

AN AMERICAN DREAM: AMERICAN EXISTENTIALISM

R A N D Y L A I S T

THE 1950S WAS A DECADE OF ANGUISH for Norman Mailer, who has often discussed the identity crisis he suffered following the runaway success of his first novel, *The Naked and the Dead*.¹ Mailer's meteoric emergence as the author of an astonishing bestseller thrust Mailer into a public position from which there was no obvious next move. If he kept writing WWII novels, he might have developed into a self-parodist. If he experimented with new forms, he might be derided as an upstart. If he stopped writing books altogether, he would be a one-hit-wonder. The two novels Mailer produced during this decade, *Barbary Shore* (1951) and *The Deer Park* (1955), both testify to the strain of this crisis. They are haunted parables of inertia and surveillance. Their protagonists have only the most provisional sense of who they are and drift through their stories with their moral compasses spinning arbitrarily from north to south and back again. If *The Naked and the Dead* bears the common first-novel sign of wearing its influences too openly, the same can easily be said of the two following novels. While *The Naked and the Dead* refers to Dos Passos, *Barbary Shore* unselfconsciously pays homage to European novelists, particularly Camus and Koestler, while *The Deer Park* is drenched in the style of Californian writers, particularly Hammett and West. Throughout these novels, one senses that Mailer is still casting about for a style. By his next work of fiction, *An American Dream* (1965), we have the Norman Mailer we recognize, as if he had risen up from some literary ooze into his most recognizable form, up to his most characteristic literary devices; recklessly pitting God against the Devil, interlarding his social, sexual, and literary lives into one another, and writing every sentence as if it were his last. In the stylistic transition from the sophomore

novels to *An American Dream*, we observe Mailer in the act of creating himself.

Mailer himself was self-conscious of this evolution in his writerly identity. The turning point in *Advertisements for Myself* (1958) is chapter three (of five), "Births," in which Mailer describes the fundamental rearrangement of the self-understanding that he experienced between the proofs of *The Deer Park* and his extensive revisions: "I turned within my psyche I can almost believe, for I felt something shift to murder in me" (234). This distinctly Mailerian conversion is informed by his identification with the new street culture of hipsterism. Among those contemporary commentators who read *Advertisements* as the lamentations of a failed novelist, a representative voice is Charles I. Glicksburg, who writes,

What Mailer never comes to grips with is the fundamental question of how Hip provides a viable aesthetic for the writer of fiction ... Mailer's negative and confused 'theology' will not serve to promote his career as a novelist, for Hip has no direct bearing on the problem the writer faces when he settles down to the task of composing fiction. There is no such mythical creature as a Hip novelist. (33)

Hip, Glicksburg explains, is a way of life, not a way of art. Glicksburg's prim practitioner "settling down to the task of composing fiction" is distancing himself from the press of existence in order to reflect abstractedly upon it. But in his formulation of hip as "an American existentialism," Mailer proposes a code according to which the acts of living and of writing are mutually constitutive. *Advertisements* is both an argument and a demonstration of the thesis that expression and experience "have an umbilical relationship" (*Advertisements* 379). The hip novel will be a natural extension of the hip existence.

Mailer underwrites his romantic conception of the writer with a style of existentialism that foregrounds the antirationalist stance of Heidegger and Sartre. Robert Denoon Cumming has criticized Mailer for loosening the term "existentialism" from its philosophical constraints, using it carelessly as a term for "romantic activism" (8), and thereby obscuring the true complexities of this branch of philosophy. But, of course, Mailer never boasted any

pretensions to being a careful student of continental philosophy. In a 1965 interview in *The Paris Review*, Mailer explained,

I'd hardly read anything by Sartre at this time, and nothing by Heidegger. I've read a bit since, and have to admire their formidable powers, but I suspect that they are no closer to the buried continent of existentialism than were medieval cartographers near to a useful map of the world. The new continent which shows on our psychic maps as intimations of eternity is still to be discovered. (*Cannibals and Christians* 215)

Mailer's understanding of existentialism recognizes no debt to its European roots; it is wholly intuitional. Mailer is attracted to existentialism as an oppositional philosophy; one that challenges the Socratic roots of the entire tradition of Western philosophy with its abstract observers and transcendent truths. Mailer's variation on existentialism goes even further than Heidegger and Sartre, however, in repudiating the very principle of philosophical discourse itself. In the American tradition of Emerson and Whitman, Mailer is dismissive of any philosophy he cannot feel coursing through his soul. Mailer's existentialism cannot be discovered in any closely reasoned tome, but only in the rhythm of the blood and the streets, in sex and drugs: "One's condition on marijuana," for example, "is always existential. One can feel the importance of each moment and how it is changing one. One feels one's being, one becomes aware of the enormous apparatus of nothingness" (*Cannibals* 214).

