"IT MIGHT NOT BE UNPLEASANT TO LIVE": The Transitional Short Fiction of Norman Mailer

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THE MID-1950S WERE A DIFFICULT TIME FOR NORMAN MAILER. His second novel *Barbary Shore* had not been well received, one critic calling it "evil-smelling" and another "paceless, tasteless, and graceless" (Rollyson 71). *The Deer Park* had publishing difficulties until Knopf, after a lengthy consideration, ultimately refused because Blanch Knopf was "almost irrationally terrified" of consequences to the publishing house (Lennon, *Life* 179–80). Even though these trials had Mailer considering that his breakout novel *The Naked and the Dead* might have been "an imposture" (*Lipton's* #159), Walter Minton of Putnum's finally agreed to publish *The Deer Park* in 1955, but only after Mailer's dark night of the soul forced him to take a long, critical look at himself and to pick up the mantle of the artist/rebel to transform himself and his work.

Mailer's views at the time were expansive. He longed to be something great, and he knew he had the capacity and desire to prove himself a "major writer," though he was tired of playing "the comic figure" running "the circuit from Rinehart to Putnam" (Mailer, "Outlaw" 89, 88, 87). Even before Minton accepted *The Deer Park*, Mailer had been ready to self-publish the novel "to make a kind of publishing history" and as an act of defiance against the "gentlemen" of the publishing industry that had become too conservative and spineless ("Outlaw" 87). In "Mind of an Outlaw," he writes:

> I was finally open to my anger. I turned within my psyche I can almost believe, for I felt something shift to murder in me. I finally had the simple sense to understand that if I wanted my work to

THE MAILER REVIEW, VOL. 15, NO. 1, FALL 2021. Copyright © 2021. The Norman Mailer Society. Published by The Norman Mailer Society.

> travel further than others, the life of my talent depended on fighting a little more, and looking for help a little less. (90)

Mailer's conviction to become a "psychic outlaw" has its genesis in his struggle to publish *The Deer Park*, but his thoughts were leaning in this direction even before: specifically in his transitional short fiction that acts as a proving ground for ideas he workshopped in *Lipton's Journal* and later published in *Advertisements for Myself*—specifically in "The White Negro." The group of short stories dating from the winter of 1951–52 allowed Mailer a space to explore these new ideas that provide the foundation for his work after the mid-1950s.

Mailer saw many social forces as strong and oppressive toward the individual man, attempting to shape him in its image, and enslaving him in a stagnant and ultimately lifeless existence. The struggle was constant for Mailer, and this idea was reflected in the struggles of his protagonists to assert their individuality. Mailer saw himself, in J. Michael Lennon's words, as a "personality-in-progress" ("JFK" 142), and his work opposed the ubiquitous forces of conformity that attempted to "bury the primitive" and to shape the individual into socially acceptable forms—generic, castrated, benign, and out of touch with something essential. Later in *The Presidential Papers*, Mailer writes: "What is at stake in the twentieth century is . . . the peril that they will extinguish the animal in us" (200). Mailer links this "animal" with the performance of masculinity. For example, in *The Armies of the Night* he writes:

> Onanism and homosexuality were not, to Mailer, light vices—to him it sometimes seemed that much of life and most of society were designed precisely to drive men deep into onanism and homosexuality; one defied such a fate by sweeping up the psychic profit which derived from the existential assertion of yourself-which was a way of saying that nobody was born a man; you earned manhood provided you were good enough, bold enough. (25–26)

Man needs to be brave and resolute in order to defy an emasculating fear, here characterized by self-pleasure and homosexuality, or symbols of effeminacy. The fear of expressing one's individuality keeps men compliant

and deadened functionaries in contemporary America. Only through a vigilant courage could a man truly know himself and perhaps, as he shows in *An American Dream*, earn the respect and love of another:

> I understood that love was not a gift but a vow. Only the brave could live with it for more than a little while. . . . It had always been the same, love was love, one could find it with anyone, one could find it anywhere. It was just that you could never keep it. Not unless you were ready to die for it, dear friend. (165)

In *Dream*, this is the love shared between a man and a woman, Rojack and Cherry, but a similar respect could also be found in groups of men, or between peers, usually through aggression and at least the threat of violence—that "animal" so threatened by the veneer of decorum. This theme is also explicit in *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, as Carl Rollyson observes: "D.J. is like Mailer's other narrators who have identity problems, doubt their maleness, fear the feminine in themselves, and try to strike out on their own. Mailer's narrators, when they succeed, do so by finding an identity in the roles they play" (193). Rollyson suggests a performative quality for a Mailerian identity, one that resists conformity, confronts the unknown with courage, and does it all again the next day.

In *Norman Mailer: A Double Life*, J. Michael Lennon cites Nietzsche's work as an influence on Mailer's ideas, particularly a section called "Live Dangerously" in Walter Kaufmann's *Existentialism from Dostoyevsky to Sartre*: "For, believe me, the secret of the greatest fruitfulness and the greatest enjoyment of existence is: to live dangerously! Build your cities under Vesuvius! Send your ships into uncharted seas! Live at war with your peers and yourselves! Be robbers and conquerors, as long as you cannot be rulers and owners, you lovers of knowledge!" (318). So, Mailer's "honor" could be read as a courage to accept the challenge, to look danger in the face, and try to be ready for whatever comes next. A part of Mailer's concept of American existentialism that he develops in "The White Negro" posits that the outcome is both serious and uncertain—something that his Hipster lives by in his "uncharted journey into the rebellious imperatives of the self" (*AFM* 339). In his essay "Some Dirt in the Talk," Mailer writes "you are in an existential situation when something important and/or unfamiliar is taking place, and you do not know how it is going to turn out" (*EE* 71). Living dangerously, then, de-

fines the protagonist on his own terms—not as other external forces might compel him to be. The existential situation pits the protagonist against external forces, and the outcome of these battles shapes the protagonist's identity in subtle and profound ways.

In order to resist these forces and discover that inner animal, Mailer turned to self-analysis during the winter of 1954–55 in what he called *Lipton's Journal*. In *Lipton's*, Mailer posits a dichotomy of opposition between external regulating forces—which he calls "sociostasis"—and the essence of the individual, which he calls "homeostasis," then "homeodynamism."[1] The former he likens to the forces that regulate social order while the latter he sees as an individual's energy, movement, and creativity in resisting those forces that would homogenize and oppress him—a conscious movement that Mailer claims is "the most healthy act possible at any moment for the soul" (*Lipton's* #223). In biology, homeostasis is the body's internal balance of physical and chemical conditions that help protect against external influences, yet in Mailer's evolving thought, he replaces "stasis" with "dynamism" suggesting that constant movement resists the imposed stasis of society and is a necessary action for realizing the individual (*Lipton's* #245). This dualism comes to represent a major disconnect in the contemporary world and a key struggle for Mailer and his protagonists. In other words, Mailer's work in *Lipton's* propels him to write: "I must trust what my instincts tell me is good rather than what the world says is good" (*Lipton's* #159). Perhaps most germane for Mailer, he opines that "sociostatic repression always allows the writer the least dangerous (to society) expression of his vision" and that the "homeodynamic demands the most" (*Lipton's* #245).

