

EXAMINING MAILER IN A TIME OF SPLIT-FOCUS—OR, WHAT THE INTERNET CANNOT DO FOR US

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INTRODUCTION: ENTERING A WORLD OF EPISTEMOLOGY-LITE

We are at a crossroads in America today in determining the extent to which we nourish our public discourse on the bounty of information available on the Internet or the Internet feeds on us. The accelerated decline of traditional print media¹ is redefining forms of understanding that once obliged us to earn meaning about issues important to ourselves and our communities the old-fashioned way: by reading about them, substantively, from the printed page. Today, studies suggest, life online is propelling us (and particularly our young) into a world wags refer to as *epistemology-lite* where we may still make the effort to stay in the know but do so by skimming, not reading for depth, and routinely end our Web-based truth-seeking on any given topic, somewhat less than intrepidly, by clicking on the first few Google hits we come to.²

Norman Mailer saw the handwriting on the digital wall. In 2005, he told a Manhattan audience that he felt “the woeful emotions of an old carriage-maker as he watched the disappearance of his trade before the onrush of the automobile.” The electronic media, namely commercial television, he suggested, had sapped even the thoughtful reader’s enthusiasm for taking the serious novel, or anything else for that matter, really seriously. “Indeed how many of you, even in this audience,” Mailer asked the crowd at the Marriott in Times Square, “do not obtain more pleasure from a review of a good novel in the *New York Times* than from the ardors involved in reading that good, but serious book?” (“Acceptance Speech” 219). (Those of us at home

are now free to lower our hands.) While the Internet has emerged as destroyer-in-chief (or co-opter-in-chief, in the view of the optimists) of earlier media epistemologies, today's digital shift puts the future of serious works of both fiction and nonfiction in question across a broad front, and with it, Mailer observed, the "insights with which good readers can enrich themselves" and expand their "comprehension of society" (220).

It is too early to tell precisely where this Darwinian process of media selection is headed, but the case for epistemological autophagy is building and nowhere more acutely than in journalism today. Fine old newspapers (and some admittedly not so fine) are either dying outright or degrading costly vital functions such as investigative reporting and long-form storytelling to stay in business while advertisers and readers head for the digital hills. Meanwhile, writes Maggie Jackson in a recent number of *Neiman Reports*, "A new hypermobile, cybercentric and split-focused world has radically changed the context of news consumption" (pars. 2–3). In her view, the Internet's "rising data floods" put the national attention span at such risk of chronic distraction that Jackson asks,

If this continues to be the way we work, learn and report, could we be collectively nurturing new forms of ignorance, born not from a dearth of information as in the past, but from an inability or an unwillingness to do the difficult work of forging knowledge from the data flooding our world? (par. 10)

You can imagine Mailer's ghost chortling at the proposition that new forms of human ignorance might be available for the inventing, but the serious point is this: The hard business of mapping the contours of our society and ourselves is only possible when we try to go in deep. And in a time of information anarchy, that calls for storytellers with the chops to deliver narrative messages in ways that show us the mountain that molehills of information can add up to when crafted with sustained energy and focus.

That of course is where *Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery* comes in. In teasing out one of the hardest bits of ectoplasm in the machinery of American political psychology, Lee Harvey Oswald, Mailer produces a book that is long, intricately built and absorbing, if in places marred by familiar bits of Mailer's hyper-rational exuberance. But what strikes me, an ink-stained-wretch-turned-educator, as particularly noteworthy at this time of media

upheaval are the tips Mailer's method offers my students and other aspiring investigators about how to extend the quality and scope of journalistic inquiry into the future of a troubled tradition. While there are a few lessons that workers in nonfiction will do well to avoid (including quixotic lapses in the author's self-proclaimed mission to seek truth through facts), there is also much to commend, namely Mailer's appetite for the brute labor required to invest a subject with deep context; his capacity to think critically about the writer's role in the process; and, last but not least, his characteristic display of writerly daring.

