

WASHED BY THE SWELLS
OF TIME: READING MAILER,
1998–2008

JOHN WHALEN-BRIDGE AND ANGELA OON

“THE FINAL PURPOSE OF ART IS TO INTENSIFY, even, if necessary, to exacerbate, the moral consciousness of people,” Mailer wrote just under a half-century ago (*Advertisements* 384), but the majority of serious readers today would not pick up Mailer by that handle. Perhaps it is the business of Mailer scholarship, first and foremost, to ask whether we should. The inquiry would, at its fullest, have implications that extend far beyond Mailer scholarship, which is a way of saying that Mailer is not (or in a just world *would not be*) merely of interest to specialists.

Implication one: Art has a final purpose, so it is not a plaything, a distraction. To say that art has a final purpose is to say that all of it, all of life’s parts, actually matter. This fragment of a thought takes us to the Mailerian test—and he was an “essayist” who tested and tried out ideas even when writing gigantic novels—of a Manichean world view which, for Mailer at least, had the great utility of making life meaningful especially in the face of cultural forces that trivialize meaning-making activities.

Implication two: “Intensify” and “exacerbate” show Mailer to be a Modernist—one of a group of late Modernists, Morris Dickstein tells us in *Leopards in the Temple*, who kept a quasi-religious faith with the artistic standards and methods of Joyce, Eliot, Pound, and company—but the words show Mailer more than anything else to be an artist who insists on risk. Mailer was one of the great leopards of postwar American writing. His writing was regularly shocking. He said many times that everyone should be able to see God in the midst of a sex act; perhaps sex was and is really a subset of “risk.” Mas-

turbation would be a sin to our existential Manichean left-conservative theologian precisely because it wasn't going to risk anything or change anything. To intensify experience is something pretty much all artists do, but not all artists exacerbate the moral consciousness of the reader, and the role of gadfly is one Mailer took up with glee. Is the gadfly always in the moral right? That isn't really a necessary condition at all, although one senses that Mailer very much wanted to be identified with the correct or best position, the one that ultimately allowed for the generation of the most meaningful life. This end of art could be blissful but it would also be painful. "No pain, no gain," as the sneaker salesmen say.

Implication three: However much Mailer aligned himself with the holy outsider, he was concerned with the moral consciousness (and aesthetic pleasure, and civic morale) of "the people." As Stephen Dedalus flies past all the various nets, bat-like himself, he dreams of forging the uncreated conscience of his race. We don't *do* this anymore.¹ We disavow our identities, though we depend on them, such as when the passport becomes a shield. We enjoy all the various birthrights but pretend, in utterly dishonest and short-sighted ways, that we are not implicated in the best and the worst of this national identity. If you don't believe it, sit through three papers at an American literature conference and you will learn that our job is to learn Right Shame and to pretend that we are "global."² Mailer, at his most antinomian, was always utterly civic-minded.

The fourth and final implication is really a corollary or an extension: Mailer is an underrated author. One dutifully mentions Melville by way of comparison, noting that *Moby-Dick* was shelved under cetology at Yale a hundred years back. One wonders if Mailer's strange embarrassing humor *now* is the analogue of Melville's strange embarrassing humor *then*. (Think about the last time you actually taught *Moby-Dick* and had occasion to discuss the marriage of Ishmael and Quohog in the Spouter's Inn.) What will happen to Mailer in his literary afterlife? Alice Walker resurrected Zora Neale Hurston's literary reputation a mere fifteen years after her bodily death. In the meantime, one has the more modest task of asking: Who was Mailer in the last ten years of his life to his readers? History has to change for Mailer to become more readable and perhaps less shocking—if I'm right. So let us engage in the work of communal prophecy-via-criticism and call our shots, saying where we think the stronger readers are emerging and where the work might go next.

I. MAILER'S WRITING FROM 1998–2008

While the real focus of this article is the scholarly response to Mailer's work, Mailer has out-written all of his critics put together, and so a sketch of that work will be necessary at the outset. These books are: *The Time of Our Time* (1998), *The Spooky Art: Some Thoughts on Writing* (2003), *Modest Gifts: Poems and Drawings* (2003), *Why Are We at War?* (2003), *Norman Mailer's Letters on An American Dream, 1963–1969* (2004), *The Big Empty* with John Buffalo Mailer (2006), *The Castle in the Forest* (2007), and *On God: An Uncommon Conversation* with J. Michael Lennon (2007). Both *The Time of Our Time* and *The Spooky Art* present dangers of a sort of which younger Mailer readers need to be warned: Do not read through these books and think that you have before you the literary equivalent of an arctic ice core, something that provides a textual analogue to phenomenological history as measured by the author's style.

Mailer has *always* rearranged his material in his retrospective collections, and the art of his collage technique has as much to do with spatial juxtaposition as it does with chronology. Mailer made this point about the "short hairs," the poems that made *Deaths for Ladies and Other Disasters* and which have been rearranged and sometimes rewritten in *Modest Gifts*, a collection of doodles and doodle-poems. The scholar who wishes to discuss the evolutions of ideas and forms will have to work through the primary forms before deciding what the revisions of 1998–2008 add—but it is ridiculously unfair to suggest that Mailer's collections were lazy cut-and-paste efforts that belie a lack of historical sense. Michiko Kakutani, however, makes the charge that "*The Spooky Art* is a manufactured book, an old-fashioned cut-and-paste job." Mailer wrote a strong letter to *The Times* objecting to Kakutani's pattern of attacks but taking particular umbrage at Kakutani's claim that "all too often dates for statement" in *The Spooky Art* "are not supplied." On April 9, 2003 the paper issued a correction:

The Books of the Times review on January 22, about *The Spooky Art: Some Thoughts on Writing*, a collection of works by Norman Mailer, referred erroneously to the absence of dates for some works republished and excerpted. While the dates were missing from the proof copy furnished to reviewers, the published book has thorough source notes at the back, compiled by the editor,

J. Michael Lennon. A letter from Mr. Mailer dated March 24 pointed out the error.

All Mailer readers know that Mailer was a professional author who made sure he got paid twice for his writings as often as possible, just as Jack London and other highly productive authors did, but this is hardly an adequate response either to Mailer's retrospective collections or his works on Picasso or Oswald. One could just as well, if one were given to agree with Kakutani, say that *The Executioner's Song* was a "cut-and-paste" job, as if Mailer's assemblage of a bewildering array of voices and texts does not form a lush and witty hand-woven carpet—a narrative that effectively transforms fragments of Gilmore's life into a redemptive and beautiful narrative.

Norman Mailer's Letters on An American Dream is a wonderful resource, detailing Mailer's aesthetic considerations, his social world from the inside as most of us have never seen it before, and his responses to the weird reception much of his work has received as well. Mailer asks Diana Trilling to please invite Iris Murdoch to dinner as he has always wanted to meet her (71); he tells several correspondents that he thinks the responses to *Dream* were not only schizophrenic but were symptomatic, also, of the nation's own tectonic fault lines (apologizing to Aldridge for the overloaded metaphor as he uses it: 74); and we see Mailer writing long, friendly, detailed letters to fans such as Mrs. Virginia M. Mangram: "Between us, I'm just a little tickled with the book, because no matter its larger merits or lack of them, I worked the surface of this book harder than anything I've ever written and so feel at last there's a certain craftsmanship to something I've done. To me it purrs a little now. It's a bitch of a book, at least I think so. If you don't like it, or are a good bit disappointed, my god, I'll respect you for saying so after reading all these fine words about me by me" (63). Evidence is accumulating to show that Mailer was actually one of the most gracious of the Truly Famous; in a few years or so, Lennon's edited collection of Mailer letters will come out, and then the world will know.

