

SITUATING HEMINGWAY: MAILER, STYLE, ETHICS

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THE PURPOSE OF THIS PAPER IS TO OFFER some preliminary reflections upon the following question: How might we make sense of the conjunction “Mailer and Hemingway”? This question has considerable force and pertinacity because to think back upon the scope and variety of Mailer’s corpus, and to begin to come to terms with his manifold significance as a major American writer, is to be compelled to recognize how profound—but also how *implicit* and sometimes almost *subterranean*—his engagement with Hemingway had been. We can, I would suggest, start to think about the nature of this engagement in various ways. We might begin, as others have, with some of the dominant features of the established account of Hemingway’s literary influence upon Mailer, which habitually accentuate both the allure of a certain romantic strain within American modernism and the seductions of the heroic literary personality. Mailer, we should note, is happily complicit with some of the presiding elements of this account; who can forget his imperishable remark in *Advertisements for Myself* that “[e]very American writer who takes himself to be both major and macho must sooner or later give a faena which borrows from the self-love of a Hemingway style” (19)? These, I must confess, are to me the least interesting aspects of Mailer’s fidelity to Hemingway, although his hypertrophy of romanticism would later constitute a crucial component of his critique of the “technological” sense. One problem with this type of investment in character and topos is that it too easily becomes, for want of a better phrase, dully thematic in its predilections and emphases: one is reminded, perhaps, of Mailer’s depiction of Lovett’s wartime infirmity in *Barbary Shore* (with its knowing evocation of Jake Barnes’s condition in *The Sun Also Rises*) which is rather

portentously intended to symbolize an aspect of damaged life brought upon by the war, most particularly its degrading effects upon our conceptions of subjective autonomy and the possibility of genuinely free and vital existence. It is difficult, in this regard, not to agree with Richard Poirier's more general observation that one of the principal weaknesses of *The Deer Park* is that Sergius O'Shaugnessy is a rather tedious and lifeless invention precisely because he too closely resembles the typology of Hemingway's alienated war veteran and, in consequence, lacks the singularity and vivacity of perspective and perception to bear the emotional and dramatic weight accorded him by the novel (41).

A second and, to my way of thinking, much more significant aspect of Hemingway's influence upon Mailer is that something in what Mailer calls Hemingway's "inner life" (an "inner" life that appears inextricably tied to both the public projection of an image of heroic and embattled personality and the internal constituents of a style) exposed to him the existential edge and quality of what it means to be fully human (*Existential* xi, 10). We can approach Mailer's imbrication of Hemingway's example with properly existential thinking and being in a number of ways. We should first acknowledge that, for Mailer, existentialism in its essence (to use a necessarily paradoxical formulation) is implacably opposed to what he elsewhere calls "camp" or the "put on" of technology: a mode of life that has surrendered its vitality to "directives determined in the main by the ruminative processes of computers" and which tricks out its desiccated sense of being in the garb of irony, pastiche and the vestments of dead style (x-xi). We should further recognize that Mailer locates the most potent means of resistance to such devitalized and technologized life in the existential sense of our radically contingent and alienated relationship to the world around us, a sense or perception that reveals itself most potently in "that stricken existential moment in which Camp is stripped of its marks of quotation and put-ons shrivel in the livid air" (xi). If existentialism, properly conceived, is for Mailer a form of anti-technological anti-camp—a *style* of living, that is, that insists upon a depth *beneath* style—then boxing and bullfighting become both a scene and a metaphor for this moment of naked existentialist vision. And it was, of course, Hemingway who presented himself to Mailer as the chief literary inhabitant and adept of both of these existential scenes: "Hemingway is the example above all," as Mailer phrased the matter in *Existential Errands*, "[b]ecause he wished to be the greatest writer in the history of literature and

still be a hero with all the body arts age would yet grant him, he was alone and he knew it" (10). The importance of Hemingway's example to Mailer's developing existentialist formulation of the need to "keep the sweet nerve of life alive" becomes clear during one of his bullfighting trips to Mexico. Here he is compelled to concede that although it would be quite an achievement in these circumstances *not* to write like Hemingway, whenever he considers what bullfighting actually means to him (the "knowledge," as he puts it, "that a man cannot be judged by what he is every day, but only in his greatest moment, for that is the moment when he shows what he was intended to be"), he cannot finally distinguish Hemingway's accents from his own (59). This concession, honestly and forthrightly made, should concentrate our minds when we recall that the two aspects of bullfighting and boxing Mailer most highly prizes (their "romantic" and "impractical" refusal of the "twentieth-century's demand for predictable ethics, high production, dependability of function, and categorization of impulse" and their disclosure that "form is the record of a war") lie right at the heart of his mature aesthetics and ethics (59).