BUILDING A "BASE CAMP ON THE SLOPES OF ... A MYSTERY"

Lord knows that tackling the Kennedy assassination required guts. By the time Mailer reexamined the riddle two decades ago, there were two major schools of thought that, as he explains, ranged "from Mark Lane's—ready to open the case—to Gerald Posner's—eager to close it" and their many sub-sects; not a few Geraldo-esque "reporting" careers had been fattened on the public's seemingly endless craving for pseudo-confirmation that the vulpine figure of Lee Harvey Oswald was at the center of a deep but fungible form of American evil. Did Oswald act alone? Was he a communist in disguise or more likely a right-wing co-conspirator in communist guise in the employ of the FBI or CIA? Was he a Mafia dupe? Wherever the red-meat enthusiasts came down on such questions, new evidence was in short supply, minds were long since made up, and the rest of us were left to bump around in a fishy stew of pop-culture morsels like Oliver Stone's conspiracy-gone-wild movie, *JFK*. What was lost in the shuffle was Oswald himself who, as Mailer points out, had become "a barely visible protagonist in a set of opposed scenarios" (*Oswald's Tale* 197).

For all of Mailer's routine protestations about being a novelist first, last and always, even when working in nonfiction (and this despite having been hailed as a founder of the New Journalism of the fifties and sixties), he proceeds here as would any reporter worth his or her salt: He effectively jams a wrench into the gearwheels of what my friend David Halberstam used to call the bullshit machine to suspend the churning of factoids so he can reframe the old questions. He asks not so much what Lee Harvey Oswald did or didn't do as what *kind* of man was he? Was he capable of killing JFK or, put in Mailer's more interesting way, was he constitutionally *incapable* of sharing the limelight as a member of a murderous conspiracy? "Before we can

understand a murderer—if he is one—we must discover his motive,” Mailer tells us. “But to find the motive, we do well to encounter the man” (350). Mailer says his goal is psychological truth and we believe him—but what he is really after, it seems to me, is to help us penetrate that tangled thicket where personal psychology encounters the pivotal political event.

Mailer divides his book into two internal volumes, the first and liveliest of which examines the details of Oswald’s life in Moscow and Minsk, where he lived in a sort of quasi-defector’s limbo from October 1959 to June 1962, and where three decades later Mailer, his colleague Lawrence Schiller, and a translator, Ludmilla Peresvetova, spent six months conducting interviews. Good timing brings good luck: The collapse of the Soviet police state in 1991 had freed sources to speak their minds. In Minsk, the Belarus KGB opened its Oswald files—“the equivalent,” says Mailer, “of an Oklahoma land-grab for an author to be able to move into a large and hitherto unrecorded part of Oswald’s life” (349). And it is through Mailer’s robust triangulation of such materials (the in-depth interviews, documents new and old, Oswald’s “Historic Diary” and letters, private and official) that Oswald’s ghost enters the Russian landscape in its callow form. Our first impression is of a milque-toast, eager-to-please nineteen-year-old—a mother-haunted ex-Marine who keeps his shoes shined, his hair combed, and who strikes Rimma, his Intourist guide, as flabbergastingly clueless about the communist doctrine that has supposedly inspired Oswald to throw in his lot with Russia in a period of maximum Cold War tension. After a month in country, Oswald tells American reporter Priscilla Johnson McMillan about his one excellent solo adventure outside his Moscow hotel. “He had walked four blocks to Detsky Mir, the children’s department store,” quotes Mailer, in an *aperçu* from Johnson’s 1977 biography of Oswald, “and bought an ice cream cone Here he was, coming to live in this country forever, and he had so far dared venture into only four blocks of it” (61).

But Oswald is not your typical mama’s boy abroad. When authorities deny him permission to stay in Russia, he does screech at his diary: “I am shocked! My dreams! ... I have waited for two years to be accepted. My fondest dreams are shattered!” (51). Yet instead of buckling, Oswald bucks the Orwellian system, staging a phony suicide attempt. The scam works: The Soviet state permits him to settle in the Workers’ Paradise, and Mailer uses the event to set the hook. There is just something about this Oswald kid, his talent for lying and manipulation in particular, we now want to explore. And it is Mailer’s

manner of patient observation, “the small revelation of separate points of view” (197), that provides a prime lesson in the importance of building writerly context in a way that thoroughly pays off readerly curiosity. In reopening a story afflicted by snap judgments not infrequently decoupled from motivation, Mailer places Oswald in a kind of suspended animation to examine his thoughts and actions as a kinesiologist might break down video footage to analyze the movements of a track athlete jumping hurdles.

