

DEATH, ART AND THE DISTURBING: HEMINGWAY AND MAILER AND THE ART OF WRITING

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IN A 1964 INTERVIEW PUBLISHED IN *THE PARIS REVIEW*, Norman Mailer cites the authors he has been influenced most by as James Farrell, F. Scott Fitzgerald, E.M. Forster, John Dos Passos, John Steinbeck, Thomas Wolfe, and, of course, Ernest Hemingway (43). Significantly, almost twenty years later, Mailer admits in a 1982 interview for *The New York Times* that his “ambition” as a writer is no longer to “try to reach Americans with a book the way Hemingway could reach them with a book, because I believe that’s beyond my powers”; “Hemingway’s style” he says, “affected whole generations of us. . . . I don’t have that kind of talent” (3). In these interviews Mailer does not elaborate on how Hemingway’s style and technique “affected whole generations” of writers or his own art, yet a closer look at Mailer’s philosophy of writing and his self-proclaimed American brand of existentialism reveals that Hemingway’s influence on Mailer’s art reaches far beyond the realm of style and technique. In fact, just as Hemingway’s philosophy of writing and art correlates to what has been labeled as Hemingway’s own, self-developed “characteristic philosophy” of life, Mailer’s philosophy of writing and his self-created brand of existentialism are also inevitably intertwined (de Madariaga 18). Yet in order to fully understand the depths and dimensions of Hemingway’s influence on Mailer’s art and thought, it is essential to first examine what founds each author’s philosophy of writing and artistic goals, then examine how they put their philosophy in motion in the form of literary art.

HONEST, TRUE AND PURE: HEMINGWAY AND MAILER'S ART OF WRITING

At their core, the art of writing both Hemingway and Mailer espouse is founded in their aspirations to, as Hemingway puts it, "tell honestly the things I have found true" (*Death* 1). Echoing Hemingway's standards, Mailer believes a writer must write "to the limit of one's honesty" ("Hazards" 399). But what exactly does this mean? Consider Hemingway's advice to friend and contemporary writer John Dos Passos in a March 1932 letter. Hemingway writes, "Keep them people, people, people, and don't let them get to be symbols . . . Keep on showing it as it is. If you can show it as it really is you will do good" (354). According to Hemingway's standards, good writing is achieved by writing honestly and thus capturing life "as it really is" (354). Mailer expresses a similar standard for good writing: "It proves amazing," Mailer writes,

how many evil reviews one can digest if there is a confidence that one has done one's best on a book, written to the limit of one's honesty, even scraped off a little of one's dishonesty. Get to that point of purity and your royalties may be injured by a small welcome, but not your working morale. ("Hazards" 399)

If one achieves this level of honesty Mailer refers to, this "point of purity," the author succeeds in showing life "as it really is" ("Letter to John" 354). Significantly, Hemingway also addresses this idea of honest writing reaching a "point of purity" when he defines what he calls "the real thing" in the opening pages of *Death in the Afternoon* (2). Hemingway writes,

In writing for a newspaper you told what happened and, with one trick and another, you communicated the emotion aided by the element of timeliness which gives a certain emotion to any account of something that has happened on that day; but the real thing, the sequence of motion and fact which made the emotion and which would be as valid in a year or ten years or, with luck and if you stated it purely enough, always, was beyond me and I was working very hard to try to get it. (2)

Hemingway makes an important distinction between his journalism and his art and suggests that if a writer-artist depicts life honestly, states it "purely

enough,” captures the “motion and fact” of life as it really happens, then honest, real, universal, and enduring emotions and experience will be conveyed to the reader (2). Yet, for both Mailer and Hemingway, honest writing not only provides the foundation for good writing, but founds the morality of their philosophy of art, a sentiment reflected in Mailer’s statement that “we might quit [this discussion on writing] with the agreeable moral instruction that one must do one’s best to be honest” (“Hazards” 399). Similarly, Hemingway tell readers in the opening pages of *Death in the Afternoon* that although they must create their own standards—ranging from moral to artistic—he strives in his writing “only to tell honestly those things I have found true about it”—it referring to the Spanish bullfight and, correlatively, art and writing, life and death, and the violence, brutality, and cruelty of the bullfight and life (2).

