MAILER AND UPDIKE: PROBING AMERICAN CULTURE AS WRITERS AND CELEBRITIES

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> "What great artists do is so profound, you don't debate with it."
> —Norman Mailer (*Spooky Art* 260)

> "[W]hat a writer wants, as every aspiring writer can tell you, is to get into print. To transform the changing shadows of one's dimly and fitfully lived life into print . . . into a time theoretically eternal: that is the siren song that holds us to our desks, our dismal revisions, our insomnia panics, our dictionaries and encyclopedias, our lonely and, the odds long are, superfluous labor."
> —John Updike (*Picked-Up Pieces* 52)

Like opposite points on the surface of a sphere, Norman Mailer and John Updike seemed to occupy positions 180 degrees apart over their long careers. As a matter of fact, their differences seemed so distinct that one could argue that they might not even belong in the same circle at all. These two literary giants differed in many ways, ranging from physical appearance (the compact, pugnacious Mailer versus the lanky, angular Updike) to public persona (Mailer scrappy and flashy, yet brilliant; Updike modest and erudite).

Despite wide-ranging differences that commonly position Mailer and Updike as diametrically opposed, there is a counterbalance to this argument. Drawing a line from one antipodal point to its opposite results in a connection passing through the center of the circle, thus forming a perfect diameter.

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In this light, the contrasting figures are drawn together, forming opposing poles, but intrinsically connected.

Although they presented themselves differently, Mailer and Updike were at their cores writers with profound gifts. Since their careers overlapped, with Mailer already assuming a kind of godfather of literature role by the time Updike burst onto the scene, it is no wonder that they kept an eye on each other's work. Their remarks and comments over the decades ranged from sometimes questioning to highly critical, but gradually lapsing into an admiring mode. This kind of progression from foe to friendly rival to friend takes place in many areas, most notably sports, when one-time, bitter enemies gradually develop into comrades in arms, from Magic Johnson and Larry Bird to Arnold Palmer and Jack Nicklaus. Sometimes it takes age and wisdom for these tandems to come together. This evolution is mirrored in the relationship between Updike and Mailer.

As a matter of fact, taken together, the two writers played a critical role in redefining what it meant to be an author/celebrity in their lifetimes simply by not rolling the train off the tracks like their predecessors, such as F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway, another set of friendly rivals; one who sprinted toward self-destruction and the other who faded slower as his writing powers slipped. Instead, Updike and Mailer kept the focus on writing, not allowing fame, celebrity, or wealth to distract them from their craft.

This essay is an exploration of Mailer and Updike, who on first glance seemed to represent the yin and yang of modern American letters. Looking deeper, however, I demonstrate that they bore (often-overlooked) similarities, which centered on their shared commitment to the writer's role in contemporary culture. In these literary lions, we have a dual case study that enables deeper investigation into near-literary history. Mailer and Updike took divergent paths to literary greatness, but like those diametrically opposed points on the circle, the line that connected them cut through the very heart of what it meant to be a writer–a straight shot from one to the other. That line is represented by their dedication to their art.

What we have, then, by studying these diametrically opposed, yet representative figures, is greater context in examining the literary world of twentieth and early twenty-first century America. My goal is to consider them as writers–their primary roles–and as celebrities within the broader culture, which is how they traversed the culture of their shared era. The picture that emerges provides new ways of looking at Mailer and Updike, as well as their

generation of literary icons, which due to numerous factors (including the supposed death spiral of the printed book and dispersed attention spans), may be the last of its kind.

EDGES AND CENTERS

While it is difficult to generalize about writers with the range of Mailer and Updike, the fundamental distinction between them is that the former chose to probe culture's edges–its dark, twisting fringes–while the latter focused primarily on its doughy center. This disparity became clearer when they examined American society.

Updike's best-known work (the Rabbit tetralogy) focuses on the tumultuous life of one American patriarch and his family over five decades set in and around the nation's suburban middle class. Mailer, on the other hand, is harder to pin down. Attempts at deducing his best work runs the gamut of numerous novels and nonfiction narratives examining a limitless range of subjects, from World War II and Vietnam to Hitler and Jesus.

