GREAT AMERICAN APP: NORMAN MAILER, ELECTRONIC BOOKS, AND REVOLUTIONARY CONSCIOUSNESS

SEAN ABBOTT

> "We deal in deception here. What we do not deal with is self-deception." —*The Departed*

Helen Morris, today Mrs. Martin Scorsese, introduced me to Norman Mailer. Helen was my boss at "Little Random," the cutesy nickname of the publishing conglomerate's eponymous flagship (because our official moniker, "Random House Adult Trade Group," was unspeakable). Helen was also my editor at *At Random*, the general interest literary magazine published triannually during what we may as well identify as the book industry's last Golden Age—the Harold Evans years at Random House.

For *At Random*, I interviewed Mailer prior to the publication of *Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery*. It would be the first of three formal[1] and of many more informal conversations between Mailer and me: my bona fides, in my own mind (and most crucially there), by which I account for my place in these pages of *The Mailer Review*, writing in midsummer 2012 of Mailer in the late '90s and of an industry today in total turmoil.

Book publishing has had so many "last" "Golden Ages" that to insist now, right now, "This time, that was *it*!"—is to insist on ridicule. And while what Burt Lancaster said is true—because you really *should* have seen the Atlantic Ocean in those days[2]—ridicule remains the generally appropriate response to pre-HALCION® halcyonics, to the soppy stirrings-still of what George

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

Steiner identified in 1970 as "a dominant cliché of the contemporary mood"—the age-old (biblical, no less) belief in a "squandered utopia": "Our experience of the present, the judgments, so often negative, that we make of our place in history, play continually against what I want to call the 'myth of the nineteenth century' or the 'imagined garden of liberal culture'" (4–5).

That quotation is courtesy of my ratty Yale University Press paperback edition of *In Bluebeard's Castle*, the book that came of Steiner's 1970–71 T.S. Eliot Memorial Lectures at Harvard. The printing is eight years younger than I but looks much older, if I do say myself. I had to fetch it out of the tight jam where I keep many a quaint and curious volume because "Page 5 is not part of this book preview," per books.google.com, which also advertises the fact of "No eBook available."[3] That's a problem in and of itself, separate from what it says about the industry of book publishing. In these pages of *The Mailer Review*, for whatever time and by whose authority they might remain attached to one another, I will explain why electronic publishing is unequal parts blessing and curse—and why the concerns of my own professional life as an editor matter in our consideration of Mailer's mattering.

I self-apply Steiner's sobriety test at the outset and hope that I will continue to pass it as we proceed. Steiner generally advises, I think, that we at least try to be specific about why we are beating our breasts if we insist upon breast-beating. Fliers for missing pets trump signs of end times, especially among endtimers. In these pages I will limit my own sense of general woe to book publishing, if only to make more resonant a pip of sorrow for publishing's many bygone Golden Ages. And while we will always be denied "This is the worst," there's no denying that things are bad. Murk is all. "I miss that kind of *clarity*," says John Houseman's CIA Man, ten years post-Fugs, speaking of OSS and earlier in *Three Days of the Condor*, that most prescient (1975) major motion picture of the coming all-out Oil War.

This essay, while not an attempt to disperse the murk (such being well beyond my abilities or ambition), is a gathering of memories of clarity, or at least of truer-than-false memories of clarity's perception at the time. It makes witness of the time when Norman Mailer mattered because Random House said Norman Mailer mattered. Of the time when Random House mattered because it said Norman Mailer mattered. Random House continues on in its established mode, of course—authors, which is to say Random House authors, matter. But the popgun that was e-books when I

started publishing them by the few dozens in 2000, for HarperCollins, is sounding today rather more like the crack of doom to the book industry's leviathans.

The so-called Big Six are Hachette Book Group (Lagardère SCA); HarperCollins (News Corp); Macmillan (Verlagsgruppe Georg von Holtzbrinck GmbH); Penguin Group (Pearson plc); Random House (Bertelsmann AG); Simon & Schuster (CBS Corporation).[4] Quick: Which leviathan swallowed Rinehart and Company, the publisher in North America of *The Naked and the Dead*? Was it the same leviathan that swallowed Allan Wingate, the novel's UK publisher? Publishing's own game of Where Are They Now naturally advances rounds to guessing which of the Big Six will itself be swallowed (by Amazon, Google, Facebook . . . *Sony?*), and when, and for what price. Establishing a price is all that really matters these days.[5] It's a problem.

The solution, if you are a leviathan, is Author Solutions. Really? It's called "Author Solutions"? Is this a joke out of Philip K. Dick? It is not, and Pearson went and bought it, for $116 million, cash—Bertram Capital's Author Solutions, Inc, an electronic publisher[6] "located primarily in Bloomington, Indiana and Cebu City, the Philippines," as Pearson explained on July 19: "The acquisition gives Penguin a leading position in this fast-growing segment of the publishing industry and brings significant opportunity for the two companies to collaborate" (Pearson PR). The "segment" is vanity, call it by its name, and its growth is boundless—not merely "fast."

Transmogrifying oneself into a vanity press is really not such mad science for the leviathans, something Gabriel Zaid pointed out back in 2003—four years prior to Amazon Kindle and the consequent "explosive growth" (my favorite expression of the neoplastic present) in vanity publishing. Zaid had actually gone to the trouble of publishing a book, *So Many Books*, to observe: "The cost of reading would be much reduced if authors and publishers respected readers' time more, and if texts that had little to say, or were badly written or poorly edited, were never published" (89). The *cost* of reading! For we who *all we do is read*, this is Occupy talk. *Not to publish!* For we who also extract reading's cost from others, this is an outright outing.

Of course, for a long time now there's been a darker reading of the cost of reading, of *too many* books (which is what Zaid really meant). Walter Benjamin, 1936: "Fascism sees its salvation in giving [the] masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves. The masses have a right to change

property relations; Fascism seeks to give them an expression while preserving property" (241).

