NORMAN MAILER, DISCURSIVE ARTIST

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NORMAN MAILER IS CLEARLY ONE OF THE MOST ECLECTIC WRITERS of the past century and the beginning of the current one, establishing himself in 1948 internationally as a novelist and later as a prose essayist, filmmaker, playwright, short fiction writer, poet, biographer, journalist, cultural and political commentator, media communicator, and much more. Further, he was a public intellectual—indeed, a towering figure—and was a dominating force as an exceptionally complex voice that commanded attention across deep and broad spectra of media. His electronic and print exposure over many decades left no doubt that he was a mind and personality that engaged the public more than any other writer of his generation. A strategic dimension of his public intellectuality was his expository prose: a masterly poetics of the art of the essay. Norman Mailer was and is, I would argue, the governing "literary" essayist of the second half of the twentieth century—a discursive artist of the first rank.

Mailer's publication of *The Naked and the Dead* (1948) introduced him to the American public as one of America's youngest and most important novelists. Mailer quickly established himself as a potent and provocative writer in other genres and his public profile rose dramatically. His ubiquitous presence on the airwaves—from William F. Buckley's *Firing Line* to appearances on Dick Cavett, Johnny Carson, The Mike Douglas Show, and

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Charlie Rose—are proof that he possessed a mind and personality that captivated the public. While the span between his first novel and his last, *The Castle in the Forest*, was a remarkable fifty-nine years, the complexity and heterogeneity of his vast, deep interests are best represented, I would suggest, in his essays. For Mailer, expository discourse, even more than his fiction, provided him a forum to unrelentingly confront the social, political, and cultural crises of the day. In the essay, Mailer's relentless curiosity engages, opposes, clarifies, complicates, and rigorously challenges whatever subjects he takes on—and take them on he did for over six decades.

Mailer's expository art, catalyzed by his fiction, represents a distinctive American cultural achievement. Discursive prose, historically, has been a natural medium for the development, exploration, and expression of ideas related to the prickly challenges that face a nation and its swarm of cultures and subcultures. Mailer's intellectual engagement has always been thickly intertwined with the cultural, social, and economic issues of his day. And it is in his essays that readers gain the closest access to Mailer, I believe, because there are fewer veils, less distancing separating the expositor from his audience. Mailer's intellectual and creative powers are strikingly elegant and poignant on so many topics: arts and letters, culture, ideology, politics, social issues (including gender), sports, national phenomena (the moon landing), and so forth. The heart of Mailer's expository writing is, of course, the man himself, the passion and intellection that defined him as what he is and who he is. *Advertisements for Myself*, book and metaphor, is but one of many concrete examples that might serve as a synecdoche for the multi-dimensional energy that was and is the brilliant, unrelenting performance of Norman Mailer.

As the founding editor of *The Mailer Review* and a member of the Norman Mailer Society Board of Directors, I have worked closely with Mailer's oeuvre for a long time. I was fortunate to have known Mailer personally. I teach his works and I write about him. Yet researching Mailer and his art of the essay was an exceptionally daunting process because Mailer had written so much over so long. I have always thought of Mailer as a thematic essayist as I placed his expository writing into categories: Prisms of the Self; Arts and Letters; The Political Arena; Race; Gender; Culture and Counterculture; American Sexuality; The Metaphor of Sport; War and Peace; Crime and Punishment; The Art of Writing; and Cosmology. These classes have helped me organize Mailer in the classroom. However, these thematic units are lim-

iting, reductive, and exclusive. There is always overlap in his discursive work and I believe that we benefit when we see Mailer's categories as intrinsically fluid yet interconnected.

Mailer's essays were published in diverse publications. There are precious gems in old issues of *Esquire*, *Village Voice*, *Saturday Review*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The Paris Review*, *The New Yorker*, and *Parade*, but also *Playboy*, *Architectural Forum*, *Harvard Advocate*, and *Dissent*. These diverse publications represent the heterogeneity of Mailer's audience, something that distinguishes him from many of his contemporaries. Sometimes Mailer's work appeared next to advertisements for typewriter repair, Fruit Fresh anti-browning preserve, and Playmates special edition books. As I examined these decades of American journalism, I was reminded how adaptable Mailer was to new times and new challenges, and especially how effectively he was able to engage so many different audiences. He demonstrated an unparalleled intellectual flexibility while never losing his edge and his sense of urgency.

