NEVER SO SIMPLE: WHY WE SHOULD LEARN FROM MAILER'S ENGAGEMENT WITH COMPLEXITY

FRASER MANN

THE SOCIAL UNREST THAT RAGED ACROSS ENGLAND IN AUGUST 2011 WAS SHOCKING not merely for the magnitude and severity of the violence but also for the polarizing reaction of the UK's heteroglossia. Prime Minister David Cameron's response[1] was to label every participants' raison d'être as "criminality, pure and simple." Simultaneously, celebrated Hackney Heroine[2] Pauline Pearce claimed that, for much of the youth involved, the violence grew from a tendency to "turn inwards" and an inability to "see a way out." Online forums and message boards became the scene of continuous volleying between the self-proclaimed voices of Left and Right. Those who condemned were out of touch and elitist while those who sought to forgive were weak apologists. Largely absent was the notion that the riots were caused by enormously complex and conflicting factors and that people with wildly differing objectives were involved. Observing the discourse[3] of the post-riot sparring, one began to form the impression that the public only had an appetite for reductive, media-led simplicity—good or evil, black or white, pure or tainted. This approach can be observed in recent social phenomena from the War on Terror to the Occupy protest groups and the newfound pariah status of corporate business in London and New York.

It may be worth stating at this juncture that I have some vested interest in the issue. As a teacher who worked with London's youth for many years, I found it thoroughly dispiriting to see broad brush-strokes of condemnation

THE MAILER REVIEW. VOL. 6, NO. 1, FALL 2012. Copyright © 2012. The Norman Mailer Society. Published by The Norman Mailer Society.

used in analysis of the events across English cities. Yet, simultaneously, I am a property owner and law-abiding citizen who sees no worth in direction-less violence, as much of this certainly was. The conflicting nature of my own responses and puzzled engagement with the media meant that I simply did not know which side to take: the bloodthirsty Right or the geographically distant apologies of the bourgeois Left. I searched the media for someone to help me or at least to empathize with my confusion, yet all I found was a continual gnashing of righteous teeth and increasingly polarized entrenchment. When I looked elsewhere in the news for distraction I was suddenly all too aware that every item—from the coverage of sports to local issues as banal as refuse collection and street lighting—were dealt with in the same reductive, sensationalist manner. Language and discourse were diminished to the level of insult, quip or slogan, designed for rapid impact rather than lengthy, rational debate. All in all, I felt a profound crisis of interpretation in the manner in which we in the UK were responding to events unfolding around us. Rather than engaging with complexity we were desperate for simplicity, eager to join camps with readymade and bite-size ideologies. What was necessary was a voice advocating a more nuanced approach, an approach that allowed confusion and moral uncertainty; perhaps an approach not too dissimilar to that of Norman Mailer.

It is not the intention of this paper to offer a sociological or economic explanation for the riots or even to explore the subsequent ocean of volatile rhetoric. Instead, I wish to lament a spirit of public intellectualism that engages with complexity and paradox, a spirit embodied by the writing, both fictional and journalistic, of Norman Mailer. Writing that encourages its reader to admit that absolutes are difficult to locate or it may not exist at all. Writing that ushers in a mood of public debate that is less hysterical and more, well, grown up. Placing Mailer in a theoretical context through a range of commentators as divergent as Derrida, Lyotard and Goffman will illustrate my argument that an articulate and literate public benefit from an encounter with Mailer's work. That he is such a divisive public figure, one that freely admits to his own tangle of contradictory facets, adds to my regard for him as a stimulus to brave the crosswinds of debate and analysis. Often I disagree with his statements, finding them wilfully controversial and swollen with the pursuit of public recognition. Yet, isn't this the point of discursive debate? Only a subject so complex can urge readers to consider their own paradoxical natures and internal

oppositions. Within the parameters of this article, I will focus primarily on examples from the Mailer's overtly subjective response to the 1967 anti-Vietnam demonstration in Washington narrated in *The Armies of the Night* (1968) as well as some brief analysis of his novel *The Naked and the Dead* (1948). To fully explore Mailer's creation of the self as a protean concept entirely resistant to categorization, I will project the complexity of the individual subject to a societal level and argue that, just as the self cannot be shackled to a fixed position of moral certitude, society and society's myriad of communicative possibilities are equally as evasive. In terms of evidence, I will discuss Mailer's vilifying analysis of media dishonesty and the public's complacent willingness to take their intellectual lead from such sources. Finally, I will examine the manner in which Mailer's deceptive experiments with genre can be read as a thematic statement on textual authority and moral absolutism.

