parallel between these two writers may seem almost painfully inapposite—even tone deaf, perhaps. But Coates is in some ways a mirror image of Mailer. Just as Mailer's style in "The White Negro" and elsewhere is at the service of racial essentialism, Coates's gift for lyrical intensity works to elevate the demon of White Supremacy into the realms of the numinous and intractable: 'To Trump, whiteness is neither notional nor symbolic but is the very core of his power. In this, Trump is not singular. But whereas his forebears carried whiteness like an ancestral talisman, Trump cracked the glowing amulet open, releasing its eldritch energies.' This is American Ham, by which the hyperbole of the case rests on the sonority of its cadence and lives in the Lovecraftian drama of its imagery.

clarification of the plight of every thinking man. What has happened to Mailer has happened to most of us. (Bufithis p. 62)

If novelists are like everyone else, only more so, then perhaps even *more* so is the stalled novelist a representative figure. At this stage in Mailer's career—before he made himself available to audacious editors and practiced a sort of participatory journalism, and before he ran for public office—he understood that in order to be taken seriously as a writer it is necessary to write. The revisionary process enacted through his form of anthologisation harnesses the past work to an intelligible sequence of development in which we witness the evolution of 'all that a man allows to appear,' which is Pierre Macherey's definition of literary production, and how Mailer can emerge as 'the spokesman for a certain ideological condition.' The consciousness of the writer interacts with the world and the result is literature—the line of thought is Marxist. We see this in the concatenation of all that is emphasised, glimpsed at, and peripheral in his argumentation. Mailer's various scattered points—both explicit and implied—about the life of the writer are of a piece with the sustained examination of material and ideological conditions described in "The White Negro"; this is ensured by their being corralled together by the author function, which is at work in the compiling of the anthology. By a variety of accents and attributions, Mailer builds up his collage of Eisenhower's America. Aside from the publishing industry gripe of the Fourth Advertisement, the starkest portrait of the dull terror of what Vidal called the Great Golfer's Age is dialectical, in the apocalyptic exhortations of "The White Negro." The accoutrements of the Eisenhower-Nixon era—the company men, the Freudian prescriptions, the Checkers speech—are felt by their absence, by their antithetical trace. Before we closely examine "The White Negro," notice that something interesting takes place in Mailer's presentation of this material. At the conclusion to the advertisement for "The White Negro" he writes

Here, and with this, I find myself forced to bring to an end whatever trace of an autobiography has slipped into these advertisements. The writing which comes after "The White Negro" has been written too close to the present to permit any style in the telling of a personal memoir. The confession is over—I sense that to give any more of what has happened to me in the last few years might make for five thousand good words, but could also strip me of fifty thousand better ones. (Mailer, 1992 p. 336)

In short, Mailer abandons previous strategies for keeping a calibrated distance from his past writing. The *Village Voice* columns are ironically foresworn in the prefatory material by their attribution to the persona of General Marijuana: ‘The General calculated to stick his ideas up the ego of the Village,’ and so on (Ibid. p. 279). Mailer doesn’t persist with the affectation throughout—writing more often than not in the first person—although it does anticipate the emergence of the Aquarius and Prisoner monikers of the early Seventies. Still, we are to understand that Mailer’s past writing (if not the entire *Village Voice* debacle) is being displayed for an inspection as dispassionate as the one he has already conducted—for slow reading. The material gathered in “Part 4—Hipsters,” on the other hand, is to be read as the achieved product; everything anterior to it was the hero’s journey, the Via Dolorosa of his individuation. ‘Mailer offers himself as a victim of the post-war Zeitgeist, torn by the conflict of Square and Hip, threatened by tranquillizing conformity, bedeviled by his past success...set up by the publishing industry to take a fall, pressured to deny the protean life within himself’ (Castranovo p. 180). Much as Mailer’s structure demands that we hold this thought in mind as we approach “The White Negro,” the abdication from further explanation and autobiographical exposition suggests that his faith lies in the self-contained rigour of the essay, on its apodictic bedrock.

In a way, Mailer obliges Barthes by evacuating the author function. Despite the occasional intrusion of the first person in “The White Negro,” the essay does not rest upon the reputation and development of its author the way its predecessors in the anthology do. More than them, it is meant to be disentangled from its neighbours, even read anonymously. Still, we cannot forget that it exists alongside them on a temporal continuum, succeeds them in a sequence of intelligible development—Mailer has trained us to think in his terms of artistic time, which has displaced empirical time. In a way, his presentation of “The White Negro” as simultaneously discrete from and the culmination of the preceding works can be read as a prolepsis of the startling literary suicide which he will accomplish two decades later with *The Executioner’s Song*, which fulfils the promise of the essay and the anthology. The rhetoric of “The White Negro” is dense and formidable, its associative logic deeply personal and hostile to schematisation, its ideas and arguments profoundly (even humourlessly) serious—and they deserve to be handled with the utmost seriousness. First it is necessary to place it in a larger context.

Part IV: The Turn to Hip

On May 3rd of 1956 Mailer wrote to Irving Howe with a proposal to write for *Dissent* a piece on the ‘philosophy of the hipster, because I think there are certain things in the ambience of hipsters which should be interesting to radicals since the hipster, after all, is a new kind of underground proletariat and one which does cut across classes.’ Along with the use of material from Lipton’s *Journal* in the later *Village Voice* columns and his response to *Waiting for Godot*, this is the first indication of what will eventually take form as “The White Negro.”¹⁵ He didn’t begin work on the essay until April of the following year. In the meantime he saw Adlai Stevenson crushed for a second time by Dwight Eisenhower, ended his association with James Jones (who considered the *Voice* columns a catastrophic error in judgement), and struck up a friendship with James Baldwin. His 1961 essay “The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy” remains one of the fairest and most redemptive assessments of Mailer as both man and author, even if his censures of “The White Negro” endure.¹⁶ The essay ran in the summer 1957 issue of *Dissent* and was published in book form by Lawrence Ferlinghetti’s *City Lights* in 1959 before it was included in *Advertisements for Myself*. Mailer also included it in *The Time of Our Time*, as did Philip Siopora in the posthumous *Mind of an Outlaw: Selected Essays*. It is probably his most notorious and widely-available essay, and can still be accessed on the *Dissent* website.

Mailer’s essay came out three months before Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*, and the two pieces were considered linked. “The White Negro,” despite its excesses, was admired by those who considered Kerouac insufferably bogus; by appealing to the likes of Diana Trilling, Richard Hofstadter, and the emerging Norman Podhoretz, Mailer saw himself as the mediating figure between the worlds of William Burroughs and Dwight McDonald. Ann Charters, who included “The White Negro” in *The Portable Beat Reader*, located the essay ‘in the mid-1950s [when] the word “hip” was often used interchangeably with “beat,” as

¹⁵ By the sixteenth column Mailer was giving vent to the darkest reflections from the journal: ‘To a Square, a rapist is a rapist. Punish the rapist, imprison him, be horrified by him and/or disinterested in him, and that is the end of the matter. But a hipster knows that the act of rape is a part of life too, and that even in the most brutal and unforgivable rape, there is artistry or the lack of it, real desire or cold compulsion, and so no two rapists nor no two rapes are ever the same’ (Mailer, 1992 p. 349).

¹⁶ ‘Now, much of this, I told myself, had to do with my resistance to the title, and with a kind of fury that so antique a vision of the blacks should, at this late hour, and in so many borrowed heirlooms, be stepping off the A train. But I was also baffled by the passion with which Norman appeared to be imitating so many people inferior to himself, i.e., Kerouac, and all the other Suzuki rhythm boys. From them, indeed, I expected nothing more than their pabulum-clogged cries of *Kicks!* and *Holy!* It seemed very clear to me that their glorification of the orgasm was but a way of avoiding all of the terrors of life and love. But Norman knew better, had to know better...What in the world, then, was he doing, slumming so outrageously, in such a dreary crowd?’ (Baldwin p. 277).

when Neal Cassady titled his account of meeting Burroughs “The History of the Hip Generation.”” Charters glosses Mailer himself as ‘a middle-class critic [who] projected his own fascination with violence onto his interpretation of the black hipster as a “philosophical psychopath”’ (Charters pp. 581-582).

The term ‘beat’ is usually attributed to Herbert Huncke, who introduced Burroughs to both the term and to heroin in 1944. In Allen Ginsberg’s recollection, the ‘original street usage’ by Huncke meant ‘exhausted, at the bottom of the world, looking up or out, sleepless, wide-eyed, perceptive, rejected by society, on your own, streetwise’ (Charters pp. xvii-xviii). The term’s prevalence peaked in the period between 1952 and 1957, which commenced with the publication of John Clellon Holmes’s *Go* and the *New York Times* article “This Is the Beat Generation” and ended with the obscenity trial of Ginsberg’s *Howl*, which hymned the ‘angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night’. Derision was quick to follow: a year later the *San Francisco Columnist* Herb Caen coined the term ‘beatnik.’ That word doesn’t occur with any especial frequency in Mailer’s work; in his “Notes Toward a Psychology of the Orgy” he offers a somewhat peremptory classification of various disparate dualisms, their constituents labelled either *Hip* or *Square*. Predictably, ‘hipster’ calls under the former category, and ‘beatnik’ under the latter (Mailer, 1992 p. 425).¹⁷

‘Kerouac,’ thought Mailer, ‘lacks discipline, honesty and a sense of the novel. His rhythms are erratic, his sense of character is nil, and he is as pretentious as a rich whore, as sentimental as a lollypop’ (Ibid. p. 465). Mailer’s identification was with that one-man wing of the Beat movement, William Burroughs; he had little truck with the Kerouac-Holmes attempts to claim some sort of religiously hortatory spirit for the movement. If Beat implied beatitude, then neither Mailer nor Burroughs was interested. Four years before Kerouac shambled after and swooned over those who ‘burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles like spiders across the stars,’ Burroughs had begun honing what Mailer would later describe as ‘the language of hatred unencumbered by guilt, hesitation, scruple, or complexity’ (Mailer, 1979 p. 106). While Kerouac was *typing*, Burroughs was *writing*: ‘There was something boneless about her, like a deep-sea creature. Her eyes were cold fish eyes that looked at you through a viscous medium she carried about with her. I could see those eyes in a shapeless, protoplasmic mass undulating over the dark sea floor’ (Burroughs p. 11).

¹⁷ Here are a few more items that Mailer considers Hip and Square, respectively: Catholic—Protestant; Heidegger—Sartre; differential calculus—analytic geometry; Schrodinger’s model of the atom—Bohr’s model of the atom; Marx as a psychologist—Marx as a sociologist; Thelonious monk—Dave Brubeck; Dostoyevsky—Tolstoy; Churchill—Atlee; Picasso—Mondrian.

From the beginning, the older and more Spenglerian Burroughs seemed an odd fit with the cod-Bohemianism of Holmes and Kerouac; his glossary for *Junky*, for example, defines Beat less as a warily sympathetic apprehension of an unequal society and more simply as ‘To take someone’s money. For example, Addict A says he will buy junk for addict B but keeps the money instead. Addict A has “beat” addict B for the money’ (Burroughs p. 129). The insistence upon the association with criminality inheres in the term ‘Hip.’ In *Green’s Dictionary of Slang* three different definitions are given: ‘*n.* a burden, a problem;’ ‘*n.* (also hipness) sophistication, the prevailing fashion;’ and ‘*n.* a narcotics user.’ The first usage, dated to 1914, is from criminal argot. The second, occurring in a 1948 letter of Kerouac’s, refers to being in the know. The third is founded on Burroughs’ use in *Junky*, and restores the delinquent association (Green Vol. 2, p. 779). The sense of being at outlaw, of being subject to imperatives which place one at odds with society, is key to Burroughs, as it is to Mailer. ‘Burroughs,’ wrote Poirier, ‘is interested in showing how the world of the underground is a metaphor for the world we all live in, while Mailer insists on the fact that the world we live in *is* the underground’ (Poirier, 1972 p. 123).

There was no conceiving of this underground without the influence of African-Americans. The jazz musician Mezz Mezzrow, who was a folk hero to the Beats as much for his drug dealing as his musicianship, declared himself a ‘voluntary negro’ and presented himself as having crossed the line dividing white and black identities. One might also think of Red Rodney, the trumpeter who was the only white member of Charlie Parker’s band in the period 1949-51. Touring the Deep South at a time when unsegregated bands were forbidden, Rodney was billed as ‘Albino Red.’¹⁸ Writing in *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, Diane DiPrima eulogised her youth as one spent among people ‘who raced about in Levis and work shirts, smoked dope, dug the new jazz, and spoke a bastardisation of the black argot.’ As we shall see in the examination of Mailer’s language in “The White Negro,” the vitality in black slang that white writers were so drawn to was one which they lacked the proper vocabulary to describe. Lacking an understanding of the dynamics underpinning it, their appropriations were sure to register as pale imitations. Drawing on the thought of Henry Louis Gates, we

¹⁸ From *The Independent’s* obituary: ‘From 1935 to 1945, the jazz scene in the United States had been dominated by the glamorous white idols of Swing. Benny Goodman, Tommy Dorsey and Artie Shaw made vast fortunes by interpreting the music of the real originators of the music - black musicians like Fletcher Henderson, Duke Ellington and Jelly Roll Morton. Legend has it that, to prevent such exploitation happening again, the young black musicians of 1944 began work on a new kind of music so complex that white musicians couldn’t copy it. They altered the harmonies and melodies of standard popular songs to create a new, convoluted music called Bebop. They were certainly successful and the legend may well be true. For years Bebop proved inaccessible to all but a tiny number of white players. Red Rodney was one of these.’

will understand that what drew them to the black argot—and what was lost in their bastardisations—was the process of signifying.

Part V: Mailer's White Negro

The essay opens: ‘Probably, we will never be able to determine the psychic havoc of the concentration camps and the atom bomb upon the unconscious mind of almost everyone alive in these years’ (Mailer, 1992 p. 338). ‘What Mailer suggests,’ writes Benjamin Noys, drawing upon Giorgio Agamben’s ideas of indifferent violence, ‘is that we are living a new collective experience of the time of death brought about, primarily, by the Holocaust and the threat of nuclear annihilation. In this new time of death we live as if we were already “doomed to die”’ (Noys p. 51). Under this dispensation, death is no longer the climactic and potentially summary event that follows a natural span of years but now something nebulous and absurd that threatens not only life but even individuality in death. ‘Not only this but the loss of our time of death, the dislocation of the moment of individual death, leads to a dislocation of time. Therefore, for Mailer, we live with an “intolerable anxiety” that time itself has come to a stop’ (ibid). The second of the essay’s six parts introduces the figure of the hipster, and one must provide the entirety of Mailer’s opening sentence to gain the flavour of his newly achieved method:

It is on this bleak scene that a phenomenon has appeared: the American existentialist—the hipster, the man who knows that if our collective condition is to live with instant death by atomic war, relatively quick death by the State as *l’univers concentrationnaire*, or with a slow death by conformity with every creative and rebellious instinct stifled (at what damage to the mind and the heart and the liver and the nerves no research foundation for cancer will discover in a hurry), if the fate of twentieth century man is to live with death from adolescence to premature senescence, why then the only life-giving answer is to accept the terms of death, to live with death as immediate danger, to divorce oneself from society, to exist without roots, to set out on that

uncharted journey into the rebellious imperatives of the self. (Mailer, 1992 p. 339)¹⁹

Recall Michael Hofmann's 'Kafka-time,' and note how Mailer's long sentence scrambles all these disparate considerations together—instant death and slow death menace the hipster within the same mental breath, as it were. Notice as well how Mailer seems to momentarily suspend the progression of the essay, bringing the hipster on stage only to prolong the introduction by expanding upon the material from the first part. The sentence itself is meant to enact Hip by its very form, by demonstrating that the hipster himself is an embodiment of the ideas expressed in the essay. A precondition of Hipness is having an experiential and intuitive grasp of the enormous demands that a totalitarian society places 'on the courage of men.' The sentence also ends up being a sneaky announcement that the author himself must qualify as such. This point isn't made to sneer at Mailer, but rather to note the division and reconstitution of identity at work in such an authorial assimilation. In her essay "The (Jewish) White Negro: Norman Mailer's Racial Bodies," Andrea Levine has alighted upon Mailer's merging of the camps and the bomb into the Janus faces of this new, absurd age. This is an apocalyptic blending that, on closer inspection, elides the realities of extermination by either of these distinct means. As an institution of slaughter, the concentration camp functions by selection—by discrimination—but as an instrument of total destruction, the atomic bomb makes no distinction among those caught in its blast radius. But in the Mailerian scheme eugenic violence and total species annihilation exist along the same techno-scientific spectrum and are thus made pragmatically equivalent. In Levine's reading 'Mailer's own efforts in "The White Negro" to conceal any recognizable Jewish "voice" are perhaps most concerted when he speaks obliquely of the Holocaust itself' (Levine p. 66).²⁰

Nowhere in his writing does Mailer grapple with the Holocaust as the systematic extermination of European Jewry, nor acknowledge its rationale of ethnic cleansing. Rather, he makes it a metonym of the forces of total annihilation that define contemporary life by their omnipresence. Perhaps, in this seeming embrace of the absurd, one can see a

¹⁹ Poirier is particularly strong on 'Mailer's taste for the long sentence, with all its potentialities for associative rambling, for tributary contributions to the main direction...For a writer so temperamentally committed to discovering improbable links and dialectical interplays, the long sentence is a most attractive instrument...It allows the suspension of a variety of even disparate items in a reflective medium wherein...they gradually absorb and enlarge one another. A sort of speculative restraint that comes out in the use of restrictive clauses and negatives, of interjections that break the rhetorical acceleration...to find a stylistic equivalence to the imagined correlation among social, political, and individual psychoses' (Poirier, 1972 p. 74).

²⁰ The starkest example of Mailer's ambivalent Jewish identity—which verged at points on Jewish anti-Semitism—is to be found in the letter to Diana Trilling in Appendix I

resemblance with the guilt of Theodor Adorno. Devorah Baum, in her recent monograph *Feeling Jewish*, writes that ‘for Adorno, the guilt of Auschwitz belongs to *all* of Western civilization, it’s a guilt he assumed would be felt most keenly “by one who escaped by accident, one who rights should have been killed”—the Jewish survivor of World War II’ (Baum p. 91). Mailer must have felt an ambivalent estrangement from the Holocaust twice over: first by his integration (did any other major Jewish writer of his generation so succeed at passing as a gentile?), and then by his physical distance from the slaughter. His deracination of the Holocaust, its elision with the atomic bomb—somehow, these knight’s moves seem an attempt to avoid imagining the genocide at the level of each individual extermination, the varieties of human error and innovation within the repetitive grind of procedure, the personhood of everyone involved at every stage. If anything he risks airbrushing the Holocaust, accelerating its yawning schedule of mass murder into the language of seconds spoken by the bomb.²¹ In Mailer’s new eschatology this is the perfect joke: that years of slow spiritual death should be cut short by sudden total death.²²

Guilt, in the sense described by Adorno, helps us understand some of Mailer’s stances in “The White Negro.” Baum writes about the emergence of the ‘survivor’ in the post-war period and the concomitant shift from ‘focus on the victim’s feelings of guilt toward a subsequent insistence upon the victim’s innocence. The shift is particularly clear within trauma studies, the discipline that arose in large part as a response to the war itself.’ In such psychoanalytic terms, Mailer clearly prefers guilt to shame, which arose to buttress the innocence of the victim. ‘Unlike guilt,’ writes Baum, ‘shame essentializes the subject.’ Guilt, properly nurtured, keeps our sight fixed upon our collusion with those mechanisms which ensure that *others* suffer and die, rather than ourselves. Guilt clears a space for the Existential ethic that calls for a decision, while shame rewrites the history of the victim into the record of what was inflicted upon her:

By conceiving of trauma victims as the *objects* of history, then, trauma theorists, albeit with the best of motivations, may find themselves

²¹ In perhaps another jab at Mailer, William Styron understood this: the title character in *Sophie’s Choice* is a gentile.

²² The following is from Ted Morgan’s *Literary Outlaw: The Life and Times of William S. Burroughs*: ‘What was certain was that after “Little Boy” and “Big Boy” [the nuclear devices dropped on Japan], nothing would ever be the same. It seemed to Burroughs that the end of classical culture, predicted by Spengler and Korzybski, had now come about, the end of culture and religion and the traditional values of society. After Hiroshima, the human species existed in a world where everything was permitted. Where was that bearded and venerable divinity who is filled with wrath at man’s transgressions? He was not in strict attendance’ (Morgan pp. 114-115)

unconsciously *colluding* with the logic of those persecutory forces that first sought to deny the inner life of the victim. By taking seriously the survivor's own expressions of guilt, on the other hand, without converting that guilt, via shame, into innocence, the trauma victim may be recognized as someone still subject to her own drives and desires, however perverse or discomfiting we—who would like to save the victim from her guilt—may consider these to be. (Baum pp. 92-93)

And yet, while cultivating the guilt that the citizens of a technological and scientific society ought to feel, Mailer also wishes to arrogate the trauma felt by the marginalised and discontent members of that society. Coined by John Mowitt in his article of the same name, 'trauma envy' refers to disputes arising out of the status imputed to trauma—which, by definition, cannot be represented and has thus paradoxically gained an esteem denied to those stories that one is capable of telling. 'Or to put it another way,' as Baum does: 'since silencing is said to be the very essence of trauma, it is now the nontraumatised subject who effectively feels traumatised' (Baum p. 79). In this we are reminded that our febrile debates around cultural appropriation are waged around questions of authenticity and qualification. In this need to usurp the podium of the traumatised subject Mowitt locates an explanation for 'the theoretical attempts of various thinkers to universalize the experience of trauma for the sake of political and moral legitimacy, a trend he critiques especially in the work of such post-Lacanian thinkers such as Slavoj Žižek' (Baum p. 259). Mailer in the essay is searching for a universal liberationist paradigm in the experiences of a marginalised group, looking beyond what is offered by whiteness or Jewishness and turning towards the Negro. 'Mailer,' according to Douglas Taylor's reading of the essay, 'tries to erase his ethnicity, often writing from the position of a pure, nonethnic white "we"' (Taylor p. 79). D.H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, Wilhelm Reich, and Hemingway are claimed as precursors of the Hipster, but 'the source of Hip is the Negro for he has been living on the margin between totalitarianism and democracy for two centuries' (Mailer, 1992 p. 340).

In his essay on liberal anti-liberalism, Andrew Hoborek wrote that 'in "The White Negro" Mailer does not just turn to black men to remake white men. He also turns to lower-class men—economically marginal hipsters—to remake middle class men' (Hoborek p. 25). 'Irony is the glory of the slaves,' in the poet Czesław Miłosz's Hegelian trope. Even if Mailer pays insufficient acknowledgement to the deep historical processes and conditions which incubated the particularly black brand of ingenuity to which he is so enthusiastically

responding, we shall see that it is this particular form of irony to which he is attracted. History notwithstanding, it's clear to us that Mailer was hardly at home in the milieu he describes in this essay. One needn't turn to speculation on Mailer's own experience or character to reach this conclusion—it's evident in some of the essay's most dated and corroded passages:²³

So the language of Hip is a language of energy, how it is found, how it is lost...I have jotted down perhaps a dozen words, the Hip perhaps most in use and most likely to last with the minimum of variation. The words are man, go, put down, make, beat, cool, swing, with it, crazy, dig, flip, creep, hip, square. They serve a variety of purposes and the nuance of the voice uses the nuance of the situation to convey the subtle contextual difference. (Mailer, 1992 p. 349)

Mailer seems oblivious to the ludicrous dissonance of registers here, between the almost starchy formality of his tone (the repetition of 'perhaps' is an uncharacteristic lapse of attention) and the libidinous vigour of what he's describing. In disregard of his own observations about the essential spoken dimension of Hip vernacular, he then commits himself to performative and illustrational uses of the vocabulary which rob the language of potency. These displays—the reader cannot be excused for thinking—foreclose on the Hipness of the author: 'To which a cool cat might reply, "Crazy, man!"...but still I am just one cat in a world of cool cats, and everything interesting is crazy, or at least so do the Squares who do not know how to swing would say' (Ibid. p. 351). The selection may be unfair, but it is representative of what Benjamin Lee described as Mailer's process of not so much cataloguing as 'simply invoking and repeating' Hip slang, which he reads as an obsession related to the effort to construct a 'new, instinctively critical, sexually charged identity.' Lee also sees something self-defeating and fundamentally un-Hip about this endeavour, this desperation to 'own, categorize, and stabilize hip slang, an undertaking that contradicts his emphasis elsewhere on process, growth, and constant movement' (Lee p. 783). The creative team behind the musical *West Side Story*, which debuted on Broadway in the same year that Mailer's essay first appeared, knew better than to even try. Librettist Arthur

²³ 'And matters were not helped at all by the fact that the Negro jazz musicians, among whom we sometimes found ourselves, who really liked Norman, did not for an instant consider him even remotely "hip" and Norman did not know this and I could not tell him. He never broke through to them, at least not as far as I know; and they were far too "hip," if that is the word I want, to even consider breaking through to him' (Baldwin p. 272)

Laurents and lyricist Stephen Sondheim felt that any attempt to use current street slang would date the show within weeks, and substituted invented phrases which were of a piece with Leonard Bernstein's score and Jerome Robbins's choreography and direction.

Upon encountering African-American vernacular Mailer evidently intuited that something interesting was afoot: a plenitude of expressive freedom, the numinous inspiration of what Ralph Ellison called 'the unwritten dictionary of American Negro usage.' What he lacked was the vocabulary and the critical metrics with which to articulate the phenomenon, which Henry Louis Gates called 'signifying.' In *The Signifying Monkey* Gates wrote of Ferdinand de Saussure's concept of signification: 'it is curious to me that this neologism in the Western tradition cuts across a term in the black vernacular tradition that is approximately two centuries old.' Gates proposes that signifying is 'a rhetorical act that is not engaged in the game of information giving,' and draws on Roger D. Abrahams for a more specific definition: it refers 'the trickster's ability to talk with great innuendo, to carp, cajole, needle, and lie. It can mean in other instances the propensity to talk around a subject, never quite coming to the point...it can denote speaking with the hands and eyes...a whole complex of expressions and gestures.' Drawing on the study of rhetorical tropes that spans from Vico to Bloom and Paul de Man, Gates locates the signifying subject as 'he who dwells at the margins of discourse, ever punning, ever troping, ever embodying the ambiguities of language.'

Mailer sees himself as occupying this space, and Poirier seeks to formalise this positioning; perhaps one could argue that Mailer's terminological inexactitude is an African-American derivation. What he lacks, crucially, is irony. 'Irony,' writes Bloom, 'may or may not be what the late Paul de Man called it, "the condition of literary language itself," but Mailer certainly could use a healthy injection of it' (Bloom, 2003 p. 3). Perhaps both more mystifying and pertinent is the definition offered by de Man in "The Concept of Irony": 'the permanent parabasis of the allegory of tropes' (Man p. 179). The daunting language notwithstanding, I prefer this definition to the one cited by Bloom because it provides a greater sense of those aspects of literary language neglected by Mailer. There is a pleasing circularity to calling irony the condition of literary language itself, but one which leaves us adrift when we try to account for a literary language as deficient in irony as Mailer's. The sort of magical thinking that Mailer cultivates around language—that it might be, as Poirier hopes, 'the potent instrument of human need in its confrontations with the benign as well as the wicked forces of institutionalised life'—requires a bludgeoning unity of exclamatory purpose (Poirier, 1972 pp. 10-11). It strikes one how peculiarly un-Modernist Mailer was in temperament: his agony

arose not from the intuition that language and reality were incommensurable but rather from the former having failed him instrumentally in his quest to affect the latter. Too bound up in the world that he has failed to influence, change, or lead, Mailer cannot attend to the antic hither-and-thithering of the world of tropes, that ceaseless strife of strophe and antistrophe. He is attuned to the noise of society at the expense of all other strains of sound, including the song of irony.²⁴

Bloom's most poignant observation is that 'one cannot require a novelist to cultivate irony, but its absolute absence causes difficulties, particularly when the writer is a passionate and heterodox moralist' (Bloom, 2003 p. 4). To borrow those ideas of Mikhail Bakhtin's that Gates uses, because Mailer is so fixated upon his ideas having some material effect he consequently lacks that 'other speech act' of hidden polemic. In his journal, Thoreau wrote that 'Writing may either be the record of a deed or a deed. It is nobler when it is a deed' (January 7th, 1884). Mailer would agree, to the degree that the clash foreseen by Bakhtin—one utterance focused on its referential object with another on the grounds of the referent itself—seems not to take place. Mailer is really a demagogue, and has little use for rhetorical ambiguity. 'The modern mode,' Julian Barnes calls irony: 'either the devil's mark or the snorkel of sanity' (Barnes p. 185). Because Mailer places his trust in the apodictic, the arguments he advances with such weird and intense sincerity are fragile before reasonable demurral. One rarely gets the sense that Mailer has anticipated any of the objections against his points. What's lacking is any reassurance that he knows how crazy it all sounds. Gore Vidal was onto him: 'His drive seems to be toward power of a religio-political kind. He is a messiah without real hope of paradise on earth or in heaven, with no precise mission except that dictated by his ever-changing temperament.' Vidal wasn't even sure if Mailer was meant to be a novelist or even a writer at all, 'despite formidable gifts' (Vidal p. 35).²⁵ If we

²⁴ 'Irony only has emergency use. Carried over time, it is the voice of the trapped who have come to enjoy their cage' – Lewis Hyde.

²⁵ As late as 1971 Mailer would still write that André Malraux 'was his idea of a great writer' (Mailer, 1971 p. 11). At this juncture of his career, Mailer may have construed greatness in a writer as the capacity for transcending the role of unacknowledged legislator. Under the presidency of Charles de Gaulle, Malraux held the position of French Minister of Culture from 1958 to 1969, the year when Mailer ran for Mayor of New York. Malraux's campaign to restore the natural stone facades of France's architectural patrimony anointed him as Prosper Merimée's heir as the nation's foremost artist-bureaucrat and cultural custodian. This must have chimed with Mailer, who saw totalitarian creep everywhere—particularly in the homogeneity of contemporary architecture, which menaced the 'sensuous flesh of [citizens'] inheritance [with] a macadamization of the psyche' (Mailer, 1979 p. 143). Mailer's bid for political power impugns his seriousness as an artist, illustrating Bloom's observation that 'Mailer's validity as a cultural critic is always qualified by his own immersion in what he censures. Well known for being well known, he is himself inevitably part of what he deplores' (Bloom, 2003 p. 5). Vidal described the 'preoccupation with actual political power' in an artist as a 'great waste of time' (Vidal p. 39).

reconsider the first of de Man's definitions of irony, perhaps we ought to ask whether "The White Negro" is literature at all.

'Orgasm is his therapy,' writes Mailer of the Hipster: 'he knows at the seed of his being that good orgasm opens his possibilities and bad orgasm imprisons him...and the apocalyptic orgasm often remains as remote as the Holy Grail' (Mailer, 1992 p. 347). African-Americans are credited with awakening him to these visions of psycho-sexual antinomianism: 'the Negro had stayed alive and begun to grow by following the need of his body where he could...he lived in the enormous present, he subsisted for his Saturday night kicks, relinquishing the pleasures of the mind for the more obligatory pleasures of the body' (Ibid. p. 341). In order for a white man to become a hipster, a white negro, these are the stances he must imitate. As Steve Shoemaker has noted, this trope of appropriating an imagined and essentialised black sensuality has made Mailer's essay an infamous chapter in the history of white attempts to depict the racial other. 'It has become by now almost a commonplace for white critics writing about the cultural influence of Afro-American jazz...to ritually invoke "The White Negro," in order to then distance themselves from its...Romanticism of the white intellectual examining black culture' (Shoemaker p. 358).

However it ought to be noted that some commentators, like Frederick Whiting, have portioned out a cautiously restorative praise to Mailer's essay within a historicist framework. The shortcomings of Mailer's fantasy, Whiting argues, obscure what's valuable in the essay. Certainly, the idea that the oppression of African-Americans could be explained by white fear of black potency was a commonplace 'particularly when it was articulated so baldly and by a white intellectual. If Mailer's attempt to subvert the situation entailed embracing the stereotype in order to promulgate an ethics of the body, it was no less subversive of the status quo for that.' Ultimately, even if the glorification of some sort of Negro primitivism are clumsy and clichéd—a spilt Rousseauvianism—the revamping nonetheless represents a departure from traditional accounts by locating the source of Negro sensualism in historically specific social injustices rather than a biological essentialism' (Whiting pp. 194-195).

And yet, as both an inconsistent and hackneyed racial essentialist, Mailer's sense of the relevant history is completely vague: at no point does he use the words 'slavery' or 'bondage'; there are no references to Emancipation or the Reconstruction or the Great Migration. Instead, the reader is thrown *in media res* into a world where urban life and its conditions are the existential given with which African-Americans must grapple. This aligns with the essay's fixation upon the enormous present, whereby the circumstances which dictate this community's experiences becomes a matter of elective affinity: a psychic

Bohemia that middle-class whites can opt into in rejection of their own cultural given. In this sense there is a nihilistic, last days of Rome-style decadence about Hip: in the face of sudden and total vaporisation one may as well live as though according to circumstances of one's choosing. In Žižekian terms (which will be further developed in the next chapter), one might say that the Hipster cultivates a refined individualistic ethics of subjective violence—that is, violence perpetrated by an identifiable agent—in order to guard against the claims and threats posed by the 'ultra-objective' or systematic violence 'that is inherent in the social conditions of global capitalism, which involve the "automatic" creation of excluded and dispensable individuals from the homeless to the unemployed' (Žižek p. 11). George Steiner, whose interest in Post-Holocaust theodicy provides an interesting perspective on "The White Negro," believed that once the inflated rhetoric and posturing of the essay is stripped away 'there remains a doctrine of vehement candour and a bizarre yet compelling attempt to reassert the sanctity of private life against the pressures of a mass technocracy. His style of life alternates between austere repose and violent psychological stress' (Steiner, 1986 p. 52).

Nevertheless, reservations abide: that Mailer fails to paint a full picture of the society against which the Hipster struggles, and that there is no squaring the circle that the author makes of death by atom bomb and gas chamber. 'Mailer's chief quarrel with Nazi genocide turns upon a point of style; he disapproves of the technological nature of the gas chambers,' wrote Kate Millett. 'Having promised Germany "the primitive secrets of her barbaric age," having offered the thrill of a chance to "*stomp* on things and scream and shout and rip things up and *kill*," Hitler paid off with nothing but the scientific tedium of gas' (Millett p. 317) The dispensations he seeks to articulate for violence as a personal style remain nebulous, born of a neurosis that is both personal and historical. As Alfred Kazin wrote of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*:

Certainly more than any other Black writer Ellison achieved as dramatic fact, as a rounded whole, a demonstration of the lunatic hatred that America can offer, on every facet of its society, to a black man. This irrationality is more real, more solidly grounded to blacks writing out of actual oppression than is the *idea* of an irrational society to white writers dislocated in the country they used to take for granted and who now find so much of America "meaningless."

The hatred that society shows to an actual victim of racist hatred is not the same thing as "meaninglessness," which is a middle-class state of mind, a

temporary fatigue, that represents the sometimes frolicsome despondency of intellectuals who see no great place for their moral influence—for changing things—in a future laid out in advance by technology. (Kazin, 1971 p. 245)²⁶

Because Mailer begins from that baseline of assumed meaninglessness which Kazin describes, he seems to forget that all sorts of coherent reasons can be discerned in almost any act of violence. He sets out to create a crisis of being where none previously existed, except in those middle-class minds which search for larger evils of which an instance of armed robbery, say, is an enactment. Take the essay's most notorious passage:

It can of course be suggested that it takes little courage for two strong eighteen-year old hoodlums, let us say, to beat in the brains of a candy-store keeper, and indeed the act—even by the logic of the psychopath—is not likely to prove very therapeutic for the victim is not an immediate equal. Still, courage of a sort is necessary, for one murders not only a weak fifty-year old man but an institution as well, one violates private property, one enters into a new relation with the police and introduces a dangerous element into one's life. The hoodlum is therefore daring the unknown, and so no matter how brutal the act it is not altogether cowardly. (Mailer, 1992 p. 347)

To those most inclined to see a financial motivation behind this action, it seems that what Mailer has done is take a fairly straightforward situation and then impose an entirely Quixotic set of criteria on it. At first the particulars of the situation seem to fall short of these imported standards, but Mailer works to show us the deeper virtues on display. This shell-game is typical of his method, and this passage contains in its simple core of narrative speculation the distillate of Mailer's thrust in "The White Negro." It also points toward his future development as a writer. The competition between the deeply-felt impulse towards violence and the coercive pressures of society will be most passionately articulated in his writings on boxing, which furnishes him with a venue for the reconciliation of these opposed imperatives.

²⁶ Mailer's comments on Ellison are highly revealing: '*Invisible Man* insists on a thesis which could not be more absurd, for the Negro is the least invisible of all people in America. (That the white does not see each Negro as an individual is not so significant as Ellison makes it—most whites can no longer see each other at all. Their experience is not as real as the experience of the Negro, and their faces have been deadened in the torture chamber of the overburdened American conscience. They have lost all quick sense of the difficulty of life and its danger, and so they do not have faces in the way Negroes have faces—it is rare for a Negro who lives it out to reach the age of twenty without having a face which is a work of art)' (Mailer, 1992 p. 471).

And since he focused exclusively on black pugilists, the sport brought Mailer into the direct contemplation of the racialised paradigm of masculinity that he so admired—and he's not insensitive when writing about the burden of expectations that fighters like Floyd Patterson and George Foreman struggled under. This sympathetic outlook will be seen in the next and final chapters.

Mailer's stance in the scenario of the hoodlums and the shopkeeper reverberates through the other strains of his non-fiction. It's there in his Burkean horror before the savage populist energies unleashed by Barry Goldwater in 1964, in his ambivalence over direct political protest against the Vietnam War—the symbolic warfare waged by his armies of the night. And it is felt most powerfully in his treatment of Gary Gilmore in *The Executioner's Song*, which is the closest that his experience brought him to something resembling the White Negro he described in 1957. For the fact is that if Hip was in any way a useful rubric for its formulator then it was as a set of organisational criteria for the management of raw material—as a journalistic angle. His recurring obsessions would give his project as the moral historian of his age the coherence of a defined and intellectually legitimate undertaking. What Hip could not provide for Mailer was the foundation for a great novel.

Besides, Burroughs had already written such a work. Mailer, in his testimony on behalf of *Naked Lunch* in the novel's obscenity trial, described *Junky* as 'just a very good, hardboiled sort of novel. It is a false novel. He wrote it to make some money; but it is well written.' Of *Naked Lunch* he said 'I think he catches the beauty, at the same time the viciousness and the meanness and the excitement, you see, of ordinary talk, the talk of criminals, of soldiers, athletes, junkies.' By writing *Naked Lunch* as a series of 'routines,' Burroughs tapped into the spirit of Ellison, of what Gates called 'nothing but voice, since it is he who shapes, edits, and narrates his own tale, thereby combining action with the representation of action, thereby defining reality by its representation.' William Lee, one might say, was the White Negro. Or perhaps Mezz Mezzrow was, for gnomically calling himself a 'voluntary negro'. Or perhaps it is an honorific bestowed, as in Red Rodney's case. Mailer, if anything, resembles the tea heads described in *Junky*: 'There are a lot of trade secrets in the tea business, and tea heads guard these supposed secrets with imbecilic slyness...Perhaps weed does affect the brain with constant use, or maybe tea heads are naturally silly' (Burroughs p. 15). Burroughs wrote the great Hip novel twice: *Naked Lunch* is the fever dream, *Junky* the latent content. Reading Mailer's comments over the years, one gets the feeling that Burroughs thwarted his writing his big novel. This would be borne out by the self-conscious imitation of the style in *Why Are*

We in Vietnam? After all, Mailer called Burroughs ‘the only American novelist today who may conceivably be possessed of genius.’

The nature of Mailer’s ultimate failure as an imaginative novelist—which is in evidence throughout the extracts at the anthology’s rear end—is encoded already in “The White Negro,” in that essay’s attempts to efface its author’s identity. For better or for worse, Mailer permanently transformed “The White Negro” when he included it in the anthology; there is no returning to the conditions under which the essay was first read in *Dissent*. For all that Mailer evacuates the autobiographical in the lead-up to that essay, it is impossible to avoid recalling the metamorphic intelligence at work and on display in the material that we have encountered previously, which both enriches and problematizes the first person at work throughout the writing. The essay aspires towards an air of detached sociological exploration; Laura Adams has described this as the ‘insidiousness’ of its imposture, parading itself as ‘a formal essay, complete with epigraph, division into sections, and quotations from authoritative sources’ and operating according to ‘the presentation of opinion as fact, and loaded language calculated to produce a given response—all standard techniques of propaganda’ (Adams p. 54). There is no avoiding reading the striving, ranting, raving Mailer whose character and temperament is the aggregate yield of the anthology into this essay. Once we have learned to read him slowly, as we has demanded, all of his insecurities and anxieties are everywhere to be seen.

This gets to the heart of Mailer’s ambivalent achievement with *Advertisements for Myself*, which succeeds at advertising its author at the expense of the sort of writing he wishes to proffer the world. Historically and pragmatically, the anthology failed to achieve its two major goals, which were closely entwined: to ‘clear a ground’ for his big novel, and to codify and popularise White Negroism as the paradigm of Hip. The successful and enduring works of Hip either preceded Mailer’s essay, or were carried out in sceptical indifference to his prognostications. No, the unforeseen success of *Advertisements for Myself* lay in its establishment of Norman Mailer as the practitioner of a potent and expressive form of creative nonfiction. As we shall see, *that* was what the world wanted more of; once enterprising editors began to coax Mailer out of the locked-room of his fulminating narcissism, he quietly retired the insistence upon racial essentialism which inhered in his White Negroism. He relented in his misguided efforts to appropriate the energy of black speech—a process which culminates in the restrained and abeyant language of *The Executioner’s Song*, which in a strange way fulfilled the promises and boasts he made in 1959. We will next examine how Mailer slowly came to embrace the possibilities of his own

stature and personality as a lens for the tumultuous public events of his era, and we conclude this chapter with the words of Robert Solotaroff:

It is not in his fiction that Mailer undams that subterranean river but in such non-fiction pieces as the ones on the Democratic Convention of 1960, the Republican one of 1964 and the first Liston-Patterson fight. But these are short hauls compared to a novel and it is obviously one thing to tell the reader what is going on in the American subconscious and then return to a description of Kennedy's appearance and life-style, and another to develop a continually believable narrative for several hundred pages through the constantly evolving interaction of the fictional elements – most of which the novelist must invent and not report – while progressively compelling the reader to feel that he is plumbing the world of his deepest self. An acute observer and a magnificent reorganizer and embellisher of what he has observed, Mailer has never had the kind of imagination needed for invention of this order. (Solotaroff, 1967 p. 15)

Chapter Three: “He would touch depths in American life which were uncharted.”

Racine, Molière, Congreve and Swift ask us to be interested in what they have made; but Chateaubriand, Musset, Byron and Wordsworth ask us to be interested in themselves. And they ask us to be interested in themselves by virtue of the intrinsic value of the individual: they vindicate the rights of the individual against the claims of society as a whole—against government, morals, conventions, academy or church.

Edmund Wilson, *Axel's Castle*

John W. Aldridge, best known for *After the Lost Generation: A Critical Study of the Writers of Two World Wars* (1951), was a sympathetic critic and correspondent of Mailer's who had been brought in to mediate between the author and Rinehart during the earliest rumblings of the *Deer Park* imbroglio. Yet even he ultimately considered Mailer unfit for the task of writing fiction. In Aldridge's reckoning, after *The Naked and the Dead* Mailer consistently failed to fully imagine his characters and then develop the matrix of interrelations emerging from among them. He lacked the serenity and intuitive openness to follow his creations into situations that lay outside his sphere of interest, and the subsequent novels were driven off the road by this steering-lock. The ideal direction for his talent lay elsewhere: 'His natural subject was not, it seemed, other people but himself. He did not want to invent; he wanted to confess, to display himself as the sole recorder and protagonist of significant contemporary experience' (Aldridge, 1978 p. 117). In this sense *Advertisements for Myself* is an intermediate work, one which predates Mailer's realisation that his sense of what Poirier (borrowing from the critic Peter Brooks) calls the 'moral occult' would 'find its proper articulation not in the forms of the novel or of the literary career of the novelist, but rather in the form of history and the career of journalism, a journalism which gives to that kind of writing an exaltation it has never before received' (Poirier, 1972 p. 66).

Perhaps even more so than writers it is editors who must cultivate an eye for what Gore Vidal called 'the main chance,' who must maintain within their managerial and curatorial practice an instinct for pairing writers to assignments. One's mind turns to the often turbulent relationship of *Rolling Stone's* Jan Weller with Hunter S. Thompson; to the recently disgraced Leon Wieseltier, who ran the literary department of *The New Republic* as his personal fiefdom; to Graydon Carter—or to any editor whose job entailed the portioning out of emoluments, latitude, and sometimes coercion in order to keep the star talent in shape and

on deadline. But Thompson—dating back to those Puerto Rico days chronicled in *The Rum Diary*—was, in his lysergic way, a beat reporter by nature. Thompson’s career conforms to the ‘features game,’ the foundational mythology of the New Journalism as spelled out by Tom Wolfe in his 1973 anthology. ‘By the 1950s,’ wrote Wolfe, ‘The Novel had become a nationwide tournament...The scene was strictly for novelists, people who were writing novels, and people who were paying court to The Novel. There was no room for a journalist unless he was there in the role of would-be great novelist or simple courtier of the great’ (Wolfe p. 21). Thompson was just such a novelist aspirant: *The Rum Diary*, written in the early Sixties, wasn’t published until 1998, and a novel that preceded it remains something of a mystery. And it’s no coincidence that in his anthology the witty but unreliable Wolfe doles out the faintest praise to writers who don’t conform to his model: Mailer and Truman Capote.

The brilliance of *Esquire*’s Clay Felker, which is sure to be underrated by the wisdom of hindsight, was to see the potential in a writer who had used a considerable portion of his last book to demonstrate how flamboyantly unsuited he had been to the grind of magazine work. The *Village Voice* columns may not have shown Mailer at his best, but the inclusion of the Fourth Advertisement under the title “The Mind of an Outlaw” in the November 1959 issue of *Esquire* was not just a canny piece of advance publicity; it was the start of a beautiful friendship. *Advertisements for Myself* laid out the shape of Mailer’s subsequent career in ways he probably did not anticipate. Alfred Kazin admired the story “The Time of Her Time,” but considered the true achievement of the anthology as residing in the ‘marvellously forceful and inventive’ style of advertisements themselves; ‘his intelligence, though muscular, has no real ease or quietly reflective power; he is as fond of his style as an Italian tenor of his vocal chords’ (Lennon, 2013 p. 257). Mailer had imagined a future for himself as a great novelist and set to work as anthologist to prepare the way for his imagined masterpiece, but the book’s reception ordained a different sort of career. A year later *Esquire* would run “Superman Comes to the Supermarket,” Mailer’s thirteen thousand word report on the Democratic National Convention which saw John F. Kennedy’s ascension to presidential candidate. Mailer had been sceptical about his qualifications for the assignment, but Felker saw the potential for *frisson*: ‘Pundits were going around saying the upcoming election would mark a turning point in American history and usher in a revolutionary age, so I thought, “What is more natural than turning loose the revolutionary mind on a revolutionary event?”’ (Ibid. p. 265).

Men like Felker (who went on to found *New York Magazine*) and his *Esquire* colleague, Harold Hayes, were the patrons of the New Journalism, and Mailer’s essay was one of its

inaugural pieces. It preceded the oldest items in Wolfe's anthology, which were Gay Talese's and Terry Southern's profiles of Joshua Logan and the Baton Twirling Institute (both *Esquire* features), by two years. Journalist Pete Hamill, reflecting on the article's first appearance, reported that 'When it came out it went through journalism like a wave. Something changed.' Mailer had taken 'political journalism beyond what the best guys—Mencken, Teddy White, Richard Rovere—had done. Rather than just a political sense there was a moral sense that came out of the piece.' Felker attributed an 'enormous impact' to the piece, and Hayes believed it 'set the tone for many, many things to come for him, and for us' (Lennon, 2013 p. 270). Mailer believed that his report was influential enough in its quiet way—galvanising campaign volunteers, reaching swing voters by word of mouth—to have helped Kennedy towards his hair's breadth victory. Such a boast takes us to a place beyond the ken and quantifying capacities of psephology, which is where Mailer is happiest.

In addition to the Kennedy piece, this chapter examines "Ten Thousand Words a Minute"—his first piece on boxing, on the dramatic upset of Sonny Liston's victory over Floyd Patterson in 1962—and "In the Red Light: A History of the Republican Convention in 1964." All three ran in *Esquire*, and will be inspected for the ways in which they presage the accomplished books that will follow. As shall be seen in these readings, at this stage in his career Mailer struggled with two questions of form: first, how to make his presence and perceptions the locus of proceedings; second, how to place his own stamp upon the pre-determined sequencing of events in such mediatised spectacles as political conventions and title fights. The two concerns are linked, and bespeak the anxieties of creative potency and personal agency that Mailer displaced from the forms of the novel and of the literary career of the novelist onto the questions of how to manage through style the material furnished by contemporary events.

I will also examine Richard Poirier's most striking and suggestive formulation, that 'Mailer's resolute practice is to locate a feeling of repression where there would for others be evidence only of the power of the oppressor, to find in the apparent majority characteristics of a minority, and to cultivate within himself what might be called the minority within.' In Poirier's reading, it is Mailer's identification of a 'minority incentive' within the constituents of any war or conflict 'which has the most beneficially corrosive effect upon form, forcing it to dispense with its merely acquired or protective or decorative attributes' (Poirier, 1972 pp. 114-115). This shall be seen in the unexpected narrative emphases of the Kennedy and Liston-Patterson reports, as well as in his reading of the cultural fissures which saw a man as dangerous as Barry Goldwater secure the Republican nomination for the presidency.

Aside from the critical literature on Mailer, throughout what follows I will also be drawing on the following thinkers. In order to understand the literary nature of these pieces—that is, as constructed works of patterned artifice—I find Susan Sontag useful. Her dismissal of the binary separation of style and content as a pseudo-problem helps us apprehend the process of aleatoric discrimination at work in Mailer’s use of journalistic materials. The application of this method to works of political and social commentary will be shown as aligning with Pierre Macherey’s ideas about the ideologically revelatory nature of literary production. This conception of literary style being less a matter of verbal ornamentation than it is one of fundamental vision is one that Mailer himself espouses, and is of a piece with his so-called Existentialism’s emphasis on the contingencies of continuous experience. In the first two chapters we saw his anxieties in the question of how to generate authentic copy, which were related to other anxieties about personal agency: both as one soldier among many, and as a young writer locked in an *agon* with his precursors. His move to journalism resolved hesitations and infelicities in his style by abrogating concerns about content that had previously been overwhelming.

And to help differentiate the shades of covert, symbolic, and egregious violence that Mailer portrays, I draw upon the thought of Slavoj Žižek, who has covered these subjects in his monograph *Violence*. While thinkers like Walter Benjamin and Peter Sloterdijk have written on these subjects, I invoke them where they overlap or are quoted by Žižek himself. Žižek and Mailer are both hugely prolific gadflies to the complacent liberal consensus of their respective times, both make repeated calls for revolutionary upheaval while remaining vague on form and outcome. Each also exhibits a troubling savour for violence, and flirts with making dangerous claims for its salutary effects—not just for individuals, but for anaemic political communities. And if we bear in mind John Gray’s censure of Žižek, then he and Mailer are both products of what they seem most to deplore.¹ Perhaps it is this temperamental inclination towards violence, or at least the imagining of it, which leads both men to point out the warlike aspects of even bloodless exchanges in society. This is where the more theoretical Žižek is useful to a reading of Mailer.

¹ ‘Whether or not Marx’s vision of communism is “the inherent capitalist fantasy,” Žižek’s vision—which apart from rejecting earlier conceptions lacks any definite content—is well adapted to an economy based on the continuous production of novel commodities and experiences, each supposed to be different from any that has gone before. With the prevailing capitalist order aware that it is in trouble but unable to conceive of practicable alternatives, Žižek’s formless radicalism is ideally suited to a culture transfixed by the spectacle of its own fragility. That there should be this isomorphism between Žižek’s thinking and contemporary capitalism is not surprising. After all, it is only an economy of the kind that exists today that could produce a thinker such as Žižek. The role of global public intellectual Žižek performs has emerged along with a media apparatus and a culture of celebrity that are integral to the current model of capitalist expansion.’

Before we join Mailer in Los Angeles, let us examine where we left him with his project to write the Big One. As my purely positivist account of Mailer's pursuit of this quarry in Appendix II makes clear, it was during the period covered by this chapter when market forces began to regularly reroute him from his higher literary ambitions. It was also when he wrote one of his major statements as a practitioner-critic: the 1963 *Esquire* article "Norman Mailer Versus Nine Writers." He included this piece in *Cannibals and Christians* with, by way of italicised prefatory remarks, the text of a lecture delivered to the American Studies Association and the Modern Language Association for a session entitled "The Modern American Writer and the Cultural Experience." Plainly written in the intellectual shadow of Lionel Trilling's *The Liberal Imagination*—in particular the essay "Reality in America"—Mailer's capsule history of modern American fiction takes its place among such complaints against literary realism's lot like Tom Wolfe's "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast," David Foster Wallace's "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," and Jonathan Franzen's "Why Bother?" While presenting a vivid literary perspective of Mailer's Henry Adams-like view of history as the dissolution of a monolithic culture and its replacement by a fissiparous one, the thesis is as nakedly self-serving as any of his swipes at his contemporaries.

In short, Mailer's vision of the problematic in American fiction is one of balkanisation along class lines. Like Trilling he adduces Henry James and Theodore Dreiser as the representative authors of the two competing currents in the national literature: respectively the Genteel Tradition of social tactics, and the Naturalism which concerns itself with strategy, 'a literature which grappled with a peculiarly American phenomenon – a tendency of American society to alter more rapidly than the ability of artists to record that change' (Mailer, 1979 p. 79).² The pathos of Mailer's history lies in the failure of any one author to bridge these two worlds; an upper class writer like his agonist, John Dos Passos, 'lacked strategy for the depths – manners may be sufficient to delineate the rich but one needs a vision of society to comprehend the poor, and Dos Passos only had revulsion at injustice, which is ultimately a manner' (Ibid. p. 83). Mailer voices a familiar lament: that the swirling heteroglossia of American self-image and experience is too large for any one book to capture, that to dream of a national fiction along the lines of *War and Peace* or *The Red and the Black*

² 'This belief in the incompatibility of mind and reality is exemplified by the doctrinaire indulgence which liberal indulgence have always displayed towards Theodore Dreiser, an indulgence which becomes the worthier of remark when it is contrasted with the liberal severity towards Henry James. Dreiser and James: with that juxtaposition we are immediately at the dark and bloody crossroads where literature and politics meet' (L. Trilling p. 77)

is to imagine a map as large as the territory. Perhaps inevitably, his account climaxes in the generation that preceded his:

The realistic literature had never caught up with the rate of change in American life, indeed it had fallen further and further behind, and the novel gave up any desire to be a creation equal to the phenomenon of the country itself; it settled for being a metaphor. Which is to say that each separate author made a separate peace. He would no longer try to capture America, he would merely try to give life to some microcosm in American life, some metaphor – in the sense that a drop of water is a metaphor of the seas, or a hair of the beast is some metaphor of the beast – and in that metaphor he might – if he were very lucky – have it all, rich and poor, strategy and tactics, insight and manner, detail, authority, the works. He would have it all for a particular few. It was just that he was no longer writing about the beast but, as in the case of Hemingway (if we are to take the best of this), but about the paw of the beast, or in Faulkner about the dreams of the beast. What a paw and what dreams! Perhaps they are the two greatest writers America ever had, but they had given up on trying to do it all. Their vision was partial, determinedly so, they saw that as the first condition for trying to be great – that one must not try to save. Not souls, not the nation. The desire for majesty was the bitch which licked at the literary loins of Hemingway and Faulkner: the country could be damned. Let it take care of itself. (Ibid. p. 84)

In his study *The Dream of the Great American Novel*, Lawrence Buell provides the taxonomic categories which help us understand Mailer's vision of American literary history and the nature of his own dreamed-of masterpiece. Mailer came of age during the great consolidation of American literature, its 'winnowing down to selected masterworks by a few practitioners: Hawthorne, Melville, Twain, James, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Faulkner, and a handful of others' (Buell p. 48). By the 1950s, Buell tells us, it had become less fashionable to speak of the Great American Novel, because it belonged to a bygone age of 'anxious collective handwringing throughout the nineteenth century and beyond about what seemed to be the maddeningly slow emergence of a robust national literary voice—an anxiety that now seems all the more overblown for underestimating what had already been accomplished,' such as *Walden*, *Moby-Dick*, and *Leaves of Grass* (Ibid. p. 2). American literature had

achieved global esteem more-or-less in sync with the nation's acquisition of hegemonic power. Mailer had intuited this as early as the end of 1941 as he dreamed of a posting to the Pacific, where he would have a chance to witness the birth of American imperial power. His hope was that proximity to the forging of a new American dominance would compensate for his artistic belatedness.

Buell proposes four 'scripts' that have been followed, to varying degrees of consciousness and calculation, by the postulants of the Great American Novel. The two that don't apply to Mailer are as illuminating as the two that do. Of course, Mailer is always as vague about the entelechy of his imagined novel as he is about the contents of his vaunted existential politics, but if we persist with Buell's scheme we can say that he was neither aiming for a story 'made classic by retelling' nor was he trying to 'romance the divides.' Mailer wasn't self-consciously grappling with themes that were perennial in the national imagination, because his experientialism was rooted in a belief in the exceptionality of the stormy present. Nor was he dealing with the nation's history of ethnic violence; perhaps his appropriations required blindness shading into indifference on this question. We get closer to the mark when we consider Buell's 'from up' narrative: Sergius O'Shaughnessy in both *The Deer Park* and the subsequent fragments, Harry Hubbard in *Harlot's Ghost*, even the older Menenhetet in *Ancient Evenings*—all social climbers, or at the very least men who must learn to navigate the different layers of a stratified society. If Mailer failed to pull this off, then he placed himself in the august company of others who supposedly were likewise incapable of crafting literary forms commensurate with such recalcitrant material.

That Mailer wanted to write 'the big one' places his ambition in the lineage of what Buell calls 'the meganovels': works like *Moby-Dick*, *U.S.A.*, and *Gravity's Rainbow*: 'sprawling performances' about 'improbably communities' 'conjoined by a common task, challenge, or threat that dramatizes democracy under siege or duress.' Such a vision is apparent as early as in *The Naked and the Dead's* rag-tag all-American military, and as late as the vision in *Harlot's Ghost* of a CIA that brings together 'bankers, psychiatrists, poison specialists, narcs, art experts, public relations people, trade unionists, hooligans, journalists' as both shadow realm and objective correlative of the nation they serve. But as we have seen, critics like Solotaroff and Aldridge considered Mailer incapable of doing justice to the ambition of his conceptions and his themes, and even Poirier conceded that his ideal vessel was history and the essay, not the novel. This is to be borne in mind as we follow Mailer's hesitant and haphazard assemblage of a long, ad-hoc, true life novel of the turbulent American Sixties.

Part I: Mailer in Los Angeles

Unlike Theodore H. White's wider-ranging *The Making of the President, 1960* (that other pioneering piece of political writing to emerge from the Kennedy-Nixon contest), the brief of Mailer's assignment confines him to the events of the Los Angeles Democrat Convention in the summer of that year. The essay is best understood in two ways: first as the record of how Mailer became a convert to the cause and promise of John Fitzgerald Kennedy; then as Mailer's instrument of preaching his newfound evangel. He works to reconstitute for the reader the fashion in which the events of the convention and the shimmering elusiveness of Kennedy's character worked upon the author while *in situ*—the same author who would cast his first vote in a national election since 1948. Readers more familiar with the major party conventions in the era of twenty-four hours news will find themselves time-travelling to an era when the fortunes of party and nation could hinge around such a gathering: an age of ruthless bossism, of backroom-smoked chicanery.³ These were the conditions of conducting party political business which had seen Henry Wallace ousted from the Democrat ticket at the 1944 convention in favour of Harry Truman: the 'Senator from Pendergrast.'⁴ This affront to popular will stands as a disgrace in the party's history and abides in the folk memory of the labour and progressive movements. It wouldn't be until the rulings of the Commission on Party Structure and Delegate Selection—convened in the aftermath of the chaotic 1968 convention, which saw the nomination of Hubert Humphrey amidst scenes of riotous disunity—that the Democrats would retire this culture of patronage. These party-political conditions provide the setting for Mailer's investigation.

Mailer's instinct and method in the essay is to search for evidence of conflict and oppositions: to give his readers a greater sense of the convention's drama than they would have received from the media at large; to urge upon them an understanding that for Kennedy this wasn't so much a coronation as it was a station of the cross. He does so by overturning the media's acceleration of political time and reconstructing already vanished memories of the previous summer for readers of the November 1960 issue of *Esquire*. He only had seventeen days to write the piece and thus was not able to bear witness to the more

³ 'After watching the Democratic convention on television, [Henry Miller] remarks, "How clean a dictatorship like de Gaulle's seems." (This is wiser than he knows. I was a delegate to that convention, chosen not by the people of New York State but by the boss of Tammany, Carmine di Sapio, with orders to vote for Kennedy' (Vidal p. 272).

⁴ Truman owed the launch of his political career to the infamous Missouri Democratic Party boss Tom Pendergrast, who backed Truman in the 1934 Senate primary. In his documentary series *The Untold History of the United States* Oliver Stone emphasises this as part of his sustained demonization of Truman.

disappointing aspects of the Kennedy campaign, like his cynical invention of the missile gap through which he ran against Nixon from the right—Clintonian triangulation *avant la lettre*.⁵ A veteran of Henry Wallace's 1948 presidential bid, Mailer was no doubt bitterly familiar with the enervation which can wither and thwart the idealism of a candidate and his campaign. Indeed, in the essay he notes that 'the hazards of the campaign make it impossible for a candidate to be as interesting as he might like to be' (Mailer, 1977 p. 60) and in a postscript written for *The Presidential Papers* he reflected that the piece's appearance was well-timed; for all the Kennedy machine's dynamic slickness 'there was no real enthusiasm, no drive' among the party's constituents (Ibid. p. 74).