As early as the 1940s, Mailer's pattern of caustic, probing expository writing began to emerge. The first sentence of "A Credo for the Living" contains three references to the author, "I must admit that I enjoy this opportunity to write a word or two about my own politics" (3). The full-throated vitality of Mailer's personality is thus announced. Is anyone surprised that the young Mailer carried the same self-confidence and intellectual bravery as the mature Mailer? From these early lines readers are drawn to call attention to the messenger as well as his message. And it should be no surprise to any reader familiar with Mailer that this incipient essay is about politics and the dangers of the fragmentation of the Left. Further, Mailer reveals a rhetorical strategy, a concise *apologia*, which would recur in later works (*The Spooky Art*, for example). In the early essay, the apology is for writing too long of a sentence. One result of the apology is to establish an ethical relationship with the reader, a rhetorical stratagem as old as discourse itself. Mailer was keenly aware of the subtle and delicate balance between him and his readers and he was careful to protect, nourish, and sustain that relationship. The strategic value of writerly *ethos* is ubiquitous in the Mailer corpus. In acknowledging his weaknesses, Mailer thus elevates his readers to the level of the author himself and sets forth a complex bonding that enables his prose to navigate its way into readers' mindsets in a genuinely personal way: a gesture of disarming takes place. We become intimate with his inimitable intellect and forms of expression. We are taken into the depths of critical issues

that Mailer has plumbed more deeply than we ever could. We are also forced to reexamine our beliefs, whether casual or deeply held. When Mailer proffers a position, he demands that we engage with him, that we become active participants or stop reading. Both writer and reader are tested in this exchange.

Mailer early on reveals his penchant for mediation and continuous dialectic, characteristic of his flexible value system when circumstances warranted. Mailer is a mind guided by the result of reasoned analysis. His well-known political self-designation (often taken as oxymoronic) was "left conservative," and Mailer's uneasiness to entrench himself in hard and fast alliances is demonstrated by this early identification in "Credo": "I feel myself to the left of the Progressive Party and to the right of the Communist Party" (4). This sentiment echoes a later sentiment that provides a glimpse into his sense of the complexities of the fierce, unceasing political struggle of his time: "It may yet take an alchemy of Left and Right to confound the corporate center" ("Why Are We at War" 101). Mailer, so often in his expository writing, reveals the necessity of an urgent yet needed flexibility necessary to survive the minefields of political discourse. He understood that America was (and is) in a moral wilderness. The fires of hope burned brightly in Mailer's vision of the Progressive Party.

Mailer's willingness to mediate his beliefs was reflected in his attitude toward homosexuality. In "The Homosexual Villain," Mailer accuses himself of bigotry: "I had been acting as a bigot in this matter, and 'bigot' was one word I did not enjoy applying to myself. With that came the realization I had been closing myself off from understanding a very large part of life" (15). So much of his writing reveals this ability to shift his thinking and beliefs when reason is trusted. This ability to adjust his beliefs according to the evolving exigencies of the issue continually reminds the reader of the ethical nuances of Mailer's thinking in his continual recreation of the moral bond between the writer and his subject matter. This awareness served Mailer well and many of his readers came to understand his persona as public intellectual was one not only capable of reasoned persuasion, but one who vigorously encouraged the rough give and take of argument.

There is no simple, formulaic pattern to Mailer's expository prose. He comments in *The Spooky Art* on the lack of unity in his writing style, particularly when works are examined from different times and perspectives. And readers should not be surprised that Mailer has rewarded them with a rich-

ness of style that is a distinct measure of his subject matter. The nineteenth-century adage, "style is the man," fits Mailer well. The classical concept of *Kairos* (appropriateness, due measure, timing, seizing opportunity) was a dominant concept through Antiquity and served as a way of thinking and functioning effectively in the public arena. Mailer was a master of seizing the right style at exactly the right time—the kairic moment—drawing forth from his deep reservoir of intellectual and emotional resources to meet the exigencies of particular circumstances in his life. As Mailer notes in "Credo": "The beauty in man is that under the press of circumstances he develops what he must possess" (6). This maxim undergirded Mailer's lifetime of political and cultural activism. One remarkable illustration is Mailer's essay on John F. Kennedy, "Superman Comes to the Supermart," written in July-August of 1960 for *Esquire* just prior to the election. Mailer later speculated on the timeliness and efficacy of the essay in helping to elect Kennedy in an exceptionally close presidential election. Throughout his life, Mailer wrote "differently," to be sure, and his prose continually strove to meet specific occasions precisely because circumstances were constantly changing and Mailer well understood that each evolving writing situation required his adroit attention. His repository of honed expository articulation was unmatched and clearly the body of Mailer's prose requires intellectual flexibility in the reader as well as the writer.

