NORMAN AND ERNEST

(EXIT MUSIC)

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Author's Note: Nearly four decades ago I wrote an essay, "The Long Happy Life of Norman Mailer," an ironic echo of Hemingway's Francis Macomber's split-second demise (Modern Fiction Studies, *1971*). *Norman Mailer's passing in 2007 inspired this revision of my premature "last words."*

HEMINGWAY'S SUICIDAL SHADOWS REINFORCED THE LITERARY TRUISM that Mailer was Papa's heir apparent for the postwar generation. In 1948 Hemingway was revisited in the guise of *The Naked and the Dead*. John Aldridge and other critics gave their blessings. At Hemingway's death, Mailer's eternal debt still echoed: "I shared with Papa the 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" (*Advertisements* 265). Even without such "advertisements," few readers, then or now, could ignore the surface similarities, so massive as to make a kind of Siamese twins out of Hemingway and Mailer.

Both men were exponents of lifestyles that almost push their writing off stage. Both took to notoriety that keeps time to gyrations of Byron in the raw. Mailer's summer action at Provincetown was a rerun of Hemingway's action at Key West and Cuba. Papa's conformation with the outdoors—bulls, fish, game—had its counterpart in Mailer's gestures at prize fighting, glider flying, hand wrestling. Both abided by the neo-primitive, a distrust of civilization and complication, a demand that man shift to the natural and simple and go back to the tough-guy earth. Females, usually, ended up as second class in fictive worlds that rocked with masculinity.

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With current American sexuality in flux, mostly spouts of neo-feminism, the Mailer-Hemingway flair for the art and life of the he-man makes for instant hate/love from the literary world. Legends-still-in-the-making cannot not wait for smug cultural certitudes. Future scholars will discover ultimate Mailer-Hemingway clarity. Much will depend on the vagaries of overall "Canon Esteem" and "Legacy Quotients." A more likely future scenario, both American and global, is, ZIP—near-zero books and readers, a literary dystopia. Already the times may be too much out of joint to include Hemingway and Mailer in the same slice of literary history after all their shadow-boxing with posterity ends.

But no such utopias or dystopias are yet here; but still lumping Norman and Ernest in a time capsule makes a generation gap look like a cultural chasm.

Such ongoing cultural and literary fireworks have already pushed Hemingway and Mailer into separate spheres of no-man's land. In the Hemingway canon, a thin slice of experience repeats itself. Heroes look and sound alike. A code emerges with an inner order. Various settings, moods, and actions almost blur, as if popping from the same narrow but deep bag of ideas and themes. And there is that prose style, unique, that brooks no imitation. Despite all the ado about his writing of hyperaction, violence, madness, and confrontation with the void, Hemingway's work survives as giving off a sense of unity, coherence and simplicity. Ultimately, there exists a rapport with the natural and the individual. All such trademarks of Hemingway end with Mailer, whose writing features a series of non-heroes without a code. Instead of Hemingway's mannered serenity, a fictive world "clean and well-lighted" as a foil to the outside void, Mailer lets the outside chaos shape his fictive world. As a chameleon of American letters, Mailer seldom repeats himself. It is either change for the sake of change or, more likely, an attempt to mark time with the headlong rush of American history. Unlike Hemingway, whose culture was ripe for "a separate peace," Mailer's culture seems ripe for a separate war.

Language takes to different styles depending on whether the writer's strategy is peace or war. Hemingway sees language as a way of disengaging from an institutionalism that brings to the individual the effects of a constant condition of war. Silence becomes an index to inner peace, the kind "that passes all understanding," the best to be had during an age given over to Nada. The answer to complication is simplification—to corruption, purification. This

is how Hemingway's language works—as a tactic of survival for those at one with the code. His hero's rapport with relative silence—tight-lipped, cool-gestured—reveals one key to how experience can be made more simple and pure. Much of the hero's pullout from the "messy" establishment rides on verbal omission. Words have become noisy lies, products of the cerebral and the institutional taboos of the Hemingway world. The magic in Papa's language rests on the ability to keep sensation a one-man show. Hemingway's ear for cutting experience to the bone gives him a one-man authorial voice and explains why he so mastered the short story, an accomplishment not repeated in the Mailer canon with its fewer and lesser Dreiser jumbo-sized stories.

