MAILER'S MODERN MYTH: REEXAMINING VIOLENCE AND MASCULINITY IN *AN AMERICAN DREAM*

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> "Being a man is the continuing battle of one's life, and one loses a bit of manhood with every stale compromise to the authority of any power which one does not believe."
>
> —Norman Mailer, *Advertisements for Myself*

> "One has to look in the eye of violence to see its meaning."
>
> —Norman Mailer, 1967 Interview for *Newsday*

In the 1973 Woody Allen film *Sleeper,* Miles Monroe (played by Allen) wakes up 200 years in the future to discover he has been cryogenically frozen. When asked to identify a number of photographs that have been stored in a time capsule with him, Monroe examines one image and says, "That's a photograph of Norman Mailer. He was a very great writer. He donated his ego to the Harvard Medical School for study." Allen's humorous assessment of Mailer is perhaps a prime example of the way in which Mailer's work has so frequently been discussed in the same breath as his public persona. In fact, though Mailer was still writing and publishing up to his death in 2007, to many readers he remains frozen in time as that controversial public figure of the 1960s and 1970s, remembered for the publicized drama surrounding his

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personal life and the battles he waged with his contemporaries, the most notorious of which often involved his engagement with Second Wave Feminism. Indeed, an impulse similar to that which led Judith Fetterley, Kate Millett, and others to criticize Mailer's gender politics over forty years ago still drives some current readers to excoriate both the man and his work together and to look back on his legacy as violently misogynistic. In 2007, for example, almost immediately after Mailer's death, Joan Smith noted in *The Guardian* that "Mailer hated authority, homosexuality, women and almost certainly himself, producing fiction and essays that would be comically bad if they did not display addictions to violence and abusive sex." In a 2009 article in *Commentary,* Algis Valiunas argued that "Mailer could not shut up about the psychic benefits of wife-killing" (72) and that "even his best works were shot through with adolescent fatuities, while the worst of his words and deeds were stupid and vicious without bottom" (75).

Assessments such as these cling to both Mailer and his writing, and often serve to mistakenly suggest that his work does not merit serious attention, specifically within the field of Gender Studies. I have been asked on numerous occasions why I, a woman, am so interested in studying Mailer and his gender politics. My answer to this question is that Mailer's fiction and nonfiction—particularly that published between the mid fifties and early seventies—reveals some of the most frustrating but also the most fascinating representations of gender in contemporary American fiction. This assessment is especially true of Mailer's rendering of masculine identity, which is more often than not accompanied by episodes of violence. Though the idea of a violent masculine ethic as presented in Mailer's work is controversial, the embedded ambivalences and complexities surrounding the relationship between violence and gender in Mailer's fiction often go unrecognized.[1] What I aim to illuminate here are that the ways in which Mailer himself interrogates violence in his own work, exploring its nuances and consequences nearly as often as he extols it as an essential aspect of masculinity.[2]

Mailer engages with themes of masculinity and violence in a number of his works, but *An American Dream*, Mailer's self proclaimed "modern myth," demonstrates perhaps most explicitly the connections between his oft-misunderstood philosophies of violence and masculinity, and thus serves as an ideal place in which to locate a discussion of these themes ("Mailer on *AAD*"

102).[3] The nuanced distinction between destructive and creative violence comprise a central theme of the novel and as a result, from the time of the novel's publication, many readers and critics have found it difficult to come to grips with the unsettling events of the novel and its morally ambiguous anti-hero, consequently overlooking the novel's complexities in favor of a denunciation of its violence.[4] Over the years, surprisingly few scholars have embarked upon an in-depth critical study of the violence that pervades the novel and, aside from a few notable exceptions, most recent studies have tended toward a reiteration of some of the more reductive criticisms of the novel's violence as either wholly misogynistic, unpunished within the narrative, or unquestioned by Mailer himself.[5] While it is important to question the ethical nature of violence in *An American Dream* to a point, I believe that it is also important to consider this violence as a literary device that facilitates an analysis of Mailer's philosophies surrounding existential freedoms, social oppressions, and gendered relationships. While I would argue that the representation of violence in the novel can be problematic in that it often reasserts the very oppressions Mailer seeks to overturn, this consequence does not translate to an indiscriminate glorification of a violent masculine ethic or a triumph of "the psychic benefits of wife killing." More importantly, the repercussions of violence are not lost on Mailer himself, as is evident in the acknowledged consequences of associating violence with a liberated masculinity, which are embedded in the narrative itself.

