THE PRESCIENCE OF MAILER'S MARXISM: SOCIALISM OR *BARBARY SHORE*?

DAVID ANSHEN

> The history of the last twenty years may be divided into two decades: a decade of economic crisis, and a decade of war and the preparations for war—
>
> I was a dog on a chain, and the radius circumscribed a world in which I was able to provide for many of my wants and most of my needs.
>
> —*Barbary Shore*

INTRODUCTION TO A NEW "TIME OF OUR TIMES"[1]

Reading the first passage above, we can see that it provides an excellent description of the first half of the last century: economic crisis followed by war and preparations for war. If we reverse the chronology to first war and war preparations followed by economic crisis, we also have an excellent description of this new century, at least so far. My point is that these lines which were descriptive of the past contain a surprising prescience and timeliness. Further we should notice that crisis, war, and relative economic stability followed by a new cycle correspond to the Marxist analysis of capitalism.

On the other hand, the second passage allows Norman Mailer to metaphorically describe how he perceived the second half of the last century, with its relative economic security that combined with a limited sense of freedom—after all, a dog on a chain may think it is free to roam, only to

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get yanked back. This second quotation articulates Norman Mailer's critique of American society contained in the majority of his writings that attempt to describe the decades in which he lived. A recurring motif in almost all of Mailer's writing has been that technological and economic abundance created new and diminished modes of a meaningful life, a position that Mailer's version of existentialism and Marxism share. Mailer consistently argued that massive corporate power and expanding consumerism corrupt the human spirit, bleed away our freedom and limit our creativity. Mailer's version of existentialism challenges these features of American society. Earlier in his career, however, Mailer explored the explanatory and revolutionary ideas of Marxism to challenge these same features. However, after *Barbary Shore* (Mailer's second novel), Marxism, for Mailer, seems largely precluded. *Barbary Shore* represents Mailer's most explicit engagement with Marxism and his only fictional expression that overtly defends Marxism. Yet, I argue that it contains real insights into the past, present and possibly the future.

Barbary Shore functions as a seminal moment when, as a thinker and writer, Mailer considers historical and political options that may again attain relevance for our times and for the foreseeable future. Because Mailer generally shifted interest away from Marxism in his later works, I also believe the novel represents a turning point where Mailer presents certain political alternatives in sharp, apocalyptic fashion, and then reaches an impasse, resulting from a sense that Marxism fails or at least proves inadequate as a philosophy of freedom to challenge the limitations that Mailer finds in society and the world. As a result of this impasse, Mailer's subsequent writing and radical stance toward modern life turned from explicit Marxism to existentialism and religious spiritualism.[2] However, Mailer always remained a rebel against the status quo. Therefore, Mailer never turned to religion in a fundamentalist Christian or New Age manner as did so many others who viewed Marxism as the "God that Failed" and claimed disenchantment as an excuse to turn inward or make peace with society. However, the dichotomy between the early Marxist Mailer and the later Mailer never really represents an absolute division. A close reading of *Barbary Shore* reveals the nature of this political barrier: the corrosive nature of Stalinism destroys the possibility for successful working-class struggle and subverts hope by diverting it into support for a totalitarian set of regimes that mask themselves in the framework of a false Marxism. *Barbary Shore* also shows how old barriers no longer stand. Today the state power of Stalinism no longer functions

as it did during the Cold War and does not represent a necessary or likely alternative for critics of capitalist society. At the same time, capitalism itself stands at an abyss and it seems that there are no easy viable roads forward for humanity: both options have failed. Authentic Marxism as conceptualized in *Barbary Shore* may gain a new hearing. In *Barbary Shore* both unattractive options offer the illusion of permanence, while today they falter. Mailer characterizes the bleak and desperate voyage of our collective history of the twentieth century implicitly even in the title *Barbary Shore*: a boat tossed in a bleak sea while the only possible shore in sight involves disaster, tragedy, and barbarism. Today, however, some passengers on the boat see beyond old barriers to a new land in the distance approaching through the mists of fog, and feel hope at the possibility that greater expansion of creativity and political options can open again.

Mailer's entire *oeuvre* concerns questions ranging from the nature of human freedom, the destructive influence of modern life on human subjectivity, the seeming loss of sensitivity and subtlety, to the loss of history and even the decline of writing. Certainly Mailer, the champion of the transformative power of good writing, would argue that large volumes of modern discussions taking place in the mass media, blogs on the Internet, and *YouTube* remain superficial, at best, and a narrowing of human intelligence, at worst.

Mailer's central issues form a totality of concerns in his writing throughout his career, but at no point was he able to escape the constraints of his time completely. The nature of the political conditions he faced and, more importantly, economic conditions, determined the ideological horizon of his output.

