# A NEW POLITICS OF FORM IN *HARLOT'S GHOST*

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> "The sour truth is that I am imprisoned with a perception which will settle for nothing less than making a revolution in the consciousness of our time" (*Advertisements for Myself* 17).
>
> "Please do not understand me too quickly." (Norman Mailer's quoting of Andre Gide in the epigraph to *The Deer Park*).

**I. Introduction**

Norman Mailer was one of the most ambitious writers of our time. He had enormous faith in the power of writing to influence and change society and to alter the quality of human life. Despite the controversies that swirled around his public figure, he should be more recognized for the scope of his efforts to use his writing to transform America. With bravado, courage, and a bit of recklessness, he has repeatedly proclaimed his *personal* ambition to place himself, as a writer, in the company of literary giants and thereby remedy what he believes are America's literary deficiencies, while also promising that he is about to write a novel that will create the "revolution in consciousness" (*Advertisements* 17) which he believes is necessary to rejuvenate a stagnant America,[1] through writing the "great American novel" which will "tell the truth of our times." Undoubtedly, however, this effort has been fraught with difficulties; as Carl Rollyson explains in his biography of Mailer: "In the forty years since *The Naked and the Dead* Mailer has been searching for a way to write the great panoramic American novel.... America had

THE MAILER REVIEW, VOL. 2, NO. 1, FALL 2008. Copyright © 2008. The Norman Mailer Society. Published by The Norman Mailer Society.

seemed too complex for any single novelist—no matter how mature—to take on (359)." His last, sustained effort to reveal America through a work of fiction is the long historical novel about the CIA, *Harlot's Ghost*. However, this novel has been overlooked as the culmination of Mailer's project of a fictional representation of America and therefore largely ignored as the important work of politically engaged fiction that I believe it is.[2] This is undoubtedly because the novel presents a strange puzzle; both its content and form need careful consideration before its significance can be understand.

My essay offers a reading of the novel in relation to Mailer's efforts to use fiction writing to reveal contradictions at the heart of American society and challenge American ideology, particularly in relation to the Cold War, while offering an explanation for the unorthodox formal features. In contrast to most critics who have written on the novel, I believe that *Harlot's Ghost* presents a fierce indictment of America during the Cold War and after, which is intensified by the unconventional form.[3] Indeed, I hope to show that the novel's importance and significance, the truth it tells about American society, lies in what might appear its utter failure, both as a novel and a judgment on the history and politics, namely the way the novel fails to cohere as a novel. The novel refuses overt judgments on the events narrated. Paradoxical as it may seem, I will argue that the *failure* of traditional novelistic form and resolution creates a dialectic between reader and text allowing important revelations about American society to emerge which make the novel a success in telling the "truth of our times." The truths revealed are precisely that the issues of the novel, which concern the meaning of the Cold War and the struggle between capitalism and its challenges, are not over and that instead of "the end of history" (to use Francis Fukiyama's famous phrase) we are still plunged into unresolved history. Therefore, the novel's form and its political and social content are unified in their challenge to the dominant societal narratives about America and how these narratives are traditionally told.

**II. A Mystery wrapped in an Enigma**

The relative neglect of the novel is easily understandable. After 1,168 pages, Norman Mailer terminates *Harlot's Ghost* with a promise. He writes in bold capital letters at the end of the novel "TO BE CONTINUED."[4] There has been no sequel. To make matters worse, none of the conflicts of the novel,

whether personal or political, are resolved, leaving readers to wonder about the fate of Harry Hubbard, the central character, and the other characters in the novel. This has obviously frustrated many readers. Given that Hubbard is a CIA agent caught in highly charged, real episodes in the history of the Cold War, and considering Mailer's career-long ambition to tell the "truth of our times," more information is expected. The novel ends with Hubbard in Moscow, after years of service to the CIA, looking for his godfather and career mentor, known as Harlot, who may have faked death and defected to the Soviets. In the last sentence of the novel, Hubbard poses a question: "Could I be ready to find my godfather and ask him, along with everything else I would ask: 'Whom?' In the immortal words of Vladimir Ilich Lenin, 'Whom? Whom does all this benefit?'"[5] It is puzzling that this question, so starkly posed, has not received an answer in the sequel promised at the end of the novel.

Mailer sets up grandiose expectations for the sequel by the incomplete ending and the final questions of the novel. The information left open concerns the fictional life of Harry Hubbard but also implies a verdict on the politics of America in the Cold War. To explain the events of *Harlot's Ghost* means to reveal history since Hubbard is conveniently placed in the midst of major episodes in the Cold War due to his role in the CIA as an "agent" trying to influence developments. It is only at the end that Hubbard and readers realize the degree to which there is uncertainty as to what exactly has happened and why. In effect, the novel has set up a mystery without providing answers. However, to provide the meaning of the political events so starkly, in the form of answers to a question ("Whom does all this benefit?"), which will supposedly be answered when Harlot is located, is difficult to imagine given the deep level of political truths involved. Can any person, no matter how well placed, really be imagined who can answer ultimate truths about the meaning of the Cold War? In my view, it is to Mailer's credit that he challenges himself to find a way to imaginatively create persuasive answers and meaning to the most important political issues of our times. Yet, it is further to his credit that, whether consciously or not, he has shown the honesty to abandon a simple approach to a career long objective which could only be achieved, I will argue, at the cost of intellectual, political, and literary triviality. In effect, Mailer turns away from a dream that, if achieved, would situate him as part of a literary tradition that includes authors he admires most: Balzac, Tolstoy, and Zola, who also strove to tell the truth of

