NORMAN MAILER: THE MAGICIAN AS TRAGIC HERO

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To whom do I speak today?
Brothers are evil,
Friends of today are not of love.

To whom do I speak today?
Hearts are thievish,
Every man seizes his neighbor's goods.

To whom do I speak today?
The gentle man perishes,
The bold-faced goes everywhere.

To whom do I speak today?
He of the peaceful face is wretched,
The good is disregarded in every place.

To whom do I speak today?
When a man should arouse wrath by his evil conduct,
He stirs all men to mirth, although his
iniquity is wicked.

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To whom do I speak today?
The pest is faithful,
But the brother who comes with it becomes an enemy.

To whom do I speak today?
There are no righteous,
The land is left to those who do iniquity.

"The Corruption of Men" (Ca. 2000 B.C.)
as rendered by J. H. Breasted

With the publication of *Ancient Evenings* it became clear that a serious reassessment of Norman Mailer's career was due. Any such reassessment, it seems to me, must take into consideration the degree to which Mailer's self-proclaimed magnum opus is a culmination of his themes, especially the fantastic and magical themes. The novel also represents a culmination of his heroes' struggles to gain independent moral stature, even amidst failure. Perhaps because it was published so late in this author's career, *Ancient Evenings* even more than Fowles' or Gardner's magical narratives is prototypical of the author's body of work. We have now a novel that gives significant order and emphasis to the narrative qualities and the ethical issues developed throughout Mailer's fiction and nonfiction career. Chief among these qualities and issues is the dialectic between vitality and entropy. Those opposing forces create the conflict behind all the other conflicts in the narrative, just as, in turn, each specific conflict helps to characterize the nature of the hero's task and the connections between his life and death.

We are reminded of Gardner's dialectic of art and chaos, of artists/heroes and the abyss, of opposing philosophies (or constructive oppositions) that test values and seek synthesis or personal transformation. He and Mailer are both seeking consciousness rather than codes. Mailer's underlying conflict between vitality and entropy is in Egypt mythologically reflected in Ra's nightly descent into darkness to battle the great serpent of entropy and in Osiris' role not only as Lord of Resurrection and Mind (consciousness). Similarly, that dialectic is symbolized by the conflicts between the gods and their opposing qualities. And ultimately it is symbolized by "the balance of Maat," which holds in creative equipoise the dialectical polarities of existence—barbarism and civilization, bestiality and nobility, death and life, waste and

generation, Set and Osiris. Entropy to Mailer is that which destroys the balance, the devouring of life principle by death principle.

Yet in Mailer's case the initial critical reaction to *Ancient Evenings* has been as curious and exorbitant as the novel itself. A few have thought it brilliant, some have thought it execrable, others have thought it both. More than a few have been unable to make up their minds. On the best and worst lists of 1983, *Ancient Evenings*, as Mailer predicted, bewildered everybody. Nearly all the reviewers were willing to grant Mailer power and significance as a major force on the American literary scene. But what to do with this new artifact? Indeed, the book, as Mailer had promised, is "out of category." Vance Bourjaily was stunned by it: "The longest damn *tour de force* I ever read," Bourjaily wrote in *Esquire*, "a monument like no other … a strange eminence." It may be a masterpiece, he went on, but it is "also totally beyond judgment." Any writer in his sixties, Bourjaily suggested, has nothing to lose; he or she can cut loose from all of us and, if nothing else, show us how "wide the final swings may be." [1] In a similar, though less sympathetic and more reductive vein, Leslie Fiedler wrote of the novel as a "deep-sleep nightmare" and "outlaw of the underground." as perhaps even that mythical "longest ball ever to go up into the air … of our American letters," which Mailer had promised back in the 1950s.[2]

Almost every reviewer has had his or her difficulties (and fatigues) with the novel. It is difficult, perhaps irresponsible, to consider this novel without first assessing this cacophony of critical reaction. Those who are generally favorable seem to have been able to suspend disbelief and prejudgment enough to confront this strange work on its own terms. They frequently offer worthy insights into the possibilities and meanings of the work. Those who are unfavorable either have been unable to sufficiently suspend disbelief or have been overwhelmed by the flaws apparent from the perspective of either traditional or current fictional conventions.

At their worst, some negative critics seem to have been saving up their anti-Mailer bile for just such an opportunity. Reading the more spiteful reviews, one conjures an image of Mailer toppling into the waiting arms (or jaws) of, for example, Margaret Manning of the *Boston Globe* or Sey Chassler of *Ms. Magazine*. Manning calls the book "oceanic, unstoppable, and mad"; she attributes Mailer's interest in reincarnation to egoism and wonders why he chose to write about "this period of degeneration," necrophilia, and artistic decline. According to Manning, Mailer is also "one of the world's

great literary snobs" because many of his characters are high-born Egyptians. Moreover, she would have him treat the Greek pantheon because she likes Greek gods better than the "boring and structured" Egyptian gods. Since Manning doesn't get her facts straight (the hero does not learn reincarnation from a woman, to take just one example), and since she lets her prejudices get in the way of her critical reading, it is no wonder she dismisses the book as claustrophobic "rubbish." Mailer fares even worse in *Ms*. Chassler stops suddenly in the middle of her brief review to complain about the tone in which a Boston newspaper reported a gang rape, refers to the tone finally as "typically Mailerian, ordinarily masculine," and ends with a howling non sequitur. *Ancient Evenings*, Chassler announces, "turns out to be about gang rape after all." [3]

This is not to suggest that all the negative reviews are simply spite. A few are. Others are thoughtful, raise serious questions, and emphatically stipulate what events and ideas in the novel were not to the reviewer's tastes, nor, by extension, to the tastes of civilized adults in America today. Robert Gorham Davis, Mailer's writing teacher and friend from Harvard days, focuses on two issues—the execrable subject matter and certain stylistic-formal qualities of the novel. Though Davis grants Mailer the creation of "states of awareness that go beyond anything ever attempted in literature before," he finds dominance through homosexual rape, ancient violence, "polymorphous and inexhaustible sex," and "regressively unscientific ideas about the body" all things that "simply do not bear thinking about." They are "the stock in trade of fakirs and mass cultists," and, furthermore, embarrassing to read. On this point he echoes Joseph Epstein's and James Wolcott's witty repugnance with Mailer's "obsessions." [4] Though Davis' criticism of style—"there is hardly a distinctive phrase or metaphor, an unexpected choice of words"—has been debated even among the negative critics, his second criticism of the novel's form indeed raises a central question about the impact and effectiveness of the novel, and Davis seems to be alone in raising it clearly. Does the "transcendence" expressed in the final pages of the novel excuse, give purpose to, or clarify the preceding seven hundred pages of "betrayal, gloating cruelty, and the immediate gratification of every impulse at whatever cost to others?" Davis asks. "Is it more than an easy out, a rhetorical flourish … when there has been heretofore not a hint of what a noble purpose might be or how it is achieved . . .?"

Although Davis misses a few "hints," his question is an important one. The question is complicated because Mailer writes from the unprivileged position of one who is—like all of us and his characters—at times consumed by his passions, confusions, obsessions, and eccentricities. He imaginatively participates with such narrative energy in all the carnality and egoism he describes that he is always in danger of undercutting the ethical issues he raises. One could argue that in his tireless heaping of betrayal, cruelty, and self-gratification Mailer fails his sympathetic readers—those who might see the ethical undercurrents, purposes, and (in the end) subversions of his gruesome tale.

Yet if transcendence and purpose are expressed only from the perspective of five failed lives and a future time when Greek and Roman classical civilization reign, as is the case at the novel's end, and if one of Mailer's greatest efforts in writing the novel was to expunge from his mind later (i.e., Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian) definitions of the spiritual and ethical nature of humanity, as he suggested in his *Harvard Magazine* interview, then Mailer may have left himself no formal choice hut a final, brief retrospective section from which vantage alone we, like Menenhetet his hero, see the value, or lack of it, in the lives these characters have led. Be that as it may, placing such a burden on his ending is among the greatest risks Mailer takes in this audacious novel. Whether the final revelation of the novel works or not, however, may ultimately be more a matter of taste than of aesthetic law or necessity. And it will be taste in turn which leads a reader to decide whether the quotation Davis cites from Mailer's old *Paris Review* interview (repeated in *Cannibals and Christians* and else-where) helps us to read the book as registering a positive or negative potential for the evolution of humanity and spirit: "violence, cannibalism, loneliness, insanity, libidinousness, hell, perversion and mess … [are] states which must in some way be passed through. digested, transcended, if one is to make one's way back to life." [5]

Benjamin DeMott's intelligent review emphasizes the familiar distaste with the subject matter; it is all, finally, a little too kinky and embarrassing. But DeMott adds a further dimension to the criticisms already noted. Though he was surprised and prepared for a masterpiece from reading the opening chapters, though pulled "inside a consciousness different from any hitherto met in fiction," the novel finally is a "disaster" for DeMott. It is the social drama of books 3 through 6 that sinks Mailer's ship. The failure amounts to replacing that opening, magical consciousness of the dynastic

world with the obsessions of a twentieth-century mind—Mailer's. In dramatizing these obsessions, Mailer too successfully represses his own sense of the ridiculous, but few readers will be able to do so.

These are telling criticisms that raise questions once again of taste as well as questions of a reader's own preconceptions of life in 1200–1000 B.C. Egypt. It is a very good line, but is it accurate to say that all the characters are a ludicrous blend of Mel Brooks and the Marquis de Sade? Especially if to support that quip DeMott can only summarize out of context the King-as-Fool's pranks and obscenities on the Night of the Pig—a night, like no other, when foolery, role reversal, and obscenity are *supposed* to reign. Such festivals are, further, not anomalous; rather, they are cyclical historical events that ring down the centuries from Egypt through Rome to Medieval Europe, right into the carnivals and Mardis Gras of our own time. They are intentional and sanctioned days and nights of excess with cathartic social and religious purposes. DeMott may be right about flawed moments of "unintended hilarity," but surely much of Mailer's material is not presented as if "it were without comic dimension," and just as surely Mailer does not always fail in presenting Eastern sensuality.[6]

Writing in *The American Spectator*, Peter Shaw offers a sobering assessment of the critics. Shaw reminds us, first, that Mailer is using Egyptian mythology in such a way that the incestuous and anal passions of the gods "are enacted by their human counterparts for whom these profane matters become the objects of religious and metaphysical speculation." If with an "unprecedented, easy condescension … the reviewers were vastly amused … to report that *Ancient Evenings* came down to a treatise on ca ca," they may have forgotten, first of all, that the scarab or dung beetle was a hieroglyph for creation and the commemorative symbol of pharaohs. And if the reviewers have expressed their distaste for such subjects as excrement and sex and the violent Eastern mythologies presented throughout the novel, they have been, secondly, expressing a distaste for D. H. Lawrence, Norman O. Brown, and James Frazer (not to mention, I might add, Eliot, Pound, Yeats, Freud, Graves, and Jung, among others). They have, in short, denied Mailer a similar context and materials; they have admitted a "self-confessed philistinism" which is one "measure of the present revolt against high modernism."[7]

Among the positive critics like Shaw we find those who are, as Henry James admonished, willing to grant Mailer his subject, idea, and starting point. Having done so, they offer the most insight into the novel. And, like

James, they are also willing to "estimate quality" by applying the only possible test, finally—"the test of execution." Execution, James argues in "The Art of Fiction," belongs "to the author alone; it is what is most personal to him, and we measure him by that. The advantage, the luxury, as well as the torment and responsibility of the novelist, is that there is no limit to his possible experiments, efforts, discoveries, successes."

As Shaw intimates, it is Mailer's starting point that seems to offend so many. Just as Mailer had to "keep making certain that there wasn't a single Judeo-Christian idea" in his head as he wrote *Ancient Evenings*, so too did he never avoid the violence of the pagan world and myth, nor the ambitions of gods and humans. He is searching for the pagan, he would say "karmic," roots of human life. And there is nothing like war and sex for stripping off the surface and revealing the roots. "I think people are going to be immensely confused by the book" Mailer said. "They are going to say … What is he saying that means something to him.… What is in this." [8] Mailer may have been strategically naive by being repetitious and heavy-handed. But his exposé of the connections between war and eroticism—the erections of warriors in battle, the brutalities of "carnal ownership" of victor over vanquished—and between sexuality and politics, power, wealth, and state violence, if offensive, are at least honest by his own lights. "Maybe it is in war that you come to the place where the rainbow touches the earth, and much that has been hidden is simple," Mailer's hero Menenhetet says. Wouldn't it be nice if it weren't so? we want to say with the reviewers.

It is this audacious honesty as much as anything that gets Mailer into trouble with the reviewers. We see just one example of audacity in the long and brutal description of the night after the Battle of Kadesh. Here is not only Ramses' nobility and bestiality, but the worst horrors of the Nazis, the Pol Pot regime, and all the government-sanctioned massacres and famines of the modern world. It is a description of the eternal human descent into Hell.

