NORMAN MAILER, METAPHYSICIAN AT WORK

PHILLIP SIPIORA

On God: An Uncommon Conversation
By Norman Mailer with Michael Lennon
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Peter Allen's striking song, "Everything Old Is New Again," reminds me of Norman Mailer's final book, *On God: An Uncommon Conversation*. Allen's lyrics call attention to the cyclical and circular nature of human experience, the necessity of returning to core principles that inform the conscious and subconscious seminal beliefs of an artist: "Don't throw the past away / You might need it some rainy day / Dreams can come true again / When everything old is new again." In an obverse way, *On God* may be read as a rearticulation—a synoptic and aggressive synthesis—of decades of Mailer's thinking, speculating, and interrogating—all coming together in a work shaded by eschatological nuances.

Mailer has long been known for his search for order,[1] for a driving interest in examining explanatory systems that offer glimpses and shreds of insight into human experience, with a continual awareness, at least implicitly and usually explicitly, of their ultimate insufficiencies. In explaining his motivation for this book, Mailer emphasizes the importance of order: "Where does my desire for order come from? Not only do we humans have a fundamental desire for order, we have an obvious tendency as well toward disorder—a true conflict between order and disorder. So I say it may be worth the attempt to search such questions." A search that, by its very nature, is ultimately futile.

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It is hardly innovative to point out Mailer's long-held interest in metaphysics, defined as the domain of ontology (being *qua* being). *The Naked and the Dead*, for example, is rife with explorations of the strategic importance of human relationships and their role in defining the quality of characters' characters. Mailer has been regarded for decades as an "existential" writer. Yet his existential vision takes him far beyond human, inter-subjective and intra-subjective issues. Mailer's metaphysics, well within philosophical tradition, has always reflected a quest into the nature and context of "reality," particularly non-material entities. It is primarily metaphysical because it pursues an interrogative avenue of analysis, unlike, say, the scientific method. As a metaphysician, Mailer is not concerned with the issue of verification. His investigation is avowedly in the realm of speculation and hypothesis. Through self-reflexive speculation, Mailer attempts not to "capture" revelation, but to explore and articulate subjective theological possibilities: "All I say here may indeed be no more than a projection of my own egotistical preferences." Most reader familiar with Mailer's *oeuvre* would find this statement neither surprising nor irrelevant.

Mailer's philosophical, speculative impulses come into play precisely because the inherited theological legacy has been too rigid in its adherence to a doctrine of the Deity as omnipotent and omniscient: "I think that's where the philosophical trouble begins: the idea that God is All-Good and All-Powerful." Mailer considers God an Artist, an anthropomorphic entity, who is part of a tripartite structure of forces in play: God, the Devil, and humans. God has some power, of course, but is not omnipotent. He knows much but not everything. Mailer's metaphysical reasoning concludes that these force are in perpetual conflict. Mailer sums up these forces as always and already in conflict, as if they were characters in a novel: "But my argument is that it has become a contest among three protagonists." Humans vacillate between God and the devil, choosing sides at various moments and remaining independent at other times.

One of the more interesting dimensions of Mailer's speculations is his rejection of the common belief that individuals are judged and given infinite punishment (or reward) for finite behavior: "I'm not interested in absolute moral judgments, eternal Heaven, eternal Hell—to the contrary. Just think of what it means to be a good man or a bad one. What, after all, is the measure of the difference?" Mailer is nothing if not firmly rooted in the critical importance of reason, and it is through his powers of intense intellec-

tion that he approaches cosmology. Mailer understands faith and its universal stature, but it is not a major force in his metaphysics. Interestingly, Mailer believes in reincarnation, although he has always spoken of it in an ironic manner, perhaps as if treating something ironically protects against the drawing of fallacious inferences. In Mailer's projections, there is always an element of doubt, skepticism, even cynicism. Mailer's tonal reservations, however, do not diminish the fervor of his intuitions. Life is a continual state of metamorphosis. In this context, Mailer is reminiscent of Aristotle, who in his *Art of Rhetoric* defines rhetoric as an "ability," "capacity," or "potential." Mailer's metaphysical exploration of cosmology deals with the art and act of what "might be," in sharp contrast to revelatory theological doctrine—rejected by Mailer—that is fundamentally assertive rather than speculative.