The frames tick by: Sent to work in a radio factory in Minsk, our eligible bachelor, whom the propaganda-conscious state has glamorized with a solid salary and a snug (by Soviet standards) apartment, is as popular with the ladies as he is resented by coworkers for his ornery indolence. Meanwhile KGB surveillance catches Oswald cheating on his bus fare. And thus as Mailer expertly layers in the details, the sense of personal duplicity that Oswald seems to inspire in others grows in us too. Stanislav Shushkevich, an old-school patriot who is assigned to help improve Oswald’s stumbling Russian, distrusts the American at first sight. “[N]o person could be worse than a traitor,” Mailer paraphrases Shushkevich as saying. “A man untrue to one side would always betray the other” (81). Not unreasonably, local KGB officials want to know if Oswald, an ex-United States Marine trained in radar and electronic surveillance, is an American spy. They tail him, bug his apartment, chronicle operatic fights with his new wife, Marina Prusakova and coerce Russian friends to spy on him. But Oswald remains a slippery fish. After a year and half of its cloak-and-dagger best, the KGB finds “no evidence that he was an active agent of any intelligence service” (252). And the lapidary context Mailer has hauled forward to this point makes his conjecture ring true: If Oswald is a CIA sleeper agent, he’s *extremely* good at it for someone so young, petulant and bone-lazy. If, on the other hand, he is a loyal Marxist, he has a funny way of showing it:

We ought to know Oswald well enough by now to understand how demoralized he was by working in a radio factory. To labor collectively was the essence of anonymity. The finished product had more importance than his own person. He had not voyaged from the Marine Corps to the Soviet Union in order to become anonymous. If to work with no enthusiasm would attract more attention, then, indeed, he would put his feet on the table.... [H]e dramatizes his presence by going to sleep. (408)

Behold the American pill in a Tolstoyan depth of field and he becomes the sum of polar opposites; alternately bullying and charming, angry and cloying, he is not merely a royal pain in the rear but a world-class grievance collector in whom outraged self-importance is at war with a timid soul, a conflict that generates the chthonic power Oswald uses to jerk around both Soviet and American governments to get what he wants. Who is Lee Harvey Oswald? Knowing what we now know, Mailer pegs him:

Oswald was a secret agent. There is no doubt about that. The only matter unsettled is whether he was working for any service larger than the power centers in the privacy of his mind. At the least, we can be certain he was spying on the world in order to report to himself. For, by his own measure, he is one of the principalities of the universe. (352)

Understanding the primacy of Oswald's personality in the equation make his politics easier to parse. When the Russian failure to appreciate his inner superman prompts Oswald to give up on Minsk and return to Texas, he goes to work translating his bruised self-regard into a political manifesto. Steaming home across the Atlantic, with Marina in tow (unhappy but buoyed by visions of American life gleaned from the movie *Oklahoma!* she saw in Minsk), Oswald demonstrates his intent "to come back to America with an even deeper sense of apocalyptic purpose: He will improve the nature of both societies" (301). After all, who better understands the dark heart of superpower hegemony? Oswald, at least in his own mind, is your man:

True democracy can be practiced only at the local level. While the centralized state, administrative, political, or supervisory functions remain, there can be no real democracy.... I have lived under both systems. I have *sought* the answers, and although it would be very easy to dupe myself into believing one system is better than the other, I know they are not. (302)

Thus Mailer ends Volume One having achieved his goal of painstakingly establishing "a base camp on the slopes of ... [the Oswald] mystery" (349), even as Oswald has created his own less stable platform for scaling the mass of personal ambition. A master at plucking the telling anecdote from great

heaps of materials, Mailer leaves us with the fleeting gem of an image that encapsulates the neediness of Oswald's interior journey: When he and Marina arrive at Love Field in Dallas in June of 1962, Lee is crushed there are no reporters waiting to record the historic event.

Before going on to Volume Two, it is worth noting how what Mailer likes to refer to as "prodigious" work of the kind he is engaged in in *Oswald's Tale* relates to our age of epistemology-*lite*. To appreciate Mailer's prodigiousness, simply go online and enter the search "Lee Harvey Oswald." Immediately, you are inside a crossfire of Web links pointing at all aspects of Oswald's life—in Dallas, in New Orleans, his childhood, his stint in the Marines, his Italian-made Carcano rifle, his own killing by mob hanger-on Jack Ruby, and on and on. And that is when the reporter-within gets that sinking feeling: It's going to take months or years, not minutes or hours, to synthesize the available information in a way that might shape a genuine understanding of the topic. To complete the point Maggie Jackson made earlier about split-focus, the way we often live now, increasingly obliged to surf the Net to establish our own context, or no context at all, depending on the amount of energy we invest, doesn't approximate what the author is doing in *Oswald's Tale*—not by a long shot—because it trends toward fragmentation, not synthesis. So here is the question: If newspapers are truly dying, book publishers survive largely by churning out twaddle, and we rely on the Internet for the news of the world rendered in drive-by summaries, who among us is doing the epistemological heavy-lifting that fosters the kind of inquiry essential to our intellectual stability as a society? As Eduardo Porter recently pointed out in *The New York Times*:

