

THE MAILERIAN NARRATIVE: STRUCTURAL DYNAMICS IN A POETICS OF MAILER'S FICTION

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STRUCTURAL INTRODUCTION

Structuralist analysis frequently traces a work's meanings and powers to an underlying structure like the static semiotic infrastructure of binary oppositions in Levi-Strauss' analysis of Amazonian myths, the dynamic narrative structure of Vladimir Propp's slavic folk tale or of Will Wright's classical western.¹ Structural analysis may also lead into a single, deep structure specific to a *single* author's vision as in Bordwell's poetics of the communitarian films of Yasujiro Ozu.² Here my emphasis is on the last, a *creator-specific* type of simplifying but empowering deep structure.

In Mailer's fiction, the underlying poetics, though simplifying, is complex in its basic *elements*. These basic elements as I see them are five: the physiological, psychic, social, cultural and transcendental. The poetics is also plural in its underlying *statics* and in the narrative *dynamics* that these statics help constitute. To quickly illustrate *statics* and *dynamics* with Western film examples, in the classical Western, static dichotomies like "outsider/insider," "wilderness/civilization." Good/bad" and "weak strong" help organize materials. These statics in turn underlie the constitution of a dynamic narrative structures in which, typically, strong outsiders, just having ridden in from the wilderness, champion a weak and beleaguered community from strong villains (as when Shane champions sodbusters against their cattle-men adversaries).³

Here I look at basic elements, statics, and dynamics, in turn, for most of Mailer's novels. I also do so for the first of his "factions, which is *The Armies*

of the Night, and longest of them, *The Executioner's Song*. In so doing I range over nearly a dozen works—both early and late, relatively realistic and relatively fanciful—in some detail. However, I especially stress *The Naked and the Dead*, *The Executioner's Song* and *Ancient Evenings*.⁴

THE BASIC ELEMENTS

The basic elements of Mailer's novels match up pretty closely with Talcott Parson's sociological articulation of the analytical aspects of human phenomena and the human sciences, which are physiological, personality centered, social relational and symbolic.⁵ To these I add the transcendental. These elements—physiological, psychic, social, cultural and transcendental—underlie Mailer's structural statics and all his work.

The basic elements are present in all Mailer's fictions right from *The Naked and the Dead*. Take the vivid *physicality* of the transport of the 77mm antitank guns; and the vivid *personalities* of Cumming strategizing, Croft and Martinez conniving, Roth and Brown reminiscing about "back home." Take the *social relations* involved in the dialogues of Goldstein and Ridges, in the conversations of Cummings and Hearn and the troops at the "Chow Lines," as well as up and down the Anapoei chain of command. For *cultural* elements, take the shared language on the Chow Lines and the battling ideologies of Cummings and Hearn, Velsen and Roth. *Transcendental* elements tend to strongly intersect other elements. For example, we can perceive a degree of emotional exhilaration in Croft's transient, intensely physical yet also transcendental sense of challenge and triumph in his ascent of Mt. Anaka.

Moving beyond *The Naked and the Dead*, examples of the basic elements are numerous. For *physicality*, we may recall the felt electrical charge of anxiety as Rojack heads toward the assembly about Deborah's corpse amidst the stopped traffic on "the Drive" and—a favorite of mine—when Provincetown Police Captain Alvin Luther Regency is so "on" at one point in *Tough Guys Don't Dance* that, to quote Mailer, "if he had had a tail, it would have been whipping the rungs" (211). For the *personality*, we have Mailer's agitated state approaching the stage to speak at Ambassador Theater in *The Armies of the Night*; Meni's nuanced mental reflections on his relations to Mother, Father and Pharaoh; Gilmore and Nicole (Harry and Kittredge) in revealing epistolary communion with each other in *The Executioner's Song* (and *Harlot's Ghost*). We also have an array of unforgettably vivid characters—Tim