Cannabis, the "tea" from which *Lipton's* gets its name, might have been an essential catalyst in uncovering this primal revelation for Mailer, for "Lipton's . . . destroys the sense of society and opens the soul" (*Lipton's* #63). Smoking tea may have been the integral, taboo action that facilitated the transition from his earlier work to his more mature style beginning with "The White Negro" and *Advertisements for Myself*. It certainly allowed him to conclude that the post-Enlightenment state of society, that associated with reason and the rational, is antithetical to the health and well-being of individuals when reason can be weaponized by the state. In turn, "life fights back by having people become monsters and mystics" and embrace the irrational and the violent, for "it is possible that at this moment in history the irrational expressions of man are more healthy than the rational" (*Lipton's* #282). Mailer's

hipster figuration and his writer-in-opposition persona, which would appear later in "The White Negro" and *Advertisements for Myself* are engendered in *Lipton's*, but they really begin in his short fiction from the winter of 1951–52.

For Mailer, short fiction was not to be taken as seriously as novels—it was a shameful pastime between novels, as he complains in a letter to Mickey Knox: "I've given up temporarily trying to write my damn novel, and have started doing short stories. (Don't spread this around.)" (*Letters* 110). In the "deadest winter of the dead years 1951–52 (*AFM* 186). Mailer would write a handful of short stories as antidote to his troubles in writing *The Deer Park*. However, these stories were written quickly and, he comments, were characterized by "sadness in the prose" that suggested to him that "I had nothing important left to write about, that maybe I was not really a writer—I thought often of becoming a psychoanalyst" (*AFM* 186, 108). Indeed, the short stories coming out of this time were all characterized by beaten protagonists and provide a transition from Mailer's early work to his new voice exemplified by *Advertisements for Myself* and later writing, both fiction and non-fiction. Mailer collects this group of five stories in *Advertisements* under part two: "Middles." It includes three stories about World War II—"The Paper House," "The Language of Men," and "The Dead Gook" (all written by the end of 1951)—and two in the city: "The Notebook" (also at the end of 1951) a scene inspired by an argument with his wife Adele, and "The Man Who Studied Yoga" (April 1952) (Lennon, *Life* 139).[2] In addition to having similar protagonists, these stories are also interested in the psychology of the individual, the external forces that influence one's psyche, and the correct actions a man must take in relation to his environment and community.

This group of five stories concern a central figure and his struggles with his identity vis-à-vis external forces, usually feminine or feminized, that acts as the major antagonistic force against the growth of the protagonist's identity. By living dangerously and confronting existential situations, Mailer's protagonists attempt to define their identities. In *Cannibals and Christians*, Mailer writes: "Masculinity is not something given to you, something you're born with, but something you gain. And you gain it by winning small battles with honor" (201). These small battles are the crucial moments in life that define the experience of Mailer's characters and could be likened to the protagonists' struggles to transcend their oppression. They are risky and dangerous, push

beyond safe boundaries often through sexual and/or violent encounters, and are necessary for continued growth and self-realization.

While Mailer theorizes the liberating power of living dangerously, the protagonists in the stories are all overwhelmed by their situations and ultimately fail in finding their individual identities that would be appropriate and healthy for embracing life. In other words, these protagonists might catch a glimpse of how to act in a genuine, life-affirming way, but are never able to quite understand it or act upon it. They are all frustrated, beaten, and impotent in confronting the overwhelming forces they are up against: they each have the insight to know there is more to life than what they do, as Brody in "The Dead Gook" muses that "it might not be unpleasant to live" (*SFNM* 169),[3] but they lack the courage or fortitude to "live dangerously" and embrace that genuine life. Yet, the therapeutic quality of these stories seems cathartic for Mailer himself: he seems to rid his own psyche of its reluctance to stand defiant and oppose the totalizing forces of sociostasis that can lead toward homeodynamic expressions.

"THE PAPER HOUSE"

Taken from an anecdote told to him by Vance Bourjaily (*AFM* 109), "The Paper House" seems to be an updated and more mature version of "Love Buds," an earlier short story Mailer wrote during his senior year at Harvard in 1942–43 (Lennon & Lennon 335). Both stories concern two friends visiting a whorehouse, but while the love buds are young and unable to see it through, the two soldiers of the later story are regular patrons of a geisha house turned brothel. While the early story's title emphasizes the two boys who are not yet able to relinquish their boyhood, "The Paper House" shifts the emphasis to a geisha house which figuratively stands for the delicate worldview of the protagonist.

"The Paper House" features a battle of the sexes, an appropriate narrative for Mailer's transitional short fiction that will be echoed in his later story "The Time of Her Time." Hayes is the protagonist, and the story is narrated by Nicholson; they work together as cooks on a base in Japan after the war has ended. The men frequent a geisha house and become involved with two women: Hayes with Yuriko and Nicholson with Mimiko. At one point, Hayes drunkenly strikes Yuriko in front of the other geishas and clients, shaming Yuriko and instigating her reprisal.

Hayes is a walking cliché: "often in a savage mood," he is a bitter GI whose wife left him for another man shortly after he joined the army. He now "professed to hate women" and calls them all "tramps" who are only out to get what they want from unsuspecting men (124). He is aggressive, strong, and "certain of his ideas" making him overbearing and boorish, especially when drinking, but he has a softer side, and "like many men who hate women, he knew how to give the impression that he adored them" (125). He has no patience for "bull" and flys into a rage when he thinks someone is trying to manipulate him: "They're all whores, you understand? . . . I know the score. . . . And it drives me nuts when people want to make me swallow bull" (128). His relationship with Yuriko is predictable: idyllic for a while, he feels her getting more attached and their relationship more familiar, so "he indulged his moods" (128). Thinking he has Yuriko wrapped around his finger, he begins abusing her in overt and subtle ways, becoming increasingly surly and finally erupting in a drunken rage: he calls her a "*jōro*" (whore), strikes her, chases her down "like a bull" as she tries to flee, corners her, and rips off most of her kimono as she and the rest of the geishas cry and scream (131). While he regrets his actions the next day and apologizes with a new kimono, the nature of their relationship has irrevocably changed.

Yuriko "was easily the best of the geishas in that house": she was clever, witty, and "acted as [the] leader" of the other geishas (125). She prides herself on being a "first-class geisha" in a country now dominated by American GIs who only "wanted a *jōro*, a common whore" (127). In traditional Japanese culture, geishas, literally "artists," are skilled performers and hosts who entertained wealthy men with dancing, singing, and storytelling (Dalby 59). Though not unknown for a geisha to engage in prostitution, those roles were almost always distinct (Dalby 242). Geishas do not marry, but take a complimentary role alongside that of wives in a man's life: the geisha's domain is romantic and social while the wife's centers around the home and domestic concerns like raising children (Dalby 175–76). If a geisha marries, she ceases to be a geisha, as this would be a "contradiction in terms" (Dalby 177). Thus, Yuriko's desire to marry Hayes seems to be a product of the American influence after the war: becoming a wife would be desirable to living as a *jōro*. And Yuriko is an excellent geisha, one who Hayes remarks "ought to be on the stage" (126), and while she proves to be little more than a diversion for Hayes, she charms Nicholson with her performances.

