

MAILER'S MYTHMAKING IN
AN AMERICAN DREAM
AND "THE WHITE NEGRO"

MARTJIN SERMEUS

INTRODUCTION: FROM REVOLUTION TO RECONSTRUCTION

Norman Mailer is very concerned with the American "identity," not just with the shape and soul of the country as a whole, but also with the individual identity of "the" American. He searches for the characteristics he thinks of as essential to the real American identity. One of the most central and long-lasting myths in American society is that of the "American Dream," the idea that anyone, anywhere, is capable of becoming successful.

In his 1965 novel, *An American Dream*, Mailer deconstructs the outlived interpretation of this all-American phenomenon and, at the same time, constructs his own, new and much more individual and existentially-rooted vision. He gives his own idiosyncratic view on the American "soul" and thus creates his own American myth.

This process from deconstruction to construction is narrated in the protagonist's metaphorical quest for personal redemption. I argue that the different pieces of the puzzle are held together by the topos of *myth*. The characteristics of what is generally regarded as *mythical* will be used to underline and substantiate the argument in an attempt to make Mailer's vision on the American identity more accessible. Not only the hero-genesis of Mailer's protagonist in *Dream* can be explained on the basis of mythology, but Mailer's claim for a new "American Dream" is underlined by the topos of mythology. For general background information about myth and how myth operates in American society, I shall refer to Richard Slotkin's theory outlined in his book *Regeneration through Violence*.

On a primary level the protagonist of the novel, Stephen Richards Rojack, is depicted as a mythical hero in the classical tradition, facing personal ordeals in the search for salvation. The series of confrontations the hero encounters on his odyssey serves as key elements for the interpretation of the protagonist in Mailer's novel. On a secondary level, I shall scrutinize the writer's deconstruction of the canonical version of the American Dream, where he is pointing at the most important elements of critique. At the same time, I shall analyze the new, existential American Dream as constructed in the novel.

These different levels will be discussed in turn and in relation to each other. At the same time, I will analyze how the vision apparent in *Dream* originates in Mailer's earlier essay "The White Negro." Mailer's search for an apt view of the American identity was already present in this 1957 essay, as Mailer tries to distil the essence of what was needed to thrive in American society into a comprehensible existential philosophy. In *Dream*, Mailer applies his findings of "White Negro," but, at the same time, adds more creative nuance.

ROJACK AS A HERO IN THE LEGACY OF THE HIPSTERS

In *Regeneration*, Slotkin delineated three basic elements necessary for myth. In order to be considered a myth, a narrative needs to comprise of a hero, a mythological world and a narrative that elaborates the relationship between the hero and the world he lives in. Moreover, Slotkin discusses several types of mythological forms present in mythology. These different forms are to be understood as different possible ways in which a writer can narrate the relationship between the hero of the myth and the world in which the myth is situated. Therefore these forms are to be considered different possible instantiations of the third basic element of myth, the narrative. In Slotkin's opinion the heroic quest "is the most important archetype in American cultural mythology":

The quest involves a departure of the hero from his common-day world to seek the power of the gods in the underworld, the eternal kingdom of death and dreams from which all men emerge; his motive is provided by the threat of some natural or human calamity which will overtake his people unless the power of the gods can be borrowed or the gods themselves be recon-

ciled with the people. The quest is also an initiation into a higher level of existence. . . . (10)

In his definition Slotkin provides four characteristics for the heroic quest: the escape from everyday life, the threat in life that is the source for the action, the subsequent confrontation with the gods of the underworld, and the resultant higher level of existence. In addition to the three basic elements for myth, these four characteristics for the heroic quest are apparent in *Dream*.

Mailer's mythmaking is centred on one of these characteristics, namely Rojack as a mythological hero. The image of a hero embarking on a mythological quest enables Mailer to construct and deconstruct the "Dream" at the same time, parallel with the journey and evolution of the protagonist. However, Rojack is not the first instance of this kind of figure in Mailer. The characteristics attributed to the protagonist in *Dream* seem derived from the writer's famous 1957 essay. In "White Negro," Mailer provided the outline of the philosophy of the Hipsters, a generation of young ambitious men with a strong sense for individualism and rebellion who were inspired by American black culture. In the philosophy of Hip great emphasis is on the importance of courage, violence, and victory in order to break free from the impediments present in society. As Mailer maintains in *Advertisements for Myself*,

The unstated essence of Hip . . . quivers with the knowledge that new kinds of victories increase one's power for new kinds of perception, and defeats . . . attack the body and imprison one's energy until one is jailed in the prison air of other people's habits, other people's defeats, boredom, quiet desperation, and muted icy self-destroying rage. (339)

In *Dream* the same pattern of regeneration and creation through violence in confrontation, which is key in the evolution of the Hipster. At the same time, other Hip-features emerge and accumulate in the protagonist's process of hero-genesis in the unravelling of the plot.

