

HEMINGWAY TO MAILER—
A DELAYED RESPONSE TO
THE DEER PARK

J. MICHAEL LENNON

SOMETIME IN SEPTEMBER OF 1955, NORMAN MAILER obtained Ernest Hemingway's address in Cuba from "a reliable source" (Mailer, "Postscript" 265), *New York Times* columnist, Harvey Breit. From his college years onward, Mailer had been deeply impressed by Hemingway—not so much his by style, as his life scars and macho exploits. In a 1956 *Village Voice* column, Mailer nominated him for President on the Democratic ticket, saying he "is one of the few people in our national life who has tried to live with a certain passion for capturing what he desired" ("Column" 312). Mailer wrote in 1959 that he concurred with Papa's "notion, arrived at slowly in my case, that even if one dulled one's talent in the punishment of becoming a man, it was more important to be a man than a very good writer" ("Postscript" 265). Mailer's second novel, *Barbary Shore* (1951), had received disastrous reviews. *Time* labeled it "paceless, tasteless and graceless" and Mailer seriously considered giving up writing altogether ("Last" 110). For the next four years, he wrote and rewrote an ambitious, multi-layered, sexually explicit (at least then) novel centered on a blacklisted director set in the Hollywood film colony of Palm Springs, renamed Desert D'Or. Turned down by seven publishers, *The Deer Park*¹ was intended to be his comeback novel.² It was written very much under Hemingway's influence (Weatherby 8), and he was hoping for "twenty good words" from Papa to use for publicity (Mailer, "Postscript" 265). But Mailer was also angry with himself for begging, "for stealing a trick from that Hollywood I knew so well," and the inscription on the copy he mailed to Finca Vigia in Cuba undercut his desire for a blurb that "would make the

difference between half-success and a breakthrough” (265). He tells the story of the episode in his 1959 miscellany, *Advertisements for Myself*, including his disastrously qualified inscription:

To Ernest Hemingway
—because finally after all these
years I am deeply curious to know
what you think of this.

—but if you do not answer, or if you
answer with the kind of crap you
use to answer unprofessional writers,
sycophants, brown-nosers, etc., then
fuck you, and I will never attempt
to communicate with you again.

—and since I suspect that you’re even
more vain than I am, I might as well
warn you that there is a reference to
you on page 353 which you may or may
not like.

Norman Mailer

The reference on page 353, which serves as a further indication of Mailer’s cross-wired intentions, is contained in a comment by Mailer’s narrator, Sergius O’Shaugnessey, about his bullfighting novel, which he says is “inevitably imitative of that excellently exiguous mathematician, Mr. Ernest Hemingway.” The inscribed copy went off and ten days later was returned in the same wrapper, “and maybe the same string,” with “Address Unknown” in Spanish stamped all over it (“Postscript” 266). Mailer pondered the various possibilities: that it was a bad address; that all unsolicited books were returned; that Mary Hemingway interceded; that Hemingway read the novel but was uncertain what to say and punted the book back; or that he had read the inscription and said to himself, “If you want to come on that hard, Buster, don’t write words like ‘deeply curious,’” mailed it back “and started to drink fifteen minutes early that day” (266–67).

As it turns out, Hemingway never received the copy that Mailer sent him,

but went out and bought it, read it and liked it, as his hand-written letter indicates.³ Hemingway's letter, with its pips of paranoia, reveal his disturbed mental state, but it also shows his desire to clear up the matter of the returned copy of *The Deer Park* and to encourage a fellow writer. Perhaps he did enjoy the novel and follow its reception (the reviews were "shitty," for the most part), but it is hard to understand how he could have missed O'Shaugnessey's line of praise, which comes near the end of the novel. A more puzzling matter is how Hemingway could have gotten his hands on *Advertisements for Myself* (and the story of the undelivered book) by the August 12, 1959 date on his letter, since *Advertisements* was not published until November. In addition, Hemingway was in Spain in August 1959⁴; it was the "dangerous summer" of the bullfighting duels between Luis Miguel Dominguín and Antonio Ordóñez that were the subject of his final book.⁵ He was in Spain again in August of 1960; the only summer he spent at his Ketchum home was his last summer. He committed suicide there on July 2, 1961.