The intersection of violence and masculinity in *An American Dream* is in large part founded on Mailer's own beliefs about violence, a key component of his existential philosophy from the very earliest stages of his writing career.[6] Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Mailer continued to revise and rearticulate his evolving views on the role of violence as a marker of both masculine power and individual freedom. For example, in an interview with Mailer for *The Realist* in 1962, Paul Krassner notes that in *The Naked and the Dead* there exists "a theme about the futility of violence on a grand scale," whereas in "The White Negro" (Mailer's infamous 1957 essay that lays out an extensive theory of liberatory violence) there is "almost a justification of violence, at least on a personal level." When asked to account for this inconsistency, Mailer replies:

> The ideas I had about violence changed 180 degrees over those years. Beneath the ideology in *The Naked and the Dead* was an

> obsession with violence. The characters for whom I had the most secret admiration, like Croft, were violent people. Ideologically, intellectually, I did disapprove of violence, though I didn't at the time of 'The White Negro.' But what I still disapprove of is *inhuman* violence—violence which is on a large scale and abstract. I disapprove of bombing a city. I disapprove of the kind of man who will derive aesthetic satisfaction from the fact that an Ethiopian village looks like a red rose at the moment the bombs are exploding. (*PP* 136)

Thus, while Mailer clearly believes in the power of violence, he also sees the damage that might be wielded by such violence and power when it is adopted as a social controlling mechanism, as evidenced by his distinction between "human" and "inhuman" violence. Still, what his remarks above also suggest is that *individual* violence has almost always been a characteristic that he has admired and even advocated, believing that it allows one to move outside of the totalitarian structure of society.[7] In terms of the masculine crisis felt by characters like Rojack in *An American Dream,* Mailer also reveals an admiration for individual violence by fashioning it as a badge of masculine honor or courage, and in some cases, a source of creative energy.[8]

On one hand, in framing violence this way, Mailer tends to unwittingly perpetuate what Hannah Arendt has referred to as the "instinct of domination" inevitably tied up in violence (36). That is, the violent episodes in Mailer's fiction demonstrate that though he attempts to construct an alternative manhood outside of the oppressive society he perceives, he largely continues to participate in the violence of that very society. Because his definition of masculine power makes physical force and a willingness to take physical risks as its dominant characteristics, this image in turn relies on the oppression and exclusion of others (women and black men in *An American Dream*) as its primary mode of expression, and in effect re-submerges the "submerged classes" and individuals that Mailer seeks to liberate (*PP* 345). In this way, one of the flaws with Mailer's fashioning of a masculine ethic defined by characteristics of an existential and violent outlaw is that while the initial intention behind the representation of such a figure might be liberatory and equalizing, the violent means by which he achieves this threatens instead to reestablish oppressive racial and gendered stereotypes. At the same time, however, these effects must be reconciled in some way with the fact

that these are the very kinds of assumptions and stereotypes that Mailer himself was initially attempting to eradicate. As Mailer stated forthrightly in a column for the *Village Voice* in 1956, "My passion . . . is to destroy stereotypes, categories, and labels" (*Advertisements* 310). Moreover, as he explained in *Dissent* in 1958, the "real desire" of the masculine figure he introduces in "The White Negro" is to make a better world, one in which individual violence would "still spare us the collective violence of rational totalitarian liquidations" and "open the possibility of working with that human creativity which is violence's opposite" (363). Thus, Mailer leaves us with a series of contradictions that raise important questions about the consequences of individual violence that is both liberating and oppressive.

An American Dream encompasses this paradoxical violence that Mailer envisions. The novel traces the journey of Stephen Rojack—war hero, professor of existential philosophy, commercially successful author, and well-known television personality —as he finds himself, as he says, at "the end of a very long street," having decided that he is "finally a failure" (8). As the narrative unfolds, Rojack embarks on an alcohol-soaked, sleepless, violent, and sex-filled bender, his behavior calling to mind the psychopathic hipster triumphed by Mailer in "The White Negro." Like that figure, Rojack acts on a desire for total freedom from the decaying, cancerous society he envisions around him, feeling detached from the world he sees as oppressive to his individual freedom and the development of his masculine identity. For Rojack, violence functions as a cleansing and cathartic force, its use justified by its potential liberating end. Early on, it also becomes evident that tied up in this concept of violence are Rojack's conflicting perceptions of what it means to be a man; in fact, he seems able to discuss manhood *only* through the language of violence. Though he acknowledges that there "is something manly about containing your rage," murder "offers the promise of vast relief" and "exhilaration" (8). Thus, to be "manly" *inside* society, according to Rojack, is to repress one's instincts toward violence; to be manly *outside* of society is to embrace these instincts. In either case, violence becomes the figure around which masculinity is fashioned, but it is the latter that Rojack wants to embody: that is, he wants to fashion a masculine identity founded on relief as opposed to restraint.[9] Yet the challenge for Mailer, as revealed by some of the most controversial moments in the novel, is to prevent the violence he creates as a necessary condition of Rojack's freedom from becoming purely destructive.

