MAILER MATTERS

RICHARD STRATTON

POSTMODERNISM IS DEAD, BURIED IN THE RUBBLE OF 9/11. SO SAYS "THE FIRST comprehensive retrospective, Postmodernism—Style and Subversion 1970–1990" at the esteemed Victoria and Albert Museum. British writer Alex Kirby concurs in his article "The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond," published in *Philosophy Today* (May/June 2012). Mailer, I suspect, would not mourn its passing. In fact, one could argue, he anticipated and participated in its demise. In nearly all his thinking, even in those ideas he categorized as "radical conservative," and certainly in his art, he was remarkably prescient, not only ahead of the curve but defining, delineating, and riding the curve with the verve of a big wave surfer.

Postmodernism isn't so much what it is—or was—as what it was not. As a philosophy, it emphasized the ineffability of universal truth. Meaning for the postmodernist was personal and therefore meaningless to the rest of us. Postmodern man or woman was an observer, a passive viewer, watching the play of life, perhaps commenting ironically but never committing, never engaging except at most to switch the channel. To the degree that the dominant communication technology characterizes and affects the art and philosophy of an era, postmodernism could be seen as the age of commercial TV. One could never really become involved in the drama of a TV show because it was constantly interrupted by mind-numbing commercials. Network and sponsor censors determined the content of the show. Cable TV, DVR and the Internet changed all that.

Mailer, with his belief in the authenticity of experience as the only valid path to knowledge, believed in absolutes, in good and evil, God and the devil, and humankind as the being in which these forces grapple continually. Though he rejected organized religion, he was a theist; he believed in a personal and universal God-as-artist, an evolving God, a God who is participating in his

THE MAILER REVIEW. VOL. 6, NO. 1, FALL 2012. Copyright © 2012. The Norman Mailer Society. Published by The Norman Mailer Society.

creation, and mankind as His greatest and most complicated on-going masterwork.

"[T]here are three aspects to reality," Mailer wrote in his last novel, *The Castle in the Forest*,

> —the Divine, the Satanic, the human—in effect, three separate armies, three kingdoms, not two. God and His angelic cohort work upon men, women, and children to bring them under His Influence. Our Maestro, and we, his representatives, look to possess the souls of many of these same humans. Until the Middle Ages, human beings could not bring much of an active role to the contest. Often, they were pawns. Hence the notion of Two Kingdoms. By now, however, we are obliged to take the individual man or woman into account. I will even say that many, if not most, humans are at present doing their best to be beholden neither to God nor to the Maestro. They seek to be free. They often remark (and most sententiously), 'I want to discover who I am.' (76)

This passage could stand as the Evil Genius describing the postmodern human experience. Seek to be free, want to discover who they are, but without being beholden to the divine or the satanic; therefore beholden (and of consequence) only to themselves: a freedom that is no freedom at all because it negates the existence of the creative and destructive forces. It is the freedom of the spectator.

In Mailer's art, and in his very public private life, he sought out and described the *post*-postmodern experience—what Kirby refers to as "pseudo-modernism," and French cultural theorist Nicolas Bourriaud calls "altermodernism" (There has got to be a better term for this; if only Norman would coin one.)—thusly, that we, like our Creator (and we are made, after all, in His image) each of us is, in writer and radio personality Christopher Lydon's words, "engaged in the composition of a panoramic Proustian novel of our time . . . " which Mailer, in the conclusion to the foreword to his collection, *The Time of Our Time* describes as "[a work] nearly all of us have created in our own minds; each book vastly different yet still related by the web of history, the style of our lives, and the river of becom-

ing that we refer to by the most intimate and indefinable of words, the most mysterious word of them all—time. Time!" (xii)

Mailer's view is that we can only truly fathom who we are by creating and recreating our evolving selves in the throes of an ongoing struggle between absolute forces that are also evolving and changing in and through us. We are creating our karma that then determines what we become. Further, we only continue to grow by "obey[ing] the risk" or we "pay more for remaining the same" ("White" 350). One must muster the courage to get in the game. Mailer has said that in his view God was more likely courage than love. We would argue this point and I would maintain that the ultimate test of courage is love.

What is intriguing about Mailer's views on who we are and how that is reflected in our art is how the technology has once again evolved to correlate the thought and art of our time, and how Mailer anticipated and embodied this technological revolution even as he disparaged it. Mailer often railed against technology, which he suspected was a tool of the Devil in that he believed it dehumanized us and took us away from God. Yet he was in many ways—or he could have been—the ultimate online artist in that he thrived on participation with his audience and loved to cast himself into the dynamic of his creation. One saw this demonstrated in very nearly every one of his public appearances, and in the great works of his participatory journalism.

I think of a talk he gave at his alma mater, in the hallowed halls of Harvard University in what must have been 1970 or 1971—the dawn of postmodernism! And already Mailer was way out ahead of the pack. He took the stage and occupied the podium like a victorious general addressing captive commanders of an opposing army. He plunked down a bottle of Jack Daniels and proceeded to abuse his audience. One heckler kept interrupting him with calls of "Fuck you, Mailer!" And, "Go fuck yourself, Mailer!" When he had heard enough, Norman ordered the man to stand and be recognized. He then dressed him down saying—and I quote from memory— (Whenever I would tell this story with Mailer present, he would get that twinkle in his eye and interrupt me to tell the story as he remembered it.)—"Sir," he said, "there are three million, eight hundred thousand, two hundred and seventy four people in Brooklyn who can say the word 'fuck' better than you."

