

REFLECTIONS OF TIME PAST:
PATTERN, TIME, AND MEMORY
IN NORMAN MAILER

RAYMOND M. VINCE

“Home is where one starts from. As we get older
The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated”
T. S. Eliot, “East Coker”

NEARLY SEVENTY YEARS AGO, T. S. Eliot wrote these words in his poem, “East Coker,” published in 1935 and later a part of his masterpiece, *Four Quartets*.¹ Hugh Kenner reminds us that East Coker is the name of “the village in Somerset where Eliots or Elyots lived for some two centuries, before the poet’s ancestor Andrew Eliot emigrated in 1667 to found the American branch of the family” (263). After Eliot died three decades later in 1965, his ashes were interred at St Michael’s Church—in that same village of East Coker. In the church on a simple wall plaque are other words from that poem, “In my beginning is my end. In my end is my beginning.” These enigmatic words seem, as Marysa Demoor has pointed out, “designed to elude death” (258).² Whether we see life as a manifestation of God’s providence or of a more impersonal Wheel of Life, surely we could see a strange sense of *recursion* and return in these simple facts of Eliot’s pilgrimage.³ At times, does not life seem to *fold back* on itself? Or, to take up a hint from the title of *Four Quartets*, is not life like a string quartet or a Bach fugue, weaving a series of complex musical variations upon various themes? As Kenner suggests, Eliot’s *Four Quartets* “traverse and exploit a diversity of timbres and intonations, interchange themes, set going a repetitive but developing minuet of motifs” (261).⁴

Did not Norman Mailer's untimely death on November 10, 2007 cause some of us to look again at the trajectory of our own lives, seeking to come to terms with his passing but also, implicitly, with our own mortality? This reflection is not to become obsessed or haunted by death—our own or others—but to examine the more positive aspects of aging, to chart the slow development of character, to find deeper meaning in the contingencies of life. This path, surely, is a crucial part of self-knowledge: in discovering character, Heraclitus tells us, we shall discover our fate.⁵ I freely acknowledge that such a stance may well reflect my own advancing years. However, as James Hillman the Jungian psychologist argues, part of the purpose of our “later years” may be that we are able to explore these deeper patterns of life.

Then we will be able to look at the decay of body and mind as more than affliction. We will connect it with an underlying truth we already feel: Something forms a human life into an overall image, including life's haphazard contingencies and wasted irrelevancies. Later years are often devoted to exploring these irrelevances, adventuring into past mistakes so as to discover understandable patterns. (xvi)

In so doing, we are reflecting on *time* past—to use Eliot's useful phrase from *Four Quartets*. In pondering the life and significance of Mailer (1923–2007), we are persuaded to re-examine the times in which he lived and about which he so eloquently wrote. We wonder how his work will be understood in *time future*. In this process of reflection, I believe that Eliot's words in “East Coker” may suggest to us three useful questions. *First*, as each of us grows older, how do we now understand today's “strange world” and “more complicated” pattern—and how can Mailer's task as a writer help in that understanding? *Second*, are Mailer's own “beginning” and “end” connected, perhaps in some recursive pattern, some contrapuntal or *fugal* relationship, or some kind of Return? And *third*, what roles do pattern, time, and memory play in Mailer's work—in his significance as a writer and in his critical reflections upon American society and the literature of his times?

However, some might reasonably ask, is there a *particular* relevance in turning to T. S. Eliot—and specifically the Eliot of the *Four Quartets* to understand Mailer? I would argue that there is. Eliot, in writing the four poems that eventually made up *Four Quartets*, was at the height of his poetic

powers, meditating upon the mysteries of time and the poet's task, and working out an understanding of his life and mortality. Although Eliot was to live over twenty years after publishing "Little Gidding" (1942), it seems undeniable that the shadow of death hangs over this final poem and the other three in the collection. As Stephen Spender puts it, "'Little Gidding' is the darkest, most wintry, most death-saturated of the quartets, and also the culminating point of Eliot's *oeuvre*. 'In my end is my beginning'" (172). But this recognition is not simply a reflection of Eliot's personal mortality: we realize that this mid-winter poem, written in 1942, was crafted "at the dark cold center of the war" (172). Mailer's final novel, *The Castle in the Forest* (2007), focusing on Hitler and the tragic events that would lead to World War II, is very different from Eliot's *Four Quartets*, but Spender's words on "Little Gidding" have at the very least a certain poignancy. Could not Mailer's *Castle* be described as the "darkest, most wintry, most death-saturated" of all his writings? Is not this novel in some ways "the culminating point" of Mailer's *oeuvre*? Of course, the *form* of Eliot's poems and Mailer's novel are very different. However, the authorial tone and the life setting—what Hermann Gunkel called the *sitz im leben*—are far less so. If we were to add *On God: An Uncommon Conversation* (2007), the other work published in Mailer's final year, the relevance in using Eliot's *Four Quartets* as one way—and only one among many—of understanding Mailer may become a little clearer and more persuasive.⁶