Rojack's relationship with his wife Deborah, who has helped him fashion his current life of relative success and privilege but who as a result also represents one of the many external threats to his manhood, lies at the center of his existential crisis and his related reliance on violence as a tool for liberation. Though Rojack looks back on the early years of their marriage with nostalgia, remembering Deborah's love for him as something that imbues him with "vitality," he also fears his own reliance on her; when they separate, for example, Rojack admits, "all of my substance fell out of me" (18). As a reaction to this, and in a move indicative of his attitude toward women throughout the novel, Rojack attributes Deborah's influence to a feminine mysticism that would supposedly afford her the ability to "lay a curse" on him should she choose to do so (22). This, coupled with his depiction of her as a "Great Bitch" who "delivers extermination to any bucko brave enough to take carnal knowledge of her" appears to be Rojack's indication that he would be somehow justified in defending himself against her cruelties; it is an attempt to prematurely excuse his murder of her (9). Living with Deborah, for example, Rojack admits he was "murderous," but also acknowledges that Deborah herself "was not incapable of murdering" him, and in reaction to this, Rojack murders Deborah within the first thirty pages of the novel (9).

While it has opened up Mailer's text to accusations of misogyny, this depiction of Deborah also serves to bring to light the fact that Rojack's own sense of compromised masculinity and his use of violence is not entirely a result of his fear of women (though that comes into play here), but also a result of his reliance on the hierarchical and limiting class structures of society that seem to dictate the status of his manhood. That is, his sense of inferiority in the face of his wife is augmented by his awareness that his success has largely been a result of her social connections. "She had been my entry into the big league," he explains. "I had loved her with the fury of my ego, that way I loved her still, but I loved her the way a drum majorette loved the power of the band for the swell it gave to each little strut" (17). His love for her, as he himself realizes, is based on her ability to build him up, to support him, and to feed his ego by introducing him into the upper echelons of society—and it is society that Rojack feels to be his true enemy. In other words, Mailer's aim here is not to fashion a masculine hero whose primary aim is to exert control over Deborah—or over women in general—but one

whose aim is to free himself from the socially imposed obligation to abide by this gender hierarchy at all.

The brief description of Deborah's murder is saturated with details that lay the foundation for Mailer's representation of a liberating power of violence that emphasizes catharsis and rebirth, wherein a new beginning outside of the previous confines of his life seems possible. Rojack's own reflections as he kills Deborah reference a transcendent "crossing over" and suggest an emergence into a new and better existence. As he strangles Deborah, he feels hatred pass from him in "wave after wave," and is driven to continue by the promise of some beauty—images of "jeweled cities" and a "tropical dusk"—that exist beyond this door and seem to represent recompense for his actions upon their completion. This vision of a remunerative paradise is supplemented by Rojak's sense that all of his hatred and illness depart upon his passage through the door—in fact, the language suggests that Rojak is describing his own death experience. This metaphorical death is followed closely by his metaphorical rebirth, for after he commits the murder, he feels that he sees the world with new eyes; every detail is fascinating, clear, and exhilarating. By subverting the horrific detail and foregrounding the euphoric sensations of his protagonist, Mailer treats the act of murder as a triumph over decay and corruption, imbuing Rojack with the "faith in the creative possibilities of the human being to envisage acts of violence as the catharsis which prepares growth"—evocative of the "psychopathic hipster" who murders "out of the necessity to purge his violence, for if he cannot empty his hatred then he cannot love" (*Advertisements* 355, 347).