Honest writing is the foundation for good writing by Hemingway and Mailer standards, yet both authors have been accused by critics of being obsessed with death, violence, and the darker aspects of life. Hemingway answers: in order to write honestly and convey life “as it really is”

You can’t do this without putting in the bad and the ugly as well as what is beautiful. Because if it is all beautiful you can’t believe in it. Things aren’t that way. It is only by showing both sides—3 dimensions and if possible 4 that you can write the way I want to. (qtd. in Baker 153)

The way he wants to write? Hemingway explains this directly in the following description of his goals as a writer: “I’m trying in all my stories to get the feeling of the actual life across—not to just depict life—or criticize it—but to actually make it alive. So that when you have read something by me you actually experience the thing” (qtd. in Baker 153). Similarly, Mailer defends his focus on “the bad and the ugly” in his writing as bound to his purpose and goals as an artist. Mailer writes,

I suppose that the virtue I should like most to achieve as a writer is to be genuinely disturbing and by this I mean no easy reliance upon material which is shocking or brutal in itself, but rather effects which come from being truly radical, from going to the root of what is written about, so that life—which I believe is always

disturbing if it is indeed seen—may serve as a gadfly to complacency, institution, and the dead weight of public taste. (qtd. in Foster 40)

Mailer's admission that he tries to capture the "disturbing" by "going to the root of what is written about" and capturing life "as it really is" (Hemingway, "Letter to John" 354)—which "is always disturbing if it is indeed seen"—not only echoes Hemingway's philosophy of portraying "the bad and the ugly as well as what is beautiful" (qtd. in Baker 153), but Mailer's focus on broadening readers' perceptions through art also recalls Hemingway's focus on teaching his readers how to see the "danger," "cruelty," and the emotional experience of "life and death" in the bullfight as mere "parts" of the "whole" of the art of Spanish bullfighting (Hemingway, *Death* 2–9). For both Hemingway and Mailer, writing honestly not only assists in the creation of the emotional experience the writer hopes to capture or convey in his/her writing, honest writing can also alter readers' perceptions, "serve as a gadfly to complacency, institution, and . . . public taste," and thus bring readers to a heightened awareness of self and world (qtd. in Foster 40). Here we find what is at the core of Mailer and Hemingway's artistic purposes: to shake us, wake us up, make us think, and make us change.

According to both Hemingway and Mailer, their focus on the disturbing aspects of life—including war, death, violence, murder, suicide, and animalistic brutality—stands at the core of both authors' philosophies of writing and of their artistic goals as writers. They strive to shake readers out of their normal ways of seeing, feeling, thinking, and being. In fact, they strive to get to the core, "the root," "the purity," "the real thing," and present the "disturbing" (qtd. in Foster) and real in order to capture the "motion and fact" (Hemingway, *Death* 2) that creates the emotion, bring readers to experience the thing for themselves, and thus bring readers to see life, themselves, and their worlds more "clearly" and as a "whole" (8–9).

Writers, as Hemingway and Mailer suggest, have a responsibility to their art, their "working morale," and their readers to try to get to the core of experience and show readers how to see self, world, life, and even art more clearly, honestly, and truly—without illusions (Mailer, "Hazards" 399). In fact, in the opening pages of *Death in the Afternoon*, Hemingway urges readers to rely on their own "experience and observation," to "only feel those things they actually feel and not the things they think they should feel"

(5, 10), to feel “what you really felt, rather than what you were supposed to feel, and had been taught to feel” (2), to create their own standards—both moral and aesthetic—and come to see the bullfight (and correlatively life, death, and art) more “clearly” and as a “whole” (4, 8–9). Significantly, Hemingway’s focus on the writer’s purpose as clarifying Americans’ vision of self and world is Mailer’s stated artistic purpose as well. In *Cannibals and Christians*, Mailer succinctly states this Hemingwayesque philosophy in his claim that the highest purpose of literature is “to clarify a nation’s vision of itself” (98). Mailer writes,

It is, I believe, the highest function a writer may serve, to see life (no matter by what means or form or experiment) as others do not see it, or only partially see it, and therefore open for the reader that literary experience which comes uniquely from the novel—the sense of having one’s perceptions deepened, and one’s illusions about oneself rendered even more untenable. For me, this is the highest function of art, precisely that it is disturbing, that it does not let man rest, and therefore forces him so far as art may force anything to enlarge the horizons of his life. (qtd. in Foster 40)

Both Hemingway and Mailer’s goal of clarifying “a nation’s vision of itself” is consciously focused on capturing and conveying real emotion and experience that shakes readers out of their normal ways of thinking and being. This, according to Hemingway and Mailer, opens readers to differing perspectives, forces them to be honest with themselves, and helps them to break all illusions of self and world (Mailer, *Cannibals* 98). Yet this philosophy of writing in which the author takes responsibility for enlarging readers’ “horizons” through presenting life honestly, “as it really is” (Hemingway, “Letter to John” 354), is not exclusively bound to Hemingway or Mailer’s own, self-developed philosophy of writing and art.

Hemingway and Mailer’s philosophy of writing and their artistic striving to make, as Mailer puts it, “a revolution in the consciousness of our time,” is founded in existential notions of creating art and becoming an artist (*Advertisements* 17). For existentialists, to become an artist, an individual must break through all illusions, see self and world more clearly, get to the core or “root” of life, and thus see life “as it really is” (Hemingway, “Letter to John”

354). The catalyst for this perceptual shift, according to existentialists, is profound emotional experience. Specifically, the existentialists' study of the intense emotional experience that accompanies facing death, an experience that shakes individuals out of their normal ways of being, seeing, feeling, and thinking, is an essential part of their philosophy of creating art and becoming an artist.