'One did not go to the other convention,' writes Mailer of the Republicans, to whose role in the political ecology he genuflects in the essay's last and shortest section:

Counting by the full spectrum of complete Right to absolute Left, the political differences would be minor, but what would be not at all minor was the power of each man to radiate his appeal into some fundamental depths of the American character. One would have an inkling at last if the desire of America was for drama or stability, for adventure or monotony. And this, this appeal to the psychic direction America would now choose for itself was the element most promising about this election, for it gave the possibility that the country might be able finally to rise above the deadening verbiage of its issues, its politics, its jargon, and live again by an image of itself. (Ibid. p. 72)

That final phrase is particularly resonant: Mailer understands that national character is a matter of theatrics. The choice before the nation is between the Eisenhowerian continuity offered by Vice President Richard Nixon—four more years of slow death by Checkers kitsch and Mundt jack-booting—and the promise of something new. But this, articulated at the essay's end, is made explicit only after the mystery and dynamism of Kennedy have been patiently established. So the true crucible for Mailer is not the national contest between the Republicans and Democrats. Instead, he wants us to consider the internecine horse-trading by which the latter decided the terms of their entry into the general election. The reader's first intimation that something momentous is afoot is provided by the disquietude that Mailer detects in Los Angeles: 'And panic it was I think which sat as the largest single sentiment in

⁵ That being said, in letters written to Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and John Saltonstall in late October he showed a pragmatic willingness to rationalise Kennedy's hostility to Castro as 'due to the excesses of campaigning.'

the breast of the collective delegates' (Ibid. p. 39). The first person had been an unfussy device in the advertisements published only a year before. Note how Mailer moves from this to the densely-written, self-abolishing speculation in which he imagines the relationship between an archetypal delegate ('an expert on local catch-as-catch-can, a small-time, often mediocre practitioner of small-town political judo') and the local party boss who brought him: a political operative beset by depression, for he

Comes to this convention resigned to nominating a man he does not understand, or let us say that, so far as he understands the candidate who is to be nominated, he is not happy about the secrets of his appeal, not so far as he divines these secrets; they seem to have little to do with politics and all too much to do with the private madresses of the nation which had thousands—or was it hundreds of thousands—of people demonstrating in the long night before Chessman was killed, and a movie star, the greatest, Marlon the Brando out in the night with them. Yes, this candidate for all his record, his good, sound, conventional liberal record has a patina of that other life, the second American life, the long electric night with the fires of neon leading down the highway to the murmur of jazz. (Ibid. p. 43)

There's a question here of attribution, of the devices and journalistic-literary dispensations by which Mailer allows himself to access the inner lives of these imagined delegates. In this passage we see Mailer offering the reader the narrative texture of fiction as a heuristic to contemporary events, and arriving at the conclusion of his old hero, John Dos Passos—'All right we are two nations'—with the execution of Caryl Chessman in 1960 providing the same point of national fissure that Dos Passos saw in the judicial lynching of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti in 1927.⁶ Already by this point, mere pages into his report, Mailer must have already exceeded any sort of expectations that might have been raised by *Advertisements for Myself*. In the earlier book, America makes itself known as that nebulous array of forces that conspire to cheat the author of the respect due to him for his unheralded and yet grindingly scrutinised labours. While the anthology—deeply admired by younger writers like Don DeLillo—earns its acclaim as a confessional chronicle of the Eisenhower

⁶ Caryl Chessman was executed on May 2nd of 1960, having been convicted on seventeen of eighteen counts of robbery, kidnapping, and rape. The four books he wrote during his twelve years on death row made him a *cause célèbre* in debates on capital punishment in America.

years from the Korean War to the budding Civil Rights Movement, a coherent vision of that society and its discontents is only dimly to be perceived through marijuana-scented clouds of paranoia and wounded pride. Moving from “The Mind of an Outlaw” or “The White Negro” to “Superman Comes to the Supermarket” one is struck by something like a vertiginous barometric shift as writer and reader enter the dizzyingly wide world of political society. The redirection of Mailer’s attention from his own etiolated career as a novelist to the specific workings of machine politics was a boon, forcing him out of the self-imposed bracketing of the first-person narration used in his second and third novels.

If anything, his shift away from *The Naked and the Dead*’s omniscient third person occasioned a retreat from attempts at imaginatively plumbing the depths of his assembled characters. *The Deer Park* illustrates Harold Bloom’s censure that ‘Mailer cannot shape his fictions, since without a sacrifice of possibility upon the altar of form, narrative becomes incoherent, frequently through redundance’ (Bloom, 2003 p. 4). In that book Mailer made nonsense of his first person narration by essentially doing away with Sergius for the long passages given over to the Eitel-Elena sequence.⁷ What Mailer seemed unable to do was imagine a world *ex nihilo* and present it to the reader without fussily interposing himself. He cannot convince the reader of the autonomy of his creation, of his characters’ having an existence that continues even off-page. Perhaps one gets a sense of this amplitude in *The Naked and the Dead* because he had, in a fashion, ‘covered’ the Pacific War; perhaps his talent was journalistic from the start. An inability to be objective is less harmful to a journalist than to a novelist, which is why Upton Sinclair’s works are rarely called ‘novels’ without being qualified as ‘muckraking.’ Mailer and the New Journalists take their place in that American tradition of genre-spanning partisan reporting which included the ceaseless calumniations of Mencken, Theodore Dreiser’s blunt and exhaustive attempts to catalogue what Lionel Trilling called ‘reality in America,’ and Hemingway’s ludicrous conduct while on assignment for *Colliers* during the liberation of Paris. Invoking Susan Sontag’s elimination of the distinction between outward style and interior content, we not only forgive but demand bracketing from a journalist, whose exploration we understand as taking place in a world of political fact that is also our own. Barthes wanted to eliminate the author partly to liberate readers from the both tedious and unanswerable question of point-of-view. Mailer’s pro-author advocacy on that question inheres in the principles of the New Journalism:

⁷ In fairness to Mailer, on the evidence of both “The Man Who Studied Yoga” (see Appendix II, Part I) and the published sections of the aborted long novel it seemed that he was planning on embracing the suggestive contradictions of a seemingly omniscient first-person narrator. However, this was ultimately unresolved in the final version of *The Deer Park*.

everything that is allowed to appear in the New Journalistic ‘text’ is there by authorial fiat. But Sontag’s attendance upon the aleatoric factor in writing also directs our attention to the free play of perspectives and common references that can be liberated when writing is ‘the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin’ (Barthes p. 1466).

For an antecedent to Mailer’s empathetic depictions of the delegates in his essay one has to go all the way back to the Time Machine segments in *The Naked and the Dead*. There one sees him attempting to imagine the lives of people unlike himself, their fears and hopes and frustrations against the backdrop of history. Still a young writer, his misprision was to attribute the achievement of the *U.S.A. Trilogy* to its elaborate formal structure and arsenal of literary devices. Only later was he ready to make his own authentic foray into Dos Passos’s territory: once he had the certitude of his own perceptions and technique, and understood that the human self is ‘man believing and trusting in the Emersonian “self-trust” when all else fails him, man taking his stand on individual integrity against the pressures of society’ (Kazin, 2003 p. 342). Where Mailer departed from Dos Passos and then found his most congenial emphasis is partly a matter of class.

To re-emphasise the resemblance of Mailer’s thought to older tendencies in American philosophy: John Dewey believed that there are certain moral situations where we cannot decide between the ends; we are forced to make our moral choice in terms of our preference for one kind of character or another. Dewey asked, ‘What sort of an agent, of a person shall [one] be? This is the question finally at stake in any genuinely moral situation: What shall the agent *be*? What sort of character shall he assume? On its face, the question is what he shall *do*, shall he act for this or that end. But the incompatibility of the ends forces the issue back into the questions of the kind of selfhood, of agency, involved in the respective ends.’ This passage is cited by Lionel Trilling in his 1938 essay “The America of John Dos Passos,” in which he stressed the contemporary nature of this concern, noting that ‘for our age with its intense self-consciousness and its uncertain moral codes, the reference to the quality of personality does have meaning’ (L. Trilling p. 8). Trilling believed that the modern novel was not only uniquely suited to this sort of investigation but had in fact been summoned forth by the need for it, although Walter Benjamin would counter that ‘one of the foremost tasks of art has always been the creation of a demand which could only be fully satisfied later.’ In the case of the *U.S.A. Trilogy* this investigation restricts itself to that stratum of society that the critic T.K. Whipple described as ‘midway people in somewhat ambiguous positions’: itinerant and freelance workers subjected by their lack of class fixity to uncertain moral codes (Ibid. p. 6). Žižek has written that ‘the modern notion of a profession implies that I

experience myself as an individual who is not directly “born into” his social role. What I will become depends on the interplay between the contingent social circumstances and my free choice. In that sense, the contemporary individual has a profession’ (Žižek p. 127). Mailer shared Dos Passos’s interest in the individuation of moral character, but swerved from his early influence on the point of emphasising class or profession. While the subjects of Mailer’s portraits tend to be more economically secure than those of Dos Passos, they are no less discontent, no less vulnerable to the sense that the nation has taken leave of a prior set of communally sanctioned values. He ultimately looks to the highest office in the land for an index of this burgeoning rift. And thus it is the arrival of Kennedy which inspires him to his most excited eloquence, to lay out his vision of the American dysfunction which this election might bring to a boil.

Part II: Enter Kennedy

As Kennedy makes his entrance in Pershing Square, Mailer interrupts the scene for a pronouncement. Note how Mailer’s interjections of opinion also serve as narrative rumble strips—a journalistic use of Kafka-time—suspending the narrative so that the salient elements may be inspected:

Since the First World War Americans have been leading a double life, and our history has moved on two rivers, one visible, the other underground; there has been the history of politics which is concrete, factual, practical and unbelievably dull if not for the consequences of the actions of some of these men; and there is a subterranean river of untapped, ferocious, lonely and romantic desires, that concentration of ecstasy and violence which is the dream life of the nation. (Mailer, 1977 p. 51) ⁸

In Mailer’s account of contemporary reality in America, the twentieth century was a new era in which the acceleration of technological progress amalgamated ‘civilised man and underprivileged man...together into one mass man, the iron and steel of the nineteenth century giving way to electronic circuits which communicated their messages to men.’ Men

⁸ The First World War ‘gave us a new objective—new discoveries, the discovery of Europe; new heroic stunts of engineering, the transportation of our army to France. Since the end of the war, however, we have, as a people, had nothing to carry us along except the momentum of money-making’ – 1931 (E. Wilson pp. 426-427).

became as interchangeable as commodities; extremes of personality were obviated—this was felt most keenly in America, which was both the blast furnace of technological modernity ‘and the most rootless of countries.’ That same rootlessness flowered and bloomed across the vast expanses of a new continent and bred a nation of heroes: ‘George Washington; Billy the Kid; Lincoln, Jefferson; Mark Twain, Jack London, Hemingway; Joe Louis, Dempsey, Gentleman Jim.’ But it was this precise quality, these unique historical conditions, which made the still-fledgling democracy uniquely vulnerable to its own homogenisation. And after the conquest of the continent ‘the expansion turned inward, became part of an agitated, overexcited, superheated dream life. The film studios threw up their searchlights as the frontier was finally sealed, and the romantic possibilities of the old conquest of land turned into a vertical myth.’ The hostile boundlessness of a now lost, raw land yielded to highways, white picket fences, and Henry Miller’s air-conditioned nightmare: ‘We American people have always been kind to animals and other creatures of the earth. It’s in our blood. Be kind to your Buick or Studebaker. God gave us these blessings in order to enrich the automobile manufacturers’ (Mailer and Miller, p. 455). And yet the dream of ‘the trek to the “edge” of civilization, there to be cleansed of its contaminants’ abided—not just as rumour or ancestral glimmer but as the nation’s waking image of itself (Poirier, 1972 p. 142). ‘The myth would not die. Indeed a quarter of the nation’s business must have depended upon its existence.’ Mailer’s fixation upon film stars—such as his frequent rhetorical invocations of Marlon Brando—can be understood according to this hypothesis of the nation’s collective self-image finding its articulation through the output of Hollywood. This is why, for Mailer, Kennedy’s film star glamour is no incidental or ancillary point but rather the crux of his potential as candidate and leader in waiting.⁹

⁹ For Twenty-First Century readers of Mailer the whole idea of Camelot—brought into the public imagination by Theodore H. White’s *Life* interview with Jacqueline Kennedy, “For President Kennedy: An Epilogue”—must be a stillborn non-starter, strangled as much by the cloying bathos of the coinage as by the decades of lurid disclosure. The Kennedy sheen has been corroded by the recriminations of iconoclasts like Christopher Hitchens and Seymour Hersh. The quiddity of that idealistic promise can seem truly lost to us, rendered inaccessible by the squalor of the imperial presidency and the multiplying fiascos of American hegemony that Kennedy helped set in motion—and perhaps as well by the disappointments of that other great box office draw, Barack Obama (of whom the quote I have chosen for this chapter’s title might also have been said). Recently, Pablo Larraín’s movie *Jackie* granted the Dealey Plaza rupture its disorienting pathos but only by a tightly calibrated sleight of hand, by scrupulously bracketing out Kennedy’s politics and harnessing the picture’s non-linear structure to a purely ‘human’ portrait of a woman in pain, forced to grieve in front of the whole world. The movie seems to mourn the violent destruction of a mode of stylishness, dilating in dew-eyed flashbacks upon the Kennedy White House’s media savvy and patronage of the fine arts—a gentility shortly to be crushed underfoot by a Lyndon Johnson written and played as a garden variety thug. Much like Arthur Schlesinger Jr., Larraín keeps the many mistresses off-stage, but even this elegy is wary enough of power to suggest that the White interview—which furnishes the framing device—was a bid for control over the dead president’s symbolic legacy.

From Mailer's idea of the nation's 'vertical myth' of itself we get a sense of his project as would-be author of the Great American Novel (his Big One), which is the identity barely masked by the persona of the journalist. The whole notion of the national epic—the literary distillate of the exceptionality of the national ethos, character, and mission—is an emanation of Manifest Destiny. The dream of writing the great national work can only stem from a monolithic belief in the unalienable primacy of the hegemonic society, the deep-seated belief that its values are universal, rather than local or contingent. The imagination of the hegemon is never neurotic, and if it is tragic it is only in the limited sense of thwarted potential, rather than of the abuses which inhere within power. Nemesis doesn't feature, because there is no hubris to punish, no reckoning to be made—failure stems from insufficient will and unity. So in the post-*Barbary Shore* Mailer, who had shucked off the heresy of Marxism, we have a figure who is counter-cultural from within the centre: a dissident who no-one could begin to describe as anti-American. Take, from the preceding paragraph, his valorisation of the nation's heroes. I can think of no instances of Mailer's writing about the nation's original sins of slavery and ethnic cleansing. 'Psychopathically marooned in the present,' as he described himself to Diana Trilling (see Appendix I), he seemed never to meditate upon Andrew Jackson and the Trail of Tears, on Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemmings, or any of the occasions when the Declaration of Independence rang most hollow. For all that Mailer positions himself as an opponent of aspects of American society as well as the domestic and foreign policy of the state, he does so from a position of frustrated hegemonic pride—that the fundamentally benevolent substance of the chosen nation is being betrayed. Minority groups, dating back to before the foundation of the republic, could easily have told him that America has never been any better than its actions.

Mailer could be described as combining André Malraux's will to concrete political power with Joseph Conrad's troubled embodiment of the imperial imagination. He seeks to occupy at least the front passenger's seat of the great Hegelian vehicle of American onward progress, from where he may advise upon those routes which will honour the nation's divine mission. So from a journalistic point of view the centrepiece of his essay ought to be his account of meeting Kennedy. It is Kennedy who calls Mailer out of hiding, bringing into focus what had previously been a circumspect presence in the essay, more easily perceived in the tone of the writing and the quality of the judgements than located in concrete space amidst the hustle and bustle of the convention. Looking at Kennedy's arrival in Pershing Square, note how Mailer places himself at a remove from the scene:

The best way to get a view was to get up on an outdoor balcony of the Biltmore, two flights above the street, and look down on the event. One waited thirty minutes, and then...One saw him immediately. He had the deep orange-brown suntan of a ski instructor, and when he smiled at the crowd his teeth were amazingly white and clearly visible at a distance of fifty yards. For one moment he saluted Pershing Square, and Pershing Square saluted him back, the prince and the beggars of glamour staring at one another across a city street, one of those very special moments in the underground history of the world...And suddenly I saw the convention, it came into focus for me, and I understood the mood of depression which had lain over the convention, because finally it was simple: the Democrats were going to nominate...a great box-office actor, and the consequences of that were staggering and not at all easy to calculate. (Mailer, 1977 pp. 50-51)

Lennon, it must be said, is weak on this passage, lauding Mailer's 'skill with long periodic sentences' and telling us that 'they take us through the scene as if we are watching an overhead tracking shot in a film, while giving hints of the emotions felt not only by the writer (here designated by the indefinite pronoun "one" to emphasise his shared identity with the crowd), but by the crowd' (Lennon, 2013 p. 271). Walter Benjamin instead helps us identify the aura of location that Mailer makes essential to his hortatory project, and apprehend the ritualistic nature of civic political events. Lennon's analogic use of the vocabulary of cinema is particularly inapposite because, as Benjamin tells us in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, film's illusion is that it promises to abridge our spatial limitations: 'it manages to assure us of an immense and unexpected field of action...the camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses' (Benjamin, 2001 p. 1181). Much as Mailer disperses his placement within the scene, he wishes continually to draw our attention to the contingencies of location, the psychogeography of Kennedy's entrance—or unveiling. A cinematic or televisual reproduction of the scene would be lacking a crucial element of direct experience of the event: 'its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be' (Ibid. p. 1168). Mailer's careful modulation of Kennedy's location in space—his blocking of the scene, if you will—evokes Benjamin's thoughts on how the maintenance of the auratic is dependent upon ritual calibration of distance and accessibility. As Stuart Jeffries glosses Benjamin, 'the distance to which Benjamin referred in his essay need not be physical: rather

it's the psychological distance, or authority, that gives the work of art its aura. That distance may involve a ritualised peek-a-boo with the spectator' (Jeffries p. 180). But perhaps a genuinely 'cinematic' approach to the scene—whatever that may look like in prose—might have achieved a sceptical distance from this political extravaganza that would have been authentically Benjaminian. Benjamin was on guard against some of those very qualities that Mailer himself seeks out and praises in his essay; Benjamin calls these 'a number of outmoded concepts, such as creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery—concepts whose uncontrolled (and at present almost uncontrollable) application would lead to a processing of data in the Fascist sense' (Benjamin, 2001 p. 1167). Benjamin suspected that Fascism would *détourne* the auratic in order to aestheticize politics; Mailer excitedly and unquestioningly soaks in the aura of Kennedy. The hegemonic imagination leaves him in thrall to the glamour of the state.

Observe that Mailer doesn't explicitly place himself on the balcony, and then further fudges his positioning within the *mise-en-scène* by his use of the fuzzy pronoun 'one.' He dissolves his own presence into the larger experience of the crowd, only announcing himself explicitly once Kennedy has moved him to his epiphany on the nature of the candidate's appeal. In this instance we get the sense that the first person emerged out of necessity, after 'one' had been subjected to the sustained pressure of having to convey Mailer's momentary assimilation into the larger, jubilant mass. From this, the first person rings out to stake the claim for the probity and priority of the journalist's perceptions. Throughout the essay the first person is deployed contingently and, one feels, sullenly. Elsewhere the use of 'one' feels fussy and evasive, particularly at those moments where an authorial declaration of presence seem most warranted: 'Or is it indeed one's own work which is called into question? "Well, there's your first hipster," says a writer one knows at the convention, "Sergius O'Shaugnessy born rich," and the temptation is to nod, for it could be true, a war hero, and the heroism is bona fide' (Mailer, 1977 p. 58). And then there's Mailer's alternating between the first and the hypothetical or analogic third person, as in how he relates his meeting with Kennedy:

What struck me most about the interview was a passing remark whose importance was invisible on the scale of politics, but was altogether meaningful to my particular competence. As we sat down for the first time, Kennedy smiled nicely and said that he had read my books. One muttered one's pleasure. "Yes," he said, "I've read...*The Deer Park* and...the others," which startled me for it was the first time in a hundred similar situations,

talking to someone whose knowledge of my work was casual, that the sentence did not come out, "I've read *The Naked and the Dead*...and the others." (Ibid. p. 60)¹⁰

I have not encountered a satisfying commentary on this episode; perhaps Mailer's vanity and susceptibility to flattery are sufficiently self-evident to not require close inspection, but his yen for the Kennedy allure threatens to impugn his seriousness as a journalist. Proximity to state power is a deleterious distraction for a writer—one remembers Mailer's abiding admiration for Malraux. In the above passage we see a germinal form of the later illeism—an effort to split himself so that he may praise himself. Perhaps his innovations in journalism were not a careful strategy for tapping into some Gonzo well of verisimilitude but rather a way of coping with his very public failures as an imaginative novelist. Given such ruminations it's almost difficult to credit his anecdote about a fellow journalist invoking the figure of Sergius O'Shaughnessy. At any rate, the ghost of Kennedy would haunt Mailer's writings as tenaciously as Hemingway's shade. In *Harlot's Ghost* Kennedy is seen from the cold perspective of the slowly metastasising deep state (which is slowly shucking off its subjection to elected authority and oversight—one would have relished the development of this strain in the abandoned sequel), and is perceived as a philandering liability, fluttering at the periphery of the narrative. Like with Lieutenant Hearn, the feeble voice of liberalism in Mailer's first novel, Kennedy's end is unceremoniously kept off stage as the agency mandarins puzzle and rejoice. In *Oswald's Tale* Kennedy's presence is modulated in equilibrium with his reputation while still living, which was no more and no less than that of 'the most potent and promise-crammed figure on earth' (Amis, 2002 p. 275). When it comes to Oswald's motivation, Mailer grants himself the speculative ingress denied to more traditional historians and investigators:

Kennedy had the ability to give hope to the American ethos. That was, therefore, cause enough to call upon "brutal determination in breaking down

¹⁰ 'As it turns out, Kennedy was briefed by [Press Secretary Pierre] Salinger, who, in turn, had been prompted by [*Serpico* author Peter] Maas. According to Maas, there had been some reluctance to grant the interview in the first place, because "at that time in his life Norman was not viewed as Mr. Stability." So Maas told Salinger that "if you really want him eating out of your hand," tell Kennedy to refer to *The Deer Park*. "But string it out a little. The timing has to be just right." Salinger, who was present for the interview, saw his boss deliver the line perfectly, and "Norman just melted"' (Lennon, 2013 p. 270).

incurable tumours.”¹¹ Kennedy was not, as American Presidents went, a bad President; therefore, he was too good. In the profoundest sense, as Oswald saw it, he had located the tumour – it was that Kennedy was too good. The world was in crisis and the social need was to create conditions for recognising that there had to be a new kind of society...An explosion at the heart of the American establishment’s complacency would be exactly the shock therapy needed to awaken the world. (Mailer, 1998 p. 489)

This is the hegemonic imagination, the American imagination drunk on its own sense of exceptionalism. Kennedy’s goodness and brilliance are essential to Mailer’s project. In an essay on the recurrence of Kennedy as a figure in Mailer’s writing, Heather Neilson points out the link that Mailer establishes in *Harlot’s Ghost* between the President and the fictional Harry Hubbard, the narrator-protagonist who for suggestive purposes Neilson elides with the author himself. For some months Harry shares Modene Murphy (a composite character) as a lover with the unwitting Kennedy, ‘who thus—through the medium of flesh—symbolically becomes the hero’s “kin,” and peer and rival...Mailer is clearly indulging his own fantasies through Hubbard’ (Neilson p. 34). Such *ad hominem* jibes have been a perennial recurrence in the critical literature on Mailer ever since Kate Millett read *An American Dream’s* Stephen Rojack as a stand-in for the author; even sympathetic critics often seem to find it necessary to incorporate such manoeuvres. The biographical critique of the novels notwithstanding, Mailer is such a persistent presence in his own work that questions of decoding literary form keep redounding unto judgements upon his temperament and character. It is also why criticism of Mailer so frequently reverts to the epithetic. This will become clearer once we get to “Ten Thousand Words a Minute”; first we will examine the reaction against Kennedy’s coronation.

Part III: The Stevenson Insurgency

Mailer’s own stated rationale for the piece was to restore the lustre of mystery to not just John F. Kennedy but also to the campaign to achieve his election to the presidency. Towards that end, Mailer’s emphasis on the last ditch attempt on the convention floor to nominate Adlai Stevenson provides his report with a surging, ambivalent coda. In the harsh light of

¹¹ That was Oswald quoting from *Mein Kampf*. Throughout this passage we see an example of the kind of accelerationism which Mailer periodically indulged, as in his final reckoning with the electoral choices of 1964 (see Part VI of this chapter).

electoral arithmetic—by tallying the votes and political cunning leveraged on Stevenson’s behalf—Mailer might seem to make too much of the insurgency. Indeed, at first he seems to insist upon it by virtue of its neglect by the rest of the media. But on the other hand he doesn’t even feel it necessary to mention that Stevenson had already been crushed in the elections of ’52 and ’56. Mailer’s method is to offer literary forms as heuristics to the understanding of contemporary events, his guiding hand evident in the structuring of the material, discernable in the patterning of emphasis. His focus upon the Stevenson surge allows him to resume investigating the tensions within the Democratic Party that he had previously foregrounded. We return to Pierre Macherey’s idea of literary production as ‘all that a man allows to appear,’ which he derives from Nietzsche. Emphasising the German word *Lassen*—which means to do, to allow, and to oblige—Macherey cleanses the process of cod-spiritual notions of inspiration and visitation. ‘Production: to show and to reveal. The question “What does he mean?” proves that it is not a matter of dispossession. Also “to reveal” is an affirmation rather than a decision: the expression of an active force, which yet does not exclude a certain autonomous actualisation of the visible.’ One might hear, over the din of jargon, an echo of Susan Sontag’s famous peroration against interpretation: ‘In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art’ (Sontag p. 14).

Sontag helps us identify what Mailer means by style, and thus the salient aspects of his own style. With reference to Hemingway and other authors that he admired, Mailer espoused an idea of style that seems para-literary. A revealing comment is one on Faulkner: ‘Faulkner’s style – which is to say, his vision – was to haunt my later themes like the ghost of some undiscovered mansion in my mind’ (Mailer, 1992 p. 84). For Mailer, a vision of life is only worth anything if it is put into practice; in this sense there is a resemblance between his conception and Pragmatism, with that American philosophy’s emphasis on the continuity of experience and nature as uncovered by the findings of directed action. There is also a more than incidental harmony with Susan Sontag’s 1962 essay “On Style”, where it is described as a discriminative and organisational process which pragmatically eliminates formalism’s distinction between form and content by insisting on style as the determinant of content. ‘In almost every case,’ writes Sontag, ‘our manner of appearing *is* our manner of being. The mask is the face’ (Sontag p. 18). What might be called ‘the physiognomy of the work, or its rhythm,’ is in fact its style (Ibid. p. 28). The pertinence to Mailer’s political journalism is potent, because in this instance style is not just the felicities and euphonies of his prose but those elements upon which his prose alights. That Mailer could turn a sentence has, I hope, been established—or at least will be by the examples to be found throughout the rest of this

book—but to reduce him to this would be to participate in the longstanding conception of style which places ‘matter on the inside, style on the outside. It would be more to the point to reverse the metaphor. The matter, the subject, is on the outside; the style is on the inside’ (Ibid. p. 17).¹²

A perspective worth brief consideration is that of the so-called Institutional Turn in the recent historiography of American literary culture. Eric Bennett’s *Workshops of Empire* builds on the achievement of Mark McGurl’s *The Programme Era* by arguing that the style inculcated by creative writing course—which have been the most overpowering influence on American literary production after the war—was a form of aesthetic anti-Communism. Luminaries like Wallace Stegner and Paul Engle emerge as Cold Warriors, their injunctions intended as bulwarks against totalitarian thought. McGurl distils the programme era ethos into three formulations which, as Fredric Jameson notes, ‘constitute an attempt to resolve a dilemma, or better still a contradiction: how can that very personal and individual practice that is writing, and in particular the writing of the novel, be taught?’ Jameson writes that McGurl’s triad attempts

To address this difficult problem in a historically new way. 1. Write what you know. This emphasises experience, in a way that tends to bracket 'imagination' and to turn the writer's attention to the autobiographical, if not the confessional. It will be focused and intensified by the next injunction: 2. Find your voice, which perhaps begins with the premium placed by modernism on the invention of a personal 'style', and develops into a virtuoso practice of the first person as performance. This seems at odds with the final injunction: 3. Show don't tell, which is the obvious legacy of James's theorisation of point of view, and most directly reintroduces 'craft' or technique, a set of rules (drawn from drama) that would seem to be more teachable in the context of a writing programme than the other two (negative and positive) recommendations.

The political goal of these injunctions, Bennett argues, is illuminated by their Cold War context: to steer budding writers away from the fondness for theory and social critique that characterised the radical literature of the inter-war period—*Barbary Shore* seems a belated

¹² In one of his essays, Arthur Schopenhauer wrote that ‘The use of the word person in every European language to signify a human individual is unintentionally appropriate; persona really means a player’s mask, and it is quite certain that no one shows himself as he is, but that each wears a mask and plays a role. In general, the whole of social life is a continual comedy, which the worthy find insipid, whilst the stupid delight in it greatly.’

example of this—and towards a sense of the concrete grounded in the individualistic and the personal. ‘Show, don’t tell’ is advice that comes decked out in the respectable garb of the apolitical, the disinterested, and the apodictic; the status quo always presents itself as such. The revelations of theory are treated as something imposed upon rather than immanent within the material, which requires only close observation and faithful rendering.

University-educated but as an engineer, Mailer nonetheless exhibits some ideological similarities with the products of the writing programmes—at least in terms of his journalism. His fiction, whether the novels he actually produced or those he wished he had, doesn’t correspond neatly with any parts of McGurl’s other triad, his taxonomy of the writing programme novel. Take *The Deer Park*, *An American Dream*, and *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, to deal with three of the novels written during the period covered by this book. They resist easy assimilation into the genres of ‘technomodernism’ or ‘lower-middle-class modernism,’ which McGurl characterises as respectively concerned with the landscapes of information technology and of economic and cultural disaffection. The latter particularly is associated with the form of the minimalist short story, which despite a handful of accomplished efforts is hardly Mailer’s mode; his introduction to *The Short Fiction of Norman Mailer* finds him in a modest mood. Perhaps a case could be made for a similarity between Mailer’s novels and McGurl’s ‘high cultural pluralism,’ which ‘joins the high literary values of modernism with a fascination with the experience of cultural difference and the authenticity of the ethnic voice.’ But few things date as quickly or corrosively as lunges for realism based on the imagined authenticity of an essentialised racial other, and such has been the fate of Mailer’s ‘Hip’ novels. *Why Are We in Vietnam?* is at once the apotheosis of this tendency and the least typical of his major works. If, as Poirier claims in his febrile overpraise, the novel is about ‘what the mass media has made of out of high culture, of psychoanalysis, of myth,’ and about ‘what lays waste to the human mind’ (and thus an example of McGurl’s ‘technomodernism’), then those themes are a function of Mailer’s extreme anxiety of influence by Burroughs (Poirier, 1972 p. 135).¹³

¹³ ‘Through the fantasies [in *Naked Lunch*] runs a vision of a future world, a half-demented welfare state, an abattoir of science fiction with surgeons, bureaucrats, perverts, diplomats, a world not describable short of getting into the book. The ideas have pushed into the frontier of an all-electronic universe. One holds onto a computer in some man-eating machine of the future which has learned to use language. The words come out in squeaks, spiced with static, sex coiled up with technology like a scream on the radar. Bombarded by his language, the sensation is like being in a room where three radios, two television sets, stereo hi-fi, a pornographic movie, and two automatic dishwashers are working at once while a mad scientist conducts the dials to squeeze out the maximum disturbance. If this is a true picture of the world to come, and it may be, then Burroughs is a great writer. Yet there is sadness in reading him, for one gets intimations of a mind which might

Despite Jameson's claim that William Faulkner was 'virtually alone along modern American writers [who] had nothing to do with writing programmes,' Mailer stood in good company: John Steinbeck, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, John Updike, Cormac McCarthy, Don DeLillo—and other besides. Of these, Baldwin shared Mailer's problematic experiences with fictional forms, while *The Fire Next Time* and *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* read like exemplars of the workshop triad of experience ('write what you know'), creativity ('find your voice'), and craft ('show don't tell'). It seemed that what neither writer, for all his formidable talents of description and analysis, could be disabused of the notion that the fundament of the novel is invention. A correlative of anxieties about the accelerations of American reality that Mailer had expressed was the concern that the fabular could no longer compete with the multiplying outages of the actual. Baldwin's meeting with Elijah Muhammad, Mailer's encounter Eugene McCarthy—of such things was history-as-the-novel made.

Mailer's style, his vision, is to be discerned in how he locates the real story in the eleventh hour's attempt on the convention floor to hand the nomination to Adlai Stevenson. This was the second mystery of the nomination, and for Mailer this is the more genuinely exciting of the two; or at least he presents it as such for the benefit of Kennedy. Mailer's dialectical loyalty, to use an evocative phrase employed by Sartre, is with Kennedy, at least to the degree that the pressure brought to bear upon his campaign by the Stevenson insurgency might have a clarifying and salutary effect on the younger candidate (Sartre, 1973 p. 27). Mailer anticipated that his essay might help to rally support for Kennedy in the autumn, an insight he perhaps derived by contrasting the perplexity of his delegates (the first mystery) against the enthusiasm for Stevenson:

Still it went on, twenty minutes, thirty minutes, the chairman could hardly be heard, the demonstrators refused to leave. The lights were turned out, giving a sudden theatrical shift to the sense of a crowded church at midnight, and a new roar went up, loader, more passionate than anything heard. It was the voice, it was the passion, if one insisted to call it that, of everything in America which was defeated, idealistic, innocent, alienated, outside and Beat, it was the potential voice of a new third of the nation whose psyche was ill from cultural malnutrition, it was powerful, it was extraordinary, it was larger than the decent, humorous, finicky, half-noble man who had called it forth, it was a cry

have come within distance of Joyce, except that a catastrophe has been visited on it, a blow by a sledgehammer, a junkie's needle which left the crystalline brilliance crashed into bits' (Mailer, 1979 p. 107).

from the Thirties when Times was simple, it was a resentment of the slick technique, the oiled gears, and the superior generals of Fitzgerald's Army; but it was also – and for this reason one could not admire it altogether, except with one's excitement – it was also the plea of the bewildered who hunger for simplicity again, it was the adolescent counterpart of the boss's depression before the unpredictable dynamic of Kennedy as President, it was the return to the sentimental dream of Roosevelt rather than the approaching nightmare of history's oncoming night, and it was inspired by a terror of the future as much as a revulsion of the present. (Mailer, 1977 p. 71)

It is this passage, more than any other in the essay, which presages the main sequence of Mailer's strongest political journalism. The strain that is developed in his writings on the 1964 Republican Convention, the 1967 march on the Pentagon, and the 1968 Chicago riots is an inherent, almost Kierkegaardian distrust of crowds and the ideas that animate them, albeit a distrust that is complicated by his relish for the visceral particularities of the situation. The demonstration for Stevenson had a profound effect on Mailer's outlook as an observer and student of political gatherings, informing his work with a dynamic appreciation for the sensory reality of the event as perceived by its participants while attuning his acuity to that which is signified by all this sound and fury. 'The crowd is untruth,' wrote Kierkegaard: 'one should in godly fear give expression to the fact that the crowd, regarded as a judge over ethical and religious matters, is untruth, whereas it is eternally true that every man can be *the one*.' Mailerian existentialism, as expressed in his treatment of the surge for Stevenson, argues for a more tragic, more dialectical relationship between the crowd and the truth. Stevenson, Mailer feels, is the wrong answer to the right question. And yet, by emphasising the demonstration for Stevenson Mailer seems to pre-empt objections to the limitations of his work. What, it may be asked, is Mailer presenting as the substance of Kennedy's appeal? The appeal of Kennedy, Mailer seems to say, is his appeal: his charisma, his glamour, his ability to address the dream-life of that nation. But history provided Mailer with the critique of the circularity of his argument: the demonstrators for Stevenson saw little to admire in the Kennedy glitz. So that whole sequence of convention drama is Mailer's peroration to Kennedy himself—that he must speak substantially to the concrete concerns and sufferings of those driven to unite around a Stevenson.

Sontag counsels us to be aware of the various contingencies that inhere in the discriminating process which unites the concerns of style and content. Barthes bristles at the

teeming multiplicities contained within the idea of the author and how they all exert spurious claims of authority upon the text. 'Is it Balzac the individual, furnished by his personal experience with a philosophy of Woman? Is it Balzac the author professing 'literary' ideas on femininity?' (Barthes p. 1466). But I would propose that it is helpful to keep some firm idea of Norman Mailer—on assignment for *Esquire*, almost nakedly partisan for Kennedy—in mind, because it focuses us on the stylistics of his decision-making process. The prominence afforded to the attempt to nominate Stevenson serves the needs of several Mailers: the Kennedy booster; the storyteller; the historian of America's dream life. 'The divorce between the aesthetic and the ethical is meaningless,' wrote Sontag. The construction of the latter part of Mailer's essay around the Stevenson surge is a matter of 'the physiognomy of the work, or its rhythm, or...its style' (Sontag p. 28). But we must remember that for Mailer, the ethical nature of style resides in his thinking he can leverage it instrumentally upon the world. As we shall see again in his piece on Goldwater, the most striking sections of Mailer's political journalism are pure rhetoric, intended as a jolt to the reader.

Sontag privileges the stylistic intelligence or process with total control over content, which recalls Vladimir Nabokov's serene assertion that the only aspects of French society which bear upon our understanding of *Madame Bovary* are those which Flaubert has allowed into the book. A thinker like Pierre Macherey reminds us to attend upon those ideological shadings of the speech acts which make up books, which an author can calibrate imperfectly but never completely bring to heel. Macherey shares with Sontag a sense of the contingent—and therefore always somehow incomplete—nature of literary texts. Mailer's absence of conclusion about the meaning of the Stevenson effort shouldn't be taken as the end of his speech act on the topic. It's what Mailer has allowed to appear in the text, and remains an open question after the text's commercial publication. He offers the convention's second mystery as an 'incompleteness which is so radical it cannot be located.' Macherey and Mailer come together in their attendance upon 'the ambiguities of the notions of origin and creation. The unacknowledged coexistence of the visible and the hidden: the visible is merely the hidden in a different guise.' As we shall see in greater detail in Mailer's examination of the crowds for Barry Goldwater, his tendency to cast historical actors as representatives of larger forces and meanings aligns his thinking with theorists of political violence like Žižek, Benjamin, and Sloterdijk.

Looking at the Kennedy and Stevenson camps, Mailer seeks out and finds a minority incentive in each. He distinguishes himself by searching for such drives and sentiments where other observers would see merely the operations of the elite. Take Kennedy: this was merely

an interruption of his coronation, and this could be seen as the final push in Mailer's efforts to claim this son of wealth and privilege as a candidate for the Hipsters.¹⁴ As for Stevenson, if American politics can be said to anoint grantees then he truly was one, with the Governorship of Illinois and the '52 and '56 Democratic candidacies to his name. We have seen that the pre-1968 Democratic Party operated on a rigged system of patronage—hardly a congenial venue for the articulation of any sort of minority position. But Mailer 'is quite unable to imagine anything except in oppositions, unable even to imagine one side of the opposition without proposing that it has yet another opposition within itself,' which Poirier calls 'the further complication that there be within each side a sense of internal embattlement' (Poirier, 1972 p. 118).

Thus the dynamics of the Kennedy-Stevenson duel can be briefly and simply summarised as follows: Stevenson, that 'decent, humorous, finicky, half-noble man,' is only the best available fit for the forces that would foist the nomination upon him. He is chosen mainly for what he is not—his is an urbane authenticity, illuminated by proximity to the glamour and glitter of the Kennedy machine.¹⁵ Kennedy, on the other hand, finds himself in the strange position of being under assault by the people who ought to be his own constituents. Mailer's view of the final battle of the Democratic Convention is one of pathos and irony, which he proffers as his warning to the Kennedy camp. The late demonstration for Stevenson could easily be dismissed as an inter-party reactionary spasm, a rejection of the modernising spirit which will save the Democrats from eight years of electoral exile. Mailer's implied argument is that this would be catastrophic, that Kennedy must recognise that the surge is 'larger' than its nominal figurehead, and that it is fuelled by more than nostalgia for the personable Stevenson. Kennedy's task, in Mailer's reckoning, is to show the nation at large that quality the author has discerned in him, to convince the people that he—not Stevenson—is the vehicle for all that is 'defeated, idealistic, innocent, alienated, outside and Beat.' It is by his compulsive search for minority dynamics that Mailer transforms the convention business from a procedural irritation into a battle for the soul of not just the party but Kennedy himself. Here the method is put towards hortatory and improving ends; as we shall see, the tenor and prognostications in his 1964 election piece are much dimmer. Before that, however, we shall turn from the world of white politicians to the arena of black boxers.

¹⁴ Recent scholarship (such as that of biographer David Nasaw) has discredited the decades' worth of rumours that Joe Kennedy Sr., the candidate's father, was a bootlegger. He was Ambassador to the Court of Saint James in the period between 1938 and 1940, and *Fortune* magazine estimated his wealth in 1957 as placing him somewhere between the sixth and nineteenth richest people in the United States.

¹⁵ Richard Hofstadter described Stevenson as 'a politician of uncommon mind and style, whose appeal to intellectuals overshadowed any in recent memory' (Hofstadter p. 3).

Part IV: A Brief and Stunning Upset

As slyly hinted at by its title, “Ten Thousand Words a Minute” is barely about boxing at all. Yes, it abounds in intelligence on the discipline—the bounties of enthusiast given a platform to descant upon his obsession—but the agonist turns out to be neither Sonny Liston nor Floyd Patterson but Mailer himself. As dismayed by either combatant by the events of September 25th of 1962, Mailer scrambled to fulfil his brief and produce a twenty-thousand word piece on a blink’s length non-event: ‘Liston hit him two or three ill-timed punches, banging a sloppy stake into the ground, and Patterson went down. And he was out...The fight was over: 2:06 of the First. It must have been the worst fight either fighter had ever had...“What happened?” said [James] Baldwin’ (Mailer, 1977 p. 274). What happened next, I will argue, constitutes a turning point in Mailer’s praxis as a journalist. Gatecrashing Liston’s press conference, he presents himself as promoter for the rematch: ‘I am the only man in this country who can build the second Patterson-Liston fight into a \$2,000,000 gate instead of a \$200,000 dog in Miami. I wish to handle the press relations for this second fight.’ Insults are flung and volleyed before Liston cracks a smile: ‘I like this guy’ (Ibid. pp. 285-287). Mailer leaves the conference a ‘modest man,’ but more pertinently he leaves with fifteen pages of copy-ready incident—all of his own instigation. This was the most elaborate intervention he had ever carried out prior to the act of writing, blurring the line between Mailer as participant and recorder of the event. To quote from Robert Merrill’s study:

The essay’s final sections confirm that Mailer’s ultimate subject is himself...The fight inspires a severe self-analysis in which Mailer takes upon himself part of the blame for Patterson’s defeat...Mailer’s disruption of Liston’s press conference, the essay’s final episode, reveals Mailer as yet another unsung romantic who has Napoleonic visions while tripping over curbs. The scene is saved from bathos because Mailer sees it for what it is (“Once more I had tried to become a hero, and had ended as an eccentric”). Yet it is also a fitting climax to his narrative, for here Mailer dramatizes his determination to be “some sort of centre about which all that had been lost must now rally.” The defeat of Patterson becomes for Mailer the defeat of love and art and discipline. His bravura at the press conference registers his

decision to reaffirm all that the week's events and the fight itself have called into question. (*Norman Mailer Revisited* p. 102)

Poirier compares Mailer to the pianist Glenn Gould, emphasising those voices and currents which other interpreters are content to keep in muffled subordination; this more accurately describes the Mailer of "Superman Comes to the Supermarket" than of "Ten Thousand Words a Minute." Somehow it fell to him to supply a fitting conclusion to the Liston-Patterson story, whereas the material to round out his panegyric to Kennedy had already been furnished by the events of the Democratic Convention. The boxing report is a quiet, yet huge advance on its predecessor. It presages what is most alive in *The Armies of the Night*: that intelligent sensitivity to the unpredictability of mass events; that dynamic sense for opportunities to insist upon the unique experiential credentials of his account and—above all—for ways to become part of the story. It seems to me that the Mailerian prime, or what we might term the high Mailerian style, emerges most distinctly in this essay; "In the Red Light" refines and hardens the Kennedy piece's political values and rhetoric, and *The Armies of the Night* is the culmination of this style. Susan Sontag accuses those who conceive of style and content as separate with having an insufficient sense of 'the arbitrary and the unjustifiable in art.' Against those who would argue for some sort of inevitability in the features of a purportedly achieved work, Sontag writes that 'every artist, when it comes to his own work, remembering the role of chance, fatigue, external distractions, knows what the critic says to be a lie, knows that it could well have been otherwise' (Sontag p. 33). More so than any other prior work of Mailer's, "Ten Thousand Words a Minute" parades this sense of peril and contingency. Recalling Nabokov's attitude towards the socio-historical background to a text, we grant journalism of the sort Mailer is writing a similar dispensation. As we shall see over the course of the essay, those elements which had the greatest impact on the strange events in the ring are those that Mailer has put into his text. The author's absolute insistence is on explaining events inside the ring through a chain of causality leading out into the wider world. All is transformed by Mailer's causal thinking.

Already with his opening paragraph Mailer advertises his growth as a journalist. We are to understand that he has learned and advanced by dint of his previous experience, that he is now a fully-fledged member of the press corps. But this is insinuated, emerging from self-criticism which masquerades as professional observation:

[Reporters'] intelligence is sound but unexceptional and they have the middle-class penchant for collecting tales, stories, legends, accounts of practical jokes, details of negotiation, bits of memoir—all those capsules of fiction which serve the middle class as a substitute for ethics and/or culture. Reporters, like shopkeepers, tend to be worshipful of the fact which wins and so covers over the other facts. (Mailer, 1977 p. 223)

Already by late 1962 Mailer was disappointed by Kennedy, who had failed to manifest himself as a president for the hipsters and neglected to invite the author into his kitchen cabinet. This is the position from which he starts out in the boxing essay, reflecting with an amiable ambivalence upon the skills he had honed in writing about the last election as he explores his new role as a journalist. This opening gambit of disquisition upon journalistic mores also serves notice of Mailer's solution to the challenge posed by the final form of the bout: nearly five thousand words are given over to this piece of scene-setting; by the time the bell rings, launching Liston and Patterson into their absurdly foreshortened showdown, Mailer had expended more than thrice that amount in building up to it. With this scrupulous and exhaustive deferment of the main event Mailer future-proofs his essay and bestows upon it a form that will speak both to contemporary experience and later historical recollection of the fight. At the risk of forcing a retroactive determinism upon Mailer's stylistic development (and we should be particularly wary of this, since he plainly was a tactical and reactive rather than a strategic thinker), we see that the role played by explicit illeism in the later works is here being pursued by means which are simply less elegant. The illeism, as we shall see, is a stalling tactic: a solution in search of a problem, which doesn't address Mailer's anxieties of experience and agency but merely defers them. Many of the spectacular effects of the Mailerian style, it occurs to us, are solutions to aporias that the author himself has conjured up. What's advertised is a sense of sheer exertion, and it strikes the reader that the only way Mailer can work is to make things difficult for himself.

However, because Mailer is not content to write mere journalism he is subject to anxieties induced by the recalcitrance of his material. But these concerns—and the efforts they summon forth—are a crucial ingredient to the prime Mailerian formula. The Mailer of "Superman Comes to the Supermarket" is a circumspect, even obsequious figure compared to the more dynamic formal component that his personality and actions provide in "Ten Thousand Words a Minute." In the earlier essay he identified his opportunity to affect history as residing in the act of writing, which required him to slip into the unobtrusive role of the

observant journalist before he could produce copy that might tempt readers into voting for Kennedy. The convention's order of proceedings dictated such an obeisant engagement—Mailer could only ever have been a recorder, his agency in such a capacity residing in his license to dilate upon those occurrences that he divined would be neglected or underplayed by more seasoned and traditionally-minded reporters. The more achieved Mailerian praxis of participatory journalism emerges amid the shock and confusion of Liston's upset victory, from the intimation that this thwarted climacteric necessitated a different plan of action.

One can imagine the frantic workings of Mailer's mind—perhaps already as he's sat next to James Baldwin, watching Patterson hit the deck—as he tallies his journalistic options. Feasibly, his choices for padding out the piece came to him sequentially. A first and obvious solution would have been to start as far back from the event as possible, to view the attenuated bout in terms of negative space and take its unexpected abridgement as sanction to indulge his talent for scene-setting. This explains the abundance of material on the sporting scene and its various constituents and affiliations, allowing Mailer to indulge his talent for portraiture. For just one example of this faculty, look at his description of Patterson's manager Cus D'Amato as having 'a funny simple quality, something of that passionate dogmatism which some men develop when they have been, by their own count, true to their principles. He had the enthusiastic manner of a saint who is all works and no contemplation' (Ibid. pp. 247-248). Besides this luxurious padding there was the Welterweight Championship bout between Benny Paret and Emile Griffith which had taken place six months previously. Given that it resulted in Paret's death and clearly shook Mailer to his core, its subsidiary role in the essay seems somehow scandalous: 'It is the culture of the killer who sickens the air about him if he does not find some half-human way to kill a little in order not to deaden all. It is a defence against the plague...the nausea of all that nonviolence which is void of peace' (Ibid. p. 267). It's almost as though Mailer resists such sustained rumination on that aspect of the discipline. Ultimately he seems more exercised by the structural demands conjured up by the main bout's upset; Paret's death is just filler.

At any rate, Kate Millett was unimpressed by such ideas, writing that 'Mailer is at pains to convince us that the violence endemic in his novels and essays is in fact endemic in humanity, or at least that portion of it which merits his attention, since children, queers, and women fail to qualify and pacifists are "unmanly"' (Millett p. 321). Christian Messenger, in an essay which places Mailer's boxing writing within the tradition of the natural—'that lonely, gifted, isolated figure of so much American sports fiction'—is more sympathetic: 'Mailer's role in the collective world is always imagined as physical crisis and then converted

to spiritual crisis. He privileges the male body as the seat of wounded sexuality, displaced male aggression, and a resultant enormous competitiveness. His "hero"-self only ventures forth protected by the most formidable psychic armature that has been fastened in place by prodigious syntheses of contraries and fashioned by intricate small motions of grace as well as by grand and overbearing utterance' (Messenger pp. 86-87).¹⁶

And yet, even with these stalling tactics available, Mailer must have known that all he could achieve would be a deferment of the Liston-Patterson fight and a compounding of his problem, an intensification of the build-up to a non-event. It is at this point in the imagined journalistic calculus that we see the harried and improvised emergence of the Mailerian method: a participation in events that isn't passive or innocent but rather pre-determined by the demands of producing copy. Awareness is split between the sensory realities of the present moment and the future demands of the piece that is slowly taking shape in his mind. The Quixotic figure that wanders through these pages (denoted by the first person with a greater and more confident frequency than in the Kennedy piece) is best understood as motivated by these anxious imperatives. If we keep in mind the Mailer lamented by Bloom—unable to shape his fictions, let alone bestow life upon the inchoate monstrosity that he previewed in *Advertisements for Myself*—then he acquires a pathos that is, I think, uniquely his. When Hunter S. Thompson, in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, wrote that 'The idea of trying to "cover this race" in any conventional press-sense was absurd,' he put about as much effort into that sentence as he had into discharging his duties at the Mint 400 (Thompson p. 38).¹⁷ Mailer doesn't hijack the nominal assignment to the radical degree that Thompson does; rather, we get the sense that it is Mailer who is rerouted by the collapse of the story he thought he was writing. It was the best thing that could have happened to him. We need look no further than *St. George and the Godfather* or *The King of the Hill* to see how dull and predictable Mailer's writing could be when applied to political conventions and sporting events that behaved themselves. The supreme example of this shortcoming in his method is A

¹⁶ This is of a piece with the sheer physicality with which Mailer describes the agonies of re-writing *The Deer Park*: 'Well, I was not in shape to consider that book. With each week of work, bombed and sapped and charged and stoned with lush, with pot, with Benny, saggy, Milltown, coffee, and two packs a day, I was working live, and overalert, and tiring into what felt like death, afraid all the way because I had achieved the worst of vicious circles in myself, I had gotten too tired, I was more tired than I had ever been in combat, and so as the weeks went on, and publication was delayed from June to August and then to October, there was only a worn-out part of me to keep protesting into the pillows of one drug and the pinch of the other that I ought to have the guts to stop the machine, to call back the galleys, to cease—to rest, to give myself another two years, and write a book which would go a little farther to the end of my particular night' (Mailer, 1992 p. 243).

¹⁷ Although he goes on to earn his Gonzo keep with his trope for the desert bedlam in which he'd found himself: 'It was like trying to keep track of a swimming meet in an Olympic-sized pool filled with talcum powder instead of water.'

Fire on the Moon, which amounts to a nearly five-hundred page stalling action, with Mailer's despair residing in the unimperilled efficiency by which NASA pulled off the staggering feat of landing men on the moon.

Whether Mailer's instinct in gate-crashing the victorious Liston's press conference succeeded in providing an adequate conclusion to the story is beside the point—one journalist's tomfoolery cannot redeem the disappointment and squalor of that one-sided encounter. Rather, his pratfall—'There would be argument later whether I was a monster or a clown. Could it be, was I indeed a bum?'—clears a space for and then provides the ultimate punch line to a series of speculations on his own valence as spectator (Mailer, 1977 p. 287). Mailer assigns the final blame for Patterson's defeat on the sheer weight of psychological pressure that the politics of liberal respectability had exerted upon the fighter:

If I had been a part of the psychic cadre guarding Patterson, I had certainly done everything to make myself useless to him. I could even wonder at that moment, my mind quick with bitterness toward the *Times*, whether the entire liberal persuasion of America had rooted for Floyd in the same idle, detached fashion as myself, wanting him to win but finding Liston secretly more interesting, in fact, and, indeed, demanding of Patterson that he win only because he was good for liberal ideology. I had a moment of vast hatred then for that bleak gluttonous void of the Establishment, that liberal power at the centre of our lives which gave jargon with charity, substituted the intolerance of mental health for the intolerance of passion, alienated emotion from its roots, and man from his past, cut the giant of our half-wakened arts to fit a bed of Procrustes...Yes, it was this Establishment which defeated Patterson precisely because it supported him, because it was able to give reward but not love. (Ibid. pp. 279-280)

Or, as he puts it more succinctly earlier in the essay: 'Patterson-in-the-ring was not Floyd Patterson sparring in his gym, but was instead a vehicle of all the will and all the particular love which truly wished him to win, as well as a target of all the hatred which was not impotent but determined to strike him down' (Ibid. p. 276). His earlier fiction provides a clue to his thinking if we remember his tendency to orchestrate confrontations between the representatives of antagonistic ideologies: we have the debates between Cummings and Hearn, the pursuit of McLeod by Hollingsworth, and Eitel's vacillating between the duelling

temptations of Marion Faye and Carlyle Munshin in *The Deer Park*. When locked into formal contention with the less thematically compliant material of real life, Mailer's instinct is to supply his own adequately resonant contest by the proposal of both a counter-narrative and a counter-character to instigate it. His intervention at the press conference might best be understood in this light, that he commits to the record that *someone* had registered a belief that the fight had not adequately resolved the larger questions at stake in the encounter. Poirier restricts himself in his monograph on Mailer to the written works, but in a piece entitled "Mailer – Good Form and Bad" he shrewdly analyses the writer's motivations in his public displays:

He finds himself as a participant in a situation, be it social, political or literary that calls for conventional good manners. There follows an effort, sooner or later, to disassociate himself from other participants in the same enterprise. This act of disassociation very often requires of him a certain degree of intemperateness, or even obscenity. Then follows a period in which he angrily justifies this differentiation of himself until finally, by argument and self-persuasion, he arrives at the pleasurable sense of minority status. At this point he makes his most direct appeal to an audience – that it should regard him as a kind of culture hero. (Poirier, 1974 p. 238)

I would push Poirier's point further. Surely what underlies Mailer's rationale is that the reader should regard him as a culture hero because—after sufficient brooding upon his conduct—the author has come to see himself as such. 'Is he finally comic, a ludicrous figure with mock-heroic associations; or is he not unheroic, and therefore embedded somewhat tragically in the comic? Or is he both at once, and all at once?' (Mailer, 1968 p. 64). But our reservations abide despite his abundant ruminations—even perhaps because of them. No matter how hard Mailer works to earn his press pass he cannot expect us to lump him in with the seedy mainstream of fight reporters. He writes too well for that. And even if Patterson's shocking defeat had less to do with physical prowess than it did with the nebulous pressures exerted by a partisan spectatorship, can we aver that it ultimately fell to Mailer to arrogate responsibility for the fiasco, let alone somehow indemnify it? The extent to which Mailer weighed these issues during the composition of "Ten Thousand Words a Minute" (which, we ought to remind ourselves, was written under a deadline towards a prescribed brief) is only murkily to be perceived within the piece. At any rate, he allowed himself little room to

explore his actions at the press conference, let alone unpack them for the reader; *Esquire* were expecting copy on the title fight, not on Norman Mailer's inability to square its unexpected result.

Recall that in the last chapter we discussed the Mailerian conception of authorship, which is really an extreme indulgence in the autobiographical fallacy as both a moral and an evaluative rubric in literary criticism. By insisting that an author's actions play as much a part in establishing their myth as their writing does, Mailer is animadverting on the necessity of continuity between reflection and practice which inheres in Hip's claims to master an unpredictable and obstreperous self. The Mailerian author function seems somehow literalised, enacted through the Mailer figure's actions as carried out prior to the writing of the text. In a Sontagian sense, we can assess the pragmatic effects of Mailer's behaviour: if there is no substantial difference between style and content, then Mailer ensures the absolute originality of his piece—one of many written on the fight—by placing himself in so unique a position *vis-à-vis* the material. An unusual content not only calls for but produces a unique style—no other boxing journalist could have generated this particular form. These are the sorts of rabbits that Mailer pulls out of his hat.

Poirier argues that Mailer's 'fascination with boxing is best understood' according to the formulation of the minority within, by which the author 'postulates disguised feelings and minority forces which then allow him to redefine the fight as a metaphysical conflict' (Poirier, 1972 p. 116). Each fighter is striving not only towards the vanquishing of his opponent but also the annihilation of that which is most despised in himself. It is this debilitating element which might undo him even before the first blow is landed. As black men of wildly different temperaments and reputations, both Liston and Patterson are thwarted by the liberal politics of black respectability which would cast either as some sort of example to their race. 'Blacks do not feel inferior to whites so much as to the psychotic brilliance created and, at once, thwarted within them by the accident of white oppression' (Ibid. pp. 115-116). This is how Mailer achieves a restitution of meaning, offering a rationale by which to explain the extreme brevity of the fight, and also clears a space for twenty-thousand words of speculation. Not for the first time in his career will Mailer seek to depict writing as somehow equivalent to pugilism. This was glimpsed in the previous chapter, when it was proposed that the Hipster is searching for an ethics of subjective violence. This is what Mailer at times seems to propose boxing as fulfilling: the search for a form of violent expression which is harmoniously mediated and personally productive. This will be reconsidered in the sixth chapter; for now, what is most interesting is how Mailer's own sense of inadequacy—

whether personally before the spectacle of the boxers, or structural and journalistic before the surprises of the event—spurs him on to those ‘acts’ of psychotic brilliance which will both gain the notice of the men he admires and resolve his technical problems. A suggestive parallel emerges: if a boxer can be thwarted before he even enters the ring, then Mailer’s writing risks failure on the basis of what has preceded his retreat into the study. In “Ten Thousand Words a Minute,” both considerations vex Mailer and incite his intervention.

It is also by virtue of this deep and unique acuity that Mailer attempts to claim minority status for himself. If we recall what it means to be Hip—to signify, to hijack and subvert that which is expected of one—then we might say that it takes a white negro to write a piece like “Ten Thousand Words a Minute.” It’s worth looking at the essay in the context of its anthology, *The Presidential Papers*. Tricked out with the explanatory and supplementary accoutrements that Mailer felt necessary to carve out a space in which his boxing report could be best read, we’re primed for the piece by remarks in the prefatory passages such as ‘The liberal promise – that Negroes and Jews are like everybody else once they are given the same rights – can only obscure the complexity, the intensity, and the psychotic brilliance of a minority’s inner life’ (Mailer, 1977 p. 207). Later, introducing passages from his review of the Broadway production of *The Blacks* by Jean Genet, he quotes from an unpublished sequel to “The White Negro,” that ‘What is at stake in the twentieth century is not the economic security of man – every bureaucrat in the world lusts to give us this – it is, on the contrary, the peril that they will extinguish the animal within us’ (Ibid. p. 217). Mailer’s obsession with boxing is fruitfully understood when set against his distaste for liberalism, which advertises its horror at egregious violence even while it inflicts psychological and spiritual injury on the polity whose diversity it seeks to abrogate in the name of an ameliorative social programme. In *The Presidential Papers* as in several other places, like the introduction to Jack Henry Abbott’s *In the Belly of the Beast*, he calls for a system of corrective justice which will ‘transmute violence into heroic activity’ (Ibid. p. 207). Sometimes he seems to find this in boxing; at other times he seems reluctant to make too much of the discipline’s redemptive potentialities. This shall be explored further in the final chapter.

Mailer is suspicious of liberalism’s claims towards the assuagement of the aggressive impulse by economic melioration and social integration. The urge may be at variance with the totalising demands of society, but for Mailer the former always trumps the latter. Otherwise that individual inner core—which defines itself by paying heed to the violent urge—would be snuffed out by society’s totalising imperatives. For Mailer this is not a square to be circled but rather the grounds for a violent rejection of the current dispensation

of society: burning down the house so that the individual may be saved. I suspect that in addition to this, Mailer relishes another aspect of a putative liberal aversion to boxing. It allows him another avenue of escape from the risk that his reputation as a novelist and his association with the critical establishment of New York could trap him in the role of a respectable writer: the artist as society man. By committing himself to the serious contemplation of what some might think of as little other than young men from deprived backgrounds beating each other into a stupor, he distances himself further from the crowd that would have him be a merely literary figure. His antics while on assignment for *Esquire* can be seen as a further pursuit of this sort of negative identification. As shall now be seen by the red light of the Republican Convention, these impulses put Mailer in an ideal position to understand the forces which underwrote the national crisis that was the candidacy of Barry Goldwater.

