SEEDS OF PROMISE:

Norman Mailer's Early Short Fiction

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> Life is not a problem to be solved, but a reality to be experienced.
> —Søren Kierkegaard

KIERKEGAARD'S ADMONITION HAS RELEVANCE, I believe, not only to Mailer's early fiction but also to his broad corpus of mature fiction and non-fiction. Mailer explores "reality" and readers, in turn, navigate Mailer's exploration. This cycle of interpretation has influenced my reading of his early short fiction and it is this infrastructure of analysis—experiencing reality—that informs my study of three early short stories: "Love-Buds," "La Petite Bourgeoise," and "The Blood of the Blunt."[1] My analysis is an inductive exploration, rather than a deductive explanation, of Mailer's fictive strategies and motifs. Hopefully, this notational approach will encourage further investigation into Mailer's prescient early work.

The titles of these stories reveal Mailer's interest in word play early on,[2] and they lend themselves to a range of literal interpretations, not an insignificant issue if we think of titles as strategic synecdoches for a work as a whole and, with an open mind, we may then be better prepared for the complexities and ambiguities that inform these narratives. "Love-Buds" may represent two buddies in pursuit of love/sex for the first time or it may suggest that male devirgination is inherently the essential "budding" of a natural growth process. And there are other referential possibilities, of course. Explicitly metaphoric titles sweeten narratives because they enrich interpretive resonance.

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There are undoubtedly many motifs running through Mailer's early, yet not unsophisticated, fiction. As a young writer, he was clearly interested in topics such as rights of passage, coming of age, and epiphanic experience, and these themes find expression in his early work. Further, Mailer clearly employs some similar compositional techniques in his early and late short fiction and there are reasonable inferences to be drawn from Mailer's personal life, as J. Michael Lennon has observed on the spectrum of his subject matter: "Mailer's work during the next several years (1959-63) ranged across the spectrum from the polemical to the personal, often cutting close to the marrow of his private experience" (171). One of Mailer's professional concerns includes the logistics of narration and the stories examined here reveal a diversity of narrative techniques and strategies. No two narrators follow a pattern of narrative exposition identical to other narrators and Mailer's technical abilities and interests illustrate his intriguing interest in mechanical and thematic dimensions of prose fiction. And, we are reminded, Mailer continued to learn from his craft as he constantly adapted to new contexts and creative challenges. As Lennon notes, "Unlike the artist who paints the landscape before him, Mailer 'paints' us a mirror that reveals both object and subject. Mailer recognizes the impossibility of ever knowing absolutely the up-to-the-minute-self, but he believes a perspective on a recent self is possible, and this self in turn can reveal its successor" (179). This talent served Mailer well in the early stage of his career.

Yet interpreting Mailer's early fiction is a challenging task because of the composing and revision uncertainties. Consequently, my approach is to consider them simply as generic "early" fiction. There are exceptions, of course, in which we do know the dates of composition, particularly those stories that were written before Mailer turned twelve. However, the texts that I examine are identified in the archives as circa 1951, which implies that 1951 is the year that has been determined to be time of final storage assembly, although some of the stories may well have been written several years earlier when Mailer was a student at Harvard. Further, some stories may have been edited before or after being assigned the time frame of 1951, and others may not have been edited beyond their time of original composition. Hence some caution is in order for all readers, not the least of which would relate to my interpretations, and I am keenly aware of the importance of compositional provenance.

LOVE-BUDS

Norman Mailer began writing fiction at a very early age, including three short stories composed when he was quite young: "Adventures of Bob and Paul" (age eight) and "The Martian Invasion" and "The Collision" (age 10). The early fiction foreshadows many of the elements of Mailer's later powerful prose fiction, including motifs, grammar, rhetoric, and various stylistic issues. In Mailer's work there appear to be connections to other seminal Modernist writers, especially James Joyce, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Ernest Hemingway, although my investigation here is not to trace, in a detailed manner, the direct influence of major writers that we know Mailer had read. What I hope to explore in this preliminary essay is a recognition of some important literary moments and movements in the early Mailer.

A common thread in some of Mailer's early fiction is the manner in which characters interpret—the how of interpretation—within evolving circumstances and, most important, the modes by which they act upon their interpretations, which sometimes lead to self-insight and awareness of others, or what is traditionally considered an epiphanic experience. My exploration of Mailer's fictive treatment of insight cannot be formulated into a detailed, unambiguous typology, but his epiphanic representations are informative, I believe, in providing insight into his thematic organization and purposes, following a long tradition of interest in epiphany. In the ancient Greek tradition there is an extended history of the importance of epiphany (ἐπιφάνεια), often dating back to its connection to Greek gods and to miracle stories and knowledge:

> It [epiphany) is also employed when identification of an individual god is precarious, for instance in the case of an epiphany or vision, or as a comprehensive reference to any inarticulate, anonymous divine operator. . . . From the 4th century (BCE) onwards there is a rapid increase in miracle-stories, and the connection withepiphany receives ever more emphasis. Under the title *Epiphaneiai* collections of miracles abounded, the term ἐπιφάνεια signifying both the appearance and the miraculous deeds of the god. (*Oxford Classical Dictionary*, "Miracles")[3]

"Love-Buds" is a relatively simple story, chronicling a coming-of-age adventure of two seventeen-year-old boys, who are average in many respects,

including their physical descriptions and names: "They were not big boys, they were somewhat small even for seventeen, one short and inclined to be fat, one short and rather thin, and they were named respectively Harold and Lester; their nicknames, Al and Eppy" (17). As typical teenagers, their lives are dominated by sexual obsessions and they routinely lie to each other about their randiness. Nothing unusual here and this tale is about their entrée into adulthood. The youths are described generically before they are assigned identity by name, which is not an atypical Mailerian technique and, interestingly, runs counter to F. Scott Fitzgerald's writerly counsel: "Begin with a type and then move to an individual."[4] I see a pattern in Mailer's early fiction that would seem to resist the wisdom of individualizing characters from the very beginning. The stories analyzed here begin with—and emphasize—generic types.

Mailer creates sexual (and sensual) context early in the story in recounting how it is a natural ritual for first-year college boys to visit brothels as a rite of passage that christens them into men. Al and Eppy become obsessed with obtaining manhood as they make plans to erase their virginity identity. The main challenge for the adventuresome fledglings is that the nearest brothel is in Scranton, one hundred and twenty-five miles away. Since they are carless, they are forced to hitch-hike, under the guise of visiting a friend, since they knew that their parents would never consent to a sex trip. Everything is well organized in advance, including a plan to "each carry five dollars." They would appear as "tough guys," clad in "tee-shirts and dungarees so that no hoboes on the way would dare to rob them" (18). And they will be well fortified against starvation by carrying "four apples, and a pound bar of chocolate" (18). What could possibly go wrong? The schedule was meticulously planned, allowing two days for getting there and two days to return. Contingency plans were well crafted: "If they ran out of money they would sleep in a farmer's barn, or else they would go to the police station of whatever town they found themselves in, and ask the police to allow them to sleep in the jail for the night" (18). Their logistical planning is scrupulous.

The strategic narrative action is, of course, a carefully calculated sexual encounter. We are told that the young hunters are punctilious in the selection of perfect mates: "They would be very careful and deliberate in their choice. Al was going to select a Spanish girl because Spanish girls were passionate, and Eppy was going to find a cuddly plump little girl with red hair" (18). So, early one summer morning at 8:00 am, the quixotic journey begins,

although not without some complications: "they set out upon the road, two hours late in humiliating concession to their mothers' demand that they begin with a good night's sleep. Loaded with advice, admonitions, and worried sighs, they marched out down the highway, each of them carrying the beach bag for five minutes." (18). The boys soon come to realize, much to their dismay, that ridding oneself of virginity is not a trifling matter and a successful game plan requires painstaking attention to detail. Mailer's attention to precise diction here warrants attention, as he intertwines uncommon, formal terms for colloquial expression. For example, the narrator describes the mechanics of their trip: "The bag was hardly heavy, but they had agreed in advance that the lightest bundle could become onerous if ported for too long, and, at all costs, they must conserve their strength"(18). "Ported" is an unusually cultured, formal verb and the functional vocabularies of Al and Eppy would probably not equivocate "port" with "carry." This choice of diction suggests the narrator's interest in introducing readers to a different sensibility in play, which emphasizes the seriousness of the occasion. We are entangled in more than a transcription of the boys' thinking. The narrator is with them—yet is also superior to them—in verbal sophistication.