The masses seem to be very busy typing their novels. One week prior to the Pearson announcement, Smashwords, the most prominent vanity press not named Amazon AuthorCentral or CreateSpace, an Amazon Company, announced the publication of its five billionth word: "From your fingertips to reader's [sic] eyes," Smashwords founder (and personal-defense trainer?) Mark Coker blogged on July 11. He added: "You, my dear Smashwords author, are the future of book publishing." *Five billion Smashwords.* As if this is heralding desiderata and not desert encroachment; as if we're talking cheeseburgers and not the effluvial p.p.m. of untold hobbyist novelists. It's an interesting publishing moment, to be sure, but not the stuff to trouble the sleep of a pope.[7]

What's troubling the sleep of Big Six publishers is the fact that some of those five billion Smashwords have *hit* (as they say) the *New York Times* Best Sellers list, that highly regarded but historically innumerate measure of the value of a given author. On August 5, to cite one Sunday, Smashwordsmiths Bella Andre, Colleen Hoover, R.L. Mathewson, and Lyla Sinclair were crowding Lee Child, James Patterson, Daniel Silva, Karin Slaughter—all Big Six born and nurtured at hideous expense.

True, every book on that list is total crap, regardless of how it got there. Still, how to account for it, if you try to take what you do, what you've always done, seriously? Because it's not like you've been actively deceived by vanity publishing's coming of age. The posterboard outside the middle school auditorium distinctly read TALENTLESS SHOW. Yet why are you here? Like a good parent, you do what you have to do, right? Mailer to Jennifer L. Farbar in 1986: "One of the ironies of modern-day life is you can't be too much of the thing you do, it's insanity to be the thing you're doing" (*Conversations* 340). I'm reminded also of an exchange in Tom Stoppard's best play, *The Real Thing* (1982). Henry, a West End playwright (i.e., a *professional*), is discussing with his actress wife, Annie, the seemingly vital subject of writing worth writing:

> HENRY: Maybe Brodie got a raw deal, maybe he didn't. . . . He's a lout with language. . . . Words don't deserve that kind of malarkey. They're innocent, neutral, precise, standing for this, describing that, meaning the other, so if you look after them you can build bridges across incomprehension and chaos. But when they get their corners

knocked off, they're no good any more, and Brodie knocks their corners off. I don't think writers are sacred, but words are. They deserve respect. If you get the right ones in the right order, you can nudge the world a little or make a poem which children will speak for you when you're dead.

(ANNIE goes to the typewriter, pulls out the page from the machine and reads it.)

ANNIE: 'Seventy-nine. Interior. Commander's capsule. From Zadok's p.o.v. we see the green glow of the laser strike-force turning towards us. BCU Zadok's grim smile. *Zadok:* "I think it's going to work. Here they come!" *Kronk,* voice over: "Hold your course!" *Zadok:*—'

HENRY: *(Interrupts)* That's not words, that's pictures. The movies. Anyway, alimony doesn't count. (53)

Norman Mailer, who knew something of alimony, never wrote Kronk and Zadok. His idea of risking cheating his talent was slamming out in ten weeks the contractual obligation novel *Tough Guys Don't Dance*. But that floozy of a book happens to contain some of the richest writing in the Mailer Canon, including this backhanded admonition to Smashword-smiths: "Put twenty adjectives before the noun and no one will know you are describing a turd" (92).

Random House is right to stand by Mailer to this day, having assigned the gifted David Ebershoff (who happens to be a novelist of note, himself) to the tending of Mailer matters. The Mailer deal, as brokered by Andrew Wylie, was a rare opportunity for a publishing house to re-affirm its own street cred, to the extent such is actually possible. Now then, as to that . . . even Jason Epstein, Mailer's great editor and the wisest book man I've ever known, subscribes to publishing's silliest shibboleth—the belief that almighty Brand Management applies to the book business, as if Alfred A. Knopf's Borzoi is some sort of Swoosh: "Amid the literary chaos of the digital future," Jason wrote as recently as 2010, "readers will be guided by the imprints of reputable publishers . . . " (4).

No, no they won't. (Cf., *NYT* Best Sellers 8/5/12.)

Beyond tomfooleries like "Author Solutions," beyond the reputables' own notorious inability to not rack-up reading's costs (*So Many Returns!*)—what,

exactly, is an "imprint"? Random House had give or take 100 of them at one time and still has many too many, which pretty well affirms Zaid's calculus right there. Meanwhile, YouTube is an imprint of the highly disreputable Google (see *Authors Guild et al v. Google*). Facebook is to TV what TV was said to be to books, proving yet again that an invasive species is just a native waiting to be displaced.

There will never be another Norman Mailer because the opportunity to identify him or her (or to fathom any self-identified him or her) is kaput. Top-down culture is done. And—so what? Look on, ye flighty, and don't despair. *TIME* magazine, that once proud purveyor of the bland and the blandishment. It's still doling it out today, knowing no other way, and is there a sadder sack all the more for it? Faces appear now on its cover with all the import of faces reflected in one of those "Man of the Year" novelty mirrors so prized by midtown Manhattan tourists. There, on August 23, 2010, is Jonathan Franzen's —*TIME*'s "Great American Novelist." He is dressed in near-identical duds to and sporting an all-American knockoff of Chairman Mao's side-gazing Sino inscrutability of February 7, 1949, when all we had was *TIME*. George Clooney meets your glance as *TIME*'s "The Last Movie Star" (March 3, 2008). *TIME* is big on last things these days, as it gasps its own last. Gone, so gone is a Mailer's need to fret such things as fronting *TIME*: "To bite and win a cover would certainly be corrosive to any iron in the spine of his long-soaked integrity, but to bite and lose! . . . " (*Prisoner* 17).[8]

So it's all over for *TIME*, Mailer's old punching bag. Is it all over for Mailer, too, and by the same forces that toppled *TIME*?

* * *

WHY MAILER MATTERS. When I first heard, from John Whalen-Bridge, the theme of this issue of *The Mailer Review*, I was, I will say it—put off. And not *mildly*. The phrase hit a nerve rooted in my childhood, as I will explain below. For now: Like most people I like to think of myself as not easily offended and like most people I am easily offended, and I like it. Rushdie: "We have come to think of taking offence as a fundamental right. We value little more highly than our rage, which gives us, in our opinion, the moral

high ground. From this high ground we can shoot down at our enemies. . . . We take pride in our short fuses. Our anger elevates, transcends" (89–90).