Mailer's claim for a conflicting plurality of individual identities lies in his self-conscious exploration of self within the pages of *Armies*. His use of a knowing third person detachment from *Mailer the Protagonist* enables *Mailer the Author* to indulge in engagement with the multiple aspects of his character, a process David Cowart claims is completed with "comic self-deprecation" and as a "literary strategy in . . . fluid identities" (163). While I agree with this reading in its observation of Mailer's humor (for there is much), I would argue that repeated assertions of internal conflict and paradox allow the reader a glimpse at something more profound, particularly when it comes to the act of *reading*. My use of this most common of verbs extends beyond the page as Mailer's suggestion that complexity is inherent in all that we are and all that we do encourages the reader to look for depth and nuance and to appreciate the aesthetic pleasure of *not knowing,* or, as he states in one of his many paradoxical phrases, the "precise feel of . . . ambiguity" (64). Mailer's kaleidoscopic representation of a fragmented self is situated in a whole manner of social situations; from the polite obligations of a cocktail party via the physical quagmire of active protest to the lengthy hours residing in a Virginia prison facility. As he prepares for a night of speeches from him and other "notables," he is aware of his "endless blessings of virtue and corruption" (73). *Blessings* further elucidated as the author considers his role as "subject," both as abstract concept and in the literal sense of a documentary project:

> For a warrior, presumptive general, ex-political candidate, embattled aging enfant terrible of the literary world, wise father of six children, radical intellectual, existential philosopher, hard-working author, champion of obscenity, husband of four battling sweet wives, amiable bar drinker, and much exaggerated street fighter, party giver, hostess insulter—he had on screen in this first documentary a fatal taint, a last remaining speck of the one personality he found absolutely insupportable—the nice Jewish boy from Brooklyn. (145)

It is interesting that Mailer considers a catalogue of identities in the context of being observed, analyzed and read by an inscrutable *other*. One of the key thematic lessons to come from his writing is that, when faced with the actions of an individual, particularly one whose every movement is accompanied by the braying and morally superior tones of the mass media, complexity should always be assumed. Rather than reducing *other* to a singular being capable of only singular discourse and just one set of prescribed behavioral positions, it should be accepted that individual subjects are complicated figures; capable in fact of confusing, of acting counter intuitively and of containing moral duality.

There are examples of Mailer's imperative to search for complexity throughout his writing. In the shifting moral nuances of the existential narrator of *An American Dream* (1965): Stephen Rojack, or the rich inner life of Gary Gilmore so memorably reconstructed in *The Executioner's Song* (1979). It is prescient to this discussion to concentrate on a less analyzed but equally salient example, namely *The Naked and the Dead's* Private Roy Gallagher. Gallagher's presence in Mailer's combat narrative is initially a simplistic caricature of brutish and dull ignorance. A violent and seemingly unthinking anti-Semite, he growls angrily across the novel's pages hovering malevolently in the margins of the main protagonists and events. However, his latent significance is a literary sleight of hand as the news of his young wife's death and the strategically placed *Time Machine* section illuminate depths to his character that have thus far remained hidden to reader and character alike. His Boston upbringing and descent into organized right-wing violence betrays the ease with which a frustrated boy, terrified of his violently alcoholic father, is manipulated by the rhetoric and promises of political partisanship. Mailer allows glimpses of sensitivity buried beneath the acquired language