According to the existentialists, it is through the study of death that individuals recognize the importance of seeing life "clearly" and as a "whole" (Hemingway, *Death* 2, 9) and come to understand the urgent necessity, as Hemingway puts it, of making "something of his own," of creating "art" and becoming "artist" (100) or "author" of one's own life, meaning, structure, content, and commitments (Yalom 8–9). The study of death reveals to individuals, according to existential scholar Charles Guignon, the importance of seeing their lives as a "whole" (Hemingway, *Death* 278) and the importance of "creating their lives as 'works of art'" (Guignon xxxv). Significantly, the profound emotional experience that brings individuals to see their lives as a "whole" is bound to the realization that the structure of human nature is a synthesis between the temporal and the eternal—what Hemingway refers to as "the feeling of life and death and mortality and immortality" (Hemingway, *Death* 3)—in which the individual moments of one's life (the temporal or parts) require an overarching unity or meaning (the eternal or whole) to give authentic meaning to one's life and/or work (63). It is through facing up to one's own certain death—and the uncertain hour and day of one's death—that the individual comes to the realization that he/she is responsible for creating his/her life and work as art by expressing the eternal in his/her nature, something Hemingway envisions as the enduring emotional experience of the bullfight, something he strives to convey through his writing and an essential aspect of his existential-oriented philosophy of creating art. This existential focus on the study of death, the realization of the temporal and eternal nature of human existence, and the profound emotional experiences that bring individuals to the realization that they must express the eternal in their nature form the basis of both Hemingway and Mailer's philosophy of writing and their goals as writer-artists.

HEMINGWAY AND MAILER: THE ART OF WRITING EXISTENTIALLY

Where Hemingway seeks to express the eternal through his art by capturing "the real thing, the sequence of motion and fact which made the emotion

and which would be valid . . . if you stated it purely enough, always" (*Death* 2), Mailer envisions as "the existential state, of the novel writer" in which the writer-artist strives to capture and convey enduring emotion and experience and is constantly faced with the death of his art ("Hazards" 393). Whether it is the death of the writer's abilities, the death of his art via his critics, or the actual "existential state" the writer-artist must enter to capture and convey the eternal through his/her art, for Mailer, and as we can see in *Death in the Afternoon*, for Hemingway, the professional writer-artist, like Hemingway's matador, must face up to his/her own death—albeit existential death—on a daily basis in order to create art.

As both Hemingway and Mailer directly and indirectly tell their readers, their philosophy of writing is an existential one; it is a philosophy of art in which the writer-artist strives to write honestly and show life "as it really is" by presenting the "genuinely disturbing" and "the bad and ugly" in order to express eternal, enduring human emotion and experience through their art ("Letter to John" 354; qtd. in Foster 40; qtd. in Baker 153). If they write "purely enough" (Hemingway, *Death* 2), according to Hemingway and Mailer, what they present in their art will be felt by readers—and correlatively their fellow writers and artists—and bring them to the realization that they, too, must take responsibility for what their lives and their work or "art" are adding up to. Importantly, imbedded in both authors' philosophy of writing is a social-mindedness and a focus on individual responsibility not normally attributed to these writers. But both Hemingway and Mailer do present a philosophy of writing and a philosophy of life through which they attempt to teach readers to learn "how to live in it"—in the increasingly modernized, post-war culture that favors conformity over individual expression and thwarts the development of the creative spirit—by presenting an art of living for their times (Hemingway, *Sun* 152).

Considering Hemingway and Mailer's didactic focus on clarifying Americans' visions of themselves and their aspirations to make "a revolution in the consciousness" of their times, it is not surprising that both authors were often disappointed when critics accused them of being morbidly obsessed with death and of endorsing violence through their works (qtd. in Glenday 86). "Hemingway," according to Carlos Baker, "was dismayed that many reviewers found *Death in the Afternoon* marred by a morbid 'preoccupation with fatality' and a tendency to 'he-manish posturing'" (243). Mailer was frustrated by critics of *An American Dream*, who accused him of being "no

more than an American pornographer, socially irresponsible, and acutely immoral” (Wenke 98). What these critics miss is that it is this death-obsessed view that founds their philosophies of writing and life and their aspirations as existentialist artists. The artist, in Hemingway and Mailer’s view, must strive to convey real, disturbing emotions and experiences in order to shake readers out of their everyday ways of being. Like the existentialists who “rose in revulsion against the corruption of values in capitalist society” and whose “basic conviction was that the evils it perceived were to be ascribed to the very concept and existence of society,” Hemingway and Mailer expose the inadequacy of American capitalism in an increasingly commercial and consumer culture and reject the capitalistic values, identities, and norms prescribed by and reinforced through the increasingly oppressive social and political structures of American culture (Finkelstein 293–94). Therefore, both Hemingway and Mailer’s choice of “disturbing” and “ugly” subjects taken alongside their existential-oriented philosophy of writing and art not only points to these authors’ intense concern for how war, death, and violence have changed the face and heart of their native nation, but reveals a social-mindedness often overlooked in their art (qtd. in Foster 40; qtd. in Baker 153).