MAILER AND THE RIFT BETWEEN MARXISM AND EXISTENTIALISM

When discussing Norman Mailer's prodigious output, his relations to Marxism often get short shrift. This neglect undoubtedly results from several related facts. First, Marxism as a political movement seems dead or hopelessly dated, at least since the end of the Cold War with its apparent victory over the forces of communism.[3] Second, at times Mailer explicitly rejects Marxism as a worldview guiding his work and thought and equates Marxism with a variant of totalitarianism, without distinguishing between its possible liberating potentials and the Stalinist nightmare that resulted from a series of historical tragedies which get specific notice in *Barbary Shore*. Finally, Mailer

has tenaciously articulated his homespun, personal, and at times idiosyncratic, worldview comprised of a stance towards the world that embraces his own mixture of existentialism, Gnosticism, and mysticism. Mailer, despite appearances to the contrary, retains a certain strain of hope for a future that corresponds to aspects of the Marxist critique of capitalism, aspects that may become more relevant in the coming years and decades as greater numbers of the public recognize real class inequalities and enter class struggle. The tragedies of the twentieth century both recede into the past and get placed under more objective scrutiny.

The last of Mailer's writings that considers Marxism in detail is *Barbary Shore*. Rarely does his writing engage with Marxism explicitly after this ill-fated second novel. Afterwards, when Marxism receives mention, the tones ring somewhat dismissive, even if tinged with certain affection. In a discussion-interview late in Mailer's life with his son, John Buffalo Mailer, he explains:

> Karl Marx has to be one of the greatest writers who ever lived. . . . He had incredible virtues as a thinker. From my point of view, he also had his lacks. He certainly didn't understand that atheism is not a way to win the world. . . . I think the real failure of Bolshevism, then Stalinism, was clinging to the idea that religion is the opium of the masses. Organized religion may well be its own species of narcotic, but the concept that we are part of divine Creation is something else altogether. (*The Big Empty* 125–6)

The discussion of "divine creation" should not be taken as traditional theism of the Judeo-Christian legacy. As Mailer carefully explains in one of his last works, *On God*, his vision of the Creator carries traits of a flawed artist, embattled and existentially committed to projects with no omnipotence that necessarily carries the day. God seems the cosmic extension of Mailer's own will to create and intervene in an alienated and fallen world. Mailer's shift from Marxism to existential theism seems the exact opposite trajectory of Marx and Engels' movement away from left-Hegelianism toward what they considered a real movement against the existing order of things. In between their Marxism proper and their philosophic beginnings, Marx and Engels took a detour through the philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach, who articulated the view that conceptions of theism reflect the projection of a desired human existence into a personified deity as a result of the inadequacy of human life.

Mailer seems to reverse the order, beginning as an atheist and Marxist (however tentatively the understanding or commitment to Marxism), and only then projecting his conception of the world spirit into a conception of God as artist, embattled and looking like the existentialist writer, uncertain if the efforts can succeed.

Be this as it may, however, shortly thereafter in the discussion, he offers his son (and his readers) some friendly wisdom:

> The hard fact—which I would like to see develop in you, my friend, over the next ten years, [this interview was originally published in 2004, which gives us two years: DA] is a much deeper sense of social structure. It's as if we're little animals running through the machine. Occasionally we touch a switch, something starts another little machine, but we can't really alter the machine that much. Not without great study and long-term devotion plus willingness to get into the grease of the gears. (131)

This passage shows clear affinities with Marxism through seeing the "social structure" as decisive determinant and as a difficult, if not impossible, machine to alter, one that can only be changed through "study," "long term devotion," and "willingness to get into the grease of the gears," and that might mean that the machine must be broken. Nonetheless, we can take Mailer at his word when he distances himself from Marxism *per se*. His intellectual and public life suggests clearly that, after a brief flirtation with Marxism,[4] Mailer basically rejected Marxism while retaining aspects of its critique of the deadening and stultifying developments in modern society. These features of his stance take the form of a clear passion for life and committed engagement with the world in all of its sensuous and visceral elements: love and sexuality, politics, writing, sports. But his early explicit desire for political and cultural revolution, furthered by his writing, remained held in check by the sentiment expressed in his notable phrase from *Advertisements for Myself*, "The Shits are killing us" (19). Maybe, since the end of Mailer's life, something is changing and as the cliché goes, "the shit is beginning to hit the fan." If so, readers interested in Mailer's concerns, freedom and creativity, truth, and beauty, may find much embedded in the collective experience that comprises Mailer's writing and life. His prodigious output chronicles many failures and much creative and political blockage (with some of the glories

noted) of the second half of the twentieth century. If so, looking at *Barbary Shore* as loosely analogous to what Louis Althusser termed the "epistemological break," he detected between the early and late Marx, may prove useful. Althusser argues that Marx's "problematic" shifted, and this can also be said about Mailer's with the proviso that the line between the two remains porous. Indeed such a shift might serve as a starting point for a reconsideration of Mailer's entire project through the lens of a revitalized Marxism—a Marxism with new-found relevance, one that learns from the mistakes and horrors of the twentieth century.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO READ *BARBARY SHORE* TODAY?