their times. However, to invent a character revealing the meaning behind historical events brings to mind the superficiality of conspiracy theories, one form of historical fiction that seems to be growing in popularity (sometimes interestingly in literature but tragically in public discourse).[6] On the other hand, Bertolt Brecht's goal for writers that they should "render reality to men in a form they can master" (*Aesthetics and Politics* 81)[7] seems the prerequisite for any politically useful fiction and sets up relevant criteria for evaluating *Harlot's Ghost*. Therefore, Mailer's unwillingness or inability to write an ending or sequel to *Harlot's Ghost* will be considered in light of such Brechtian goals. This paper will show that the novel's lack of resolution is best understood not as a personal failure, or as symptomatic of the impossibility of political writing at the present time, but rather represents a new and valuable strategy in Mailer's efforts to present unpleasant realities of American society. It should be noted, in passing, that my argument is not based on Mailer's conscious *intention*, which cannot be definitively ascertained, but rather on the logic of the novel in relation to its historical and political subject matter and Mailer's stated objectives. These objectives are derived from Mailer's career-long writings, interviews and public pronouncements and, in my view, form a clear and definable worldview and approach to human existence and human freedom.

With a few notable exceptions, this novel hasn't fared well among critics and readers because it has been taken as conservative and sympathetic to the CIA, and because of its lack of an ending. These reactions need to be reconsidered. The novel is not a flattering portrait of the CIA, as we shall see, despite the tendency of some commentators to conflate the politics of *Harlot's Ghost* with that of its narrator and protagonist, Harry Hubbard who, at least initially, views the CIA as a noble organization.[8] *Harlot's Ghost* presents a damning vision of contemporary American society that fits into an alternative canon of politically engaged, Cold War literature that find traditional modes of representation inadequate for conditions of late capitalism. The novel's lack of closure, although frustrating to many readers, reflects an unwillingness to artificially resolve the real historical conditions and conflicts depicted in the novel—even if this is a *post-facto* explanation. This refusal of premature closure represents a new politics of form for Mailer. To understand the novel's lack of ending, we need to consider the subtle and unexpected affinities between Mailer's performance and the Brechtian concepts of how political art should function as elaborated by Walter Benjamin.[9]

The novel's lack of closure is best understood by considering it in light of Walter Benjamin's famous essay, influenced by Brecht, "The Author as Producer."[10] Benjamin confronts the question that has haunted Mailer for years—namely, how can authors effectively and meaningfully use their writing to expand creativity and human freedom[11] in the face of the de-personalizing effects of modern capitalism. It is often the case that the politics of a work of fiction is reduced to its explicit political content but Benjamin, in contrast makes the claim, still radical in current circumstances, that "the tendency of a work of literature can be politically correct only if it is also correct in the literary sense," (86) inextricably linking political content to form. Therefore, by Benjamin's criteria the politics of *Harlot's Ghost* do not reside in what it overtly tells us about the politics of the CIA, but rather through a more complex dialectic between the novel's form and content. The justification for Benjamin's assertion lies in his description of a situation in which, "we are in the midst of a vast process in which literary forms are being melted down, a process in which many of the contrasts in terms of which we have been accustomed to think may lose their relevance" (87), which is more true in the contemporary media and information explosion that accompanies late capitalism than when Benjamin wrote. Mailer's incomplete novel can be taken as coherent if, despite the belief that we live in a post-ideological era where the struggle between capitalism and its challenges are over, the issues at the heart of the Cold War remain unresolved, leaving a final word impossible.

**III. The Portrait of a Young Man—Hubbard and Mailer**

There is a strange ambiguity within *Harlot's Ghost* concerning the novel's subject matter. The novel is about real historical events yet it also serves as a *Bildüngsroman* (as Hubbard himself describes the work) (*HG* 109) under the veneer of the spy genre. *Harlot's Ghost* certainly disappoints readers who expect the traditional features of spy novels, since all of the experiences described are left profoundly opaque and there are no heroic resolutions à la Ian Fleming. Perhaps the closest literary comparison would be Conrad's *The Secret Agent* since both novels are filled with bureaucratic machinations, unsavory characters, and a vision of society in terminal crisis, although Mailer never provides even the limited cognitive satisfaction of Conrad's highly ambiguous work. In *The Secret Agent*, readers are at least provided with enough details to understand the motivations of the characters and the

events of the novel. *Harlot's Ghost* features an almost complete, radical indeterminacy, where it is not just the characters that don't know the meaning of the events but also the readers and perhaps even the author himself. This situation is justified by understanding the real subject matter of the novel.

Critics who have written about the novel have generally taken it as a simple novel about the CIA, and have failed to notice its allegorical features and the way the novel operates.[12] On the literal level, the novel treats historical events from the Cold War and espionage. On a deeper level, the novel concerns issues central to Mailer, namely the possibility of creativity, freedom, and the cost of success in American society. Mailer's intellectual framework, based on the valorization of courage and existential integrity as the road to self-expansion, is tested in this novel through characters who strive to succeed in influencing history.[13] Further, as is often true of Mailer's writing, questions of individuality and freedom intersect with the status of *writing* and being a *writer*. The status of writing is explicitly at stake since the novel is formed by a series of incomplete narratives with missing information from the protagonist Hubbard, who at one point explains, "I clung to my writings as if they were body organs" (102). Hubbard feels that if he can narrate the events he will have gained knowledge and provided absolute truths; however, since his narrative if fragmentary, filled with gaps, and incomplete, he cannot fulfill either goal.

