THE BLADE AND THE GAMBLER: F. SCOTT FITZGERALD AND NORMAN MAILER

MICHAEL K. GLENDAY

> If the years since the war had not been brave or noble in the history of the country . . . why then did it come as surprise that people in publishing were not as good as they used to be, and that the day of Maxwell Perkins was a day which was gone, really gone, gone as Greta Garbo and Scott Fitzgerald? . . . there was no room for the old literary idea of oneself as a major writer, a figure in the landscape. . . . The day was gone when people held on to your novels no matter what others might say. (Mailer, *Advertisements* 233)

Here, in *Advertisements for Myself*, Norman Mailer laments the loss of what seemed to him a past world of publishing values, which he takes also as an index of a larger American culture of declining values and standards. His critique dismisses the academic essayists, creatures of the emerging system, whose "lack of the critical faculty" was both product and cause of what he saw as a new norm of enervation in American literature which had developed with the rise of mass culture since the war ended in 1945: "too lumpy for the particular" (233). F. Scott Fitzgerald, like John Dos Passos and Thomas Wolfe, is seen as belonging to a prelapsarian age that existed before what Mailer presented as the indecent collapse of American literary culture into a debased new order. By mid-century that age was "gone, really gone," replaced by an emerging world of corporate slavery, in which writers were ill-served by craven *lumpenkritik*, themselves both product and servants of the

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mass society that was "expert on the aggregate" and "masticate[d] the themes of ten writers rather than approach the difficulties of any one" (233). His epiphanic recognition that the idealism of the 1920s had declined into a post-1945 diminishment of values is one that informed the innovative autobiography that was *Advertisements for Myself*, easily conflating his own misfortune with that of the American century, with both growing up into the perils and cynicism of maturity. As Mailer puts it in the "Fourth Advertisement for Myself: The Last Draft of *The Deer Park*," "My adolescent crush on the profession of the writer had been more lasting than I could have guessed. I had even been so simple as to think that the kind of people who went into publishing were still most concerned with the few writers who made the profession not empty of honor, and I had been taking myself seriously, I had been thinking I was one of those writers" (234). The "Preface" to *Advertisements* is nothing if not confessional as Mailer owns up to what he regards as the fault besetting his early novels:

> I did not know what I was doing. Apart from the psychological vertigo that will attack any athlete, performer, or young entrepreneur who has huge early success, I had my own particular problem, a beauty—I did not know my métier. *The Naked and the Dead* had been written out of what I could learn from reading James T. Farrell and John Dos Passos, with good doses of Thomas Wolfe and Tolstoy, plus homeopathic tinctures from Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Faulkner, Melville, and Dostoyevsky. With such help, it was a book that wrote itself. (*Spooky* 74)

The inclusion of F. Scott Fitzgerald in this group is only one of the first of many such references to a writer whose influence upon Mailer's aesthetic as it developed throughout the 1950s was significant and shaping. Fitzgerald's final, unfinished novel, *The Last Tycoon*, had most certainly informed *The Deer Park* in its Hollywood setting and subject matter as well as its style. Mailer's self-lacerating recognition that he was not, could not be part of that stellar group, was a crucial definitional aspect of his radical development as remembered in *Advertisements*, "a book whose writing changed my life" (76) and which he identified as "the first work I wrote with a style that I could call my own" (74). *Advertisements for Myself* can be regarded as one his most definitive style sheets, a complex blend of ideology, politics and autobiography

mobilized through essay, short fiction, poetry, literary and cultural criticism and journalism. Its real function, however, was self-declaration and polemic; it proposed a basic redefinition of identity and is in that regard at least very reminiscent of Fitzgerald's autobiographical essay of 1936 "The Crack-Up." Sensing that the age demanded an urgent and more exacting response from the American writer, Mailer in *Advertisements* responded with vigor and verve.