To this day critics still denounce Hemingway and Mailer’s choice of subjects—war, murder, rape, violence, madness, suicide, and senseless brutality—when, in fact, their choice of these subjects is consistent with existential philosophy of art and the concerns of the existential artist. In short, what Hemingway and Mailer’s philosophy of writing reveals is that they are intensely concerned with the direction our increasingly conformist and inauthentic American culture is headed: towards the death of the individual, the death of individualism, and the death of the vitality of the creative spirit (Adams 4). Their philosophies focus on how to combat the feelings and forces that oppress the individual psyche and thwart individual growth and development. They show and tell readers to break from all illusions of self and world—they try to “clarify” our vision—and show us that we must refuse to be complicit. What they present is an art of writing that is also an art of living for their times, one in which the individual or artist must take responsibility first for what his/her life or art is adding up to, and then for what his/her culture is and is becoming. Nowhere is this more evident than in Hemingway’s *Death in the Afternoon* and Mailer’s *An American Dream*, works a handful of critics—including Lawrence Broer, John Killinger, Kurt

Muller, Michael Reynolds, Laura Adams, Michael Glenday and Richard Poirier—argue represent a shift in each author's art and reflect the creation of their own, self-developed philosophies of life and death, philosophies that they will carry with them throughout the rest of their lives. These works, taken together, provide a key to the depth of Hemingway's influence on Mailer's art and thought. Throughout *An American Dream* Mailer subtly references and invokes Hemingway, the man, Hemingway's characters, and espouses what is at the core of the philosophy of life, death and art Hemingway focuses on throughout his manifesto on bullfight, art and writing, *Death in the Afternoon*.

An American Dream not only reveals Mailer's indebtedness to Hemingway's existential-oriented philosophy of life, death, and art, but also reveals how Mailer puts this philosophy in novelistic motion is consistent with Hemingway's philosophy and approach to art. For example, Mailer employs the "ice-berg" theory of writing Hemingway espouses and enacts throughout *Death in the Afternoon* (*Death* 192). What we find below the surface is Mailer's creation of a Hemingwayesque character—Stephen Richards "Rojack"—whose war experience, study of death, and attempts to create the feeling of "life and death" recall and reverberate the characteristic philosophy on life, death, and art Hemingway espouses in *Death in the Afternoon* (192). In the opening pages of *An American Dream*, Mailer invokes both Hemingway and Mailer's characters and reveals his indebtedness to both Hemingway's art and his early brand of existentialism by presenting Rojack's view toward death, his study of violent death, and of his own wounding and near-death experience as a continuation of Hemingway's study of life and death in *Death in the Afternoon*.

BELOW THE SURFACE: THE DEPTHS OF HEMINGWAY IN AN AMERICAN DREAM

From the opening pages of *An American Dream*, Hemingway is there. It begins with Rojack's reference to his World War II wounding on "a particular hill in Italy" (Mailer, *American* 2), an experience that echoes Hemingway's own war experience on the Italian front, as well as that of Hemingway's Jake Barnes (*The Sun Also Rises*) and *A Farewell to Arms*' Frederick Henry's near-death experiences and woundings on the Italian front. Rojack's wounds—to his thigh and pelvis—are the wounds Frederick Henry, Jake Barnes, and Hemingway himself received during their World War I service in Italy.

Rojack's injury—"a minor crack and small split in the girdle of the pelvis"—recalls Jake Barnes' groin wound, in particular (6). Yet, unlike Barnes' wound, Rojack's wound does not leave him physically impotent, although Rojack admits that his wounding leaves him psychologically and existentially impotent. Rojack writes, "Where many another young athlete or hero might have had a vast and continuing recreation with sex, I was lost in a private kaleidoscope of death" (7). Significantly, Rojack's pelvis is split, which is not only suggestive of Rojack's split selves—what he distinguishes as his "public" and his "lost in a private kaleidoscope of death" selves—but his is a wound, unlike that of Barnes' wound, which can heal.