Although it takes ten rides for the boys to hitch-hike to their destination, all is well by arrival and they are even ahead of schedule. The tireless tyros are energized as they patrol the streets in quiet confidence, "having been told that anyone in Scranton could inform them where the houses of prostitution were to be found" (19). Shortly after their arrival, they locate a cheap "rooming-house" and then they roam the streets, killing time. In their naivete, they do not realize that brothels are also open during the day. In a scene revealing the narrator's sense of humor, Al and Eppy approach a milkman for sex directions and he responds with a logical, yet unfriendly, question: "Why do you want to go there?"(19). The milkman, clearly a man of the streets, gives the boys some straight talk: "Listen," said the milkman, grasping him (Eppy) by the arm, "just pick up a couple of girls. Any girls. Just pick them up on the street" (19). So, the inexperienced boys are working from "rumor knowledge" and the street-smart milkman speaks from common sense and practical experience: *any girls will do*. This scene is obviously steeped in sarcastic irony and reminds us of Mailer's comment, "The mark of good prose writing is that you never use an adjective without backing it with your personal

irony" (Qtd. in Schumaker, 165). Mailer's deft, ironic touch is ubiquitous in his early fiction.

The hard, hot facts of the street traumatize Al and Eppy and no advice could have been more depressing. They had spent the last chapter of their seventeen years struggling to stir up enough courage for sexual adventure and the thought of accomplishing this goal in a strange city was beyond their ken. Chastened, dejected, convinced of failure, and certain that the trip would be without any impediments they move slowly down the street. The young warriors, dispirited and in heat, are clueless in their search for adventure.

As nightfall creeps in, the boys reenergize their courage and, once again, seek advice from an apparent good source—a counterman in a cheap lunch-wagon, who is more helpful than the milkman. He counsels the boys "to go to the center of the city, and there in an alley behind a building he named, they would discover any number of establishments" (19). Success at last! Eppy and Al dutifully follow the instructions, winding up in an alley that is perfect—"it looked ordinary enough" (19–20). We are told that the boys are stunned by a raft of sensual activity:

> Women seemed to appear in every ground floor window; calls were hissed at them, and purred, and shrieked, and murmured. They had a dim impression of partially dressed women at every window and in the aperture of each half-opened door. Fingernails beat upon glass; perfume, evil and thrilling, seemed to flood the alley. Their hearts responded like fire engines, clanging a siren inside the body of the fat little boy and the thin little boy. (20)

This highly charged environment, whether real or imagined, unleashes full throated passion in the sexually charged neophytes and catalyzes their commitment to securing manhood. Yet the passage emphasizes the sexual tension of the scene and raises a strategic interpretive issue. The stakes are as high for the reader as for the boys because we do not know the reliability of what the narrator is recounting. The "facts" of the episode are unclear, especially the possible differences between imagined projections in the minds of the sex searchers and their actual experiences on the street.

In a powerful passage of "silence" or "pause" in the narrator's exposition, readers are forced to imagine what has happened in this (mis)adventure.[5] Have Al and Eppy been deflowered? As the boys egress from the alley, Al is reduced to one word in summarizing his experience: "Wow." Eppy is more loquacious: "That's real stuff." We are told that the protagonists, "apparently" newly minted "men," now have "husky voices," another illustration of the narrator's sense of humor/sarcasm. Yet being young and virile, the hardened young men are by no means interested in concluding their voyage of initiation into adulthood. "Should we go back?" asks Al. "I'm willing if you're willing" (20), responds Eppy.

Although the boys are supercharged by their conquest, actual or imagined, underneath their superficial bravado they express reticence:

> They dared each other like children trying to muster pluck to dive into freezing water. Neither of them wanted to enter the alley again; they would much have preferred to go back to their rooming-house and return home the next day, but they were halted by the thought of how depressing would be their cowardice. (20)

Decisively, Eppy takes charge of the situation and leads Al into action: "Well, come on," (20) said Eppy at last, and he stalked into the alley with Al closely behind him. Once again, the sexual adventure continues, with no inkling of whether the experience is actual or imagined: "The voices called to them again, fingernails tapped at window-panes, women caressed themselves in invitation. The two boys knew they must pick a place for that was easier than to run such a gauntlet again" (20). However, this specific encounter includes actual character details, which enhances its status as reality-based experience. Eppy stops at a window and a voice reaches out to him:

> "Come on in, dearie," a woman with heavy make-up said to him.
>
> He stared at the window sill, and attempted to looked bored. In a deep solemn voice, he blurted, "What's the tariff?"
>
> She looked at him. "What, dearie?"
>
> "What's the tariff?" he repeated numbly, stricken that she could not understand him. "What does it cost?" he asked weakly.
>
> "Oh. Oh, two bucks, dearie." (20)

The adventurers suddenly realize that they must represent themselves as experienced customers in the business of pleasure: "Al and Eppy looked at each other. They tried to appear wise and shrewd as though they were evaluating a business proposition" (20). The boys quickly surrender on the cost of the commodity as they face the hard street reality of negotiating for sex:

> Almost instantly the door was opened, and the boys were ushered into a shabby living room with cheap chromium chairs and a faded rug. The woman who had spoken to them stood to one side, and the boys looked at each other, swallowing from time to time, and grinning weakly. There was something utterly graceless and damp about them; they looked like recruits on their first day in the army, waiting to be handed uniforms. (21)

In this sentence, there is a hint of Mailer's WW II military experience, although the dates of composition and revision(s) of "Love-Buds" are uncertain.

The scene in the parlor waiting room is both comic and surreal as the boys struggle to find the courage to face the sex workers: "Upon a signal four females entered the room. The boys had a vague impression of four grown women wearing tropical costumes and standing upon four pairs of very high heels. They could never have described any more, for they were glowering at the floor. It would have taken more resolution than they possessed to stare these women in the face" (21). Eppy is automatonic as his arm involuntarily signals his selection of a partner, which prompts Al to provide his short term "date" a head signal, confirming their transaction:

> Eppy felt himself putting out an arm to indicate one of them. Galvanized by the gesture, Al bobbed his head at another. The two boys stood in the center of the floor, and shook hands formally.
>
> "I'll meet you on the street," Eppy said loudly, testing his voice to see if it would function.
>
> "Follow me, dearie," the woman Eppy had chosen said over her shoulder, and the boys were separated. (21)

Another pause ensues and the escapade is over. It is now time for manly talk as the boys regain their confidence:

> "Well, we did it," Eppy sighed.
> "Yeah, it's done."
> "How was it?" Eppy asked tentatively.
> "It was wonderful," said Al.
> "Yeah, just wonderful." (21)

This exchange is emphatically wooden and it is not possible to know the level of irony in the mutual congratulations, especially in the diction of "wonderful."[6] However, things do not remain wonderful as the boys evaluate their initiation into the world of adulthood:

> "I was really scared," Al muttered, "but it turned out okay."
> "I wasn't too scared," Eppy mumbled in return.
> "The girl I saw told me to come back."
> "Mine did too," Eppy said quickly.
> They walked along, their footsteps lagging. (21)

This sentence is impressive in its synecdochic resonance. The words are sparse but "lagging footsteps" suggest that their heads are ahead of their bodies. Do they really want to return to re-engage the ladies of the night? Or do they prefer to reinforce their virile images to each other in verbal male bonding? As in other Mailer's short stories, appearances are sometimes contrasted with conflicting psychological portraits lurking beneath the surface of what characters say and do, essentially as part of a stage performance.