The contrast between the two literary lions even seeped into the distinctions between the outlets where their work appeared. Mailer wrote for edgier audiences in *Esquire* and the *Village Voice*, while Updike cozied into the *New Yorker*, essentially becoming its house writer. Even earlier in their lives as Harvard undergraduates, Updike and Mailer took different paths: Mailer writing for *The Advocate*, while Updike rose to president of *The Lampoon*.

The two writers represented the establishment and anti-establishment, a distinction both understood and discussed. In retrospect, though, it seems that Mailer and Updike needed this chip on their shoulders to fuel their work, but no one could reach the literary heights they achieved without being inside the system. Both, for example, were influential members of the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Thinking of themselves as craftsmen and, to some degree, literary interlopers, however, enabled them to remain relevant well past the age when other writers begin to lose their abilities. For example, included among each writer's final work is Updike's *Terrorist* (2006), centering on a post-9/11 homegrown terrorist, and Mailer's *The Castle in the Forest* (2007), a reexamination of Hitler's childhood. Both novels demonstrate its author's commitment to edgy, difficult subjects, at a time when either could have simply taken on less difficult topics or stopped producing entirely. These novels

embody pushing on one's talent despite age and atrophy, the two forces that no one can defy.

The decision to emphasize society's often-blurry, radical outskirts versus its everyday middle represents more than just a nod toward artistic temperament. Mailer and Updike hinged their respective worldviews on these choices. Mailer became a post-World War II literary star based on the gritty realism and violence of *The Naked and the Dead*. In contrast, Updike's early career, marked by quick acceptance into the literary elite, took a gentler path with a book of poems, then two well-received novels: *The Poorhouse Fair* and *Rabbit, Run*. The notion of violence and its place in society continued to distinguish the two writers: Mailer placing it at the core, while Updike rarely dealt with physical violence, instead focusing on psychological wounds produced via marriage, adultery, child-rearing, and the attempt at living up to aspirations.

While both started from the dream of producing the Great American Novel, Mailer used his quest as an exploration of self and celebrity, virtually absorbing, then personifying, the popular culture of the age. Updike took a less adventurous route (although audiences considered his early work salacious) by retiring from the limelight of New York City at the tender age of twenty-five. Where Mailer strutted and charged, Updike tiptoed and uncovered. Each man's decision regarding how to deal with early fame appears to have had important ramifications for the subsequent work they produced.

For Mailer, according to scholar Morris Dickstein, fame changed his thinking, because he could no longer take part in "ordinary life," instead leading him to "riskier kinds of fiction that pleased fewer readers, but also to personal reportage fired by the kinds of inwardness and depth that could make fiction so powerful." As a result, "He would move far afield from where he began" (119). This included a variety of creative nonfiction avenues that helped redefine that genre in the late twentieth century.

Mailer's agonizing decision to move away from traditional fiction also set him in stark contrast to Updike, who remained committed to probing the soft underbelly of suburban America, with the occasional wild fling into more global subject matter. In *Advertisements for Myself* (a title one could never imagine Updike employing), Mailer explains, "there was no room for the old literary idea of oneself as a major writer . . . 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" (qtd. in Dickstein 124).

Although Updike sometimes startled readers with graphic language and sexual situations in his fiction, as an individual, "gentleman" might be the most characteristic trait he possessed. Using a sports metaphor, which I think both men would appreciate, Mailer embodied boxing (if not a drunken fist-fight out in the alley), while Updike golfed–the elegant swing and steely confidence of rolling in a clutch 12–foot putt.

While there is no way to meld boxing and golf into one odd amalgamation, there is a way to strip Mailer and Updike from their subject matter and examine them from the perspective of two of literary history's most productive and successful writers. What sets them apart from their contemporaries (whether Bellow and Malamud or Oates and Roth), is the sheer volume of fine work across genres. Stripping them of fiction, Mailer and Updike still appear in multiple "the best we have produced" categories in other areas. For example, either could have concentrated solely on literary criticism, essays, and forms of creative nonfiction and been considered among the handful of American "greats."

STYLE AND CRAFTSMANSHIP

Almost immediately, style leaps off the page when surveying Mailer and Updike. Like the rare baseball prospect said to possess all five tools (hitting for average, for power, arm strength, running, and fielding skills), the two writers excelled across genres. This shared commitment to language is where Updike and Mailer merge most noticeably, away from the tumult of literary stardom, tucked away behind a desk, and crafting words. Morris Dickstein looks at the private/public nature of the writing life, saying, "Yet the *process* of writing, though it involves a kind of performance, *is* intensely private—the least worldly, the least social of all callings. Writers are creatures who can live in their heads and tolerate long stretches of solitude" (194). Updike and Mailer were able to carve out time at the desk, despite the demands they faced as members of the literary elite.