Part V: The Republican Party Under Siege

Mailer's report on the Republican Convention of 1964 is unshaped by the sort of authorial interventions that have been discussed so far. It does not constitute any particular advance, much less breakthrough, in the journalistic technique that he had been developing as a star writer for *Esquire*, but it is one of his purest essays and his most tough-minded, morally serious contribution to political journalism. As F.W. Dupee noted, 'though America is unquestionably exciting to Mailer, it is wonderful how little he ever allows it to become tragic. Indeed, his response to the excitement of it is intense enough to preclude his feeling "deeply" any tragedy in it,' which is to say that Mailer is inspired to his most strongest writing by chaotic vistas of American disorder (Dupee p. 100). "In the Red Light" is punctuated with several epigraphic quotations from Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, declaring an affinity with the tradition of conservative scepticism and distaste for revolutionary violence. 'I must see the things, I must see the men' is the sentiment of Burke's that Mailer annexes as the animating principle of his undertaking, and in that spirit the Mailerian first person discloses itself with greater confidence than in his earlier convention piece even while he refracts and disperses his own voice and point of view through multiple layers of speculation and ventriloquism. Robert Merrill, one of the best critics of the intermediate journalism, wrote that 'Mailer's interpretative presence is felt throughout,' and that the essay is about 'his response to the ascending right wing rather than the phenomenon itself. Mailer attached such weight to his impressions because he assumes

they are representative' (*Norman Mailer Revisited* pp. 98-99). Mailer appears very early in the essay: while seated on a flight into San Francisco 'I got into a conversation with the man who sat next to the window, an Australian journalist named Moffit.' Their exchange is ultimately distinguished by what Mailer wishes he had said. A description of a back-and-forth on the topic of Kennedy conspiracy theories is instantly undercut with 'this conversation did not of course take place – an Astrojet is not the vehicle for metaphorical transactions, it is after all still another of the extermination chambers of the century – slowly the breath gives up some microcosmic portion of itself, green plastic and silver-green plastic, the nostrils breathe no odour of materials which existed once as elements of nature, no wood, no stone, no ore, time moulders like a sponge in the sink' (Mailer, 1979 p. 22).

More so than in the Kennedy or Liston-Patterson pieces we see here the division between Mailer-now and Mailer-then that is the grist to his reflective mill. The participant Mailer that is the object of the writer's scrutiny wanders the wilderness of his harried and circumscribed perspective. Much of the material that provides the social and political context of his peregrinations through the hustle and bustle of American events belongs diegetically to the later Mailer. This figure, while beholden to the immutable record of what actually happened is free to elaborate, to say what had not occurred to him at the time. This is the pathos of Mailer's self-representation: a thwartedness, an implied *esprit de l'escalier* that is to be glimpsed in the form of his writings but is unmistakable in what Elizabeth Hardwick describes as the 'anecdotal pile' that has accumulated about him. It is evident in his sputtering profanities that litter D.A. Pennebaker's *Town Bloody Hall*, and in his humiliating altercation with Rip Torn in *Maidstone*, which Mailer not only included in the final movie but inscribed into the published screenplay. 'Cocksucker' is his eternal reply to having had his head bashed in with a hammer.¹⁸ In the Republican Convention report it is thus not the Mailer who is sat on the plane but the writer whose vision he fulfils that extemporises a diagnosis for the nation:

'Why is it,' [Moffitt] asked, 'that all the new stuff you build here, including the interior furnishings on this airplane, looks like a child's nursery?'

[...]

'Because we want to go back, because the nerves grew in all the wrong ways. Because we developed habits which are suffocating us to death. I tell you,

¹⁸ See Appendix II, Part II.

man, we're sick to the edge of vomit and so we build our lives with materials which smell like vomit, polyethylene and Bakelite and fibreglass and styrene. Yes, our schools look like nurseries, and our factories and our temples, and our kitchens and our johns, our airports and our libraries and our offices, we are one great big bloody nursery attached to a doctor's waiting room, and we are sick, we're very sick, maybe we always were sick.' (Ibid. p. 23)

'Nobody spoke that way any more,' Mailer rues. Perhaps not; and perhaps if Mailer could he would be capable of more effectively influencing the body politic. On the other hand, even if he were able to command such rhetoric while *in situ* he would have found few willing to listen. In Mailer's eyes it is the quotidian and tactile reality of contemporary life in the United States which is compromised, and the participants in machine politics are competing over who gets to preside over this fallen world, this air-conditioned nightmare. Instead of Republicans and Democrats Mailer sees only the two wings of the plastic party. Setting the scene for a press conference by Governor William Scranton he notes that 'the carpet was an electric plastic green, the bridge seats (some two hundred of them) were covered in a plastic the colour of wet aspirin, and the walls were white, a hospital-sink white. The practical effect was to leave you feeling like a cold cut set in the white tray of a refrigerator' (Ibid. p. 30). Mailer's greatest frustration as a radical is that no one else seems to share his apprehension of the antiseptic reality in which we have been encased without our consent, and as such he distrusts enthusiasm for either of the traditional Left or Right. Although it never declares itself as such, "In the Red Light" is a protest against the American two-party system, and Mailer's attempt, his *essai*, is to decide how to cast his vote given the evidence presented at the Republican Convention. And Mailer can't conceal the degree to which Goldwater dangerously fascinates him. Or it might be more accurate to say that Mailer is drawn to the dialectic between the establishment, represented by Scranton, and the forces that Goldwater has tapped into. The choice before the nation is between Lyndon Johnson's Democrats and the Republican Party that will emerge from this confrontation. Observe how Mailer declares himself so much more explicitly than he ever did in the Kennedy essay:

Yes, the Goldwater movement excited the depths because the apocalypse was brought more near, and like millions of other whites, I had been leading a life which was a trifle too pointless and a trifle too full of guilt and my gullet was close to nausea with the endless compromises of an empty liberal centre. So I

followed the four days of the convention with something more than simple apprehension. The country was taking a turn, the colours were deepening, the knives of the afternoon were out, something of the best in American life might now be going forever; or was it altogether the opposite? And was the country starting at last to take the knots of its contradictions up from a premature midnight of nightmare into the surgical terrains of the open skin? Were we in the beginning, or turning the middle, of our worst disease? (Ibid. p. 48)

In the Kennedy piece and in “Ten Thousand Words a Minute,” he discovered an uncanny ability to read a crowd as a simultaneously homogenous and dynamic whole. In those two essays this facility is deployed in the service of Mailer’s expertise, to help explain Kennedy *qua* Hipster and the art of boxing to his readership. “In the Red Light” presents an advance on the technique of these earlier pieces by upping the stakes of his crowd reading. The resulting narrative bloat, which swells the essay into something resembling a novella of political reportage, indicates that Mailer’s gifts will eventually find their fullest expression in book length, but the form of the piece is the consequence of the wealth of raw material that assailed his perceptions at the convention. Four years earlier the slickness of what he had dubbed ‘Fitzgerald’s Army’ had aroused his scepticism, and by 1964 he knew well that conventions were the last place you could hope to glimpse the true selves of the candidates. Witnessing a Scranton press conference he notes that the speaker

Was like a fly annealed on the electric-light bulb of the refrigerator. The banks of lights were turned on him, movie lights, TV lights, four thousand watts in the eye must be the average price a politician pays for his press conference. It gives them all a high instant patina, their skin responding to the call of the wild; there is danger, because the press conference creates the moment when the actor must walk into the gears of the machine...it is to the interest of the speaker, or of his party, or his wing of the party, to make no particular news, but rather to repress news. Still the speaker must not be too dull, or he will hurt his own position, his remarks will be printed too far back in the paper. So he must be interesting without being revealing. (Ibid. pp. 30-31)

The image of the refrigerator recurs here as a symbol for technological encasement—the media and the subjects of their scrutiny share the same cage. A student of mediated non-

events, Mailer's attempt is to liberate himself and his perceptions: he must see the men, and it is by casting his gaze upon the followers of the different leaders that he most effectively discerns what they stand for. And the forces arrayed against Scranton and the Republican establishment are ferociously portrayed. From the West and Midwest 'there's the unheard cry of a wounded coyote in all the minor leagues of the Junior League, in all the tacky doings of each small town, the grinding grasp of envy rubs the liver of each big frog in his small pond, no hatred like hatred for the East in the hearts of those who were left behind.' The Wasps for Goldwater 'were full of psychic wastes they could not quit – they had moved into the Middle West and settled the West, they had won the country, and now they were losing it to immigrants who come after and the descendants of slaves. They had watched as their culture was adulterated, transported, converted into some surrealistic mélange of public piety *cum* rock and roll, product of the movies and television, of the mass media where sons of immigrants were so often king, yes the Wasps did not understand what was going on' (Ibid. pp. 34-35).

It might seem like we're missing one crucial component of the high Mailerian style in this work: the purchase on Gonzo verisimilitude that is guaranteed by a narratively and interpretatively necessary authorial presence. This insistent self-insertion—his need to place some sort of personal stamp on the form of events even before he has begun to make a literary form of them—is the anxious imperative of his experientialism. The Liston-Paterson essay is so useful to an analysis of the emerging Mailerian praxis because it casts such a stark light on its contours; perhaps Mailer was able to ham it up so egregiously because of the comparatively low stakes of the occasion. Recall how, in the Kennedy essay, Mailer presents himself as the inventor of the frame of reference best suited to explain the candidate. The unique testimony and guarantee of a unique style is secured by this supposedly resonant meeting. We know that Kennedy, 'your first hipster, Sergius O'Shaughnessy born rich,' wouldn't have gotten the reference because he hadn't read *The Deer Park*. The line of development is explained more fully in Appendix II, but it's interesting to note that at some point after meeting Kennedy Mailer began to envision the Marion Faye character in his imagined big novel as an enigmatic millionaire and presidential kingmaker. Still, in the first two essays examined in this chapter the author successfully engineers the material's summoning, as it were, of the Mailer character from out of hiding.

What's unique about "In the Red Light" is the same that thing sets it apart not only from its precursor essays but also from the book-length works of political journalism that followed. Illeism in *The Armies of the Night* is the masterstroke of the experientialist mentality, because

obviously no one else could have written the same book on the Pentagon protest. Illeism, even as hesitant false modesty as in the Kennedy encounter, is the public self-correction that Aristotle prescribed in *Rhetoric*: the strident and embattled monologue of *Advertisements for Myself* was a plaint for a supposedly diminished celebrity, and had to give way to a mode that would allow him to depict his resurgence as a public personality as an active process in the world. In the latter part of *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*, it's explicitly his fame and his obligations to file copy which kept him away from the worst carnage that Mayor Daley unleashed on the protestors. "In the Red Light" seems to rely on the Mailer character less than any of the works which flank it, which is to say that the essay's form makes no special pleading on behalf of experiential credentials. Note that what Mailer does with the Moffit opening is make a place-holder of his self-representation. The Mailer who went to the convention didn't know who he was going to vote for; he is scared of other people's politics, and he's scared of his own politics. He must void himself of polish and preconception, to achieve an open-minded ideal of neutral arbitration: he must convince his reader that he will reach his final, painful conclusion only after the most intense scrutiny.

But Merrill is correct: the continual stream of judgements belongs unmistakably to Mailer. He almost seems to disperse his presence, cut himself loose from the anchoring in solidly-imagined space that makes "Superman Comes to the Supermarket" a classic vision of Los Angeles. Daly City's Cow Palace is glimpsed much more murkily. For Mailer—seemingly everywhere and yet curiously static—it's like a revue stage throwing up a succession of gargoyles and other grotesques for his inspection. He greets each with a cavalcade of contempt, with a barely interrupted Jeremiad on plastics, on the oneness of psychic and physical malaise, of the best lacking all conviction and the worst being full of passionate intensity. 'The Wasps did not understand what was going on,' but the exploitation of their rage capital is being continually focalised through a narrative intelligence with a rehearsed point of view.

Mailer is here returning to his idea of vertical myth, and the implication that elections provide a chance for the nation to choose which image of itself to live by. When an electorate seems on the verge of voting for strongman rule, Richard Rorty says that the proper response—the most effective pragmatic audit—is to ask: what narratives about the outcomes of authoritarianism are the people considering such an option telling themselves? If they, to the horror of liberals, consider this as fulfilling rather than debauching American values, then what is their foundational myth of the nation? The narrative fuel to the Goldwater movement is an aggrieved nativism, a disenfranchisement from the promises of American modernity,

and a confrontationally xenophobic nationalism. Žižek draws on two key ideas—Sloterdijk’s *thymos* and Walter Benjamin’s divine violence—to explain the sort of populist spasm that Mailer’s essay depicts, and to this I would add a category of Benjamin’s largely neglected by Žižek; namely, mythical violence.

More so here than in his depiction of the attempted *putsch* for Stevenson, Mailer depicts the phenomenon around Goldwater as retributive, as the omen of an immense reckoning. If we conceive of the mass-surge for Goldwater as an instantiation of *thymos*—envy, rage, competition in the work of the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, who proposes it as the neglected counterpart to the better-known *eros*—then we may apply Žižek’s thoughts on divine violence to Mailer’s depiction. The concept derives from Walter Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence,” in which it is opposed to mythical violence: ‘If mythical violence is lawmaking, divine violence is law destroying...if the former is bloody, the latter is lethal without spilling blood.’ The former is identified with the founding of the polity and is equivalent with all legal violence while the latter ‘constitutes its antithesis in all respects...[it] strikes without warning, without threat, and does not stop short of annihilation. But in annihilating it expiates, and a deep connection between the lack of bloodshed and the expiatory character of this violence is unmistakable’ (Benjamin, 1989 p. 297). Divine violence restitutes those inequities which lie beyond the ken of the state’s monopoly on violence, and Žižek’s enterprise is to tether this category to ‘explosions of resentment,’ Sloterdijk’s *thymos*, within the framework of liberal democracy.

Part VI: Goldwater’s Army

Mailer is plainly terrified by what Goldwater has unleashed, a vituperative mass whose revolt against modernity he would no doubt have joined, had he not seen it as incomplete and misguided. ‘Because humans are partly animalistic,’ writes Cyrus Zirakzadeh, in an essay on Mailer’s left-conservatism: ‘they naturally enjoy physical challenges, risks, and thrills. In the absence of such outlets, they become anxious and restless and satisfy their feral desires vicariously,’ both through the nation’s prosecution of foreign wars and by the tub-thumping of demagogic politicians (Zirakzadeh p. 637). What William Gibson wrote in 2003 was already true in 1964: ‘The future is already here—it’s just not evenly distributed.’ Uncannily, Goldwater is seen talking in terms that might have had Mailer nodding along, were it not for the baseness of his appeal to American nativism: ‘Why should any of us trust the polls?’

They've been wrong before. They'll be wrong again. Man is superior to the machine. The thing to remember is that America is a spiritual country, we're founded on a belief in God, we may wander a little as a country, but we never get too far away' (Mailer, 1979 p. 44). Mailer might have shared his rejection of pollsters but was wise to the dog-whistle implied by Goldwater's folksy sentimentality: 'A good-looking woman got out and cheered. There was something in the way she did it. Just as strange Negroes scattered at random through a white audience may act in awareness of one another, so the Goldwater supporters in their thirties and forties gave off a similar confidence of holding the secret. This very good-looking woman yelled, "You go, Barry, you go, go." But there was anger and elation in her voice, as if she were declaring "We're going to get the country back." And Goldwater smiled modestly and went on' (Ibid. p. 45). This passage could be read over-hastily, with the reader fixating upon Mailer's quasi-mystical fetishisation of black ingenuity within the confines of oppression—but this would be at the expense of the subtle attention he draws to Goldwater's position on civil rights. If this is held in mind as Mailer's ultimate reason for voting Democrat then the asperity with which he portrays Goldwater's staff assumes a righteous anger:

But the total of all the professional Goldwater people one saw...was directly reminiscent of a guided tour through the F.B.I. in the Department of Justice Building in Washington...The tourists were mainly fathers and sons. The wives were rugged, the kind who are built for dungarees and a green plaid hunting jacket, the sisters and daughters plain and skinny, no expression. They all had lead shot for eyes, the lecturers and the tourists. Most of the boys were near twelve and almost without exception had the blank private faces which belong to kids who kill their old man with a blast, old lady with a butcher's knife, tie sister with telephone cord and hide out in the woods for three days. (Ibid. pp. 41-42)

Here we see the sharp side of Mailer's immersion in America, how his insight into the dream life of the nation's mainstream can be scurrilously weaponised. Goldwater's staff is conflated with the lumpen proletariat whose most unattractive feature (in Mailer's eyes) is their worship of those American institutions which embody the state's monopoly on violence, and both groups are subjected to his disdain. The viciousness of Mailer's portrait is qualified only by its unblinking specificity; no-one could accuse him, like the beltway isolates of

Twenty-First Century political discourse, of peddling a deracinated or rarefied critique of America's working class. What draws Mailer's attention is this demographic's capacity and taste for violence, which could deliver a victory for Goldwater because 'he would be breadwinner, husband, and rogue to the underprivileged of the psyche, he would strike a spark in many dry souls for he offered release to frustrations deeper than politics' (Ibid. p. 68). Mailer sees that he's not the only voter to have apprehended the lapsed nature of American reality, but what he most fears is the promise of politicians to harness this energy towards sinister ends. 'What a swindle was in the making, what an extinction of the best in conservative thought' (Ibid. p. 73). The final choice, as Mailer sees it, is grim.

Let us be clear what Barry Goldwater represented: rolling back civil rights, and escalation of the Cold War. It was on the former point at which Mailer finally declined to vote for the Republican candidate. The accelerationist in Mailer was tempted by the opportunity to hurry America along its fractious way; Žižek would describe this as a near indulgence in fetishistic disavowal: the forgetting necessary to the foundation of a political ethic, which is 'obliged to draw a line and ignore some sort of suffering' (Žižek p. 45). Mailer's vote for Johnson could also be argued to entail a similar self-induced forgetfulness, which he attempts to overcome by a comprehensive tallying of the political situation in America. It is with the greatest caution that I adduce the following passage, partly because I consider it one of the most vital in Mailer's political journalism, and partly for reasons which will become clear:

Yes, if we all worked to beat Barry, and got behind Lyndon and pushed, radicals and moderate Republicans, Negroes and Southern liberals, college professors and Cosa Nostra, cafe society and Beatniks-for-Johnson, were we all then going down a liberal superhighway into the deepest swamp of them all? For Johnson was intelligent enough to run a total land, he had vast competence, no vision, and the heart to hold huge power, he had the vanity of a Renaissance prince or a modern dictator, whereas Barry might secretly be happier with his own show daily on radio. If Goldwater were elected, he could not control the country without moving to the center; moving to the center he would lose a part of the Right, satisfy no one, and be obliged to drift still further Left, or moving back to the Right would open schisms across the land which could not be closed. Goldwater elected, America would stand revealed, its latent treacheries would pop forth like boils; Johnson elected, the drift would go on, the San Francisco Hiltons would deploy among us. Under

Goldwater, the odds were certainly greater that nuclear war would come, but under Johnson we could move from the threat of total war to war itself with nothing to prevent it; the anti-Goldwater forces which might keep the country too divided to go to war would now be contained within Johnson. Goldwater promised to lead the nation across the edge of a precipice, Johnson would walk us through the woods, perchance to quicksand itself. Goldwater would open us to the perils of our madness, Johnson would continue our trip into the plague. Goldwater could accelerate the Negro Revolution to violence and disaster - Johnson might yet be obliged to betray it from within. And what a job could be done! Who in such a pass should receive the blessing of a vote - the man who inspired the deepest fear, or the man who encouraged us to live in a lard of guilt cold as the most mediocre of our satisfied needs? (Mailer, 1979 pp. 72-73)

The rhetoric here risks detaching itself from the subject matter—the modern reader could scarcely be faulted for substituting the names of the 2016 candidates and nodding in stunned assent. But the idea of a Hillary Clinton victory is banished forever to the world of the counterfactual, and we continue to live with Johnson’s legacy. The fact remains that Mailer was tempted to vote for Goldwater, and the above peroration—while still calling for his defeat—explains why. Poirier’s concept of the minority within helps us appreciate Mailer’s most penetrating insight as a political journalist, helps us see him as a prophet of the white rage which would elect Donald Trump to the presidency fifty-two years later. His commitment to the location of a minority incentive within the seeming majority is what sets him apart from the commentariat which merely balked at Goldwater and Trump, which saw their supporters as mere rabble. Mailer takes his own search for minority incentives as license to indulge in the most vicious caricatures of the Goldwater people while also empathetically inhabiting their position. At times, Mailer seems so open to the anti-modern claims of the movement that we apprehend the ideological blinkers of the hegemonic imagination, which allows Mailer to imagine and proffer himself as a neutral arbiter. Žižek notes the insidious dynamic of Sloterdijk’s *thymos*: ‘The problem is that there is never enough rage capital. This is why it is necessary to borrow from or combine with other rages: national or cultural’ (Žižek p. 159). Mailer is wise to what Goldwater’s rhetorical co-option of positions that the author would otherwise be sympathetic to; it is the aggregated combination of all those different rages which Mailer exhorts his readers to reject.

How might some of these issues and ideas translate into contemporary American terms? One could propose that the libertarian fringe movement of the Three Percenters—so called after the erroneous claim that only three percent of the Thirteen Colonies’ population fought in the War of Independence—constitute the dream of a mythical violence. Pledged to protest against and resist by force the Federal Government’s encroachments upon constitutional rights, especially those guaranteed by the Second Amendment, this paramilitary group styles itself as keeping alive the foundational spirit of the republic. Their dreamed-of confrontation with state power and the resulting conflagration would result in sacrificial violence: aesthetic, ethical, and religious. ‘It is mythical violence that demands sacrifice, and holds power over bare life’ (Žižek p. 168). The presidential campaigns of Barry Goldwater and Donald Trump, if viewed as mass movements fed on resentment, can be seen as divine violence in that they sought to bloodlessly annex ‘the domain of sovereignty, the domain in which killing is neither an expression of a personal pathology, nor a crime, nor a sacred sacrifice’ (Ibid.). As Žižek states:

Divine violence should thus be conceived as divine in the precise sense of the old Latin motto *vox populi, vox dei*: not in the perverse sense of ‘we are doing it as mere instruments of the People’s Will,’ but as the heroic assumption of the solitude of sovereign decision...When those outside the structured social field strike ‘blindly,’ demanding and enacting immediate justice/vengeance, this is divine violence. Recall, a decade or so ago, the panic in Rio de Janeiro when crowds descended from the favelas into the rich part of the city and started looting and burning supermarkets. This was indeed divine violence...They were like biblical locusts, the divine punishment for men’s sinful ways. This divine violence strikes out of nowhere, a means without end. (Žižek p. 171)

The proposition that either Goldwater or Trump struck ‘out of nowhere’ will raise no end of protests and accusations of Beltway blinkeredness. Mailer’s minority inclinations anticipate these, and expose the weaknesses of consensus thinking that allowed the political establishment to be surprised by these explosions of resentment. His achievement—perhaps the most valuable in his political journalism—is to overturn liberal discourses which would portray these movements as quasi- or proto-fascistic and to expose the emancipatory rage that these demagogues exploited. Because Mailer is free from the multi-cultural neuroses which

lead modern commentators to condescend to Trump's heartland base, he is able to empathise with their self-image as an embattled minority within their own country. This formulation cuts to the problematic heart of Mailer's method and Poirier's articulation of it, which plainly predate our current identity politics. Among myriad other reasons for Mailer's current neglect, the license he grants himself to appropriate aspects of minority experience and dole it out to various groups of disgruntled whites must read like arrant blackface—minstrelsy that makes a mockery of the genuinely excluded and disenfranchised. Even if he quietly retired the overtly racial paradigms of "The White Negro," that essay still set the pattern for his blithe appropriations. At least among the conscientious and educated young who once made up Mailer's readership, the tenets of identity politics are acquiring the ineluctability of fact. If they no longer turn to Mailer, as their precursors did, to try to make sense of a fractious reality, it's because they consider him an embodiment of the values they have rejected. In the final chapter I speculate on what we stand to lose by so summarily dismissing Mailer.

In the next chapter, we will apprehend some of the starkest features of Mailer's existential politics: distaste for what he described in "The White Negro" as the sophisticated inhibitions of civilisation, and an exhortation towards the sort of decisive action which is sanctioned by moving beyond those scruples. His anti-liberal animus, as we shall see in his depiction of both the establishment and the anti-war movement, was really a dangerous impatience with the dull work of maintaining technocratic liberal democracy. Mailer's quest was always for a more exciting, more viscerally-felt vision of life, which sent him off searching for threats to the liberal order which he could examine and stop short of endorsing while still making them vivid and terrifying to the reader. We're reminded of how in thrall he was to the material furnished by history. Mailer's method was to thrive on American disorder. The idea wasn't to salve it but to exploit it.

At any rate, Goldwater was buried under the biggest landslide in American history; Johnson's 61%-39% margin wouldn't be bettered until Nixon's vanquishing of George McGovern eight years later. The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, passed in the August before Johnson's victory, gave his administration licence to expand American military involvement in the Vietnam War. *Cannibals and Christians* was dedicated to the President 'whose name inspired young men to cheer for me in public.' He may have that same president to thank for his greatest achievement as a writer: *The Armies of the Night*, which comes next.

Chapter Four: “But Mailer could feel no sense of belonging to any of these people.”

‘Are you Norman Mailer?’ one of the reporters said nervously, even though he knew that it was Norman Mailer. He stood there with a pad and pencil in his hands waiting for Norman Mailer to say that he was Norman Mailer, so that he could write it down.

‘Got to get to work,’ Mailer said and walked over to a waiting car that was to take him to the town.

‘Was that Norman Mailer?’ the young reporter would say to his colleague. Even his colleague was put off by that and looked away in embarrassment.

‘That was Norman Mailer,’ the young reporter would say to himself now because Norman Mailer was gone and his colleague was looking away.

‘Norman Mailer,’ the young reporter wrote down on his pad. That’s all he wrote.

Norman Mailer.

Richard Brautigan, *Sombrero Fallout: A Japanese Novel*

The Armies of the Night is the Mailerian masterpiece. If we hold this statement to be self-evident then we must also grapple with the full weight of both the approbation and the ambivalence that it contains. The book stands at the centre of its author’s achievement, roughly in the middle of what we ought to consider his creative prime. It is the culmination of a mode of self-examination that commenced with the assembly of *Advertisements for Myself* a decade a previously, and it preceded the appearance of *The Executioner’s Song* by just over as long a period of time. That later book is both the great work promised by the earlier anthology and something strangely other than Mailerian—at least in the sense that I have been attempting to propose—and constitutes a retreat from or abandonment of the style that he had been honing since the late Fifties. I have suggested that the success which ensued from *Advertisements for Myself* was something of an accident, that it determined the subsequent shape of Mailer’s career by suggesting to various patrons, critics, and power-brokers that his talents leaned towards the enterprise of journalism. *The Armies of the Night* presents the full flowering of the mode that Clay Felker had intuited would be the ideal exercise of his energies. So decisive is the book’s consolidation of and improvement over the style of the occasional pieces collected in *The Presidential Papers* and *Cannibals and Christians* that it bestows a retroactive order upon them. Poirier repeatedly insists that we

think of Mailer as the author of one enormous continuing work.¹ So if *The Armies of the Night* is but one chapter it is the narrative and structural climacteric. The stylistic breakthrough is the objective-correlative of an epiphany in the life of the protagonist. The hesitant and contingent attempts of the precursor works to reconcile the assignment to the reporter are subordinated to a teleology—a sequence of intelligible development which culminates in the Pentagon protest.

The Armies of the Night is composed of two parts. The longer Book One, “History as a Novel: The Steps of the Pentagon,” was published in *Harper’s*; Book Two, “The Novel as History: The Battle of the Pentagon,” ran in *Commentary*. First I wish to explore what emerges if we treat Mailer’s first section as the novel that it claims to be. What is liberated in his style by the illeistic approach, what insights does it allow him to disclose? Then I will examine his change to the more panoptic perspective of the second section, and question why he kept its findings discrete from those yielded by the peregrinations of the Mailer character. Further developing my previous chapter’s examination of political violence, I will attempt an exposition of the ‘existential politics’ that he propounds in this work before taking a close look at the character named Norman Mailer whom he offers up for our inspection. What is he like, how is he both unique and representative, what is his relationship to the intelligence that has crafted the book in which he resides? These questions are arguably perennial to the consideration of non-fiction, but they inhere in the Mailerian style. His writing continually raises these issues in order to answer them with the substance of what it offers. His method, as we have seen over the previous chapters, achieves Sontag’s abrogation of the style-content duality by commencing its operations prior to any act of writing. And by forcing his personal actions into the fabric of his subject matter he unites style and content under the auspices of the author function. But also encoded in the Mailerian style is a profound anxiety over not only agency but also impact. Mailer is indebted to the events of the world and the unfolding of history for his material, and his goal is that his words should have some reciprocal effect upon their source. Perhaps the Mailerian style—which is the Mailerian vision—could be summed up by his most unfortunate role model, André Malraux: ‘The artist is not the

¹ ‘To make a structural and not qualitative comparison, each of his works bears a relation to the whole of his *oeuvre* like that of an act to a play of Shakespeare’s. In Shakespeare the terms set up initially, very often in the first scene, invariably turn up at the end accumulated, enriched, transformed but still there to make us feel – as if by some steady drumming of sound – that the career of the words has been the heartbeat of the play, that as they issue from the trials and circumstances which they have helped call forth, they are a measure of destiny in the play and of the fate of its heroes. While there is a later as distinguished from an early style in Mailer, as assuredly as there is in James, both can be traced back to some generative mix of obsessive terms and metaphors’ (Poirier, 1972 pp. 63-64).

transcriber of the world, he is its rival.’ When the time came to write *The Executioner’s Song*, Mailer would avail himself of the tape recorder and achieve something like Lionel Trilling identified in the novels of Theodore Dreiser: an image of reality in America. But before accomplishing that pellucid work Mailer had to work through his discontinuous, shimmering image of himself. It is through this distorted field that the reader experiences the American turbulence of 1967.

Part I: Mailer’s Historical Novel

‘On a day somewhat early in September, the year of the first March on the Pentagon, 1967, the phone rang one morning and Norman Mailer, operating on his own principle of war games and random chance, picked it up. This was not characteristic of Mailer’ (Mailer, 1968 p. 14). On the other end of the phone is the author Mitch Goodman, who would recruit Mailer for the march on the Pentagon against the war in Vietnam. Mailer is ambivalent—‘One’s own literary work was the only answer to the war’—but reluctantly signs up for the action (p. 19). On Thursday, October 19th, he flies from New York to Washington D.C., and at a party ‘given by an attractive liberal couple’ we’re introduced to the characters who will define his experience of the coming days: the lawyer Ed de Grazia, the thinker Dwight Macdonald, and the poet Robert Lowell (p. 23).² Mailer himself is foregrounded in terms of his etiolated career: we learn that he has been playing at filmmaker, and we see him brood over the receptions accorded to his last two novels.³ Lowell’s wife, the novelist Elizabeth Hardwick, ‘had just published a review of *An American Dream* in *Partisan Review* which had done its best to disembowel the novel’ (p. 31). With the deck stacked against its protagonist, the novel in these early chapters plays like a comedy of manners and a hatchet job:

If the republic was now managing to convert the citizenry to a plastic mass, ready to be attached to any manipulative gung ho, the author was ready to cast much of the blame for such success into the undernourished lap, the over-psychologized loins, of the liberal academic intelligentsia. They were of course politically opposed to the present programs and movements of the republic in Asian foreign policy, but this political difference seemed no more

² Mailer’s path had crossed with de Grazia’s at the Boston obscenity trial of *Naked Lunch*. De Grazia represented the novel in court, and Mailer provided expert testimony for the defence.

³ See Appendix II, Part II for a sense of Mailer’s extra-literary activities during this period.

than a quarrel among engineers. Liberal academics...were the natural managers of that future air-conditioned vault where the last of human life would still exist. (p. 25)

The party moves to the nearby Ambassador Theatre for a variety evening of music and speeches. The event's purpose is to raise money for the bail funds and legal fees of young men who will be burning their draft cards on the steps of the Justice Department on the following day. Mailer has demanded to perform as Master of Ceremonies, and the reader knows exactly how well that's going to go. Courtesy of the October 27th issue of *Time*, the novel opened with a prolepsis of Mailer's 'unscheduled scatological solo,' which sees the author 'slurping liquor from a coffee mug...mumbling and spewing obscenities.' Even beyond his hijinks at the theatre Mailer's fate has been sealed by the writ of *Time*: 'By the time the action shifted to the Pentagon, Mailer was perky enough to get himself arrested by two Marshals' (p. 13).

We come to the novel's first major set-piece, with the protagonist's performance a spectacular catastrophe. Drunk and truculent as per *Time*'s account, 'Mailer's senses are now tuned to absolute pitch of sheer error – he marks a ballot for absolute pitch – he is certain there is a profound pall in the audience' (p. 44). Mailer embarrasses himself, his audience, and his peers. It falls to Lowell—who over the days' events emerges as something resembling Mailer's foil and conscience—to pacify the audience with his poetry, as well as his equipoise and sense of occasion. Here we see our novelist off-stage, in self-flagellation: 'Mailer was depressed. He had betrayed himself again. The end of his introduction belonged in a burlesque house – he worked his own worst veins, like a man on the edge of a bankruptcy trying to collect hopeless debts. He was fatally vulgar!' (p. 54). He is cursed with a paranoid self-importance which must tether every rejection to some larger failure in the culture at large. He cannot help seeing a parallel between the unimpressed Ambassador audience and those critics who sneered at the scatological language in *Why Are We in Vietnam?*: 'What was disappointing was the crankiness across the country...[which] was not growing up so much as getting a premature case of arthritis' (p. 59). Bruised by this public humiliation, feeling out of step with the liberal mentality, Mailer retires to the Hay-Adams Hotel; 'Of course if this were a novel, Mailer would spend the rest of the night with a lady' (p. 63).

Named for the site where the homes of Secretary of State John Hay and historian Henry Adams once stood, the hotel was a serendipitous pick for the writer. That Mailer's illeism has

a precursor in *The Education of Henry Adams* (which, at the very least, he probably would have read at Harvard) has gone unremarked upon in most of the critical literature. Perhaps the point seems too self-evident to be worth making, but Michael Cowan draws a canny parallel between the texts by describing both as ‘the rather ironic story of an education whose value as preparation for succeeding in or at least understanding a rapidly changing modern world is at best ambiguous...Like Adams, Mailer sees history as an accelerating movement from unity to multiplicity’ (Cowan p. 106). As Adams had lived through the Civil War to see Theodore Roosevelt send the Great White Fleet around the globe in advertisement of a nascent American hegemony, Mailer had gone from participating in the last mass war that all Americans could be said to have believed in to witnessing the fissures rent in the body politic by the Vietnam War.

Still, homage isn’t Mailer’s mode. Indeed, illeism seems so natural a form for his personality that homage is foreclosed because of the subservience it implies. It seems so decisively his ideal style that we start to consider the precursor works as workshop products: rudiments and prototypes. What stylistic elements does the deictic readjustment bring into focus and consolidate, which concerns does it quell? These early, pre-protest passages might be illuminatingly compared with the author’s more harried deployments of the Mailer persona as plot device and heuristic in the materials covered in the previous chapter. One might be vividly reminded of the Mailer who gate-crashed Liston’s press conference and note that the later Mailer who embarrasses himself at the Ambassador Theatre is both a more opaque and a shapelier personality. It’s up to the reader to decipher that Mailer on assignment for *Esquire* will sink to any length to spike the tepid material served up by events; once this has been achieved, his motivations become transparent. Mailer the New Journalist thus writes unreliable first person narration. He is able to offer his own actions as a mystery entangled with that of the title fight because, as James Wood has written, unreliable narration has to be reliably unreliable in order to be legible. ‘For Mailer, and probably for any writer of the first rank,’ according to Poirier, ‘questions about literary form are simultaneously questions about the shape of human consciousness’ (Poirier, 1972 p. 145). Mailer’s was shaped by deadline panic.

No such excuses for humiliating himself and his peers on that October evening, however. Illeism presents itself as a solution by seeming more objective than first person narration even while it dispenses with that voice’s obligation towards either full disclosure or artful misdirection. A celebrity for twenty years, he was used to reading reports about the bad behaviour of some character named Norman Mailer. Illeism can be read as a counterpunch, a

challenge accepted: no one would be able write one so as well as the man himself. At the level of writing as grind, craft, and pursuit of the aleatoric, illeism could most charitably read as a bulwark against the worst tendencies of narcissism. Perhaps the prospect of repeatedly calling attention to himself in the third person might stay his hand from repeated or prolonged self-justification or reports on his mental processes. But really, we get that anyway, focalised and transmitted to the reader through the third-person narration. The gesture allows him the best of his writings of the early Sixties: he could be both anti-heroic protagonist, as confusing to himself as to his reader, and an utterly lucid interpreter of events raging around him.

We re-join our hero on Friday afternoon, as he and his compatriots grumble over press coverage of the previous evening: 'The papers distorted one's actions, and that was painful enough, but they wrenched and garbled and twisted and broke one's words and sentences until a good author always sounded like an incoherent overcharged idiot in newsprint' (p. 76). From a gathering at the Church of the Reformation, 212 E. Capitol Street, the protestors move to the Justice Department. Mailer is restless; 'he was sufficiently devil-ridden to need a little action from time to time, and the promise of these pacifistic moods seemed to be that they would go on forever' (p. 79). Speeches are given and many fine words addressed to the gravity of the situation—none finer, Mailer feels, than those summoned up by Lowell:

It was said softly, on a current of intense indignation and Lowell had never looked more dignified nor more admirable. Each word seemed to come on a separate journey from the poet's mind to his voice, along a winding route or through an exorbitant gate. Each word cost him much – Lowell's fine grace was in the value words had for him, he seemed to emit a horror at the possibility of squandering them or leaving them abused, and political speeches had never seemed more difficult for him, and on the consequence, more necessary for statement. (p. 85)

The novel's main sequence of events commences with the dawn of Saturday. Mailer has breakfast with Lowell and Macdonald; the three men will not be separated until Mailer's arrest later in the day. They 'did not have to talk or argue, they had learned what politics they had, each in his own separate way, and so they did not need to discuss the sound-as-brickwork-logic-of-the-next-step. The March tomorrow would more or less work or not work. If it didn't, the Left would always find a new step.' Before the phenomenon of the so-called New Left Mailer allows himself the luxury of doubt, which seems the sober response

to a younger generation that, for its having been born into a technologized world, 'also believed in LSD, in witches, in tribal knowledge, in orgy, and revolution. It had no respect whatsoever for the unassailable logic of the next step: belief was reserved for the revelatory mystery of the happening where you did not know what was going to happen next; that was what was good about it' (pp. 97-98). If Mailer is intrigued it is because he can perhaps claim a small part in having made this esoteric weather. If the action is to have any impact, then it must reside in its essential mystery and in rejecting the technocratic rhetoric of outcomes and the next step; 'the bureaucrats of the American centre...were aghast at any political activity which ignored' these values (p. 99). The same ethos can be said to characterise Mailer's own approach to the march: he came not as a writer but as a participant; only later did he decide to write about it.

As the trio make their way 'through the long grass up the long flat breast of hill at the base of Washington Monument and looked down the length of the reflecting pool to Lincoln Memorial perhaps one-half mile away,' Mailer drifts off in contemplation of the nation's martial past (p. 100). As their massed ranks come into sight the armies of the night commingle with the armies of the dead, the clamouring of the former 'seemed to go all the way back through a galaxy of bugles to the cries of the Civil War and the first trumpet note to blow the attack. The ghosts of old battles were wheeling like clouds over Washington today.' He sees them, 'this army with a thousand costumes': 'many dressed like the legions of Sgt Pepper's band, some were gotten up like Arab sheiks, or in Park Avenue doormen's greatcoats,' and more besides in all variety of get-up and motley (pp. 102-103). But these sartorial declarations of multifarious variety are at odds with the distressing signs of group-think:

Names like SANE or Women Strike for Peace sounded like brand names which could have been used as happily to sell aspirin... it was more that the Novelist begrudged the dimming of what was remarkable in the best of these young men because some part of their nervous system would have to attach vision and lust and dreams of power, glory, justice, sacrifice, and future purchases on heaven to these deadening letters. (p. 106)

As well-known and mediagenic faces, Mailer and his two friends are placed at the front of the march as it makes its slow way down the half-mile to Virginia after the day's speeches. Progress is halting and frustrating: 'it is possible any other group so large, so leaderless, so

infused with anxiety for the unknown situations ahead, and so packed upon the [Arlington Memorial] bridge would have erupted, but finally it was a pacifist crowd.’ But the exhilaration of event and moment prove intoxicating:

A great happiness came back into the day as if finally one stood under some mythical arch in the great vault of history, helicopters buzzing about, chop-chop, and the sense of America divided on this day now liberated some undiscovered patriotism in Mailer so that he felt a sharp searing love for his country in this moment and on this day...he was in fact in love with himself for having less fear than he thought he might have – he knew suddenly then he had less fear now than when he was a young man; in some part of himself at least, he had grown; if less innocent, less timid...they were going to face the symbol, the embodiment, no, call it the true and high church of the military-industrial complex, the Pentagon, blind five-eyed star of a subtle oppression which had come to America out of the very air of this century. (p. 125)

The parking lot of the Pentagon is a festival of dissent. Bands are playing, speakers are in high dudgeon; our trio ‘were hardly in the mood for further addresses...combat was getting nearer.’ Led by Allen Ginsberg the crowd joins together in a spell to levitate that ‘five-sided tip on the spout of a spray can to be used under the arm’ (p. 129). ‘On acidic journeys had the hippies met the witches and the devils and the cutting edge of all primitive awe, the savage’s sense of explosion’ (p. 135). The entire area is abuzz and confusion reigns: ‘the N.L.F. [National Liberation Front], yes, the American branch of the Vietcong was rushing across the parking lot for an assault on the unseen Pentagon’ (p. 138). That same group is later seen in a retreat as abrupt as its appearance: ‘Mailer’s imagination so clearly conceived MPs chasing them with bayonets that for an instant he did literally see fixed bayonets’ (p. 140). Mailer, Lowell, and Macdonald resolve to get arrested; crossing a line of military police, Mailer finds himself alone and in custody—‘yes, he was more than a visitor, he was in the land of the enemy now, he would get to see their face’ (p. 143).

I would argue that it is this juncture which gives the material of the book its special power. Clowning around at major sporting events notwithstanding, Mailer was a diligent journalist; one need look no further than the easy ride given to Henry Kissinger over a lunchtime interview in *St. George and the Godfather* to see how his good behaviour could translate into

a soft touch.⁴ As mentioned previously, his yearning for proximity to the violent scenes which erupted in Chicago during the 1968 Democratic Convention was tempered by the duties of being on assignment for *Harper's*. That publication would devote an entire issue to the first part of *The Armies of the Night*, but Mailer's actions on that day were those of a citizen, not a writer. Let us briefly imagine a counter-text, the copy Mailer might have filed if he had been contracted to cover the protest in advance. It probably would have been another densely-packed magazine item, its form and tone largely dictated in advance. The freedoms enjoyed by Mailer as participant and eventually recorder of the participant's experiences are illuminated by counterfactual juxtaposition as possibilities that would have been precluded by the demands of beat journalism. Instead the rising action and escalating involvement of the Mailer character we probably would have gotten something a lot more planate and peremptory. We probably would have lost both the Ambassador Theatre antics and everything that follows. Fluxes in the high Mailerian style have been explained with reference to Sontag's notion of the Caucus-race of form and content; what's fascinating is how these seem to depend on Mailer's relationship with the literary-industrial complex, whether he was pitching the idea or contracted to cover it. Note as well how much of the ensuing action—which becomes increasingly intimate and personal as we're shunted off the world stage and into the realms of the disciplinary and the carceral—emerges from the *frisson* of Mailer's fame.

'After twenty years of radical opinions, he was finally under arrest for a real cause...He felt his own age, forty-four...as if he had arrived, as if this picayune arrest had been his Rubicon' (p. 149). Mailer is placed in the van which will take him and other arrestees to the U.S. Post Office in Alexandria. 'He kept searching the distance for Lowell and Macdonald whom he assumed would be following any minute' (p. 150). Marshals take his details and others join him in the van, most conspicuously 'a young man with straight blond hair and a Nazi armband on his sleeve...next came the suspicion that this was not an accident, but a provocation in the making' (p. 152). Mailer gets into a row and staring contest with the Nazi, but he reserves his most intense and interior disdain for the Marshal—a man who believes that 'the evil was without, America was threatened by a foreign disease, and the Marshal was threatened to the core of his sanity by any one of the first fifty of Mailer's ideas which would

⁴ 'Since he also gave every sign of the vanity and vulnerability and ruddy substance of a middle-aged man with a tendency to corpulence – the temptation to eat too much had to be his private war! – his weaknesses would probably be as amenable to women as his powers, and that German voice, deep, fortified with an accent that promised emoluments, savouries, even meat gravies of culture at the tip of one's tongue – what European wealth! – produced an impression more agreeable than his photographs' (Mailer, 1998 p. 839). This is finely wrought, if a touch camp.

insist that the evil was within, that the best in America was being destroyed by what in itself seemed next best' (p. 156). A near-confrontation is defused, and the van goes on its way.

Spirits are high and solidarity prevails on the bus; chants and slogans help pass the time en route to the processing centre. His encounter with the Marshal—that avatar of white bread and picket fence Americana—moves him to a minatory rumination:

If one could find the irredeemable madness of America (for we are a nation where weeds will breed in the gilding tank) it was in those late afternoon race track faces coming into the neon lights of the parimutuel windows, or those early morning hollows in the eye of the soul in places like Vegas where the fevers of America go livid in the hum of the night, and Grandmother, the church-goer, orange-hair burning bright now crooned over the One-Arm bandit, pocketbook open, driving those half-dollars home, home to the slot.

'Madame, we are burning children in Vietnam.'

'Boy, you just go get yourself lost. Grandma's about ready for a kiss from the jackpot.'

The burned child is brought into the gaming hall on her hospital bed.

'Madame, regard our act in Vietnam.'

'I hit! I hit! Hot deedy, I hit. Why, you poor burned child – you just brought me good luck. Here, honey. Here's a lucky half-dollar in reward. And listen sugar, tell the nurse to change your sheets. Those sheets sure do stink. I hope you ain't got gangrene. Hee, hee, hee, hee. I get a supreme pleasure mixing with gooks in Vegas.' (pp. 162-163)⁵

'Perhaps fifteen men shared the cell' in the Post Office 'in which he now found himself, and they immediately characterised themselves by their first action, a social process he had noticed in new schools, in hospital wards, and in prison' (p. 170). Mailer meditates upon the nature of their confinement, berates himself for his naïve optimism: 'The only reason he had

⁵ 'Each character or item in Mailer's work since the mid-fifties is magnified by his effort to illumine the page, to make the page "filled," and his quite proper justification for this is that each thing really is more than it seems to be or is taken to be. It is a "vector in a network of forces." The network is of course only his language, his creation, but it is insistently evocative of forces that have to be imagined as at least possibly at work in the political, sexual, psychic life of the times. The grandmother with orange hair in *The Armies of the Night*, the hippies or Mayor Daley in *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*, the various political and athletic figures in *The Presidential Papers* and *Cannibals and Christians* are all described with great deftness of allusion because for Mailer they bring into remarkable focus elements from various sectors of American life which are called out of hiding, as it were, at times of political or other public extravaganzas' (Poirier p. 89).

expected to be out of jail in half an hour was the covert impression he had of government as brotherly; dull but brotherly; ten thousand hours of television, ten million words of newsprint added up to one thundering misapprehension of all the little details of institutional life' (p. 172). In a rare piece of domestic intelligence, he broods upon his four marriages and his current wife, who 'was as opposed to the war in Vietnam as he was, except when she was very drunk and then she would talk of her brothers in Vietnam (p. 183). He gives out a hundred and fifty dollars to fellow prisoners towards their fines; he himself is taken along with others to the processing centre in Occoquan, Virginia. The fighting spirit on the night's second bus trip galvanises him, makes him curiously pleased to have not been released.

'That night at Occoquan, Mailer had a long reverie about the war in Vietnam before he fell asleep'— to which we will return (p. 186). He steels himself for his hearing the next day; he passes the time in conversation with his fellow detainees. Noam Chomsky, who would later praise this book, turns up at this juncture as Mailer's bunkmate. There is great warmth in the portrait of the linguist and M.I.T.-lifer: 'a slim sharp-featured man with an ascetic expression, and an air of gentle but absolute integrity...Chomsky – by all odds a dedicated teacher – seemed uneasy at the thought of missing class on Monday' (pp. 191-192). The following morning Mailer 'felt as if he had been on an all night party in a college dormitory with no girls, no booze, just lots of cigarette smoke and endless conversation' (p. 208). Lawyers arrive and the protestors are advised to plead *nolo contendere*; 'the fines were running at \$25 and the sentences were for five days but suspended. Plus the written promise not to return to the Pentagon for six months. This did not seem unreasonable,' yet Mailer wishes to plead guilty.

De Grazia makes his belated entrance and Mailer's hearing before U.S. Commissioner Scaife begins. Scaife is inclined to punish Mailer more severely—'You are a mature man, responsible for your ideas, well-known, and you exert influence upon many young people'— and threatens him with a thirty day sentence, of which twenty-five will be suspended (p. 218). Mailer is oddly flattered by the seriousness and regard implied by Scaife's position, but also gripped by fear: 'since the assassination of Kennedy, no political prisoner could necessarily trust an American jail again, not even a political amateur for a routine five days' (p. 220). De Grazia and his colleague, Philip Hirschkop, lay on the theatrics and legalistic technicalities; the finer points go over their client's head, but we're invited to share in his delight at the final *coup*:

[Hirschkop] entered a plea that the prisoner be let out on his own recognizance...The Commissioner asked on what ground could Counsel establish Defendant's right to said provision of the Federal Bail Reform Act? Hirschkop then pointed out that the Commissioner had given the thirty-day sentence to the Defendant on the ground that he was a mature and responsible individual. (p. 224)

A free man, he then 'began his history of the Pentagon. It insisted on becoming a history of himself over four days, and therefore was history in the costume of a novel' (p. 228).

Part II: A Character Named Norman Mailer

As I hope the preceding summary makes clear, *The Armies of the Night* constitutes a huge advance on its predecessors. Their inconsistencies and hesitations are triumphantly resolved. Unbound by the prior obligations of commission and unconfined to a specific beat, as it were, the work is characterised, above all else, by its freedom, because its author is at un-anxious liberty to place himself at the centre of proceedings. I have previously proposed that the foundational tension or pressure at work in his journalism is the gap between the Mailer who acted—whether in conversation with Kennedy or humiliating himself at Liston's press conference—and the later Mailer who bestows a literary form on those actions. But isn't this arguably the grist to *any* memoirist or autobiographical writer's mill? Yes, but with the turn to illeistic narration Mailer doubles down into this doubling of the self and makes explicit the temporal split between the entity which lives and acts and the later intelligence which takes the past as its material. What's fascinating about the Mailerian mode is how it provides no prolepsis of the task and process of writing. Instead, the author's frustration and perplexity before the ineluctable record of how his past self behaved is woven into the mono-perspectival narration. It strikes one that this work—excepting the comparatively self-effacing style of *The Executioner's Song*—is the closest Mailer came to writing a narrative in the spirit of the Existentialism he so hazily grasped. Whatever Mailer understood by the term, he claimed William Faulkner as its first American exemplar, and Alfred Kazin praised Faulkner's 'sense of language as parallel to action, another kind of action, able to write history but not to change it...[Man] could realise his experience only after he had lived it.

The doing and the realising are inaccessible to each other, and this also is the human conflict' (Kazin, 1971 p. 28).

In *The Armies of the Night* the Mailer character stands as a lesson in the unfathomable particularity of every human action and interaction. Like Kafka's Josef K or the Meursault of Camus, one gets the sense that his acquiescence to the inscrutable logic by which events unfold is as much a mystery to him as it is to the reader. So what is the Mailer who marched on the Pentagon like? Laura Adams has characterised the book as taking its form from his 'progress from the mock-heroic to the heroic through the increasing significance of his confrontations...revealing that a man can be a buffoon one moment and a hero the next' (Adams p. 127). Where Adams restricts herself to the words on the page, a critic like James Breslin defaults to a barely concealed personal diatribe:

But I think that Mailer's prose is, on the contrary, alternately flat and overblown, self-consciously stiff yet soft around the edges, consistently emptying events of their potential affective power. Most often, reading Mailer's prose in *The Armies of the Night* is like listening to the performance of a five-foot two-inch counter-tenor who has been asked to sing the bass part in a Wagnerian opera: what we hear is the nervous affectation (to use one of Mailer's own phrases) of 'a large voice.' (Breslin p. 164)

One might say that Adams reviews the book while Breslin reviews the reputation; surely the latter approach is more in line with the Mailerian ethos. In this work, more than any since *Advertisements for Myself*, Mailer offers up the substance of his character for the reader's moral audit. In the intermediate reportage of the previous chapter one might object to him *qua* journalist, and the objection would make its case on a point of taste: perhaps one thought him too easily impressed by Kennedy, or that the Gonzo intervention in "Ten Thousand Words a Minute" was a solution in search of a problem. The form of "In the Red Light" might have suggested that Mailer was cooling on questions of point-of-view and authorial presence, and more content to play it straight. But the occasion called for a peremptory tone—Goldwater had to be stopped. In *The Armies of the Night*, Mailer advances the contradictions of his own personality as a matter to be explored in tandem with the mystery of the protest action. The opacities of his character are suggested as being somehow equivalent to the inchoate objectives of the March, and John W. Aldridge ascribes Mailer's

success to the marriage of a new writerly approach with the appearance of a spectacularly congenial subject:

He was discovering how to project in his work – primarily in the meta-journalism he began to write in the late Sixties – a self-image which became steadily more attractive, not so much because the things he described himself as saying and doing had suddenly ceased to become outrageous, but because a new note of humour had come to characterize the description and to give it an air of ironic detachment and ambiguity that was both appealing and enormously effective as a tranquilizer of enemies. He was no longer the victim of his bludgeoning first-person delivery. Instead, Mailer became his own most derisive critic as he observed his various personae...pass through the postures of acute embarrassment, ineptitude, braggadocio, affectation, and occasional wisdom, hamming it up for the gallery or putting down a rival, but always being put down hardest by himself...As a journalist, he began to laugh at himself – an action we prize even more highly than failure...that these things occurred at this particular time was immensely fortuitous, and so was the fact that he began just then to offer in his journalism a kind of material singularly appropriate to the historical moment and guaranteed to have a major impact particularly on the younger audience of the moment. (Aldridge, 1986 p. 67)

Reading Aldridge, it strikes us that illeism itself is an enactment of what Poirier described as the search of a minority incentive within Mailer. Cynically, one could describe it as an attempt to make Mailer an attractive character: a buffoon who somehow overcomes his propensity towards self-sabotage and rises to the occasion. It might also be—as in his emphases upon the reverses that his career has undergone—a strategy for making the remote public figure (a celebrity since the age of twenty-five) into something more approachable and relatable. This strategy is doomed to backfire *eo ipso*. Who are history's other great illeists? Americans might say Henry Adams, or more likely Bob Dole or even Donald Trump.⁶ Classicists would respond with the examples of Julius Caesar or Xenophon. None of these men invite our easy identification. When Lennon in his biography cutely affects the style he

⁶ From Michael Wolff's *Fire and Fury*: 'A pro wrestling fan who became a World Wrestling Entertainment supporter and personality (inducted into the WWE Hall of Fame), Trump lived, like Hulk Hogan, as a real-life fictional character. To the amusement of his friends, and unease of many of the people now preparing to work for him at the highest levels of the federal government, Trump often spoke of himself in the third person.'

implicitly exonerates the massive ego that it betrays in Mailer's case. For the illeistic, despite its pretensions towards objectivity, forecloses on the universal; but in the case of the current book the heady occasion of opposing a wicked war obscures this limitation. Ultimately, it is shared sentiment rather than any sort of stylistic or rhetorical coup which brings Mailer and the reader together. In *The Prisoner of Sex* the device fixes Mailer all-too-directly within the centre of that which he is attempting to defend.

In order to understand Mailer's motivations for writing about himself in the third person it is necessary to turn once again to his particular form of literary criticism, to his own personal canon, and to his conception of the author function. The clues to Mailer's thinking are located in his review of Norman Podhoretz's *Making It* and his writings on Henry Miller. The former ran in the Spring 1968 issue of *Partisan Review*, and was one of only a handful of book reviews that ever he wrote. The latter are contained in *The Prisoner of Sex*, which will be examined in the next chapter, and in the prefatory matter composed for the anthology *Genius and Lust: A Journey Through the Major Writings of Henry Miller*, which was published in 1976. Throughout these pieces we see a practitioner-critic play at custodian of his chosen tradition and grapple with the question of self-presentation. 'The other Norman' had been editor of *Commentary* since 1960, and while originally a staunch liberal from out of the Lionel Trilling mould (Podhoretz had studied under him) he would later become one of America's most prominent conservative commentators; *Making It* was the account of his rise, and his broadside against the New York intellectual establishment which had incubated his career. Mailer's excoriating review reads as both a defence of his beloved Trillings and as a consolidation of his own thoughts on the form and execution of the mid-career memoir, which he had arguably invented a decade previously.⁷ Who, wonders Mailer, 'would choose to dive through the plate-glass window of his own splendid showcase in order to allow an outside mob of hungry assassins, literary gung-hos, and assorted rhinoceri to come roaring in to examine the goods with knives, feet, and teeth?' (Mailer, 1972 p. 160). Mailer sets out a very specific set of criteria by which he will judge the book and, by extension, the entire genre of the mid-career memoir. Put simply, he demands that a writer who would present himself in such a way must imbue the portrait with the autonomy of a character in a novel:

⁷ From Mailer acolyte James Walcott's recent revisiting of *Making It*: 'Most heinous of all was the backstabbing betrayal by his friend and idol Norman Mailer, whose collection *Advertisements for Myself* provided the inspiration and model for *Making It*... Podhoretz was stepping up into Mailer's heavyweight division, only to get KO'd by the champ himself – sucker-punched. Mailer read the book in galley and told Podhoretz he liked it. It was Podhoretz's hope after the volley of abuse from nearly every quarter that Mailer would ride to the cavalry rescue.'

When a man writes a book about himself in the beginning or middle of his career, then his work if at all penetrating is not a biography so much as a special category of fiction, precisely because his choices for future career are still open, his possibilities remain numerous, his conflicts are as alive as his enemies, his feelings are tender as his friends, and his sense of himself is as confused, complex, even bewildered as his sense of others. So he must make that same creative abstraction from life that a novelist makes when he cooks up or conceives a character out of one or more people he partially comprehends. The character if successful comes to life, the character engages a series of events which he shapes, and fails to affect, and from his strivings the reader may draw some comprehension, even a hypothesis. (Ibid. p. 164)

The creation of a compelling and coherent character poses its own challenges to the novelist. Self-representation of the sort attempted by the two Normans brings further concerns and complications: one must consider the feelings of those acquaintances who appear in the text, and how the public will react to divergences between one's self and the character on the page. 'One is presenting a personality which will be better or worse than one's own, the book is now a protagonist in the progress of one's own success. Self-interest naturally slants a word here, literary honesty bends it back there. One does not know whether to tell the little lie or shrive oneself' (Ibid. p. 165). Mailer's solution to this problem is to proceed on the basis that literary honesty, when pursued at full tilt, ultimately serves self-interest. Hopes rests on the possibility that the presentation of a personality worse than one's own is a paradox that redounds to one's credit. The reader is at liberty to disagree. She is free to aggregate the author's indiscriminate self-disclosures and weigh them against the virtue that has made them available for her scrutiny. From the strife between memory's 'I did thus' and pride's 'I could never have,' Nietzsche tells us, pride emerges the victor. Memory is obliterated, and what is recorded is the writ of pride, which clothes itself in the garb of honesty and style.

Mailer had been giving serious thought to these matters since the late Fifties. The turn to illeism could be traced back to Edmund Wilson's remarks on Hemingway's journalism. His experimentation in *The Armies of the Night* can be seen as his search for a literary form in which he wouldn't 'lose all his capacity for self-criticism,' or 'become fatuous or maudlin.' Hemingway could only provide a model in negative: a cautionary tale, an American tragedy. He began to look elsewhere. So overpowering a presence is Burroughs in *Why Are We in*

Vietnam? that the novel stands as an illustration of Harold Bloom's pun on the paronymy between 'influence' and 'influenza,' since Mailer seems to write as though infected by the Burroughsian voice, an ear-worm vermiculating its way through his prose. As the Sixties drew to a close Mailer turned to the example of Henry Miller. What Miller represented for Mailer will be covered more extensively in the next chapter, but for now let it suffice to say that what he offered him was freedom from the past, paradoxically achieved by its ruthless examination. 'He has never looked back in moral guilt,' he writes of Miller: 'He could look yesterday's act in the eye because the man who did it was no longer himself. In the act of doing it, he became another man, free to go in another direction. It can be 180° away from yesterday's attempt. Tomorrow he may be close again to the man he was the day before yesterday, but never the same' (Mailer, 1976 pp. 183-184). To Mailer this productive self-regard is narcissism: the dialectic of love and hate experienced within the self, a dialogue which never ceases. The dialectic and dialogue are between the present self as it engages in the act of creation, of fashioning itself by sculpting the material provided by past action—which is not just fodder for writing but also a negative guide for future conduct—and the observed past self. This process earns the title of dialectic because both are transformed: the present self is fortified by the boons of such a productive undertaking, and the past self is revised from its unexamined form.

