TO DELIVER THE METAPHOR: INTENT AND RHETORIC IN NORMAN MAILER

SUSAN OOMMEN

NORMAN MAILER WAS THE ICONIC WRITER-PERFORMER WHO SOUGHT TO deliver, at least notionally, directions in alternate reality. He remained unabashed in his role as a game changer, consumed by reality curves he believed he was scripting; in his words, "to bend reality like a curve in a field of space"(*Presidential Papers* 74). In 1959 he declared he would settle for nothing less than a total revolution in consciousness. In 1963 he asserted that his literary work was the only answer to the war in Vietnam. In 1982 he submitted that he would be happy to have created a dialectic. The younger Mailer rode the wave donning mantles; Bruce Cook was to call him "the Beats' celebrity-in-residence" (93). The older Mailer was a lot more dispassionate. He had probably come to recognize that the rhetoric of the *enfant terrible* was more performance than revolution. In a way he was conceding: "By the time you reach your sixties, you feel as if you're in the twelfth round and you're battered" ("Twelfth" 40). He had come to accept with the passing years that the world was not as sinister as he had once imagined ("Twelfth" 47). Notwithstanding, the revolution wasn't quite over, and the war games were very much on. In a sense this battle-preparedness, as it were, continued to inform much of his writing. The Mailer trademark—shades of the hipster, existential anguish, walpurgisnacht, kinetic energy— was relentlessly fashioning protagonists and fabulating experiences. The uncanny mix of the heroic and the ridiculous had come to stay. Mailer's compositions were moving centre stage. Today, sixty four years after *The Naked and the Dead*, the politics of being continues to turn with the day. Traces from a

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lifetime of writing have carried over. Indeed, Mailer seems to have nudged the reader into passageways that open up imaginings of reality. To borrow Jean Luc Nancy's term, the reader confronts alterity, "the most classic of God's aporias"(11).

Mailer had observed in *Advertisements for Myself* that the most terrifying confrontation for his contemporary was the "terror before the romantic"; he speculated that weakening presence and diminishing accord of life posed serious threat to the romantic spirit, and this indeed was a matter of shame (382). Intimidated by shame and terror the Mailer protagonist contemplates walls closing in. He decides to run. In that moment of seemingly pure dread he supposedly apprehends the probability of unmapped spaces. He searches for gaps seeking passageways he must have once traveled in memory. Stephen Rojack (*The American Dream*) climbs the parapet wall and walks the length, for as Tony Tanner points out, Rojack must "negotiate the edge where the worlds meet" (363). Ridiculous, no doubt, but romantic, if this is to be Rojack's leap of faith: from war hero and politician to the knowing self. D.J. (*Why Are We in Vietnam?)* heads for the Brooks Mountain Range for a naked confrontation with nature. He talks to the Arctic Lights and comes to grasp the essence of violence. D.J. seeks to acknowledge the power that is dormant within him; with this comes the release of energies and the coalescing of the subjective, the impulsive, and the anarchic. As Mailer claims in *The Armies of the Night*, "the good Christian Americans needed the war or they would lose their Christ" (212). It was important for Mailer, supposedly within parameters of romantic-existential traditions, that the individual becomes aware of his own presences. Mailer's assertion in *Advertisements*: "one must be able to feel oneself—one must know one's desires, one's rages, one's anguish, one must be aware of the character of one's frustration and know what would satisfy it" (341), comes full circle in *Armies* where Mailer admits that in Vietnam America sought to rectify its imbalances, providing in the use of napalm bombs the index of the collective instability of the nation (211).

For Mailer the metaphor was gaining importance. He remarks in the case of *Vietnam*, "I trusted metaphor in that novel to a degree I've never trusted before. I worked on the assumption that if I had a metaphor where I might, for eg., mix electromagnetism and pine sap in a tree that there was something there. Something scientific to be discovered" ("Existential" 207). Posturing, no doubt, but Mailer apparently gave to his novel a magnetic field in

the wilderness of the Arctic Circle, where according to him, all the messages of North America lay concentrated ("Existential"207). *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, the Mailer exclusive on violence, appears based on the metaphor of the hunt. Indeed for D.J. the hunt for the grizzly in Alaska forms his initiation rites into manhood. From there he will journey to the end of the quest—Vietnam. The novel explores the limits of brutality and obscenity, and relocates the metaphor to the American war in Vietnam. The concluding sentence, "Vietnam, hot damn.", which is probably the novel's only reference to the Vietnam war, notoriously burlesques the national reasons for going to war. In *Armies* Mailer transfers Matthew Arnold's metaphor of the armies clashing by night in "Dover Beach" to the Pentagon Marchers. In particular he looks at a group of marchers from the Quaker farm in Voluntown who court arrest, and in non-violent civil disobedience refuse prison food and clothing, is exhausted and starved, is tortured by visions, and becomes delirious: "a long column of Vietnamese dead, Vietnamese walking a column of fire, nose on fire, mouth speaking flame" (319). Existential angst finds articulation in redemptive liturgy: "O Lord, bring more suffering upon me that the sins of our soldiers in Vietnam be not utterly unforgiven—they are too young to be damned forever" (319). For generations of readers who remember the sixties, and not just in America, the metaphor recalls horrendous public policy and agonizing private experience; it recalls the trauma cultures and counter cultures were subject to; it also recalls critical phases in evolving thoughts and lives of both nations and individuals. For subsequent readers who are post Mailer, the experiences carry over, played out on canvasses that get larger—Iraq, Syria, Rwanda, Sarajevo.