Mailer himself speculated that different times might arrive in which his most bleak book, *Barbary Shore* and its concerns, will attain new validation:

> Yet, it could be that if my work is alive one hundred years from now, *Barbary Shore*, will be considered the richest of my first three novels for it has in it . . . a kind of insane insight into the psychic mysteries of Stalinists, secret policemen, . . . revolutionaries—it has an air which is for me the air of our time, authority and nihilism stalking one another in the orgiastic hollow of this century. (*Advertisements* 94)

On the one hand, Mailer speculates that posterity will make *Barbary Shore* attain greater significance than most readers and critics find. This logically implies that its subject matter, revolutionary Marxism and the opposing forces of Stalinism and capitalism (which are presented as converging), will become more important and may enter into contest once again. However, we should note that by the time Mailer makes his appraisal, at a distance from the book, a certain shift has subtly taken place. The alternatives posed in *Barbary Shore* are not "authority" or "revolution," much less "authority" or "nihilism," as the choices get posed above, but rather "socialism" or "capitalism"—even if they are presented tentatively and amid a great deal of pessimism. This displacement, which creates a new series of oppositions, underpins his most famous manifesto for the future, "The White Negro," the most famous essay from *Advertisements for Myself*. This influential essay stakes precisely the alternatives he saw for his own writing and

modern individuals striving for freedom. The choice becomes "authority" or "nihilism" which Mailer subsequently softened by the term "existentialism."

Nevertheless, in his judgment on *Barbary Shore* in *Advertisements* he suggests that future "centuries" will learn from the book. If so, this suggests that the logic of the authority/nihilism dichotomy will for future readers have turned out to be a temporary state of affairs, a displacement, and the capitalism/socialism contest will have returned as the real manifest content of history. Indeed, he goes further and concludes the essay/advertisement with the suggestive clue that readers interested in his writing should notice that "much of my later writing cannot be understood without a glimpse of the odd shadow and theme-maddened light *Barbary Shore* casts before it" (94). So Mailer claims the novel and the political issues at the core of it will be of importance for the future *and* that all of his later writings derive from issues at the heart of the novel. If we take Mailer as an astute judge of his work, certain implications emerge. Since the novel presents the failures of revolutionary socialism as the cause of the emptiness of modern life and restrictions on our freedom and later writings never again pose the need for socialism so starkly and openly, his statement requires consideration. We are left wondering what Mailer means by his assertion that all subsequent writing remains in the shadow of *Barbary Shore*. It appears that class struggle and revolution remain hidden, not open (to paraphrase Marx in the *Manifesto*)[5] in Mailer's subsequent writings. If so, we are dealing with some kind of barrier that stops a journey and displaces it. This explains his phrase "odd shadow" that is a darkening that obscures vision. To push the metaphor further, his writing and themes *after Barbary Shore* result from ideological shadows only illuminated through "theme maddened light." The madness becomes central in novels like *An American Dream*, where madness represents a lure, a temptation, a danger, a road to freedom, and a worldview. But, as Freud suggests, sometimes displacement and transference, combined with symptoms of abnormality, necessarily accompany the healing process. And if we wait, shadows pass, and as Freud suggests analysis reveals the repressed truth.

However, *Barbary Shore* probably remains among the least popular and least read of Mailer's novels. The reasons for its relative neglect do not require deep insight. Robert Begiebing correctly notes that "Mailer's revolutionary effort began . . . with *Barbary Shore*—a strange allegorical narrative consumed by an ideological debate that even Mailer has admitted collapses

'into a chapter of political speech'" (226). Those who have written about the novel tend, correctly, to stress that it represents Mailer's early attempt to develop a "precise position with regard to the ideological perspectives evoked in the novel" and that "[f]or better or worse, Mailer thinks thematically rather than aesthetically, without the insurance policy of a sound structure" (Leigh 84). The novel, indeed, in my view, suffers from tendentiousness and cannot be claimed as his finest writing (although some critics note the presence of strong passages and powerful moments—which I also find to be true). However, reading the novel in the light of the demise of the Soviet Union and Stalinist style communism at a moment when capitalism seems increasingly shaky, makes some of the political theory and speculations that comprise *Barbary Shore* important both for prescience about the present situation and also to understand Mailer's long literary career marked by a seeming departure from overt interest in Marxist politics. As Mailer critic Gabriel Miller argues with a good degree of validity, "In Mailer's later work" in contrast to *Barbary Shore* "spiritual/psychological vitality will become paramount, and it will be linked not to political urges but to existential ones" (Bloom, *Norman* 74). While this dichotomy seems too strong in Mailer's development (as this essay attempts to demonstrate), the degree to which Miller captures a clear turn in Mailer's writing can be explained by the logic of the novel itself. This movement in Mailer's writing cannot be taken as merely his personal response. As Perry Anderson, long-term editor of *New Left Review*, argued in his masterful survey of what has been termed "Western Marxism," a general cultural turn amongst Marxist intellectuals resulted from:

> [A]n ever increasing scission between socialist theory and working- class practice. The gulf between the two . . . was widened and fixed by the bureaucratization of the USSR and of the Comintern under Stalin. . . . The structural divorce of theory and practice . . . of this epoch precluded unitary political-intellectual work of the type that defined classical Marxism. . . . [T]he major substantive field in which method [Marxism: DA] was actually applied became aesthetics—or cultural superstructures in a broader sense. (92–3)

This description of a shift in Marxist thinking as a product of historical obstacles correlates with the shift in Mailer's writing after *Barbary Shore*.