While Mailer and Updike saw themselves working toward different ends and addressing contrasting topics, other commentators removed them from their subjects and instead examined them regarding style. Critic Michael Novak, for example, in reviewing *Couples* in mid-1968 claims, "No American writer, with the possible exception of Norman Mailer, has greater gifts: a

more exquisite and poignant poetic sense, an almost absolute command of descriptive language, an inner voice that sings through resistant sentences as genius sings" (Macnaughton 59). The nod toward style is another link, although they certainly had no love lost for one another's style in the 1960s.

Mailer and Updike butted, despite their commitment to style, because their fundamental thinking about why someone should write clashed. Mailer, more than a decade into his writing career as Updike appeared, felt that great writing could only be achieved through commitment to probing one's own edges. He explains:

> A man lays his character on the line when he writes a novel. Anything in him which is lazy, or meretricious, or unthoughtout, complacent, fearful, overambitious, or terrified by the ultimate logic of his exploration will be revealed in his book. Some writers are skillful at concealing their weaknesses; some have a genius for converting a weakness into an acceptable mannerism of style. Nonetheless, no novelist can escape his or her own character altogether. (*Spooky Art*, 59)

Mailer's feeling that Updike did not go deep enough or put it "on the line" led to public reproach. He wrote a column for *Esquire* in 1963, "Some Children of the Goddess: Further Evaluations of the Talent in the Room." He heaped criticism on nine contemporary writers, including Updike. Former *Esquire* editor Harold Hayes explains that Mailer's affiliation with the magazine continued its tradition in the vein of Fitzgerald and Hemingway, who each wrote extensively for the monthly. Hayes also identifies why Mailer was a provocative choice for *Esquire*, revealing, "we were also very much absorbed with the writer-as-personality" (Manso 354). In this specific article, Mailer beats up on his fellow writers, thus adding to his renegade persona.

Looking more closely at the piece, Mailer assails Updike in part because the "Literary Establishment" champions him (*Cannibals* 120). Maybe by 1963, the then 40-year old Mailer felt that the elites deserted him or perhaps he just moved on to other interests, but the criticism seems forced, particularly since he himself had once been America's literary golden boy. Mailer then calls Updike out for his style, which he says is "atrocious—and smells like stale garlic" and "other imprecise, flatulent, wry-necked, precious, overpreened,

self-indulgent, tortured sentences" (*Cannibals* 120, 121). He flipped the party line on Updike, blasting the style that most commentators praised.

Yet, for all the criticism leveled against *Rabbit, Run* and its author, Mailer cuts to the heart of the novel, identifying its harrowing thesis: "a sense, not absolutely unworthy of Thomas Hardy, that the universe hangs over our fates like a great sullen hopeless sky." He even admits, "There is real pain in the book, and a touch of awe" (*Cannibals* 121). The thousands of words surrounding these two sentences might have cut Updike to the bone, but no one could deny that Mailer nailed the novel's core, offering a critique that is pure, despite its harshness.

Three years later, Updike returned fire in an interview with *Life Magazine*, saying, "Mailer has energy and candor, and cares about what he thinks of as important things, but has quite abandoned fiction as a form of truth-seeking." Despite Updike's reputation as a gentler writer/reviewer, he then dubs Mailer "a pamphleteer" and "crank." The final blow is harshly delivered and deliberate: "He cares more about power than words. Maybe a European country like France would make better use of him" (qtd. in Plath 17).

Despite sniping at one another from afar, examining the hundreds of thousands of words Updike and Mailer crafted about writing and how one composes within the broader culture, strains meld and intertwine that indicate how the postwar generation of writers interpreted process. Mailer equates writing with "self-destruction" and the "damage" it does to the body: "Your factory is yourself. You're always examining the factory for potential breakdowns, anticipating troubles . . . writing impinges on your body" (Lennon, *Conversations* 376).