Philosophers such as Slavoj ÎiÏek question the approach by which the state self-mediates in order to construct fixed identity. For ÎiÏek the very concept of absolute identity appears an untenable theoretical position (62). He converts the Establishment's self-obsessive "identity-with-itself" into a metaphor almost everybody is familiar with: the emperor's new clothes. The Emperor becomes the State, and therefore the condition of without clothes/new clothes is self enclosed and refuses to carry meaning outside the representation (88–89). The metaphor unfolds at two levels: at the level of the little boy who is delighted that the Emperor can be naked, and therefore the leaning toward the playful and the juvenile; at the level of the adult, encoding stupidity and manipulation. Metaphors such as these seek to play a role in one's grasp of who one is and significantly,

who one is not. They initiate conversations that are simultaneously private, political and public. They negotiate spaces wherein the self may begin to process both imaginings and subtexts. They also turn ambivalent in contexts that are hostile to alterity, such as in the draconian encoding in the adult metaphor of the emperor's clothes. Confronted with the knowledge that one's identity may well lie beyond self enclosed markers, and that in all probability identities elude one's grasp, the subject/reader steps aside. In that moment he finds both entry and exit points in fields he probably dared not enter, where metaphors endlessly play out. Indeed, to access unmediated spaces such as these is also to access the interiors of the self. Journeys course through consciousness, unraveling perceptions in time and space. In the melee that is so significant in such journeys, lies the truth of the metaphor, that reality may not be so easily invented after all. To come to know one's frustration is probably to do right by identities. The city of Sarajevo as an example of self-enclosed political construct, unfolds the argument. Sarajevo was assigned identity markers in order to preserve its purity. The State sought to appropriate its destiny and turned the city's gaze upon itself. The State accorded Sarajevo its hawkish manifesto that screamed that origins are self-contained. In that positioning Sarajevo seeks notations that guarantee absolute identity. Here is transgression, a violation of being itself. Today Sarajevo may no longer enjoy geographical quietude. It transforms into a metaphor, senseless, bloody, and violent, raising the pitch against traces, moving further into self-obsession. Sarajevo represents faces of humanity that have turned fanatical and have forgotten grace and goodness. Out of the reduction of multiplicities rose the tragedy of Sarajevo. Nancy offers the core argument here, that Sarajevo is really three cities, Bosna-Saray, Miljacka, and Ilidza, and the city/cities may only exist in successive and simultaneous singularities and pluralities (158).

Sarajevo is only one name in growing incoherent lists that invent identity. This residue is the aberration in human thinking, forcing tragedies humanity must witness, where peoples and cities are made targets. Cultures and regions adopt mulish stances and declare hardened positions. The total distrust in pluralities, compounded by the inability to understand singularites, and the nervousness in acknowledging alterity, results in a tragic lack—the disinterestedness in dis-positions and co-appearances. Nancy posits the argument:

> We no longer look for a singularity of the origin in the other; we look for the unique and exclusive origin in order either to adopt it or reject it. The other becomes the Other according to the mode of desire or hatred. Making the other divine (together with our voluntary servitude) or making it evil (together with its exclusion or extermination) is that part of curiosity no longer interested in dis-position and co-appearance, but rather has become the desire for the Position itself. This desire is the desire to fix the origin, or *to give the origin to itself,* once and for all, and in one place for all, that is, always outside the world. This is why such desire is a desire for murder, and not only murder but also an increase of cruelty and horror, which is like the tendency toward the intensification of murder; it is mutilation, relentlessness, meticulous execution, the joy of agony. (20–21)

This edginess about alterity that explains "the disinterestedness in dis-positions and co-appeareances" aggravates a tragic lack. In the absence of imaginings, passageways continue their untracked elliptical movements. Both Emperor and Subject deny the metaphor, and remain forever excluded from aporias. Surely this must be a variant of Mailer's terror before the romantic, a recasting of orgies of violence. Vietnam, hot damn!

In *Armies* Mailer presents "Grandma with Orange Hair" (166). She is a churchgoer, crooning over the One-Arm Bandit, driving half-dollars into the slot machine; and her hair is orange burning bright (172). Mailer's scheme of throwing in ideas and counter ideas along lines of punches and counter punches in order to force rapidly shifting lines of thought becomes operative. The readings, leaning toward the aberrant and the fantastical, relentlessly converge on Vietnam. This movement is pure authorial intent. The metaphor transfers itself to war technology, raising apparitions of a land and a people, after which the metaphor turns to crack the imperial gamble played out in a faraway land:

> 'Madame, we are burning children in Vietnam."
>
> 'Boy, you just go get yourself lost. Grandma's about ready for a kiss from the jackpot.'
>
> The burned child is brought into the gaming hall on her hospital bed.