In order to understand the reading of *Dream* as a heroic quest, we must understand the importance attributed to the series of confrontations in the novel. The momentum of violence and victory in the novel are crucial in the depiction and emergence of Mailer's main character. At the same, the

hero-genesis of Rojack is supported by Slotkin's theoretical framework about American mythology. In order to substantiate the thesis of *Dream* as a heroic quest in the American mythological tradition, the four different characteristics of Slotkin's definition will be discussed in turn and in relation with the essay "The White Negro."

BREAKING THE BONDS

According to the philosophy of Hip that Mailer outlines in "White Negro," the need for divergence is generated out of the dichotomy between conformity and rebellion. Rebellion is viewed as the solution to withstand and overcome the deadening pressure present in society that forces every single one to become part of the nameless mass of comfortably numb people who live according to the rules of the totalitarian state. As a result, the greatest danger besieging society in Mailer's perspective is "slow death by conformity with every creative and rebellious instinct stifled" (339). The reason for this numbing of society lies in the aftermath of the Second World War. The legacy of the war implanted society with the constant fear of "instant death by atomic war" and "death by *deus ex machina*" (339, 338). As a result, "[a] stench of fear has come out of every pore of American life," draining the last drop of dynamism and forcing society to a frightened standstill (338). This dead stop in American society is reinforced by the rule of the upper class. The high society regime has absolute power over the nation and deprives the individual of his will to stand out as an individual. The Hipster is the only one in society who dares to turn away from the safe bosom of the totalitarian state, reluctant to die the "slow death by conformity." Therefore the Hipster consciously chooses the path of rebellion.

The same dichotomy between conformity and rebellion is present in the novel. Initially, Rojack is part of the mass of comfortably numb people. Notwithstanding the fact that he is considered a successful man who lives the American Dream, he feels depressed. Rojack is tied down by his high-society marriage to Deborah, "the bitch goddess." Everything in Rojack's life is controlled by the influential Kelly family. Rojack has no free will left and is decided for. Or as Rojack himself puts it in the novel: "Deborah had gotten her hooks into me, eight years ago she had clinched the hooks and they had given birth to other hooks" (Mailer, *American* 9). Rojack's possibilities coincide with those of the Hipster—either he dies the death of conformity or he acts violently in order to break free. This juxtaposition between courage

and cowardice is metaphorically elaborated by the image of cancer. A lack of bravery not only nullifies the possibility of rebellion and the resultant personal freedom, but it also generates the deadly disease.

In the first chapter, Rojack desperately wants to break free from his high society life and he considers committing suicide. It seems the final resolution is to come in contact with his uncorrupted, “raw being” (11-12). Only by killing himself will he be liberated from the restraints his life imposes on him. Rojack is attending a party when the urge for suicide overwhelms him. He goes outside to the balcony and is lured to the parapet. Standing on the edge of the balcony he debates whether to jump or not. In the end, he must admit that he lacks the bravery to leap into the void. After this failed attempt to step out of life and regain his freedom, he feels the cancerous growth of cowardice in his body:

This illness now, huddling in the deck chair, was an extinction. I could feel what was good in me going away, going away perhaps forever, rising after all to the moon, my courage, my wit, ambition and hope. Nothing but sickness and dung remained in the sack of my torso. . . . [I]f I died from a revolt of the cells, a growth against the design of my organs, that this was the moment it all began, this was the hour when the cells took their leap? (13)

Rojack, however, is not yet completely condemned to die the death of conformity. He can “cure” his cancer by finding another way to unearth the necessary courage to stand out as an individual. Instead of stepping out of life, he has to take what is his own and reclaim his individuality by engaging in open battle with the powers that hold him down. The need for courage is the most basic characteristic of Hip and will resonate throughout the whole novel. Rojack has to unearth his courage to “seek the powers of the gods in the underworld,” which is the next phase of the heroic quest.

FIGHTING DEMONS

The third characteristic of Slotkin’s definition of the heroic quest exemplified in *Dream* is the motivation of the hero, after his departure from the common day world, to “seek the power of the gods in the underworld” and thus to complete his odyssey. This characteristic of the mythological form of the heroic quest must be understood in the light of confrontation and con-

flict. The mythical hero engages in an open battle with the gods who wrong him and the society in which he lives. In the novel this confrontation with the gods is spread out over a series of conflicts with an array of adversaries and assumes a ladder-like structure. Rojack has to pass a series of ascending stages by which he may advance and, ultimately, reach his destination.