In the twin interests of achieving some insight into the nature of the American existentialism that Mailer discovered in the late 1950s and examining the manner in which Mailer translated this discovery into a novelistic style, it may be useful to parse out the four pieces of Mailer's marijuana revelation. Mailer's catalogue of insights clearly indicates that his existential theory is more comprehensive than the mere "romantic activism" derided by Cumming. Mailer's recognition of "the importance of each moment" reflects Sartre's formulation of anguish and responsibility. Attention to the manner in which each moment "is changing one" recapitulates the Sartrean motto that "existence precedes essence." Mailer's reference to "being" signifies more than just "a good existential word," as one of Mailer's interviewers quips (*Presidential Papers* 294). It is a term that broadens the field of subjectivity

to include not only sensual perception, but also the deep structures of mood and context that organize experience. In Sartrean terms, “the enormous apparatus of nothingness” is nothing less than consciousness itself, which is the upsurge, as Sartre would say, of nothingness into the world. Mailer is no Sartre scholar, but the consistency of his unique variety of existentialism has more in common with Sartrean existentialism than perhaps even Mailer himself supposed.

At the same time, moreover, each of these existential tenets reflects an attitude toward what has been commonly identified as the four pillars of the novelist’s art: plot, character, atmosphere, and tone. When Mailer returned to fiction in 1963 to begin writing *An American Dream*, it is evident that his plot moves with an urgency that is completely absent from *Barbary Shore* or *The Deer Park*. There is an inbuilt sense of “the importance of every moment.” Although the narrative of *An American Dream* spans only thirty-two hours, its protagonist Stephen Rojack is continually destroyed and reborn in response to his extreme experiences in a way that contrasts sharply with the numb souls wandering through the two subsequent novels. The atmosphere of *An American Dream*, rather than reflecting the social realism and literary naturalism of the 1950s novels, is permeated with occult tremors that signify that the reality Rojack inhabits is the kind of field-consciousness associated with philosophies of Being. Finally, in the hell-bent prose of *An American Dream*, Mailer invents a consciousness that aspires to give full vent to the enormous apparatus of language and expression, to the reckless shapes of nothingness that somehow become art and communication. In all of these aspects of *An American Dream*, Mailer explores the possibilities of his American existentialism as they apply to the art of the novel.

When Mailer said of *Barbary Shore* that it was “the first of the existential novels written in America” (*Advertisements* 106), he surely must have been referring to the European kind of existentialism with its grim mood and haunted corridors as opposed to his own homegrown variety. Although the characters in *Barbary Shore* are always aware of the imminent end of the world, their apocalypticism doesn’t inspire their lives with any urgency. The plot is a series of random encounters, confined almost entirely to a dreary boarding house. The narrator’s mood is typical of the murk of ennui in which the entire storyline is immersed: “I lived, and was it I alone in relation to nothing? The world would revolve, and I who might exercise a will for so long as money lasted, exercised nothing and dreamed away hours

upon my bed" (162). Most strikingly, despite the blur of adultery, murder, and espionage, the last chapter of *Barbary Shore* ends with the very same expression of pointlessness with which the first chapter concluded: "So the blind lead the blind and the deaf shout warnings to one another until their voices are lost" (6, 312). Among the many similarities between *Barbary Shore* and *The Deer Park* is this purgatorial sense of a sordid cast of characters exiled alone with one another. Like Lovett of *Barbary Shore*, O'Shaugnessy is living off of some money he saved up, drifting aimlessly through time. If Lovett is ostensibly occupied by a novel that he never writes, O'Shaugnessy is involved in an even more negative project of forgetfulness and self-narcosis: He's "trying to forget how to fly a plane" (34). The plot of *The Deer Park* is certainly more kinetic than Mailer's previous novel, but the stakes—being "in" or "out" of the Hollywood power circles, winning or losing the affections of vain and mercurial women—are generally phony, interchangeable pursuits in self-deception. Toward the end of the novel, however, Sergius's resolution to strive for a new kind of life and Marion Faye's Manichean psychosis charge the climax of the book with a new dimension. Although the plot of *The Deer Park* remains essentially unchanged through Mailer's revisions, these developments are clearly inflected by the born-again Mailer, touched by a vision of American existentialism and its new possibilities for purpose and resolution. As such, they point toward the more fully realized treatment this vision would receive in *An American Dream*.