But for Mailer, for decades on a kaleidoscopic search for authorial voices, language poses an altogether different challenge. Words must echo history. Instead of the Hemingway sound of disengagement, Mailer's language leads to a confrontation with the stuff of American culture, past and present. Since culture continues to undergo shock, language as communication is pushed to its limit. This results in language complicated and experimental. Unlike Hemingway with his one-man style, Mailer has turned into an everyman. Versatility sounds throughout his canon: to read Mailer's novels—from the neo-naturalism of *The Naked and the Dead* to the mixture of bland essay and flip allegory in *Barbary Shore* to the aesthetics of magic and mood in *An American Dream* to the pop dynamics of *Why Are We in Vietnam?* and to the "simple declaratives" Hemingway echoes of *The Executioner's Song*, and to *Ancient Evenings*, a time capsule with Melville operatics; and to elevated Le Carré and Clancy genre diction of *Harlot's Ghost*; and later "near novels"—*Oswald's Tale* or neo-classic "Creative Nonfiction"; and *The Gospel According to the Sun* with its show-stopping "Divine First Person Narrator," and the Mailer literary finale, *The Time of Our Time*, a six-decade creative tome, is the antithesis of Hemingway's clean well-lighted pocket dictionary. As a bonus, the stuff of Mailer's prose is a kind of rhetoric that rocks with grace and wit. It befits a mod Jeremiah who aims to win over readers to the word, an image that has made Mailer a modern master of the essay. His is the language of involvement, the opposite of Hemingway's voice at the fringe of American experience, almost underground. No other American writer but Hemingway has made it so big with so small a vocabulary while Mailer, in his attempt to interpret what makes his culture tick, uses a vocabulary that pumps without beginning to end.

This dissimilarity between Hemingway and Mailer holds when the focus shifts from language to hero, from voice to face. The Hemingway hero enters as a fixture. His face fits the contour of a generation more letdown than lost. His is masculinity plus with a next-door name. He sports a big wound (scarring body and soul) but puts down any self-pity. With heavyweight thought in hock, he leads with his body, seeks out a life of sensation with much coolness and courage until hedonism turns into his religion. If Nada still bothers, the hero counters with an ironic lip and enough cosmic stoicism to insure belief in selfhood. Such a lifestyle clings to the Hemingway hero with little variation—Nick Adams, Jake Barnes, Frederick Henry, Robert Jordan, and others all resembling the same Papa with the same message. The code to be emulated enables an individual to erect a no-man's land between himself and the establishment. At least there is survival with dignity as Hemingway's heroism passes on a vital advertisement that even if God is dead, man, alone, is very much alive.

Any such hope fades with what passes for heroism in the Mailer canon. Here a hero is defined as someone to be emulated in terms of cultural survival. But America is cancerous, too sick a culture to justify automatic survival and thus more ripe for villainy than heroism. As a result, Mailer takes to a diverse and tentative approach to heroism that had turned out non-heroes, antiheroes and, at best, heroes-in-training. The wartime culture of *The Naked and the Dead* offers five soldiers—Ridges, Goldstein, Valsen, Hearn, and Croft—whose heroics are halfhearted and part-time. In *Barbary Shore*, the theme of mankind drifting toward barbarism squelches any vital heroism. As for *The Deer Park*, Sergius O'Shaugnessy (the cool one) and Marion Faye (the cold one) are experts in styles of sensibility that mark them as villains in a sickly sentimental land. Stephen Rojack, in the shadow of hipsters and "White Negroes," acts as a "philosophical psychopath" who exposes the nerve of cancer in *An American Dream* and ends more the murderer than savior of his culture: a happening in language serves as makeshift heroism in *Why Are We in Vietnam?*

An omniscient "D.J." (disc jockey) in a way-out version of the "Voice of America" spews out a one-way dialogue at the heart of cultural abyss. Any reader, bothered by books without overt classic heroes, can tune in or turn off the Word as hero. In his socio political work—*The Armies of the Night* and *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* and *Some Honorable Men*—Mailer playacts as hero-narrator, camouflaged with all the tonal acrobatics of self as third

person (shades of Joyce's *Stephen Hero* and *Portrait*). And there is Gary Gilmore, the Maileresque philosophical soulful All-American Murderer, and, ultra pop celebs, Ali and Marilyn, and super-stud artists or writers, Picasso and Henry Miller; and the "historic" Lee Harvey Oswald, the eternal "suspect" J.F.K. killer, subtitled, "An American Mystery." But there is no mystery hero in Mailer's idiosyncratic tome, *Time of Our Time*. Just open it and out will rush a one-man's "The American Language" in all its "Baroque Glory." Yet, there remains a Manichean-based "hero" mystery—Mailer's final project and protagonist. During his last days, Mailer envisioned a trilogy centered on Adolf Hitler, his generation's consummate human evil. No human heroism here, just villainy, with a Nazi-SS point of view, and no counter American in sight. Finally the Mailer hero has stopped wrestling with tangible American culture. All in all, there is little chance (so sayeth posterity) that Mailer will duplicate Hemingway's feat of making a mode of heroism and his name inseparable.