Some of us, I'd like to believe, have better use for such elevating transcendence than others. If I may be so bold—I will be—*The Mailer Review* itself is a battlement. Philosophical but also functional. This is appropriate to the man who established our locus; a man whose rage, ever his potential immediate undoing, was also so often his eventual redemption. If the world is not run so well as Mailer could have run it, Why Mailer Matters resides in negotiating, individually and collectively, the potentially deranging complexity of Mailer's legacy—a legacy bounded up early on (1959) in a graal quest. You've committed to memory these tragicomic words but here they are again: "I am imprisoned with a perception which will settle for nothing less than making a revolution in the consciousness of our time" (*Advertisements* 17). Holy grails: when are they ever not MacGuffins? Because the point is not the finding but the questing.

Our work is made no easier, of course, by Mailer's insistence on describing his empyreal ambition in terms of loss. "I failed, didn't I?" Mailer said to me in 1998. "At the time," he explained of 1959, "I thought I had something to say that no one else had to say and I thought that once I said it (which, of course, I never quite did) everything would be altered, that society would be altered. I had grandiose ideas in those days. But finally, you might say that the things I've stood for have been roundly defeated. I think most serious writers might be willing to give their accord to that. Literature has been defeated . . . " (4).[9]

It's curious, authorial amnesia—especially about the big things. I'll return to Mailer's "failure." I need to let the idea I have of it find me out first. It will if I'm wrong about it. As to the lesser amnesias. On occasion at Random House, I would read aloud to Mailer passages that it turned out he'd forgotten he'd written. That was his right—he'd written so much. So much of it good, and different from anything else he'd written, but also of a piece, recognizable entire—a *Gesamtkunstwerk* we must call Mailerian. As we must call Orwellian the distinctly realized totality of George Orwell's authorship, despite *Nineteen Eighty-Four*'s forever shorthanding "Orwellian" as meaning "individual obliteration by a presumptive collective." *Mailerian* should know such woe as *Orwellian*. But Mailer hasn't the One Book. Should he have?[10] Without it, it's harder to define what we mean by Mailerian. On the other hand, it should not come easily, if at all—a single definition of a writer's

work. (Not for nothing did Mailer like to quote Gide's *Please do not understand me too quickly.*) "Johnsonian" is elusive, too. As Orwellian ought to be.

Mailer carried Orwell's work forward and we could not read Orwell today without Mailer (hugely important, that, and needful of explication elsewhere[11]). It's what great writers do. They read other great writers and write accordingly, advancing the interests of all.[12] Something Smashwordsmiths do not and cannot do, nor do they seem much troubled by the fact that nobody reads *them.*[13] Not being read was unacceptable to Mailer. Writing to be read ought to be the first criterion in any consideration of the matter of the writer.

Which is not the same thing as acknowledging the successful writer who set out to write what he believed would win him a wide readership: *Why YA?* I hear my mind moaning, every time I meet, as I so often do, a latter-day '49er who is intent on panning for something apocalyptically appealing to seeming young adults. It's interesting how many of these prospectors' heads were so full of drugs during their own YA years that they have no memory whatsoever of being young, other than of its being a lot like middle age—medicated. Perhaps that's an advantage, but I doubt it very much. It is the way of Solutioned Authors, however: *Write what you don't know or care to know.*

And there is plenty for all! Publishing categories are popping open like orifices on a *Naked Lunch* Vigilante. "BDSM is the new YA." Such is the demented (while highly rational) thinking of publishing folk following upon Knopf's *Fifty Shades of Fan Fiction* jackpot. The authors are mainly women in their middle forties who haven't had coitus in years and didn't enjoy it when they did. But they are writing for their own Passion Party® demographic[14], so it's a sure thing even if it's not—*because* it is not—the real thing. Revolutionary *un*-consciousness. Yes. That's the calling. A descent deeper into self-entire, self-awareness dimming all the way down. So I think Mailer was wrong, too, when he said to me in '98: "There's a certain rebellion in American life against the absolute corporatization of everything. Because one of the things about the corporation that's totally unpleasant is that they've thought of it before you have. You see, in the course of making your life so comfortable, they've analyzed your life and now they're doing it all for you" (7).

Dearest to be wished, but this was wishful thinking, I think. Since then, I've had the dubious advantage over Mailer of passing epochs at Apple Store with my children, spending oodles being "creative." I always felt like crud

but the kids loved it, and everyone else seemed to be having the best of times, too. There is no more perfectly tooled damping of invention than Apple Store. So I would say to Mailer now that there's another "one percent" of Americans I'd like to know about. If they actually number that many. I'd like to meet them. I mean those people who feel a "certain rebellion" against corporate America and who act accordingly. I'm not talking Ted Kaczynski or of any other nutcase, but of those non-Mennonite[15] men and women whose consciousness is incompatible with, for example, the internet connection without which my own life would be unthinkable. Mailer knew nothing of the dread void of being unwillingly offline. He had Judith McNally (literary assistant nonpareil) to transfer his longhand to the computer. I have a timeslot at the Genius Bar.

Mailer never stopped believing in revolutionary consciousness in part because his talent had afforded him the splendid isolation that only the Great may possess. Not to misrepresent: Mailer rode the 4 train to my place on Lexington Avenue when we did the *Gospel* interview (he had a Christmas party in my neighborhood, following), and I've known no one of his stature more comfortable in a common crowd. But there were occasions, in my time with him, that I thought he had privileged too much the Mailerian over the common sense of the crowd. And so what? Why be Mailer, otherwise?

Very often in his company, one enjoyed Mailer's enjoyment of being challenged. You learned to identify what was genuinely sacred to him. Here's one, apropos of our overall inquiry in these pages: I'd said to Mailer in the '98 interview, having quoted him his famous "revolution in consciousness" quote, that I couldn't imagine the average shopkeep in 1780s London knowing he was living in the Age of Johnson (as it came to be called much later, of course). I wondered if it wasn't true of all times. Mailer bridled at this. Evoking Dickens and Shakespeare and James Joyce, Mailer said: "They were mighty men, mighty artists, and they absolutely affected the way people behaved" (5). I said something about the extent of authorial effect being felt more or less according to class rank and we both grudgingly left it at that.[16]

On an earlier occasion at Random House, Mailer explicated for Veronica Windholz (copy editor nonpareil) and me how contemporary Russians pronounce the name Pushkin. Why that lingering, lovingly articulated *Poooosh* is so laden with meaning. Is there an American author whose name the serious reader rolls along the tongue in wonder and amazement and thinks that such a one as he or she has helped us to know ourselves? Well, whoever

it may be, it's not Mailer. That was his point then and it was his point in '98 in endorsing a vision of a "garden of liberal culture"—pace George Steiner and his "imagined"—wherein literary giants strode and were hosannaed by the people. And never mind that the people were largely illiterate—they all harbored secret dreams of a science fiction future in which they could be published authors, too.