One of the common critiques of Sartrean existentialism is that it has no moral dimension and implies an ultimate relativism and quietism. All action is equivalent and therefore useless. Sartre tried to contest this verdict by articulating a theory of what he called "anguish." The very absence of any definitive code of right or wrong, Sartre argued, transforms every human action into a moral act of universal import; we invent right and wrong through our actions: "When a man commits himself to anything, fully realizing that he is not only choosing what will be, but is thereby at the same time a legislator deciding for the whole of mankind—in such a moment man cannot escape from the sense of complete and profound responsibility" (*Existentialism* 292). This aspect of Sartrean philosophy is generally overlooked, and existentialism continues to have associations with the kind of moral nihilism and Beckettian futility that characterizes novels like *Barbary Shore*. One of the most salient aspects of Mailer's existentialism, however, is its unabashedly metaphysical character. Although the appeal to God and

the Devil seems to fly in the face of any conventional existentialist attitude, Mailer insists that, “To be a real existentialist (Sartre admittedly to the contrary) one must be religious, one must have one’s sense of the ‘purpose’—whatever the purpose may be—but a life which is directed by one’s faith in the necessity of action is a life committed to the notion that substratum of existence is the search, the end meaningful but mysterious” (*Advertisements* 341). Mailer’s theology invests the existential world with the pressing sense of moral urgency that Sartre had attempted to communicate through his thesis of anguish, because the events which befall his characters are no longer random and meaningless; every moment is transformed into a pitched battle for the soul of the universe. The plot of *An American Dream* is propelled by the imperatives of this existential metaphysics.

Mailer has told us that “there is one single burning pinpoint in the vision in hip: it’s that God is in danger of dying” (*Advertisements* 380). In *An American Dream*, it is a tenet of Rojack’s existential philosophy that “God’s in a war with the Devil, and God may lose” (236). Everything Rojack sees and does in the thirty-two hours of his story is inseparable from this vulnerability of God to the predations of the Devil. The random sequence of events that constitutes the narrative plot of the novel is transformed through Rojack’s existential theology into a mythological odyssey. By some mystical coincidence, Cherry shares Rojack’s conviction about the metaphysical dimension of human choices. She is haunted by “the idea that God is weaker because I didn’t turn out well” (197). Kelly, moreover, gleefully plays the role of the Devil which Rojack’s intuitions have assigned to him. Rojack is really in the world he has philosophized, and so every action he performs is fraught with a significance that bears no relation to its worldly consequences, but represents a victory or a defeat on a universal and hence invisible plane. Rojack’s murder of his wife is obviously a sickening crime in the worldly sense, but to look for the substance of Rojack’s actions in the factual-pragmatic modality would be to make a hash of Mailer’s story. One of the most radical achievements of this book is its complete dislocation of heroism from conventional morality. If Rojack is a hero or a villain, a warrior for God or the Devil, it has nothing to do with how we feel about uxoricide or, in the case of Ruta, anal rape. Rojack perceives the moral character of his actions by their alignment with an entirely intuitional sense of symbolic valences. The result is that every moment of Rojack’s story is saturated with a significance that is immediate but at the same time mysterious and

ambiguous. Even Rojack can never be sure that he is reading the valences accurately: "Am I now good?" he wonders after killing Deborah, or "Am I evil forever?" (38). It is surely one definitive fate or the other—that is the metaphysical dimension of Rojack's belief-system—but there is no way to tell which one—and that is the existential twist. The result of the uncertainty is that Rojack has to try again and again, yet he can never finally succeed. Like Sartre's anguished consciousness, Rojack is burdened at every turn with the urgent responsibility of deciding the fate of mankind and the universe. Should he come in Ruta's ass or in her vagina? Should he follow Shago to Harlem or obey Kelly's summons? Should he walk the parapet or scoff at the absurdity of such an insane gesture? Rojack's actions in response to these seemingly trivial dilemmas have consequences that go to the root of Rojack's sense of the universe, and they fill him with the dread of a sacred onus: "Comfortless was my religion, anxiety of anxieties, for I believed God was not love but courage" (204). This all-pervasive emphasis on heroic courage reconfigures the ennui characteristic of conventional existential fiction (Barth's *The End of the Road*, Bellow's *Dangling Man*, Percy's *The Moviegoer*, Mailer's *Barbary Shore*) into the plot-driven suspense more characteristic of an action movie in which the hero is called upon in every scene to save the world.