Madden's father, Dougie, and Harry Hubbard's father, Cal; Pharaoh Ptah-nem-hotep, Queen Nefitiri and "little queen" Honey Ball; and Alois Shicklgruber (aka Alois Hitler). For *social relations*—the core stuff of the novel according to Northrop Frye—the list is endless: a favorite of mine is the rich social interplay among the vivid Ptah-nem-hotep, little Meni, Meni's mother Hathfertiti, and his Father Nef-khep-aukhem and the other guests at *Evenings'* banquet, "The Night of the Pig." For *culture*, we have the densely rendered U.S. Army, Hollywood and CIA worlds. We have stuff of Mickey Lovett's conversation with revolutionary MacLeod, Hugh "Harlot" Montague's conversations with Harry, Mailer's own conversation with Robert Lowell on the Pentagon march or with a Hell's Angel just afterwards while in Federal custody, the rituals of the Pharaoh's court and temples, the tavern banter of Alois Shicklgruber and his drinking companions. For *transcendence*, we have Rojack's communing with Cherry across a club room in the Village, Menenhetet at the side of Ramses II as he communes with Amon during a blood sacrifice, and Gary Gilmore's self-designed striving after public moral rehabilitation through self-promoted execution. What I would stress about these basic elements is the broad range of modes of humanity at the foundations of Mailer's work, a breadth that affirms Lee Siegel's claim that "Mailer is one of the last Western writers to create a self-contained intellectual universe out of strong, idiosyncratic convictions about the relationship between spiritual, psychic and social existence" (2).

STATICS

The emergent, *molecular* Mailerian statics help specify the characters and dramatic tensions that generate narrative. They consist of pairs of contrasting categories. One pair is individual-society (Hearn versus platoon; O'Shaugnessy versus Hollywood; Rojack versus police and business establishments; Mailer versus the Pentagon; Harry Hubbard *vis-à-vis* the CIA). A second couplet is dominant-subordinate (for example, Cummings over Hearn; studio head Herman over director Charles Eitel; Barney Kelly and Lieut. Roberts over Rojack; Pharaoh over Menenhetet; Captain Regency over Tim Madden; Bill Harvey over Harry Hubbard). A third and fourth are the cowardly-courageous and the everyman-magus. Here, Hearn retrieving his cigarette butt off the General's floor illustrates the cowardly, while Hearn previously stamping out that that cigarette butt illustrates courage. Rojack on his first, failed walk on the parapet at Barney Kelly's penthouse illustrates

both the cowardly and a bit of everyman; Rojack on his last triumphant walk illustrates both the courageous and the magus. Menenhetet casting spells with Honey Ball against the bugger Pharaoh Ramses II does so as well.

A fifth is the mundane versus the transcendent. O'Shaugnessy's fractured consciousness may pass as mundane in the alienated Hollywood of *The Deer Park*, but his sexual gymnastic in "The Time of Her Time" again attain an at least ephemeral transcendence. The funk of most of Rojack's marriage is mundane; but Rojack's regenerative sodomy with Ruta and exhilarating combat with Shaggo Martin again touch the transcendent. Menenhetet idling with his childhood friends in the Nile delta or training as charioteer taps little more than the mundane. However, the temporally restorative power of Menenhetet's intercourse with the Secret Whore of the King of Kadesh touches the transcendent, and Menenhetet's self-reincarnating embrace with Nefitiri transcends the finality of at least one death. Little Meni regularly transcends normal social and psychological limitation through his mind reading, especially in "The Book of the Child," a veritable symphony of empathetic leaps of a sort prefigured by the leaps that Rojack makes into the mind of Cherry in *An American Dream*. It merits stressing that transcendence in Mailer's work tends toward not only to be frequent and salient but to be ephemeral as well. Menenhetet's trysts with the Secret Whore of Tyre and with Honey Ball are interludes. Rojack's ecstatic first witness of Cherry singing in a Village joint is a "rare moment of balm" (99). Sergius O'Shaugnessy's long fuck with Denise Gondelman at the end of "The Time of Her Time," although perhaps fullest and fittest conclusion to *The Deer Park* O'Shaugnessy's saga, seems an end to O'Shaugnessy's relationship to Gondelman.

Terms are now in place for a discussion of the Mailerian dynamic.

THE MAILERIAN DYNAMIC

This takes the specific form of narratives of socio-physiological dominance and anxiety, of anxiety mastered through courage, love, sex or magic, and of a mastery that often attains a sort of transcendence—be it transient.⁶

In *The Naked and the Dead*, the narrative is dispersed among numerous characters. Indeed, major, analytically distinguishable narrative strands can be traced for each of three principal protagonists—Lieutenant Hearn, General Cummings and Sergeant Croft—even though the three strands are

intertwined. In his strand, Hearn is directly humiliated by Cummings when he succumbs to Cumming's use of his authority to compel him to pick up a cigarette he has left on the floor of Cumming's tent. The anxiety that ensues, complete with undercurrents of sexual domination that salt the wound of social degradation, is literally dreadful for Hearn. Yet resolution of the Cummings-Hearn agon, truncated by social and historical contingencies of *Naked's* tale, never clearly arrives for Hearn. His initial humiliation by Cummings is not offset by the assistance of powerful allies or amorous or erotic or magical agents. Instead, it is ended by an abrupt death: "At the ledge that faced the first grove he had stood up casually, had been about to motion the others to follow him, when the Jap machine gun fired. He toppled back among the men gathered behind the shelf" (523).