Perhaps it's no wonder that Mailer held so much confidence in that which could be extracted from the past. Walter Benjamin examined the cultural accoutrements of his childhood and looked deeper into history for discontinuities and ghostly echoes of unfulfilled futures in order to shatter the illusion of time as an intelligible sequence of development towards some capitalist utopia. Benjamin hoped that this excavation would break false consciousness. Mailer in his journalism of the 1960s works to show how events thought of as 'recent'—and therefore, arguably, on-going and developing—are already ripe for inspection as history, and that without this sort of inspection we risk proceeding on the basis of erroneous and damaging interpretations. So his account of the Pentagon action is a sort of Benjaminian dialectical excursion into the recent past, where he might rescue that uncontaminated core of potential which ought to be the proper politico-historical moral of the episode. If Mailer believed that the nation could benefit from his carrying out this sort of investigation, it might be because it had worked so well on his own career. If *Advertisements for Myself* was a turning point in his career, it's because the examination of the past had generated a potent literary form. It's not just that it played a huge part in that dialectic by which an author discovers his themes, but that its material reality was undeniable. A market

theory of Mailer's development begins to emerge: it would argue that his embrace of autobiographically-enhanced journalism (and the concomitant abandonment of his large novel) was not the adaptive pursuit of an incremental series of stylistic epiphanies. The eye for the main chance turns out to be the eye for the cash prize: the glossy magazines were calling. They're the ones who decided which components of *Advertisements for Myself* were 'strongest.' Mailer's leaps into his own past had yielded a change in his material existence. So why should he doubt his writing's ability to affect reality? Later in life he was able to go on Charlie Rose's show, call his novel a masterpiece, and then sit back and watch it surge up the charts. *There's* his author function; *that's* his ideology. As Louis Althusser wrote: 'What is represented in ideology is not the system of the real relations which govern the existence of individuals, but the imaginary relation of those individuals to the real relations in which they live.' This is also to be discerned in his caution in incorporating real people into his nonfiction novels.

Mailer was not the most theoretically-minded of authors; he didn't bring the enormous canonical erudition of, say, Saul Bellow to bear upon his project. During his encounter with Chomsky in Occoquan we're told that 'he had an amateur's mad interest in [linguistics], no, rather, he had a mad inventor's interest, with several wild theories in his pocket which he had never been able to exercise since he could not understand what he read in linguistic books' (Mailer, 1968 p. 192). So Mailer may or may not have been aware of contemporary developments in theories around the death of the author. Roland Barthes's seminal essay appeared in the year of the Pentagon protest; Michel Foucault's "What is an Author?" came two years later. Still, those ideas were clearly part of the cultural atmosphere, because Mailer at times seems engaged in a vociferous plea for the life of the author. This is a battle waged on multiple fronts, not only in his literary criticism's insistence upon the context generated by the examined author's reputation and character but also in the illeistic form itself. His innovation is to split himself in two and thus reify Foucault's notion of the author function. By appearing under his own name within his own text, the author is suddenly literally 'present, marking off the edges of the text, revealing, or at least characterising, its mode of being. The author's name manifests the appearance of a certain discursive set and indicates the status of this discourse within a society and culture.' We see this in Mailer's scrupulous attempts to keep separate the forms of insight and intelligence yielded by the two books' contrasting approaches. It's also in evidence in the renunciation of or revenge upon *l'esprit de l'escalier* that is implied by illeism as a form. When Mailer the narrator scores points against those Mailer the protagonist encounters, we can answer the questions of attribution

that so consternated Barthes by uniting protagonist and narrator along a temporal continuum. Recall how dubiously Mailer crowned Faulkner the first American existentialist, but let us grant him that he may have read the same author that Alfred Kazin did:

The heart is blind, hot, passionate, insatiable beyond anything we admit. Man explodes himself in the service of his passions; his ambition constantly destroys the society he thinks the foundation of moral order. Yet once the deed is done, it is irrevocable; thought alone puts the story together—the artist is a chronicler going back into the havoc that had never ended. (Kazin, 1971 p. 28)

If the havoc has yet to end, then it is also an open question—and it is to the open question of resisting the war in Vietnam that Mailer's literary work presents itself as the only answer. So how are we to understand this particular text's mode of being? It seems to me that there are two key aspects to this question. The first has to do with what we might term Mailer's experiential anxiety. Across his works this concern emerges as not only his own affliction but the condition of all literary endeavours; this is an aspect of his nebulous Existentialism.⁸ The second is more straightforwardly structural, and has to do with what Poirier calls the 'hocus pocus about the degree to which history is really the novel and the novel really history.' Richard Gilman was similarly ambivalent about Mailer's gnomic taxonomy:

The trouble lies in Mailer's notion of "novel" and "novelist." The idea has always ruled him—and is, I think, the source of his erratic and inconclusive performance as an imaginative writer—of the novelist as someone whose gifts of intuition and prophecy enable him to see more deeply than other men into society or human organizations.⁹ From this follows the notion that novels are superior reports on social or psychic or moral phenomena and that fiction is

⁸ If we play Isaiah Berlin's game of dividing writers and thinkers into hedgehogs (who know one thing) and foxes (who know many things), then did American literature ever produce a figure less vulpine than the spiny Mailer? Paradoxically, despite the seeming boundlessness of his reading, one might nominate Harold Bloom. As James Wood wrote, Bloom 'has strayed very far from Kent's threat in *King Lear*: "I'll teach you differences." Instead, he teaches us samenesses. For him, literature has become an enormous family tree, in which genetically similar generations quarrel and make up and die, and hand on their majestic and generally Oedipal DNA to their offspring.'

⁹ There is a more than incidental affinity here with the thought of René Girard, who wrote that 'It is essential to make it clear, once and for all, that to draw on literature does not mean to relinquish scholarly standards of research; nor does it constitute a purely "aesthetic" approach to the subject.'

therefore a superior way of agitating for change and helping to bring it about...What Mailer has done is not to have written a novel in the form of history or history in the form of a novel, not to have produced any startlingly new forms, but to have rescued history from abstraction and aridity by approaching it with certain “novelistic” instruments at the ready and in a certain large, general “novelistic” spirit....A more advanced novelist than Mailer, one less interested in getting at social or political reality, wouldn’t have been able to bring it off; that Mailer is only imperfectly a novelist, that his passion for moving and shaking the actual has prevented him from fully inhabiting imaginary kingdoms, is the underlying, paradoxical strength of this book. (Gilman pp. 165-166)

The first question has been dealt with by critics like Adams, who by praising Mailer grant him his foundational point: that it was only by participating in the march that he could have written this book. That particular formulation flirts with redundancy; it would be more pertinent to argue for a substantial, even existential, difference between the two Mailers. Unlike the material covered in the previous chapter, the crucial distinction to be made is that Mailer wasn’t on assignment during the march, so the distinction between man and writer (recalling Lionel Trilling on Hemingway) emerges more starkly. Allegedly, Mailer did not decide to write about the march until afterwards. If one can suspend one’s disbelief and imagine that Mailer *didn’t* realise he had stumbled upon a goldmine of material, then one can ascribe the superior writing of *The Armies of the Night* to a one-off occurrence in his career, perhaps the only time when his need to write well didn’t precede him to experience. The leisurely, open-ended quality of the prose is offered as an objective correlative to the spirit in which he engaged in the march.

So in, say, “Ten Thousand Words a Minute,” the Mailer we encounter *in situ* is on duty as a writer, and his actions are guided by a writer’s requirements. Conversely, the Mailer who marched on the Pentagon and got arrested is a comparatively innocent and pliable figure, whose experiences await the later efforts of the writer to give them form, definition, and magnitude. We are to understand that Mailer has discovered himself through this division of the self into the past one that lived and the later one that writes. ‘Here, then, awaiting our study,’ wrote Ortega, ‘lies man’s authentic “being”—stretching the whole length of his past. Man is what has happened to him, what he has done...*Man, in a word, has no nature; what he has is—history.*’ And if history, properly understood, has usurped the role played in our

conceptions by ‘nature,’ then the study of history itself has to be liberated from the abstraction and aridity mentioned by Gillman. This is why Mailer is a strange sort of historian, whose rear-vision extends mere paces into the fog of recent history. It’s as though he thinks in astonishingly short historical cycles: the length of time between the experience of an event and his converting it into a literary form. At points Mailer seems guilty of projecting this shortness of mental breath and this narrow vision of the historical present onto the world at large. He is so desperate to urge his readings of recent events upon the public because he assumes that they’re basing their next action on the one immediately preceding it. So powerfully do tactical considerations overpower the strategic that he assumes everyone else wears the same blinkers as him. He is so indulgent of impulsive action—even those with dire consequences—because he sees them as paradigmatic of his own harried behaviour when out hunting for material. He dignifies his own struggles by imagining them to be perennial and intractable.

The second part of Mailer’s book, *pace* his claiming it to be the novel as history, might be best described as the novel *in* history. As we shall see, Mailer abandons the mono-perspectival third-person narration which we have been examining, and allows himself a more panoptic or synoptic view of the days’ events. After summarising the intelligence that Mailer furnishes the reader in this form, we shall turn finally to his vision of Existential politics.

Part III: Mailer’s Novel in History

Towards the end of the book’s first part we are given a glimpse of the bedlam that rages in Mailer’s absence, of the larger ‘historical’ strife which is somehow inaccessible to the illeistic mode:

Doubtless there had been something wrong in the style of the move on the Pentagon, but it would take him weeks to comprehend this March, and the events now taking place: it was only by forcing his mind to the subject that he could recognise something was still going on at the Pentagon – prisoner of his own egotism, some large vital part of the March had ended for him with his own arrest. He was poor material for a general indeed if he had no sense of the major combat twenty miles away. (Mailer, 1968 p. 204)

“The Novel as History: The Battle of the Pentagon” seeks to abrogate and leap beyond the circumscription of Mailer’s ego. The ‘history’ he claims to be providing can be understood in two ways: first, it is reiterated that Mailer himself was a late addition to the proceedings. The march was the brainchild and labour of organisers like David Dellinger or Jerry Rubin: ‘serious men, devoted to hard detailed work.’ Second, the switch to an omniscient form of third person narration suggests the more panoramic perspective of history itself—that the true matter of record consists of the leadership’s efforts and the violence which befell the most determined rump of the protestors. Before we examine these, let me adduce two issues which arise from Mailer’s systematic distinctions.

Firstly, there’s that his division between the ‘novelistic’ and the ‘historical’ draws our attention to his over-hasty thinking around these categories. Broadly, it seems that we are to understand that the stuff of individual experience is to be properly communicated in the form of the novel, while mass experience is the purview of the historian. It never seemed to occur to Mailer that the European novelists he had so admired—Tolstoy, Stendhal; even Malraux, to take a senior contemporary—had no problem blending the two. But Mailer had struggled with this since the earliest days of his career, as in the awkward incorporation of personal and social history in *The Naked and the Dead*’s ‘Time Machine’ segments. Second, the sequencing and size of *The Armies of the Night*’s two books show where his emphasis and priorities lay; mass history is ultimately side-lined, the B movie to the Mailerian misadventures. Both of these weaknesses can be traced to the work’s provenance: it originated as two pieces of individual journalism, and market forces clearly favoured the focus on Mailer. When the time came to prepare his book on the Pentagon action, he took the path of least resistance and bolted the *Commentary* piece onto that which appeared in *Harper’s*.

At any rate, Mailer himself is still unmistakably present even when at work *qua* historian. Drawing on the work of Hayden White, David Cowart portrays Mailer’s work as embodying a paradox of postmodern historiography: that all narrative is fiction, and that history itself is ‘always emplotted, always the product of someone’s point of view. Purely objective history does not exist, and the most valuable history is that in which a self-conscious chronicler such as Norman Mailer candidly exposes the subjectivity of his perceptions’ (Cowart pp. 163-164). Mailer’s account of the March’s planning, for example, is dense with editorialising. Despite the omniscient perspective which she is putatively granted, the reader can scarcely escape Mailer’s own opinions on the proceedings. However, it must be conceded that these

are of a piece with the reservations displayed by the Mailer character in the first book, and that Mailer clearly conceived the second book as complementing and augmenting its predecessor. The aggregate of both books' argumentation will be weighed in the next section, and before then we shall see how Mailer combines the circumscription of illeism and the boundlessness of the panoptic to disclose the full meaning of certain events. Those episodes which receive close attention in both books are incidents for which Mailer was present. For the rest, he presents himself to the reader as a sort of hierophantic interpreter, uniquely qualified to divine the truth in both bureaucratic cant and the distortions of the media.

The first book's observations on the liberal intelligentsia and the dubious sloganeering on display at the march acquire a retroactive political and comic logic in the second book's depiction of the protest's organisation. The second, third, and fourth of the book's eleven chapters are concerned with the technocratic haggling which took place both within the anti-war movement and in its representatives' dealings with agents of the state. His attitude towards this process is summarised by the title of the fourth chapter, "An Arbitrated Aesthetic." In Mailer's accounting,

The meetings could have served as another paradigm of American civilisation in this decade of the twentieth century, for two groups with absolutely incompatible ends and an irretrievable lack of final resolution between them, were nonetheless adjudicators in effect with one another over the few small items of common ground which were negotiable, and this through its sheer instrumentalism – since it is somewhat more difficult to take militant action after negotiating quietly with one's enemy for weeks – was to work to pacify and finally curtail the more unmanageable aspects of the Antiwar March. (Ibid. p. 252)

Note the double—even multiple—duties carried out by this long sentence. By this point in the narrative the representatives of the March are putatively advancing on a united front: after a long expenditure of man-hours in debate and deliberation, the Pentagon rather than the Capitol has been chosen as the locus of the action. But still, the movement struggles to present itself as a coherent monolith instead of the heterogeneous swarm of competing ideas, priorities, and sensibilities that it actually represents. In this sense its leaders enter into negotiations from at least two positions of disadvantage. First, they must work to satisfy as many of the coalition's imperatives as possible while curbing their own most extreme

constituents. Here Mailer is registering a familiar complaint about the narcissism of small differences among anti-establishment forces. Second—and this is his more substantive point—counter-culturists who enter into negotiations with the government risk becoming ensnared by incommensurable paradoxes. By submitting themselves to the tedium of route planning, estimates of attendance, and disposition of law enforcement, they have already blunted the dissenting nature of the action.

Such scepticism is meant to afflict the liberals in whose beliefs, as T.H. Adamowski notes, Mailer began to see ‘forms of totalitarianism itself, marked by an instrumentalist rationalism that used the methods of modern technical and managerial success’ (Adamowski p. 897). This idea of complicity runs throughout the book, and was prevalent in the counter-culture itself; Sean McCann and Michael Szalay describe the twilight of the Kennedy-Johnson era as one in which ‘academics and policy makers seemed so intermeshed that Vietnam appeared to Garry Wills “our first professors’ war”...liberals generally appeared guilty not just of the nation's disastrous policies in Vietnam, but of all the domestic and international evils of the cold war’ (McCann and Szalay p. 435). It is against this consensus that Mailer stakes the claims for his own independence; if his own work is to be the only response to the war in Vietnam, then it will also be the only response to the imperfections in the anti-war movement. In his study of *The Armies of the Night* Andrew Wilson writes that Mailer ‘defines his country amid the escalations in Vietnam, as if the idea of "America" recedes when disunity prevails. Finding the union in crisis, he converts to the tradition of taming the country through language’ (A. Wilson, 2010 p. 731). Mailer, committed to some numinous belief in the bite of a well-turned sentence upon reality, writes as though his interpretative efforts might be sufficient to repurpose the protest as the act of symbolic warfare that he thinks it ought to be. In this he was aided by the anti-war coalition’s eventual choice of the Pentagon as its target, as opposed to the Capitol. ‘Congress was an agreeable symbol to the vast majority of Americans,’ where a move on the Pentagon ‘would have symbolic meaning in America and around the world, for the Pentagon was the symbol of the American military, and so was hated wherever U.S. forces were resented or despised at home or abroad’ (Mailer, 1968 p. 238). However, Mailer makes clear the trade-off, which is that while the Pentagon might make for the more potent symbolic target it is also by far the more recalcitrant:

The Pentagon, architecturally, was as undifferentiated as a jellyfish or a cluster of barnacles. One could chip away at any part of the interior without locating a nerve centre...an enormous office building in the shape of a fortress housed

the military centre of the most powerful nation on earth, yet there was no need for guards – the proliferation of the building itself was its own defence: assassination of any high official in the edifice could serve only to augment the power of the Pentagon; vulnerable to sabotage, that could also work only for the fortification of its interest. High church of the corporation, the Pentagon spoke exclusively of mass man and his civilisation; every aspect of the building was anonymous, monotonous, massive, interchangeable. (Ibid. pp. 240-241)

Here Mailer is giving voice to a thwarted sense of the auratic, and links this anxious feeling to his reservations about the necessarily arbitrated and technocratic nature of the protest action. Mailer requires that evil show itself in the world, announce its ill-intentions with sufficient grandeur as to inspire heroes to stand forth. He makes the same demand on architecture. Aura, for Walter Benjamin, was a function of the ritual calibration of access to works of art, as though they were devotional sacraments. ‘Certain sculptures in cathedrals,’ wrote Benjamin in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, ‘are invisible to the spectator on ground level.’ From the spectator on ground level the Pentagon withholds nothing—except, crucially, some sense of the vast and violent decisions made within its walls. Mailer sees the building’s auratic vacuum as paradigmatic of American power, how it has dispersed itself so finely and so thoroughly throughout all strata of society so as to be invisible. It doesn’t function egregiously but attritionally, as in its bureaucratic efforts to curb the scope of the march. Because it is in the government’s power to grant or withhold permission for the action, its aim was to avoid engaging in a reciprocal exchange with the protestors; rather, the government will have been successful if it has dampened the prospects of the march and emerged with its own position unmoderated. If the government is successful in exercising its full managerial power over the nature of the action, then it will have turned the march into a pseudo-event. Furthermore, there remained the possibility that the organisers would fail to seize the correct revolutionary moment, and it is to forestall this that Mailer proposes his philosophy of existential politics and symbolic warfare. In order to understand these, it is first necessary to identify those days’ events that Mailer emphasises, and to consider their meaning within his scheme.

An example of how the work’s two books complete each other is the dual-depiction of the mysterious incident which took place shortly after the march’s arrival at the Pentagon, when Mailer saw a group of the few hundred men of the National Liberation Front commencing

their charge on the Pentagon. From Mailer's vantage point it is impossible to discern the cause or result of this sudden charge, but what ensues is a flurry of confusion that betokens the influence of Céline on that generation of American writers:

Abruptly – no warning – the men at the base of the stairs, the very troops who had carried the N.L.F. flags were running towards the rear in a panic. Mailer then had that superimposition of vision which makes descriptions of combat so contradictory when one compares eyewitness reports – he did not literally see any uniformed soldiers or marshals chasing this civilian army down the embankment, there was nothing but demonstrators flying down toward them now, panic on their faces, but Mailer's imagination so clearly conceived MPs chasing them with bayonets that for an instant he did literally see fixed bayonets and knew in some other part of himself that he didn't, like two transparent images almost superimposed. Then he saw nothing but the look of terror on the faces coming towards him and he turned to run in order not to be run down by them, conceiving for one instant MPs squirting Mace in everyone's eyes. Then panic was on him too...It was confusing. Nobody knew why the men on the stairs had suddenly begun to flee. (Ibid. pp. 139-140)

This fog of war seems at points to have seeped out of the early passages of *Journey to the End of Night*. As in Celine's nightmarishly free-form vision of the First World War, the protagonist is at the mercy of inscrutable comings and goings, random and meaningless incidents and encounters, and his own overwhelming fear of violence. And, in another Kafkan affinity, there are variable rates of time at work here, at the service of the palimpsest-like blurring of memory. It is more than partly to forestall being beaten that Mailer crosses the police line and gets himself arrested. It's in his capacity as the historian that he provides a fuller picture of what had seemed like carnage to the participant, and what he discloses is a synecdoche for the character of the larger demonstration:

This group consisted in fact of two groups, the Students for a Democratic Society, and a considerably smaller group of unattached elements who had once called themselves the Revolutionary Contingent, but had been unable to function together because of many arguments on the proper style of their militancy, i.e. whether to use Vietcong flags...That the Revolutionary

Contingent happened to be in the vanguard was not surprising, but the body of the striking force remained the SDS, and that was significant, for the SDS, sharing apparently the detestation of some on the left for the mass rally and the Great Left Pall, had a practice never to take part in large demonstrations. (Ibid. p. 259)

Mailer was evidently so excited by this incident that he took two passes at it. But observe the somewhat dutiful, even affectedly pedantic, tone of the second passage: ‘consisted in fact...happened to be...was not surprising...that was significant.’ It’s almost as though at some level Mailer were defying certain instincts, or that the novelist’s preference for mystery were hobbling the historian’s duty towards full disclosure. Wilson doesn’t consider Mailer immersed in the history of the march: ‘history is lost in the course of self-determinism: the self as a controlling agent rather than the self determined, used, injured by an array of outside forces. This is the difference between the first and second books’ (A. Wilson, 2010 pp. 734-735). To this one might add that it is in the second book where Mailer properly grapples with the form that mass resistance to the war might take, as well as its human cost. After six chapters’ patient work, his interest in the action intensifies after that point where he is shunted off stage, so to speak. The earlier focus on the comings and goings of the SDS and the Revolutionary Contingent pays off as the protestors around the Pentagon are slowly worn down to a final, hard core of holdouts: ‘They were alone, and no longer linked to the eighty-or hundred-thousand-headed force of men and women around the reflecting pool, or the fifty thousand at the Pentagon, but were instead down to a few thousand of the true, the adventurous, and the dedicated’ (Mailer, 1968 p. 280).

We are to understand by Mailer’s emphasis that if anything of what happened over those days contains an image of the future, it is to be found in the actions and fate of those last, most dedicated protestors. If America’s fate is violence and civic disorder, then it will not be experienced by the comfortable and the middle-aged like Mailer (who can avail himself of brilliant attorneys like de Grazia and Hirschkop) but by the young. If Mailer’s literary work is to be the proper response to the war, then it resides in his ability to read the recent past as though it were already a matter of settled history, and to find within it some intelligence of what is to come:

Once in a while an arrest would be made. It seemed never to make much sense...There was meaning in it: the technique of avoiding martyrs in riots.

The essence of that technique is to arrest at random. The arrested hero having done nothing in particular feels like a victim or a fool. Upon his release, his friends treat him like a hero. But he is the sort of hero who must end by disappointing them. That is part of the technical wisdom of random arrest. It also disrupts, since no preparation for self-protection can be made, no sense of slow immersion into the possibility of arrest is possible, and the growth of rumour is exaggerated – for random arrests seem always more brutal than logical arrests. In fact they are more brutal. (Ibid. p. 284)

Notice how Mailer makes the armed clash between the authorities and protestors a re-enactment of their earlier organisational struggle. The machine logic of the government works to deny the anti-war movement its various human requirements, to sap their actions of individual significance. The malign power of the government forces lies in their ability to toggle between the application of force to an undifferentiated mass and the specific targeting of distinct groups and individuals within that mass. ‘There is always a logic in repression,’ writes Mailer. ‘The logic is there for a reason – it will drive something into flesh.’ What fascinates him is the process by which violence is reified, trained upon individuals according to entirely contingent aspects of identity, and how this dissipates the mass strength of the group. Reification, after all, affects relations between persons, who become objects to themselves, alienated not only from themselves but also from others, even those with whom one is putatively bound by class solidarity. ‘Yes,’ he writes: ‘they beat the women for another reason. To humiliate the demonstrators, to break them from their new resistance down to the old passive disobedience of the helpless sit-in waiting one’s turn to be clubbed; they ground it into their faces that they sat there while their women were being taken off’ (Ibid. pp. 288-289).

Mailer gets at the insidiousness of how the state’s brutalisation of the protestors is malignantly condign to their aggregated ideological temperament. Because as evidenced in his distaste for young people gathering under the banners of Women Strike for Peace, Mailer was a critic *avant la lettre* of identity politics. Of course, his belief in himself as a sort of ideologically neutral arbiter of all claims towards cultural authority and political action is an identity politics of the hegemonic group. In this blinkeredness we see Mailer’s implication in the liberal consensus which he supposedly disdains, although we shall see in the next chapter that Mailer’s opposition to feminism rests on an opposition to sexual autonomy, to what Will

Self evocatively described as ‘contemporary liberalism’s commitment to the Frankensteinian project of mastering nature entirely, including human reproduction.’

‘The first relevant citation for “identity politics” in the *Oxford English Dictionary* was for 1989’ (Fawcett p. 435). Edmund Fawcett, drawing on the theories of conservative liberals like Francis Fukuyama, diagnoses that now widely-circulated term as germinal within liberalism’s championing of ‘liberty’ and ‘freedom’—in a neo-Hegelian sense, ‘a yearning for recognition...[for] respect from the powers of society for each of us as self-possessed people with lives and commitments of our own’ (Fawcett p. 442). The *reduction ad absurdum* of this position is the well-known narcissism of small differences, which is the substance of Mailer’s frequently dim portrait of the multifarious anti-war coalition. As shall be shown in *The Prisoner of Sex*, Mailer condemns himself by essentially disputing the legitimacy of female claims towards recognition because they impinge on his central position in the cultural superstructure as well as impugning the supposed neutrality of his work. If *The Armies of the Night* survives the cultural expunging which Mailer is undergoing, then it will be because in that book he offers his scepticism towards the incipient politicians of identity as heuristics of their weaknesses in their struggle with state authority. Because as we see in the soldiers’ brutality as directed specifically towards women: the unitary state is able to exploit the counter-culture’s rhetoric, and turn its values of heterogeneous individuality against its members. If their ideology turns out to exert any sort of material reality it will be the one decided by the state: pain is doled out perversely, according to the implied demands of that mass—which shall be reduced to quivering individuals, each with their own eccentric notions of how the Empire should conduct itself. How should one oppose the imagination of the state? In the next and final section we shall see how both books work together to present Mailer’s programme of existential politics and symbolic warfare, and how these work to answer and address the question of why America found itself in Vietnam.

Part IV: Mailer’s Existential Politics

In one of the first book’s most obvious concessions to the dramatic, structural, and rhythmic demands of the novel that Mailer wishes to make of history, he withholds his own thoughts on the etiology of America’s Southeast Asian quagmire until he has his character take a moment to reflect while held with fellow protestors in Occoquan: ‘The argument in his brain can be submitted to the reader with somewhat more order than Mailer possessed on his

long voyage out into the unfamiliar dimensions of prison rest' (Mailer, 1968 p. 192). The section is titled "Why are we in Vietnam?" and much like in the novel bearing the same name readers seeking to understand the grandest folly of American military adventurism will find little in the way of earnest fretting about the military-industrial complex or sceptical relitigation of the Gulf of Tonkin incident. In the novel—which was his first since *The Naked and the Dead* to be set outdoors—nature provides the venue for man to attune himself to his soul's previously inscrutable exhortations to kill. Poirier noted that 'man in nature is what Lawrence said Deerslayer truly proved to be: "isolate and a killer." In *Why Are We in Vietnam?* what is finally bequeathed by the presiding spirit of the North is the order to go forth and kill' (Poirier, 1972 p. 139). The dream of 'the trek to the "edge" of civilisation, there to be cleansed of its contaminants' is exposed as precisely that: a reverie of the nation's frontier past (Ibid. p. 142).

In *The Armies of the Night* he reaches 'the covert and unhappy intimation that we were in Vietnam because we had to be. Such was the imbalance of the nation that war was its balance. The burning of villages by napalm might be the index of our collective instability' (Mailer, 1968 p. 200). 'The Doves were evasive of the real question,' Mailer writes, because they were liberals whose liberalism was at stake 'for they would have to admit they were willing to advocate policies which could conceivably end in major advances of Asian Communism' (Ibid. p. 196). It is this sort of liberalism that Mailer sees in the organisation of the march, in how securing the permission for which required submission to bureaucratic procedure. In the section titled "The Historian" Mailer works to reconcile the validity of his testimony with the peripheral position he occupied over those days, proposing both his own scepticism towards the action and the 'monumental disproportions' of the Mailer persona as heuristics to 'an ambiguous event whose essential value of ambiguity may not be established for ten or twenty years, or indeed ever' (Ibid. p. 64). The ambiguity of the event wouldn't be resolved by a traditional historian's emphasis on the march's organisers like Dellinger or Jerry Rubin. (Nor could Mailer be said to write 'history from below' which, as practised by writers like Howard Zinn, produces its own assured and decidedly leftist prescriptions.) This wasn't just because of their necessary faith in the potential of the demonstration but also because of their immersion in precisely those transactions of technocratic management and negotiation which inflame Mailer's scepticism. In "The Novel as History" he speculates that 'the idea for such a massive rally probably derived from the success and the organizational

mechanics of the April March ¹⁰ rather than in response to the lack of political effect that March had had on the Johnson Administration' (Ibid. p. 233). Mailer's ambivalence towards the anti-war movement extends beyond the impression that the organisation of a mass demonstration will end up duplicating the institutional discourses and processes that are to blame for the war in Vietnam; his deeply troubled intuition is that by its adherence to this logic the cause is inextricably part of what it deplures.

He draws our attention to two processes: the calcification of Pentagon and State Department groupthink, and the formation of a hierarchical structure of opposition to the war. Both ensure a sort of imaginative steering lock: America's foreign and military policy is heading down the vortex of escalating commitment (the "sunk cost" fallacy). Meanwhile, having organised one mass march to protest this state of affairs, it would be easier to repeat the last one by rote rather than to responsively adjust the approach. Mailer himself draws the parallel between these two spheres of obdurate activity:

Just as a student of foreign policy usually succeeds in depressing any lover of democratic process because foreign policy is encapsulated and therefore self-governing, so political life on the American Left tends to have an inner development which bears little relation to subtle changes in political context...intellectual rigidity which reacted to cataclysmic changes outside the way a patient reacts to an operation (misery, nausea, and convalescence) and much skill in internecine organisational war. (Ibid. pp. 233-234)

In other words, it seems that the questions raised by Mailer—why are we in Vietnam? what is the best response to this situation?—are best answered by Mailer himself. Faced with the dialectic tangle in which both the establishment and the leadership of the war movement are ensnared, he seeks to chart an individualistic third way. Joshua Miller has identified three crucial aspects of Mailer's existential politics:

(1) their outcome is unclear and unpredictable; (2) ideas and strategy do not determine the definition and value of the action, for what matters are the intentions and feelings of the participants; and (3) rather than being the most

¹⁰ On April 15th of that year the Spring Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam organised a march from Central Park to the United Nations; like at the subsequent action, draft cards were burned and the attendance numbered in the hundreds of thousands.

effective means to attain specific ends, symbolic politics either involves actions that themselves stand for something else (e.g., a "march," actually a walk with hundreds or thousands of others, is meant to be read as an expression of protest; self-starvation can be a "hunger strike" against a governmental policy) or engages in an action at a building, event, public speech, etc. that represents a policy, principle, or activity that one supports or abhors (e.g., turning one's back on a commencement speaker or sitting in at a nuclear test site). (Miller p. 382)

It's politics as therapy: cathartic and edifying rather quantifiable. A late or Neo-Pragmatist like Richard Rorty argues that democratic communities assess their choices according to the narratives that they take to be those choices' outcomes. Mailer, rewriting the traditional pragmatic audit, argues that existential politics is carried out without a prior roadmap, and its outcomes are assessed—even ultimately achieved—by narrative. It's one way of stressing the unprecedentedness of the current situation, of saying that there are no past models for resistance to this evil. It's an American Exceptionalism of the present, a reprise of Lincoln's 1862 State of the Union: 'The dogmas of the quiet past, are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise—with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves, and then we shall save our country.' The anti-war movement, we are to understand, would only know what story they would tell about the Pentagon Protest once Mailer had written it. Mailer would have us believe in his image of himself as an historian whose subject is the immediate past: the firestorm still blazing, the ash that hasn't settled. But what's really happened is that he has confused circadian rhythm with his own sense of deadline pressure, and taken the idea of historical significance to be equivalent to market price, to whatever stories he can pitch to powerful editors. The Mailer of the late Sixties is a very different creature to the beggarly figure of "The Mind of an Outlaw"; he seemed to drop his entire *animus* against the publishing industry once it had installed him at the pinnacle of literary life. If Mailer never again fixated upon the superstructure of the culture industry with the same obsessiveness as when had been merely a one book writer, it's because he never had to worry about the caprices of its gatekeepers. He began to genuinely see his own success as a product of meritocracy.

Looking back at the works which preceded *The Armies of the Night* one can think of numerous illustrative examples for each of Gabriel Miller's points. Take, as a primordial

case, Mailer's infamous scenario in "The White Negro" of the youths who murder a shopkeeper (which will feature again in our examination of Gary Gilmore). If we follow them on their journey we pass through all three stages: they enter into a new and unpredictable relationship with the law, which barely registers as a consideration during the visceral thrill of the act. The young thugs act with no precise monetary gain in mind; if they're driven by the thoughts of any sort of advancement it would be in terms of reputation, which returns us to their subjective feelings. And the doomed shopkeeper is not murdered for who he is but for what he represents: the bourgeois world that will be rattled by his death, which will then confer meaning and status upon his murderers by making them the objects of retributive justice.

At the time, Mailer called this thinking Hip. By 1961 he had grown restless with the terminology; in a letter to the novelist Don Carpenter he wrote: 'I got so sick of "hip" and "square" as words that from now on they're out. I mean, let's start something new. Existentialism is the word we have to use now as in "That's very E-X, man, very E-X." Squares will now be called essentialists, as in "That's very E-S, man, straight 8"' (October 23rd). While he never ran with 'essentialist' as a tag, 'Existentialism' was his new catch-all. But the terminological elasticity shouldn't obscure the continuity in Mailer's thinking. Rather, I would suggest that—partly following his perhaps overexcited attempt to claim Kennedy as a president for the hipsters—Mailer wanted to belatedly hitch his wagon to the already dissipated phenomenon of European Existentialism. Just as Sartre found the performance of a waiter to be paradigmatic of everyone's affectations, Mailer no longer wanted to speak for the marginalised but to show how what he had theorised upon the persona of the Hipster held true for all of mass man. Miller intuits this and follows his lead by attempting to codify Existential politics, which is both the condition and the recourse of technologized humanity.

So the demonstrators who marched on the Pentagon find something of a precursor in the Mailer of the late Fifties and early Sixties. Publishing an elaborate anthology is certainly an indirect way of attempting to write a huge novel, and ambushing a prize-winner at his press conference is one way of supplying a commensurate ending for one's piece. In both cases, as in marching on a building to protest a war, a gamble is undertaken according to nebulous imperatives; arguably, in all three cases, the initial problem is not truly addressed. As the hostile Breslin finally judges: 'the real problem lies in accepting Mailer's terms in the first place, his conception of politics-as-therapy. With Mailer, what becomes primary is not the ending of the war in Vietnam, nor the transformation of American society, but the vindication

of himself to himself' (Breslin p. 162). Breslin understands the workings of the illeistic mode, the failures of its pretensions towards universal prescriptions.

The latter part of Breslin's judgement one can take or leave, since his indulgence in *ad hominem* is already a matter of record. But there might be something to his accusation that Mailer is only peddling a form of therapy. Let's return briefly to "In the Red Light," which is surely the intermediate journalistic work which most anticipates *The Armies of the Night*. Looking at his treatment of the baying crowds who have elevated Goldwater to his party's candidacy, could it not be argued that Mailer is only normalising—even legitimising—white rage and bigotry? In that essay, in order to bestow his final decision to vote for Johnson its necessary didactic and rhetorical force he must work to inhabit the pro-Goldwater position; he must make the reader understand the fell attraction of the Republican candidate. But Mailer no more endorses the rancour and recklessness of the Goldwater voters than he does the woolly group think of the Pentagon demonstrators three years later. Returning to the idea of the minority within one is struck by the profound affinity between the critic and the writer, by how Poirier himself emerges as a Mailerian figure: one whose arrival upon a scene sows evaluative confusion and interpretative disorder which only the intruder himself is able to dispel.¹¹

One of Mailer's favourite dialectical formulations, restated throughout his work, is that one may be carrying out the work of the Devil even when dedicated to the work of God—and vice versa.¹² Therefore the Goldwater throngs, for all their hatreds and excesses, are on the verge of delivering a profound shock to an already immoral and hypocritical political establishment ('Goldwater would open us to the perils of our madness'). And the 1967 demonstrators, for all their groupthink and perhaps unreflecting involvement in the action—even despite the technocratic aspects of the march's organisation—play their part in exposing and confronting the machine logic of American authority. In both cases, we are left to presume, these processes of unforeseen or even unintended outcomes would go unremarked upon but for Mailer's efforts at penetrating the mind-numbing heteroglossia of America's competing images of itself. Sometimes he poses as a Freudian by way of Wilhelm Reich, but

¹¹ One sees this principle at work elsewhere in Poirier, as in his quest to show his readers that Emerson and Robert Frost are infinitely more subtle and disturbing than their veneration by teachers and anthologists suggests.

¹² As Walter Kaufmann wrote of Karl Jaspers: 'The same material is treated over and over again...for almost every point, view, or opinion one can choose a formulation from approximately half a dozen places in his writings, if not more, and sometimes the same formulations are repeated. More importantly by far, the central point is everywhere the same, with the insistence of Ecclesiastes who, however, confined himself to less than a dozen pages' (Kaufmann p. 27).

at least as often he is an undisclosed Jungian, attempting to peer into the teeming collective subconscious of the nation.

As we saw already in the first chapter, what Mailer brings to bear upon his subject is an understanding of the mechanical and military nature of civic authority. Noam Chomsky, in his reflections on the march, expressed hope that ‘participants in nonviolent resistance will themselves become human beings of a more admirable sort.’ (Chomsky p. 68). He resists the idea of searching for symbolic power in the action. It is difficult to fault his logic of civil disobedience for considering the authority’s preponderance of power and the state’s monopoly on violence. Mailer, on the other hand, is interested less by the character-building potential of scrupulous non-violent protest than he is by the transformative experience of state violence: ‘Standing against [the troops], the demonstrators were not only sons of the middle class of course, but sons who had departed the middle class, they were rebels and radicals and young revolutionaries; yet they were unbloodied, they felt secretly weak, they did not know if they were the simple equal, man for man, of these soldiers’ (Mailer, 1968 p. 271). In his book *Violence* Slavoj Žižek writes about the exposure of the torture and demeaning treatment meted out to Iraqi prisoners by American soldiers at Abu Ghraib in 2003. Contradicting the criticism mounted by writers like Christopher Hitchens who framed the abuse as an abnegation of American principles and the fundamental *casus belli* of democratic nation building, Žižek proposes instead that the prisoners were initiated into American society (Žižek pp. 149-150). And so it is with the young who were brutalised on the steps of their Pentagon, who by their resistance have called the true nature of American power from out of hiding.

In the actions of the authorities on the day the ideologies of American life achieve their egregious material existence. ‘In every case,’ wrote Louis Althusser, ‘the ideology of ideology thus recognises, despite its imaginary distortions, that the “ideas” of a human subject exist in his actions, or ought to exist in his actions...these practices are governed by the *rituals* in which these practices are inscribed, within the *material existence of an ideological apparatus*.’ If the March achieved anything, it was to provoke this reification or violent literalisation of the concealed military logic of civilian authority. The Foucaultian engine of government was bloodily exposed, just as it had been during the Bonus Army March of 1932, or as it would be during the Chicago Democratic Convention riots of 1968.

We have seen the substance of Mailer’s White Negroism as a political programme, and that it is of a piece with the accelerationism he advocated in his analysis of the 1964 contest between Johnson and Goldwater. His existential politics exists in that flash point when the

individual is able to escape the deadening effects of objective violence by provoking the state into disclosing its true self through subjective violence. For Mailer, explosions of subjective, egregious violence are the closest we'll ever get to those explicit confrontations between good and evil for which he reserves his greatest relish. The experience of physical pain refers us back to the life of the body, to a sphere in which diligence and discipline may do their good work. What Mailer peddles is politics as therapy, and offers his work as an attempt to supply meaning to an alienated middle-class that needs to have explicit violence pointed out to it, because it is too cut off from those violent processes to which they are putatively opposed. Hip would eventually help bestow a literary form upon the passion of Gary Gilmore, who gave meaning to his own death by forcing the hand of the state. But before we come to this there is Mailer's clash with feminism and his attempts to delegitimise its liberationist claims.

Chapter Five: “He would agree with everything they asked but to quit the womb.”

For finally, despite the idealization of motherhood, it is men’s work that really counts.

Coppélia Kahn, *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle*

In his 1961 essay on Mailer, “The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy,” James Baldwin expressed confidence that Mailer’s achievement as a writer would last, and that his misbehaviour as a man would be forgotten:

His work, after all, is all that will be left when the newspapers are yellowed, all the gossip columnists silenced, and all the cocktail parties over, and when Norman and you and I are dead. I know that this point of view is not terribly fashionable these days, but I think we do have a responsibility, not only to ourselves and to our own time, but to those who are coming after us. And I suppose that this responsibility can only be discharged by dealing as truthfully as we know how with our present fortunes, these present days. (Baldwin pp. 284-285)

This isn’t to reckon, however, with the prime Mailerian offence, and the ideological shadings that Mailer’s actions and character would accrue with the passage of time. Stefan Collini, in an essay on Christopher Hitchens, has noted that ‘contrarians are prone to congratulate themselves on being out of step with their times.’ Mailer exulted in that sort of negative approbation, as evidenced in his quotation in *Advertisements for Myself* of the negative review of *Barbary Shore* written by Sterling North:

It is relatively rare to discover a novel [whose] obvious intent is to debauch as many readers as possible, mentally, morally, physically and politically...When one has finished reading (by way of duty) this evil-smelling novel and dropped

it gingerly in the garbage can, one has an overwhelming urge to take a hot bath with very strong soap. (Mailer, 1992 p. 105) ¹

‘And that was funny,’ purrs Mailer in his satisfaction. We’re at liberty to laugh along with him: the second Red Scare was a tawdry episode in American history. *Barbary Shore* may not survive alongside other literary artefacts of the period such as *Inherit the Wind* or *The Crucible*, but it places Mailer on the right side of history—at least from a liberal-democratic perspective. With *The Prisoner of Sex* he picked a fight with what was at the time a vocal, burgeoning fringe movement and ended up on the wrong side. I would propose that, despite Baldwin’s confidence, three black marks will abide in Mailer’s record. The assault on his second wife in 1960 has been established (see Appendix II). The Jack Henry Abbott affair of 1981 will be dealt with in the next chapter. Right now I wish to focus on the flurry of activity that ensued from Mailer’s entry into the debate on Women’s Lib. There’s no escaping the fact that he can still be seen in *Town Bloody Hall*—D.A. Pennebaker’s documentary of the panel debate that took place on April 30th of 1971 in The Town Hall in New York City—addressing a woman as ‘hey cunt,’ and that he did so not only while sharing a stage with Diana Trilling and Germaine Greer, but also in front of an audience that included Susan Sontag, Elizabeth Hardwick, and Betty Friedan. There’s the persistent behaviour, painfully reported by J. Michael Lennon in the authorised biography:

At every college, his audience brought up his opposition to women’s liberation. When he felt feisty, he brought it up first. He usually stated, as he did at Towson State in Baltimore, that he agreed with “the body of demands that ask for equity,” but disagreed with the movement’s “sexual ideals.” He also complained that women would not enter into a dialogue with him, which he called “potentially totalitarian.” This college tour went west, with stops at San Francisco State...and the University of California, Berkeley. At this stop, Mailer began by asking the feminists in the audience to hiss. When they did, he said, “Obedient little bitches,” which drew laughs and more hisses. He then went on, according to a news report, to deliver an electrifying speech, “dumping poisonous invective on just about every aspect of the feminist

¹ In that same anthology, Mailer expressed his fantasy that his big novel would be so incendiary that it could only be available in pirated forms, smuggled from reader to scandalized reader—just as he had read excerpts of *Naked Lunch*. North’s reaction was the closest he ever got to this sort of cult notoriety.

movement and gleefully one-upping most of the epithets that his audience snarled back at him.” In the course of the speech, he said that “a little bit of rape is good for a man’s soul.” Whatever the context, the line was widely reported and cemented his position as the *bête noir* of women’s liberation. *Time* ran it, unadorned, as the beginning of its “People” squib on the speech in the November 6 issue. He wrote a letter, complaining as he had in the past, about being quoted out of context. But he had said it and the damage was done. (Lennon, 2013 pp. 456-457)

Recall that at the time, the autumn of ’72, his book *St. George and the Godfather* had been rushed into publication in the hopes of influencing the election—such was his prestige. Until a recent crackdown, the entirety of *Town Bloody Hall* was available for free online; for the time being its viewership will be restricted to those undeterred by the prohibitive price of its DVD release. But that hasn’t stopped the movie and the public confrontation that it captures from remaining a part of the current conversation on feminism. In *She’s Beautiful When She’s Angry*, Mary Dore’s disappointingly bland 2014 documentary about the women’s movement from 1966 to 1971, mere minutes have passed before we’re shown footage from the Pennebaker film. Intriguingly, Dore uses footage of Mailer, presumably still notorious enough to raise the on-screen temperature by his mere presence, to introduce Jacqueline Ceballos of the ‘National Organisation of the [*sic*] Women,’ who is the documentary’s first talking head proper. There’s something ominous about having Mailer raise the curtain on the movie’s subject: ‘The question of Women’s Liberation is the deepest question that faces us and we’re going to go right into the centre of it.’ To some ears, this alone is starting on the wrong note. Panellist Jill Johnston later wrote that she’d questioned appearing at all (and indeed several women, including Gloria Steinem, turned Mailer down), since the panel’s very existence seemed to allow that women’s liberation was an open question, not a social ultimatum.²

Town Bloody Hall was filmed in 1971 and not released until 1979. In early 2017 it was reappropriated for the Trump era—which had been inaugurated by the global Women’s March—by The Wooster Group, a New York-based experimental theatre collective. Staged as *The Town Hall Affair*, it occasioned the re-examination of a near-forgotten incident in the history of the women’s movement. ‘It used to be funny,’ said actress Maura Tierney:

² See the article by Travis Diehl listed in the bibliography.

‘Norman Mailer says these outrageous things, outrageously disrespectful and crass things to the women on the panel. But now our president talks like that’ (Soloski). This is, of course, unfair to Mailer—but representatively so, a measure of how uncongenial his views and temperament are to the young and politically conscious of this generation, who haven’t stepped forward to replenish his readership.

Much as these events precede any contemporary reading of *The Prisoner of Sex*, they followed the publication of the book—and it is the book which is the object of this chapter’s scrutiny. First I will establish the occasion for its composition, which will involve an introduction to Kate Millett’s seminal work *Sexual Politics* and an overview of intellectual currents in the Second Wave of Feminism. Then I will adduce the two key aspects of Mailer’s counter-attack: his literary and moral defence of the white male canon that Millett impugns, and his critique of technological modernity. And before meditating upon the damage done to his reputation, I will frame Mailer’s clash with Millett in terms of the subsequent development of Feminist thought. It is on these jagged rocks that the Mailerian author function experiences shipwreck, and over the course of this chapter we will see its captain as a grim Ahab—stabbing and grappling; spewing obscenities before going under amid the wreckage of a dying order.

Part I: The Opening Salvo

In “Dancing through the Minefield” Annette Kolodny reflected on the storm that swept through the academy during the 1970s:

The pace of inquiry these last ten years has been fast and furious—especially after Kate Millett’s 1970 analysis of the sexual politics of literature added a note of urgency to what had earlier been [Mary] Ellman’s sardonic anger—while the diversity of inquiry easily outstripped all efforts to define feminist literary criticism as either a coherent system or a unified set of methodologies. Under its wide umbrella, everything had been thrown into the question: our established canons, our aesthetic criteria, our interpretative strategies, our reading habits, and, most of all, ourselves as critics and teachers. (Kolodny p. 2146)

Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* was published in the same year as Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* and Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex*, and seven years after Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. Based on her doctoral thesis, the work is a wide-ranging and multi-disciplinary indictment of patriarchal power dynamics as they make themselves felt in the realms of society, culture, and sexual relations. Millett's most striking and combative innovation is her polemical feminist criticism of the literary canon—it preceded Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's pioneering *The Madwoman in the Attic* by nearly a decade. Perhaps the most influential section of the book is Millett's survey of the literature of the period of sexual counterrevolution (which in her account spans the years 1930 to 1960), in which she dilates upon three representative authors: D.H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, and Norman Mailer.

In many ways Millett set the tone for future criticism of Mailer. Take for example Michael Snyder's, which echoes her analysis of gendered violence in the novels: 'For Mailer, sex is a function of power. All power relationships are sexualized, and all sex relations have to do with a power dynamic; this is true for experiences with one's own or the opposite sex...Mailer demonstrates paranoia that trends in American society are pushing men away from masculinity [and] is swept up in this paranoia and fear himself, which tends to muddy the waters of his critique of the national narrative' (Snyder p. 263). But it doesn't necessarily follow that a critic like Snyder is directly influenced by Millett. The idea of a definitive work of literary criticism as described by Frank Kermode—one that sets up the matrix for a generation of subsequent comment—is only possible within a canon built on absolute and putatively disinterested values, and whose statements take the form of the literary and the apodictic. Bloom's anxiety model of influence encompasses literary criticism if we grant him his premise that criticism is either a genre of literature or it is nothing at all. Anything else, we are to imagine, is merely ideological criticism, in which the evaluative matrix is not passed on hierarchically but rather rhizomatically. As Foucault writes in "What is an Author?": 'unlike the founding of a science, the initiation of a discursive practice does not participate in its later transformations'. Millett no doubt cleared a cultural space for the literary critique of sexual politics, but such a concept is too vast to belong to any single figure; and subsequent examples of the practice emerge from a cluster of intellectual affiliations, rather than from the deeply private relay race of influence.

Lawrence had died in 1930; Miller hadn't produced a major work since 1959, with the publication *Nexus* and the completion of *The Rosy Crucifixion*. As the sole contemporary

writer of the three, Mailer came in for particular criticism—the more pointed for being inflected by an acknowledgement of his importance:

Mailer is paradoxical, full of ambivalence, divided conscience, and conflicting loyalties. There is probably no other writer who can describe the present and its "practical working-day American schizophrenia" so well. For by now Mailer is as much a cultural phenomenon as a man of letters, *fulfilling his enormous ambition to exert a direct effect on the consciousness of his time*. What he offers for our edification is the spectacle of his dilemma, the plight of a man whose powerful intellectual comprehension of what is most dangerous in the masculine sensibility is exceeded only by his attachment to the malaise. No one has done so much to explain, yet justify violence. Mailer is enigmatic enough to be a militarist with quasi-pacifist books to his credit, a man compulsively given to casting himself into the role of the general leading "his troops" when invited to appear as a celebrity at anti-war demonstrations. (Millett p. 314)³

From this Millett lays out her case against the man and his method. She's particularly strong on Mailer's obsession with what might be termed a sort of existential finitude: the idea that any act may result in a deleterious and irrevocable expenditure of inner reserves; that in every moment one is either growing into more or fading into less. 'His prose,' writes Millet (while noting his debt to the late work of Wilhelm Reich): 'both didactic and biographical, is full of terrified endorsements of Freud's prescription that sexuality is inimical to cultural achievement with harrowed accounts of sapped energy, wasted time' (Millett p. 328). While Millett focuses on Mailer's sexual puritanism ('like a grim semen bank on the verge of collapse [he is] Jesuitically fierce over Procreation, nearly frantic that a seed be spilled in vain') she could have pushed further. Mailer extends this logic to all the key spheres of endeavour. Recall how towards the end of *Advertisements for Myself* he announced that 'I find myself forced to bring to an end whatever trace of an autobiography has slipped into these advertisements...I sense that to give any more of what happened to me on the last few years might make for five thousand good words, but could also strip me of fifty thousand

³ The emphasis in italics is my own

better ones' (Mailer, 1992 p. 336). Then there's his confession to son John, in their book of dialogues:

I smoked marijuana for about five years. Loved it, smoked it intensely. I finally gave it up. Like any vice, there's a price you pay for what you get. In my case, I felt if I wanted to be a serious writer, I couldn't continue because—how to put it?—marijuana was foreclosing the future, anticipating the future, using up my future before it happened. I'd tear through the equivalent of two days' worth of my best perceptions in a pot high that lasted two hours. For the next couple of days I was blank. So I realised that if I wanted to be a writer, I couldn't keep on with it. I was eating up my novels before I could write them. For the sheer mind-joy of experiencing them all at once. (Mailer and Mailer, pp. 164-165)

The fortitude required to produce the nebulous 'big one' was fatally siphoned off at least twice: not into a weed habit, but rather first into the shambolic *Village Voice* columns, and then into *An American Dream*—a grim distillate of the nightmarish doorstopper Mailer had been dreaming up (see Appendix II). The remarks by Mailer's peers after the stabbing of Adele Morales hint at just how extensively these inchoate notions of esoteric energy were indulged, even taken seriously. The intellectual community of New York closed ranks around Mailer. James Baldwin, for instance, indulged the assault to the degree that it relieved Mailer of the pressure of his fantasies towards holding elected office—he would finally run in 1969. Diana Trilling, as recorded in Peter Manso's biography as oral history, recalled her husband Lionel's assessment of the incident as some sort of Dostoyevskian ploy by Mailer 'to test the limits of evil within himself' (Manso p. 331). When he ran for Mayor of New York he counted not only Steinem but also Bella Abzug among his boosters.⁴

Incredibly, Millett forebears from prosecuting Mailer on that count; he had spun plenty of rope throughout his novels, and she mines *An American Dream* especially for instances of violence against women and aligns them with the rhetoric of his essays and interviews. She's correct to point out the problem of interrelation that arises out of his activities as fiction writer and essayist, which is that his output in each capacity can easily be read as a parody of

⁴ 'Inarticulacy is the key to [Lee Harvey] Oswald's thwartedness. He was a wife-beater; and what else is a wife-beater but a man who runs out of words—who keeps coming up empty on words?' reflected Martin Amis in a review of *Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery* in which he clearly lost sight of the author whose book he was praising (Amis, 2002 p. 276).

its counterpart. At a time when French innovations in the emerging field of post-structuralist thought had yet to completely saturate the academic mainstream we see Millett advancing a germinal critique of Mailer's author function. Millett grants him the notoriety and influence for which he yearned; that he had achieved some sort of simultaneity between utterance and signification was borne out by the weight of his words in public forums. It also means that there is no foreswearing the most egregious of his pronouncements—irony cannot be evoked to sever the paper trail. Mailer's misogyny is a thing of darkness that must be acknowledged as his. This is the weak flank that Millett exposed, and which Mailer's splenetic counter-attacks on the Miller and Lawrence fronts cannot adequately defend. But Millett was in no historical position to wield those particular arms; it's telling, though, that in Mailer's case she makes much more frequent recourse to his extra-literary record than she does when dealing with Lawrence or Miller. She clearly intuited that Mailer was almost unique in his ability to unify all manner of activity under the banner of his name, and that this left him singularly vulnerable to the emotive and absolute judgements of the *ad hominem* and the *ex hypothesi*.

Otherwise, today her book's engagement with such diverse fields as anthropology, anti-psychiatry and sociology strike even the lay reader as over-hasty and rudimentary. It is shot through with the period's vociferous rejection of Freudian gender essentialism,⁵ and its second-hand speculations on the existence of some pre-civilizational Ur-Matriarchy seem more therapeutic than rigorous.⁶ The book is also recklessly prescriptive, at one point calling (almost in passing) for all child-rearing to be the responsibility of the state—a demand that Mailer decries as pure Stalinism. Those last two points reveal the temperamental and ideological saliences of what is now routinely decried as the blinkered narrowness of white liberal feminism. Notwithstanding the claim's basis in any sort of historical or archaeological record, a lesbian theorist like Monique Wittig critiques the concept of a primordial matriarchate as only more binary sexual determinism:

The belief in mother right and in a “prehistory” when women created civilization (because of a biological predisposition) while the coarse and brutal

⁵ '[Freud] promises to explain unsubstantiated modification in an unsubstantiated entity, the superego: if physiology is destiny Freud is anxious to invent a physiology of the mind. If judgement had not been separated from feeling so unnaturally in the Nazi officers presumably they would not have carried out orders so crisply. What kind of a criticism is it to say that women are less stoical than men? After two world wars stoicism seems to have outlived its value' (Greer p. 110).

⁶ There's surely an affinity of motive with the pseudo-historical Afrocentrism of George G.M. James and Ivan Van Sertima. Respectively, they are the authors of *Stolen Legacy* (1954) and *They Came Before Columbus* (1976), which spuriously argued for the African origins of Greek philosophy and the Olmec culture of Mesoamerica. In both cases Eurocentrism is merely shunted aside in favour of its postcolonial mirror image.

men hunted (because of a biological predisposition) is symmetrical with the biologizing interpretation of history produced up to now by the class of men. It is still the same method of finding in women and men a biological explanation of their division, outside of social facts. For me this could never constitute a lesbian approach to women's oppression, since it assumes that the basis of society or the beginning of society lies in heterosexuality. Matriarchy is no less heterosexual than patriarchy: it is only the sex of the oppressor that changes. (Wittig p. 2015)

And, more recently, the Christian conservative thinker Patrick J. Deneen helps locate the entire feminist project within a John Dewey-derived liberal 'antipathy to culture as a deep relationship with a nature that defines and limits human nature' (Deneen p. 72). While Millett's proposals to abolish the family unit by state fiat may be no more than the rhetorical overreach or necessary exaggeration which flowers during any revolutionary moment, it is still a telling utterance, revealing 'the liberal model that apparent natural limits are to be overcome through short-term solutions whose consequences will be left for future generations...While purportedly forward looking, this approach is profoundly presentist and placeless' (p. 70). Like Deneen, the less systematic Mailer intuitively feels that Feminism is emblematic of Liberalism's twinned assault on culture and nature. 'The presence of culture,' writes Deneen, 'marks existence of artifice and convention, the simultaneous effort to alter but conform to nature' (p. 67). Liberalism promises to free us from our obligations to the dubious moral authority of the former and our enthrallment to the limitations and determinisms of the latter, and finally to sever the link between the two. Mailer's liberal anti-liberalism, or his left-conservatism, rests on a defence of antinomianism as carried out by his favourite writers, and on an argument for this activity's being aligned with some sort of natural order. Mailer's idea of culture is far more limited than Deneen's, and ultimately self-serving. Miller and Lawrence are his canaries down the coalmine—what begins with them must surely come for him. Such was his belief in the resonance of his utterances that it seemed he could defend himself by fending off assaults against them.

Kolodny characterised the feministic critical project of the '70s as an attempt to expose how the power relations which men hold over women are 'inscribed in the texts (both literary and critical) that we have inherited, not merely as subject matter, but as the unquestioned, often unacknowledged *given* of the culture' (Kolodny p. 2148). Millett's critique of Miller

and Lawrence will become clear in what follows through Mailer's interactions with them in *The Prisoner of Sex*.

Part II: Mailer's Response

The pressure exerted by Millett's critique prompted a response from Mailer on two levels, the literary and the public. Both have done lasting damage to his reputation—so much so that one needn't read a word of *An American Dream* or *Why Are We in Vietnam?* in order to be utterly convinced of the fundamental ugliness of his character, an assessment which has become anterior to almost any reading of his work. I shall return to the matter of Mailer's public conduct and focus for now on *The Prisoner of Sex*. The piece originated in *Harper's* in 1971 (the same year as the founding of the National Women's Political Caucus); market losses and a huge income tax bill forced Mailer to delay work on the 'Egyptian Novel' (the slowly gestating *Ancient Evenings*, which wouldn't appear until 1983) and accept editor Willie Morris's proposal for a rejoinder to Millett's work and a broader meditation on Women's Lib. Morris's tenure at *Harper's* would be terminated later that year, with falling sales blamed on his reckless and incendiary editorial strategies. An entire issue was taken up by Mailer's piece and Morris (who takes his place among the author's most ardent promoters) advertised it in *The New York Times* with a ten-by-fifteen ad: 'The Favourite Target of Women's Lib Chooses His Weapon. Harper's Magazine. Pick Up a Copy. Before Your Newsstand Is Picketed' (Lennon, 2013 p. 435).

Mailer's book is composed of four parts, named after the persona he adopts in each. The first and shortest, "The Prizewinner," provides the most candid glimpse into his private life that he ever afforded his readership. In it he relates his disappointment at missing out on the Nobel Prize and his burgeoning awareness of the feminist *animus* against him: 'It was hard to think of himself as one of their leading enemies' (Mailer, 1971 p. 18).⁷ In "The Acolyte" he lays out his own reading of the literature of Women's Liberation: 'Now women were writing about men and themselves as Henry Miller had once written about women, which is to say, with all the gusto of a veterinarian getting into the glisten of a chancre in a show mare's dock. What a shock!'—do we detect a hint of mockery in his tone and rhyme? (p. 34). "The Advocate" is where Mailer most directly addresses Millett's various charges. Forbearing

⁷ 'By evening arrived the true report. Samuel Beckett had been given the prize over André Malraux. One had to be a hint illiterate not to have thought of either name. Let us hope modesty prevented him from considering his own work for even an instant in comparison; Malraux, after all, was his idea of a great writer' (Mailer, 1971 pp. 10-11).

from defending his own work, he instead vigorously opposes her critiques of Lawrence and Miller; he also sets out to rescue Jean Genet from what he sees as Millett's wrongheaded and imprecise approbation. 'Millett is not interested in the dialectic by which writers deliver their themes to themselves; she is more interested in hiding the process' is one of his more delicate brickbats (p. 103). Finally, in "The Prisoner" he consolidates and magnifies his condemnation of Women's Liberation as essentially a fifth column of useful idiots, peddling liberation but working to deliver the sort of technological, corporatist, and centralised totalitarianism which he has always opposed: 'Of course, the revolution could also become the first bureaucracy of sex, and the technicians of genetics its intelligentsia' (p. 160). Here we see once again Mailer's favourite dialectical trope: that one may be committed to the work of God but in fact carrying out the design of the devil. It strikes us that this is essentially a pragmatist's argument from outcome; that Mailer, throughout what follows, never really engages with the claims of feminism except by constructing worst-case scenarios about the results. What he never says explicitly is that even the mildest of these would constitute a concrete loss for the character we have come to know as Norman Mailer, who evinces absolutely no self-consciousness in griping in the pages of *Harper's* about not being awarded the Nobel Prize.