Back to amnesia, then, about the big things. Be it actual or—*willful*, this amnesia. It seemed to me at the time of my '98 conversations with him that Mailer was either forgetting what we should call the mood surrounding the famous quote that opens *Advertisements for Myself* or it had become, in fact, *inconvenient* to him. As I now read "First Advertisement for Myself," I see Mailer rehearsing that sly declaration of forty years later; it is framed as a question, a demand of his interlocutor: "I failed, didn't I?" He was saying this in "First Advertisement," too, and then also as a challenge to and a daring of the reader's affirmation. Because read Mailer and it's happened: he's changed your consciousness. Is it a "revolutionary" change? Mailer's true readers sound those waters, with greater or lesser degrees of accuracy, each according to his or her own comfort with self-awareness—or outright ego. "I think this man is trying to influence me," Martin Amis quipped of his adolescent reading of Mailer, warming up the crowd for the main event at the *New Yorker* Festival's Mailer-Amis double bill of May 18, 2001.

The theme before us now is also a demand by Mailer, because also a question. *Does Mailer matter?* But it is not a question that redeems and heals. There is no Parsifal, no holy fool, to ask our Amfortas, *What ails you?* Our Amfortas doesn't want the question asked. Or perhaps it is simply too soon to ask it. Mailer's Graal Knights having only just assembled. We are past the Prelude, perhaps, but it is early still for us. Our own actions are far from being fully realized. This by way of acknowledging my own particular lunacy (not that the attentive reader, toting up "graal quest" and "*Gesamtkunstwerk*" and now this, has missed it): when I think of Mailer for any period of close concentration, Wagner is often on my mind.

There's some Freudiania or Proustiania to this. Our question penetrates deeply the orthodoxy of my own family. Mailer has always mattered. No discussion. Norman Mailer was a kind of Lar of the household where I grew up. Why Mailer Matters was established for me, in my childhood, by observing my father, John Abbott, attentively reading Mailer and chuckling, chortling, guffawing at something ribald Mailer had written. Dad would often recite

whatever it was to my mother, Mary. "John and Mary, the pilgrim couple," as a snarky gay friend once dubbed them, and *ha-ha*. Try and find two people less puritanical. (I'm considered the family tory, in fact.)

My pilgrim parents, having fled what my father calls "Not Nick Carraway's Middle West," having escaped *the totalitarianism of the totally pleasant personality*, encamped with their books and their two boys in the big woods of middle-of-nowhere Connecticut. Mailer's tomes (and his rack paperbacks) were a constant presence. Wagner was on the hi-fi, though never generative of the mirth and the warmth that Mailer produced unfailingly. The association was of Greatness; it is a product of childhood, so a palimpsest, really. But I think there may also be something there, an adumbration of something genuine.

Dad—who is, notably, an esteemed scholar of the Age of Johnson to this day—put Mailer on the syllabus of his American literature course, as John Whalen-Bridge attests elsewhere in this volume. Through the decades of my father's career at the University of Connecticut, Hunter Thompson, DeLillo, Toni Morrison—they came and went from that syllabus, but Mailer stayed. Mailer was, like Samuel Johnson and George Orwell (and, incidentally, John le Carré), good for the ages, in my father's opinion. An opinion I came to share in my own time and on my own terms.

But first I had to spar with Mailer, and I am sparring still. I've had many excellent relationships with well-established authors and enjoyed a few genuine collaborations. But I was never so personally comfortable with any writer as I was with Mailer. This had everything to do with Mailer's insistence on just that, sparring. It was his crafty way of receiving but not taking an edit—your punch never hit the page.[17] The Gide was also his way of saying *Do not agree with me too quickly*. Because what would Mailer have been then? Just another boss, on his way to becoming a corporate master on a rung of the fear ladder. Not a novelist by his measure. Not what was most important to Mailer—an honest man.

And yet—Mailer's "failure." *What of* his "I failed, didn't I?" Philip Larkin, that delightful wretch, opens "Success Story" by observing the etymology of *failure*, that the Latin *fallere* may be translated as *to deceive*.[18] If failure is a deception, what is self-deception? Mailer's deception of the self or others: I refute it thus. So what, then, is he up to in *Advertisements for Myself*? And in the decades following, when he would explain-away something he'd written as if it were the work of another writer. As if a *Gesamtkunstwerk* works

like that. This annoyed me during our interviews, and I ought to have called him on it, but I must plead that this interviewer was doing double-duty as a promoter. (It's depressing, how much of my "editorial" career has been more about publishing marketing materials than about publishing the thing being marketed.) Mailer '98 had this to say of Mailer Prior: "I made remarks that were appropriate to me at the time, and now I look at old statements and some of them hold up and some don't. But that doesn't bother me. You know, if you're not ready to make a fool of yourself, you're never going to get anything done" (4).

You see this hedging elsewhere in the interviews, as Mike Lennon's *Conversations with Norman Mailer* confirms.[19] I understand it now as Mailer's way of keeping current, always addressing the present, not getting too involved in the work of managing his own legacy. He had better things to do. The work itself. The legacy is our work. Confronting all of the reasons not to engage this work, and yet persisting in it because what better evidence of its necessity than the regular assembly in these pages of people who value consciousness. In the five years since its establishment, *The Mailer Review* has published over 3,000 pages. Our graal quest is no fool's errand. These pages were created by men and women who have plenty of other important preoccupations and yet also choose to be *here*.

* * *

To have permitted Mailer's sensibility (indeed, his *consciousness*) to define my own for so long, to what practical purpose may I apply the best of him in the work I must do? Just this, and at this juncture: His generosity. His refusal to close off the possibility of his being wrong. His mistrust of expertise, despite his own supernal gifts, means that there is no place for all-out meanness in a consideration of Mailer that is also a consideration of something still taking form. They cannot all be Stoppard's Brodies, knocking the corners off words. Somewhere there is a Smashwordsmith, if not a Solutioned Author, who might be near to Mailer. She will become known to us, but we are going to have to adopt Mailer's optimism and—wait. Wait it out. There is no other way to go about this, as Mailer explained it to me in '98:

> In my darkest moods I begin to think that what we're seeing is the reduction of the human soul on a mass collective basis.