The fact that this comes not only at the expense of Deborah's freedom but her life, of course, makes this justification of violence in the name of freedom difficult to digest: in stark, visceral and grotesque detail and in crisp, straightforward prose, Mailer recounts the way Rojack "struck her a blow on the back of the neck, a dead cold chop which dropped her to a knee, and then hooked an arm about her head and put a pressure on her throat" (30). The aftermath, despite its emphasis on transcendence, is equally disconcerting, since Rojack appears to resume his routine without difficulty or guilt; everything he does is presented as mundane in the face of what seems a so decidedly abnormal and horrifying act. Yet this residue, I would argue, is precisely the effect that Mailer wants to create. In other words, Mailer does not diminish the horrifying nature of murder itself; in fact, the juxtaposition between the systematic details of Deborah's murder and Rojack's spiritual

rebirth is *meant* to be unsettling, and we are not meant to see violence as purely triumphant.

Moreover, while Rojack is not brought to justice under the law, his actions do not go unquestioned or uncriticized within the construct of the narrative. After the murder, for example, Rojack has not achieved the freedom he seeks—either from Deborah or his attachments to society—a fact that is exhibited but yet perhaps also buried in another disturbing moment in the aftermath of the murder. When Rojack finally returns to Deborah's body to consider his plan of action, he finds himself overcome with rage again, feeling "an impulse to go up to her and kick her ribs, grind my heel on her nose, drive the point of my shoe into her temple and kill her again, kill her good this time, kill her right" (50). This violent desire is also accompanied by a strange cannibalistic fantasy in which he places Deborah's body in the bathtub to "sup on [her] flesh," for in this way he feels he might be able to "digest [his] wife's curse before it could form" (50). Such an image suggests that even in her death Deborah seems to exert an influence over Rojack, diminishing his power and instilling fear within him, as if to prove his impulse toward masculine dominance is destined to be unsuccessful. Tied to gendered stereotypes that have been instilled within him by society, Rojack maintains his belief in a mystical power that Deborah might be able to wield over him from the grave and is therefore not, in fact, entirely free from his gendered anxiety. Moreover, as Rojack begins to envision the potential consequences of his actions, he realizes that his violent method of freeing himself of his wife may actually be his undoing and that he has not been truly freed.

A similar apprehension also manifests itself within his relationship with Cherry Melanie, a romance that is meant to be indicative of Rojack's ability to love after purging his hatred through violence. With Cherry, as with Deborah, Rojack reveals an anxiety that arises from the threat of female power with which he is confronted. Rojack has confessed that he "had come to the conclusion a long time ago that all women were killers" (82) and is therefore already on the defensive when he meets Cherry, prematurely reacting to an imagined threat of her feminine violence or evil mysticism. As Rojack watches Cherry sing in a nightclub on the day they meet, he surmises in a drunken haze that "women must murder us unless we possess them altogether," and admits to having a "fear" of Cherry that can only be resolved by his attempt to possess her; immediately thereafter, he imagines himself

shooting an arrow into her womb (100). Initially, this imagined violence seems to clearly embody Rojack's patriarchal aim to establish control over Cherry, by way of his ability to inflict damage to the source of Cherry's own (biologically) creative power. Yet Mailer also imbues Rojack with ambivalence about this action. Soon after this illusory act of violence, for example, Rojack pictures himself "draining poison from the wound" he had imaginatively inflicted, after which he himself becomes sick, as though he is purging the violence from the both of them (101). Thus, immediately after Rojack envisions exacting violence upon Cherry, he not only assumes responsibility for it, but imposes it onto himself. These contradictory impulses to both harm Cherry and to save her reflect Rojack's similarly conflicted desire to love Cherry even as he feels threatened by her. "Let me love that girl, and become a father, and try to be a good man, and do some decent work" Rojack prays at one point (162). And indeed, though she cannot offer the justification for violence that he seeks, and though Rojack's prayers here are not quite answered, Cherry will ultimately offer Rojack at least the chance, in his mind, for redemption. That he will squander this chance through another act of violence, however, further illuminates Mailer's recognition of the repercussions of Rojack's aggressive assertion of power.

Rojack's interaction with Shago Martin, a well-known jazz artist and Cherry's ex-boyfriend, provides the scene for this violence, offering yet another episode within which Mailer is able to both endorse and question violent masculine empowerment. Shago immediately poses a threat to Rojack not only because he is competition for Cherry, but also because he represents the powerful and sexually potent male "other" who, in his powerful evocation of the figure depicted in "The White Negro," challenges Rojack's sense of manhood. While the physical fight that ensues demonstrates a shared masculine anxiety between the two men grounded in a reciprocity of fear and desire, it also serves as a means for Rojack to attempt to appropriate those qualities he feels he is lacking by overcoming Shago with physical force. And indeed, before Rojack throws Shago down the stairs in his final triumphant move of the fight, he notes that "violence seemed to shake himself free from [Shago] every time I smashed him back to the floor and shake itself into me" (193). As with his murder of Deborah and his metaphorical wounding of Cherry, Rojack imagines that he can take another's power into himself through his own act of violence.[10] In this way, by violently seeking to acquire the hypermasculine characteristics he asso-

ciates with Shago's blackness, Rojack essentially reasserts a hierarchy of masculinities.