> Over it all was the smell of sweat. I could smell the buttocks of half an army. A fit husband was that odor to blood and smoke. I would speak of these acts as abominations but it was less than what was yet to come. Besides, I will offer no judgment.… I can only say I was part of it, and much stimulated. I swear, if it were not the Night of the Pig, you would not know so much of this.…

> Sometimes you could not tell the oaths of pleasure from the wails of the doomed. Through such cries did Hera-Ra and I walk, among the flames.... I have never seen women [camp whores] so insatiable, so brutal, so superior in pure joy—it is their art, not a man's.... It must have been all the blood and burning flesh. Maybe Maat approaches with love when all are choking with smoke. You have to wonder how many generals are conceived on campgrounds such as this.... Before the night was over, I, too, indulged the meat of a limb, burned it in the fire, took a taste, and knew the pleasures of a cannibal.... Suffice it that the first step in what is considered the filth of my habits was taken. It has led me through many a wonder and many a wisdom.[9]

"None of us," Mailer remarked in an unpublished portion of an interview, "has been able to explain the concentration camps, and in fact we step away from it in horror because the most logical answer is that those horrors are in all of us, and there to be tapped. We draw back from that as a conclusion about human nature. So the question is unsettled. Because it is unsettled, no one is rewarded for approaching that question. We don't really want to know the answer to it." We are reminded here of George Steiner's argument that the Holocaust cannot be separated from the psychology of religion, from the vengeance of some deep polytheistic and animistic need, or from the "egotistical failure of common, instinctual behavior" set against the ideal. The bloodlust, barbaric warfare, and orgiastic pain of ancient Egypt erupts in Mailer's novel, as Steiner points out it did in the 1850s in *Salammbô*, like some "metaphysical provocation" or sadistic dream of violence against the "interminable Sunday and suet of a bourgeois lifeform."[10]

Those critics like Richard Poirier, who can stand the audacious honesty, grant Mailer his chaff but seek the kernel. Poirier finds it not remarkable that American reviewers have found things to make fun of. Any work of "sustained visionary ambition" (e.g., *Paradise Lost*, *Moby Dick*) is bound "to have stretches of tiresome exposition, phrasings that are ludicrous, whole scenes that, as Dr. Johnson remarked, 'should have been not only difficult but impossible.' " What is remarkable to Poirier is that so many of Mailer's risks pay off in "moments of subliminal ecstasy, visionary descriptions." Seeing *Ancient Evenings* as a work of magnitude, Poirier also sees it as a work that

retrospectively orders Mailer's entire body of work: "Mailer has imagined a culture that gives formal, and not merely anthropological sanction to what in his other works often seems eccentric or plaintively metaphysical, like his obsessions with 'psychic darts' and mind-reading, with immortality, with battles of the gods … with villainous homosexuality, with magic and sorcery, and with excrement as an encoding of psychic failure or success.[11]

Harold Bloom similarly focuses on the losses and payoffs of Mailer's risks, and he sounds the same note as Bourjaily: "Our most conspicuous literary energy has generated its weirdest text, a book that defies usual aesthetic standards, even as it is beyond conventional ideas of good and evil." Despite working his own hobbyhorse of literary influences, Bloom does suggest (and in two cases develops) four useful approaches to Mailer's novel. First, *Evenings* can be seen as a culmination of Mailer's metaphorical vision. By an "outrageous literalism," Mailer makes the metaphorical seem literal, thereby granting a "reality" Mailer has always attributed to metaphor. In this primitive, magical world literal perceptions are meaningless without their metaphorical, intuitive dimensions and energies. Second, Mailer's connections to a literary heritage of "religious vitalism" require readers to take him seriously or not at all. Like D. H. Lawrence, Mailer is a writer who would both "save our souls" and "renew our original relationship both to the sun and to a visionary origin beyond the natural sun." Bloom is, third, one of the few reviewers to suggest, at least, a real connection between Mailer's ancient world and contemporary America. And, finally, Bloom develops Mailer's connection to the nineteenth-century American Literary Renaissance. Like his forebears, Mailer finds in ancient Egypt a vision of resurrection that not only gives flesh and history to his long-held obsessions about life, death, power, courage, and the relationship between the human and the divine, but is an analogue of resurrection or personal survival through works of art.[12]

George Stade, to take one final example, carried further the many reviewers' references to the novel's fantasy and nightmare qualities. Stade sees ancient Egypt as Mailer's "metaphor for the unconscious." Indeed, it is with dream logic and energy that Mailer has worked since *The Naked and the Dead*, I might add. Such logic and energy are simply carried to their furthest, most risky, use here. And, of course, the images arising are often as rationally inexplicable, alien, surprising, magical, and distasteful to rational consciousness as they can be in our nightly dreams. For Stade, we are witness to a form of consciousness both alien and familiar that makes other novels of

ancient magic, like Robert Graves' novels, psychologically shallow by comparison and without formal distinction. Stade describes the design of Mailer's novel as a kind of spiral interweaving two narrative strands around each other and sustaining a series of narrative parallels between gods and humans.

It was Mailer himself who first suggested in *Harvard Magazine*, incidentally, the spiral image, but this spiral has really three, rather than two, narrative strands or parallels: the reign of Ramses II, the reign of Ramses IX, and the eternal realm of the gods. The gods and their carnal possessions, ambitions, intrigues, battles, and gifts are mirrored by human counterparts. As Stade notes, the gods are metaphors for the permanent energies of the human psyche and the character types they produce.

What Stade means by Mailer's "somber excavations of our aboriginal and buried human nature," is what Bernard Dick means by Mailer's continuing creation of "a holograph of the psyche." Mailer himself prescribed such excavations and holographs in 1966 when he called for "robust art": a "hearty" quest for that which is fundamental and primitive in our nature, a "savage" antidote to all the "dissolution" and "entropy" in our world. Such art would above all be characterized by the dream (or dream novel), for the dream and the novel are "country cousins." [13]

What Stade and Dick, and even Bloom, remind us of, then, is that Mailer is not merely showing us powerful, affecting elements in human racial history through national and heroic events (i.e., a traditional historical novel); he is trying more to create a history of the dynamic and collective human psyche, which, as Jung among others argues, we can never sever without catastrophic loss and self-destruction. It is probably on that basis—as part of the history of the human psyche and its dynamic energies (including what James Breasted calls "the dawn of conscience")—that *Ancient Evenings* will have to rest its claim for meaningfulness.

To understand and to begin to assess *Ancient Evenings*, I think we need first to grant the novel its chunks of ponderous, turgid writing and static ceremony. Then, beyond that admission, we need to discover whether anything of value, and how much, remains to us as readers. Joyce Carol Oates, in her chapter "The Teleology of the Unconscious," reminds us how easy it is to go wrong with Mailer. "Norman Mailer's efforts to dramatize the terror of the disintegrating identity have largely been mistaken as self-display, and his

highly stylized, poetic, image-making structures of language have often been mistaken as willful and perverse hallucinations, instead of countermagic." It is largely because Mailer's literary countermagic is melodramatic that he has met with so much resistance from critics. His lurid texts, founded on the void left by our loss of the sacred, do indeed, as Peter Brooks has argued of melodrama generally, "depend for their validity on a kind of visionary leap," on a suspension of our disbelief.

The desire to express all, to utter the unspeakable and dramatize deepest feelings through heightened and polarized gestures; the underlying Manichaeism and its accompanying hyperbole and extravagance; the "supersignification" of a world of charged interconnections, correspondences, and meanings—all are essential qualities of the melodramatic mode of expression that, as Brooks argues, seeks "a victory over the repression and censorship of the social reality principle, a release of psychic energy by the articulation of the unsayable." The goal of this victory and release is to suggest that what is being played out in the realm of manners or the quotidian is charged with meaning, value, and "significance from the realm of the moral occult," a domain of "spiritual values" or deeper sources of being where the stakes are life and death. We are always, of course, perilously close as readers to feeling that "the represented world won't bear the weight of the significances placed on it." The metaphorical relationship between the represented world and the occult world—or in Mailer's case the stark immediacy of the occult in the represented—is what makes the fictive world barely supportable to the reader. Yet it is just this metaphorical nature of the text that creates "an expanded moral context" and "ethical consciousness." Indeed, Brooks speculates that it is just this search to bring into the drama of manners and quotidian existence "the higher drama of moral forces" that is "one of the large quests of the modern imagination" since Romanticism; our "most Promethean writers" insist that the realm of the moral occult exists; they "write their fiction to make it exist" and to show "its primacy in life." [14]

If, as Brooks says, melodrama is the only form of the tragic left to a world where there is "no longer a tenable idea of the sacred," Mailer balances precariously on the edge of the tragic and the melodramatic because he balances so precariously on the edge of the sacred and the profane. Such balancing acts place enormous demands on us as readers.

The suspension of disbelief Mailer requires of us in this novel has proven too much for some readers, even in these post-modern times when the irreal

becomes common. When we add to that demand Mailer's long-standing idea that the first ethic required of us is courage—the courage and strength to take risks and to rebel against anything that would diminish us—we can see why Mailer would be bound for heavy weather indeed in, if Mailer is right, an epoch of adjustment, compromise, and homogeneity.

The connections between courage and power, magic and power, and sexuality and power suggested repeatedly in this novel are not unlike Mailer's own connection between risk or courage and power in writing as well. Like so many of his characters, Mailer is valuable as a writer in part because of his ability and endurance in risk-taking. He pursues, now more than ever, his questions and instincts through whatever slimes and sublimities he discovers along the way. He may outrage most of his critics, but he could least of all be accused of writing, in Donald Hall's apt phrase, mere "letters to Stockholm." He seems willing, not unlike Melville, to put everything on the line in a book, literary establishments and taste-makers be damned! He may arguably (as many have argued) fail. But there may be as much nobility as ludicrousness in his failures, if that they are. In his interview for *Harvard Magazine*, Mailer phrased it this way:

> If I had tried to write the book in a year, the fear would have been so great it couldn't have been written. But over ten years, you can carry the fear. *Writing* a book is the fear… Most people take pride in the fears they can endure. It's obvious that you can't be a professional writer for as many years as I have been without taking a certain pride that I can endure those fears. I would say that writing is like all occupations that have some real element of risk.… And I will say I've taken more risks with the Egyptian novel than any book I've ever written. It's the most, dare I say it, audacious of the books I've done. (48)

Two questions need to be addressed before we can make sense of Mailer's strangest novel. First, what is the central relationship between *Ancient Evenings* and Mailer's previous work? Second, what is it about ancient Egypt that drew Mailer to that subject in the first place?

Mailer's previous work stands, like Fowles', emphatically antagonistic to a common element of post-war literature—the absurd or anti-hero. Above all, Mailer's rebel heroes glory in their search for the power to advance their

own lives and visions, even when they fail. Whether as "Life,""Vision," "God," or "It," the power Mailer's heroes seek is unconscious, divine, regenerative. With this power the hero gains the only effective force available to struggle against a deadening, homogenizing, and totalitarian world. This power, this Vital Life Source, is a principle in the order of creation that stands in opposition to entropy, whether the entropy of violent personal defeat, or totalitarianism, or of chaotic force. Chaos and order, Devil and God, now Osiris and Set battle in human as in supernal realms. Each hero pursues and repeats the archetypal act of regeneration. What to Mailer keeps our condition from being absurd merely is just this universal dialectic. The God of Life is not all-powerful but at war, suffering—even as ourselves—defeats as well as victories.

This search for the rebellious, divine energy within is exactly what connects Mailer's heroes to the mythological heroes of the past, to the ancient heroic adventure, to the archetypal return to the life-source within. The hero then returns to the world with expanded consciousness or nourishment for himself and others. In a previous book, I argued in detail how each of Mailer's heroes makes such a journey and how, taken as a composite, they express a regenerative synthesis of both conscious and unconscious psyche (or "heroic consciousness") characterized by five main qualities. The first two qualities are metaphorical perception (or the capacity to see interrelationships and telepathies between things) and divine or instinctual energy, the basis for courageous self-potency with which the hero opposes whatever would deaden or defeat him. These first two qualities especially are the sources of the hero's deeper vision into life and his moral force. The third quality of heroic consciousness is a revolutionary attitude toward the status quo. Such an attitude is the basis of that violence which precedes personal and social transformation. The fourth quality of heroic consciousness is the impulse to restore "wholeness" or balance to self and society whenever there is disproportion and imbalance. The final quality is extraordinary individualism, which best expresses Mailer's own faith in the intensity, power, and truth of the subjective perceptions of heroic or tested individuals. These last three qualities especially define the relationship of the hero to his society or culture. Through all of these qualities Mailer is reacting to what he sees as two shortcomings in contemporary novelists. First, they create heroes (or anti-heroes) who are "passive, timid, other-directed, pathetic, up to their nostrils in anguish." Second, their work shows great felicity (Fowles'

rococo) but little other significance: "There seem to be more and more felicity all the time. Each year there seem to be more people who can really write stunning prose. And technique gets more and more elaborated. But I can't think offhand of any young writers who are philosophically disturbing at this point." [15]

These attributes of the Mailer hero connect the author to a literary and mythological tradition (including Fowles and Gardner) that seeks a larger foundation, a greater potential, for human aspirations than that of most anti-heroic twentieth-century existentialists. In American literature alone, this tradition of human transcendence, with its roots in Puritanism, ranges through Emerson and Thoreau, Melville, Twain, Fitzgerald, and Faulkner. This is a lineage of artists who have sought to awaken the moral consciousness of their culture by, often, depicting the journey of the individual soul as somehow connected to the journey of America itself. In British literature a similar lineage continues at least from Blake through D. H. Lawrence. These writers have continually warned humanity of the dangers of the drift toward spiritual impoverishment, loss of unconscious life or soul, mechanization, and what Mailer more inclusively has called "totalitarianism." By that term Mailer means the human impulse to defeat nature, to avoid risk and chance, to homogenize all diversity and opposition, and to destroy mystery. When he has defined evil in his fiction and nonfiction, he has defined it as stasis, stereotype, and bland homogeneity.

