"NOW THE GREATEST LIVING ROMANTIC WAS DEAD": NORMAN MAILER AND MARY HEMINGWAY'S EULOGIES TO ERNEST HEMINGWAY

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> To say of someone that he is a romantic thinker or a romantic hero is not to say nothing. Sometimes it is to say that what he is or does requires to be explained in terms of a purpose, or a cluster of purposes (perhaps internally contradictory, or a vision, or perhaps glimpses or intimations, which may point towards some state or activity that is in principle unrealizable . . . . (vii)
>
> Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*

> Cicero says that to philosophize is nothing else but to prepare for death. This is because study and contemplation draw our soul out of us to some extent and keep it busy outside the body; which is a sort of apprenticeship and semblance of death. (56)
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> Michel de Montaigne, "That to Philosophize Is to Learn How to Die" in *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*

I. INTRODUCTION

Early in the morning of Sunday, July 2, 1961 in Boise, Idaho, Ernest Hemingway died of a self-inflicted double-barreled shotgun blast to the head. His yearning for exploring unbounded territories reached its unattained

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end. The roaring lion of American letters fell silent on that day, forever. Much that he had experienced in his life would now remain indefinable and perhaps ineffable. Yet two defiant voices rose plaintively but strongly after that fateful morning. They questioned the manner of Hemingway's death and advanced their own theories on his last moments among us. The voices belonged to his widow, Mary, and Norman Mailer and they were intuitive and consequential. What I shall have to say in this brief essay concerns these two loyal voices. What the voices conveyed was highly sensitive and had perceptive consequences. In my mind, the philosophical and metaphysical implications of their utterances approximate the elegiac in intention and tone. This was particularly so in Mailer's case, who made a passionate effort to envision Hemingway's death as the man's restless habitual practice of simulating suicide with a shotgun gone wrong.

In retrospect, Mary's original statement laid the initiatory ground of intuitive doubt about her husband's suicide as an accident. Later Mailer burst through the conventional notions of suicide by extending Mary's intuitive doubt into an interpretive response to the circumstances of Hemingway's death. Clearly, Mary and Mailer had distinct relationships with Hemingway as man and writer but, just the same, they both truly cared for him in their singular ways. And despite their unique styles of thinking, it would seem to me, after Hemingway's departure Mary and Mailer shared similar "moods" about the event. The phenomenon of mood is of relevance to our present purposes. Mood, as a way of being, opens up an accommodating space of its own between the individual human being and the environing world. It occupies an intermediate zone between the self and the non-self, provisionally stitching them together. Mood accommodates the intensities of our specific states of what German philosopher Martin Heidegger calls "being-in-the-world." Subsequent to her husband's death, what Mary faced was the genuine reality of a mood of sorrow. Later, Mailer, too, found himself in a comparable mood as a fellow writer, regarding Hemingway's death as a blow for the many who believed in him as the embodiment of the courage *to be*. Each of our moods has its own distinctive *texture* and *feel* to it, as it were, because it possesses emotional structures of its own, which powerfully produces its affective aftershocks as a series of novel cognitions and recognitions. What a mood reveals is of considerable existential importance and leads to its own characteristic understanding and knowledge, which in turn become conscious and affect our perception, thinking and judgment.

As Heidegger discerned it, one's mood involves the intentionality, that is, purposefulness of our lived experience. The intentional structures of the mood enable us to direct ourselves toward the world we inhabit and attempt to embrace it in a unified protective manner. Our moods emerge in a halfway zone of interaction between our intentional conscious self and the non-self, not entirely belonging to either one. Mary's initial statement, declaring her husband's suicide accidental and Mailer's subsequent more detailed and intricate remarks were effects of providing a voice to the promptings that surfaced from the depths of their grief. Traditionally, dirges and eulogies would have expressed such feelings prompted by genuine grief. Both Mary and Mailer made a case for a certain sense of *reality*, as they perceived or imagined it. They did so through the particularity of their own mood in reaction to Hemingway leaving us in the fashion he did. They defended this mood reality as an attitude, a position toward the factual that would put its sovereignty in question in the manner that the use of subjunctive mood in grammar does so effectively.