Hemingway's and Mailer's split over the hero carries over to their authorial tone. Unlike Mailer, whose rhetoric of self sends out an array of attitudes throughout his work, Hemingway usually lets his authorial voice play it straight. Whether fiction or nonfiction, Hemingway relies on an expertise of total experience to cut down on tonal ambiguity. When it does occur—playful or serious or in between—such ambiguity clings to the work or to the reader and rarely refers to Hemingway himself. One authorial mask that Papa rejects is that which undercuts the authority of self, especially any tone that smacks of self-parody. Papa, at bottom, is serious. As Carlos Baker and others have pointed out, Hemingway as man often takes to the gross lie, a way to make his life as jazzy as his art. But once the claims of art intrude, he subscribes to a law of authenticity, fact or pseudo-fact done up in a style that tells it the way it is. Autobiography passes into fiction. As for nonfiction, fact becomes the final word. No matter how well he could hunt, fish, fight bulls or men, Hemingway's greatest and most lasting gift is with words whose main power derives from an authority of self.

But America's current increasingly reader-free, flashy-iffy pop culture for decades ran counter to any one-man expertise as a serious writer. But the expatriate Hemingway's fame occurred in the early 1920s, with America on the brink of worldwide literary acclaim. Mailer's overnight Byronic literary debut with his "Big War Novel" happened with America on the brink of "culture shock" that erupted in the 1960s. Quickly the Hemingway-Mailer time

frames differed. As Norman sweated over a disappointing *Barbary Shore*, Ernest was surfing to literary heights with *The Old Man and the Sea*. Clearly, literary times were out of joint. Mailer's new radicalized America superseded any possible tonal uniformity with Papa. See *Advertisements for Myself*, the Mailer opus with underlined homage to the new "Cultural Papa," mass media. Granted, Hemingway knew how to create notoriety (becoming an instant celebrity in his own time) by doing "tricks," his way, cool and sly, with the voracious media. But by Mailer's time, mega-media (no less) demanded excess, derring-do, and out-and-out egomania. Mailer complied with inflated prose and personality. In Hemingway's day, a writer's life could be (should be) derring-do, but a writer's craft (his art) should be highly disciplined and aesthetically grounded. But by Mailer's time, derring-do had to be both on and off the page.

Advertisements introduces the necessary hard sell. Mailer's tonal grotesqueries range from self-exalting arrogance to self-pitying confessions. What also shapes such a personality plus is a style of existentialism that leads Mailer into "those areas of experience where no expert is competent" (qtd. in Kaufmann 111). More at home with the radical, the tabooed and the mysterious, Mailer veers from the Hemingway rapport with a clean well-lighted slice of experience. Unlike Papa's assimilation of autobiography, Mailer makes do with bits and pieces of his life revised to fit his fiction. This makes for writing spiced with sound effects of a pseudo-self. During the media craze for privacy, Mailer finds that aping Papa and restricting the big lie to real life is superfluous. Notoriety is automatic once an American writer makes it big. That is the iron law of mass media. As a result, the authorial voice in Mailer's nonfiction runs on an overload of tone—arrogant, perceptive, naughty, defiant, confessional, scatological, humble, profane, candid, and so on. Such a barrage of attitudes blurs the images of Mailer as man and Mailer as writer. At times, readers cannot distinguish between the authentic and the phony and between the sincere and the put-on, as if Mailer is a kind of writer on a tightrope straddled between wisdom and nonsense. Irony, Hemingway's key tactic for insulating the me from the not-me, can become in Mailer's hands a radical extension of self, from the heights of adulation to the depths of parody. Such is the price—seer or clown?—that Mailer pays for his refusal to settle on expertise not heavyweight enough to confront the ills of his culture.