of hatred and bigotry. The literature of *Christians United* speaks in absolutes regarding the "goddam conspiracy" and "rich kikes figured . . . to bring us communism" (277). These terms and reductive ideologies inhibit Gallagher from meaningful self-analysis or concessions to vulnerability; instead he projects his failures and frustrations outwards to a two-dimensional enemy caricatured by racial exaggeration. As such, his own complexities, such as his compassion toward his subservient mother and his determination not to emulate the bullying domination of his father, remain hidden from him and are obscured by the ease with which he conforms to the group mentality of political fanaticism. Reader assumptions are swept along by the tide of his hatred and we conclude that his is a life not worth caring about, just another example of tragic stupidity included in the novel to embolden Mailer's attack regarding the dangers of fascism. Yet, Mailer forces the reader to see depth and complexity in the young soldier's response to news of his wife's death during childbirth. The vicious irony of receiving several of her letters after he learns of her demise overwhelms him. The intensity of his connection to her, previously unknown to him, results in a tender moment of emotive capitulation.

> She had been very small and he thought of how she had seemed like a little girl to him at times and how he had been amused by her seriousness. He laughed softly and then abruptly, with no defences raised, he realised that she was utterly dead and he would never see her any more. The knowledge flowed through him without any resistance like a torrent of water when a floodgate is lowered. He heard himself sob and then was no longer conscious of the choking sounds of his anguish. (291)

This soldier is the same individual so caught up in the absolutes of racial hatred and violence, yet the reader is invited to recognize his evident suffering and begins to develop empathy. Mailer's engagement with human complexity forces a confrontation with our own moral boundaries and presumptions, particularly as Mailer employs the death of a child and mother as a universal motif for the death of innocents. Surely an individual capable of vindictive prejudice cannot be seen to possess an inner life and a compassionate tenderness for his spouse. Gallagher himself cannot recognize this either as his emotive response is virtually wordless, a powerful surge of

grief that transcends the petty constraints of polarizing rhetoric. How is it then that readers of both texts and of societal events in general, whether war novel or social unrest, are so determined to see explanations in the simplest possible terms? If we look to Mailer, his answer takes us to the rhetoric and rapid judgement of the media.

Throughout *Armies* Mailer takes aim at the vulgar dishonesty he perceives in the media's communication of complex events. He reserves his most acidic prose for the deliberate deception of a public hanging on every tumultuous account of radical threats to social stability. Mailer claims that "misinformation in systemic form" creates an inevitable surge of "mass schizophrenia" (152) and, with archly sarcastic mock seriousness that, "the media would scream at the violence of these dissenters who attacked innocent helicopters with paint" (127). Mailer opens the novel with *Time Magazine's* account of his speech at Washington's Ambassador Theatre the night prior to the main demonstration. The account itself is littered with the hysterical language of moral outrage, depicting Mailer as bordering on violent lunacy and guilty of inept and drunken inarticulacy as he "staggered about the stage . . . mumbling and spewing obscenities" (13). Mailer juxtaposes the lengthy account with the simple phrase, "Now we may leave *Time* to find out what happened" (14). Mailer engages further with the polarized disparity of media accounts by the inclusion, late in the text, of conflicting narratives depicting the nighttime battles between the forces of authority and the remaining groups of demonstrators, accounts that differ greatly dependent on the political orientation of the source. Those appealing to a conservative readership castigate the demonstrators as "dropouts, drifters and rabble, eager to turn the event in to a club swinging mess" (273). While more liberal journalists turn the moral microscope onto the behaviour of the state troops who are also accused of "clubs swinging" (274) and are dehumanized courtesy of their authoritarian appearance as, "white helmeted federal marshals" (274). Clearly the true instigators of "swinging clubs" exist somewhere between each account, never to be fully realized or recounted. The media's manipulation of imagery and language tries to shape chaos into a linear narrative palatable to its perceived audience.