Thus, at different times, Mary and Mailer tried to come to grips with the *truth* of Hemingway's death, as they saw it. They reached deep down into their own specific mood of disappointment and sorrow, which made manifest its own lived emotional experience and dictated an intervention. The tragic truth of the writer's death came through for each of them as a form of refusal of his suicide as an unquestionable voluntary act. *Premeditated*, yes; voluntary, doubtful. It was a noncompliance with the facile understanding as preunderstanding of a simple act of willful self-destruction. For Mary and Mailer the uncertainties that rule the balance between chance and necessity, voluntary and involuntary, intentional and unintentional, all comprised the intricate web of an alternative reality of the manner of how Hemingway died. However briefly, Mary considered her husband a knight slain by the ineradicable opaqueness of the accidental in our everyday experiences as we face the ever-present possibility of death. The upshot of her way of thinking, perhaps an exercise of a mode of sympathetic magic or a ritual of wish fulfillment, was the emergence of a space for reflection on her husband's death. It allows one to consider and articulate Hemingway's death and disappearance as an "event."

Here, by "event" I wish to convey a phenomenon that intervenes and interrupts the given here-and-now situation as a given. French philosopher Alain Badiou comprehends "event" as a spacetime entity or situation as we

find it; but he endows it with a spontaneous subjective and coextensive human dimension that transforms it. As such, an event possesses multiple structural and structuring elements that enable it to become an "interpretive intervention" (*Being and Event* 181). Extreme circumstances tend to resist speech. They often make us dumbstricken. As a result, Mary's initial interpretive statement and Mailer's later comments concerning Hemingway's death were noteworthy events. It turned the situation of Hemingway's death into the subject of a series of intuitive and speculative interventions. In their totality, such "interpretive interventions" set up a considerable hermeneutic of Hemingway's premature death. Hemingway, a man engraved on our mind by language, was now forever beyond the terrain where he so solidly belonged. He could offer no justification of his final act, one way or the other. He was speechless, and would remain so forever. That speechlessness primarily deprived us of his presence among us as a splendid practitioner of the language arts. All the same, Mary and Mailer's dissenting voices and their nonconformity to the prevalent notions of suicide gave Hemingway a voice from beyond the grave. They *intended* to disclose a truth of their own about his death rather than acceptance of it as a story foretold. And they did. They pronounced it accidental. So Hemingway had an accident. So shall we all.

I think that Mary initially and Mailer later attempted to imagine that Hemingway died as one of his own characters, say, Robert Jordan might have died. Did young Jordan die from internal bleeding? Did Lieutenant Berrendo capture him or shoot him to death where he lay on the pine needle floor of the forest? Each reader of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, according to their imagination, understanding of the novel, and general culture of reading, could have chosen one of those speculative scenarios. In their melancholy twilit world of what one may justifiably consider as cosmic anguish, Mary and Mailer decided Hemingway's death did indicate more complexity than a merely straightforward *voluntary* act of suicide. For one may claim that suicide is so psychologically constituted as to happen at once as a predetermined and freely chosen act. Thus Mary and Mailer both couched their statements and reflections about Hemingway's death within the ancient and venerable tradition of memorial rites, emphasizing how one ought to remember the departed. It represented a moment that demanded reflection and respect for them.

From a certain point of view, even Mary's concealment of the exact manner of her husband's demise—if concealment it were—disclosed a different

reality rather than a clear-cut lie. Her utterances rose from the experience of a nearly inexpressible reality, which resonated in a different register rather than unadulterated rationality and logic. One can call such reality a form of hyper-reality rather than nonreality. Perhaps this was even more so for Mailer than Mary. For Mailer, the loss of Hemingway's death opened up a completely new way of reconstructing the event as a metaphysical reality, requiring a qualitatively different language to express it.

Hence, prompted by distinct reasons, Hemingway's death brought Mary and Mailer closer together in genuine moments of lived experiences of grief, which induced imaginative epiphanies for both. The shared element in their responses was the forlorn light of a permanent void that would not easily fade away. Bathed in that light, one could detect a contemplative opening into a melancholy death as a solitary but intentional rebellion.