The fact that Mailer is more the heavyweight thinker than Hemingway points to how the American milieu has grown evermore a mix of the high-

tech and lowbrow: the result, the current obsession with the "touchy-feely," and the chic media creation, the celebrity writer, billed as the "Popular Culture Philosopher." Hemingway's earlier aversion toward "Big Thinking" stems from his believing the roots of American experience to be (at that late date) still tied to the frontier. Thus he sees the urban and industrial side of the American Twenties as transplanted Europe, foreign to what really makes Americans tick—nature as the ultimate test for man, alone. Papa's resultant flair for the neo-primitive and raw sensations does away with the intellectual style of art. Ideology weighs down fiction. Thought, even in nonfiction, should be cut to the bone. The intensity of self, tuned to the body, not the mind, becomes Hemingway's touchstone for art.

But Mailer takes art far outside the heart of self into the glare of history, American style. Neo-primitivism, in the Mailer style, also enshrines the role of sensations but only as an adjunct to a more vital mission of the artist—"making a revolution in the consciousness of our time" (*Advertisements* 17). Art, as a style of revolution, feeds on ideas, especially those that expose the underside of American experience, the roots of orgy, orgasm, psychopathy, violence, suicide, and the rest of the cultural abyss. Hemingway's frontier—as an index to American experience—is art that is dead-end. In its place, and saturating the entire Mailer canon, stands the image of America as world-wide number one, a modern Rome, the undisputed shaper of current history, the key to why Mailer's writing remains a "peculiarly American statement." It also makes Mailer (despite his protestations to the contrary) one of America's arch-intellectual writers of all time. Hemingway's standard of art has gone into reverse.

Even those themes—sex, violence, death—which look to be Hemingway hand-me-downs are worked over by Mailer with a scope and depth never attempted by Papa. Hemingway's mode of sex, he-man's "pleasures on the run," strikes a Mailer reader as a throwback to the pristine sex of yore. Of course, the Hemingway hero does not make love to unpolluted maids on horsehair sofas. Nick Adams meets his quota of perverts, and Jake Barnes does the can-can with occasional whores as expatriate homosexuals cruise Left Bank bars. But nowhere in the Hemingway canon is there anything that matches Mailer's souped-up probe into the guts of current American sexuality on a 3-D online "XXX" rated romp. In his earlier fiction, Mailer takes apart autoeroticism, onanism, and narcissism, a prelude to the analism, orgy, incest, "apocalyptic orgasm," and other erotic cousins of violence and

murder in *An American Dream* and *Why Are We in Vietnam?* In the latter, Mailer takes Hemingway's dictum that the real obscene words are institutional abstractions (such as "honor" or "patriotism") to a linguistic point of no return. "Vietnam" sports so-called obscenities by the hundreds before it is finally mentioned twice on the last page. "Vietnam," for Mailer, is the only dirty word in the book. The sexual and cultural revolution in American letters has put Mailer's style of sex almost outside Hemingway's shadow.

The same holds for the theme of violence. Hemingway, as expected, snubs cerebral comment and sticks to dramatic action. His hero finds violence the key unit of sense experience, the most natural way of discovering the sources of one's own feeling. When he confronts violence, all concerns about the not-me (all those institutionalized obscenities) fade; in their place, there is only a lust for survival, a passion for life, self-contained, unique. Philip Young and others have traced Hemingway's obsession with violence to "traumatic neurosis" or a permanent shock after a wartime Big Wound, which makes for suicidal urges that must be diverted and purged through the destruction of other things. This may well be true, but Hemingway stays silent and lets his critics supply a rationale to his style of violence.

Again, Mailer does the expected, doing Papa one better. Not content with just dramatizing a mode of violence, Mailer adds his own ideology. In "The White Negro," he projects from hipsterism the "philosophical psychopath" or "the antithetical psychopath who extrapolates from his own condition, from the inner certainty that his rebellion is just, a radical vision of the universe which thus separates him from the general ignorance, reactionary prejudice, and self-doubt of the more conventional psychopath"(*Advertisements* 343). Once this psychopathy is set up as a revolutionary force against the establishment, Mailer focuses on how philosophic psychopaths create "a new nervous system for themselves" (345). This sounds like a see-all composite of Rojack, Gilmore, Oswald, and other hip derring-do "tough guys." Hemingway's noted—"killing is not a feeling that you share"—passes into the complexity of Mailer's "authentic violence," an existential way of seeing the roots of emotions during a violent act. The ancient intimacy of violence of "*et tu, Brute?*" is updated to explain the zest for love and the reign of violence in a modern Rome. In America, killing (contrary to Papa) has become a last ditch way to share a feeling that love will conquer all.