Mailer's treatment of the dangers and conditions of life in the CIA gives a clue to the novel's real subject matter, which is broader than just the military and information gathering features of the Cold War. The Cold War and espionage serve as parts of a greater whole, as metonymic representations of the nature of life in America. This explains the fact that we find few episodes of physical danger in Mailer's CIA. Instead, the difficulty of CIA work seems to parallel the struggles of any individual striving for success inside a large, faceless bureaucracy and an impersonal society. Harry Hubbard describes himself at the beginning of the novel when he reviews his entire career, as a once-promising CIA operative, who is reduced to hack status. He has failed in every major project and has been reduced to the object of amusement by his colleagues who whisper about his failed potential. Indeed, all the agents in the novel, whether fictional or based on real CIA agents, are obsessed with the most American of ambitions: career advancement. Courage, skill, and grace (key values for Mailer) are generally tested in the shark infested waters of "the Company," not by evil madmen intent on taking over the world, but

by common features of life in capitalist America, including the struggle for career advancement. The dangers to America are what America is becoming. This theme is familiar in Mailer's work and has been accurately summarized by Harold Bloom as conditions of, "[A]n America where he [Mailer] sees our bodies and spirits as becoming increasingly artificial, even 'plastic' ...." ("Norman" 40). In other words, authentic experience and meaningful action is constantly threatened by standardizing features and mediocrity prevalent in the CIA ("the Company" extraordinaire).

An indicative example of life in the CIA and its "dangers" face Hubbard on his first assignment. He is placed in a records room known as the "Snake Pit" and ordered to provide information and files on an individual known only by a code acronym. He cannot locate the data since it has either been removed or lost. Since he is under orders by a superior officer overseas to provide this information, which cannot be located, his mission becomes to conceal his own identity as an incompetent data clerk. He is able to do this with the help of his mentor and Godfather, Harlot, who has the power to change Harry's own code name acronym. Eventually, he gets placed overseas and finds himself in West Germany, serving under Bill Harvey (the real CIA station head at that time) who gives him the assignment of locating the real identity of the incompetent data clerk who, it turns out, failed to locate information for Harvey. Hubbard's mission becomes investigating and reporting on the real identity of an incompetent clerk who turns out to be Hubbard himself (shades of Oedipus).

Hubbard manages to conceal his identity despite close dealings with Harvey. However, he never finds out the significance of his original inability to locate the data requested. Perhaps the original missing information would have provided Harvey with information about a double agent, reporting to the East Germans about the secret construction of a tunnel, which would have aided the West in spiriting information and people across the Iron Curtain. In other words, Hubbard's failure might have been of real importance in the Cold War. This distinguishes life in the CIA from other agencies or bureaus of government or business, since the CIA is, to a very large degree, in the business of directly intervening in history through the achievement of accurate information or "intelligence." Hubbard makes clear that he is attracted to the CIA precisely because, as he explains in his CIA personal history statement, "*I have been brought up to face ultimates*" (182), which reflects the belief that the CIA is the road to truth and effective action. However,

truth is never so easy. Harlot argues to Hubbard that the successful completion of the tunnel would have been a disaster because it would have provided *too much* information about the real state of affairs in the Soviet bloc (a weak level of military preparedness and a series of bankrupt economies), which would threaten CIA funding. Harlot prefers disinformation to accurate information because it justifies future government expenditures. Did he set up Hubbard? Another possibility readers are forced to consider is that Harlot himself is a double agent and therefore subverts the tunnel to aid the Soviets. Readers, like Hubbard, never know for sure.

When Hubbard moves on to operations in Uruguay to fight communist influence, he receives a secret message from a high-ranking KGB official that there is a high-ranking double agent and he shouldn't trust anyone—particularly the Soviet Division of the CIA. When Hubbard is debriefed; that is, interrogated by the Soviet Division, he decides not to report this part of the message. His evasion sets in motion a prolonged series of questions: it seems suspicious to the Soviet Division, experts on how the KGB works, that a KGB agent would become a double agent for the US by fingering double agents against the US without specifying who they are. And, of course, the KGB does act exactly as expected to act, but Harry, not knowing how the KGB is supposed to act, puts himself in jeopardy. If his omission is revealed, Hubbard will appear as a double agent himself, but with the help of Harlot he is able to get out of the jam. Harlot himself offers the theory that if Hubbard mentioned the Soviet Division, it would be taken, by the Soviet Division, as evidence that Harlot and Harry were intent on destroying the Soviet Division.