Mailer seemed to derive the underlining idea for structuring the novel along the lines of subsequent confrontations from the basic ideas expressed in "White Negro." Here, the Hipster must seek confrontation and violence to improve on his life. Instead of having to face the "constant humility" the mass of comfortably numb people is subjected to, the Hipster chooses to live a life with "ever-threatening danger" (341). The Hipster actively seeks danger because, according to the philosophy of Hip, "life was war" and one can only "remain in life only by engaging death" (341- 42). The ability of violence, however, goes beyond supplying the Hipster with the necessary thrills to feel alive. The importance of violence in the philosophy of the Hipster is summarized in the term "to swing" from the Hip-lexicon:

For to swing is to communicate, is to convey the rhythms of one's own being to a lover, a friend, or an audience, and—equally necessary—be able to feel the rhythm of their response. To swing with the rhythms of another is to enrich oneself—the conception of the learning process as dug by Hip is that one cannot really learn until one contains within oneself the implicit rhythm of the subject or the person. (350)

On a primary level "to swing" indicates that the defeat of an adversary not only enables the Hipster to move up a step in the ladder of confrontations, but also prepares him for the next conflict in his path. On a secondary level, the accomplishment of a stage in the series of conflicts invests the Hipster with the characteristics necessary to combat his next and more powerful enemy. In conflict the Hipster is able to unearth previously unknown talents because "[t]o swing with the rhythms of another is to enrich oneself"—with the characteristics of his adversary. On a tertiary level, an act of violence functions as a purifying act. This cleansing ability of violence enables the Hipster to lessen tensions from the past, coming to terms with the traumas in his previous life.

The context of the act of "swinging" determines the outcome of the con-

flict. Because men are viewed as “a collection of possibilities,” the context is predominant in stimulating the different possibilities present in men. Moreover, “success or failure of an action in a given context reacts upon the character and therefore affects what the character will be in the next context” (353–54). Therefore, not only conflict, but also the success in a conflict, is extremely important for the positive evolution of the character of the Hipster.

The nature of violence, as it is outlined in the philosophy of the Hipsters, echoes one of the underlying characteristics of American mythology. Slotkin notices that “the myth of Regeneration became the structuring metaphor of the American experience” (5). In *Dream*, this thesis of “Regeneration” is further elaborated. Mailer put the theory of violence developed in “White Negro” into practice through the actions of the novel’s protagonist. Barry H. Leeds and Laura Adams have assigned a great deal of importance to the moments of violence in their studies of the novel, and indeed the plot of the novel centers on the momentum of inevitable violence. These conflicts push the action of the novel forward and at the same time function as pivotal moments in the emergence of Rojack as a hero in the legacy of “White Negro.” Parallel with the outbursts of violence described in the novel, Mailer assigns other characteristics of Hip to his protagonist, completely in line with the Hip-notion of “to swing.” Moreover, the contexts in which the conflicts take place are in all cases illustrative of the character of the respective adversaries and stimulate Rojack in unearthing his necessary talents. In this respect, the context emphasizes the importance of the conflict.

The first conflict in the novel is Deborah Kelly’s murder. Rojack strangles his wife in an act of brutal and barbaric ferocity. In the act of killing Deborah, Rojack discovers his ability to “swing.” In line with the Hip-philosophy, it is the body—“the paradise of limitless energy”—that guides Rojack safely to “victory.” It seems that Rojack’s body has taken over: “I had meant . . . to make it no more than a slap, but my body was speaking faster than my brain” (30). Rojack is at the height of his powers at the moment of violence. The powers needed to thrive in a conflict are derived from the fact that by murdering Deborah, Rojack is able to lessen the tensions generated by his depressing marriage to the wealthy and dominant Deborah Kelly.

Corresponding to the Hip meaning of “to swing,” Rojack is able to encapsulate Deborah’s energy and power: “For ten or twenty seconds she strained in balance, and then her strength began to pass, it passed over to me, and I felt my arm tightening about her neck” (31). These forces, derived from

the character of his wife, will prove to be necessary for Rojack to combat the following enemies on his perilous journey. Murdering Deborah enables Rojack to cast his cowardice aside and unearth a courage he never expected to possess. For the first time, Rojack cracks the mold he has been fitted in and starts leaving his depressing life behind, determined to cast aside the high society life.

Murdering Deborah is only the onset for his journey into the dark abyss of American society. However, in the act of murder, Rojack caught a glimpse of how life could be. In the novel this image of Rojack's new life is presented by the use of the metaphor of a jewelled city: "I had the mental image I was pushing with my shoulder against an enormous door which would give inch by inch to the effort. . . . But I had had a vision of what was on the other side of the door, and heaven was there, some quiver of jewelled cities shining in the glow of a tropical dusk" (31).

Enforced by the "inner certainty that his rebellion is just" ("White" 343), Rojack decides to continue his perilous odyssey, determined to reach this "jewelled city."

In the next ascending stage of the journey, Rojack engages in combat with the former prizefighter, Romeo. In a dark and gloomy nightclub they dispute over the favor of the beautiful blond singer Cherry. When Rojack tries to come close to Cherry in order to start a conversation, Romeo and Tony, both small time crooks in the New York underworld, start bullying him around. In normal circumstances, Rojack wouldn't try to take on a "tough guy," but strengthened by the courage he discovered in murdering Deborah and motivated by the fierce desire he feels for Cherry, Rojack prepares to "swing."