Although Hearn never attains ephemeral transcendence, Cummings does attain a touch of transcendences with the death of Hearn. This death is not an inadvertent byproduct of Cumming's decision to send out a patrol to try to traverse Mt. Anaka. No, Hearn's death is envisioned by Cummings when he thinks up the patrol as what we would call a win-win design: either the patrol would happily succeed or Hearn's death would garland its failure. General Cummings consciously promotes, if not precisely plans, Hearn's death. Cummings has suffered the intellectual autonomy of Hearn in conversation opposing Cumming's views and those of Hearn: pitting Cumming's vision of war as a chess-like implementation of mind (157), of fascism as "grounded firmly in men's actual natures" (280), of twentieth-century human beings as puppets of "organization" and the slave anxiety it orchestrates, of Cummings himself and authorities like him as "god like" against Hearn's Left-liberal antitheses. He has told Hearn that his tossing of a cigarette butt on the floor of his tent had been a "childish tantrum" done out of resentment toward the actions of an authority toward whom the "proper attitude of awe and obedience" is one that can only be "generated" by means of the application of "immense and disproportionate power" (283); and he has forced Hearn to compensate, if only in some small part, by picking up a cigarette tossed by the General (284). Subsequently, thinking through his plan for an Anoka patrol by "recon," Cummings realizes "[w]ith a little shock" that "Hearn was to be assigned to recon tomorrow" (350). Consolidating his plan he reflects that with a patrol of "[a] dozen or fifteen men ... if it went badly for them nothing was lost." (350). Mailer writes of the consolidation of the plan in Cummings's mind that,

It was a process which had developed in his mind along subterranean routes, directed, coming to fruition when it was necessary. Some of his actions toward Hearn were fitting together now. You could always find a pattern if you looked for it. . . . This patrol was a good augury. He had been barren of ideas for too long, and he had a certainty now that there would be many others to follow in the next week. Whatever straightjacket there had been about his movements lately would be sloughed off . . . as he had sloughed off Hearn. In the final analysis there was only necessity and one's own response to it. (351)

For the General, sending Hearn off with a considerable risk of death, if not quite murder, is at least one problem solved. Hearing of his death yields "at first a fragile grain of pleasure" and later "something more complex . . . a mingled pain and satisfaction" (623). But what of Croft's narrative?

Croft responds effectively to the perceived indignity of sharing authority with the despised Hearn when, aided by Martinez, he maneuvers Hearn's death by Japanese machine gun fire. Croft subsequently rises to an encounter of mythic proportions with Mt. Anaka. The mountain ascent is mythic not only in Croft's own mind: when platoon members, following leads from the recently shot Hearn, clamor to end the mission and return to base are rebuked by Croft, Private Polack says to Private Wyman: "that Croft . . . he's an idealist" and goes on to compare God to Croft as a fellow "sonofabitch" (526–27). As the ascent grows formidable and one member of recon (Roth) fails a leap and falls to his death and clamor to go back reemerges, "Croft spat . . . The mountain ahead had never looked so high and forbidding . . . The peak still taunted him" (600). Challenges to Croft's mission recur, but Croft beats them back, even at gunpoint and soon is "confident again . . . [e]verything and everybody had tried to hold him back but there could be nothing left now, no obstacle at all" (605). Croft drives "himself onward with the last sources of his endeavor, dropping at the halts with no energy left" when he "[senses] that the top [is] near" (607–8). However, the push onward ends in the disarray of a frantic retreat, rifles tossed away and packs dropped when Croft smashes into a nest of hornets" (608).

In short, although the tales of Hearn, Cummings and Croft are all spurred forward by tensions and anxieties, Mailer's poetics is not only dispersed across the tales. In each of these three stories, transcendence, if it comes at all,

is borderline as well as transient. Hearn knows no transcendence. Cumming's knows merely "a fragile grain of pleasure ... a mingled pain and satisfaction" (623) from his successful self-assertion over Hearn; and this is more than eclipsed by the rise of Dalleson in the wake of the patrol's failure and Major Dalleson's credit for the island campaign's final success. Croft's transcendent experience of the ascent of Mt. Anaka is short-lived, if not premature. As I hope to show, the course of the full Mailerian dynamic from oppression and anxiety through courage or magic (or both) to transcendence is less dispersed among protagonists and more unequivocal in Mailer's other novels. Still, Mailer's work, though rich in spells of transient transcendence, is short on that more enduring transcendence that we commonly call salvation.

