

THE FAITH OF ROMANTICISM:
DIALECTICAL SYNTHESIS AND
NORMAN MAILER'S ENGLISH
ROMANTIC VISION

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IN THE WINTER OF 2002, I HAD THE FORTUNE of meeting Norman Mailer and being able to spend some time talking with him. At the time I was an undergraduate majoring in English at Suffolk University in Boston. I was begging to formulate my own path as a writer and scholar and my main pre-occupations were with two particular writers: Lord Byron and Norman Mailer. For me, there was something about these two—separated as they were by several generations—that inspired me, thrilled me, and made me want to write and read in the same fashion they did. When I first met Mailer, he asked me what I was working on and what was interesting me. I answered him honestly and said, “Well, you and Lord Byron.” Mailer smiled brightly at this, leaned in close and told me he had just finished re-reading Byron’s *Don Juan* which he had found “much in.” I wasn’t sure what to say. Mailer and Byron had for long been aligned in my imagination and here, in a bar-room in downtown Boston, they were coming together. I mentioned to Mailer that I had long thought of him as something of a “Byronesque, if not downright Byronic figure.” This statement earned another smile from Mailer, and a wink and punch in the ribs to boot. “That’s an honor,” he said. “But I’m not sure.” Still, the twinkle in Mailer’s eyes suggested to me that I was on to something. “In fact,” I said—and this was after a swallow of beer—“I’ve thought of you as a Romantic figure, maybe even a Romantic thinker.” He said, “How so?” “Negative capability,” I said. Mailer looked at me and

smiled again. “Keats’s notion that great minds can accept that not everything can be resolved, that some concepts are above such. I suppose in that respect you’re more like Keats than Byron.” Mailer said the idea was interesting and winked at me. He then said, “I’m not sure about that, though, not all of it. Especially the ‘above such’ stuff.” I intended to say more to Mailer on the topic but the afternoon was long and before I knew it we were embracing and saying our goodbyes. He told me to come visit him sometime so we could “talk more.” I thanked him and he said, “Keep thinking, keep writing.” I spent the next several years pondering the implications of all of this. All the while I had Mailer’s phone number stuck in my wallet with the knowledge that I could visit him to “talk more.” Yet I never took him up on the offer. Honestly, I wasn’t sure of what to ask him. I didn’t know if he would reject my ideas and laugh me out of his house. This was something I need to figure out for myself, I felt.

In November of 2007, I began writing Mailer a long letter. We had traded a few letters over the years, usually about plans to get together that never came to fruition. I opened my letter with an apology and explanation of what I was working on. I told him how I was aware of Harold Bloom’s notion of the anxiety of influence and felt, to some measure, that I had developed a case of it myself in regard to him. I then asked him a number of questions about his sense of the Romantics and the concept of negative capability. I closed by saying, “I gotta know, are you a Romantic?” I finished the letter on the ninth of November. The next morning my wife woke me up by saying she had some bad news and pointed at my computer. I logged on and there, on the first page I opened, was the announcement of Mailer’s death.

The challenge I faced then was to bring this all together. With Mailer gone I know that I will never be able to ask him those questions myself. As his critical legacy continues to be built, and his position in literary history negotiated, I felt I had a duty—one born from respect, admiration, and something akin to friendship—to figure out where Mailer stands in respect to one of the most forceful and influential movements in the history of literature: the English Romantic movement.

For this essay—which represents just one of many different pieces I have been crafting on Mailer’s Romanticism—my focus is on Mailer’s employment of a more contemporary and advanced conception of negative capability: dialectical synthesis. I use Frederick Jameson’s notions of dialectical

synthesis as my springboard and critical apparatus through which to examine Mailer's unique ability to carry contrary notions simultaneously without resorting to simple, practical resolution in order to resolve such. Jameson and Mailer, despite their radically different stylistic approaches, seem akin to me and, also, mutually Romantic in terms of their respective understandings of reality. My main claim is that Mailer—like Jameson—does not wholly resist resolution to incommensurable situations and concepts. Instead, he takes Keats's notion of negative capability a step further than Keats and his contemporaries. When confronted with incommensurable concepts, Mailer does not entirely abandon the possibility of resolution, but, instead, begins to seek for such through a process of dialectical synthesis.

Given their mutual interest in the manifest structures of power between what might be broadly characterized as the "oppressed" and the "oppressive" in the social and cultural structures of Western culture, as well as the operations of what Jameson terms "the political unconscious," and perhaps moreover their ready employment of a form of post-Marxist, Hegelian dialectical thinking throughout their respective texts, it is surprising that the ideological connections and similarities between Frederic Jameson and Norman Mailer have not been given any measure of consideration by critics of either author.