As the Congressional House Un-American Activities Committee sustained its primitive hunt for what it saw as Communist lesions in the national body politic, Mailer's critique of the American state, which he saw as caught in the grip of a clammy cowardice and totalitarian control, is also manifest in one of his self-appraisals which appeared in *Advertisements* and which was developed from his sensational essay of 1957, "The White Negro." Applying a bleak realism to the writerly predicament described above, he is forced towards a fundamental reappraisal of his options. For if the cultural centre has suffered contamination, then, following a radical logic, he must embrace the perilous margins. The boxer's concentration may have lapsed but the resulting punishment had released in him a primary, transfiguring rage:

> Instead I caught it in the face and deserved it for not looking at the evidence. . . . the publishing habits of the past were going to be of no help for my *Deer Park*. And so . . . something broke in me, but I do not know if it was so much a loving heart, as a cyst of the weak, the unreal, and the needy, and I was finally open to my anger. I turned within my psyche I can almost believe, for I felt something shift to murder in me. . . . All I felt then was that I was an outlaw, a psychic outlaw, and I liked it, I liked it a good night better than trying to be a gentleman . . . I mined down deep into the murderous message of marijuana, the smoke of the assassins, and for the first time in my life I knew what it was to make your kicks. (Mailer, *Advertisements* 234)

Engendered by this mood, a fundamental redaction thus began to influence his approach to his novel-in-progress, and as he worked on it, his verdict was not to be denied, his honesty bringing him towards an unhappy conclusion: the style of his new novel was inauthentic, insincere and worst of all,

was an indictment of his own insincere relationship with his art: "I could at last admit the style was wrong" (235). The novel's early drafts were, as he acknowledged in a 1961 interview, clearly derivative, with strong debts owing to Fitzgerald: "The second draft was located somewhere between the English novel of manners and Scott Fitzgerald" (*Spooky* 76). The narrator, Sergius O'Shaugnessy, introduces himself to us at the start of the novel's second chapter and confesses his own derivative style standing in the bars of Desert D'Or in his Air Force uniform. He tells us that he "would feel like an unemployed actor who tries to interest a casting director by dressing for the role" (*Deer* 10). Mailer's novel-in-the-making leaned heavily upon the inflections of Fitzgerald's narrator in *The Great Gatsby*, who is himself also not averse to employing what he regards as necessary pretence: to escape the "intimate revelations" of "veteran bores," as he tells us in the novel's second paragraph, "frequently I have feigned sleep, preoccupation, or a hostile levity" (Fitzgerald 5). However, whereas in *Gatsby* Fitzgerald's narrative style had creative integrity since, as Mailer recognized, "Nick was legitimate, out of fair family, the Midwest and Princeton—he would write as he did, his style was himself" (*Advertisements* 235), the origins of O'Shaugnessy's style were much closer to home, with Mailer finally acknowledging it as "a style which came out of nothing so much as my determination to prove I could muster a fine style" (235). When O'Shaugnessy begins to sound like Fitzgerald's narrator, then recording has taken the place of creation, leaving O'Shaugnessy but a poor ventriloquist, faking "a style which at its best sounded like Nick Carraway in *The Great Gatsby* [which] must of course blur his character and leave the book unreal" (235). Setbacks such as these which he experienced while working on the narrative of *The Deer Park*, go far to explain the restless search for integrity of style across the Mailer *oeuvre*, with every subsequent fiction seemingly exhibiting a new stylistic departure, as though after *The Deer Park* he had resolved to never again rest easy in that search for original and requisite utterance.

At a time when—as readers of *An American Dream* (1965) and *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (1969) would soon discover—he was about to become the most daring stylist in American fiction, we have here a clear index of his concerns. In the mid 1950s, however, Fitzgerald's recent death and influence cast a long shadow, and in the "Last Advertisement for Myself Before the Way Out," Fitzgerald is again cited as one of the few noble antecedents who "wrote strong, original novels, personal in style—so many of us were ready

to become writers because of the world they opened" (*Advertisements* 474). Mailer's admiration for what he saw as Fitzgerald's "strong, original novels, personal in style" may well have influenced his own approach in his fiction of the 1960s, which was also distinguished by such virtues. His feeling in any case is heartfelt, an elegy for the artist, the man, and the generation he was part of: "Fitzgerald is dead . . . dead too early . . . a gentleman blade who concealed his wounds too long and died lingering over them" (474). It is clear that in the bleak final reckonings of *Advertisements for Myself*, Mailer saw Fitzgerald as seminal and exemplary. Since his death, the landscape of American publishing had become meaner, yet Mailer was still able to find the mediations between Fitzgerald's fate and his own, for both had played fast and loose with regard to their given pot of artistic talent and both had been imperfect conservationists of the energy remaining to them:

> There is the fault of others, and the fault of oneself, and I have my debts to pay. Fitzgerald was an indifferent caretaker of his talent, and I have been a cheap gambler with mine. As I add up the accounts, I cannot like myself too much, for I was cowardly when I should have been good, and too brave on many a bad chance . . . from fear and vanity I paid out too much for what I managed to learn. (477)

Perhaps Mailer was aware that, as he aged, accountancy had also become one of Fitzgerald's favored figures of speech, and certainly the comparison may be more than coincidental, for the fiction of both writers demonstrates highly developed insights into the tragic potential of humanity's finite resources.