Mailer's exuberant, sometimes dizzying, collocation of terms like existentialism, ethics, writing, form, and risk brings us closer to the core of my concern with Hemingway's "influence" upon him (if the word can register the impression of a pressure at once so pervasive and indistinct): the question of literary style. It is worth acknowledging at the outset that the claim that Hemingway exerted a stylistic, rather than attitudinal or more generally cultural, influence upon Mailer requires careful nuance and qualification. Thus when I read as sensitive a critic of Hemingway's style as John Graham I find myself once again reminded of a certain Mailerian fidelity to Hemingway and yet continually unsure in what this fidelity actually consists. Graham locates the well-spring of the extraordinary vitality of Hemingway's prose in features such as his active presentation of subject and object, his character's conscious reception of present fact (not judgement or even response to fact), the constant activity of sensory perception of active objects, the interplay between his character's awareness of their relation to these objects and a deliberate simplicity of plot, a directness of human relations, and a basic impermanency of novelistic situation (18). It is undoubtedly true that Mailer excels at the active presentation of subject and object and the constant activity of sensory perception of active objects, and I shall return momentarily to his preoccupation with the idea of the *situation* of aesthetical and

ethical deliberation and judgement. But his novels also never allow us to forget that the perception of *any* subject or object must contend with the contextual web of socio-political discourse and institutional pressure that would bend us to their will and they are replete with judgements, responses and resistances to these pre-emptive and coercive forces. Returning briefly to Hemingway, we might also want to suggest that any description of his narrative vitality that locates its source in the “constant activity of sensory perception of active objects and, still more important, in the subject’s awareness of relationship to these objects” misses the meaning of its subject in the act of accounting for it by confusing Hemingway with Henry James or Virginia Woolf (18). Valuable though it is on its own terms, Graham’s typical (some might say stereotypical) reading of Hemingway’s style needs to be supplemented by the analytical rigour David Lodge brings to his engagement with Hemingway’s 1925 story “Cat in the Rain.” Beginning, as we all must, with the interpretative conundrums Hemingway’s prose presents to us (by which I mean our sense as readers that the meaning of the story does not inhere in its action), Lodge reminds us of Carlos Baker’s observation that in the 1920s Hemingway was evolving a “new theory that you could omit anything if you knew what you omitted, and the omitted part would strengthen the story and make people feel something more than they understood” (165). Lodge finds Baker’s description of Hemingway’s practices to be of seminal significance because it rather gropingly captures what is vital and new in Hemingway’s style: his “application of the metonymic mode of classic realism to modernist literary purposes” (30). Metonymy, we recall, is a principle of non-logical deletion (Lodge reminds us that Baker’s own word is “omission”): metonymy “connects actions that are contiguous in time and space and engendered by the principle of cause and effect,” but, since it cannot describe exhaustively, the “narrative text selects certain details or connections and suppresses or deletes others” (22). Hemingway’s genius was to generate emotional resonances from a constellation of metonymically connected details while suppressing or subtracting the kinds of motivation that would explain them. In so doing, he “generated a symbolist polyvalency in his deceptively simple stories, making the readers ‘feel more than they understood’” (30). Against this background it would be a mistake to look for a single clue or explanatory narrative ground to explain the “meaning” of Hemingway’s fiction: the “situation” of his prose always exceeds the scene he evokes at the same time that the suggestive but necessarily indeterminate relationship be-

tween the two compels us as readers continually to reconsider the interpretative (by which I mean ethical as well as aesthetic) decisions by which we bring our own narrative worlds into coherence.