While both Mailer and Jameson often share particular and mutual ideological interests and philosophical tactics, Mailer and Jameson appear to also be connected at more fundamental and perhaps even relatively subconscious level for the ideological structures and theories of both are very much products of 1960s American radical Marxist ideology. While Mailer, to some measure, departed from Marx and Hegel in terms of his own political and social philosophy during the late 1960s in a far more drastic manner than Jameson, the potent ideological strands of Marxist and Hegelian dialectics have nonetheless remained present throughout much of Mailer's thought over the past forty years, although they have gone relatively unexamined by his critics over the past three decades.

An attempt, such as the following, to posit some ideological connection between Jameson and Mailer's use of the dialectical method is not merely speculative or without basis. In his 1972 essay, "The Great American Hunter, or, Ideological Content in the Novel," Frederic Jameson offers a critical exploration of the Marxist ideological and political underpinnings of Norman Mailer's controversial novel *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, published in 1967.

Jameson conceives of the novel as an exploration and interpellation of the various structures of power present between American bourgeois men during the middle stage of the 1960s. While Jameson has, at least as of yet, written nothing further about Mailer, this early essay nevertheless begins to suggest a unique and pertinent manner through which we might begin to reconceptualize, if not wholly re-imagine, Mailer's notions of power structures and the function of the dialectical throughout the course of his writings. In his examination of Mailer's text, Jameson offers, then, something of a conceptual basis through which we can begin to further interpret and conceptualize the ideological basis of Mailer's writing. Jameson's critique of the novel is rather surprising, for he parts ways, drastically and succinctly at that, with a majority of Mailer's critics during the late 1960s and early 1970s, many of whom considered *Why are We in Vietnam?* to be a downright obscene, pointless, and ultimately unimportant text that served only as a platform from which Mailer could offend and instigate the politics and tastes of his reading public. Instead, in his reading of the novel through a decidedly Marxist perspective, Jameson argues that when reading the novel, "we may well have the feeling that its attitude and values are anything more objectionable than those implied, rather than directly addressed in [James Dickey's *Deliverance*]," ("Great American" 186), the novel against which Jameson reads *Why Are We in Vietnam?*

Jameson considers Mailer's novel to be in striking political and social contrast to Dickey's *Deliverance*, for despite the fact that, at least ostensibly, both novels offer, thematically, relatively similar stories in the vein of what Jameson calls "a very old American genre, the wilderness novel, or the tale of the great American hunter" (185) in the course of which a party of bourgeois men enter into the wilderness on a quest to re-obtain and define their very masculinity, Jameson conceives of Mailer's text as offering a self-conscious, critical examination of the power structures and ideologies at work within the fraught structure of male, bourgeois masculine power relations.

Jameson locates a fundamental ideological difference between Mailer's novel and Dickey's *Deliverance*, for he sees the latter as being "a fantasy about class struggle in which the middle-class American property owner wins through to a happy ending and is able, by reconquering his self-respect, to think of himself as bathing in the legendary glow of a moderate heroism" (186), completely devoid of any conscious awareness of the actual social implications of the power structures upon which such a fantasy rests.

While Jameson does not engage in a direct dialectical analysis of these texts *per se*, we can interpret his criticism of Dickey's novel as being an implicit recognition of Dickey's utter failure to actually be able to go about thinking through and conceiving of power structures dialectically. Jameson remarks that "what is the matter with Dickey's treatment of these social terrors is that he is himself possessed by them; he is as unaware, as profoundly unconscious, of their shaping presence as are his readers" (186), hence Jameson's insistence that the novel is fundamentally unprogressive in terms of the socio-political dynamics it appears to attempt to represent.

Jameson argues that Dickey's "story is thus not an instrument of ideological demystification, but rather an outright political and social wish-fulfillment and as such it reinforces the very tendencies which it is the function of genuine art to expose" (186). While Jameson does not refute that Dickey's novel shares "many of the same conscious or unconscious preoccupations" (186) as Mailer's *Why Are We In Vietnam?*, he conceptualizes the differences between these novels quite carefully, arguing that in Mailer's novel, "it is already apparent that Mailer's treatment of violence" and by extension masculine bourgeois power relations, "has an explicit ethical and political dimension which is almost wholly lacking in *Deliverance*" (188).