Further, it corresponds with general trends in intellectual life; after the radicalism of the first half of the twentieth century, Marxist challenges to the capitalist system seemed less appealing due to the awareness of Stalinist atrocities and the sense among those who maintained Marxist convictions that they had to pick a camp among two seemingly invulnerable behemoths, the Soviet Union or the United States. Indeed the novel prefigures Mailer's later stance and expresses the rupture in critical thought that made Marxism virtually unthinkable for most serious intellectuals and writers unwilling to turn a blind eye to the horrors of Stalinism. For many, commitment to a socialist future became, at best, a theoretical practice of cultural critique, and Mailer dramatizes in *Barbary Shore* why he and others could only maintain a tenuous connection to Marxism through the very logic of the novel and the ideas it contains.

The novel's pessimism about history and likely future developments finds expression, initially, in the novel's formal structure. The novel presents a protagonist, Mikey Lovett, blocked from his own personal history due to a never-explained amnesia (although there are frequent hints of political trauma). Virtually all the action takes place in the boarding house in which Lovett rents a room, among a small motley group of characters including McLeod (a former committed Stalinist henchman oscillating between commitment to his past Marxism, to a kind of Trotskyist critique of the Soviet Union, and a willingness to serve the US government), Hollingsworth (some kind of government informer—the precise agency he serves remains unclear), and two strange women who play little role except as observers and love interests, and the narrator and witness, Lovett. Lovett remains probably the least individuated of Mailer's major characters (and has less distinct personality than, for example, Lee Harvey Oswald in *Oswald's Tale*, or even minor characters in other works such as Nelson Rockefeller in *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*). The reasons for Lovett's lack of specific individuality concern his symbolic role in the novel—a man with no past, observing debates and speeches about the past and considering the meaning of revolutionary history. Lovett remains a blank slate, an impersonal judge who arbitrates between views and ultimately sides with a revolutionary Marxist commitment to the future for no apparent reason. The form his Marxism takes resembles an existentialist plunge—a radical choice for freedom with little grounding in social conditions.

It appears fair to assert that Lovett functions as a stand-in for the reader:

encouraged to act in a revolutionary manner he simultaneously finds action difficult in a world situation shaped by a violent dislocation from the revolutionary dreams and ambitions of the twenties and thirties that seem to have expired. Indeed, Lovett also seems to represent the world-historic consciousness, which like him is in a state of passivity and forgetfulness. Therefore his amnesia serves as historical amnesia.

As a novel of ideas, most of the action involves dialogue amongst the characters as Hollingsworth tries to retrieve some obscure object that McLeod presumably possesses, an object that, if turned over, will seemingly signify the demise of McLeod's revolutionary soul and impact the Cold War. But almost all of the action takes place in the boarding house with little sense of the outside world as a force that has any effect upon the characters or the issues at stake.

We should consider a point made in a contemporary review of the book at the time it was written by James P. Cannon, the founder of American Trotskyism and a lifelong revolutionary who was very familiar with the politics and theory of Marxism, Stalinism, and Trotskyism, and therefore the issues of the novel. Cannon first expresses the deep and profound impression Mailer's famous work, *The Naked and the Dead*, made on him as the first work of a "writer . . . with profound insight into the heart of present-day man and his contradiction . . . " and that he expected "the author, once he got the war out of his system, would courageously face this side [revolution: DA] of social reality too, and report it truthfully" (212). Cannon's judgment on the novel is that it suffers from its insularity:

> As for the revolutionary movement—the real movement—I don't see it here. The movement lives in the great surging tides of people throughout the world—in the trade unions, parties, mass meetings, strikes, demonstrations and committees of housewives protesting high prices in the imperialist countries; in the prisons and forced labor camps of the Soviet Union and in the mighty upheavals of the colonial millions. (215–6)

The irony worth noting, in retrospect, is that such realities, nowhere directly pictured in *Barbary Shore*, become the subject matter, directly or indirectly, of much of Mailer's writing after *Barbary Shore*. *The Armies of the Night* captures the feelings and perceptions of participants struggling in the thick of

the mass antiwar movement against the Vietnam War (which had enormous implications for the colonial millions), many of Mailer's essays and much of his reporting represent and attempt to bring to life political and social conflict in which Mailer was often present or participating in. *Harlot's Ghost*, for example, explores the Cold War and contains convincing imaginative reconstructions of real social and political upheavals: *Oswald's Tale* captures the bleak landscape of what has been termed "actually existing Socialism;" and even Mailer's famous debates with feminists captured in film and in his controversial book, *The Prisoner of Sex*, all give a sense of the real struggles sweeping America and the world, at various moments—regardless of whether Mailer's view persuades in each case. Yet, as Cannon notes, these kinds of mass political struggles do not get represented imaginatively in *Barbary Shore*. Instead they serve as the absent but implied backdrop for the content of the political discourse offered in large parts of the novel, particularly the second half which becomes almost pure discourse.