The dynamic aspect of Mailer's dynamic poetics is evident in Mailer's next three fictions, *Barbary Shore*, *The Deer Park* and *An American Dream*. In the first, Mickey Lovett reacts to the trauma of World War II and the vehemence of post-War repression of revolutionary Leftists with an attempt at the theoretical transcendence of his political situation. In *The Deer Park*, Sergius O'Shaugnessy transcends his post-War and Hollywood moral confusion with a series of striving for personal regeneration and integration through political and sexual ventures that culminate most emphatically in his mastery of some arts of the toreador and the womanizer in the story/sequel entitled "The Time of Her Time."

An early, *manifest* expression of a poetics in Mailer's fiction emerges in *An American Dream*. In this notably mythopoetic tale, Rojack actively responds to the impasse of his sexual humiliation before wife Deborah's felt effrontery and the overbearing disdain of Deborah's tycoon father Augustus Kelly. He does so, as he sees it, by strangling Deborah and with that act mustering the strength to clear his nervous system of psychic and spiritual pollutants, "hatred passing from" him as he strangles," wave after wave, illness as well, rot and pestilence, nausea, a bleak string of salts" (31). He ends in "a most honorable fatigue," feeling that "flesh seemed new," that he had "not felt so nice since I was twelve" (32). Rojack also demonstrates the power to break loose of any constrictions of Deborah's *post-humus* hold on his superego. This is evident in his tryst with Ruta, his cool in the face of Roberts and fellow NYPD officers, and his ascent, despite opposition from Mobland romantic competition and from jazzman Shago Martin, toward the *paradiso* of Cherry's love. Indeed, Rojack has the imagination and courage to

encounter oppressive memories of the dead German (and of the Moon) that had haunted him since the night of the German's death during the War. This he does by going to encounter August Barney Kelly at his penthouse and the Moon on the penthouse's parapet—indeed by encountering these challenges effectively. Nevertheless, once again, as with Sergius' failure to dominate the entropic forces of Hollywood, we find a Mailerian protagonist who finally is not much freer or more self possessed than what is needed to hit the road on a renewed quest for wholeness.⁷

The Mailerian dynamic gains salience in definition as we move away from its early manifestations in *The Naked and the Dead*. However, to most fully plumb the deep narrative structure of Mailer's work, the richest focus is one on the naturalistically unencumbered poetry of *Ancient Evenings*. Here, Mailer's poetics, relatively unencumbered by the demands of realism, is most richly elaborated. As the quotation from Oscar Wilde inscribed atop the front fly leave of the original Little Brown edition of *Ancient Evenings* reads, in warning to readers expecting a realistic text, "To give an accurate description of what has never occurred is not merely the proper occupation of the historian, but the inalienable privilege of any man of parts and culture."

In *Evenings*, the place to start is with the "The Book of the Gods," specifically the tale of Set's conflict with Osiris, Isis and two Horuses. Nearly all of *Evening's* human stories mirror this tale of immortals. To recap the tale, Osiris is a victim of the vengeance of Set, who, enraged at Osiris' coupling with his beloved wife Nephthys (sister, alas poor listener, to Osiris and Set, as well as Isis), strikes out at Osiris. Set first imprisons Osiris in a chest and, latter, when Osiris is freed from the chest by Isis, Set cuts Osiris up into fourteen pieces, which he disperses among swamps of the Nile delta. Though Isis' champion Horus is killed as Set executes his vengeance against Oriris, a child named Horus (here Horus II) is conceived by Isis and Osiris (at the moment of the first Horus' death). This second Horus proves a better champion of Isis and Osiris than the first and accomplishes the recovery and reassembly of Osiris. Here Isis, Osiris, and the two Horuses function as a four-headed antagonist of Set and as a kind of four-headed protagonist for us the readers. This Osiran Circle, as I dub it, experiences socio-physiological dominance and anxiety—Osiris and the slain Horus I most dreadfully—but it proceeds to triumph. To focus on Horus II as the circle's most active force, through a series of bold and magical quests and combats involving incarnations into fierce bears and a magical potion made from the wasted seed of a

failed attempt at buggery by Set. Horus II defeats Set and rises to a position of high power among the Gods and, in time, into a long and enriching love relation with Isis. Osiris is reassembled from one fourteenth part of his old form plus parts of other creatures and of waxen artifice. He is reassembled with such success that that when his *Ka* (that soul which is a person's "double") "[came] forth from the eyes and mouth of His new abode ... His odor had the fragrance of the finest gardens of Egypt" (60–1). Thus, the narrative of domination and anxiety, courageous, amorous and/or magical response to these, and final transcendent resolution—amorous bliss for Isis and Horus II and a robust apotheosis for Osiris—is recounted in *Ancient Evenings*' "Book of the Gods."

