

NORMAN VS. ERNEST: INFLUENCE AND IDENTITY

M I C H A E L L . S H U M A N

IN THE SHORT ESSAY INTRODUCING *THE BULLFIGHT* (1967), a collection of photographs capturing the heat and light of a spectacle nearly synonymous with style and masculinity, Norman Mailer confesses not only his passion for the brutal ceremony but also his love for a bullfighter, El Loco, the Crazy One. “He was an apparition,” Mailer writes:

He had a skinny body and a funny ugly face with little eyes set close together, a big nose, and a little mouth. He had very black Indian hair, and a tuft in the rear of his head stood up like the spike of an antenna. . . . He had comic buttocks. They went straight back like a duck’s tail feathers. His suit fit poorly. He was some sort of grafting between Ray Bolger and Charley Chaplin. (“Homage” 185–6)

El Loco was the clown, of course, the unsung bullfighter meant to provide comic relief as a succession of young novilleros take on the serious business of a raucous blood sport. In the remarkable match described with all the detail fitting a life-changing event, Mailer tells how El Loco lifts the audience from sullen funk to cathartic excitement: “Then he came out with the muleta and did a fine series of *derechazos*, the best seen in several weeks, and to everyone’s amazement, he killed on the first *estocada*. They gave him an ear. He was the *triunfador* of the day” (187).

Mailer cautions readers that he never met El Loco, a country rube whose real name was Amado Ramirez, “Beloved Remington,” but Mailer never regrets missing that encounter. “I would not have wanted to meet him,” Mailer

maintains. "Meeting him could only have spoiled the perfection of my love, so pure was my affection" (182–3). But the comedic bumpkin helped Mailer understand the personality underlying bullfighting and how method becomes a defining aspect of any accomplished artist.

After a while I got good at seeing the flaws and virtues in novilleros, and in fact I began to see so much of their character in their style, and began to learn so much about style by comprehending their character . . . that I began to take the same furious interest and partisanship in the triumph of one style over another that is usually reserved for literary matters . . . or what indeed average Americans and some not so average might take over political figures. (182)

Mailer's adoration of *El Loco*, a highlight of the essay and one of Mailer's most provocative statements of the relationship between character and style, comes at the midpoint of the article. As a literary man writing about bullfighting, Mailer mentions the name of Ernest Hemingway early in the essay. Mailer first hangs on the color of the afternoon sunlight, the agony of a gored bull, the flow of bright red blood. His words provoke a feeling of melancholy loss amid the horror, a sense of nostalgia for places and times beyond our own experience. We are moved by his words as much as by the ritualistic atmosphere they describe, and Mailer clearly becomes captivated by his own display of rhetorical style. Mailer's mention of Hemingway, when it comes, is not so much homage as apology. "It would be memorable not to sound like Hemingway," he insists, but then barter that claim to distinction for the simple act of solid representation. The hour just before the bullfight, in Mexico, is always the best hour of the week, and there is no other way to say that without following Hemingway's trail of language (177).

Hemingway's public character and authorial style indeed influenced Mailer throughout his long career, much as *El Loco*'s in-ring identity and crowd-pleasing flourish affected Mailer following that memorable 1954 bullfight in Mexico City. And just as Mailer never met his bullfighting hero, Mailer and Hemingway never met, either, although the two literary giants once came close when both were visiting New York. Hemingway had planned a dinner with George Plimpton and A.E. Hochner, author of an early Hemingway biography, and Plimpton had been anxious to invite

Mailer. Hemingway had agreed, expressing his appreciation for *The Naked and the Dead*, and Plimpton started the ball rolling. "So I called Norman in the morning," Plimpton relates, "and I said, 'Listen, I'm going out with Mr. Hemingway, and I'm going to try to get you to come along: surely you two must meet?' But Hochner intervened, claiming that the two wouldn't be a good mix. "Oh, it was awful," Plimpton tells Oliver Burkeman in a 2002 interview in *The Guardian*. "Poor old Norman sat by the telephone. It was . . . very bad." Plimpton admits that Hemingway was a rough man to be around, and perhaps sparks would have flown in abundance if Mailer's own abrasive ego had been on the scene, too (4).