Lovett serves as the novel's self-reflexive awareness of the historical conditions that separate socialist aspirations from historical struggles proper. Yet the character also serves as a witness and judge to dialogues concerning the possibility of revolutionary action, in the past and future. Lovett functions as a blank slate who must evaluate the destiny of humankind's historical efforts. The character recognizes this about himself and he notes this irony when he ponders:

> How apt that I who had no past and so eschewed a future, who entered neither social nor economic relations, who was without memory and henceforth privileged not to reason, should have struggled again with ideas which were not my own, that I had learned upon a time and then ignored. (155)

We should notice the ambiguity in a character claiming no memory, yet asserting he has "learned upon a time and then ignored" Marxist theory. This corresponds to the moment of the novel's creation, late 1940s and early 1950s. The "American Century" and the Cold War served to break linkage with classical Marxism, yet living memory of the tumultuous period of the 1920s and 1930s had not been erased by time or complete despair. Earlier in the narrative, we encounter arguments between Lovett and McLeod concerning the nature of the Soviet Union and the politics of the

official "Communist," that is, Stalinist, movement. In this argument, insulting but precise political labels are traded. McLeod recognizes specific politics underpinning Lovett's fractured memory and calls Lovett a "left deviationist," code for Troskyist or other forms of anti-Stalinism Marxism. Lovett responds by calling McLeod a "hack"—a term independent Marxists employed to characterize Soviet apologists or functionaries.

So Lovett represents a strange allegorical everyman and a type of spirit of the age, prevented from memories and seemingly therefore outside history and social relations, yet with strange flashes from the past of dissident Marxist commitments and previous historical struggles. Lovett recognizes his own lack of clear personality, signifying his allegorical features when expressing:

> [M]emory for me was never a wall but more a roulette of the most extraordinary events and the most insignificant, all laced into the same vessel until I could not discern the casual fact from the most patent fancy, nor the past from the future; and the details of my own history were lost in the other, common to us all. (5)

Lovett functions as a metonymic allegory, an individual that stands in for a totality of "lost" "history" but history remains difficult to completely suppress.

Much, but not all, of the treatment of political issues within the novel transpires as dialogue. The rest seems to be contained in symbolic imagery. There are accounts of Lovett's dreams—perhaps his forgotten memories. At one point, he attempts to imagine memories of the past which include being in orphanages, living in an "old house . . . going quietly to seed" (61) because his family was "one of the oldest families [which] became less important to everyone but ourselves," (61) while finally concluding, "It is a sweet picture but a false shore. The only . . . houses I ever knew were in disrepair and skived by landlords" (62). Shortly afterwards, he describes dreaming of a "vast dormitory for children, and while we slept a fire had begun . . . and was sweeping along the dry wood" (62)—a clear reference to William Blake's famous poem, "The Chimney Sweepers." So Lovett's life, unreliable and uncertain, suggests contradictory vantage points on American reality. We see images of the decline of traditional American small-town values in the face of bourgeois standardization, followed by the bleakness of working-class poverty and urban blight. These are two sides of a similar series of changes due to

modernization, separated by different class positions. In addition, however, he and his strange friend Lannie have memories/images in their mind that depict mass institutions of authoritarian, communal life (orphanages, concentration camps) that suggest earlier forms of oppression (shades of Dickens and, as previously noted, Blake's chimney sweepers sleeping soundly at night while they find their innocence blinds them to their exploitation) and fears of a totalitarian recent past (fascism, Stalinism). These images further function to illustrate what society may become if authoritarian tendencies in the novel's present (McCarthyism, corporatism, fascism, or Stalinist labor camps) become the nature of the twentieth century. So the symbolic and allegorical features shift and elude precision precisely through their overdetermined nature. This furthers the difficulty in ascertaining how to understand, in any simple way, the meaning of large parts of the novel.

The complex and multilayered symbolic resonance of the novel moves beyond the narrator, Lovett. The two female characters, who serve as romantic/erotic foils for all of the male characters (in my mind unconvincingly), further complicate matters. When first introduced to Guinevere, who is technically McLeod's wife, but moves as an object of desire between all the male characters, she falsely pretends to share a commitment and belief in the apocalyptic religious imagery of Jehovah's Witnesses. She also lies and tells Lovett that she shares these convictions with her husband, whom we later find out is McLeod. Mailer's dislike of fundamentalism takes a form where Marxism and apocalyptic Christianity come together serving as interchangeable metaphors. But the metaphor contains positive resonances as well and develops further with the other female character, Lannie, who equates Jesus with Marx and Trotsky.