Part of Rojak's public self is formed after Rojack returns from the war, is awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, and is "used" by the Army as a "public relations" agent (6). Rojack, like Hemingway, who is awarded an Italian Medal for Valor, returns from the war to a hero's welcome bearing the "trace of a distinguished limp" and, like Hemingway, the first American wounded on the Italian front. Rojack, too, "was a curiosity after all, a most special product; I was the one intellectual in America's history with a DSC and I spoke in public with a modest warrior's charm" (6). But Rojack admits that years later he still "could not forget the fourth soldier" he killed in Italy. Rojack writes,

His eyes had come to see what was waiting on the other side, and they told me then that death was a creation more dangerous than life. I could have had a career in politics if only I had been able to think that death was zero, death was everyone's emptiness. But I knew it was not. I remained an actor. My personality was built upon a void. (7)

Rojack's realization that during his time in politics, "Congressman Stephen Richards Rojack, Democrat from New York," he was merely "a young actor" playing a "part" and he must "depart from politics before [he] was separated from [myself] forever," suggests that Rojack comes to the realization that his "personality was built upon a void" (7). As existential scholar Charles Guignon puts it, "our social roles are really anonymous, 'anyone-roles'"; we see that in "playing our normal public roles, we are not really *ourselves*" and that we are ultimately "responsible for making something of our own lives" (198). Although Rojack does not specify when he became a student of

existential ideology, he suggests his need to understand and face up to his war experience and face up to his role as an “actor” for the Army, his “role” as a Congressman (Mailer, *American* 7), and as an actor in a marriage he envisions to be “a five-act play” (10), which is the catalyst for his examination of his own life and death and his Hemingwayesque study of death via the forum of the executioner.

Like Hemingway, the death-haunted Rojack not only studies his own near-death experience and repeatedly faces up to the possibility of his own death via his suicidal impulses, but he, like Hemingway, also publishes a study of violent death. Hemingway chooses the bullring, since it is “the only place where you could see life and death—that is, violent death now that the wars were over,” whereas Rojack chooses to study violent death in the forum of the executioner, the only place Rojack can study death now that his war is over (Hemingway, *Death* 2).¹ It is no coincidence that Rojack’s study of violent death focuses on differing forms of execution. It is a means of violent death that Hemingway mentions he would like to study in the opening pages of *Death in the Afternoon*. After telling readers he never had the opportunity to study “an execution by firing squad, or a hanging,” Hemingway writes that he had “never been able to study them as a man might, for instance, study the death of his father or the hanging of some one, say, that he did not know and would not have to write of immediately after for the first edition of an afternoon newspaper” (3). Rojack’s study, “a psychological study of the styles of execution in different states and nations—death by guillotine, firing squad, by rope, by electric chair, by gas pellets,” is an extension of Hemingway’s study of violent death in the bullring in *Death in the Afternoon* (Mailer, *American* 8).² Further, Hemingway’s mention of his desire to “study the death of his father,” or more accurately, the violent death by suicide of his father, lies just below the surface of Rojack’s study of his own suicidal impulses throughout *An American Dream* (*Death* 3).³ Particularly in light of Hemingway’s violent death by suicide, which Mailer himself struggled to understand, Rojack seems to be haunted by the same demons Mailer imagined as Hemingway’s. Yet, what is most significant about Rojack’s study of violent death and suicide is the implication that he, like Hemingway, seeks a place where he can see, study, understand, and write about “the feeling of life and death and mortality and immortality” he first experienced during the war (Hemingway, *Death* 63).

Rojack’s study of violent death via the executioner and his study of

existential psychology taken together are the basis for Rojack's "thesis that magic, dread, and the perception of death were the roots of motivation" (Mailer, *American* 8). Although Rojack's belief in "magic" is a variation on Hemingway's and the existentialist's philosophy of death, the concepts of existential dread or anxiety over facing up to one's own certain future death and the resulting impact the study of one's own death has on life and art are consistent with both Hemingway and the existential vision of life, death, and art. Because the study of death, to use Søren Kierkegaard's words, gives the individual's "life force as nothing else does," death teaches the individual "not to fear those who kill the body but to fear for himself and fear having his life in vanity, in the moment, in imagination" (Kierkegaard 83, 77). This "fear" of having lived an inauthentic life—the reason Rojack sees himself as a "failure"—is the unspoken catalyst for Rojack's realization that he is merely an "actor," that his "personality was built upon a void," and that if he does not struggle free from his public roles, he will be "separated from" his self "forever" (Mailer, *American* 7). This urgency to live life more authentically points to the impact the thought of death has on one's life and work. It brings the individual to the realization that the individual is wholly "responsible for—that is, is the author of—his or her own world, life design, choices, and actions." It motivates the individual to create his/her life and work as "art" (Yalom 8–9). It is this existential awareness that Rojack has lived life "in vanity" (Kierkegaard 77), falsely, by American standards of happiness and success, that brings Rojack to conclude that he "had come to the end of a very long street. Call it an avenue. For I had come to decide I was finally a failure" (Mailer, *American* 8).