Closely connected to the mood of cosmic significance permeating every development in the plot of *An American Dream* is the manner in which Rojack is conceived as a character in contrast to Mailer's previous protagonists. In *Barbary Shore*, Lovett is planning to write "a large ambitious work about an immense institution ... and about the people who wandered through it. The book had a hero and a heroine, but they never met while they were in the institution. It was only when they escaped ... that they were able to love and so discover each other" (58). Lovett, of course, is the hero of this story, clamped down under a set of circumstances that defer any possibility of personal transformation into the future. Indeed, we learn that this deferral is to be indefinitely and probably perpetually postponed for Lovett himself. In the final chapter, Lovett perceives, "If I fled down the alley which led from that rooming house, it was only to enter another, then another" (311). There is no escape from the institution, and therefore Lovett's character is condemned to a state of suspended animation, incapable of the kind of potentiality that gives meaning to agency. Likewise, O'Shaugnessy spends most of *The Deer Park* wandering without direction in a fog of self-

alienation: "I didn't know what was right, and I didn't know if I cared, and I didn't even care if I knew what I wanted or what was going on in me" (224). O'Shaugnessy's final scenes are charged with an urgency and a will toward self-transformative encounters that echoes Mailer's own experience of existential rebirth. In O'Shaugnessy's closing thoughts on the kind of writer he will aspire to be, we hear Mailer's distinctive new voice: "I know that finally one must do, simply do, for we act in total ignorance and yet in honest ignorance we must act, or we can never learn, for we can hardly believe what we are told, we can only measure what has happened inside ourselves" (326).

This closing sentiment in *The Deer Park* becomes the starting point for Mailer's writing on hipsterism. Rather than hopelessly wiling away a Beckettian endgame, Mailer's hipsters are charged with the imperatives "to set out into that uncharted journey into the rebellious imperatives of the self" (*Advertisements* 339) and "to create a new nervous system for themselves" (345). As a character, the hipster is committed to not only the possibility but the necessity of permanent mutability. In this sense, he faithfully reflects the Sartrean premise that "Man is nothing else but what he purposes, he exists only insofar as he realizes himself, he is therefore nothing else but the sum of his actions, nothing else but what his life is" (*Existentialism* 300). Although Sartre's philosophy points toward a radical new understanding of the manner in which human beings exist, it has often been said that Sartre's own fictional technique relies too heavily on naturalistic conventions that conceive of people as "characters."² In conventional novelistic practice, the very idea of a "character" implies an essentialist kernel of inherent traits; a fictional character coheres through the perceived unity of the character's "soul." Challenging this essentialist conception of human identity has become one of the central projects of existential and postmodern fiction, from William S. Burroughs to Don DeLillo. In his characterization of Rojack as a man capable of just about anything, Mailer presents his first major contribution to the literature of open-ended subjectivity. The identity of the hipster is a perpetual upsurge of something out of nothing. The hipster of Mailer's essays and interviews has come to narrative life as a raw existence flooding up into the world in the form of action, danger, and self-invention.

What identity Rojack has is established in exclusively negative terms. In the first sentence of the novel, Rojack identifies himself as the shadow-double of Jack Kennedy. If JFK represents the solar, public image of the American daydream, Rojack's awareness of "the abyss" (2) has torn him out

of this daylight world of war heroes, professors, congressmen, and television personalities. While Rojack continues to “be” a public figure, most pressingly in his identity as Deborah’s husband, his personal experience is reflected in observations such as “My personality was built on a void” (7) and “I had opened a void—I was now without center” (27). The war memory which Rojack reports in the opening paragraphs of the book serves less to ground Rojack’s identity in a specific history than it does to present the suggestion that what identity Rojack can be said to have is grounded only in the emptiness he perceived in the eyes of the German soldiers he killed. We are introduced to Rojack as he hovers over a balcony struggling with the question of whether or not to fling himself over the balcony.