Jameson defends the hypermasculinity, blatant eroticism, and apparent obscenity that Mailer's novel had been attacked for by critics by arguing that

I'm not referring, by this, to the Free Speech Movement quality of the narrator's language, which may momentarily prevent us from noticing the perfectly chaste character of the novel's plot, in which a teenager becomes disillusioned with his Texas corporation executive father during an expensive hunting trip in Northern Alaska. The disparity between the language and events ought therefore to be enough to make us realize that sex here always stands for something else, for power relationships, or imposing your own ego; and it is the vital locus of the things that can happen to your ego when you lose, so that in this world ego damage is translated into sexual malfunction. (186)

Jameson, then, understands Mailer's text, unlike Dickey's, to self-consciously represent a number of particular power dynamics at once, particularly those which exists between father and sons, or, more broadly, between the figures

of the oppressor and oppressed, a theme which Mailer has pursued at length in not only *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, but, also in such novels as *Barbary Shore*, *The Armies of the Night*, and *The Executioner's Song*. Jameson, very much in line with Mailer's own thoughts on the subject, keenly recognizes that the power dynamics at play in the novel become manifest through the performance of machismo, which he refers to, in terms of its practice, as "that strident cult of ... maleness and courage, which Mailer inherited from Hemingway, not without giving it a few twists of his own" (187).

While countless critics have taken an interest in Mailer's brand of professed machismo, aside from Jameson, few critics have attempted to actually navigate and trace its ideological roots and its connections, both explicit and implicit, to Mailer's general sense of the always lurking power struggle between the figures of the oppressed and oppressor in modern Western society. Jameson writes, "like all such psychological ideologies ... machismo takes its toll of oppressor as well as oppressed and imprisons men in their superiority just as surely as it maintains women in their inferiority" (187), reminding us that Mailer's novel indeed does not offer a celebration of this particular power dynamic, but rather a critique and, to some measure, outright indictment of it. Jameson, however, recognizes where Mailer's interest in the machismo, at least in terms of *Why Are We in Vietnam?* departs quite drastically from that of Hemingway, particularly in terms of Mailer's interest, in both his characters' and his own experiences, of machismo and the fraught masculine category of what Jameson terms "the intellectual" (187):

The American intellectual, indeed, suffers under a double burden of social guilt: first, in that as a bourgeois and as an American, he finds himself deeply and inextricably implicated in the values which he cannot but abhor on a purely intellectual level; and then, inasmuch as he is an intellectual, he finds himself rejected and spewed forth by the very business society which is his milieu and his public and the predestined arena of his life's work. Hence the strategy of machismo: he pitches his appeal to be received back as an equal into the collectivity on the more fundamental physical basis on sex itself. For being a male is something he shares with the businessmen (and with the workers), sex (and its accompanying symbolic expressions in the realm of personal courage, sports, hunting, warfare, and the like)

is the one object with which he can talk to them without a feeling of his own difference and his own exclusion. It thus becomes the privileged place of his self-dramatization and of his attempt—through the fantasy-work of his own creation—to overcome the tensions to his unhappy consciousness and to be reunited with the social order itself. (187)

For Jameson, Mailer's primary interest in *Why Are We in Vietnam?* is in exploring the functions and dynamics of machismo in terms of the manner in which such becomes manifest within the power structures of bourgeois masculine power relations. Mailer, he contends, structures a particular ideological and psychological system in the text, one which is dedicated to exposing the very roots of masculine power struggle. Mailer, as Jameson insists, presents this struggle within the confines of a particular brand of quest narrative, though which he is able to explore "the various ways you can go about achieving manhood" (188). Mailer's text, as he contends, offers an ostensive object quest where the object is apparent on the immediate level (unlike the object in *Deliverance*), "and because in this work the precise object is given, its characters and Mailer himself are far more lucid about the deeper purposes of the expedition, which is nothing more nor less than ... to learn fear" in order to be able to measure oneself against "the most frightening experience man can know" (188) which, in the case of this novel, is manifest in the potent symbolic allegory of the masculine wilderness hunt for a grizzly bear. Jameson argues that, for both Mailer and his various protagonists in the novel, "fear is the privileged moment in which the psyche can purify itself of its accumulated positions" (188). The moment of fear, then, represents the very moment at which thought is purified and, indeed, synthesized, a dialectical moment, that is, when divergent ideas and emotions are formulated into some cohesive whole.

Unlike a number of Mailer's critics of the 1960s and 1970s, Jameson avoids, here, the critical mistake of aligning Mailer, totally, with his own ideological and philosophical systems; he does not resort to equating Mailer's personal actions to his own professed philosophies and systems; rather he is aware of Mailer's particular ability to separate himself in his narrative from his own proposed systems and structures. In his consideration of the system Mailer proposes in *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, Jameson contends that Mailer does not necessarily believe in the systems he propagates, at least "not

in the way in which Zola 'believed' in his analogous notions of the bodily heredity and determinism: not scientifically or positively, but perhaps aesthetically" (189). Jameson ultimately concludes that