This picture of CIA activities would be ridiculous if it didn't present a convincing picture of institutional logic. All of these gaps in knowledge are typical of the novel. Indeed, they present a consistent picture of inherent, systematic obstacles to effective activity. As Hubbard puts it, "As an Agency officer, I … encountered my fair share of plots … but I was rarely able to see them whole" (109–110). This conflicts with the "existential" quest for courage, freedom and effective action since for an individual to freely choose his or her behavior, they must be able to understand their situation with a certain degree of accuracy. What prevents success in *Harlot's Ghost* is not lack of courage or unwillingness to face unpleasant truths, but rather the daily functioning of compartmentalized, fragmented, and isolated individuals pursuing their own local interests. Knowledge and effective action are

revealed as impossible on a micro-level, despite the traditional claim that competing interests in a market system result in maximum efficiency, fair results, and the common good. Truth, if it exists at all in this fictional world of espionage, can only be imagined as a whole picture looked at from the outside of the multiple bureaus and interests. However, if we take these episodes as suggestive of American society more broadly with its logic of privatization and the market system, we are given a critical picture of how the divergent interests that operate within American capitalist society serve to frustrate the interests of the whole. The ultimate logic of capitalism and the market (where each individual pursues individual interests) are revealed as leading to incoherence and flawed results. American society is in crisis, unable to function effectively in the Cold War because so-called intelligence gathering can never effectively provide more than limited and partial information, and truth is contingent upon pragmatic considerations.

The major characters and their problems also function more narrowly. The CIA agents, determined to influence history, are all would-be authors; they are not just writers-in-general, but the characters often articulate ideas similar to Mailer himself.[14] On the most general level, they are all ambitious and determined, but are left in a precarious status in terms of their ultimate contribution to history (like Mailer).

The novel opens with Hubbard reading over his memoirs. He opines that under other circumstances he might have settled as a writer (just as Mailer states in the "Author's note" that under other circumstances he might have been a CIA agent, which reveals similarities between the two "spooky arts") but he wonders if anyone will ever read his document. We flash back to his early life where, notably, there are many common features between the tradecraft of writing and espionage. Hubbard learns that espionage is an art. He finds out that "codes" express and determine the life of an agent. Codes change an individual's name, and Hubbard expresses the view that "the change of name itself ought to be enough to alter one's character" (196) and that "even as shifting one's cryptonym called forth a new potentiality for oneself, so there was a shiver of metamorphosis in this alteration of appearance"(197). Developing a code name is taken as the construction of a personality, one of the primary tasks of writers and CIA agents alike. Being an effective agent is almost directly compared to the kinds of imagination and creativity required for producing powerful literature. For example, Hubbard describes his early training:

> We were assigned a specific color for each number…
>
> [n]ext, we were asked to visualize a wall, a table, a lamp. If the first three digits of the telephone number were 586, we were to picture a red wall behind a gray table on which was sitting an orange lamp. For the succeeding four numbers, we might visualize a woman in a purple jacket, green skirt, and yellow shoes sitting on an orange chair. That was our mental notation for 4216. By such means, 586-4216 had been converted into a picture with seven colored objects.… I became so proficient at these equivalents that I saw hues so soon as I heard numbers. (197–198)

Espionage is the art of metaphor. Representation allows transformation, the alteration of "appearances" and signifiers creating powerful new meanings. This is what agents learn in their CIA schooling, according to Mailer. They don't just master symbols, metaphors, codes, and figures of speech; they also master influence over others. This is Harlot's specialty, what he trains agents in, and he stresses that influencing individuals through the art of espionage is linked with the struggle to influence history. This is made particularly clear when "counter-espionage," or developing double agents, is taught by Harlot and practiced by Hubbard in Uruguay. Hubbard describes feeling a loyalty to his "creation" Chevi Fuertes, a leftist won over to the CIA who eventually defects to Cuba after the Bay of Pigs fails to create effective characters or characters misunderstood by critics. Through these and other episodes in the CIA, we see that Hubbard's grand ambitions parallel Mailer's, and interestingly, generally lead to failure.

It is not just Harry that can be seen as embodying elements of Mailer's worldview. Kittredge, a woman agent married to both Harry and Harlot at different times in the novel, is a career psychologist and theorist for the CIA, and she also articulates a theory of personality that shares much in common with Mailer's views. (Mailer's worldview is frequently given voice in almost all of his novels since *An American Dream*.) Her explanations of human behavior are direct articulations of Mailer's theories of the human personality, to the degree that her theories seems straight out of Mailer's essays on Henry Miller, collected in the anthology *Genius and Lust*, or even Mailer's last collection of reflections, *On God: An Uncommon Conversation*.[15] She articulates, in great detail, Mailer's oft-stated theory of the dual nature of the human personality and the concept of the "Alpha and Omega" of the

psyche; the two-sided, male-female, divided nature of the human personality. She explains that when one acts in a destructive or ineffective manner, this should be understood as the inability to reconcile two sides of an individual's personality. Although she has had a successful career as the CIA's in-house psychologist and philosopher, she has a problem: her career is failing. In fact, it is an interesting fact that despite her championing of Mailer's views, she is in despair. It is a sign of Mailer's own self-critical ability to question his own perspective that characters fail and flounder despite articulating views close to Mailer's. She writes:

> Harry, for the last five years, I have carried this burden of woe, doubt, misery, and burgeoning frustration…
>
> Harry, life has always treated me as a darling, and for much too long. If my mother merely adored me my father more than made up for it.… My brain was so fertile that I could have gone off to a desert island and been deliriously happy with myself. The only pains I knew were the ferocious congestions attendant on new ideas. (556–557)

Mailer has described feeling as if he were the literary darling of critics after his early success with *The Naked and The Dead*, which was extravagantly praised, but followed by harshly treated subsequent novels, *The Deer Park* and *Barbary Shore*. Clearly, Mailer knew what it felt like to have incredibly "fertile" periods of creativity accompanied by frustration. Mailer has shown a repeated willingness to air publicly the frustrations of being a writer in his writing. Kittredge ends her despair, as Mailer so often has, by resolving to "find a way to renew oneself."