According to Plimpton, Hemingway nevertheless spent much of that odd dinner at the Colony Restaurant inquiring about Mailer and listening, with great interest, to Plimpton's account of the Mailer's macho practices: roping women into staring contests and beating men in the curious game of knock-the-heads. Plimpton reports asking Mailer, later, what he and Hemingway would have discussed and Mailer contemplates, but just for a moment: "After a while I probably would have criticized him for not being in the country when we needed him—spending so much time out of it when we were slipping into totalitarianism. . . . I would have said, 'Stop perfuming your vanity, get your hands dirty; we're tired of you and your little hurts'" (*Shadow* 262).

Mailer elsewhere confirms Plimpton's account of that near-miss meeting, admits that his admiration for Hemingway began at an early age and, at the same time, laments that society's respect for authors and for literary ambition in general is on the decline. "How I aspired!" he says in *The Spooky Art*. "In those years at Harvard, if I had heard that Ernest Hemingway was going to speak in Worcester, Mass., I might have trudged the forty miles from Cambridge. That was how we felt then about writers. It is probably how I still feel. The shock, decades later, was to realize that this view of the writer is rare by now" (13). Mailer acknowledges Hemingway's influence on his college-age short stories but considers the great man's presence an accommodation for his deficiencies: "Although I was more excited by Dos Passos and Farrell," Mailer writes in *Advertisements for Myself*, "it was Hemingway I imitated—probably because he seemed easier. To write like Farrell or Dos Passos would have required more experience than I could possibly have had at eighteen" ("Advertisement" 27). This gentle dig at Hemingway's simple style is an admission of youthful inexperience, although it challenges

Hemingway's syntactical abilities more than his extensive life experience. Indeed, in *Spooky* Mailer attributes the early and full-blown development of Hemingway's style with an existential awareness of the proximity of death: "He had, before he was twenty, the unmistakable sensation of being wounded so near to death that he felt his soul slide out of him, then slip back" (75). Ultimately Hemingway's style, in Mailer's interpretation, is a natural process of accommodation shared by other major authors: "It is comforting to argue that some major writers develop a style out of the very avoidance of their major weakness," Mailer notes. "Hemingway was not capable of writing a long, complex sentence with good architecture in the syntax. But he turned that inability into his personal skill at writing short declarative sentences or long run-on sentences connected by conjunctions" (77–8).

Yet Hemingway has flaws in character that the author cannot compensate for and that remain largely unredeemed, and Mailer is not hesitant to cite those shortcomings. Most prominent of all, perhaps, is the personal vanity Mailer points to, at Plimpton's request, in his imaginary dinner-party conversation with Hemingway, and especially that vanity accompanying a large reputation or the lust for one. In fact vanity, Mailer says in an interview with Andrew O'Hagan,

can take your down. Look at poor Truman [Capote]. His attitude became, if I'm not recognized in my own time then something absolutely awful is taking place in society. And that vanity is something that we all have to approach and walk around with great care. It can destroy a good part of you. You know, you really have to be able to exhale, just to exhale, and say, Why don't we just leave it to history. (80)

Hemingway's own vanity is revealed in an anecdote in *That Summer in Paris*, Morley Callaghan's memoir of his 1929 stay in Paris, and colorfully retold by Mailer in his book review, "Punching Papa." Callaghan, an upstart reporter for *The Toronto Sun* when Hemingway joined the staff as a war correspondent, tells the story of a botched boxing match with Hemingway, an account that becomes the centerpiece of Mailer's review of the memoir. One day Fitzgerald suggests that Hemingway is a boxer of heavyweight champion ability, and Callaghan, taking the bait, counters that after all

Hemingway is just an amateur like himself. A match is arranged between the two men and Fitzgerald agrees to serve as timekeeper. As the second round progresses, the boxers became tired and Hemingway, in a careless moment, gets knocked down by Callaghan. Fitzgerald, realizing that he had abdicated his responsibility as timekeeper by letting the round go too long, admits his error with some astonishment and shame. Hemingway is not convinced: “‘All right, Scott,’ Ernest said. ‘If you want to see me getting the shit knocked out of me, just say so. Only don’t say you made a mistake’” (Mailer, “Punching” 13). Four months later Hemingway joined Fitzgerald in demanding an apology from Callaghan, whose story was wildly distorted in *The Herald Tribune* book section, but Hemingway’s character flaws already had been revealed. Not only would he, in the interest of personal pride, call Fitzgerald a liar for suggesting his timekeeping error was a mistake rather than a calculated attempt to see Hemingway on his back, but he also would insist on an apology for the bad explanation of an incident that was, after all, a simple and informal sparring match.