In light of these attributes of Mailer's mythic heroes, what is it, to address my second question, that drew Mailer to ancient Egypt as the subject of his first massive work of a possible trilogy? This question is all the more likely to arise when we recall that since *Armies of the Night* (1968) Mailer had turned exclusively to nonfiction, including the "nonfiction novel" *The Executioner's Song* (1979). He found in contemporary history itself the same quests, the same archetypal order, the same allegories for social criticism, and the same material for his preoccupations that he had imagined in fiction. Suddenly in 1983 with the publication of the Egyptian novel, Mailer seemed to shift away from the contemporary and the increasingly realistic. In a sense Mailer has reversed direction from his published work; on the other hand, he was writing *Ancient Evenings* off and on throughout the 1970s and early 1980s. He anticipated the issue himself: "the trouble is everybody is going to be saying, 'How the devil does Norman Mailer get himself up to start writing about Egyptian pharaohs? I mean that's really going too far.'" [16]

Mailer had pursued his themes as far as he could in the contemporary and naturalistic *Executioner's Song*. In Egypt Mailer could cut loose and develop his "karmic" concerns in a bold and original way, finally freed as much from the restrictions of fictional realism as from twentieth-century rationalism and scientism. Put simply, Mailer found in Egypt an ancient heroic and primary civilization; he found, in other words, an extremely fertile ground in which to plant and let flourish his fascination with the way extraordinary people have acted out and often failed in the eternal drama of the soul's struggle for "salvation" through the ancient patterns of rebirth. He found in Egypt a primal area in which to stage the conflict basic to all his novels and major nonfiction books—the struggle to balance and control the ageless, conflicting, and dynamic forces in oneself and in the world. It is the struggle for the creative power of life itself. Because Mailer intended to include future and present civilizations in his trilogy of regeneration, it is not surprising that he wished to begin that drama at its root, at one of the places in the Ancient Near East where civilization and recorded history began. In scope and ambition, this proposed trilogy is as audacious as anything ever written by an American. Whether Mailer succeeds or fails, literary history will determine.

There are, moreover, some generally acknowledged principles of Egyptian civilization that might further explain Mailer's attraction to Egypt and help clarify my later discussion. The constancy of Egyptian civilization through Old, Middle, and New Kingdoms and through successive dynasties, despite internal and particular changes, is significant. If ancient Egypt could be be said to initiate and repeat the patterns of degeneration and regeneration familiar to us as the briefer cycles of later civilizations, Egypt's continuities are the basis of its survival for three millennia. Chief among these continuities, this cultural identity, is its mythopoeic approach to experience and existence, that is, there is no clear division between the sacred and the secular, no desacralization of the world. Much to the consternation of his realist critics, Mailer has always sought this sacralization of the cosmos and human life. Mircea Eliade, in *The Sacred and the Profane*, suggests the archaic consciousness Mailer would approach:

> The man of the archaic societies lends to live as much as possible *in* the sacred.… The tendency is perfectly understandable, because, for primitive as for the man of all pre-modern soci-

> eties, the sacred is equivalent to a power, and, in the last analysis, to reality. The sacred is saturated with *being*.… It should be said at once that the *completely* profane world, the wholly desacralized cosmos, is a recent discovery in the history of the human spirit… .
>
> For nonreligious man of the modem societies, this simultaneously cosmic and sacred dimension of conjugal union is difficult to grasp. But … it must not be forgotten that religious man of the archaic societies sees the world as fraught with messages. Sometimes the messages are in cipher, but the myths are there to help man decipher them.… What we find as soon as we place ourselves in the perspective of religious man of the archaic societies is that *the world exists because it was created by the gods*, and that the existence of the world itself "means" something, "wants to say" something, that the world is neither mute nor opaque, that it is not a mute thing without purpose or significance. For religious man the cosmos "lives" and "speaks." The mere life of the cosmos is proof of its sanctity.… For nonreligious man, all vital experiences—whether sex or eating, work or play—have been desacralized. This means that all these physiological acts are deprived of spiritual significance, hence deprived of their truly human dimension.[17]

As Gardner uses ancient Eastern wisdom in his magician's dialogues as a counterforce to our (i.e., Clumly's) habitual assumptions and perceptions, and as a tentative redirecting of lives out of balance with the cosmos, so does Mailer. But the difference of course is larger than the differences between Mesopotamia and Egypt. Mailer bases his novel completely on an archaic approach to life (as best he can gather it). His disruption (or "defamiliarization") of our assumptions and perceptions is not incidental but total. We enter a magical universe and a psychic condition counter to our own. We find ourselves in an unsettling realm where the sacred and the profane, the metaphorical and the literal, the micro- and macrocosmic are inseparable.

The Egyptian pharaoh is but another example of this archaic view; he is the unifying and life-giving god-king. The king is Lord of Two Lands not

only because he unifies Upper and Lower Egypt, but because his role is both historical and cosmological, both natural *and* supernatural, both human *and* divine. He represents a unified cosmos in which nature, humanity, and gods all participate in the cosmological order and drama. If he functions as a charismatic hero-god with powers beyond other mortals, his rule is not arbitrary nor, historically, free from the corruptions of disproportion. He, like everything existent, is subject to Maat—truth, justice, order, harmony, and the equilibrium of opposites or "balance," to use Mailer's repeated word. As guardian of Maat, the king is responsible for Egypt's order instead of chaos, truth instead of falsity, harmony instead of conflict. As sun-king and fertility god, his health and potency must be preserved through magic, ceremony, and celebration as in the Sed Festival, to take one example, commemorating his accession to power.

The king is, furthermore, without equal. and by his wealth and power is divorced from mere mortals in his social relationships. His identity like any god's is, therefore, at once aloof and multiple. Such identity and power entails responsibilities. The king's affirmation of Maat is part of the eternal pattern of recurrence, of death and regeneration, of the cycles of the sun, the Nile, and Osiris.

The gods are especially important in Mailer's novel. They, like those attaining godly powers, express their multiple identities through many names and transformations. The pharaoh embodies two gods—Osiris in death and Horns in life. Particularly after the Old Kingdom, Osiris is at the center of Egyptian religion as well as Mailer's novel. He is the very power and symbol of resurrection, of eternal recurrence. He is bringer of civilization and lawgiver. His eternal adversary is Set, his evil brother, the god of opposition, desert, discord, confusion, chaos. (As Osiris-Horus, of course, the pharaoh himself would typically hold himself in opposition to the Set-principle.) Osiris is also god of the vitality of vegetation, soil, and Nile, life-giver as well as law-giver. In supernal realms he is equally important, identified with Orion and the ever-changing moon. In the Underworld he is King of the Dead. In his suffering, death, mutilation, and resurrection, the Egyptians saw their own life after death.

So at the very source of Egyptian civilization is a principle Mailer has argued for years: death and life are a continuum, and not merely absurd. Death is risky and adventurous, a state in which the debts and wastes of one's life carry significance beyond earthly existence. Mailer calls his version of this

idea loosely "American existentialism" and "Karma," and by such terms he hopes to expand the meaning of existentialism to a sense of one's responsibility to others, to one's "soul," even to the "gods," as well as to oneself. As Mircea Eliade describes this approach, "For religious man, the appearance of life is the central mystery of the world. Human life is not felt as a brief appearance in time, between one nothingness and another: it is preceded by a pre-existence and continued in a postexistence.... Hence, for religious man, death does not put a final end to life. Death is but another modality of human existence."[18]

Osiris is at the center of the judgment of one's life in one's death, for he presides in the dramatic ritual of the Judgment of the Dead, Here, in the presence of gods, the dead make their "negative confession," denying commission of forty-two sins while their hearts are weighed against the feather of Maat in the balance of Anubis. Beginning in the Old Kingdom, and developing in the Middle Kingdom, even as nobles and nomarchs (provincial rulers) gain more power through decentralization, the possibility of salvation and regeneration passes down through the nobility to everyone, though only the wealthy can afford elaborate rites. By the New Kingdom (1570–1090 B.C.), the setting of *Ancient Evenings*, the cult of Osiris and democratization of regenerative power has spread, in principle, throughout society. In times of social responsibility (between cycles of social decay) one's judgment in death depends on having lived an ethical life.

James Henry Breasted's *The Dawn of Conscience* is the classic study of the evolution of this ethical dimension in ancient Egyptian life. Mailer could hardly have overlooked such a book. Breasted's thesis is that in Egypt we find the first social prophets who ultimately develop "a standard of morals far superior to that of the Decalogue over a thousand years before the Decalogue was written." Breasted traces the processes of that struggle—its growths and recessions from a Memphite drama dating back to the fourth millennium B.C. It is with the Pyramid Texts, after 3000 B.C., that the first sophistication begins. The sun-god remains the original source of approved and disapproved conduct, but in the Pyramid Texts the pharaoh embarks on an epic journey after life to test the power of his courage and magic, to become the lord of the gods themselves, a hunter of gods, a devourer whose cannibalism appropriates godly power. Yet even here, justice and righteousness are mightier than the king. It is at this time that Maat rises as the highest principle of existence, and a cosmic and national moral order becomes

clear [in the "Maxims of Ptahhotep"]. In the collapse of the Old Kingdom, Breasted finds a disillusionment with the failure of the ideal before the comiptions of humanity and government, so eloquently expressed in "The Dialogue of a Misanthrope with His Own Soul."

With the social regeneration of the Middle Kingdom arises a series of moral sages who contrast ideals to be striven for with society as it is, as in the "Admonitions of Ipuwer," and in the teachings of Neferroh and the Messianists (who call for a righteous king). In the Coffin Texts the possibility of afterlife extends to common people, as does the power of magic, which therefore includes everyone in the moral imperative of righteousness an justice (as opposed the merely the powerful and the wealthy). The afterlife is by now (after 2000 B.C.) an ethical ordeal, a drama of justification.

Breasted points out that with the rise of the New Kingdom and Egyptian Empire after 1600 B.C., the "sense of [one's] own personal responsibility for the quality of his character" grows even larger. By now the Egyptians have "pondered deeply" their own nature and place "each man's oral responsibility squarely on his own understanding." The growing conception of judgment now expressed in the *Book of the Dead* emphasizes the claim to innocence. And later in the period, the "Wisdom of Amenemope" not only establishes conscience as the voice of god within; that wisdom is the single most influential body of Egyptian moral teaching, reaching far beyond the Nile and ultimately to Palestine as the source of much Old Testament moral teaching.

Of equal importance during the Empire is the rise of a counterforce to ethical conscience—magic. In the *Book of the Dead* magic becomes an agent for moral ends and priestly profit. The negative confession is purchased as a charm, not unlike a Christian indulgence, to profess an innocence in the afterlife that did not exist in life. The magical potency of the scarab beetle, to take another example, is that it prevents the heart of the dead from betraying one's true character. This manipulation of one's ultimate judgment and ethical ordeal, Breasted argues, suddenly arrests the early moral evolution of humanity. The use of magic itself becomes a disproportion, for the good of magic holds many protections against destruction, evil, and disease in everyday life, and Isis the greatest of magicians uses her magic in Osiris' resurrection. But once magic becomes a commodity sold to deceive the dreaded Judge, to obscure the scrutiny of one's transgressions and the moral quality of one's life, it becomes a corruption. Ethical decadence parallels social dec-

adence. And Egyptian civilization heads into a decline rapidly in the last century of Empire from which it never recovers.

We are witness, nevertheless, through Breasted's history of ancient Egypt, to that process by which the forms of state "pass over into the world of the gods" and the "relations of social life" deeply influence religion. We see the birth of the dialectic between external organized power and the internal power of the moral imperative.