As the boys slow walk back to the brothel, honesty breaks forth:

> "Eppy?" Al asked.
> "Yeah?"
> "Were you able to do it?" Al squeaked.
> "No. Were you?"
> "No." (22)

The narrator has shrewdly set the stage for this straight talk and Al and Eppy are close enough friends that they cannot continue the masquerade of im-

poster conquerors. Indeed, they are relieved when they can finally be fully honest with each other:

> Al let out a whoop of laughter, and Eppy pummeled him on the back. What a relief! They hugged one another, they jumped up and down on the city street beneath the light of a street lamp, and roared with laughter at themselves and at each other. Soon, they were busy describing the thundering details of incapacity, each trying to defeat the other in the enormity of his failure. They laughed until they were weak, sensing the balm of such laughter, applying it in broad sweeps of unguent. As they walked back to their room, they swore with profound seriousness that never, never, would they tell on one another. (22)

As each boy proudly attempts *to defeat the other in the enormity of his respective failure*, Mailer reminds us here of the importance of epiphany in coming-of-age fiction.[7] Twentieth-century prose fiction is rich in epiphany and James Joyce is often considered the leading artist of epiphanic insight, so eloquently created in his treatment of Gabriel's penetrating self-recognition as a failed husband and man at the conclusion of "The Dead." Yet Al and Eppy are neither defeated nor depressed but, on the contrary, they have experienced proud rebirth as coming-of-age males in this penetrating portrait of initiation ritual, even if the baptism itself has been a failure. Is there epiphany in the rebirth of the boys? Yes, it seems that, at one level, they have come to grips with the inadequacy of falsehoods and braggadocio as instruments of creating a new reality. Perhaps they do gain an understanding of themselves and have learned from their experience, principally that adventures cannot be manufactured by language. In fact, one result of their farcical performance is that they have generated renewed confidence in themselves. Their inability to physically perform is far less significant than the "buddy-love" that comes forth between them. That, I believe, may be the epiphanic residue of this tale. Yet there is another dimension of epiphany worth considering and that is epiphanic change in the reader. We surely gain insight into Al and Eppy when, as we witness their talk and actions, we gain glimpses into underlying psychological substructures that shed light on their interactions, especially their speech acts that attempt to create alternative realities to what they both know to be true. As Ashton Nichols has observed,

"As a narrative technique, epiphany provides a way of moving from one intense perception to the next and thereby presenting independent truths of character rather than truths of nature." The concluding "truth exchange" in "Love-Buds" may be the climax of the narrative because of the insights it brings about. We come to know the characters, weaknesses in full view, in an intense way and, following literally tradition, Mailer's dramatic epiphany occurs precisely at the end of the narrative.

LA PETITE BOURGEOISE

This story, unlike "Love-Buds," focuses on a female protagonist, Rosalie, and a first-person narrator, Michael, who caustically probes Rosalie in an intense psychological portrait. Michael begins his highly personal description of Rosalie as distinctly earthy and sensual:

> Rosalie has lovely red hair and blue eyes; she is plump and she has the throaty voice of a young actress. She carries her body provocatively, it whispers innuendo, and even as one is convinced that she is offering something, her eyes deny it with their blue innocence. She is just a child they seem to say. Altogether, Rosalie is quite appetizing. (14)

Sensuality dominates our introduction to Rosalie. And what are we to read into and out of the title, which is rich in metaphorical word play Like "Love-Buds"? Are we to infer a sarcastic synecdoche for middle class mores and values, as in "the petty middle class? Does "petite" refer to Rosalie's diminished stature as a reasonable, compassionate woman or, perhaps, is it an allusive, caustic frame for the tale's four characters as soulless, shallow middle-class imposters? Are Rosalie, Robert, Thomas, and Michael all subjects of critique by a narrator behind the narrator? And what role(s) does Michael play in the overall critique? Is he a somewhat reliable observer or is he so deeply entangled in his own psychological mesh that he is incapable of detached reporting? Probing into authorial narrative sensibility behind a first-person narrator is a challenging phenomenon, particularly examining authors as they may be explored (seemingly) undermining their narrators, a topic that has been under discussion since at least the Eighteenth Century in narrative structures and strategies in Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*.[8] Such frames of narrative perspective create an interpretive challenge story

because narrators are often complicated and difficult to decode, especially when the "Uncle Charles" narrative strategy, associated with James Joyce, is (or is not) in play. This principle refers to a strategy by which a narrator expresses something in the idiom of a character that is distinct from the language system that we may associate with the narrator. Narrative patterns become even more complicated when narrators are characters implying/representing a "detached" sensibility. So, what are we to make of Michael's narration? Is he reporting "what others say and think" or is he injecting himself into their words and thoughts and functioning as an Uncle Charles with a range of multiple sensibilities? We are never quite sure when Michael is Narrator Michael and when he is narrating Rosalie and Thomas. Michael is a heavily invested narrator with explicit value judgments lurking within his judgmental phrasings. For a more general discussion, Hugh Kenner provides an excellent overview of the Uncle Charles Principle in Chapter 2 of *Joyce's Voices*.

From his opening words we are informed that the narrator, Michael, has deep, personal knowledge of Rosalie and he is explicitly frank in both his showing and telling. The sexual energy and appeal of Rosalie, as emphasized by Michael, is unambiguous and it reveals the narrator to be explicitly subjective rather than objective, in sharp contrast to the narrator of "Love-Buds." It is not unreasonable to infer from the opening sentences of "La Petite Bourgeiose" that this personal tale will reveal a relationship between Rosalie and Michael. Each word is a weighty investment and takes on special significance in a story that is little more than one-thousand words. The story's extensive dialogue explicitly reveals Michael's reading of cultural norms. Yet the conversation sometimes appears contrived and unnatural. Michael seems, at times, to create Rosalie in staged language as rhetorical theatre, more so than a transcription of events from his memory bank. This difference in the mechanics of storytelling may be insignificant to some readers, but it also may tell us something about the technical fibre of this highly charged personal, emotional narrative, which is not dissimilar, in some technical tactics, to the early long fiction of Ernest Hemingway.[9] Dialogic banter seems to function primarily in the service of Michael and his jaded, jaundiced perspective(s) on codes of personality and relationships, such as her academic experience.

This (short) short story calls attention to Michael, early on, as a primary focus. Michael's choice of diction reveals, from the beginning, his disparag-

ing attitude toward Rosalie and her gender: "I met her first at college. She was taking a two-year course at one of those female institutions whose title is the name of the spinster who founded it, Miss Julia's perhaps, or Miss Thatcher's—I hardly remember—really the sort of place whose function is drawn midway between a finishing school and a business college"(14). The tone is sharp and denigrating as it bitingly disparages Rosalie's academic program of work: "I suppose that together with such subjects as English and French, Silver-Service and Party-Management, Rosalie also submitted to a course or two in Stenography and Typing" (14). Michael's nouns trivialize Rosalie (*Silver-Service* and *Party Management*) and his passive verbs mock and diminish Rosalie's management of her education by enrolling in non-academic subjects. Further, Rosalie has learned little and has retained even less: "Whatever the curriculum, she has certainly forgotten all of it, except perhaps the hour devoted to Flower-Arrangements" (14). Michael's attacks are vicious, yet he shrinks his relationship with her to a superficial summary of the depth of their linkage: "It can hardly be said that we had a romance in college. We went out a few times, we probably kissed a few times, and that was the extent of our activity. I heard later that she got married, and still later I heard that she was divorced" (14). If Michael is unsure as to whether they had a physical relationship, then his attitude here represents a shift from his opening sentiments that describe a sultry, sensual Rosalie.