The poet W. H. Auden has been described by his editor, Edward Mendelson, as "the first poet writing in English who felt at home in the twentieth century" (Auden, *Selected Poems* ix). Mendelson's evaluation could be argued but there is little doubt that Auden's poem, "September 1, 1939," written as a response to the beginning of World War II and set in Manhattan, New York, became significant for many as the twenty-first century began in the light of the traumatic events in Manhattan and elsewhere of September 11, 2001.⁷ In fact, along with another poem of Auden's and Conrad's novel *The Secret Agent* (1907), these three texts became the most cited and referenced literary texts in America after 9/11.⁸ But it is in another of his poems, "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," that Auden wrote, "The words of a dead man / Are modified in the guts of the living" (*Selected Poems* 44).⁹ As we remember and celebrate Mailer's work, beginning with *The Naked and the Dead* (1948) and ending with *Castle* (2007) and *On God* (2007), so we might well ask—how might his words be "modified" in our guts today? We

are meditating not only on one man's death but the passing of an era. Norman Mailer has left us but the whole World War II generation—*his* generation—is fast disappearing. Already we miss their perspective, their realistic, no-nonsense understanding of the world so typical of the “greatest generation.” But we are left. So we ask: how then should the words of Mailer impact us in this generation?

I. STRANGER WORLD, MORE COMPLICATED PATTERN: MAILER'S TASK

Eliot said, “As we get older / The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated.” Now, in those lines from “East Coker,” the word *older* would seem to refer initially to our personal aging—Eliot was fifty two when he wrote and published “East Coker.” In fact, the later work of many poets may offer profound glimpses into old age: along with Eliot, we might think of Yeats, Auden, and Frost, among many others. While our culture often dismisses the elderly in purely negative terms—the not-young, not-new, not-strong, and not-capable—it is sometimes the poets who have thought more deeply about aging.¹⁰ Other disciplines have also examined aging in more positive ways, including religion and psychology. To quote Hillman again,

Aging is no accident. It is necessary to the human condition, intended by the soul. Aging is built into our physiology; yet, to our puzzlement, human life extends beyond fertility and outlasts muscular usefulness and sensory acuteness. For this reason we need imaginative ideas that can grace aging and speak to it with the intelligence it deserves. (xii)

But *older* in Eliot's lines could refer also to the age of mankind, to what many people see as the evolution and increasing complexity of the human world. In the twentieth century, indeed our world did become strange—the curved space-time of Einstein, the mysterious reality of the quantum, Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, the Freudian depths, the artistic revolutions of modernism and postmodernism, the strangeness of chaos and complexity theory, and—perhaps above all—the horrific traumas of two world wars. The twenty-first century, shadowed by 9/11, is proving no less strange. What about the search for *pattern*? Many of us, I think, try to find some kind of pattern to the world: maybe a simple philosophy or a paradigm along the lines of Thomas Kuhn.¹¹ For some, such a search might

include some kind of faith commitment such as Judaism or Christianity.¹² But in our stranger, Alice-in-Wonderland, postmodern world, the struggle to find personally significant patterns is, for many, increasingly demanding. Unless one is persuaded by the more simplistic forms of Fundamentalism, the patterns are indeed becoming, as Eliot foretold over sixty years ago, “more complicated.”

The mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947) once said, “Art is the imposing of a pattern on experience, and our aesthetic enjoyment is recognition of the pattern” (225). Could we imagine our world, for instance, without the amazing patterns of Johann Sebastian Bach or of Rembrandt? But this enjoyment of and need for meaningful *patterns* is not simply an artistic or humanistic perspective: pattern recognition and theory appraisal seem increasingly important in science, technology, and mathematics.¹³ In his book, *Mathematics, the Science of Patterns*, Keith Devlin begins with these words: “Numbers, that is to say, whole numbers, arise from the recognition of patterns in the world around us: the pattern of ‘oneness’, the pattern of ‘twoness’, the pattern of ‘threeness’, and so on” (9). So the human desire to find—or to impose—meaningful patterns amid the chaos of life may be universal. Presumably because of individual temperaments or varying cultures, each person finds meaning in a particular pattern: but the *search* for pattern itself may be universal.

In the humanities, music, literature, and art are quite obviously patterning devices. These different art forms take a few basic elements and arrange them—often as transformations in time—in a profusion of ways, all in order to express human meaning. The basic elements are often simple: in Western music a mere eleven notes from A to G# are arranged as a progression in time; in English Literature just twenty six letters and a few other symbols are required, arranged in linear time progression (a text decoded on a page from left to right, a story placed in time) or maybe in non-linear form (hyper-text). In the visual arts, a few primary colors and a set of basic shapes (point, line, square, circle, etc.) and sufficient to generate the diverse beauty of Western art.¹⁴ The elements, then, may well be simple: the resulting patterns are very complex. What we know as the artifacts of culture and civilization could be regarded as a vast array of meaningful patterns—from the sculpture of Ancient Greece to the late string quartets of Beethoven, from the poetry of Eliot to the colors and shapes of Picasso. Scientific theories and mathematical models can also be seen as patterning devices, an insight, I would argue,

that goes back to William Herbert George and his *The Scientist in Action* (1936).¹⁵