Rojack’s uncertainty is the first of many paroxysms of doubt that collectively suggest that Rojack can never know what to do because he has no “character” to direct his actions. Whatever essence there is in his identity subsists in his actions or in his failure to act. Rojack’s condition is more unstable than that indicated by Napoleon’s romantic epistemology, “Act, then we’ll see”; rather it signifies a Sartrean statement about being, such as “Act, then you will become.” Rojack continually invents himself out of action. The German’s eyes stare “into the new flesh of [his] memory” (6); after killing Deborah, he exults that “my flesh seemed new” (32). Rojack forms his own flesh through extreme gestures in the same manner that the hipster creates a new nervous system for himself; Mailer’s existential American defines himself out of living moments. But these moments of self-definition are perpetually falling apart under the flux of temporality, and so the existential character is required to continuously renew the self-defining gesture. Waiting in the police station, Rojack feels that he “had crossed a chasm of time and was some new breed of man” (81), throwing up into a toilet, he imagines that “if the murderer were now loose in me, well, so too was a saint of sorts” (101), after having sex with Cherry, Rojack observes again, “my flesh felt new” (131). New sources of selfhood are constantly welling up into the void of Rojack’s personality to give him a temporary hold on reality, but they just as quickly collapse into failure and doubt. No act of courage, however brazen or irrational, ultimately has any power to summon Rojack into any substantial state of being. Whether killing Deborah, impregnating Cherry, beating up Shago, or walking Kelly’s balcony parapet, Rojack is still hounded by emptiness. The stench that bursts out of the cavity in a corpse’s gut and follows Rojack out into the American hinterland is a clear correlative of this triumph of empti-

ness, as are the “holes” torn in space by the hotel air conditioners. Rather than being a “character” in the traditional sense, Rojack dramatizes the failure of character to cohere, the failure of being to exorcise nothingness.

Perhaps the most unique aspect of *An American Dream* is Mailer’s depiction of the narratological atmosphere Rojack inhabits. Rojack’s New York is a city on the brink of a dream, barely differentiated from Rojack’s own consciousness. *Barbary Shore*, although its plot and characterizations tend toward the surreal and oneiric, insists on the dialectical materialist’s faith in an objective facticity. Lovett is troubled by a vision of a passenger in a taxi who, frightened by the city he sees out the window, takes refuge in fantasy: “It is a dream, he thinks, hugging his body to the rear of the cab. He is dreaming and the city is imaginary and the cab is imaginary. And on he goes. I shout at him. You are wrong, I cry, although he does not hear me; this city is the real city, the material city, and your vehicle is history” (6). Lovett’s Marxist parable sets reality and fantasy in stark opposition, as does O’Shaughnessy’s statement that he “had the idea that there were two worlds. There was a real world, as I called it, a world of wars and boxing clubs and children’s homes on back streets, and this real world was a world where orphans burned orphans. It was better not to think of this. I liked the other world in which almost everybody lived. The imaginary world” (47). In both novels, Mailer derives moral clarity from an imperative against self-deception. In *Barbary Shore*, both bourgeois oblivion and ideological zeal insulate individuals from the factual world of blunt reality. In *The Deer Park*, Hollywood is the epicenter of all falsity and deception, the entity that Sergius must resist in order to “try for that other world, the real world” (374). The easy separation of reality from illusion in these two novels translates into a relatively simple morality by establishing “the real” as the good.

The separation between the real and the imaginational in which Lovett and O’Shaughnessy had both believed cannot survive, of course, in the mentality of hipsterism. The ontological stability of “the material city” and “the real world” gives way to a radical subjectivism:

It is as if the universe which has usually existed conceptually as a Fact, ... but a fact which it was the aim of all science and philosophy to reveal, becomes instead a changing reality whose laws are remade at each instant by everything living, but most particularly man, man raised to a neo-medieval summit where the

truth is not what one has felt yesterday or what one expects to feel tomorrow but rather truth is no more nor less than what one feels at each instant in the perpetual climax of the present.
(*Advertisements* 354)

The hipster's reality is constantly being recreated through the perpetual mutability of consciousness. The membrane that had separated the materialist's self and his world dissolves, and with it, the moral criteria such a membrane had made possible become untenable. His reality is a living dream, a field of being in which the world is perceived as a symbolic landscape of possibilities and recognitions.