Despite her articulation of Mailer's theories, she, like all the characters, is unable ultimately to account for her sense of failure, and the theory fails. What makes this reading important about *Harlot's Ghost* is that the novel functions as a testing ground for Mailer's ideology, yet reveals the possibility of deconstructing that ideology. Mailer has stressed, in his essays and fiction, his conviction that courage and will determine success and that we must be "existentially" responsible for the conditions of our life. Bravery and honesty must be summoned and maintained and then we will be successful, Mailer claims. Mailer's conviction is represented in *An American Dream* when Stephen Rojack walks around an apartment building balcony ledge,

staving off the attempt of a devil-like character to push him off. After this act, Rojack, achieves inner peace and the novel resolves (unpersuasively, in my view).

The problem of failure, therefore, is a problem in Mailer's worldview. This may explain the persistence of the supernatural in Mailer's writings with the frequent presence of powerful forces, pressures, and "ghosts" that serve to constrict or destroy. The pseudo-metaphoric struggle between the individual spirit and supernatural forces (in all their murky strangeness and mystery) is central in almost all of Mailer's writing. These "ghosts" seem to serve the function of calling upon individuals to achieve inner courage and strength, and also, to explain the failure of these values. What must be noticed is that all the agents in *Harlot's Ghost* seem headed toward failure, precisely because of intangible conditions that cannot be dealt with or understood—then the novel's abrupt ending leaves their lives and history suspended, with Kittredge either speaking to Harlot or his ghost. Why doesn't the novel resolve this? It is as if Mailer stands at the abyss of a logic he will not face, namely that courage and spiritual development cannot provide success in the face of the impersonal forces of American society, and turns away out of fear and frustration. But this turning away is actually supreme honesty for Mailer's project since it reveals the true unresolved state of American society.

In Mailer's writing, dualism has not been enough to explain away the prevalent dread of failure. He has repeatedly supplemented his dualist explanation with "ghosts" and references to the battle between God and the Devil. What are these strange powers that move and slip in all realms of Mailer's literary life? The unknowable and the supernatural in *Harlot's Ghost* is manifest in the character of Harlot himself. Harlot is the God-like figure of the novel as Hubbard explains, "Harlot [is] a manifest of the Lord" (75), or when he believes Harlot is dead Hubbard poses the question, "What would you do if you received incontrovertible news that the Lord had died?" (45). However literally we take this, it is clear by the end of the novel that Harlot's status as a character who will reveal the mysteries of the novel is made problematic by his uncertain status as either dead, alive, or a ghost. History as an absolute truth is blocked by the structure of American society in ways so effectively represented in this novel, yet history itself is experienced as an inexplicable failure by Mailer's characters. They fail to effectively intervene in history, most clearly in their efforts to defeat the Cuban revolution. This explains the mysteries around Harlot and his "ghost"; how else to explain

heroic efforts that fail, if you believe, like Harry Hubbard that "love [is] a reward [for courage]. One could find it only after one's virtue, or one's courage, or self-sacrifice, or generosity or loss, had succeeded in stirring the power of creation" (54). Harlot, is amongst all else, the rival for Kittredge's affections, whom she seems to be talking with toward the end of the novel's chronology. Mailer himself states in *On God*, "my own experience tells me that the degree one is brave, one finds more love than when one is cowardly" (29). The mysterious and ghostly is precisely the failure of ambition, of courage and the American dream (if you work hard and persevere, you succeed—if you fail it is your own fault). Mailer, like his characters, is caught in this duality: he subscribes to the American dream, yet realizes his own experience doesn't correspond to it. This requires mysticism to sustain the dream. If you are worthy, the "powers of creation" will be stirred, but if you fail the same powers will block you.

There is one other "author" who functions with a formal similarity to Mailer in *Harlot's Ghost*, namely Harlot. He is the master spy that is expected to tell the truth and reveal all in the sequel. He has been the guiding influence on events, the person Hubbard describes as his own personal "master in the only spiritual art that American men and boys respect—machismo" who "gave life courses in grace under pressure" (17). He is the author of the ideology of courage that Hubbard develops. Of course, it must be stressed that Harlot tests his willingness to face absolutes, to push beyond the limits, and he fails during a rock climbing accident which reduces him to a wheelchair and literal and symbolic impotence (Kittredge leaves him after the accident and marries Hubbard), killing their son, and damaging his career. This suggests the limitations of Harlot's framework and, by extension, Mailer's.

Harlot, however, remains the author of the various plots that drive the novel. In this sense, he is again like Mailer. He is expected to answer the questions that have been left unanswered and provide historical truth. Harlot is the godfather to Hubbard, the god-like figure who would be in a position to tell the truth and rise above the fray of conflicting interests and perspectives, but he is left fundamentally unknowable as a character.