Compared with Mailer's best nonfiction, *Why Are We at War?* and *The Big Empty* are less intense efforts. In the former case, Mailer blasts the Bush administration appropriately, although it does seem a bit out of time for Mailer to claim that Bush and Company invaded Iraq to bolster whiteness and maleness. *On God* offers some interesting refinements on Mailer's psycho-theology. *On God*, though it strikes me more as a series of lectures

than a conversation, has a great deal of essential information for readers of *The Gospel According to the Son* and *The Castle in the Forest*.

II. BOOK-LENGTH STUDIES AND DEVELOPING RESOURCES

In the last ten years, there have been four book-length scholarly studies of Mailer's work, none of them from major presses,³ and an annotated bibliography. There have also been three collections of essays about his work, if we count the special issue of *Journal of Modern Literature* (2006) that the *JML* editors downgraded to a "cluster of essays" and the first two issues of *The Mailer Review* (2007 and 2008), published by The Norman Mailer Society and co-sponsored with the University of South Florida.⁴ Other new resources include the Mailer papers at the Harry Ransom Center at The University of Texas at Austin, which in 2005 acquired a mind-bogglingly comprehensive archive of Mailer's work. There is also the website of The Norman Mailer Society. Harvard University also acquired some papers of limited value when Carole Mallory sold her papers to America's most prestigious university.

First book-length study: Mailer continues to receive more attention as a symptom rather than as a shaper of culture, and Mary V. Dearborn's *Mailer: a Biography* is an excellent window into literary politics in postwar America. In presenting Mailer as an artist who has lost as much as he has gained by bargaining with fame, Dearborn raises important issues about the effects of celebrity culture on literature. Her account begins with Mailer's fiftieth birthday party in 1973, in which he was to announce his plan for a "Fifth Estate," a citizen watchdog group to monitor the activities of the FBI and the CIA. Mailer was intoxicated as he stepped up to the microphone and bungled the event. Dearborn examines Mailer's every failure in excruciating detail and hypothesizes a Freudian repetition-compulsion at one point, but psychological explanation of Mailer's behavior is in no way a priority in this text. Rather, Dearborn marshals the author's crimes and misdemeanors to argue that Mailer has been cut off from the world in important ways by the celebrity that has been such an important part of his literary arsenal: "[H]e became famous seemingly overnight, and his stature ensured that he was shielded from reality by a tight band of supporters and family. When he tragically stumbled, stabbing Adele in 1960, his inner circle made sure that he would pay no price for the deed" (424). Previous biographers have covered what has been euphemistically called "the Trouble," but none have been as

astute as Dearborn in assessing the more painful consequences of America's love affair with literary rebellion.

What, then, is Mailer's achievement? Dearborn mercilessly assesses Mailer's failures but finally concludes that he has "turned his celebrity to good account" (425). For Dearborn "Mailer ... discovered that celebrity could open up doors to a new kind of cultural expression in which the artist's personal and creative lives inform each other in beneficial ways" (425). While insisting that his experiments with celebrity have often been disastrous failures, Dearborn finally lauds Mailer for having opened up a cultural space that was not available previously, one which has been as important to ideological opponents as it was to himself: "[C]ould Germaine Greer not have known that without Norman Mailer she would perhaps not have been able to cut the figure she did, flamboyant in feathers, and as the author of *The Female Eunuch*, a feminist text that brilliantly mixed the personal and the political?" (425). This argument is often put forward by Mailer defenders, but it is more credible when it appears in Dearborn's frequently severe assessment.

Though Dearborn claims that the life and the work are equally important in Mailer's case, her non-hagiographic view of the life is worth much more than her approach to the writing. *The Armies of the Night* (1968) is for Dearborn Mailer's best work, and it is an unsurprising opinion. She declares *Of a Fire on the Moon* (1971) "one of the most disastrous projects of his writing life," which is a strange assessment when one considers the thoughtful responses to that work in studies by Kernan, Landow, and Tabbi. Dearborn's discussions of the work occasionally strike one as breezy, and they seem to rely a little too much on the scuttlebutt of reviewers. For example, she claims that *Oswald's Tale* (1995) received almost uniformly bad reviews, but actually this book received positive reviews in a number of publications. More ambitious works such as *Ancient Evenings* (1983) receive a competent overview, but the study offers no real surprises. Each generation, at any rate, must write its own biography of a phenomenon such as Mailer, and Dearborn's is the most complete portrait from this period, 1998–2008. Since Robert Lucid's death, J. Michael Lennon has taken over the job of writing an authorized biography.

Second book-length study: Barry H. Leeds, author of *The Structured Vision of Norman Mailer* (1969), has collected essays written about Mailer into a strongly affirmative reading of Mailer's career, and *The Enduring*

Vision of Norman Mailer is an extremely personal overview that brings together in one book the major concerns of Mailer readers. The book, we might say, is a series of conversations: Leeds has chapters on Mailer's dialogue with Marilyn, Mailer's political debates with American culture, and on Mailer's long-term relationship with the boxing metaphor. There is also a chapter on the relationship between *Tough Guys Don't Dance* and *An American Dream*, one on *Tough Guys* in relation to Hollywood, and a reading of *Harlot's Ghost*. Leeds leads a discussion of Mailer criticism, and finally he offers a personal testimony about his relationship with Mailer over four decades. Leeds insightfully discusses sexuality as an aspect of celebrity in his *Marilyn* chapter, and his focus on the notion of the psychic outlaw is, as we shall see, an enduring theme of Mailer criticism of the last decade: "Boxing has provided a significant moral paradigm throughout most of Mailer's life and work" (57). Although this chapter really is exclusively about boxing, it announces another of our major themes in so far as Mailer, more than any other post-war American writer, personifies the agonistic conception of the writer theorized by Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* and related works. Leeds's fourth chapter, "The Mystery Novels: *Tough Guys Don't Dance*: *An American Dream* Revisited" does something almost no one else does—it makes comparisons between Mailer at the height of his reputation and Mailer in the last few decades, when many critics have decided that he is past his sell-by date. I am perhaps alone in the view that Mailer, in the decades since *The Executioner's Song*, is at the height of his powers, an idea I had hoped to demonstrate by collecting essays on this period of Mailer's work in the Fall 2006 issue of *Journal of Modern Literature*. Leeds' final chapters, "Mailer and Me" and "Into the Millennium" gather together various observations on the Picasso book, Oswald's tale, and *The Gospel According to the Son*, noting the obvious point that it takeschutzpah (171) to rewrite the Gospel as a first-person narrative, but going on to say as well that the book has parallels to Mailer's meticulous research into other cultures (*The Fight*) and historic civilizations (*Ancient Evenings*). Critics and reviewers have utterly failed to adequately appreciate Mailer's historical research, preferring instead the fantasy that Mailer produced endless books that no editor could improve and which were entirely innocent of knowledge of the actual world. This is a slander that Mailer criticism should set itself the task of correcting.

The third and fourth book-length studies were not published in the United States. Hongli Gu's *A New Historicist and Cultural Materialistic Study*

of *Norman Mailer's Work* was published in China by Xiamen University Press. This book has many errors but it also has much to offer. Gu argues, along with New Historicists and Cultural Studies theorists of various stripes, that there is "a dialogical relationship between history and literature" (36). In assuming that Mailer is "the spokesman for American culture for about four decades" (38), Gu's willingness to articulate connections between predominant trends between literary criticism and theory and Mailer's own themes are worthy of more attention.