To explore this notion further, it is helpful to consider Goffman's work in *Frame Analysis* regarding the manner in which the individual subject chooses to process their perception of surrounding reality. Goffman argues that subjects feel the need to position themselves within their immediate social

environment through the simple enquiry "what is going on here?" (152). He describes the question as central to the manner in which we search for a subject position and that it is employed—"explicitly, as in times of confusion and doubt, or tacitly, during occasions of moral certitude" (153). So, no matter the scenario, whether it be interaction amongst peers or formulating judgment concerning events of seismic consequence, the imperative to inquire and receive satisfying explanation pulls strongly. This would appear at a superficial level to simply be innate human curiosity and, if so, it is unclear why that presents a moral problem. Goffman, however, argues that parallel to such curiosity is the preference for simplicity in all that is registered and that nuance or complexity repels the questioner into a state of ongoing denial: "in most situations many things are happening simultaneously—things that are likely to have begun at different moments may terminate dissynchronously. To ask the question 'what is going on here?' biases matters in the direction of unitary exposition and simplicity" (154).

Crucially, Goffman adds that happy acquiescence to such "unitary exposition" is aided by the existence of narratives, or "associated lore" (162) that surround the individual in his or her particular societal niche. He concludes that confirmation of "moral tradition" (162) is to be found in "folk tales, characters in novels, advertisements, myth, movie stars and their famous roles, the Bible and other sources of exemplary representation" (162).

Goffman claims that the subject finds answers to their moral queries by looking to familiarity and moving instinctively toward the same conclusions that have always existed. It is far easier to confirm truisms that have been raised, discussed and dissected *ad nauseum* than to consider complexities that force confrontation with contradiction and unknown realms of philosophical possibility. In addition to this, the individual can go through this process as if new, happy in the delusion that conclusions are drawn from genuine analysis and insight rather than falling back on codified responses. In the light of Goffman's ideas, it is clear that Mailer's polemical approach to the behaviour of the media claims exploitation of the public's desire for simple and familiar resolutions that confirm and entrench age-old moral boundaries. This view is supported by the empirical work completed in the 1970s by McCombs and Shaw in which they analyze the "agenda setting" (176) of the American mass media during times of political significance. Their studies suggest that the media acts as the key "associated lore" for the

American public. Their claim is a simple yet stark statement of the singular power of media narrative:

> The information in the mass media becomes the only contact many have with politics. The pledges, promises and rhetoric encapsulated in news stories, columns and editorial constitute much of the information upon which a voting decision has to me made. Most of what people know comes to them second or third hand from the mass media. (176)

The world of information can be described in hierarchical terms stemming from purportedly honest reports of truth that are disseminated, shared and inevitably passed on through society at large. That we place such faith and trust in reportage lies at the heart of Mailer's concern regarding the complacent avoidance of moral complexity. An example of such behaviour is witnessed in the disparity of the media's reporting of numbers attending the demonstration in Washington and what these estimates achieve in confirming public perceptions of truth.

> It was one of the little inconveniences, one of the sewed up pockets of modern history that no-one was capable of counting the crowd. Each newspaper and government bureau and Left Wing organising committee released the count which made the most sense from their own point of view; so the mob today would be numbered everywhere from twenty-five thousand to two hundred twenty-five thousand. (111)

Mailer senses that when using notions of truth to confirm one's own moral stance numerical data has an authority all of its own. It is as if the bare discourse of mathematics cannot be argued with as long as the term *estimate* is relegated to linguistic insignificance as the subject searches for a palpable or systemic rubric of knowledge. The impact on the rational thinking of the public is obvious as Mailer sits in prison with a cross section of demonstrators listening to their own estimates of numbers arrested in violent skirmishes. He draws a distinctive parallel with the blind loyalty of sports fans cheering a healthy victory, a critique of moral myopia in times of national conflict: "Everybody wanted to know how many had

been arrested—calculations of the total varied from two hundred to four hundred, and groans replied to the low totals, cheers to the high—they were reacting to the score at a ball game. It was a natural reaction for any American, Mailer decided" (203).