Despite any perceived lapses in Hemingway’s character, Mailer ultimately finds a single trump card in an otherwise mixed hand: the man’s expression and exercise of fundamental courage. “If the intellectual antecedents of this generation can be traced to such separate influences as D. H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, and Wilhelm Reich,” Mailer maintains in “The White Negro,” “the viable philosophy of Hemingway fit most of their facts: in a bad world . . . there is no love nor mercy nor charity nor justice unless a man can keep his courage. . . . What fitted the need of the adventurer even more precisely was Hemingway’s categorical imperative that what made him feel good became therefore The Good” (Sec. II). When asked if Hemingway’s suicide compromised his sense of the author’s courage, Mailer admits that he struggled with the notion but then imagines a scenario making the tragic incident seem like yet another expression of curiosity and manhood, another attempt to provoke insight through the near loss of soul: “Hemingway had learned early in life that the closer he came to daring death the healthier it was for him,” he tells O’Hagan.

And so I had this notion that night after night when he was alone, after he said goodnight to Mary, Hemingway would go to his bedroom and he’d put his thumb on the shotgun trigger and put the barrel in his mouth and squeeze down on the trigger a

little bit, and—trembling, shaking—he'd try to see how close he could come without having the thing go off. (51)

Hemingway's suicide becomes a catastrophic misstep in this continual quest for *The Good*: "On the final night he went too far. That to me made more sense than him just deciding to blow it all to bits" (51). Elsewhere Mailer admits the personally devastating effect of Hemingway's final act: "Hemingway's death was cautionary to me. His suicide was as wounding as if one's own parent had taken his life" (*Spooky* 120). So pure was my affection, Mailer might say, Papa's suicide as a conscious act is beyond contemplation.

Mailer never maintains, as he does with *El Loco*, that proximity to this hero would diminish his adoration. Yet Hemingway's influence on Mailer is predicated upon the same masculine courage that drove the willful bullfighter, again and again, to coax his audience into mass euphoria. In *Advertisements*, Mailer announces Hemingway's preeminence with dignity, authority, and a sense of gravity perhaps reserved for no other author. And he does so using the metaphor of the *faena*, a matador's final passes at the bull just before the kill:

So, mark you. Every American writer who takes himself to be both major and macho must sooner or later give a *faena* which borrows from the self-love of a Hemingway style. Any reader who will let me circle back later, in my own way, via the whorls and ellipses of my knotted mind, to earlier remarks, will be entertained en route by a series of comments I have to make (not altogether out of the rhythms of Hemingway) on the man, on my contemporaries and on myself. ("First" 19)

Mailer goes on to praise Hemingway's acute powers of observation and the calculated care Hemingway exercised when crafting his role as the preeminent masculine artist:

For you see I have come finally to have a great sympathy for The Master's irrepressible tantrum that he is the champion writer of this time, and of all time, and that if anyone can pin Tolstoy, it is Ernest H. Somewhere in Hemingway is the hard mind of a shrewd small-town boy, the kind of boy who knows you have a

real cigar only when you are the biggest man in town, because to be just one of the big men in town is tiring, much too tiring, you inspire hatred, and what is worse than hatred, a wave of cross-talk in everyone around you. (19–20)

While Mailer also charges his hero with a lack of relevancy, an abandonment of moral duty as a late-career thinker, he realizes that that great deficit is countered by the man's impeccable reputation and sense of public self:

Hemingway knows this: for years he has not written anything which would bother an eight-year old or one's grandmother, and yet his reputation is firm—he knows in advance, with a fine sense of timing, that he would have to campaign for himself, that the best tactic to hide the lockjaw of his shrinking genius was to become the personality of our time. And here he succeeded. (20)

In Hemingway's unparalleled reputation, his ambition, his manly courage, Mailer finds the rationale for a concerted advertisement for himself. Not only can reputation slow down the audience to appreciate some masked meaning in a sentence perhaps accessible to the writer alone, but indeed the author's personality can make the difference between success and failure:

An author's personality can help or hurt the attention readers give to his books," Mailer maintains in *Advertisements*, "and it is sometimes fatal to one's talent not to have a public with a clear public recognition of one's size. The way to save your work and reach more readers is to advertise yourself, steal your own favorite page out of Hemingway's unwritten Notes from Papa on How the Working Novelist Can Get Ahead (21).