Markku Lehtimäki's *The Poetics of Norman Mailer's Nonfiction: Self-Reflexivity, Literary Form, and The Rhetoric of Narrative* is, like Gu's study, a version of the author's doctoral dissertation. Neither author agrees with the critical consensus holding that Mailer was finished sometime around 1970. The study traces connections between self-reflexivity and literary form in Mailer's work, comparing Mailer's narratological innovations with the highly-developed conceptual schemes of contemporary theory.

The title presents this study as a discussion of Mailer's nonfiction, but Lehtimäki makes connections among *all* of Mailer's works, and the delimitations of the title do an injustice to the thoroughness of the project. Whether or not the author meant it in this way, it would seem that the book has a strategy for recouping a center: the overstated claim. In arguing that "Norman Mailer's work represents a third mode between the conventional categories of fiction and nonfiction," Lehtimäki argues that "we need a systematic theory (poetics) for tracing the uncharted territory in the first place" (1). The problem here is that Lehtimäki, in a kind of scholarly *tour de force*, expends a hundred pages reviewing claims about this "uncharted territory" (a phrase he borrows from Eric Heyne). The overstated claim is not a criminal offense, but it leaves one thinking that the author's desire for completion in his representation of narratological discourse has displaced a more developed thesis about Mailer. The claim that Mailer's fiction is a third way is strong enough, but it is not really exceptional. The claim that his "own thesis is the first book-length study specially devoted to the poetics and problems of Mailer's nonfiction" is taken without quibble or qualification, but the follow-up claim that "the strict distinction between fictional and factual narratives does not characterize the complexity and self-reflexivity of Mailer's use of the literary form" (23) leaves one asking, Who ever thought it did? Barbara Lounsberry is faulted for "rather rigidly" separating works composed of "documentable subject matter chosen from the real world" from those that

are “the writer’s inventions” (5), and Lehtimäki attempts to bring the languages of narratology and literary nonfiction to higher levels of precision, but it would enhance the focus and thus the ultimate force of the argument to allow more for the useful generalization.

Those who are interested in Mailer’s life, work, and cultural milieu will also be interested in J. Michael and Donna Pedro Lennon’s *Norman Mailer: Works and Days*, a thorough bio-bibliographical study that documents all Mailer publications, reviews, and major critical statements. The witty annotations make this volume an enjoyable read, and *Works and Days* also includes many unpublished photos and useful apparatuses such as the “ratings of Reviews” of Mailer’s twenty-seven key books. Lennon has assigned a numerical value to all reviews of the main Mailer books and has charted them from most to least successful. Where does *Oswald’s Tale* show up on this list? Just slightly above the center mark. Where is *Of a Fire on the Moon* within Mailer’s *oeuvre*? It is the seventh book from the top, following *The Executioner’s Song* (1979). In a factoid world where many believe “there are no facts, only interpretations,” it is important to preserve the value of facts: *Works and Days* is the sort of tool that helps us keep a complex record straight.⁵

The inaugural issue of *The Mailer Review* (Fall 2007), expertly edited by Phillip Sipiora, was a much-anticipated publication by members of The Norman Mailer Society.⁶ It is an eclectic collection: there is a piece by Barbara Mailer Wasserman, Norman’s sister, on the years they spent together before he became famous; an analysis of Mailer’s work in films by William Kennedy entitled “Norman Mailer as Occasional Commentator in a Self-Interview and Memoir”—an homage to Mailer’s own ludic approach to interviews. Jonathan Middlebrook anticipates the reconsideration to come in “Five Notes Toward a Reassessment of Norman Mailer,” and Alan Petigny’s “Norman Mailer, ‘The White Negro,’ and New Conceptions of the Self in Postwar America” argues for the centrality of Mailer’s polemical definition of the hipster for anyone who wishes to understand the shifts that characterize postwar American culture.

“Boston State Hospital: The Summer of 1942” is an excerpt from Robert F. Lucid’s unfinished authorized biography of Mailer, and it is accompanied by an excerpt from Mailer’s *play* “The Naked and the Dead,” written in 1942 after Mailer’s experience as an employee in the of Boston State Hospital. J. Michael Lennon presents a selection of Mailer’s letters entitled “‘A Series

of Tragicomedies': Mailer's Letters on *The Deer Park*, 1954–55," which chronicle Mailer's extraordinary effort to complete and publish his third novel. There is also Philip Bufithis' reconnaissance, "*The Executioner's Song*: a Life Beneath Our Conscience," Jeffrey Severs' interview with Mailer comrade-in-arms, entitled "The Untold Story Behind *The Executioner's Song*: A Conversation with Lawrence Schiller," and Morris Dickstein's typically clear and authoritative "How Mailer Became 'Mailer': The Writer as Private and Public Character."

A variety of interesting visuals (including pages of his notebooks, plot charts, royalty statements, etc.) from the Mailer Archive at the Harry Ransom Center, appear courtesy of Cathy Henderson, Richard W. Oram, Molly Schwartzburg, and Molly Hardy: "Mailer Takes on America: Images from the Ransom Center Archive" is a museum show that comes to you. Donald L. Kaufmann's "*An American Dream*: The Singular Nightmare" is a reprint of an influential essay on Mailer's most cohesive novel, and there are five preliminary considerations of Mailer's last novel *The Castle in the Forest* by renowned Mailer readers Christopher Ricks, Robert J. Begiebing, Barbara Probst Solomon, and Phillip Sipiora. Finally, Constance E. Holmes and J. Michael Lennon update Lennon's essential *Works and Days* with a "Supplemental Bibliography Through 2006."

Mailer readers will find *The Mailer Review* at once indispensable and a whole lot of fun. Clearly it would not be possible to maintain this level of excellence, and of course Phillip Sipiora could not do this, so he exceeded it. The second volume of the *Mailer Review* (Fall 2008) was published after Mailer's death on 10 November 2007, and is a tribute to Mailer's towering achievement with contributions from the heavyweights of American writing and expression. It is twice as long as the inaugural volume and contains an entire section of tributes read during his memorial at Carnegie Hall in April 2008. This eclectic group of guests, which included Don DeLillo, Sean Penn, all of Mailer's nine children, Günter Grass, and Lonnie Ali (wife of Muhammad Ali), shared personal anecdotes and reminisces of their encounters with Mailer. More of such remembrances continue in the next section of the journal; there are written tributes by writers like Gay Talese, Richard Lee Fulgham and filmmaker Dick Fontaine.

Three works by Mailer are also included; a hitherto unpublished essay "What's Wrong With America: Five Proposals," the acceptance speech he gave at the National Book Foundation Award ceremony, and my favorite—

the lyrics to a blues song he wrote called “The Bodily Functions Blues,” which is everything you would expect from its title.

In 2005, the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin acquired the archive of Mailer’s papers for \$2.5 million, making it the go-to place for Mailer scholars, students and the public to study his papers first-hand. This collection was opened to the public in January 2008. The more than 1,000 boxes of materials include handwritten manuscripts and typescripts of his books, their galley proofs, drafts of every single one of his literary projects (published and unpublished), personal papers including business and financial records, and audio and video tapes.