Rojack's realization that he is a "failure" brings him to the admission that his "parts" did not add up to a self-authored, authentic "whole" (Mailer, *American* 18), and sentiment that recalls Hemingway's view that each "part" of the bullfight—and correlatively of one's art and one's life—"if made truly" will reflect the "whole" (*Death* 8–9, 278). Rojack writes,

At any rate, such were my parts. Without Deborah they did not add to any more than another name for the bars and gossip columns of New York. With her beside me, I had leverage . . . But for myself the evidence made no good case: probably I did not have the strength to stand alone. (18)

For the existentialists, as well as Hemingway and Rojack, each part signifies each separate moment of our lives or the temporal aspects of our lives. The “whole” signifies the overarching unity and meaning we give to our lives—the eternal. It is the expression of the eternal in our lives that is not only difficult, but it “comes only with a struggle” (Guignon 7). This struggle is envisioned by some existential thinkers as a violent process through which an individual must wrench him/her “self” free from the cultural and social forces that thwart and corrupt identity, smother individuals in conformity, and destroy the individual’s creative spirit. Significantly, Rojack suggests throughout the opening chapter of *An American Dream* that Deborah is this inauthentic force, his unifying structure, his “whole,” which he envisions to be “fused” at the “center” of his being (Mailer 28).

What Rojack suggests through his realization that Deborah—the embodiment of the corrupt, oppressive force of American culture—is “fused” at the “center” of his being is that with Deborah as his “center,” life is merely “a series of means-end strategies” (Guignon 196). That is, Deborah serves and has served as the means to Rojack’s inauthentic dreams. “I thought the road to President,” Rojack writes, “might begin at the entrance to her Irish heart” (Mailer, *American* 2). Her money, status, power, family, and connections are the basis from which all of his successes, post-war, stem. As his “center”—at the “center” of Rojack’s dreams and aspirations in life—Deborah, like the culture Rojack is beginning to reject, threatens annihilation of Rojack’s true “self.” Rojack couples this fear of annihilation of his “self” with his literal fear of Deborah on the night Rojack visits Deborah in her bedroom: Rojack tell us she “was violent” (23), and “I was afraid of her. She was not incapable of murdering me” (25).

Thus Rojack’s crisis over Deborah occupying his “center” is an existential crisis, a fear of existential annihilation of the “self.” He knows he must wrench himself free—which “comes only with a struggle”; he knows he must free his “self” from its false, unifying force: Deborah and the inauthentic aspects of the culture she represents (Guignon 7). This existential fear of the death of the self, like Rojack’s fear that he is not able to wrench himself free from Deborah, becomes a literal fear of death when they engage in a physical struggle during which enraged Deborah charges Rojack “like a bull” (Mailer, *American* 30).

MAN VERSUS BULL: ROJACK AS HEMINGWAY'S MATADOR

The most direct and most obvious reference to Hemingway in *An American Dream* is in the scene when Deborah admits to Rojack of a bullfighter lover in her past. Significantly, Deborah's admission that she was once in love with a bullfighter comes at the end of Deborah's almost methodical attempt to psychologically emasculate Rojack.

"God, you're a whimperer," said Deborah. "Sometimes I lie here and wonder how you ever became a hero. You're such a bloody whimperer. I suppose the Germans were whimpering even worse than you. It must have been quite a sight. You whimpering and they whimpering, and you going pop pop pop with your little gun." (23)

After Deborah calls him a "whimperer," questions his courage, and questions his masculinity for having an affair with a weak woman, a "sparrow" (25), she confesses to sex acts with other lovers, then boasts of her affair with a great man—a bullfighter, she says (28). Deborah admits,

"There was one man I never told you about. I never told anyone about him. Although once, somebody guessed."

"Who was the man?"

"He was a bullfighter. Marvelous ripe man."

"You're lying."

"Have it your way."

"It wasn't a bullfighter."

"No, it wasn't. It was someone far better than a bullfighter, far greater. . . . As a matter of fact, it was the finest and most extraordinary man I ever knew. Delicious. Just a marvelous wild feast of things. I tried to make him jealous once and lost him." (28)

Those familiar with Hemingway's canon will recall Brett Ashley's affair with bullfighter Pedro Romero and Jake Barnes' physical emasculation. But Rojack, unlike Barnes, suggests he cannot "take it" and slaps Deborah in the face. "[T]he blow," Rojack writes, "caught her on the side of the ear and knocked her half out of bed." Deborah's response, Rojack writes, "She was up

like a bull and like a bull she charged" (30). Here, Deborah's psychological emasculation of Rojack escalates to a physical threat when Deborah tries, as Rojack puts it, "to find my root and mangle me" (30). Faced with existential and literal emasculation, Rojack, like the matador, delivers a "cold chop" to "the back of the neck," which drops Deborah, like the bull, "to a knee" (30). Rojack then hooks his arm around her neck, yet Deborah, Rojack tells us, "had almost the strength to force herself up to her feet and lift me in the air," an image that recalls Hemingway's description of the bull tossing the matador (30). At this moment Rojack kills Deborah like a bull: he cracks her neck like the bull's spinal column is severed in what Hemingway describes as a clean kill (Hemingway, *Death* 81, 249). This clean kill brings Rojack, like the matador, to transcend the material world, which Rojack suggests through his vision of "heaven," the "new grace," and the "honorable fatigue" he describes (Mailer, *American* 31–32).