II. MARY'S STATEMENTS AFTER HEMINGWAY'S DEATH

> How does it go in Spanish? *Un callejón sin salida.* A passageway with no exit. I suppose I could go through with it [death] all right. You only have to do it once and it is soon over with.
>
> —Ernest Hemingway. *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (305)

What Mailer's highly imaginative reflections tell us is not only touching as a eulogy to Hemingway, they are also of considerable speculative philosophical and metaphysical consequences. Let us, nonetheless, begin by Mary's statements because they had preceded Mailer's meditations. In retrospect, they provide a general introductory perspective on Mailer's later reflections. No doubt, Mary must have continued to feel the strong effects of Hemingway's death and disappearance as a disembodied sort of presence in her life, as he has been for some of his ardent readers, scholars, and critics as well. Perhaps she even sensed his presence as more powerful in his permanent absence.[1] As we have seen, immediately after her husband's ostensible suicide, she pronounced it "accidental." She later explained, "Not consciously lying, I told the press that the shooting had been accidental. It was months before I could face the reality" (*How It Was* 503). The reality that took months to dawn on her was that there was a consensus that her husband had voluntarily taken his own life. Her first intuitive judgment of his death as accidental must have later seemed to her erroneous at best or an outright

refusal to accept the empirical reality of his death as suicide. Briefly put, she later thought she had indulged in a falsehood, and dealt with nonreality. In either case, she did not deem it a *conscious* lie. Therefore, her initial interpretation of the empirical reality of her husband's suicide appeared to her to be the result of a case of dissociation under duress. She had simply refused to believe in the *intentionality* of her husband's final act. She had had doubts about the inherence of his shooting himself in the head as a conscious, freely chosen, voluntary act.

One may attribute the interpretive twist Mary gave to her initial statement about the indeterminacy of her husband's death to a mood caused by the severity of her experience of loss and grief and a sincere sense of loyalty to a man who was no longer there to defend himself. However, it would be somewhat questionable to assert that her interpretive claim that "the shooting was accidental" was an outright lie, or the expression of a kind of impossibility and therefore a nonreality. Within the general perspective of lived experiential reality rather than the absolute reality of sense perception, Mary's first account of her husband's accidental shooting death would not automatically and categorically fall beyond the domain of alternative possibilities. After all, it had happened while she was sleeping. Clearly, she had been aware of Hemingway's suicidal tendencies in the final year and months of his life and actual attempts at taking his life in the months before his demise. But in her grief-stricken mood, she might still have felt her characterization of his death as an accident justifiable. Because one could still have considered Hemingway's final act as an unexpected and unfortunate *situation* that became an *event*—or so I believe.

In my view, in her grief Mary placed the event of her husband's suicide in the open-ended context of the indeterminate and accidental rather than a predetermined action with dire consequences. In the terminology of philosopher and linguist John L. Austin, Mary performed a specific "speech act," which generally falls into the purlieu of an "illocutionary act," "giving some information or an assurance" (*How to Do Things with Words* 98). However, as Austin reminds us, an "illocutionary act" may also "produce certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience" (101). Mary's statements precisely fall at the intersection of the crossover within Austin's two interrelated illocutionary acts. One may speculate that the overlapping nature of the effects of her statements would have pleased her husband no end as a novelist. In a self-interview, at the end of *How It*

Was, to the question, "You say you're a reporter. But you don't report your feelings?'" Mary replied, "'If events are properly reported, the reactions should be implied'" (535). On the following page, her answer to the question, "'How did you sustain the trauma of Ernest's suicide?'" partially was, "'First it was remembering how to breathe in and out'" (536). That leads us to the kernel of her first statement we have been discussing. All literary works produce such speech act crossovers to get beyond the literal to the connotative. For Mary initially stated the inherent ambiguities of existential circumstances and their serious but essentially accidental implications and consequences. Rather than viewing her husband's action as an intentional, willful act of suicide, Mary regarded it as accidental. Clearly, she intended to make a statement of fact, as she grasped it at the time and made it her own. It provided straightforward informative statement of fact and assurance from her viewpoint.