Lannie, a bizarre semi-Trotskyist woman who shows up at the boarding house inexplicably, oscillates between hatred of McLeod for his Stalinist past, seemingly for his role suppressing Trotskyism, and an attraction to Hollingsworth, the pseudo-McCarthyite. She ostensibly finds Hollingworth's authority and power attractive (despite his serving the US government), particularly as she abandons her own psychotically infused past affiliation with Trotskyism. Her abandonment of Marxism expresses itself in the novel in her relations with a pesky mouse in her apartment. Early in the novel she tells Lovett that she received a visitor, a mouse, who "although he would not admit it, [Lannie] knew . . . was Christ who now

[has] lived too long" (102). We might associate Lannie's comments with Dostoevesky's Grand Inquisitor, who condemns Christ for raising expectations of freedom amongst the masses, only to disappoint. Immediately afterward she compares the mouse to McLeod, noting "he was like the mouse too, only I hated him" (102). At this point, both women have compared McLeod, the old, former Stalinist functionary with blood on his hands but remnants of his Marxist convictions intact, to Christianity or the hope for apocalyptic transformation. This suggests the transformative power of authentic Marxist revolution gone bad. Later in the novel, Lannie again discusses the strange persistence of the little mouse:

> The little mouse who came to me and said he was Jesus will leave me alone no longer. This morning I found his hole, and once I have the paint I'll cover it, and he will die . . . I had hopes for him but this [her room] has made me realize that there is small future for such a mouse. (188)

Later, in a moment of despair, Lovett reports that Lannie killed the mouse. This gesture seems to signify her desire to kill previous dreams of a Marxist future. The mouse serves as a reference to Marx's well-known passage from his *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* where he talks of the subterranean processes of the proletarian revolution and history that operate beneath the surface of things and describes the revolution as "journeying through purgatory" (121) (interestingly also a religious metaphor for revolution), culminating in a hidden undermining of the appearance of stability. Marx then famously quotes Shakespeare's *Hamlet* with the line, "well grubbed old mole" (121), signifying that through pain, exertion, losses and the appearance of defeat, the undermining of the old order proceeds beneath visibility to prepare ultimate success. This possibility that the defeats of the twentieth century might contain a secret undermining of what appears solid: namely, capitalism and Soviet totalitarianism with their respective camps. How solid these alternatives will remain forms the core issue at the heart of the novel. Contemporary readers should notice that the mole has done its work and what was solid in the novel has fallen or has shaken at the present. We can echo Marx's greeting and notice how far the journey has travelled. The mole beneath the surface history of the moment both represents the source of the novel's despair and the glimmers of hope.

The political framework of the novel takes explicit form in the discourse and theories of McLeod. This character doubly betrays his Marxist framework, first by serving as a henchman for the Stalinist apparatus, and then by collaborating with the American McCarthyite witch hunters. Yet, he holds onto a remnant of his Marxist convictions. He attempts to offer a political critique of the powerful behemoths that exist, the US and the USSR. Attention to McLeod's views proves instructive in assessing their validity and the political issues at the heart of the novel.

He begins by asserting the "importance" that the "lessons of that last revolution be learned" (Mailer, *Barbary* 192). McLeod offers something close to the traditional Trotskyist view that the failure of revolutions in Europe, in the twenties, led to the degeneration of the Soviet state into a condition of political degeneration in which the politics and attitudes of the ruling strata lead to a form of society converging with capitalism."[6] He then states his conviction that war will come due to the economic contradictions that both superpowers face. On this his prognosis retains partial validity; the US carried out several major wars and the Soviet Union invaded territories under their sphere of influence. He stresses the need for the US to function as an imperialist power, arguing,

> The productive capacity of monopoly had become so tremendous [. . .] so great in comparison to the labor force it could exploit, that only the opening of the entire world market could solve its search for investment and profit even temporarily. (197)

This, of course, offers a controversial but more than plausible explanation for US foreign policy, then and now. McLeod's analysis of the Soviet Union seems quite persuasive. McLeod stresses the material backwardness of the Soviet Union at the time of the revolution and that "when the events of 1917 failed to induce similar proletarian uprisings in the countries of the West, the revolution was doomed" (198) forcing the Soviet Union into a drive for expanded "industrial capacity" (198). But, the fatal flaw, according to McLeod, was that "if benefits do not follow deprivation" (which was necessary for industrialism), "the proletariat diminishes its rate of productivity" (198). This leads to both powers utilizing their influence militarily to seize territories and convert their economies to war. Out of this the two powers will go to war and the end result is "people who depended upon commodities as the opium

which gave meaning to their lives" find their "luxuries" "inexorably wiped from the board" leading to a state where "discontent is everywhere" (199). Massive repression develops, totalitarianism reigns, and both powers devote themselves almost completely to war and war preparations. This brings us to the shores of barbarism.