[I]t does not ultimately matter whether Balzac was a reactionary, or whether Mailer is a sexist, a dupe of the myths of American business, and so forth. For his essential task as a writer, faced with such ideological values both within and without himself, is, through his own prereflexive lucidity about himself and through the articulations of his fantasy life and the evocative ingenuity of his language, to bring such materials to artistic thematization and thus to make them an object of aesthetic consciousness. (196)

Jameson's ultimate failure in his reading of the novel is his failure to recognize the operations of dialectical thinking throughout the novel, particularly in terms of the manner in which Mailer is able to present and synthesize together entirely contrary modes of thought and ideology throughout the text, evident, particularly, in the sense of fear that his protagonists are able to reconcile themselves to and confront, but also in the "Intro Beeps" sections of the novel, in which Mailer steps somewhere outside of the narrative position (into yet another fictional character) of the protagonists and offers a form of metacritical commentary upon the narrative events at hand, in turn violating the ontological divisions set within the novel itself.

Mailer, much like Jameson, has proven himself to be very much a dialectical thinker throughout his career. As Richard Poirier argues, "Mailer's commitment to dialectics means that he includes materials which threaten the symmetry of any possible forms ... throughout his work, dialectics is equivalent to imagination" (153).¹ As with Jameson, Mailer's systems are often dialectical in structure. Jameson conceives of dialectics as a metacritical mode of thought, a manner of thinking and performing criticism that is always in some manner or another rather self-conscious of itself. Jameson writes, "dialectical thinking is a thought to the second power, a thought about thinking itself, in which the mind must deal with its own thought process just as much as with the material it works on" (*Marxism and Form* 45). Drawing from the dialectical methodology of Adorno, Jameson contends that

‘Society precedes the subject’: thought’s categories are collective and social; identity is not option but a doom; reason and its categories are at one with the rise of civilization or capitalism, and can scarcely be transformed until the latter is transformed. But ... Habermass is wrong to conclude that Adorno’s implacable critique of reason ... paints him into the corner of irrationalism and leaves him no implicit recourse but the now familiar post-structural one of *acephale*. He thinks so only because he cannot himself allow for the possibility or reality of some new, genuinely dialectical thinking. (*Late Marxism* 24)

In this respect, the dialect can be understood as working against systems and allowing us to think in manners which the various forces of social oppression do not readily allow us to think or imagine another side or possibility to any question, what Jameson considers to be “an external face of the concept which, like that of the moon, can never be directly visible or accessible to us” (*Late Marxism* 25) and which serves to link the dialectic closely to the realm of self-consciousness.

But the dialectical method is not subservient to the structure of the problems at hand; rather, it exists firmly within the structure of such. For Jameson, “one of the most basic lessons of the dialectical method is that the potentialities for development of a given mode of thought lie predetermined and, as it were, foreordained within the very structure of the initial terms themselves, and reflect the characteristics of its point of departure” (*Marxism and Form* 9).

Dialectical thinking, for Jameson, allows for a way of giving account to the pronounced differences within a particular system of thought. He quotes Adorno on this matter: “Thought need not rest content in its logical regularity: it is capable of thinking against itself without absolving itself altogether; indeed, were definitions of the dialectical possible, that one might be worth proposing” (*Late Marxism* 17). In *A Singular Modernity*, Jameson contends that

the dialectic is thus proposed as a kind of new language strategy, in which both identity and difference are given their due in advance and systematically played off against each other ... but the dialectic comes into being as an attempt to hold ... contra-

dictory features structural analogy and the radical internal differences in dynamic and in historical causality together within the framework of a single thought or language. (65)

In terms of the decided difference that he locates between Dickey and Mailer's respective narratives, Jameson seems to suggest that Mailer's superiority as an artist and intellectual is owed, in large part, to his particular ability to offer a, in Jameson's terms, "a new language strategy ... within the framework of a single thought or language," and bring forth a dialectical consciousness in his narrative (though Jameson does not, at least overtly, suggest that Mailer's narrative is, in fact, dialectical).

[T]he essential difference between Dickey's social attitudes and those of Mailer turned out to be that the first were unconscious and unarticulated, informing the work after the fashion of blind and deeply held prejudices; whereas the ideology of Mailer proved to be a supremely self-conscious construction, constantly dramatized and reexamined by the author himself. It is then enough for a writer to systematize his attitudes and to transform his implicit feelings into some coherent and personalized world view? (195)

For Jameson, the particular force of Mailer's work results from his "genius," something which he identifies as being entirely lacking in *Deliverance*: "Much of the force of Mailer's work springs from the coincidence in it of the personal obsession and the historical contradiction, from the way in which he has been able to experience an objective historical institution (the competitive nature of life under capitalism)" (189), hence the genius of the novel can be conceived in terms of Mailer's intrinsic, personal, conscious connection of it, his awareness of its divergent facets and his resulting ability to think beyond such while existing firmly within and being subjected to the very forces of it.