Mailer's depiction of Shago, however, not only reaffirms but also revises Rojack's perceptions of blackness as a model of hyper-masculinity, prompting Rojack to briefly reconsider his own mythologizing of race and gender. While the scene reasserts certain racialized stereotypes of gender, it also points to a mutual identification between Rojack and Shago. In his analysis of this episode, Barry Leeds has argued that "the strength derived from Shago (as he represents the best virtues and strengths of his people) is necessary to Rojack for victory" (148). While I would agree that Rojack perceives the violence as necessary here, and that he believes in the transference of power, the term "victory" is in itself questionable. Certainly, this confrontation is symbolic of Rojack's desire to replace Shago by appropriating his masculine qualities and, physically, he wins this fight. However, after he sees Shago leave Cherry's apartment, he is suddenly overwhelmed with dread; as after the murder of Deborah, his euphoria is only temporary. "It had all gone wrong again," he says. "If I could have taken some of it back, I would have returned to that moment when I began to beat Shago to the floor and he dared me to let him go" (195). In retrospect, he also senses that his actions have done irreparable damage to his relationship with Cherry, and that because of this fight, "some flaw would continue to rot at the center" of their bond (199).

This embedded ambivalence about the intersections between violence, masculine identity, and liberation is also present in Rojack's climactic meeting with Barney Oswald Kelly, Deborah's father. After Kelly confesses to Rojack that he had been involved with Cherry, Rojack prepares to fight—but this time, balks at his own potential use of violence and instead decides that a real test of his masculine courage would be to walk around the parapet of Kelly's building (which is, in fact, something Mailer himself did in his own life as a test of his courage). This is the third time Rojack will have attempted this feat in the novel, yet this moment is marked by his belief that if he should successfully complete a trip around the walls of the tower, he will be released from the guilt of murdering Deborah and injuring Shago, and will thus be free to embark on a new life with Cherry.

Yet Rojack cannot be absolved from this guilt: in a tragic twist, he returns to Harlem after circling the parapet to discover that Cherry is dying, fatally beaten by a member of Shago's gang—a conclusion that punctuates the paradoxical nature of violence that has pervaded the novel. In one sense,

Cherry's death does serve to release Rojack from his last attachment to society, thus affording him the opportunity to escape; Rojack retreats to the desert and strikes out on his own, ultimately living the life of the outsider he desired, considering himself part of the "new breed" of man being fashioned in the West (269). In this way, Mailer upholds the concept of violence as a successful tool for liberation and masculine power by allowing Rojack the escape he desires, and his conclusion seems determined to justify Rojack's actions by inviting us to accept violence as an inherent characteristic of individual life and as an embedded characteristic of modern culture. Yet Mailer seems equally determined to demonstrate the ways that Rojack's quest is unsuccessful. By emphasizing that his murder of Deborah has set in motion a chain of events that have led directly to Cherry's own death, thus ruining his chance at redemptive love. Of course, the fact that Rojack survives while Deborah and Cherry must die seems cruelly unjust—but that is precisely Mailer's point. Though Rojack can escape to the desert and face no legal penalty for his violence, to a certain degree Mailer himself recognizes that the justice in—and justification for—his violence must be called into question.