Rojack senses "the implicit rhythms" of his adversary Romeo and mirrors his opponent's behavior in order to gain Cherry's favour. Rojack out-classes his adversary in wit and masculinity and is therefore able to scoop Cherry away. The prime motivation for Rojack's actions is found in his longing for Cherry: "It was the glitter of light in Cherry's eyes, bright and prideful. That fed the anger to stare back into Romeo's eyes" (*American* 106). Rojack's sexual motivation to seek danger is an illustration of yet another important quality of Hip apparent in this confrontation. In the life view of the Hipster, competition for (sexual) pleasure plays an important role. This results from the major significance Mailer attributed to sex. In his opinion "good sex" has the power to refresh a human being, while bad sex cripples and destructs men's personality. Rojack, however, is on the right track. When

Rojack and Chery make love afterwards, Rojack has the same vision of the heavenly city he had in the act of killing Deborah. This portrait indicates that he made the right choice and he now has to complete his perilous journey through the darkest corners of American society in order to arrive at the gates of this jewelled city. Ultimately, this confrontation invests Rojack with the knowledge that he can also show male bravery and wit, which he can use to stupefy his opponents. These features will prove to be necessary in the remaining conflicts of his odyssey.

For the next confrontation, Rojack goes to the police station where he arranged to meet the investigating police officer, D.I. Roberts. At the start of the interrogation, Roberts makes it immediately clear what he wants: "I think you're entitled to know how bad your situation is. I want your confession, this evening, right here" (153). The autopsy report leaves little doubt about the real cause of Deborah's death and shows clear evidence of a violent struggle only minutes before her death. Roberts is certain Rojack murdered Deborah and he is not inclined to let Rojack go. Rojack, however, uses the talents that were brought to light in the previous conflicts to withstand the bombardment of accusations. He shows placid masculinity and coldly states: "I'm not guilty. So I assume there's something wrong with your evidence" (154). By mirroring Roberts' behaviour of the determined hard-boiled detective, Rojack is able to withstand the crossfire of questions just long enough for Roberts to receive the liberating telephone that orders Rojack's release. Later on it will be made clear that Rojack's father-in-law, Barney Oswald Kelly, applied pressure to release Rojack. Rojack notices: "It was as if we'd been wrestlers and Roberts had proceeded on the assumption it was his night to win. Then the referee had whispered in his ear – his turn to lose" (160).

Rojack's prime motivation for withstanding the pressure of the interrogation is his desire to see Cherry again. He is determined to go back to Cherry that night and this resoluteness generates the necessary courage to keep on the winning track. In line with a Hipster's philosophy, Rojack's actions are sexually driven. For Rojack, Cherry embodies his vision of the jewelled kingdom. Therefore, Cherry represents liberation. However, Rojack is not yet liberated from his "society life." The corruption of the police force shows that the influence of the Kelly family stretches further than Rojack initially had thought. In order to be freed from the Kelly family's power, Rojack must pass two more stages of his odyssey in which he will have to turn to new talents to be victorious.

The next confrontation in the novel is the violent encounter between Rojack and the black jazz-singer Shago Martin, an ex-boyfriend of Cherry's. When Rojack and Cherry are quietly enjoying their breakfast, Shago comes stumbling in. The sight of Cherry and her new lover infuriates Shago and he immediately orders Rojack to leave. Rojack, however, resists. At first they engage in a battle with words, but the conflict quickly turns to physical violence when Shago feels that he is about to lose.

The confrontation between the protagonist and the black artist is the most extensive passage in the novel thus far. The reason why Mailer assigns this much importance to this conflict in *Dream* is twofold. First, as a consequence of the novel's ascending narrative stages, Shago has to be the strongest enemy in Rojack's odyssey at that point. Therefore, their conflict is the most intense and most powerfully described in the novel, up to this point. Secondly, Shago's character echoes Mailer's description of the Hip movement, the potent black man in contemporary society, and the source from which Mailer derived his ideas for "White Negro." Moreover, the juxtaposition of Rojack and Shago is essential in understanding the protagonist's genesis.

In "White Negro," Mailer frequently refers to jazz-music as the music of Hip. Jazz represents the same motion and unrehearsed action that is important in the philosophy of the Hipster. The character of Shago equals motion and agility, impulsive action and streetwise wit. He is the sexually potent prince of Harlem and therefore a fearsome enemy. The inherent dynamism of Mailer's philosophy is also reflected in the language of Hip, which, according to Mailer in *Advertisements*, is "an artful language, tested and shaped by an intense experience" (348). In his speech, Shago frequently uses words directly taken from the Hip lexicon, such as *dig*, *cool*, *square*, and *cat*.

The language of Hip is also an important feature in the dichotomy between Rojack and Shago. In Shago's opinion Rojack serves as a prime example of "square," which in Hip functions as the total opposite of "hip": "[I]f I got to lose, I got to lose to a square with heart, I mean he's all that heart and no potatoes, just Ivy League ass. Harvard, I presume, Doctor Rojack" (*American* 187). By using the word "square" to refer to his adversary, Shago makes it clear that he detests the fact that Rojack renounced his individuality in order to be successful. By losing his personality, Rojack becomes a familiar face in the pantheon of the rich and famous. Shago, on the other hand, holds onto his personality on the way to fame. Notwithstanding his fame, he re-

mains a strong and independent individual. Shago's success is based on the Hip characteristic of "swinging," the power to adapt to different and changing circumstances in order to blend in and take control over the situation. Shago knows that this capability is his secret weapon, and he explains, "I'm just the future, in love with myself, that's the future. I got twenty faces, I talk the tongues" (189).

