LAST OF THE LATE ROMANTICS

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Norman Mailer's Later Fictions:
Ancient Evenings through The Castle in the Forest
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WITH THE EXCEPTION OF GORE VIDAL, the generation of American novelists who served in WW II is gone. Among that group, which included James Jones, William Styron, Joseph Heller, Saul Bellow, Kurt Vonnegut, Ralph Ellison, and J.D. Salinger, Mailer was famous for the longest period: from 1948, with the publication of his first novel, *The Naked and the Dead*, until his death in 2007. Over the course of almost sixty years, through the second half of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century, Mailer wrestled with American culture. Mailer was an indispensable figure, a writer of massive ambition and undeniable celebrity. It is hard to imagine the course American literature might have taken without his chutzpah. As the country slides ever closer to perpetual war, to a surveillance state, and to the abyss of corporate fascism, I miss his voice and keep imagining what choice observations he might have made during the 2012 Presidential election year about our current crop of political crazies. As John Whalen-Bridge writes, "Mailer was a public intellectual like no other, and there is no American author who can succeed him" (9-10).

Similar to Hemingway, there was no else quite like him and, like Hemingway, his notoriety and self-mythology overshadowed his works and made it difficult to assess his writing. Again, like Hemingway, his career suffered ups and downs, and many critics dismissed his late work, writing premature obits. His last critically acclaimed work was the nonfiction novel *The Exe-*

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cutioner's Song in 1979. The reviews of his later novels were mixed, sometimes scathing. He began disappearing from the anthologies and was in danger of being de-canonized. Although I continued to teach *The Armies of the Night* in my course on American fiction of the 1960s, I never attempted any of his later works in the classroom.

Now that Mailer is gone, we have a chance to reassess his career, and John Whalen-Bridge's anthology *Norman Mailer's Later Fictions: Ancient Evenings through Castle in the Forest* is a worthy start to that revisioning. Whalen-Bridge sees the late Mailer in "late" terms: "a late romantic, perhaps the last of the late romantics" (184), "our last quixotic/heroic writer" (185), a writer like Melville, "so rich that he gave us a kind of cultural indigestion" (189). The argument of the book is that in his last two decades, Mailer "not only maintained his powers as a writer—he continued, against all expectations, to grow" (190). This edited collection makes a good case for that assertion, with a variety of approaches to the richness and range of Mailer's last five novels: *Ancient Evenings*, *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, *Harlot's Ghost*, *The Gospel According to the Son*, and *The Castle in the Forest*.

"Sex, God, politics, and fame: Mailer's late work develops the relationship between these areas of interest obsessively and with a cavalier joy" (3). Accordingly, Whalen-Bridge divides the book into these four sections. Part I, Sex, contains two essays on *Ancient Evenings* and *Tough Guys Don't Dance*. They are Scott Duguid's "From Egypt to Provincetown, By Trump Air: Modernist History and the Return of the Repressed in *Ancient Evenings* and *Tough Guys Don't Dance*"; and James Emmet Ryan's "Mailer and the 'Diet of Reality': *Tough Guys Don't Dance* and American Values."

Scott Duguid sees *Tough Guys* as "a satire on the machismo of the Reagan 1980s," with Mailer having fun mocking his own macho reputation. The novel shows contrasting styles of American masculinity through the decades: Doug Madden, Tim's father, is a 1940s-style tough guy; Tim Madden, the hero, represents 1960s liberal masculinity; and Police Chief Regency is Reaganite masculinity; his "misogyny and violence thereby encompasses the 1980s twin backlashes against 1960s liberalism and against feminism" (22). He also reads *Ancient Evenings* and *Tough Guys* as representative of 1980s artistic tendencies: *Ancient Evenings* is a return to modernist aesthetics in a postmodern era, whereas *Tough Guys* shows an ironic, postmodern nostalgia for mass culture, the hard-boiled detective novels of the 1940s. Duguid also makes some good comparisons of *Tough Guys* to another 1980s satire on

American sex and violence, Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*. The downside of the essay is that it is sometimes rambling and references *Ancient Evenings* only glancingly.

James Emmet Ryan continues the argument in favor of *Tough Guys* as not the hastily-written potboiler which many critics dismissed but as "a clever piece of genre fiction" with "a good deal of trenchant cultural commentary" (42). He interprets the novel as dealing with the transformation of America into a community where vice, criminality, and pornography are the new norms. Ryan further argues that in *Tough Guys* Mailer's "distinctive journalistic sensibilities are fused to a pulp fiction criminal narrative" (37), although he does not make it clear in what way the novel is "journalistic."