Updike emphasizes both the mental battle writing necessitates and how dealing in prose affects others. "Writing—the leap onto the blank paper, the precarious linkage of one sentence to the next—is labor of a peculiarly exhausting sort," he explains. "The goal of perfection, for which the classics are our measure, is intimidating enough to freeze fine minds and pure hearts into permanent silence" (*More* 683). The difficulty of writing for a living caused the writer, even as successful as Updike, to bleed a little each day in search for words.

Updike acknowledges that fiction and life are both "dirty business[es]," offending family members and friends used as models in stories for either being "reflected all too accurately and yet not accurately enough" (*Self-Consciousness*

244). As a result, there is a price one pays in composing fiction, particularly if the output mirrors the writer's own life.

Mailer took a similarly realistic path. In a 1967 interview with himself, he confessed that he wrote *Why Are We in Vietnam?* to fulfill a contract: "What's so exceptional about that? My expenses are, to me, huge. I write to make a living. That does not obligatorily inhibit the work from rising above itself" (Lennon 106). Clearly, both writers understood the connection between writing and selling books and themselves as part of the cultural capital they possessed.

Looking at Updike, critics often turn for or against him based on their ideas about style (or at least about his style). Whether indirect or not, a quick look at how critics interpret Updike's style leads into one of two pretty distinct camps. Time and again, one finds critics in virtual death matches over the role of style in Updike's work. They use the topic as a primary catalyst for determining his significance.

Scholar James A. Schiff equates style with Updike's focus on popular culture, explaining, "Few writers have made as great an effort as John Updike to capture what it feels like to be an American living in the twentieth century" (147). In other words, Updike's ability to capture life's nuances in its everyday grace not only sets the writer apart, but infuses his style with beauty. Literary critic James Wood, arguing against Updike's style is representative of this brand of reviewer, claiming, "He is a prose writer of great beauty, but that prose confronts one with the question of whether beauty is enough . . . his fondness for an expensive phrase obscures, because it marks the moment at which he inserts himself oppressively" (212).

In a 1985 address, Updike danced around the notion of style, linking it with imagination: "Creative excitement, and a sense of useful work, has invariably and only come to me when I felt I was transferring, with a lively accuracy, some piece of experienced reality to the printed page" (*Odd Jobs* 135). He continued, explaining, "The wish to do justice to the real world compels language into those semi-transparent layers that make a style . . . some perception about the nature of reality seeks embodiment" (136). Thus, if one takes the author at his word, the desire to portray reality faithfully drives style.

Later, in 2004, Updike provided a different view of style, telling an author, "Style as I understand it is nothing less than a writer's habits of mind . . . the very germ of the thing" (*Higher* 472). Examining Updike's work after the writer died, Larry Woiwode compared him to other greats, saying, "The

only comparisons to his silken and often seamless prose, though no comparison really quite fits, are Henry James and James Joyce and Marcel Proust, with a dash of Henry Green. It is that good" (85–6).

Mailer's 2003 book *The Spooky Art* is a treasure trove of his collected thoughts on writing and the writing life. Demonstrating his range as a literary critic, though, is where Mailer shines brightest. Moving from the personal to macro-level interpretation, Mailer explains why no American writer ever produced the fabled "Great American Novel," saying:

> The two impulses in American letters had failed—the realistic impulse never delivered the novel that would ignite a nation's consciousness of itself . . . the aristocratic impulse clawed at the remaining fabric of a wealthy society it despised and no longer wished to sustain . . . Literature then had failed. The work was done by the movies, by television. The consciousness of the masses and the culture of the land trudged through endless mud. (303)

A MASK THAT EATS INTO THE FACE

Updike tackled the consequences of celebrity on the writer's work, boldly declaring, "Celebrity is a mask that eats into the face." For Updike, the recognition that came with fame and the incessant requests to speak largely on any topic created a wall around his "early impressions, taken in before the writer became conscious of himself as a writer." As a result, "the 'successful' writer acquires a film over his eyes. His eyes get fat" (*Self-Consciousness* 266).

In a confessional mode, however, Updike also linked his celebrity to internal needs for acceptance on a personal level, as the result of a lifetime dealing with psoriasis and a speech impediment. On one hand, he explained, "I need these excursions," yet they "leave me feeling dirty and disturbed, as though I have wasted this time away from my desk, posing as an author instead of being one" (*Self-Consciousness* 250). In this light, one sees a vulnerable side of Updike, attracted to fame and its diversions, but realizing that it carries a price tag.