But it is Mailer’s nearly 45,000 letters with more than 3,500 correspondents, including friends and family, that should prove the most interesting primary material for researchers looking to find additional context to all his works as well as insight into the man himself. As Steve Mielke, lead archivist for the project, explains in Gillian Reagan’s article in the *New York Observer*:

‘Correspondence within an archive often reveals unexpected insights that aren’t obvious in manuscripts or elsewhere From the 1940s to the 1980s, Mailer’s letters with Japanese literary translator Eiichi Yamanishi, for example, record a fascinating discussion between author and translator about the composition and meaning of Mailer’s works.’

Mailer corresponded with some of the most important American figures in his time, including Allen Ginsberg, Aldous Huxley, Truman Capote, Muhammad Ali, John Lennon, Don DeLillo, Joyce Carol Oates, Diana Trilling, James Jones and William Styron.

On November 9–11, 2006, the Center hosted its biennale Fleur Cowles Flair Symposium, *The Sense of Our Time: Norman Mailer and America in Conflict*. The panelists included Norman Mailer himself, J. Michael Lennon, and Pulitzer Prize-winning writer David Oshinsky. There was also an exhibition held in conjunction with the Symposium—“Norman Mailer Takes On America”—which was described by Lennon as “by far the most impressive exhibition of the life and work of Norman Mailer ever mounted”. Lennon’s interview with the Centre can be found at http://www.hrc.utexas.edu/ransomedition/2006/fall/norman_mailer.html. Also, an interview with Nor-

man Mailer, his son John Buffalo Mailer and sister Barbara Mailer Wasserman was conducted by Ransom Center's Curator of Academic Affairs, Robert Fulton, when the family came for the Symposium. The audio clips from the interview and its transcript can be found at the Center's website at http://eupdates.hrc.utexas.edu/site/PageServer?pagename=Audio_with_Mailer_Family. Among other questions, Fulton asked the following:

Robert Fulton: You as Norman Mailer have various identities—you are Norman Mailer the writer, then when you speak about yourself as Norman or Mailer in your writings in sort of the third person, and then you're Norman Mailer the reader. Which one of those is stronger for you?

Norman Mailer: It almost depends on my mood. If I'm reading aloud, I'll be the person I'm pretending to be, at that point I'll be Norman Mailer the reader. I do think we have a certain separation from ourselves. In other words, when I'm talking about myself at the age of 28, and I'm saying "Norman"—he exists in my mind almost like a relative. In other words I don't feel the individual umbilical cord stretching right out to him so I can yank on him and bring him in. He's there; he is what he was and so on. And I think that's true of all of us. We bear an odd relation to our own past that is beyond my powers to explore, but they may get into that sort of thing.

The umbilical cord stretching endlessly between imagination and reality—Mailer's musings, his more polished prose, and the anecdotes we now think of as "his life" flow one into the other, defeating our attempts at anything like narratological precision.

The Harry Ransom Center's website provides an inventory page for the Mailer archive at <http://www.hrc.utexas.edu/research/fa/mailer.hp.html>, which includes detailed descriptions of its scope and contents, the six series the collection is divided into, the folder list and indexes of his correspondents and works. A press release page at <http://www.hrc.utexas.edu/press/releases/2007/mailer/> also serves as a navigation page to various Mailer resources available on the website—interviews, photos, and information about Mailer-related materials found in *other* collections at the Center. A

searchable “Finding Aid” at <http://www.hrc.utexas.edu/research/fa/> provides more information about the collection under the search term “Norman Mailer,” although many of the search results are repeated and hence difficult to wade through. However some of this information can only be found via the Finding Aid, so until the search engine becomes more intelligent, the dedicated researcher will have to go through every link. These online search aids should prove most valuable to those intending to visit the Harry Ransom Center, as one can locate a thorough picture of what is available before going there.

Another online resource is the home page of The Norman Mailer Society.⁷ It is essentially presented as a blog, complete with a news feed one can subscribe to for news and announcements—a boon for those who want to keep abreast of the latest Mailer-related news, as the site is frequently updated. Information about the Society’s yearly conference is available, and registration payment can be made directly from the site using PayPal. The Society also puts out newsletters that can be downloaded from their site. The section of the website called “Books” provides an Amazon-powered search engine for books and convenient links to first-editions of Mailer books available for purchase at the Amazon website. There is also a recommended list of key texts for Mailer studies. Another section is dedicated to information about *The Mailer Review*, including excerpts from the second volume.

As the website is run on a blogging platform, each “post” on the website is open to comments from the public. Alas, hardly any comments can be found—not even a Bronx cheer in response to the announcement that Mailer had been inducted into the Brooklyn Hall of Fame. The posting of comments creates a sense of community with the possibility for back-and-forth conversations, and hopefully more Mailer enthusiasts will participate as the Society matures. Provocations are proposed. That said, the website is the first place to go for Mailer news. Headlines at this moment include the national high school and college-level writing contests (co-sponsored by The Mailer Estate and the National Council of Teachers of English), and the launching of the Mailer Writer’s Colony, which has its own website: <http://www.nmwcolony.org/aboutUs/ourVision/>.

In April 2008, Harvard University purchased seven boxes of letters, books and papers from Mailer’s mistress of nine years, actress Carole Mallory. The material includes photos, interview transcripts and notes from the writing lessons he gave her. What researchers would most likely be interested in, and

what Leslie Morris, Harvard's curator of modern books and manuscripts, regards as "important" are Mailer's hand-written edits and notes on several of Mallory's manuscripts.⁸

III. MAILER AND HIS OTHERS: THE PERSONIFICATION OF *Agon*?

Taking all the articles written about Mailer in the last ten years in hand, one could select a set of which compare Mailer to another writer, usually in not very surprising ways, but the interesting tendency is for critics to begin to see Mailer less in terms of *agon* and more in terms of affiliation. Mailer has been often understood as a rival of other writers, and this perspective is a large aspect of his own self-creation. His 1959 article, "Quick and Expensive Comments on the Talent in the Room," was perhaps Mailer's Rubicon: his appraisals of James Jones, William Styron, Truman Capote, Jack Kerouac, Saul Bellow, and so forth made it clear that Mailer was not destined to become a literary politician. Mailer wrote in *The Armies of the Night* that he thought of himself as a counter-puncher, and his literary feuds and rivalries, including spats and major feuds with writers such as James Baldwin and Gore Vidal, as well as his battles with larger movements such as his engagement with feminism that led to *The Prisoner of Sex*, reveal the essential truth of Richard Poirier's claim that Mailer never stopped being a war novelist. If Mailer has always had reliable Orwellian intuitions about the ways in which American political forces drift toward war to enhance an internal organization rather than ward off external threat, then perhaps it could be said it takes one to know one. Mailer writes on the imagination at war and Mailer readers look for the mythical "good war." Mailer often was not quite on the right side in the Manichean battle between the Devil and the Lord.

Mailer and Coover, for example, help us see homophobia as a function of cold war hegemony in "Crises of Masculinity: Homosexual Desire and Homosexual Panic in the Critical Cold War Narratives of Mailer and Coover" by Michael Snyder. For Snyder, Mailer's *An American Dream* and *Why are We in Vietnam?*, like Coover's *The Public Burning*, "critique the way homosexuality functions to consolidate patriarchal power" (250), but Mailer is a little more of the bad cop to Robert Coover's good cop, since Mailer's homophobia is compared to Coover's "use of subversive Bakhtinian carnival laughter," which "presents a more devastating, comprehensive critique of cold war rhetoric" than do texts by Mailer (250).