Mailer later told interviewer Robert Begiebing that he "corresponded with Hemingway ten years after *The Naked and the Dead* [1948] came out" ("Twelfth" 320), but he did not give a more specific date. One plausible explanation is that Hemingway wrote to Mailer at the urging of George Plimpton, who tried and failed to set up a meeting between the two writers in New York on November 3, 1959, shortly after Hemingway returned from Europe. It seems likely that Hemingway bought his copy of *Advertisements* during this stay in New York. In a letter to Plimpton on January 17, 1961, he recalls being with Plimpton when buying *Advertisements*, which he calls a "ragtag assembly of his rewrites, second thoughts and ramblings shot through with occasional brilliance" ("To George" 912). Hemingway left New York for Ketchum about a week later and was there until mid-January 1960 when he went to Cuba. If the letter was indeed written in Ketchum, it was probably written during this period, although there is no certain way of knowing. In Plimpton's memoir-history-new journalism study of boxing, *Shadow Box*, he recalls how he tried and failed to get Mailer and Hemingway together shortly after *Advertisements* was published. Plimpton told stories of Mailer's head butting and thumb wrestling and got Hemingway interested in meeting him. "You call him," Hemingway told Plimpton. But A.E. Hotchner, a close friend of Hemingway's, advised against it and Papa said, "Oh, well, forget it." Thumb wrestling intrigued him though, and he went at it with Plimpton. When he couldn't get the hang of it, he began to squeeze Plimpton's hand in

his powerful grip, leaving marks that lasted a week. When someone asked what they were doing, Hemingway replied, "We're pretending we're a pair of Norman Mailers." Mailer waited in vain for the call from Plimpton, "both scared and excited," he told Plimpton later, "and then both disappointed and even a bit relieved when the call never came through" (Plimpton 259–64).

In the fall of 1960, Mailer wrote an open letter to Fidel Castro in an attempt to reverse growing American opposition to his revolution. He proposed that Castro invite Hemingway to Cuba and give him free access to report on the situation there. But Mailer is pessimistic about Hemingway agreeing to the idea and says that he "no longer writes to us. Maybe a letter once in a while. . . . We feel he has deserted us and produced no work good enough to justify his silence. There are many of us who will curse his memory if he dies in silence" (*Presidential* 73). Mailer had no way of knowing the depth of Hemingway's depression in his final year, or his concern about events in Cuba. Later, when he learned of Hemingway's suicide, "He was sick in that miasmal and not quite discoverable region between the liver and the soul. Hemingway's suicide left him wedded to horror" for he had "constituted the walls of the fort: Hemingway had given the power to believe you could still shout down the corridor of the hospital, live next to the breath of the beast, accept your portion of dread each day. Now the greatest living romantic was dead. Dread was loose" (Mailer, *Of a Fire* 3–4). Over the next decade, it could be argued, Mailer himself assumed the role of chief American romantic. Who will aspire to that position now that he is also gone?

NOTES

1. Putnam's finally accepted the much-revised novel and published it on November 6, 1955.
2. *The Deer Park* received mainly negative reviews but was a middling commercial success, selling approximately 50,000 copies. It spent 15 weeks on the *Times* best seller list, reaching number six. *Time* panned it (October 17, 1955), but *Newsweek* (October 17, 1955) ranked it with Fitzgerald's *The Last Tycoon* (1941) and Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust* (1939).
3. See pp. 17–18 of this number of *The Mailer Review*. Hemingway's original hand-written letter resides in the Mailer Archive at the Harry Ransom Center of the University of Texas-Austin. Hemingway knew about, if he had not read, *The Deer Park* as early as December 5, 1955, when he wrote to Wallace Meyer: "In *The Deer Park* Mailer really blows the whistle on himself" ("To Wallace" 852). It is more likely that he was merely relaying the buzz about the book then circulating.

4. The dates for Hemingway's movements are taken from Carlos Baker's biography, *Ernest Hemingway: A Life Story*; Baker's edition of Hemingway's letters; and A.E. Hotchner's *Papa Hemingway*.
5. *The Dangerous Summer*. About half of the book was published in three parts in *Life*, September 1960.

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