Part II, God, consists of three essays: Ashton Howley's "Mailer's 'Gnostic' *Gospel*"; Mashey Bernstein's "A Jew for Jesus? A Jewish Reading of Norman Mailer's *The Gospel According to the Son*"; and Jeffrey F. L. Partridge's "Augustinian Evil in *The Gospel According to the Son* and *The Castle in the Forest*: A Case for Non-Dualism."

Ashton Howley's excellent, learned essay takes *The Gospel According to the Son* seriously, detailing the Gnostic, Aristotelian, and Jungian elements in the novel as it "restores psychological, theological, and dramatic balance to the story of Jesus" (58). Howley connects the novel to Mailer's Manichean notions going back to *The Presidential Papers* and *Cannibals and Christians* in the 1960s. "Gnosticism" refers to the scrolls found at Nag Hammadi, Egypt in the 1940s, which led to a reinterpretation of Christianity among some Christian thinkers. Mailer's is a Gnostic Jesus who returns to "the immanent world of nature and the body" (57). And Mailer's Jesus is also Aristotelian in his inductive logic. Mailer renders the gospel "in the interrogative mood" (62), posing questions as to what really happened and if the events have a supernatural or natural explanation. Finally, Howley reads the novel as Jungian in its belief in the existence and co-dependence of both good and evil and female and male principles in the human psyche. Mailer makes Satan into a necessary figure, a mentor to Jesus, and his Jehovah is not omnipotent and fails to understand women. Most interestingly, Mailer turns Jesus into a speculative "novelist like himself" (62).

In counterpoint to Howley's reading of *Gospel* in terms of Gnosticism and Christian theology, Mashey Bernstein does a Jewish reading. Bernstein notes that Jews such as Sholem Asch who write novels about the life of Jesus risk being denounced by Jews as an apostate or traitor and by Christians as

an upstart or blasphemer. *Gospel* received such caustic reviews that Bernstein wonders whether "the fact that Mailer is Jewish played a large part in the way the text has been received. Other authors have rewritten the Gospels without being taken to task so severely" (75).

Bernstein may be correct about the reception of this novel. In fact, I was reminded of the episode in *The Armies of the Night* when Mailer is released from jail after his participation in the March on the Pentagon and preaches a sermon before the press assembled on the lawn: "You see, dear fellow Americans, it is Sunday, and we are burning the body and blood of Christ in Vietnam" (*Armies* 214). When his speech is reported in *The Washington Post,* the story ends "Mailer is a Jew" (*Armies* 215), as if that invalidates Mailer's entire speech.

Bernstein explains that many Jewish-American novelists—including Henry Roth, Philip Roth, Potok, Wallant, Malamud, and Salinger—are attracted to Christian mythology and symbolism because Jesus was a Jew, because the crucifixion provides a potent metaphor for martyrdom, and because Christianity is so central to Western culture. There is also a messianic and prophetic strain in some Jewish-American writers, especially in Mailer. I note that the best commentator on this messianic strain is Sam Girgus in *The New Covenant: Jewish Writers and the American Idea*, where he talks about the American Jeremiad.

Ultimately, Bernstein connects Mailer's Jesus not so much to Mailer's theological concerns but to previous Mailer heroes: Jesus is an existential hero, another "white negro" testing himself through action and risk (83).

In "Augustinian Evil," Jeffrey F.L. Partridge looks at Mailer's last two novels, *The Gospel According to the Son* and *The Castle in the Forest*, as, in a sense, a single work, "two volumes of his final novel on God and the Devil" (101). If Jesus is the son of God, then Hitler is the anti-Christ, for in Mailer's novel, the Devil is present at the incestuous conception of the future Führer. These final works are capstones of Mailer's lifelong fascination with the nature of good and evil, novels Mailer said he felt "assigned" to write (88). In writing them, Mailer tapped into the unconscious, and it "led him down a path he had not foreseen" (88).

Partridge compares the evolution of Mailer's thinking about the nature of evil in the two books to that of St. Augustine: from the dualism of Manicheanism to non-dualism, from the eternal struggle between good and evil in *Gospel* to the belief that evil is simply the lack of the good or a per-

version of the good in *The Castle*. Hitler is not born evil, nor is he the product of child abuse or a particular trauma. Rather, his evil is created gradually through a perversion of the good: incest, excessive mother love, and masturbation (Mailer has always denounced masturbation). Partridge's essay is worthwhile in linking the two novels and showing the subtle evolution of Mailer's thought about theological questions.

Part II, Politics, also has three essays: Ashton Howley's "Imperial Mailer: *Ancient Evenings*"; Brian J. McDonald's "Spooks and Agencies: *Harlot's Ghost* and the Culture of Secrecy"; and Heather Wolffram's "The Nazi Occult and *The Castle in the Forest*."

