BECOMING MAILER: VIOLENCE, EGO, GUILT, COURAGE

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Norman Mailer in Context
Maggie McKinley, Editor
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READERS MAY APPROACH *NORMAN MAILER IN CONTEXT*, Maggie McKinley's edited collection of articles on the eminent chronicler of American politics, history, and culture, with bemused trepidation. After all, some may mumble, haven't we already seen five biographies lining bookstore shelves in the past forty years? Have we not read a few—if not all—of this challenging writer's forty-or-more books of fiction, journalism, and public musings, most of them still here, on these same bookstore displays? Were we not expected to read, for our undergraduate English course, his 1967 novel *Why are We in Vietnam*? And didn't this man Mailer piss off an entire audience back in 1972, when we went to university auditoriums to hear him talk, only for him to expect that we sacrifice ourselves to a pre-lecture screening of his 1970 film *Maidstone*? And didn't he read his poetry then, too? Casual readers may thumb-flip the book's 400 pages and shrug, academics may be impressed by the publisher, Cambridge, before moving on to shelves filled with Foucault and Thomas Sewell. Even confirmed Mailerians, most of whom are members of The Norman Mailer Society and read the generally-hefty critical journal, *The Mailer Review*, may question the book's value. Isn't Mag-

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gie McKinley president of that Society, and don't most of the scholars in her book also write for the *Review*? *Haven't we read all this before?*

No, we haven't, at least not from this perspective, with this much passion, or in this *context*, as McKinley might insist. The organization of the book by topics relative to Mailer's life work—from literary influences to politics to gender to legacy, among others—provides both the opportunity to concentrate on one aspect of the author's expansive influence and intellect, or to gain new insight into his perception of twentieth century American culture by reading the book *in toto*, from cover to cover. McKinley's collection provides context for the biographies by allowing contributors to incorporate biographical elements whenever appropriate, and goes beyond single-author books on Mailer by providing thirty four diverse voices, most from scholars who have studied Mailer and published on his works and days for decades. This is a cohesive, mature statement on Mailer and, perhaps, the one opportune publication that will define the condition of twenty first century Mailer scholarship while providing a basis for renewed interest in the author's work. In short, this book is a culmination of every Mailer study before it and an augury of what may come. *No, we haven't read all this before.*

McKinley's introduction, itself an important contribution, cites themes consistent throughout Mailer's career, including existentialism, democracy, and masculinity, to name a few. Public figures in the arts, religion, and politics—John F. Kennedy, Gary Gilmore, Adolf Hitler, and others—formed a cohort of personalities that Mailer returned to for inspiration and intellectual advancement throughout his life. Mailer was "a chameleon of sorts," McKinley maintains, "constantly reinventing himself as a writer," yet these ideas and those people all helped Mailer define the fundamental subject of his art: America. "Mailer strives to capture the essence of America's cultural and political turmoil," McKinley writes, "offering incisive commentary on its history and its geopolitical roles, while also working to articulate the emotional undercurrents of a nation and the intangible forces that propelled individual and social behaviors" (1).

Mailer's mutable character, an evolving projection of self predicated upon both social trends and hero-worship, inevitably became attracted to politics, that unstable thread binding together all of the elements that make—or unmake—the American Dream. J. Michael Lennon, Mailer's official biographer and inarguably the preeminent Mailer scholar, writes of the author's fascination with John F. Kennedy in "JFK and Political Heroism."

Kennedy's 1960 campaign for the presidency, Lennon notes, reignited Mailer's interest in politics in a peculiarly concrete way. The candidate's physical glamour, all milk-white teeth and suntanned grace, was undeniable and suitably complimented by the special charms of his wife, Jacqueline: "A man who is married to such an eye-catching woman," Mailer explained, in one of Lennon's most revealing quotations, "must be out of the ordinary, I told myself." Mailer, forever a gatherer of stunning women, perhaps saw a kindred spirit in the young politician and eventually planned on entering politics himself, running for mayor of New York on the ticket of the Existentialist Party, "an organization that did not then, or now, exist" (141). Lennon recounts Mailer's intent to announce his candidacy, a circuitous way of becoming a Kennedy advisor and member of the Camelot select, at a party in his New York apartment. Mailer, always a conundrum of conflicting and advancing ideas, also championed Fidel Castro—certainly not a movie star heartthrob—and anticipated reading an unpublished and laudatory open letter to the freshly-installed dictator at his calamitous campaign kick-off. The underattended event, Lennon recounts, was a disaster, with Mailer afterward stabbing his wife, Adele Morales, with a penknife. Readers are tempted to think, although not explicitly encouraged by Lennon's article, that part of Mailer's post-party depression centered on his own fears of not having the aspirational movie-star allure of JFK, while Adele, a scapegoat of his worries, made an unsuitable Jackie. After all, "the politics they were thinking about was not that of polls, platforms, and primary tactics," Lennon writes, "but the unconscious appeal of some candidates fostered by films that connected moviegoers with what Mailer called 'a subterranean river of untapped, ferocious, lonely and romantic desires . . . the dream life of the nation'" (140).