Those changing times have also revised the concept of death, long a thematic trademark of Hemingway and Mailer. Death as terminal experience

is what the Hemingway code is all about. Existence before or after death, no such nonsense! Courage spiced with stoicism is all the hero can muster against his ultimate encounter with nothingness. *Carpe diem* will, in the meantime, keep Nada at bay. But Hemingway's cosmic blackout does not hold for Mailer, who rejects old-time God-is-dead and seeks a mode of eschatology that fits modern times. In Mailer's existential theology, God is much alive but "not all-powerful; He exists as a warring element in a divided universe" (380). Old-time Manichaeism takes on a modern look as Mailer sees drama flare up at the hub of the universe: "If God and the Devil are locked in an implacable war, it might not be excessive to assume their powers are separate, God the lord of inspiration, the Devil a monumental bureaucrat of repetition" (*Time* 1233). The 2007 Mailer/Lennon's "An Uncommon Conversation," entitled *On God*, offers final Mailer words on his "iffy" theology. Of course, such an existential vision makes death a mere workable mystery. Unlike Hemingway's pinpointing death as a one-way ultimate experience, Mailer runs variations on the concept of death—from the "naked knowledge of wartime to the sophisticated techniques of the concentration camps, death "unknown, unhonored and unremarked" (*Advertisements* 338). He most resembles Hemingway when he approaches death from an existential standpoint—death as the most exact way of defining the self. But in his later work, Mailer passes beyond Papa's orbit into the mysticism of death "as sea change, voyages, metamorphoses" (*Cannibals* 328). Rojack's "private kaleidoscope of death" is as much his as his culture's (*American Dream* 7). Hemingway's use of death as the ultimate definer of a man still appeals to Mailer, but not as much as death as a crucial definer of a culture.

The one area that creates a sophistication gap is political thought. Next to Mailer, Hemingway comes out naïve. His journalism has its quota of surface accounts of revolutions gone astray. The action spills outside America onto the world scene as Communists and Fascists vie with each other. Hemingway's emphasis stays pragmatic; his is the politics of action, immediate and tangible, with issues clear-cut. As for speculation and theory, Papa declares "a separate peace" from all that political claptrap. But Mailer's salvos on the ills of America shift into total war. What stays fixed as a target is America's political horror—totalitarianism. The writer as political warrior now employs new literary weaponry, heightened nomenclature, "The Novel as History," known earlier as "Art Journalism," and more recently, "Creative Nonfiction." But in 1968, the award-winning *The Armies of the Night*, Mailer's

"hybrid novel" still remains a literary revelation. Writers, on the cultural or political beat, now can do it many ways—as fact or fancy, in either first or third person, or other multiple tones and moods. (Hemingway, if still around, would have either smirked or shuddered.) But not media-crazed 1968 America. Mailer (also Vidal and Capote) achieves media stardom. The new Mailer calendar now features big-time television appearances as sage and seer; and, in print media, numerous essays, articles, interviews, and other "talking points" literary ephemera. And, of course, multi-books on politics (*Some Honorable Men*) or pop culture happenings, the Marilyn books and the Ali fights. And don't forget Mailer's "live" campaign for the New York City mayoralty. Politics and culture literature, at such protean times, entirely blur. (The literary world once thought that History itself cannot be invented.) Hemingway's world is dead. But not for Mailer. A few years before his death, he interrupts his massive Hitler biography, to publish a slim soft-cover, entitled *Why Are We at War?* (2003). (No Vietnam—this time, Iraq.) Until the end, Mailer remains a literary warrior and, perhaps a history-maker.

Gone are Papa's days when fiction—in the hands of a master—seems stranger than truth and, not surprisingly, with Mailer's canon in an orbit unknown to Hemingway's, this is also true of aesthetics. Critics agree that aesthetic thought is not one of Hemingway's strong points. Besides the oft-resurrected "principle of the iceberg" of *Death in the Afternoon*, Hemingway usually limits aesthetics to his own problems as writer and gray-bearded advice to young writers. Papa's dicta include the high premium on honesty and imagination in fiction, with an accent on the sensuous and concrete, a muscled version of Henry James' "felt life." The abstract and other cerebral fallout he relegated to the essay. For the writer, action is rooted in his inner life; its highest quality turns into the stuff of fiction. To do any more with aesthetics would be superfluous to Hemingway, who learned early how to key up and measure out his life for his art, a tactic that later times denied to Mailer.