Once again, Mailer has taken us into Sartrean territory. Rojack, a professor of "existential psychology" shares with Sartre the project of "turn[ing] Freud on his head" (17). The starting point of this inversion for both existentialists is the dissolution of the ego. In *The Transcendence of the Ego*, Sartre explodes the opacity of the Freudian ego. Rather than a "me" over here and a "world" over there, "these are two objects for absolute, impersonal consciousness, and it is by virtue of this consciousness that they are connected" (106). If this radical spontaneity intends "the self" and "the world" in the same stroke, then the relation between the self and the world takes on the quality of that between the dream-self and the dreamscape he inhabits. The subject-object barriers which kept one aloof and enclosed within a bubble of selfhood dissolve and the existential subject comes to himself through the world. Here and there lose their Cartesian neutrality and the world becomes painted with phenomenological concern. Sartre explains, "the world [is] mine because it is haunted by my possibles, and the consciousness of each of these is a possible self-consciousness which I *am*; it is these possibles as such which give the world its unity and meaning as the world" (*Being and Nothingness* 158).

Rojack takes pains to be "phenomenologically precise" (2) in his description of his history with the full moon. He might be referring specifically to the starting point of Sartre's ontology as it develops out of the rejection of the transcendental ego. Since there is no ego to mar the perfect translucency of intentional consciousness, Sartre explains, the being of an existent is exactly what it *appears*; the phenomenon "reveals itself as it is" (*Being* 4). If Rojack intuits a connection between the full moon and certain pivotal episodes in his history, then this connection is "real" insofar as it constitutes

Rojack's understanding: "I looked into my being ... and proceeded to listen. Which is to say, I looked out deep into that shimmer of past death and new madness, that platinum lady with her silver light, and she was in my ear" (12). In the dreamscape of Rojack's existential atmosphere, the significance of the real is a function of memory and intuition; looking outward and looking inward are reciprocal activities. If the being of magic is that it connects worldly existents that shouldn't rationally be connected, then the phenomenological experience is more magical than it is rational. "Objectively," it's surely a coincidence that the full moon was shining bright the night Rojack killed the four German soldiers, the night he first met Deborah, and the night the novel begins, but he doesn't live in objective space, which is for JFK and the *New York Times*, but Rojack is plumbing a more primordial mode of consciousness, one in which "the caverns of the moon" (11) and "the liverish caverns of [his] belly" (14) correspond not only isomorphically, but existentially; the emptiness of "the mirror of the moon" (266) is *his* emptiness externalized and put to him as a question, a blank significance which he can only aspire to understand. It is this "magic" of the moon, its action at a distance, its obscure relevance to Rojack's being, that lures him over the edge of the balcony in the first chapter, and Deborah constitutes a similarly dream-like potency. Rojack describes an occasion on which, following a fight with Deborah, he got three traffic tickets in fifteen minutes. The naturalistic explanation would appeal to coincidence, but for Rojack, to intuit a connection between the police and Deborah is to give Deborah real power. If phenomena reveal themselves as they are, then the police really are embodiments of Deborah's wrath, just as the moon presents Rojack with a mirror of his own emptiness.

In this subjectivist mirror-house, Rojack's murder of Deborah is only another form of the suicide he had left uncompleted earlier in the chapter. It takes place, like all of Rojack's experiences, in a kind of psychic space that is subject only to an intuitional morality that never finally comes into focus. Any moral judgment on Rojack's behavior would require a real world of values as a point of leverage, but Mailer plunges us into a world of magic and ritual in which nothing is ever finally real or unreal. In a naturalistic atmosphere, Rojack would be a psychopath at odds with his world, but in fact, Rojack "swings" with the magical demands of his environment that he seems to rightly perceive. That Deborah really was "the Devil's daughter" (204) is seemingly substantiated by the confrontation with Kelly, who radiates

Satanic energy from every fiber of his being. Rojack lives in a narrative logic according to which, as in psychoanalysis, the hermeneutic intuition about what a symbol means is inseparable from the real meaning of the symbol. His condition is the real paranoia which Mailer describes when he appeals to “the reality more real than the reality of closely reasoned logic.” (*Advertisements* 342)