Developing this approach, we could argue that the novel and the story—like any other works of art—also create such patterns: we can regard story as a complex pattern of narrative, grammar, metaphor, metonymy, and other rhetorical devices. We may well be *homo faber*, but we are also Mankind the Storyteller. Peter Brooks has argued, “We live immersed in narrative, recounting and reassessing the meaning of past actions, anticipating the outcome of future projects, situating ourselves at the intersections of several stories not yet completed. The narrative impulse is as old as our oldest literature” (327). Certainly the modern novel—unlike previous literary genres—does not offer simplistic explanations of the world or unchanging religious dogmas. Today, Grand Narratives are not much in fashion. But the novel does offer, I suggest, an *implicit pattern*, a bold attempt—indirectly and tacitly—to grasp the complexity of life. Actually, in contemporary religion, not all preachers and theologians would stress fixed dogmas rather than that kind of implicit pattern. Frederick Buechner, both novelist and preacher, has suggested that:

[A]ll theology, like all fiction, is at its heart autobiography, and that what a theologian is doing essentially is examining as honestly as he can the rough-and-tumble of his own experience with all its ups and downs, its mysteries and loose ends, and expressing in logical, abstract terms the truths about human life and about God that he believes he has found implicit there. (*The Sacred Journey* 1)

What of the work of Norman Mailer? In his novels and in a work like *The Armies of the Night* (1968), we can see the relevance of Brooks’ words: “immersed in narrative, recounting and reassessing the meaning of past actions ... situating ourselves at the intersections of several stories not yet completed” (327). Certainly, Mailer seems more at ease with Buechner’s “mysteries and loose ends” than with “logical, abstract terms”—even, I think, in his final work, *On God*. In many ways, I would argue that his views on art and narrative are not too far from Whitehead, Brooks, and Buechner. He sees storytelling as an essential human characteristic, one of the ways we create patterns to make sense of the absurd. In *The Spooky Art*, Mailer says: “We tell

ourselves stories in order to make sense of life. Narrative is reassuring. There are days when life is so absurd, it's crippling—nothing makes sense, but stories bring order to the absurdity. Relief is provided by the narrative's beginning, middle, and end" (156–157). So, Mailer's stories—in whatever genre they are written—try to "make sense of life," creating some kind of pattern. A little later in *The Spooky Art*, in his critique of Gore Vidal, Mailer almost echoes Eliot's words in "East Coker": "What I would argue, however, is that his particular tradition has become inadequate to our needs. The world is growing so genuinely complex (and perplexed) that it's limiting to enclose it with aphorisms, no matter how brilliant. One has to qualify them" (170).

I must admit that when I first began to read Mailer I found the breadth and complexity of his work difficult. Why couldn't he stick with one genre, one type of writing? While Hemingway and Fitzgerald are hardly simplistic writers, even as a British native I felt somehow that I could find my way around their work. With Mailer, I was in a different realm, more surrealist, absurd, and violent: this was no Norman Rockwell America. In part, this may be because his world is stranger and more disturbing than Hemingway and Fitzgerald's—whether we call it a shift from *Modernism* to *Postmodernism* or whether we describe it in some other way. The pattern indeed has become "more complicated." But in the breadth and ambition of his work, has anyone else captured the crazy, chaotic pattern of post-war and post-modern American society quite so perceptively as Norman Mailer? I think not. Making art, forming patterns, or creating spells—that was Mailer's mission, whatever his critics said. As he himself put it:

The artist seeks to create a spell ... a spell equivalent to the spell a primitive felt when he passed a great oak and knew something deeper than his normal comprehension was reaching him. Perhaps the primitive felt close to what we feel when we see a great painting on a museum wall. (*The Spooky Art* 148–49)

There is also another kind of pattern here. According to the *OED*, the word *text* is related to the word *textile*—that which is woven, a fabric—another kind of *pattern*, if you like. In her Carnegie Hall tribute entitled "Tapestry," his daughter Susan Mailer said this: "Most people think of Dad as a great writer. I like to think of him as a master weaver" (29). As storyteller, Mailer can be seen as both a magician casting a spell and also a mas-

ter weaver of complex but meaningful patterns. Eliot's *Four Quartets* date from the period 1935–1942.¹⁶ A few years later, Mailer's first work appeared, *The Naked and the Dead* (1948). Throughout his long life, Mailer has been weaving this "more complicated" pattern for our "strange" world.

II. "IN MY BEGINNING IS MY END": MAILER'S RETURN

Many have commented that in the six-decade evolution from *The Naked and the Dead* to *The Castle in the Forest*, from the ordinary heroism of World War Two soldiers to the transcendent evil of Adolf Hitler, Mailer has in a real sense come full circle, he has returned to where he began. In an interview published in 2007, Mailer said that he had been thinking about Hitler "since I was nine years old," that he "grew up with the idea of Hitler as someone who was going to kill Jews—and he succeeded by half" (Lee 203–204). His was the generation called on to face Hitler and fascism. Mailer realized that the battle for freedom—the battle against fascism—had to be fought again and again, fought in every generation. He knew that the greatest dilemma posed by Hitler was not so much the existence of his evil ideas as the fact that millions of ordinary Germans voted for him and supported him. It is not enough to admit the existence of fascism as a theoretical possibility: one has to face its awful attraction for some people—and not only in the 1930s. This would seem to be sufficient reason for Mailer to come full circle, to return in his final novel to the genesis of Hitler and fascism. "In my beginning is my end."

