LITERATURE AS LIFE; LIFE AS LITERATURE: MAILER'S EXISTENTIAL SHOUT OF DEFIANCE IN *AN AMERICAN DREAM*

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I WOULD SUBMIT THAT MAILER MATTERS BECAUSE HIS WORKS AT THEIR BEST ARE positively life changing. Mailer has changed my life for the better, and I firmly believe he has changed many more by the exultant shout of existential defiance that informs virtually all of his work after *The Naked and the Dead* (1948). Following the clearly Naturalistic bias of this first work, the themes of existentialism dominate his work. The clearest example of this is in *An American Dream* (1965). I have lived and worked with *Dream* virtually since its publication almost fifty years ago, and in the process have forged a highly personal relationship with the book.

A PARADIGM

As you will see, the premise of this piece is fairly simple. As we know if we have been paying attention, life is not. Far from it.

The title says it all: for most of my life in reading, writing, and teaching literature, I have lived with the assurance that I am also *living* literature. The books that form the central core of my aesthetic vision have also been those that inform my life ethic, encouraging and enabling me by their example to make meaningful existential choices, to flesh them out in my actions, and to live with the consequences.

It is a more recent recognition, filling my mind with a gathering certainty over past decades, that my life–its adventures, triumphs and travails, actions

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and reactions–has invariably changed my perceptions of the books I have lived with as companions and friends for all these years. In other words, from *Hamlet* to *The Great Gatsby*, *A Farewell to Arms, Sometimes a Great Notion* and *An American Dream*, the books have changed in my perception of them from age twenty to thirty to forty and beyond, while the actual texts have remained the same.

With my own life in literature and action as my obvious paradigm, I trace and illuminate this healthy symbiotic relationship between the instinctive life of a pulsing procreative animal and the carefully examined life of a creative, sentient mind.

This is the beginning of a great adventure.

My first example comes, paradoxically, from the end of *Dream*, when Cherry's death leaves Rojack bereft of the great redemptive love he has found. From 1996 on, when students have hazarded the specious belief that Rojack (as Kate Millet also claims) "get[s] away with murder" (Millet 33) and by implication, escapes unscathed, I have responded that it may be harder to be the survivor. How do I know this?

Two weeks after I began teaching my Hemingway course in January of 1996, my daughter Leslie died. I returned to work the day after the funeral. My students were nervous as to how to respond to me, so I reassured them, telling them that it was they who would save me. I thanked those who had attended the wake or the funeral, those who had written or otherwise expressed condolences, and those who had just thought about or prayed for us. I told them that we'd find many answers in the literature we studied together, with the possible exception of "What's it all about, Alfie?"

As the days wore on, I found myself again adrenalized by teaching. I could even crack jokes. But every day, leaving the university energized and upbeat, I got only a block or so away before I had to pull my Jeep over and break down in wracking sobs before pulling myself together and driving home.

Shortly thereafter, we reached *A Farewell to Arms* on the syllabus. One night, I awoke at 3:00 AM as usual and decided to finish my rereading of the novel. I knew the ending far too well, and figured that this would be the last time I could stand to experience Frederick Henry's farewell to the dead Catherine Barkley. But I found that I was able to read the scene without losing control of myself.

When I got to the very end, I read again Hemingway's statement: "But after I had got them out and shut the door and turned off the light it wasn't

any good. It was like saying good-bye to a statue. After a while I went out and left the hospital and walked back to the hotel in the rain" (Hemingway 332). I realized that by my experience Hemingway was wrong. When I said goodbye to Leslie, she had just been pronounced dead. Her blue eyes were open and bright, not glazed, and when I kissed her cheek it was warm. I sensed her soul hovering above us, not yet departed. I kissed her, talked to her, and sent a hello to my dead mother and brother.

So I learned two things about literature and life that night while reading. First, an author's experience or imagination of it can be wrong, or at least different from the reader's. Second, a book changes as the reader changes. You can take down your old, tattered copy of a book you've read many times before, and when you reread it, it's a different book if you're different. The typo on page 87 is still there, the familiar words, the coffee stain on page 126. But the book is different for *you*, and that's the important thing.

So take this, if you will, as a paradigm of the shifting, dynamic relationship between author and reader, text and experience, literature and life.

If Mikey Lovett of *Barbary Shore* (1951) and Sergius O'Shaugnessy of *The Deer Park* (1955) represent interim stages of development toward the full-blown existentialist realized in Stephen Richards Rojack, the prescription for Mailer's peculiarly American version of this philosophy is clearly set forth in "The White Negro" (1957). In both "The White Negro" and *An American Dream,* Mailer demonstrates artistic courage in his choice of literary framework for respectively defining and fleshing out his vision of American existentialism. To call these two works controversial would be a dramatic understatement. Upon their publication they caused a hue and cry of outrage throughout much of the intellectual community among many readers who should have been perceptive enough to see beneath their lurid surface to the fervent moral lesson within.