The story is rife with irony and it seems obvious that Rosalie and Michael are driven by their own personal wants and needs, *if* Michael is to be trusted as reliable. It seems reasonable to infer that Mailer creates these off-putting characters to entertain (and enlighten) us with portraits of dysfunction. Indeed, it would be hard to argue that there is a conventional character in the narrative. In "Love-Buds" it would not be unusual for some readers to feel sympathy for Al and Eppy as they seek out their first sexual experience in order to transition to adulthood. However, it is hard to imagine a sympathetic reaction—much less identification—with any of the four characters in "La Petite Bourgeoise," who constitute a group portrait in misery, anguish, and acrimony. From the very beginning, we are exposed to egotistical, selfish refugees from a mid-twentieth-century *Cuckoo's Nest*, as characters confront one another from unstable, relentless, self-centered points of view. If a central purpose in this narrative is to illustrate personal and social dystopia, it surely succeeds.

James Joyce has long been the primary theoretical force in Modern and Contemporary literary epiphany. However, Ford Madox Ford may be the most important literary artist exemplifying narrator unreliability in *The Good Soldier*, where James Dowell is a notorious example of narrative unreliability. I bring up *The Good Soldier* because I do not see any other problematic narrator that comes closer to Michael and Dowell. John Hessler has referred to Dowell as purveying "the metaphor of diminishment." Indeed, it seems obvious that Michael consistently debases all characters, Rosalie in particular.

How do the characters come to know one another? Michael's (limited) knowledge of Rosalie, we are told, is mostly the result of rumor and hearsay: "I heard later that she got married, and still later I heard that she was divorced." Rosalie's husband was Robert. However, the narrator then suddenly acknowledges an understanding of Rosalie that comes out of what he has heard about her love life: "She was eventually to tell me in her husky voice about that marriage. "It was all sex, Michael," she was to say, "and it was just silly. If only I'd gone to bed with Robert, I would never have married him. It was his fault. He was such a boob. He could have made me go to bed with him, but he adored me too much, so I had to pay for it by marrying him" (14). So, we learn that Robert is the actual villain of the story (from Rosalie's perspective), if Michael's memory testimony and Rosalie's representations are to be trusted. Michael summarizes Rosalie's marriage to Robert in pathetic (and bathetic) terms: "The marriage had been empty enough. . . . [S]he had become a bride expressly to be deflowered by him, and on her wedding night, long after he had fallen asleep, she lay alone in the darkness, and wept big solemn child's tears. She had gotten married for *that*, and it was nothing" (14). Michael gives readers no indication that this stunning revelation provides insight into Rosalie (hence epiphany). Thus, we are nestled in a complex depiction of social infrastructure chronicling displaced and misplaced dreams and perceptions, with Rosalie at the narrative center. We then learn that Rosalie served a two-year sentence as a bored housewife, "visiting her girlfriends, playing bridge, . . . and shopping with her mother" (15). We are witnessing uncontrolled metaphor: "The very anarchy of metaphor in his narrative suggests how tragically out of control he is, how little he understands his own emotions" (Hessler 113). The "he" in this passage refers to Dowell, but I believe that it can be applied equally to Michael.

In Rosalie's frenzied world, she faces two choices—either divorce Robert or have a baby. The decision to divorce Robert is an easy one and these few pithy sentences clarify a fundamental existential challenge: how to live, which is a powerful thematic and interpretive movement across all three stories. Rosalie's existence is a stream of thinking and living in (and by) a code that exists within a cauldron of clichés. Indeed, Rosalie herself is depicted as a caricature of a caricature. This cogent narrative, I believe, anticipates and reflects Mailer's later concerns for existential realities in novels such as *The Deer Park* and *An American Dream*. Mailer's interest in existentialism was deep and theoretical and finds early pragmatic expression, I would suggest, in the 1951 archival fiction.

Returning to Rosalie, the plot quickly thickens with the entrance of Thomas into her personal psychodrama. Thomas, a bizarre character to be sure, is a foil to Michael and, simultaneously, a potential inamorata of Rosalie. As Michael recounts,

> When I met her again, she had been free for a year. She was at a party escorted by a young man in a business suit. He looked proper, efficient, and somewhat deadly to me. He had a pale face, and his straight black hair was thin and showed promise of being prematurely bald. He spoke softly, he stayed close to her, he possessed her by his presence, and though he was as civil to me as he had been to every other man who approached Rosalie, it was quite evident that he was a formidable watchdog. The three of us talked at random. Rosalie employed her blue eyes: they seemed to tell me that she was delighted to see me again, that I must pay no attention to the young man beside her, he was obviously repulsive, and I was as evidently attractive. We had the sort of silly party conversation which is always the compromise between liquor, intention, and embarrassment. We talked about body deodorants. (15)

This strange, seemingly trivial recollection says something about Michael's observational skills and his eccentric, shuddersome metaphors, which is the basic weapon in his storytelling arsenal. Similar to Ford's narrator, Michael reflects primarily to himself in the bizarre things that he says, not unlike Dowell, "The very anarchy of metaphor in his narrative suggests how trag-

ically out of control he is, how little he understands his own emotions" (Hessler 113). This assessment also applies to Michael and it reveals that he, like Dowell, cannot distance himself from the events that he narrates: "With all his imaginative energy, Dowell tries to enforce the impression that he is at a distance from what he describes, that he is not implicated. But every word he speaks connects him in a particular way to what he describes" (115). This narrative is surely just as much about Michael than it is about any other character, just as *The Good Soldier* fundamentally focuses on John Dowell and the problematics of narrative reliability.

Michael continually reminds us of Rosalie's lack of stature and her self-destructive behavior. We are told that it is unlikely that Rosalie will experience any self-insight from her relationships, as we sometimes see in other twentieth-century, first-person depictions.[9] However, it is important to remember that epiphany (or lack thereof) can also be experienced by any character and, of course, readers. For example, in examining epiphany in *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, Jessica Gerson concludes that "D. J.'s and Tex's epiphany on the mountain top reflects Mailer's belief in the purgative power of descent into one's compulsions"(13). This observation raises questions about Michael and his many compulsions. Further, it is directly relevant to the overbearing, compulsive husband in "La Petite Bourgeoise."

As Michael's recounting of social mores and odd characters continues in a somewhat odd, quasi-journalistic mode, readers become increasingly familiar with his biting sarcasm and personal disparagement, so Michael's caustic criticism of Thomas can easily be anticipated in Michael's aggressive diction and syntax, which reveal his fundamentally jaundiced character, especially in this mean-spirited observation: Thomas *showed promise of being prematurely bald.* Promise for whom? Hence, Michael focuses on Thomas' unpromising future, which tells us something about the poisoned mind and emotions of our only source of information. Mailer has created a hard-edged narrator, to be sure, who reflects more than one personality—and they are not disguised to the reader. Michael's bifurcated persona is very much on the surface of this narrative and, when the storytelling turns to personal issues, Michael's running commentary borders on comic absurdity: "Thomas, which was the name of her escort, took deodorants seriously" (15). Michael tells us that Rosalie told him that Thomas is obsessed with hygiene: "He's so *clean*," Rosalie said. "He makes me feel like I'm a sewer-pot or something. Thomas won't go out with me unless I put Mum

under my arms" (15). Michael is particularly effective in reporting hearsay and, in response to Rosalie, Michael reveals his familiarity of Shakespeare by shoring up his literary knowledge, 'Out, out, damned spot,' I murmured"(15). Status noted.

Michael obsessively drives home Thomas' obsession with personal hygiene. However, there is a structural residue to the narrator's tactical strategy, which allows Michael to probe more deeply into Rosalie's character, increasingly portrayed as unstable. Rosalie describes Thomas: "He makes me feel like I'm a sewer-pot or something. Thomas won't go out with me unless I put Mum under my arms." Michael quotes Thomas to show how far removed from reality he (Thomas) is: "I've found something new," Thomas drawled, his eyes upon the ceiling. "It's Ennds. You take a pill and it dissipates all odors" (15). The portraiture becomes more aggressive when Michael ends his quotation with a comment suggesting that Thomas is gay: "He had almost a lisp," (15) to which Michael adds a personal assessment, "I found him unpleasant. He was making a dull courteous effort to be humorous about himself, but it was apparent that he took the subject seriously" (15). Rosalie voices a similar complaint: "You see the kind of man who wants to marry me . . . Thomas, you know what you are, you're nothing but an old homosexual, that's what" (16). Michael and Rosalie have influenced one another in style and substance—and their gestures provide fodder for reader epiphany.