Reporting the news in far-flung countries, spending weeks on investigations of uncertain pay-off, fighting for freedom of information in court—is expensive. Virtually the only entities still doing it on the necessary scale are newspapers. Letting them go on the expectation that the Internet will enable a better-informed citizenry seems like a risky bet. (par. 14)

What do the survival of newspapers have to do with the production of book-length nonfiction investigations on the order of *Oswald's Tale*? Partly this: Newspapers and magazines have long served as the farm-team organization for our tradition of letters, helping to train or sustain everybody from Walt

Whitman and Ida Tarbell to Betty Friedan and Tom Wolfe, while inculcating Americans into a serious reading habit along the way. A new literary feeder system may well emerge in digital form but until we see its clear outlines taking shape, it is worth restating the question: How do we penetrate the mysteries of our world without a serious-minded structure to sustain the effort?

THE HINGE OF CRITICAL THINKING

Critics have complained that Volume Two of *Oswald's Tale*, which examines Oswald's life and times in America, contains "nothing new" (Powers, par. 18), relying as it does on well-trampled documents such as the twenty-six volume Warren Commission report on the Kennedy assassination. Even Mailer acknowledges that his role here shifts to that of an "usher" who guides us to existing materials. But the real point, it seems to me, is that Mailer does the job in a mostly shrewd and illuminating way (prodigious work I only came to truly appreciate, by the way, after prodigiously reading the book, slowly, for a second time). First, he reminds us as any good journalist might, that we need to be on guard against self-bamboozlement: We may know Oswald better than we did before we followed him in Minsk but we haven't yet laid a glove on the main-event questions: "Did Oswald kill President Kennedy? And, if so, did he do it on his own or as part of a conspiracy?" (Mailer, *Oswald's Tale* 349).

That takes us to Dallas, Fort Worth and New Orleans mainly and, Mailer warns that the territory is fraught with tactical peril:

‘Oswald in Minsk’ depended upon the integrity of the interviews, and they revealed a simple if surprising phenomenon—the memories of most of our subjects were clear even though thirty years had passed. After the assassination, they had been instructed by the KGB not to speak about Oswald or Marina, and indeed, they did not. So, their recall was often pristine; it had not been exposed to time so much as sealed against it. (350)

In America, by contrast, the Oswald story is wicked old, and it is a maxim in the reporting trade that however sincere, helpful or passionate the people closest to events might seem, their stories generally become less trustworthy in proportion to the frequency with which they have told them. In this

case, witnesses by the score—Oswald's neighbors and coworkers, retired FBI agents, cops and Russian and Cuban émigrés—have long since claimed stakes in the great dark drama and stand by to deliver their lines for the umpteenth time. How to avoid this slough of polluted source material?

Once again, Mailer follows his journalistic gut. Despite his disdain for the Warren Commission report, by far the most encyclopedic reservoir of material at hand, but which as a piece of investigation Mailer derides for having all the integrity of "a dead whale decomposing on a beach," the author manfully holds his nose to reexamine the carcass. And indeed, looking at it from a new angle, Mailer discovers value; the report can "be honored" in pieces, he says, "for its short stories, historical vignettes, and vast cast of characters ... that do make some attempt to cut tracks through the wilderness surrounding Oswald's motives" (351).

Artful "ushering" of such nuggets, in turn, helps illuminate questions about Oswald's character quirks that arose in Minsk. We learn from a neighbor lady in Fort Worth, Mrs. Murret, for example, that as a boy Oswald's mother, Marguerite, "'trained Lee to stay in the house'" while she was at work, "'[so] he just got in the habit of staying alone'" (359). Oswald's half-brother, John Pic, says Oswald slept in his mother's bed until he was at least ten years old (360). And through the eyes of Evelyn Strickman, a psychiatric social worker, we see there is "a rather pleasant, appealing quality about this emotionally starved, affectionless youngster," now a teenage truant cutting classes to hang out at the Bronx Zoo (365), this in contrast to Marguerite Oswald, who Strickman finds "'a snob'" overly concerned about the development of Lee's genitals. "'When I indicated we had found nothing the matter with his genitals,'" she testifies, "'she then looked at once relieved and, I felt, a little disappointed'" (367).