If, as I believe, Rojack is intended to be seen as a mid-century American Everyman, he represents what at the beginning of the novel was best in the American character during and immediately after World War II, what has been lost through moral sloth and compromise, and what can be regained through embracing the values of "The White Negro." In the course of doing so, Rojack rejects and purges the spurious values of a corrupt American society and embraces the strengths of blacks and women as represented by Shago Martin and Cherry Melanie. This journey takes him from the verge

of madness, damnation and death to sanity, salvation and a new life. And, always, I accompany him on this modern *Pilgrim's Progress*.

While *Dream* proceeds on a literal level in a real, if infernal, New York City, it is like *Pilgrim's Progress* in the allegorical level which its characters and situations represent. When Rojack kills the four German machine-gunners in the opening chapter and becomes a hero and a Congressman (double-dating with John F. Kennedy, no less) he represents the strength and forward-looking vitality and hope that characterized the American people at their best immediately after the end of World War Two. During the intervening twenty years between his act of heroism and the action of the rest of the novel, Rojack, like an archetypal American, has imprudently squandered and slothfully surrendered many of his values and virtues. Although he has found some nominal success as an intellectual figure, marginal socialite and television personality, he is near the end of his psychic rope. Unable to produce a long-planned and neglected major book, deeply in debt and estranged from his wife Deborah, Rojack has lost his self-respect and is on the verge of despair. Of his dependence on Deborah, he tells the reader, "Probably I did not have the strength to stand alone" (*Dream* 18).

In January 1964, aged 23, I read this first chapter, serialized in *Esquire*. As on the night of Rojack's greatest valor, an eerily portentous full moon oversees the night when he feels a powerful compulsion to suicide, then resists it only to visit Deborah and, after a horrific exchange of insults and physical blows, strangles her. For the first time of many I came up against the unequivocal conclusion: "She was dead, indeed she was dead" (32). I was shaken, disbelieving. Here was something entirely different.

As I later came to realize, the act of murder and the heavenly city he glimpses during it cut Rojack loose from societal strictures and self-destructive habits and send him on a pilgrimage to his own heavenly city: a true American dream of the existential freedom to define himself. The steps along this path of tests and trepidation are marked by confrontations with characters who are as real as those in a history book and simultaneously as rife with allegorical significance as those of John Bunyan.

The notorious passage of infernal fornication with Deborah's maid Ruta introduces a carefully articulated polarity between good and evil, God and Satan, vagina and anus. If it has become commonplace to remark on the clearly Manichaean vision represented by this passage, this novel, and the body of Mailer's work that follows it, that makes it no less true. I know it

solves my problem, as it did Mailer's, of reconciling a benign deity with the evil that seems to thrive in this world. As Mailer believes, God *is* all good, but not all-powerful: He or She is locked instead in a battle with Satan over the hearts and souls of men and women. Our choices for good or evil strengthen one or the other. This is what I've signed up for; I'm a volunteer, not a draftee.

As I have written elsewhere, Rojack's progress from damnation to salvation is marked by the progressively more difficult confrontations with Ruta, Romeo Romalazzo, and Roberts. The similarity of their names to Rojack suggests that they represent aspects of his cowardice and compromise that he must purge to move forward. The Romeo passage is particularly harrowing, because Rojack risks a brutal beating at his hands.

One day when I was twenty-five, a Ph.D. candidate at Ohio University, I saw a couple of guys with their dates walking down Fraternity Row wearing Nazi uniforms and swastikas. I stopped my car in the middle of the street, left the doors open, and approached them, accompanied by my buddy Tony Piccione.

I explained that I was perturbed by their uniforms and emblems, and they laughingly explained that it was all a big joke for a fraternity costume party, pointing to the fraternity house festooned with an enormous Nazi flag, out of which a few dozen uniformed brothers poured, including the Master, who was introduced as The Fuhrer. So, you see, it was just a joke.

> "I'm Jewish," I said.
> "So am I," said Anthony Piccione.
> "Take off the swastikas."

It was again explained that this was a costume, a party, a joke. Suddenly, I understood what happens to Rojack in the Shago Martin confrontation. I really, truly, saw red. My vision was full of blood. The street was red, the house, the people.

> "Take off the swastikas or I'll break both your arms."
> They removed them.
> Sometimes intellection and articulacy don't work in this world.
> Sometimes you can't play the odds. They don't matter.

The turning point of this symmetrically structured novel lies at its center, when Rojack commits himself to a procreative heterosexual love with Cherry and begins to internalize positive qualities rather than purge weaknesses. The Cherry passage completes the sexual nexus that links Barney Oswald Kelly and Rojack, for each has been carnally linked to the same three women: Deborah, Ruta and Cherry. This is echoed by Mailer's comments on James Baldwin's *Another Country* (1963) in *Cannibals and Christians* (1966):

> There is a chain of fornication which is all but complete. . . . With the exception of Rufus Scott, who does not go to bed with his sister, everybody else in the book is connected by their skin to another character. . . . All the sex in the book is displaced, whites with blacks, men with men, women with homosexuals; the sex is funky to suffocation, rich but claustrophobic, sensual but airless. Baldwin understands the existential abyss of love . . . one no longer just falls in love–one has to take a brave leap over the wall of one's impacted rage and cowardice. And nobody makes it, not quite. . . . They cannot find the juice to break out of their hatred into the other country of love. (*Cannibals* 114)

In *An American Dream,* Mailer presents a series of characters as promiscuously connected to one another as those who people Baldwin's book. But while the sexual world of Mailer's characters is as dark as that in *Another Country*, it is finally in the realm of sexual love that Mailer presents his statement of hope for salvation: Rojack and Cherry give one another their symbolic virginity in this new beginning, because they are ultimately able to take the "brave leap over the wall of . . . impacted rage and cowardice." I leave it to my reader to determine whether he or she has similarly succeeded in this quest. I know whether I have.