> Man's ancient love of power is enormously older than The Age of Character and it has thus far been so dangerously victorious over new-born conscience and character that we are faced with the grave question of the survival of civilization.… Man's growing eagerness for power as national organization advanced, until the machinery of human government became the organized expression of the thirst for power—the appetite for the exercise of force.
>
> In wandering for years through the ancient lands of the Near East I have been impressed with this outstanding fact: the insistent monuments now surviving in all those distant lands have been primarily expressions of man's power. It is as if his struggles with the forces of nature, a struggle which has now been going on or perhaps a million years, had imbued him with a defiant you may enter one of the lonely valleys of the Sinai… There he [a pharaoh's statue] has been standing since the Thirty-fourth Century before Christ, the oldest historical monument in the world. With uplifted weapon he is about to crush the skull of an Asiatic captive whom he has thrust down upon his knees before him. A monument of brutal force, it was a declaration of possession by right of conquest.… It strikes the note of force which has dominated human history ever since.[19]

The particular setting for Mailer's novel is a period of international empires and power struggles in the Near East—from the reign of Ramses II to the end of the Egyptian Empire (1290–1090 B.C.). Egypt was the greatest empire, rivaled in the late 1200s by the Hittites over Syrian lands. Egypt was then an enormous, centralized state. When imagining a hierarchical, bureau-

cratic society combined with the power of a divine king who rules an international empire by decree, one imagines a totalitarianism indeed, complete with monolithic government and personality cult. One of Mailer's most enduring obsessions is the nature of power-establishments and totalitarianisms, whether of East or West. And he believes that writing about Egypt taught him much about the nature of wealth and power in all times: "I think I've come to an understanding of the wealthy I've never had before, dealing with Egypt, its gold, and its pharaohs.… Fitzgerald was trying to say something, and Hemingway was trying to keep him from saying it. The very rich are not like you and me. Just as movie stars are not like you and me.… They no longer have a trustworthy relation to the society around them."[20] It is possible that Mailer's understanding of wealth and power engenders the deepest structural principle of the novel. For if indeed his narrative is a series of embedded tales, if it has the episodic and comic elements of the picaresque, and if it can even be described, as it has been, as an epic, *Ancient Evenings* is, to the extent that it concerns humanity in this life, a tragic epic in prose.

In the novel, as in Egyptian mythology, an enormous principle of death, degeneration, and evil exists in the cosmos and humanity with a counterpotential for life, regeneration, and righteousness. Jeffrey Burton Russell, in *The Devil: Perceptions of Evil from Antiquity to Primitive Christianity*, explains the Egyptian merging and differentiation of the two principles:

> No deity ever becomes the principle of evil, but in one god, Seth, the destructive and inharmonious element is more evident than in others.… That Seth is in conflict with his "good" doublet Osirisi means that he himself has to be to some extent "evil." He therefore sets about to do the opposite of what is needed.… Horus [son of Osiris] castrates Seth, so depriving him of his power, but Seth in turn mutilates Horus: in the form of a black pig, he tears out Horus' eye and buries it.
>
> Both gods suffer from their bloody fray. That each loses a vital organ is a sign that their battle was a divine error. What is needed is not a struggle between the two parts of the divine nature but rather an effort at harmony, centering, union. Seth's attempt at union with Horus by sodomizing him fails because it is the

> wrong kind of effort—an effort at union by force and by transgression of maul. Only through … a coincidence of opposites that again renders the divine nature whole and one, can the entity Horus/Seth (or Osiris/Seth) be restored. Unhappily, the myth does not relate their reconciliation.

True dualism does not arise until the Zarathushtrian prophecies after 600 B.C. The Egyptian opposites are manifestations of the One, lending an ambiguity to divinity and evil that is perhaps more in keeping with the human experience of them and with Mailer's themes. Yet for Egyptians the destructive, evil principle arises and exists most commonly in the form of Set.[21]

Egyptian mythology therefore provides a view of human earthly life in its full tragic (entropic) potential. In some accounts, for example, Ra himself creates mankind, then sees that his creation is not good, but evil and rebellious. He sends Hathor to destroy humanity but, relenting, causes Hathor to become drunk on blood-red beer; hence, she lets some humans escape to carry on.

Mailer's previous novels, as well as *Ancient Evenings*, are saturated with tragic defeats, often the defeat of considerable potential. Those few heroes who succeed somewhat in their struggles to gain life, vitality, and creative force (Sergius and Rojack, for example) make only tentative gains. Here too in *Ancient Evenings* a heroic king goes down in corruption and defeat. Likewise the hero-commoner—a peasant of extraordinary physical and psychic power—tells his story of ambitions and capitulations through four lives. Only in death, in the journey through the Land of the Dead, is there vague hope of regeneration to a creative and purposeful life. And only if Mailer completes the trilogy may we know whether the quest ftr regeneration and nobility is to Mailer ultimately a living quest or a tragic one.

Indeed, Menenhetet I's adventures—the largest and most significant series of embedded tales—and the brief life of Meni II both make sense, it seems to me, only if we understand how bleak a vision of human vanity, waste, and degeneration most of Mailer's Egyptian tale is. If one has to make it to the final "Book of Secrets," and even to the final two chapters, to realize this tragic perspective, such nonetheless is the angle of Mailer's vision in this gargantuan, sometimes tedious book. This is not so say that the story is without many moments of humor, or, like its predecessors in ancient Eastern and Western literatures, its moments of human and godly triumph, her-

oism, epic fornications and death, Yet it is to say that humans are so confused by their Faustian lusts for power, wealth, and the "divine" royalty at the top that they cannot know whether their motivations and purposes are noble or base.

The ambiguous morality of our actions, the difficulty—even impossibility—of knowing. finally, whether we act for noble or base purposes, whether we are more fundamentally guilty and evil or innocent and good—this is a theme Mailer has been tracking for years, most emphatically in such previous works as *Armies of the Night* and *The Executioner's Song*. And after *Ancient Evenings*, in *Tough Guys Don't Dance* (1984), Mailer emphasizes that theme at even greater pitch, this time again in the late twentieth century; and he is reshaping still another genre, the mystery novel, for his own purposes. Tim Madden, the protagonist, is a man solving the mystery of his own guilt or innocence in the murder of his wift and an acquaintance. Uncertain of his motivations and actions on a previous evening, he must learn to act courageously, for he had no ethical north or boundary, as did the Pilgrims who first landed in Provincetown where Tim now lives.

This concept of good is repeated throughout Mailer's work: you can't cheat life, nor exploit death. Physical courage may be the basis, as well as the type and symbol, of spiritual and moral courage, especially in what Mailer likes to call "apocalyptic times": that is to say, especially in periods of chaos, degeneration, or totalitarianism.

Like the gods themselves, we can only hope that our courageous efforts will be noble (or even righteous) in the end. But of course most likely our efforts will not be noble, and such a condition we might recognize only from the perspective of our deaths. The history of humanity might be viewed, as much as anything, as a tragic history of rising arcs of aspirations and ideals that are doomed to bend down and away from promise toward base results, toward eventual decay. Whether that is the result of some canker in the very nature of men and women, or some kink in the very order of things (even "the gods") would be an unanswerable question, although Mailer seems to suggest both the canker and the kink.

From the perspective of death, near the end of the novel, Meni II (to adapt Mailer's designations for differentiating the grandson from the grandfather) sees the suffering of others in the Land of the Dead and comes to recognize the tragic waste and worthlessness of his own life, just as he comes to see the failures of his grandfather's four lives. Here is an Underworld worthy of

Dante where the unjust, the liars, the wealthy who would buy their way past the gatekeepers and soul-weighers, all suffer their appropriate agonies. Woe to the "enemies of Ra" whose misdeeds outweigh their virtues! For in the final bend of the Duad, Anubis awaits to judge the dead by weighing "the moral worth of the heart," as Menenhetet puts it at the outset of the tale (53), against Maat's feather of truth, that feather of justice and proportion in all things.

Meni II fears in the end that his heart is "heavy as a Canopic jar," though "when the heart was without evil, it weighed no more than a feather." Now he knows how he died and "could count the waste of my life," and that was "suffering enough" (703). The waste and evil in one's life is the revelation in death. The magician's tale on the Night of the Pig is a gift to his grandson. It is a revelation during the boy's lifetime of the ways of the world and the gods; it is also a revelation (intended or not) of the continuity of aspiration and waste throughout the tale-teller's four lives. The young Meni, assassinated in a barroom brawl, was, however, as unable to use the wisdom and revelation to change his life as Ramses IX ultimately is. "I was dead. All that had lived in the little boy who was six, all of his tenderness, his wisdom, his pleasure, all that spoke of his days to come, and the promise of it was gone. There had been no more purpose than in the squashing of a beetle. I could have wept for myself as if lamenting another. In all the debauchery of these last few years, I had never thought that I would not emerge with some—at least—of the expectations of my earliest years redeemed. Now I would not.… A young life and a wasted one!" (700).

Even given the opportunity and wisdom of four lives, the failure of the great-grandfather's enormous potential is as great or greater.

> Upon me came the weight of the failure of my great-grandfather in his four lives. I could feel how the magnitude of his desire remained as large as the pain of his defeats.… My great-grandfather must live near the sorrow that dwelt in the heart of the Lord of the Dead. Who but Osiris hoped to discover what would yet come forth from gods unborn? … He was the God Who longed to create the works and the marvels of the future. So he suffered the most from every high purpose that failed. He would know how bitter it had been for my great-grandfather to be so defeated that the taste of his seed was foul? (706)

Given the choice to die a "second time" or return through "the fundament of pain" to rebirth, Meni II hesitates because of his now-understood unworthiness: "I was worthless, and my grandfather was damned and worthless, and we were beset by mighty curses." When, however, he finally chooses rebirth it is because he realizes his grandfather's whole tale had been told to gain his trust, to prepare to join their souls (Kas) together in a regenerative effort for new strength and purpose. "His body had reeked of the Land of the Dead … and now I perceived that in his loneliness, he wished for me to join him. The tales he had told the Pharaoh, had been told for me as well. It was I whom he had wanted to trust. And I did. Here in the Duad, in this hour, I would trust him" (708).

Their souls fused, Meni I and II ascend, gazing "like Osiris upon the portents of all that is ahead, and to try to turn the storm before it breaks." That storm, that apocalypse of gods and men, lies so close by that even as Meni feels that neither he nor his grandfather is "pure enough for such a task … [for] neither of us could offer a feather to lie upon the heart as nicely as a sense of right and wrong," he also comes to believe that things have reached such a desperate pitch in the realms of gods and humans and in the struggles between Osiris and Set that now "purity and goodness were worth less to Osiris than strength." At whatever cost, defeating his adversaries is Osiris' first task; only then might he turn to creation. "Indeed, the Lord Osiris might be as desperate as ourselves when it came to choosing his troops" (708–9).

The novel ends nearly a thousand years after Menenhetet's death, about 322 B.C., which is the farthest point in the outer frame of the narrative. Egypt has fallen, Greece and Rome are now in possession of the gods and of the Duad (where "death is more treacherous than life") itself. Now humanity knows even "less of the differences between gods and men" or "despise[s] such differences." Gone is the understanding that when the Gods threw Set on the ground and Osiris sat on his face, there was "the victory of righteousness over evil," and a true throne (705–6). The gods usurped and misunderstood, the Duad a mere dream—that is the world into which Menenhetet is about to be reborn and to renew his struggles in the heroic round. "May my hope of heaven now prove equal to my ignorance of where I go.… I do not know if I will labor in greed forever among the demonic or serve some noble purpose I cannot name" (709). Whether he is doomed to failure through endless cycles of reincarnation, or whether there is some alternative avenue of human courage and endurance, Mailer has yet to discover.

To express this vision of bold effort and failure, Mailer chooses two narrators. In a spirit of outrageous experimentation Mailer grants his six-year-old first narrator a first-person omniscient point of view. Having the lineage and gifts of pharaohs, as Mailer depicts them, Meni II sees others' minds. Through this first narrator, the grandfather in turn tells the stories of his four lives for most of the novel. The grandfather guides the young Meni through the World of the Dead as well as the world of the living, as Conchis and Tag Hodge guide their initiates, by the use of a series of parabolic tales about human nature and history. Like the archetypal guides of ancient and modern literature, and again like Fowles' and Gardner's, Mailer's guide figure is at once magus, odoriferous old man, shapeshifter, and obscene fool. Like the artist himself, the guide may even lie to get at the truth: "The traveler from distant places is an everlasting liar" (65). Previously a student of magic, medicine, and religion, and the High Priest of Thebes, Menenhetet I has the lore to negotiate the Land of the Dead and mediate between the worlds of gods and humans. "I will offer a story far better then any father ever gave a son, … and I would like my granddaughter to listen as well," Menenhetet tells the pharaoh. "They are now nearest my flesh of all four lives" (232).