Mailer's analysis of his nation's relationship with debates depicts a country divided into deeply entrenched polarities; ignorant of nuanced middle ground or the existence of paradox. Indeed, the natural reaction he speaks of is to gather behind your chosen side and allow immersion into simplistic and familiar moral discourse. The manifestation of this act is through the reduction of language from a tool to engage in difficult and frequently open ended debate to that of sound bite and slogan, easily memorable and as perfectly suited to front pages as it is to the placards and chants of popular protest. A reader cannot help but make the connection at this point with Orwell's fears, so bleakly communicated in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* regarding the philosophical straight jacket of Newspeak.[4] Remove subtlety from language and you create an unconscious willingness to conform to well-established binary positions.[5] Throughout the text—in depictions of the media, the speeches of the Left and the communal spirit of the demonstrators—Mailer uses the various slogans of protest and counter protest as signifiers of a general refusal to engage with complexity. The mantra-like repetition in the chapter entitled "A Busload of Slogans" operates not as a bargaining chip in political debate but as a badge of identity to a social group determined to voice opposition no matter how vague the details. His commentary, however, does not exclude the attractiveness of such group behaviour. Indeed, it is a mark of Mailer's awareness of his own conflicting self that, despite his fear of reductive language, he is happy to sink into its soporific atmosphere: "So it went. Lots of song, all the slogans, 'Hell, no, we won't go.' 'Bring the troops home now.' 'Hey, hey, LBJ.' He yelled with the rest. That was the advantage of being shriven—you could join the Communist sing" (169).

Mailer likens this linguistic process to the rhetoric of advertising and, as one would expect from a writer so intertwined with the possibilities of language, is depressed by the possibilities for intellectual liberation that are lost amongst the quagmire of reductive discourse. As he observes the morass of signs and placards at the protest, replete with acronyms and monosyllabic identities, he mourns for lost opportunity, replaced as it is by simplicity and stunted rationalization: "it was more that the Novelist begrudged the dimming of what was remarkable in the best of these young men because some

part of their nervous system would have to attach vision and list and dreams of power, glory, justice, sacrifice and future purchase on heaven to these deadening letters" (106).

The most redolent term of this passage, "deadening," comments on the reduction of language and the media's role in perpetuating declining intellectual courage followed by society's consequent moribund division. Instead of limitless and humane paradox, Mailer sees only the rise of certainties, fixed moral absolutes and stagnant, polarised stability. His symbolic journey from the demonstration to his prison dwelling, passing through "shopping streets" (166) full of "kids" (166) with "blank faces" (166) witnesses something of an anti-epiphany as his worst fears for society are confirmed by the dreary spectacle of lifeless suburbia.

> A part of him had always tried to believe that the America he saw in family television dramas did not exist, had no power—as of course he knew it did—to direct the styles and manners and therefore the ideas of America . . . ideas like conformity, cleanliness, America-is-always-right. (167)

Ironically, this doomed half of America, sated by consumerism and sedated by the flickering screen is comparable with their dogmatically obsessive opponents of the Old Left and their equally restrictive political discourse. Perhaps there is more melancholy in Mailer's attack on them as their delusion is the death of a once heralded progressive intellectual tangent. The optimistic energy of initial activism is sapped by circular argument, ego and the supine belief in "the-sound-as-brickwork-logic-of-the-next-step" (96). The romance of the pre-war labor movement has dissipated, replaced by in-fighting and power broking between interested parties. All the while, the ominous beast that is governmental and media power has assumed totalitarian control ensuring that the emancipating activities of the Old Left have meant nothing more than the rights of man to watch television. Mailer's satire of Old Left's once proud discourse is withering in its rebuttal of supposed anti-authoritarianism.