Rojack appears to be no match for the powerful black jazz-singer, yet is able to defeat him. Rojack relies on the powers he extracted from his previous victories and is motivated by his strong love for Cherry. Rojack's determination to love Cherry, and reach "the heavenly city" makes him a much stronger adversary than Shago initially anticipates. In the actual physical encounter between Shago and the protagonist, Rojack shows his true colors.

One of the recurring and frequently discussed characteristics of "White Negro" is the need for courage at the moment of violence. As in the previous conflicts of Rojack, the energy needed to win the battle with Shago is extracted from Rojack's "paradise of limitless energy," his body, which is constantly fuelled by rage. His rage and energy are derived from Rojack's determination to win this part of the "competition for pleasure" ("White" 349). From this point of view Shago and Rojack are drawing swords over the love of Cherry.

Another important feature to note in this conflict is the explicit reference to the notion of the psychopath, which is expressed in "Negro." Here Mailer depicts the Hipster as the elite of the psychopaths, "the wise primitive in a giant jungle" (343). Rojack himself notes during the conflict: "The feeling of joy came up in me again the way the lyric of a song might remind a man on the edge of insanity that soon he will be insane again and there is a world there more interesting than his own" (185–86). This more interesting world can be accessed only by violence, which is why Rojack finally instigates the physical conflict; "I took a step toward him. I did not know what I was going to do, but it felt right to take that step," after which Shago feels threatened and starts pushing the hero-protagonist around, but Rojack reacts with the speed of lightning (185). "The pressure back of my neck let go of itself and I was a brain full of blood, the light went red, it was red." Rojack senses that "[m]y rage took over," his body governs his actions; "I was out of control, violence seemed to shake itself free from him each time I smashed him back to the floor and shake itself into me" (192–93). According to the philosophy of Hip outlined in *Advertisements*, violence is a necessary cleansing characteristic for the Negro

to grow and reach salvation and be able to feel real love: “the necessity to purge his violence, for if he cannot empty his hatred then he cannot love” (347).

In the end, Rojack defeats Shago by kicking him down the stairs and back on the street. Rojack has absorbed Shago’s power—or, as Cherry remarks to Shago, “you’re not white, you’re just losing your black” (*American* 191). Shago’s powers pass over to Rojack. As a token of her love and trust in Rojack, and as an illustration of Rojack’s newly acquired powers, Cherry hands over Shago’s umbrella to Rojack. It is clear that Rojack accumulates the final necessary characteristics in this penultimate confrontation to be enabled to defeat his last and foremost powerful adversary.

In the final confrontation of the novel, Rojack has to face his father-in-law, Barney Oswald Kelly. In the unravelling of the novel’s plot, this encounter is the final ordeal the protagonist has to face before reaching personal salvation. The rich and powerful Kelly is the strongest and foremost intelligent enemy Rojack has encountered thus far. In contrast with Shago or Romeo, Kelly deliberately postpones the actual physical encounter. Mailer makes clear that Kelly is situated in a totally different league of evil—Kelly is the novel’s Devil, the physical embodiment of upper evil in American society. Indeed, Kelly’s life story reveals him as the prime example of the corrupt American *nouveau riche*, bereft even of the smallest hint of morality. However, this digression from the actual encounter between the two characters is not only a tool to complete the disturbing image of Barney Kelly, but can also be considered an attempt on behalf of Kelly to gain Rojack’s confidence in order to make the protagonist confess the murder of his daughter Deborah. From early on in the conversation, Kelly stresses the fact that Rojack has to attend Deborah’s funeral.

Kelly uses the topic of the funeral to probe into the actual facts about Deborah’s sudden death. When Kelly has finished unearthing the specifics of his past life, Kelly asks Rojack, “There’s one reason why you won’t go to the funeral, isn’t there? . . . It’s because you did kill Deborah?” Rojack replies affirmatively, but launches a counterattack by confronting Kelly with his failure as a father. Subsequently, Rojack senses that “finally I had blundered through a barrier,” opening up the possibilities for real confrontation. Kelly seems furious (253).