However, for McLeod this is only one alternative, albeit the most likely one. The other alternative, which "occupies no prominence at present," (203) is the "body of ideas" "called revolutionary socialism." This unlikely variant can only take place if "the state deteriorates more rapidly than the people" (203). The dream is that:

> [A] revolutionary determination, the like of which has never been seen before will sweep the earth, and these theses, difficult, recondite, and often incomprehensible, will match the experience of even the most inarticulate peasant, so that the socialist theorist will once again find the language to reach the many. (204)

The affirmation of revolutionary "determination," contrasts with the bleakness of the political-economic analysis presented in McLeod's soliloquy. We have here a strange mélange of Marxism and existentialism; the unity of theory and practice finds fulfillment but only based on a worldwide emergence of a new kind of determination and will. The hope for subjective effort based on a determined attitude creating a new mass worldwide revolutionary will directly conflicts with an earlier statement made by McLeod. When McLeod begins his analysis he reiterates a basic Marxist premise when he explains that, "I wish merely to underline the notion that socialism does not come about by an act of will" (198). The idea of a new will driving history, held as a fragile hope by McLeod, shares much with existentialism and little with Marxism that situates historical possibilities within a series of unfolding contradictions which transform the objective and subjective conditions as part of an interrelated process. Indeed, Marxism stresses its distinction from other forms of radical or socialist critique of capitalism, at least as early as the *Communist Manifesto*, precisely by its analysis of "actual relations" (36) that derive from "a historical movement" (36).The nature of the real contradictions, not will alone or the efforts of would-be historical actors, provides the Marxist basis for freedom.

Therefore, on the basis of this passage, we have moved from a "critique of political economy" to a fervent wish for rebellion and struggle. This gives early anticipation of the stance that Mailer will take in his later writings which often celebrate courage, or will and determination, as the road to existential authenticity and/or the basis for political rebellion. We might notice that even at his most Marxist, McLeod, and by extension Mailer, shift between the two different radical approaches. Indeed here McLeod's view anticipates elements of Mailer's later world view.

However, one of McLeod's analyses/predictions points in a different direction and contains a bit of the unexpected gift of prophecy. When discussing the "apologists" view of permanent oppression, he notes a contradiction of logic. The "apologist" finds himself "espousing the cause of one side or the other," and if "the other side wins, he will answer: disaster, complete disaster" (Mailer, *Barbary* 197). A few lines later he theorizes: "I think it is reasonable to assert that if either of the two powers is unable to solve its economic problems without going to war, it must follow that war will come" (197). In these passages, we gain an anticipation of future events that correspond to what did happen in the Cold War. The Soviet Union and the US obviously did not go to war with each other, but economic crisis in the Soviet bloc combined with political movements against repression led to the ending of the political framework that Stalinism, the "colossi" of the novel, rests on. And the reward for victory by the US was not a "New World Order" or the "End of History" but greater war efforts combined with the present worldwide economic crisis of uncertain severity and duration. In this sense, McLeod's assertion that "we must accept today . . . the temporary abdication of the best in human potentiality. Periods like ours will pass. The problem for today is to end the crippling conflicts of the economic system" comes to fruition (196). The conditions of two seemingly all powerful "colossi" that stifle human freedoms end and, indeed, the period passed. Now what a growing number of people face are the "crippling conflicts of the economic system." And the war(s) continue.

The novel ends on a particularly ambiguous note. McLeod leaves his legacy or his "will" to Lovett which contains "the remnants of my socialist culture" (223). Lovett reflects, "So the heritage passed on to me, poor hope . . . and I went out into the world (223). But his entrance into the world is to other boarding houses where Lovett "live[s] waiting for the signs which tell me I must move on again" while "time passes and I work and I study, and I

keep my eye on the door" while "vast armies mount themselves" but "for the present the storm approaches its thunderhead and it is apparent the boat drifts ever closer to the shore" (223).

Lovett remains trapped in a precarious place, somewhere between the isolated intellectual aware of his alienation and waiting for a salvation from the storm. Yet, he retains traces of "socialist culture" hoping it will help him steer the ship.

CONCLUSION: MAILER'S LINGERING MARXISM AND RELEVANCE FOR THE FUTURE

This novel, which appears to be a farewell to Marxism in Mailer's efforts, does not signify a complete amnesia from the "socialist culture" weakly defended as a lingering hope. While it is my contention that close scrutiny of his entire project would reveal persistent traces of the Marxism of the early Mailer, I will point to one example where Marxism trumps existentialism after *Barbary Shore*, even if in attenuated form.