> The labour movement lifted the country and carried it to a field of plenty, but it was a football field where professionals played and America watched on Sunday full of Peace before the rainbow

> of the colour set, feeling Justice when their side won, knowing Equality since everybody presumably had an unimpeded view of his own set, and Freedom in abundance for a man could always turn his set off. (97)

While the Old Left rage at one another and the rest of America stupefies in suburbia, the real enemy, the real *Moloch* (to borrow from Ginsberg) acts with impunity in its drive to narcotize the public, to render them unable to suspect or engage with the complex and ultimately nefarious activities of those holding economic and legislative power. Mailer's depiction of a country left in a tranquil slump by television suggests the carefully orchestrated dishonesty of a totalitarian regime: "The authority had operated on their brain with commercials, and washed their brain with packaged education, packaged politics. The authority had presented itself as honourable, and it was corrupt, corrupt as payola on television" (98).

Division is safeguarded by authority's deception, encouraging reductive polarization between constructed political camps. Mailer fears that the divide is irreversible, that "all of history may be lost" (169) and that engagement with complexity is now unthinkable. Naturally challenging issues such as policy or public morality are reduced to easily digestible "packaged" form. Even Mailer, for all of his noble antagonism toward the power of the mass media, happily concedes that he too is needy if its ability to communicate ideas to the populace as evidenced by his contrived attempts at arrest in front of the ever-present cameras; an event cautiously planned and considered a "situation to study" (142).

Division is all too plainly evident in the theoretical machinations of either side of the Vietnam argument. Argument itself becomes the topic of Mailer's discontentedness in the chapter knowingly entitled *Why Are We in Vietnam?*[6] Mailer offers his own subjective explanation of the nature of polarized argument in which opposition is considered primary to intellectual content; as prefaced by the final words of the preceding chapter: "Let us hope the argument is not too long, for then like most arguments it would merely be repeating a point already made, amassing new facts to shore polemical walls not buttressed sufficiently by the pouring of the first facts" (192).

Thus, Mailer undermines assumed authority and breaks apart the rhetorical validity of argumentation itself. Nuanced and reasoned engagement with all angles of the debate is secondary to Mailer's insistence that any claims

regarding certitude are rendered impotent by the fact that argument is inherently fallible. The chapter mocks the polarities of the "doves" and "hawks" (192) and their relentless determination to "pick at the seed" (194) of their opponents' reasoning. After a lengthy recounting of both sides' moral and philosophical manoeuvring, Mailer's frustration with their one-sidedness is communicated in stark terms that juxtapose the convoluted nature of debate itself: "Mailer was bored with such arguments. The Hawks were smug and self-righteous; the Doves were evasive of the real question" (196).

Mailer's negative appraisal of cosseted simplicity would be futile if left without some suggestion of alternative. It is testament to his understanding of his own art form that this solution comes not in further absolutism or posturing argument but in the manipulation of genre. The subtitle of the text, "History as a novel: The novel as history" and the generic boundary between *Book One* and *Book Two* foregrounds Mailer's attempt to question the validity of any text which claims factual authority or objective moral absolutism. The writer's participation in *real* events (in that there was indeed an anti-war demonstration on the date provided) is brought to the reader through the creative filters of experience and overt subjectivity. A strangely satisfying confusion swells around the narration in which the reader cannot be sure if the text is intended as historiography, mock-heroic prose or personal polemic; when in fact it's all of these in equal measure. Mailer's insistence is that the written word is as ambiguous and fraught with contradiction as any other avenue of debate and that, rather than retreating from confusion, the complexity should be welcomed as call to engagement. Jason Mosser's analysis of Mailer's use of genre declares that the text is "ultimately open ended, ambiguous and suggestive, qualities Mailer again associates with fiction; [he] illumines questions about the future of the embattled Republic without drawing definitive conclusions" (308).

Mosser's comments assert that Mailer's stylistic and generic choices are thematic in themselves. As an encouragement to engage with complexity there is no better approach than to demonstrate the futility of searching absolutes. He continues by claiming that Mailer's readers are cajoled into a position in which they "understand that the writer's perspective is determined by his personality and ideological biases" (311). Once Mailer has achieved this objective he can assert that the honesty of his overt subjectivity is not one matched by textual sources that claim to have at their heart factual absolutes or neutrality. In essence, he asserts that that a relativist approach to

textual content is the only manner in which to avoid reductive simplicity. The process itself may be absurd and frustratingly futile but at its heart dwells a heroic intellectualism, as Mailer makes the choice, in the words of Morris Dickstein, to "descend . . . textually into the thick of battle" (119).