In his public appearances, Mailer loved to breach the line between audience and performer much the way an online blogger or twitterer (and I feel

him now recoiling at those two terms) might engage with their web-based community. One can imagine the ferocity of the debates that would take place in a Mailer online chat room, or envision Mailer's Facebook page with Norman chiding his followers to get off their asses and go out and do something with their lives. Yet what they are doing is exactly what he proposed as our calling: composing the great Proustian novel of our time, crossing barriers of space and time with technology. If ninety-nine point nine percent of what is composed by these online novelists is drivel, pap or downright crap, one could argue the same is true of printed and even published writing. We are still in the nascent stages of this technological revolution, a period akin to the few years immediately following the invention of the printing press. But what is undeniable even in these early times is that the more things change the more they remain the same. The emerging global village is not so different from primitive villages wherein wise men, medicine men, and fools could spout their wisdom or nonsense for all to hear.

Yes, Mailer resented and bewailed encroaching technology. Indeed, it was the subject we most frequently disagreed upon. But where he matters most today, I would argue, is in that he understood and deplored how art and thinking had become mired in the entropy of the passive, ironic postmodernist view of life. Mailer wrote from and epitomized a stance and approach to life and art that emphasized commitment, putting oneself in the game rather than sitting on the sidelines, risking embarrassment, ridicule, even rancor for the audacity and courage of his work and his worldview. In this sense, one could make the case that he again anticipated the change that has come with the new technology. Whereas the cool medium of TV with its no-man's land between the viewer and the subject made for a community of couch potatoes dulled into anomie, the computer and the worldwide web call for interaction, discourse, rage and outrage and even social revolution. Like everything else humans have devised in the on-going interplay with God and the Devil, technology has a capacity for good or evil, thus proving Mailer's thesis of the triune nature of existence. How we use technology determines its force for good or evil. One can fall in love over the Internet, make or lose a fortune, overthrow a regime, or be goaded into jumping off a bridge.

Witness what almost happened in Iran, and is still smoldering on the Internet, or with the 400 hundred plus tweets from Tahrir Square as the new participatory journalism, and what happened in America with the elec-

tion of Barack Obama. As British novelist and technology blogger Nick Harkaway said in an online interview, "On Negotiating the Digital Age," posted on *The Browser*,

> If the digital age means anything at all, it means the age of participation . . . When the Internet came along . . . [w]e could now participate in that nebulous, piratic, free-speaking space that existed in no country and owed allegiance to no court and no crown. . . . Coincident with the arrival of the iPad and other touch-screen technologies where you can actually put your hand on the data, we have begun to understand that what's on the internet is just what's in our heads, and what we carry around with ourselves all the time.

Recently I addressed a graduate class of aspiring writers and an undergraduate class seeking to learn about careers in media. I was disappointed at how few of these twenty-somethings born in the midst of the postmodern age were conversant with Mailer's writing. Yes, they had heard of Norman's public persona, but next to none of them had bothered to read him. Upon consideration it makes sense. The college students of today have not had the opportunity to catch up with Mailer. Curiously, as an avatar of the cyber age, Mailer was something of a cyberphobe. To the end of his writing life he composed in longhand using pencil on paper. It was as though he needed the tactile experience of composing words by hand to allow his mind to wander freely in the land of ideas. His handwriting was almost illegible, yet his ideas are as lucid as they are challenging. It is as though Mailer resisted the new technology the way an old casino poker player adept at reading the body language of the other players might avoid an online game of Texas Hold'em—unless and until he mastered the skill set needed to play a dozen different players in cyberspace and sense the strengths and weaknesses of their cards in the hesitation or alacrity of their key strokes. As the player who should be winning the game, Mailer's cards are not on the table. He may be the last of the great paper and pen authors. His presence in cyberspace is not commensurate with his dominance of the ideas that are played out online.

I would propose a remedy: the creation of a Mailer virtual afterlife. The media exists. He opined on virtually every issue hotly debated online to this day. His archives contain enough video and audio to provoke a torrential

meteor shower of reaction. The body may have moved on but the ideas Mailer generated and embodied still thrive. Mailer's work deserves to be considered and debated by a generation that came of age with the advent of the technology he eschewed, even as he preconceived how to make one's mark in the global village.

One cannot simply sit back and watch life anymore. The computer age demands participation. Kids would rather play video games than sit placidly watching TV. They want to interact with the media. In a world where we are called to participate, where there are stakes in the game, where we must act or cease to exist, and where once in the game it is only a matter of moments before one becomes aware of opposing forces at work in determining the outcome, God and the Devil are alive and well in cyberspace. The more things change the more they remain the same. Fundamentalism and fanaticism are thriving on the web. We come back to a primitive appreciation of the forces at work in creation in the global village because we must participate or we have no online presence, and hence we slip into cyber oblivion and become irrelevant. We lose in the struggle for the soul now being waged online.

It is time to give it up, all you reactionary postmodernists. Stand down. If life is worth saving, if it is important, we must come to recognize that it has value and meaning beyond the surface show. Otherwise, why bother? Life is too challenging, too difficult to be pointless. Mailer knew this. He took it head on. Mailer matters most because life matters.

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