The real physical confrontation, however, is situated on the terrace of Kelly’s apartment. A little voice inside the protagonist’s head urges him to walk the parapet as a test of his courage, and Kelly tries to use this situation to have his

revenge on Rojack. Therefore he stimulates the protagonist to attempt his perilous walk. Before Rojack mounts the parapet, Kelly says: "You'd better give me your umbrella" (256). When Rojack has almost finished his vertiginous task, Kelly steps forward and uses the umbrella as a weapon with which he tries to push Rojack over the edge. "You're not bad Stephen," he said, "it's just . . . I don't know that I want you to get away with it," and he lifted the tip of the umbrella to my ribs and gave a push to poke me off (260). Rojack reacts with the speed of lightning, seizes the umbrella and strikes Kelly across the face before leaving him behind defeated. Notwithstanding the fact that the outcome of the conflict holds the defeat of Rojack's enemy, the walk on the parapet is much more than a conflict between the two men. When the focus is on the parallels with the philosophical doctrine outlined in "White Negro," it has to be observed that the confrontation represents the struggle between the Hipster features of courage and cowardice and is therefore located in the psyche of the protagonist. This internal battle is most apparent in the moments before and during the walk on the parapet, which is reminiscent of Rojack's suicide attempt at a party at the beginning of the novel. The parallels between the two attempts to walk round the parapet illustrate the "Hip notion" that present actions lessen the tension of past trauma.

Because Rojack has finally finished the final league of his journey, he is able to cast aside his cowardice and walk the parapet. In order to gain resolve, Rojack must control the tearing dichotomy in his own head. When Rojack first mounts the parapet, he is terribly frightened by his hazardous task, which is made even more difficult by wind and rain. At first he is inclined to give up, but Rojack quickly recovers: "And then I felt some hard contemptuous disgust of my fear" (257). Nevertheless the fact that he decides to confront his fear, the hero-protagonist still feels the urge "to leave the balcony and fly." The little voice inside his head cautions him: "You murdered. So you are in [Deborah's] cage. Now, earn your release. Go around the parapet again" (259). When Rojack is forced to step off the parapet by Barney Kelly's attack with Shago's umbrella, the little voice warns him that "It's not enough. It goes for nothing if you don't do it twice (260)." Rojack is determined however, that he finished his final ordeal and responds: "I've lain with madness long enough," and he walks away, turning his back to the corrupt American upper class (260).

In the act of "swinging" represented in this confrontation, Rojack is able to take over the powers and qualities of his adversary. However, in contrast with

the desired qualities of streetwise wit, cool and power represented by Romeo, Roberts and Shago, Kelly's determining characteristics are of a different, less desirable kind. The main reason for Barney Kelly's success is his pact with the devil, which invested him with a magical kind of intelligence, a "[w]ondrous sort of power," enabling him to be visionary and therefore extremely successful in business (244). Rojack is frightened by the immense power of Barney Kelly's devilish intelligence, which briefly seems to pass over to him. "[A] gout of the stench which comes from devotion to the goat came up from him and went over to me" (253). This fills Rojack with an immense and crippling fear:

For I wanted to escape from that intelligence which let me know of murders in one direction and conceive of visits to Cherry from the other, I wanted to be free of magic, the tongue of the Devil, the dread of the Lord, I wanted to be some sort of rational man again, nailed tight to details, promiscuous, reasonable, blind to the reach of the seas. (255)

By taking the walk round the parapet, defeating Kelly and his own cowardice, Rojack casts away the temptation of real evil, opening up the possibilities for a new, rational and even happy life with Cherry.

On the level of myth and the battle between good and evil, this final conflict shows that Rojack equally uses good and evil in order to reach a state of higher personal awareness. Rojack has learned to master the Hipster skill of "swinging," but in this final confrontation he consciously opts not to "swing" and, as a result, chooses not to continue to nurture the evil side of his personality. Rather than being tempted by the allure of immense power equal to that of Kelly or even the Devil, the hero-protagonist resolutely chooses for good, for Cherry and for love, determined to reach his personal salvation. The Hip morality as presented by Mailer in "White Negro" provides a set of rules that Rojack must follow and absorb if he wants to break with his previous, depressing high society life. Rojack hopes to start life anew, reaching a higher level of existence.

REACHING SALVATION

The fourth and final characteristic of Slotkin's definition of the heroic quest is "the initiation into a higher level of existence." For Rojack, this means that he reached the end of his ordeals and acquired personal salvation. At last,

he is liberated from the constraints of his deadening high-society life, having personally defeated the representatives of his previous life. In line with American mythology, Rojack goes west to Las Vegas where he redresses balances, after which he continues on to the lawless territories of Mexico. Free at last. However, this character of the heroic quest is the least elaborated in the novel. The reason therefore lies in the fact that the novel *is* an act of constructing, not a finalized construction.

THE MYTHOGENESIS OF MAILER

According to Slotkin, mythology is a key for understanding a nation's identity, since "a mythology is a complex of narratives that dramatizes the world visions and historical sense of a people or culture, reducing centuries of experience into a constellation of compelling metaphors." It is important to note that the narrative of a myth is not perpetual, but has to be reactive to the changes in an inherently dynamic society. If a mythological narrative strives to sustain its functionality, the myth must address these alterations in society. At the same time, the response of people living in that particular society to that particular myth is equally essential to the viability of a myth, because "a people unaware of myths is likely to continue living by them, though the world around that people may change and demand changes in their psychology, their world view, their ethics, and their institutions" (4-5).