> Everything is being reduced. . . . Then sometimes I think, Well, you know, you're getting old, Mailer, and you're beginning to cut slits in your sneakers [laughs]. Yes, you're that old. And you'd better recognize something—that there may be a process going on that's much larger than anything you ever dreamed of. Maybe everything has to fall into the middle, and mediocrity must prevail for a period in order that equality can be built, the necessary equality upon which you've constructed your hopes for so long: your belief that humankind was worthy of equality and that great things would come once it was achieved. (11)

The fact that such a one as Mailer has not been revealed by my own alleged expertise or by my colleagues' is insufficient evidence against a Norman Mailer not being out there. We experts haven't helped matters in the course of our I-am-damned servitude to the leviathans, wherein *What Would Oprah Do?* and *Is It Costcoesque?* have been the only relevant concerns—up until the present hysterical attention-must-be-paid to vanity publishing. *Who saw that coming!?* Actually, I did—and now's about the time I 'fess to it: I've long enabled what we politely called "subsidy publishing" back in '99, when I started flogging the grift that is vanity. When I subsequently sold to Rupert Murdoch my talents for combining machinery and literacy, initially as a consultant and then as a fully vested staffer (Health Plan Über Alles), Norman Mailer was alone among my former authors to express his dismay that I had become the leviathans' first dedicated e-book editor. I reminded him of our conversations during the months I worked on *Gospel*'s much fretted-over pre-publication media package, how he liked to quote Kierkegaard's notion that you can't really know if you are serving God or the Devil. "Sometimes it's not so mysterious," Mailer replied.

He would not permit the electronic publication of his works while he was alive. I'm not sure what, if anything, Epstein or Ebershoff (who served as editor on *The Castle in the Forest*) said to Mailer on the subject. It was not my place to try and sell him on the idea of broadening the distribution of his consciousness. It was enough to assert that I believed in what I was doing. That exchange (by telephone, rum luck) was, I'm sad to say, the last conversation of any substance I had with Norman Mailer. It pained me that he was not pleased with me. But such is the nature of apostleship—apostasy. I could question the Teacher on the specifics (something Mailer actively encour-

aged), but I could not then go off and live a life that aided and abetted those forces the Teacher had long opposed.

Mea culpas duly noted, the problem with book publishing today was underway or in the works well prior to whatever I may or may not have done, and continue to do, in service to Whoever. It's still all about the leviathans, overall. Long as it lasts. Mailer's premature (1967) dismissal of Styron—"a dangerous idea has never infiltrated his brain" (*Conversations* 105)—is actually a start on figuring out what went wrong inside the whales these past decades. Because one thing that went wrong—terribly wrong—is who we chose to publish as novelists, within that absurdist catch-all category, LITERARY.

It's important to at least try to comprehend—to crib Frank Kermode—"the sense of an ending" for career authors who have no sense of a beginning. Or of a middle, for that matter. The obligation of novelist is actually an embarrassment to these people. They are good enough people (they are not hedge fund "managers," after all) to be embarrassed by themselves. But because they have only themselves to write about, their subject is the embarrassment of how little they have to write about, and how embarrassing it feels to feel embarrassed by this embarrassment. So there is no confusion: these are not Author-Solutioned Smashwordsmiths. I am speaking of people with New York & London & Hollywood agents, agents who've won their cringing career authors multiple advances from the leviathans.

Novel-writing among the careerists is de facto an embarrassment. It's too much (for *them*) of the thing they do. *Embarrassments for Myself*. There's the title of the book summarizing the careerist novelist at age thirty-six, Mailer's age at *Advertisements*. Sheila Heti (b. 1976) calls hers *How Should a Person Be?: A Novel from Life* (2012). You can attempt to read along with the haruspicy that James Wood passes off for book criticism in *The New Yorker* to know all you need to know of that book—that it is self-importantly self-dissatisfied. Which is to say that *How Should a Person Be?*, for all its formlessness, has assumed a familiar form. Which is to say that it makes all the familiar noises of petulant rejection. Of narrative. Of the novel. And certainly of any aspiration to the Great (North) American Novel. (Heti is Torontonian.)

Wood suspects that David Shields is lurking nearby, and I agree with Wood. Shields of the prancing and the pouting and the decreeing, ridiculously, that Scott Fitzgerald's masterpiece was actually *The Crack-up*. Shields,

manifestoist. Shields, who would be the André Breton of The Embarrassists, as they might call themselves, these "reality hungry" novelists who just can't bear to be novelists. "First came the trust fund! Now comes the book advance! It's all so embarrassing. So *boring*." And so it is. In my own Embarrassists-inspired torpor, I might unlock my Quote Hoard, too. Ah, André Gregory, 1981: "Okay, yes. We are bored. We're all bored now. But has it ever occurred to you, Wally, that the process that creates this boredom that we see in the world now may very well be a self-perpetuating unconscious form of brainwashing created by a world totalitarian government based on money?" (*My Dinner* 13/17)

Why, yes. Yes it has. And isn't this just Breaking News (*The Guardian*, 21 July): "A global super-rich elite has exploited gaps in cross-border tax rules to hide an extraordinary £13 trillion ($21tn) of wealth offshore—as much as the American and Japanese GDPs put together—according to research commissioned by the campaign group Tax Justice Network."

I will say it plainly: Raided, plundered, raped, left for dead: All we have left are our novelists. They can fight these Ibsen trolls called "elite" or they can join them. Consciousness may be transferred to hidden vaults, too.

What did Norman Mailer and André Gregory-Wallace Shawn-Louis Malle ever do to deserve such heirs as The Embarrassists? The Torporists? The Defeatists? *The Departed*. Yes. Let's call them *that*. These authors determined of oblivion, so assured of the pointlessness of cultural production—something about which to bellyache at Big Six book length. All books being contractual obligations before any other consideration. And never any *Tough Guys* around when you need 'em.

How does this happen? Cayman banks. Careerist novelists.