Once again Hemingway leads Mailer into the light of self-promotion and authorial egotism.

Yet some indelible cosmic force prevented Mailer and Hemingway from that historic meeting that would have allowed Mailer, finally, to size up himself with his literary antecedent. Perhaps it was a subtext of Mailer's own powerful character, a personal karma projected to keep away the great man

just as Mailer had wanted to keep away El Loco. Despite the early influence and the later powerful testament to Hemingway's preeminence, Mailer sometimes marginalizes Hemingway's influence on his work with parenthetical comments and under-the-breath asides. In a conversation with J. Michael Lennon, for instance, Mailer minimizes his appreciation for one of Hemingway's most characteristic books: "Hemingway meant a great deal to me," he maintains, "but I wouldn't say *The Sun Also Rises* is a large part of that. I read it in college, and like all college kids I was impressed by it. But there are other books that meant more to me then" (Lennon 141). Mailer, too, allows that his opinion of Hemingway's work changes from day to day and that the great man normally is not at all a persistent concern: "I think he's been very important as an influence on all American writers," Mailer points out in a 1955 interview with Lyle Stuart (*Conversations* 26) and reiterates in *Advertisements*, "even if like Faulkner they were stimulated to writing in the opposite and possibly greater direction. But just how I rate Hemingway is impossible to answer because each time I think of him—which is not that often—I find that my estimate of him goes up or down a little on the basis of the new thing I've thought" ("Sixty-Nine" 275).

In the "Postscript to the Fourth *Advertisement for Myself*," Mailer curiously recounts an attempt to contact Hemingway following the 1955 publication of *The Deer Park*. Mailer's account of the incident, along with Hemingway's eventual response, may be the closest we will get to a virtual sparring match between these two literary pugilists. Mailer begins by acknowledging both an admiration for Hemingway's strength and a disappointment for his weaknesses, and then announces himself as one of the few writers of his generation sharing with Hemingway a fundamental belief: that only the will to sustain courage can allow a person to become a writer of any import; that it's "more important to be a man than a very good writer" ("Postscript" 265). Always inclined to post yet another advertisement for himself, Mailer has the impulse to promote his reputation, too: "I could not keep myself from thinking that twenty good words from Ernest Hemingway would make the difference between half-success and a breakthrough. He would like the book, he would have to—it would be impossible for him not to see how much there was in it" (265). So Mailer tracks down Hemingway's address in Cuba and mails him a copy of *Park*. Worried about violating some cosmic law related to seeking connection, or "cheating life," Mailer inscribes the book to Hemingway in a manner intended to

preserve dignity in a situation courting defeat. He notes in his inscription that he is “deeply curious” to get Hemingway’s reaction to the book, but then offers an aggressive and profane rebuff, an advance punch to Papa’s jaw just in case the old man ignores Mailer’s outreach or marginalizes his literary authority:

—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. (266)

Mailer lets loose a second quick jab, a one-two punch apparently intended to provoke Hemingway if he were not irritated enough already:

—and since I suspect that you’ve 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. (266)

The supposed outrage buried within the novel, and highlighted here perhaps to hasten Hemingway’s affront, is little more than O’Shaughnessy’s admission that he had attempted to write a novel about bullfighting but had failed: “It was inevitably imitative of that excellently exiguous mathematician, Mr. Ernest Hemingway,” O’Shaughnessy confesses, “and I was learning that it is not creatively satisfying to repeat the work of a good writer” (Mailer, *Deer* 353). Did Mailer suspect that Hemingway would be miffed by being called good and not great? Or that Hemingway was a coolly calculating author rather than an inspired artist? Or perhaps that upstart writers should avoid Mailer’s early error and attempt to find, *ex nihil*, distinct voices of their own? The answer may be elusive but the challenge is clear: we both are accomplished artists, Mailer says, and you must treat me as an equal or suffer the consequences.