"Imperial Mailer: *Ancient Evenings*" is, for me, not as successful as Howley's other essay in this volume on *Gospel*. The problem is not in the thorough scholarship or the able Jungian reading but because I am unsure at times if Howley is defending or criticizing *Ancient Evenings*. For example, he writes, "With Mailer persisting in his dramatizing of this sadomasochistic dynamic and of its emotional and political consequences for Menenhetet, *Ancient Evenings* threatens to become insufferably tedious" (112). I have to agree, for I too found the novel hard to take in its unrelenting sadomasochistic brutality. Is Mailer commenting on the limitations of this warrior culture, comparing it to present day imperialism? Or is he celebrating it or even indulging his own fantasies? Howley might consider a recent study by Daniel Fuchs, *The Limits of Ferocity: Sexual Aggression and Modern Literary Rebellion* (Duke UP, 2011), which places Mailer in the tradition of Sadean writers of sexual aggression: "the nihilism of hip, as Mailer conceives it, goes back to Sade, with every social restraint removed—even murder" (Fuchs 8). According to Fuchs, "In *Ancient Evenings*, Mailer presents a world without superego as he leaves no phallus unadorned, no incest inhibited, no hole unentered" (Fuchs 315).

Brian J. McDonald's "Spooks and Agencies" is a fine essay comparing the CIA as represented in *Harlot's Ghost* and Don DeLillo's *Libra*. He sees both novels as a critique of the culture of secrecy as anti-democratic. "Like Mailer's depiction of the CIA in *Harlot's Ghost*, Delillo's CIA in *Libra* is ultimately revealed as more 'sinister bureaucracy' than 'invisible government'" (133). In Mailer's novel, the CIA uses secrecy "as a tool in the battle for influence and resources between governmental bureaucracies" (133).

Heather Wolffram's "The Nazi Occult and *The Castle in the Forest*" is an impressively researched account of the relationship between Hitler and

Nazism and the occult, which then shows Mailer's use of the occult in his novel. Although Hitler has minimal use for the occult except for the racist theories of a group called the Ariosophists, Hess and Himmler were very interested. Nevertheless, after 1937, the Nazis outlawed the occult on ideological grounds. "Occultists cannot in any serious way be seen as an important source for or sinister force behind Hitler's genocidal dream" (145). There is, however, a cryptohistory about Nazism and the occult that flourishes in popular fiction and films such as the *Indiana Jones* series. Mailer's novel draws on both "historical fact and cryptohistorical myth" (153) as he attempts to propose a grand theory of Hitler's psychological development by hinting at incest and occult influences. Ultimately, however, "Mailer leaves the reader with a sense of the inexplicable" (154), for Hitler still possesses free will.

The final section of the volume, Part IV, Fame, is a kind of bonus offering biographical information and appreciation of Mailer's achievement. In "History Looks at Itself: On the Road with the Mailers and George Plimpton," Lawrence Shainberg provides a delightful account of a performance in Vienna in 2002 of "Zelda, Scott, and Ernest: A Dramatic Dialogue" compiled by George Plimpton and Terry Quinn from the letters and writings of the three authors. Norris Mailer played Zelda, George Plimpton read Scott, and Norman Mailer of course was Hemingway. Along the way, Shainberg discusses the influence of Hemingway and Fitzgerald on the trio of authors onstage, the vexed friendship between Ernest and Scott and the embattled marriage of Zelda and Scott, which he compares with the more halcyon friendship between Mailer and Plimpton and the turbulent relationship between Mailer and his wife.

Next, John Whalen-Bridge rounds out the book with his astute reassessment of Mailer's career and importance in "Late Mailer: His Writings and Reputation since *Ancient Evenings*," described above. Whalen-Bridge gives the last word in the book, appropriately, to an affectionate but wry tribute by Norris Mailer, who talks about Mailer as "one of the best editors I knew. I got an education in editing from Mailer U by living with him for nearly 33 years and reading his manuscripts" (193). Yet Norris admits she was "too vulnerable to his criticisms," so that she only gave him the manuscript of her first novel when it was already in galleys and too late to change (194). In the Foreword to the book, Jason Epstein, Norman's editor, also talks about Norman and editing. Memorably, Epstein says, "Like Lord Byron, he was—when I first knew him, God knows forty years ago or more—mad, bad, and dan-

gerous to know" (xi). With Mailer, writes Epstein, "an editor really wasn't much more than a valet" (xii). And he concludes, "Whatever I contributed to Norman's understanding is nothing compared to what he contributed to mine" (xii).

John Whalen-Bridge's rich and varied collection goes a ways toward demonstrating that Mailer's last five novels are not evidence of a talent in decline but of a master craftsman still capable of stretching the medium. The volume reminds us that all readers are in Mailer's debt for his contributions to American literature over the span of almost sixty years.