As previously mentioned, this chapter will focus on Mailer's literary arguments and his critique of technological modernity; the material on his domestic life requires less attention. One might even say that it has the retroactive effect of justifying his relative parsimony on that front in the earlier works of illeistic journalism. 'Yes, he could be a housewife for six weeks, even for six years if it came to it, even work without help if it came to it, but he did not question what he would have to give up forever' (p. 14).⁸ The most sophisticated appraisal of the frivolity on display is the one advanced by Jennifer Bailey, who is particularly canny on the limitations of illeism as a strategy:

Mailer's narrative can offer no meaning, beyond its prosaic literalness, to his private life. It is not a comparative point of reference, it does not carry symbolic connotations; it is simply a comfortable antidote to his recent emotional and creative lacerations. His ego, his reputation is resident in New York, beyond his immediate concern or control. It is because the narrator of *The Prisoner of Sex* is safeguarding a self and a lifestyle which bears no relevance to his literary style, that the interpretative criteria of his book are so

⁸ Clive James spoke on behalf of countless readers when he noted 'the Prisoner's technique of tossing in a Yes, comma, or No, comma, at the very moment when the reader is yelling Hold On exclamation mark.'

confused. He has given meaning to sex, but whether it is literal or metaphorical meaning is never, at any stage, really established. This is because the Prisoner of sex has locked himself in and is therefore prevented from making a dialectical contact with the Prizewinner, who possesses the literary ego which is under attack. Although the Prisoner ostensibly mounts a counter-attack against Kate Millett, he is unwittingly forced into a defensive impasse because he has conceded, in part, to her critical stance, which is that of a moral realist. (Bailey p. 131)

What Bailey gets directly is the failure of Mailer's illeism to universalise, particularly when dedicated to expounding such fractious views as in this book. Rather than working to depict the author as a representative figure it gives us something shabby and specific: a rich and complacent man who has chosen to pick a fight. Poirier, writing his monograph shortly after the publication of *The Prisoner of Sex*, expressed concern that Mailer's style of self-explanation had begun to precede the author's experience of any event or phenomenon. One might be blunter and assert that, with its application to Women's Lib—presumably as pliant a topic of investigation as any political or sporting spectacle—the project of illeistic narration hit the buffers. In this more than in any piece he had written since “Ten Thousand Words a Minute” the reader is conscious of the insistence upon authorial presence in the work as a stalling action. But what in the boxing essay reveals itself under careful scrutiny as a quite brilliant elision of form and content strikes us in the present work as unmerited fabular padding. Recall that the Mailer of 1962 had enough nous as a storyteller to present himself to his readers as a *schlemiel*, which would serve him equally well during the comedy of manners with which he opened *The Armies of the Night*. The autobiographical material in *The Prisoner of Sex* exposes the affectation of the previous works. Here we see Mailer in his prime, installed at the pinnacle of cultural life—jealously guarding his treasure and greedy for more. The self-deprecation of previous illeistic presentations worked to position him at a sufficient remove from the subjects of his investigations; his responses and analyses were proffered as disinterested and representative. In the case of *The Prisoner of Sex* he seems blind to how his self-foregrounding places him within the centre of what feminism is calling into question. Among other pressures and conundrums, the Mailerian author function was a response to his anxiety of influence by Hemingway and an attempt to escape the fate which befell his hero. But by 1971, illeism meant that ‘he seems to lose all his capacity for self-criticism and is likely to become fatuous or maudlin,’ and that he ‘fumbles at communication

and falsifies’—which were Edmund Wilson and Lionel Trilling’s final assessments of Hemingway. The problematic of authorship established, let us examine the substance of Mailer’s arguments.

Part III: Miller & Lawrence

Both Miller and Lawrence were profound formative influences on Mailer, who had had the opportunity at Harvard to read *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* and *Tropic of Cancer* when they were both still unavailable to the American public at large and thus charged with the allure of the prohibited. Mailer inverts Millett’s order and deals with the authors in a reverse chronological sequence, tackling her assault on Miller first; this one clearly felt personal. In Millett’s view Miller is the exemplary counterrevolutionary sexual politician, a man whose mantra is ‘it’s fuck or be fucked’—except, as Mailer points out, Miller never committed those words to paper. At this very early point in his reckoning with Millett’s account Mailer scores a major point by drawing the reader’s attention to the dishonesties of her critical methodology. He gives us Miller’s actual words: ‘We were a merry crew, united in our desire to fuck the company at all costs. And while fucking the company we fucked everything in sight that we could get hold of.’ Mailer calls this ‘a merry observation, not a bitter one. But Kate’s version works more effectively to slip a reader the assumption that Miller is a racist who jeers at his secretary’s death’ (Mailer, 1971 p. 73).

Already in this first skirmish there is something fundamentally unsatisfying about the exchange between Millett and Mailer. Jennifer Bailey caught this scent and noted the flaws in both writers’ approaches: that while Millett ‘is unaware that when Mailer (like Henry Miller) employs a sexual metaphor, it does not bring into play the whole self,’ her ‘attack is, ironically, justified by the counter-attack’ (Bailey p. 132). On that latter point one need look no further than Mailer’s sneeringly patriarchal impertinence in referring to Millett as ‘Kate.’ Mailer argues that Millett is unsuited in terms of both literary style and critical temperament to give Miller a fair hearing. Regarding the episode of Miller’s ‘part-nigger’ secretary whom he drives to suicide, Mailer points out that ‘in fact the suicide isn’t even mentioned at this point...it’s mentioned twenty-eight pages later’ in what Mailer proposes is an exculpatory light (Mailer, 1971 p. 73). He’s correct to point out that Millett’s linear, point-by-point style of argumentation doesn’t grant her commensurate ingress to Miller’s wandering, free-associative style. Where she falls down is in her attempts to hold him to definite positions on

matters of sexual politics. What ‘Kate hates old Henry for’ is this: ‘that he dares to be an energetic scientist but is without a smock, that he does his lab work out of the lab, and yet is so scientific that his amours are as case histories’ (Ibid. p. 85). Elsewhere, Mailer refers to his foil as ‘Kate-baby,’ ‘good laboratory assistant Kate,’ and ‘Comrade Millet.’ The condescension hardly needs spelling out, but what betrays Mailer’s hand is the rationale by which he grants priority to the findings of Miller’s concupiscent peregrinations over Millett’s more conventional scholarly procedure. What’s implied by his contempt is a bullying, almost anti-intellectual attitude—his experiential anxiety as its most philistine.⁹

In *The Prisoner of Sex* Mailer had undertaken field work of a different sort compared to his political reportage. In this sense *A Fire on the Moon*, which was written for *Life* two years earlier, constitutes a transitional work of non-fiction. Denied unmediated access to the astronauts, Mailer was fed PR copy and invited to tightly-controlled events like any other journalist; he responded by digging down into his skill as a ‘reader’ of official jargon and by replenishing his dormant knowledge of aeronautical engineering, which he had studied at Harvard. To prepare to take on the arguments of Women’s Lib he retreated entirely into the library, and his relish is palpable when he sees a chance to call Millett’s credentials as a historian of sexual politics into question. To condense a point he makes at florid length, Mailer charges Millett with painting an incomplete picture: in her historical scheme, the first phase of the Sexual Revolution spanned the years 1830-1930, and makes much of figures like John Stuart Mill, Friedrich Engels, and the Brontës but largely elides the years after 1900. In his view, Millett miscategorises Miller by dealing with him in the years 1930 to 1960—the age of counterrevolution, in which he looms large as a figure of oppression.

Instead, Mailer argues that Miller be seen as a model figure of the 1920s, ‘a species of sexual renaissance where man emerges from the long medieval night of Victorian sex with its perversions, hypocrisies, and brothel dispensations’ (Ibid. p. 77). The Miller that Mailer depicts is engaged in an investigation that melds the psychological, sociological, and sexual in a manner that resists and confounds Millet’s reductionism. His quotations from Miller are abundant to a fault and carry out their appointed restorative function. But while Mailer

⁹ ‘Instead of being welcomed onto the train, however, we’ve been forced to negotiate a minefield. The very energy and diversity of our enterprise have rendered us vulnerable to attack on the grounds that we lack both definition and coherence; while our particular attentiveness to the ways in which literature encodes and disseminates cultural value systems calls down upon us imprecations echoing those heaped upon the Marxist critics of an earlier generation. If we are scholars dedicated to rediscovering a lost body of writings by women, then our finds are questioned on aesthetic grounds. And if we are critics, determined to practice revisionist readings, it is claimed that our focus is too narrow, and our results are only distortions or, worse still, polemical misreadings’ (Kolodny p. 2151).

provides us with a fuller picture of Miller than that conveyed in Millett's overdetermined reading, he is being evasive in his own way. Miller's portrayal of women may be fuller than the gallery of a 'thousand floozie caricatures' that Millett charges him with painting. But Mailer's defence ultimately reverts to a formula that he states bluntly in *Town Bloody Hall*: in a brazen reversal of Simone de Beauvoir, he argues that it is also difficult to be, much less become, a man. What Mailer defends his two heroes against—and by extension himself—is their being depersonalised by an analysis which would reduce them to mere indices of inequality: 'The power relations inscribed in the form of conventions within our literary inheritance,' writes Kolodny, 'reify the encodings of those same power relations in the culture at large' (Kolodny p. 2149). Mailer bristles at the ways in which his favoured writers are exposed as not only vectors but propagators of coercive social dynamics, but ultimately his defence of the male canon from the feminist critique rests on little more than changing the subject.

Let us at this point turn our attention to de Beauvoir, partly in order to give the lie to Mailer's claimed membership among existential thinkers—the more authentic inheritors of the existentialist-phenomenological tradition are the later feminist theorists like Judith Butler. Reading *The Second Sex* it is startling to appreciate the extent to which de Beauvoir pre-empted Mailer's various (and, it must be said, utterly fatuous) positions. Had he read beyond Walter Kaufmann's *Existentialism from Dostoyevsky to Sartre* he might have known better:

Few myths have been more advantageous to the ruling caste than the myth of woman: it justifies all privileges and even authorises their abuse. Men need not bother themselves with alleviating the pains and the burdens that physiologically are women's lot, since these are "intended by Nature"; men use them as a pretext for increasing the misery of the feminine lot still further, for instance by refusing to grant to woman any right to sexual pleasure, by making her work like a beast of burden.

If Mailer took anything from the general atmosphere of Existentialism—if not from de Beauvoir—it is that sex is an existential choice, but his self-obsessed individualism turns the quest into a zero-sum game. I mean this in two regards: first, that in the Mailerian scheme one becomes male by dominating women; second, that the legitimation of male individuation depends on the appropriation of female trauma. The first point will become evident over the ensuing literary examination. The second ought to remind us of "The White Negro," and that

Mailer's evasion of his Jewish identity was so total that he turned to *other* oppressed groups in order to clothe himself in their sense of struggle—he was an early adopter of trauma envy. Even notwithstanding the frankly incredible obsession with male-on-male anal rape that recurs throughout his fiction, Mailer's attempts to essentially reverse the power structures of sexual politics are in evidence in *The Prisoner of Sex*.¹⁰ If he expends a great deal of energy in splitting hairs over the feminist demand for a single permissive sexual standard, it's because he believes it already exists by dint of the awe in which men instinctively hold women. This is, of course, Poirier's "minority within"—in drag. Turning our attention to the chapter which bears that name from his book on Mailer, let us examine a highly revealing passage:

If writing, creativity, a personal style as opposed to an imposed one, could all be associated with femininity, then Mailer's selection of subjects like war, boxing, politics, moonshots, and his own brawling activities, about which he writes with a boyishly self-approving apology, can be taken as counterbalancing attempts to affirm his masculinity...When the sexes meet in his novels it is either for frantic sexual experiences or for conferences about manners and role playing that never significantly modify either one. When he tries to get around this, as in *An American Dream*, he surrounds the relationships with portents and circumstances that prevent it from ever becoming more than an alliance for some mutual escape to an imagined ordinariness never to be achieved. Perhaps the reason for this is that the conflicts that might bring about a change in the relationship between men and women actually take place *within* the nature of all the men in his works, within his own nature.¹¹ Mailer is finally the most androgynous of writers. Perhaps that is why, of what are now eighteen books, only five are novels, a form

¹⁰ 'Even the most avid enthusiasts of buggery...may flinch at confronting Mailer's narrative enthusiasm in heaping up sodomistic rapes, but the religious seriousness of all these representations is rather humourlessly unquestioned and unquestionable,' wrote Harold Bloom of *Ancient Evenings* (Bloom, 2003 p. 35). He goes on to write that the novel 'fulfils the critical prophecy of Richard Poirier's book on Mailer which found in the emphasis upon buggery a dialectic by which meaning is both de-created and restituted. Poirier argued that it is almost as though in the Kabbalah of Norman Mailer, buggery constitutes the trope of the breaking of the vessels, as a negative creation that is a prime Gnostic image' (Ibid. pp. 37-38).

¹¹ 'Indeed, the bonds that in every individual connects the physiological life and the psychic life—or better the relation existing between the contingency of an individual and the free spirit that assumes it—is the deepest enigma implied in the condition of being human, and this enigma is presented in its most disturbing form in woman...If one considers a woman in her immanent presence, her inward self, one can say absolutely nothing about her, she falls short of having any qualifications. Now, in amorous or conjugal relations, in all relations where the woman is the vassal, the other, she is dealt with in her immanence' (de Beauvoir).

where some developed relationship between the sexes is generally called for.
(Poirier, 1972 pp. 156-157)

This passage is flatly astonishing in its contradictions, evasions, and attempted sleights. These are worth examining because the sort of criticism practiced by Poirier is as much the target of feminist critique as Mailer's writing—and because it exhibits the traits of the counter-feminist reaction identified by Kolodny.¹² First Poirier imports an arbitrary prejudice about the supposed femininity of writing and creative undertakings, one that is completely absent from Mailer's system. And if there is a note of 'boyishly self-approving apology' to his writings on masculine subjects its volume is greatly exaggerated. It sets up a false motivation for Mailer's interest in these subjects; in fact, Poirier indulges in the same fallacy that he routinely identifies in his subject: of setting up a facile and predictable dualism. Notice then how he swerves to avoid actually criticising how Mailer portrays the relationships between men and women. His characterisation of the dynamic serves to set up a wholly incompatible pair of literary judgements. If in Mailer's work, as he seems to propose, the experience of heterosexual interpersonal dynamism is purely a matter of male perception—if the role played by the woman in a relationship is mediated entirely through masculine solipsism—then what claims towards androgyny can Mailer make? The most provocative point in the passage is left unsubstantiated. Instead, Poirier's pivot onto a tallying of Mailer's output only serves to work against his point, and remind us of Mailer's few and failed attempts to imagine the lives of his female characters. *Madame Bovary – ce n'est pas lui*. The amount of creative energy Poirier expended in abetting Mailer's appropriations and masking his trauma envy is bewildering, and if I have engaged with his positions at length it is because I wish to insist on the ideological similarities as well as the flaws shared by Mailer with his most talented exegete. A critic like Poirier or Bloom insists that critiques of the canon be canonical in themselves, but sequestration in such a hall of mirrors could only ever result in a fine-tuning of the concept, rather than any sort of upheaval. The Feminist position—or any that calls for a diversification of the body of works thus designated—exposes the exclusionary mechanisms of canon-formation. The ideology of the supposedly sublime neutrality of the traditional canon is unmasked by triangulation, and shown up for the ways in which it lags behind realignments in society at large.

¹² 'For Mailer, a masculine nature that denies the minority claims within it of feminine feeling – which is how he might account for a masculinized sensibility like Kate Millet's – chills the imagination, prevents it from encompassing even such admission of feminine inclination, or the need of masculine support'—my emphasis (Poirier, 1972 p. 155).

Compared to Lawrence, Mailer's portrait of Miller is a still-life. Because Miller didn't commit to transmuting his experience into fiction until well into his maturity, there was something fully formed and achieved about him from the beginning: a confidence, a serene alignment of ethos which united the currents of his life and work. His failure wasn't one of nerve as in the case of Hemingway, who was undone by the effort to live up to the reputation of the style and moral character of his fiction.¹³ Rather, Miller failed to renew his technique, and in *The Rosy Crucifixion* spins his wheels over one and a half thousand sludgy pages. Mailer's defence of D.H. Lawrence, on the other hand, gives him greater scope to expound his thoughts on change and transformation. He follows the same strategy as in his section on Miller: Millett's quotes are expanded beyond her didactic truncations, and her ordering of Lawrence's works is exposed as partial and partisan. Millett's critique 'fails to underline the heroism of his achievement,' and her

Critical misdemeanour is to conceal the pilgrimage, hide the life, cover over the emotional odyssey which took him from adoration of the woman to outright lust for her murder, then took him back to worship her beauty, even her procreative beauty...Not every female reader will remind herself that Lawrence, having purged his blood of murder, would now go on to write *Lady Chatterley*. (Mailer, 1971 pp. 102-103)

As we saw in his baffling counterfactual of Hemingway's books having been written by some neurasthenic weakling, we see that Mailer's masculine essentialism is also a physical determinism—both of which bear upon the faculty of writing. What Mailer finds fascinating in Lawrence is his frailty of character and physique, his anti-democratic leanings, that 'he contained a cauldron of boiling opposites – he was on the one hand a Hitler in a teapot, on the other hand we was the blessed breast of tender love...these incompatibles, enough to break a less extraordinary man, were squared in their difficulty by the fact that he had intellectual ambition sufficient to desire the overthrow of European civilisation, his themes were nothing

¹³ 'The difference between Hemingway and Miller is that Hemingway set out thereafter to grow into Jakes Barnes and locked himself for better and worse, for enormous fame and eventual destruction, into that character who embodied the spirit of an age. Whereas Miller, eight years older than Hemingway but arriving at publication eight years later, and so sixteen years older in 1934 than Hemingway was in 1926, chose to go in the opposite direction. He proceeded to move away from the first Henry Miller he had created. He was not a character but a soul – he would be various...refining his own personality to become less and less separate from his book, and he could have entered the American life of legend. There were obstacles in his way, of course, and the first was that he was not publishable in America – the growth of his legend would have taken longer. But he had something to offer which went beyond Hemingway' (Mailer and Miller, pp. 14-15).

if not immense' (Ibid. p. 100). Mailer threatens to turn maudlin in his characterisation of Lawrence's redeeming qualities. This is of a piece of the restoration he carries out on both authors, whereby the establishment of broader context is intended to soften the blow of sexual violence with something resembling love or tenderness—on the part of the abusive man towards 'his' woman. What Mailer evades is that in the values-system of his two heroes, women are essentially auxiliary in the male quest for individuation.

More so than Miller it is Lawrence who emerges as the avatar of the Mailerian sexual cosmology, whose strife and triumph illustrates the scheme identified by Judith Fetterley in which 'human sexuality is female and that male sexuality is something created. Males must continually fight their way out of this state and must continually create themselves sexually as male. Achieved against the grain, male sexuality is always in danger of ceasing to exist'—impotence and castration loom as perennial threats (Fetterley p. 143). Let us grant that Mailer emerges as the victor from the Miller skirmish, and that he does so by the passion of his argument on behalf of male experience. However, something altogether more sinister emerges from his defence of Lawrence. Mailer is aware of the perils of Lawrence's personality and outlook: 'in all his books there are unmistakable tendencies toward the absolute domination of women by men, mystical worship of the male will, detestation of democracy' (Mailer, 1971 p. 100). As is his wont at this stage of his career, Mailer packs the many contradictions of Lawrence—that 'cauldron of boiling opposites'—into a single, swarming sentence. In this context his long line comes most electrifyingly to life with admonishment and imprecation: a challenge to the sort of 'meretricious' misrepresentations that he inveighs against. In Mailer's tallying Lawrence emerges as a great writer whose prose stumbled into the pedestrian whenever it ventured beyond the bounds of his experience. He was a didactic, hectoring, and humourless nag; a craven mother's boy. He betrayed his own fear of inadequacy by his repeated demands that men subject themselves to the dictates of one superior than them. But all these incompatibilities are somehow harmoniously arrayed within the immensity of his themes and the totality of his ambition, which would have not settled for less than the violent purification of European civilisation (Ibid.).

But as with his defence of Miller, all Mailer can do is merely assert that Lawrence truly did love women. Women were his salvation from the worst of himself—from his latent homosexuality, from his proto-fascism, from his physical frailty—and this vision was to be realised through sex without 'reserves or defences.' There might be something worth welcoming in the Mailerian determination to bar the technologists of sex from the bedroom but for the dispensations he demands. 'Dominance over women,' he writes, 'was not tyranny

to [Lawrence] but equality, for dominance was the indispensable elevator which would raise his phallus to that height from which it might seek transcendence' (Ibid. p. 112). This is the specious reasoning around which Mailer's objection to Women's Liberation hinges: a numinous elevation of the mysterious female, who figures in his cosmology as some sort of divine adversary, a hurdle in the hero's journey towards the individuation of his masculine essence.

'The myth of woman is a luxury,' writes de Beauvoir:

Going beyond patriarchal experience toward the transcendent Idea was deliberately used by patriarchal society for purposes of self-justification; through the myth this society imposed its laws and customs upon individuals in a picturesque, effective manner; it is under a mythical form that the group-imperative is indoctrinated into each conscience...Here everyone can find sublimation of his drab experiences: deceived by the woman he loves, one declares that she is a Crazy Womb; another, obsessed by his impotence, calls her a Praying Mantis; still another enjoys his wife's company: behold, she is Harmony, Rest, the Good Earth! The taste for eternity at a bargain, for a pocket-sized absolute, which is shared by the majority of men, is satisfied by myths. The smallest emotion, a slight annoyance, becomes the reflection of a timeless idea—an illusion agreeably flattering to the vanity.

De Beauvoir is dangerous to any reading of Mailer because she exposes the neurotic sham of his experientialism, which might be a better term than Existentialism, which in his hands has always meant something like a twofold attitude towards writing. First there's the demand that prose expression evince some quality of psychological immediacy; then there's an associated set of personal practices which are meant to guarantee that quality. It must be said that following his stressful tenure as a *Village Voice* columnist he displayed a remarkable discipline in meeting ambitious deadlines; surely a key part of Mailer's appeal to his contemporary reading public lay in this ability to quickly follow tumultuous mass experiences with such achieved commentary. The Mailerian spectacle took place *in situ*—neglect was sure to follow the silence of death. But returning to this idea of experience as the guarantor of artistic authenticity, we have occasion to examine a revealing passage from one of the novels excoriated by Millett: *Why Are We in Vietnam?* The character Rusty, father of the narrator-protagonist D.J., is fretting over the spoils of his hunting trip:

Well, even with professional bullshit, and that's the secret of the corporation – it is filled with men who are professional bullshit packers – there is a limit. A yes-man will strain his guts to produce – they are the unsung heroes of America (reason they're unsung is they can't get their tongue out of the boss' ass long enough to sing) but strain a gut as they may they cannot strain it past its own true natural elasticity. Something bona fide has got to happen, they can't just go up to Alaska woods, get drunk for a week, buy a bear skin in Fairbanks or McGrath, take pictures, and slip a suppository up the folks back home, those Texas ears too sharp. There'd be a soupçon of caviar shit in the voice and that would be a rick-tick-tick in the narrator's disc. So Rusty's got to produce something big enough for his boys, Minor Asshole 1 and Minor Asshole 2, to say you're right, Rusty, with an easy harmonious concordium of voice, a choir of Texas ass-purring where the yeah boss you go right ahead and kick my Nigger ass gets a Texas hum. For then corporate power is cooking in Rusty's veins. (Mailer, 1982 pp. 52-53) ¹⁴

So masculinity for Mailer is experiential and falsifiable. It is not bestowed but rather earned: something gained by winning small battles with honour, as he'd put it previously. It is its own shibboleth, disclosed by shit in the voice and power coursing through the bloodstream. But for all this, Mailer is unable to make the reader experience femininity directly; stereotypes precede his perceptions. Consider the eccentricity of Mailer's so-called Existentialism. His nausea, his sense of a turbulent self, resides not in the universe—in some disturbed intuition that the relationship between phenomena and their substance is fundamentally instable—but rather in the body. This is why Mailer grants so much weight to the physical sensations that arise from activities like pugilism and fornication: to him, they are infallible indices to the health and stability of male essence. His horror at the demands of Women's Liberation is the knowledge that they will delegitimise such undertakings and leave

¹⁴ What drives Rusty? 'The women are free. They fuck too many to believe one man can do the job. The Niggers are free, and the dues they got to be paid is no Texas Virgin's delight. The white men are no longer champions in boxing.' Millett and others are too hasty to ascribe the worst of the novel directly to Mailer. These aren't Rusty's own words, and they may not even be D.J.'s but those of his alter-ego: a black cripple, a 'genius brain from Harlem pretending to write a white man's fink fuck book.' (Could Bernard Malamud have had this in mind when he wrote *The Tenants* four years later?) The question of which man is the author and which is the put-on is the occasion for scurrilous crowing from both as they alternate in debauching WASP America. 'The fact of the matter,' D.J. tells us, 'is that you're up tight with a mystery, me, and this mystery can't be solved because I'm in the centre of it, and I don't comprehend, not necessarily, I could be traducing myself.'

men stranded in somnolent satisfaction with the doctrines offered to them by society. Mailer's ultimate critique of the feminist project is to frame it as merely the newest component and instantiation of the nebulous conspiracy to subordinate men to a paradigm of femininity. The priority which Mailer grants these processes is evident in his elevation of Lawrence and Ernest Hemingway. According to Christian Messenger, Mailer's fixation upon these authors' 'physical weak points is consistent with his views of the psychic nature of disease: thus Lawrence's tuberculosis and Hemingway's early senility are metaphysical and ritualistic in nature and begin in what they have too deeply seen, felt, and sought to deny' (Messenger p. 92).

Fredric Jameson, in his piece on the programme era, describes the institutionalisation of creative writing as something like the secret shame of American letters. 'Modern American writers have always wanted to think of themselves as being innocent of that artificial supplement to real life which is college education,' he writes, before noting that inter- and post-war European intellectuals had made the supposed authenticity of the American author a point of worship. As we have seen, one of the purposes of the creative writing programme was to reify a set of ideological assumptions through the standardisation of a supposedly neutral prose style. If Mailer's diminished cachet is partly to be understood against the ubiquity of the programme ethos, then we must consider how unfashionable his influences have become. We have examined how several aspects of Mailer's approach to literary production align with tenets of the programme process: an embrace of autobiography, the prioritising of direct experience over the schematising consolations of theory—Mailer figured this out for himself. Having been awestruck by the reading requirement for his composition course at Harvard, the great sorrow and the thrilling inspiration of the experience lay in immediately recognising in these writings the imprimatur of experience. He knew it despite not having it himself, and to have one's eyes opened to the vistas of life's potentialities in this manner is to be made painfully aware of belatedness.

Take Mailer's great triad of precursors. Lawrence and Miller are probably too eccentric and disobliging to be of much use to the formula mongers who teach creative writing, for reasons I'll quickly return to. Hemingway, even if only as an ancestral rather than direct topic of study, is probably guaranteed a perennial centrality by dint of his misunderstood 'iceberg theory.' The minimalist short story is the quintessential mode of programme-approved literary production, and what this enshrines is a Hemingway method completely deracinated from the original author. Harold Bloom wishes to stress Hemingway's often uncanny resemblance to and affinity with powerful contemporaries like Wallace Stevens, which I

imagine creative writing instructors would consider an unhelpful and even deleterious point of comparison. For much as creative writing seeks to make all fiction a species of lyric, the perils of professionalization lie in the establishment of an ideological filter bubble: ‘good’ writing becomes defined as the careful product of people who think like the instructors. Much as programme prose claims to abide by the rule that style is content, it fails to interrogate the assumptions—whether performative masculine essentialism or Modernist scepticism—which lie beneath Hemingway’s minimalist diction.

Literary influence as belatedness, anxiety, and agon is like how the poet Delmore Schwartz described time: both ‘the school in which we learn’ and ‘the fire in which we burn.’ Mailer, as we have seen, burned to better the instruction of Hemingway without wanting to sound like him. He treasured those sculpted and reticent sentences not for their outer form but rather for what they represent: a deeply passionate grappling with the actual. The sentences and vignettes were taken not as guides to writing but as guides to life. A creative writing course would use the example of Hemingway to hearten its students, to point out how viable it is to write what one knows; to a writer like Mailer, each trimmed line is a reminder that he hasn’t lived enough, doesn’t know enough. *The Prisoner of Sex* can be read as a climacteric in Mailer’s continuing campaign to emulate Papa’s life and vision. One cannot imagine any creative writing professor being so drastic and immersive in her prescriptions.

Nor can one imagine any institution of creative writing giving its endorsement to a project founded on the lure of Miller and Lawrence. Remember Mailer’s first enchantment with literature at Harvard and then his dream of his large novel having to be smuggled about in pirated form: the dream precedes his reading of *Naked Lunch* and can be tracked back to the proscribed examples of *Tropic of Cancer* and *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*. To court outrage, to aim to shock a complacent consensus, to dream of legal censure and struggle—surely the commercial imperatives which underpin professionalised creative writing would preclude such pipe dreams *ipso facto*. But what becomes clear from reading *The Prisoner of Sex* is that Mailer seemed to fall even more deeply in love with his heroes for having fallen afoul of Feminist values. The fact that he’s having this conversation at all becomes a justification of his early dreams of avant-garde transgression.

What a precarious balancing act, what exacting standards of integrity Mailer demands from his canonical authors. What becomes unmistakable from perusing his gallery is the tumid and stifling hothouse atmosphere of overpowering maleness. Annette Barnes has described this sensation in reading Mailer, the clear message that ‘the passion to be masculine is inseparable from the passion to create, but creation for men can be both a spiritual and

physical assertion. Once the seeds are deposited, Mailer can hunt for literary or political prizes, leaving the woman the task of tending the garden' (Barnes p. 272). What Mailer doesn't realise, to quote de Beauvoir once again, is that 'to recognise in woman a human being is not to impoverish man's experience: this would lose none of its diversity, its richness, or its intensity if it were to occur between two subjectivities.' It strikes us that for all the importance he places on childbirth he never demonstrates even the slightest curiosity in the subjective intensities of it as a unique experience—his eye is trained not upon individual women, but rather the propagation of the species. So much existential weight does he ascribe to this biological process and the ensuing duties of childrearing that 'he constructs a situation where in practice very few of these real women would have the time or energy to create more than those babies' (Barnes p. 273). The domestic intelligence with which he opens the book—the portrait he paints of himself dealing with the care of five of his six children—finds Mailer weighing the life of the writer against that of the housewife: he 'knew he could do all this for year after year and never write another word, be content, honourably fatigued, empty of doubt about his worth...but in no uncertainty that the most interesting part of his mind and heart was condemned to dry on the vine' (Mailer, 1971 p. 14).

It never seems to occur to Mailer that a woman might arrive at the exact same conclusion as him, or that her experience of the life of domesticity would far outweigh one summer in Maine (during which, he informs us, he was assisted by his sister, a hired cleaner, and an unidentified mistress). But that she might strike out for a life beyond the one mandated by the demand to produce seems to him an unthinkable abandonment of a sacrosanct duty. One returns to one of Mailer's most egregious pronouncements: 'I doubt if there will be a really exciting woman writer until the first whore becomes a call girl and tells her tale...a good novelist can do without everything but the remnant of his balls' (Mailer, 1992 p. 472).¹⁵ Diana Trilling paid little heed to this passing remark when she wrote "The Moral Radicalism of Norman Mailer," her panegyric to *Advertisements for Myself*.¹⁶ Her next major statement on Mailer was a reflection on *The Prisoner of Sex*, in which she admitted to being entirely

¹⁵ F.R. Leavis, who placed Lawrence at the pinnacle of the so-called great tradition, 'believed that he could identify a woman writer by her style, even though necessarily all that she wrote must have been a parody of some man's superior achievement. After all, there was not much wrong with Virginia Woolf except that she was a woman...The detection of sex in mind is not only the privilege of the most eminent literary pundits from Dr Leavis to Norman Mailer, it extends to the lowest levels of literacy – the schoolboy muttering about 'bloody girls'" (Greer p. 104).

¹⁶ A search on YouTube for footage from *Town Bloody Hall* yields the following results: Susan Sontag asking a 'very quiet question' about Mailer's use of the epithet *lady* ('I don't like being called a lady writer, Norman'); Cynthia Ozick is less circumspect—'For years and years I've been wondering, Mr Mailer: when you dip your balls in ink, what colour ink is it?'

unprepared for ‘this degree of biological emphasis in a writer who, in so many areas other than that of the relation of the sexes, has been so pre-eminent a spokesman for the unconditioned life.’ Trilling found it difficult to square this with Mailer’s advocacy for what she described as ‘the stern determinisms of nature’ which place a ‘terrible shackle upon unconditioned selfhood,’ and are the more self-defeating for ‘weaken[ing] the metaphors by which we undertake to make a revolution in personal consciousness’ (D. Trilling, 1986 p. 107).¹⁷

Jean Radford has also noted the ideological slant of Mailer’s posture. His argumentation in *The Prisoner of Sex* goes far beyond a mere literary stance. If he had settled on mounting a defence of his heroes against tendentious misquotation then the book might take its rightful place as a masterful and vigorous display of cultural custodianship. It would have been an advertisement for the priority of the practitioner-critic as against the claims of humourless technocrats. At his finest and most passionate, Mailer gives succour and fortification to those who believe that literature does not and cannot belong to ‘flatiron’ minds like Millett’s. The language he employs towards this end constitutes a sort of performative aesthetics, whereby hostile exegetes are enfolded within and excoriated by the precise lexical system that they have proven themselves incapable of understanding. Take any passage of luxurious digression, like his tract on lust in Miller’s novels:

But lust is a world of bewildering dimensions, for it is that power to take over creation and convert it to a force. Curious force. Lust exhibits all the attributes of junk. It dominates the mind and other habits, it appropriates loyalties, generalizes character, leaches character out, rides on the fuel of almost any emotional gas—whether hated, affection, curiosity, even the pressures of boredom—yet it is never definable because it can alter to love or be as suddenly sealed from love, indeed the more intense lust becomes, the more it is indefinable, the line of the ridge between lust and love is where the light is first luminous, then blinding, and the ground remains unknown. (Mailer, 1971 p. 82)¹⁸

¹⁷ From *The Guardian’s* review of the Barbican production of *The Town Hall Affair*: ‘The one false note in an otherwise pitch-perfect show is the casting of a male actor, Greg Mehrten, as Trilling. If the intention is to underline that this literary grande dame was a stooge for the male intellectual establishment, it misfires, drawing unsisterly attention to her frumpy appearance and undercutting her valiant, and surely correct, defence of a woman’s right to have whatever sort of orgasm she can with whomever she wants.’ (Armitstead)

¹⁸ What did Mailer know about heroin addiction? Probably that “A junkie runs on junk time. When his junk is cut off, the clock runs down and stops. All he can do is hang on and wait for non-junk time to start. A sick

One might say that when Mailer changes the subject, he does so with style—and little else. The emotive rhetoric does nothing to alter the substance of the actions and attitudes that Miller depicts; it only attempts to enrich them and problematize evaluation by the proposal of a set of motivations visible only to Mailer. What is this if not ultimately a comment on the qualifications of his female opponent? But Mailer, scarcely content with having supposedly fended Millett off, seeks to turn victory into a rout: ‘Ironically,’ writes Radford, ‘in dismissing twentieth-century liberalism and technological advance as the unwitting tools of the Devil, and by raising his standard as the champion of radical instincts, he makes (for a “revolutionary”) a classically conservative gesture.’ To wit: the claim that God is on his side, that his opponents seek to pervert the divinely prescribed order of things, that any attempt to revise the primitive givens of the human race is a Trojan Horse for its enslavement. ‘His arguments about the advantages of being a woman are a parody of the religious ideas about being deprived on earth, but richly rewarded in heaven’ (Radford p. 157).

The ‘unconditioned life’ of which Trilling writes is the goal of Mailer’s existentialism or experientialism. Among other things, as we have seen, this presumably means the freedom to indulge a boundless solipsism in his interactions with women; any attempt to moderate this is treated as the perilous intrusion of ideology—something unnatural—upon an order that is perfectly harmonious. Now behold, when driven into a corner, the bewildering *reductio* that he adduces.

Part IV: The Nazi Promise Revisited

In order to elide the agenda of Feminism with the authoritarianism that he sees as inhering within technological society, Mailer makes his point in a dim hinterland of political provocation. He seems wilfully to not just court but outright demand condemnation by declaring that he will pick up the truncated threads of Nazi thought. Referring to ideas that have been tarnished by their association with the rhetoric and programmes of German National Socialism, Mailer declares his readiness to

Follow his thought where it would take him – he had no fear he was cousin to
a Nazi – no, he was all too emancipated himself – he wished to explore down

junkie has no escape from external time, no place to go. He can only wait,” which he would have read in *Junky* (Burroughs p. 72). Mailer was not only in Burroughs’s shadow artistically, but experientially.

the alleys of thought the Nazis had come close to shutting down forever. Indeed, gifted with a paranoid edge, one could even argue that the Nazis had been the diabolical success of a Devil who wished to cut man off from his primitive instincts and thereby leave us marooned in a plastic maze which could shatter the balance of nature before the warnings were read. (Mailer, 1971 pp. 132-133)¹⁹

Once again, Annette Barnes cuts to the marrow of Mailer's disquietude: 'Mailer fears technology. It depersonalizes. He fears its imprint in contraception, planned parenthood, eugenics. But he writes as if in light of the general depersonalization of man by the machine, the depersonalization of women by men is a lesser evil... there is a difference, is there not, between depersonalizing oneself (if this were an appropriate description of the effects of detachable digital sex) and being depersonalized by others or depersonalizing them?' (Barnes p. 273). Mailer spells out at length the precise manner in which he will engage with the lines of thought which were abbreviated by Nazi appropriation. It's clear that Mailer thought them a preferable opponent to the elusive forces which were working to corrode contemporary American reality. Not for him the Hitler of Structuralism—Ian Kershaw's 'unperson'—that bland nonentity barely in control of Germany's various competing bureaucracies. Rather, Hitler was a leader who tapped into a sort of Jungian well within the German national psyche, promising a return to a primitive, Wagnerian past—a *nostalgie de la boue*—but instead delivered the nation into the hands of the most total technocracy that the world had ever seen. This was not the accidental result of his collision with the unanticipated realities of managing a modern state but rather the determined result of his unique political genius. Mailer sees the Devil's work in the continuation of this project of modernisation—he inevitably makes much of NASA's employment of Wernher von Braun in *A Fire on the Moon*—while Hitler's rhetoric of atavism was thrown onto the pyre of Denazification.

Ever since, it has been intellectually dubious to make any but the most cultivated appeals for a return to the primitive, since Nazi propaganda was always ready to speak in the profoundest tones of instinct and vision and soul even though Hitler would die no more honourably than a junkie addicted to

¹⁹ As Martin Amis wrote: Mailer 'isn't frightened of sounding outrageous; he isn't frightened of making a fool of himself; and, above all, he isn't frightened of being boring. Well, fear has its uses. Perhaps he ought to be a little less frightened of being frightened' (Amis, 2002 pp. 267-268).

every factory-made pill which could insulate him from blood, instinct, vision, or the oncoming vibrations of his own death. (Mailer, 1971 p. 130)

Mailer had been haunted by this contradiction in the heart of what happened in Germany since *Barbary Shore*, and in the present text he seems happy to confirm Millett's characterisation of his position:

Mailer's chief quarrel with Nazi genocide turns upon a point of style; he disapproves of the technological nature of the gas chambers. Having promised Germany 'the primitive secrets of her barbarian age' [*The Presidential Papers*], having offered the thrill of a chance to 'stomp on things and scream and shout and rip things up and kill' [*ibid.*], Hitler paid off with nothing but the scientific tedium of gas. (Millett p. 317)

Again, Mailer refrains from direct rebuttal. In fact, he doubles down and replicates two quotes that Millett provides as proof of the counter-revolutionary character of the Nazi regime: 'The Jew has stolen woman from us through the forms of sex democracy. We, the youth, must march out to kill the dragon so that we may again attain the most holy thing in the world, the woman as maid and servant;' and 'The message of woman's emancipation is a message discovered solely by the Jewish intellect.' Again openly courting the charges of outright provocation, Mailer seeks to get at the truth contained within these calumnies. To condense another segment where Mailer's clear intent is to confound by wild verbiage, *ex cathedra* verdicts upon history, and unorthodox rhetorical association, he argues that the Nazis were correct to see the Jews as 'the whippets of the unisexual, classless future' (Mailer, 1971 p. 130). This is, of course, wildly different from endorsing their mass-murder, but Mailer's method seems to be to lure his opponents into damagingly rash judgements on his character. Of course, criticism is not a zero-sum game but Mailer often treats it as though it were—as though the function of vivid figuration in that sort of writing were not the articulation of critical judgements but rather the enactment of the struggle of trope to encompass, trump, and subjugate trope. So Mailer offers a huge trope of his own, with roots in the Jewish anti-Semitism of Otto Weininger's *Sex and Character* and the study of comparative religion in James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough*.

In Mailer's counter-history the Jews emerge—by dint of their rootlessness and the imperatives of their survival—as the apostles and handmaidens of modernity. He cautions

against laying excessive blame at their feet for the age of technology which they helped usher in, because he locates the true origins of technology, of human mediocrity, on the Cross. When Christ forgave the sons for the sins of the father he abolished the fear that sacrilege may dissolve the tribe, and in so doing sanctioned the sacrilege of ignoring taboo and experimenting with nature. From this, Mailer argues, flows the spirit of our Faustian age in which man licenses himself to meddle with the essential order of creation. Mailer's purpose, then, is to usurp the inquisitive function of science and to restore the mysteries of nature while addressing himself to the human and material world of public debate. From this position he allows himself to make pronouncements like the following:

No, he wasn't interested in the biochemistry of it, nor the electromagnetism of it, nor the answer to such riddles as the meaning of a million sperm, but what he did know that if sex had meaning, conception could not be empty of it, which was a way, he supposed, of assuming that a woman would hardly conceive equally well with any man. For sex, left to itself, could hardly exhibit less selection than appetite. Biologically, it was difficult, if one began to think on it, to assume a scheme of conception was ready to exist in a female body without all the powers of a scheme of natural contraception as well. (Ibid. p. 142)²⁰

What is Mailer attempting with this trope? How does he think it will be received, and what persuasive force does he hope it will exert upon the debate? First it strikes one that Poirier's argument for Mailer's androgyny has been left in utter ruins. Given the private nature of the letter to Diana Trilling which makes up the first of my appendices, this tract is Mailer's most vociferous public rejection of his Jewish identity. He seems to suggest that the true tragedy of the Holocaust lay not in the sheer scale of its moral and physical ruination but rather—and here's the typical Mailerian sleight—in its occlusion of a fundamental dilemma, now presumably visible only to Mailer. The slaughter of the Jews serves to disguise the fact that they are largely responsible for the technological encasement that saps and impurifies our

²⁰ When Representative Todd Akin, Republican of Missouri, was queried on abortion in the case of rape, he said: 'Well you know, people always want to try to make that as one of those things, well how do you, how do you slice this particularly tough sort of ethical question. First of all, from what I understand from doctors, that's really rare. If it's a legitimate rape, the female body has ways to try to shut that whole thing down. But let's assume that maybe that didn't work or something. I think there should be some punishment, but the punishment ought to be on the rapist and not attacking the child'. The backlash against the remarks cost him his 2012 bid for a Senate seat.

vital essence, just as Hitler's espousal of blood and soil primitivism has forever tarnished the appeal of rhetoric that calls for a return to a state of nature. We are to understand that the central crime of the Twentieth Century was essentially a false flag operation by the dire forces of technology. With the defeat of Hitler we were left on guard against the claims of a supposed 'natural order,' but the victory was for a sexless, bureaucratic future. This is what Mailer thought he was rejecting by swerving from his given Jewish identity: the malevolence of androgyny and an association with a scientific spirit that seeks to abrogate the authority of culture. If it seems that Mailer is making two parallel but not quite connected points—that the Jews were the apostles of modernity, *and* that the origins of human mediocrity reside in the birth of Christianity—then they are united by tracing his thought to the Gospel of John, which framed the Jews as the persecutors of Christ and broke from the Synoptic Gospels in seeking to establish a separate, non-Jewish Christian community.

'Mailer's speculations,' wrote Bloom mildly, 'are all properly notorious, and probably will not earn him a place as one of the major sages' (Bloom, 2003 p. 4). His point—if there is any worth making amidst all this provocation—emerges only in adumbrated form if we place him alongside more proper critics of liberal and post-Enlightenment thinking. Take his spin on the Crucifixion as a major index to his thought. In his reprise of what took place upon Golgotha several hypotheses converge. First, Mailer suggests that scientific inquiry—the Faustian hubris required to meddle in nature—is sanctioned by the simultaneous death of God upon the cross at the hands of man and the granting of forgiveness for his murder. By the abrogation of ancestral sin, Mailer suggests, man is absolved of his duty towards continuity with the past. At this juncture, a thinker like Deneen would interject that what Mailer means is that science, or scientism, has eroded the authority of culture. Pre-liberal culture, for Deneen, was the equilibrium of human existence alongside nature and in harmony with its limitations and possibilities. Culture is then mischaracterised by the liberal animus as not only a concatenation of outmoded and constrictive mores but also an impediment towards human progress, which must be achieved against the straitjacket of nature. Making a far more urgent and substantive point than any available in Mailer's complaints against equity for women, Deneen characterises the liberal project as one which will ensue in environment despoliation and the substitution of cultural authority with a mono-anti-culture.

Mailer shares Deneen's concerns about the development of an anti-culture, which is also to be discerned in Bloom's repeated invectives against the so-called School of Resentment, which includes all ideological approaches which debauch the proper aesthetic study of literature. Mailer would no doubt have assented with Deneen's definition of culture as 'the

“convention” by which humans interact responsibly with nature, at once conforming to its governance while introducing human ingenuity and invention within its limits and boundaries’ (Deneen p. 70). But Mailer is always *in medias res*, always harried, improvising, shooting from the hip—he never took the time to unite his various impressions of totalitarian encroachment upon everyday life under any sort of systematic presentation. So he ends up being much narrower in his critique than Deneen, and so the ‘culture’ that he seeks to defend is little more than the *status quo* for white, male writers like himself.

As we have seen, Mailer’s argument against equity and the negotiation of a single permissive sexual standard rests on a sentimental vision of women that casts men in a supplicant role. The metaphorical and conceptual waywardness of his speculations is fully in evidence in his invocation of the anthropological study of sacred kingship. Although now widely discarded, James George Frazer’s 1890 comparative study of religion exerted a huge influence on the literature of several generations that preceded Mailer’s. The invocations of the Arthurian legends of the Maimed or Fisher King—as well as Richard Wagner’s opera *Parsifal* on this theme—in *The Waste Land* of T.S. Eliot are a Frazerian inspiration. To condense and blend a geographically and temporally diffuse array of variously complementary, contrasting, and competing traditions—Celtic, Medieval, Romantic, and Modernist—the story of the Fisher King presents a crisis in the vision of sacred kingship by tethering the wholeness of the land and polity to the corporeal potency of the King. The King, guardian of the Holy Grail, is wounded: in many accounts in the groin; in Wagner’s retelling, by the Lance of Longinus (which dealt the fatal blow to Christ on the cross), wielded by a self-castrating traitor to the Order of the Grail. The King, his knights, and his people await the deliverance of the holy innocent, Percival or Parsifal, who will overcome temptation of the flesh in order to realise the powers of the Grail and release the King—either into the restoration of his health or into the peace of death—and redeem the benighted land. This is the basic mythopoeic material which Mailer is invoking: an argument for the connection, perennial in world cultures, for the inseparability of male authority from sexual and creative fecundity.²¹ The theme is present in Hemingway, Bellow, and Roth—and certainly in Mailer.

²¹ ‘The ruler may be viewed as the possessor of supernatural power—both beneficial and malevolent—needed to maintain the welfare and order of the community and to avert danger and damage. In preliterate societies he represents the life force of the tribe, in which worldly and spiritual or political and religious spheres are not distinguished. Concentrated in the chief is the common inheritance of the magical power of the community, and his authority is based solely on the possession and exercise of this supernatural power. The impact and comprehensiveness of such power wielded by a chief, for example, reaches into all areas of life of the tribe: provision of food, fertility, weather, all forms of communal life, and protection against enemies and misfortune. Because the supernatural (magical) power of the chief is identical with his own life force, the chief (or king) of such a society is not allowed to have any physical defects. With the dwindling of his own physical powers

‘Rojack is the last surviving white man as a conquering hero,’ wrote Millett: ‘Mailer’s *An American Dream* is an exercise in how to kill your wife and be happy ever after.’ Mailer’s particular brand of phallogocentrism is the yearning for the reconstitution of an ancient order of patriarchal authority in which meaning is guaranteed by a cultural continuity—embodied in sacred kingship—founded upon harmony with the natural order, with a dash of puritanical self-abnegation. This is how writers will take their due place as the acknowledged legislators of mankind.

All this because he resented being criticised for having written passages like ‘There was a high private pleasure in plugging a Nazi,’ referring the sexual violation of a teenaged German girl in *An American Dream*. ‘No, he wasn’t interested in the biochemistry of it, nor the electromagnetism of it, nor the answer to such riddles as the meaning of a million sperm.’ Because Mailer considers himself, in Larkin’s phrase, among the less deceived he believes he has been granted access *eo ipso* to a language unfettered by responsibility to the falsifying capacities of the sciences. This is his magical thinking, his imagined unification of utterance and meaning. Having established the obscene and obscure rhetorical lengths to which Mailer was willing to go in order to impugn feminism, we will now look at later feminist perspectives which, in their way, constitute the arrival of the prophesised future which haunted his nightmares.

Part V: The Cultural Project of Gender

When reading the secondary literature on Mailer one becomes aware of a strange absence: namely, a paucity of readings inflected by the theoretics of Third Wave Feminism. There’s the odd example, which I have touched upon throughout this book, but largely there’s the abiding impression that ensuing generations of feminists have considered the battle with Mailer over and won. Mailer is a bogeyman of the past, and there are more pressing concerns than yesterday’s misogynists. Revolutions are known to turn inwards, and so it has been: Millett was spurned by both liberal and lesbian feminists and fell into destitution, and her death was marked by the most cursory of obituaries. During the writing of this book the stock of Germaine Greer has only continued to plummet—the recent publication of her book *On Rape* was decried by many, sight unseen. Transgenderism, and the question of how to accommodate trans women, has become one of the most pressing and factional debates

(illness, graying of hair, and loss of teeth), his own power to maintain and secure the common welfare and his own ability to rule are believed to be correspondingly diminished’ (Westermann).

within feminism. Sceptical views like those put forward by Greer are demonised *ex hypothesi*, and are taken to sanction *ad hominem* abuse of the most vicious kind.

The absence of recent systematic engagement with Mailer by practitioners of feminist criticism is telling, indicative of his diminished cachet. It suggests that no further comment is required, because Mailer has fallen so far outside current discourse on gender as to render new criticism otiose. Where should later feminists even begin with Mailer, and what would be gained by renewed litigation? For our purposes, I find it necessary to sketch out those aspects of feminist thought which have shaped our current discourse (even if predominantly in negative, by their being the epicentres of such salient cultural disputes) and rendered Mailer so unfashionable a figure. In the interest of brevity I will confine my remarks to the work of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, in the hope that it can be agreed that if any two thinkers have made the modern weather of our thinking around these topics, it's them. Beyond that, it behoves us to return to Foucault given the prominence he's been afforded in previous chapters; as for Butler, she continues the de Beauvoirian spirit of phenomenological investigation, and helps us historicise not only Mailer but also Millett, and illuminate the limited nature of their exchange.

Foucault's analysis, in his *History of Sexuality*, of how homosexuals had become a prejudicial object of study is crucial because it helps us transcend Deneen's critique of liberalism's Faustian attempt to conquer nature. Inevitably, a conservative voice like Deneen's which addresses our current social and historical fissures will categorise the claims of identity politics as a product of the liberal project. The mistake of such conservatism is to assume that traditional gender roles are immanent within human beings instead of what Foucault identifies them as being: a set of discourses 'governed by the endeavour to expel from reality the forms of sexuality that were not amenable to the strict economy of reproduction...motivated by one concern: to ensure population, to reproduce labour capacity, to perpetuate the form of social relations: in short, to constitute a sexuality that is economically useful and politically conservative.' What Foucault does is demystify Mailer's cloudy veneration of heterosexual couplings, and show that it is 'the real product of the encroachment of a type of power on bodies and their pleasures.' What Mailer doesn't seem to realise is that when he poses himself as a bulwark against some gender neutral apocalypse, he is in fact reprising the eighteenth and nineteenth century rhetorical postures which Foucault identified as having criminalised hermaphrodites for 'confound[ing] the law that distinguished the sexes and prescribed their union.'

Butler, who similarly believes that ‘gender is a project which has cultural survival as its end’ and ‘is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis,’ famously argued that drag queens were a radical political class because they expose the performative nature of gender. If feminine essence can be reduced to a series of poses, mannerisms, and affectations and then reprised by an ‘act,’ then ‘woman’ as a concept has been revealed as a species of choreography—enforced as brutally as the most exacting of ballets. ‘When Beauvoir claims that woman is an “historical situation,” she emphasizes that the body suffers a certain cultural construction, not only through conventions that sanction and proscribe how one acts through one’s body, the “act” or performance that one’s body is, but also in the tacit conventions that structure the way the body is culturally perceived.’ Butler writes that ‘gender is constructed through specific corporeal acts,’ like the rape that Mailer at least pretended to believe is good for a man’s soul.²² The problematics of his position are, I hope, evident by this point; turning to Millett, we see that she falls into the historical pattern identified by thinkers like Gayatri Spivak and Julia Kristeva, who recommend a weaponisation of the concept of woman, what Butler paraphrases as ‘an operational essentialism, a false ontology of women as a universal in order to advance a feminist political programme’ and ‘us[ing] the category of woman as a political tool.’ But Butler and these other theorists are on guard against the limitations of liberal feminism:

There are thus acts which are done in the name of women, and then there are acts in and of themselves, apart from any instrumental consequence, that challenge the category of women itself. Indeed, one ought to consider the futility of a political program which seeks radically to transform the social situation of women without first determining whether the category of woman is socially constructed in such a way that to be a woman is, by definition, to be in an oppressed situation. In an understandable desire to forge bonds of solidarity, feminist discourse has often relied upon the category of woman as a universal presupposition of cultural experience which, in its universal status, provides a false ontological promise of eventual political solidarity. In a culture in which the false universal of man has for the most part been presupposed as coextensive with humanness itself, feminist theory has sought with success to bring female specificity into visibility and to rewrite the

²² ‘We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be,’ wrote Kurt Vonnegut in *Mother Night*, in one of his more existential formulations.

history of culture in terms which acknowledge the presence, the influence, and the oppression of women.

Or, put more succinctly by Monique Wittig: ‘What the concept “Woman is wonderful” accomplishes is that it retains for defining women the best features (best according to whom?) which oppression has granted us, and it does not radically question the categories “man” and “woman,” which are political categories and not natural givens’ (Wittig p. 2017). None of this is to denigrate the pioneering work done by Millett and other second wave writers in arguing for a new process of canon formation through social constructionism and the concomitant proposal of a counter-tradition of female writing. This patient work of scholarship, of rescuing dissident voices from longstanding neglect and belittlement, may constitute both the most softly-spoken and most devastating rebuke to Mailer. By ‘examining women writers’ various attempts to portray feminine consciousness and self-consciousness, not as a psychological category, but as a stylistic or rhetorical device,’ the emerging body of work exposes the ignorance of Mailer’s pronouncements on the subject (Kolodny p. 2148).

For the Mailerian project of gender is both flimsy and ugly: it collapses upon contact with any feminist paradigm, whether female-essentialist or existential/phenomenological/post-structuralist. The former approach exposes the hypocrisies and limitations of Mailer’s dissident pose: his is a liberationist undertaking which not only excludes half the population, but routinely denigrates it. The latter, more overwhelmingly, reveals him as an agent of the coercive processes and discourses to which he is putatively opposed. ‘The authors of gender,’ writes Butler, ‘become entranced by their own fictions whereby the construction compels one’s belief in its necessity and naturalness.’ Mailer’s obsession with gaining access to some baseline reality unmediated by cant and received wisdom is given the lie by his evident belief in the necessity of those gender dynamics which are crucial to his experience of women. ‘Surely, there are nuanced and individual ways of *doing* one’s gender,’ Butler continues, ‘but *that* one does it, and that one does it *in accord with* certain sanctions and prescriptions, is clearly not a fully individual matter.’ Butler robs Mailer of his individuality, and draws our attention to the script that he is so slavishly following. According to Foucault, we are given to elevating the figure of the author above other people, to regard him as so successfully transcending language as to be the nexus of an indefinite proliferation of meaning. Mailer would certainly agree—he stakes his defence of Miller and Lawrence, and by extension his own enterprise, on a plea for the maintenance of this conception. What he wishes to protect from Millett is an image of the author as ‘the genial creator of a work in which he deposits,

with infinite wealth and generosity, an inexhaustible world of significations.’ However, as Foucault cautions:

The truth is quite the contrary: the author is not an indefinite source of significations which fill a work; the author does not precede the works; he is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses; in short, by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction...The author is therefore the ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning.

If Mailer’s illeism backfires in *The Prisoner of Sex*, it’s because his author function serves to unify all of the book’s distasteful, constricting, and counter-revolutionary utterances within the figure of Norman Mailer. That emergence of such a discursive entity ultimately works against the stated authorial intent of the actual Mailer. But it’s by his own design that he is fused with his own quasi-fictional self-presentation, and his views are thus exposed not as universal fundamentals but rather as local, contingent, and the product of historical processes. The fiasco of the illeistic project can be reduced to the following formulation: that the most potent argument against *The Prisoner of Sex* is that it was written by Norman Mailer.

Part VI: Mailer’s Fate

I return to Poirier’s claim, made only a year after the publication of *The Prisoner of Sex*, that Mailer was the thoughtful young reader’s writer of choice. His work on Mailer is very much of its time, and as such doesn’t achieve sufficient ideological distance from its subject. It particularly shows its age in its treatment of *The Prisoner of Sex*, when early on he states that

It is perhaps there that his exercises in verbal and imaginative ingenuity are most offensive, in that they turn out to be efforts less at daring speculation than at evasion. In almost every one of his arguments he reaches a point of serious peril about the relations of the sexes as persons, only then to offer rather dizzy eugenic proposals about the relations of ‘X’ and ‘Y’

chromosomes. And he confounds his triviality in such instances first by admitting and then by pretending that he will now return to face such issues which he knows have been so blurred as to permit him yet other, even more erroneous flights. (Poirier, 1972 p. 18)

Poirier genuflects towards the contentiousness of Mailer's argumentation by his freighted description of the operating rationale as eugenic. The many Mailers are on abundant display throughout this book. First, and of most enduring interest, is Mailer the practitioner-critic, guarding his literary canon from the assault of ideology, tendentiousness, and imprecision. If a distinguished literary critic is someone who identifies a canon to an audience and explains it, then Mailer qualifies as such. Second, there is Mailer the Cassandra of technologisation, issuing grim jeremiads against America's somnambulistic march into a sexless plastic apocalypse. Poirier calls this 'tired and shrivelled chestnut heated over and over-heated throughout Mailer's works...his vulgar and easy opposition between himself as Novelist and technology or science as System.' Incredibly, Poirier judges that 'it is this failing, more than male chauvinism, which makes *The Prisoner of Sex* such an interestingly flawed, exciting and yet aggravating book' (Poirier, 1972 pp. 109-110). Incredible, because the third Mailer is a figure that resembles the pre-Darwinian grotesques in Louis Menand's *The Metaphysical Club*: Louis Aggasiz and his fellow adherents to polygenism and other discredited paradigms—like Mailer, they were willing to jettison science in order to keep the raft of their prejudices afloat.

What separates Mailer from historical proponents of debunked scientific racism is that he provides nothing that passes as concrete evidence to justify his biological determinism. Rather, he places his faith in the apodictic—that these propositions will be taken as true because they sound right. This is how he hopes a statement like the following will work upon the reader: 'Where a man can become more male and a woman more female by coming together in the full rigours of the fuck...homosexuals, it can be suggested, tend to pass their qualities over to one another, for there is no womb to mirror and return what is most forceful or attractive in each of them' (Mailer, 1971 pp. 122-123). Notice Mailer's coy acknowledgement of the contingent nature of his propositions, and how they then entrust themselves to the elegance of his rhetoric. The pleasing lilt of 'no womb to mirror and return' can scarcely be denied, nor can one gainsay the satisfaction to be found in how he echoes this structurally—forcefulness and attractiveness are set up as interrelated yet still discrete virtues (presumably to be brought into unison by the outcome of successful sexual congress)—before

landing a solid cadence. The reader, Mailer hopes, will nod along, humming their assent to his fine-tuned sentences—unless, of course, one is less instinctively awed by the virtues that Mailer seeks out in his favourite writers.

Alfred Kazin, in one of his most ambivalent pronouncements on Mailer, got to the heart of the problematic in not only Mailer's writing of the period but also the broader phenomenon of creative nonfiction:

They move us out of the inherent consistency and exhaustive human relationships of the novel onto the great TV screen of contemporary history, and Mailer's illusion is that he is somehow helping to change history. Mailer is the greatest historical actor in his own books, but they do not convey any action of his own. They are efforts to rise above the Americanness that he loves to profane, but which fascinates him into brilliance. The nonfiction novel exists in order *not* to change the American situation that makes possible so much literary aggression against it. (Kazin, 2003 p. 278)

To conclude this chapter I wish to contest Kazin on one crucial point. His characterisation of the nonfiction novel as so much attitudinizing—a harmless Catherine wheel of literary pyrotechnics—holds true for those works covered in the previous chapters. Neither in writing *The Armies of the Night* nor in committing himself to the civil disobedience described within its pages did Mailer risk as much as the young men he witnessed burning their draft cards. The book may abide, in Bloom's approbation, as 'one of a handful of works that vividly represent an already lost and legendary time:' the counter-culture of the Sixties (Bloom, 2003 p.5). However, I don't think that even its survival among readers can convince us that its existence—then or now—constitutes the 'the only answer to the war in Vietnam'. Surely that distinction belongs (among many candidates) to Daniel Ellsberg's leaking of the Pentagon Papers; to the passage of the War Powers Resolution by the 93rd Congress over Nixon's veto; to the activities of any number of grassroots organisations—like the Boston Draft Resistance Group, the Chicano Moratorium, and the Vietnam Veterans Against the War—that gave the lie to the enduring myths of the Hardhat Hawk and the Silent Majority. They also puncture the bubble of Mailer's self-regard by reminding us that there was no single answer to the war in Vietnam, that such a monstrous undertaking by the state could be met only with vigorous and coordinated opposition at all levels of society. 'Literature,' wrote Lionel Trilling, 'in a

political sense, is not in the least important. Wherever the sword is drawn it is mightier than the pen. Whatever you can do as a man, you can win no wars as an artist' (L. Trilling p. 14).

Kurt Vonnegut memorably reflected that 'during the Vietnam War, every respectable artist in this country was against the war. It was like a laser beam. We were all aimed in the same direction. The power of this weapon turns out to be that of a custard pie dropped from a stepladder six feet high.' But with all qualifications of artistic impact properly understood, I would ascribe to writers of Mailer's standing a more indefinite influence—a kind of socio-artistic 'soft' power. It is the power to help articulate and thus sanction individual belief, to underwrite personally-held convictions and bestow upon them a patina of authority. This authority derives from the public intellectual's outstanding body of work, thought, and achievement. The weight it lends to such a figure's pronouncements may even have a deleterious effect upon the effort of opposing American military adventurism: 'Have you read Mailer's latest? He was giving it to the shits!' one might say and then feel relieved by the act of cerebration from the pressure towards action—resistance as dinner party patter.