When Pic suggests that Oswald had joined the Marines to escape Marguerite's "yoke of oppression" (378), we are not surprised to hear from Mailer that "this mother's boy, over-loved and much neglected" (381) has a rough time of it in the Corps. Fellow Marines harp on Oswald's "feminine characteristics" (380), call him "shit-bird" (381) and eventually goad him into firing "a pistol into the wall while a few Marines standing nearby were riding him mercilessly" (383). Mailer's re-reporting of Oswald's struggle with his sense of manhood breaks little new factual ground but does lead to a poignant observation about the context of times when such issues became a compelling motif for many young men terrified by homosexual inclinations and ready to

go to great lengths to combat and/or conceal them In the mind-set of the 1950s, a century away from the prevailing concepts of the 1990s, to be weak among men was to perceive oneself as a woman, and that, by the male code of the times, was an intolerable condition for a man (379–381).

Sad to say, not all of Mailer's speculations are nearly so well grounded. One signpost that we are entering terra incognita is the author's insistence that "a mystery of the immense dimensions" demands the invention of "a peculiar form of non-fiction, since not only interviews, documents, newspaper accounts, intelligence files, recorded dialogues, and letters are employed, but speculations as well" (353). A little of the old Mailer-esque razzle-dazzle aside, the idea that the use of speculation is somehow unique to the author's enterprise is a bit much. The fact is that all good reporters use the tool of speculative thought as an intellectual exercise, to stretch and explore the boundaries of argument, as they work over their accumulating material; it is only by raising such questions that we deepen our understanding of the story at hand.

The big difference in *Oswald's Tale* is the degree to which Mailer is willing to push beyond facts or plausibility and to do so in print. The effect is not unlike holding your breathe as you watch a downhill skier skirt deadly objects as he pushes his speed to the max; the process is thrilling to behold but you do worry about loss of control. Take Mailer's attempt to build a case for Oswald having been recruited as intelligence operative while serving as a Marine radar technician at Atsugi airbase in Japan in the late 1950s. Yes, Oswald *could* have been approached by Japanese communists, as Mailer says (388); he *could* have paid for his eventual defection trip to Moscow "by selling secrets" to them (400–401); and his possible relationship with a bar hostess at a high-priced Tokyo night club *could* have introduced him to a shadowy bazaar involving "the pursuit and purchase of pieces of military information" (389–390). And in the view of someone like me, who lived in and reported on Japan in the Cold War 1970s, pigs could have sprouted wings and flown air cover over the Japanese islands, but the fact is that Mailer's musings are so gauzy and under-reported as to be pretty much useless, if not outright misleading. The simple point is this: *Oswald's Tale* would have been more comprehensively robust had Mailer stuck with his otherwise impressive reportorial instincts and invested a little more shoe leather in tethering his imaginative leaps to reality.

You would also hate to see students of nonfiction reporting adopt Mailer's unfortunate, if sporadic lack of transparency with his readers. Mailer believed there is an implied pact between writer and reader that requires the application of sweat equity: I worked hard, now you work hard too ("An interview"). Excellent principle! Yet it is one thing to make your readers work for their meaning; it is quite another to arbitrarily hide information from them that in the hiding makes the meaning unnecessarily obscure. For instance, Mailer waits until halfway through his 800 pages to tell us that Stepan Vasilyevich, the intriguingly complex KGB agent in Minsk, is a pseudonym. Would it have hurt the literary merits of the story had Mailer squared that fact with readers up front and before we grew to respect if not admire "Stepan's" meticulous dedication to his inspector's craft? Yes, it is a small misstep perhaps, but the inquiring reader grows suspicious: Okay, and what else aren't we being told? Mailer then creates a composite character named "General Marov" from three separate KGB sources who he says did not want to be identified. Having faithfully followed Mailer this far up Mount Oswald, I doubt any serious reader would abandon the quest if the author had referred to these individuals as "sources" and left his advertised respect for the material intact (*Oswald's Tale* 403–404).