Mailer's abiding interest in boxing and pugilism is well known: in *The Mailer Review* (2008), along with allusions to boxing in the memorials and tributes, there were major articles on boxing by Barry Leeds and John Rodwan. Leeds says that,

Boxing has provided a significant moral paradigm throughout much of Norman Mailer's life and work.... Mailer has, indeed, perceived gladiatorial confrontation and violence as a central metaphor for his own artistic and personal struggles for growth, fulfillment, salvation. (385–386)

Part of the attraction of boxing as such a metaphor is no doubt temperamental—that is simply part of who Norman Mailer the man was. But I wonder: how much does the readiness to use such martial metaphors

arise from his experience as a soldier in World War II, an experience encapsulated in *The Naked and the Dead*?

In his article, referring to *An American Dream*, Leeds goes on to say, “Rojack comes to represent what was best in the American character after WWII, what was shamelessly corrupted, and what Mailer suggests may be redeemed ...” (393). In his article, Rodwan suggests, “[F]ighters are heroic warriors, which is precisely how Mailer imagined writers, or at least himself” (400). In other words, the boxing metaphor could in part be an extrapolation of the warrior’s experience into peace time. Mailer the soldier became Mailer the fighter. We might posit a similar relationship between Hemingway’s Great War experience and his lifelong interest in the art and heroism of bullfighting. So, I suggest that Mailer’s WWII military experiences provide themes and metaphors for his later work as an author—from beginning to end of his published work—throughout his life. “In my end is my beginning.”

III. PATTERN, TIME, AND MEMORY: MAILER’S SIGNIFICANCE

I have called this paper, “Reflections of Time Past,” alluding to Eliot’s meditation on time in *Four Quartets*, and reflecting on Norman’s passing. If we are scholars who value his life and work, we might ask what our next step could be. All literary, visual, and musical art—like other human artifacts—is of course rooted in time. Robert Scott describes literature as “making concrete” the tragic truth of life and death symbolized by the concept of *entropy*: “moments, chances, choices” are—in the end—lost in time (81). But while it is rooted in time, art is not necessarily *bound* by time. Art and literature represent a kind of cheating of entropy, a humanistic challenge to the Second Law of Thermodynamics.¹⁷ Art and literature promise a form of immortality. The human artists and authors succumb to the Second Law and to death, but their creations live on. Three or four millennia after their various creators have gone, the narratives of Gilgamesh, Homer, and the Old Testament are still being read.¹⁸

While story-tellers are embedded within a particular time, their *stories*—if truly great—can speak to the ages, rising above context to communicate some meaningful pattern, some exemplar of art, some human truth that may seem almost timeless. Certainly, Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls* is rooted in the Spanish Civil War of the 1930s—but it may be saying something about heroism, the good earth, and human connection that could last

for a thousand years. On a more modest scale, as the Cold War was coming to an end in 1988, the narrative, patterns, and metaphors of John Donne and Ernest Hemingway were found very relevant by Mikhail Gorbachev.¹⁹ How will Mailer's work be regarded in the future? From this vantage point, we have no way of knowing. But we can say this: from WWII to the new millennium—with passion, intelligence, and skill—Mailer has charted the strange and troubled times of the United States.

In his 1998 work, *The Time of Our Time*, Mailer tried to place his life work as a writer on a larger canvas, which he described as “the web of history, the style of our lives, and the river of becoming” (xii). A *web*—that which is woven, whether it be textile or tale—is a wonderful choice of word to describe the patterning of our lives. The words *web* and *weave* are ancient Teutonic terms, dating in English from before 1000 AD, and referring to a craft known from Neolithic times. But in their contemporary use, as a pattern of linked hypertext documents accessed through the Internet, *web* and *weave* also describe the patterning of meaning captured in the World Wide Web. Mailer also writes of “the river of becoming” (xii), a powerful synecdoche of our lives and times seen as a river, a synecdoche used also by Twain and Hemingway, and drawing, perhaps, on ancient memories of the earliest River Cultures of the Nile, the Tigris and Euphrates, the Indus, and the Yellow River. Mailer describes *time* itself as “the most intimate and indefinable of words, the most mysterious word of them all” (xii).²⁰ All human life—all art and culture, all human artifacts, all meaningful patterns—are ultimately transformations in time. Time, then, is the inescapable matrix for everything else of significance: Mailer's words seem appropriate.