It is in the field he ploughs in *The Prisoner of Sex* as well as his considerable public efforts on behalf of that book and its arguments where Mailer has the greatest power to sow disorder. When Poirier haughtily proclaims Mailer's status among the young he seems serenely unperturbed by the sort of views that they might absorb from such a luminary—one who leveraged his weight and influence on behalf a grim, revanchist sexual politics. In this sense *The Prisoner of Sex* might be described as the only book of his to not only convey but also constitute action of his own, and it is on this point of action that he is doomed to be remembered, judged, and then forgotten. Forget Mailer's own anxieties and recall Millett's characterisation of him—'as much a cultural phenomenon as a man of letters, fulfilling his enormous ambition to exert a direct effect on the consciousness of his time'—and trust a member of an oppressed group to recognise who really wields power in society. It bespeaks the highly haphazard and maddeningly problematic nature of the aggregated Mailerian achievement that so slender and occasional a work should weigh so heavily on his reputation—more so than either *Ancient Evenings* or *Harlot's Ghost*. If the Big One was conceived as the guarantor of Mailer's posterity it is perhaps fitting that this role was carried out by one of his smallest, which is left standing as monument to his infamy.

However, it will be seen in the next and final chapter that Mailer *did* manage to write the Big One—not the Great American Novel, but certainly the novel that he had been promising since the late Fifties. In *The Executioner's Song* Mailer would relieve himself of the ballast that has sunk his reputation, and in so doing purge his writing of everything that had

accumulated to his name. It is by examining this singular feat of authorial suicide, stylistic self-abnegation, and literary disappearance that we will apprehend the form of the Mailerian corpus as well the most productive means of understanding it.

Chapter Six: “To transmute violence into craft.”

Why should we attribute to Racine the capacity to write yet another tragedy when that is precisely what he did not write? In life, a man commits himself, draws his own portrait and there is nothing but that portrait.

Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*

This chapter will first examine *The Fight* before dilating upon *The Executioner’s Song* which, as we shall see, is the masterpiece that Mailer had first promised in 1959. In addition to inspecting these two contrasting works of nonfiction I shall also meditate upon the significance of the Jack Henry Abbott affair and what it reveals of Mailer’s judgement and values as well as his dependence on material furnished by other parties and external events. These writings and experiences cover the period between 1974 and 1981. *The Fight*, originally published in *Playboy*, is his chronicle of the “Rumble in the Jungle,” the world heavyweight title bout between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman in Zaire. The work is his major statement on the art of boxing. It is also the last major work in the illeistic mode, and marked the return of the straightforward Norman Mailer persona.¹ Subsequent to this he undertook various left-handed assignments whilst continuing the agonizing labour on the Egyptian Novel (*Ancient Evenings* would finally appear in 1983; see Appendix II). In 1975 he published *Genius and Lust: A Journey Through the Major Writings of Henry Miller*, the prefatory material for which expanded upon and repeated the praise he had heaped on Miller in *The Prisoner of Sex*. 1978 saw the release of the facsimile of *A Transit to Narcissus*, his unpublished first novel, in a limited print run. It retailed for \$100 a copy—‘The IRS still hounded him,’ Lennon reports—and it was the same financial exigencies which lead to his accepting a new assignment (Lennon, 2013 p. 770).

The Executioner’s Song tells the story of Gary Gilmore, whose death in Utah on January 17th of 1977—the first legal execution in the United States in a decade—made him a national

¹ For covering the moon landing he dubbed himself Aquarius, which he retained for the 1972 election: ‘So Norman Mailer, who looked to rule himself by Voltaire’s catch-all precept, “Once a philosopher, twice a pervert” and preferred therefore never to repeat a technique, was still obliged to call himself Aquarius again for he had not been in Miami for two days before he knew he would not write objectively about the Convention of ’72. There would be too many questions, and (given the probability of a McGovern steamroller) not enough drama to supply answers. He would be obliged to drift through events, and use the reactions of his brain for evidence. A slow brain, a muddy river, and therefore no name better suited to himself again than the modest and half-invisible Aquarius’ (Mailer, 1972 p. 3). In “The Faith of Graffiti” he assumed the persona A-I, the Aesthetic Investigator. In the 1990s Mailer would revive illeism as a tool for covering presidential campaigns, but these were minor pieces; by this point in his career he was like a heritage rock act, playing the hits for the home crowd.

media sensation.² A habitual reoffender, he had been convicted of assault and armed robbery in 1964. Most his life has been spent in the Utah and Federal prison system before being paroled in 1976 at the age of thirty-five. Despite the best efforts of distant cousin Brenda Nicol and her family he struggled to readjust to life on the outside. He struck up a tempestuous relationship with Nicole Barrett Baker, a nineteen year-old widow and mother of two. On July 19th of that year he murdered two men: gas station employee Max Jensen, and motel manager Bennie Bushnell. Gilmore claimed the attention of the nation when he not only acquiesced to but also demanded his death sentence: ‘You sentenced me to die. Unless it’s a joke or something, I want to go ahead and do it.’ Declining appellate procedure and resisting the efforts and entreaties of his family and the American Civil Liberties Union, he got his wish and chose the manner of his death: firing squad. His last words were ‘Let’s do it.’

Mailer had been merely one of an entire nation of awestruck onlookers. He was then approached by Larry Schiller. Schiller was a producer, filmmaker, and all-round impresario and ideas man who had previously collaborated with Mailer on the 1973 bestseller *Marilyn: A Biography*.³ For the price of sixty thousand dollars he had secured the exclusive rights to Gilmore’s life story, and had already been awarded an advance of half a million dollars for a book on the subject. Mailer was brought on board.⁴ *The Executioner’s Song* would confound his critics even as his fans reacted with a cautious delight. The book was unlike anything he had previously written in tone or form, and would win the 1980 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. In Gilmore, it seemed, Mailer had alighted upon the ideal vessel for the ideas that had obsessed him for two decades. What was most curious, however, was that in rising to the occasion Mailer jettisoned his achieved style; it seemed that the language with which he had imagined and summoned the ideal of the psychopath was inadequate to describing the thing itself. We return to the evaluative bifurcation which first arose in *Advertisements for Myself*, in which

² The Supreme Court ruling in the 1972 case of *Furman vs. Georgia* struck down the death penalty as an instance of cruel or unusual punishment, resulting in a *de facto* moratorium. The so-called ‘July 2 Cases’ of 1976 reaffirmed the constitutionality of executions by the state, although because Gilmore demanded his execution some legal scholars consider the national moratorium as having ended in 1979, with the electrocution of John Arthur Spenkenlink in Florida following his conviction for first-degree murder.

³ The book is essentially a marriage of Mailer’s text with a bundling of photographs from the “Legend and the Truth” exhibition that Schiller had curated. Not a reader, Schiller had tapped Mailer up almost purely for his name value and the promise of controversy. In the 1990s Schiller would orchestrate the ‘Oklahoma land-grab’ of declassified Soviet materials that would form the basis for *Oswald’s Tale: An American Mystery*. That so much of Mailer’s subsequent career should have rested on his association with this opportunistic mogul is one of the final peculiarities of a life’s work that had benefited from canny patronage at almost every major juncture.

⁴ Scott Meredith, Mailer’s agent, was sceptical: ‘All he does is write these 30,000-word articles for *Life* and everybody else and then turns them into books,’ he told Schiller. ‘And some of them are good books, but he’s not writing narratives. They’re really big essays.’ Schiller was lost—‘I don’t even know the difference’ (Lennon, 2013 p. 504).

the explanatory passages were plainly superior to the unfinished novel for which they were supposed to clear a space. If we consider the two novels of the 1960s—*An American Dream* and *Why Are We in Vietnam?*—as images of his fugitive ‘big one,’ we are scarcely given any reason to lament Mailer’s procrastinations and distractedness. After all, these detours resulted in the material covered in the third and fourth chapters. If we are to assess his achievement then counterfactuals will get us nowhere: the bibliography is set.

This final chapter will bring Mailer’s career to the crescendo that he had promised since *Advertisements for Myself*, when he vowed to ‘try to hit the longest ball ever to go up into the accelerated hurricane air of our American letters,’ to ‘write a novel which Dostoyevsky and Marx; Joyce and Freud; Stendhal, Tolstoy, Proust and Spengler; Faulkner and even mouldering Hemingway might come to read, for it would carry what they had to tell another part of the way’ (Mailer, 1992 p. 477). This is what people remember, what they talk about when they talk about Mailer’s failure. It is convenient to do so, for which other major writer of his generation provided so perfect a punch-line to their own obituary? What lingers is the promise, not its context. Mailer had discovered a personal philosophy that would give birth to so great a work, and identified a new and authentically American archetype that would vindicate what the author had proclaimed with his voice of one crying in the wilderness. Mailer had never merely promised to write any old Great American Novel; his claim was that the Hipster would take his due place in the Empyrean of imaginative literature as a representative personality.

He had plainly failed to accomplish this in his fictional endeavours. Do *An American Dream*’s Stephen Rojack and *Why Are We in Vietnam*’s D.J. stand up alongside Dostoyevsky’s Raskolnikov, Ivan Karamazov, and *Underground Man*? Stendhal’s Julien Sorel and Proust’s Charles Swann? Leopold Bloom and Stephen Dedalus? Jake Barnes or Nick Adams? These questions are self-answering. It would be futile to beg for more lenient terms of comparison, because Mailer’s creations shrink next to the strongest of his contemporaries: Roth’s Alexander Portnoy and Nathan Zuckerman; Vonnegut’s Eliot Rosewater and Howard W. Campbell; pretty much *any* of Bellow’s mature protagonists. Even that finicky aesthete John Updike had, with Harry “Rabbit” Angstrom and Henry Bech—that Janus-linked pair of literary alter-egos—achieved something evidently beyond Mailer’s capabilities: to bestow upon a fictional representation some spark of life, to delight the reader with the uncanny sensation that such a figure has an existence somehow prior to and independent of any attempt to house them within a work of fiction. It is by dint of this numinous autonomy from the literary form (or forms, as in the case of Roth, Vonnegut, and

Updike's recurring protagonists) which contains the sum of their facticity that these characters survive in the memory as something like entities adjacent to as much as emanating from the works which delivered them to us. These characters abide not just by virtue of the cherished thrill of aesthetic pleasure that they have played their part in stirring up within the reader but also for the unique witness they bear to the society and circumstances which helped summon them forth.

And of course, the Hipster *had* already taken his place in the American tradition. Poirier considered Mailer an excellent literary critic; Bloom disagreed, at least when it came to *other* writers' books. Although Bloom doesn't expand on this passing remark, I imagine he would extend to Mailer the same judgement he made on Wallace Stevens: that 'Stevens, as a theorist of poetry, is little more than a self-deceiver' (Bloom, 1997 p. 281). This is an aspect of Bloom's concept of 'misprision,' in which the strong writer achieves freedom from the over-determining effects of artistic influence by deliberately misreading his precursors. Recall Mailer's dismissal of *Junky* as a hard-boiled rush-job and a false novel, and his swipes in *Advertisements for Myself* against not only Jack Kerouac but also Paul Bowles, who both 'opened the world of Hip' but is also 'as bored with his characters as they are bored with each other, and this boredom, the breath of Bowles' work, is not the boredom of the world raised to the cool relations of art, but rather is a miasma from the author' (Mailer, 1992 p. 468). The charitable reading would be that Mailer was constructing a necessary fiction about the deficiencies about his rivals; otherwise, one might say that his status *qua* Beat or Hip was ancillary—remember that Ann Charters consigned him to an appendix of *The Portable Beat Reader*. But the comparison with Stevens holds, because for Bloom the pathos of the self-deceiving practitioner-critic resides in their main line of work, which cannot help disclosing the artist's true valuations of his predecessors. And just look at the sclerotic impersonation of *Naked Lunch* which possessed Mailer during the composition of *Why Are We in Vietnam?* When Mailer tried to imagine a pair of White Negros he defaulted to a naked anxiety of influence; when presented with a real one in the form of Gary Gilmore, he effaced himself linguistically.

I will examine *The Fight* as the final display of Mailer's illeistic journalism: an exercise that at once glorifies and exhausts the practice. When Poirier wrote his book on Mailer (it followed *The Prisoner of Sex* and preceded *St. George and the Godfather*) he noted that 'his most impressive writing at the moment seems to occur where he is least ambitious' (Poirier, 1972 p. 162). For all that boxing excited his imagination and focused his writing, Mailer's obsession with it always seems tempered by his awareness that it is ultimately a sideshow.

While providing an artistic—even perhaps socially productive—outlet for violent impulses, boxing could not provide the balm for the societal ills that Mailer envisioned Hip as salving. *The Fight*, as we shall see, is best approached on the same terms that Mailer applied to James Jones's *The Thin Red Line*, which he described as 'a holding action, a long-distance call to the Goddess to declare that one still has one's hand in, expect roses for sure, but for the time, you know, like there're contacts to make on the road, and few Johns to impress' (Mailer, 1979 p. 103).

Richard Poirier praised Mailer as

Living *at* the divide, living *on* the divide, between the world of recorded reality and a world of omens, spirits, and powers, only that his presence there may blur the distinction. He seals and obliterates the gap he finds, like a sacrificial warrior or, as he would probably prefer, like a Christ who brings not peace but a sword, not forgiveness for past sins but an example of the pains necessary to secure a future. This fusion in the self of conflicting realms makes him a disturbing, a difficult, and an important writer...There is no satisfactory form for his imagination when it is most alive. There are only exercises for it. (Poirier, 1972 pp. 123-124)

But what if Mailer is no Christ but, rather, a John? What if, like the Baptist of Luke, his lot is to proclaim that 'one mightier than I cometh' (KJV 3:16)? Throughout his career Mailer had promised the deliverance of a new ethic but could not embody it himself; he ceaselessly speculated on its salvational potentialities but could not give it form, let alone embody it. What seemed to him a bold new vision for the life of the body as against the claims of biopolitics was read by others as *recherché* recklessness, a privileged belief in the fundamental purity of very bad behaviour. He successfully made his life an example of these highly dubious principles without convincing anyone that he was undertaking these actions on their behalf. In order to understand quite how anyone's souls were saved by the near-murder of Adele Morales or by his Quixotic bid for the New York Mayoralty—which helped secure the re-election of the Republican John Lindsay—one would have to turn to Mailer himself, who refrained from exploring these most egregious of his public performances. In the clash between pride and memory, we remember Nietzsche urging upon us, memory is vanquished. And so it shall be shown that the great Mailerian work required the abandonment of the high Mailerian style. The presentation of the true hipster was too serious a matter to

risk contamination by the Mailerian author function, even if every ounce of Mailer's artistry was leveraged on Gilmore's behalf.

Part I: In Zaire

The Fight is the most leisurely and expansive but also perhaps the least ambitious of Mailer's boxing narratives. As in the evolution of his political journalism of the 1960s, Mailer benefitted from the release into a more generous word-count. "Superman Comes to the Supermarket" is overwritten; "In the Red Light" is overwritten and cluttered, and it is after reaching this point of peril in his political writing that he is prepared to deliver the large scale performance of *The Armies of the Night*. While the book does not constitute Mailer's definitive statement on the compromised nature of contemporary American reality (no major book of his is even *meant* to be the final word, for each is a deferment), Mailer does use its wider space to present his ideas in their most accessible form. *The Fight* offers a different sort of delivery system for his insights as a sports journalist, and the difference is partly to do with the discontinuity of his practice of that sort of writing.⁵

It also has to do, I suspect, with a somewhat chastened sense of boxing's existential priority or metaphorical weight. Perhaps unexpectedly, this is to be detected in the sheer amount of *boxing* to be found in the book – not only the three chapters (nearly forty pages) dedicated to the title fight, but also to Mailer's scrupulous observation and patient evocation of the fighters' training and sparring in the lead-up to it. In "King of the Hill" training camps were factories dedicated to the manufacturing of ego, a line echoed in *The Fight*. Note the opening to the later book, and how deftly Mailer takes us into Ali's training camp:

There is always a shock in seeing him again. Not *live* as in television but standing before you, looking his best. Then the World's Greatest Athlete is in danger of being our most beautiful man, and the vocabulary of Camp is doomed to appear. Women draw an *audible* breath. Men look *down*. They are reminded again of their lack of worth. If Ali never opened his mouth to quiver

⁵ Mailer's major writings on boxing amount to three pieces: "Ten Thousand Words a Minute" (Liston vs. Patterson, 1963) "King of the Hill" (Frazier vs. Ali, 1971), and *The Fight* (Ali vs. Foreman, 1975). To these might be added his uncollected 1988 piece "Understanding Mike Tyson," which is an outlier for taking the form of a profile rather than being an account of a fight; in this sense it is of a piece with the sort of "Norman Mailer on" or "Norman Mailer meets" style pieces he did in his late career. Madonna Ciccone also got this treatment.

the jellies of public opinion, he would still inspire love and hate. For he is the Prince of Heaven – so says the silence around his body when he is luminous.

When he is depressed, however, his pale skin turns the colour of coffee with milky water, no cream. There is the sickly green of a depressed morning in the muddy washes of the flesh. He looks not quite well. That may be a fair description of how he appeared at his training camp in Deer Lake, Pennsylvania, on a September afternoon seven weeks before his fight in Kinshasa with George Foreman. (Mailer, 1975 p. 3)

The pleasing effect of this sort of writing—nimble, roaming smoothly—displays what Mailer is capable of when he stops trying to be great and focuses instead on being good; ‘he has apparently decided to settle for being a very good writer among other good writers,’ as Mailer wrote about James Jones. *The Fight* will remain one of the books of Mailer’s that people are likeliest to have read because it is perhaps his most charming and also vigorous display of casual excellence. The other reason is that Mailer has written about an event of perhaps permanent popular interest, and created a book that people might arrive at by extra-literary avenues of curiosity—just as someone wanting to learn about, say, the Jonestown Massacre might end up reading Shiva Naipaul’s book on the subject. The opening sets the tone of amiability which will characterise Mailer’s performance in the book. Take, for another example, his funniest allusion to Ernest Hemingway. Mailer has been jogging with Muhammad Ali:

Just then, he heard a lion roar. It was no small sound, more like thunder, and it opened an unfolding wave of wrath across the sky and through the fields. Did the sound originate a mile away, or less? ... He would never reach those lights before the lion would run him down. Then his next thought was that the lion, if it chose, could certainly race up on him silently, might even be on his way now.

[...] To be eaten by a lion on the banks of the Congo – who could fail to notice that it was Hemingway’s own lion waiting down these years for the flesh of Ernest until an appropriate substitute had at last arrived?

They laughed back at Ali’s villa when he told them about the roar. He had forgotten Nsele had a zoo and lions might well be in it. (Ibid. pp. 91-92)

This is deft: notice how it pivots around the intersection of legend, reputation, and cliché before redounding upon the dubious persona and agenda of Norman Mailer. This is the figure—part public personality, part literary creation—from whom the author had maintained an improvisational but also carefully calibrated distance through various degrees of illeism and synecdoche. Crucially, it displays a sense of humour on the subject—born, perhaps, of the assurance that the project of writing through the third-person character of Norman Mailer had produced an achievement in the field of creative nonfiction that was truly distinct from Hemingway’s memoirs and journalism. Observe, in the above passage, precisely how much is punctured by the bemusement of Ali and his entourage: not just Mailer’s own pretensions towards the mantle of Hemingway but also the very notion of danger, which serves the broader ambivalence Mailer holds towards the modernisation of Zaire. Several of Mailer’s key themes converge: the possibility for physical courage in a world from which we have insulated ourselves, the imago of Black virility, and the agon with one’s literary precursors.⁶

Mailer hadn’t written this loosely and fluently, with such sheer joy in his craft, in years. One experiences once again the thrill of the high Mailerian style at full tilt. Mark Edmundson, in “Romantic Self-Creations: Mailer and Gilmore in *The Executioner’s Song*,” characterised this rush—absent by design from the later book—as the ‘sense that the writing possesses boundless resources and possibilities. One feels that Mailer will never run out of metaphors. His invention will never flag, his powers of observation and analysis will persist forever’ (Edmundson pp. 136-137). It is the figure of Ali who excites Mailer to such brilliance. Crucially, it is Ali as underdog and unexpected victor who brings out the best in him; one need look no further than his previous piece on boxing, “The King of the Hill” to get a sense of what a uninspired Mailer looks like. In that essay, the sight of Ali going the championship distance with Joe Frazier leaves Mailer cold and his prose becalmed, moving from one static description to another. One scarcely gets the sense that this bout was the putative Fight of the Century; there is none of the harried improvisation and invention that the abbreviated Liston-Patterson encounter had spurred him onto. When the time came to assemble *The Time of Our Time* Mailer did not include anything from “King of the Hill.”

Mailer was clearly as unmoved by a well-behaved title fight as he was by, say, the 1972 election. This reminds us of the extent to which Mailer relied on the material furnished by events—particularly later in his career, when he seemed less given to Gonzo antics. In the

⁶ ‘Mailer may be capable of mischief, flippancy and haste, but he is not capable of broad comic design. For all his wit, irony and high spirits he is essentially humourless: laughs in Mailer derive from the close observation of things that are, so to speak, already funny. The humour can never turn inward. Besides, one smile in the mirror at this stage in his career and the whole corpus would corpse. Self-parody is not Mailer’s style’ (Amis, 2002 p. 271).

case of the Rumble in the Jungle, Mailer is helped by the fact that he's dealing with a genuine upset, a stunning underdog victory: an archetypal narrative which inherently suggests change, upswing, triumph over not only an opponent but also over one's past form—this is prime Mailerian territory. The best critical work on Mailer's fight journalism is Christian Messenger's "Norman Mailer: Boxing and the Art of his Narrative," from which I draw throughout the ensuing discussion. Messenger gives a convincing explanation for Mailer's greater enthusiasm for Ali in 1974 as compared to 1971: the older Ali 'is attempting to regain his title after a shattering exile, feeling himself full of the power and wisdom that Mailer felt poised to come back with in the late 1950s after the earlier "championship" of *The Naked and the Dead*' (Messenger p. 99). With this thought held in mind, consider carefully Mailer's description of George Foreman, to how he establishes the odds that are stacked against Ali:

[Foreman's trainer, Dick] Sadler was back holding the bag, and Foreman was pounding punches into it. These were no ordinary swings. Foreman was working for the maximum power in punch after punch round after round fifty or a hundred punches in a row without diminishing his power—he would throw five or six hundred punches in this session, and they were probably the heaviest cumulative series of punches any boxing writer had seen. Each of these blows was enough to smash an average man's ribs; anybody with poor stomach muscles would have a broken spine. Foreman hit the heavy bag with the confidence of a man who can pick up a sledgehammer and knock down a tree. The bag developed a hollow as deep as his head...One could feel the strategy. Sooner or later, there must come a time in the fight when Ali would be so tired he could not move, could only use his arms to protect himself. Then he would be like a heavy bag. Then Foreman would treat him like a heavy bag. (Mailer, 1975 pp. 61-62)

Is it any wonder that the price of Ali's victory by rope-a-dope was urine in his blood? *The Fight* abounds in local pleasures such as this passage, distinguished by Mailer's well-behaved journalistic courtesy towards the reader, who might note the occasional infelicity (such as the uneuphonious repetition of the word 'power') but forgive it on account of the generosity by which Mailer shares his intelligence on the subject. Notice how Mailer slows down to give Foreman's practice punches their due space and weight. Even the reader who knows the bout's eventual outcome will fear for Ali. Messenger wants the reader to cast their mind back to "The

White Negro,” and how ‘the essay articulates the power of inhabiting the present to the fullest possible extent.’ Messenger believes that the values of Hip find their purest articulation in the ring:

This is the arena for action that sport privileges to such a great degree. In an over-determined world of past and future, of inhibitions and goals, athletes possess time and space perhaps more vividly than any other performers. They shape time to game time, performing action in the arena for the duration of competition. Mailer's hero would thrust to the centre and inhabit it in time of his own ritual creation, a heightened realm where action reveals being. (Messenger p. 89)

This has its force and persuasiveness, but I would dissent from Messenger’s assertion that the ring is where Hip achieves its culmination. What Messenger seems to miss is the subtle qualifications that Mailer encodes within his own language: a countermelody to the writing’s main line of visceral power, an intimation that things aren’t really like that. Whatever exaltation the fighters might win in the ring, whatever joy they might take from their own physical prowess—these aren’t available in the world of ordinary reality. Also, none of this is within the grasp of that sedentary mass of men who, to adapt Thoreau, lead lives of quiet enervation. This ambivalence is to be detected in certain moments of relative repose, as in the beginning of the fourteenth chapter, “The Man in the Rigging,” by which time the title fight is well under way:

It seems like eight rounds have passed yet we only finished two. Is it because we are trying to watch with the fighters' sense of time? Before fatigue brings boxers to the boiler rooms of the damned, they live at a height of consciousness and with a sense of detail they encounter nowhere else. In no other place is their intelligence so full, nor their sense of time able to contain so much of itself as in the long internal effort of the ring. Thirty minutes go by like three hours. Let us undertake the chance, then, that our description of the fight may be longer to read than the fight itself. We can assure ourselves: It was even longer for the fighters. (Mailer, 1975 p. 188)

As a sometime enthusiast of marijuana—under the influence of which he came up with some of his crazier ideas—Mailer was attuned to the subjective experience of variable rates of time. In *Junky*, Burroughs observes that ‘weed disturbs your sense of time and consequently your sense of spatial relations’ (Burroughs p. 16). Of course, as we saw in the first chapter, Mailer was experimenting with something like Kafka-time as early as *Barbary Shore*, before his excursions into Hip. He is interested in psychological extremes because they expose the illusion of collective time; like the novelist, the boxer is capable of usurping time and replacing it with the rarefied subjectivity of artistic time. It’s by this logic that Mailer demands that we read his account of the Rumble in the Jungle rather than, say, watch it on television. Consider how long it takes him to get to the fight: 177 pages have passed before the bell is rung. By the time the first blow is struck Mailer has caught his fighters in a variety of poses, we have seen them engaged passionately in numerous other kinds of activity. There’s Foreman at his training, the force of his punches terrifying even to the gathered corps of veteran fight watchers. We relish Ali’s delight in sparring with the media, joking with his entourage, entertaining Mailer with outrageously ostentatious flattery.⁷ The reader is most engaged by the sensation of these men being alive, that they are awake to the variety of challenges that life offers and receptive of the rewards that are won by meeting them with openness, with enthusiasm. For all that his imagination is most moved by Ali, Mailer clearly loves both of these men, finds nothing to apologise for in either of them—only a serene masculinity, one worth emulating.⁸

However, these joys are beyond the grasp of most men, which is a fact that is independent of Mailer’s valorisation. One of the crucial pressures experienced by both of these men is the gaze of millions, the weight of expectations. Each manages it thrillingly, with integrity. While Mailer never puts it so crassly himself, the picture that emerges from his patient approach (and this is also to be apprehended in his previous works on boxing) is that victory in the ring is partly secured by grace under pressure during the build-up to the match: by trash-talk, by self-advertised confidence, by a courtship dance with the media and public.

⁷ ‘The interviewer was now formally introduced to Ali’s Black associates as a great writer. “No’min is a man of wisdom,” said Ali. A serious hindrance to the interview. For after such an interview how can Ali not wish to read his poetry?’ Foreman, it has to be said, was no slouch at that game: ‘Yeah, I’ve heard of you. You’re the champ among writers’ (Mailer, 1975 pp. 26-27).

⁸ It must be stressed, however, that Mailer is firmly on Ali’s side. Here’s Messenger again: ‘He can inhabit the masculine-feminine contraries without disintegration. In the Ali-George Foreman fight in Zaire, Ali would truly come to utilize this dual nature and not battle it into submission. Muhammad Ali became the one Mailer male character rich enough in possibilities to overcome the dominant fears of violation and obsessive mortal testing...It is not that Ali blinds Mailer's ego with his own (perhaps an impossibility); it is that Mailer may write comfortably through Ali and resolve, if only momentarily, his own masculine-feminine tensions’ (Messenger p. 98).

These are challenges that few of us will ever face. Because Mailer is serious about wanting to save our souls from the steamroller of totalitarianism he cannot begin by demanding that we attain fame and ascend to the highest echelon of so demanding a competitive sport. Take Mailer's first encounter with Foreman, which leaves such an impression on him: "Excuse me for not shaking hands with you," he said in that voice so carefully muted to retain his powers, "but you see I'm keeping my hands in my pockets" (Ibid. p. 45). Only the world heavyweight champion could pull off such a power move, bury it within so gnostic a pronouncement. Who else would ever be taken seriously for having made it?

Mailer's observations about his subjects reveal his own anxieties about fame: first about the proper conduct when under such intense scrutiny, and then about the relationship between such conduct and one's practice. It gets to the heart of why Mailer is a gift to any biographer.⁹ Most writers aren't: the very work that inflames our curiosity was carried out in solitude, and it is precisely in that solitude that the would-be examined life was at its most vivid and intense. But in the case of Mailer, it's not just that his own work amounts to a discontinuous and variably revealing form of autobiography—it's that so much of his life was lived for the sake of his work. I mean this not only in the sense of gathering—and often generating—material for copy, but in a sense analogous to the behaviour he notes in his beloved pugilists. Mailer seems to think that writers, like boxers, might somehow be defeated before they even step into the ring, as it were. Good practice is understood as beginning outside the arena and study; and subsequent to this, victory has a material effect on life, which in turn redounds upon future work. The eccentricity of a writer's conceiving his activities as somehow gladiatorial, it is hoped, doesn't require elaboration, and so let us turn to the actual fight which the Mailer character has come out of retirement to witness.

Part II: On Boxing

And with all that being said, what does Mailer emphasize once the heralded fight is underway? That in the ring 'they live at a height of consciousness and with a sense of detail they encounter nowhere else. In no other place is their intelligence so full, nor their sense of

⁹ Reviewing *A Double Life* for *The New York Times*, Graydon Carter noted that 'Like most legends, Mailer's was, as Geoffrey Wolff called it, a "self-cultivated" one. And indeed, a veritable Norman Mailer cottage industry has burnished the legend and continues to carry it forward. No fewer than 15 biographies, quasi--biographies and remembrances, by admirers, literary historians, wives and a mistress, have been published since 1969, when the torrent of Mailer-centric scholarship began, almost four decades before his death in 2007. My rough calculation puts the total number of book pages already devoted exclusively to Mailer at more than 5,000.'

time able to contain so much of itself as in the long internal effort of the ring.’ Ultimately, Mailer knows that the sort of reprieve from indolence and uncertainty available to men of Ali and Foreman’s stature is no true salvation, for once the bell is rung and a victor emerges both must return from the certitudes of competition to the twilit murk of ordinary existence. The essence of Mailer’s criticism of James Jones was that his friend returned too obsessively to images of men at war; that this was a less than total vision of life. (Salinger’s problem, apparently, was that he didn’t make *enough* of his harrowing wartime experiences—what does it take to please a set of criteria as nakedly self-serving as Mailer’s?) Let’s expand on the Mailerian similarity between war and boxing, and the relationship of both to the half world of midnight frustration. For all that he believes in the possibility of a good war, Mailer is vague about the form it might take as well as the salutary effects it may have upon the constituents involved in such a conflict. The Second World War, until the nuclear razing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, was a man-to-man conflict. The flattening of European cities by aerial bombardment was still the occasion for outstanding feats of bravery and composure under pressure by the bombardiers who incinerated so many lives and annihilated so much of the continent’s architectural patrimony. The experience of war liberates man into a delirious awareness of the demands of his body. What’s awakened is a pre-bureaucratic state of living according to the exhortation to survive in order that one may kill. However, as shown in *Catch-22*, not even this avenue of escape is immune from contamination by the corrosive absurdities of technocratic authority. War could be a bracing and abstergent experience for man but for the resemblance between the hierarchic military world of the front and the bureaucratic subordination of civilian life in peacetime.

Despite being a keen amateur boxer himself Mailer never really advertises for the pursuit, never expounds its benefits. His gaze is invariably drawn upwards, and he obsesses over those pressures and challenges that make championship fights such singular tests of physical and psychological endurance. Looking back at his first major piece on the discipline, a remarkable feature of “Ten Thousand Words a Minute” is how little boxing it contains, which is an aspect of its form that is partially dictated by the course of events. Ultimately, Mailer dedicates less than a thousand words to the title fight and concludes of Patterson’s defeat by knockout in two minutes that ‘It must have been the worst fight either fighter ever had...‘What happened?’ said [James] Baldwin’ (Mailer, 1977 p. 274). The question is allowed to close the essay’s third part, and so immersive has been Mailer’s evocation of organised crime’s impingement on the sport that foul play instantly suggests itself to the reader. Immediately after, at the beginning of the essay’s fourth and final part, Mailer

answers Baldwin's stunned question with a sort of non-reply as he aggregates media depictions of the event. Writing that the 'descriptions of the fight fed next morning to The Goat [the retinue of professional boxing journalists] showed no uncertainty,' he anticipates his own and others' sceptical inquiry into the media's role in adding to the perplexity of the Kennedy assassination. Note how Mailer begins with the language of conspiracy theory before returning to the terminology that he has cultivated as a philosopher of pugilism: 'Something had struck at [Paterson]. From inside himself or from without, in that instant he straightened from his crouch and stared at the sky, he had the surprise of a man struck by treachery' (Ibid. p. 275).

This treachery is the contamination of boxing by the press and the establishment, the milieu of which he has spent the first section of the essay compendiously evoking. For Mailer boxing is akin to not only war but also to writing and reading in that none of these potentially productive activities is ever carried out under perfect circumstances, because their participants' experience of them is mediated to varying degrees by institutions. These are not just the formal and *ad hoc* bodies that bear directly upon these disciplines but also a broader matrix of authorities whose influence cuts through many strata of American life. In this sense literature and pugilism have a greater proximity to each other and by extension to the half world of midnight frustration than any of these spheres have to war, for which Mailer actually has limited use. The contingencies of pursuing victory preclude everything but the logic and imperatives of military authority, which brings in its attendant corruptions and absurdities. As we have seen, military discipline provides a model for the control of society, but the soldier's experience while at war doesn't provide a paradigm for civilian life. In Mailer's work the boxer in the ring exists in a much more fraught state of division than the soldier in the jungle: unless the latter is some crude visionary in the mode of Sergeant Croft who has found the ideal—if not to say the only—exercise for the demands of his self, then the soldier is engaged in a less complex *agon* with the mechanisms which govern his being there than the boxer. The soldier's position, after all, is summarised by a song sung by British soldiers of the First World War to the tune of Auld Lang Syne: 'We're here because we're here because we're here because we're here'—unless, of course, you're Private Mailer, who treated the war as his first reportorial beat.

If Mailer tries to somehow equate boxing and writing, then the effort is of a piece with his existential view of masculinity, which must be achieved against the grain. Perhaps the metaphor can be extended in ways that Mailer did not intend. First: if a boxer must convince himself through extra-pugilistic activities of his innate superiority over his opponent, then the

reciprocal relationship between his double-selves—the fighter and the trash-talker—is a distillation of the imposture of illeistic narration. After all, it is through illeism that Mailer is able to wish for himself what he desired for America in 1960, that she live by some image of herself. Second: if the boxer's work of art is the fight, then his aesthetic potentialities are absolutely dependent upon his material—his opponent. Mailer's is a similar dependence; in both *The Fight* and *The Executioner's Song* he struck upon a treasure trove of dynamic and suggestive material. What cannot be squared in his analogy is the matter of victory. Ali's, of course, is unquestioned. Whether Mailer can be said to have 'won' in his clash with either his material or his hostile critics is for each individual reader to decide. And that judgement, I have been at pains to argue, is subject to the reader's opinion on the man—both as disclosed by the books themselves and his history of public actions.

Towards the end of his own book Poirier notes that in Mailer's then-recent work 'there are already hints of a healthy negative assessment of where he is, of boredom with characteristic and familiar ways of doing things. Finally, he is even at "war" with his own achievements.' *The Fight* may not constitute the hoped-for emergence of 'still other, different forms for himself, for contemporary life and for our language,' but throughout the work the sheer serenity of the style imbues the occasion with a sense of the valedictory (Poirier, 1972 p. 166). Reviewing *The Armies of the Night*, Alfred Kazin wrote that 'I believe that it is a work of personal and political reportage that brings to the inner and developing crisis of the United States at this moment admirable sensibilities, candid intelligence, the most moving concern for America itself. Mailer's intuition in this book is that the times demand a new form. He has found it.' No one would greet *The Fight* with the same awe. In the former work, the forging of an illeistic persona signalled the dramatic consolidation of nearly a decade's work of experimentation; in the latter work his reprising that innovation suggested a return to comfortable territory. The emergence of a character named Norman Mailer in 1968 indicated the gravity of the situation; his return in 1975 was by contrast oddly reassuring—signifying the maintained capacity for a *jeu d'esprit*.

As we saw in the previous chapter, the Mailerian formula of illeistic-essayistic argumentation underwent a crisis before the phenomenon of Women's Liberation. Consequently, *The Fight* is distinguished by an uncharacteristic modesty. Throughout the work the concomitant of his ruthless focus on his subject matter and the generosity of his expertise and insight is a stubborn refusal to universalise. Thematic reverberations are scrupulously end-stopped, and we're reminded anew of the limitations of Mailer's racial essentialism. Much as he took blackness as his paradigm for Hip, his search was for a white

figure of violent alienation.¹⁰ If, as I have argued, the illeistic mode grew out of and continued the exploratory endeavour of *Advertisements for Myself*, then *The Fight* is, *ipso facto*, not 'the big one'—it's only more homework, more displacement activity. It is neither the record of some attempt at significant action, nor does it present itself as some such meaningful act. Really, it is no more and no less than a superior work of glossy magazine journalism: another editorial coup in marrying writer to assignment.

Recall the benighted *Barbary Shore*, and how it is augmented by Mailer's careful custodianship of his bibliography. The Mailerian author function is, among things, an effort to harness the past to a sequence of intelligible development. If we follow his cue and indulge the autobiographical fallacy then that work's use of first-person narration takes its place in our saga as a prequel to illeism and gains a retroactive pathos. So it is, in a curious way, with *The Fight*. From behind a Barthesian veil of authorial ignorance we would probably be struck mainly by the vigour of its language and the passion of its depictions. But duly installed in the mainline of its author's development we see that these saliences belie an ambivalence and pathos—perhaps even the despair of a writer whose themes and techniques, which once held the promise of his triumph, have been exercised to the point of rote. When viewed like this the resemblance between *The Fight* and *The Thin Red Line* deepens: 'the faults and barbarities of his style are gone,' wrote Mailer of Jones's novel. 'The language has been filed down and the phrases no longer collide like trailer trucks at a hot intersection...the underlying passion of this book is not to go for broke, but to promise the vested idiots of the book reviews that he can write as good as anyone who writes a book review.' Mailer assesses Jones's novel as 'satisfying, as if one had studied geology for a semester and now knew more,' and likens it to a 'thoroughgoing company man's exhibition of how much he knows technically about his product' (Ibid. p. 102). In the mid-Seventies Mailer found himself in some ways an even more profound crisis than he had twenty years previously, when he was dismissed as a one-book writer and had everything to play for. Now the methods which had delivered him from those straits had hardened into permanent affectation, and he no longer seemed to dare his talent and offer new forms as heuristics for the great questions of the day.

Look at his contemporaries: in the same year Saul Bellow had published *Humboldt's Gift*; the previous year had seen the appearance of *Gravity's Rainbow* by Thomas Pynchon. And in

¹⁰ 'Mailer, we know, has tried to live some of this search for "purpose" through positive personal action. The deepest part of this belief in action has been not only his commitment to writing—and his willingness to risk failure and ridicule through the use of any new form—but his need to be a personal example of "existential courage." "Blackness" never interested Mailer, even in *The White Negro*, except as a synonym for the "hipster or psychopath." It was orgasm as the path to a wilder, freer personal sensation of life that made Mailer romanticize the *white Negro* as the "outlaw" who could find purpose only in sex' (Kazin, 1971 p. 257).

the year before that, Gore Vidal's *Burr* saw the commencement of his career-defining *Narratives of Empire* series of historical novels, while Kurt Vonnegut had delivered the delightful and inventive *Breakfast of Champions*. Meanwhile, John Updike was halfway through Rabbit's progress. Clearly, given all the creative fecundity on display, Mailer's problem was personal rather than widespread: a lack of imagination. In a peculiar illustration of Sontag's holistic formalism, Mailer's stylistic innovations were contingent upon material discoveries. Until a new subject presented itself, all he could do was repeat himself, repeatedly offer his increasingly familiar self to a readership and critical establishment that had grown comfortable with his presence. That new subject, and its attendant demand for a new approach, came in the form of Gary Gilmore.

Part III: The Utahan Style

The Executioner's Song opens with the following artful paragraph:

Brenda was six when she fell out of the apple tree. She climbed to the top and the limb with the good apples broke off. Gary caught her as the branch came scraping down. They were scared. The apple trees were their grandmother's best crop and it was forbidden to climb in the orchard. She helped him drag away the tree limb and they hoped no one would notice. That was Brenda's earliest recollection of Gary. (Mailer, 1979 p. 5)

From the outset 'the basic unit of *The Executioner's Song* is the short paragraph written from the perspective of one or another participant in the story. The passages work as self-contained dramatic units, a fact Mailer emphasizes by surrounding each one with a generous aura of blank space' (Edmundson p. 133). The long sentence, his trademark sidewinder, is conspicuous by its absence—much like Mailer himself. Over the next thousand pages the prose will barely rise above the temperature set at the beginning. Facts are established with an unadorned directness and meaning is bestowed by a network of communal associations. The style may not resemble anything that we might consider Mailerian, but the workings of a subtle intelligence can immediately be gleaned. There's the stroke and counter-stroke of movement in the first three sentences—down and out of the tree, to the top of the tree, and down again—and the subtle blocking which places Brenda on 'the limb with the good

apples.’ Note the placement of the sentence ‘They were scared,’ and how it is enriched by both of its neighbours: not just the fear of their grandmother’s anger which spurs them into their cover-up, but also the shock of the narrowly-averted injury. With an incredible economy of gesture Mailer evokes the psychology of childhood in all its rough and tumble, rendered in an almost Biblically spare cadence. Most crucially, we are also introduced to one of his key stylistic decisions: we see Gary through Brenda’s eyes, just as we will only ever apprehend him through the perceptions of those whose lives he touched—or destroyed. Mailer will never grant the reader access to Gilmore’s thoughts; as Robert Merrill has noted, we see ‘Gilmore’s strengths and weaknesses through the eyes of many witnesses who try to understand this profoundly enigmatic figure. The very mode of representation stresses the many different perspectives on Gilmore, who is the one significant character never seen from “within”’ (“Mailer’s Sad Comedy: The Executioner’s Song” p. 141). But as we shall see, this isn’t a matter of volition as much as it is a function of Mailer’s literalistic approach to his material: it’s because he never met Gilmore himself.

The reader will note that this may already be the most tender and raw scene that Mailer had ever committed to the page; she will also notice that, for the first time since *The Naked and the Dead*, he is writing in the third person. She will quickly adjust her expectations, for whatever baggage she may bring to the reading of this book—whether knowledge of the ‘real life’ facts of the Gilmore case or familiarity with the high Mailerian style and method—she will have to jettison it. Instead of the old hocus pocus working to convince her that history is really the novel and the novel really history she finds Mailer content to cast a simpler spell, like how in the third paragraph the narration seems to veer off and into the distance: ‘Right outside the door was a lot of open space. Beyond the backyards were orchards and fields and then the mountains. A dirt road went past the house and up the slope of the valley into the canyon.’ What are these three unadorned sentences doing? What might initially be read as abstemious or parsimonious quickly discloses its justification as one realises that Mailer’s voice is inhabiting the landscape as his characters do, with accustomed and even weary eyes. The excitability and exhilaration of his previous style—appropriate for recording the sensations of the writer on assignment for *Esquire* or *Playboy* or *Life*—would be wholly mismatched to this milieu and these people.

The novel (and we ought to consider the work as such, just as the Pulitzer Prize committee did) is made up of two books—“Western Voices” and “Eastern Voices”—with each divided into seven parts. Each part is made up of between three and nine chapters, ranging between fifty and one hundred and twenty pages. These numbers are meant to emphasise the pleasing

symmetry of Mailer's structure, to make clear the unusual effort he has put into giving a form to his material. It strikes one that we're reading Mailer at his most entrepreneurial: having digested the material furnished by Schiller and his own follow-up interviews, he releases it to the reader in a digestible series of incrementally addictive portions. We will apprehend the depths beneath us at his leisure and by our own acumen, for he will neither insist nor comment upon them. "Western Voices," commencing with his cousin Brenda's memories, tells the story of Gilmore's parole from prison and his failure to readjust to society; it climaxes with the murders of Jensen and Bushnell, and ends with Gilmore's death sentence. Despite the huge notoriety of the story he's telling, Mailer makes his pitch to posterity—he allows no prolepsis of the bloody deeds that will ensue, he makes no appeals to the reader's preconceptions of these events and the people caught up in them. He has given this material the texture of fiction; for despite its use of the simple past tense *The Executioner's Song* gives every feeling of unfolding in the present, which 'is only the top of the past,' as Nabokov wrote—'and the future does not exist' (Nabokov p. 156).

It's worth asking why Mailer's previous works of creative nonfiction lack this sensation of the present tense. After all, we see in those books something like the refusal of prolepsis at work in *The Executioner's Song*: there is no indication given of, say, the outcomes of the various title fights. However, the impressions ascribed to the Mailer character—as well as their sculpted literariness—inevitably remind the reader of the existence of a future Mailer. The sheer amount of writing overwhelms the suspension of disbelief because it nullifies *l'esprit de l'escalier* and gives to putatively current events the form of achieved history. The perambulating figure that the reader has followed will excuse himself and retire to his study, where he will work his hardest to convince us that his sitting down to write is a sufficient underscoring to confine the events covered to history, where they may lie supine and await the novelist-historian's careful examination. What's past is prologue to Mailer's achievement, which by its own most salient features reminds us that what he would so prematurely call history is still in fact our present. So once we've finished reading him we must continue to live with the failure of Kennedy to live up to his potential, of the Pentagon protest to forestall the horrors inflicted upon Cambodia and Laos, of George McGovern to dethrone Richard Nixon. Perhaps Orwell was correct when he wrote that 'Who controls the past controls the future,' but first one must control the present—something entirely beyond the powers of even Mailer's finest prose, no matter how many young men it inspires to cheer his name in public. Whatever the power of Mailer's writing, it can neither convince us to dissent from Faulkner's wisdom—'The past is never dead. It's not even past'—nor to grant it the potency it so clearly

demands even if the opposite *were* the case. History is not a novel, and Mailer's study provides no sufficient remove from the on-going unfolding of events.

These thoughts are more than partly prompted by encountering the different style of *The Executioner's Song*; it's as though the previous high Mailerian style can be apprehended in negative space or antithetical trace. I have previously mentioned the circularity which is implied by illeism: if you offer the reader a character named after yourself you can hardly expect them to allow for a substantial difference between author and protagonist. The literary personality belongs to the past *ipso facto*, so the sensation of the case being open-and-shut is a product of Mailer's literalism. The author's name—occurring not only on the cover of the book but repeatedly throughout its pages—carries out the duties described by Foucault: it marks the edges of the text, defines its social function, and delimits its reverberations. So in some ways the temporal effects of the mature journalism are not just a matter of verbal texture and structural signification but a product of the carefully-cultivated Mailerian author-function. In the case of *The Executioner's Song*, Mailer's lack of direct experience of the events described can be said to have forced him into a scrupulous linearity and a patient abstention from prolepsis. This would also be an aspect of his having to manage an overwhelming multiplicity of testimonial perspective, as opposed to the single vision and experience which illeism was summoned to mould into a literary form. The forbearance from the temptation to universalize is taken even further than it was in *The Fight*, but here it scans like a taciturn confidence as opposed to a workmanlike rehearsal of old saws.

Forbearing from commentary, Mailer instead achieves a nauseous tension, a nameless ratcheting of pressure. Without being able to say precisely why, the reader knows that Gilmore's destiny is violence. Observe how simply Mailer creates this minatory atmosphere of violence shimmering at the horizon's edge:

Spence said, "Nobody catches you, huh?" "No." "How long you been doing that?" "Weeks." Spencer said, "Steal a six-pack of beer every day and never been caught?" Gary said, "Never." Spencer said, "I don't know. How come people get caught and you don't?" Gary said, "I'm better than they are."

"I think you're pulling my leg," said Spencer.

Gary proceeded to tell about the black convict he had stabbed 57 times. Now Spencer thought Gary was trying to impress him with how tough he was, see if

he would scare. "Come on, Gary," he said, "57 times sounds like a variety of soup."

After they finished laughing, Gary broke it to Spence. He'd like to get off early on Friday.

"I don't know if you've noticed," said Spence, "but the other fellows don't take off. They work all day, and take care of things after hours. That's how it's normally done."

Still, he gave him the time. One more time. Spence felt a little uneasy. After all, the government, with the ex-convicts' program, was paying half of Gary's \$3.50 an hour. It could account for why Gary was giving him half an hour on the hour. (Mailer, 1979 pp. 145-146)

This passage provides a sense of Mailer's paragraph-by-paragraph approach. The spaces around the units of text, noted by Edmundson, serve sufficient notice of his stylistic departure; no other book of his *looks* like this, greeting the reader with such discrete blocks of uncluttered prose—snapshot after snapshot. The slideshow-like effect, as though Mailer were talking us through a series of surveillance photos taken from a distance, is crucial to his throttling and release of tempo. It occurs to the reader that the book's seemingly daunting length (his greatest to date) can be ascribed to this laidback and generous aspect of layout, and as they breeze across its flat vistas of chaste prose and patiently-accumulated detail she will also realise that Mailer's prime achievement is rhythmic. This is granted even by a critic as sceptical as Elizabeth Hardwick. In a major essay she cast aspersions on the emerging genre of testimonial non-fiction, of which she considered *The Executioner's Song* the apotheosis. For Hardwick the book is a triumphant advertisement for the art of the tape-recorder, for better and for worse.¹¹ 'It's true that Mailer "doesn't exist in the book" – or largely true,' she states before asking: 'And has he created the voice, the plains, the flatness, the Westness of it? Aren't the voices and landscapes those of Vern and Brenda, Nicole and Garry and Bessie, accurately taped?' (Hardwick p. 227). Hardwick's loaded questions are self-answering, but even she can't deny that Mailer's hand is to be divined in the patterning of this received material:

¹¹ Mailer himself got this treatment in Peter Manso's biography as 'oral history,' *Mailer: His Life and Times*.

This publically ordained ending from which there was no escape might have prompted Mailer to his most genuine contribution to the tale of Gary Gilmore. Mailer's mark on the book is an accentual one. By accent, placement, and distribution, and finally insistence, no matter what a contrary cynicism about reality might have suggested, he created a romance. From Schiller's pit, we can say that Mailer has excavated a *Liebestod*, possibly proposing it as a redemption of the squalor of this long, long death trip so arresting to the voyeur in most of us. (Hardwick p. 229)

What Hardwick lauds as Mailer's accentual coup can be discerned in the exchange with Spence as a subtle form of synecdochic recapitulation: Gilmore's eventual fall into violence is contained in miniature, as are the pressures which eventually tipped him over the edge. It's all there: his upbringing in prison, the foreignness of the daily grind, the humiliating condescension of government work programmes, and the well-meaning blindness of those attempting to help him. What Mailer achieves by this slow, cumulative process is not so much a foreshadowing of Gilmore's actions as the suggestion of their predetermination: the past-as-character-as-fate. Mailer's portioning out of his small blocks of text reads like the merciless tick-tocking of a clock counting down to the deed that even a reader fresh to the material must know is inevitable. Nabokov, who in *Ada* described time as 'rhythm, the tender intervals between stresses,' later remarked that 'Those "intervals" which seem to reveal the grey gaps of time between the black bars of space are much more similar to the interspaces between a metronome's monotonous beat than to the various rhythms of music or verse' (Nabokov p. 104). It is in the temporal gaps between Mailer's passages—sometimes hairline-thin, sometimes canyon-wide—that he achieves what Poirier acclaimed as not only the displacement but the usurping of empirical time.

As has been demonstrated throughout the preceding chapters, the previous Mailerian style shared with Franz Kafka a sense of the tension between time as a flow and time as incrementally visible. If Mailer's project is to cast the spell of convincing the reader that history is somehow a novel then the sleight of hand is the long sentence. What Mailer doesn't apprehend—what he misses not only in Kafka but in the thought of Walter Benjamin—is that this subjectively experienced temporal disjuncture derives from the imposition of variable rates of times upon humanity. If Mailer experiences industrial time it's not in the nightmarish sense that Gregor Samsa does (recall that wretched vermin's fretting over being on time for

his train in the opening of *Metamorphosis*) but rather in the form of deadline pressure that he transmuted into such potent fuel for his structural innovations. In Mailer's work one can detect something of an intuition that the medium is the message: most explicitly in the anthologies' attempts to reclaim the occasional material from their presentation in magazines, as well as in his detour into filmmaking. What's lacking, however, is the concomitant epiphany that sentences really are semiotic machines as much as photographs or the frames of a motion picture, and not ideologically neutral or somehow 'natural' instruments for achieving a reality uncontaminated by technological mediation. As we have seen, Mailer's method was to instigate by the shock of his presence—both on and off the page—an interpretative disorder that only he can quell. Remember that many if not most of the disparate elements that his long sentences work to harness together are usually not part of the empirical or manifest 'content' of the scene being surveyed; rather, they have been summoned in by his particular associative rhetoric and metaphorical logic. So what the reader is being guided through is not some direct experience of the political or sporting events that Mailer has been assigned to cover but rather the multiplying thoughts of the author himself. With Mailer we have the strange case of a writer whose conception of style is properly Sontagian but whose stated ambitions tend more towards the Orwellian—which begins to get at something of the 'objective' approach he is attempting in *The Executioner's Song*.

Because at first glance the facts of the Gilmore case, as bought and gathered by Larry Schiller, could easily have leant themselves to the antic Mailerian style; he could have written a potboiler like "Charlie Simpson's Apocalypse," Joe Eszterhas's 1972 *Rolling Stone* article about the gun violence that had engulfed Harrisonville, Missouri. Eszterhas, proclaimed by Tom Wolfe as a New Journalist, shares several virtues with Mailer: an acute sense of urban topography, an unsentimental grasp of human frailty, and a respect for the mysteries of violence as deliriously and ineffably contingent upon subjective experience.¹² The reader is gripped with horror as the young hippy Charles "Ootney" Simpson stands to have his small plot of land taken away from him and subsequently strikes out in the town square. He avenges not only the injustice visited upon him but also brings to a bloody climax the dispute between town authorities and his friends, who enjoyed loitering in that space. With considerable passion and intelligence Eszterhas melds the motivation of his characters with a

¹² From Wolfe's introductory remarks: 'Eszterhas winds up by doing something that, I think, demonstrates the flexibility of the New Journalism. He suddenly introduces himself, the reporter, as a character. He tells how he came to town, how he dressed up one way to talk to the town's more solid burghers and another way to talk to the freaks. In other words, he suddenly, at the very end, decides to tell you how he put the story together. Far from being an epilogue or anti-climax, however, the device leads to a denouement of considerable power' (Wolfe p. 247).

vividly realised vision of the urban scene; as much as in Mailer's account of Gilmore's murders, the reader is provided a terrifyingly lucid grip of the relevant psychogeography, is able to track each fell development as the players make their way through concrete space. In both cases we are left with a picture of the failure of Manifest Destiny to bring civilization to the land in the form of the urban. But all Eszterhas can finally offer is cold comfort and bitter irony. 'Ootney loved nature' is the final word on the indigent kid who had brought such catastrophe upon the community, leaving the reader with nothing but rot and randomness (Eszterhas p. 183). Mailer's self-appointed task was to rise above the chaos that Gilmore had wrought, and to articulate for the reader a coherent teleology that would bestow upon these events an intelligible progression.

It seems that the problem for Mailer and his peers—whether immersionist or participatory New Journalists like Eszterhas, Wolfe, or Thompson, or those purveyors of transcription identified by Hardwick—is that their methodology precluded them from the hunt for the Great American Novel. When Walt Whitman (who was the man, who suffered, who was there) called the United States 'essentially the greatest poem' he was not only lauding the polyglot nation's ability to make a whole out of disparate elements, he was also prophesying the anxiety of the national literature. To be defeatist about the possibilities of a national fictional *summa* seems an abdication of American ingenuity and an inability to parse American self-image. Such abdication and defeating inheres in the various kinds of creative non-fiction we have examined, their surface virtuosity and great commercial brilliance notwithstanding. The writers we have been discussing must have felt themselves in a crushing bind. Look at the subjects that they covered in their works of non-fiction: Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters, men on the moon, biker gangs—to be expected to invent on top of capturing these phenomena seemed a capricious and arbitrary standard. It's not that each of these subjects is inconceivable in and of itself, far from it; it's rather that the vivid life of detail discovered by each writer served as a reminder of how much a great novel would have to encompass.

Nabokov described reality as a descending and increasingly microscopic series of specialisations. His point, I think, is an acknowledgement of the lot or problematic of post-Flaubertian realist narration. I would then argue that the idea of the Great American Novel reaches a thrombotic impasse at the moment that Lawrence Buell's fourth script, the so-called 'meganovel,' becomes the only viable means of advance. I follow James Wood's diagnosis of 'hysterical realism' by identifying the problematic in large works by David Foster Wallace, Don DeLillo, and Thomas Pynchon as a hazardous miscegenation of two currents in modern

American writing. On the one hand there's the continuous and self-conscious performance of noticing, which the legacy of what Nicholson Baker called the 'Prousto-Nabovian' order of achievement. Chief among the votaries of the noticing eye is John Updike, whose coarse misogyny Wallace rebukes even as he succumbs to the same spellbound devotion to the infinite possibilities of the granular. What Wallace in particular combines this with, to very disturbing results in particularly the late fiction, is a commitment to that concrete knowledge of practice and process which animates Mailer's experientialism, the New Journalists, and the wielders of the tape recorder.

Wood, I think, errs characteristically when he identifies Charles Dickens as the progenitor of hysterical realism. Surely the great agonist, in the sense we have been discussing, is Herman Melville and *Moby-Dick*. The compendious information on the logistics of whaling, its committing to the literary record of the marine biological taxonomies of its day—these aren't the Romantic digressions and disquisitions of a Victor Hugo but rather precise itemisations of the actual. The confines of the ship and the realities of running of a seaborne business in a world of economic colonialism provide the bracketing that gives this picture of American identity its viable form. The modern meganovelist, university educated and deracinated, feels it incumbent on himself to achieve a Melvillean particularity of detail about each constituency of an atomised society. Wallace's highly informed and informative journalism lets him play the role of Mailerian arbiter—another elder writer he abhorred—and what's true about Pynchon's fiction is true for his. Richard Poirier dismissed the suggestion—surely attractive to readers both as get out clause and as logically necessary next step—that *Gravity's Rainbow* will yield its meaning to one equipped with knowledge of rocket science. The same might be said about the necessity of knowing Internal Revenue Service processes to a reading of Wallace's unfinished *The Pale King*.

Mailer's most extravagant literary invention is *Ancient Evenings*, which honestly defies any attempts at being read. When Poirier praised the novel it was surely because he still needed Mailer to vindicate his earlier critical prophecy of an achieved imaginative work. Bloom's sceptical fondness for the eccentricity and commitment of Mailer's abbreviated achievement seems the fairest assessment the work deserves: '[it] goes on for seven hundred large pages, yet gives every sign of truncation, as though its present form were merely its despair of finding its proper shape. The book could be half again as long, but no reader will wish it so' (see Appendix II, Part III). But it must be said that even Bloom surprises by lauding 'a relevance to current reality in America that actually surpasses that of Mailer's largest previous achievement, *The Executioner's Song*,' and suggesting that 'one aspect of Mailer's

phantasmagoria may be its need to challenge Pynchon precisely where he is strongest' (Bloom, 2003 pp. 33-34). Still, as Bloom has predicted, its quality has not proven durable with readers or critics. Bloom's even-handed assessment of the book touches on some of the issues we have considered, for his essay seems to acknowledge that readers less invested than himself in Gnostic speculation and the Egyptian influence on American literature will struggle with Mailer's large novel.

Harlot's Ghost finally seems like the attempt at a Great American Novel that a writer of Mailer's background and bent ought to have attempted—perhaps even pulled off. Then why relegate it—as well as the text that is in many ways its mutated sequel, *Oswald's Tale*—to the appendix? Despite memorable characters and set-pieces, despite that the C.I.A. ought to provide the perfect milieu for Mailer's paranoid ideas, the book is essentially a large and inconclusive work of aesthetically conservative social realism. It treads water across interminable doldrums of epistolary exchanges—Nabokovians would fail it *tout court*. Unlike in a harried yet brilliant essay like “A Harlot High and Low,” Mailer's language doesn't even attempt to register the disturbances and insecurities of what Jesus James Angleton called the ‘wilderness of mirrors,’ the nightmare world of counter-intelligence. The positivist stance I adopt in Appendix II is meant to capture Mailer in the process of abandoning complex multi-novel projects. Repeatedly, Mailer is forced to proffer the public a much touted, large dead thing. The reader will see how, again and again, he quietly retires his big books' promised sequels. Surely the books that do appear are thwarted by this incompleteness, like solitary panels from unseen diptychs and triptychs. *Oswald's Tale*, while ferociously accomplished and lavishly praised by its British admirers, corresponds to *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* and *The Fight* as successful reprises of what had been a disruptive and new way of working. We can now continue our investigation of the book which, while disqualified *eo ipso* from consideration as a great American work of fiction, constitutes the ideal exercise of Mailer's talents.