In his essay, "Mailer and the Fitzgerald Tradition" (1968), Richard Foster cites Mailer's awareness of this, noting that he "once expressed the conviction that "keeping in shape" morally and intellectually is much more important than 'craft'" (221). Working from Steven Marcus's 1963 *Paris Review* interview with Mailer, Foster reminds us of Mailer's view that "Craft is very little finally. But if you're continually worrying about whether you're growing or deteriorating as a man, whether your integrity is turning soft or firming itself, why then it's in that slow war, that slow rear-guard battle you fight against diminishing talent that you stay in shape as a writer" (221). Both writers feared that decline in physical well being would manifest also in a

decline of their artistic potentiality. Fitzgerald's grim awareness of the costs of both financial and physical over-expenditure in his last years is certainly clear. As he wrote his wife Zelda in 1937, "extra waste of energy has to be paid for at a double price" (Bruccoli 466). His view of that dangerous economy is more than matched by Mailer's rueful recognition that "I spent my first thirty years abusing my body . . . and so I am more stupid today than I ought to be, my memory is half-gone, and my mind is slow" (*Advertisements* 477). In Fitzgerald's case the spendthrift conduct of youth was, perhaps inevitably, modified as he aged and developed into his recognition of the benefits of a more frugal aesthetic. In 1937 for instance, we find him sending Thomas Wolfe a crucial advisory, writing him that, "the more that the stronger man's inner tendencies are defined . . . the more necessity to rarefy them, to use them sparingly" (Bruccoli 332).

Fitzgerald's presence in a Mailer narrative is again clear at the start of *An American Dream* (1965), a novel that probes the corrupt surface and repressed psyche of the American 1960s and which unquestionably furthered the reach of Mailer's own style. In the opening paragraph the narrator, Stephen Rojack, name checks Jack Kennedy and its final sentence includes an unmistakable intertextual reference to F. Scott Fitzgerald in the spike of *homage* paid to his short story of early Jazz Age cupidity, "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz" (1922). The inventory of Rojack's success includes sex, power and the big money as he reminisces at the close of the novel's opening paragraph: "I met Jack Kennedy in November, 1946. We were both war heroes, and both of us had just been elected to Congress. We went out one night on a double date and it turned out to be a fair evening for me. I seduced a girl who would have been bored by a diamond as big as the Ritz" (Mailer, *American* 1). In her review of *An American Dream*, Joan Didion was able to see that

> In fact it is Fitzgerald whom Mailer most resembles. They share that instinct for the essence of things, that great social eye . . . some fascination with the heart of the structure, some deep feeling for the mysteries of power. For both Mailer and Fitzgerald, as for the tellers of fairy tales, there remains something sexual about money, some sense in which the princess and the gold are inextricably one . . . They share a couple of other things, Mailer and Fitzgerald. The notoriety, the devastating celebrity, which is probably in the end at least as nourishing as it is destructive. The

> immense technical skill, the passion for realizing the gift. The deep romanticism. And perhaps above all the unfashionableness, the final refusal to sail with the prevailing winds. (329)

Didion was right, and in the American fairy tale that was the Camelot of the Kennedys, Mailer indeed found a romantic pull that was answerable to that deep mythic river of American dreams, forced underground but refusing to die. He declared that America was "the country in which the dynamic myth of the Renaissance—that every man was potentially extraordinary—knew its most passionate persistence" ("Third" 39).

Beneath the suffocating fog of 1950s totalitarianism, his argument was that the myth-river of dreams continued to flow, proclaiming always its truth, "that each of us was born to be free, to wander, to have adventure and to grow on the waves of the violent, the perfumed, and the unexpected" (Mailer, "Third" 39). In his landmark essay of 1963, "Superman Comes to the Supermarket"—Mailer's memoir of the Democratic Convention of the summer of 1960 that secured Kennedy's nomination for President—Kennedy is pictured as the superman, America (more specifically Los Angeles, in which "that essence of the new postwar SuperAmerica" can be located—"that homogenous extension of stainless surfaces and psychoanalyzed people, packaged commodities and ranch homes" [32]) the Supermarket. Mailer does not resist subtitling one of its sections, "An Observation on the Name Fitzgerald." For surrounded by the style tokens of the Kennedy campaign—"the personnel had something of the Kennedy *élan*, those paper hats designed to look like straw boaters with Kennedy's face on the crown . . . those hats which had come to symbolize the crack speed of the Kennedy team . . . the elegance always giving its subtle echo of the Twenties" (54)—Fitzgerald's presence as influential *eminence grise* and "gentleman blade" is found again. He is suddenly there in "that Madison Avenue cachet which one finds in bars like P. J. Clarke's" where "the colored waistcoats are measured by the charm they would have drawn from Scott Fitzgerald's eye" (54).