Ten days after Mailer sends the book to Hemingway, the parcel comes back by return mail, the “same wrapper and maybe the same string enclosing

the package. Stamped all over it was the Spanish equivalent of Address Unknown—Return to Sender” (“Postscript” 266). Mailer recounts the possibilities with an increasing sense of paranoia and wild speculation well inflated into the zones of comedy, even numbering possible scenarios in a virtual laundry list of existential worry. Maybe the address was wrong; maybe Hemingway has an ironclad policy against receiving unsolicited books; maybe Hemingway’s wife, Mary, previews the inscription and decides to save her husband from the affront. Perhaps Hemingway peruses the book and, afraid to make the commitment of a comment, engages local postal authorities to repackage the book in an approximation of its original wrapping, forge Mailer’s handwriting on the address label and ship it back, apparently unopened. Or even worse: Hemingway unwraps the book, reads the inscription, and perplexed by Mailer’s temperate curiosity tinged with straightforward aggression, rewraps the package, marks it with his own “Address Unknown” stamp, and sends it on its way back to Mailer’s doorstep. Both of the final two outrageous scenarios end with Hemingway enjoying a celebratory toast while anticipating Mailer’s shattered self-respect as he reclaims the rejected parcel (266–67).

Mailer ends the whirlwind account of his suspicions with—what else?—a boxing allegory, a spectacular recovery by Carmen Basilio during a televised match with Paddy DeMarco. Refusing to take an eight-count rest following a nasty knock-down by DeMarco, Basilio explains his reason: “‘I didn’t want to start any bad habits’” (267). Mailer alludes to the possibility that Basilio’s comment is apocryphal, but nevertheless leans on it as an emblem of his own masculine resiliency. Nevertheless the author comes clean about the personal blow to his dignity, treating his “Postscript” as a “confession”:

I must have carried the memory as a silent shame which helped to push me further and deeper into the next half year of bold assertions, half-done work, unbalanced heroics, and an odd notoriety of my own choice. I was on the edge of many things and I had more than a bit of violence in me. (267)

The truth of the matter is far less exciting than Mailer’s wildest fears and precisely fits his most mundane speculation: Hemingway in fact never received the package. He did, however, acquire a copy of *Advertisements* and

read Mailer's confession, and Hemingway's response is the basis for the only extant letter to Mailer above Hemingway's signature.¹

The letter, with its "Dear Mr. Mailer" salutation, is cordial and direct, certainly granting Mailer the respect he had looked for when Mailer mailed the inscribed copy of *The Deer Park*. Hemingway explains that packages sometimes take months to reach Finca Vigia San Francisco de Paula, Cuba, his home, or they never arrive at all. He graciously apologizes and assures Mailer that he would have written to express his positive opinion of the book. "As it was," Hemingway explains, "I bought it and read it while laid up in bed and still liked it and thought it had shitty reviews." All this must have been comforting to Mailer's own bruised vanity, but then Hemingway asserts his own literary position with a one-two punch of his own: "Do not remember any reference to me," he explains, "but have not taken references to me or me as a writer personally for a long time now." Hemingway in effect is telling Mailer not only that he did not read *The Deer Park* closely, but that he had not gone back to review the passage after seeing Mailer's explicit citation of the page number containing O'Shaughnessy's comment. Moreover, by taking the high road and not worrying about personal or artistic affronts, Hemingway points to the folly of Mailer's own hand-wringing confession, no matter how inflated for humorous effect. Real men don't worry about such things, Hemingway implies, and he councils so explicitly later in the letter: "Remember only suckers worry. You can't write, fuck or fight if you worry."

The letter ends with Hemingway instructing Mailer on courtesy and telling him not to respond to his correspondence, one boxer pushing another away after a close-range clinch. "I have no time to write letters with my work piled up and no time ever to be rude. I just wanted to write this to let you know I'd never received the book" (Hemingway). The match between two headstrong authors ends in a technical draw.