Robert Francis Saxe, in "1968 Political Conventions," follows Mailer's later political involvement as he documents, in his characteristic third-person personal or illeistic voice, the late-decade and tumultuous Republican and Democratic national conventions. Saxe, like Lennon, points to Mailer's 1960 *Esquire* essay "Superman Comes to the Supermarket" as both a celebration of Kennedy's potential to shake up a stagnant nation and as a primary document in the development of New Journalism. The aspirational notions of Camelot may have vanished by the time Mailer wrote *The Armies of the Night* (1968), the multiple-award-winning rumination on the 1967 March on the Pentagon, but New Journalism still scattered sparks, including Mailer's bril-

liant *Miami and the Siege of Chicago: An Informal History of the Republican and Democratic Conventions of 1968*. Saxe reveals an even more conflicted Mailer now, as the decade winds down, than Lennon reveals in its earliest days. "By 1968," Saxe maintains, "the Republican Party had evolved from the infighting that characterized 1964" and Richard M. Nixon, who threw a hissy-fit at the press following his twin losses to Kennedy in 1960 and Pat Brown, his 1962 California gubernatorial opponent, remarkably held appeal for the mercuric Mailer. Saxe quotes Mailer celebrating the wounded Nixon as he might a defeated boxer: Nixon "'had finally acquired some dignity of the old athlete and the old con—he had taken punishment, that was on his face now, he knew the detailed schedule of pain in a real loss, there was an attentiveness in his eyes which gave offer to some knowledge of the abyss, even the kind of gentleness which ex-drunkards attain after years in AA'" (160-161). Mailer adopted the ideals of a Left-Conservative, an intellectual uncomfortable with the liberalism of the Democratic party and disturbed by the party division caused by Lyndon Johnson's Vietnam War policies. Saxe reveals Mailer's disillusionment with revolutionary actions, an almost weariness of spirit as Mailer chronicles the events in Lincoln Park. Readers of *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*, Saxe suggests, find the author "questioning his own commitment to anti-war protest and whether he will confront the police and violence just as he had done in the past. In the end, he decides to leave and is horrified to learn of the violent methods that the police used to clear the park later that night'" (165-166). Mailer's disappointment in the failure of a radical youth movement, Saxe maintains, eventually led him to adopt an even more conservative stance: "1968 was a turning point in America (and the world), and Mailer's radicalism and hope for a different America seemed to be swept away by the storm" (167-168).

Mailer's political engagement, inspired by the movie-star glamour of the Kennedys, illuminates his notion of the masculine persona, a defining quality not assigned at birth but earned through battle, blood, and discontent. The revolutionary failure of the 60s counterculture and Mailer's resulting crisis of conscience and slow funk emerge, in the context of masculine identity, as one more defining blow leading to manhood. Brad Congdon, in his chapter on "Masculinity," lingers over a photograph of Mailer accompanying his July 1963 *Esquire* article, "Norman Mailer Versus Nine Writers." Shot in black and white at Wiley's Gym in Harlem, the photo presents the sharp-dressed literary lion in a rough-and-tumble setting. "The image is a brilliant

piece of marketing," Congdon writes. "Mailer's suit and, moreover, *his demeanor*—his slouch and his nonchalance—play to his hip credibility while his surroundings resonate with his tough-guy persona" (259). The image could be Mailer *playing* Kennedy, the so-suave reader of the hyper-suave James Bond books and someone who just might save a nation from itself. Congdon, absorbed in this photo that is at once physically histrionic and a metaphorical representation of Mailer's inner struggles, doesn't airbrush the demeanor of Mailer's masculinity in the twenty-first century social landscape. "Mailer belonged to an earlier period," Congdon notes, and "made a name for himself in American letters based upon the virtuosity of his prose and the pugnacity of his person" (260). The author, observing the constrictions of Eisenhower-era conformity, the Civil Rights Movement, and the rocket-fast emergence of feminist thought, worked in a different social environment and, perhaps, used the machinery of a generally unchallenged masculine privilege—today's "toxic masculinity"—to respond to the social and cultural upheavals throughout his lifetime. "The Language of Men," Mailer's 1958 short story, presents masculinity as a language, Congdon notes, a series of codes and signs men must learn to interpret and express in a social performance of identity. Mailer's hipster, cool and jive, is one interpretation of that language and one way to resist the emasculating forces at work in mid-century America.