Mailer has retained a dialectical vision, if not a dialectical cosmology, throughout nearly the entirety of his career. In his first novel, *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), Mailer recognizes, quite keenly, the class divide between soldiers and officers within a military brigade during the later stages of World War II. Mailer conceives of the social divide between these groups as being

ultimately irresolvable in the social sphere, at least within the contemporary construct of such in Western society. While he is unable, at this stage in his career, to suggest a manner in which one might be able to surmount such an oppressive system (that is, the dialectical), he is nonetheless able to move beyond it in a relatively dialectical manner by positioning himself as an objective narrator who synthesizes both positions into the form of a narrative that gives credence to each. Mailer is even more capable of representing the fundamental social divide between the bourgeois and proletariat (as well as the company man and the artist, the white and the black, the conservative and the liberal, the capitalism and the communist) in *Barbary Shore* (1953), the novel that follows *The Naked and the Dead*.

For Charles Glicksberg, *Barbary Shore*, “though a failure,” represents Mailer’s first genuine attempt at active dialectical thinking, for he sees the novel as “the first example of Existential dialectics in fiction that analyzes with detachment the soul of a native Communist, with all his casuistry and masochistic compulsions” (27). Gutman sees Hollingsworth, the antagonist in the novel, as “an agent of monopoly capitalism, of the United States, of the ‘free world’” (27). McLeod, the protagonist in the novel, then, represents, for Gutman, “the Marxist-Leninist tradition as it has been perverted and corrupted into Stalinism, or state capitalism” (32). While Mailer gives voice to a number of contrasting ideas and viewpoints throughout the novel, his narrative is centered, at least ideologically, primarily upon McLeod, who, at the end of the novel, issues a lengthy polemic that is representative, in large part, of Mailer’s view of the political situations of the Western world at that time.

Mailer’s allegory in this novel, then, is ultimately a dialectical failure, for it develops into a mere polemic, a pronouncement of his own political, social and artistic view points. He is, at this point, unable to bring his narrative (and social vision) to full dialectical fruition. Instead, Mailer issues a particular judgment in this text, and overtly privileges one ideological system over another without a fair weighing of the contrasting viewpoints or struggles at stake, something that he avoids doing, at least overtly, in his later dialectical allegorical texts.

For Mailer, who by the midpoint of his career can be seen as operating very much in line with Jameson’s notion of the dialectic, the only manner in which one can begin to free himself or herself from the confines of oppression is through a method of dialectical thinking. Joseph Wenke has contended that

In Mailer's work it is characteristically the protagonist's responsibility to discover authentic forms of expression that represent significant opposition to the prevailing tendencies of society. Ironically, it was Mailer's assumption of the protagonist's representativeness through his embodiment of the nation's ills that undoubtedly made it so difficult for him in his first three books to create strong protagonists who would be capable of expressing significant opposition. For the protagonist would have to embody both the plague and possible solution. He would have to be capable of engaging in a dialectic between apparent contradictions in value, an engagement that would be possible only if he were able to represent all that the society expresses through its institutions and all of the possibilities for expression that those institutions outlaw or deny. (17)

The supposed ideological weaknesses of Mailer's first three novels, for Wenke, is owed to Mailer's inability to sustain the dialectic "and thereby represent the plague and the possible solutions" (18) to modern Western life. It is not until Mailer's *An American Dream*, according to Wenke, that Mailer is able to begin to successfully sustain the dialectic, although Wenke argues that the dialectic does not come to full fruition until *Why Are We In Vietnam?* in which Mailer's protagonist, D.J. "balances opposing values ... for his unrelenting disc jockey rant is both a critique and an embodiment of the electric insanity of corporate America" (19).

Ehrlich contends that throughout his writings in the 1960s, "Mailer himself believes that he has retained a revolutionary perspective within the framework of Marx's dialectical method and sensitivity to political and economic oppression, as well as Reich's understanding of the restrictions imposed by society upon the full development of the individual's emotional life" (182). But despite his intellectual grounding in Marx's dialectical method, Ehrlich sees Mailer's use of the dialectical in his fictions as a hindrance, if not a crutch, to his own thinking: "He luxuriates in dialectics, a kind of Paterian delight in the imaginative resources an individual can bring to the contradictions in everything" (182), a surprising comment that would appear to be more in the way of an attack on Mailer's own egotism in his dialectical process than a criticism of his employment of the dialectical mode. On the other hand, he sees Mailer's use of the dialectical in his jour-

nalism as having been successful, for in such “he has employed his sense of the dialectic both aesthetically and ideologically without succumbing to the terrible pressure of his inner experience or to the torturous nature of American life” (184).