F. Scott Fitzgerald and John Fitzgerald Kennedy: Mailer asserts this as more than a mere coincidence of nomenclature, his essay moving quickly to embrace and elaborate upon the doubling, to find the correspondences between the novelist who had embodied the spirit of the Twenties and the politician who would embody the spirit of the Sixties: "it occurred to one for the first time that Kennedy's middle name was just that, Fitzgerald, and the

tone of his crack lieutenants, the unstated style, was true to Scott. The legend of Fitzgerald had an army at last" (54). The "legend" was one that drew upon Fitzgerald, firstly, as inspiring icon of style, flourishing again in "the self-image in the mind of every superior Madison Avenue opportunist that he was hard, he was young, he was In, his conversation was lean as wit, and if the work was not always scrupulous, well the style could aspire" (54–5). Beyond this though, in the final paragraph of probably his most renowned essay, Mailer's bold vision finds F. Scott Fitzgerald at the head of the Kennedy political army that battled for a more fulfilled American future, an army turning towards the victory of hope and freedom. Its weapons expressed a modern political warfare, evident in "the slick technique, the oiled gears, and the superior generals of Fitzgerald's Army" (57). Above all, Mailer gives us the American political convention as a blast from *vox populi*, its roar deriving from the confluence of "collective rivers of animal sweat . . . the roots still come grubby from the soil" (52). "Superman Comes to the Supermarket" reminds us that in those years "politics in America [was] still different from politics anywhere else," that its energy derived from the viscera of the people rather than "the chill punctilio of aristocratic negotiation" (52).

In its willingness to invoke "Fitz's Army" (57) as a rhetorical device in its proposal of national possibilities, Mailer's essay was a bold effort to elaborate the discourse of a modern mythography and dreamscape. As George Steiner reminds us,

> The historicity of dreams is twofold. Dreams are made the matter of history. Dreams of victory or of defeat . . . oracular or enigmatic dreams deciphered in the light of subsequent events, all these are recorded by chroniclers, historians and biographers . . . the appeal made to the relevant dream reinforces and underwrites the authenticity of the historical event. The dream is a prime document; it is deposited in the historical archives . . . the concept of the exemplary or illustrious life of the monarch, hero or sage overlaps with the concept of history itself. (209)

In such terms, Mailer in "Superman" can be reckoned as a chronicler of not just a significant event in twentieth-century American history but also as one who seeks its rightful place in "the historicity of dreams," so joining with ancient biographers such as Plutarch, whose *Lives* also took for granted

the integrity and relevance of dreams to mass-consciousness. Such a parallel is more than validated by Mailer's novel of 1983, *Ancient Evenings*, (still today widely ignored or dismissed by his readers and critics), a revelation of the extent to which at that time his imagination was alive to metaphysical meanings. The world of the pharaohs and their subjects was attractive to him because their metaphysic assumed a fundamental relationship between humanity and the numinous. Even in the final paragraph of *The Fight* (1975), a book published almost 20 years after "Superman," Mailer concludes by returning to "the play of forces between those who are living and those who are dead" (234).