Some of the “Mailer vs. X” merely recycle an idea, using the staged fight to expand naught into naught-much-more. Michael Macilwee’s article “Saul Bellow and Normal Mailer” is somewhat reminiscent of earlier articles we have seen on these two writers. There have been two Vidal vs. Mailer articles during this period, one by Michael Mewshaw, appearing in 2002, “Vidal and Mailer,” and Heather Nelson’s “Jack’s Ghost: Reappearances of John F. Kennedy in the Work of Gore Vidal and Normal Mailer” in *American Studies International*. Neither one mentions Donald Pease’s Mailer/Vidal comparison from 1992, “Citizen Vidal and Mailer’s America,” for example.

Mewshaw informs us, after recycling the Mailer/Vidal feud one more time, that “Vidal gave no sign of being bothered by the noise and the pollution,” that a “servant, Indian or Sri Lankan, brought our drinks” (6), and that “as I would often hear Vidal repeat with glee, no number of dinner parties could possibly dry up a writer’s creative juices as quickly as a steady diet of teaching freshman composition” (8). Heather Neilson alternatively not only recovers but extends more significant literary memory. She reminds us that this comparison has a history, quoting Bernard F. Dick from 1974, who had astutely suggested that “the fact that *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (1967) appeared in the same year as *Washington D.C.* not only crystallizes the difference between these two literary rivals but also explains why Mailer has become the voice of his generation while Vidal has become its mocking persona” (Dick 27). In more recent years, Neilson notes the pattern has not held: The almost simultaneous appearance of *Palimpsest* and *Oswald’s Tale* can be seen as a piquant reversal of the expected projectories of their authors’ careers—Vidal at last writing openly about his private life, and Mailer confirming his growing interest in history and historiography. We would like to see Neilson develop these points more fully.

Whether or not “Vidal vs. Mailer” was in any sense the fight of the century, a good literary feud can have a salutary effect on literary history. The Maxine Hong Kingston vs. Frank Chin fight, for example, has helped Asian-American writers and scholars make communally recognized literary constellations out of what would otherwise be random points of light, and we may ask, along these lines: What has the Gore/Norman fight *produced*? Reviewing the matter from various angles, including for example Fred Kaplan’s *Gore Vidal: a Biography* and Dick Cavett’s recollections of the televised parts of the feud just after Mailer’s death, one does not come away thinking that great battles have been won either by the Devil or the Lord.⁹

Fred Kaplan's *Gore Vidal: a Biography* gives the chemical formulas for the various high-intensity exchanges between the two; Kaplan's account gives much more than recycled spleen. There are also detailed portraits of intermediaries such as the influential editor Jason Epstein, contrasting responses to various phases of the relationship between Mailer and Vidal, and a tactful rendition of the highly cautious manner in which the two aging writers sidled up to one another in order to end the feud.¹⁰ The story of Mailer as a *friend* rather than as an ineluctable adversary emerges in Rachel Cohen's *A Chance Meeting: Intertwined Lives of American Writers and Artists, 1854–1967*. This book is in some ways quite Mailerian, folding in the radical intuitionism of Mailer's speculative biography *Marilyn* into the subjective force of *The Armies of the Night*, in which the centering self stands up to history. The book braids together the pacts and patterns of hundreds of biographical books and articles, and if it is a little too general at times, it always proceeds from a genuine appreciation of the affiliations that explain the intensity of all literary quests. Mailer figures quite strongly in the last third of the book, with chapters on Mailer with Baldwin, with Marianne Moore, and with Robert Lowell.

There have been a few articles in which Mailer is not the Satanic adversary. John M. Kinder's "The Good War's 'Raw Chunks': Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* and James Gould Cozzens's *Guard of Honor*" returns to WWII via two 1948 novels to correct our misimpression that the "good war" was always good: "At best, what we now call the 'Good War' is a well-maintained fiction, a constellation of images, narratives, memories, and sound bites invoked to lend authority to everything from the War on Drugs to the current American-lead occupation of Iraq" (187). In this article, not only does Mailer become friends with another writer, he also gets to be the political good guy. Gary Rosenshield aligns Mailer with three other writers in his article "Crime and Redemption, Russian and American style: Dostoevsky, Buckley, Mailer, Styron and Their Wards." Many people have commented critically on Mailer's involvement in the Abbot case, noting his valorization in contemporary American society, "his romanticization of the criminal, and his faith in the redemptive power of literary talent" (684). The main virtue of Rosenshield's essay is that he does not look at the activity of a single writer in isolation, instead choosing to compare Mailer, Styron and Dostoevsky to show the complex interrelations between judgment, risk and seduction in all of these cases. Rosenshield does what a scholar should do—he

connects the impulsive judgments that energize daily journalism to the deeper responsibilities of historical memory. How does Mailer come off compared to others?:

By comparison to both Buckley and Dostoevsky, Mailer indeed seems reckless. What makes Mailer's intercession so interesting in relationship to Dostoevsky's is that like Dostoevsky he conceives his redemptive project in the broadest social and ideological terms. He even seems to have borrowed some of the rhetoric relating to the redemption of criminals directly from Dostoevsky, buttressing his sponsorship of [Jack Henry] Abbot—and the downtrodden in general—by framing it in a Dostoevskian progression from crime, imprisonment, and punishment to redemption. (696)

Rosenshield attempts to understand the phenomena but not just to play “gotcha.” He knows that several of these famous writer-criminal relationships have had “unfortunate outcomes” (678) and that the writers are aware of the risks, but that the American hunger for redemption makes those risks seem worthwhile to American writers.

Mailer never tried to be average, to tack toward the center, and so the idea that we can better understand the range of possibilities by comparing something, a name, with Norman Mailer and it will often yield good results. We see this in two elegiac pieces, one from the *Los Angeles Times* and one from the *New York Times* after Mailer's death. Morris Dickstein's triptych “Mailer, Paley, Vonnegut: Same Era, Different Voices” pays homage to three distinctly different talents but puts them together not just because they all died around the same time but rather to make a claim about scale. Sam Tanenhaus' “Requiem for Two Heavyweights” makes a comparison between Mailer and William F. Buckley, one that seems both more apt (because of the way these two men related to the mass media) and more surprising, considering that they often debated the issues from opposite ends of the spectrum. For Tanenhaus, these two were “more than public intellectuals they were citizen intellectuals, active participants in the great dramas of their time, and eager at times to pursue their ideas in democracy's more bruising arenas.”

IV. MAILER AS POLITICAL SYMPTOM: LIBERALISM AND RACE

One book in particular describes Mailer as having a political role that was at once pivotal and eccentric. George Cotkin's *Existential America* works out the evolution of Mailer's "giddy existentialism" (208) but ambiguously balances between saying that Mailer failed to maintain a position of leadership on the one hand and that he got himself ejected from such a role to maintain his purity: "By the 1960s a new generation had arisen to join in his critique of an existentialist perspective, certainly in terms of choice and commitment. But the student radicals would jettison the idiosyncratic theology of Mailer's hip saints, and would reject much of his macho posturing" (207). Mailer's errand, Cotkin writes, "required that he speak to the consciousness of an age without being part of it" (207).