The story of Menenhetet's great grandson Meni *mirrors* that of Osiris to a degree. In broad strokes, much of our experience of Meni is of a beleaguered, fragmented and *anxious* consciousness, caught, after much depredation, in an afterlife, an anxious body and psyche strikingly like that of Osiris (or Sergius O'Shaugnessey early in *The Deer Park*, Rojack early in *An American Dream*, Mailer early in *The Armies of the Night*, Gilmore in most phases of *The Executioner's Song* and Harry Hubbard in Uruguay). However, neither little Meni's rich, telepathically augmented social life nor his quests across worlds and times yield any courageous or amorously graced transformation and transcendence.

It is the story of the elder Menenhetet's ascent from his sexual use by Ramses II that most comprehensively expresses the Mailerian narrative. This tale *mirrors* the four-headed tale of the Osiran Circle Horuses (as Mailer's more naturalistic narratives mirror the Mailerian poetics). The elder Menenhetet ascends from the anxious depth of his sexual denigration by Ramses II. One phase of this ascent involves such *courageous*, if often brutish, actions as heroism at the battle of Kadesh and the slaying and raping of a group of brigands on the road to Tyre. Another phase involves the casting of *magic* spells—half potent, half pyrrhic—often resulting in some *transcendence*. A *third* involves the regenerations and developments of *love*—Menenhetet's affairs with the Tyrian whore, Honey Ball and Nefitiri. These affairs also deliver a degree of transcendence—most durably in the form of Menenhetet's fathering of his own reincarnation during his third coupling with Nefitiri.

In *The Executioner's Song*, social reality imposes the constraints of particular documentary sources, their sheer descriptive weight, upon Mailer's

poetics. This is particularly so because, on the one hand, the poetics rather narrowly focuses on Gilmore's central story and a few of its principals (for example, Nicole Barrett) while, on the other hand, this story is embedded in numerous voices, many of them with their own narratives. In short, many narratives are present whose courses have no direct functions for *Executioner's* most central narrative or Mailer's poetics. Yet, amidst the rich Warp of *Song's* social fabric, we find the stout Weft of Gary's Gilmore's tale, this patterned to the core poetic dynamic of a courageous effort to transcend the anxiety brought on by oppressive forces. First we have the poverty, corrective institutions and outsider status (non-Mormon, low income) of Gilmore's childhood and youth, complete with possibly excessive protestation that he was no punk: "I'm not a weak man. I've never been a punk" (359).⁸ Then we have those key stretches of Gilmore's tale marked by the accumulating tensions and frustrations of Gilmore's life following his first weeks living with Nicole Barrett, weeks of drinking and barroom fights, absenteeism from work and shop lifting, encounters (first misdemeanor, then felonious) with the law enforcement and court personnel that begin to jeopardize Gilmore's freedom, and, above all, fights and breakups with Nicole. [When an interviewer asks Gilmore whether he had formed the concept to kill someone prior to his gas station and motel killings, Gilmore responds, "I can't say. It had been building all week. That night I knew I had to open a valve and let something out" (799).] These early events link forward to incarceration, trial and punishment. They anchor an overall narrative arc of mounting physical tension that reaches from the brief resolutions of murder to further anxieties brought on by the imprisonment and prosecution, to Gilmore's pursuit of the execution for himself, and to Gary apparently striving (with Nicole) after for a transcendent *Liebestod*.

The *Liebestod*, or "love death," is most directly, if ineffectively, pursued through the couples' thwarted double suicide attempt (although suicide of Nicole and simple execution for Gary might suffice for the lovers' shared death and reunion for eternity). This starts with Gary's suggestions to Nicole that she commit suicide to accompany him beyond this life: "I've considered outright asking you to commit suicide" (478). Gary responds exultantly to Nicole's receptiveness: "You amaze me, the utter strength and beauty you show. It would be so easy for me to die.... If you choose to join me it would be much harder for you" (479–80). Shortly after each is in Intensive Care, following a round self-administered doses of Seconal, *Desert News* journalist

Tamera Smith writes that “[d]eath and suicide ... were the main topic in convicted killer Gary Mark Gilmore’s conversations with his girlfriend Nicole Barrett in the week preceding suicide attempts by both” (585). Indeed, two suicide notes had been written by Nicole to family and friends (568–573). Nevertheless, Nicole would survive despite a potentially lethal dosage; and the authenticity of Gilmore’s suicidal intent would be clouded. For example, the best calculation of the hospital staff caring for Gilmore would be that “he had taken half of a lethal dose” (590).