**IV. The Novelist as the God that Fails and the Novel as Disinformation**

Close to the end of the novel, Hubbard has some disconcerting thoughts. In a conversation with Bill Harvey (a fictional character based on the real CIA station chief) suspicion is cast upon the loyalty of Hugh Montague, a.k.a.

Harlot, who has been the primary influence over Harry's career. Could Harlot, one of the most powerful leaders of the CIA, actually be a Soviet agent? This would make Harlot the complete opposite of everything he appears to be and would call into question all the values and ideology that Harry Hubbard assumes. In addition, since Harlot explains all of his efforts in Manichean terms of serving God against the Devil (echoes of Mailer), and *if* Harlot is a Soviet agent, then the absolute values assumed throughout the novel, and taught by Harlot, either collapse into nihilism and become self-serving or reverse their position: God representing democracy and capitalism is really evil and the Devil of Communism is really good. This has become a possibility that Harry's experience with the CIA, particularly his truly disastrous efforts to overthrow the Cuban revolution and assassinate Fidel Castro, makes him inclined to consider seriously if the God of Capitalism is really the God or the Devil. How the entire novel is to be understood rests upon what side, if any, Harlot really serves.

Harry remembers a conversation with Harlot about God and Evolution. Evolution threatens the theory of divine creation. In response, Harlot proposes the theory that God tricks man by setting up false appearances for God's protection to secure his function. Evolution explains things, but is a "cover story" designed by God to confuse man. Harlot reasons: " 'You can say the universe is a splendidly-worked up system of disinformation calculated to make us believe in evolution and so divert us away from God. Yes, that is exactly what I would do if I were the Lord and could not trust My own creation.' " (1281). This disconcerts Harry considerably since *he* is Harlot's creation. Has the entire Cold War, or at least his part of it, been a massive disinformation campaign? If so, has Hubbard been serving good (God) or the (Devil), and do these values reside in capitalism or communism, or some third way? Also, the discourse of deception should make readers of this novel suspicious since it suggests the novel itself might be a complex piece of trickery, precisely what the incomplete ending of the novel also suggests. If we go back to an early Mailer interview, "Hip, Hell, and the Navigator" in *Advertisements for Myself*, we find Mailer talking about God in terms of the future of the novel and creativity more broadly. In this interview, Mailer disarmingly jumps from conceptions of God, to conceptions of individual freedom, to the place of the writer in history. In an interesting way, these levels of concern shift and alter into a common concern. He explains his conception of God as "divided, not-all powerful; He exists as a warring element" and claims

"we are a part—perhaps the most important part—of His great expression." (*Advertisements* 380) Mailer makes humans into characters in God's great novel. In both cases, language such as "God," "His great expression" and "creation" directly connects God and the universe with the novelist and his novel. In the interview Mailer goes on to make explicit this connection by stressing the implications of his Gnostic brand of theology:

> It [God as the source of expression] opens the possibility that the novel, along with many other art forms may be growing into something larger rather than something smaller, and the sickness of our times for me has been just this damn thing that everything has been getting smaller and smaller and less and less important. (*Advertisements* 382)

The divine and mystical power of God allows new reservoirs of creative energy for aesthetic expression. If, however, we compare Harlot's statement with Mailer's earlier claims above, we detect an important shift. In both conceptions God is divided and warring, like a writer struggling to create works that are true to personal vision but facing critical rejection. However, Harlot's theology is based on a God that is a losing force and that does not trust his audience. God needs to produce disinformation or his rule will be threatened by his creations. I suggest that Mailer's theology, and Harlot's, helps us understand how to read *Harlot's Ghost* and probe beneath appearances. Harlot, who plots Hubbard's fate and orchestrated history, manipulates because, like God, he needs to face the conditions of things becoming "smaller" and "less important." Therefore, what is at stake in this novel is precisely the possibility of the novel, in general, as a creative form which can reveal understanding about history and society (which has always been Mailer's stated objectives), or novels reduced to a minor expressive form. Mailer's youthful optimism and confident rebellion against shrinkage of human and expressive potential seem lost: as God, Harlot and the novel are in danger of being revealed as weak frauds. If Harlot, who plays God with his Godson Harry, not to mention the CIA as a whole with its missions and history, is really part of an elaborate hoax, then the novel itself, by extension, threatens to be revealed as inadequate to represent history. However, perhaps Mailer's strategy is similar to what he projected onto a threatened God; the grand novel that resolves history is disinformation. The lapse in this novel's ending

becomes full of implications for novel writing at large. Perhaps just this deception is necessary since the novel is not expanding and growing larger in our world of the television and the Internet but needs to be fought for in new ways.

To pursue this idea further, it is necessary to return to a scene early in the novel, (but late in Harry's life) before he decides to travel to Russia, when the news has come that Harlot is dead. Harry, after deceiving Kittredge with an affair, and before she explains she will leave him for someone else, comes upon Kittredge talking to Harlot. Since Harlot is thought to be dead, this is quite strange. She is either delusional, talking to his ghost, or talking to the real Harlot. However, Harry can never know or obtain answers, short of finding Harlot, and the entire meaning of all that will come (or has come depending on the chronology taken in terms of Harry's life or the narrative structure of the novel) revolves around this ghost. Is it real or not? The implications fundamentally shape the meaning of the entire novel and Harry's relation with history. If Harlot is dead, then there can be no answers to motivations, loyalties, and the meaning of historical actions. The only meaning Harlot can retain in the "death of God" scenario is as a figure in the personal memories of Kittredge and Harry. Further, Kittredge's talking with Harlot is madness, a delusion that truth can be revealed through communication. Harlot's death is the end of the dream of making sense of history and of the novel's mysteries. If Harlot is alive, on the other hand, then meaning can be made of his historical interventions (he can be asked for the truth in Moscow) and of history proper. If so, however, then his ghostly visage is illusory, a deception and fraud and the personal relations between Kittredge and Harlot become thoroughly subjective and unreliable. Take your choice, Harlot can seemingly only function as truth on the personal level or on the political level—but not both.