Mailer has always been deeply intrigued in exploring how people know things and how they should behave. These essential metaphysical concerns, traditionally understood as epistemology and ontology, have been dominant in intellectual history for well over two millennia, and Mailer's keen interest in knowing and being come forth in 1957 in his frequently reprinted essay, "The White Negro." This treatise contains the strains of his probing analysis into race and into one of America's most familiar characters: the Hipster, a primal figure. Race was a subject that Mailer never abandoned, and in this germinal essay Mailer conjoins race and cultural philosophy. The rise of Existentialism in America in the 1950s is a movement that fascinated Mailer, and his 1957 essay serves as an exemplary early discursive illustration of his linking knowing and being. For Mailer, the existentialist hipster must learn (know) the parameters of the challenges he faces (war, destruction) and be ready to engage (be) according to the tenor and dimensions of the challenge: "The unstated essence of Hip, its psychopathic brilliance, quivers with the knowledge that new kinds of victories increase one's power for new

kinds of perception; and defeats, the wrong kind of defeats, attack the body and imprison one's energy until one is jailed in the prison air of other people's habits, other people's defeats, boredom, quiet desperation, and muted icy self-destroying rage" ("The White Negro" 44). The source of Hip is, of course, the "Negro," who has been marginalized in American culture and is therefore in a unique position to serve as exemplar, having lived on the margin between totalitarianism and democracy for two hundred years, according to Mailer. As in so much of Mailer's work, there is a driving emphasis on dynamism and tension as fundamental components of knowing and being. The Hipster is always and necessarily in a battle with himself, challenging everything and everyone in ferreting out the essential from the transitory. The existentialist Hipster is forever in an exploratory, dynamic mode of inquiry because "the language of Hip is a language of energy, how it is found, how it is lost" (55). The perception of language as energy is a mainstay in Mailer's intellectual wheelhouse and subsequent decades would reveal how essential this relationship is to Mailer's thirst for knowing and being.

Mailer was acutely aware of the many glaring absurdities of his time and, more significant, the critical importance of the necessity of a writer's absurdist sensibility in chronicling the conditions and outcomes of critical social modes of expression, as he states in "Introducing Our Argument": "We live in a time which has created the art of the absurd. It is our art. It contains happenings, Pop art, camp, a theater of the absurd, a homosexual genius who spent thirty years as a thief; black humor is its wit; the dances are livid and solitary" (209). The stakes are so very high (and ironically macabre) because the threat to extinction has never been greater. "And we are close to dead," Mailer concludes, having entered a "time of plague" cancer writ large for the human race (209). Mailer is careful to frame his concerns as the intellectual result of insight rather than obsession. There is stridency in Mailer's articulation of his worst fears. His most pervasive metaphor for the desperation of the human condition is "Cannibals and Christians." Mailerian motifs of energy, conflict, and predation reach a crescendo by the mid-1960s and they never wane. "Cannibals" is one of the most revealing, full force works that Mailer has ever written about himself, his times, and the intellectual challenges that define contemporary times, running the gamut from the political to the cultural to the social to the sexual. It is interrogative confrontation of the highest order and could come about only when Mailer had achieved a critical stage of public intellectual acuity and confidence.