Over and above what Mailer has done with his manipulation of plot, character, and tone in *An American Dream* is the unmistakable voice that Mailer seems to have unleashed in his telling of the story. The narration of the two sophomore novels is cautious and conventional. Even though the rewrite of *The Deer Park* captures a hipper, more colloquial style, the style pays homage to the tenets of “good writing,” particularly to the values of economy, precision, and narrative pacing. It might be said of the style of *An American Dream* that Mailer has done away with the imperatives of such refinement and simply let loose. Mailer has attempted to live up to his remark that “What makes a novelist great is that he illumines each line of his work with the greatest intensity of experience” (*Advertisements* 379). In the spirit of a plot that is always surfing along a point of ultimate crisis, a character who is always being broken down and rebuilt as a result of his actions, and an atmosphere awash in magical influences, Mailer has Rojack tell the story in a voice that strives to find “the greatest intensity” in every sentence and phrase. If Mailer stylistically emulates Hemingway in certain ways, stylistically he has become the anti-Hemingway, notorious for his Byzantine effusiveness. In the same manner that Rojack trusted to his intuitions as the only authority on what he should do, Mailer the writer has liberated himself from writerly formulas of craft. In an interview, Mailer describes writerly craft as a variety of bad faith. The cultivation of craft gets between the writer and his real subject and offers an escape from “the terror of confronting a reality which might open into more and more anxiety and so present a deeper and deeper view of the abyss. Craft protects one from facing those endless expanding realities of deterioration and responsibility” (*Cannibals* 216). Throughout *An American Dream*, when Mailer’s prose gets a whiff of something, it pursues relentlessly. His over-the-top description of Rojack’s sexual encounter with Ruta, the elaborate game of psychic warfare in the after-hours club, and Kelly’s epic monologue in his penthouse; all of these moments suggest that Mailer has thrown off any concern for balance or subtlety in favor of extreme effects and exhaustive treatment of ideas. More than

any of the other innovations in Mailer's fictional technique, this matter of his intuitional, ecstatic prose style is the one that will become most commonly associated with his writing. Indeed, he ratchets the frenzy up several notches for his next work of fiction, *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, and his most recent novel, *The Castle in the Forest*, has received all the usual criticism for its flights of digression and bombast.

Certainly, there are many influences that inform Mailer's self-invention as a vessel for rhetorical excess. Writing articles for the *Village Voice* and other periodicals gave him practice composing under the urgency of the deadline, and Mailer himself has attributed much of his hipster style to the influence of marijuana, alcohol, Benzedrine, and Seconal.³ But clearly Mailer the writer is captivated with the possibilities of translating the imperatives of Hip existentialism from the realm of experience into the realm of expression. The tone of Mailer's prose is intended to be contiguous with the tone of Mailer's consciousness. The original appearance of *An American Dream* in monthly installments combined the art of the novelist and the art of the journalist in ways which Mailer would famously go on to explore. The self-parodic correspondences between Rojack's character and Mailer's public persona represent a further fusion of artist and artwork. In this stance, Mailer makes a definitive break with Sartre, who disdains passion as a poise of bad faith and insists on the modernist conception of a necessary "aesthetic withdrawal" (*Literature* 49) of the artist and the work. For Sartre, the writer's freedom is dependent upon a detachment from any commitment to a state of mind or an overriding emotion. The writer's decision to write "supposes that he withdraws somewhat from his feelings, in short, that he has transformed his emotions into free emotions as I do mine while reading him" (55). Mailer, of course, would site such a remark as evidence that French philosophers are "alienated beyond alienation from their unconscious" (*Advertisements* 341), and his hip existentialism is more authentically grounded in the corporeal and libidinal experience of living. Mailer has said, "I edit on a spectrum which runs from the high clear manic impressions of a drunk which has made one electrically alert all the way down to the soberest reaches of depression where I can hardly bear my words. By the time I'm done with writing I care about I usually have worked on it through the full gamut of my consciousness" (*Cannibals* 218). Writing, for Mailer, is a transubstantiation of his flesh and spirit into his words, an act that comprises elements of confession and excretion. He aspires to compose sentences

that will reek of his sweat and dread. In this sense, Rojack and Mailer are both committed to the Sartrean necessity of inventing themselves *ex nihilo*. Rojack has to create himself through action in his dreamlike world of magical possibilities just as Mailer pushes himself into being through the unfathomable possibilities of language.

NOTES

1. See the 2002 interview with Dotson Rader.
2. See Esslin's critique that Sartre and Camus "express the new content [of their philosophies] in the old convention" (xx).
3. See "Fourth Advertisement for Myself: The Last Draft of *The Deer Park*," *Advertisements*, 205–224.

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