Ultimately, Yuriko ends up manipulating and shaming Hayes, providing a gratifying end to "The Paper House." After Hayes makes amends for his drunken brutality, Yuriko becomes sullen and removed, though still polite, and she informs Hayes that she must commit *hari-kari* in two weeks because Hayes publicly dishonored her. Hayes and Nicholson are incredulous, and they continue to come back at the prompting of Yuriko, though the house becomes melancholy, as the other geishas weep at the imminent fate of their leader. At first, Hayes suspects she is joking, or "throwing the bull" (133), but she maintains her conviction until Hayes rushes at the last minute to dissuade her: "'Yuriko, you got to stop this. It's crap.'" She and the rest of the geishas begin to laugh at him and Nicholson, echoing "crap-crap" and "the geishas followed . . . shouting insults in English, Japanese and pantomime" (136). Her *coup de grâce* comes when Hayes and Nicholson return after a week, but Yuriko and Mimiko refuse to entertain them. Yuriko turns the tables and gets her revenge, shaming Hayes in public and manipulating him despite his convictions. Yet, even though Hayes initially saw through the act, Yuriko was still able to get the better of him proving her skills as a "first-rate geisha" and exposing Hayes for the cad that he is.

This story seems less about Hayes than it is about Nicholson, the narrator that shares some of Mailer's own qualities. He is obviously a talented writer, and, like Mailer, was a cook in the army during and after the war (Mills 80). The narrator takes a quiet role in the story, placing the emphasis on the Hayes/Yuriko contretemps, and it seems to be this very decision that makes him a failed Mailerian figure. From the outset, Nicholson acknowledges that he did not really like Hayes, and that they only became buddies by chance, since they were cooks on the same shift. Nicholson seems to be fine with Hayes as the alpha, and content to be "the tail to his kite" (123). He goes the way the wind blows, and at one point describes their foursome in milquetoast terms: "It was very pleasant" (126). Nicholson's flaw is his disconnectedness and failure to assert his individuality: he goes along with Hayes and Yuriko, even allowing himself to be coupled with Mimiko though he doesn't find her attractive and describes her as having the "disposition of a draught animal" (126). He is more even-headed than Hayes, often thinks the latter acts imprudently, but is either ineffective in changing Hayes' mind or simply does not use his better judgement. Instead, he tacitly supports his frenemy: Hayes "was one of those big gregarious men who need company and an uncritical ear, and I could furnish both" (123). While educated and

creative, his inaction at crucial moments proves Nicholson to be morally irresponsible and subservient to Hayes' stronger will. The character can garner sympathy, but he only envies Hayes his time with Yuriko and would certainly be incapable of earning her love.

While lying awake in the geisha house one night, Nicholson listens to the sounds of life around him in the paper house, especially Yuriko whom he loved to hear speak. He describes the "paper rooms" through which sounds "flowed without hindrance," especially "Yuriko's voice as it floated, breath-like and soft, through the frail partitions" (128–129). He hears Hayes express his love for Yuriko, envying his "possession of her" and the "tenderness which she gave him so warmly" (126, 129). Nicholson is in the friend zone, and there's little chance he could be otherwise, yet he never tries to climb beyond his position as second-rank buddy. This fact condemns him to share Hayes' fate through his inaction and tacit involvement. He, maybe like the writer in "The Notebook" discussed below, is just an observer of life—perhaps a life he longs to have, but will not because of his inaction. Instead of causing waves, he is content to just maintain the pleasant status quo. Thus, life can be *very pleasant*, but never extraordinary for Nicholson.

The title's significance is taken from this passage, but seems to be more a metaphor for the house that Hayes built. Hayes' boorish persona seems made of paper, in that his outlook and treatment of others ends up providing a faulty foundation—one that is easily toppled. When Nicholson listens to the sounds of the house in the above scene, he hears Hayes express his love to Yuriko and promise to re-enlist for another tour to stay with her. The next morning, Hayes confesses that it was a lie, seemingly for the lie's sake:

> "You lie to a dame. That's my advice to you. You get them in closer and closer, you feed them whatever you want, and the only trick is never to believe it yourself. Do you understand, Nicholson?"
>
> "No, I don't." (129–30)

Yet, Nicholson attempts to justify Hayes' lie, reasoning that Hayes got caught up in the fairy tale of the situation, much like he did, and desired it to continue, but in the reality of the morning, he has come to his senses. He imagines Hayes signing the papers that would extend his service, but the magic of the geisha house cannot combat the "gamut of his nature" (130). In other

words, Hayes had developed real feelings for Yuriko that run contrary to his bitter experience with women. In is mind, he had bought the "bull" she—who he sees as a common whore—was selling, and rather than take the risk of being hurt again, he returns to his misogynistic convictions, falls into a dark mood, and shames Yuriko rather than allowing himself genuine feelings for a *jōro*. Nicholson is complicit, then, in his decision, since he does nothing to dissuade Hayes, or anything but "follow in Hayes's shadow" (125). It's this very performance of toxic masculinity that shames Yuriko that she attacks and topples like a paper house. Even after their public shaming, Hayes and Nicholson come slinking back like puppies, but the fantasy is over.

Hayes' misogynist armor protecting his delicate sensibilities was easily penetrated by Yuriko, a superior opponent. Ironically, had Hayes actually just followed his own advice, he likely would have come out the other side not having been hurt again. His own performance of masculinity that tried to safeguard his emotions has further compounded his psychological injuries. As for Nicholson, "the tail to his kite," the narrator does not seem too put out by the whole experience, as if his own emotional investment was even more shallow than Hayes'. The story he tells indicts him even more: as an emotionally shallow, disconnected functionary, easily directed by stronger men, like Hayes. Even for all his faults, at least Hayes turns out to have the capacity for passion, whereas Nicholson's pleasant life precludes any real passion or risk.

"THE LANGUAGE OF MEN"

In "The Language of Men," Mailer's protagonist Sanford Carter longs to connect with his fellow soldiers, but can't seem to be break out of the role that has been imposed upon him by others. If Nicholson from "The Paper House" shared characteristics of Mailer, "The Language of Men" might be even more autobiographical (Lennon, *Life* 139). Like Nicholson, Carter is an army cook stationed in Japan after the war. Unlike Nicholson, who seems to be biding his time until going home, Carter embraces his job as a cook and tries his best to address the sociostatic forces that confront him: "to please people, to discharge responsibility, to be a man" (146). Carter feels that his service in the army has been unsuccessful, based on his failure at a host of jobs—"whatever responsibility had been handed to him, he had discharged

it miserably, tensely, over-conscientiously," and his inability to earn a promotion (143). He needed to do something "to prove to himself that he was not completely worthless" to the "huge army which had proved to him that he was good at no work, and incapable of succeeding at anything" (142, 143). His frustration comes to a head "and he was close to violent attacks of anger" and he "knew that if he did not find his niche it was possible that he would crack" (143, 144).

He finds unlikely success as a cook—a position that earned his antipathy in the past—but "he found that he liked it" and succeeded in earning that elusive promotion to the mess sergeant. However, he seems, at least subconsciously, to consider the job of a cook emasculating, provoking an internal struggle between his desire to *please* the men that cannot seem to coexist with his desire to be one of the men. Even Mailer's language through the story pokes fun at Carter's insecurities; here it equates his skills with giving birth:

> He was given at first the job of baking the bread for the company, and every other night he worked till early in the morning, kneading and shaping his fifty-pound mix of dough. At two or three he would be done, and for his work there would be the tangible reward of fifty loaves of bread, all fresh from the oven, all clean and smelling of fertile accomplished creativity. He had the rare and therefore intensely satisfying emotion of seeing at the end of an army chore the product of his labor. (144)

Mailer's use of words like "fertile" and "labour" just emphasize Carter's care for his *buns in the oven* and his emotional satisfaction at birthing fifty loaves of bread. Not only is Carter fertile, but he revels in his "accomplished creativity." The kitchen becomes his domain—the place where he feels secure and in control, and where he is most himself. His success as a cook overjoys Carter and allows him to fill that vacuum at least for a while, so that "in general everything was fine" and it became "the happiest period of Carter's life in the army" (145). Again, Mailer's language associates Carter with the domain of the housewife. The kitchen became "his property . . . his domain" and "he came to take pleasure at the very sight of it"; he even begins to take extra effort to personalize breakfast for each soldier according "to their desire," and "he baked like a housewife satisfying her young husband" (145).