The best academic articles have tended to discuss Mailer as a repository of our psycho-social rebellion. Several of these articles have been collected in a clutch of articles on Norman Mailer in the *Journal of Modern Literature*. James Ryan, Ashton Howley and Scott Duguid each discuss Mailer as a figure of resistance with some ambivalence: Mailer is at once the resister-in-chief who was celebrated as "General Marijuana," but, increasingly in the last several decades, Mailer has been seen as a symptom of what is wrong with the left rather than medicine for the ailment. In "'Insatiable as Good Old America': *Tough Guys Don't Dance* and Popular Criminality," Ryan argues for the achievement of Mailer's often disparaged novel *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, which Ryan considers neglected by the critics because of its formulaic adherence to the genre of crime fiction and also because, by Mailer's own admission, it was written hastily because he needed money. Ryan shows how the populist form of the novel is well suited to its themes and allows Mailer a fresh angle on a favored theme, obscenity. The novel allows for fully fleshed treatment of American self-understanding circa 1980 in which vulgarity and obscenity (especially pornography) had become common cultural currency. Ryan points out that the repetitive structure of this populist form resonates with the structure of pornography, which in turn resonates with the American "diet of reality" (21). With the explosion of "reality culture" that has taken over contemporary popular media, Ryan's analysis shows Mailer's attention to America's crude hunger for illusory "realities" to have been quite prescient.

In "The Addiction of Masculinity: Norman Mailer's *Tough Guys Don't Dance* and the Cultural Politics of Reaganism," Scott Duguid offers a sym-

pathetic reading of Mailer's treatment of masculinity in *Tough Guys Don't Dance* with the immediate aim of recovering the novel's insight and thematic integrity. A larger ambition of this article is to address feminist disapprovals of Mailer's work. He reads Mailer's emphases on masculinity as a product of resistance to other ideological systems of power that can potentially compromise an individual's sense of self. Further, masculinity is portrayed as "high dark comedy" in the novel with "narrative excesses" that point to its own "absurdity" points to Mailer's awareness of its flaws (26). Duguid also takes a socio-historical approach to recognize the novel's achievement, showing how its emergence coincided with "the cultural materialization of American maleness" (24).

Similar to the work of Ryan and Duguid, Ashton Howley's "Mailer Again: Heterophobia in *Tough Guys Don't Dance*" entreats critics to look beyond the populist form of the critically neglected film in order to give it the hearing it deserves. According to Howley, it deserves critical attention because it shows that Mailer's debate with his feminist detractors continues long after *The Prisoner of Sex*. Critics may be interested in further exploring the extensive formal links that Mailer sets up between Reichian psychoanalysis and the crime fiction genre, which differentiates (slightly) the novel from the usual crime story. Howley, Ryan, and Duguid, individually and collectively, make it quite clear that it is a bit of a slander to accuse Mailer of having an "unblinking investment in masculinity" when his books are, in fact, obsessive examinations of the perils of masculine identity.

Three other academic articles take up Mailer's role as—depending on whether or not you use the "L-word" to describe yourself—either the conscience of American liberalism or as the rightist fox in the leftist henhouse. In "The Imperiled Republic: Norman Mailer and the Poetics of Anti-Liberalism" Sean McCann positions Mailer's entire novelistic *oeuvre* as a reaction against the dangers of a liberal politics. For McCann, Mailer's literary obsession with a metaphysics of violence and his frequent depictions of sex (namely anal penetration) point towards a more communitarian-based system of polity where members of a political community can debate and engage with pressing issues as a civic body, as against the individualistic self-assertion that Mailer thinks liberalism entails. McCann thus positions Mailer as a critic against the atomized and anomic individual that he thinks the political culture of liberalism creates, through his upholding of a vision of a community that taps into its collective culture, thereby accessing a more

ideal political and social arrangement. McCann's work is an astonishingly comprehensive effort, one that we would like to see as a fully realized book. However, the author knows too well why it would not be a good career move to do so. He begins by looking at the lavish praise Mikal Gilmore's rather narrowly focused *Shot in the Heart* received: "There may be no better example of the way the world has changed around Norman Mailer than the recent critical esteem showered on Mikal Gilmore's memoir *Shot in the Heart*" (293). "To put it lightly," McCann admits, "Norman Mailer has gone out of style." From this sad beginning, though, he tells the story of *why* Mailer went out of style. Basically, Mailer won the battle against the dragon and so put himself out of business:

For more than three decades Mailer wrote as if he were engaged in a life or death struggle with a gargantuan enemy, a many-headed beast whose ability to absorb antagonists, swallow injuries, and engulf opposition, gave it the invulnerability of a mythological creature. It was the hideous immunity of this animal that Mailer always used to justify his literary outrages ... The great surprise of Mailer's career, however, turns out to be that the enemy unexpectedly expired. In a twisted manner, Mailer's side won. (295)

We will not attempt to summarize all the developments of this fascinating article, but will just suggest that McCann's reading of *Ancient Evenings* as a response to America's turn toward identity politics in the early 1980s brings this article to its astonishing close. It is highly recommended.

In another excellent article, T. H. Adamowski works similar ground when he hypothesizes in "Demoralizing Liberalism: Lionel Trilling, Leslie Fiedler, and Norman Mailer" that Norman Mailer (alongside Lionel Trilling and Leslie Fiedler) contributed to the demoralization of liberalism just before and after WWII through inadvertent critiques of liberalism from *within* its confines. Mailer began to portray *forms of totalitarianism* within liberalism itself after *The Naked and the Dead*, effectively attacking liberalism from both the Left (in his paranoiac mode) and the rightist legacy of the counter-Enlightenment tradition (that includes de Maistre, Lawrence, and Heidegger). By going beyond Trilling and Fiedler's portrayals of liberals as political dupes, Mailer was ultimately prescient in his portrayal of liberals as weak and

compromising, since he anticipated the 1960s adoption of this same notion. “Never let the troops become demoralized.” Adamowski writes near the conclusion of his article: “They might desert to the other side” (891). Closing with the triumph of Neo-Conservatism, the suggestion is, somewhat, that Mailer is to blame. Alan Petigny’s counterstatement “Norman Mailer, ‘The White Negro,’ and New Conceptions of the Self in Postwar America” from the inaugural issue of *The Mailer Review* in an interesting rejoinder to the idea that Mailer *et alia* brought down the house of liberalism, as Petigny argues that Mailer and Company misconstrued the Eisenhower decade: “In ‘The White Negro,’ Mailer seemed to regard white middle-class America as uptight and sexually repressed. While partially correct, Mailer failed to see what the majority of Americans at the time, and till this day, fail to see: a great and broad liberalization that was unfolding almost unnoticed during the fifties” (186). Petigny closes with an interesting paradox: “Norman Mailer’s hand-wringing about the lack of individuality in American Society was not a substantiation of his claims but of the reverse,” since the resonance of “The White Negro” was in fact “Evidence of an ascendant spirit during the postwar era—one which was more secular, more expressive, and—in the aggregate—less conformist than anything that had come before” (192). So three full cheers for literary liberalism.

Three essays return us to “The White Negro” in relation to racial anxiety. Andrea Levine, unlike many critics who have focused on the dialectic between white and black masculinity in “The White Negro,” claims that an anxiety concerning the vulnerable, white, *Jewish* body becomes central to the text. Mailer’s fetishization of the aggressive African American male actually serves to “obscure the image of the cowed, impotent Jew going meekly to the gas chamber” (61). Mailer’s (re)construction of Jewish male identity operates first by eradicating Jewish biological and cultural history, after which it deprecates femininity in order to recapture certain notions of white, Jewish masculine difference.