In the space that remains I want to develop these remarks by suggesting that the real clue to Mailer's interest in Hemingway's writing lay in its persistent reworking of the relationship between style, situation and vitality. My central claim is that the crucial and constitutive relationship Mailer's work adduces between style and vitality (or that expansive mode of being that pits itself ceaselessly against the managerial and technocratic determination and regulation of modern life) is best understood as an elaboration of Hemingway's literary and existential paradigm of the *situation*: a paradigm that seeks to tie a new grammar of perception to a new style of life. Everything, it seems to me, that Mailer most prizes in Hemingway's situational aesthetics and ethics—its radicalization of perception and point-of-view, its inventive rethinking of interpretative contexts and grounds, and its dissolution of values into power-relationships and shifting alignments of force—later comes to inflect his mature conception of both an improvisational and an existential ethics. We might begin to elucidate the complex relationship in Mailer's work among form, perception and ethics by dwelling for a moment upon the implications of one of his most Hemingwayesque sentences: "[Y]ou are in an existential situation when something important and/or unfamiliar is taking place and you do not know how it is going to turn out" (*Existential* 104). This expository statement is drawn from a passage in *Existential Errands* where he makes an explicit connection between the "technological" deadening of spirit, reflex, and vitality that subtends the increasing administration and management of modern life and what he sees as the contemporary narcosis of apprehensive and visual forms. Mailer brings his point into sharper relief by positing an antithesis between the formal modalities of theatre and television. Television, Mailer argues, is one of the key media by which the technological waning of affect and vitality degrades the body politic because it recycles pre-programmed (the clue is in the title) and incipiently generic gobbets of cultural style and judgement in order to impose a kind of universal suburban mediocrity of taste:

America has been watching television for twenty years and the style of television has transfused itself not only into the taste, but

the demand, even the expectancy, of the suburban middle class—that precise compound of neurons and suet so capable of being smelted into money. . . . Television, after all, was the child of the Age of Conformity which came to America after the Second World War. Television produced a genre: moderate characters in modest situations. It offered endlessly recognizable detail, *surface* detail: supermarkets, highways, suburban streets, pastel-colored classrooms. However, the characters in such television dramas presented nothing which was biologically real. They bore the same relation to human beings which vinyl does to leather. (77–8)

The flatness of television, its subtraction of a shared intersubjective space for audience response and interaction, engenders a kind of narcosis or stupefaction in the same way that the familiarity of its generic routine dulls the synapses and conditions and enervates our imaginative reflexes (and television increasingly depends upon the conditioned reflex of canned laughter). Mailer emphasizes that such conditioning of reflex and response lies at the heart of the administered life: corporate control, he argues, extends and reproduces itself by imposing a rational and repeatable structure upon every form of exchange (even the exchange of nerve and synapse); he distills the essence of this corporate conversion of responsiveness into a conditioned and dependably reactive reflex into the lapidary formulation “Fear + Control = Corporate Power” (103). But what might offer us solace and redemption from the “camps of concentration” established by the technological circumscription of sense (88)? Mailer’s answer arrives in the form of a new mode (or situation) of existential theatre (and later cinema) that works by stripping out the connective tissue of narrative consecution and implicating his audience instead in the collective labor of devising an interpretative ground from a circulating array of reality-effects. Crucially, for my purposes, his elaboration of this new mode of existential or situational drama (a drama in which all the “formal” elements of thought no longer frame the scene of writing but compose its very possibility or ground) is conducted in explicitly Hemingwayesque terms:

So why not write a play which went from explosion to explosion, or . . . from one moment of intensity or reality (which is to say a

moment which feels more real than other moments) to the next—a play which went at full throttle all the way. Which is precisely what was done this summer when *The Deer Park*, a four-hour play, its third draft five years old, had an hour or more taken out of it, a transition which cut away all dramatic scaffolding, connective tissue, road signs, guides, and left the play stripped to its essential connections, the movement ideally from one real scene to the next, with the audience left to fill the spaces between. (66)

This observation strikes me, in conclusion, as a signal moment in Mailer's developing aesthetic philosophy. It reaches forward to what he describes as the explicitly existential milieu of films like *Maidstone* and *Wild 90* which loose their participants into a situation without a script or normative ground and record them composing a world together from a series of unpremeditated responses to shifts and alignments of force. It pits creativity and vitality against both the authoritarian recourse to the refuge of "moral values" and the condescension and programmatic devitalisation of liberal reformism and the social coding of "good taste" that retards any authentic expression of thinking and feeling; and it portends, in terms Mailer was yet to clarify, an experience of becoming-life, a life which is not managed life, a life which in its fluid improvisational forms is not *quite life* and yet which is ready to *become life* (158). Yet if this newly fashioned improvisational aesthetics points us forwards towards the style of Mailer's great literary accomplishments of the 1960s and early 1970s, it also reaches back in its form and figures to those radical years in the 1920s when Hemingway reinvented American prose page by page from one moment of intensity or reality to the next.

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