This triple dynamic between the mythology itself, the myth-maker, and the myth-maker's audience shapes the precarious task of the literary myth-maker as the seismograph of a society:

On the basis of limited, finite experience, he (the myth-maker) creates a hypothetical vision of a universal, infinite order and imposes that hypothesis on his perception of the phenomena of nature and his own behavior. He tests his vision by acting in accordance with the principles of behavior that seem to be demanded by reality as he envisions it. (7)

In constructing his own myth, the writer is able to ventilate his own idiosyncratic view on the values of society that is intended to raise certain awareness among the people of a particular society. Not only does artistic mythogenesis tend to make people aware of the existence of a myth, it also prescribes this population with a set of rules to follow if they want to survive

in a society dominated by that particular myth. Subsequently, a myth is much more than *only* a narrative, but can be considered to be “a source of power.” This power is derived from the fact that a myth shows its readers “how to appropriate and control the forces that order the world” (7). In this view, myths offer a guide to success.

In what Slotkin calls the primary stage of myth, the “mythopoeic state of consciousness” predominates. This means that both mythmaker and audience are very susceptible to a new myth. In this stage a certain fixity of form takes hold in society.

In the secondary or romantic stage of myth, the emphasis is on “the fulfilment of the obligations established for the myth” (13). This means that the people became aware of the specific set of rules outlined by the myth-artist, and try to live life accordingly.

The third and final stage is called the consumatory stage of myth. In this stage, the major thinkers in society become aware of the corruption that flowed from the romantic stage. The original faiths and values that were constructed in the primary stage were perverted to such an extent that the myth is no longer supportive to the nation and the nation’s people. The myth-making artist is the first to become aware of this degeneration. He is blessed with a strong sense of critical awareness and senses the need for a new myth. “In a conscious attempt to recapture the lost innocence of the mythopoeic attitude, [he] tries to assume the role of a prophet in society.” As a visionary, he reaches out to people and tries to make them susceptible to his new vision. The artist’s prophecy is based on his new hypothetical “construction of symbols and values, derived from real and imaginary experience and ordered by the imagination according to the deepest needs of the psyche” (13). Mailer’s work on the “American identity” is situated in this final stage of the development of American mythology, not only because of the apparent reaction to a degenerated myth frozen in the romantic stage, but also because of the prophecy of a new, consumatory myth.

The myth Mailer is concerned with is one of the strongest surviving myths in American society: the American Dream. According to Slotkin, the American Dream equals “the conception of America as a wide-open land of unlimited opportunity for the strong, ambitious, self-reliant individual to thrust his way to the top” (5). In this view, anyone can climb the ladder of success by hard work and just a bit of luck. However, the reality of everyday life often contradicts this perpetual *idee-fixe*—and wealth is often accom-

modated by corruption and high-society influencing. In contrast with the democratic ideal of the original American Dream, wealth has become the privilege of a secluded group of perverted semi-criminals.

In *Advertisements*, Mailer signals a frightened standstill in contemporary society. American society has turned into a totalitarian state controlled by a small number of highly powerful people—"men who had too much money and controlled too many things"—who are obstructively relentless to change. As a consequence, the American people were deprived of the possibilities of personal growth, which were initially offered by the democratic ideal of the American Dream. Enforced by the legacy of the Second World War, "[a] stench of fear has come out of every pore of American life," resulting in the fact that "almost any kind of unconventional action often takes disproportionate courage" (338, 339-40). According to Mailer, the power needed to overthrow the dictatorial regime is found in the power of the individual. The individual has to show courage to stand out of society, because without deviation from the norm, progress is not possible. By breaking away from the impediments of society, the Hipster will be able to claim what is rightfully his, namely the American possibility of self-creation. The guideline for this individual regeneration—a source of power in Slotkin's view—was outlined in the essay and re-evaluated in *Dream*. Mailer tests his mythological hypothesis by applying it to Rojack. At the same time, the dichotomy between the "evil" and the "good" American Dream that was already touched upon in *Advertisements* is further elaborated in the novel. In *Dream* the conflict between the romantic and the consumatory stage of the American myth is illustrated by the protagonist's heroic attempt to break the bonds with his old life and start life anew. The representation of Rojack's old life holds Mailer's description of the corrupted American Dream while the protagonist's new life represents the new myth Mailer is proposing.

THE DECONSTRUCTION OF AN AMERICAN IDEAL.

The prime representative of Rojack's old life is his highly influential father-in-law, Barney Oswald Kelly. Kelly is presented as the embodiment of the romantic stage in the mythological development of the American Dream. The plot of Kelly's life-story reveals the characteristics of a corrupted American society.

Kelly is of Northern-Irish descent and grew up in a poor immigrant family. Notwithstanding the fact that Kelly had to start from an impoverished

background, he was able to climb the ladder of success and become one of America's most powerful men. On the surface, the synopsis of Kelly's life seems the perfect illustration of the original American Dream in the primary stage of the mythological development. However, a closer look at the reasons for his success reveals the corruption that Mailer reacts against.