What of *memory*? Memory is the human facility that enables us to reflect who we are and from whence we have come, to understand our identity as beings in time, and to create and tell our stories. Our reflection of *time past*—and our understanding of *time present* and our hopes and fears concerning *time future*—are all created and shaped by our memories. Memory cannot physically change the events of the past but memory shapes how the past is perceived. Memory may help to determine, for instance, whether the past will be for us oppressor or liberator. At times, memory may provide the chance, almost, of a *do-over*.²¹ Again, I quote from Buechner:

We cannot undo our old mistakes or their consequences any more that we can erase old wounds that we have both suffered

and inflicted, but through the power that memory gives us of thinking, feeling, imagining our way back through time we can at long last finally finish with the past in the sense of removing its power to hurt us and other people and to stunt our growth as human beings. (*Telling Secrets* 32–33)

Apart from the obvious fact that memory is at the core of both narrative and our human identity, what is the particular place of memory in Mailer's work? He once called *form*—something surely vital to any narrative—"the physical equivalent of memory" (qtd. in Busa 90). As we continue to study the form of his narratives and stories, in effect we are recalling Mailer's memory, his perception of the "the web of history" (*Time of Our Time* xii), so that we may better weave our own pattern. Through memory, each of us composes—and continually revises—our personal story, creating our own narrative, part fictional part factual. Throughout our lives, we are telling our stories, shaping a history of our times, drafting our own map of reality, weaving our own *web* of meaning. At the heart of that patterning process, we find human memory. Again, here is how Mailer expresses it in *The Time of Our Time*:

Over the course of our lives, most of us compose in the privacy of our minds a social and cultural history of the years through which we have passed. We often think of it as a collective remembrance that others will share with us. We even speak of it as *our* time [...] we are forever working to obtain some understanding of our lives and our time. (x)

Memories may be lost, of course. We may simply forget, move on with other concerns, and/or get older. Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia may destroy memory. Sometimes, as Toni Morrison suggests in *Beloved* (1987), severe trauma can erase, as it were, our cultural history circuits.²² Under the impact of war and other traumas, what was once called "shell shock" and now PTSD continue to do so. Human memory seems to be both conscious and unconscious—both voluntary and involuntary.²³ Memory needs sustaining, reshaping, reimagining. The Norman Mailer Society, its annual conferences, *The Mailer Review*, and their counterparts in other bailiwicks of the literary world, are reminders of the power and necessity of

cultural and literary memory for all of us. In November 2007, we lost Norman Mailer. Each day we lose more of the “Greatest Generation.” We must not forget the memories, that “social and cultural history” and “collective remembrance” that is threaded through Mailer’s work—and the voices of his generation.

IV. THE PLACE OF HOME

Eliot wrote, “Home is where one starts from. As we get older / The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated” (“East Coker” V). What is the place of *home* in Norman Mailer’s work and significance? We could answer that on several levels: his rootedness both in Brooklyn, New York City and in Provincetown, Massachusetts; his secular Jewish identity; and his citizenship and sense of home here in the United States. Much can be said about Mailer’s roots in New York City and in Provincetown; in *The Mailer Review* (2008), Chris Busa wrote about his Provincetown roots. Mailer’s Jewish identity may be seen throughout his work, in his love of language and debate, his passion for the life of the mind, and his abiding sense of history and *kairos* time.²⁴ We can see that Jewish identity, I think, in *The Gospel According to the Son, On God*, and—more implicitly but passionately—in *The Castle in the Forest*. Again, in *The Mailer Review* (2008), Mashey Bernstein and Ezra Cappell both write of this Jewish dimension. Cappell reports that in 2006, speaking at the Harry Ransom Center in Texas, Mailer said that the Talmud “has influenced everything I have written” (qtd. in Cappell 98).

Home is where “one starts from.” Mailer’s citizenship and character as an American are evident throughout his life and work. From time to time, the Right-wing tries to suggest that dissent is somehow un-American and unpatriotic: during his life Mailer certainly was tarred with that brush. In reality, however, dissent is at the core of the American experience. As both a British citizen and a U.S. resident alien, I believe I can testify to this fact. If I remember correctly, was not the 1776 Revolution concerned with dissent against a certain British king? Instinctively, Mailer—always the warrior and the rebel—knew that dissenting reality. This country was always his home and his reference point in the space-time continuum. This nation, with its long, painful, but ultimately noble quest for genuine freedom, was both his passion and his theme. If his work is a complex form of patterning—like any work of narrative or art—the pattern he was searching for was always a pat-

terning of times and spaces specifically American. For this reason, I am convinced that Norman Mailer was and is a great *American* writer. Despite increasing and welcome interest in his work from other countries, that will remain his abiding significance.

V. PATTERN AND CALENDAR

This essay was completed on February 25th, which in the Christian calendar for 2009 was Ash Wednesday. Is not a calendar, religious or secular, a way of patterning time, of bringing meaning to the chaos and losses that *chronos* may signify? In effect, a calendar interposes occasions of *kairos*—significant, critical, meaningful events—upon the rather forbidding expanses of *chronos*. In the Christian calendar, one of those significant *kairos* times is Ash Wednesday. In many churches, at the special liturgy for Ash Wednesday, these words accompany the marking of the forehead with ashes, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (BCP 265). Some may see this as excessively morbid or an outdated superstition, but for others this ritual is a healthy reminder of the frailties and fragilities of human nature. To that extent, Ash Wednesday is a simple patterning of life: Judaism and Christianity are more complex and comprehensive patterns, larger narratives that to some offer meaning and significance.