We permit it. That's how it happens. We indulge missionless creep. We mistake poltroons for paratroopers. Bank robbers for bankers. Someone confesses something (never a banker-robber: I'm speaking of careerist novelists), or hints at the "reality" of their fiction, and we go all gushy right along with them. Please explain, what's so "brave" about couch-trip nattering transcribed? Why do we likewise adore novelists who adore TV's short cuts (jump cuts! smash cuts! exit while entering!); who fear instinct; who actually favor the Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibiting of Influence (because fug "anxiety"—even if it means being psychopharmacologically reduced, oneself, to fucklessness); while all the while they pander to a feckless and fickle and largely fictive "social network." Oh, assuredly, Tolstoy would have

left Anna's fate up to a readers' poll had the technology only been available to him.

I could (and wish to) go on about how little I respect my own and the younger generation of "serious" writers. But what matters is how obvious it is that their testimonials of shattered confidence are the products of a splintered consciousness. One year ago in these pages Gerald R. Lucas wrote lucidly of the novel's survival as a definable (which is to say culturally useful) form, despite all of the electronic forces arrayed against it—including the novel's becoming electronic, itself. Following Mailer's lead, Lucas concludes generously: "perhaps the digital age will present the novel with a new life—a medium that can both represent the individual talent and the voices of the people" (260–261). I wish I could be so sanguine here, but the problem is simply that I have been gauging the extent of my own distraction and distractibility; my own dwindling attention to the long form; my own consumerist "[impatience] with complex ideas and nuance" (Lucas 260). I have been too long inside Apple Store. And I have also witnessed, in a child who was on her way to becoming a reader like me at her age (eleven), the extinguishing-by-app of the *ability* to read.[20] This in the space of six months—I agreed with her mother last Christmas that she could have an iPhone. When she preferred gaming apps to e-books we ran out and got her a Nook—for display in the permanent collection of the Museum of Obsolete Reading Devices, est. 2002 by me. (MORD's Mona Lisa is NuvoMedia's "Rocket" to nowhere.)

To try to close somewhat on the up-beat, as TV has instructed me that I must, I will make this last point by attesting to my faith, still, in long-form narrative—cinema's. Whatever careerist or hobbyist novelists might yet do to the novel, there are visionary filmmakers at work today as at no time since the 1970s. (This is a Golden Age.) They are Wes Anderson; Jane Campion; The Coen Bros.; Alfonso Cuarón; David Fincher; Luca Guadagnino (*I Am Love*); David Michôd (*Animal Kingdom*); Gaspar Noé (*Enter the Void*); Michael Winterbottom; and one (or *ten*—this *is* a Golden Age!) other filmmaker(s) I will not identify to avoid risk of unnecessary offense—in the diplomatic manner of Mailer's naming, when asked who they were, all but one of the novelists of his own stature.

Over all of these filmmakers, of course, is Martin Scorsese. My affection for Marty, as for Mailer, is in part personal and based in a sense of deep indebtedness. (Like his wonderful wife before him, Marty trusted me at Random House.) Scorsese, like Mailer, is Great for so many aesthetic and moral

reasons. Like Mailer, Scorsese's Greatness is an aspect of his overall GENEROSITY. Like Mailer, Scorsese is fierce and unembarrassed. It is the only way to go about creating a Canon.

Mailer and Scorsese. Masters in different realms of long-form narrative. But they are both up against it. You've heard the cliché of the killer app. Clichés come true. A certain Citia recently advertised for an "editorial director," fishing among the leviathans. Citia (which sounds like a name for a robber-bank) is in the business of converting nonfiction titles into an iTunes app that presents the book in the style of flashcards. It is the job of the editorial team to rejigger the author's own words according to the app template and, failing that, to *rewrite* the author's words. Kevin Kelly effuses the apping by Citia of his 2010 book *What Technology Wants*: "I am gobsmacked by the amount and quality of writing you've put into this. You've managed to digest the entire book and to make it sing as well" (Citia.com).

The godawful Britishism *gobsmacked*, we can live with that. But what's with "amount"? Isn't the point to get to the pith? "Quality of writing": Confusion worse confounded. Is this an *Attaboy!*? Purchasers of the $17 hardcover will feel especially cheated otherwise. As for books singing. Babies' books have been doing that for decades. So, all right, then: PASS (publishing's double entendre!). Book-to-app. Craven New World. *We been there before.* I am reminded of the speed-reading course Woody Allen endorsed in his Village Gate days: "I read *War and Peace* in five minutes. It's about Russia."

Citia's alimentary machinery are currently programmed to masticate nonfiction. Books by the likes of *WIRED* magazine's founding editor might be toothsomely appropriate to Citia's project, arriving to their "editors" as the factory-frozen meals served by chain restaurants are delivered to franchisees and then to customers' mouths—*pre-chewed.* But I wonder what dyspepsia the "digesting" of, say, *The Armies of the Night* or *Of a Fire on the Moon* or *Oswald's Tale* might produce? It would be fun to throw the spanner of Mailer into Citia's works. What's worrying is that what comes out the other end might actually be palatable to Citia's "readership."

The true killer app is all apps. The Total App, what you will. Here is the revolution in consciousness, nutshell-unbound, king of the finite space of one's own sense of reality. While careerist novelists lack all conviction, here is passionate intensity—among the app makers. The novel is no doubt next in Citia's sights, to make sushi of *Moby-Dick.* Of the leviathans themselves. Citia-Ran-

dom House is AOL-Time Warner waiting to happen. Great American App. Watch it harpoon the last great American whale.