Michael's role (self-described alpha male?) takes shape as he and Thomas compete as suitors for Rosalie's affection. Michael recounts a social gathering: "I searched for some way to get Rosalie alone. Later, while I was talking to other people, I hear her go to the bathroom, and I was preparing to detach myself from the group in which I found myself, when I discovered that it would be pointless to wait for Rosalie outside the door of the john. Thomas had taken his station there" (16). Ergo, two Romeos standing guard outside Juliet's bathroom door. Yet Rosalie is neither unaware nor uninvolved in Michael's pursuit of her. After the bathroom scene, we are told that Rosalie makes an overt gesture—in front of Thomas no less—to entice Michael into the triangle: "Rosalie arranged matters. As she was leaving with Thomas, she made it a point to stop and say good-night. 'Telephone me, Michael, will you?'" (16). Michael does not take the bait and the "relationship" between Rosalie and Michael ends abruptly, as he tells us: "I did not call Rosalie for quite some time. I decided after the party

that if she had really wanted to see me, she would not have made such a point of it before Thomas. I had been used, I thought, to arouse his jealousy" (16). So, a quirky conclusion to a quirky narrative. Michael concludes his terse narrative by revealing very little about himself. What is the interpretive residue of this quixotic tale? That is a redoubtable question. Yet surely there is some epiphanic insight in Michael's sensibility, who is jaded, injured, and dolefully pessimistic after his romantic experience, which may not, however, be without some redemptive lining of knowledge. Michael and Rosalie use each other and they both gain experience in this rough game of flirtation, even as it comes at a high cost.

Michael is neither a mending nor an ameliorating narrator, another quality of character that he shares with Dowell: "Though his words contain real anguish, they contain no healing recognition" (115). However, is there a "settling of scores" motif in the ego-driven analysis of Michael's summary reflections? Such an interpretation cannot be demonstrated, but Rosalie is stridently sardonic and derisive, therefore fitting in seamlessly with the personalities of both Michael and Thomas. Her flippant attitude is explicit when, in a conversation with Michael, she says of Robert, with aplomb: "He could have made me go to bed with him, but he adored me too much, so I had to pay for it by marrying him" (14). This comment says much about her perverse sensibility, view of men, and gender relationships. Rosalie and Michael both seem to share a strong disgust for the opposite sex and misanthropic would not be a hyperbolic adjective in characterizing their personalities. Perhaps this narrative, like *The Good Soldier*, reveals an essential repudiation of responsibility in all characters: "The gratuitous nature of Dowell's memories is crucial to that central passage where, setting out to describe the feeling he had when he stood on the steps of his hotel in the morning, he gets lost in the vivid description of what he saw from those steps, and finally forsakes syntax altogether in his confusion about the details of that 'remembered' world" (Hessler 114). Mailer's story, one of the shortest, crispest narratives ever written by him, reveals insight into dispirited and fractured one-dimensional characters, especially in their relationships with others, revealing a window into themselves that is based on (and generated by) shared experience, which says much about Mailer's mid-twentieth-century world view.

BLOOD OF THE BLUNT

We are told in *The Deer Park* that "Poor memory is so indispensable to passionate lovers" (122). This aphorism would seem to contain early seeds in "The Blood of the Blunt," in which a devolving marriage is illustrated by explicitly dispassionate spouses, whose lack of positive passion is unambiguously attributable to their impeccable and unforgiving memories of the past, which generates continuous spousal wounding. In this early fiction, Mailer's continues his pattern of aggressive, figurative titles. "The Blood of the Blunt" provides a crisp, taunting metaphor naming a specific kind of weapon the husband and wife use upon each other—"A blunt knife that inflicts a particular kind of injury," unable to cut cleanly but sufficient to render pain and suffering.

Sadly, neither nameless spouse seems to be much aware of this well-travelled maxim about personal history: "The past is place of reference; not a place of residence; the past is a place of learning, not a place of living" (Bennett 57). The opening of the story sets the stage for unforgettable (and unforgivable) past abuses and quickly turns to the dominant "bed" metaphor: "For a long time the husband and wife had been wishing secretly that they could sleep in twin beds. As the early years of their marriage passed, and the husband became successful, the bed on which they slept passed through a metamorphosis" (20). The wreckage of their marriage marches on as the bed is portrayed as an ancillary character: "Yet it [the bed] was not large enough for the husband and wife to sleep side by side. Under an accumulation of what was sore, apprehensive, and guilty, they were most comfortable with their backs to one another, a chill width of empty bed between them" (20). The marriage carriage, sadly, no longer transports husband and wife to sexual nirvana, but they are resistant to switch to other sleeping arrangements because they remain residents of the past, prisoners of memories of different days and nights: "They were still young enough to remember how much they had been in love when they were very young. Then, with the certainty of young lovers, they had known that nothing could ever change" (20). This common belief in a never-ending present has stunted the growth of their relationship: "There was still the memory of early love on the studio couch in the one-room-and-kitchenette, there was still the recollection of the agreeable apartment with what it had signified of his developing career as a young executive, there was even the irony of the Hollywood bed" (20). The

narrator reminds us that their good memories were altogether, "a subject too painful to discuss" (21). Thus the reader confronts spouses hopelessly lost in a loveless marriage.

Readers may anticipate that the remainder of this story of words will characterize their poisoned relationship with dramatic illustrations. As in "Love-Buds," Mailer begins with types and subsequently individualizes them as needed. Similar to "La Petite Bourgeoise," there is an exposition of romantic and sexual dysfunction as generic types become representative characters in a spectacle of personal turmoil. The forlorn spouses seem to fall into what D.H. Lawrence calls "a state of funk" in *Literature, and Censorship*.[10] In analyzing Lawrence, Peter Balbert observes that the logical order of love is not stable and can only reflect the inherent instability of characters: "The 'logic to love' often conveys its truths inscrutably, for the direction of the depicted passion has its own unpredictable laws, and the 'emotional Tightness' of a scene in life or in a novel depends on the existential mood of characters rather than on the predetermined formulae of the world or of fiction" (69). Emotional configuration cuttingly portrays turmoil-ridden characters and scenes throughout this taut tale of a fractured marriage.

Mailer illuminates the emotional tightness of the marriage, night and day: "[T]he husband and wife had gone to bed early, and at two in the morning, they were still awake." A quarrel had developed that evening and each of them was restless . . . lying a yard apart in the darkness, their emotions seemed to converse, anger begetting sullenness; sullenness, hurt; hurt, contrition; without ever a word" (21). What breaks the silence of hostility is their baby's cry for attention, which neither parent cares about. And from the bed springs all, including their times of passion that generated the new life that now is a wall between them. Love has turned to contempt. After more skirmishing, the wife surrenders and tends to the child. The narrator reads the husband's mind and relates his self-absorbed thoughts inciting his anger: "While his wife was gone, he lay in bed and brooded about the nurse. It seemed as if she were always having her night off. There were three servants in the house, the nurse, the maid, and the cook, yet whenever he wanted something done, no one was about. Once he had become furious at the breakfast table because his eggs were wet" (21). The relation has so deteriorated that daily disputes are never resolved, "Their fights were now without climax and virtually continuous" (22). Marital harmony has struck a new low as the husband becomes jealous of his infant son, "In her loneliness, in

their frozen loneliness, she could turn to the infant and find solace and humor in the smallest gurgle of its belly" (22). So much for fatherly love.

The narrator shifts to articulating the wife's feelings: "It was not fair. It was all she had. He had the world of his business life with its concerns, its activity, the sense it could give him of being, after all, not unimportant. She had only the apartment, the servants to manage—a task she loathed—and the tepid routine of shopping" (22). Indeed, the tepidity of her life, as well as that of her husband's, is fueled by the supercharged egos of both spouses and there is a vacuum of negotiating space containing moments and opportunities for resolving conflict, or at least provide temporary ceasefires from warfare. Indeed, this tale of marital suffering is reminiscent of war reporting that attempts to objectively represent the thoughts, words, and actions of both warring factions.