Because Deborah threatens Rojack's "self" literally and existentially, he violently struggles with her in order to wrench himself free from the world in which he has been complicity absorbed and struggles to free himself from his absorption in the "they"—from the corrupt and oppressive American cultural values, identities, and norms Deborah represents—and free himself from her oppressive, corrupting, and pervasive force. He must reclaim his "self," his "center" (28). Existential scholar Jon Mills envisions this process of freeing one's self from the "they" as a "struggle," a "violent process" through which the authentic self "finds itself in its lostness" and recovers "its authenticity in its freedom." Rojack not only illustrates this process, but during his literal physical struggle with Deborah he feels he must kill her to reclaim his "center," achieve his freedom, and thus begin to form his own, authentic basis for being (28).

Throughout Rojack's description of his physical struggle with Deborah, what Rojack experiences is a struggle for his freedom. He describes the mental picture he sees as his arm tightens around her neck: "I had the mental image I was pushing with my shoulder against an enormous door which would give inch by inch to the effort" (31). Rojack writes,

I released the pressure on her throat, and the door I had been opening began to close. But I had had a view of what was on the other side of the door, and heaven was there . . . and I thrust against the door . . . and *crack* the door flew open and the wire

tore in her throat, and I was through the door, hatred passing from me in wave after wave, illness as well, rot and pestilence, nausea, a bleak string of salts. I was floating. I was as far into myself as I had ever been and universes wheeled in a dream. (31)

What Rojack sees on the other side of the door—"heaven"—is his freedom from the "they" and from Deborah who stands at the "center" of his Being (28, 31). What he catches a glimpse of is his freedom from his lostness in the "they." What he sees is "heaven"—his freedom from earthly forces and constraints—and the authentic possibilities for the "self" that transcends its thrownness in a corrupt, oppressive and stifling culture (31). Hemingway describes this feeling and this experience occurring at "the moment of truth" in the Spanish bullfight, the moment when life and death exist simultaneously for the audience and the matador to feel and see (*Death* 68).

Rojack's description of the "feeling of life and death," his vision of "heaven," and the feeling of freedom he achieves, recalls the spiritual experience Hemingway describes of the "moment of truth" or the "moment of killing" in the Spanish bullfight. According to Hemingway, this moment in the bullfight is charged with "emotional and spiritual intensity," and "takes a man out of himself . . . makes him feel immortal while it is proceeding . . . [and] gives him an ecstasy, that is, while momentary, as profound as any religious ecstasy" (206). It leaves you, Hemingway writes, "as empty, as changed and as sad as any major emotion will leave you" (206). Rojack suggests a commensurate feeling and experience in his description of coming out of himself as "floating" and emptying himself as "wave after wave" of "hatred . . . illness . . . rot and pestilence" leave him (Mailer, *American* 31). He tells us he was "as far into" himself as he "had ever been" (31) and his "flesh seemed new" (32), since by freeing himself from his false "center"—Deborah—he transcends his inauthentic, everyday ways of being by literally killing what is fused at his "center" and frees himself to form his own basis for Being (28). Further, Rojack envisions his experience as a religious one, an extension of what Hemingway describes as "the feeling of life and death" (*Death* 3) charged with emotional and "spiritual intensity" that reaches "religious ecstasy" (206), a feeling that becomes a vision of "heaven" in Rojack's experience (Mailer, *American* 31). It is this feeling "of life and death and mortality and immortality" that Rojack and the matador, as well as Hemingway and Mailer, strive to create in their life and art (Hemingway, *Death* 63). Through-

out the novel, Rojack is in the midst of this process, and his struggle for freedom is the life and death struggle of Hemingway's matador, an artist who faces literal and existential death on almost a daily basis. Whether Rojack is studying executions, struggling with Deborah, or poised on a balcony or parapet over the abyss of meaninglessness that is the American city below, Rojack repeatedly faces death in an attempt to create and study the intense emotional and spiritual experience he first felt during the war, an experience, many critics argue, that founds Hemingway's own intense interest in the study of death in general, and the bullfight, in particular.