Whether described in older essentialist categories or in more contemporary dynamic ones, human nature is regarded by Jews and Christians as *mortal*—sharing the atoms, DNA, and fate of the rest of the physical world—and also *spiritual*, animated by the Spirit of the Creator. Ash Wednesday powerfully brings together—at a specific moment in time and place—*pattern*, *time*, and *memory*. It can be seen as a significant *kairos* time between birth and death.²⁵ The day reminds one of larger issues of life—and death—and of the pattern that may outlast each person’s mortality. Ash Wednesday also reminds us of the power and necessity of memory itself. “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (BCP 265, emphasis added). Religion shares with art and literature the belief that it is only through *memory* that human identity may be understood and some kind of order brought to the ravages of time.

In the American literary realm, over which he ruled so magnificently, Mailer was seeking a pattern that could outlast each one of us. His task, simply put, was to tell stories that could “bring order to the absurdity” of life:

We tell ourselves stories in order to make sense of life. Narrative is reassuring. There are days when life is so absurd, it's crippling—nothing makes sense, but stories bring order to the absurdity. Relief is provided by the narrative's beginning, middle, and end. (Mailer, *Spooky Art* 156–157)

The stories of Mailer remain to reassure us: his patterns abide to help us make sense of this life. The words of Eliot's *Four Quartets* may perhaps offer us some guidance, as we too face a "stranger" world and a "more complicated" pattern. "In my beginning is my end." As we reflect upon Norman Mailer and his significance, so we shall continue to examine the rhetorical and metaphorical patterns of his writing, the times about which he so eloquently wrote, and the cultural memory of America that is preserved in this distinguished body of work.

NOTES

1. An earlier version of this paper was given at the 2008 Norman Mailer Conference, October 16–18, in Provincetown, MA.
2. "And T. S. Eliot's poetry was the source for the epitaphs on two plaques commemorating his death in 1965. His ashes are interred in the church of St. Michael's in East Coker, where a commemorative plaque on the church wall bears his chosen epitaph—two lines from *Four Quartets*: 'In my beginning is my end. In my end is my beginning.' Significant lines of course, considering the topic of this paper. The circularity of the reasoning, as well as the engraving on the stone, seems designed to elude death. The T. S. Eliot memorial stone in Westminster Abbey, featured in the BBC documentary, reads: 'The communication of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living.' Taken from Eliot's 'Little Gidding,' this even more intriguing passage marks a communication between the dead, the living, and the 'beyond'—in other words, a communication licensed by God (Kermode and Hollander 497). Communication 'tongued with fire' may indeed be poetic language, endowed with special godly powers going 'beyond the language of the living.' Here, then, modernist poets see their dead selves as immortal souls whose language has divine qualities capable of reaching the living" (Demoor 258).
3. The concepts of recursion, strange loops, and "metaphorical fugues" are dealt with by Douglas Hofstadter in his *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* (Basic Books, 1979). His book won the 1980 Pulitzer Prize for General Non-Fiction, the same year that Norman Mailer won the Pulitzer Fiction Prize for *The Executioner's Song* (<http://www.pulitzer.org/awards/1980>).

4. The music parallel to Eliot's *Four Quartets* is sometimes said to be the "late" quartets of Beethoven, but Kenner (relying on information from Hodgart) maintains that Eliot was "paying attention chiefly to Bartok's Quartets, Nos. 2–6" (261).
5. "The idea we are moving in its place says it is to character that you are most truly yoked. 'Character,' said Heraclitus at the beginning of Western thought, 'is fate.' No, Napoleon, not geography; and no, Freud, not anatomy, either. Character! Character governs—governing physiology, too. We will be maintaining, with all the heft and perseverance we can still summon, that genetic inheritance is shaped into our own peculiar pattern by character, that specific composition of traits, foibles, delights, and commitments, that identifiable figure bearing our name, our history, and a face that mirrors a 'me'" (Hillman xvi).
6. I am not here dealing with the vexed question of Eliot's anti-Semitism, which—if proven—would strongly suggest that Eliot might not be appropriate as a way to interpret Mailer's work. Matthew Hart deals with this issue in a recent article, writing of "the centrality, in recent criticism, of the question of anti-Semitism" (179). Giving a brief bibliography on this subject (note 5), he writes, "the point is not just that Eliot helped create the unpleasant myths through which we comprehend his writing and thought; it is that these myths are partly accurate" (179). What seems undeniable is that Eliot's complex identity—English, American, international, and perhaps *the* representative of modernism—makes such evaluations unusually problematic.
7. Shortly after 9/11, Auden's poem was read on National Public Radio and elsewhere on the Web. Eric McHenry wrote, "Auden on Bin Laden" in *Slate.com* on September 20, 2001 (<http://www.slate.com/?id=115900>). Some months later, Peter Steinfels wrote that the poem had been "endlessly quoted and reprinted to express grief over what had happened and foreboding about what was to come" in his *New York Times* article.
8. "In the aftermath of the Sept. 11 attacks, Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* became one of the three works of literature most frequently cited in the American media. (The other two were poems by WYSTAN AUDEN: 'Sept 1, 1939'—also the subject of 'Culturebox'—and 'Musée des Beaux Arts.')" (Shulevitz)
9. On a lighter note, Auden's poem "Stop all the clocks" became popular after it was featured in the funeral scene of Mike Newell's 1994 film, *Four Weddings and a Funeral*. The poem, also known as "Funeral Blues," is poem IX in Auden's "Twelve Songs" (*Collected Poems* 141).
10. "When 'old' gains its definition only by pairing, it loses its value. In a culture that has identified with the 'new' since Columbus, 'old' gets the short end of the comparative stick, and it becomes ever more difficult to imagine oldness as a phenomenon apart from the lazy simplicities of conventional wisdom" (Hillman 42).