America is deeply and intrinsically divided for Mailer, just as the universe is divided and he himself is divided. Mailer, as J. Michael Lennon has argued, has constructed his own ideology—if not theology—around a notion of the universe being fundamentally divided. At the core of Mailer’s cosmology is a sense that the fundamental dynamic of the universe revolves around a continuous war between what Mailer broadly terms as “God” and the “Devil,” who he sees as signifying the “warring element in a divided universe” (*Advertisements for Myself* 380). Stanley Gutman has argued that Mailer’s “recreation of these divisions will utilize a form and method that are themselves divided” (191), as seen in his “true life novel,” *The Armies of the Night*.

Gutman feels that this is demonstrated mostly keenly in *Armies*, which itself takes the very form of the dialectical: “Mailer’s novel is divided into two parts, and each part, furthermore, is an amalgam, yoked by a dialectical tension, of two styles and formal approaches, those of Mailer the novelist and Mailer the historian” (191). Mailer’s positioning of himself, quite consciously, in *Armies* as both novelist and historian (the subtitle for the novel is “The Novel as History, History as the Novel”) is the very key to his dialectical method at this stage in his career, for by operating dialectically, he is able, in effect, to operate within the confines of two seemingly opposed literary genres (and epistemologies) at once. While Gutman contends that fragmentation has been among the hallmarks of twentieth century literature, “Mailer departs from this tradition” (191) in *Armies*, for in the novel “God and the Devil, good and evil, the individual and society—all exist in a necessary bilateral relationship. And this overarching relationship, the dialectical, encompasses both diversity and unity. Thus Mailer’s use of a style and structure that are divided is a reflection of the reality he is describing and creating” (191).

Yet Mailer does not conceive of the fundamental divide as being beyond the possibility of individuation, at least not in terms of the realm of the psyche. Rather, his dialectical operation allows the divide to be bridged by the act of synthesis. Mailer often departs from a variety of other modern and early postmodern writers, who often discover fragmentation in the process of seeking some form of wholeness. Mailer often opens with division that

“through dialectical confrontation” are “eventually united into a coherent whole” (Gutman 191) through the psychic processes of self-conscious narratives.

But what, for Mailer, is the ultimate end of dialectical thinking, where does it take him as a thinker? For Marx, the end result of such was Communism, the synthesis that would arise from the clash between the bourgeoisie and proletariat. Despite the obvious connection between Mailer’s notion of the dialectic and Marx’s, Mailer does not see communism, or any particular social institution, as the end result of the dialectical. For Mailer, dialectics pertain to the individual mind and imagination.

For Mailer, dialectical unification takes place within the psyche of the protagonist at hand, provided he or she is able to weigh issues from two opposite ontological realms at once: “The insights into a society and his own experience become, in the crucible of Mailer’s psyche, acts of affirmation of the self. His order becomes the order of the universe” (Gutman 191). Jameson shows a similar tendency to connect the proper end of dialectical thinking to the realm of the self-conscious and metacritical. Jameson contends that

Dialectical thinking is therefore not only thought to the second power, thought about preexisting thought, but also the latter’s fulfillment, its realization and abolition in a sense yet to be described. For to the degree to which it places the older mental operation of problem-solving in a new and larger context, it converts the problem itself into a solution, no longer attempting to solve the dilemma head on, according to its own terms, but rather coming to understand the dilemma itself as the mark of profound contradictions latent in the very mode of posing the problem. (*Marxism and Form* 341)

For Jameson, then, any attempt to think dialectically represents the very solution to the problem being encountered, for it allows one to step beyond the problem at hand, however fundamentally unsolvable it might in fact be. In *Marxism and Form*, Jameson contends that

Dialectical thought is in its very structure self-consciousness and may be described as the attempt to think about a given object on one level, and at the same time to observe our own thought pro-

cess as we do so: or to use a more scientific figure, to reckon the position of the observer into the experiment itself. In this light, the difference between the Hegelian and Marxist dialectics can be defined in terms of the type of self-consciousness involved. (340)

Self-consciousness, that is, awareness of the very process of thinking is crucial to the dialectical method for both Jameson and Mailer. It requires one to be able to stand in two spheres at once, to exist within and without the issue at hand for, as Jameson argues, "Dialectical thinking can be characterized as historical reflexivity, that is, the study of an object ... which also involves the study of the concepts and categories (themselves historical) that we necessarily bring to the object" (*The Political Unconscious* 109).