In "Sex and Sexuality," Nicole DePolo further decodes Mailer's notion of manhood and, like Congdon, emphasizes that Mailer saw procreative sex as a healing force, a counterweight to social conditions encouraging homosexuality and masturbation. "Contrary to Metasex," DePolo writes, referring to Marco Vassi's term denoting sexual activities outside of marriage, "he gave serious weight to the idea that existence could be conceived, destroyed, and regenerated through vitalistic and psychic forces operating through sex—and through words" (280). Procreative sex, then, creates its own language and engenders communication as does the spooky art of writing, and Mailer, perhaps as addicted to sex as he was to writing, supported any kind of communication in a world where human beings seemed to be tragically disconnected. DePolo points to Mailer's active defense of eroticism in literature and the arts, the cultural flash point of communication, noting that he served as an expert witness in the obscenity trials of Herbert Selby and Alan Ginsberg, and was "able to land substantial blows when it came to battering down censorship in the United States and internationally" (281). While

Mailer may have advanced the sexual revolution both in act and expression, DePolo cites Kate Millett's transformative 1969 book *Sexual Politics* as an existential challenge to Mailer's right-conservative ideas of gender roles and the redemptive power of procreational sex. "Mailer's metaphysics," writes DePolo, "even more than his machismo, blocked him from appreciating Millett's rhetorical flourish against a society that had chained women to their role as child-bearers since time immemorial" (228). Mailer, perhaps abashed at his establishment-oriented reinforcement of sexual orientation and gender roles, "held himself a captive of the normative standards of his own time, and in many ways, lived as his own Prisoner of Sex in twentieth century America" (288).

Mailer's intellectual conflicts—his regrets at being too conservative, too submissive to societal conventions and normative trends—often emerge both in scholarly studies and in his own essays and fiction. Mark Olshaker's "The Criminal Mind: Gary Gilmore and Lee Harvey Oswald" opens with Mailer's lunchtime confession of two lamentable events in his life: the alcohol-inflamed stabbing of Adele Morales and his successful petition for the release of Jack Henry Abbott, an incarcerated man with promising talent as a writer. The former transgression, Olshaker reminds us, led to Mailer's confinement in the Bellevue psych ward, while the latter resulted in the paroled Abbott's brutal stabbing of a Greenwich Village restaurant waiter. "These two stated regrets represent *real world* phenomena," Olshaker writes, "as opposed to literary/philosophical conceits so often asserted in his early and mid-career works" (322–323). Olshaker's emphasis upon external, real-life events rather than internal conflict as a location of personal development brings a welcome dimension to the mature Mailer, an artist whose brash boxer posture had led him, earlier, into some dark, dead-end alleys of intellectual determination. "The White Negro," Mailer's 1957 essay espousing masculine non-conformity as a way of breaking through 1950s social restrictions and conventions, remains for Olshaker a work of dubious moral and ethical import. "Originally published in *Dissent*," Olshaker notes, "the piece naively, and not a little offensively, lionized the psychic outlaw—in some ways, Mailer's alter ego—and extolled an apocryphal murder of a candy store owner as a form of existential self-actualization" (323). Mailer, dining with Olshaker decades after the publication of that troubling essay, seems finally to comprehend Jack Kerouac's opinion that the essay was a well-intentioned but morally-flawed support of violent acts. Yet Olshaker

acknowledges that Mailer, in envisioning violence, simply may be identifying the fundamental basis of our country's social order. "Whatever Mailer may be portraying," Olshaker says, "his primary concern is almost always an examination of the American psyche. In Mailer's view, violence and criminality are the frequent, if not near constant, correlatives of that psyche" (323).