In Mailer's participation/writing during the turbulent events of the Chicago Democratic Party convention of 1968, captured in his second "novel as history," *Miami and the Siege of Chicago,* Mailer describes, tentatively and with self-doubts, his own motivation for *not* remaining in Lincoln Park (the area the Yippies and National Mobilization to End the War in Vietnam occupied in 68) when massive forces of police repression circle the park and plan to drive the rebels out. While acknowledging the possibility that fear drives him out, (a cardinal sin in Mailer's courage-infused existentialism), and while pointing to the danger that his friend Jose Torres, the boxing champion, will probably fight any police to the point of serious danger, he makes a point about the politics of choosing not to remain in the park:

> He only knew he did not wish to spend hours in this park. For what was one to do when the attack came? Would one leave when asked—small honor there—why wait to offer that modest obedience. And to stay—to what end?—to protest being ejected from the park, to take tear gas in the face, have one's head cracked? He could not make the essential connection between that and Vietnam. If the warwere on already, if this piece of ground were essential to the support of other pieces of ground . . . but this

> ridiculous barricade, this symbolic contest with real bloody heads—he simply did not know what he thought. (148)

I would like to suggest, perhaps counter-intuitively, that his position reflects a trumping of existentialism (he calls the Yippies the existentialists) by a strategic appraisal of the situation that shares much in common with Marxism. Mailer must choose how to intervene in a situation that doesn't involve a "war on already," or to follow the military appraisal, he makes the tactical judgment that no significance stands in maintaining this "ground," if real violence ensues, one-sidedly, for a mere "symbolic contest." In other words, his decision to leave derives from a realistic assessment of the objective and subjective factors and an unwillingness to engage in token gestures, no matter how heroic, that serve no real revolutionary purposes. We should notice that he holds open the possibility that if the violence served objective purposes, his response might have been different. However, like the Bolsheviks in April 1917, who argued against premature confrontations, but called for power in October, Mailer practices the art of judging the real possibilities.

This episode might offer the activists in the various Occupy movements food for thought. Surely his advice to John Buffalo, cited earlier, calling for recognizing the machine-like nature of capitalist society with its rigid institutions and his call for long-term commitment and study merits consideration among the most determined young protestors. Perhaps Mailer would counsel serious and careful political tactics in the face of new political openings. I imagine him stressing the value of careful attention to the events of the twentieth century. In light of the rapidity of change and unexpected shifts in the world today, marked by economic crisis and war, we can only speculate about the precise nature of Norman Mailer's response were he alive. One thing seems certain: partisanship not neutrality was built into his character. I believe that Mailer's response to the world developing would entail a combativity and an openness to the possibility that the cynicism and narrowness of the age Mailer scrupulously challenged may be reaching its limit. Surely the writer known for pugilistic tendencies would not give up such possibilities without a fight.

NOTES

1. This is a reference to the title Norman Mailer gave to his anthology of his work throughout his career, *The Time of Our Time.*
2. The most developed expression of Mailer's theology can be found in *On God: An Uncommon Conversation,* which is an interview/discussion with Michael Lennon. His embrace of his own form of existentialism begins in *Advertisements for Myself.*
3. As is well known, after the Cold War, we received the now infamous claim by Francis Fukuyama, that the defeat of Soviet style Communism signifies the "end of history" which dovetailed nicely with various interpretations of our "postmodern" condition in which we have allegedly, "forgotten how to think historically" or are at the end of "metanarratives" (read Marxism).See Fredric Jameson for the former and Francois Lyotard for the latter. Such claims which build upon a supposed final crisis of Marxism are themselves in a bit of a crisis. As capitalism enters into increasingly turbulent waters, such supposed closure of an epoch becomes more unreliable. As Terry Eagleton, the Marxist literary critic, notes, "You can tell that the capitalist system is in trouble when people start talking about capitalism. It indicates that the system has ceased to be as natural as the air we breathe [. . .]" (xi).
4. This support initially involved his participation in the Wallace Progressive Party campaign and his friendship with various Communist Party-influenced intellectuals including writers, intellectuals, and Hollywood actors. Afterwards his friendship with the French writer and intellectual influenced by Trotskyism, Jean Malaquais, deepened his exploration of Marxism. For details of this period there are several good biographies including Mary Dearborn's *Mailer a Biography*, Carl Rollyson's *The Lives of Norman Mailer* and Peter Manso's oral history of Mailer titled, *Mailer: His Life and Times.*
5. Marx writes, "[. . .] oppressor and oppressed stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight" (*Communist Manifesto* 22).
6. To be precise, the analysis of Trotsky was that the Soviet Union became a degenerated workers state which would require a political revolution to preserve the social property relations. McLeod articulates a view that some around Trotsky articulated that the Soviet Union became a new form of "state capitalism." If interested in this distinction one should read *The Revolution Betrayed* by Leon Trotsky or his polemics against those who offered an analysis closer to McLeod's contained in the book, *In Defense of Marxism.*

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