In his purposely self-conscious (if not parodic) and historically reflexive *Advertisements for Myself* pieces, as well as his new journalistic novels *The Armies of the Night* and *Of A Fire on the Moon*, Mailer shows a particular interest in observing and dramatizing his own psychic process and, in turn, reckoning his own position within the terms of the narrative itself. While Mailer has been criticized for his apparent egotism and self-obsession in these works, his insistence on constantly and consciously weighing his own position as author or dreamer of the text at hand can be seen, indeed, as representing a genuinely dialectical attempt to consider and try to resolve problems on two simultaneous but wholly separate ontological levels.

In *Armies*, as Gutman observes, "Mailer's preoccupation with himself is the central theme of the book. The novel is an attempt by Mailer to understand, define, and come to grips with his self, to describe his own human condition. His understanding of history is through the process of the predication of truths he learns about his own identity" (163). Dialectical thought, for Mailer, is crucial in order for one to reach individuation or a greater degree of critical awareness. Wenke argues that in *Armies* "Mailer uses a comic persona of himself to contain cultural contradictions ... he is both a participant and an observer whose idiosyncratic point of view becomes the centered consciousness of an ironic third person narration that succeeds in establishing a standpoint of detachment and objectivity" (20).

Ehrlich contends that in *Armies* Mailer is "acknowledging his dual role as actor and writer, he is a dialectician who tries to describe the various aspects of a situation and seeks to extract from experience the largest possible mean-

ing" (113), hence Mailer's invention, in this book (as well as *Of a Fire on the Moon*, *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*, *Marilyn*, and *The Fight*), of a narrator who is both an observer and a participant, author and protagonist. Mailer's technique then represents what Jameson would surely term dialectical "thought to the second power," in so far as he is able to think both within and beyond the actions occurring within the ontology of the narrative at hand.

Mailer attempts to solve the various political, social and psychic problems he raises in the narrative through the dialectical process of unification, represented in an explicit hope that he represents in *Armies*, "two very different rivers, one external, one subjective, had come together" (62) within the confines of his own representative mode of consciousness. It is within the psyche that Mailer's dialectical process can reach fruition and manifest some form or another of relative synthesis.

However, Mailer's most subtle yet radical use of the dialectical occurs in his 1979 "novel," *The Executioner's Song*, his "true life" narrative exploring the life, crimes and execution of Utah murderer Gary Gilmore in the mid-1970s. Over the course of over one thousand pages, Mailer meticulously details the nine months between Gilmore's release from prison, his murder of two men, and his execution (which Gilmore himself insisted upon and refused legal efforts to reverse). Unlike Mailer's previous non-fiction accounts, however, he does not directly intersect with the text. He remains somewhere beyond it and behind it, allowing the hundreds of participants in Gilmore's drama (including Gilmore himself) to perform the narration.

The divide in *The Executioner's Song* is not presented, overtly, as being a simple binary structure. Rather, Mailer represents hundreds of divergent points of view throughout the narrative (all of which share some tie to Gilmore), none of which can be readily aligned with one another in order to form a cohesive whole. Instead, Mailer divides the novel into two separate books: the first section entitled "Western Voices" and the second "Eastern Voices."

Wenke argues that "the theme of estrangement dominates Book One" of the novel, for in this section "Mailer's westerners suggest the sickening divisions that live within us all, divisions that are reflected in the current epidemic of broken marriages, the absence of any clear direction, and the widespread loss of faith in any idea or value beyond the self" (209). Mailer's westerners are primarily common, oppressed, working class people subjected

to the oppressive forces of Western capitalism, while the second book consists primarily of the voices of various Easterners who represent capitalistic, oppressive forces and ideologies.

Further, Wenke contends that "through Book Two's eastern voices the suggestion is that there is also a division in America between the chaos of public and private life" (210), especially in terms of Mailer's portrait of the media people who cover Gilmore's execution: "[F]or the most part their essentially predatory objectives conflict violently with the personal intentions of the people who are intimately involved in Gilmore's life, people who are simply trying to get one with their lives despite a near to overwhelming sense of pain and loss" (210). Mailer, however, by carefully pronouncing and separating these two radically different "voices" in his text, effectively synthesizes them by presenting them together as, ultimately, a single unified text, without issuing comment or judgment, allowing the two voices equal say, such as it might be, hence "one is left finally with the image of America as a complex, multileveled society that is madly working at cross-purposes with itself in the absence of any communication, understanding, or sympathy" (210). The synthesis in this novel occurs, then, at the very level of the text, the totality that results from the synthesis of these contrary voices.