Olshaker discusses two essential works that reveal Mailer's fascination with American violence and the "profound emptiness" of the outlaws who give this nation that ignoble aspect of its expansive character. *The Executioner's Song* (1979), Mailer's account of serial killer Gary Gilmore, "is told in omniscient narration offering no overt judgments, but with the almost fatalistic inevitability of a Greek tragedy," while *Oswald's Tale* (1995), illuminating the story of JFK assassin Lee Harvey Oswald, "is instead a mystery, full of provocative questions, changing assumptions, and tentative conclusions" (326). Olshaker, a prolific author and documentary filmmaker investigating criminal behavior, concludes that Gilmore and Oswald represent two distinct types of criminal mind. Gilmore, the indiscriminate killer, typifies Mailer's notion of the outlaw from "The White Negro," an existential actor asserting his masculinity and division from a restrictive society. Oswald, however, fulfils the profile of the assassin who ultimately tries to find meaning in an otherwise empty existence. "[P]art of the assassin's internal logic is that if you are powerful enough to kill a political figure or a celebrity, you become his or her equal, as you could not in any other way" (329). While Mailer devoted more time, in *Executioner*, to humanizing Gilmore's victims rather than glamorizing the outlaw's crimes, he continued struggling with a form of compassion that undermined his tough-guy belief in the transformative value of the word and, tragically, his dedication to Abbott's ill-starred pardon.

Mailer once maintained that his relationship with women suitably defined his progress as a writer, suggesting a similar metric for gauging the motivation of both Oswald and Gilmore. Olshaker finds merit in this assessment, seeing Marina as the catalyst for Oswald's history-defining act and Nicole Barrett Baker as the accelerant for Gilmore's soulless murders. After Olshaker's explanation of the assassin's motivation and this revealing vision of women as unintentional *agents provocateur*, the reader may wonder, once again, if Mailer's regrettable act of stabbing Morales represented more than just the frustration of a failed campaign party. Was he adopting the persona of the hipster criminal, slashing violently at an impediment to his mas-

culinity? Or was he assuming—the only way he could, through violence—the Kennedy-like cool of a politician with perfect teeth and a stunning wife at his side? Olshaker more positively concludes that, whatever our suspicions, Mailer ultimately employs his literary talent, in these two extraordinary books, "to prove that he finally comprehends the nuances and realities of the criminal mind" (331).

McKinley's own essay on "Violence" further addresses the troubling aspect of violent behavior in Mailer's life and work. McKinley mentions not only the author's impulsive stabbing of Adele but his later attacks upon author Gore Vidal and his physical altercation with actor Rip Torn, captured while cameras were rolling during the filming of *Maidstone*. As with other authors dealing with violence in this volume, McKinley understands Mailer's supposition that violence is necessary to escape from social restrictions, and that the masculine character is built upon the freedoms that violent acts may award. "Mailer's ideas about violence," McKinley writes, "are triangulated with his notion of existentialism and totalitarianism, philosophies that fuel the thematic development of his fiction and nonfiction" (223-224). McKinley points out Mailer's distinction between violence committed as part of a masculine ritual of self-identity and, as Mailer tells Paul Krassner in a 1962 interview for *The Realist*, the objectional, large-scale "inhuman" violence committed by governments and societies, state-approved violence that refuses to acknowledge its victims. Like Olshaker, McKinley notes that Mailer's notions of violence softened with maturity, and underscores that Mailer's own violent outbursts were concentrated in the early decades of his career. Mailer's later works, such as *Why Are We at War*? (2003) and *The Big Empty* (2006), demonstrate his evolving concepts of violence. "In these," McKinley writes, "his attitude about violence is revealed to be less certain, less tinged with the hubris of a work like 'The White Negro,' as he becomes even more contemplative and even regretful of the consequences of his previous assertions" (230).

Mailer's apparent regret for his earlier foundational ideas, as well as his insistence, always, for the kind of responsibility for "inhuman" violence that societies and governments unconscionably avoid, exemplify the dualistic center of Mailer's work as described by Victor Peppard in his chapter on "Existentialism and Manichaeism." Peppard also notes that Heidegger, whose notions of existentialism Mailer shared, maintained that "'being guilty has the further significance of *being responsible*,' and that 'making oneself re-