NOTES

1. "America's Obsessions" was published in *At Random* No. 11, Summer 1995. The other formal interviews were connected to the publication of *The Gospel According to the Son* ("Mailer Goes to the Mountain," *At Random* No. 17, Spring/Summer 1997) and of *The Time of Our Time* ("Mailer Opus," *At Random*, published online "05/98").
2. Thus I brazenly commence—by quoting a famous (*to me*) line from Louis Malle's *Atlantic City*—a mode of presumptive allusion, an imagined call-and-response to the faithful reader and person of culture. And if such is not actionable in *The Mailer Review*, then where? Elizabeth D. Samet wrote recently in the *TBR* of allusion as a means of giving offense. True. It's come to that. We'd sooner die at the hands of a torturer than offend his pig ignorance—cf., Stellan Skarsgård's query of Daniel Craig in David Fincher's highly watchable movie adaptation of Stieg Larsson's wholly unreadable *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. And so it is full upon us, what George Steiner, in 1971, described as "this dimming of recognitions," a silencing of the "reciprocal discourse" that comes of "natural reading" (*Bluebeard* 99). All of this has everything to do with too many people writing (or "authoring" or, rather, *author-tooling*) books and too few people reading books—because they are writing them. My argument in these pages bounded in a nutshell.
3. What moonshine, the scholarly noting of Universal Resource Locators. We'll be well shot of the practice, as *MLA Style Manual* now recommends. Absent a screen capture, however, it becomes a matter of faith by the reader that the author's access to a given datum was truly obscured. The "cloud" is a terribly—and terrifyingly—apt metaphor for the present trend in information containment. A "trend" that is a certain irreversible absolute unless individuals individually resist it. Who among you does not regret chucking all those LPs?
4. The headline—"eBooks Now 'Dominant Single Format' in Adult Fiction Sales" —and the accompanying hyperbole—"eye-popping figures"—are unhelpful to grasping any reasonable sense of publishing reality. *GalleyCat*, a book industry blog, is here summarizing (July 18, 2012 3:42 PM) the "BookStats joint report from the Association of American Publishers and the Book Industry Study Group."

   A link from this article connects to an earlier article by the same reporter (*AppNewser*, July 18, 2012 12:36 AM) in which it is said that the "total US book market sagged 2.5 percent"—"from $27.9 billion in 2010 to $27.2 billion in 2011."

   And, really, you can safely stop puzzling over any given publishing-related news alert when you read a sentence like this one (back to *GalleyCat* at 3:42 PM): "The data was collected from 1,977 publishers, ranging from major publishers to smaller companies." The "range" is plainly dominated by the little guy (lots and lots of them; all very, very little) as further confirmed by this tidbit from BookStats (per *GalleyCat*): "direct-to-consumer sales by publishers nearly doubled in revenue and topped $1 billion for the first time."

We're not really set-up to do that is the typically honest (i.e., cocktail party-context) response from anyone you might query at a "major publisher" about direct-to-consumer sales. And even if a publisher has a sales site that *actually functions* (many do not), why would I buy Mailer's *Why Are We at War?* for $7.99 from Random House when Amazon will sell it to me for the same price, less the additional cost of my keying-in all of my vitals? Oh, and shipping—*Why Are We at War?* is *not* "available as an e-book." My enthusiasm for a fair analysis crashed at the point of trying to compare shipping costs (see "keying-in all of my vitals"). Which is nothing to wrestling with whether a given title, e-book-available direct-from-publisher, can actually be (re)delivered to whatever reading device you've got at the moment.

5. Complicated by the continuing muddle of the U.S. Department of Justice's April 11 complaint of collusion by Apple and five of the Big Six (Random House excepted) to stymie Amazon's establishing of the leviathans' value via the pricing of their e-books. Ken Auletta's "Paper Trail" in *The New Yorker* of June 25, 2012 is the best summary to date of the leviathans' woes.
6. Some—e.g., Smashword's Mark Coker—describe Author Solutions as one would a racketeer: "[ASI's] . . . business model is entirely dependent upon blinding the eyes and stealing the dreams of unsuspecting authors. It earns 2/3+ of its revenue selling services and packages to authors, not selling books to consumers" (Comment to Reid).
7. Because July 11, 2012 also brings this Good News from Falls Church, VA: "Aptara, a pioneer in digital publishing solutions, [has] produced the Vatican's first eBooks, an illustrated series of Pope Benedict's weekly addresses dating back to March, 2006. . . . 'The adoption of eBooks by an institution founded before Gutenberg represents a significant coming of age for publishing,' said Dev Ganesan, President and CEO of Aptara" (press release).
8. *Sharing TIME*'s cover with Marilyn Monroe, collaged there as if her Benjamin Button—a different consideration, two years later (July 16, 1973), and one of those Mailerian seeming- (or actual) contradictions that silts the stream of one's own clear thinking.
9. "Mailer Opus" was published when I became *At Random*'s editor, on the verge of the magazine's virtual (which is to say *actual*) vanishing—I'd moved us online, made us a "zine," in the halflife-of-a-fruitfly parlance of the day. The page numbers I reference are of a printout from "5/5/99," which I identify as the March 25, 1998 interview in its final form. Important passages of "Mailer Opus" survive, fortunately, in *The Spooky Art* (2003).
10. And who says he *doesn't*? I say it's *Ancient Evenings*, Mailer's *Moby-Dick*. Mine is a genuinely felt but as yet unreasoned (and perhaps unreasonable) sense of something more awesome than even my own existence. That is what great books do to and for you. This feeling commenced in 1983, in the summer of my eighteenth year. I am today forty-seven, about the age Mailer was when *Ancient Evenings* began to reveal itself to him. I hope one day to possess what is necessary to articulate of that work what are now merely crude thoughts of fierce forces.
11. As is my response to *The Wall Street Journal*'s report of June 29, 2012 headlined "Your E-Book Is Reading You," about how publishers have set up, to monitor how readers read, the moral equivalent of the UK's CCTV surveillance centers.