This short story is three times the length of "La Petite Bourgeoise" and includes a richer plot, more complex characterization, and aggressive figuration. The third-person narrator of this narrative appears to be more detached than Michael. As we have seen before, generic descriptors, such as "husband," "wife," "boys," are used by Mailer and one effect is to create a space for narrator distance. Indeterminacy of time (for example, phrasing like *for a long time*), compounded with the use of common nouns rather than proper names, creates an aura of a further removed tale, distanced from a personal experience tale. And there are also other implications to Mailer's generic naming. We are reminded in Plato's *Cratylus* (Sedley 385b, 387c) that naming is critical in establishing *being* which, of course, is strategic to revelation of meaning in interpreting literary characters and plots.[11] In selecting generic marital roles as a means of identification, Mailer establishes tropes that are strategically ambiguous, inviting readers to inscribe whatever meaning they may read into "husband" and "wife." Issues of change, growth, and insight are generally left to readers' interpretations. For example, what nuances might readers draw from a narrative in which a narrator appears to be unaligned, in any sense, with any of the characters? (The opposite of the Uncle Charles principle.) The ability to think, speak, and act reasonably comes to mind as we interpret characters, especially narrators. Hans-Georg Gadamer asserts that *phronesis* (practical wisdom or common sense) must be considered as it is a *manifested* component of epiphany: "The decisive thing is finding the right nuance. The *phronesis* that does this is a *hexis tou aletheuein*, a state of being in which something hidden is made manifest, i.e,

in which something is known" (40). Determining meaning and values in literature must be worked for by readers (see Gadamer, note 71). "Understanding" in literature is important business as an axiomatically cooperative effort between writer and reader and there must be a minimum of shared experience about phronetic conceptions of "reality" for reasonable inferences to be drawn and interpretations to be shared. Mailer's engineering of words, syntax, and sentences surely relies on threads of interpretive readerly "pre-experience" in the gamut of values and themes introduced.[12]

Mailer returns to the metaphoric bed to represent the evolution and devolution of a marriage. The husband's financial success, for example, is symbolized by the grand bed: "They had first lain upon a fold-out studio couch in a tiny one-room-and-kitchenette, they had progressed to a comfortable double bed in an agreeable apartment, and by now, the husband's career impressively advanced, they lived in a seven-room apartment with a good address. In their bedroom reposed a Hollywood bed" (20). This description is literal as well as figurative, of course and, couched in sarcasm, it creates a material context for development of the narrative and irony.

The foreshadowing of his sarcastic stance is suggested in the narrator's treatment of the devolution of the bed's function as it evolves, increasing in size over the years, yet also morphing into a symbol of the failed marriage:

> Yet it was not large enough for the husband and wife to sleep side by side. Under an accumulation of what was sore, apprehensive, and guilty, they were most comfortable with their backs to one another, a chill width of empty bed between them. Often they would lie awake for hours, the pressure of things unsaid attuning their nerves, until the simplest motion of one—no more than a foot rustling against the sheet—was enough to arouse the other as tensely and irritably as if a piece of chalk had squeaked upon a blackboard. (20)

A troubled relationship is clearly the fulcrum of the story, yet the relative newlyweds are indecisive about their future as they are reminded of their salad days of sexual energy and romance. The wife, for example, recalls how she felt as a young lover: "Oh, darling," she had said once, those years ago, "we'll never be indifferent to each other, will we? We'll never be bored" (20). Like many couples, the former lovers cling to the belief that their earlier pas-

sion may be resurrected. We are told that they cannot accept conjugal failure. These moments of emotional turmoil are brought to life, once again, in the master bed. They fight often, engaging in the non-violent violence of silence. A recurring Mailerian motif appears here: Connubial conflict in a wrap of romance, desire, and sex. Further, there appears to be an inclination to look at marriage as an inherently unstable institution, lending itself, by its very nature, to strife, anger, disillusionment, and psychological dysfunction. Genetic differences between the sexes may provide the fuel to exacerbate such profound, systemic turbulence.

The tension between the spouses is intensified by their baby. One night both parents hear the cries of their offspring, but neither parent is interested in addressing the source of the cries:

> Through the darkness came the cries of a baby.
> "He's awake," said the wife out of the silence.
> "Well, the nurse will take care of him," the husband answered.

Yet neither spouse shows much parental instinct. Irony springs forth as the narrator brings forth the bed: "They had conceived the baby in this very bed, out of the pathetic hope that a baby would mend matters. In desperation, they had conceived another which the wife was carrying now. Neither the baby which was born nor the one which was to come seemed very real to the husband" (21). The diction in this passage is jarring, to be sure, and it is difficult to draw meaning out of this wording: *In desperation* they had made another child. Who conceives a child out of desperation? One explanation might be that both members of the marriage team are fundamentally dysfunctional and cannot live rationally. Or, perhaps, the "desperation" phrasing is more reflective of the narrator's jaundiced attitude toward the couple, using dramatic constructions to convey the awkwardness in their lives. It is important to consider the narrator's rationality and sensibility in his struggle to convey the marital experience(s).

Returning to the sound of the crying baby, the mother finally agrees to retrieve a bottle once she realizes that the husband has no intention of stirring from the bed. The husband is furious because he feels isolated. Although they employ three servants, the husband is never satisfied: "whenever he wanted something done, no one was about." This portrait illustrates more than an unhappy, disgruntled character as it digs more deeply into systemic instability.

Consistent with Michael and Thomas in "La Petit Bourgeoise," we encounter scene after scene of melancholic misanthropy, which is reinforced when we are given the feeble justification for the conception of the first baby: "They had conceived the baby in this very bed, out of the pathetic hope that a baby would mend matters" (21). However, neither the baby, nor a second baby in utero, matters much to the husband as we are told that neither baby "seemed very real to the husband" (21). So, the husband's discontent extends beyond an unhappy marriage and borders on misanthropic malaise in which the reality of his wife and children have been supplanted by a different reality of self-centered malaise. This encounter illustrates overwhelming narcissism.

The husband is described as explicitly moody, often brooding in self-conceit: "While his wife was gone, he lay in bed and brooded about the nurse. It seemed as if she were always having her night off" (21). His anger has become a dangerous and explosive ritual, often triggered by seemingly inconsequential events and the relationship has reached a point of no return as anger rages with neither climax nor suspension of warfare. The ebb is low, not likely to lift, and the narrator continues to narrate conflict that serves to reinforce its powerful current and unending presence. Discord has overwhelmed the participant—and the narrator's reinforcement of turmoil maintains the flow of tension. The narrator even draws the baby into the hostile relationship: "Now, the baby could cry with indignation, seeming to say that he had waited long indeed for his wants to be filled" (22). There are no positive moments or movements in this terse narrative. The husband defiantly resists familial attachment or involvement in his obsessed concern with himself and there is no safe harbor for him, as there is for his wife. "It was not fair" (22) is his assessment of his plight in life.

The husband justifies his aloofness from his family on his responsibilities as the economic engine of the home:

> He had the world of his business life with its concerns, its activity, the sense it could give him of being, after all, not unimportant. She had only the apartment, the servants to manage—a task she loathed—and the tepid routine of shopping, of lunch with friends, the entertaining his work demanded, so much less absorbing than the results of that entertainment she could experience only at second-hand. She seemed disinterested now in almost all they did. (22)

This reaction is neither new nor enlightening beyond confirming what we have already witnessed in their marital interactions. Both spouses *are* their roles. Their *being* is an enactment of their *essences*, catalyzed by their unrelenting, antagonistic behavior. For example, the wife cares nothing about her husband's colleagues, whom she knows personally.