Drawing on the historical example of Muhammad Ali’s verbal challenges to Terrell and the general dynamics at work in the boxing ring, Christopher Brookeman’s “Float Like a Butterfly, Sting Like a Bee: Mythologies of Representation in Selected Writings on Boxing by Norman Mailer” shows how Mailer reconstructs society as existential and oral—as opposed to conceptual and literary—by rewriting it in the key of black boxing culture. He argues that Mailer’s model of African American culture did not depend

on a sole fixation on blackness alone but, rather, arose from a complex interplay between African American cultural creativity and a dominant white culture. Muhammad Ali, Brookeman helps us see, was both an aesthetic and political guru of sorts, a source of “mythic defiance and confidence” which essentially became the foundation for the renewal of Mailer’s career. Ali and African American artists like him “challenged the gradualist liberalism of civil rights leaders and their supporters in the Democratic Party” (50).

Finally, Shelly Eversley’s “The Source of Hip” compares Mailer and Kerouac’s treatments of interracial sex: “Hip happens as whiteness processes into blackness, at the moment when a cross-racial union of bodies suggests movement beyond rigid categories of identity, and ideally, toward the revelatory potential of integration” (261). Eversley finds that both Mailer and Kerouac “get fabulously close to the edge of integration’s potential” (266) but ultimately “participate consciously in a cultural economy that marginalizes individuals” that results in ultimate failure: “By fixing the line that separates ‘the Negro’ and ‘the white,’ they insure that there is no communion. They exemplify their own critique, a ‘failure of nerve’ and relinquish the opportunity to come, finally, to cross the most sacrosanct boundaries of postwar U.S. culture” (267). This is a detailed and perspicacious essay, but I wish the author would give us the measure of who succeeded. White authors, for a variety of reasons and toward a number of aesthetic and political ends, challenged soft and hard taboos and put blacks and whites in bed together. The suggestion is made early in the essay that Mailer and Kerouac moved toward interracial sex to revivify their declining careers, but Mailer’s character Wilson, the gut-soldier in *The Naked and the Dead*, is proof that Mailer was interested in just this sort of transgression before he ever gained fame. It would be nice if a progressive political development came all at once, as complete as Athena when she burst out of her father’s skull, but some things take more time.

Even the most formalistic approaches to Mailer’s work are connected to political perception. Very little has been written about Mailer’s achievement as an artist first and foremost. Mailer’s work would seem to sustain moral commentary much more readily than it does purely formalist appreciation, and critics such as Robert Merrill have complained that writing about Mailer’s *life* cannot sufficiently bolster claims that he is a first-rate American writer. According to Merrill, first-rate criticism of first-rate writing is need-

ful, and in his 1992 revised Twayne study of Mailer, Merrill claims this burden has not been met. There have been a few attempts that warrant attention, however. In “Plexed Artistry: The Formal Case for Mailer’s *Harlot’s Ghost*” David Rampton begins by squaring off against Richard Rorty, who in *Achieving Our Country* attacked Pynchon, Mailer, and several other writers in for being writers too ready to portray America with “mockery” or “disgust.” Rampton challenges Rorty on ideological grounds but then defends Mailer as an artist. Unlike the reviewers and critics who complain about the formlessness of *Harlot’s Ghost*, Rampton demonstrates that Mailer’s work is patterned carefully and balanced almost obsessively. Rampton also draws attention to acts of reading in *Harlot’s Ghost* with a view to defending it on artistic rather than political grounds.

Lennon’s “Norman Mailer: Novelist, Journalist, or Historian” locates Mailer’s key claims to our attention in the region between clearly fictional and clearly non-fictional writing. Lennon carefully approaches what he describes as a “reversible dualism” between fiction and non-fiction, carefully avoiding prescriptive definitions of narrative forms. He concludes that Mailer’s primary purpose is not to blur genre so much as to engulf and ingest whatever form, stance or rhetoric he needs to carry his tales forward. Mailer succeeds in reminding us that there is no real difference between fact and fiction. Mailer was completely dedicated to the novel and to his role as a novelist, although the writer’s intentions and the reader’s own requirements may not coincide exactly.

Louis Menand, in the *New Yorker*, located Mailer’s greatest achievements in the interplay between fictional and non-fictional selves, a proliferation of protean selves that some readers did not like very much at all. The sense we get from Menand is that Mailer did a great deal to humanize writing and to make it more honest:

Some readers found all these Normans obnoxious, a display of egotism. But Mailer was simply making apparent something that modern literature and, in particular, modern journalism preferred to disguise, which is that a book is written by a human being, someone with professional ambitions, financial needs, tastes and distastes, and this human being is part of the story whether he or she appears in the story or not. It was not important for readers to like this person; it was important to know

him. Mailer did not put the first person into journalism; he took it out of the closet.

V. MAILER AND FINAL THINGS

When Mailer is not read politically, he is considered eschatologically, but it is a false dualism to put Mailer's politics to one side and his religion to the other. Discussions of Mailer's beliefs about God, karma, the Devil, and the bureaucracy of hell don't say very much when they do not flow into discussions of power relations.

Whether or not we believe in an afterlife, we enjoy imagining our way into and around such beliefs, and several articles show how Mailer's fictive constructions guide us through the land of the dead. In "Books of the Dead: Postmortem Politics in Novels by Mailer, Burroughs, Acker, and Pynchon," Kathryn Hume highlights Mailer's usage of "ancient ritual instructions" (417) in his novel *Ancient Evenings*, emphasizing especially his investment in ancient Egyptian myths in relation to the postmodern, mainly secular world of the late twentieth century. She defends Mailer against accusations of obscenity by demonstrating that Mailer's graphic representations of sexual and even excremental activities metaphorical celebrate forms of resistance that are at once spiritual and political. Against dehumanizing forces of modern life such as totalitarian ideology and unquestioned materialism, Hume argues, Mailer redeploys the imagery and ideas found in *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* in the service of liberation. This article could be said to read Mailer in a magical/utopian way, proceeding as *Ancient Evenings* does from underworld to reincarnation, whereas Hume's book length study, *American Dream, American Nightmare: Fiction since 1960*, presents us with Mailer's more dystopian underworld vision. In novels like *An American Dream* and *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, Mailer fleshes out the "American Nightmare" by ironically distorting the heroic structure of descent and return (Hume 285); by problematizing notions of success, morality, and freedom (275); and by portraying the running themes of lost innocence, of the dissolution of love in contemporary society, and of families with no future where children are not an expression of hope. These novels, Hume finds, generally project a demonic vision of America that undermines its rosier self-concepts.

Two articles explore religious aspects of Mailer's recent fiction. In "*The Gospel According to the Son* and Christian Belief," Jeffrey F. L. Partridge takes

issue with James Wood's contention that the novel's fails. According to Partridge, Mailer's reverential treatment of Jesus successfully and paradoxically dismantles the traditional Christian impulse to deify the Son. Mailer's subtle revision of the gospel and his determined refusal to resort to merely shocking portrayals of Jesus make room for his characteristic explorations of the father/son relationship. Partridge also discusses Mailer's metafictional inclusions of themes of writing, acts of authorship, and existentialism in the novel, as these formal elaborations amplify its theological concerns in resonant ways. In "Post-Holocaust Theodicy, American Imperialism, and the 'Very Jewish Jesus' of Norman Mailer's *The Gospel According to the Son*," which is also in the *Journal of Modern Literature* cluster, Brian McDonald convincingly draws connections the thematization of evil in *The Gospel According to the Son* and American imperialism. Mailer, furthermore, revises the "gospel" form by focusing its polemical energy on the inner being of the divine figure, so as to foreground Jesus' self-doubt instead of his external actions. By connecting Mailer's reinterpretation of the life of Jesus to post-Holocaust theology and to American foreign policy, McDonald sensitizes us to variety of ways in which Mailer's religious imagination resonates with timely political concerns.