However, while the soldiers appreciated it at first, they soon returned to their old ways, and "seemed to eat without tasting the food" and their faces seemed to reflect "the distaste with which he had once stared at cooks" (146).

In short order, Carter seems to realize that the niche he has found is somehow inadequate for fitting in with the rest of the soldiers. While Carter seems incapable of decoding his troubles, Mailer provides clues that suggest his identity has been determined by his need for security and acceptance, perhaps centering around the fact that he "was accustomed to the attention and the protection of women" (146). The influence of women on his personality may be Carter's highest sociostatic hurdle as it seems to have cloistered him from the necessary experiences that would help him build his own (masculine) identity. Even the army added to his impotence by making him a cook—at least at first. This fact, coupled with Carter's desire to please, suggests further that he has been feminized by his experiences and shaped into something other than a man that would be successful in the army and accepted by the other soldiers. At first, when assigned to be a cook, Sanford acts with revulsion, as

> cooks existed for him as a symbol of all that was corrupt, overbearing, stupid, and privileged in army life. The image which came to mind was a fat cook with an enormous sandwich in one hand, and a bottle of beer in the other, sweat pouring down a porcine face, foot on a flour barrel, shouting at the K.P.s, "Hurry up, you men, I ain't got all day." More than once in those two and a half years, driven to exasperation, Carter had been on the verge of throwing his food into a cook's face as he passed on the serving line. His anger often derived from nothing . . . Since life in the army was in most aspects a marriage, this rage over apparently harmless details was not a sign of unbalance. Every soldier found some particular habit of the army spouse impossible to support. (142)

From the outset, Carter equates the cook with an overbearing and castrating figure that exerts a wife-like power over him, driving him into a "rage over apparently harmless details" (142). Interestingly, Carter seems to become a reflection of this cook, the very thing he despises.

While "The Paper House" begins with an observation that the army makes buddies out of unlikely men as chance throws them together, "The Language of Men" uses marriage as a metaphor for army life that makes chance more intimate. If the army is like a marriage, then Carter is most definitely the wife, forced to play a submissive role in the hierarchal organization that by its very nature exists for combat and regards the feminine with disdain. This fact might explain Carter's desire for promotion, as if a higher rank somehow increases his manliness and esteem among the men. When Carter does get some authority in the kitchen, he seems to use it bitterly rather than generously, like other men might.

For example, the climax of the story comes when Carter catches wind of the men's intention to take some oil from the kitchen for a fish fry. Not only is this against the rules, but Carter learns that the men had no intention of inviting him—that he was considered "one of the . . . undesirables" (147). Holding back tears, he attempts to assert his authority by denying them the oil, and when he is confronted, becomes flustered, falling into the role of the unappreciated housewife, even catching himself as he was about to utter a cliché:

> "I'm sick of trying to please you. You think I have to work"—he was about to say, my fingers to the bone—"well, I don't. From now on, you'll see what chow in the army is supposed to be like." He was almost hysterical. (150)

Carter has become what he despises, and when pushed further, he becomes aggressive and tries to fight Hobbs, a man he knows he could not best, but once he

> intended to fight until he was pounded unconscious, advancing the pain and bruises he would collect as collateral for his self-respect. (150)

This aggression may be Carter's most genuine moment as he defends his own honor. This homeodynamic act allows Carter to come out on top and momentarily gain the men's respect, especially Hobbs', yet it is short-lived. Carter again alienates Hobbs by assuming his sociostatic conditioning and attempting to assert his moral superiority in a passive-aggressive way.

During their confrontation, the men accuse Carter of selling surplus supplies on the black market. This practice is apparently ubiquitous among the men, so they all assume that Carter indulges. Carter prides himself on his honesty and is shocked that these men would use that against him. All the same, Carter wonders about the "obscure prejudice which had kept him from selling food for his own profit" (149). Hobbs presses the matter, stating the tacit understanding that selling to the black market is fine, but "a cook ought to give a little food to a G.I. if he wants it" (149). This statement implies that Carter is selfishly disregarding the *esprit de corps* the other men share. Later, after Carter has gained Hobbs' respect out of a willingness to fight, Carter decides that "he wished the friendship to be more intimate," so he, misreading the situation, tries again to tout his honesty: "You know I really never did sell anything on the black market. Not that I'm proud of it, but I just didn't" (152). Hobbs frowns, still suspecting that Carter is lying, perhaps boasting in a way that claims his moral superiority to the other men. The situation snowballs until Carter, in a nervous fit, comes clean about the almost-fight: "I was awful glad I didn't have to fight you" (152). This honest confession was meant to further solidify the friendship, but only succeeds in alienating Hobbs.

At the story's end, Carter laments that "he would never learn the language of men" (153). His realization is one of failure. While his aggression with Hobbs seemed to be an existential situation that Carter could grow from, he falls back into his comfortable, feminized role. His desire for intimacy with other men becomes forced and nervous and contradicts the more relaxed relations between the soldiers. Carter's desire "to prove to himself that he was not completely worthless" comes across as an "excess of eagerness" that shows he "cared too much" to the other men (142). This quality subconsciously makes him more like a woman in the eyes of the men and causes his increased isolation and bitterness.

While Carter himself never understands this unspoken language of men, Corporal Taylor speaks that language naturally and with "the greatest facility" (146). Taylor succeeds effortlessly with the men where Carter fails: he's a detached, natural leader who conveys an easy-going manner that charms men and geishas alike. Taylor even teases Carter about his cooking in a way that the latter interprets as hostile rather than the friendly banter of comrades. If Taylor is the model for the correct language of men, then that language seems somehow implicit and genuine, rather than overt and forced.

Taylor embodies all that Carter desires to be, so "Carter envied him, envied his grace, his charmed indifference; then grew to hate him" (147). Carter takes everything personally, in an extroverted, uptight way that seems the antithesis of the way men should behave. He is proud and arrogant, with a streak of moral superiority that the other soldiers understand implicitly. This pride and honesty, ironically, seem disingenuous to others, as if Carter is trying to be something he's genuinely not—something that somehow makes him appear as less than a man. Carter is so caught up in his neuroses that the end of the story is more like Carter's lament rather than a good faith effort to see his faults. There's no lesson to be learned at the end for Carter who, perhaps like Hayes from "The Paper House," allows pain and bitterness to cloud his capacity for growth.

"THE DEAD GOOK"

The setting of "The Dead Gook" is an island in the Philippines occupied by Japanese and American forces near the end of World War II who "were satisfied to let events pass in the most quiet manner possible" (163, 164). The story concerns an American military patrol led by a group of Filipinos sent on a recovery mission. It turns out, the mission is to find out what happened to a missing Filipino guerrilla and becomes much more than routine. The soldiers on this island are in a sort of limbo, oppressed by the war, the interminable patrols that "went nowhere," tropical diseases, and the heavy equipment on their backs: "It was dreary. There was danger, but it was remote; there was diversion, but it was rare. . . . There were better things to do, but there were certainly worse" (164). While dreary, there was a quotidian regularity to their shared situation that seemed to give them a certain numbness that's necessary to survive the situation while life was put on hold. In other words, the soldiers were seasoned and therefore numb to the fact that the war would likely kill them. This survival technique allows the soldiers to function, but it diminished their thoughts and senses making life "mild and colorless."