> "Don't you like them?" he would ask.
> "Why should I? They're not interested in me. They're interested in you. You're the one who does things." (22)

In this poisoned marriage, no one can do anything right. Strangely, however, the husband does ironically reveal a flash of good intentions: "He would be tender toward her, he told himself, he would try" (22). However, nothing ever comes of his fleeting impulses as he then pretends to sleep. So much for good intentions.

The husband does not display any sexual energy for his spouse, however, and as his wife lies awake next to him, unmoving, his mind wanders to another woman whom he hopes to see again soon, which causes him to sweat nervously. His marriage had been built on distortions, misrepresentations, falsehoods, and emotional nothingness, so his posture is defensive: "There had been so many lies, so many little preparations, so many concealments, that he was invariably uneasy with her, found himself guarding the answers to the most casual questions she might ask" (23). A non-conversation ensues as they make noises to show that they are not sleeping, yet his fury is building and it is very clear that the narrator is far more focused on the husband than the wife, or at least his moods and thoughts receive more attention than her psychological state. The husband comes to realize that their attitude toward the other is irreparable: "Although they did not touch, he knew her body was rigid. With indifference, with resentment, with—no use concealing it from himself—distaste, he could just make out the small mound her pregnant body lifted against the sheets" (23).

As tension builds, a discussion ensues, which leads to a dramatic revelation:

> "Can I ask you a question?"
> Her voice came quietly, evenly, from the space beside him.
> "Go ahead," he answered, almost certain what it would be.

> "Have you been having any affairs?"
>
> "Yes," he answered, and turned toward her, as though to receive whatever she might offer him, her tears, her rage, her hurt, even disdain if it should come.
>
> "Oh, I see," said the wife, "I didn't know."
>
> "Yes," he said again. It was out. He had a kind of relief. Now, perhaps they could talk about it.
>
> "How long has it been going on?" she asked in the same even voice.
>
> "I don't know. Two years perhaps."
>
> "You mean even before Baby was born."
>
> "I suppose so."
>
> He could sense her drawing further and further away from him. He had no idea at all of what she would say next.
>
> "You must have thought I was pretty dumb," his wife said slowly.
>
> "I didn't think anything at all."
>
> "You just kept . . ." She didn't finish the sentence. "That time you went to Chicago," she said after the pause. (23–24)

I quote at length because this passage reveals an important quality in the narrator: Michael is a shrewd rhetorical tactician. He understands that any attempt to explain or justify his deceit would only exacerbate his wife's antipathy toward him, as we are reminded: "Those functional lies, the gestures he had employed, the words he had uttered, would all seem monstrous to her now" (24).

Far better to calm the waters and turn the discussion, as discretion becomes the tactic that the husband shifts to using businesslike language: "Let's not go through the files" (24). However, the wife is unmollified and she rains blows upon his head. Moreover, her punches lack power and the scene become bizarrely comic as she excuses herself for her droll attempt at violence. An apology slips forth: "I'm sorry. It was stupid to hit you" (24). Yet the wife is not finished with digging deeper into the women and clandestine rendezvous in his adulterous past. The wife insists on learning the names of his paramours, with particular interest in knowing whether she knew them or not. The husband, consistent with his character, refuses to reveal any identifying information. However, the wife stubbornly insists: "I want to know"

(24). This stalemate conjures up memories within both spouses, especially the husband, who cannot forget his fears that she has been unfaithful to him while he was in the Army. At the time he, too, demanded to know the names of her lovers and, like him, she refuses to divulge their names on the ground that "if I tell you their names, I will have to stop seeing them. I'm not ready to do that yet. There've been some pleasant moments, you see" (25). The husband struggles for an olive branch, saying "I'm sorry" (25). Yet there is no response from her as they return to edged enmity.

The husband grasps at straws of reconciliation: "They must have a talk, he tells himself. Perhaps they could work out some sort of arrangement. They were not stupid. She could understand, as well as he how complicated things had become. Was it altogether impossible for her to understand that he needed certain kinds of freedom?" (25). Hence, his reasoning turns to self-preservation, based on a request for "freedom." Yet the wife also wants, needs, and deserves freedom, but his reflections ignore her desires. All we learn are the ruminations of the husband. This is not to say that the narrator is unapologetically biased in favor of the husband, but psychological reflections are not presented in an explicitly objective manner. The husband surmises that his wife would, of course, demand equal freedom—however, the husband concludes that he does not care: "If she so desired, he would not stand in her way. He could offer her equality at least" (25). The husband thinks of himself as a fair-minded spouse, or at least that it what he tells himself. As his reflections continue, the husband reassures himself that his instincts and actions are defensible and virtuous. After all, he has been to war and, upon returning, he believes that he has purged his mind of negative assumptions and accusations: "It was only after he returned from the war that he was able to believe she had been faithful to him" (25). Sympathetic understanding seems (temporarily) to take control of his mind and emotions.

We learn more about the narrator when he succinctly summarizes this strategic shift in the husband: "He could understand such jealousy now. He had been so young at the time, he had accomplished so little—no more than college and a year of work. There had been nothing exceptional about him, nothing but her love for him. She had thought him extraordinary" (25). Things appear to be fitting into place. However, the drama is only beginning: "His wife turned on the bed-lamp. Her eyes were puffed, the tip of her nose was red. 'Maybe I have something to tell you, she whispered'" (25). The

climax has arrived and the wife is about to admit her mortal sins: "What would you say if I told you I've had . . . certain experiences, too?" (26). Her confession is then changed to a single affair. The husband, once again, probes for a name but he is not prepared for her bombshell revelation: "He made me pregnant" (26). The husband hears the words but refuses to accept them: "He did not know what he wanted to say, and the words lapsed" (26). However, the drama is not yet over as the wife completes the tense narrative: "I had an operation," she repeated, "and when I was carrying Baby, I was afraid I might not be right, and he would be born not a normal baby. That was what I was worried about" (26). The scene changes dramatically as the husband's emotions take over his persona: "The husband began to weep. He cried openly, crying for her and the portion of her frozen silence she had uncovered to him. It was all so long ago, and she had suffered so needlessly. He fumbled toward her, and held her in an embrace. Quietly, she began to cry with him" (26). Tension has (momentarily?) dissipated and, conceivably, a catharsis of reconciliation takes place: "With the lamp on, the husband lay alone in the Hollywood bed, emotions spent. He was sad, but his sadness was not unpleasant" (27). Is this denouement a fitting conclusion to a trauma-infused narrative, one that delivers resolution to readers? We are told that the husband sees life cycles and gains possible wisdom yet, even after his baptism by truth, he is not sure that the wife has earned entree to his now wider world. "What must it feel to be a wife," (27) he wonders at story's end, implying empathy for her, which raises the issue of character epiphany. Only each reader can render a verdict on the significance of the conclusion.

So, in summary, are there threads of functional epiphany in Mailer's early fiction? One major epiphanic movement is arguably an emphasis on reader insight into a range of characters as we adjust to differing patterns and types of narratives and narrators. Mailer is reminiscent of Faulkner in that both seem focused on telling interesting stories which, in the case of both writers, involves developing characters that are not easily understood in their nuances and complexity. Mailer introduces us to a range of developing characters (Al and Eppy) and dysfunctional individuals (Michael, Rosalie, the husband, the wife). In each of the three stories, Mailer provides a surgical view of the struggles and meanderings of characters who are subsets of existential misfits, representing differences in individual cultures and idiocultures that are *sui generis* representations of Mailer's contemporary culture

and he consciously focuses on characters and themes of misfitting, struggle, and personal chaos. The center cannot hold, as it may have held in earlier times, and literary language is the tool to reveal internal and external forces that inform Mailer's characters. Al and Eppy's fabricated communication, to mask a feared underlying sexual inadequacy, is but one example. One interpretive residue is that in Mailer's early fiction we encounter a series of scenes of descriptive vignettes that reveal characters exploring fragments of ephemeral meaning. This unsatisfiable quest is not limited to literary characters, of course, and extends to readers as well. Writers and readers are inextricably intertwined in the investigation of subjects and subjectivities. As Merleau-Ponty observes, in discussing a phenomenological approach to rhythms of life and interpretation, "This cycle characterizes the spirit of the art and act of philosophy . . . and Philosophy does not raise questions and does not provide answers that would little by little fill in the blanks. The questions are within our life, within our history: they are born there, they die there, if they have found a response, more often than not they are transformed there" (105). "Transformation" is the key term and, in the most powerful fiction, readers are transformed by the literary representations and the questions they inevitably ask.