The three interior books of the novel (4 through 6) are devoted to Meni I's story of his first life and all the embedded tales, digressions, and commentaries within that story. This is the heart of the novel, the repository of all the lore, folly, and wisdom revealed to Meni II, his family, and Ramses IX. Appropriately. "Menehetet" means "foundation of speech," and such a name itself associates him with magical powers. for the word to Egyptians is basic to magic, to affecting actuality. The spoken/written word is believed to have a significance, therefore, that any modern writer would envy.[22]

This magician, tale-teller, and guide, like Gardner's heroic models from Clumly to Lars-Goren, is not known so much for his quickness of wit as for his peasantlike persistence, truth-seeking, and courage despite all his foibles and failures. These qualities of endurance and risk-taking are what first endeared him to the youthful Ramses II. Above all, Meni l's tale is one of personal courage, ambition, and folly, and each of these qualities of his tale are in turn reflected by the desires, maneuverings, and comments of his three interlocutors—Ramses IX, Hathfertiti (little Meni's mother), Meni's father Nef-khepaukhem. All of the characters at both levels of the narrative are caught in a web of conflicting ambitions and historical contexts—a context

extended by comparison even as far back to such earlier pharaohs as Kufitu, for example. If by the end of the novel, the historical context extends forward to Greece and Rome, then by appropriate comparisons each reader may extrapolate to modern history as well. Such themes as the value of courage and strength, the necessity of balance or proportion, the brutal and disconnected nature of social and political establishments, and the psychic underworld of ambition, greed, and lust are emphatic themes in the novel with ethical ramifications in many historical contexts.

Mailer's theme of the ethical connections between life and death is sounded early in the novel. Realizing he is dead, the ghost-narrator Meni II suddenly feels happiness beside his fear because now:

> I would he free at last to know all the ways I had failed to live my life, all the boredom I had swallowed, and each foul sentiment of wasted flesh. It was as if I had spent my days beneath a curse, and the sign of it—despite every lively pandemonium of gambling and debauch—was the state of immutable monotony that dwelt in my heart. The sense of being dead while alive … I had an inkling then of the force of the desire to die when that is the only way to encounter one's demon.… If, in these curious intoxications of knowing I was dead, I had begun to feel as splendid as a hero, still I could not remember my heroism. Nonetheless, I had hardly doubted that my purposes (if I could ever find them) would be noble. (36–37)

The connected journeys through life and death are the subject of the novel. Both journeys are filled with dangers, temptations, and huge risks. What one can endure and overcome depends at each point in the continuum on what one has endured and overcome. The commodities most required are courage and strength. Mailer has long approached, and in Egypt apparently found, this archaic attitude toward life and death described in The Sacred and the Profane: "the man of the primitive societies has sought to conquer death by transforming it into a rite of passage.… In short, death comes to be regarded as the supreme initiation, that is, as the beginning of a new spiritual existence. Nor is this all. Generation, death, and regeneration (= rebirth) were understood as three moments in a single mystery, and

the entire spiritual effort of archaic man was exerted to show that there must he no interval between these moments" (196).

In death, the ultimate question is what use has one made of one's life force. That is the question raised at the outset of the novel. The Sekhem (the gift from the sun, the "Power" in oneself) asks the dead person "its dire question": "Some succeed in using me well. Can you make that claim?" How well the hero has used his vitality, his life force, is the question constantly before him, his auditors, and the reader as Menenhetet tells his tale. His vital force is finally all the hero has to oppose the personal, social, and historical forces of entropy. And that is the real conflict in the novel (much as it is in Mailer's life, or in Au's, the hero of Mailer's *The Fight*)—how to use one's force and all the forces one can attach to oneself against internal and external forces of entropy.

Of course, one may confuse destructive with vital forces, one cannot be certain he or she is not the instrument rather than the destroyer of, for example, totalitarianism, and one may misread one's own intentions and actions. If it is only from the perspective of death that one begins to see the nobility or baseness of one's actions and desires, one has little choice but to act at least, to assert one's life and force against every form of dissolution. It may indeed take something on the order of four lives and deaths, Mailer seems to be suggesting, before one is prepared for nobility of purpose and prepared to effectively channel rather than squander one's spirit and power. "I'm a great believer in karma," Mailer has said. "I do believe that we're not here just one time, and I don't have any highly organized theology behind that.… Karma tends to make more sense than a world conceived without it, because when you think of the incredible elaborations that go into any one human being, it does seem wasteful of the cosmos to send us out just once to learn all those things, and then molder in the weeds. It doesn't make as much sense as the idea that we are part of some continual process that uses us over and over again.… There is some sort of divine collaboration going on." [23]

Each would-be hero, whether pharaoh or peasant, repeats the battle of vitality against entropy and wins or loses according to how much folly, vanity, and bestiality overcome his life-affirming powers. If the vitalist-hero has to pass through waste, mess, disease, greed, and murder to recast the self, he must also pass beyond such experiences to rebuild a heroic personality. An examination of the three seekers of truth and divine force—Ramses IX, Ramses II, and Menenhetet I—will suggest how much this tragic conflict

between vitality and entropy is the deepest structural principle of the novel. Such an examination will also suggest to what extent Mailer's unusual ethic is contained and expressed by the conflict. Just as each potential hero's vitality is arrayed (in each case unsuccessfully) against internal and external forces of entropy, so is it in the nature of existence that the conflict is repeated endlessly, ever in need of renewal. As Eliade put it in *Sacred and Profane*, "If religious man feels the need of indefinitely reproducing the same paradigmatic acts and gestures, *this is because he desires and attempts to live close to his gods*" (91).

Ramses IX, to take our first example, is the weakest of the three seekers, but it is from the perspective of the seventh year of his reign that old Menenhetet's story is told. Ramses IX's condition and story are told by the young narrator, Meni II. What he, and we, discover is revealed, therefore, by the frame-narrator or story; that story reaffirms, as a kind of object lesson in human nature and degeneration, much of what Menenhetet I has to teach through his own tale (that interior series of narratives). What the pharaoh seeks through the old man is the knowledge and heart of his greatest ancestor Ramses II (Usermare). "If He had chosen to become my Father, I was in no doubt of the reason. He was, by now, by way of my mother, nearer indeed now to all that Menenhetet might know, nearer, therefore, to what He desired the most—which was to dwell in the heart of Usermare" (538). That, as Meni II tells us, is one of only two means available to him to gain necessary knowledge and power: to learn from the life of Ramses II, and to receive the favor of the gods. Thereby might he gain "the godly power to rule Egypt" (539).

The reasons why Ramses IX is desperate for such power are emphasized through one of the most common refrains expressed by many of the characters—the historical processes of social and political degeneration. "Do I never hear talk of victory?" asks Ramses IX of his General. By the king's own testimony he danced naked at age ten when other pharaohs led troops; he has never led an army into battle, whereas Ramses II tamed a lion and won at Kadesh; he does not even visit his harem, whereas Ramses II mated with or sired children by "every beauty in Memphi and Thebes." Neither a daring leader of nations nor men, Ptah-nem-hotep (Ramses IX) is merely a sort of witty and enduring bureaucrat (157–58).

It is as if historical processes were ever playing regenerative powers against entropic powers. In such times of degeneration, as Menenhetet puts it, "we are not close to the gods"; or as Ramses IX says: "These are the years when

no one in Egypt can be trusted.… There are more tomb robberies than ever before.… The grain accounts are calculated by corrupt officials. Theft in high places is frequent.… The Overseer of the Golden Bowl was stealing from my Person. It convinced Me more than any raids on our frontiers that the Two-Lands are weak. I have not gained the respect of the Gods. Not at least as other Pharaohs. They have been able to speak to Them better than I" (223). Here is a pharaoh (Ramses IX) who ends up as a man desperate for the knowledge that Menenhetet I might have given him, and a ruthless and uncourageous parent and leader (690). We are seeing a three-millenia civilization well into its ultimate decline; the times, as Mailer would put it, are indeed apocalyptic for Egypt.

Yet even Ramses the Great, to take our second example, must struggle to maintain his favor and power. If Ra himself must battle entropy in each daily round, if Osiris must counter Set, what king or hero, indeed what human being, can be free of such tasks? The long, central account of the reign of Ramses II is itself a story of the bold rise to godly heights (in terms that the ancient, heroic world understood) and the descent to personal and political degradation. One has only to compare the "King of Kings" in the elder Menenhetet's interior tale before and after the Battle of Kadesh to see the pattern.

Well over two hundred pages into the novel when we are introduced to Ramses the Great, we see him, as Menenhetet the young charioteer did, as a heroic model of the ancient world. In the glory of his youth, Ramses is taller, more able, more courageous than any other—a charioteer's charioteer, a king's king. Loved by his loyal legions and his queen Nefertiri, his body bathed in the reddish glow that would associate him with the powers of Set too, Ramses is also marked as the divinely inspired and charismatic hero-king, a son of Ra. His hair is wild and golden, his eyes are unearthly blue.

In the earlier period of his reign Ramses' daily religious devotions are profound and humble before greater gods than he. Just as his inferiors grovel before him, so he grovels in his secret prayers to Amon. His goal, now, is righteousness in his power, so that he may rule the lands of Egypt as the parts of his body, as did Osiris the first king. "All that is evil in me, I throw on the ground," the attending priest says. The oracle promises him victory and increased strength if he remains loyal to Amon (270–71).

The battle of Kadesh is the culmination of his heroism, a heroism as alive with the assumptions of the ancient world as the battle scenes of the Iliad. In

this epic set piece, gods and men exchange favors and devotions, and victory comes through courage, risk, and acts of desperation. The battle, its aftermath, and Menenhetet's journey before the battle through ancient Lebanon and Syria as a scout are among Mailer's most impressive descriptive achievements in the book. Perhaps one of Ramses' most magnificent moments is when he receives the hands of the enemy dead as trophies to his victory, standing immovable, miraculously restored from his wounds and fatigues, aloof from the carnage and rape of the Hittite warriors like an unseeing god above the Hellish glare of human brutality.

> All through the night, our fires burned, and through the same night, Usermare-Setpenere stood in His Chariot under a full moon and received the severed hands of the slain Hittites one by one.… I realized once again how to be near Him was to gain all knowledge of how a God might act when He is in the form of a man. He looks so much like a man and yet reveals divinity by even the smallest of His Moves. In this case, it was that He did not move His feet … an exhibition of such poise that one saw the mark of a God. (356)

No less than the gods, the king too must battle the serpent of entropy, and even less than Ra or Osiris is there certainty of his success. Even as he begins his tale, Menenhetet prepares us for the other potential in Ramses—the degeneration of the kingship, his marriage, his court, and his kingdom. How much his reign cost him, Menenhetet tells us, is in part suggested by the changes in his physical stature and in the color of his hair and eyes over the years. Indeed, what we do see in this novel is Mailer's chronicle of the king's failures after his finest victory at Kadesh. Ramses II fails to maintain his earlier power as an Osirian king of fertility and civilization whose lands, people, and political systems all depend on him for continuous productivity and harmony. At the heart of his failure lies the insurmountable serpent within: egoism, totalitarian lusts for carnal ownership, and fear—fear of diminished potency and of one's social inferiors. Mailer's portrait of Ramses' hubris is not unlike Barbara Mertz's more impatient description of the pharaoh as "probably the most monumental egotist of all time." [24]

Although there are earlier intimations of future deficiencies in the king, his worst impulses fully emerge by book 4, chapter 13. The novel seems to

divide in two after chapter 12 as dissolution sets in. As in Mailer's metaphysic since the 1960s the hero is as embattled as the gods and in danger of defeat and disproportion. From early in Menenhetet's tale of his first life we learned that even those the king loves and who love him he must debase and own, make instruments of his will, as when he first has Menenhetet "by the asshole" and thereby ignites the young charioteer's life-long impulse for revenge. Likewise, immediately following Kadesh, Ramses denies the labors and wounds of his men and generals (even of his right arm Menenhetet) in the king's behalf by taking sole credit for victory over the Hittite armies. His future monuments to himself repeat that claim and, quite likely, sow seeds of later betrayal. "Some had fought, and some had even fought a lot. Many were bloody with their wounds. Yet they listened in shame … and when the Generals of the Division of Ptah came forward … he did not thank them for saving the day, nor reward His son Amen-Khep-shu-ef for the rigors of that ride, but only remarked, 'What will Amon say when He hears that Ptah left Me alone on this great day? … I, and I alone, was the tempest against their chiefs.' " Menenhetet responds: "I wondered if His mind had not taken a wrench from the screams of that Asiatic God who roared out of His throat" (354).

But it is after his return from fourteen years of exile in Eshuranib that Menenhetet notices the most dramatic change in his king. Ramses has become a liar, increasingly selfish and vain, and filled with petty vices. He has built a monumental cult of personality, and by accepting the Hittite princess Rama Nefru as his favorite he has taken in strange gods to help him stand against whatever sedition—divine, magical, or political—may be afoot. As his paranoia enlarges, his fear of death becomes great as well (see especially 381–88, 501). A vicious circle of fear and plots now blind the king, and he spends the rest of his days looking back to his moment at Kadesh, hoping somehow to regain the power to rule Egypt wholly again. "Usermare lived so much in fear that He was like a man who looks at a field glistening in the sun and thinks it is a river" (396). And once he learns that the Hittite King Metella had not even participated in the Battle of Kadesh, even that great memory is corrupted "like vines that would grow into His pride" (607).