> 'Madame, regard our act in Vietnam.'
>
> 'I hit! I hit! Hot deedy, I hit. Why, you poor burned child—you just brought me luck. Here, honey, here's a lucky half-dollar in reward. And listen sugar, tell the nurses to change your sheets. Those sheets sure do stink. I hope you ain't got gangrene. Hee hee, hee hee. I get a supreme pleasure mixing with gooks in Vegas. (172)

Crass, without doubt, and nauseous in content, but Mailer delivers the metaphor. Nick Ut's 1972 photograph of 9–year-old Kim Phuc naked and burned, running down a road, may have been composed by a posturing novelist. On 8 June 1972 the South Vietnamese Air Force dropped napalm bombs on Kim Phuc's village. Or in a later time, a posturing novelist may have claimed as his own, David Leeson's photograph of Squad leader and Staff Sgt Lonnie Roberts mourning Private Gregory Huxley, 19 years old. Roberts' sorrow appears older than Jesus' mother's sorrow in the Pieta. The photograph is from Iraq in 2003. Unreal scenes in unreal cities. Yet a nation honoured both photographers. Neither was posturing, only recording war orgies. Images develop: Rwanda 1994. James Nachtwey presents to the world the unspeakable in the image of a Hutu tribesman who was imprisoned, tortured and starved because he did not support the killing of 80 ,000 of his fellowmen. The Hutu had found a fleeting aporia. His face carries three slashes from temple to mouth from a machete. He had refused to hunt. The violence continues; walpurgisnacht plays out; the hunt as metaphor stays.

If today people read Norman Mailer it is not only to discover the anxieties of an epoch, but also to discover experiences that quaintly approximate myth. Somewhere in memory recognitions surface about innate similarities/dissimilarities in subject positions. One is the Hutu and yet not the perpetrator; one embodies power and yet is without power. One may not be entirely the opposite of another, and yet retain singularities. The sense of singularities co- appearing with multiplicities poses no threat because in the richness of life's disconcerting profusion, the "totality of beings" has come to define human kind (Nancy 9). Mailer possessed the argumentative turn. His stories and characters circle in successive points of divergence and convergence in journeys of becoming. His body of work, that must include not only his writings, but also his gestures and his proclamations, sought to understand the nature of reality. He explored the essence of the white negro,

even as he sought clarity in the excesses of love and sex and violence. He appropriated anything that was American. Presidential candidates, boxing champions, communists, rebels, dissenters, death row convicts, writers, feminists and movie stars became his subjects. He was irreverent. He ridiculed and burlesqued. He ranted and raved. He produced narratives. He told stories about wars, about political murders and conspiracies, about man's landing on the moon. He even threw in stories about a pharaoh and a disciple. Mailer reveled in exaggerations and wildness. He was happy to provoke because he assumed his writings would engage the reader in the battle for the spirit. He affirms:

> I'm a great believer in the idea that if you advance an idea as far as you can and it's overtaken by someone who argues the opposite of you, in effect you've improved your enemy's mind. Then someone will come along your side who will take your enemy's improvement of your idea and convert it back again. I'm nothing if I'm not a believer in the dialectic. And to that extent one does the best one can. And that's the end of it. The thought of everyone thinking the way I do is as bad as any other form of totalitarianism. ("Twelfth" 50)

In the final analysis Mailer gave his reader and his audience the notion of presences. Nancy's argument for "co –appearances" invokes for the Mailer reader the terror before the romantic. Consciousness bows down before memory, summoning storehouses of anguish, desire, and frustration, waiting to be inventoried, explored and understood. Refusal to confront regroups as sins of omission. If one may not come face to face with the angels and the demons of the world, one risks the danger of damnation; one becomes the collaborator. In the end that is the real question. Will the world watch? Or bear witness? Or turn away? Here is why Mailer matters. From *The Naked and the Dead* (1948) to *A Castle in the Forest* (2007) he played out his metaphors, opening up spaces for his readers, and queering passageways in order to negotiate meanings. The experience maybe described, one more time, in Nancy's wonderful conception of physical time: "A 'day' is not simply a unit for counting; it is the turning of the world—each time singular. And days, indeed every day, could not be similar if they were not

first different, difference itself" (9). In his wild posturings Norman Mailer had delivered the metaphor:

> Brood on that country who expresses our will. She is America, once a beauty of magnificence unparalleled, now a beauty with a leprous skin. She is heavy with child—no one knows if legitimate—and languishes in a dungeon whose walls are never seen. Now the first contractions of her fearsome labor begin—it will go on: no doctor exists to tell the hour. It is only known that false labor is not likely on her now, no, she will probably give birth, and to what?—the most fearsome totalitarianism the world has ever known? Or can she, poor giant, tormented lovely girl, deliver a babe of a new world brave and tender, artful and wild? Rush to the locks. God writhes in his bonds. Rush to the locks. Deliver us from our curse. For we must end on the road to that mystery where courage, death, and the dream of love give promise of sleep (*Armies* 320.)

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