Fortunately, Mailer gets big things largely right, and his distrust of his own perceptions offers a valuable lesson for prospective toilers in nonfiction. For example, he continues to question whether he knows Oswald as well as he thinks he does or is he fooling himself. Up against a deadline or just weary of the fight, reporters are routinely tempted to throw down anchors in a sea of information. Ah yes, I see where this is going, we tell ourselves—Oswald's massive ego obviously led him to kill the president as an esteem-boosting grab for glory—and then unwittingly arrange the facts to fit the template. (Doctors say they face the same temptations in making an accurate diagnosis.) In his own case, Mailer confesses that he started *Oswald's Tale* "with a prejudice in favor of the conspiracy theorists" but has forced himself to keep an open mind in order to "take Oswald on his own terms as long as that was possible—that is, try to comprehend his deeds as arising from nothing more than himself until such a premise lost all headway" (605).

Three-quarters of the way through the book, and with Oswald finally poised for his rendezvous with infamy in the fall of 1963, Mailer wonders whether his open-mindedness hasn't led him into fresh peril:

Hypotheses commence as our servant—they enable us to keep our facts in order while we attempt to learn more about a partially obscured subject. Once the profits of such a method accumulate, however, one is morally obliged... to be scrupulously on guard against one's own corruption. Otherwise, the hitherto useful hypothesis will insist on prevailing over everything that comes in and so will take over the integrity of the project.... One can feel such a tendency stirring. It is possible that the working hypothesis has become more important to the author than trying to discover the truth. (605–606)

And here is where writerly daring comes in. Mailer fights the urge to jump to a final conclusion (though we detect his knees flexing for the leap) by forcing himself to reexamine all the familiar, pop-culture-encrusted cases for conspiracy. And while that particular business strikes me as something akin to picking up a fistful of sleepy snakes, Mailer's contract with his reader holds up: We have come to admire our avuncular guide for his capacity to shoulder his reporting weight; we appreciate the insights it has so far produced; and so we willingly trot once again through this boggy patch, coming at last (and once again for many of us, I'd wager) to the conclusion that even though a

formidable number of books have been written by conspiracy theorists examining many a possibility of intelligence activity by and around Oswald ... after all this time, there is no overruling evidence that he was definitely associated with the FBI, the CIA, Army or Navy Intelligence, or any Cuban groups. (605)

Or for that matter with any conspiracy whatsoever. In the end, however, Mailer does his readers the favor of honestly erring on the side of an only partially revealed mystery when he concludes that the chances are three out of four that Oswald acted alone to kill the president. Laying odds might be considered a copout had Mailer not spent so many pages building his case with mostly meticulous care.

CONCLUSION: THE REAL COST OF FAST FOOD

In January 2003, Mailer appeared on *The Charlie Rose Show* to argue that great novels (and presumably merely *really* good ones too) change “people’s

lives in ways they cannot even begin to measure.” And despite his reservations about the practice of the craft, I suspect that today, with traditional journalism chewing off its paws, he would tolerate the idea that good journalism, great journalism, can change America for the better too—and that its absence will have the opposite effect. It is this transformative aspect of nonfiction documentary work and its power to lead us to new ways of knowing that for my money is most significantly on display in *Oswald’s Tale*.

Like others before him, Mailer locates the psychological motor that has helped generate endless conjecture over Oswald’s role in the Kennedy assassination in our collective resistance to the idea that an angry pissant like Oswald could by acting alone bring down a king. And until we get beyond that disconnect

we will keep asking who was behind it and which conspiracy was operative. It is virtually not assimilable to our reason that a small lonely man felled a giant in the midst of his limousines, his legions, his throng, and his security. If such a non-entity destroyed the leader of the most powerful nation on earth, then a world of disproportion engulfs us, and we live in a universe that is absurd. So the question reduces itself to some degree: If we should decide that Oswald killed Kennedy by himself, let us at least try to comprehend whether he was an assassin with a vision or a killer without one. (Mailer, *Oswald’s Tale* 198)

And in pushing that logic forward on the strength of his reporting (and not undisciplined speculation), Mailer is able to decide that Oswald was indeed an assassin with a megalomaniacal vision in which he

would not be shooting at Kennedy because he liked him or disliked him—that would be irrelevant to the depth of his deed. The answer speaks out of our understanding of him: It was the largest opportunity he had ever been offered. (779–780)