Mailer reminds readers that his tentative tenets are to be taken with the same sense of caution and limitation that he brings to his inquiry: "All right—we are going to be reincarnated. Whether we know what our reincarnation will be, I doubt it. I expect it will be full of surprises, most unforeseen. Some, given out vanity, are likely to seem outrageously warped." The circumspection that characterizes *On God* reveals Mailer to be not only a metaphysician, but also a deft rhetorician in the classical (and best) sense of the term. "I believe," he says "the soul is a gift from God." The choice of "belief" as a critical, recurring term in his cosmology is strategically important. Ancient rhetoric is built upon the principle of belief or appeal (*pistis*/*eis*), often loosely translated as "proofs," but not to be confused with scientific verification. As James Kinneavy persuasively argues,[2] belief/*pistis* is a cornerstone of the Christian concept of faith in the New Testament and derives from Greek rhetoric, which was taught at Greek schools attended by the gospel writers and probably Christ Himself. Mailer is surely aware of the rich nuances of "belief" and, I suspect, uses the term precisely because of its rich resonance of historical importance in philosophy, rhetoric, and theology.

Mailer's portrait of God is idiosyncratically singular. The designation of God as Artist emphasizes His creativity *and* His limitations. Yet Mailer's God is described metaphorically in a number of professional roles. He is a technical specialist, proficient in applied science: "God is certainly an engineer. An engineer would see it all in terms of future construction." Indeed, Mailer's Deity is described as infused with all-too-human qualities: "It isn't that God is only fighting the Devil. He's also debating within Himself or Herself what the next proper course might be." Mailer's God clearly does not know

the future—He exists in a contingent cosmos. As Mailer asks, "Why must a god be independent of time?" And He is limited in the goals He can pursue. Mailer states, "God's energies are limited." It is difficult not to come away from reading *On God* without an acute sense of anthropomorphism in Mailer's version of God, portrayed as a being who can be overwhelmed by events. God, like humans, is capable of growth: "God, too, is always looking to become wiser." God is in a continual state of self-discovery, like us: "What, after all, is God's relationship to evil? Is He trying to discover more about it? May it be that God doesn't comprehend Evil that well?" Unquestionably, traditional theological norms are aggressively challenged

A number of fascinating questions are posed by Mailer. For example: "Given the number of people exterminated in a day during the Holocaust, the number of souls arriving in tumult, is it possible they became too great in number for God to measure with calm and justice?" We are not sure if this question is a real one or a rhetorical one. Mailer's complex sense of irony often interweaves the grammatical with the rhetorical, creating questions that might profitably be read as *both* rhetorical and grammatical, without a stain of contradiction.

Mailer's writings have always placed a high priority on ethics. Indeed, for Mailer, God is characterized, in part, by His moral qualities (*sine qua non*): "God is not only an element in existence but a moral presence." Yet Mailer's sense of ethics do not reside in formal codes or rigid allegiance to doctrinal obligations to do what is "absolutely right," but rather ethics in the sense of commitment to consider the moral implications (and obligations) of one's actions: "[E]thics is not a system of rules … not something you can etch in stone. Ethics is a sensitivity to the moment and the thought: 'This is probably better to do than that.' " The ancient Greeks had a term for this kind of situational circumstance: *kairos* (seeking the opportune time or moment to speak or act). Mailer calls attention to this notion of special time through the ethical act.

Does *On God* provide insight into "how to think" or "how to live"? Is there a cosmological prescription woven into these many layers of intensive, reflective thought? I would say yes. Mailer explores his vision of God (and all else) within the acknowledged limits of his intellectual powers. He provides a model for his readers. There is an analytical imperative in his metaphysical speculations: Use your God-given intellectual talents to explore the mysteries that have forever beguiled and enchanted humankind. *On God*

reveals Mailer as an intensely interrogative persona, a role he clearly relishes and promotes: "[T]he purpose of life may be to find higher and better questions." A mind that strives to remain continuously in inquiry is an exemplary model—and a strategic motif in this stimulating treatise.

NOTES

1. In 1971, Robert Merrill wrote a dissertation, "A Fondness for Order: The Achievement of Norman Mailer." (U of Chicago). He later wrote *Norman Mailer* (1978) and *Norman Mailer Revisited* (1992), both books in Twayne's United States Authors Series (New York: Twayne Publishers).
2. James L. Kinneavy. *Greek Rhetorical Origins of Christian Faith*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987.