Mailer's ultimate representation of dialectical synthesis, however, can be located in his portrayal of Gilmore himself. Robert Begiebing reminds us that "Gilmore was, above all, a divided personality, a personality full of contradictions ... he is at times the ultimate macho man, arm wrestling or fighting for his male pride, but he is at other times a creature of huge self-doubt" (187), hence Mailer's fascination with him. As Begiebing notes, "[F]lawed, confused, frustrated, possessing large passions and designs as both man and artist, Gary Gilmore was both murder and philosopher, both psychopath and saint, both chameleon actor and Middle American ... there was much in his personality that was crass and drab, and much that was brilliant and exciting" (187). It is in his presentation of Gilmore (who occupies equal space in both sections of the novel, hence his voice is representative of both what Mailer symbolizes as the "East" and the "West," the oppressed and the oppressive). For all of his irresolvable and incommensurable contradictions and differences, the narrative reaches ostensible dialectical synthesis, something which Jameson strived to conceptualize.

Mailer, in his dialectical portrait of Gilmore, presents him not as the problem in the text, but rather the solution. Gilmore, for Mailer, represents

all that is imprisoned and imprisoning in contemporary American society. No explicit judgment is passed in the novel; rather Mailer unifies all aspects of the social situation within Gilmore and presents a genuinely dialectical mode of thinking.

It is in Mailer's presentation of a dialectical mode of thinking that he, in many respects, connects back to the English Romantic movement. Dialectical synthesis, for all its ties to Marxian and Hegelian thought, seem intrinsically connected to Keats's conception of negative capability. Both notions offer an understanding of reality which, in the English Romantic tradition, does not call for an outright adherence to apparent logic or systematic thought. What we see in Mailer, then, in these terms, is a conception of reality which relies not on systematic, linear logic, but one which relies on the ability to escape from such through the ability to accept that which cannot be resolved and attempt to reconcile such through a process of psychic synthesis of joining, often through some form of an intermediary, contrary elements together into a whole which, although it might not be entirely cohesive, remains ceaselessly interesting.

Mailer's ultimate representation of dialectical synthesis occurs at the very conclusion of *The Castle in the Forest*. At the end of the novel, Mailer's satanic protagonist, Dieter, gives a name to the enterprise he has helped spawn. Dieter concludes his narrative by offering, ostensibly, something of an explication for the mysterious and unexplained title of his text:

All that remains to discuss is why I have chosen this title, *The Castle in the Forest*. If the reader, having come with me through Adolph Hitler's birth, childhood, and a good part of his adolescence, would now ask, "Dieter, where is the link to your text? There is a lot of forest in your story, but where is the castle?"

I would reply that *The Castle in the Forest* translates into *Das Waldschloss*. This happens to be the name given by the inmates some years ago to the camp just liberated ... not many trees are in sight, no any hint of a castle. Nothing of interest is on the horizon. Waldschloss became, therefore, the appellation given by the brightest of the prisoners to their compound. One pride maintained to the end was that they must not surrender their sense of irony. That had become their fortitude. It should come as no surprise that the prisoners who came up with this piece of

nomenclature were from Berlin. If you are German and possessed of lively intelligence, irony is, of course, vital to one's pride. (465)

It appears that Dieter offers no direct insight into how the title he has provided links to his text and suggests that "nothing of interest is on the horizon" (465). Still, if we consider this matter closely, the answer to the question is precisely in the very questions that are raised for, as Mailer writes in the final lines of the novel, "There may be no answer to this, but good questions still vibrate within" (467). For Mailer, operating in terms of both negative capability and dialectical synthesis, resolutions to incommensurabilities are never readily apparent, nor does he suggest otherwise. Instead, Mailer—much in the spirit of Keats and Jameson—contains and manages the contradictions he encounters by residing somewhere above or between them, and reaches individuation through the portrayal of pronounced consciousness that provides a heightened perspective of the matters at hand, as exemplified in *The Executioner's Song* and *The Castle in the Forest*, which itself serves as Mailer's greatest Romantic gesture. Mailer does not offer simple resolutions to the problems, incommensurabilities and contradiction he exposes, but instead presents us with a variety of possibilities, all the while admitting that there may be no answer to them but leaving us, instead, with good, vibrating questions.

NOTE

1. Gutman provides a brief review of the Marxist, Hegelian and Freudian roots of Mailer's dialectical ideology:

Mailer shows himself directly in the tradition of two of his most important mentors, Marx and Freud. The Hegelian dialect was based on the concept that the unity of reality is always the product of divided and opposed elements. Marx applied this to history, which he saw as class struggle; the dialectical process of history will ultimately lead to the triumph of the proletariat. Freud's emphasis on the ambivalence of the human condition ... is likewise similar to Mailer's view of the essential duality of existence. Indeed, Freud's final formulation of the ambivalence, the competing drives of Eros and Thanatos, life instinct and death instinct, comes close to Mailer's belief that life is continually forced to choose either new life or death. (76)

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