sponsible by breaking a law can also at the same time have the character of becoming responsible to others'" (203). Mailer's fiction, as Peppard compares it with that of Dostoevsky, reveals much about the nature of *doing*, even when the results of an action are unknown, and further reveals the importance of the perpetrator's acceptance of responsibility for any outcome. Raskolnikov, in Dostoevsky's 1866 novel *Crime and Punishment*, murders an elderly pawnbroker and ultimately confesses, yet may never really accept responsibility; Rojack, Mailer's troubled protagonist in *An American Dream* (1965), murders his wife but never confesses or accepts responsibility, thus revealing, in Peppard's estimation, "a certain existential emptiness in his character" (205). Peppard's analysis of these fictional transgressive acts illuminates what he sees as "a central existential question we may ask about all of Mailer's murderers, from Rojack to Gilmore to Oswald—can we judge them and the significance of their lives on the basis of a single act?" This existential question, posed more generally by Jean-Paul Sartre in the 1944 play *No Exit*, leads Peppard to rhetorically inquire whether confession of guilt, in fact, "puts one on a higher moral plane than someone who does not take responsibility for his/her actions" (206). Peppard extends his discussion of Mailer's philosophy by describing the mythology of Manichaeism and the importance of Manichaean dualism in the author's work. "The crux of Mailer's brand of existentialism," Peppard writes, "was the ability to face down the unknown with courage, which in turn meant dealing with the Manichaean idea that an imperfect God was constantly at war with the Devil" (202). *The Castle in the Forest* (2007), Mailer's final novel, directly relates this cosmic duality through the voice of Dieter, the narrator, a lower devil who relates the struggle between these two supernatural forces. "Even if Mailer did not consciously 'adopt' Manichaeism," Peppard maintains, the conflict between Good and Evil—"the central preoccupation of his work"—exemplifies his embrace of this dualistic philosophy (210).

Mailer's exploration of the dialectical nature of existence extended into his experiments with movie production, as Justin Bozung explains in his article on "Film." Bozung reinforces the notion of Mailer's "Dostoevsky-like archetype of the saint and the psychopath," citing the actions of Rojack and Gilmore as exemplars of this tendency in Mailer's work. *Beyond the Law* (1968), Bozung maintains, "takes Mailer's ideas on the nature of Being and pushes them into an even darker metaphysical realm," as the author, in the guise of Detective Pope, interrogates suspected criminals, thus allowing

Mailer to examine "the metaphysical relationship between cop and criminal—but also the nature of good and evil, the duality of man" (96-97). Bozung relates Mailer's interest in Cubism, especially as expressed by the artist Pablo Picasso, as one intellectual basis for his films, and notes that Mailer's goal with his motion pictures was to force a Picasso-like distortion of reality both in the minds of his actors and in the audience as well. *Maidstone* (1970), Bozung suggests, is a work of Cubism as it "analyzes and deconstructs reality, resembling its complex narrative by presenting chapters through multiple points-of-view so that an audience can explore perception, as they attempt to decipher what is real and what is not" (97). Mailer's existentialist ideas also affected his approach toward casting and directing, and he normally chose people outside the acting profession—Bozung calls them "nonactors"—to engage in improvisational interactions in normal settings. "Mailer believed acting was not only rooted in make believe, it was also metaphysical and existential business. He insisted on such because, 'there is hardly a guy alive who is not an actor to the hilt'" (92). Mailer, in Bozung's quoted passage, no doubt intentionally refers to the masculine gender, supporting his notion that men must create a hipster presence in order to resist the confining nature of social reality. Improvision is important, too, both as a way to capture the reality of human interaction and to avoid a scripted outcome. "The Hollywood film actor worked with a script," Bozung writes, "a screenplay represented a situation or scenario; therefore, it could not be existential, because the outcome was predetermined" (96). Mailer was intrigued by the process of film editing, Bozung notes, and found that manipulating scenes in the editing room resulted in a visual experience approaching the intricacy and detail of the novel. Bozung finally identifies Mailer's work in film as an early precursor to today's ubiquitous reality shows, where nonactors are placed in situations requiring interaction, presumably without knowledge of a studio-invented ending. "As in *Maidstone*," Bozung notes, ". . . reality television shows are dependent upon the placement of amateur or nonactors into a situation where the outcome is existentially unknowable: who will last the longest in the *Big Brother* house, who will get kicked off the *Survivor* island first, what hunk will the *Bachelorette* pick at the end?" We ask questions like these every day, without a life-script, living in an existential universe that Mailer attempts to capture in both his novels and films.