On Gilmore’s decision to insist upon and strive for his own execution, the record is clearer (Guest 142–153; Gilmore 342–345). Although Gilmore’s motives for seeking execution are not fully knowable, a few are evident. One is a personally controlled end to the degradations of imprisonment.⁹ A second is attainment of a fantasized afterlife of relative “freedom” (*The Executioner’s Song* 488). A third is public expiation through Gilmore’s confession of his killings and his public pursuit of implementation of the execution that has been legally declared fit punishment for his crimes. To quote Gilmore just after sentencing when asked if he would like to appeal, “You sentenced me to die. Unless it’s a joke or something, I want to go ahead and do it” (492).¹⁰

In short, increasing physical stress and correlate psychic anxiety—both made palpable by Mailer’s art—ground Gilmore’s murders. Further, the murders emerge as acts of release from that anxiety and as means to an odd re-possession of self-respect accomplished through the embrace of public execution as a righteous, courageously sought, spiritually transcendent end. Gilmore’s stress and anxiety are rooted in the social oppression of probable parental abuse and definite prison assaults—inmate and guard, life threatening and rapacious. They lead forward, via the execution that Gilmore bravely ensures, to a resolution of some transcendence.¹¹

I leave to your imagination the several incidentally disparate but structurally similar Mailerian narratives to be identified—for example, Tim Madden’s self-assertion *vis-à-vis* the domineering Captain Regency, Harry Hubbard’s progressive rites of passage into a fuller manhood from the precipices to Berlin to Miami to Playa Girón, and the eventually transcendent personal integration of Sergius O’Shaughnessy’s—at least if we see *Deer Park* as fully concluding with the events of “The Time of Her Time.”

Earlier I cited Lee Siegel on the breadth of Mailer’s work. I’ll now allude to the science of biology, in particular to the theory of animal behavior,¹² as it relates to the arc of the Mailerian narrative. In this the primary

dimension that differentiates animals is “anxiety-equanimity.” The range of this dimension suggests to me the long arc of the Mailerian narrative from anxiety to transcendence. Furthermore, in the theory of animal behavior, the second major dimension is “timidity-boldness.” This dimension seems to me to loosely parallel a key span of the Mailerian narrative, the one linking protagonist’s transformation from anxious to transcendent states that reaches from the cowardly to the courageous.¹³

THE POETICS AND FICTIONAL POWERS

Consideration of Mailer’s poetics advances understanding of the aesthetic merit as well as the construction of Mailer’s work. What can be said at once to telegraph some rudiments of such a contribution to aesthetic assessment is this. The range of the poetic’s basic elements, extending as it does across the physiological, psychic, social, cultural and transcendental can make for a work that is consistently rich in the breadth of its apprehension of the human experience and condition.¹⁴ Indeed, the work is rich not simply for the varieties of human experience and circumstance that it covers as captured by my five basic elements but for the breadth and depth of its writing within each category, perhaps the social and cultural above all (Lennon 91–103).¹⁵ Not only is the reach of the Mailerian story long, characteristic tensions between individual and society, domination and subordination, the cowardly and courageous, everyman and magus, and the mundane and the transcendent help drive the Mailerian narrative across its rich landscape in a long arc of great propulsive force.

Less affirmative is a Mailerian narrative that, although it tends toward a transcendental resolution, seldom offers more than passing, partial and palliative moments of transcendence, even for the brave. The issue raised here resembles what Richard Poirier suggested in his review of *Ancient Evenings* when he wrote that Mailer does not offer the illusion “that there is something we want to know and that we will eventually know it, that a center will be located in a wilderness of possibility, that the true shape of a person’s life will emerge out of the mysteries that have shrouded it” (“Mailer’s Strangest Book” 233). The recurrence in Mailer’s work of a merely transient transcendence as the principal resolution to narrative tension gives new meaning to Poirier’s earlier, but no less general, claim that Mailer shows a “willingness not to foreclose on his materials in the interest of merely formal resolution” (Poirier, *Norman Mailer* 120).¹⁶