11. Thomas Kuhn (1922–1996) used the idea of *paradigm* and *paradigm shift* in his *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Although the term *paradigm* has been used for a long time in English, it is Kuhn's usage that since the 1960s has become influential.
12. I briefly examine religion as a form of patterning in the final paragraph below.
13. Since 1978, there has been an International Association of Pattern Recognition (IAPR), with member bodies in many countries. Lawrence O'Gorman's article describes some of the developments.
14. Patterning in *time* is obviously integral to both music and literature but seems less crucial in the visual arts, like painting. But from the perspective of Physics, a particular color is certain light vibrations per second and hence is a transformation (or pattern) in time. As Einstein saw with startling originality in 1905, a stationary light wave has no meaning. In addition, all forms of art and language are *cultural* transformations in time. The visual arts qualitatively changed when Masaccio (1401–1428) and others developed perspective: music patterns were different after Stravinsky from before.
15. Ahead of many others, W. H. George argued the human activity of patterning was at the heart of science and its theories. In the mid 1970s, I became aware of George's significant role through a Mr. Frost who taught History & Philosophy of Science in the University of London's Extra-Mural Department. Back in the 1930s, George had written: "To remove the human element is to remove science. When Newton formulated his law of universal gravitation he did not reduce by one the number of absolute truths too be discovered, he created a new pattern into which facts could be fitted. Einstein created still another pattern into which these same facts, together with others, could be fitted" (George 19).
16. "‘Burnt Norton’, published in 1935, was written five years before the other three quartets, which were published within a year of one another: ‘East Coker’ in 1940; ‘The Dry Salvages’ in 1941; and ‘Little Gidding’ in 1942" (Spender 155).
17. The second law of thermodynamics concerns *entropy*, a scientific concept that has had some effect on our culture and literature. Entropy is a kind of *unavailable* energy, a manifestation of the chaos or randomness of a system. "In 1850 Rudolf Clausius [...] said that there is energy which is available, and there is also a residue of energy which is not accessible. This inaccessible energy he called entropy, and he formulated the famous Second Law of Thermodynamics: entropy is always increasing. In the universe, heat is draining into a sort of lake of equality in which it is no longer accessible" (Bronowski 347).
18. The oral traditions of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* may be as early as 2,000 BC, Homer's *Iliad* perhaps dates from 1,000–800 BC, and the Old Testament sagas and narratives may date from 1,000 BC, the time of King David, or earlier. The written texts, of course, would be somewhat later.

19. In December 1988, less than a year before the fall of the Berlin Wall, Mikhail Gorbachev addressed the United Nations in New York. He began his speech by “invoking the great English poet, John Donne, cited in his novel by Ernest Hemingway, ‘No man is an island ...’” (Josephs 9). Allen Josephs comments, “Were not these ever-widening gyres precisely what Professor Baker had meant by the partisanship of humanity? It is one thing to cite John Donne’s ‘Meditation,’ but an altogether larger issue to invoke Donne as invoked by Hemingway, invoked in turn by Mr. Gorbachev in his historic, bridge-building address” (9). Donne’s conceit and Hemingway’s bridge are indeed potent metaphors—especially across the Wall, behind the Iron Curtain, as quoted by Gorbachev.
20. “So I can have the hope that this book may stimulate your sense of our time [...] In effect, this is a book that nearly all of us have created in our own minds; each book vastly different yet still related by the web of history, the style of our lives, and the river of becoming that we refer to by the most intimate and indefinable of words, the most mysterious word of them all—time. Time!” (Mailer, *The Time of Our Time* xii).
21. “I am inclined to believe that God’s chief purpose in giving us memory is to enable us to go back in time so that if we didn’t play those roles right the first time round, we can still have another go at it now” (Buechner, *Telling Secrets* 32).
22. “Only this woman Sethe could have left him his manhood like that. He wants to put his story next to hers. ‘Sethe,’ he says, ‘me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow’” (Morrison 314).
23. Zora Neal Hurston suggests this blend of the conscious and unconscious in human memory when she says “Now, women forget all those things they don’t want to remember, and remember everything they don’t want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly” (1).
24. Why, some might ask, would *kairos* be an aspect of Jewishness? After all, *kairos* is a Greek word for time, dating back to Hesiod’s *Works*, and signifying *opportunity*, *significant time*, *right time*, *critical time*, as opposed to the word *chronos*, the more general term for *time as a period*. *Kairos* is both common and important in New Testament usage and Christian theology. But significantly—it seems to me—in the *Septuagint*, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, *kairos* occurs about three times as often as *chronos* to translate the usual Hebrew word for time, *et* (Hahn 835). To that extent, it seems that the perspective on time that is represented by the Greek word *kairos* is as much Jewish as Christian in origin. As Hans-Christoph Hahn has said, “The creator, Yahweh, has created the whole of time and fills it in accordance with his will, and also fixes the individual *kairoi* (cf. Gen. 1:14)” (835).
25. “This is the time of tension between dying and birth / The place of solitude where three dreams cross ...” (Eliot 66).