Surveying the expansive narrative landscape of Mailer's novels—the diversity of themes, settings, narrative perspective, and the sheer number of words representing the writer's major life work—would be an imposing exercise for any critic, but Peter Balbert manages to convey the essence of Mailer's longer fiction with a confident style and convincing insight making this chapter both instructive and a joy to read. In "The Novel," Balbert acknowledges this challenge but identifies an organizational locus that is effective and illuminating: Mailer's formidable ego and its intersection with creative, or perhaps *procreative*, guilt. Balbert establishes this foundation for his chapter, first, by citing Mailer's comments on the particularly existential idea of ego asserted in his account of the 1971 Ali-Frazier fight. "'Everything we have done in this century,'" Mailer maintains, "'from monumental feats to nightmares of human destruction, has been a function of that extraordinary state of the psyche which gives us authority to declare we are sure of ourselves when we are not'" (70). Balbert equates this notion of the human ego in an unstable, existentialist environment with the persistence of an author who continues working on a project without knowing if it will succeed or fail. Balbert, secondly, quotes Mailer's "sex-with-guilt" passage from *The Armies of the Night*, cleverly inviting the reader to substitute the word *writing* for *sex*. "'For guilt was the existential edge of sex,'" Mailer notes, "'Without guilt, sex was meaningless'" (70). This form of guilt, though, requires no apology, as with Gilmore's, Rojack's, or Raskolnikov's transgressive actions; this notion of guilt embodies the emotions of insecurity and unsure manhood. Mailer's intent is to demonstrate the revelatory nature of intercourse, allowing sexed-up participants to gain insight into Being while probably learning more about the process of sex as well. Balbert extends this insight into the novelist's creative practice, that frightful intersection between pen and page where writing is learning and expression is the temporary submission of guilt. "Whether with pen or phallus," Balbert writes, "the livid issue is accepting the burden and finding the appropriate mode of defiance, the workable ethic for 'successful' opposition to the guilt" (71). Mailer thus applied what Balbert calls "his heavyweight ego" to complex projects that require him to approach each project "with that brooding sense of guilt that operates as the formative dynamic of his work" (71).

With an effective critical apparatus established, Balbert proceeds to discuss Mailer's novels and their adherence to the author's philosophy and world view. *The Naked and the Dead* (1948) reveals, obliquely, Mailer's out-

sized ego and his understanding that "overcoming fear will serve as the essential mandate in life" (72); the talkative plot of *Barbary Shore* (1951) fails to provide that guilt-defying insight into life that was Mailer's creative aspiration; *The Deer Park* (1955) is more successful, offering a "persuasive critique of corruption and sentimentality in postwar America" while illustrating Mailer's remarkable insight into the economy and necessity of individual growth and reinvention (72-73). Balbert attributes the success of *An American Dream*, at least in part, to its publication as a series of installments written for *Esquire* beginning in 1964. Mailer wrote the novel, Balbert explains, in a public forum with forced deadlines, no outline, and therefore no idea of where the plot would go next. This method of writing emulates life itself, with characters interacting in an existentialist context as they create personalities and attempt to comprehend their existence while trying to avoid death. "It is the ultimate existential novel," Balbert maintains, "with a sense of urgency about Mailer's deadlines and Rojack's struggles" (73). An omniscient voice is the primary existential instrument in *The Executioner's Song,* as Mailer adapts an anonymous persona to bring alive hundreds of characters as they interact through involvement in Gary Gilmore's murderous interlude, a ventriloquistic act of ego-expressing literary magic. *Ancient Evenings* similarly animates an ancient culture, "dispensing with customary assumptions of space and time in fiction," and remains Mailer's "most daring expression of the existential motivation for writing-with-guilt" (75). Balbert's act of criticism in many ways emulates Mailer's own creative process by undertaking a daunting task with perseverance and clarity. In just ten pages of text, Balbert succeeds in providing readers with an understanding of Mailer's novels and the existential narrative landscape that takes ego and persistence to navigate, without Google Maps, possibly to arrive at a guilt-defeating location of perhaps momentary—but developing—understanding of where we have been.