Indeed, there is a modesty to Mailer's poetics when it comes to the realization of human potential and, thus, to the finality of narrative resolution. This is perhaps well expressed by the final sentence of *The Deer Park* where Mailer writes, "Then for a moment in that cold Irish soul of mine, a glimmer of the joy of the flesh came toward me ... and we laughed together after all, because to have heard that sex was time and time the connection of new circuits was a part of the poor odd dialogues which give hope to us noble humans for more than one night" (375). I refer especially to Mailer's choices of "moment" and "glimmer," "rare" and "hope." These fall short of salvation, in so far as I address the matter of narrative resolution. However, much could be said for the honesty of a vision that offers recurrent, hard earned "joy," and "hope ... for more than one night."¹⁷

NOTES

1. See Levi-Strauss. At the level of the specific genre, Propp, Wright and Morretti offers an historically shifting structural analysis of the *Bildungsroman* in his *The Way of the World*. Walt Reed criticized the interpretive adequacy of a structural poetics of the picaresque in light of the genre's (and the novel's) sheer historical and documentary social contents. Here, however, I focus on poetics to the virtual exclusion of Reed's "history," or social content. (That is, I focus on the core events of tales like Shane's, not the tales' uses of the likes of homesteading range wars). Thus, my structuralism shares little or no focus with that of Leeds on the social and social psychological, which is to say on Leeds' foci on "social problems," "the individual and society" and "voice" (3-4). This is so despite some overlaps between the current work's Mailerian poetics, on the one hand, and "the individual and society" in Mailer's work, on the other hand. Although structural analysis may lead out into an expansive multiplicity of structures that illuminate a work's unique plurality of meanings as in Barthes' *S/Z*, I refer here to *reductive* underlying structures rather than to outwardly branching ones like those of Barthes.
2. Bordwell's Ozu is a director with his own mode of film, not simply a distinctive style, like many an "art film" director, but a mode of film distinct from the Bordwellian "art film."
3. More specifically, the dynamics of the genre are constituted by the following sequence of events: hero enters social group; hero is unknown to group; hero has exceptional ability, is set apart by group and given special status; hero is not accepted by group; hero enters into conflict with villains who threaten group and are stronger than it; hero befriends or respects key villain; hero avoids opposing villains when they first threaten society but when the villains endanger a friend of the hero; hero fights and defeats villains, saving

society, which accepts him and assimilates him (if he does not move off). See Wright (48–49).

4. I stress *The Naked and the Dead* and *The Executioner's Song* as, alongside *The Armies of the Night*, the most broadly acclaimed of Mailer's fictions. Because of its frequent distance from fiction that is, in part, due to its excursions into the essay and analytical historical forms, I do not stress *Armies*. I stress *Evenings*, however, both as the most developed and as the least realistically inhibited expression of Mailer's poetics (a point that I hope my discussion of it here will substantiate) and as because the bimodal reception to this work makes it at once a zenith and nadir of Mailer's critical reception [Bloom, Burgess (132–133) and Poirier ("Mailer's Strangest Book" 226–337)]. I somewhat limit my attention, largely ignoring *Why Are We in Vietnam?* and *The Gospel According to the Son*, which are the shortest of Mailer's fictions, and *Harlot's Ghost* and *The Castle in the Forest*, which are the least complete with regard to closure of the stories of their respective central protagonists, namely Harry Hubbard and Adolf Hitler.
5. See Parsons and Smelser.
6. Note that anxiety is perhaps the central motive of the theory of animal behavior (Winfred Gallagher), while problem solving behavior is a key vehicle for the resolution of anxiety. In animals, action may be developmentally transforming as when an animal ascends or descends the social hierarchy of its group on the basis of the competitive effectiveness/ineffectiveness of its action and adjust organically to their fortune, for example becoming more timid or bold. In humans, still viewed as animals (albeit of unusual complexity and capability) action of course also may be developmentally transforming. As in some such classical anthropological accounts as Malinowski's *Magic, Science and Religion* and Evans-Pritchard's *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*, magic emerges as important aid to the problem of anxiety. The consistency of a vision encompassing the physiological and transcendental might seem inconsistent, but note that social scientists characteristically regard emotions, even religious ones, to have a somatic components (for example Kemper, Theodore, Thoits, and Hartley). The variety of modes of transcendence is a topic I bracket here for lack of easy reference or resolution and, thus, space.
7. Rojack, unlike O'Shaughnessy, can conjure up some of the courage (with Lieutenant Roberts, jazzman Shaggo Martin and Kelly) and some of the magic (the love of Cherry and daughter Deidre's love) of Horus. However, at *Dream's* end Rojack is closer to the dispersed spirit of Osiris than the triumphs of Horus over Set and with Isis.
8. The truth of this protestation is unclear. Certainly, his protestation is loud, if not necessarily "too much," when Gilmore states that in jail he'd killed "a black dude" who "had been trying to make a nice white kid his punk" (55), that "I've never had any trouble with