Of course Ramses will seek to renew strength and courage during his period of decline. He will even on occasion find such strength and courage, albeit more momentary and attenuated than in his youth. The focus of such efforts is his "Third Festival" in celebration of his thirty-fifth year of reign

(i.e., the subject of book 5, "The Book of the Pharaoh"). He will, to take one example, reaffirm his potency as a god of earthly fertility from whom all abundance and generation flow.[25] But such scenes of godlike potency reveal their underside as well. As in Mailer's scenes of the cheering populace, the attentive and obsequious priests, the retinues and protocol, the mass and frenzied worship of the great man, one sees the ancient roots of those modern spectacles of totalitarian worship—that mutual, frenzied species of orgiastic rituals and sexual longing for the master power.

Later in the Festival, to suggest a second example of Ramses' search for renewed potency, the king will publicly hide his fear and choose Rama-Nefru over Nefertiri: "There is no magic whose terror is more powerful than the fear of a Pharaoh before the strength of his Son. To choose Nefertiri would calm every force that might rise against Him. With Rama-Nefru, He would only possess the radiance that is in the light of far off lands. Yet His pride that He was the One was great, and He hated to bow before His fear of Amen-Khep-shuef.… I see Him, and understand that He could never make His choice from fear, or He would be no longer divine" (649).

Despite such kingly efforts and momentary successes, it becomes clearer that the last years of Ramses II's reign in Egypt are a period of failing kingship, official and priestly corruption and wealth, tomb-robbery, and general dissolution. And in the successive reigns of further Ramseses the corruption worsens and is reflected in Menenhetet's own lives. Without the balance of Maat, entropy turns the wheel toward a cycle of degeneration.

If Ramses IX is a diminished and bureaucratic monarch, and Ramses II is a heroic man who loses control of the forces that inhabit and surround him, then the narrator-hero Menenhetet I is a portrait of a prodigious power that is, once again, enervated and wasted. The battles between his own vitality and entropy during four lives are the second center of interest in the elder Menenhetet's tale. Favored by the gods and associated with Osiris in particular—Lord of the Dead, of the mind, of order, and regeneration—Menenhetet is a Mailer hero of truly mythic proportions. It is Osiris whom he most seeks as a student of magic (215), Osiris who speaks to him at Kadesh (3445), and Osiris into whose temple the sorceress-queen Honey-Ball initiates him as "First Priest" through their repetition of the Isis-Osiris ritual (446–49).

Menenhetet's rise from peasant to soldier, to charioteer to confidant of Ramses II, to General of the Armies, Governor of the Secluded, Compan-

ion to the Queen, and Master of the Secrets in books 4 and 5 is the story of an epic adventure that is the result of great physical strength and courage, persistence and endurance, and finally political, sexual, and magical wisdom. In still another sense he is truly a Mailer hero, for his chief heroic attribute is his sense of rebellion and the force to perpetuate it. For Sergius in *The Deer Park*, Rojack in *An American Dream*, Gilmore in *The Executioner's Song*, and even Mailer's own clownish heroism in *Armies of the Night*, it is just this principle of rebellion—as rebel artist, hipster, criminal, or citizen—that defines heroism for Mailer. Menenhetet pits his rebellion against perhaps the most powerful authoritarian force in history—one of the greatest absolute rulers of the Ancient Near East. To build the structure of a heroic self, Menenhetet, like his predecessors in Mailer's pantheon, will not only have to use his best impulses and qualities, but he will also have to descend into the maw of the beast, live in its filth, steal its powers and receive its gifts. What judgment is to be offered comes only in the Land of the Dead. But while alive he participates in all the human joys and depravities, all that is admirably and disgustingly human. Like the excesses of the gods, like the opposing principles of Osiris and Set, each human and each epoch repeat the drama of embattled oppositions. Heroic success is the balancing of all these forces one comes to know and use; it is the defeat of disproportion and entropy through balance. Heroic failure is the capitulation to state and ruler as much as to waste, ambition, greed, pettiness, and vanity. And only in death does Menenhetet begin to realize that there may be conceivably more noble if mysterious purposes of our rebellion than avenging personal shame.

The initial source of Menenhetet's heroic rebellion, a source that creates the channel that will direct his great vitality and knowledge, is Ramses'"carnal ownership" (i.e., anal rape) of Menenhetet when Ramses shows him the king's secret tomb. When the rape is repeated, it only strengthens Menenhetet's resolve. Mailer's Egyptians practice such violations to express a kind of sexual chain of being (or hierarchy of power) from gods, to pharaohs, right down to the lowest commoner or prisoner. It is the victory of ownership over another person's body and will, his or her life and death, which each absolute ruler of course holds over all his minions. As Menenhetet describes his violation: "something in the very sanctuary of myself flew open, and the last of my pride was gone. I was no longer myself but His, and loved Him, and knew I would die for Him, but I also knew I would never forgive Him, not when I ate, not when I drank, not when I defecated. Like an arrow flew

one thought through my mind: It was that I must revenge myself" (288). During his long journey, however, Menenhetet is not above stealing the prides and gifts of others in similar fashion. He gains all the "bad habits," all the "strength and bravery and the cheap treacherous shit of this cutthroat" when he rapes a thief in the mountains. "There was a thief in me for the next ten years" (306). As Rojack used Ruta's, Menenhetet will use the thief's treachery to forge his acts of courage and rebellion against others, from the King of Kadesh to Ramses himself.

His rebellion against Ramses will not only include sexual rebellion in the harem with Honey-Ball and Nefertiri the Royal Consort herself, but rebellion through all the forces he can bring to bear against the seemingly insurmountable power of the king. The most important of these forces is magic. Mailer has commented that in Egypt "magic was being converted into social equivalence, in effect used as an exchange," and that because of this common usage "the book has an immense preoccupation with magic as such." [26] Nowhere than in Ancient Egypt, as Frazer reminded us, were the magic arts more carefully cultivated. A drop of one's blood, a clipping of hair or parings of nails, excreta, a strip of garment, a footprint, a name, a portrait—all might be used "to give a sorcerer complete power" over one.[27] Though in his later lives Menenhetet will seek the powers and mysteries of magic as High Priest and master magician, magic will even in his first life become a significant part of his heroic rebellion and revenge, another source of his vital power. With the sorceress Queen Honey-Ball, Menenhetet will learn the power of both foulness and beauty, loyalty and treachery, and through her, he will learn of magic's connection (like every other form of power) to courage and to sexuality. "I decided to seek the courage of madness itself. I would dare what no one else was ready to dare, and put myself in bed with one of the little queens.… My shame, carried for so many years, was now inflamed" (426–27). Against all the powers of the king and state worship on Ramses' side, Menenhetet and Honey-Ball, who has her own shame and vengefulness, will do magical battle, causing such a stir of anxieties and mishaps that the king and his new Hittite queen will mount counterattacks and protections.

As with any risk-taking for Mailer, magic requires the courage to seek out everything and, in seeking, to strike the balance just necessary to stay destruction. That is one of Menenhetet's earliest lessons to his grandson at the outset of their journey through death and life:

> "The Gods … are capable of anything. They do everything." And in sudden wrath, he added, "That is why They have real need of Maat. If not for Maat, there would be no end to the destruction They cause. Nor the wild passions They strew when They turn into animals. The abominable situation is that Their transformations depend on shit, blood-sacrifice, and fucking, and They respect none of it. They do not appreciate how magic is obedient to the deepest principle [i.e., "the balance of Maat"]….
>
> "In its [magic's] true exchange, one cannot gain a great deal unless one is willing to dare losing all.… You do dot buy a few words of power.… One has to pay a price for magic.… That is the obligation. Look for the risk. We must obey it every time. There is no credit to be drawn from the virtue of one's past." (65–66)

Courage (in this case the courage of risk-taking) is of course, as MacIntyre reminds us in *After Virtue*, one of the great heroic virtues or excellences of the ancient world. MacIntyre develops the point at length: physical courage and strength are universally admired in heroic societies not only as the basis of a healthy social order but as a necessity of life under the pressure of one's *worldly* fate—ultimately defeat, not victory. To face "the patterns of harms and dangers," the personal and the god-inspired passions. and the accountability to others that shapes one's identity out of an "interlocking set of … narratable lives," one needs courage. "We are," MacIntyre writes, "whether we acknowledge it or not, what the past has made us and we cannot eradicate from ourselves, even in America, those parts of ourselves which are formed by our relationship to each formative stage in our history.… Even heroic society is still inescapably a part of us all, and we are narrating a history that is peculiarly *our own history* when we recount its past in the formation of our moral culture." History forces us, among other things, to ask whether human life can be viewed as a victory or a defeat.[25] The heroic ethic of courage Mailer adapts in all his work to modern men and women, since he believes that courage is what we most lack yet most need, and is the only sign of the "good" left to us.

Magic most requires courage because the magician stands to lose as much as gain, to debilitate as much as augment her own force. Nowhere is this

clearer than in Honey-Ball's exchange with Heqat—sorceress of primordial energy and chaos, of the entropic lizard, of a host of demons and the eight mothers and fathers of the slime who precede the gods themselves (557. 566).

Hence, we begin to see in this novel an idea that has long been part of Mailer's existential metaphysic. to borrow his own terminology. When the gods fail in virtue, courage, or balance it is because we humans fail. Just as in the fantasy of *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, to take but one example, whether some bestial or some enlightened, civilizing god emerges to shape human life and passion depends on the quality of our conscious and unconscious life, so in *Ancient Evenings* does the virtue and harmony, or bestiality and disorder of the gods depend on our deepest passions, desires, and dreams. "The Gods listen to mean thought," Menenhetet explains to Ramses IX. "None of us is without magic when we speak to the Gods in a dream" (215).

If the war of magic between the Isis and Seti-Ka powers of Honey-Ball and all the state's magical powers and Hittite gods of Ramses II did succeed in breaking the pharaoh's ring of protection, it did not "turn his head" and defeat him. Menenhetet, as a result, is once again reduced to being carnally owned by Ramses and to, quite literally, kissing the king's arse. Raising the ante further, Ramses II, now believing he has regained ownership of him, dispatches Menenhetet to watch over the now-mistrusted Nefertiri. And of course like every ruler before or since, whether metaphorically or literally, the king promises Menenhetet a place in his golden boat in the afterlife if he remains a loyal servant.

But Menenhetet's heroic proportions have not yet been fully tested. He will take even greater risks with the Consort herself. The sexual betrayal increases and the magical war renews, this time through the power of the pharaoh's leavings, which Menenhetet steals from the Golden Bowl. "I hated my Pharaoh, but such hatred was worthless since I wished to be able to love Him, and it was hopeless. He would only love me less. How I wished to destroy Him" (505).

If the queen and her guardian fail by their magical rebellion to destroy the king this time too, their magic is more effective, with the help of Honey-Ball again, and nearly leads to Ramses' death. More successful is Nefertiri's and Menenhetet's sexual rebellion. Short of assassination, their greatest revenge is for the Queen to violate her sexual fidelity with a peasant and with him to break every taboo. In this revenge they both revel—she claiming the power and being of the pharaoh, and he traveling through the Land of the Dead and

rising to the celestial city and Amon at the climax. Knowing at once "a change as great as death itself" and the full fury of Ramses in the queen's orgasm, Menenhetet can say as he did on first beginning their lovemaking, "my buttocks were my own again"; he has retaken ownership of his carnality.

Yet for both, the revenge seems incomplete, and they dare even more—further fornications and agreeing to assassinate the king. That is how Menenhetet ends his first life and (through Nefertiri's womb) begins his second. Yet each life will be less noble than the last, though each confirms the lessons of human existence gained in the first. "If I failed in my first life, and betrayed much in my second, fouled every nest in my third, so must I see my fourth life as the one where I sought to use what I learned in order to learn much more" (681). That is a way of expressing the dialectic of courage and entropy, of the efforts and failures of his lives. For if even in his fourth life as a physician, general, nobleman, notable, and magician, Menenhetet had sought the knowledge finally to restore Egypt to her former harmonies and powers, "to enrich the marrow of our failing lands," as he puts it (215), his efforts were not without that taint of vain ambition to be a pharaoh himself. Such ambition earns him only the betrayal of his granddaughter Hathfertiti for her own place in the sun, and ostracism at the hands of Ramses IX. "My hopes are extinct," he realizes; his monumental story-telling efforts on the Night of the Pig have failed, at least for his own political and social ambitions (683). This failure to become a pharaoh, the premier social, political, and religious ruler of peoples and lands, the source of life and strength—indeed the failure to become godlike—is the ostensible failure. The real failure is the hero's inability to remain undefeated by ambitions, to remain a heroic vitalist furthering the cause of life against death, balance against disproportion, nobility against baseness of purpose. As he realizes in the moment he decides to dare all with Queen Nefertiri: "for the first time I saw my life without pride. I did not think of my achievements (which were the blood and bone of my good esteem each morning) but saw instead all I had not done, the friends I had never made (for I trusted no man), the family I would never have (for I trusted no woman enough to keep a family) … my nostrils full of the puke of others. Just as atrocious seemed the contents of my own heart. I saw then the helplessness of growing into an old man—for me, at least" (614).