If Papa (like Byron) woke up in the twenties to find himself famous, Mailer wakes up in a postwar milieu intent on converting overnight fame into instant notoriety. *Advertisements for Myself* brims with personality jitters as Mailer confronts a media-minded America given over to pushing writers into the limelight, Horatio Algers as entertainers. Show business and cutthroat competition are a writer's touchstones for survival in an electric

age and Mailer reacts with an electric personality. Unable to do smooth autobiographical fiction in the Hemingway manner, Mailer begins living, rather than writing novels. This results in aesthetic stance and thought that hover between the sublime and banal. The overload of egocentricity, courage, and honesty that Mailer expends on his public image puts his aesthetics outside past norms of separating a man from his work, an artist from his mission. For Hemingway's "iceberg," he substitutes a metaphor of writers as "pole vaulters"—"a being who ventured into the jungle of his unconscious to bring back a sense of order or a sense of chaos. . . . If a writer is really good enough and bold enough he will, by the logic of society, write himself out onto the end of a limb which the world will saw off. He does not go necessarily to his death, but he must dare it" (*Cannibals* 108). As a mode of literary survival and self-preservation, Mailer projects on the national scene a panorama of aesthetic possibilities—self images of the writer as prize fighter, as army general, as a cultural spokesman, soulful revolutionary, and so on—a razzle-dazzle public image whose strategy aims to "influence the history of my time a little bit" (*Advertisements* 269). Such a grandiose goal seems within reach, thanks to the literary establishment's belated taking up with Mailer. But if some critics still insist that Mailer's image as a writer ends up more clown than sage, Mailer would blast back with the ironic fact that his inner life is already a matter of public record in *Time* or *Life* or Talk Radio or *Vanity Fair* or blogs or Google, and that Hemingway's "principle of the iceberg" sounds quaint during a time given over to disappearing books and "brain modification" and ubiquitous computers and "identity theft." Mailer also eclipses and excels Papa in the realm, usually reserved for academe and prestigious publications—serious literary criticism. The Mailer canon sports many tidbits on the craft and tribulations of "The Writing Life." Typically, Mailer, as literary critic, is candid and blustery, usually softened by surplus charm and wit and, an unusual gift, serendipity, and, at bottom, some genuine literary heft and depth. Thus far, this phase of Mailer has been either ignored or underrated. His "Some Thoughts about Writing" has been collected and published in 2003, aptly entitled *The Spooky Art.* By contrast, Hemingway's life seems the more "spooky."

As for present and future biographers of Hemingway and Mailer, they can only note a growing incompatibility in lifestyles. Mailer's career, especially its later stages, points up the absurdity of any conscious imitation of classic Hemingway. Even the two World Wars, supposedly Hemingway's and

Mailer's twin springboards, make for little harmony. In the South Pacific, Private Mailer with his cool rifle and hot dream of being first with the big postwar novel looks bush league next to the legendary adventures of a warrior-Papa who (as an over-aged World War II war correspondent) still takes a lion's share of frontline action around Paris and elsewhere. Hemingway's "big" wounds—237 mortar fragments from World War I plus countless late injuries—look like high romance when set against the black eyes and bruised fists and other more prosaic variations of Mailer's peace "in our time." Mailer's world—Dachau, Hiroshima, Watts, man on the moon, 9/11, and Iraq—is tone-deaf to the Byronic rumblings of a writer whose shadow loomed over bullrings, safaris, and big and little wars. This disparity in lifestyles comes out in their fiction. "Big Two-Hearted River," which features Nick Adams—a chunk of composite Hemingway—the wounded outdoor man who embodies the American loner's last rapport with nature, passes into the Mailer canon as the surrealistic autobiography of *Why Are We in Vietnam?* where an American eclectic voice chimes in and beeps out an overkill world of Heinrich Himmler. A second go-round with Papa's classic life was off the American literary map, and this Mailer well knew.