In that sense, I would suggest Mary's first account of her husband's demise offered a maximally succinct, indeed terse, but at once nuanced eulogy to her dead husband. Perhaps it articulated the briefest veiled public eulogy her husband would have received in the devastating circumstances after his death in which she uttered them. It initiated a hermeneutic discourse that still stirs the imagination of Hemingway's readers and critics. The French refer to it as *oraison funèbre* (funeral oration), a hymnal eulogy practiced in the seventeenth century as a literary genre. Its most famous practitioner was a French Bishop, orator and historian: Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet (1627-1704). His collection of *Les Oraison funèbres* is a classic.

I am certain that the Bishop would not have approved of Mary's statements being qualified as *oraison funèbre.* He would not have considered it either literary enough or sufficient in length. But I would imagine that Hemingway, the novelist, well known as the nemesis of the ornamental and flowery baroque utterances, oral or scriptural, would have found it valiant and stylistically appropriate. His own unadorned style occasionally bordered on the hymnal, the elegiac, and the panegyric in lexically and syntactically simple language. Mary clearly couched the account of the manner of her husband's violent death as directly, concisely and yet as openly plurisignificant as she could. She omitted much of what she knew so that the listeners or the readers would be able to imagine and feel the hidden sorrow more profoundly. They would then reflect upon it, and interpret it according to the measure of their own knowledge and understanding of extremis and its im-

plications. That, too, would have pleased Hemingway, who believed in reader response theory of literature.

III. MAILER'S REFLECTIONS ON HEMINGWAY'S DEATH AS A MAN AND WRITER

> "When asked what he [infant Ernest Hemingway] is afraid of," wrote Grace [his mother], "he shouts out *fraid a nothing*, with great gusto." His aspiration was to be taken for a man.
>
> —Carlos Baker, *Ernest Hemingway: A Life Story* (5)

> When we examine what we should say when, what words we should use in what situations, we are looking again not merely at words (or 'meanings', whatever they may be) but also at the realities we use the words to talk about: we are using a sharpened awareness of words to sharpen our perception of, though not as the final arbiter, of the phenomena. (182)
>
> —John L. Austen, "A Plea for Excuses" in *Philosophical Papers*

Subsequent to Mary's brief oral statements came Mailer's textual reflections, and they were more extensive and incisive. Mailer was authoritative and lucid in what he wrote about Hemingway's suicide. His approach to the subject was imaginative, radical, provocative, articulate, and trenchant as he had always been in his best essays. He went far beyond Mary's statements, which logically served as introductory to his own views on Hemingway as man and writer and the metaphysics of his way of ending his life. Mailer was often exceedingly original and inspired as he made forays into yet unknown spiritual and affective territories of Hemingway's psyche. His language remained concise and measured, if melancholic. His comments on the event of Hemingway's death approximated a series of metaphysical pursuits for a deeper interpretive venture. Again, I use "event" in the sense that Badiou has given it: a transformation of spacetime characteristics of a given situation through human intervention. In this sense, an event now acquires its own particular features, causes, and effects, which transcend the situation. From this vantage point, Mailer's characterization of Hemingway as the questing knight of twentieth century American literature, going on terrain-oriented metaphysical reconnaissance missions is a brilliant exercise of figurative speech. It exemplifies the best of his imaginative critical insights in his essays.

In December of 1962, in one of his *Esquire* columns, "The Big Bite," Mailer questioned the manner of Hemingway's death as voluntary suicide. "I wonder if it is possible Ernest Hemingway was not a suicide." he wrote, "It may be said he took his life, but I wonder if the deed were not more like a reconnaissance from which he did not come back" (*Presidential Papers of Norman Mailer* 104). It is an extraordinary reflection. Choosing the verb "wonder" casts doubt on Hemingway's suicide by making it comparable to being on a reconnaissance mission.