Mailer is also working well within the English literary tradition here. Magicians' failures are typically Faustian and symptomatic of their tragic humanity. Their temporal concerns trap them—their aspirations finally

unequal to their degeneracy, their sensual moral failures the emblem of spiritual failure. Bacon, Faustus, Prospero (before the island) are the types. These magicians continually fall by their overwhelming desire for power as well as by their inability to balance contemplation and action, humility and vanity, control and excess. In each case Prospero's words about Caliban are apt: "This thing of darkness I / Acknowledge mine." [29]

One is tempted to read much of the elder Menenhetet's tale and musings with autobiographical resonances of the author: Mailer running for mayor or "president," Mailer betrayed by his own ambitions, Mailer whose turbulent family life is the stuff of gossip magazines, Mailer whose "star" status skews his relationships to others and to his society, Mailer the infamous and conceivably the failed artist. But let us leave such speculations to others and say merely that much of what Menenhetet displays of his ambitions, vices, confused moral stature, and risk-takings (to cite but a few parallels) suggests at the least a high degree of imaginative sympathy of the artist for his hero. And it would not be too much to say that, accurate or misinformed, the tale embodies what Mailer has learned of ambition, vanity, violence, and dread in our world.

What we learn of Ramses IX through Meni II, of Ramses II and Menenhetet I through the old magician's tale, then, contains Mailer's principal theme and provides the largest structural principle of the novel—the conflict between entropy and vitality. Each of these noble characters displays the personal hubris of his pride, vanity, and ambition, and each, through these and other faults, is incapable of urging his vital power an potential above the wastes and defeats of his life. Such, it turns out, is also the case with young Meni's brief life, until his journey into Death with his grandfather finally promises, perhaps, something more.

Those external, which is to say social, entropic impulses against which Menenhetet struggles are, as I have only suggested to this point, a form of totalitarianism. The forms of entropic totalitarianism and the pressures of social conformity and abnegation are both central concerns in all of Mailer's work; *Ancient Evenings* is no exception.

The conflict of self against totalitarian hegemony is for Mailer part of the continual drama of disintegrating/integrating identity. Mailer has always argued that one quality of modern hegemony is, as Lentricchia puts it, the transformation of "the Romantic yearning for the new" into an "energetic consumerism." That transformation is effected through, in Mailer's terms, a

corporate totalitarianism and all its "cancerous" plastics, wastes, and rhetorical-symbolic mechanisms of repression. What Lentricchia identifies as the total absorption of romantic Utopian impulses by corporate "economic perpetuation" is also one face of the hegemony both Fowles and Mailer rail against, and against which they place their counter-rhetoric, symbolism, and myth. It is this very image of commodity utopia that, Lentricchia argues, turns revolutionary, dissident, antinomian force into the desire to conserve consumer capitalism. With such an adversary, Fowles and Mailer invest their texts (as Lentricchia and Kenneth Burke do) with greater significance and urgency. What these contemporary writers and critics see as a version of Western totalitarianism has made them reject the currency of textual pleasures in favor of adversarial textual powers.

Even though Mailer has frequently argued (as Burke has) that the normalizing, disciplinary mechanisms within our bureaucratic institutions do not necessarily apply physical force, the mechanisms do saturate our lives, our sense of ourselves, and our relations with their values. Mailer, however, melodramatically depicts the lusts and mechanisms of totalitarianism in *Ancient Evenings* as, largely, physical force and repression. The relationship between the ancient and the modern is not merely "historical," but metaphoric. The melodramatic, physical oppression is the metaphor for all oppression, including psychic or spiritual oppression. What matters is the fact of centralized efforts to control and exploit human beings, to reduce freedom, to codify consciousness. Mailer, no more then Fowles or Gardner, simply cannot as an artist avoid such historical issues of oppression or freedom, of flowering or withering of consciousness, of life or death. All three authors are committed to the terrain of history and fiction; they insist on the combination—the mutual nourishment—rather than separation of the two. As Lentricchia argues, there is "no privileged mode of persuasion available" to the radical mind; "there is no morally pure, no epistemologically secure, no linguistically uncontaminated route to radical change." Lentricchia then adds: "To attempt to proceed in purity—to reject the rhetorical strategies of capitalism and Christianity, as if such strategies were in themselves responsible for human oppression—to proceed with the illusion of purity is to situate oneself on the margin of history, as the possessor of a unique truth disengaged from history's flow. It is to exclude oneself from having any chance of making a difference for better or worse." [30] Indeed, it is to exclude oneself from ethical consciousness, choice, and act.

But I have yet to define the nature of those totalitarian concerns in *Ancient Evenings*, or their interrelationships, adequately. There are familiar qualities to totalitarian power in this novel—the tendency toward homogeneity, the reduction of dialectic to static order, and the collaborations of wealth and political power to dominate and shape society for the ends of a few. Whether it be Eitel and Sergius struggling against a witch-hunting American government and a commercial, conforming Hollywood, or D. J. and Mailer-Aquarius caught in the toils of the military-industrial establishment, or Rojack fighting the manipulative wealth of Kelly, or Gilmore fighting the whole liberal establishment for the right to choose his own death and expiation, Mailer's heroes always confront one kind of oppressive social order or another: they express what Samuel Coale calls an "essential romantic anarchism."

Since the Egyptian concept of the pharaoh as life-giving god would not have encouraged Egyptians to see kingship in any modern or objective sense as a cult-of-personality dictatorship, Mailer is more cautious here than elsewhere in presenting the issue. The question becomes, perhaps more accurately from the Egyptian view, to what degree the king represents the principle or the violation of Maat. It is in the violation of Maat that kingly power turns to degenerative tyranny, that personal nobility turns to vanity, pride, and carnal ownership.

One element of totalitarianism in Mailer's novel is the tyranny of pharaonic power, expressed through the themes of carnal ownership and social brutality. The underside of kingly power, its brutal and disconnected nature as it reaches down through all the social classes, is clearest from a number of glimpses Mailer gives us of the conditions of slaves, laborers, poor people, and those upon whom kingly retribution falls. It is as if the very root of civilization—its wealth, power, and economic stability—has been nourished only in such soil from the beginning. One of the best examples of this theme comes in book 3, "The Book of the Child." On his journey with his family to the court of Ramses IX and during the conduct of business at court, six-year-old Meni notices and contemplates the "long cry of that labor" of oarsmen rowing an obelisk upriver, the hovels of the poor in that section of town the rich, like mother Hathfertiti, would prefer to avoid sight of, the withered hands of thieves nailed to posts in a flourishing garden, the "shiny stumps" of many a eunuch slave, Bonesmasher's drunken wanderings in a poor quarter while he recalls his family's impoverishment, a manacled prisoner with

stumps of forearms near the palace walls where a woman lashed to another post holds her dead baby, a maid who once had her nipples cut off for stealing the pharaoh's snails, the legions of men who have gone blind from quarry dust and splinters, and a previous pharaoh so obsessed with his wife's fidelity that he ordered everyone in Memphis not to make love without his permission. One of Meni's most revealing intuitions of the nature of absolute power and submission comes when he looks into the eyes of Pharaoh's dog Tet-tut:

> I thought I would laugh—but sorrow seemed to come right out of Tet-tut's heart and into mine.… A melancholy … so complete as the woe I felt when Eyaseyab told me about her relations who worked in a quarry and had to load great slabs of granite on sledges and pull them up ramps with ropes. Sometimes, while working, they were whipped until they dropped.
>
> The sorrows of Tel-ut's eyes was like the look I had seen in the expression of many an intelligent slave. Worse. It was as if the dog's eyes spoke of something he wanted to accomplish but never would.
>
> So I wept.… The dog had managed to tell me of a terrible fright in a far-off place and I was more afraid than I had ever been, as if I might not live like a slave but still knew the fear that sooner or later I, too, would know a life I did not want, and be powerless to go where I wished.… Yes, at six had a sight of myself debased in the Land of the Dead when I was twenty one. (139–40).

In old Menenhetet's story Ramses II will use the same dog-master metaphor in his prayers to Amon explaining the divinity-pharaoh-royalty-nobility-commoner-slave chain of power: "I am as Your dog … even as the soldiers are My dogs. and the soldiers of the Hittites are My soldiers' dogs" (271). Menenhetet describes the feeling of such power over others just before his ambush of the thieves: "I knew it was the peace that comes when you can choose what to do with another man. You can kill, or let him go.… Indeed, my Pharaoh always seemed to live in just such a way" (303).

Such carnal ownership, as I mentioned, is that personal tyranny most often expressed in this novel by anal rape. Mailer is of course aware of the humorous possibilities of the "buggery order," a colloquial metaphor in common usage, after all. Indeed, the book has more intentional humor (much of it scatological) than most reviewers found. Mailer's bawdy may become monotonous, but it has often seemed convenient for reviewers to forget the precedents of Rabelais, Shakespeare, or Swift.

On the other hand, there is a serious, even tragic, side to Mailer's sexual and anal themes. Carnal ownership has become for Mailer the perfect expression of the power held by the victor over the vanquished, or by the ruler over the ruled. It is, therefore, also an expression of the totalitarian impulses of ruler and state. Although nearly everyone in the novel does or has the potential to practice that brutal assertion over another, it is the very wealthy and the entrenched who practice it most.

Mailer makes his theme of anal violence and sexuality resonate with several meanings. The first I have just suggested. Homosexual rape is tantamount to domination, violation, and ownership of another person. The emphasis of such rape is usually political or economic rather than sexual. It is a brutal source of establishing national hierarchy in peace and international hierarchy in war. In a version of the tale of "Horus and Seth" from the era of Ramses V, Set says to the gods: "Let the office of ruler be given to me, for as regards Horns who stands here, I have done a man's deed to him." The Set-power of pederasty is also expressly forbidden, for in the Egyptian Declaration of Innocence and in the accompanying Acknowledgment of the Forty-Two Gods, pederasty is one of the sins one claims innocence of, as are fornication, causing pain, violence, and adultery.[31]

A second thematic resonance is in heterosexual copulation. Here anal sexuality, a deep and repressed drive, becomes rebellious. It is unsanctioned sex, decreative sex, against the laws of gods and humans (which gods and humans will always break). It is, to borrow Richard Poirier's phrase, a "breaking of the vessels," the blackest magic. Hence, it is the violation of sexual taboo Menenhetet engages in with Honey-Ball and, finally, with Nefertiri in their rebellions against the order of king and cosmos.

A third resonance is magical power through excremental ritual. Courtiers work feces magic against the king himself for personal revenge, as we have seen. Here the magical power theme is further connected to the anal-obsessive character of wealth and social status in this novel as in Mailer's ear-

lier novels. Think of the Satanic Kelly and Ruta in *An American Dream*, for example. Menenhetet puts it:

> I brooded much on the nature of such stuff when I lived in the Gardens of the Secluded.… I even supposed that dung must be the center of all things … that excrement was as much a part of magic as blood or fire, an elixir of dying Gods and rotting spirits desperate to regain the life they were about to lose. Yet when I thought of all the transformation that dung contains … I began to think of all those Gods, small and mean as pestilence itself, who dwell next to such great changes. "How dangerous is this excrement," I said.… To hold the leavings of another must he equal to owning great gold and wealth.
>
> Was it for such a reason that all who visited the Court would wear as much gold as they possessed? (502–3)

This is in part a rehash of Mailer's "metaphysics of the belly," reaching at least as far back as *An American Dream* (1964–65) and *Cannibals and Christians* (1966). In the latter, Mailer argued that the close relationship of one's being to one's deepest cellular functions explains why people or societies may be obsessed with scatology; waste contains some message from the unconscious that reveals one's (or a society's) state of being and disproportions. By airing one's obsessions, by confronting the messages of disease and waste, and by engaging perversion, death, and dread, one may prepare the disproportionate self or state to grow away from death toward life, from imbalance toward balance.[32] Of course possible defeat by or victory over the shadow self is part of the risk-taking of the embattled hero, that representative of the individual. Mailer's ideas parallel such depth psychologists as Carl Jung and Erich Neumann, for example, who have also suggested a close but mysterious relationship and balance between body and psyche which is basic to our understanding of the unconscious. Awareness of a functional relationship between the body and the psyche is a fundamentally primitive state of consciousness, expressing the functioning of mana (soul or psyche power) in the self and between the self and the external world.[33] By a primitive logic, or metaphor, one would possess the deepest truths of another's self—all the evil and the good—when one possesses another's anus or, in

magic, feces. If anal sex is, as it was for Menenhetet and Honey-Ball, "the secret ceremony of marriage" (455), the deepest, rebellious sharing of one another's flesh, anal rape is the absolute control of another for other, often political or economic, purposes.

It is understandable that when Mailer time and again presents such scatological meditations as "literal metaphors," if I may coin a paradoxical phrase, he both fascinates and outrages many critics. His toying with an associational, primitive, subconscious logic is simply not acceptable to them. But like the heroes of his tales, Mailer is not one to blink the most curious secrets and obsessions—as he sees them—of our conscious and unconscious life. The unconscious—that is, obsessive and primitive—roots of sexuality and of totalitarianism are important subjects in this novel.