The two sides continue at war. Updike lumped writing book reviews, public readings, and appearances together, calling them "superfluous," but done "for the money and the easy exposure of it, the showing-off, the quick

certification from a world that I fear is not hearing me, is not understanding me." Concurrently, according to the author, "My public, marketable self–the self put on display in interviews and slightly 'off' caricatures in provincial book-review sections, the book-autographing, anxious-to-please me–feels like another skin and hurts" (*Self-Consciousness* 250).

Whether or not Mailer viewed celebrity as painful, he understood that it taxed him physically and emotionally. Moreover, Mailer explains, his bravado cost him readers, particularly in comparison with his "safe" contemporaries:

> If you're unsavory in public life, it doesn't matter that everyone knows your name—you are not going to sell as many hardcover books as you should. The good authors who do well are usually careful not to be in the public eye—Saul Bellow and John Updike for two. Very few can flout that law. Capote has. So has Vidal. I certainly haven't. (*Spooky* 56)

One of the methods Updike used to validate his dual life as an individual and also a celebrity meant that he would view "Updike, Writer" as a kind of cartoon character that enabled him to maintain a semblance of privacy. An additional factor, which made the author unique, is the way the publishing industry transformed as the America of the 1950s morphed into the technology age over the next fifty years. The Updike who experienced early fame in the mid-1950s coped with an entirely different world as his career progressed. In the mid-1990s, Updike penned an essay titled "Updike and I" that focused on the relationship between Updike as a man and the writer/celebrity that the "real" Updike "created . . . out of the sticks and mud of my Pennsylvania boyhood" (*More Matter* 757).

The unnamed "I" in the short piece sees Updike as a "monster" and is horrified at facing "the rooms that Updike has filled with his books, his papers, his trophies, his projects." Yet, the two are fused into a "sacred reality" that makes it impossible for one to act without the other (*More Matter* 758). Despite the strident tone at the opening of the essay, the narrator fears Updike abandoning him, a tinge of doubt at the core of many successful people who wonder–am I really that good or did I just get lucky?

While Updike enacted a plan of self-revelation through his work, some of his contemporaries addressed the change more aggressively. For example, in

an interview with Lawrence Grobel, Mailer took offense at being asked repeated questions about his marriages and other personal topics.

Rather than smash Grobel in the face, as he might have done at an earlier stage in his career, Mailer explained his rationale, saying, "You want to discuss my life. I'm not going to give away my life. My life is my material. I would give you my life no more than I would give you my mate. That belongs to me, not to an interviewer" (309). Updike, Mailer, and many of their contemporaries wanted to differentiate between their work and the information they provided during celebrity moments. Yet, they also understood the connection their confession created with audiences.

Updike protested–sometimes loudly–at his place in the marketing machine. He explained his position to an interviewer at the height of his post-*Couples* national fame in 1968:

> My life is, in a sense, trash; my life is only that of which the residue is my writing. The person who appears on the cover of *Time* or whose monologue will be printed in *The Paris Review* is neither the me who exists physically and socially or the me who signs the fiction and poetry. That is, everything is infinitely fine, and any opinion is somehow coarser than the texture of the real thing. (Plath 31)

The reader senses Updike's conflict regarding the split between true self and professional self, yet he delivered this clarification in the midst of conducting an interview.

This Updike is wholly realistic about his celebrity status–confessing its use to fulfill an internal desire for acceptance and interaction with the outside world, as well as an additional means for drawing income from his work. In the poem, "At the End of the Rainbow," for example, the author questions traveling to yet another (unnamed) university lecture, which ends with him alone in a drab motel room, with nothing but the electronic clock for company.

Hardly the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, despite his brief stint on the celebrity pedestal, Updike contrasts the "thunderous applause / still tingling in your body" with the mundane realities of time on the road, "Hi-tech / alarm clock, digital. The John. The Check" (*Collected Poems* 253–54). Here Updike offered a behind-the-curtains image of the downside of

fame–loneliness, austerity, and the deep-rooted, almost humiliating, realization that all of this is for nothing more than money.