Part IV: Schiller's Opus

At this point I wish to examine Mailer's absence from the text. Without gainsaying the authorial hand that can be discerned throughout the book, the absenteeism of anything resembling the Mailer character of his previous works may be its most egregious feature. In the introduction to his collection *Critical Essays on Norman Mailer* Lennon notes the

response to the book: that Richard Stern felt that Mailer's 'absence is so pronounced that it dominates the book like an empty chair at a family dinner,' and that the book 'is so unremittingly unmailerian, it is also antimailerian; an act of literary suicide analogous to the legal suicide that is the book's core' (Lennon, 1986 p. 17). Richard Brautigan had published *Sombrero Fallout: A Japanese Novel*, which provided the epigraph to my fourth chapter, in 1975. Mailer's mock-heroic cameo in that book lampoons the position he had come to occupy in the ecology of the nation's media: a shark to whom mere beat journalists play the part of clamouring pilot fish. 'Norman Mailer' is all the terrified young reporter writes. Norman Mailer. *That* was the nation's inerrant clue that something momentous was afoot. Brautigan satirises both the chattering classes' filter bubble which accords a disproportionate prominence and power to the sort of writing peddled by Mailer while also sneaking in a jab at Mailer's immodesty. All those moments in which he quotes the praise and approbation heaped upon him by those he encounters (which are supposedly counter-weighted by his honesty in reporting his numerous solecisms) are summed up in the reporter's panicked deference. Once Gilmore has murdered Jensen and Bushnell and embraced his death sentence, the reader might reasonably expect Mailer himself to be among the "Eastern Voices" which throng upon the scene. But that isn't what happened. Instead, what had previously been the on-the-ground intelligence gathering function of the Mailer character is taken up by Larry Schiller. Here's his entrance:

He reported income over six figures before he was twenty-four, and got awful tired of photographing different heads on the same body. He was conceivably the best one-eyed photographer in the world—lost the sight of the other in an accident when he was five years old—but he got weary of walking into people's lives, shaking their hands, photographing them, walking out. He left *Life* and went into producing books and movies and fast magazine syndications on stories that weren't small. Wanted to do people in depth. Instead, did Jack Ruby on his deathbed, and Susan Atkins in the Manson trial. He got a terrible reputation. Schiller worked hard to change that image...It did not matter. He was the journalist who dealt in death. (Mailer, 1979 pp. 596-579)

Note Mailer's use of free-indirect discourse: that striking expression of professional burnout—'tired of photographing different heads on the same body'—is unmistakably

Schiller's own, but it cannot escape one's attention that, yet again, Mailer has used the folksy qualifier 'awful.' Joan Didion's *New York Times Book Review* piece offered the most substantive praise of Mailer's book and preceding career, in which she described the 'meticulously limited vocabulary and a voice as flat as the horizon' and lauded 'the authentic Western Voice, the voice heard in *The Executioner's Song*, [as] one heard often in life but only rarely in literature' (Didion 1986, pp. 79-80). In a more recent piece on Mailer, David Cowart assented with Didion's approbation and added his own: 'Mailer shows once again here what an immensely original and perspicacious journalist he was. As such, he wrote prose of extraordinary energy. Always an artist for whom language was paramount, Mailer sought consciously to suit his style to his subject matter' (Cowart p. 165). Mailer's repeated use of unadorned vernacular gives the sense of a communal voice meditating upon its individual constituents. This strategy weaves its spell throughout the first book of the novel, in which the milieu does not allow for extremes of social or professional stratification; the resulting literary tone justifies its homogeneity by virtue of its fidelity to how these people speak. In Markku Lehtimäki's *Poetics of Norman Mailer's Nonfiction*, the novel's style is described as one in which 'American voices are "naturalistically" gathered and critically juxtaposed through imitation and stylization of oral communication. In a sense the book is a factual realization of Mailer's earlier, both realistic and fabulistic fictions which play with styles, voices, and discourses of contemporary America' (Lehtimäki p. 276).

Of course, Mailer the journalist has spent time up close with these people, conducting follow-ups to Schiller's interviews. He has gotten to know them intimately, and the tape recorder has captured their raw humanity—their hopes, dreams, and frustrations; their painful memories of Gary. He hasn't sneered at them from a distance at a political convention, and they haven't hitched their wagon to a cause he considers dubious or malevolent. It strikes us that in his previous works Mailer has mainly seen people in those contexts which magnify the worst within them: mass political and sporting events, which stoke factional affiliations and antagonistic emotions, and foreclose on empathy. Because crowds respond to their own lowest emotional common denominator, it is all too easy for the journalist to abolish individuality and treat people as a mass, as representatives of the wider forces and tendencies which exercise his political imagination. But now Mailer is no longer dealing with the world of political society, with all its crusades, crises, and tribal passions. His subject here is the smaller and more terrifyingly intimate world of domestic and communal society, its network of personal connections and its bottomless innocence—its vulnerability to the cruellest and most random of shocks and ruptures. If Mailer's chaste prose declines throughout the book—

particularly in the taciturn dignity with which it renders the Western Voices—to universalise the material, it's because he is writing about a strictly local event. Until the Gilmore case became a matter of national attention, Mailer is dealing with events of a sort that had previously not invited his usual mode of examination. If there's a stubborn refusal to make these events refer to anything but themselves it's because they literally didn't—not until disaster struck and legal proceedings got underway. This is the sense in which the narrative is distinguished by the hesitancies and contingencies of the present tense.

Mailer's use of folksy turns of phrase like 'awfully' in association with a figure as urbane and foreign to this environment as Schiller might seem a misstep, as though he were applying the Uncle Charles Principle to the point of indiscrimination. But it's actually brilliant in the way it opens up to two different yet harmoniously overlapping interpretations: either Schiller is affecting that mode of speech as a means of ingratiating himself with the community, or he has already succeeded at this aim and is thus included within a community as evoked by its vernacular—he was been accepted by the Western Voices. One's sense of Schiller's nous and charm is reinforced by Mailer's linguistic handling of other media representatives. Take as a contrasting example the depiction of the writer Stanley Greenberg, who arrives on the scene as a scout for the television producer David Susskind. Susskind's \$160,000 bid for the rights to Gilmore's story is ultimately rejected by the family, who accept Schiller's offer of \$50,000. To give one example of Schiller's superior chicanery, as reported by Lennon: 'He purposely made several spelling errors in a telegram to Gilmore, which allowed the convict to feel slightly superior to him, as he took justifiable pride in his language skills' (Lennon, 2013 p. 511). It's this sort of cunning which got him into the Utahan fold as evoked by the book's language. Conversely, the entrance of a character like Greenberg allows Mailer to introduce a sense of lexical stratification:

Greenberg was a man of some decorum, but Susskind could tell he was aroused. "What fascinates me about this Gilmore case," he was saying, "is that it's an open commentary on the utter failure of our prison system to rehabilitate anybody. Why, the guy's been in and out his whole damn life and he just keeps getting worse. It all escalated from car stealing up to armed robbery with a dangerous weapon. That's a devastating commentary," said Greenberg. "Secondly, it could offer a wonderful statement about capital punishment and how godawful it is, eye for an eye. I even think that reaching a large audience can probably save the guy's life. Gilmore says he wants to

die, but he's obviously out of his head. I think our production could be a factor in the man's not being executed." That appealed to Susskind. "They can't execute this man," he said to Stanley, "he's deranged. He's insane. They should have understood that way back." (Mailer, 1979 pp. 602-306)

A man of some decorum—and aroused? As if such five-dollar words and metropolitan euphemism didn't already strike the wrong note, observe how extensively Mailer allows Greenberg to arraign himself by his own speech: there is no genuine empathy in what he says, he clearly didn't take Gilmore seriously, and one feels that Mailer's judgement of these men discloses itself in the length of quotation. As Edmundson notes of the method of composition: 'Mailer combed through the relevant tapes and transcripts in search of similarly revealing moments of speech. One test of the book's integrity would be whether those represented would be willing to sign their names to their sections of the text' (Edmundson pp. 133-134). Susskind and Greenberg were not adopted by the community; Schiller, on the other hand, convinced Gilmore to give forty of his sixty thousand to the families of his victims. Joseph Wenke, in his book *Mailer's America*, writes that 'Mailer exposes Schiller's flaws but is largely sympathetic towards him,' that Schiller is given the same treatment meted out to 'Mailer,' Aquarius, and the others—a mixture of humour and affection with a remorseless probing of motive. 'In addition to admiring the professionalism of Schiller's hustling, Mailer apparently saw in Schiller's problematic reputation a reflection of the wanton misunderstanding that has plagued his own public image' (Wenke p. 210).

Merrill perhaps overstates the case for both Mailer and Schiller as they appear in *The Armies of the Night* and *The Executioner's Song* when he compares them and writes that 'in each case a man of mixed motives, even a mild cynicism, comes to believe in what he is doing and to act more honourably than we would have thought possible when introduced to him.' But he goes on to make a canny point when he suggests that Schiller provides Mailer with a window onto his own methods and motivations: 'The point to be made here is that Schiller's late-blooming integrity confirms Mailer's portrait of Gilmore as a man of unsuspected depth. The more we come to believe in Larry Schiller, the more we believe in his conception of Gary Gilmore' ("Mailer's Sad Comedy: The Executioner's Song" p. 139). Of Schiller's deep implication in the events of the story that he had bought, Lennon writes:

At the centre is Schiller, frantically seeking to record everything. Schiller "had to obtain this story," Mailer wrote. "That was fundamental. He wanted this

story from his spinal cord out.” He was Gilmore’s chief interviewer (they met five times in person), as well as his advisor, paymaster, salesman, media spokesman, witness to his execution, literary executor and distributor of his ashes. Over three hundred people have speaking parts in *The Executioner’s Song*, and Schiller had dealings with 99 percent of them. (Lennon, 2013 pp. 533-534)

And yet, as Andrew Wilson has noted in *Norman Mailer: An American Aesthetic*, ‘intention is undercut in several ways, in Mailer’s faint presence, in the absence of free-indirect discourse in the characterisation of Gilmore, and in the absence of lingering judgement on the part of the hundreds of characters’ (A. Wilson, 2008 p. 251). Now, it wasn’t that Mailer was lacking material on Gilmore; the author, according to Schiller, was provided with ‘over 16,000 pages of interview transcript,’ along with ‘Gilmore’s letters and poems,’ amounting to ‘about 600 to 700 pages on legal-size yellow ruled paper, written on both sides’ (Cowart p. 39). In his previous works of creative nonfiction Mailer had granted himself speculative ingress into his subjects on much shakier grounds; take, as an example, his portrait of astronaut Buzz Aldrin in *A Fire on the Moon*, whom NASA would not let him interview:

All meat and stone, a man of solid presentation, dependable as a tractor, but suggesting the strength of a tank, dull, almost ponderous, yet with the hint of unpredictability, as if, eighteen drinks in him, his eyes would turn red, he would arm-wrestle a gorilla or invite you to join him in jumping out a third-story window in order to see who could do the better somersault on the follow-through out of the landing. This streak was radium and encased within fifty physical and institutional cases of lead, but it was there. (Mailer, 1998 p. 708)

Of course, Mailer has invented nothing here: Aldrin was already out there in the world and has sat for him, as it were. If this sort of writing has any staying power then it derives from its powers of defamiliarisation. In the comprehensiveness of the descriptions that he piles upon these figures Mailer seeks to give them the permanence of fictional representations. Commencing with “Superman Comes to the Supermarket” in 1960, Mailer’s project was to write a counter-history of America’s public life—one which unfolded like a single work, a long ad hoc novel. This accounts for the rhythmic and metaphorical consistency by which he

treated his gallery of notables.¹³ Note the recurring tropes and tics: he enjoys speculating on the subterranean reserves in each of these characters—and each is somehow subject to the inscrutable exhortations of these esoteric forces. Each leads a double life, with the public face continually menaced by its alter ego.¹⁴ I have provided this example in order to reinforce our sense of the achieved Mailerian style which is on display in *The Fight* and so conspicuously absent from *The Executioner's Song*.

And yet it must be said that in none of those cases is Mailer attempting anything like the subtle free-indirect discourse that he employs to such emotive effect throughout *The Executioner's Song*. For all the vivid brilliance of these breathless passages they also expose the nonsensicality of Mailer's claim to be making a novel out of history. Placing Mailer among the best American novelists—Pynchon and Doctorow are also identified—Geoffrey Hartman praises his prose as 'polyphonic despite or within its monologue, its confessional stream of words...Mailer places himself too near events, as science fiction or other forms of romance place themselves too far' (Bloom, 2003 p. 1). While flirting with overpraise, this feels about right. If, as Orwell problematically claimed, prose is like a window pane, then Mailer's is stained glass; his inventiveness interposes itself between the reader and whichever public eminence has sat for their portrait. In this sense Mailer is less John Singer Sargent, and more Lucian Freud, the brush strokes guided less by the subject than by the obsessive themes of the artist. For all the force, even beauty, of the writing Mailer brings to bear upon famous figures, the reader cannot shake the sense that they're all of a piece with the world according to Norman Mailer. The coherence of his descriptive set-pieces always refer us back to the figure of Mailer himself, with all his obsessions, bugbears, and tropes.

So even when writing a true-life novel he is still writing journalism. 'Mailer,' wrote Bloom, 'more than any other figure, has broken down the distinction between fiction and journalism. This sometimes is praised in itself. I judge it an aesthetic misfortune, in everyone else, but on Mailer himself I tend to reserve judgement, since the mode now seems his own' (Ibid. p. 5). In his *London Review of Books* essay on John Updike, James Wood writes about the perils of

¹³ Take as another example the First Lady on the 1972 campaign trail: 'Pat Nixon had obviously come from folds of human endeavour which believed the reward for service was not to be found in the act but afterward. Naturally she gave energy and took energy, impossible not to, and was somewhat wilted if with a glow when she was done, but it was the muscles of her arm that worked, and the muscles in her smile, her soul was foreman of the act, and so did reside in her muscles, but off to the side and vigilant as she worked the machine...Afterward, her fixed expression stayed in memory, for she had the features of a woman athlete or the heroine of some insurmountable disease that she had succeeded in surmounting' (Mailer, 1998 p. 846).

¹⁴ Here's a striking line from a minor novel, *Tough Guys Don't Dance*: 'He had the ability of many a big and powerful man to stow whole packets of unrest in various parts of his body. He could sit unmoving like a big beast in a chair, but if he had a tail, it would have been whipping the rungs.'

bringing the tone of the ‘mandarin-essayist’ to the enterprise of fiction—the danger is that which I have been describing, of the writer continually announcing their presence and interposing themselves between the reader and the reality they are attempting to apprehend:

One of the dangers for the stylist such as Updike – and one of the ways in which prose is unlike poetry – is that prose always forces the question: who is thinking in these particular words, and why? Point of view, a boring topic to most readers, is the densest riddle for the novelist, since words are either directly ascribed to characters (first-person narration) or indirectly ascribed to them (third-person narration). By contrast, the poet’s words are generally assumed to flow from the poet, who wishes, as it were, to draw attention to himself.

Mailer and Updike are linked in the popular imagination. ‘The Great Male Narcissists,’ wrote David Foster Wallace: ‘Unless, of course, you consider constructing long encomiums to a woman’s “sacred several-lipped gateway” or saying things like “It is true, the sight of her plump lips obediently distended around my swollen member, her eyelids lowered demurely, afflicts me with a religious peace” to be the same as loving her.’ Mailer certainly wasn’t unique in his limited treatment of women—almost none of his most prominent contemporaries could escape a dichotomy of seeing them as either sexually available or malignantly castrating. The most dispiriting moment in any reading of, say, Saul Bellow takes place with the introduction of a female character and the realisation that the descriptive prose has defaulted to leering generalities. It strikes us that Barthes’s call for the death of the author is also, in its way, a stay of execution: by scattering an array of texts previously united under the banner of a single author, their writer can no longer be charged with repeated offences. The problem with a recognisable style like Mailer’s or Updike’s is that they eventually become subject to the sin of association; we recall their indecencies even when they’re at their most incandescent. The prosecution brings charges of joint enterprise, or common purpose.

In another observation with deep and painful resonances for Mailer, Wood notes that ‘for some time now Updike’s language has seemed to encode an almost theological optimism about its capacity to refer. Updike is notably unmodern in his impermeability to silence and the interruptions of the abyss.’ In Mailer we notice this most egregiously in *A Fire on the Moon*, the length of which bears sufficient testimony to his despair in attempting to force

entry into the mysteries of the Apollo 11 mission. In that work Mailer seems a monkey at a typewriter, placing his faith in the hope that by accumulating tonnage his words may somehow acquire meaning. It is the abandonment of this tone and method of abundant explanation and fugal rumination for the occasion of *The Executioner's Song* which is, to my mind, the prime indicator that Mailer was finally prepared to sit down and write the great novel that he long envisioned. Despite the bluster, most of everything he had written since *Advertisements for Myself* was a stalling action—brilliant bursts of deferment. The language he had cultivated since the 1959 anthology could only proclaim his upcoming masterpiece; it couldn't produce it. He could only dilate upon likenesses of the hipster—political geniuses like Kennedy, powerful artistic precursors like Hemingway and Miller, pugilists like Ali—without finding the real thing, much less imagining one into existence. With Gilmore, however, his search had come to an end. This seismic discovery, Cowart notes, was greeted with 'no narcissism, no bizarre conceits about repression and cancer, no extravagant romanticizing of the criminal' (Cowart p. 164). When Mailer was the guest on the November 4th, 1979 episode of *Firing Line*, William F. Buckley (whose association with the murderer Edgar Smith shall be considered later) introduced him with typically gracious eloquence:

Suddenly one of the most rococo writers of the 20th century sounds almost like Dashiell Hammett or Ernest Hemingway. As critic James Wolcott observed on picking up *The Executioners Song*. "I assumed that Mailer would use the occasion to unveil his own Psychology of the Hangman, turning Gilmore's life into a crime and punishment saga seething with blood, madness, nihilism, damnation, blank cartridges, and beggarly redemption. Once again Norman Mailer would roll out the Dostoevskian cannons and leave the landscape covered with smoke." Nothing of the sort, as you will discover, has happened. This is not a book about Mailer, and not a book, were you to pick it up not knowing the Identity of the author, would lead you to guess his identity. You would, however, know instantly that you were in the hands of a master. (Mailer, 1988 p. 228)

I quote this to re-emphasize the surprise with which *The Executioner's Song* was greeted. When questioned on this point Mailer's reply was technical and self-effacing. He suggests that the tonnage of material—not just that delivered by Schiller but also the yield of his own follow-up interviews—stunned him into a sort of cautious circumspection. He had been

drawn to Gilmore's story because of the questions that it had embodied—ones which had exercised his imagination for decades—but found the process one of uncanny estrangement: 'I discovered as I wrote it, and as the material came in and as I went out and got more material...that I knew less and less. Or let me put it this way, I knew more and more and I understood less and less' (Ibid. p. 229). I think there's a combination here of genuine mystery and artful misdirection. On the one hand, the simplest explanation for the mystery Mailer makes of Gilmore is logistical: Gilmore was the only major player that Mailer couldn't interview himself. The wealth of material on and interpersonal insights into the others could have stayed his hand. Recall the structural division of *The Armies of the Night*, and his reluctance to attempt a blend of events that he did and did not witness himself. But as plausible as this explanation is—and it isn't precluded by my next suggestion—I would propose that Mailer's reticence in the Buckley interview is of a piece with the forbearance on display throughout the book. For Mailer had finally escaped the paradox of his enterprise, namely that his self-explanations precluded *eo ipso* his own Hipness. Hip is mysterious, Hip is laconic, Hip is only discriminately self-revealing. His masterstroke in *The Executioner's Song* is to dignify Gilmore by granting him these qualities as against the shameless and debasing clamour of the media. In this sense, Mailer has rescued not only Gilmore but also Schiller. In a way, Mailer and Schiller can be said to have redeemed each other's careers.

Confronted with the stylistic schism represented by *The Executioner's Song*, it behoves us to revisit Roland Barthes's contribution to the debate around authorship, considered in my second chapter. The desire to bring about the death of the author can be attributed to any number of hermeneutic and ideological motivations, but at least one is purely practical: the liberation of the *writer* from their duties to their identity as an *author*. Mailer was up to something similar, as in his contrasting censures of Hemingway and Miller, who both felt various degrees of obligation to the legends their work had established. If the critical identification of literary influence can too often devolve into a species of parlour game then so can the systematic study of literary style, with the prize going to the critic who has fashioned the most efficient net—the one that excludes the fewest of the author's works. By freeing texts from their obligation to other texts, from an association which is the product of the persistent fiction of authorship, the critic is similarly unfettered and thus licensed to study individualities, rather than similarities. As a student of his own work Mailer—I would propose—came to a similar conclusion. Recall how, in *Advertisements for Myself*, he effected a scrupulous evacuation of the emerging Mailer persona from his presentation of "The White Negro". We were to understand that this was the main event, that the material required no

apology, much less the clownish antics of the author. This withdrawal suggested that Mailer's calibrations of authorial absence and presence were an index to his sense of occasion as well as his auto-critical judgements. Of course, as we saw, he wanted to have it both ways: by the time we reached "The White Negro" there was no forgetting the passions and strivings of the previous three hundred pages. But a whole book, as in the case of *The Executioner's Song*, provides a more discrete opportunity for the sort of self-purgation that he thought necessary to honour Gilmore. There are more workaday, banal, and entirely plausible ways to account for Mailer's textual absence, such as his literal absence from the events depicted, his literalistic imagination, and the impossibility of his interviewing Gilmore. But the most resonant explanation for his act of literary suicide is the same one that binds the life and work into a coherent whole. Mailer must have known that Gilmore was his White Negro, and that called for an approach that was more austere, more direct, and more impersonal than the language he had used to first describe him.

Part V: Gilmore as Hipster

Robert Solotaroff, who is one of Mailer's most sympathetic readers (and less theoretically-minded than Poirier), cautions against reading the philosophy of Hip as a set of personal aspirations for the author. Describing Mailer as 'complicated' (a tellingly evasive hedging), he writes that 'that one cannot bluntly assert that he celebrated the hipster because he unequivocally hoped to become one himself. Certainly the author, who could not explicitly endorse the hipster solution, was much less rebellious than the hero of the essay' (Solotaroff, 1986 p. 122). This isn't a completely accurate description of a writer who ran for Mayor of New York on an eccentric platform, but Solotaroff's point does chime with my intuition that Mailer knew he was incapable of delivering what he had promised in "The White Negro"; he could only point it out to his readers. I will now examine how Gilmore is the figure he had described in that earlier essay—'the hipster as a kind of personal absolute who might exert a pull upon his own psyche to bend it toward the rebellious, the primitive, the creative'—and how the occasion of his appearance allowed Mailer to write the book that was the culmination of his career (Ibid. p. 123).

Let us reconsider Mailer's most infamous speculation in "The White Negro," in which he postulated some possibility for honour and bravery in an imagined scenario of two strong eighteen-year old hoodlums beating in the brains of a candy-store keeper. It seemed his main

objection to the image rested upon the uneven nature of the competition—because the victim was not physically equal to his assailants there would be no therapy in the act of killing. However, the value of the act lay in the courage necessary to dare the unknown, ‘for one murders not only a weak fifty-year old man but an institution as well, one violates private property, one enters into a new relation with the police and introduces a dangerous element into one’s life’ (Mailer, 1992 p. 347). Now, it cannot have escaped Mailer’s notice that there is a more than incidental resemblance to the murders of Jensen and Bushnell. The *frisson* of this recognition might have put him in mind of another earlier line of his:

If you’re holding a gun and you shoot a defenceless man [says General Cummings to Lieutenant Hearn] then you’re a poor creature, a dastardly person. That’s a perfectly ridiculous idea, you realize. The fact that you’re holding the gun and the other man is not is no accident. It’s a product of everything you’ve achieved, it assumes that if you’re...you’re aware enough, you have the gun when you need it. (Mailer, 1980)

The events of the evening of July 19th, 1976 allowed Mailer to revisit one of his most incendiary statements, to put flesh upon the skeletal outline of his speculation, and to make us understand how and why one man held the gun when two others didn’t. *The Executioner’s Song* exposes the sham of “The White Negro”: if Gilmore is Hip, it’s because he got what he wanted by being the man who *didn’t* hold the gun. If this seems pat, consider the following: Mailer, as has been repeatedly shown, was an obsessive student of his own work—not only to provide a model for future students and readers of his writings but also in order to treat his past selves as examples to be bettered in subsequent works. ‘By sitting so frequently in self-judgement upon his past he is always implicitly proposing for himself some fresh start in the future’ (Poirier, 1972 p. 11). But even if Mailer had forgotten about Cummings’s scenario, the narrative core of the speculation runs throughout his fiction and non-fiction. It’s there in the murder of Rojack’s wife in *An American Dream* and the absurd escalations of the hunting trip in *Why Are We in Vietnam?* It’s present throughout his boxing journalism, with those pieces’ repeated insistence upon victory being contingent upon activities outside the ring. The idea of subjecting yourself to an almost lethally asymmetrical exchange forms the crux of *The Fight*, with Ali’s rope-a-dope tactics against Foreman.

Mailer—or the entity that we perhaps should designate as Poirier’s Mailer—offers us the phenomenon of the Minority Within as an explanation for how equilibrium is achieved in

encounters between unevenly matched forces. This is how boxers can be defeated in upsets and how promising politicians can lose the sheen of their idealism. As we have seen, there is an alignment between this idea of an independently teleological inner substance and the quasi- or post-Hegelian thinking of Žižek, who adopts the tropes of Benjamin and Sloterdijk to turn black swan events into ‘readable’ historical occurrences. That latter term, whose usage I derive from Nassim Nicholas Taleb, refers to those unforeseen and unaccountable events around which history can be said to pivot, which are distinguished by subsequent hermeneutic efforts to demonstrate why they *should* have been anticipated. The desire is to seek out some sort of guiding hand amidst the chaos and contingency of events, to rig them up into a coherent narrative of class-based justice. So for Žižek, putatively sudden outbreaks of political or ‘divine’ violence should be understood as the operations of history seeking to correct itself: *Geist* getting its own house in order. The Minority Within, like divine violence—Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novus* which haunted Benjamin’s imagination—can be understood as a way of transcending the false consciousness of class: the sublime historical masochism of a class traitor wishing for a grand reckoning against his own kind. It is this identification of an inner core which is crucial to Mailer’s assimilation of Gilmore into his long-established project.

Consider the context, Edmundson exhorts us (just as Cummings does in the above passage): ‘Gilmore has spent the balance of his life under the control of institutions. He has been told when to get up in the morning, when to sleep, when to exercise, when to eat. Society has applied enormous resources to the task of normalizing him, rendering him into a coherent, stable citizen’ (Edmundson p. 132). Mailer leaves his motivations an open question. As Wilson notes, ‘his paltry profit discredits the financial motive,’ to which we can add the nature of the crime: that Gilmore had murdered both men *after* they had complied with his wishes (A. Wilson, 2008 p. 215). The younger Mailer would have expended a great deal of ink and energy in imagining the psychic rush and vicissitudes of the act; the Mailer of 1979 is more interested in what came after, which is where he locates Gilmore’s authentic act of defiance—one might say his true act of art. Before we come to this, I wish to propose another reason for Mailer’s understated treatment of the murders. Edmundson is, I think, brilliant in emphasising the differing historical contexts of Mailer’s work in ’57 and ’79:

Mailer's early romantic style signified an energetic denial of death. The words were supposed to seem unstoppable, a stream of invention that would never find its placid level. The culture to which Mailer addressed himself then had

imposed what he saw as living death by conformity on its citizens, and the task at hand was to revitalize them. But when a culture becomes falsely vitalistic, making the denial of death the principle on which its mystifications rest, it is time to try to undermine it by the Emersonian gesture of diving to reappear in a new place. (Edmundson p. 137)

The false vitalism to which Edmundson alludes is on abundant display throughout what followed the murders: the frantic media circus, the nationwide fixation on Gilmore, the bidding war. It's as though Mailer were foreswearing a climate that he helped make, his stylistic chastity standing almost in pre-emptive rebuke of a culture that will devote eleven months of attention in 1994-95 to the minutiae of the O.J. Simpson trial—a culture violently satirised in Oliver Stone's motion picture *Natural Born Killers*.¹⁵ By de-emphasising the act as spectacle and private sensual delight, Mailer gives it its due gravity and does honour not only to Gilmore but to his victims. Murder, in this new Mailerian dispensation, is now too grave and private a matter for the Emersonian 'gaze of millions.' Besides, if Gilmore saved his soul he did not do so on that fateful night, nor does Mailer ultimately valorise him for that act. If Mailer abided by any component of his previous thought, then it lay in the collision course upon which Gilmore set himself—the choice would be between a return to prison and death. It is his bitter and intimate knowledge of the former which leads him to choose the latter, which failed to prepare him for life on the outside and set him on that disastrous course. Sean McCann reads the book as the story of how 'a set of interlocking and sometimes conflicting institutions,' such as 'the law, the criminal justice system, psychiatry, the press, the Mormon church, and the family' bear down upon the subjects they interpellate. 'Yet,' he adds, 'against the novel's predominant impression of constraint and regulation, Mailer also imagines a limited kind of redemption... Mailer's book suggests that, despite the forces of social expectations and despite the personal weight of accumulated sins and errors, a determined individual might rescue for him or herself some small measure of honour' (McCann pp. 293-294).

Žižek writes that 'there are no "objective" criteria enabling us to identify an act of violence as divine; the same act that, to an external observer, is merely an outburst of violence can be divine for those engaged in it – there is no big Other guaranteeing its divine nature, the risk of

¹⁵ That film's production coincided with—and was tonally influenced by—not only the Simpson case but also the Menendez Brothers' murder of their parents, the assault on figure skater Nancy Kerrigan, the beating of Rodney King by the LAPD, and the siege of the Branch Davidians' Waco compound by Federal forces.

reading and assuming it as divine is fully the subject's own' (Žižek p. 169). It is at this point of uncertainty where Mailer and Hip stage their intervention. Nothing is Hip until it is made so by an effort of language—specifically Mailer's, which is why he grants himself licence to bestow the term as a badge of honour. What Mailer offers the reader is the spectacle of his stylistic suicide as a correlate for Gilmore's legal self-slaughter; the restraint of the writing is the only way to honour Gilmore, for we will all become Hip by the effort of understanding how he has hijacked the system. For if Hip is, among much else, the cultivation of a sufficient awe before the mysteries of not only the body but also the unfathomability of human motivation, then none of us will achieve it by dint of Mailer's continual explanations. For finally this is a book and a sequence of action for which we have been primed by our previous readings of Mailer—the author function is snuck in and operates in the background, located in negative space.

The following striking phrase occurs in Walter Kaufman's introduction to *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*: 'If one comes from Kierkegaard and plunges into Dostoevsky, one is lost like a man brought up in a small room who is suddenly placed in a sailboat in the middle of the ocean' (Kaufman, 1975, p. 14). One might say the same about a man brought up in incarceration before being released into a world he has not been equipped to navigate. Adrift upon this vast sea of mores that no one has explained to him, duties he rejects, institutions he does not recognise—does Gilmore find anything worthy of him? Where does he locate the possibility for what Faulkner called 'his own one anonymous chance to perform something passionate and brave and austere not just in but into man's enduring chronicle worth of a place in it (who knew? perhaps adding even one anonymous jot to the austerity of the chronicle's brave passion) in gratitude for the gift of his time in it'?¹⁶ The answer is new to Mailer's repertoire of emotions: love.

Now, many would object to using the word to describe Gilmore's relationship with Nicole Baker. He was her senior by sixteen years. Prior to his arrest the intensity and abusiveness of his behaviour led her family to intervene. Whilst in prison he coerced her into an attempted simultaneous suicide. It is perhaps in the treatment of this strain that we catch Mailer indulging his old, strange ideas. As Lehtimäki notes, 'while writing letters in prison is Gary's way of self-creation, he simultaneously aims at "creating" Nicole, insisting that their relationship is a product of *karma* and reincarnation, a reunion after a separation in their previous lives.' Lehtimäki notices the similarity between Gilmore's and Mailer's thinking to

¹⁶ From *Intruder in the Dust*.

ancient Jewish mysticism: ‘all souls pre-exist, and descend into mundane bodies to complete their mission on earth; this resembles a belief in “karmic balance,” according to which human beings come into the world with a soul that carries an import of guilt and reward from the past’ (Lehtimäki p. 289). The reader may be forgiven for not sharing in this intellectual excitement—a young woman’s life is endangered; two children nearly lose their mother to satisfy Gilmore’s vanity.

And yet, Lehtimäki is not the only one of the book’s readers to consider it the most feminist text that Mailer had ever written: ‘Even though there are typical signs of romanticism in Mailer’s representation of female characters, *The Executioner’s Song*, more than any of his narratives, encourages an empathetically feminist reading’ (Lehtimäki p. 267). It is the women who provide the book’s objective correlative standard of stoicism, of accepting the existential given. It is their silent sufferance which adumbrates what Merrill calls the work’s great theme of ‘the heroic individual’s passionate (and often destructive) attempt to reject the deadly social environment endured so stoically by the book’s western women. This attempt can also be seen in Gilmore’s rejection of life in prison, his “dignified” preference for whatever succeeds this life’ (“Mailer’s Sad Comedy: *The Executioner’s Song*” p. 144). While Gilmore retains the love and understanding of the book’s western voices, even as he earns the admiration and respect of some of its eastern voices (not just Schiller but, most crucially, the Brooklyn-born intelligence that has orchestrated these many voices), his actions are finally a judgement on a society’s prisons. His deep joke, writes Edmundson, lay ‘in capitulating and becoming just the kind of well-disciplined subject everyone always wanted him to be, but at the wrong moment. The most imaginative act of Gilmore’s life, and the costliest to himself, is to pretend to possess no imagination whatever’ (Edmundson p. 132). What Althusser described as the affirmation of the interpellated subject—‘the admirable works of the prayer: “Amen – *So be it*”’—is rewritten by Gilmore’s ‘Let’s do it.’ ‘The individual,’ wrote Althusser, ‘*is interpellated as a (free) subject in order that he shall (freely) accept his subjection*, i.e. in order that he shall make the gestures and actions of his subjection “all by himself.” *There are no subjects except by and for their subjection*. That is why they “work all by themselves.”’

Gilmore’s final jest—to demand his own execution—brings us back to the origins of Hip: the dawning of a new technological age in which the state wielded indiscriminate powers to liquidate its citizens. Like the protestors on the steps of the Pentagon, he brought state power from out of hiding. The masterstroke of his *détournément* or hijacking is to bring that power to bear upon himself in order to reject what that society has made of him, and what it has to

offer him. Gilmore finds his meaning by finally choosing the time of death—the precise substance which, as Benjamin Noys wrote, was denied to us in the age that had been inaugurated by the Holocaust and the nuclear bomb. More so than the soldier in the jungle or the boxer in the ring, Gilmore was able to deliver and vindicate this theme of Mailer’s—and he did it so successfully that Mailer scarcely needed to spell it out for the reader. By choosing his time, Gilmore had brought about Mailer’s. This strange act of literary suicide, this feat of stylistic retreat and disappearance, allowed Mailer to finally displace empirical with artistic time. We can see that a clock had started with the publication of *Advertisements for Myself*; it wasn’t until *The Executioner’s Song* that we could apprehend that to which it had been counting down. Time had finally been called on twenty years of concerted and haphazard effort.

Coda: “Culture is worth a little risk.”

The first broadcast of *A Prairie Home Companion* aired on July 6th, 1974—three years after the publication of *The Prisoner of Sex*. The radio variety show and its host, Garrison Keillor, would stand as bastions of down-home Americana for four decades, trafficking in folk music and Keillor’s own uniquely arch vignettes of life in the fictional Minnesota town of Lake Wobegon. In 2006 Keillor was afforded the front page of the *New York Times Book Review* to excoriate Bernard- Henri Levy’s *Travelling America in the Footsteps of Tocqueville* and in so doing occasioned a minor cultural skirmish, with Christopher Hitchens inveighing against Keillor’s ‘full-blown, corn-fed, white-bread American nativist bloviation.’¹⁷ In that same year Keillor fronted a movie named after and inspired by his show—the last ever directed by Robert Altman. Eleven years later, on November 29th of 2017, Minnesota Public Radio terminated its contract with Keillor, citing ‘allegations of his inappropriate behaviour with an individual who worked with him.’ A powerful article by Megan Garber for *The Atlantic* titled “Garrison Keillor, Settler of a Fallen Frontier” situated the icon’s downfall within the context of a wider cultural upheaval and reckoning:

Keillor ended up starring in another kind of story of the American frontier...[and came] to serve as a representative of an American cultural

¹⁷ A sample of Keillor’s invective, which now scans as a four-car pileup of inadvertent prescience: ‘He worships Woody Allen and Charlie Rose in terms that would make Donald Trump blush.’ Incidentally, Mailer was one of the notables interviewed by Lévy.

ideal. He became one of the many men who have fallen to the “Weinstein effect.” That effect is its own kind of landscape, its own kind of frontier—a version of manifest destiny in which expansion is not geographical but ideological, and in which justice, rather than justification, is the guiding ethic. The new American landscape is a cultural space that is cognizant of power differentials and mutual respect. It is one that strives for equality. And it is one that takes for granted the conviction that belittling those who are less powerful—*all the women are strong*—will have, finally, meaningful consequences.

To a degree it would be pointless to speculate on how Mailer would have fared in the age of #MeToo and #TimesUp—he would have been ninety-four years old at the time of Keillor’s dismissal—which isn’t to say he is unfreighted by the tonnage of his record; one need look no further to understand his disappearance from the literary landscape. It is his enablers who are spared by his absence: the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Foundation, and the American Chapter of PEN for installing him in the upper echelons of the nation’s cultural life; Hillary Clinton evangelist Gloria Steinem for endorsing his 1969 Mayoral bid—delayed by seven years after his assault on Adele Morales. The febrile events of the last few years have thrown into high relief the reasons for his neglect. For better and for worse, it seems that the separation of art from the flawed men who produce it is no longer a cultural luxury that we can afford. May they be gone and their work with them—that way blows the wind.

It was interesting to note, upon the death of V.S. Naipaul in the summer of 2018, how little the obituaries made of his infidelities, of his emotional and physical abusiveness. Perhaps the collective decision was to view it as ultimately a private affair, one that adds nothing to our readings of *A House for Mr Biswas* or *A Bend in the River*. And more substantial points required censure: the succour and encouragement his political writings gave to neo-conservative adventurists and his crowing post-colonial chauvinism. To hammer on his purely personal failings would be to grant too easy a victory to the dim forces with which he aligned himself, permitting them to cry foul of the *ad hominem*. Notwithstanding the entirely viable case that could be made about the relative autonomy of his achievement as a writer, a figure like Naipaul finally has recourse to a defence that is completely unavailable to Mailer: that of a private life. As we have seen repeatedly over the course of this book, Mailer wove the substance of his intemperance into the fabric of his works, and not only invited but dared the reader to incorporate it into their valuations. And as Foucault warns, there is no coherent

or unified theory of the work—a lack which Mailer makes perilously explicit. His truculent incitements of the temptation towards personal judgement were carried out not just in the study but in the world, so let us remind ourselves not only of the evolution of his literary project but also of those public acts that we should consider his most prominent works.

The first thing that Mailer did for his country was fight for it. It behoves us to neither pass judgement upon the dimensions of his service and contribution to the victory, nor upon his motivations for seeking the posting that he did. Both, as we saw in the first chapter, combined into the success that was *The Naked and the Dead*. The moral legacy of the inter-war novelists and Mailer's own peripheral position helped him comprehend the machine-like nature of the modern military state, and both these factors came together to furnish him with a plot and texture of considerable suggestive power. Re-reading his first novel, it is almost startling to witness the mature and assured execution of the themes which would animate his nonfiction and elude his future imaginative enterprises. Why could he never give us another character as brutal and implacable as Croft, as charismatic and resonantly vulnerable to dramatic ironies as Cummings?

It seems that as early as *Barbary Shore* he was subject to a deleterious self-consciousness. Recall how evocative a work that book promised to be in its opening passages, how patient it was in its evocation of character, how dreamily it cast its spell—that sense of withheld truth. What if he hadn't felt the need to show his homework, to impress Malaquais, to somehow bring to conclusion decades-old fissures within the world of Marxist thought? How did he even think he could execute that last ambition? Perhaps all his future failures as an imaginative writer are previewed already in McLeod's final soliloquy. And maybe we could locate the source of his fallacious thinking in what might be his first public-act-as-work: his campaigning on behalf of Henry Wallace and the Progressive Party in the 1948 election. That activity found him at an ideological crossroads: fighting to forestall the worst of what he had prognosticated for his country in *The Naked and the Dead*, and instead seeing the electorate overwhelmingly reject a message of hope. The Truman Doctrine seemed to accelerate the oncoming of the imperialistic America that he portrayed in his book.

And yet, I hesitate to incorporate Mailer's progressive phase into our tessellated scheme of overlapping public and literary works. Because as we have seen throughout the preceding chapters, what we have come to know as the high Mailerian style was not simply a matter of verbal texture or ornamentation. It was an entire manner of conduct which blurred the boundaries between the study and the world at large. It generates an entire atmosphere around the Mailer persona—not just the literary representation, but the public figure. It

predetermined his actions and conduct, always guiding him towards the most febrile source of copy—even if he had to instigate it himself by sheer tomfoolery or other, more sinister means. His public advocacy for Wallace was carried out in sheer innocence. Note that he never violated it by committing it to the page. If *Barbary Shore* is in fact a sort of adumbrated autobiography, then it sublimates the rout of the Progressives into the larger sense of dislocation that he felt following the success of his war novel and the consequent emptying of his past as a theme. It's not just that our man had yet to begin writing like Norman Mailer—he'd yet to start acting like him.

So what could be designated as the first authentically Mailerian public act? Let us disqualify anything contained in *Advertisements for Myself*. Take his participation in the "Our Country and Our Culture Symposium"—that was still the action and the style of a pre-Mailerian Mailer. One might counter this with the farce of his *Village Voice* column. At first we seem to grope towards the *frisson* we associate with him. It is fitting that following the miseries of *The Deer Park* Mailer tried his hand at direct engagement with his audience. His column was a comedy of errors which unfolded over seventeen excruciating weeks before a small but obstreperous Greenwich Village readership. The quality of their response, as made vivid by a generous selection of the letters written to the editor, is evidence that his tenure was a local spectacle looked upon with mouths agape. The first letter reproduced, which denounces the author of the column as having gotten himself a 'reputation' by 'gutlessly imitating (a prim term for thievery) Dos Passos in your ONE & ONLY book,' is from a resident of Bank Street—which is where Dos Passos lived during the writing of *Manhattan Transfer*. In generating the weekly experience of awaiting Mailer's next freebooting invective, the columnist arguably created a sort of psychogeographic happening: a Village street fight, local history in the making.

But this came at a price. In responding to another reader who upbraided Mailer for his vanity he made recourse to the crassest defence of his ethos: 'I really do have a poor character. Wouldn't it be dishonest and a fraud to the public, as well as deeply un-American, to present myself as better than I am? Let others profit by my unseemly self-absorption, and so look to improve their own characters.' Mailer could save no one's soul by such vain obstinacy, such obvious *amour propre*, and as anthologist he cannot recreate the localised excitement of what unfolded over those seventeen weeks because the Village was 'a seed-ground for the opinions of America, a cross-roads between the small town and the mass-media'. It is only in anthology, as a sort of discontinuous literary presentation, that Mailer can claim to put forward an example for the improvement of character—for it is by his authority

to direct the attention of any reader that has persisted this far through a five hundred page book that he can finally and reasonably expect the ‘slow readers’ that his columns evidently didn’t get.

All these things considered—all this evidence of the emerging method of blending past behaviour and public perception—why oughtn’t we to consider this a purely public act? Because it generated a paper trail; it has a direct presence in his bibliography. No, by the Mailerian acts that we should consider Mailerian works, we should refer to those occasions on which he leveraged his image and influence on behalf of a cause; that he did not mine as a source of writing; and that impinge upon our sense of the man as disclosed in the nonfiction. Of course, the objection to these stringent criteria is immediate and emotional—it would seem not to account for the most infamous event of his life, the stabbing of Adele Morales. But I believe it is for each reader to deal with that incident as they choose. I have attempted to address Foucault’s point about the anarchy which prevails in the absence of a theory of the work. But if there is a simple way of incorporating that near-fatal assault into a moral and evaluative reckoning of Mailer’s work and career then the question wouldn’t prove so vexatious. Nor would we struggle with the cases of Naipaul or William Burroughs, who of course actually murdered his wife. Whether you still want to read *An Area of Darkness* or *The Ticket That Exploded* is up to you. We can only leave it by saying that Mailer acted in that instant not as a writer or a public figure, but simply as a lost, violent soul. Denounce him for it, but don’t stop there: the blame must also be laid at the feet of the New York intellectuals who sheltered him from the public, for the legal system that let him off so lightly, for the publishers and magazines that continued to disseminate his work. Do so, and you would be proceeding in the spirit that animates #TimesUp and #MeToo. The fell aura that the assault casts around the written works—that also emanates from that act’s absence in the written works—is shimmering and nebulous, flickeringly visible only according to the gaze of each individual reader.

These qualifications established, what is his canon of public actions? I would adduce five such undertakings, and it strikes me upon the occasion of tabulating them in this manner that they chart a rise into notoriety before a descent into infamy. First, following the success of “Superman Comes to the Supermarket,” there was the witness he bore for the defence in the 1962 Boston obscenity trial of *Naked Lunch*. The anxiety of influence as disclosed in the record of his testimony notwithstanding, surely this was commendable *ipso facto*—the sort of conduct we like to see in a man of Mailer’s stature. Then there were all his appearances at anti-war gatherings throughout the Sixties—not just the ones recorded in *The Armies of the*

Night and Why Are We in Vietnam?—and his participation in the Writers and Editors War Tax Protest.

Then came 1969, and—a Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award to his name—his belated bid for the mayoralty of New York. This is not the occasion to assess Mailer’s political programme as revealed through his manifesto. All I can do is describe it as equal parts provocation and prescription—a stunt that contained within it a glimmer of thoughtful seriousness. Disregard all the bluster about public executions and gladiatorial combat, the conspiratorial jeremiads against the fluoridation of water, and the wild fantasy of statehood for New York City. For those few who bothered to look closely, there was a vision worth considering: an extreme but idealistic form of decentralisation, a dream of empowering the individual neighbourhoods—local solutions for local problems. If we were charitable, we might propose that what the city’s voters passed on is paradigmatic of what we stand to lose if we dismiss Mailer too easily. Endure the antics, the arrogance, and the bristling animosities, and you might be rewarded with a singular and uncompromising vision. As I hope has been clear in the preceding chapters: Mailer’s was a ferocious intelligence, and at his finest moments he was a critic who fully exploited his proximity to the cultural and political authority of the state and society. But perhaps for many he is too close, and this is exemplified in his quixotic bid for concrete power. Such a display licenses too many of the agnostic and the sceptical to discard him outright.

Then there was his clash with the representatives of Women’s Lib, which took place both on and off the page, and on screen. We have given this sufficient scrutiny, and so we are lead straight onto the bloody climacteric of his public career: his championing of Jack Henry Abbott. The facts of that case were laid out back in the introduction, and they don’t really require further expansion. All that needs to be said is that Mailer’s actions had two consequences: the publication of a very powerful book, *In the Belly of the Beast*, and the death of Richard Adan. Mailer would have us believe that one nullifies the other: culture is worth a little risk. Perhaps Abbott was the White Negro that Mailer was looking for—perhaps such an encounter was always going to end in bloodshed.

Intriguingly, William F. Buckley at one point found himself similarly entangled. The *New York Times* obituary of the murderer Edgar Smith opened by emphasising his association with the writer and broadcaster. The outlines of the Smith and Abbott affairs are remarkable in their similarities. Smith had also authored a book while in prison: 1968’s *Brief Against Death*, in which he argued that his 1957 conviction on the charge of murdering a teenage girl was based on a coerced confession. His cause was championed by Buckley, who promoted a

defence fund and assembled a legal team. After his release in 1971, Smith appeared on *Firing Line*. In 1976 Smith was incarcerated for a second time, following his conviction for kidnapping and attempted murder. What is the substantial difference between the cases of Abbott and Smith? It would be this: that much as Buckley can be said to have shown poor judgement on the same scale that Mailer did, no one could seriously claim that Smith was epiphenomenal of Buckley in the way that Abbott was of Mailer. The final crisis of the Mailerian author function was that it was unable to resist being tarred with this bloody brush.

Mailer's career as we have come to understand it was a happy accident. This line of development was laid out across the second, third, and fourth chapters. Mailer was alive to the pathos of his situation: that for all that he offers his fictions to the world—no matter how slavishly he toiled at the metamorphic iterations of the Big One—what the world liked best was really the bi-product of the main-line of his labours. But what he didn't understand was the degree to which this was a matter of indulgence, of incredible latitude. His ideology, as disclosed in those career-defining collisions with the feminists, was his belief that his success was a matter of meritocracy instead of what it was: the boons of patriarchy. His author function was just a tactic, and one that required continual renewal: the Mailerian spectacle was a travelling road show and seemingly a perpetual motion machine—arrested only by his death. What disappeared along with him was the thrill of each new public crisis being greeted with a new work by Mailer

Now that the dust has settled, in the absence of the man the author function only discloses itself through long and patient study of the aggregated works—by the sort of exploration that we have just attempted. But in order to commit to such a labour one has to see something worth the effort. What the world sees, I have attempted to propose, is as much a matter of personal as literary reputation. Bloom saw Mailer not as Hemingway but as Carlyle, while Poirier saw in him the potential to match James or Faulkner. And Lennon compared him to Faustus, Proteus, and Falstaff. Any of these may be the case, but perhaps all there is to see is a canary down the coalmine, gasping for air, screeching his dying warnings to others of his kind. Perhaps there is merely a hollow man: battered and cornered—spitting blood while nursing the broken jaw of his lost kingdoms. But reading his work might take us beyond this, to the core of life that cannot be cheated.

Appendix I: Letter to Diana Trilling

August 10, 1960¹

Dear Diana:

Most annoying. I can't find your long letter at this moment I want to write you back, and I know if I devote a half-hour to discovering it, the impulse will pass. Anyway, I think I remember it well enough to answer—it had after all its tacit thesis.

But first, before I forget, let me mention that there was no production of *The Deer Park*. If there had been, of course I would have invited you, but I got caught in rewriting it and the prime weeks went by, and then I decided I really did want the summer to think about it, so it's now probably to be done in the Fall, and you and Lionel will get your engraved [invitations]. Between us, I'm a bit excited about it. Something happened to the play in the last rewrite and it's now free and clear of the book, and the things it says are so different that I feel as if in a way I've written a new novel, perhaps the novel *The Deer Park* should have been to make it undeniable. Since you're nothing if not perverse (I? Perverse? says Diana), it is a mistake of the first category to say that I think the play of *The Deer Park* will come upon the theatre the way *The Naked and the Dead* came upon the war novel. You'll be bound now to dislike it, but I said it anyway because I could not resist the possibilities of this effortless transition to the next paragraph after the galumph a la [Pierre] Bezuhov of the first paragraph to this one.

Yes. You say in effect I thought you were a very good and talented writer, but now I read *The Naked and the Dead* and I realize you could be a great writer if only . . . if only you would stop posturing, if only you would quit that most unrealistic and self-distorted first person and go back to your modest and much more talented third.² And I throw up my hands. Because for years I have been aghast at the peculiar vision of the critic. You, all of you, are forever ascribing powers to us we don't have, and misreading our crippling as our strengths.

¹ Trilling's essay "The Moral Radicalism of Norman Mailer" followed in 1962; I quote from it in several footnotes. Also note that the letter to Truman Capote, cited in Appendix II, Part I, was written the next day.

² 'After the extraordinary triumph of *The Naked and the Dead*, he not only deserted the "naturalism" of his first novel but more and more moved from fiction to nonfiction, and of a polemical sort. And increasingly he has offered the public the myth of the man rather than the work of the writer. When we add to this the nature of his present doctrine and the degree to which he has met the challenge of modernity by disavowing that considerable part of his sense of life which is traditional in favour of the more subversive aspects of it thought, it is scarcely surprising that his career is now shadowed in dubiety.' – Trilling.

Faulkner's long breath, Hemingway's command of the short sentence, Proust's cocoon, Steinbeck's earth. The only one any critic ever got right in his infirmities was [Thomas] Wolfe, and that was because Wolfe gave the show away. Faulkner writes his long sentence because he never really touches what he is about to say and so keeps chasing it; Hemingway writes short because he strangles in a dependent clause; Steinbeck digs into the earth because characters who hold martini glasses make him sweat; Proust spins his wrappings because a fag gets slapped if he says what he thinks. Don't worry—I am not becoming the Westbrook Pegler of world letters—what I work up to saying is that these men, saving Steinbeck, became great writers because of their infirmities, and what separates Hemingway from that every good writer in three who can't be comfortable with a long sentence, is that Hemingway did not tailor his aims to suit his lacks and so become, let us say, a good sports writer, but he took his infirmity and made it a *weltanschauung* like a one-legged man who decides not only to be the world's greatest skier but convinces himself that one leg is better for skiing than two because each leg can betray the other leg, but when there is only one limb the secret is only to develop it to enormous power, cultivate exquisite balance and then ski like a genius because the possibility to betray oneself is no longer there. So with Faulkner. If you are incapable of saying what you mean, then never stop speaking and you will create a furnace of possibilities. If only you dare.³ And Faulkner dared. And so on with Proust, with Joyce (who was as incapable of drama as Lillian [Hellman] was capable of narrative introspection). And so with Stendhal who did not read the Code Napoleon every morning on the throne because he wished to write in a dry style, but on the contrary did his reading to justify the dryness of his style which was dry to the bone after twenty years of failed passions and now juiceless loins; [Henry] James was incapable of measuring the proportions of things (no wonder he admired [Émile] Zola, since Zola knew everything about proportion and nothing about manner) so James created a world in which manner was the proportion of everything including lust, and so became the first writer to anticipate the fall of lust from the last mannerless emotion to the first of the new manners.⁴ I could go on and on. You get the idea by now. A great novelist is

³ Arguably this is exactly what Mailer attempted eleven years later, when he wrote *A Fire on the Moon*.

⁴ From the preface to "Norman Mailer Versus Nine Writers," written for its inclusion in *Cannibals and Christians*: "So let us say the war was between Dreiser and Edith Wharton, Dreiser all strategy, no tactics; and Wharton all tactics. Marvellous tactics they were – a jewel of a writer and stingy as a parson – she needed no strategy. The upper-class writer had all strategy provided him by the logic of his class. Maybe that is why the war never came to decision, or even to conclusion. No upper-class writer went down into the pits to bring back the manner alive of the change going on down there...The Gap in American letters continued. Upper-class writers like John Dos Passos made brave efforts to go down and get the stuff and never quite got it, mainly in Dos Passos's case because they lacked strategy for the depths – manners may be sufficient to delineate the rich but one needs a vision of society to comprehend the poor, and Dos Passos only had revulsion at injustice, which

like a great bullfighter—the day after an heroic faena the bullfight critics say Manolo was superb, it was the quintessential exhibition of calm, never has a matador so dominated a brave bull, whereas Manolo as the other bullfighters know has a physiological infirmity, his face cannot shift its expression and he can perspire only through the skin of his testes. Like any genius he has therefore made “calm” his style since catatonia is the fate from which he fled into the comparative valley of the bullfight, and as the other toreros also know Manolo was saying to himself at the end of yesterday’s heroic faena, “If I pass that stinking rhinoceros once more, he will get my brown on his horn. The time has come to run.” In fact, Manolo doesn’t run, he passes the rhinoceros five more times, and three of the passes are unbelievable even for him, he is a great matador, but his greatness is existential, unwilling—he has not made the aesthetic decision to promulgate a new regime of “calm” in the *corrida*, he has instead taken his infirmity, made it his art, and miracle of creation, the infirmity has become the chalice of the courage itself. He stood his ground, and made his five passes because a long time ago he surrendered his will to the infirmity. The infirmity was more Faustian than himself. And the truth of it all, I think, is that there is no passion a woman can know like the passion a man has to achieve the greatness he senses within himself. When a man loses that passion, as almost all of us do, he becomes comprehensible again, and so despised by women.

What then of our Norman? (If only you dear drear deadbeats would realize that I am just as much the curator of my jewels as any of you—) Our Norman has everything, in modest measure of course, but he is really so promising. His style may well be durable for there is poetry to mine in it, his ideas are bold if distressing, his knowledge of people is hard, his grasp is war-like, his intelligence is not always missing, he has every promise but definition.

And here Diana will say: Oh God, is he going to advance lack of definition as his infirmity? And Norman will. Leave it to Norman to say after all it must be remembered that he is a Jew and that being a major novelist is not a natural activity for a Jew. (Please hear the voice as adenoidal now—the smug loving tone of a young J*w*sh intellectual who was loved by his mother.)⁵ The novel came into existence, he will claim, as the avatar of society at the

is ultimately a manner...lower-class writers like Farrell and Steinbeck described whole seas of the uncharted ocean but their characters did not push from one milieu into another, and so the results were more taxonomic than apocalyptic.’

⁵ From Alfred Kazin’s survey of the post-war Jewish novelists in *Bright Book of Life*: ‘When John Updike brilliantly conceived Henry Bech, who was in everything he did, and especially in what he didn’t do, “the Jew as contemporary American novelist,” Updike was having fun with that once unlikely but now well-known American product, Bellow-Malamud-Roth.’ Incredibly, Kazin neglects that Bech himself, in his opening address to the reader, explicitly claims Mailer as an antecedent. Elsewhere Kazin writes that ‘The “Jewish” identity of Norman Mailer lay precisely in the fact that, as he said in *The Armies of the Night*, that to be a nice

moment society developed roots too subtle for the historian to trace. The novel was the life of its society up from its roots. And for a long time there were no Jewish novelists because the Jews had no roots sufficiently deep to support a hero. Daniel Deronda (“Ech mir a giant,” the other Norman [Podhoretz] would say) was the attempt of a good Christian lady to applaud how our poor cousins live, and in all of the Nineteenth Century is there another Hebrew hero in the novel? No, the major Jewish novelist came in the door after the Second World War, and only in America, what? For good cause. Because the conventional big novel, the novel of manners and roots, no longer had to concern itself with roots. The Twentieth Century had ripped up all the roots, and so the Jew was in his element because he never had his own personality, he never had known the genteel security of relaxing in a habit because all the aspiration of the class, the caste, the cult and the family was artfully deposited in the habit; the Jew was always a bloody schizophrenic, his parlor manners greasy and his aspiration incandescent. “Pass the kugel, Rifke, I want to tell Moishe my new thesis on Schopenhauer.”⁶

But now the world was schizophrenic: H-bombs and P.T.A. committees. The Jew—those who were left—could be the first to swim the divided waters. Need roots? do the research. Understand manners? have a good ear for dialogue. That’s just fruit salad. All you have to do to be a novelist is to be without skin, that epidermal Protestantism of reliable habit, dig the present, there is no meaning but the present. So of course I could do *The Naked and the Dead*. I had no past to protect, no habits to hold on to, no style to defend. My infirmity is that I had no emotional memory (still don’t—a dead love is never deader than with me). I was psychopathically marooned in the present.

Three days later

I was writing the above late at night, and I ran out about the time the style seemed ready to return to *Advertisements for Myself*. It is a pity because something I had to say was in my mind at the moment and I went to bed with a splitting headache as the result, but there was nothing to be done about it—I was too tired to accomplish what I was holding.

Jewish boy was the one role unacceptable to him. By this Mailer meant a rejection not of Jewishness—that would have been bourgeois and out of date—but of the sweetness, the conscious propriety that would have limited his social curiosity, social omnivorousness, his proven ability to play as many parts as possible in his books and through his books. More than any other novelist of this period (he was said to have “sacrificed” his career as a novelist to this) Mailer projected Mailer into the variousness of American life...In a period when some Jews took pride in not being nice—“priests and Jews are civically timid,” thought Kant—Mailer insisted on upsetting all expectations.’

⁶ I urge the reader to pay careful attention to the preceding paragraph; it speaks for itself.

Now I have to go back and reconstruct it. I suppose what I was leading up to was a defense of the way I go at writing, and obviously it was going to depend on *The Jewish Question*. The other Norman said once as I remember that what characterized our generation is that we were all obliged to create our own personalities, by which he meant that none of us could be valid or authentic in the French sense since there was nothing or very little in our roots which was useful to retain, and so our personalities became syntheses and/or borrowings of what we admired in others. We talked about it for a long time because there is a subtle dialectic beneath the process. If you posture, if you take on the trappings of a personality which is not altogether natural for you, the pose or what works in the pose begins to become a bona-fide part of you—you have experience with the pose, victories and defeats, whose product becomes new habit and habit eventually refines itself into character. This is exactly what a child does, but my generation deprived of its sense of succession cannot let go of the brilliant and wasteful techniques of the child. A girl asked me once, “Well, how can I come to terms with my Jewishness,” and I answered in effect that one not only couldn’t but one shouldn’t because then the only answer was to go to Israel or join the local Sisterhood, that the Jew was most interesting precisely when he didn’t try to become a Jew but instead became a mirror of what he admired most in his civilization, that the art of the Jew was to capture and personify the manner of his time more exquisitely than those who were born to it.⁷

All of which is a digression. What I can say directly is this: I wrote *The Naked and the Dead*, I was able to write it because I was one of the first who could dispense comfortably with my roots, my infirmity was my strength. But the success of the book deepened the infirmity (by making me most vulnerable in a hundred little situations for which I was unequipped) in the same way I had before. Hemingway surrendered to his infirmity more naturally—his inability to go beneath a most predetermined surface refined his style and the infirmity nourished him for two decades. Now it is in danger of leaving him fatally old-fashioned in the work he does at present—at least I would suspect so—but the character of his infirmity was nice for his needs over a long period. But mine was the opposite of Hemingway’s. He could not go to his roots because the pain and emotional intensity of such a

⁷ ‘Where the novelist of an earlier day helped us to understand and master a mysterious or recalcitrant environment, the present-day novelist undertakes only to help us define the self in relation to the world that surrounds and threatens to overwhelm it. And this search for self-definition proceeds by sensibility, by the choice of a personal style or stance which will differentiate the self from, or within, its undifferentiated social context...[Mailer] is engrossed in his own grim effort of self-validation. But he conceives society as being quite as actual as the self, and as much to be addressed. It is not so much that he thinks of the modern world as a world of negotiable particulars. But he believes the social totality generates a dialectic between itself and individual; it is therefore not merely to be endured in self-pity, it can be faced up to and changed.’ – Trilling.

search would perhaps have unmanned his mind—I could go toward roots with the cruelty of a child saying, “Grandpa, why is your lower lip so fat?” because I had no roots to respect and no emotion could ambush me on the search. What could ambush me and did was the violence aroused in others by ripping into their secret places; they resented it precisely as they would have resented outrageous bad manners, and indeed from their point of view it was just that.