Phillip Sipiora, Editor of *The Mailer Review* and a founding Member of The Norman Mailer Society, examines Mailer's own critical work in "Criticism." Sipiora understands that the task of defining Mailer's critical methods is complicated by the author's refusal to be confined by traditional genre-based systems of thought. "His evaluative analyses are often *ad hominem* and emotionally reactive," Sipiora writes, while noting that the overriding sensibility behind Mailer's criticism is dualistic in nature, the God/Devil approach informing much of his fiction. "One way to character-

ize Mailer's critical sensibility," Sipiora maintains, "is to frame it as a 'double vision,' the positioning of the self (Mailer as Critic), analyzing his subject matter in a duality or binary arc of perspective" (80). Mailer often exhibits this duality in the structure of his critical articles, playing opposite opinions or evaluations against each other to arrive at a specific truth otherwise unobtainable. "The critical chain pattern is familiar," Sipiora says, "Mailer opens with a disparagement, setting up subsequent encouragement. And this pattern is sometimes reversed—positive assessment opening the way for a negative judgment" (92–83). If a certain tone of ire is obvious in much of Mailer's criticism, that's for good reason: Mailer relied upon courage to make it through any project, a persistence of vision that required ego and the submission of guilt, and anger was the accelerant most likely to ignite this creative journey. Mailer also demands that characters grow, just as human beings must, in that distinctly Mailerian economy that exacts a price for remaining stagnant.

Mailer thus evaluates his contemporaries through the kaleidoscope of his own literary concerns, a multifaceted, often changing lens of ideas and approaches that emphasize, above all else, hard work and ambitious goals. Truman Capote is a nearly perfect writer but has nothing to say; Saul Bellow has all the right words but his style seems self-conscious and unnatural; James Baldwin, in *Another Country* (1960), writes well when he talks about sex but abominably everywhere else. Even Henry Miller receives a critical cocktail of alternate praise and condemnation. "'Where he is complex,'" Sipiora quotes Mailer, "'he is too complex—we do not feel the resonance of slowly dissolving mystery but the madness of too many knots; where he is simple, he is not attractive—his air is harsh'" (85). Sipiora is correct in his identification of Mailer as a singular critic without alliance to any formal method. Find me another literary critic who complains about an artist's harsh air, and we will have two.

While Maggie McKinley's edited collection may be a place for Mailer scholars to pause, look around, and size-up the critical path before them, Robert J. Begiebing describes the new tools available for that important expedition. Begiebing provides a succinct history of The Norman Mailer Society and its print publication, *The Mailer Review*, especially noting the work of *Review* editor Sipiora and Senior Research Editor Shannon Tivnan Zinck, whose comprehensive bibliography of books and articles published in Mailer studies each year is featured in the annual publication. J. Michael and Donna

Lennon's first edition of *Works and Days*, published in 2007 and containing primary and secondary Mailer resources, is now available in an expanded print edition, while a digital version curated by Gerald Lucas is available at the Project Mailer website (projectmailer.net). Mailer's papers now reside in the archives of the Harry Ransom Center at The University of Texas at Austin and provide an extensive collection of journals, correspondence, photographs, and other research material previously unavailable for wide scholarly use. All of these resources are valuable, of course, but Begiebing prudently concentrates upon *Lipton's Journal*, a revealing personal chronicle of Mailer's self-analysis written between December 1954 and March 1955. Mailer had entered a troubling period in his life, Begiebing explains, and was reacting to both the poor reception of his second novel, *Barbary Shore*, and his troublesome attempts to find a publisher for his third, *The Deer Park*. His experimentation with cannabis, an attempt to achieve greater self-awareness through psychoactive means, inspired the journal's name, a cagy substitution of the brand name for a popular hot beverage for *tea*, hipster slang for marijuana. Begiebing sees *Lipton's Journal* as a landmark resource in Mailer scholarship, "a first draft of a larger, multi-volume project," he maintains, suggesting that "Mailer extended his self-analysis into the next decade of his published fiction and nonfiction" (168). Begiebing proceeds to offer a test case of sorts, a model of the criticism he envisions, by analyzing *An American Dream*, *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, and *Armies of the Night* in the context of the journeys of self-awareness recorded in *Lipton's*. That introspective journal, begun when Mailer most needed such a mechanism for understanding his developing artistic and personal self, thus continued in the pages of his later creative works, with Begiebing identifying *Armies* as the project's culminating success. The book, Begiebing says, "reads like the work of a man who has come through. Mailer discovers in an event filled with absurdity, compromise, and mass movements, hope for a renaissance of integrated consciousness" (170).