Mailer's career is distinguished by an intricate understanding of intellectual complications, and one of them is his insistence on what might be called a "consistency of inconsistency." Mailer's expository life (as well as his literary life) was distinguished by a steadfast clinging to the necessity of an unceasing, evolving articulation of positions and perspectives, whether political, social, ideological, or whatever. Mailer's stances, however, are necessarily fluid and constantly under pressure from within for critical reconsideration, reformulation, and re-articulation, which is where the inevitability of inconsistency comes in. Mailer subscribed to Fitzgerald's belief that the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function. For Mailer, contrariety was a necessary condition of intellection and the very essence of Mailer himself (as poignantly expressed in the "double life" metaphoric subtitle of the recently published authorized biography by J. Michael Lennon). A Mailer motto was "Movement is always to be preferred to inaction" ("The White Negro" 56). Mailer's ethic to "Know Thyself and Be Thyself" (61) was deeply ingrained in his intellectual sensibility.

The trope of synecdoche is a strategic weapon in the Mailer quiver of expository (and literary) arrows. One sees this concern for representation of the part for the whole in his expository treatment of literary and cultural celebrities over the decades. As in so much of his writing, Mailer extols the virtues of dynamism and reflects upon the importance of aggressive living. In his 1959 essay, "Evaluations: Quick and Expensive Comments on the Talent in the Room," Mailer says of James Jones: "His first virtues are an appetite for life and an animal sense of who has the power" (72). Mailer evaluates William Styron and questions his inability to elevate his talent to meet the challenges he faced in lacking "the moral courage to write a book equal to his hatred and therefore able to turn the consciousness of our time, an achievement which is the primary measure of a writer's size" (73). Mailer felt the same way toward Saul Bellow and his inability, according to Mailer, to rise to address relationships in fiction, which is an act of surrender: "The clue to this capitulation may be detected in Bellow's one major weakness, which is that he creates individuals and not relations between them" ("Some Children of the Goddess" 201). In evaluating the styles of Hemingway and Faulkner, Mailer observes that their stylistic weaknesses were turned into strengths: "One can even go so far as to say that Hemingway could never write a really good long sentence, and so cultivated the art of the short,

whereas Faulkner could never express the simple very simply, and so flowered a great garden in the thicket of nonstop prose" (175). Mailer is uncanny in his ability to examine what is there and what is not there and speculate with precision the implications of his analyses. The presence and essentiality of dynamism is never far from Mailer's consciousness. Yet Mailer's overriding intellectual sensibility sometimes transcends the limitations of his subject matter. Mailer's intellect is clearly infused with a penetrating sense of American culture as a complex tapestry of thought, language, and behavior. At a primal level, Mailer's writing reveals his undaunted concern for fundamental modes of intellection—thought, speech, and writing—as intricate weaves of art and reason that position the role of public intellectual as a translator, an interlocutor mediating the tense and always fractious ongoing negotiation between and among cultural values, traditions and their proponents.

Mailer is many persons inside his cloak of public intellectual and outlaw. Foremost among his identities is that of a probing, hectoring teacher—the very best kind of educator. Mailer never fully lets go of either his reader-students or his topic(s). Mailer is very much an interrogative intellectual. A common mode in his teaching-writing included unrelenting questioning of his subject matter, infused with unceasing challenge of the status quo, as we see in is his probing analysis of the existential minority as part of his theory of violence in "The White Negro." This group is comprised of individuals who are neither inherently good nor bad, but represent a series of divergent perspectives (such as feeling a sense of superiority while simultaneously doubting this sense of superiority). In other words, an individual might *appear* to exhibit contradictory thinking or actions, when he or she is strategically reflecting different views that are held at different times because they are inherently and necessarily deeply conflicted. This tension is existential angst. Mailer was keenly aware of the rich texture of contradictions that make up human beliefs, but believed that these contradictions offer considerable flexibility in one's choices throughout life. In posing these possibilities, Mailer promotes a sensibility that recognizes the importance of divergent thought and behavior. The cast of a question, for Mailer, is far more important than the reach of an answer.

Mailer has been taking on America in this way since the 1940s.[1] His ongoing confrontation with the country he loved (and did not love) was always in the spirit of productive intellectual engagement that would, ideally,

lead to a further freeing of the American spirit. As Mailer stated in his Foreword to *The Time of our Time* (1998): "Our noble idea of democracy was forever being traduced, sullied, exploited, and downgraded" (iv). Every fiber in Mailer's being fought the onslaught of assaults against the country that he served throughout his life in his lifelong critique of government and governmental abuse of authority. From his criticism of the devastating failure of the Viet Nam War to his late essays attacking America's war acts in Iraq, Mailer clearly lived a life of affirmative rebellion.