To make sense of this ending, it is useful to return to Walter Benjamin. In his essay on authors in capitalism, he claims that the true revolution that writers can affect is one in terms of "technique":

> Before I ask: what is a work's position *vis-à-vis* the production relations of its time, I should like to ask: what is its position *within* them? This question concerns the function of a work within the literary production relations of its time. In other words, it is directly concerned with literary *technique*. (87)

This emphasis on "technique" is further explained by the claim that a progressive "technique" is defined as a type of writing which "will be better, the more consumers it brings in contact with the production process—in short, the more readers or spectators it turns into collaborators" (98).

This framework of Benjamin's sheds new light on what can be made of the apparent failure of the novel to resolve. Mailer himself has given two explanations. At the time of the novel's publication, Mailer promised to complete the work after some time went by, but recently has stated that he won't revisit the novel because technology has dehumanized espionage. This doesn't seem persuasive to me because the novel's scope is not contemporary espionage but historical episodes revealed through the voice of a fictional spy positioned to discover truth. Interestingly, in an earlier interview for BBC, Mailer defends the form of the novel in a way that directly echoes Benjamin's concept of a transformation in technique, which transforms authors into producers. He says:

> The reader having been given the end and the beginning will conceive of that 'middle'; they know that the middle takes place in Vietnam, and Watergate, and that the love affair between Harry Hubbard and Kittredge … was consummated in that 'middle' and they will think about it, and in their own mind—if they like the book—they'll come to the point where they conceive of that middle novel. Now, if I come along and write it in the next few years, they'll then be able to check their version of the novel against mine. (Glenday 135)

From the vantage point of "telling" the "truth of our times," and on the level of crafting an explicit plot resolution, the novel fails. The position of the author is in decline—at least in terms of the author as the "hero" who reveals history. Could the novel be taken as an elaborate hoax? Mailer, himself, at some level, recognizes that there is no novelistic resolution to the level of questions he poses. Even though Mailer planned to write a sequel, the results remain: the incomplete novel becomes a radical formal experiment and gesture of making the readers into the "authors" of the sequel. Mailer stresses the value of readers who "conceive" the ending. Given that the ending revolves around the nature of the Cold War and the value of the relative sides, making the readers interpret the future "ending" means placing the readers as

judges of history. Perhaps Mailer's attachment to radical individualism and existential courage is shown inadequate in the face of "ghosts"; that is, the collective, overpowering force of history that cannot be revealed by an "author" because they are beyond the purview of an individual. On the other hand, out of this failure, meaningful truth is produced and revealed, precisely out of abandoning the position of the author who tells all. Any answers given by Mailer to the questions at the end of the novel would ring hollow since they would force him to stand for or against the U.S. role in the Cold War by making Harlot a hero or villain. True, the reader cannot end this novel with the sense of completion or satisfaction traditional novels provide. Instead, we are left to become the writers and producers—speculating and arguing about how the novel that wasn't written should end. We may consider whether the public media-driven faith in the God-like claims about capitalism and so-called democracy, which are supposedly outside of time and history and beyond challenge are an elaborate hoax. Harlot may be alive or dead, and like a possible "God" and "Devil" we cannot know, but we are put in the writer's place free from the authority of any divine will. It would be ironic if Mailer, who, like his fictional CIA agents, has spent a career attempting to write the great novel, decided not to, precisely so that by turning away from this project and refusing a sequel, he forces us to rethink our relationship to novels and history. This is where his great contribution can reside.

**V. Back to the Future**

There is one other way that the novel offers knowledge about history. The novel was written before the end of the Cold War. Since this point, we, the readers of history, have been told the story that we are at the "end of history" where the great dualistic struggle between capitalism (as represented by America) and communism (represented by the Soviet bloc) is over, goodness has won, and the era of peace and prosperity is awaiting.[16] This suggests that the truth of the Cold War was revealed and it can be seen clearly what was at stake—the benefits of liberal democracy or the necessarily evil nature of communism or any attempt to challenge the market system. In a sense, history seemed to provide the answer to the question of Mailer's novel. A sense of euphoria and moral certitude swept over the victors of the Cold War as they proclaimed with religious ferocity the advent of the American Century and the "new world order." However, quickly this resolution of the plot dissolved. From the vantage point of distance, the choice God or the

Devil, the Soviet Union or America, victory or defeat seems a strange piece of "disinformation." Despite America's victory, like Norman Mailer's unfinished novel, all of the dangers and possibilities, the ambiguities and contradictions, seem still unresolved. Mailer turns out to be prescient; the novel is not over. There still has been no way to end, for good or bad, the plot twists and surprises, the unexplained betrayals and crimes of recent history. Any answers to history that seemed written by the end of the Cold War turn out to be incomplete and faulty, ideological and short-sighted as capitalist America continues to engender conflict and confusion, dangers and resistance. The truth of these events will not be given to us by some expert with words. We are still left to create the story that will tell the truth of our times, but it won't be written on paper.