WORKS CITED

- Auden, W. H. *Selected Poems*. Ed. Edward Mendelson. 1979. New York: Vintage, 2007. Print.
- . *Collected Poems*. Ed. Edward Mendelson. Rev. ed. New York: Vintage, 1991. Print.
- Berstein, Mashey. "The Heart of the Nation: Jewish Values in the Fiction of Norman Mailer." *The Mailer Review* 2.1 (2008): 376–384. Print.
- The Book of Common Prayer ... according to the use of the Episcopal Church (BCP)*. New York: Oxford UP, 1979. Print.
- Bronowski, J. *The Ascent of Man*. New York: Little, Brown, 1973. Print.
- Brooks, Peter. "Reading for the Plot." *Essentials of the Theory of Fiction*. Ed. Michael J. Hoffman and Patrick D. Murphy. 2nd edition. Durham: Duke UP, 1996. 326–347. Print.
- Buechner, Frederick. *The Sacred Journey: A Memoir of Early Days*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1982. Print.
- . *Telling Secrets*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991. Print.
- Busa, Christopher. "This Is a Town Worth Digging In and Fighting For." *The Mailer Review* 2.1 (2008): 87–96. Print.
- Cappell, Ezra. "Norman Mailer: A Man of Letters Inspired by the People of the Book." *The Mailer Review* 2.1 (2008): 97–99. Print.
- Demoor, Marysa. "From Epitaph to Obituary: the Death Politics of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound." *Biography* 28.2 (Spring 2005): 255–275. Print.
- Devlin, Keith J. *Mathematics, the Science of Patterns: the Search for Order in Life, Mind, and the Universe*. New York: Scientific American / W.H. Freeman, 1997. Print.
- Eliot, T. S. *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909–1950*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1952. Print.
- George, William Herbert. *The Scientist in Action*. London: Williams and Norgate, 1936. Print.
- Hahn, Hans-Christoh. "Time, kairos." *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*. Ed. Colin Brown. Vol 3. Exeter, England: Paternoster, 1978. Print.
- Hart, Matthew. "Visible Poet: T. S. Eliot and Modernist Studies." *American Literary History* 19.1 (Spring 2007): 174–189. Print.
- Hillman, James. *The Force of Character and the Lasting Life*. New York: Random House, 1999. Print.
- Hurston, Zora Neale. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. 1937. New York: HarperCollins, 2006. Print.
- Josephs, Allen. *For Whom the Bell Tolls: Ernest Hemingway's Undiscovered Country*. New York: Twayne, 1994. Print.
- Kenner, Hugh. *The Invisible Poet: T. S. Eliot*. London: Methuen, 1965. Print.
- Kuhn, Thomas. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1962. Print.
- Lee, Michael. "The Devil in Norman Mailer." *Literary Review* 50.4 (Summer 2007): 202–216. Print.

- Leeds, Barry H. "He was a Fighter: Boxing in Norman Mailer's Life and Work" *The Mailer Review* 2.1 (2008): 385–395. Print.
- Mailer, Norman. *The Spooky Art*. New York: Random House, 2003. Print.
- . *The Time of Our Time*. New York: Random House, 1998. Print.
- Mailer, Susan. "Tapestry." *The Mailer Review* 2.1 (2008): 28–29. Print.
- Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Introd. A. S. Byatt. New York: Everyman's Library, 2006. Print.
- O'Gorman, Lawrence. "Six Years of Pattern Recognition." *IAPR Newsletter* 30.4 (Oct 2008): 3–4. Print.
- Rodwan, John G, Jr. "Fighters and Writers." *The Mailer Review* 2.1 (2008): 396–406. Print.
- Scott, Robert Ian. "Entropy vs. Ecology in *The Great Gatsby*." *Gatsby*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House, 1991. 81–92. Print. Major Literary Characters.
- Shulevitz, Judith. "Chasing after Conrad's *Secret Agent*: It's the archetypal novel about terrorists. And everyone's getting it wrong." *Slate*. Washington Post Company, 27 Sept 2001. Web. 23 Feb 2009.
- Spender, Stephen. *Eliot*. London: Fontana, 1975. Print. Fontana Modern Masters.
- Steinfels, Peter. "Beliefs; After Sept. 11, a 62-year-old poem by Auden drew new attention. Not all of it was favorable." *The New York Times* 1 Dec. 2001, late ed., sec. A: 13. Print.
- Whitehead, Alfred North. *The Dialogues of Alfred North Whitehead*. New York: David R. Godine, 2001. Print.