If successful, such reconnaissance intimates an inkling of how it feels to be in the proximity of death and, at least provisionally, staring it down—a maximally daring pursuit of a transcendental lived experience of ultimate "courage under pressure." If the defiant act fails, all too obviously, there is no return from such a deliberately chosen mission. It is similar to playing the potentially lethal game of Russian roulette, exploring the terrain of possibility and of an encounter with the absolute unknown, indeed the *unknowable*. The fatal human intervention in such a situation alters the temporal dimension of human existence into the eternal.

What Mailer wondered about was the likelihood of an intuitive interpretation of the reality of altered consciousness, which would allow the extreme experience of facing one's mortality, exploring its ground of emergence as it soars up in the psyche and acquires its own organization, coordinates, logic, and effects. Mailer's imagination, as a novelist, enables him to conjure up a clearing where one might find much that is of true significance through the ultimate act of bravery. The quality of Mailer's language reminds me of the English philosopher Peter Winch's comment:

> Reality is not what gives language sense. What is real and what is unreal shows itself in the sense language has. Further, both the distinction between the real and the unreal and the concept of agreement with reality themselves belong to our language." (*Ethic and Action* 12)

In that sense, Mailer's intimation that Hemingway might have been attempting to reconnoiter the territory where death's everlasting mystery unfolds into eternity is a tough but robust way to initiate a series of speculative notions. Such speculations would involve matters at the same time existential, psychological and metaphysical, because it brings to the fore the dreaded

negation of our consciousness and the embrace of the void and oblivion. By implication, Mailer situates the void as a lived experience within the richness of conscious life. He highlights this void as a part of life we need to be aware of to live fully. As Badiou points out, "The void of a situation is the suture to its being" (*Being and Event* 526).

In a general way, the initial sentence "I wonder if it is possible Ernest Hemingway was not a suicide" is an "illocutionary act" as Austin would have called it. In this sentence, Mailer is wondering, that is, contemplating and probing; but he is not offering a true or false statement. As Mary had done before him, he is merely making an interrogative statement that suggests a new and different way to look at an accepted opinion. Mailer's speculation emerges from the mental act of wondering, from which most of our genuine inquiries and discoveries come forth. I would find it reasonable to say that the experience of wonder precedes all new modes of thought and their consequent epistemology and hermeneutics. In this context, the substantive thought should evoke the signification French language gives it as *pensée*, denoting the whole processes of thinking as a whole as well as "thought." To wonder, in its triple sense of to be curious, to doubt, and to engage in particular mental activities, goes against preunderstanding, prejudgment, as preconceived notions; in short, prejudices. The combination of the wonder and awe create a weird mixture of contrary emotions, running the gamut from inspiration and admiration to downright fear. Of necessity, from the depths of the wonderful and the awesome also rise acts of description, elucidation and eventually articulation and construal of a new way of perceiving, thinking, and knowing. The ensemble of these critical activities produces theoretically endless new narratives, which carry in them the possibilities of their own critiques.

Correspondingly, I would characterize Mailer's act of wondering about Hemingway's suicide as the original moment of a new critical attitude toward the writer he often previously had begrudgingly admired and had occasionally criticized. It would appear his wondering constituted a different logos for him. Here by logos I have in mind the multiplicity of its etymological meanings as an assortment of discourses, accounts, pleas, opinions, and their corresponding mythos. The newly discovered logos helped Mailer to estimate Hemingway differently and arrive at a new esteem for him. In his essays, I believe, Mailer practiced modified Kantian formulations of explication (*Erklärung*) and clarification or enlightenment (*Aufklärung*) by

repeated acts of autocriticism. From this time forth, his observations on Hemingway and his explications of his views of autocritique became most instructive too. In their entirety, his comments on Hemingway opened up a completely new horizon of helpful critical reevaluations.