Mailer's acute political consciousness is explicitly connected to his view of art and the artist. In his mid-1950s essay, "What I Think of Artistic Freedom," Mailer describes the social responsibilities of the artist: "It is the artist, embodying the most noble faculty of man—his urge to rebel—who is forever enlarging the walls" (23). A cornerstone of Mailer's approach to restructuring the political and social landscapes was the strategic importance of productive conflict, as illustrated in his books and numerous essays focusing on political/military action. A politically sensitive artist cannot be aloof and uninvolved. Never was a public intellectual so intimately interconnected with the public through constant appearances in a range of media, especially television. There were other celebrated novelists who commented publicly on events (James Baldwin and Gore Vidal, for example), and there were other public intellectuals, like William F. Buckley, consistently in the fray of controversy. However, no single person rose to Mailer's stature, and certainly no one has filled the void left by his death. His detractors did not always acknowledge the suppleness of the Mailer intellect, but his debates with others (and himself) over more than six decades reveal a deft and razor sharp intellect, fully susceptible to persuasion to beliefs that were not part of an intellectual rigidity. Mailer established a complex persona that was public service at its very best.

Last year as I was searching through the Mailer archives at the Harry Ransom Center (University of Texas at Austin), I struck a vein of gold: a previously unpublished essay on Sigmund Freud, written in the mid-1950s which reveals Mailer's conception of public responsibility. Freud is described less as a pioneering theoretical psychiatrist than as a "public doctor," one who administers to the generic ills that plagued twentieth century society. According to Mailer, Freud, more than his findings, was the antidote to the vast range of threats to contemporary life. Society, with its wars and poverty and hypocrisies, was sick and barbaric—and threatening to become even worse

without Freud's ameliorating contributions, especially his emphasis on the importance of a civilizing culture. Mailer obviously feels a strong kinship with Freud, whom Mailer describes as "a lower-middle-class middle-European Jew who rose in bourgeois society" ("Freud" 9). His description of Freud's mental acuity could easily be a description of himself: "[H]e was capable of the finest intellectual distinctions" (9). Freud and Mailer were interlocutors, mediating the tense, ongoing negotiation between cultural values and their representatives. This early essay shows how Mailer felt a responsibility to speak for us all in his investigation into the collective remembrance of time and change. Blood ran deep between Mailer and Freud.

In "Mind of an Outlaw" Mailer explains the agonizing history of publishing *The Deer Park*, articulating the importance of his persevering, never-surrender attitude toward his writing (and, indeed, his life): "I finally had the simple sense to understand that if I wanted my work to travel further than others, the life of my talent depended on fighting a little more, and looking for help a little less" (90). Outlaw is a powerful metaphor for the labyrinthine and renegade Mailer mind and spirit. Indeed, Mailer was always a rogue intellectual, perpetually prepared for combat with those forces that threatened his beliefs and values—quintessential American ideals. The Mailer code of "rising to meet the exigencies of crisis" is unambiguous. It was at this point that Mailer fully recognizes that he is an outlaw, a rogue artist-intellectual that would never function seamlessly and harmoniously in the cauldron of his times and his art. Further, the essay chronicles how he was infused by marijuana and other drugs: "[F]or the first time in my life I knew what it was to make your kicks" (90). Like Hemingway, Mailer was very much aware of the principle of purchased value: "[Y]ou pay for what you get, in one way or another. The bigger the return, the greater the cost" (90). There is no question that Mailer felt that he had paid a significant price for being a "working addict," as he describes himself. The delicate relationship between profit and loss is forged into Mailer's mind ("From Surplus Value to the Mass Media") and the influence of Karl Marx looms large. The marshaling of these principles are qualities that mark Mailer as an exceptionally rare American resource, an incomparable national treasure. Mailer's lifetime of expository prose chronicles a complex journey through topics inextricably related to one another in complex and often indefinable ways.

Mailer was not, however, a rigid ideologue. His intellectual opponents, who included James Baldwin, Norman Podhoretz, William F. Buckley, Gore

Vidal, and Irving Howe, did not always acknowledge the suppleness of the Mailer mind, but his debates with others (and himself) over more than six decades reveal a man fully capable of being persuaded. Mailer's stances are necessarily fluid and constantly under pressure from within for critical reconsideration, reformulation, and rearticulation, which is where the inevitability of inconsistency comes in. Mailer was willing to change his mind publicly when warranted, no matter the consequences to perceptions of his personal consistency.