Mailer populates his stories with a range of characters to show us meaning through their interpersonal encounters, which is the result of something that might be thought of as a "phenomenological epiphany." As we probe literary language, we necessarily penetrate characters, their relationships, and their interactions. We see the ways in which their co-dependency may generate insight. We learn from these stories and characters by observing what they do with and to each other. Is there a formal philosophy embedded within the stories? I don't think so, at least explicitly, but it seems reasonable that Mailer was deeply interested in how relationships not only shape character and personality, but they also reveal so much of what is submerged beneath the surface. Perhaps this strategy is akin to Hemingway's "iceberg theory" of experience and narrative. We do know that Hemingway was much admired by Mailer and we also know that Mailer was familiar with Hemingway's work, so perhaps it is relevant that Hemingway often gives us "incomplete" stories and "partial" profiles of characters and their sometimes destructive and impulsive behavior. Indeed, in the stories examined here, there is much that we do not learn about characters, yet in two of the three stories, there are slivers and shards of plots and subplots that il-

lustrate some meaning, in spite of an apparent lack of resolution. Things happen and we witness characters' "recognition"—rather than insight—into meaning in their lives drawn out from the thin slices of experience that we are shown.

As we have witnessed, characters interact with one another in varying degrees of intensity, creating an existential, momentary reality. Al and Eppy respond to the exigencies of their sexual coming-of-age adventure by transacting, though language, their bumbling reaction to their stumbling experience and, most important, they recreate their personal relationship and reinforce their co-dependent consociation, as they must if they are to remain friends. In "La Petite Bourgeoise," Michael recounts a series of encounters with others, especially Rosalie, and we witness the transactions that come to define each of the four characters directly as a result of their interactions with others. There is, necessarily, a collective cauldron of caricature and values in which no character *alone* creates existential representation. In "The Blood and the Blunt," meaning is generated primarily by spousal interactions and, secondarily, through memory encounters. The interpretative effect, I would suggest, is consistent: the architecture of meaning by and through character deployment is inherently established by collaborative construction. As Merleau-Ponty has poignantly articulated, "The 'there' is said to be a wall between us and others, but it is a wall we build together, each putting a stone in the niche left by the other" (*Signs* 19). Literary bricolage is never a solitary experience and, brick by brick, characters reveal dimensions of their natures and values, thus informing the work product of a master bricoleur, Norman Mailer.

NOTES

1. These three stories have been published, as transcriptions of archival manuscripts, for the first time in *The Mailer Review*. Page references are to their respective appearances in the *Review*. "Love-Buds" is part of the Texas 1951 archives and it is believed to have been written during Mailer's senior year at Harvard. However, it is not possible to accurately date most of the initial compositions of the early short fiction or dates of later possible revision. Such investigative work would more properly be a formal textual study and they are not addressed in this analysis.
2. Early Mailer is in the company of Heraclitus on the importance of naming and word play: "Can we speak of the rightness of names? But must we not speak of the rightness of words—i.e., insist on the unity of word and thing? Did not the most profound of all early thinkers, Heraclitus, discover the depth of meaning contained in the play on words?" (Gadamer 405).

3. The epiphanic tradition continues throughout the Christian era and it often appears in the *New Testament* as "Striking appearance . . . A manifestation or appearance of some divine or superhuman being" (*OED* 243). The Western tradition of *belles lettre* is also rich in epiphanic experiences beginning in 1320 Chaucer and continuing through every century to the present day. The Twentieth Century, in particular, includes copious illustrations and discussions of literary epiphany, particularly in Modernist authors such as Joyce, Woolf, Faulkner, and others. Wim Tigges has edited a superb collection of essays that examines typologies of epiphanies as includes copious analyses across major areas of *belles lettre*.
4. "Begin with an individual, and before you know it you find that you have created a type: begin with a type, and you find that you have created—nothing. That is because we are all queer fish, queerer behind our faces and voices than we want anyone to know or than we know ourselves" (317). This opening sentence is the powerful beginning of "The Rich Boy," one of Fitzgerald's most complex narratives examining personal growth and failure.
5. The classical trope, *aposiopesis*, is defined by Richard Lanham as: "Suddenly stopping in midcourse, leaving a statement unfinished; sometimes from genuine passion, sometimes for effect."
6. This scene is reminiscent of Hemingway's conclusion of "Hills Like White Elephants," when Hemingway's railway travelers state that they "feel fine" after a passionate discussion over abortion.
7. There is a layered history of epiphanic revelation, as Sharon Kim points out: "James Joyce first used the term epiphany in its literary sense and defined it in *Stephen Hero* (1904–05) as a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself." According to Joyce's theory there are three epiphanic phases, "First we recognise that the object is *one* integral thing, then we recognise that it is an organised composite structure, a *thing* in fact: finally, when the relation of the parts is exquisite, when the parts are adjusted to the special point, we recognise that it is *that* thing which it is. Its soul, its whatness, leaps to us from the vestment of its appearance. [. . .] The object achieves its epiphany" (*Hero* 213). Limits of space prevent a detailed discussion of Joyce's epiphanic template in "Love-Buds," but I do believe that it is relevant to this story and other fiction by Mailer.
8. There is a long literary history of narrators who suffer from serious psychological disorders, including Vladimir Nabokov's narrator of *Pale Fire*, Charles Kinbote, and Bret Easton Ellis' narrator of *American Psycho*, Patrick Bateman. Explicitly untruthful narrators have been well analyzed for a long time, of course. One important example is James Dowell, the first-person narrator of Ford Maddox Ford's, *The Good Soldier* (1915). See John G. Hessler for an excellent discussion of narrative unreliability in *The Good Soldier*. Hessler notes the "metaphor of diminishment" (113), which seems particularly relevant to Michael's narration in "La Petite Bourgeoise."
9. This assessment is eerily similar to the ending of the first chapter of *The Sun Also Rises* when narrator Jake Barnes, who has viciously characterized Robert Cohn throughout Chapter One, concludes with irony and sarcasm: "I watched him (Robert Cohn) walk back to the café holding his

paper. I rather liked him and evidently she (Frances) led him quite a life" (15). This conclusion is oddly reminiscent of "La Petite Bourgeoise" as the first-person narrator, Michael, depicts Rosalie as a chaotic, unbalanced character (like Cohn) and Michael uses her ex-husband, Robert and her subsequent lover, Thomas, as examples that illustrate Rosalie's dysfunctionality, not unlike the narrator's characterization of Robert Cohn. This observation does not suggest direct influence, but these patterns of characterization appear to be relatable.

10. According to Lawrence, "If we fall into a state of funk, impotence, and persecution, then things may be very much worse than they are now. It is up to us. It is up to men to be men. While men are courageous and willing to change, nothing terribly bad can happen. But once men fall into a state of funk, with the inevitable accompaniment" (76). Qtd. in Balbert, from Lawrence, *Literature, and Censorship*, pp. 59–60.
11. As Hans-Georg Gadamer notes in his treatment of *Language and Logos*, "In the earliest times the intimate unity of word and thing was so obvious that *the true name was to be considered to be part of the bearer of the name, is not indeed to substitute for him*" (emphasis added, 405). Hence, Mailer's use of generic spousal diction carries substantial implications, including definitional assumptions that readers may have about the duties, roles, and responsibilities of husbands and wives.
12. As Gadamer reminds us, "In our analysis of romantic hermeneutics we have already seen that understanding is not based on transposing oneself into another person, on one person's immediate participation with another. To understand what a person says is . . . to come to an understanding about the subject matter, not to get inside another person and relive his experiences (*Erlebnisse*) (383).

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