One of the pillars on which the success of Kelly is based is his ability to network. From early on, Kelly was able to sense the importance of high society influence. His first marriage with the Sicilian Leonora, her name meaning "bright light," was not a marriage of love but of convenience. This marriage to the old European aristocracy provided Kelly with the necessary money and influences to continue his path to success. Or, as he comments, "I adored the life she opened, Leonora's friends were the patch for me" (*American* 240).

This blending of old and new money, which lies at the basis of Kelly's success, is metaphorically elaborated by the coat of arms Kelly constructs out of the heraldic images stolen from the Mangaravidi and the Kelly family's symbols. The image represents a naked infant being devoured by the serpent of the Mangaravidi family. On a metaphorical level, the naked, pure child represents the innocence of the Irish immigrant family, while the serpent serves as clear rendition of the Devil and illustrates the temptation of wealth and success. Moreover, the motto underlining the coat of arms also invokes the presence of the devil. The phrase *Victoria caelo terraque* seems to echo the famous line, "It's better to reign in Hell, than to serve in Heaven," from John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (263).

In order to consolidate his bond with the old and powerful Mangaravidi family, Kelly must have a child with Leonora. Kelly knew that a child means a connection to good luck. Leonora however, is reluctant to the idea of sex and in an attempt to rape her, Kelly calls the Devil, the serpent in the coat of arms, for help: "Satan, if it takes your pitchfork up my gut, let me blast a child into this bitch!" (240). With the help of Lucifer, Deborah is conceived, reassuring Kelly's physical connection to the powerful Mangaravidi family. The influence of the devil, however, is not restricted to the conception of Deborah but continues throughout Kelly's successes. Moreover, Satan's help is the second pillar on which Kelly's success story is built. Not only does the devil invest Kelly with a "wondrous sort of power"—when Kelly wished one of his adversaries to drop dead, it actually happened—but Kelly is also able to reinforce his position at the pinnacle of American society. Mailer uses the

image of the “spider” to describe Kelly’s position at the top of society (237). As a spider, Kelly constructed a flexible web that stretches out over American society, rigorously controlling the different powers constituting the nation. Kelly’s influence ranges from the corrupted police officer in the street to the head of the CIA, from the petty thieves populating the outskirts of the city to the organized crime of the mafia and even to the American media.

But if you strike a bargain with the devil, the devil will come and collect. Kelly has to pay the price for his success and the devil sends his envoy Bess to corrupt Kelly even further. Bess is described as a representative of the American *nouveau rich* and is, to say the least, not reluctant to the idea of sex. She tempts Kelly in cheating on his wife Leonora and wants him to take part in an incestuous threesome with her daughter. Even for Kelly, who never felt such temptation, this act is too much. Nevertheless, Kelly debates what the outcome could have been if he had not resisted, since “[i]ncest is the gate to the worst sort of forces” (246). The idea of the potential powers of incest keeps haunting him until Deborah, fifteen years old at the time, returns home to live with her father. This time Deborah is the serpent, the temptress sent by Satan to corrupt Kelly. In contrast with Bess, she succeeds in her sinister task. The temptation overwhelms Kelly, and he and Deborah have sex. Deborah’s daughter Deirdre is the living proof of their incestuous relationship. At this point, Barney Oswald Kelly is totally corrupted and reached the point of no return. The corruption of the American Dream is now complete.

Mailer uses Kelly’s character to illustrate the corrupted American Dream in the romantic stage of American mythology. Following Mailer’s hypothesis, the American Dream was destroyed by the corruption and perversion of the *nouveau riche* class, who succeeded in acquiring the power needed to control society. Their influence on society is so powerful that the possibilities for individual growth are effaced. Personal enrichment is only possible by responding to the demands imposed by the ruling class. Mailer’s prophecy rises as a phoenix from the ashes of a corrupted society sent to inflame the American people, not only with the ideas of the newly proposed myth but also with the idea of great personal awareness.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF AN AMERICAN IDEAL

The greatest motivation for the destruction of the power of the ruling class and the fourth characteristic in Mailer’s myth is the urge to be free. In the ro-

mantic stage of the mythology of the American dream, the right to freedom of the common man was bound and gagged by the supreme powers of upper class. It may seem a cliché, but for an American this stage is not acceptable because personal freedom is one of the pillars of American citizenship.

Mailer has always shown a great concern for the welfare of his nation. Therefore his mythogenesis can be considered a call to arms to recapture the lost right for personal freedom. This thesis clearly echoes the Hip morality Mailer proposed in *Advertisements*: "The only Hip morality (but of course it is an ever-present morality) is to do what one feels whenever and wherever it is possible" (354). America is the land of the free.

Within the framework of mythology offered by Slotkin, Mailer functions as a consummate myth-maker, a creator who in times of need assumes the role of prophet, shaking the nation's people with new ideas and beliefs. As a critical observer he is able to sense that change is needed in order to assure the nation's health, and the message he sends is one of hope. If the original American features of individuality and persistence are regained, change is still possible and the corrupted powers can be overthrown. America remains the land of endless opportunity.

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