The protagonist of "The Dead Gook" is Private Brody—a man oppressed by the reality of the war, but more so by a Dear-John letter he received from his fiancée, and what he sees as a pointless patrol that the "buck sergeant" Lucas agrees to undertake at the request of the island's native Filipinos. As a consequence, an encounter with a dead Filipino soon disrupts the

fog of the everyday for Private Brody and precipitates his existential crisis. "The Dead Gook" distinguishes between the everyday reality of death that a soldier encounters in war and that of an existential awareness of death that Brody has in the story. Brody's crisis comes to a head when he encounters Luiz, the dead Filipino, "who was the first dead man who was completely dead to Brody, and it filled him with fright" (176).

Circumstances align just right in "The Dead Gook" to give Brody a bad day. His somewhat lax sergeant Lucas, "a big relaxed man who spoke slowly and thought slowly" agrees to accompany a group of Filipinos for some unknown purpose, unnecessarily risking the entire squad, thinks Brody, for the undeserving "Gooks" (165). Brody's initial unease begins when the letter breaks the "quiet manner" of the war and reminds "him of how he lived, and that was unbearable"; it "destroyed his armor" and "made Brody wonder who he was, and what it would mean if he would die" (169). Notably, the letter itself is like an invading army from abroad, it shatters the malaise that allows Brody to cope as a soldier at war, and it triggers something in him, making him feel that "it might not be unpleasant to live"—beginning his off day (169). It's as if the mere suggestion of a woman and a domestic life that continued without him outside the daily realities of the war that breaks the necessary "mild and colorless depression," and Brody reacts with rage based on his inability to do anything about his current reality.[4] Suddenly, Brody is confronted with the emptiness of his life and identity in the face of a likely death, and he directs his rage at the easiest targets: "I hate the Gooks" (167). What makes it worse is that Brody sees Lucas' willingness to help the Filipinos as an unnecessary risk to him and the squad for something trivial.

In a sense Brody is a sort of everyman—this rage sooner or later affects "each of them at different times" when "everything he did expressed a generalized hatred toward the most astonishing people and objects" (168). Today it's Brody, but Mailer suggests that these crises are not just individual moments of rage, but are shared by all soldiers—perhaps all people—sooner or later. Poignantly, then, Brody's imminent existential crisis instigated by his encounter with the "completely dead" guerrilla suggests that this sort of feeling, like death, will ultimately affect us all. Maybe, Mailer seems to posit, we can learn something about how to react to our individual crises by seeing how Brody reacts to his.

At one point during their patrol, the squad stops to take a break from from the oppressive heat and humidity of the jungle that inhibits their quick

progress. Their nerves are already on-edge as they approach the part of the jungle known to be occupied by the Japanese. As the men catch their breath, the Filipinos pass back chunks of pineapple. The pineapple, a symbol of wealth and hospitality in the American south, breaks the monotony, causing "blissful satisfaction," but increasing their anxiety on the patrol. Their "stomachs accepted the food with lust," but the relief it offers is temporary, highlighting instead their fatigue and the ominous jungle (171). The symbolic importance of the pineapple can be likened to the latter: an external element that breaks through the disquiet of the everyday, causing the soldiers to see the world in a new way. The pineapple breaks the men out of the oppression of their immediate surroundings and reminds them of a sweeter life left behind. While the unexpected and sweet pineapple offers a treat to the ailing soldiers, it also provides a contrast to their current reality: "the deliciousness of the feast was increased by the situation" (171). Their break is short-lived, but Mailer seems to use the exotic pineapple to represent the possibility of awakening something that sleeps inside the soldiers through new stimuli. Brody's Dear-John letter offers a similar emancipatory potential, but one he does not or cannot see.

Just after the effects of the pineapple have worn off, the squad encounters the goal of their mission: the recovery of Luiz, a missing Filipino man. They find the dead man behind a Japanese machine gun, and Miguel, the Filipino leader, remarks "he brave mahn. He kill three Japanese last month. He come here every night" (172–73). The Japanese machine gun was taken by Luiz, and it becomes a potent symbol for his heroic mettle. Lucas becomes fascinated by the "funny old gun," and the sergeant's calm attitude infuriates Brody all the more: "Everything Lucas did seemed outrageous. Like a man who wishes to strike a woman and frustrates the impulse, Brody now effectively begged the woman to strike him" (174). The "strike" becomes Brody's volunteering to carry the heavy gun back to camp. While Luiz earned the machine gun by taking it from the Japanese, it becomes a heavy burden for Brody and a symbol of his powerlessness. Brody is uncomfortable with the weight of the gun and struggles to carry it; it had a "detestable odor" that smells like everything oppressing Brody: the Japanese, the dead Filipino, his own body, and the dank jungle (175). Brody begins to associate the foul odor with Luiz, the miserable march, and his own current crisis. Poking him in the ribs as he walks, the gun is a constant reminder to Brody of his current situation and his utter incapacity to do anything about it. As he struggles with

the machine gun, he likens the gun to the dead man—the first man that Brody has encountered "who was completely dead" (176). While Brody had seen much death, it had always lacked significance, but now it "filled his pores" and threatened to overwhelm him to the point of crying or screaming. As he walks, he rages silently and nurses a hatred for the Filipinos in general, but begins to feel instead that the dead man carries him. Instead of living, Brody realizes that death directs his life, causing him to rage all the more. Like an animal, Brody snarls at guards who are curious about the machine gun, but then surrenders the "prize" to Lucas when the sergeant claims it, an action significant and obvious in its symbolism.

Brody's impotent rage comes to a head when the squad delivers the Filipino crew and the body of Luiz back to their village, Panazagay. While the soldiers collapse from fatigue, the women and children react to Luiz' body with tears and screams. Miguel explains that Luiz' son was killed by the Japanese and that Luiz went out every night for a month, seemingly for vengeance. This fact prompts Lucas to acknowledge the dead man's bravery: "Well, I guess he was all right" (177). Later, Brody begins to obsess further about Luiz. He recalls the lamentations of Luiz's family and villagers, and he begins to admire the dead Filipino's courage and heroic capacity in attacking the Japanese alone at night: "It seemed impossible; it seemed . . . enormous" (178). Alone that night in the machine gun emplacement, Brody feels uneasy as he considers his life in relation to Luiz's, and he realizes that no one would weep for him if he were to suddenly be killed because

> He had never done a thing in his life which he could consider the least bit exceptional, he could not think of anything to do. He only felt that somehow before he died he must do something. He must be remembered. (179)

However, by the next morning, Brody's crisis had passed. Even though the immediacy of the patrol is mitigated by time and distance, the echoes of the experience continue to haunt Brody. After the war ends, Brody and Lucas get drunk together—an unlikely pair that the war has thrown together, perhaps like Hayes and Nicholson from "The Paper House"—and the former finds himself at the close of the story "weeping for Luiz, weeping as hard as the old women in the bamboo house" did for the dead man, as the crisis has

now passed for Brody and along with it the necessity of his own heroism (188).