But you make a mistake (yes, now I’ve found and reread your letter) if you think that my “power ploys . . . stances and dances” are “misplaced and miscalculated as well.” Because so many of them were ridiculous and ill-fitted they gave no doubt an illusion of having been chosen with a foolish detachment, but in fact they were rabid, the desperate and often inadequate hurly-burly of an amateur. But they were necessary.⁸ Necessary to defend my gift and not to defend me because they fatigued me as much as a man with an Italian accent trying to do Hamlet but if I had not gone in for them, the decline in my reputation would have gutted my liver. Remember the first time we met at Lillian’s, and the extreme of what I did? the hostility?⁹ You see your opinion then of me was not all the same as it is now, but my books were the same, and the lack of attention given them by the people I felt should be the first to read them was almost maddening. You can say why? Why be so weak? And I can answer first that that unhappily is the way I am, or I can underline the nice thesis that people without roots receive their first profound excitement about life the moment they acquire a little power, and their desperation is unlike others when they lose it. My stunts of the last five years were inevitable, and I think they succeeded in recapturing a part of the audience which was torn (most unfairly I think) away from me. So I set out on a war to capture attention and to some extent I succeeded, and God knows what I lost, because you blunt your brain by living too hard especially when drugs become the psychic fuel, but it was inevitable, this you must see Diana before you give me pep talks.¹⁰

⁸ One would be forgiven for thinking that he is referring to his stunt at Sonny Liston’s press conference; this lay two years in the future.

⁹ From Lennon’s biography: ‘He was seated next to Diana at the table and turned to her with a comment not recommended for establishing a friendship: “And how about you, smart cunt.” In her memoir, Trilling said, “I am usually addressed with appalling respect: he got my attention. We became good friends.”’

¹⁰ ‘Clearly, this is the chief pitfall Mailer had contrived for himself as a writer—his neglect of the metaphoric character of the literary endeavour. For it is here that his espousal of violence ceases to be a strategy by which we are shorn of the hypocrisies and self-delusions with which we surround our participation in a violent civilisation and becomes so gross an offence against the decency we still cherish both in our personal and collective lives. But if Mailer’s actualisation, even his own conduct, of ideas that, for another writer, would remain simply figures of speech, has had its inevitable effect of nullifying some of the difficult truth with which he is dealing, it may also in the long run protect his radical insights from being so quickly and easily absorbed that we make no use of them...If there has always been missing from Mailer’s writing any true perception of the mysterious circuitous paths by which literature accomplishes its improving work, undoubtedly this is because he has always been occupied with the mysterious circuitous ways in which God performs his work. His moral imagination is the imagination not of art but of theology, theology in action.’ – Trilling.

Besides the activity made its own kind of sense. After *Naked* I could not dispense with manners and roots in my work nor could I fake it any longer—the sense I had of complexity demanded a life which could go out into situations in a world which was now at once exceptionally mannered and extraordinarily without mooring. So my infirmity became my sanction; what was altogether different was that the infirmity of the other writers I mentioned enabled them to find a classic simplicity (classic in the sense of being characteristic in style and consecutive in development)—my infirmity demanded that I give myself up to changing as rapidly as possible, surrendering all hope of style or sequence, and so looking instead for an existential purity—to wit, that at any moment I would be what I would be, and be aware of it, so that my mood would reflect my mood of the present and be true to that rather than to a private aesthetic or a loyalty to the previous work. The answer is not for me to go back to an earlier, simpler, healthier and less self-conscious way of working, but to learn how to strip the fats of unliterary indulgence, save myself for the work (which may still involve certain kinds of stunts) and let the work take care of itself.

I am depressed that I did not finish the letter the other night, because I had much the same things to say but I would have said them more sharply.

Best to you and Lionel,

Norman

Appendix II: “To try to hit the longest ball.”

As this is America, if you publicise a non-existent work enough, it becomes positively palpable.

Gore Vidal, on Truman Capote’s *Answered Prayers*

If, as Richard Poirier contends, one of the characteristics of the ambitious writer is that they will become a student and theoretician of their own work, then theirs is what Mailer called the ‘spooky art’ because its dolorous requirement is that you spend your time in the company and contemplation of dead things: not just the vanished circumstances which summoned forth the creation of previous works (which alone keep those circumstances alive) but also those works whose time simply had not come and, finally, never will. But some novels, though abandoned, are unforgotten and abiding, calcified in all the inviolate potential of their thwarted conception—lithopedia of the mind.

Mailer praised Neil Gaiman’s graphic novel series *The Sandman* (1989-1996) as ‘a comic strip for intellectuals,’ which appeared as a laudatory quote on the hardback edition and helped win the title a widespread readership. Among Gaiman’s many inventive and fantastic conceits one in particular earns that favour—and if Mailer had read as far as the fourth story arc, *Seasons of Mists*, he must have reacted to it with a sad and wistful delight. In the realm of the Lord of Dreams, the titular Sandman, there is a library of ‘unusual books.’ As Lucien, its curator, explains: ‘You’ll find none of them on Earth. In this section, for example, are novels their authors never wrote, or never finished, except in dreams.’ Gaiman and his artists give us one shelf in close-up: *The Man Who Was October*, by G.K. Chesterton; *The Lost Road*, by J.R.R. Tolkien; *The Conscience of Sherlock Holmes*, by Arthur Conan Doyle; *The Return of Edwin Drood*, by Charles Dickens. Perhaps, elsewhere in that section, there is a shelf dedicated to Mailer’s thwarted imaginings; it would contain *The Saint and the Psychopath*, *The Psychology of the Orgy*, *The Book of the First-Born*, *The Boat of Ra*, *Of Modern Times*, and *Harlot’s Grave* as well as other untitled, dreamed-of works.

Robert Lucid, who was one of Mailer’s most prominent critical boosters (and, until his death in 2006, original authorised biographer), called his tendency to plan his writing around grandiose multi-book projects as ‘exercises in imagination-isometrics.’ Perhaps, but the purpose of this appendix is not to speculate nor pass judgement upon Mailer’s many aborted novels—this book remains primarily a study of his creative non-fiction. Rather, my intention

here is to provide the reader with both a firm idea of what the ‘big one’ meant to Mailer at various stages of his career as well as a sense for the rhythms of his working life. The two are entwined, for what emerges starkly from the following narrative is a career marked by interruption. As we shall see, Mailer’s labours on his most ambitious fictional works were continually frustrated by the demand for his other talents, which he could scarcely afford to disoblige. This tension between Mailer as *author* and as jobbing writer comes into view with a surprising poignancy—one which is not tempered but instead heightened by his unmistakably canny sense of his own worth in the latter capacity. It becomes clear that Mailer struggled not only against temperamental and conceptual disadvantages in his quest to write a great novel but also circumstances of his own creation. He not only had a very lucrative reputation to maintain as America’s foremost journalist, he also had pressing financial incentives to burnish his image as such. His fame was a sarcophagus in which the novelist was immured, choked of light and air.

What follows will also furnish the reader with an incomplete but entirely representative image of Mailer’s professional and social network, as well as the vast range of his extra-literary activities. Again: both are linked, and both played their part in sporadically detaining him from what he considered his main work. In this regard this appendix stands as a bookend to the biographical material contained in the introduction, and takes the reader beyond *The Executioner’s Song* and the Jack Henry Abbott incident through the subsequent three decades to Mailer’s death. Harold Bloom compared him to Lord Byron: a man whose work is curiously less than he was, or seemed, or still seems, and ‘an earlier instance of the literary use of celebrity, or of the mastery of polyphonic remarks.’ Mailer might yet assume the same status in popular depictions of his period as Byron and Hemingway have in theirs: an inevitable cameo appearance, a defining salient of the milieu. ‘I think Norman Mailer shot a deer over there,’ runs one joke in the television series *Mad Men*, which achieves its local and historical flavour with such well-judged quips. For better or worse, such a man clearly did more than just write. What’s remarkable is the latitude he was afforded, and the seemingly inexhaustible patience of agents, editors and publishers that gave him the time to be Norman Mailer, as exhilarating and frustrating as it must have been for those in his orbit.

For all that this book has handled him roughly, I must record my debt to J. Michael Lennon, from whose biographical and editorial efforts the following narrative has been extracted. Pretty much all of this appendix derives from *Norman Mailer: A Double Life* and *The Selected Letters of Norman Mailer*; all I have done is pick out the relevant narrative line from the anecdotal heap. The material gathered here provides background to each chapter from the

second onwards. But the reader will remember that Mailer struggled with grand visions as early as *Barbary Shore*, which is to say nothing of the unpublished *A Transit to Narcissus*. She will also notice that *The Armies of the Night* was the only major, mature work of his that wasn't composed while truant from some elaborate literary project.

Part I: The Adventures of Sergius O'Shaughnessy and Marion Faye

Following the failure of *Barbary Shore* Mailer spent the first few months of 1952 struggling against depression and professional frustration. In March he conceived a sequence of eight novels along the lines of Balzac's *La Comédie Humaine*. The cycle would explore the following themes, with a novel dedicated to each: pleasure, business, communism, church, the working-class, crime, homosexuality, and mysticism. Already by April he had written "The Man Who Studied Yoga" (eventually included in *Advertisements for Myself*), which was to serve as a prologue to the series. The first novel was supposed to ensue from the dreams of that story's protagonist, inspired by tales of Louis XV's pleasure garden, where young virgins were debauched by the king. It was called the Deer Park, which Mailer took as the title for the opening entry of his sequence.

In the following November Mailer handed a three-hundred page manuscript to Rinehart & Company. It contained the subtitle (crossed out on the title page) "The Search for the Obscene." At this point he still considered the book the opening to the novel cycle. The text was heavily criticised by John W. Aldridge, who had been brought in by Rinehart as a literary consultant. The experience was chastening—from then on, Mailer kept his novels to himself until they were done. Around the time of his birthday on January 31st of 1953 Mailer was in a slump. On February 5th he wrote to his ex-wife, Beatrice Silverman:

After much thought on The Deer Park and my eight novel scheme, I've about decided to rewrite it pretty thoroughly, making it one novel with many different characters, and with something more to say about Hollywood rather than sex. I find the present draft does not bear up well on several rereadings, and tends to be a little empty. Ah, well. At least I seem to have been writing long enough by now not to feel I must hold and publish every scrap I finish. My intention is to write the new draft without looking at the old, precisely the kind of courage I could never get up on *Barbary*.

He intuited that the novel required an ‘evil genius.’ His imagination was sparked by the trial of Minot “Mickey” Jelke, a twenty-two year old kid from a good family who took up pimping: partly for money, but mostly—and here’s what got Mailer’s attention—for the sheer thrill of it. Jelke provided the inspiration for Marion Faye. Faye, alongside Sergius O’Shaughnessy (*The Deer Park’s* protagonist-narrator), would obsess Mailer until 1967. Despite this thematic boon Mailer struggled with fundamental aspects of novelistic craft. In April he wrote to William Styron, confiding his uncertainty over point of view and the push-and-pull he felt between the first and third persons. He spent the spring and early summer obsessively reworking the opening chapter. From early July he spent ten weeks in Mexico City, where he revised the novel. On September 26th, as he prepared to return to the States, he sent Vance Bourjaily the most extraordinarily revealing letter in which he gave full vent to his creative agony:

The thing about experience and material is something else. Maybe you’re right, probably you’re right—I’ve had the argument with Malaquais many times—but to me the fact remains that the more the experience the better the chance to come up with something fortunate. I don’t even know quite how, but at its best experience can give you ideas for the other things, so that maybe working as a stevedore for a year might help one to write a novel about priests. There’s something somewhere about the idea of proportion, and seeing everything in its place. Besides, one can go after experience consciously, determinedly, and in a funny way not disqualify oneself for writing about the material. I went to Hollywood four years ago because in the back of my mind was the idea that I would write a nice big fat collective novel about the whole works—the idea I suppose with which every young writer goes out. What’s happened is that after several years I am writing a Hollywood book, enormously different from the one I saw a priori, a book where the word Hollywood does not occur once, and where the preoccupation is with other things than with Hollywood itself. It’s also true that some of the best scenes are wholly imaginary and have absolutely no relation to my own experience, but I do believe they come out of a body of experience which enables me to feel proportion.

Between October 1953 and June 1954 he made frequent promises of the novel's imminent completion when he was actually in a continual state of agitated dissatisfaction: problems with the book seemed to spring up in Hydra-headed multiplication from his attempts at improving it. During this period he made the decision to marginalise Sergius as a character so that he could grant himself narrative omniscience for the Eitel-Elena sequence. During this period he made the acquaintance and firm friendship of the psychoanalyst Robert Lindner, author of *Rebel Without a Cause: The Hypoanalysis of a Criminal Psychopath*. Their association lasted until his death at the age of forty-one in 1956 and exerted a huge influence on Mailer's subsequent thought; "The White Negro" and the novel promised in *Advertisements for Myself* grew out of what Mailer learned from Lindner.

As laid out in the second chapter, Mailer handed in the manuscript on around June 10th of 1954, at which point the events described in his essay "The Mind of an Outlaw" begin to unfold. Following the struggles to first find a publisher for *The Deer Park* and then to revise the novel Mailer focused his efforts on *The Village Voice*, which he had co-founded. That fiasco is also unfolded in *Advertisements for Myself*. As his commitments to the magazine wound down in May of 1956 he had the idea for a new short story centred on the O'Shaughnessy character, who by this point had become something of a readily available stand-in for the author. "The Time of Her Time" would eventually be absorbed into his scheme for 'the big novel,' as he began to refer to it. Mailer originally saw it as a standalone piece, and its conception roughly coincides with that of "The White Negro"—what would later take shape as *Advertisements for Myself* was initially a paperback collection intended to house these two new pieces and some of his recent occasional output. The essay would appear in the summer 1957 issue of *Dissent*. On February 1st of 1958 he wrote the following to his friend and confidant, the actor Mickey Knox:

I've been working hard on my novel, although the going has been slow, and so far I've done about fifty pages of very exhausting work in about nine weeks, no great rate, but this book since it will embody an attitude and philosophical viewpoint which is very new is going to take years, and if I can find the style and the structure in one year of hard work I'll be pleased. The funny thing about it is that it's the first serious pornographic novel I know. I just finished writing a twenty page chapter on Sergius O'Shaughnessy in New York trying to screw a nineteen-year-old Jewish babe in such a way that she'll have her first orgasm, and it's interesting I believe, real blow for blow stuff, not hot, but

direct enough in its details to be considered pornographic. I'll probably have to have it printed in green covers and sold in Paris. Anyway, I'll send you a copy once I get it typed up—I think you may find it interesting.

Mailer is describing “The Time of Her Time.” At this point the work-in-progress consisted of this and another section, “Advertisements for Myself on the Way Out: The Prologue to a Long Novel.” The latter was selected by Philip Rahv for publication in *Partisan Review*; both were included in *Advertisements for Myself* as previews of the big novel. Another section, a fragment about Faye being raped in prison and turning up to Sergius's loft after his release, remains unpublished. On January 7th of 1959 he wrote to his Japanese translator, Eiichi Yamanishi:

The new novel, “Advertisements,” will take many years...The book will take all my efforts and must be enormous or else it will fail. Enormous in intention (but also enormous in size—perhaps a thousand pages). Before this, however, there will be my book of collected pieces [*Advertisements for Myself*] which has sixty or seventy pages of new material which have not been printed anywhere else.

As described in the third chapter, further work on the big novel was forestalled by the interest generated by the anthology's other components. Following his work covering the 1960 election for *Esquire* he wrote to Truman Capote on August 11th of that year, praising *In Cold Blood* with ‘I hate you for writing about murder. I thought that was my province.’ After expressing doubts as to the quality of his Kennedy essay he writes ‘Now it seems too late in the summer to make a big push on the novel. Sometimes I realize I'm not really serious enough to become as good a writer as I would like.’

On November 19th of that year Mailer threw a party to announce his bid to run for Mayor of New York. In the early hours of the following morning an argument with his second wife, Adele Morales, ended in a near-fatal assault. From his diary:

Head upstairs and have trouble getting in. Adele mocks me (fag crack)—I rush the door, others try to push me out, I flail, fight, succeed in getting in, Adele looks away in scorn, I hit her, then order others out. Mannix offers resistance, and I rumble with him, am too weak, and Lester bops him. Then go back in.

There is Neddie, Clint, Les, & Adele—Back to the hall with Adele??? We come out, after while she leaves with others. I start to go to sleep, Les comes back, they are over at Humes—glass tale. Humes comes by—I abuse him, drive him away, as he flees, he drops bottle behind him on floor thus stopping my exit.

And from his remarks to Lennon, made near the end of his life:

Well, Adele and I had been getting into bigger and bigger games when I ran for mayor in '60 that got her, it absolutely got her, in a state of suppressed hysteria because she thought it was going to shatter our lives. What does she know about being a mayor, a mayor's wife, what if I got elected? Like, you know, we had our children by then, we had Danielle, we had Betsy. Those were very important events for me in the '50s, Danielle and Betsy being born. And, so, we were getting along very badly, and we getting into a kind of gotcha routine where each of us was doing something that was superior to the other. And so finally I had this big party at which I was going to announce my coming out for mayor, and Adele was going nuts at the party, from my point of view. And, finally, in a rage I took out my penknife and stuck it into her with the idea of, "Here, you think you're tough, I'm tougher." It was madness. I was pretty drunk at the time and probably on pot. The idea was not to do her any damage, just give her a nick or two, you see? Damn it, if I didn't nick her heart. She could have died from it. And, of course, they took her to the emergency hospital, cut her open from the sternum virtually down to below the navel. So for years afterwards, she had this huge scar and she'd sometimes show it at parties.

Mailer stabbed Morales in the back and upper abdomen. The former was a superficial wound, while the latter pierced the pericardium and missed her heart by a fraction of an inch. The next day he announced his candidacy on Mike Wallace's WNTA-TV show and had dinner with Norman Podhoretz before going to the hospital, where he handed himself over to the police. Magistrate Rueben Levy told Mailer, 'Your recent history indicates that you cannot distinguish fiction from reality,' and sentenced him to three weeks under observation

in Bellevue Hospital. ‘The Trouble,’ as Mailer referred to it, engendered a chorus of defence of the New York establishment that lingers as a stain on its collective record.

In the summer of 1962 Mailer wrote the self-interview “The Metaphysics of the Belly”, which he intended to incorporate into the big novel. At this point he was flirting with the titles *The Saint and the Psychopath* and *The Psychology of the Orgy*. Lennon speculates that the question of how either this or two other self-interviews (published in *Cannibals and Christians* and running at 135 pages long) were to fit into the work contributed to its eventual abandonment. At any rate, the process of composing the dialogues led to his conceiving a study of Pablo Picasso. While he even went as far as signing a contract with Macmillan he wouldn’t seriously pursue the project for decades—*Portrait of Picasso as a Young Man* finally appeared in 1995. In the autumn Mailer decamped to a rented house in Bucks County, Pennsylvania to make a big push on the novel. It didn’t go well. As he wrote to Don Carpenter: ‘I always suffer from the same thing you suffer from: to wit, I start a novel and immediately I’m getting all my best ideas on the excursions and departures from it.’ He had never found a way to avoid this, he said, and his only working principle was to ‘let the unconscious have complete dominion.’ By the time Clay Felker asked him to write a piece on Jacqueline Kennedy he was happy to have a financial incentive to set the big novel aside.

The short story “Truth and Being; Nothing and Time: A Broken Fragment from a Long Novel” appeared in *Evergreen Review* in September 1962. By this point Mailer seemed to have completely lost control of the material. Instead of making progress he was “making separate starts” on different versions. One of these would continue the story set in motion by “Advertisements for Myself on the Way Out.” It seems Mailer intended at some point for the novel to alternate between two timelines. As he wrote in his notes:

The novel sits in two periods, the present and the future. Present is O’Shaughnessy in Monroe St., Marion out of jail, Joyce [Dr. Sandy Joyce, Denise Gondelman’s shrink] with Elena, etc. The future is O’Shaughnessy as a TV star, Marion as a millionaire and President-maker, and Joyce as a great intellectual who is dying of cancer.

By early 1963 his third marriage, to Jeanne Campbell, was beginning to deteriorate. Work on the big novel wasn’t going much better. After seven years of fitful labour he could show no better than various seemingly irreconcilable fragments. Occasional work called—*Advertisements for Myself* and his “Big Bite” column for *Esquire* had raised his profile—and

his wallet demanded that he heed it. Norman Mailer was available for interviews, speaking engagements, and seemingly any commission. Throughout the year he lectured at Harvard, the universities of Connecticut, Michigan, Chicago, and Wesleyan University. “An Existential Evening,” a talk at Carnegie Hall on May 31st, sold 1,200 tickets. He wrote for *Playboy* and *Esquire* and was profiled by *Cosmopolitan*. Alimony, child support, and mortgage payments exhausted the royalties from *The Naked and the Dead* and his earnings from these activities; his British and American publishers expected a new novel. But the rest of the year was spent preparing the anthology *The Presidential Papers* and writing a number of ambitious pieces for *Esquire*, including “Norman Mailer Versus Nine Writers: Further Evaluations of the Talent in the Room.” As disclosed in a footnote to the essay when it was published in *Cannibals and Christians*, the big novel was put aside six months afterwards so he could work on *An American Dream*. That novel was serialised in *Esquire* between January and August of 1964. He also covered the July 1964 Republican Convention for the magazine. In October of 1964 he returned to a piece of fiction that he had first begun in 1962, or perhaps even earlier. First referred to as “The Fisher Novel” and then titled *The Book of the First-Born*, it was a completely separate project from the big novel. Lennon describes the extant material:

Like Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, [it] begins with the protagonist Stephen Merrill in utero. Over the next decade, he would occasionally read “First-Born” aloud to friends and family, who found its half-stately, half-mock-heroic descriptions of Merrill’s earliest days—his breach birth delivery (“the contractions of birth came with the panic of convicts who discovered their dynamite is not sufficient to blow the doors”), his circumcision (“an animal wounded wantonly”), and his breast feeding (“the infant’s mouth flew like a hawk to the nipple”)—to be riveting. Barbara remembered her brother reading it to her in Provincetown during the summer of 1963; Carol Stevens, recalled him reading it to her in the early 1970s. Mailer signed a contract with Walter Minton for the novel and received an advance, but never got beyond eighty pages.

Mailer was still working on this fragment in the autumn of 1974, and spoke of returning to it in the early 1980s. In a 2006 interview he disclosed his conception for the piece, as well as the reasons for its failure to materialise. Apparently, the titular *Book of the First-Born* would

be held in the computer system of a sort of generation ship that has left earth far behind in some distant, science-fictional future. Mailer had been planning to fuse this with his short story "The Last Night" (anthologised in *Cannibals and Christians*), but what daunted him was the labour of making the science of the spaceship plausible. At any rate, when Yamanishi wrote to him in December of 1964, asking him if "Truth and Being; Nothing and Time: A Broken Fragment from a Long Novel" was intended as part of the big novel he responded with: 'so many years have gone by, and I have changed so much, that I think the long novel will never be written in its original form.' *An American Dream*, heavily revised after serialisation, appeared in book form in 1965. Throughout the rest of that year and early 1966 other projects began to take hold: the novel that would eventually become *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, the preparation of materials for *Cannibals and Christians*, and the stage adaptation of *The Deer Park*. Seeking to clarify his earlier remarks, he wrote to Yamanishi on June 18th of 1966:

I think I did not make myself clear when I spoke to you of giving up the long novel which is mentioned in *Advertisements for Myself*. It is not that I am giving up that novel in the specific form in which it appeared in *Advertisements*. In other words, I do not know that I will necessarily write a long book about Sergius O'Shaughnessy and Marion Faye, although I'm not certain. But what I've most assuredly not given up is the idea of writing a long novel, a novel which, before I'm done, might perhaps be as long as *Remembrance of Things Past*. It's just the form it will take must now be different and I must write it as separate novels, five, six or seven, which when completed will make a huge structure, because otherwise, with the peculiarities of my economic situation, I would not be able to make enough money to live during the many years it would take to write the book as one single book. Also I begin to despair of the possibility that people will ever again read books the way they would when you were young and I was young. I think when people know a book is 3,000 pages long they are incapable of reading 30 pages and so the demand on the ambitious novelist is more curious than ever. But at any rate do not think that I have given up hope of writing a long novel. Not yet, my friend.

His theatrical adaptation of *The Deer Park* was staged Off-Broadway in 1967. He had first completed a draft of this version in 1957 and rewritten it four times over the following decade. In the introduction to the published play script he had described it as ‘perhaps the dearest work of all my work,’ even more so than the original novel. It was the last time that these characters—Sergius O’Shaughnessy, Marion Faye, Charles Eitel, Elena Esposito—would appear in his work. The play closed on May 21st after 127 performances. Mailer lost sixty-thousand dollars.

Part II: The Filmmaker

At this point we follow Mailer down the peculiar turn that his career took after the theatrical production of *The Deer Park*. During the run of the play he would spend evenings drinking in a Village bar with two of the cast members, Buzz Farbar and Mickey Knox. They riffed on drunken routines and came up with a set of characters. So smitten were they with their own profane wit that they decided to film their improvisations. Mailer stumped \$1,600 towards the costs, and for the price of ten dollars an hour they hired the filmmaker D.A. Pennebaker—then best known for the Bob Dylan documentary *Don’t Look Back*, and who would film *Town Bloody Hall*—who also provided the room in which they shot over four nights in March of 1967. Mailer and his associates play Italian American gangsters who have gone to the mattresses and holed up in an empty apartment. Over the movie’s ninety minute running-time the men curse, joke, and pass the time in unscripted, idle chatter. Mailer’s wife Beverley Bentley and the light heavyweight boxing champion José Torres had cameo roles. It is a bizarre and tedious spectacle. To the degree that the dialogue can be made out through the fuzzy sound design (‘as if *everybody* is talking through a *jock strap*,’ as Mailer himself put it), Mailer emerges badly: a lame and haphazard improviser, and a hog—barely anyone else is allowed to get a word in. Pauline Kael called it ‘the worst movie that I’ve stayed to see all the way through. It’s terrible in ways that are portentous.’

Mailer had already come up with the premise for his next movie, based on his interrogation at the West 100th Street police station following the stabbing of Adele. But Scot Meredith had secured him a \$450,000 advance for a new novel, so he decamped to Provincetown to focus his efforts on *The Book of the First-Born*. Desultory work on the project alternated with the editing of *Wild 90*, and by October Mailer had assembled his cast and crew for *Beyond the Law*. Set over a single night in a police precinct, it was a much more elaborate production

than his first. Pennebaker returned and was joined by Jan Welt and Nicholas Proferes; there were three film crews and working sound equipment. Once again, Mailer was only nominally the director: the entire process was allowed to unfold according to the collective spirit; there was no script. From *A Double Life*:

The lead, played by Mailer, is an Irish American vice squad lieutenant, Francis Xavier Pope, and one camera crew moves with him as he makes his station house rounds on a weekend evening. The other two crews worked simultaneously in other parts of the building, meaning that interrogations going on in one part of the precinct were interrupted by loud interactions in other parts. “The intensity of this process,” Mailer wrote, “camera, actors, and scenes working simultaneously on the same floor (which is about the way matters proceed in a police station) conceivably worked a magic on the actors.” He thought that he had “divined and/or blundered onto the making of the best American movie about the police he had ever seen.” His fundamental idea, which grows out of his existentialism, was that “people who were able to talk themselves in and out of trouble,” if allowed to speak naturally in certain situations, and not required to memorize anything, could turn in unusual performances.

The movie is not without its fleeting pleasures: Rip Torn (who had played Marion Faye on stage in *The Deer Park*) brings an unpredictable sense of danger to his brief role as an intoxicated biker, and George Plimpton acquits himself in a milquetoast walk-on as the Mayor of New York, conducting a surprise inspection. Once again, Mailer’s own performance is a ludicrous spectacle. As Roger Ebert noted in his review: ‘He’s not only convinced that he can act, but that he can play an Irish cop named Francis Xavier Pope and do it with an Irish accent. He can do none of the three.’ Mailer was engaged in the editing of the movie when he was called by Mitch Goodman and invited to participate in the Pentagon Protest. ‘As he was talking,’ he reports of the conversation in *The Armies of the Night*, ‘Mailer began to realise that he had not done any real writing in months – he had been making movies.’ He ultimately spent eight months editing *Beyond the Law*—four times as long as it took to write his first Pulitzer Prize-winner—and lost seventy thousand dollars.

Mailer’s detour into experimental filmmaking reached its bizarre and even bloody climax with *Maidstone*, which was filmed over five days in July of 1968 on Long Island. The idea

for the film came out of the febrile atmosphere of that year: the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy and the attempted murder of Andy Warhol by Valerie Solanas all informed the movie's central premise. The production involved the cinematographers from *Beyond the Law* and a cast of nearly sixty actors: intimates and associates like current wife Beverley Bentley, ex-wife Jeanne Campbell, Buzz Farbar, José Torres, and Robert Lucid appeared alongside cult figures like Hervé Villechaize and Ultra Violet. The main parts were taken by Mailer and Rip Torn.

Maidstone is the hallucinatory story of half-brothers Norman T. Kingsley and Raoul Rey O'Houlihan.¹ Kingsley is a filmmaker lauded as the American Buñuel and 'one of fifty men who America in her bewilderment and profound demoralisation might be contemplating as a notable President.' Raoul is the leader of the Cashbox, the entourage surrounding Kingsley. While Kingsley eyes a bid for the Oval Office he is engaged in making an experimental film in which members of the Cashbox play prostitutes; several frankly uncomfortable scenes are given over to Kingsley's interviewing young actresses to play the brothel's patrons. Paranoia prevails, with threats to Kingsley percolating not only within the Cashbox but also the shadowy organisation PAX-C—Protection Against Assassinations Experiments-Control—which is nominally charged with the candidate's protection. The movie is not only the longest but also the most distinct of Mailer's three experimental movies. The screenplay was published in 1971, along with various essays by Mailer and a profile written by James Toback for *Esquire*:²

There was a fair amount of tension all through the whole shoot and I would say that he was never in control in the way a director is normally in control of a set. First of all, the set was all sprawled out; things were being shot all over the place. People were inventing things at the last minute. So it wasn't subject to any of the normal protections that a director has if in fact he wants to keep control of a set. I don't think Norman minded it at all, I think that was part of the idea. But there was, I would say without sounding too melodramatic about it, there was a danger in the air.

¹ In neither his novels nor his films does Mailer take his place among the great originators of character names. Nothing he came up with sang like, say, Billy Pilgrim, Charles Kinbote, or Von Humboldt Fleischer. Kingsley, it ought to be noted, was his own middle-name.

² James Toback is known for the screenplays for *The Gambler* and *Bugsy*. On October 22nd of 2017 the *Los Angeles Times* reported that thirty-eight women had accused Toback of sexual harassment or assault; since then an additional 357 women had added to the accusations, dating over a forty-year period.

The ending to *Maidstone*, viewed by hundreds of thousands online, has achieved something approaching cult notoriety. During filming Mailer expressed his concern that the material was becalmed; the cameras rolled, the improvisations unfolded, material accumulated without adding up. Between takes, he and Torn speculated that the natural culmination of the plot ought to be the assassination of Kingsley by Raoul. Nothing seemed to come of this. Lennon reports:

The next day, the last day of shooting, Torn struck. Most of the cast and camera crews had departed, and Mailer and Beverly are walking with four of their children, Betsy, Kate, Michael, and Stephen, through a field on Gardiners Island, an actual island owned by the Gardiner family. The children were eight, five, four, and two, respectively. Pennebaker is following them, recording what appears to be a summer idyll. With no warning, Torn, who had been off in the distance, comes running at them, full tilt, with a hammer in his hand. He strikes Mailer in the head twice and blood flows. Beverly screams; Mailer bellows, “You crazy fool cocksucker”; the children cry in terror. Torn-O’Houlihan, still holding the hammer, comes forward and speaks: “You’re supposed to die, Mr. Kingsley. You must die, not Mailer, I don’t want to kill Mailer, but I must kill Kingsley in this picture.” The real and the fictional merge. The two men wrestle and roll on the ground. Mailer bites Torn’s ear. More blood, more screams; Beverly cries like a wolverine. Finally, with her help, the two men are separated, and after mutual recriminations, they part. Mailer tells Torn he is taking the scene out of the film.

Mailer spent the next three years editing the film, and ultimately retained Torn’s intervention as his ending. There is almost no describing the pathetic, surreal antics it captures short of urging readers to seek it out for themselves. Despite the counter-cultural sheen lent by the involvement of Pennebaker and the qualified enthusiasm of film historian Michael Chaiken (who contextualises the efforts as ‘part of a certain conversation that was happening in New York City at that time about direct cinema’ and cautiously proposes comparisons with Warhol’s films) Mailer’s might constitute the most exposed, vulnerable, and egregious salience of his life’s work. They show Mailer the man at his most ludicrous, and the range of roles he essays in the trilogy bespeaks his fundamental discomfort with his

Jewish identity: Italian, Irish, WASP. Nigel Leigh articulates the fairest possible assessment of these efforts:

The failure of Mailer's underground film-making lies in his excessive naivety about the medium, his conviction that cinema vérité techniques can be used as a short cut to producing instant narrative cinema. Almost everything is left to inspiration. So each film collapses, leaving Pennebaker to ghost the finished product. Undoubtedly Mailer is trying for a new kind of realism, something more truthful than mainstream cinema. But what makes his films fail where, say, John Cassavetes's succeed is their lack of artistic control. Cassavetes, unlike Mailer, has a strong instinct for structure, whether drawn from relationships (as in *Husbands or Opening Night*) or genre (*The Killing of a Chinese Bookie, Gloria*). Knowing the value of a script, he only allows improvisation under specific conditions. The same is true of Bertolucci's *Last Tango in Paris*, a film revered by Mailer. Cassavetes and Bertolucci severely limit the role played by inspiration in their inspirational film-making. Mailer, though, has failed to recognize the importance of this. Throwing caution to the wind, his films always become entangled in their own poetic conceptions.

Mailer relished the task of editing the raw material into a coherent narrative, and saw this as contributing to his shift to the 'third person personal', and Lennon takes him at this word: He said the idea came from editing *Wild 90*. Watching the film made him see himself 'as a piece of material, as a piece of yard goods. I'd say: "Where am I going to cut myself?"'

Part III: Egypt and Beyond

Having finished fourth in a field of five candidates in the 1969 New York mayoral election, and with three underground films and a Pulitzer Prize to his name, Mailer had hoped to begin work on another 'big book' in the summer of 1970, but financial pressures led to his entertaining a number of offers, including from his erstwhile nemesis *Time*; he was also struggling to find a distributor for *Maidstone*, and believed that a high profile assignment might help the movie's chances. He eventually accepted Willie Morris's invitation to write about Women's Liberation for *Harper's*, resulting in *The Prisoner of Sex*. By early 1971 his

agent, Scott Meredith, had negotiated a million-dollar contract for a trilogy of novels: a 600,000-word opus which would, in Meredith's announcement, 'encompass the entire history of a human family from ancient times to the world of the future.' Following the completion of *The Prisoner of Sex* and *King of the Hill* he began compiling his research materials on ancient Egypt, which would provide the setting for the trilogy's first book. He managed little writing over the summer, which was taken up with the assembly of the anthology *Existential Errands*. In a letter to Yamanishi he wrote that he 'just lay fallow like an old field. But now I feel the stirrings of literary work. It would be nice if the time has come to begin a long book.' Two books proved particularly inspiring: André Schwarz-Bart's *The Last of the Just* and Will Durant's *The Story of Civilization*. Work on the Egyptian novel began in earnest in early 1972, and would continue over the next ten years. On January 30th he wrote to Lennon:

I am at work on a novel now and when it is done it could, if it is successful, do harm to your thesis, but I don't believe it could wipe it out because I have come to a place where I think it is almost impossible to go on with a novel unless one can transcend the domination of actual events—invariably more extraordinary and interesting than fiction. So if this new novel is good enough, it may serve to underline how hard it is to write a novel today and how journalism when it becomes an existential species of non-fiction can generally be superior to the novel, superior even on metaphysical grounds—but this last I don't dare go near.

As for the war of God and the devil, let's assume that it is no longer a simple combat and each is capable of subtlety in their methods. Then the difficulty in comprehending the authority of the senses is that it often becomes rarified to a point which the flesh simply can't make. So in our most existential moments we can't know if we are saints or demons, or put another way, agents of white or black magic. So the war may yet prove that like all wars it proves nothing. Even if the devil wins it could be that he relied upon power greater than his own, derived from some galaxy whose name we don't even know.

Equally, the Lord could be compromised by some equally major and dubious transaction. Maybe it is part of the pleasure that we must trust the authority of our senses but can never trust them absolutely.

In 1986 Lucid characterised Mailer's instinct as 'following his navigator toward a novel that he himself found bewildering: a novel set so far back in time as to be out of history altogether.' After only five weeks work on the novel had to be put aside while he embarked on a tour of two dozen universities, where he screened *Maidstone* and debated representatives of Women's Lib. Another distraction came in the form of the 1972 presidential election, which Mailer documented in *St. George and the Godfather*. 1973 saw the publication of *Marilyn: A Biography*: a huge but ambivalent success—his biggest since *The Naked and the Dead*. 400,000 hardcover copies were sold; the paperback version sold another 600,000. No other book of Mailer's was so widely reviewed. Throughout the rest of the Seventies progress on the Egyptian novel would be hindered by his work on biographical subjects: Muhammad Ali and George Foreman, Henry Miller, and Gary Gilmore. He would return to Monroe for the quick-job coffee table book, *Of Women and Their Elegance*, in 1982—a year before the publication of *Ancient Evenings*.

At the end of 1973 he announced his New Year's resolution in a *New York Times* survey: 'To work on a novel...just those five words, to work on a novel.' He consulted E.A. Wallis Budge's edition of *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* and was fascinated by the mythology and rituals around death. As Harold Bloom would eventually note of the finished product:

Unfortunately, the great hazards of passing through the various stages and places that lay between the tomb and heaven made this vision of resurrection difficult even for those handfuls of monarchs and great nobles who could afford properly monumental and well-stocked tombs. The *duad* or Land of the Dead swarmed with hideous monsters, and only a proper combination of magical preparation, courage, and plain good fortune was likely to get one through. This is essentially the given material that Mailer appropriates.

Mailer wrote to Poirier in March, saying that he couldn't write at the same pace as he had in the Sixties; he was finding that 'novel writing is hard—I move so cautiously.' This novel was different 'from anything I've done before, in style, matter, stance, nitty gritty. I think you'll love it.' In the spring of 1974 he sat for a *Rolling Stone* interview with Richard Stratton; when the two-part feature ran in the following year it contained his first public comments on the Egyptian novel. He took the opportunity to correct Meredith's earlier remarks: 'Some early scenes in the book may take place in Egypt,' Mailer said, 'but that's not to say that the

book begins there and inches along chronologically.’ The novel’s structure was still very much in flux.

Mailer’s next major project was *The Fight*, which took him to Zaire. As impressive as that book is, its reception was tempered by the abiding news of his million-dollar advance. Amid all the good reviews the notice which struck Mailer most was one of the more critical. Seymour Krim was one of Mailer’s most ardent supporters, but even his favourable review concluded on an ambivalent note: ‘These reportorial books after a while become something of a sham, a waste, a kind of John Barrymore exhibition for the cash no matter how much fine skill goes into the performance.’ Mailer replied, ‘I think it’s legitimate,’ adding that he had ‘mixed feelings’ about the book. ‘Maybe I have ten years left to write,’ he said, ‘maybe I have 20.’ After half a year spent on *The Fight* he couldn’t help wonder: ‘was that right, was it sensible?’

There followed three years of more-or-less dedicated work on the Egyptian novel; the next major detour was *Genius and Lust: A Journey Through the Major Writings of Henry Miller*, which appeared in 1976. He split the \$50,000 advance with Miller. Mailer composed over eighty pages of commentary to go alongside his selections from Miller’s work. Despite wishing to return to the big novel he accepted an assignment to adapt Harry Grey’s novel *The Hoods* into a screenplay for Sergio Leone. Mailer turned in a more than two-hundred page draft; Leone was unimpressed, and went on to make *Once Upon a Time in America* with other screenwriters. In February of 1976 he was awarded the Gold Medal for Literature from the National Arts Club. He wanted his next work to constitute no less of an historical event than *The Rite of Spring* or *Guernica* had. In a letter sent to Miller on May 25th of that year he reported that he had written 130,000 words and had 350,000 to 400,000 to go. The only other piece he composed that spring was the *New York Magazine* essay “A Harlot High and Low,” which explores paranoia, the insinuation of the CIA into the domestic life of the nation, and the mysteries of the Watergate scandal. Even if only in rudimentary and inconclusive form, the themes of *Harlot’s Ghost* are present throughout, visible in premonitory adumbration. By the year’s end Mailer had been spurred on by Saul Bellow’s winning the Nobel Prize for Literature, and his editor at Little, Brown could tell *The New York Times* that he had written more than 175,000 words of his next novel. In a letter to Robert Gorham Davis, an old Harvard instructor, he disclosed that the work would focus on the 19th Dynasty and the pharaoh Ramses IX. His research, however, would lead to his fixation upon Ramses II and his victory in the Battle of Kadesh in 1274 B.C. —an awkward flashback structure would have to bridge the 150 year gap between the two periods.

On March 4th of 1977 Mailer and Larry Schiller signed a contract with Warner Books for a book on Gary Gilmore. Before he decided on *The Executioner's Song* as the title, Mailer had considered using *The Saint and the Psychopath*. Little, Brown were not happy with this development, and had passed on the book. Where was the Egyptian novel? It was put aside while interviews were conducted and the true life novel took form. As he wrote to his aunt Moos on May 6th:

My five marriages, seven children, and increasing debts to the income tax people have me at the point where I have to earn money and earn it fast and earn it all the time, and while that's a deterrent to having as much fun as I'd like to have—it seems the older I get the more interested I become in fun and the less in work—it does keep me working on my long novel, and maybe that's to the good. I have 800 pages of it by now, and am deep in the Twentieth Dynasty of Egypt, about 1130 B.C. Honest, my dears, I don't know how I ever got in so deep and don't know when I'll ever get out. The Egyptians, as you can believe, are a slow moving people, and I'm assuming they moved even more slowly then, so in ten pages of my narrative I'm lucky to go around one bend of the Nile. It's truly a majestically slow book and heaven help me if it's unreadable. My poor publishers. It's the million-dollar book and I don't know whether or not they'll feel blessed when they see it. At any rate, it's years away from completion because I just can't write it fast enough to make a living and don't want to rush it, and so once again I'm deserting this metaphorically speaking three-hundred-pound wife and am rushing off with a slim girl, to wit, I'm doing what I hope is a relatively quick book on Gary Gilmore, who fascinates me. In case his name has slipped away from your memory over these six months, he's the fellow who killed two people, was sentenced to death, and then told the state to hurry up and kill him and fulfill its verdict. If you remember a great deal occurred after that, including a mutual suicide pact with his beloved, and all sorts of hell broke loose in the courts. It could be a very good book if I can put it together properly and keep myself in leash from writing too much.

It wasn't until July of 1980 that he returned to work in earnest on *Ancient Evenings*. He abstained from alcohol for eighteen months; he could afford to decline journalistic

assignments and focus on the big novel. Writing continued even while Mailer attempted to introduce the recently paroled Jack Henry Abbott into New York society. In fact, Mailer was being interviewed by Barbara Probst Solomon in Provincetown on the subject of his long-gestating work when he learned that Abbott had murdered Richard Adan; Solomon reports that Mailer broke down and wept.

The anthology *Pieces and Pontifications* appeared on June 21st of 1982; while it was his first that didn't contain any specially-composed prefatory matter, its assembly still required time spent away from the novel. Mailer also worked sporadically on *Strawhead*, his play about Marilyn Monroe. During that summer Little, Brown pressed him, and he dedicated himself to the effort of writing the last few hundred pages. *Ancient Evenings* was finished by the autumn, and the last galleys were revised in December. The novel received a massive publicity push and the worst reviews of any of his work since the 1950s. That said, it sold well and Little, Brown earned back their advance. Mailer considered the book one of his best, but was dispirited by the poor critical response. Lennon lays out what is known about its imagined sequels:

Mailer intended that "The Boat of Ra," the second novel of his planned trilogy, would begin with the explosion that concludes *Ancient Evenings*. In "The Last Night," his 1963 short story, a lone spaceship is propelled out beyond the sun's gravity by a series of planned nuclear detonations that destroy the earth, sending "a scream of anguish, jubilation, desperation, terror, ecstasy" across the heavens. Aboard are eighty humans and some animals seeking a new home in distant galaxies. Most of the novel, beginning with this story, would take place aboard the ship. Meni will be aboard, reincarnated in one of the survivors of earth, which has been ravaged by corruption, plagues, and wars. Humans may have been "mismated with earth," and "the beauty that first gave speech to our tongues commands us to go out and find another world," one where the power of the word will have primacy. Mailer's short story ends with "a glimpse of the spaceship, a silver minnow of light, streaming into the oceans of mystery, and the darkness beyond." A decade later in the mid-1990s, he and Norris would collaborate on several versions of a screenplay based on this story, the last attempt to salvage something of the "big novel" that he never finished writing.

The final novel of the three, “Of Modern Times,” would introduce a last reincarnation of Menenhetet-Meni, now known as “Norman Mailer.” After the account of his conception and early years (taken from “The Book of the First-Born”), he would grow into the writer who would write *Ancient Evenings*, thus completing the circle. Mailer saw that it would be a vainglorious mistake to lay this out when the first novel was published, to reveal that Menenhetet was a fictional forebear or that Meni would fulfill “the power of the word” aboard the spaceship. He also didn’t know if he could pull it off, and as we now know, he could not.

At any rate, Mailer’s immediate attention was taken up by fulfilling his contractual obligation to provide Little, Brown with a shorter novel. *Tough Guys Don’t Dance* was written in sixty-one days. From Martin Amis’s review:

It is, then, a highly contorted performance, containing much trapped energy. Perhaps *Tough Guys* is simply a brief and lurid vacation after the great girdings and flexings of its predecessor. One admires the ambition of *Ancient Evenings* because that’s all there is to admire. That’s all the book is: 700 pages of ambition. The new book settles for talent rather than genius, and brings homelier pleasures: a natural sensitivity to place and to weather, and an eloquent awareness of the human vicissitudes, the raw edges of even the most ordinary day.

Part IV: A History of America’s Secrets

Dissatisfied with both the long gestation of *Ancient Evenings* and the quality of *Tough Guys Don’t Dance*, Little, Brown broke with Mailer. They had been his publisher for fifteen years and seven books. In August of 1983 he signed a four-novel deal with Random House; by the end of 1985 had four hundred manuscript pages of what he was describing as ‘a spy novel.’ Around the beginning of the following year the writing was put to one side as his duties as President of PEN demanded more of his time. Organising the 48th International PEN Congress was a massive and daunting task; the event was a huge success. In October of 1986 filming began in Provincetown on the film version of *Tough Guys Don’t Dance*, his only

studio production as writer-director. He had five million dollars to play with, and brought the movie in under budget and ahead of schedule. Filming had been an engaging but also relaxing experience. 'Anything's easier than writing,' he told interviewers; writing novels was 'an excruciating activity; when I'm in the middle of one I often feel like a monk in the wrong monastery.' But directing made him feel like a general in 'an ideal war' with no blood. 'It is like a campaign: you eat outside standing up; everybody starts the day having breakfast together; it's a communal exercise. You move to different places every day; the campaign moves here, moves there; it's going to be over in forty-two days. It's like hunting with a camera in Africa.'

He owed Random House 'a million dollars in advance royalties they've already paid me over the last three years for a book which is only half done.' He planned to spend half his time editing the feature film and the rest working on the novel, which he managed throughout 1987. By the summer he was managing ninety pages a month and felt sufficiently emboldened to let it be known that his novel was about the CIA. Random House were unhappy with his rate of progress. The book was a year overdue, and the firm had hoped that he could repeat the feat of quick writing that had produced *Tough Guys Don't Dance* on a more-or-less annual basis. But this book required a huge amount of research and preparation; the novel's final bibliography lists 130 books, which he consulted with assistance from his secretary, Judith McNally. Together they created a timeline of events, spanning 1940 to 1980. They listed the key historical players: CIA counterintelligence specialist Jesus James Angleton, West Berlin Chief of Base William King Harvey, J. Edgar Hoover, E. Howard Hunt, Kim Philby, Allen Dulles, Lee Harvey Oswald, Marilyn Monroe, mobster Sam Giancana, and others. There were five categories as organisational rubrics: Watergate, Cuba, Vietnam, CIA Mind Control, and World Events. Four charts were made up, taped together, and placed by Mailer's desk: the first events noted are the assassination of Leon Trotsky in August of 1940 and the start of the German bombing of London a few weeks later and the last event noted is the signing of the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty II by President Carter in June of 1979. The novel effectively ends after the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962; it continues up to 1966 but essentially peters out after the assassination of Kennedy, which is referred to without being depicted directly

By the end of 1988, after a year of solid work, he had 1,300 pages of manuscript. He kept his occasional output on a tight leash: during that year he wrote a piece on Mike Tyson for *Spin Magazine* and, in a *New York Times* op-ed, an endorsement of Jesse Jackson's bid for the Democratic presidential nomination. Otherwise, all readers got of Mailer were excerpts

from *Harlot's Ghost*—one in *Esquire*, and the other in *Playboy*. But by early 1989 the book, as reported in a letter to William Styron, was in the doldrums. He had been toiling on the Montevideo section of the novel when the *Satanic Verses* controversy erupted, which demanded several months' worth of energy and attention on Mailer's part. In April he wrote to his daughter Kate that he had nearly 1,500 pages; he then put his correspondence on hold for the subsequent half year in an attempt to wrestle with what he called 'a 300-lb greased beast.' By March of the following year, when he took a break to address his backlog of correspondence, the book had only grown by three hundred pages. Once again he invoked Proust as a point of comparison: he wrote to Knox that 'my elephant' will be 'two-thirds as long as "Remembrance of Things Past" and half as good.' A sequel would be necessary to resolve all the narrative and thematic material, to answer the question: is Hugh Montague (codenamed Harlot) dead? Was he a Soviet Mole? Lennon writes:

There is another possibility: Harlot might have gone deeper into the wilderness of mirrors, switching sides and going to Moscow as a fake turncoat, or triple agent. Mailer's provisional plan for the sequel (to be titled "Harlot's Grave") was for Hubbard to find Harlot in Russia. He has gone there, according to his notes, because the general degradation he feels "convince him that his life, reputation, career, and sense of inner status can be redeemed only if he sacrifices himself," exactly how Mailer does not say. But in another note he says, "Watergate operated by Harlot to fuck Nixon since he will make peace with Russians." Harlot, like Angleton, does not trust the Russians, does not want the Cold War to end, and does not want the CIA's power to shrivel. Many of the actions of the CIA's hierarchy are calculated to overestimate Russia's strength. Mailer later publicly criticized President Reagan for such fearmongering.

Mailer missed his extended June 1990 deadline, and Random House gave him until the end of July. He imagined that if he could reach 2,500 pages his publishers would then grant him two years to write the sequel. In mid-December he submitted the manuscript; the next three months were spent in intense collaboration with Random House's Jason Epstein as they worked on the 2,700 page work. Galleys were sent to reviewers in May, and October 2nd of 1991 was set as the publication date. The galleys weighed in at 1,334 pages—Random House eventually added a line to every page to reduce the count to 1,310. With fewer interruptions

than had occurred during the composition of *Ancient Evenings*, he had spent seven years writing *Harlot's Ghost*. It ends with the words 'TO BE CONTINUED.' He spent the next few years doing anything but making good on that promise. He would publish three kinds of biography and put together an anthology of his work. He also produced more political journalism than in any period since 1963 to 1972 as he covered the political campaigns and conventions of 1992 and 1996. The high rate of work suited him, but he remained deeply unhappy with his procrastination on the sequel to *Harlot's Ghost*.

In early 1992 he commenced work on *Portrait of Picasso as a Young Man*, which he planned to finish in six months before turning to *Harlot's Grave*. We recall that as long ago as 1962 he had signed a contract with Macmillan to write a book on Picasso; by September, thirty years later, he had completed the work. The biography, which takes Picasso from his birth to the period of the First World War, is 125,000 words long; Mailer quoted least eight thousand words from John Richardson's authorised biography, and paraphrased a great deal more. Richardson was also published by Random House; an intramural dispute seemed to be brewing when Mailer's attention was diverted by a new lead from Larry Schiller. Schiller had gained access to the newly declassified KGB files on Lee Harvey Oswald's period in Minsk, 1960-1962. Jason Epstein agreed to bankroll the pair's trips to Moscow and Minsk for further research and interviews. The project examining Oswald's connection to the Soviet Union held a multifarious appeal: he and Schiller would be among the first to access 'the virtual Oklahoma land grab' of sealed records. The KGB files could shed light on the Kennedy assassination; insight into the agency's domestic operations, it was hoped, would 'get me beefed up for the second volume of *Harlot's Ghost*.' He kept an open mind as to the book's form—Epstein was only provided with the working title "Oswald's Years in Russia."

Mailer would spend most of the period of September of 1992 to the spring of 1993 in Russia, and celebrated his seventieth birthday in Moscow. Even as the huge *Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery* took shape he convinced himself that he was still working towards *Harlot's Grave*; he planned to make the assassination of Kennedy the opening of that book. By September of 1994 he had completed a manuscript of 1,700 pages; the book was roughly a thousand pages long. Two months later he had it down to 1,400 manuscript pages, which resulted in the published book of 828 pages. It was published on May 12th of the following year, and received some of his best reviews since *The Executioner's Song*. However, like the Picasso book it sold poorly. Despite the best efforts of his new agent, Andrew Wylie, the situation in the summer of 1995 was dire: he owed Random House three million dollars and

the sequel to *Harlot's Ghost*. A new contract with the firm forced him to think about *Harlot's Grave*.

It didn't take long for him to ignore his pledge. Having told no-one but his wife, his personal secretary, and Jason Epstein, he commenced work on a novel about Christ, a retelling of the Gospel narratives in the first person. The work didn't require the same voluminous research as his last two fiction projects; aside from consulting sources like Elaine Pagels's *The Gnostic Gospels* and *The Origin of Satan* he mainly deepened his familiarity with different translations of the Old Testament. He worked steadily through the first half of 1996, and then put it aside during the summer so he could attend the political conventions. *The Gospel According to the Son* was published in 1997, and the urge to dedicate serious effort to *Harlot's Grave* had to compete with the temptation to direct another feature film. Filming on *Ringside*, a boxing movie which had been co-written by his son Michael, had been slated to begin in April of that year when the financial backing suddenly evaporated. Then Michiko Kakutani's *New York Times* review set the tone for the book's notices. She characterised it as 'a sort of novelized "Jesus Christ Superstar" starring Jesus as an ambivalent pop star and guru: a silly, self-important and inadvertently comical book that reads like a combination of "Godspell," Nikos Kazantzakis' "Last Temptation of Christ" and one of those dumbed-down Bible translations, all seasoned with Mr. Mailer's eccentric views on God.' Still, the book was his tenth bestseller—it reached number seven on the list. Notoriously, *The New Republic* made James Wood's excoriation the cover story for that issue: a cartoon of Mailer with a crown of thorns carried the title "He Is Finished." A few months later, Mailer punched the magazine's publisher, Martin Peretz, outside a Provincetown restaurant.

Mailer decided to mark the fiftieth anniversary of *The Naked and the Dead*—May 6th of 1998—with the publication of a career-spanning anthology. Inspired by Gore Vidal's recent *United States: Essays, 1952-1992*, he hoped that *The Time of Our Time* would buy him some grace from Random House while he worked on *Harlot's Grave*. If anyone was still expecting the sequel it was because he had continued to encourage their hopes; during the publicity tour for *The Gospel According to the Son* he repeatedly brought it up without prompt. He worked closely with Lennon and Lucid over the spring and summer of that year, making selections for the anthology and decisions as to their sequencing. It won some of his best latter day reviews and occasioned several warm profiles and retrospectives. And yet, as 1998 drew to a close, he still had yet to write a single word of *Harlot's Grave*.

Part V: Visions of Hitler

He never would. The distraction of inspiration arrived in the form of Ron Rosenbaum's 1998 study, *Explaining Hitler: The Search for the Origins of His Evil*. Mailer was intrigued; 'long after the details had faded from my mind the feeling of the book remained,' he said, and just as he was settling on his plan for the sequel to *Harlot's Ghost*, 'this little muse appeared in an apse of the literary church,' he recalled, 'and wiggled her finger at me.' Until then, 'I was absolutely intrigued with the idea of Montague as a Jungian,' intending to have him surface in Russia with 'some mad notion' of converting the nation to a polity based on Jungian principles. The idea of a novel about Hitler proved overpowering, and 1999 was spent on research. 'There were only a few good books. Just three or four really counted, and none of them of course could do more than satisfy a little bit.' In addition to Rosenbaum's study, Mailer drew heavily on August Kubizek's *The Young Hitler I Knew* and Franz Jetzinger's *Hitler's Youth*. He had found his subject: the childhood of the dictator.

By April of 2000 he had a hundred and fifty typewritten pages. Mailer and Norris Church participated in several dozen performances of a play co-written by George Plimpton: *Zelda, Scott & Ernest*. Plimpton and Norris played the Fitzgeralds, and Mailer took the part of Hemingway. Over eighteen months, they performed the play more than a dozen times. In the summer and fall of 2002, the trio performed it in seven European cities, beginning in Paris and ending in London. Mailer continued work on the novel between performances while also collaborating with Schiller on a teleplay based on the trial of Robert Hanssen, the FBI agent who had passed information to the Soviet and Russian intelligence services between 1979 and 2001. Mailer was paid \$250,000 for the teleplay, which allowed him to keep up with monthly expenses of approximately \$50,000. With the Hitler novel far from finished he decided to placate Random House with a project of Lennon's imagining; from February of 2002 the pair began the work on what eventually became *The Spooky Art: Some Thoughts on Writing*. In the following summer Mailer and Norris joined Gore Vidal to reprise the staged reading of George Bernard Shaw's *Don Juan in Hell* that had been such a success nine years earlier.

These activities only necessitated a few months' furlough from work on the Hitler novel. During the European tour of *Zelda, Scott & Ernest* he and Norris took the time to see Dachau concentration camp, Hitler's Berchtesgaden retreat, and locales in Upper Austria where he had grown up, and where the main action of the novel would take place. In April of 2003 he

wrote that he was still trying to work on a big novel; ‘The worst thing about Bush at times—from my point of view—is how much time he consumes writing about him and his gang.’ Opposition to American foreign policy absorbed much of his energy during that year, which saw the publication of *Why Are We at War?*—a collection of various anti-war speeches and interviews he had given. During the back half of 2003 he and Lennon started taping a series of conversations on Mailer’s theological views, which would continue until the middle of 2005. During this, in 2004, Mailer read excerpts from his work-in-progress at the Institute for Writers at the State University of New York in Albany, and engaged in a Q&A with the audience. Lennon recorded his impressions in his “Mailer Log”:

NM talked about the problems of writing the sequel to *Castle*, the largest being the vast amount of material to be covered. He wants to write about Hitler as a struggling student-artist in Vienna, about his affair with his cousin and her mysterious death, about the events after the 1933 seizure of power when Hitler, and of course the war, the concentration camps and his suicide in the bunker. He offered one possibility for handling all this and more: move the story to Russia and Rasputin for a time to avoid chronicling every major milestone in Hitler’s life. He explained that he thought of doing something like this with Montague in the unwritten sequel to *Harlot’s Ghost*.

He made steady progress on the book throughout 2004 and 2005. Despite not feeling up to travel he needed to bolster his income, and accepted several assignments and engagements. He wrote a number of further pieces on American imperialism and arrogance; three took the form of conversations with his son, John Buffalo. The younger Mailer proposed assembling a book of their joint reflections—*The Big Empty* began taking shape. Mailer *père* also picked up a \$100,000 paycheque for serving as boxing consultant to the motion picture *Cinderella Man* and made a guest appearance on the television series *Gilmore Girls*. But his largest financial windfall came from the Harry Ransom Centre, of the University of Texas at Austin, which bought Mailer’s papers for \$2.5 million. By the spring of 2005 he had completed seven hundred pages of *The Castle in the Forest*, but complained in a letter to John Hemingway (Ernest’s grandson) of his reduced rate of literary production. ‘I used to pride myself on the white heat of my first drafts,’ he said. But now they took more time as he trimmed and polished. ‘I work them over in return for losing that early speed and smoke and flash and

dash. The moment a sentence disappoints me slightly I start looking at what's wrong with it.' In the meantime he continued recording his colloquies with Lennon and John Buffalo.

On September 8th, following sustained entreaties from his family, Mailer underwent heart bypass surgery. *The Big Empty* was scheduled for publication in the following February. Prior to his surgery Mailer reckoned he had completed three quarters of the novel—sufficient for publication—and wrote around of hundred pages towards an 'emergency ending' in the event of his death. From the authorised biography:

He wanted the novel to end shortly after the death of Hitler's father in 1903, with some additional material on Russia and the dislocations there during World War I. He had already written about the 1896 coronation of Czar Nicholas II at some length, which moved the narrative away from the Hitler family for several chapters. This was done in preparation for Rasputin becoming a major figure in the next volume of what he hoped would be a series of three novels. He said that Rasputin had considerable presence and was loved by many for his healing powers.

Whilst convalescing from the successful procedure he learned that the National Book Foundation would award him the 2005 Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters on November 16. His acceptance speech was the first thing he wrote after his recovery; work on the novel was put off until the following year. After numerous editorial meetings he turned in the manuscript in the spring of 2006. After review copies were sent out in October he began to think about a new stage version of *The Deer Park*, which he said he was working on in April of the following year. His last letter was written on August 3rd:

James Jones is one of the few major American novelists to emerge here since the Second World War. He was an immensely talented man and I think it is a splendid idea to endow a chair in his name at Eastern Illinois University. He would have grumbled, but I think it would have given him true pleasure.

His health was failing and he still wanted to begin work on the sequel to *The Castle in the Forest*. 'It's all there,' he said, pointing to his head, 'a helluva novel. Hitler was so human, and I'd love to cook him to a turn.' But Mailer died on November 10th of 2007. *On God: An*

Uncommon Conversation, which had been published the previous month, was his last book, and its final word was ‘experience.’

So one would postulate a society built on the lively concept that God needs us as much as we need God. I would say that premise offers more promise than the ongoing overinflated managerial ethic of corporate capitalism so ready to believe that greed is good and full of God's sanction, and that the free market is Valhalla. Yet how much more life could be gained by the opposed belief that in company (at least some of the time) with the Creator, we can try to do the best of which we are capable, even as we navigate the falls, the rapids, the rocks, and the unforeseen events of our ongoing experience.

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