Having already established that argument only offers division, Mailer also identifies the divisive quality of constructed intellectual barriers between competing narrative genres. Initially, Mailer's separation of his own work into "novel" and "history" suggests a clear demarcation of subjective perception and factual reportage. Indeed the register of the text in *Book Two* becomes less playful in its textual experimentation and more focussed upon chronological detail with the voluminous voice of the author mostly relegated to that of a distant and academic historian. However, as the second section of the text progresses, the reader becomes aware that this is in fact a mischievous subversion of textual tradition and of predicted reader response to changes in register. In the sixth chapter of *Book Two*, revealingly entitled "A Palette of Tactics," Mailer comes clean, conceding that, "the conceit one is writing history must be relinquished" (267). This frank and intrusive admission jolts the reader from their expectations of this section of the novel (for that it what we now realize we are reading). Just as he has done with the language of the mass media and persuasive sloganeering, he goes on to scrape away the veneer of authenticity painted on historiography's surface.

> the difficulty is that the history is interior—no documents can give sufficient intimation: the novel must replace history at precisely that point where experience is sufficiently emotional, spiritual, psychical, moral existential or supernatural to expose the fact that the historian in pursuing the experience would be obliged to quit the clearly demarcated limits of historic inquiry. (268)

It is an argument that contains future echoes of Lyotard's writing in *The Postmodern Condition* and *The Differend* on the conflicts of genre. Lyotard—like Mailer a skilled practitioner in using the technicalities of genre[7] itself to demonstrate and undermine a reader's textual presumptions—identifies the restrictions between "genres of discourse" in terms of hi or her codified stylistic rules and their semantic purpose. For Lyotard, the novel and historiography traditionally resist one another in that one creatively denotes while

the other offers detached, empirical reportage. Historiography's objective claims toward recounting the solidity of the past events are identified as a crisis in narrative, one that Lyotard grapples with in *The Differend:* "Its finality is to come to an end . . . its term makes sense and retroactively organises the recounted events. The narrative function is redeeming in itself. It acts as if the occurrence . . . could come to a completion, or as if there were a last word" (131).

As Simon Malpas identifies, Lyotard's famed *incredulity* extends to any notion of historical narrative and claims to unquestionable authority: "we can't continue to organise experience around the idea of universal history: universal history and the ideas of humanity, knowledge and emancipation that accompany it are no longer possible" (75).

Lyotard's work reflects that of Mailer's in that authenticity can only be approached by a paradoxical recognition of its inherent artifice. Those that brandish absolutist arguments supported by the bold notes of historical accuracy are, in Mailer's eyes, deceived by the narrative techniques of professed impartiality or, to refer to Lyotard once more the codes inherent in established *genres of discourse.* To identify doubt in the pages of accepted historical narrative is not, as one may assume, depressing and dislocating; it is actually intellectual liberation. If Mailer matters it is because he wants to celebrate confusion, plurality and subjectivity as a means to debate. Rather than close oneself off in the safety of polarized, unshakable morality, he asks that we see the inherent contradictions of self and carry them into the grand arenas of intellectual jousting.

It seems unlikely that a text borne out of an iconic moment of the 1960s in Washington DC can provide illumination for the crisis of interpretation of a twenty-first century event in the cities of England. However, there are distinctive correlations to be drawn from Mailer's commentary, particularly as we in the UK were faced with our own version of *doves* and *hawks* in the guise of the *vicious Right* and the *simpering Left.* They too "picked at the seeds" of their opponents' stance and played to the frothing, sensationalist expectations of the mass media. Our country was also divided and stupefied by the imperative to take a side; those of us loitering in the middle ground were soon ushered one way or another and told to either condemn or sympathise with the perpetrators of social unrest. We dutifully cheered at the deservedly punitive judicial sentences handed out to a never ending line of hooded menaces or, alternatively, wept at the uncaring legal systems