Perhaps Brody has accepted his place in life now that the immediacy of death is no longer imminent since the long, dark night of the war has come to an end. Or, maybe this experience might have been a crucial moment that Brody could have used to change the direction of his life, but, like the letter and the pineapple, it was a passing moment of potential quickly covered over by a more comfortable existence. The crisis passes for Brody with the war, and though "it might not be unpleasant to live," it seems that Brody ultimately chooses something less because life would be too terrible for him. Mailer's litotes is an apt trope for Brody: rather than a positive assertion that "life would be pleasant," this anti-hyperbole poignantly assesses the man's weak and beaten personality, something he is never quite able to overcome.

"THE NOTEBOOK"

In "The Notebook," Mailer draws his material from personal experience—in this case a quarrel with his second wife Adele—for this battle-of-the-sexes story (Lennon, *Life* 139). "The Notebook" is a departure from the first three transitional stories, as it does not concern the war and takes place in the city—arguably a more dangerous place for the Mailerian protagonist. The style, too, has evolved, as Mailer experiments with narratorial voice: it's told in a limited omniscient, third-person point-of-view, but implies the narrator is actually the protagonist who has later written a vignette based on an entry in his notebook—the very one that likely ends his relationship with the young lady.

The characters are not named except for "the young lady" and "the writer," suggesting a parable or allegory—maybe something that could have a lesson or moral upon conclusion. "The writer" becomes an identity that the male protagonist plays, contrasted with "the young lady," a socially constructed and less well defined role assumed by the antagonist. Here, the writer is a deliberate role the protagonist attempts to define, but it seems too narrow and disconnected for the young lady's reality.

If the lady is young, it's a safe bet the aspiring writer is too. The implication is that he wants to be a writer and has adopted the mannerisms and behaviors that he thinks a "writer" should practice. His attempt to play a writer in daily life frustrates his girlfriend's desire to simply live. The narrator states

that "The writer was suffering with some dignity," an unusual sentence that implies his assumed "dignity" is causing his current discomfort. His persona has made the writer an observer of life, rather than one who directly lives it. The young lady complains: "I'm sick and tired of you being so superior. . . . You're the coldest man I've ever known" (138).

The writer is not deaf to her complaints, but Mailer employs another litotes: "The writer was actually not unmoved" (138). With this ironic understatement, the narrator implies ambivalence: that the writer "liked this young lady very much" and "did not want to see her unhappy," but that he also silently judges her and critiques the way she constructs her sentences. After she calls him a mummy, he can't help but think her "imagery . . . somewhat uninspired" (138, 139). Another way of interpreting this litotes is that the writer was indeed very much moved by the potential literary situation, but less so by the reality of living through it. Even though he insists "I do love you," she claims in response that "you never feel anything and you make believe that you do" (139). After this comment, the writer gets the idea to record the incident in his notebook, almost employing it as a shield to block her emotions behind his impartiality toward what's going on outside the notebook and his responsibility as "the writer" to record it. This reaction causes further contention, and the young lady attacks: "you're nothing but a notebook" (140). Her observation is an astute one, as the notebook is an integral component of his writer persona, and together they mediate and compartmentalize reality into manageable forms.

However, life does not happen in a notebook. The notebook becomes the medium that separates the writer from the world, and "The Notebook" is how Mailer rids himself of this persona that he could easily embody—and did so for a while. In fact, Mailer kept a similar notebook at Harvard, a "pocket-sized notebook of thirty-odd pages" full of "one-sentence character sketches and two-sentence plot ideas, memorable people, places, and moments, a list of his dates with girls in Brooklyn, with telephone numbers and a letter grade next to each" (Lennon, *Life* 29) that suggests this protagonist is a facet of Mailer himself. While Mailer's early notebooks became a wellspring of ideas for his writing—his mother Fanny gave him his first writing notebook when he was nine (Mills 56), a similar item led to contention with Adele in real life. Yet, while Mailer was able to patch things up with Adele and also got an excellent short story out of it, his "writer" in "The Notebook"

might not be so lucky. In fact, he muses, this might his very way to destroy the relationship, if he so chose.

In a reversal of the young lady's accusation, the notebook replaces the young lady with qualities the writer desires in an intimate relationship: "always faithful, always affectionate" (141). The notebook becomes a symbol for the protagonist's distraction, maybe like a cell phone would be today. It's a medium, as is his writer persona, that comes between him and life: something that he thinks connects him with a more genuine identity, but only ends up increasing his isolation, separating him from his immediate environment and fracturing his concentration. At the same time the writer loves the young lady, he also coldly judges her, as if she's just an object for study and he a detached observer: "When you look at me, you're not really looking at all. I don't exist for you" (139). He is caught between life and the observation of life—or between reality and fantasy, and the latter is winning. The young lady's assessment seems spot on: for the writer, she is a character to be observed, not a person to be known in a genuine sense.

Perhaps this is Mailer's purging of a fake writer's persona—using a short story to expurgate "the writer" who might have been beholden to the sociostatic publishing industry that snubbed *Barbary Shore* and that refuses to publish *The Deer Park*.[5] Mailer the author purges himself of "the writer," a moribund observer of the life that happens around him. The young woman calls him a mummy or something lifeless and desiccated, preserved and buried in a tomb while the years pass. This protagonist, while ambitious and driven, represents an ersatz identity for Mailer—one that does not engage life or live dangerously. Ultimately, "the writer" seems to be fearful of coming out from behind the media and engaging life, costing him potential love.

By the end of the story, the young lady is essentially replaced with the notebook—"a puppy of a playmate" that's predictable and dependable, and even sensual as it "jiggled warmly against his side" (141). Mailer's narrator, "the writer," now fetishizes the notebook, describing it in intimate and suggestive terms. Again, the notebook seems to be a prototypical smart phone, feeding the young man's ego to pretense—in this case "the writer" might be equivalent to an Instagram "influencer" who pretends to live deep, but has only given up a life to shill for likes and commercial conformity. Like the smart phone, the writer's notebook captures what he thinks is the essence of reality, but it only shows a limited perspective, filtered through the notebook and creating his writer persona. If life is to be lived in a genuine way,

"The Notebook" seems to say, one must have the bravery to ditch the safety of the deadening media—here the notebook, the persona, and the sociostatic ideas that created them—in order to see the possibilities the streets offer for living genuinely.

"THE MAN WHO STUDIED YOGA"

Like the writer in "The Notebook," Sam Slovoda, the protagonist of "The Man Who Studied Yoga," might also be a reflection of Mailer's own personality, one that Richard Poirier claims Mailer "might have feared in himself" (43). Written after the other stories considered here, "Yoga" was going to act as a prologue to a multi-volume sequence of novels that would begin with *The Deer Park* and include many of the same and similar characters traveling through time and "through many worlds, through pleasure, business, communism, church, working class, crime, homosexuality and mysticism" (*AFM* 154). The story's domestic action takes place on a Sunday, when Sam and his wife host an impromptu get-together with a group of friends and watch a pornographic film on Sam's projector. The subject of the story is the "suffocation of spirit" to overwhelming sociostatic forces, or what Andrew Gordon calls the "deadening trap of American life, [of] middle-class security and freedom from dread purchased at the price of one's soul" (Dienstrefy 431, Gordon 87).