As Mailer stated in an interview with Richard Wollheim in the *New Statesman* in 1961: "Violence must be violence for which full responsibility is accepted, and that's rare today. Today we have the violence of the man who won't look his victim in the face" (66). The alternating venerations and criticisms of violence in *An American Dream* highlight the way Mailer struggled to acknowledge the victims of violence within his fiction while also incorporating violence into his model for a liberated man of the future. He was not always successful, as evidenced by the various ways in which the novel seems to uphold gendered and racial hierarchies as often as it questions them. In my view, however, the contradictions and ambivalences inherent in Mailer's representations of a violent masculine ethic are themselves demonstrative of the value in continuing to interrogate the roles of gendered violence in Mailer's work. In fact, the themes present in *An American Dream* have also proved to be eerily prescient, in many ways anticipating similar gendered anxieties that pervade popular media representations of masculinity today, in which men are frequently depicted in positions of compromised masculinity that prompt them to respond with violence. Moreover, in some cases, these more recent narratives actually fail to define and question the nature of violence the way that Mailer has attempted to do throughout his

career, thus proving the importance of situating Mailer's work within an ongoing discussion of gender in contemporary American culture. "The purpose of life may be to find higher and better questions," Mailer says to Michael Lennon in *On God* (75). Part of the ambition of *An American Dream* is its attempt to ask some of these questions about the role of violence and gender in modern society; while these questions are rarely easy or even answerable, they remain relevant to study both within and beyond Mailer's canon.

NOTES

1. A recent exception to this is Warren Rosenberg's *Legacy of Rage,* which discusses Mailer's ambivalence about violence within a broader discussion of Jewish masculine identity in Mailer's work.
2. In *City of Words* Tony Tanner speaks to this dialectic in terms of Mailer's narrative style, arguing that in his fiction Mailer is perpetually negotiating between two worlds, and that his narrative voice often "calls into question its own theories" and "mocks its own metaphors and notions of magic" (370). My aim is to explore how this tension manifests itself specifically in Mailer's treatment of violence.
3. Throughout the course of this essay, I will be referring to the 1965 publication of *An American Dream* in its novel form, as opposed to the serialized version published in *Esquire.*
4. In her 1965 review entitled "A Nightmare by Norman Mailer," for example, Elizabeth Hardwick deems the novel a "literary disaster," calling it "morally foolish and intellectually empty" (145) and Stanley Edgar Hyman provided a similarly scathing review of the novel upon its publication. Donald L. Kaufmann concluded that "Mailer's theory of authentic violence finds no way for American morality to come to terms with a 'new nervous system' of a murderer" (96) and even Philip Bufithis, who ranked *An American Dream* among the finest American novels, argued that it "does not hold up well on the ethical level" (74).
5. Daniel Fuchs, for example, has recently argued that in *An American Dream,* "we have murder without consequences, crime without punishment," a statement reminiscent of Millett's accusation that Mailer allows his protagonist to get away with murder, and one that I feel does not quite do justice to Mailer's dialectical treatment of violence (309). Exceptions to this trend have been Joseph Wenke's *Mailer's America,* which provides an insightful analysis of violence in a number of Mailer's works, and Linda Patterson Miller's recent article on the novel, which argues that Mailer's purpose was "not to destroy women but to liberate them from within and to restore harmony for both men and women" (301).
6. As early as age 20, Mailer was already commenting on the necessity of violence to the construction of manhood. In "A Calculus to Heaven," a story he wrote as a senior at Harvard that was later published in *Advertisements for Myself,* one of Mailer's military heroes believes that "life and death and violent action were fundamentals, and he would find no lie there" (51).
7. "It requires a primitive passion about human nature to believe that individual acts of violence are always to be preferred to the violence of the State," Mailer says in "The White Negro"

(*Advertisements* 355). In his 1964 interview with *Twentieth Century*, Mailer also argues that individual violence is an essential response to the "extinction of possibilities," and claims that those who understand this can experience not only liberation, but revelation (*Pieces* 28).

8. The creative potential of violence was something Mailer believed in for most of his life. "If you cut all the violence out of society," Mailer told Lawrence Grobel in 2001, "you also cut out all the creativity" (439).
9. Later in his life, Mailer revised and clarified this idea, commenting on the repercussions of this philosophy. In *On God: An Uncommon Conversation,* he explains to J. Michael Lennon: "I work on the notion that there's godliness within us and diabolism as well. So to bring forth what is within you, it is necessary, very often, to send out the worst elements of yourself. Because if they stay within, they can poison you. That is much more complex than saying, 'Get it out! Act it out. Be free, man! Liberate yourself.' Because very often what comes out is so bad that it injures others, sometimes dreadfully . . . To the degree that certain ugly emotions are acted out, others are injured terribly by your freedom to do so." (67–68).
10. Laura Adams, who conducted one of the earliest studies of Mailer's work, has argued that Mailer's emphasis on the necessity of masculine courage is based on the assumption embodied by this episode, that "if one is victorious he extracts from his defeated opponent some of his force, which is then used to sustain and nurture his own life" (5).

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