VI. WHO MAILER WAS NOW

Mailer outlived almost all of the post-WWII writers to whom he was most often compared. He received the National Book Foundation's Medal for "Distinguished Contribution to American Letters" at the 2005 National Book Awards Ceremony, and Toni Morrison presented the award. Acknowledging Mailer as one of America's "tallest lightening rods," Toni Morrison in presenting the award praised him as a writer who is "Generous, intractable, often wrong, always engaged, mindful of and amused by his own power and his prodigious gifts, wide spirited."

The secular and the sacred, the political and the innermost personal, constitute one another, and this mutuality comes through powerfully and strangely in the epigraph from Kafka that Morris Dickstein chose for his 1999 study, *Leopards in the Temple: The Transformation of American Fiction, 1945–1970*: "Leopards break into the temple and drink to the dregs what is in the sacrificial pitchers; this is repeated over and over again; finally it can be calculated in advance, and it becomes part of the ceremony" (i). This quotation takes us in two directions. Our need for order is such that the most

blasphemous actions imaginable, should they continue regularly, are retrofitted in the imagination such that they become religion itself, part of the ritual they had previously upset. But then we think about established religious forms and wonder: when was this priest a leopard? By “leopards” Dickstein means outsiders; a Jew or a homosexual or an ethnic minority was a leopard but is now a priest. Mailer was a leopard but is now a priest. In his opening autobiographical prelude, Dickstein describes the shift in his reading from sacred to secular-sacred: “As I grew disenchanted with the religious texts I had grown up on, secular literature became a kind of scripture for me, a continuous commentary on living in the world” (x). Writers like Bellow, Mailer, Vidal, Roth, Updike, O’Connor, Ellison, Nabokov and others were “like Kafka’s ravenous leopards, invading and disrupting the sheltered precincts of our literary culture” (x). The old-time religion to which these writers remained true was always Modernism: “Bellow, O’Connor, Ellison, Malamud, Cheever, Updike, Baldwin, Mailer, and Roth were faithful to their aesthetic conscience, to the gospel according to James and Joyce, Kafka and Proust, even when the results showed up in their own faults of craft or character. They remained loyal to the novel even as its boundaries blurred and its hold on readers diminished” (20). Mailer is more than prominent in Dickstein’s pantheon; though Dickstein does not say that any one of these writers was first among equals, Mailer’s name is indexed over 120 times—more than any other writer.

But let me not close by counting entries in an index as if one were a reincarnation of Melville’s “Sub-sub-librarian,” a collector of extracts and what-not. Even a review of so many reviews of Mailer’s world should end like this:

We sail across dominions barely seen, washed by the swells of time. We plow through fields of magnetism. Past and future come together on thunderheads and our dead hearts live with lightning in the wounds of the Gods. (*Ancient Evenings* 709)

We began by noting that Mailer prided himself as one who wished to intentionally exacerbate the consciences of the complacent. Mailer never stopped doing this, and it would seem he got better and better at it, but the market for exacerbation seems to have dried up. “Our dead hearts” prevail for the moment, but the right words in the right order create fields of magnetism,

and the thunderous illuminations Mailer has left for readers await us, generously and patiently.

NOTES

1. Richard Rorty attempted to exacerbate the conscience of the Left about this issue in *Achieving Our Country* when he cudgelled the American Academic Left for its improper lack of patriotism. Unfortunately, he used the typical AAD move of establishing his own superiority by scape-goating one of the fallen. Rorty attacked Mailer, Pynchon, and Leslie Marmon Silko. Rorty's point about our ridiculous celebration of our own communal subversion might apply to *Almanac of the Dead* but is a poor reading of *Vineland* and *Harlot's Ghost*. I wrote to Rorty about this and he graciously wrote back to say that I'd thought about these things more than he had and that I was probably right. For a discussion of Rorty on Mailer, see Rampton's article, which takes up *Achieving Our Country*.
2. I recommend Bruce Robbins on the distinction between "globalism" and "internationalism." Internationalism is real solidarity, and you make sacrifices for and suffer with people across national boundaries because they are you—the national boundaries don't create a border to limit your responsibility. Globalism, on the other hand, is the sentimental enjoyment of easy travel and cosmopolitanism of various sorts. We can feel superior to all the people who aren't global. We can believe that our enjoyments are distinct from unfair advantages.
3. Harold Bloom's *Modern Critical Views* volume does not really contribute much to post-1998 scholarship, even though it was published in 2003. It includes my chapter on Mailer "The Myth of the American Adam in Late Mailer" from *Political Fiction and the American Self* (1998), which argues that supposedly conservative and often ahistorical political mythologies can and are deployed, by Mailer, in politically progressive ways. The introduction does not seem to have undergone a genuine introduction since the first edition of the volume, and so Harold Boom declares that American literature in 2003 is in "the Age of Pynchon" (6) and that it has been twenty-five years since the publication of *Advertisements for Myself* (1959).
4. The introduction to the *Journal of Modern Literature* cluster is more or less an act of editorial disassociation. Consider this sentence from Robert Caserio's "Editor's Introduction": "To scholars whose liberating address to representations of women was succeeded by consciousness of the artificiality of gender, masculine and feminine, Mailer's unblinking investment in masculinity in *Ancient Evenings* or *Tough Guys Don't Dance* has looked late indeed—positively out of date" (Fall 2006, Volume 30, number 1, page v). Anyone who reads the essays on *Ancient Evenings* and *Tough Guys* will see that "unblinking investment in masculinity" is an inadequate characterization.

5. Lennon and Constance E. Holmes update the bibliography through 2006 in the 2007 issue of *The Mailer Review*.
6. The first issue was praised in the New York Times literary blog, "Papercuts" by Dwight Garner: "For anyone who's interested, a fascinating testament to Mailer's headlong life has arrived on newsstands—the inaugural issue of *The Mailer Review*, a product of the University of South Florida and the Norman Mailer Society. The journal's editor, Phillip Sipiora, has deftly searched the Mailer archives ... and rounded up a lot of first-rate material. There's nary a dull page among its 265."
7. The NMS Web Site has been developed and is maintained by Gerald R. Lucas. Direct content inquiries, additions, and errors to: webmaster@mailreview.org.
8. An example of a Mailer edit involved changing the phrase "stick that up your English tushy" to "stick that up your Hungarian bottom." There was also a recommendation that Mallory delete a reference to "nibbling his bullets."
9. Dick Cavett's recollections are a great pleasure to read, as dozens of readers noted on his *New York Times* blog page. Miraculously, he frames the matter in such a way as to indicate how the weirdness of a given time touches the participants in estranging ways that are funny, awful, and invigorating: "It was at a vividly bad time in Norman Mailer's life that I met him, and a sort of water-treading time in mine. He had stabbed his wife, and I was a copy boy at Time magazine."
10. Published in the same year as *Gore Vidal*, Norman Podhoretz' *Ex-Friends: Falling Out with Allen Ginsberg, Lionel and Diana Trilling, Lillian Hellman, Hannah Arendt, and Norman Mailer* is a picture of rancor for its own sake.

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