Hemingway's letter perhaps reveals less in its content than it does in the simple fact of its existence. Indeed, under the circumstances Hemingway had no obligation to address the incident at all. That he did respond, and with no other prompt than reading Mailer's comment in *Advertisements*, presumably demonstrates not only Hemingway's great goodness but also his admiration for the younger man's opinion and work. Expecting no response from Hemingway, Mailer no doubt received a much different letter than he might have otherwise anticipated, once again affirming Mailer's view of the complexity of the older man's personality. "What characterizes every book

about Hemingway I have read is the way his character remains out of focus,” Mailer notes in both *Spooky* and the “Preface” to *Papa*. This lone letter does little to clear up that image (*Spooky* 261; “Preface” xi).

For all his insistence on the slippery, scattershot nature of Hemingway’s character, Mailer at least twice acknowledges success at locating and revealing the root-being of this complex man. Once is in Morley Callaghan’s account of the Hemingway/Fitzgerald match-up and Hemingway’s subsequent outburst at being knocked down by a man who, in his opinion, was an inferior boxer. “For the first time,” Mailer writes in his review of Callaghan’s book,

one has the confidence that an eyewitness has been able to cut a bonafide trail through the charm, the mystery, and the curious perversity of Hemingway’s personality. One gets a good intimation of what was very bad in the man, and the portrait is reinforced by the fact that Callaghan was not out to damage the reputation—on the contrary, he is nearly obsessed by the presence of taint in a man he considers great. (“Punching” 13)

The second clear vision of Hemingway comes by way of the great author’s son, Gregory, and his personal memoir *Papa*. “He is there,” Mailer writes in the “Preface”:

By God, he exists. . . . and his contradictions are now his unity, his dirty fighting and his love of craft come out of the same blood. We can feel the man present before us, and his complexes have now become no more than his moods. His pride and his evasions have become one man, his innocence and sophistication, his honesty and outsize snobbery, his romantic madness and inconceivably practical sense of how to be outrageously romantic, it all comes through as in no other book about Hemingway, and for the simplest reason—the father was real to the son. (xii–xiii)

Mailer here might be confessing once again, admitting to his own duplicitous nature just as he confessed the subtext of wounded pride and contained violence following the receipt of that returned copy of *The Deer Park*. Mailer

may have seen, in Hemingway's reflection, the same complex mixture of courage and vanity, pride and ambition, moral righteousness and abandonment of duty that fueled his own abrupt ascendancy to accomplishment and fame. The literary son may have embraced, with honor and with love, the literary father.

Mailer indeed became the Hemingway for a new generation of writers, a model of masculine courage, adventurous physical appetite, and singular style. The correspondence between the two, although not a typical exchange of stamped-and-posted personal letters, at last provides insight into what Hemingway was and what Mailer would become. Marie Brenner, in a *New York Magazine* article on *Ancient Evenings*, describes an interview with Mailer in his Brooklyn Heights home in early 1983 when Mailer was sixty years old. The family is winding down from another busy day while Mailer moves around the kitchen, nostalgic, reminiscing about his long literary life and looking at a collage of photographs he made years ago, as if for the first time: "His assemblage features a photograph of Hemingway, bearded and gray, as round as a stevedore, posed beneath a moose head with an enormous antler span" (38). Below the moose is a picture of Mailer as a young man, just back from Paris in 1948, about to ascend the literary stage. In the photograph, Mailer is a skinny kid with frizzy hair and "ears out to Brooklyn" (38). Brenner's description of the pose resounds with the same comedic charm Mailer inflicted on *El Loco*, years earlier, in his revelation of an uncertain outsider about to captivate a crowd of weary and humorless aficionados. Mailer had committed an apparent photographic affront, merging images of two men separated by different physical ages and cultural generations, but in doing so affirmed the influence of one literary giant on another. "Look at that picture," Mailer remarks, perhaps contemplating the years of acclaim, honors, defeats, and downright scandal separating that shot from the man now standing with his family. "'God, how thin I was. Isn't it strange. I've grown into Hemingway's body. I think he was 60 in that photograph, too. How strange, how damn strange'" (38).

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NOTE

1. See pp. 17–18 of this number of *The Mailer Review*

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Boxing gloves, Norman Mailer's Provincetown living room. Photo by Bill Lowenburg.