that. No, never once" (797). The meaning of Gilmore's silence on parental abuse is also uncertain. According to Guest (142), "If Mikal Gilmore's *Shot in the Hearts* has a central thesis, it is that Gary's murders originated in regular and frequent beating, administered by both his mother and father."

9. When Gilmores first tells his court appointed attorney of his right not to appeal he says, "I've been here for three weeks. I don't know that I want to live here for the rest of my life." (*The Executioner's Song* 489).
10. These lines are memorably excerpted in Didion (BR1) and Ricks (88).
11. Gilmore writes in his letters of a romantic rapture nourished by separation and elaborated by fantasies of an afterlife with Nicole that is augmented by poetic and ritual models out of Ovid and the Egyptian Book of the Dead. This introduces elements of the magic into Gilmore's quest for transcendence.
12. The considerable scientific (especially biological) sophistication, or simply insight, of the biological facet of Mailer's writing is as unappreciated when it comes to gender or illness as to anxiety ("dread") and animal behavior. See Eysenck and Adessa.
13. The role of the magus seems missing from the biological formulation, undermining this biological analogy. However, if one recalls those ritual combat and courtship displays in which muscles or plumage expand to the consternation or enthrallment of the Other and the emboldening of the Actor, some aspects of the magus might even be encompassed by an analogy that joins some rudiments of Mailer's narrative and the behavior of the living in close parallel. On the somatics of emotion, religious included, see note 6.
14. Just how Mailer's own metaphysics of a God and Devil locked in unresolved conflict might ground an alternative poetics, if any at all, is a topic I do not address here. Mailer, with Lennon, probably provides the best entre to relevant writing on such a metaphysics.
15. Not for nothing did Mailer publish an anthology of his work entitled *The Time of Our Time*, organized as a social chronicle.
16. This absence of formal resolution takes on, among other forms, an absence of that sustained transcendence we call salvation. To draw on Moretti's discussion of the *Bildungsroman*, a genre with parallels to the frequently strong strands of protagonist development in Mailer's fiction, this fiction tends to eschew the happy ending in which "story's ending and hero's aim fully coincide" (Moretti 118), and in which the protagonist's transition is one from "youthful illusions to realism," (93), to "maturity," as in the classical *Bildungsromanen* of the Fielding of *Tom Jones* and the Goethe of *Wilhelm Meister*, of Austen and early Dickens (15–73). Instead, Mailer's fiction is marked, like Stendhal and Balzac's, by a world in which "there is a divergence of story and meaning, of factual reality and value judgment" (124), in which youth "is not a teleological course ending in a superior maturity" (118) and in which maturity is not perceived as an "acquisition but

as a lose" (90), in which one is always pressed forward by a "persisting tension" between the "difference between the ... achieved" (113), in which "the combination of individual strife and historical change" (110) point forward to a Faustian *streben*, an incessant striving, and backwards to a "political history" in light of which the "course" of the "individual's formation" is twisted and contradictory" (80). We have here not only psychological and narrative affinities between the post-Revolution and post-Waterloo fictions of Stendhal and Balzac and the post-Depression and cold War ones of Mailer, but similarities in relations of individual to history and society that are not foregrounded by my Mailerian poetics and that point to the ultimate importance of the analysis of Mailerian and history in unison (see note 1 and 15).

17. I think that O'Shaugnessy's self assertion in "The Time of Her Time" would provide a more dramatically satisfying conclusion to *The Deer Park* than the ending just quoted. However, O'Shaugnessy sexually grasped transcendence in "The Time of her Time" is also transient. Intriguingly, Rojack's final, ostensibly triumphant walk around the parapet at Barny Kelly's penthouse ends short of completion. As Rojack "approached the wall, ten feet away, eight feet away, six feet away, Kelly came near." Kelly "lifted the tip of the umbrella" to Rojack's ribs and "gave a push to poke" him "off" (*American Dream* 260); and off Rojack jumps. I thank Mike Melloy for bringing the truncated character of Rojack's final walk on Kelly's parapet to my attention.

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