But Mailer and the rest of the literary world had to ride out Hemingway's grotesque finale, a suicide that made his life in retrospect read like terminal writer's block. Prior to the end, the Hemingway style as a viable force in American letters had already been eclipsed, even Papa's twilight triumph in *The Old Man and the Sea*, despite its fine prose, still reeked with the last-ditch happenings of hero, code, and the rest of Hemingway's message, tied neatly with upbeat humanism. An old Cuban fisherman's stoic victory over a big fish sounded hollow to Mailer's generation, more in tune with the earlier Hemingway whose fictive world was rooted in an encounter with Nada without any fishy *deus ex machina.* A big fish or any ready made index to identity was a metaphysical luxury out of sight for Mailer's generation. Papa was human after all. Like most men, Hemingway has lacked the ultimate "grace under pressure," that of growing old. The Hemingway message in the sixties had a last-minute relevancy for the middle-aged. Or, as Mailer said—in regard to *An American Dream* and how he cast Rojack (age 44) in the Hemingway mold—a reader "really enjoys Hemingway" when middle-aged, when ripe for "that attack on masculinity that comes about the time when life is chipped away" (qtd. in Kaufmann 124–125). Mailer was speaking, three years after a death that had shocked both him and America:

> I think Ernest hates us by the end. He deprived us of his head. It does not matter so much whether it was suicide or an accident—one does not put a gun barrel in one's mouth, tickle the edge of an accident and fail to see that people will say it's suicide. Ernest, so proud of his reputation. So fierce about it. His death was awful. Say it. It was the most difficult death in America since Roosevelt. One has still not recovered from Hemingway's death. One may never. (*Presidential* 103)

Then, Mailer tried to clean up a "messy" suicide by substituting an existential ritual that made Papa's "deed . . . more like a reconnaissance from which he did not come back." Mailer's imagination saw Hemingway each morning "go downstairs secretly in the dawn, set the base of his loaded shotgun on the floor, put the muzzle to his mouth, and press his thumb into the trigger. There is a no-man's-land in each trigger." To enter here became Hemingway's (a skilled hunter's) final expertise, to press as far as possible, to recover "the touch of health" by daring to "come close to death without dying." Mailer ended by suggesting that this may not be suicide: "When we do not wish to live, we execute ourselves. If we are ill and yet want to go on, we must put up the ante. If we lose, it does not mean we wished to die" (104–105). Mailer's version of Hemingway's death (not meant for official biographies) was his way of "recovering" from a literary fact—that Papa's suicide (even by any other name) had instantly converted all his life into an American tragedy, a total experience that any other American writer would find suicidal (no joke intended) to follow.

Norman Mailer didn't. He must have concluded that Hemingway's death reflected how void of grace American old age still is.

Mailer died on November 10, 2007, and his dying provided some telling final words on the Mailer-Hemingway connection. (I should add that during Mailer's final three years, I was periodically privy to Mailer and to his inner circle. I have either seen or heard firsthand some of this Mailer epilogue.)

At the 2005 Norman Mailer Society conference, in Provincetown, members were offered souvenir tokens, key holders attached to a miniature pair of finger-sized red and white boxing gloves, with the caption, "Norman Mailer Takes on America." At that time, Mailer, in his early eighties, was already visibly aging. He might have amended that caption to read, "Norman

Mailer Takes on Norman Mailer." His opponent was his body. His mind, probably from enriched family DNA, thus far, had decided to "sit this bout out." His body, subject to decades of excess, was finally saying "enough." It also more and more whispered such dire sounds as "bedridden" and "house arrest." This also meant no more moneyed celebrity outings for the octogenarian writer, still the reputed "Super Papa," and also the blue chip "Good Family Man" who (unlike Hemingway) befriended ex-wives and supported the offspring. Still, "not enough," said his stubborn body, after decades of supporting a literary celebrity too often "off the page" and "out" on the edge—what some might call "crypto-suicidal."

Was this an existential Mailer-Hemingway combo attempt to "fix" the bout? Would Norman do an Ernest encore?

Some of the early signs said "either way." The Mailer mind was on the march. Alzheimer's was not welcomed here. Each day he religiously assaulted the *New York Times* "toughie" crossword puzzles, usually to his advantage. Much of his time was still devoted to various writing projects—that steady grind along with other mental feats. The Mailer mind, like those deathless counterparts in *Ancient Evenings*, seemed steely hip and immune to termination.