The existential and religious choice Rojack makes here is unmistakably described in a lyrical passage:

> 'Do not ask,' said the voice, 'choose now!' and some continent of dread speared wide in me, rising like a dragon, as if I knew the choice were real, and in a lift of terror I opened my eyes and her face was beautiful beneath me in that rainy morning, her eyes were golden with light, and she said, 'Ah, honey, sure,' and I said

> sure to the voice in me, and felt love fly in like some great winged bird, some beating of wings at my back, and felt her will dissolve into tears, and some great deep sorrow like roses drowned in the salt of the sea came flooding from her womb and washed into me like a sweet honey of balm for all the bitter sores of my soul and for the first time in my life without passing through fire or straining the stones of my will, I came up from my body rather than down from my mind, I could not stop, some shield broke in me, bliss, and the honey she had given me I could only give back, all sweets to her womb, all come in her cunt. (*Dream* 128)

To me, this deeply evocative and emotionally true passage, neither sentimental nor romantic, is a true reflection of the sacrifices and rewards of such commitment. I find in it a model for my own life, particularly when Rojack muses upon the lessons he has learned about love: " . . . love was not a gift but a vow. . . one could find it anywhere. It was just that you could never keep it. Not unless you were ready to die for it."(*Dream* 156). And, "No, if one wished to be a lover, one could not find one's sanity in another. That was the iron law of romance: one took the vow to be brave" (191).

Another model lies in the Shago Martin passage, in which Rojack bests his rival and internalizes his strengths of courage and mercy, becoming a white Negro:

> In such places as Greenwich Village, a menage-a-trois was completed–the bohemian and the juvenile delinquent came face-to-face with the Negro, and the hipster was a fact in American life. If marijuana was the wedding ring, the child was the language of Hip . . . (*Advertisements* 340)

And this passage unfailingly throws me back to the years I lived in the Village during the 1960s, where I first read *An American Dream* and took its lessons to heart.

Carrying Shago's umbrella, the totemic vessel of the Negro's strengths, Rojack proceeds to his most difficult confrontation, that with Barney Oswald Kelly. The umbrella, at first obviously phallic and sword-like, becomes (when Rojack opens it for protection against a light rain) womb and shield. The confrontation with the goatlike Kelly, with its infernal sexual temptations and

redemptive parapet-walking terror, completes Rojack's repudiation of Satan and arrival at the heavenly city. He has bearded the devil in his own lair, and like a true American existentialist, a White Negro, has learned "to live with death as an immediate danger, to divorce oneself from society, to exist without roots, to set out on that uncharted journey into the rebellious imperatives of the self" (339).

One day when I was fifty-five, I was in a gun shop, buying a case of .357 cartridges. Some guy was complaining about the morass of paperwork and FBI and State Police checks to buy a gun with his permit. I sympathized.

He continued, "And the niggers can get whatever they want without any papers."

I was armed, as I could assume he and virtually every other patron and employee was. I was big. I was trained in wrestling, karate, and the use of tactical knives and firearms. But my real weapons were my voice, my language, my presence, my ethical stance, my conviction.

I looked deep into his eyes as everyone around us looked uneasy.

> "I think," I said, "that what you meant to say was that those black Americans, and those Asian Americans, and those Caucasian Americans, and those Hispanic Americans, who have chosen Pre-Crime as their college major, and Crime as their livelihood, can buy all the guns they want for a hundred bucks each out of the trunk of some guy's car in an alley in Hartford."

He looked away. "Yeah, like you said."

Everyone else looked relieved. But nobody else said anything.

After Shago's death, and the consequent death of Cherry, Rojack has little to hold him in New York. The legacy of white magic left him as promised by Cherry enables him to win a final victory at the gambling tables of Las Vegas, the capital of Kelly's infernal influence in America. He has come further than Red Valsen, Mikey Lovett, and Sergius O'Shaugnessy, and in his new freedom looks ahead to a more profound American dream of individual freedom in *The Armies of the Night* (1968) and a more forceful existentialism in such later works as *Ancient Evenings* (1983) and *Harlot's Ghost* (1991).

Thus, Mailer matters because at his best, as in *An American Dream*, he presents, even prescribes, a metaphorical lesson in how to repudiate the false

American dream of materialism and position, and instead to forge ahead in the true American (and human) dream of courage and self-determination.

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