PRESIDENT OF THE LITERARY WORLD

Updike and Mailer approached their public lives from different angles, but often worked toward the same end. Mailer made loud splashes and forced the spotlight on him. Updike took stealthier routes, tucked away in rural Massachusetts where he could evade the limelight. Neither man, though, could truly skirt fame. Mailer just took celebrity on recklessly, for example, declaring in a 1967 interview (with himself) in the *New York Times Book Review*, "It is no accident, you see, that I run for President of the literary world" (Lennon 107). Updike produced no such pronouncements, but exerted influence by feigning a persona as above the eye gouging that often marked literary feuds.

For Mailer, where a writer stood in the public's eye obviously mattered, because he wrote and spoke about such mythical rankings and harshly assessed his contemporaries. Being "president of the literary world," meant that he commented on the state of the writing scene, especially with regard to those who might attempt to usurp his authority (although self-anointed).

Evidence reveals Updike fashioned similar evaluations of his contemporaries, some personal, rather than on the writer's work. Joyce Carol Oates alluded to several examples of such disparaging remarks in a 2012 speech that quoted from her personal letters from Updike (Oates). Moreover, while Mailer is considered more bombastic, Updike offered biting observations about his fellow writers in interviews and, less frequently, in the *New Yorker*. Often these two greats aimed their arrows at one another publicly.

Because Mailer took a harsher public tone, he is perceived as more strident than Updike, who shied away from attacks from his venerated perch at the magazine. As scholar Robert Merrill asserts, "Mailer's literary criticism reveals a decided interest in the writer as opposed to the writer's work" (145). His younger rival, in contrast, disclosed one of his reviewing "rules" as "Review the book, not the reputation" (*Picked-Up* 15).

Another thing the president of the literary world might do is to serve as an activist on political topics. The notion of power and how a celebrated author might engage within society marked another distinction between Mailer and Updike. While the older writer, who had witnessed warfare, spoke out against Vietnam in packed halls on university campuses, Updike quietly lived a small town life, joining church councils and joining community

recorder groups. The literary world's president has obligations that others are not forced to follow. In 1995, Updike recalled the turmoil of the 1960s and his decision to sit it out, explaining, "Unlike such estimable elders as Vonnegut, Vidal, and Mailer, I have little reformist tendency and instinct for social criticism . . . the rhetoric of social protest and revolt which roiled the Sixties alarmed and, even, disoriented me" (*Higher* 452).

At the time, Updike at least attempted to stay out of the fray regarding Vietnam, but he got sucked into it after *Authors Take Sides on Vietnam* (1967), a collection of essays by famous writers, came out. In response, the *New York Times* covered the publication and declared Updike the lone writer in favor of the war. Visibly wounded for what he thought served as a hit job, Updike never seemed to recover. Decades later, in his memoir *Self-Consciousness* (1989), the author wrote a long chapter (approximately 20 percent of the book) titled "On Not Being a Dove," a tortured examination of his feelings about the article and its psychic fallout. Here Updike agonizes over his own challenges ("*Had* I suffered enough?) versus his gut-reaction to the peace movement ("Wake up to reality, peaceniks"), warring with himself and those many critics he faced at the time, including close Ipswich friends and his own wife (157). This distinction between the questioning Mailer and the accepting Updike never went away.

In contrast to Mailer's declarations, posturing, and public involvement in a myriad of issues, Updike told a reporter in early 1985 that unlike Mailer he preferred to keep his distance from politics and political issues. "I try to be useful to my society by telling the truth in fiction without trying to be a politician," he explains (Plath 172). Updike often used this tact in placing himself outside activist writers, particularly when asked by interviewers why he did not engage politically.

Literary observers were used to Updike and Mailer trading barbs, particularly over issues regarding politics and genre. However, Updike upped the ante in a 1986 interview when asked about writers whom he could not read, which essentially says that not only is he uninterested in these writers, but deliberately chooses not to read them at all. "Nor do I feel close to the naturalist school of Norman Mailer or James Jones," Updike says. "Rather than energy and violence at all costs, I prefer things to be neat and precise: 'domestic' writing" (Plath 178).

Although this jab seems deliberately meant to send a message, Updike was not truthful, unless he somehow secretly cordoned off in his own mind

the older writer's fiction versus nonfiction. On numerous occasions, for example, Updike spoke about enjoying Mailer's *The Armies of the Night.*

ASSESSING MAILER AND UPDIKE

As described above, Mailer and Updike could not be considered allies, though they may have at least been willing to admit that they were collegial colleagues. They stood too far apart on many issues, from America's stake in the world and politics to violence and the topics one should tackle, to be genuine friends (if successful writers can even make this claim). Added to this notion is each man's innate competitiveness, which certainly impelled much of the bluster they aimed at each other.