buckling to public mood as they unfairly incarcerated innocent victims of economic deprivation; it all depended upon whose side you were on. What was certainly absent was a figure willing to put their head above the parapet and ask that we all admit that we *just don't know* and that life is always more complicated than we are comfortable with. A person that is willing to admit to his or her own fallibility and that, just as anyone else, he or she will never have the authority to offer an absolute answer. We need such a figure whenever global or national events leave us spinning and eager to cling onto any explanation that will offer us sanctuary in simplicity. Mailer matters because without him we inhabit the cozy myopia of such simplicity rather than forcing our eyes uncomfortably open as we engage with our most human of qualities: complexity.

NOTES

1. Cameron's initial reaction to the unrest was to become the ideological focus of both his Conservative Party and for members of the public angered by violence and eager for strong punitive action against those involved. http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/crime/8690819/London-riots-David-Cameron-says-police-must-be-more-robust.html
2. Pearce—a resident of Hackney, one of the areas worst hit by unrest—became famous for her vehement and spontaneous response to the riots captured, as so much was, on film and posted to YouTube. For the Left, she became a totem of reason, for the Right, another example of apologist hand-wringing. http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/dec/18/pauline-pearce-faces-2011–riots
3. The political climate of the UK added to the national mood of moral and intellectual uncertainty in that the Coalition government is itself something of a paradox. Two parties, the Liberal Democrats and Conservatives, that espoused opposing political stances prior to 2010's General Election were now expected to communicate a coherent response to social unrest when their positions on the public spectrum would indicate conflict.
4. *Newspeak* is chillingly described in Orwell's mock historical appendix as, "a medium of expression . . . to make all other modes of thought impossible . . . a heretical thought . . . should be literally unthinkable" (312).
5. This brings Derrida into the argument, in particular his commentary on the attractiveness of binaries in Western thought. K. Malcolm Richards summarizes Derrida's preoccupation with the veracity with which the West takes to binary *différance* by identifying his "distrust of systems seeking to bring a singular interpretation to a field of theoretical inquiry" (7).
6. The title of Mailer's stylistically adventurous novel (1967) which challenges the expectations of its readers by only mentioning the conflict in its final sentence.
7. Both of the texts mentioned play with the formal properties of genre as a commentary on a reader's relationship with text. As Malpas states: "it is just as important to pay attention to the way he writes as it is to understand what is written about" (16).

WORKS CITED

Baym, Nina, Jerome Klinkowitz, and Patricia B. Wallace, eds. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. Volume E, Literature since 1945. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2007. Print.

Cowart, David. "Norman Mailer: Like a Wrecking Ball from Outer Space." *Critique* 51.2 (2010): 159–67. Print.

Dickstein, Morris. "How Mailer Became 'Mailer': The Writer as Private and Public Character." *The Mailer Review* 1.1 (2007): 118–31. Print.

Goffman, Erving, Charles C. Lemert, and Ann Branaman, eds. *The Goffman Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1997. Print.

Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1988. Print.

Lyotard, Jean-François, et al. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1984. Print.

McCombs, Maxwell E., and Donald L. Shaw. "The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 36.2 (1972): 176–87. Print.

Mailer, Norman. *An American Dream*. London: Andre Deutsch Limited, 1965. Print.

_____. *The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel; the Novel as History*. London: Penguin, 1968. Print.

_____. *The Executioner's Song*. London: Vintage, 1979. Print.

_____. *The Naked and the Dead*. London: Harper Collins, 1948. Print.

_____. *Why Are We in Vietnam?* New York: Piccador, 1967. Print.

Malpas, Simon. *Jean-Francois Lyotard*. London: Routledge, 2003. Print.

Mosser, Jason. "Genre-Bending in the Armies of the Night." *The Mailer Review* 3.1 (2009): 307–21. Print.

Orwell, George. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. London: Penguin, 2000. Print.

Richards, Kevin Malcolm. *Derrida Reframed: A Guide for the Arts Student*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2008. Print.