IV. ENTERING THE NO MAN'S LAND BETWEEN BEING AND NOTHINGNESS

> It is uncertain where death awaits us; let us await it everywhere. Premeditation of death is premeditation of freedom. He who has learned how to die has unlearned how to be a slave. Knowing how to die frees us from all subjection and constraints. (60)
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> —Michel de Montaigne, "To Philosophize is to Learn How to die" in *Complete Essays of Michel de Montaigne*

From the "I" at the center of subjectivity and the sense of wonder within it fanning the flames of awe, Mailer introduced a speculative mode of inquiry into the manner of Hemingway's death. He offered a kind of imaginative psycho-metaphysical post-mortem, as it were. He then attempted to support it as methodical doubt: I wonder; therefore, there are possibilities. In its methodology, it is perhaps similar but not identical to Cartesian doubt. It attempts to show how the last morning of Hemingway's life might have unfolded otherwise than we perceive it. Mailer wrote in "The Big Bite":

> I wonder if, morning after morning he did not go downstairs, secretly in the dawn, set the base of the loaded shotgun on the floor, put the muzzle to his mouth, and press his thumb into the trigger. There is a no-man's-land in each trigger. For the dull hand it is a quarter of an inch. A professional hunter can feel to the division of a millimeter the point where the gun can go off. He can move the trigger up to that point yet not fire the gun. Hemingway was not too old to test this skill. (*PPNM* 104)

First, Mailer draws our attention to a "no man's land" in the trigger of a shotgun, a sober statement of a technical fact. Nevertheless, he intends this factual statement to carry a series of negative connotations. It mentions land, a piece of terra firma, which in this specific case is anything but firm as no man's land. Unclaimed, uninhabited and empty, "no man's land" designates a territory between hostile forces; so it inspires unpredictability and there-

fore anxiety. Being within the "no man's land" of a gun's trigger is tantamount to the possibility of altering a situation into a dreadful irreversible event: accidental death. However, being able to bear the uncertainty of living in such life-threatening territory is also bearing witness to one's lived experience of audaciousness in facing death, divesting oneself of a crippling fear that clutches at the heart. Mailer acknowledges Hemingway's well-known practical knowledge of firearms and grants him the power and the calmness to exploit the no-man's-land of his shotgun trigger. It tests not so much Hemingway's skill but his mettle in tempting and staring down the fates and reestablishing psychophysical health and stability. According to Mailer, the result would be maximal freedom in keeping the existential dread in abeyance.

As a writer, Mailer goes on to deftly avail himself of another factual narrative whose logic, however, makes itself known in imaginal spacetime, which has assuredly a creative reality of its own. He suggests that

> Perhaps he [Hemingway] was trying the deed a first time, perhaps he had tried just such a reconnaissance one hundred times before, and felt the touch of health return ninety times, ninety respectable times when he dared to press the trigger far into the zone where the shot could go. If he did it well, he could come close to death without dying. On that particular morning in July, it is not impossible he said (because the curiosity could be that indeed he talked to himself the way he talked in his books), Look, we could go in further. It's going to be tricky and we may not get out, but it will be good for us if we go in just a little further, so we have to try, and now we will. (*PPNM* 105)

A novelist of imaginative powers as well as a man of reflection and intellection, Mailer attempts to reconstruct the last moments of Hemingway's life. Looking at it from within his own intuitive grid and coordinates, Mailer makes a daring foray into Hemingway's psyche, believing that it had an extremely unusual but coherent logic of its own. From his own standpoint, Mailer probes and, I believe, gains insights into the ultimate nature of Hemingway's suicide. He takes a chance and tries to locate within the very psychical site of Hemingway's purported suicide an event, which has its own remarkable rationale and narrative discourse. Mailer puts forth the idea of

a habitual and potentially lethal transcendent action by Hemingway, intended to be life-enhancing by vivifying the senses as it negates the oppressive presence of what Søren Kierkegaard's regarded as "fear and trembling unto death." As I understand it, Mailer's reasoning is that on the fateful July morning Hemingway needed more courage than ever before to face the day. So he took greater chances than usual in his death-defying rituals. According to Mailer, what Hemingway was after on that fateful day was to cheat the fear of death of its dominance by getting to defy it more fiercely through maximal proximity. He must have agreed with Michel de Montaigne, whose essays he knew, who advised:

> Let us learn to meet it [death] steadfastly and to combat it. And to begin to strip it from its greatest advantage against us, let us take an entirely different way from the usual one. Let us rid of it of its strangeness, come to know it and get used to it (*The Complete Essays of Montaigne* 60)

That is as cogent and concise as Hemingway's and Mailer's own statements. Furthermore, because suicide still tends to reside in an opaque domain of the psyche, oscillating between premeditation as well as an eventual accidental act, making a decision on its ultimate intentionality always remains murky and troublesome. To me, this contradictory voluntary/involuntary dichotomy in the suicidal impulse does not negate its fundamentally self-destructive truth as a response to suffering. On the other hand, one may say suicide is, at least theoretically, subject to intervention and therefore wavers between psychical determinism and freedom.

As Mary had provisionally been before him, Mailer essentially was aware of the deeply dialectical nature of suicide. This gloomy dual existential relationship shapes up between the experiences of love of life, as the only thing we truly have, and occasionally unbearable pain that eventually renders life intolerable and absurd. The desire for self-annihilation on one hand and the passionate embrace of life on the other made suicide such a central point in Albert Camus' philosophy. For a considerably long time, it was so for Hemingway as well. One may state then that this life-and-death dialectic sustains itself to the last second of one's life, but still does not constitute a determinism, inherited or otherwise, as some critics have suggested. It would appear to me that the dialectical nature of suicide in Mailer's argument for Heming-

way's accidental death develops in the name of a higher ontology of lived experience in defiance of death, somewhere in-between the suture of being and the rupture of death and the void, to use Badiou's language once more. Philosophically, this way of thinking has an existentialist heritage, of which Hemingway was a literary avatar and Mailer an inheritor. Mailer never tired of affirming the notion that a veritably worthy life fulfills itself only in the proximity of violence and death. It is fair to say, that Hemingway lived his life in an experiential realization of the truth of that worthiness, giving it reality to the extent that he could by his actions, freely chosen and exuberantly carried out.

V. MAILER'S DEPICTION OF HEMINGWAY AS THE "GREATEST LIVING ROMANTIC"

> INTERVIEWER: Did it [Hemingway's suicide] compromise your sense of his courage?
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> MAILER: I hated to think that his death might do that. I came up with a thesis: Hemingway had learned early in life that the closer he came to daring death the healthier it was for him. He saw that as the great medicine, to dare to engage in a nearness to death. And so I had this notion that night after night when he was alone, after he said goodnight to Mary, Hemingway would go to his bedroom and he'd put his thumb on the shotgun trigger and put the barrel in his mouth and squeeze down on the trigger a little bit, and—trembling, shaking—he'd try to see how close he could come without having the thing go off. On the final night he went too far. That to me made more sense than him just deciding to blow it all to bits. However, it's nothing but a theory. The fact of the matter is that Hemingway committed suicide. (51)
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> —Norman Mailer, "The Art of Fiction No. 193"

In his own unique way, Mailer eulogized Hemingway as a fallen warrior, as I think Mary had done. He envisions Hemingway as a reconnaissance man who did not return from his last mission. Consequently, for Mailer Hemingway's final act implies the sum total of his daring covert missions into hostile territories in the dark night of the soul. In this specific case, reconnaissance amounts to nothing less than forays made into Shakespeare's

"The undiscovere'd country, from whose bourn/No traveller returns" (*Hamlet*, Act 3, Scene 1, 79–80). Mailer honors Hemingway in his own inimitable style.

At first glance, Mailer's interpretation of the manner of Hemingway's death may strike one as unwarranted and implausible speculation. Surprisingly, however, Hemingway in his own words offers credibility to Mailer's account of his death. During World War II, in a letter Hemingway wrote:

> I think there is a steady renewal of immortality through storms, attacks, landings on beaches where landing is opposed, flying, when there are problems and many other things which are all awful and horrible and hateful to those who are not suited to them. . . . These things make a katharis [sic] which is not a pathological thing, nor seeking after thrills, but it is an ennobling thing to those who are suited for them and have the luck so that they survive them. (Jeffrey Meyers 400-401)

Clearly, Hemingway found confronting death revitalizing and ennobling. Besides, there are also accounts of his inclination toward simulating suicide with his favorite twelve-gauge, double-barreled Boss shotgun. In his book *The Other Hemingway*, James Brasch quotes Hemingway's Cuban physician and close friend Dr. José Luis Herrera as recalling that Hemingway often "would take the posture in which he [eventually] killed himself. He killed himself with a shotgun, putting the barrel in his mouth and shooting with the big toe" (38).