McKinley's afterword, an attempt to reconcile the value of Mailer scholarship in the context of the #MeToo movement, effectively accomplishes that task through a logical and persuasive argument. McKinley cites Mailer's ideas and actions that run counter to current thought—his apparent sexism, endorsement of violence, "toxic masculinity," and perhaps especially the stabling of Adele Morales—all colliding to potentially marginalize his accomplishments in today's cultural environment. While McKinley main-

tains that this edited collection is intended to examine Mailer's works primarily in their historical context, she understands that mission may appear to dismiss the author's more egregious thoughts and actions, many—and Mailer would cheer this—transgressive and controversial even in their own day. "In another sense," McKinley writes, "such dismissiveness threatens to falsely position Mailer's entire body of work as a relic of history, irrelevant to our modern time or unworthy of study due to its dated notions" (384). McKinley poses a question that is now necessary to ask, adapted with the appropriate nouns for the subjects under siege, as we confront nearly any suspect artifact of our evolving culture: "What do we do with art and literature produced by someone whose actions fly in the face of our own beliefs about what is 'right' and 'good'?" (385). The question, with the same existentialist implications Peppard elicits when he asks if Rojack, Gilmore, or Oswald should be judged on the significance of a single act, is similarly important when applied to a cultural transgressor rather than an assassin or murderer. The answer, McKinley suggests, is to interrogate bad behavior of the artist along with our study of the work, thereby gaining a more comprehensive understanding of the nature of humanity. "Mailer is more than his troubling or flawed ideas about gender and sexuality," McKinley maintains, "and . . . it is worth it to confront, not elide, those unsettling elements in order to benefit from the insights and critical interrogations elicited by his body of work" (388).

McKinley's collection arrives at this crucial time in Mailer studies, reminding us of previous research while establishing a benchmark for further contemplation and analysis of Mailer's work. While a comprehensive overview of a collection this extensive, representing so many diverse voices, may exceed the expectations of any review, not to mention the bounds of the reader's attention, I have tried to convey the value of McKinley's imposing book by commenting on significant, representative chapters and thus, I hope, communicating the essence of current Mailer scholarship. Readers may find that, by inspecting chapters not mentioned in this review, the significance of a thing may be equally assessed from what is absent as from what is present. Jason Mosser's chapter on "New Journalism" relates the methods and effects of this form of reporting to the theories of Bakhtin and to John C. Hartsock's notion that "literary journalism tends to flourish during periods of cultural transformation and crisis," providing new insights into a uniquely mid-century genre that Mailer helped create (51). Carl

Rollyson argues, in "Marilyn Monroe," that Mailer made "a singular contribution to the study of biography by insisting that certain mysteries about the subject should not be ignored but explored," discussing Mailer's "raw and unfinished" play "Strawhead" along the way (300). Gerald R. Lucas, in "Political Resonance," auspiciously suggests that "Mailer's outrage—'*The shits are killing us*'—remains poignant and could still serve as a cry of defiance as our democracy—and those around the world—remain under threat" (380).

Begiebing, in his survey of available research material, remarks upon recurrent topics and trends he identified while browsing current bibliographies of secondary resources in preparation for writing his chapter on Mailer studies in the twenty-first century. "I noticed growing emphasis," he writes, "on Mailer's politics (including his FBI files), on masculinity and gender, on narrative theory, on Mailer as filmmaker, and on Mailer as Jewish writer" (363). Identifying topics that reappear throughout the chapters in McKinley's book is instructive, too, and readers will find among them Mailer's stabbing of Adele Morales, a hot story when it happened in 1960 and still cited frequently, well over a half-century later, even by Mailer specialists who know the tale by heart. This remarkable incident from Mailer's life apparently resonates as an insight into his works and character, with implications far beyond its value as an anecdote. Mailer's ideas of violence as a way of developing a masculine identity also recur through the book, as do references to his existentialist philosophy, his notions of the creative ego, his concepts of guilt, his remarkable intellectual courage, and his fascination with the dualism of Good and Evil. The direction of Mailer studies proceeds existentially, we know not how or to where, but it's comforting to at least know where we are presently. McKinley's stance, in her afterword, toward the continuing study of Mailer is particularly convincing to readers of this collection, many of whom already have a vested interest in advancing the research they have pursued for decades. Others, whose assessments of value are predicated by prevailing cultural trends and who may never open this book in any case, may be immune from any such argument, no matter the utility or logic. The difficulty of promoting Mailer's work in the third decade of this century is indeed prodigious, requiring the same guilt-transcendent perseverance and courage that Mailer applied to his own creative projects. Have we already heard all we need to know about Mailer? As McKinley would argue and her book suggests: *No, we haven't.*