Fitzgerald's relevance to this dialogue was a key ingredient in Mailer's imagination of the forms his nation's culture might take, as evident in both his essays and fiction of the time. Writing in 1968, Richard Foster noted that "what needs to be stressed in Mailer's case, as in Fitzgerald's, is that he is indeed a serious 'experimentalist' writer, though an experimentalist of a different order than our moment in the history of 'the tradition' allows us easily to recognize, accept and understand" (*Norman Mailer* 6). Writers and critics have continued to trace the mediations between Mailer and Fitzgerald and more recently Richard Godden's study *Fictions of Capital: The American Novel From James to Mailer* (1990) takes as assumption that "Mailer, who is forever re-writing Fitzgerald" (195), can easily be read as kin to the latter as "the novelist of American manners" (216). In later career, with *Harlot's Ghost* (1991), the Fitzgerald reprise is most obviously located in its setting amidst the mannered society of Ivy League WASPs in New England**;** it is they**,** with their inbred feel for protocol and caste who rule Mailer's blue-blooded CIA. The novel is of course concerned with agents, double-agents and the pathologies of espionage, so reflecting one of Mailer's abiding concerns, for as he acknowledged —"I've been obsessed with questions of identity all of my life . . . I've always been fascinated with spies and actors and people who take on roles that are not their own" (Spencer 21). The spy also enacted the Mailer paradigm of the divided self, the moralist and the sinner—the CIA agent would ideally embody a superhuman mentality that could transcend self and identity. And in his final novel, *The Castle in the Forest* (2007), he again gives us a narrator whose devilish mission requires a masquerade so as to operate convincingly within multiple personalities, be that as Dieter, one of Himmler's élite SS corps, "tall, quick, blond, blue-eyed, witty," as he

himself says, "a troubled Nazi" (464) or as one of the devils responsible for provoking the peasants' revolt that led to the death of more than a thousand at Kohdinsko Field, St Petersburg in 1896, following the coronation of Czar Nicholas II.

Like Mailer, Fitzgerald too was concerned with questions of identity, which he explored not only in the "Crack-Up" essay but throughout his fiction, where we often find characters involved with the drama of self-definition, as in *The Great Gatsby*. Jay Gatsby is himself "an extravagant and secretive character" (Blazek 276), whose "identity" is presented as shrouded in mystique, with Fitzgerald having cut around 18,000 words from the draft of the novel in order to enhance that mystique of identity. If spies are spooks, then Gatsby is also something of a ghostly figure to those who attend his parties, aware as they are of his *louche* reputation. Dark rumours of his own underworld contacts abound: for some indeed "he was a German spy during the war" (Fitzgerald 36), while others are wiling to "bet he killed a man once" (37). In any case his absence provokes murmurs of anticipation from his guests, who seek more palpable reassurances of his identity: "Lucille shivered. We all turned and looked around for Gatsby. It was testimony to the romantic speculation he inspired that there were whispers about him from those who had found little that it was necessary to whisper about in this world" (37). Even his name is false, part of the role he plays and the new identity he has designed. Born James Gatz in North Dakota, a poor farmhand, he becomes in his imaginary reminiscence "the son of wealthy people in the middle-west . . . educated at Oxford . . . after that [he] lived like a young rajah in all the capitals of Europe" (52).

Like Fitzgerald, Mailer too went to stay in Paris as a young man in the years following a World War, arriving there on the GI Bill with his wife Bea in 1947, only sixteen years after Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald had left France for the last time. For the Mailers and the enclave of American expatriate writers and artists who gathered at the Café de Flore on the Left Bank, Paris was resonant with recollections of the expatriate past. According to Mary Dearborn in her biography of Mailer, "it was an exciting time to be in Paris. Memories of the heyday of the Lost Generation were still fresh, and a new generation of expatriates was flocking to the city" (56), while Hilary Mills in her biography finds that Mailer "in the tradition of American expatriates, including Hemingway and Fitzgerald, began frequenting the Café des Deux

Magots with the other American students" (96), who were also taking courses at the Sorbonne. But whereas Mills concludes that Mailer "had no desire to play the longtime expatriate" and "was far less nostalgic than many of his peers about following in the footsteps of the preceding literary generation" (95), according to his second wife Adele, the summons to role-playing itself would soon become a part of their life together. In her memoir *The Last Party* (1997), she recalled how "drinking also released the actress in me, permitting me to play any role to Norman's liquor-induced personalities," among whom were "God, Svengali, Ivan the Terrible, Rocky Marciano, Jesse James, Miles Davis the Cool, and Scott Fitzgerald the Drunk" (188).

In his final *Paris Review* interview (in April 2007), Mailer responded to Andrew O'Hagan's remark that "F. Scott Fitzgerald knew that America was addicted to illusion" with a series of instances describing contemporary America's continuing bad faith, guilt and wilful self-delusion in matters of morality and politics. Keeping America honest to its foundation values, and reminding the nation of their beauty and continuing relevance, was a core concern for both writers. Whether those values were buried in the past, beyond what Fitzgerald, in the famous lines that bring *Gatsby* to its close, called "that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night" (142) or whether in the underground river of American dreams where Mailer saw that "the myth continued to flow" (Mailer, "Third" 40), these writers were kin, concerned at their best with America's deepest destiny and its departures from it.

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