What separates Mailer from so many essayists who have written about ideas and cultural events is his ability to quickly master the rapidly changing context and danger zones in so many areas. Yet he does so with remarkable technical knowledge, gleaned from careful preparation and long term interest in his subject matter. For example, Mailer's interest in and knowledge of boxing is legendary. But the same principle is at work in his foray into other activities like bullfighting. His seminal essay connecting him to bullfighting and Hemingway is "The Crazy One," published in *Playboy*. In this detailed analysis of bullfighters and bulls, Mailer systematically connects the art of bullfighting to the art of life: "I will always have love for El Loco because he taught me how to love the bullfight, and how to penetrate some of its secrets. And finally he taught me something about the mystery of form. He gave me the clue that form is the record of a war" (239). The secrets of life are penetrable if one knows where and how to look, a useful reminder for readers of Mailer.

Mailer's ability to adjust his thinking and beliefs continually reminds the reader of the ethical texture of the writer. Mailer's ethos is strategically important because it requires the reader to be aware of his or her own ethical stance on issues. If a reader is in conflict with Mailer's positions, he or she shares an obligation with Mailer to base any resistance on ethical reasoning. Mailer's writing, throughout his career, is girded on a foundation of what is "right" under the present circumstances. For Mailer, contrariety is a catalyst for debate as well as lubrication for honest thinking and writing. Mailer well understood the importance of paying attention to the machinery of discourse. When Mailer assumed contrary positions, as he did throughout his life, he knew that one effect would be to enrich the debate. This way of thinking is evident, for example, in Mailer's engagement with feminism, which resulted in the occasional stormy confrontation with hecklers while on lecture tours, or planned face-to-face conflicts on television. Mailer well understood that theatricality and rhetorical performance were integral

nourishment for his role as an intellectual outlaw, but it should also be pointed out that he maintained long term, close friendships with Gloria Steinem and Diana Trilling. Mailer was an intellectual performer of staggering proportions and it is no surprise that often he would rely on theatricality to activate the emotions of his audience.

What is the state of the expository Mailer in his later years? As always, he was engaged as fully as possible, carrying the responsibilities of a public person fighting for progressive humanist ideas. Indeed, his anti-war sentiment continued until his final breath. A book written weeks before the beginning of the Iraq war, *Why Are We at War?*, was published in his eightieth year. Yet despite the tens of thousands of pages he left us with, a mystery about Mailer remains, a sense that the public intellectual is ultimately irreducible and indefinable. F. Scott Fitzgerald once said that "[T]here never was a good biography of a good novelist. There couldn't be. He is too many people if he's any good." For the same reason, no treatment of the essays of Norman Mailer could ever hope to capture even a fragment of his complex and intertwined personalities. Mailer, surely by volition, repels reductive, singular definition. He is an outlaw public intellectual who can only be understood, however insufficiently, as a complex plural construction. Mailer demands a great deal from himself, and if we fully engage his expository work, he demands much from us, too. Yet readers who approach the essays with a Maileresque energy and intellectual flexibility—and readers who have a bit of the outlaw in themselves—will engage Mailer's discursive prose challenged and rewarded.

My special thanks to M. Allison Wise, Managing Editor of The Mailer Review*, for her painstaking and meticulous assistance in locating elusive manuscripts of Norman Mailer's discursive prose.*

NOTE

1. In 2006 the University of Texas Harry Ransom Center put on an exhibit of the newly acquired archive of Mailer's works and the title of the exhibition was "Norman Mailer Takes On America." Indeed, Mailer has been taking on America since the 1940s and the depth and breadth of his ongoing confrontation with the country he loved (and did not love) was always in the spirit of productive intellectual engagement that would, ideally, generate a post-confrontation residue that would be a force of growth, for values, for the freeing of the American spirit. Always an optimist, Mailer believed that he contributed in strategic and tactical ways moving toward triumph over greed and the hegemony of the mediocre. Positivism and hopefulness were

important qualities in the Mailer canon. I do not believe that there was ever a serious doubt that democracy would triumph in the Mailer worldview.

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