**NOTES**

1. See again *Advertisements* as well as essays in *Cannibals and Christians* and Norman Mailer, *Pieces and Pontifications* (Boston: Little Brown, 1982). This point recurs throughout his writing.
2. One of the many critics who argue this way is Heather Nielson (pp. 23–41), who sums up her conclusion about Mailer's politics based on *Harlot's Ghost* and *Oswald's Tale* by stating, "What an examination of the persistent presence of Kennedy in their writings tends to suggest is that, for all Mailer's non-conformism, his oeuvre serves to ultimately uphold the defining myths of the society which he describes, while that of Vidal works to undermine them" (23). While her analysis of the episodes featuring Kennedy in Mailer's work and Vidal's is persuasive in showing that Mailer's writings on Kennedy are more positive than Vidal's, this doesn't justify, in my opinion, the broad conclusions she draws. On the other hand, the major critic who has treated *Harlot's Ghost* as a whole, John Whalen-Bridge argues persuasively in "The Myth of American Adam in Late Mailer" that Mailer's novel debunks the "myth of the American Adam." This "myth" described by R.W.B Lewis (and others) concerns alleged American "innocence" which Whalen-Bridge convincingly demonstrates is undermined by the novel. Whalen-Bridge is the major scholar that has written in detail on *Harlot's Ghost* and draws the conclusion that "His [Mailer's DA] fictional interpretation of American intelligence work does more than any other work of literature to help readers gain access to 'the imagination of the state.' " Unfortunately, few others have recognized the critical features of the novel. See also Whalen-Bridge, *Political Fiction and the American Self*. Others who don't believe the novel is critical of the CIA include Glenday who, in his biography states categorically that the novel "doesn't set out be, then, a critique of the CIA" (p. 131) and Dearborn.

3. I would place this novel alongside masterpieces of Cold War literature such as Coover, Doctorow and Delillo below. All of these novels challenge the conventions of traditional literary realism and present radical formal structures.
4. This isn't the very end of the *Harlot's Ghost*. Mailer writes an "Author's Note" which offers a defense of the novel's claim for "verisimilitude" to historical reality and a list of non-fiction works about the CIA that informed the novel. This is followed by a list of CIA acronyms and individuals. This is an interesting and unconventional ending to a fictional spy novel. See *Harlot's Ghost* pp. 1169–1187.
5. It is doubtful that Lenin ever said this. Although presented as a quotation it is, as far as I can ascertain—at best—a paraphrase. It sounds a little like the title of Lenin's famous book that also presents a question, *What is to be Done*? It also seems similar to the question Kevin Costner, playing Jim Garrison, in Oliver Stone's *JFK* asks about the Kennedy assassination—who benefits from this? See Lenin.
6. Conspiracy theories have been taken by several critics as the hallmark of postmodern historical representation. See Jameson, and McHale, among others.
7. This phrase comes from Brecht's polemic around the *nature* of realism with Georg Lukács "Against Lukács" in *Aesthetics and Politics* (NY: Verso, 1978 p. 81).
8. Mary Dearborn in her recent biography of Norman Mailer takes this view of the work. She writes, "To Hubbard, America is a country that 'had God's sanction' and he is privileged and honored to serve it" and concludes from her reading of the novel that "Norman's admiration for the CIA, and his approval of what he takes to be its patrician ways, is obvious in *Harlot's Ghost*" (p. 409). This seems to me to miss the ambiguity and tension that drive the novel and represents a too simplistic conflation of the framework of the protagonist with the logic of the novel.
9. See Brecht, "The Modern Theater is the Epic Theater" in *Brecht on Theater*.
10. See Benjamin pp. 85–105. I wish to make it clear that I am not suggesting that Mailer was influenced by this essay directly but rather that it helps us understand the functioning and logic of the structure of the novel. While Mailer never cites Benjamin or Brecht, in relation to this novel or in any of his writings (that I know of), his explanation for the structure of the novel, quoted towards the end of this essay (see footnote 45) echoes their approach.
11. Benjamin pp. 85–105.
12. A notable exception, as mentioned above, is John Whalen-Bridge.
13. See *An American Dream* and the episodes of rock climbing in *Harlot's Ghost*.
14. Mailer makes explicit his connection with his characters in the "Authors Note" of *Harlot's Ghost* when he says that, "I wrote this book with the part of my mind that had lived in the CIA for forty years" (1169), going on to say that he might have joined the CIA pro-

vided he had a "different political bent" (1170). On at least one other occasion, he explicitly compared the life of writers, and his, with CIA agents. In an interview quoted by Glenday, he explains, "I have an umbilical connection to *Harlot's Ghost* because I've been obsessed with questions of identity my whole life" explaining that the changes in his status as a writer have been comparable to "spies and actors who take on roles that are not their own" (*Norman Mailer* 134).

15. See Mailer, *Genius and Lust*.
16. The most famous version of this comes from Francis Fukiyama's book. He has since basically abandoned his thesis and now warns of the dangers to civilization by "radical Islamist" forces.

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