"The Man Who Studied Yoga" is well established and respected in critical circles. A cautionary tale, "Yoga" illustrates the conformity to sociostatic elements resulting in a "purposeless death" of "anguish and entrapment" (Gordon 87). Hilary Mills calls "Yoga" a "poignant depiction of the Slovodas and their civic-minded friends, locked in conformity and resorting to Freudian psychology for their answers when they truly ache for sexual satisfaction" (142). Likewise, Diana Trilling argues that "Yoga" presents characters who "ache with the sexual longings that are never to be satisfied, and with the frustration of their dreams of themselves" (59). "Yoga" is a story of bad faith, impotence, and ambivalence that depicts the living death of a man who lacks the courage to defy the stifling forces that mire him in a colorless world of inaction.[6] Ultimately, it allows Mailer to exorcise this failed personality by dramatizing the numbing effects of contemporary life, and prompts the reader to identify and resist the forces that might do the same to him or her.[7] Sam longs to assert his creativity and masculinity, but seems

incapable of uncovering his deeply buried aggression and courage that are integral for psychic growth. For Mailer, courage was necessary, along with "distrust of pure reason, faith in the authority of the senses, [and] psychic growth achieved by risk taking" in resisting and overcoming "the greed and corruption of American life, and fear that fascism might be rooting" (Lennon, *Life* 340). Yet, "Yoga" is a tale of failure and a portrait of a man broken by a sociostatic tyranny that he can see but do nothing about: Sam has become a "middle-class archetype for the overwhelming impotence of modern man" who has retreated from the challenges of the "Mailer jungle" and into the safety, security, and comfort of the womb (Gordon 88, 92).

Sam Slovoda (a suggestive name—maybe slovenly or sloppy—is the double-S, sociostasis squared) has retreated from the challenges of the world into a claustrophobic life. He is a middle-aged, "middle-class square, a failed radical, and a failed artist in servitude to a deadening psychoanalytic jargon and to the power of his analyst, Dr. Sergius" (Gordon 33). Nevertheless, he is "better than most," yet "he wishes he were better" (*SFNM* 255). In tone, the beginning of "Yoga," which describes Slovoda feels like Tolstoy's novella *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, especially Tolstoy's description of Ivan's life: "Ivan llych's life had been most simple and most ordinary and therefore most terrible" (1285). Like Carter in "The Language of Men," Sam is aware of his failings, but "he is not fond of himself" and "he seems powerless to change his habits" (255, 260). Unlike Carter and Ivan Ilych, Sam seems to have unrealized potential as an artist, which makes his situation all the more tragic. Sam exists in a limbo of mediocrity, a sort of gray purgatory that makes him like a zombie stumbling through "the flat and familiar dispirit of nearly all days" (257). Sam is haunted by ghosts—who he is, who he was, who he isn't, and who he'll never be. He was the rebel, Communist, and creative, but now he is the neurotic somnambulist who has retreated from the world into middle-class mediocrity. He isn't the better man/husband/father or the man who studies yoga, and he will never be a novelist. His apartment is too hot, while outside the world stagnates in a cold winter—movement is at a minimum, as if any animation might bring anguish and fatigue.

As Robert Solotroff observes, "Sam is in search of a hero" (74) who can lead him out of this predicament—one who is, in Sam's estimation, "a man of action and contemplation, capable of sin, large enough for good, a man immense" (283). Yet, even potential models of escape end in *bathos*: the eponymous man who studies yoga, Cassius O'Shaugnessy, has retreated from

the world and loses control of his body in the shaggy-dog story within the story (Gordon 93). Cassius O'Shaugnessy is related to Sergius O'Shaugnessy, the Hipster narrator of *The Deer Park* and "The Time of Her Time," but ultimately makes the mistake Sam does: he stops engaging with the world and living dangerously. Yoga, here, becomes symbolic of this turn away from life into inner contemplation and stagnation; while it might offer the practitioner a glimpse into his homeodynamic inner life, that is not enough. Mailer suggests that life and one's true self can only be found in the risky ventures of the external world, not in contemplating one's navel. While Sperber's story of O'Shaugnessy's exploits seems as if it might contain some method of escape from the stifling contemporary world, like a shaggy-dog story, it turns these great expectations into anti-climax (Michaels 35). Even Cassius as the prototypical Hipster is a letdown in Sam's world. Likewise, Jerry O'Shaugnessy, the "hero-worker" and member of the Communist party who Sam always admired, has succumbed to drink after losing his position in the party by stealing some funds. Each of the O'Shaugnessys has lost control of his own body to a kind of "shapeless fecal horror" (Gordon 89) that also threatens Sam. He wants to order the chaos but cannot, represented by the great novel he longs to write but remains disorganized and too complex: "One does not know where to begin" (262). His world is constipated, where rage and action are blocked up inside, accruing, and slowly rotting his soul. The clutter and heat of the apartment stifle any movement, keeping Sam in a chaos of disorganization that resists any order he might attempt to bring—particularly in making any progress on his novel. Even the narrator's language betrays Sam's inability to move forward with this constipated sentence: "For a year, he has been giving a day once or twice a month to a bit of thought and a little writing on a novel he hopes to begin sometime" (261).

If the O'Shaugnessys are a heroic dead end, perhaps a model of living dangerously presents itself to Sam after he, Eleanor, and their friends watch *The Evil Act*, a pornographic film brought by Marvin Rossman. The film follows a character named Eleanor (a double of Sam's wife) who is ravished by a couple, Frankie Idell, an echo of Charles Frances Eitel from *The Deer Park*, and his wife Magnolia. The friends watch the film twice, and Sam imagines an orgy commencing with the two other couples,

> Is it possible, Sam wonders, that each of them here, two Rossmans, two Sperbers, two Slovodas, will cast off their clothes

> when the movie is done and perform the orgy which tickles at the heart of their desire? They will not, he knows . . . He will be the first to make jokes.
>
> Sam is right. The movie has made him extraordinarily alive to the limits of them all. While they sit with red faces, eyes bugged, glutting sandwiches of ham, salami, and tongue, he begins the teasing. (275–76)

Rather, they discuss the film like embarrassed, rational people, obfuscating any sort of titillation as they comically consume and wag *tongue* rather than using it in other ways. Instead of a dangerous situation, this has turned into a way for them to dominate and make the danger safe without confronting it—no better than onanism. Unlike the danger of a potential orgy—not sanctioned by social mores—Sam sees their response as retreating into "the womb of middle-class life" (277). Even Sam and Eleanor's real love-making—which they do later while watching the film again—cannot match the film's simulated love making, as Sam is too caught up in analyzing his own sexual inadequacies. He lies insomniac at the story's end feeling his body go numb, an outward manifestation of his inner life.