Other signs played more overt Papa music. What resounded from Mailer's refusal to become housebound was his battle with the dreaded wheelchair (echoes of Hemingway's "Old Man" and "Big Fish"). Reports out of his Provincetown home told of his herculean attempts to stay robust and mobile. Such were his indoor military manners, but what about the more showy outdoors and the public image of Mailer-being-Mailer? What result was battleground vanity? Using a "walker" was a no-show, most unbecoming for the (another Papa echo) "undefeated." Instead of the old folk's "walker," the Mailer choice—the "telling" tough guy sleek twin dark walking canes and yes, more Hemingway grace notes: Papa's matador with his code-blessed minimal artsy cape. Lastly, the public Mailer's outer countenance: massive stress and pain, notwithstanding, the sustained and composed image of a laconic stoic, a muted reminder of Hemingway's "grace under pressure."

The end-result: a surprising engaging, elderly avuncular Mailer, once again stage center. I witnessed in a South Florida auditorium, its audience hushed, on seeing the featured speaker's laborious Mailer reading Mailer, spiced with meaty but cozy cultural nuggets, the focus on his current favorite, the mystery of creative writing, or *The Spooky Art.* There was an

encore (surprise), for those fortunate admirers able to get up close and personal and seeing, almost touching, healthy gray hair, and, still a muscled-toned face, and that prime-time Irish glint and smile. Had those giddy 1960s made a comeback? But this was still February 2004, and those up close soon realized that today's feature performer had but one imperfect ear, and that his body was locked in last ditch combat.

Yet, there was some leftover Mailer celebrity magic, especially, when the Mailer Society met in Provincetowntown, where the Mailers (Norman and wife, Norris Church) held an open house. These parties were an instant follow-up of Mailer's live dramatics at the nearby, legendary Provincetown Playhouse. Now our host was ready for closet drama. Such stage hopping rejuvenated and morphed octogenarian Norman into a vintage host. He stationed himself room-center, seated, with his twin parked canes. He was the hub, the party's only main artery. About one hundred guests took turns, passed by and pressed flesh, hearts, and minds. All later agreed that the Mailer mind remained indomitable. At mid-party, guests could believe in miracles—endless Mailer parties, what with Norman, intermittently, swigging whiskey, flirting with young, sexy, guests, still dispensing loads of rapturous charm and wit, but (below the party's radar) the party-room's one indomitable brain knew that a "war" was going on.

What those partygoers did not see was the hands-off sign on Mailer, what the insiders, supposedly respected, a warning temporarily deactivated, for this time, under this roof. On these open house occasions, guests, including some of his own family, and, of course, neighbors and friends and Society members, in short, this onetime extended family could be hands-on. Hence, those wishful images of the host as an ephemeral "Life of the Party," reinforced by the reputed Norman Mailer, the good Family Man (no Hemingway overtones here). But those partygoers, oblivious to "hands off," did not see what the usually mannerly Mailer did when I tried to help him up a steep building ramp. His twin canes miscued. He lost his balance and I, instinctively, grabbed and held him and he glared and pushed me off, saying, "Never do that again." I nodded and obeyed. His strategy for survival was his and nobody else's. Few, if any, knew the totality of Mailer's wrestling with death.

In his final weeks, amid media whispers of overnight Boston hospital "check-ups," Mailer was "failing." Dire Provincetown reports told of morning and midnight tussles with newspaper crosswords and other mind-boosters, and sweat over the ongoing Hitler book. There were in-house

endurance feats, such as prolonged torturous twin-caned inching, alone, to use the bathroom. All indoor and outdoor activity had become an obstacle course. The last battle alert read: his body, situation hopeless.

Hemingway did his own mop-up. Suicide, no less. And where was his beloved code? His end was not clean and well lighted. His last act, instead, was darkly done and downright messy. Mailer's version of Papa's final act was creative, revealing much more about Mailer and the extremities of the "Spooky Art." Hemingway's suicide remains more mystery than fact. Instead of a lengthy tell-all letter, a shotgun in the mouth was his final word. America's famed literary Papa, at the end, seemingly sought a separate peace.

Mailer, instead, remained Mailer.

One of the most eloquent maxims on confronting one's own death remains: "Do not go gentle into that good night"—so said Dylan Thomas with his battle cry: and Norman Mailer, seemingly, was "going" in the midst of a one-man war (Thomas 791). No separate peace here. Mailer ended, an existential warrior more and more resembling an aging and defiant Nick Adams but certainly not this hero's creator. On November 10, 2007, in a Boston Hospital, Mailer closed his eyes for the final time, and no Hemingway in sight.

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