Thus the perpetrator’s road to his event leads us to questions about ourselves. Whatever collective anger we may still feel over the JFK assassination, Mailer suggests, stems at least in part from the existential confusion that Oswald’s behavior long ago activated in the public mind. Marines “plant

flags on Iwo Jima," he observes; they "do not defect" to Russia. And by showing us how Oswald had "injured one of our Cold War certainties" (403), Mailer reminds us of what it was like to live in America in a time when Hollywood and the news media helped fan anti-communist paranoia, "the American imagination saw a Red menace under every bed" (723) and "the leading actors in this tragicomedy of superpowers ... with limited comprehension, lived in dread of each other" (353). In so doing, he makes an indelible point about what happens when political events pull the curtain on what George Orwell called "the strange mixture of reality and illusion, democracy and privilege, humbug and decency, by which the nation keeps itself in its familiar shape" (Orwell 22). We live with a residual anger about the Kennedy assassination not merely because Oswald killed a popular president but because the act led us to questions about ourselves that were not easy to think about or resolve.

Mailer's demonstration of the power by which a malcontent's apocalyptic vision can shake our sense of who we are is arguably even more poignant today than it was when *Oswald's Tale* was first published, since we are now obliged to look back at Oswald's actions over the devil's hump of September 11, 2001. In the aftermath of that event, the TV-dominated and therefore context-challenged commercial news media had challenge aplenty in keeping us focused on what was really important to the public's understanding and as a result at once informed us about what was happening while simultaneously helping to obscure the deeper motivations of the hijackers and exactly who or what was after us. As Mailer pointed out in his commentary on 9/11, *Why Are We At War?*:

The United States was going through an identity crisis. Questions about our nature as a country were being asked that most good American men and women had never posed to themselves before. Questions such as, Why are we so hated? How could anyone resent us that much? We do no evil. We believe in goodness and freedom. Who are we, then? Are we not who we think we are? More pressing, who are "they?" What does it all mean? (10–11)

One of Mailer's great talents was his capacity to invoke a sense of universal mystery against which all good questions, journalistic or otherwise, are ultimately asked. And therefore one of my favorite passages in *Oswald's Tale*

is a tiny one that has nothing to do with geopolitics or political conspiracy; it comes when Marina Oswald, not having found the *Oklahoma!* she sought in America but rather a marriage that propelled her to maximum public humiliation, reflects on a sad, unguarded moment in 1963: "She still thinks of the night Lee sat in the dark on their porch in New Orleans and he was weeping. It was such a heavy burden for him. Something, and she does not know what it was" (*Oswald's Tale* 785). With all respect to Archibald MacLeish's classical take on the utility of poetical spareness ("For all the history of grief/An empty doorway and a maple leaf") (681), the epigrammatic snapshot here resonates all the more chillingly surrounded as it is by a huge book in which the author has paid his contextual dues. And when Mailer honors the rooting of mystery within context, it confirms a valuable piece of advice for any intellectual adventurer: "It is worth remembering that in life, as in other mysteries, there are no answers, only questions, but part of the pleasure of intellection is to refine the question, or discover a new one" (Mailer, *Oswald's Tale* 515–516).

In his 2003 conversation with Charlie Rose, Mailer argued against what he saw as too much literary product being produced and consumed as fast food. As he told Rose,

A book ... that's an absolutely agreeable, fast read, is usually a meretricious book There's usually something wrong with the depth of perception ... It's kind of like McDonald's food. We have a huge equivalent of McDonald's food in the literary world Most great writers are not easy to read and shouldn't be.

What Mailer was arguing *for* then, it seems to me, was the equivalent of a slow food movement to regulate our epistemological consumption and make us think a little harder about what is going down the pipe. Don't get me wrong: The digital revolution is a blessing to those who would inform the public; it enables us to get our hands on information that only few years ago would have generally been beyond reach (real-time video corroboration of public misconduct, for one thing), so we can take our stories farther, faster. What the Internet cannot do, however, is the prodigious work required to turn us into more discriminating consumers of context; it is, as we educators not infrequently hear ourselves saying, *only* a tool. Yet as any reader of

science fiction—or of Norman Mailer—will know, the tool, unchallenged, ultimately imposes its own menu of demands.

NOTES

1. Among many recent articles describing the crisis in the newspaper industry and its social and political implications, one of the most insightful is by John Nichols and Robert W. McChesney.
2. For a guide to the behavior of young news consumers, see Thomas E. Patterson. For patterns of Internet usage, see Tameka Kee.

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