Sam is the main attraction in this menagerie of mediocrity, but equally as important is the unnamed narrator who is preoccupied with Sam. The story begins with the narrator's ambiguous declaration: "I would introduce myself if it were not useless. The name I had last night will not be the same as the name I have tonight" (255). While the beginning seems to echo the "Call me Ishmael" at the start of *Moby-Dick*, Mailer's narrator, unlike Melville's, does not become a literal participant in the story's actions, but remains a kind of master of ceremonies to the (in)action of the story. The narrator would have acted as a kind of muse in Mailer's ambitious plan for a sequence of novels, but as a stand-alone story, the personality takes on a role almost like Virgil does in Dante's *Inferno*: a tour guide in hell who has intimate knowledge of the landscape and who offers commentary on the damned. The narrator is a disembodied but very present character that chats with and often interjects his own opinions and judgements about Sam, Eleanor, and their friends. He is a participant in the metanarrative, but never engages in the action of the story except as a dream-like figure near its end when he gives Sam some ambiguous advice: "Destroy time, and chaos may be ordered" (285). In Mailer's original plan, Sam would have been inspired and

have dreamed *The Deer Park*, but as a short story, he is abandoned by the narrator to sleep and likely to a life of waking somnambulance, free of both pain and pleasure. The narrator's advice in this stand-alone short story seems almost cruel and mocking—perhaps a way to rid himself of his own Sam-like propensities.[8] Indeed, from the outset, the narrator calls attention to himself, only to deflect attention by shining the spotlight on Sam, as if "Yoga" is *his* story. However, the ambiguity of the story's opening two sentences becomes clear as the narrator keeps interrupting Sam's narrative with his own commentary. If the narrator is considered the protagonist of "Yoga," Sam becomes the antagonist working against the narrator's delicate ontology. The narrator, too, searches for a hero, but first he must escape Sam's world. He is in the process of *becoming*—of attempting to avoid the pitfalls that Sam himself has become mired in. As the story progresses, it becomes evident that Sam is a hopeless case who is well past redemption, but the narrator, while sympathetic with Sam's plight—after all Sam is an aspect of his psyche—he realizes he must escape it. Here, the narrator is most closely aligned with Mailer who, while writing "Yoga," was attempting to "insinuate himself diplomatically into a short-story market which thrived on established decencies" and failing to conform to the decorous literary establishment (Mills 140). As Hilary Mills writes, Mailer knew "he had to return to the novel," and that would mean leaving Sam and his world behind (140).

The story ends with another echo of Melville from "Bartleby the Scrivener": "Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!" (Melville 250). Melville's narrator is also unnamed, but is a direct participant in the story: he is an "elderly" attorney who adds Bartleby to his staff of eccentric clerks. Like Mailer's narrator, Melville's becomes preoccupied with Bartleby and spends most of the story trying to get away from him. Indeed, Bartleby's very presence is a threat to the lawyer and his success, particularly if the narrator's sympathy turned into empathy for the lost scrivener. In fact, Sam might very well be a twentieth-century Bartleby: a ghost-like figure who haunts the world, rather than living in it. He has been abused and broken by relentless external forces that have robbed him of his vitality. Bartleby's "I prefer not to" participate in soul-destroying activities of the business world seems also to apply to Sam. While it remains ambiguous as to Bartleby's understanding of his plight, his choice to disengage from those corrupting forces comes too late—as it may already be too late or impossible for Sam to make any positive changes, even

though he is cognizant of his problems. Yet, while the narrator of "Bartleby" seems to miss the import of Bartleby's pathetic demise and any lesson he could have gleaned from his scrivener, Mailer's narrator has no such difficulties casting off Sam at the story's end with a lament that echoes Melville's narrator's lament: "What a dreary compromise is our life!" (285).

* * *

In book eleven of Homer's *Odyssey*, Odysseus has reached his nadir as a hero: thus far he has failed to get his men home, losing one after another often by indulging his own curiosity and desire. He has just spent a year on Circe's island, and when his men confront him, he turns to despair and depression, symbolized by his journey into the underworld. One of the shades he meets is his mother Antikleia, who sees his doubt and despair and gives him some advice: "You must crave sunlight soon" (192). Similarly, Odysseus learns from Achilles that life is precious, and it's better to be a slave and alive than the king of the dead (Homer 201). In other words: life is *out there*, so one must have the courage to embrace it, because the Sirens, Cyclopses, and Suitors offer crucial existential situations. These dangers are what allow one to grow and make life meaningful. The *Odyssey*, after all, is the epic of survival and life.

The first step for Mailer's journey back to the sunlight is to purge these failed protagonists, each an aspect of himself. These characters miss the mark in some way, choosing safety and comfort above the decisions that would introduce danger into their lives and ultimately allow them to live. Tragically, each catch glimpses of a meaningful life in their homeodynamism, but ultimately lack the courage to confront the forces of sociostasis. The stories reflect a period of difficulty for Mailer, but they were only necessary transitional steps to a more mature writer. Mailer's intellectual and metaphysical growth comes out of this difficult time in his creative life, and these transitional stories articulate the negative insights he theorizes in *Lipton's* and point toward a new period where Mailer finds his hero in fiction and in himself. Indeed, Mailer's Law has its first articulation in *The Deer Park*, published just after this time: "there was that law of life so cruel and so just which demanded that one must grow or else pay more for remaining the same" (294). These stories from the winter of 1951–52 deftly illustrate the deadening effects of a lack of growth, but allowed Mailer to purge the comfortable

propensities within himself as a writer and embrace the courage to risk reinventing himself.

NOTES

1. *Homeo* is "similar to" and *stasis* is "standing still," meaning "staying the same." Knowing Mailer, it makes sense that homeostasis would seem alien to him as a guiding metaphor for an individual who is always changing, so the suffix *dynamism*—force or movement—replaces *stasis* as self-change that's important for life, creativity, and growth. From biology, Homeodynamics is a type of homeostasis that maintains equilibrium in disparate and changing processes. Mailer continues to develop sociostasis and homeodynamism in *Lipton's*, shortening them to "S" and "H" and then later to "Sup" and "er" from the Freudian superego. Mailer's fascination with words and language is a central motif of *Lipton's*, and one he continues to explore in subsequent works.
2. In *The Short Fiction of Norman Mailer* (1967), Mailer groups the former four in part four "Sobrieties, Impieties" and puts "The Notebook" second after "The Paper House." "Yoga" closes *SFNM* under part eight "Clues to Love."
3. All quotations from the primary texts are taken from *The Short Fiction of Norman Mailer* (*SFNM*).
4. Perhaps Brody's rage is an expression of frustration at his inability to face the current situation with courage, and therefore, as Rojack in *An American Dream* asserts, be deserving of love. As Rojack prepares to confront Kelly, he longs to run back to Cherry's bed, the most sane place he can think of, but instead he has a duty to fulfill: "No, if one wished to be a lover, one could not find one's sanity in another. That was the iron law of romance: one took the vow to be brave" (203). In this sense, Brody is not even aware of the real issue.
5. I'm reminded of "Axolotl," a 1967 story by Julio Cortázar, where the narrator becomes obsessed with the ghostly amphibians in a Paris zoo, and he begins to project himself into their tank until he becomes an axolotl. One reading of this story is that the narrator doesn't literally become an axolotl, but becomes the "Axolotl"—the story—allowing the author to escape his unhealthy obsession. Cortázar's story borders on the surreal and the nightmarish, unlike Mailer's, but Mailer might be suggesting a similar outcome. In other words, the author is about to rid himself of an obsession by giving it a life on the page.
6. See Busch (1973), Rollyson (1991), and Poirier (1972).
7. See Castronovo (2014), Solotaroff (1973), and Bufithis (1978).
8. I. Lloyd Michaels sees the narrator's advice as evidence that "Yoga" is also a shaggy-dog story and that the narrator, too, has become like Sam in employing jargon in language that is only meaningful to himself (38). However, Robert Solotaroff demystifies the narrator's cryptic remark by equating the destruction of time with growth: in "Advertisements for Myself on the Way Out," Mailer suggests clock-time leads toward death; growth-time to life (75). In this story written in 1958, Mailer employs a similar narrator to "Yoga": a disembodied and creative potential who is ready to attack the world—one who can "grow if one has enough courage to act out one's forbidden desires" (Solotaroff 75). Jargon, simulated sex, psychoanalysis and the other representa-

tions of sociostasis are components of clock-time and only lead toward death. Sam lacks the courage to act—the minutes of his life marked by clock-time, but the narrator seems to find a way out.

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