Mailer was aware of Hemingway's perilous proclivities as the reverse side of his passionate love for a vigorous life. He pointed out in direct but elegiac tones:

> I think Ernest hated us by the end. He deprived us of his head. It does not matter so much whether it was suicide or an accident—one does not put a gun barrel in one's mouth, tickle the edge of an accident and fail to see that people will say it's suicide. Ernest, so proud of his reputation. So fierce about it. (*PPNM* 103)

More disturbingly, however, Mailer also implied that Hemingway's perilous pursuit of the truth of the human condition might have finally brought him face to face with intolerable horror. Mailer wrote:

> We learn the truth by giving away pieces of our tongue. When we know it all, there is no tongue left. Is it then that one rises at dawn for the black flirtation, slips downstairs, slips the muzzle into the mouth, cool gunmetal to balm the void of a lost tongue, and goes blasting off like a rocket. Here come I, eternity, cries Ernest, I trust you no longer. You must try to find me now, eternity. I am in little pieces. (*PPNM* 103)

These reflections set the parameters for Mailer's heuristics and hermeneutics of Hemingway's death. In his Noble Prize speech Hemingway observed that a writer does "his work alone and if he is a good enough writer he must face eternity, or the lack of it, each day" (*Ernest Hemingway: A Life Story* 528). On that July morning, as a writer he felt the urge to run hurriedly from facing eternity to embracing it. All the same, Mailer believed Hemingway's death was "awful. Say it. The most difficult death in America since Roosevelt. One has still not recovered from Hemingway's death. One may never" (*PPNM* 103).

In 1969, while writing *Of a Fire on the Moon*, Mailer still had Hemingway's death on his mind. He wrote, "Hemingway's suicide left him wedded to horror. It is possible that in the eight years since, he never had a day which was completely free of thoughts of death" (*Of a Fire on the Moon* 3). Mailer concluded, "He had, of course, been thinking that Hemingway constituted the walls of the fort: Hemingway had given the power to believe you could still shout down the corridor of the hospital, live next to the breath of the beast, accept your portion of dread each day. Now the greatest living romantic was dead. Dread was loose." It was conceivable that man was no longer ready to share the dread of the Lord (*Of a Fire on the Moon* 3). In the context of Mailer's theological perspective, the Devil, on the prowl among us as dread on the loose, foretold a deep sense of our separation from the Good Lord.

For Mailer, this portent had ominous consequences. He regarded Hemingway and Marilyn Monroe as America's mythical Adam and Eve. "Hemingway and Monroe," he brooded. "Pass lightly over their names.They were two of the people in America most beautiful to us" (*PPNM* 103). Now they

were both gone. There was Hemingway's exit in violent anger and haste. Then there was Monroe, who was "slipping away from us for years" who suddenly and altogether left us for good (*PPNM* 103). It did not bode well for Mailer's vision of "America the beautiful." All the same, his generous belief in the quasi-mystical promise inherent in his eulogies of them never wavered. He was not going to miss the chance to wish them well and farewell.

NOTE

1. I had the good fortune of briefly meeting Mary Hemingway at the Hemingway Conference held at The University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, Alabama on October 15, 1976. She graciously signed my copy of her autobiography *How It Was*, which had just been published. I then gave her a collection of Ernest Hemingway's short stories to sign. She was half way though signing the book when she looked up with genuine concern on her face and said, "Oh, Ernest would not have liked that!" She kindly finished signing the book. Nevertheless, one could feel that she felt the presence of her husband as a strong presence fifteen years after his death.

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