12. It's also what great directors do. On one memorably unmercifully cold Manhattan midnight, the Scorseses invited me to the Bellevue Hospital set of *Bringing Out the Dead* (1999). There I had the privilege of seeing Marty setting up a shot as the Great do it—by reference to another Great. Scorsese to DP Robert Richardson: "Do you remember how Michael Powell walked it in [gesturing as if holding the camera surreptitiously] on . . . ?" And now I can't remember which Michael Powell movie Marty was referencing, but Robert Richardson remembered (or Marty did a very good job of explaining it), and that is how the camera moved in the subsequent take.
13. People read, if they read anything at all, what's on the *NYT* Best Sellers list. One day soon that list may be entirely inhabited by Smashwordsmiths, and perhaps because the Big Six have been abandoned by their own authors (ergo, "Author Solutions"). What matters (to its presumed legitimacy, above all) is the compactness of the *NYT* BS list—two dozen fiction slots that still compel, for example, purchases by public libraries: a faithful customer base (going back more than a century!) much abused by Five of the Big Six and which they alienate at their peril. (Only Random House will permit the unfettered purchase of e-books by public libraries.) "Full disclosure": I am a trustee of a public library.
14. All that is solid melts into air or else is molded into another plastic form, as "The Ultimate Girls' Night In®" (per passionparties.com) has replaced the Tupperware® Party of yore.
15. E-books for the Amish! Because, if your industry is publishing, no concept is sufficiently self-evidently idiotic not to try it at least once: "Digital publishing company Open Road Integrated Media has partnered with Good Books, an independent publisher specializing in Amish and Mennonite life, to turn a number of Good Books' titles into eBooks" (Dilworth).
16. These interviews were always substantially edited by Mailer and me. In part to rid them of my talk.
17. Jason Epstein, in his Foreword to Editor John Whalen-Bridge's *Norman Mailer's Later Fictions* (2010), is hilarious on the subject of Mailer's Bartlebying Jason's editorial authority.
18. Why not simply quote the line from Larkin? Here's why not: One less inquiry in my day to a Copyright & Permissions Dept. It's simply out of control, the need to "clear" (they trace it from the American, *to pay for*) something quoted. Occasionally I wonder if allusion would be less offensive (see Note 2) if quotation were more readily accessible, but then I must man-up and acknowledge that they are separate crises—offense (giving-receiving) and ownership. Own your offense. And you *will* own it, you'll pay whatever outrageous fee is demanded, if your paperwork is not in order. Authors and their estates need to eat, I couldn't agree more. But will we malnourish ourselves with only "original" "content" as a consequence? There are no originals. (There are seedless fruits.) This dilemma, grotesquely exacerbated by the U.S. Supreme Court on January 18 (*Golan v. Holder*), which returned to (corporate) ownership works that had been in the public domain, is consistent with the electronic distribution of intellectual property in formats pre-established to become obsolete in the very short term. Think "housing bubble"—but done *with intent*. (Oh. Quite right. It *was*.)

19. *Esquire*'s Jennifer L. Farbar, having quoted Mailer to Mailer in 1986, received this response (which happens also to be apropos of our larger consideration here): "Well, I wouldn't support this . . . today. Because, how does one create complexities? At that time, I thought maybe we could, but now I've given up. I think the communications Establishment has succeeded in creating an ability to send out vast clouds of intellectual smog and so, far from creating complexities, we're creating ambiguities and dull obsessions" (Lennon 341).
20. Not hyperbole, if you define the ability to read as *with attention over extended periods.* Anything less is just variant "functional illiteracy."

WORKS CITED

Abbott, Sean. "Mailer Opus: An Interview at the Time of *The Time of Our Time*." *At Random. Atrandom.com.* May 1998. Web. Page numbers refer to a printout ("5/5/99") of the interview in its final form—before it vanished during one of Random House's renovations of its website.

Aptara, Inc. *Aptara Produces the Vatican's First eBooks.* Aptara, 11 July 2012. Web.

Atlantic City. Screenplay John Guare. Dir. Louis Malle. Perf. Burt Lancaster, Susan Sarandon, and Kate Reid. Paramount, 1980. Film.

Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections.* Ed. Hannah Arendt. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Shocken Books, 1968. Print.

Boog, Jason. "eBooks Now 'Dominant Single Format' in Adult Fiction Sales." *GalleyCat.* WebMediaBrands. 18 July 2012. Web. 14 Aug 2012.

_____. "Total US Book Market Down 2.5% Last Year." *AppNewser.* WebMediaBrands. 18 July 2012. Web. 14 Aug 2012.

Citia. Semi-linear Inc., 2012. Web. 14 Aug 2012.

Coker, Mark. *Smashwords Publishes 5 Billion Words.* Smashwords, Inc. Blog, 11 July 2012. Web. 19 July 2012.

The Departed. Dir. Martin Scorsese. Perf. Leonardo DiCaprio, Matt Damon, and Jack Nicholson. Warner, 2006. Film.

Dilworth, Dianna. "Open Road & Good Books Partner For eBook Series." *GalleyCat.* WebMediaBrands. 17 July 2012. Web. 29 July 2012

Epstein, Jason. "Publishing: The Revolutionary Future." *The New York Review of Books.* 11 March 2010: 4, 6. Print.

The Fugs. "CIA Man." *YouTube.* YouTube, 01 Nov 2008. Web. 18 July 2012.

Larkin, Philip. "Success Story." *Collected Poems.* Ed. Anthony Thwaite. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003. 176. Print.

Lennon, J. Michael, ed. *Conversations with Norman Mailer.* Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1988. Print.

Lucas, Gerald R. "Norman Mailer and the Novel 2.0." *The Mailer Review.* 5.1 (Fall 2011): 248–263. Print.

Mailer, Norman. *Advertisements for Myself.* London: Panther Books, 1968. Print.

_____. *The Prisoner of Sex.* Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971. Print.

_____. *Tough Guys Don't Dance*. New York: Random House, 1984. Print.

My Dinner with André. Screenplay by Wallace Shawn and André Gregory. Dir. Louis Malle. Perf. André Gregory, Wallace Shawn, and Jean Lenauer. The Criterion Collection, 1981. DVD.

Pearson plc. *Pearson to Acquire Author Solutions, Inc for $116m*. Pearson, 19 July 2012. Web. 19 July 2012.

Reid, Calvin. "Pearson Acquires Self-Publishing Vendor Author Solutions For $116 Million." *Publishersweekly.com*. Publishers Weekly, 19 July 2012. Web. 20 July 2012.

Rushdie, Salman. "At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers." *East, West: Stories*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1994. 85–103. Print.

Samet, Elizabeth D. "Grand Allusion." *The New York Times Book Review*. The New York Times, 03 Feb 2012. Web. 26 July 2012.

Steiner, George. *In Bluebeard's Castle: Some Notes Towards the Redefinition of Culture*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1973. Print.

Stewart, Heather. "£13tn Hoard Hidden From Taxman By Global Elite." *The Guardian*. The Guardian, 21 July 2012. Web. 14 Aug 2012.

Stoppard, Tom. *The Real Thing*. Boston and London: Faber and Faber, 1984. Print.

Three Days of the Condor. Dir. Sydney Pollack. Perf. Robert Redford, Faye Dunaway, and Cliff Robertson. Paramount, 1975. Film.

Wood, James. "True Lives." *The New Yorker*. 25 June 2012. 66–69. Print.

Zaid, Gabriel. *So Many Books: Reading and Publishing in an Age of Abundance* Trans. Natasha Wimmer. Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books, 2003. Print.