Ironically, it took the ego of a fellow writer–Tom Wolfe–and a full-scale literary feud that ensued to draw Updike and Mailer firmly into the same camp. Both reviewed Wolfe's novel *A Man in Full* (1998). Although the reviews were positive in many sections, both Mailer and Updike felt the novel fell short of the greatness Wolfe had been talking about for the nearly a decade he had been writing it. Mailer, for example, noted points where "Wolfe suddenly becomes startlingly good" (*Time* 1290), but also tosses bombs: "Tom may be the hardest-working showoff the literary world has ever owned . . . He lives in the King Kong Kingdom of the mega-best sellers—he is already a Media Immortal. He has married his large talent to real money and very few can do that or allow themselves to do that" (*Time* 1299). Basically, Mailer called Wolfe out for whoring himself and did it for the whole world to see.

Rather than take his licks lying down, Wolfe went on television, labeling Updike, Mailer, and novelist John Irving "my three stooges," a charge he then elaborated in print in *Hooking Up* (2000). In it, he piles on age-related barbs, calling Updike and Mailer "two old piles of bones" and wondering about their "exhausted carcasses" (152). Despite being older than Updike, Wolfe kept up the attack, and the feud kept literary wags wagging for about two years. Taking the battle away from the novel and making it personal, Wolfe suddenly went from victim to aggressor, thus facilitating a makeshift alliance between Mailer and Updike.

When old age became a common denominator for Mailer and Updike, an "us vs. them" mentality also drew the two closer. In *The Spooky Art*, Mailer juxtaposes himself, Updike, DeLillo and several others of that generation against the younger crowd, represented by Jonathan Franzen, David Foster Wallace, and Michael Cunningham. He deduces:

> [T]he younger writers are sick of Roth, Bellow, Updike, and myself the way we were sick of Hemingway and Faulkner . . . we never talked about anyone but them, and that feeling grew into resentment. Since they had no interest in us, we began to think, Yeah, they're great—now get off the stage! We want the lights on us! (294)

A corollary to the battles regarding aging versus younger writers is the larger question regarding literature's role in contemporary society: Does it even matter, and how can we measure its consequence? In discussing how a president gets rated as poor, good, or great, renowned historian Sean Wilentz explains that a "good" president needs an event that tests the nation to its core to move into the "great" category. Without this triggering event, a good president, in other words, never gets to prove his mettle under fire (Wilentz). At one time, the same might have been said about literary figures: Hemingway had his wars and Fitzgerald had his decade in the sun. Yet, the contemporary world has less time for novelists, even when enormous macro events swirl.

With *The Naked and the Dead*, Mailer emerged from World War II with a novel that almost immediately made him important. In 1972, scholar and critic Richard Poirier claimed that "most thoughtful and literate young readers prefer Mailer to, say, Updike or Roth or Malamud," because "his timing is synchronized to theirs, while the others move to an older beat" (121). Yet, when we view other crises from the same perspective, from Vietnam to terrorism and the Great Recession, writers have a less important role to play in a society numbed by constant chaos driven by mass communications.

As far back as the 1970s and early 1980s, Mailer indicts television for dulling brains and diminishing the ability of writers to impact thinking on the national issues of the day. As a result, he lessened his attack on his contemporaries to a degree, blaming their general lack of "greatness" on the era, despite being "highly accomplished and skillful and talented and artful." Even a Hemingway-esque stylist, Mailer explains, "wouldn't move people as profoundly—their senses are too dulled by TV and their higher senses are too diverted by film." He then claims that if he were young in the early 1980s, he would choose writing or directing films over being a novelist (Lennon 295). These kinds of questions plagued Mailer and Updike for decades.

Mailer, in fact, declared his hopelessness, saying, "the things I've stood for have been roundly defeated . . . The profound novel will be a curiosity, a

long cry away from what great writing once offered" (*Spooky Art* 62). In battling this wholesale move away from literature, today's scholars, readers, and enthusiasts might adopt a cultist's mentality: celebrate one's intense love and devotion to the novel or novelist and search diligently for converts. There is much to learn from the experiences of Mailer and Updike in this quest. Doors may be slammed in one's face, but courage cannot waver.

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