It is especially in the striving for power over others that yet another element of totalitarianism is depicted in the novel. Ambition for wealth, social status, and privilege becomes a force in itself, perhaps the most degenerative force in the novel; that force becomes a collective energy that seems to make the whole brutal social fabric cohere. The value of wealth, the sources of ambition for it, is that wealth is built on the agony (i.e., carnal ownership) of others. "I was aware suddenly of all that shone of gold," young Meni says, "around my father's chest … my mother's head, the gold bracelets of Menenhetet, or … the gold in the houses of all the nobles we would visit. It was then I thought I heard, like a faint cry, some echo of the labor that had delivered this wondrous metal, and I saw the Pharaoh nod wisely as though He had also heard such groans and they were part of the curious value of gold" (372–73).

Meni's mother Hathfertiti—insatiably ambitious, a monster of greed and lust—is one of the most fully, and humorously, developed portraits in the novel. Her embraces with Ramses IX are a "joining of His Double-Throne with her insatiable greed" (483); her means of achieving godlike pharaoh-power and wealth are through her son's claims to royal lineage. Of course the culmination of her ambition on the Night of the Pig is to buy her passage on the pharaoh's golden boat on earth and in the Land of the Dead. With her beauty and lust she hopes to buy more wealth, more power, and even eternal life, just as the scribe-priest Pepti will castrate himself to realize his ambitions to power. By the pharaoh's phallus would Hathfertiti "climb the ladder of Heaven" (485). Such false, but such perennially human, ambitions are the true waste in human lives, as Meni realizes only in death. As Mailer argues

here and in most of his work, it is not by such ambitions, by wealth or power or lust in high places, that we might purchase any true virtue or merit or peace or even afterlife, but by our courage alone, by always seeking the risk, always placing our individual force against whatever powers would shape, own, or defeat us.

Likewise, Hathfertiti's forerunner Nefertiri dared everything to maintain her own power and wealth amidst a court filled with intrigue, ambition, and greed. And Mailer's depiction of her petty complaints about the upstart family of Honey-Ball is a funny example of the timeless whine of entrenched ambition and privilege against the ambitions of others farther down the social power-chain: "I cannot bear her family. I was entertained by them on my last visit to Sais, and they are common. Very wealthy and common.… They have the audacity—oh, they are truly common—to present the names of their forebears as if one were speaking of people of substance. They went on in that manner to Me! … She [Honey-Ball] has noble blood, but of the lowest sort. Her family does business with shit-collectors" (514–15).

It is this ambition to power and wealth to the exclusion of other sources or kinds of power, and other sources of merit and virtue, that makes Mailer's narrative a tragic one in the ancient sense. It is exactly the kind of narrative or catalogue of moral defeat that Breasted's moral prophets of Ancient Egypt have written more briefly. For here is the spectacle of a naturally endowed man and of privileged men and women with their fatal flaws—pride and the blind ambition to wealth and power over the structures of state and the people who populate it. If power in itself is mythically sanctioned in such a society's conception of the god-king and his servants, where is the balance, the truth, the justice, the righteousness (in a word, the Maat) when ambition and pride blind all to everything but greed and lust?

This timeless ambition and pride must have been to some extent what Mailer had in mind in 1983 just before *Ancient Evenings* was published when he spoke of our own manifestations of ego: "On the one hand we, all of us, consciously or unconsciously, contain an adoration of the universe. We also have great animus toward the universe. It's larger than we are and that's intolerable to us. The ego, or the twentieth-century manifestation of it, flames up in us. We have to *score* it. We have to literally score on it, and plastic is a wonderful way to do that because we create something that the universe can't digest."[34] This ancient and modern theme is neatly summed up in the fate of one fat, rich merchant named Fekh-futi ("shit-collector") who

had all the proper rituals performed, purchased the all-important "Negative Confession" to show "the Gods, the demons, and the beasts that he was a good man," that, indeed, he "had committed not a single one of the forty-two sins, not one." Yet as Honey-Ball says, he was so foul he had committed them all. Honey-Ball herself is, however, seduced by the ambitious logic of wealth's purchase on eternity. She dreams that "Fekh-futi thrives in the Land of the Dead, and my little toe beside him" because "the virtue of the papyrus is not to be found in its truth but in the power of the family who purchases it" (451–53).

Yet as we see in the end, Fekh-futi most certainly does not thrive in the Land of the Dead; the power of wealth and status alone is insufficient to outweigh the scales of truth, to cheat life, death, Maat, and Anubis. Likewise does Menenhetet learn through four lives, finally, that ambition is not only insufficient for purposeful and powerful life; ambition can overwhelm, it can tip the balance against even such virtues as great courage and strength.

For modern as for ancient cultures, perhaps the mythic sources of power are not in themselves "evil" or "wrong"; it is, rather, out of abuse, disproportion, and blindness that human evil arises. If the nobles and the highly placed in Mailer's novel seek to buy earthly power and stature as much as to buy eternal life, the ideals and principles of religion in Egyptian Empire suggest that true power and afterlife are not to be bought; they are to be earned through the virtue of Maat, through courage, and through proportion, through, in short, the ever-renewed battle against entropy. Mailer has for thirty years now been writing a similar ethic and seeking a culture and a narrative to embody it.

NOTES

1. *Esquire*, July 1983: 116–17.
2. Leslie Fiedler, "Going for the Long Ball," *Psychology Today*, June 1983: 16–17.
3. See Manning's "Look upon this Work, Oh ye Mailer, and Despair," *Boston Globe*, 3 April 1983: AlO-Al I; and Chassler in *Ms. Magazine*, 12 August 1983: 33–34.
4. See Epstein's "Mailer Hits Bottom," *Commentary*, July 1983: 62–68; and Wolcott's "Enter the Mummy," *Harpers*, May 1983: 81–83. Epstein and Wolcott represent a host of negative reviewers who could not stomach the subject matter and who still believe Mailer's gifts are as a naturalistic, not fantastic, writer.
5. See Davis, "Excess without End," *The New Leader*, 16 May 1983: 14–16. This principle—the healthy confrontation with one's dark side—goes back at least as far as "The White

Negro" (1957) and of course is Jungian in its implications. For Jung, individuation or the restructuring of the self comes about by the meeting of the "shadow"; that is, the patient meets the instinctual, irrational, primitive, and violent side of his or her nature, recognizes it for what it is, no longer represses it or totally capitulates to it, but learns to accept it and even use it in some healthy balance with the other elements of psychic life.

6. See DeMott's "Normal Mailer's Egyptian Novel," *New York Times*, 10 April 1983: 1, 34–36. That Mailer centered his narrative on the Night of the Pig is not arbitrary; it is directly related to his theme of rebirth. As Mircea Eliade points out: "The meaning of this periodical retrogression of the world into a chaotic modality [i.e., 'the extinction of fires, the return of the souls of the dead, social confusion of the type exemplified by Satumalia, erotic license, orgies, and so on'] was this: all the 'sins' of the year, everything that time had soiled and worn, was annihilated in the physical sense of the word. By symbolically participating in the annihilation and re-creation of the world, man too was created anew; he was reborn, for he began a new life." See *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1959), 78–79.
7. Peter Shaw, "Norman Mailer Turns Victim," *The American Spectator*, September 1983: 45–46.
8. The source of Mailer's comments here on the novel is Robert Begiebing, "Twelfth Round," *Harvard Magazine*, March-April 1983: 49, hereafter cited as "Twelfth Round."
9. Norman Mailer, *Ancient Evenings* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1983), 363, 365. Future references are parenthetical.
10. From page 40 of the full transcript of the interview "Twelfth Round" for *Harvard Magazine* (1983), which is available in the Harvard University Archives, Harley P. Holden, Curator. The statement that elicited this response was: "You've also made the argument that trying to understand fascism and Nazism leads one to the great questions of our century, the nature of the unconscious." George Steiner's quotation is from *In Bluebeard's Castle: Some Notes Towards the Redefinition of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), 43–44.
11. See Richard Poiner in *TLS*, 10 June 1983: 591–92.
12. Harold Bloom, "Norman in Egypt," New *York Review of Books*, 28 April 1983: 3–5.
13. See Stade's "A Chthonic Novel," in *The New Republic*, 2 May 1983: 32–36; and Dick's review in *World Literature Today* 58 (Winter 1984): 102–3. For Mailer's complete discussion of dreamlike, robust art see *Cannibals and Christians*, 101–3, 214; and *Existential Errands: Twenty-Six Pieces Selected by the Author from the Body of All His Writings* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1972), 111–12, 122.
14. See Joyce Carol Oates, *New Heaven, New Earth: The Visionary Experience in Literature* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1974), 177–203; and Peter Brooks, "The Melodramatic Imag-

ination," *Partisan Review* 2 (Spring 1972): 195–212. For a further discussion of the moral occult principle that Brooks develops, see also Robert C. Post, "A Theory of Genre: Romance, Realism, and Moral Reality," in *American Quarterly* 33 (Fall 1981): 367–90. Post compares romance and realism and finds in Hawthorne a connection to this inward, spiritual realm of human value.

15. For a more complete discussion of these heroic themes in Mailer's previous work, see Robert Begiebing, *Acts of Regeneration: Allegory and Archetype in the Works of Normal Mailer* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1981), esp. 113–31. The two quotations in this passage are from *Cannibals and Christians*, 100, and "Twelfth Round," 46.
16. "Twelfth Round," 48.
17. Eliade, 12–13, 146, 165, 168. Rene Girard's study of sacrificial violence makes a similar point relevant to Mailer's use of violence in the novel: "The Sacred consists of all forces whose dominance over man increases or seems to increase in proportion to man's effort to master them. Tempests, forest fires, and plagues … may be classified as sacred. Far outranking these, however, … stands human violence—violence seen as something exterior to man and henceforth as part of all the other outside forces that threaten mankind. Violence is the heart and secret soul of the sacred." *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 31.
18. See for example Mailer's development of these points in *The Presidential Papers* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1963), 213–14; and *Cannibals and Christians*, 321–27. The Eliade quotation is from *Sacred and Profane*, 147–48. Future obvious references are parenthetical.
19. James Henry Breasted, *The Dawn of Conscience* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1933, 1968), 411–13. My previous summary of the rise of conscience is much indebted to Breasted's book.
20. "Twelfth Round," 49.
21. Jeffrey Burton Russell, *The Devil: Perceptions of Evil from Antiquity to Primitive Christianity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 78, 80, 82.
22. Compare Barbara Mertz on this point in *Temples, Tombs, and Hieroglyphs* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1964), 99. Two sources come to mind for Mailer's narrator-hero. The first is Ramses II himself who speaks of one "Menena"—his charioteer and shield-bearer at Kadesh—who, alone with certain household butlers and his two steeds, was with the king at the outbreak of battle and who became "weak and faint-hearted." See the "Kadesh Battle Inscriptions of Ramses II, The Poem," in Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature: The New Kingdom*, vol. 2 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976), 68, 70. The second source might be an actual son of Ramses II, Khaemwise, a high priest whose celebrity as a learned man and magician carried his name into

Graeco-Roman times. See Sir Alan Gardiner's *Egypt of the Pharaohs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961, 1980), 267.

23. "Twelfth Round," 45.
24. Mertz, 277–78.
25. *Ancient Evenings*, 587–88. Among Mailer's many sources we must certainly count Sir James George Frazer, especially when considering the nature of magic. On the point at hand, however, Frazer's description of Osiris-power and worship in the section on dying and reviving gods seems relevant to Mailer's depiction of the Sed Festival. Here Ramses seeks to renew what Frazer calls the power "of creative energy in general," represented in Osiris worship by the erect phallus, an "aspect of his nature … presented to the eye not merely of the initiated but of the multitude." Village women, for example, would sing praises to his phallic image, which they set in motion by means of strings." See *The New Golden Bough*. ed. Theodor H. Gaster (New York: Criterion Books. 1959), 345.
26. "Twelfth Round," 49.
27. See *The New Golden Bough*, 9, 31, 132.
28. Maclntyre. *After Virtue*, esp. 116–19, 22, 202–3.
29. See Traister, 52–53, 99, 133–52. A further connection between Mailer and this tradition is worth mentioning: the foundation for the rise of dramatic magicians is the Renaissance revival of Neoplatonism as a revival in the belief of a general animating spirit as, through Plotinus and the hermetic writings, a source of cosmic wisdom and energy. Mailer's magus, like Mailer the artist, seeks contact with the infinite and archetypal wisdom. See Traister's discussion on 5–6 esp.
30. *Criticism and Social Change*, 18, 22–27 .35–36, 61–62.
31. See Lichtheim's *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, vol. 2, 124–28, 220.
32. See esp. *Cannibals and Christians*, 274–86.
33. See Carl Jung's introduction to Aion*: Researches into the Phenomenology of the Self*, translated by R. F. C. Hull, Vol. 9 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951); and Neumann, *The Origins and History of Consciousness* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press., 1973), 25–27, 288, 290–91.
34. "Twelfth Round," 47.