Significantly, *An American Dream* both begins and ends on a Hemingwayesque note: after many attempts to create authentic meaning for his life by making a commitment—as husband to Cherry and father to their imagined child—Rojack wanders the desert mourning Cherry's death and the loss of authentic possibilities for himself. Without a viable base for meaning in his life and without a base from which Rojack can begin to build an authentic community in America now that Cherry is dead, Rojack leaves America—the vast wasteland of the desert and the corrupting American cities, the only environments in America now that the frontier is closed—and heads for an environment capable of nurturing growth and expression of the creative spirit. He departs for the green breast of Guatemala and the Yucatan. Like Hemingway, who favors Spanish culture, the national art of the Spanish bullfight, and the virgin land of Spain to the overcrowded, modernized face of America and American culture, Rojack heads for Guatemala, another home of the bullfight, and toward the unspoiled jungles of the Yucatan.

Although few critics may agree, *An American Dream* ends optimistically, at least for the individual, but America does not fare as well. Rojack rejects the increasingly empty and materialistic values of his culture, shows us that he refuses to be complicit anymore, and becomes an artist, a writer, the author of his own story in the form of *An American Dream*. But the America that stands in both Rojack and Mailer's imagination seems hopelessly lost to continue to stifle individual desire and expression and smother individuals in conformity until they can no longer act in any moral way. For Mailer, America is destined to continue to make individuals “think there's something wrong” with them if they are “not on the big capitalist team” (*The Big Empty* 128). In Mailer's works, his disdain for the inauthentic parts of American culture sound loud, but you can often hear Hemingway's whisper in the background.

Considering how influential Hemingway was on Mailer's art and thought, it is surprising that Mailer gave up on trying to "reach Americans with a book the way Hemingway" did (Mailer, "Mailer" 3), when Mailer's philosophy of art, his own brand of existentialism, and *An American Dream*, in particular, meet all of Hemingway's criteria for what makes an artist a "great artist" (Hemingway, *Death* 100). Hemingway writes,

The individual, the great artist when he comes, uses everything that has been discovered or known about his art up to that point, being able to accept or reject in a time so short it seems that the knowledge was born with him, rather than that he takes instantly what it takes the ordinary man a lifetime to know, and then the great artist goes beyond what has been done or known and makes something of his own. (100)

Although Mailer's philosophy of art and his existentialism are indebted in their foundations to Hemingway's philosophy of life, death, and art, Mailer "goes beyond" the founding philosophies Hemingway espouses and creates "something of his own" (100): he creates a religiously charged, American brand of existentialism suited to meet the needs of *his* historic moment and creates an art that is social-minded and didactic with aspirations to both shock and heal his readers. As Hemingway does for his generation, Mailer presents an art of living for his times through which he attempts to shake us, wake us up, and teach us "how to live in it" (Hemingway, *Sun* 152).

The decades of criticism and praise Hemingway has received for creating his own characteristic philosophy, his own philosophy of life, death and art and for trying to teach readers "how to live in it" (152) has earned Hemingway the titles of "guide" for his generation (Kvam 29) and "prophet of those who are without faith" (20). Although Mailer's philosophy and art are heavily indebted to Hemingway's existential vision of art, life, and American culture, Mailer, as Hemingway advises, "uses everything that has been discovered or known about his art" and creates "something of his own": he creates his own American-based existentialism and puts it in motion in the form of literary art. By Hemingway's standards, Mailer becomes, with *An American Dream* in particular, a "great artist" (Hemingway, *Death* 100). In my estimation, this earns Mailer a place next to Hemingway as a seer and a healer, as a "guide" and a "prophet" for *his* post-war, post-modern lost generation (Kvam 29, 20).

NOTES

1. Rojack, like Hemingway, finds a forum in which he can study death now that his war is over. Both study “killers”: Hemingway studies the matador and Rojack, the executioner. Rojack’s choice to study execution is not explained, but it is suggested that he studies death in an attempt to see, feel, and understand the emotional experience of life and death, the “real thing” which is conveyed, as Hemingway tells us, to the audience in the bullring, and which Rojack and the audience can observe during differing styles of execution (*Death* 2).
2. Rojack’s claim that his study of death would “turn Freud on his head” echoes what Susan Beegel identifies as Hemingway’s rejection of Freudian interpretations of the Spanish bullfight in *Death in the Afternoon* in favor of an existential interpretation of the experience of death and of the Spanish bullfight (Mailer, *American* 17).
3. Hemingway suggests an association between the matador and suicide, and Rojack expands his “study” to include his own inclinations toward suicide (*Death* 20). The key for both Hemingway and Rojack: the study of death is essential to the creation of art and life as art. Like Hemingway describes the matador, Rojack faces death on a daily basis and attempts to create “the feeling of life and death” (3). In the wake of Hemingway’s suicide, it is not coincidence that Rojack is suicidal. Plus, now that the war is over, the only place Rojack can study death in America is by climbing onto a balcony.

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