PROPHESYING THE NEWS: NORMAN MAILER'S JOURNALISM

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NORMAN MAILER'S JOURNALISM HAS BEEN JUSTIFIABLY LAUDED for its perspicacity, breadth of vision, and daring use of novelistic techniques. In the fracas surrounding the so-called "New Journalism" in the 1960s and 1970s, and the debates arguing the distinction between fiction and nonfiction, objectivity and subjectivity, what has been overlooked is Mailer's accomplishment in the context of American journalism history. With the publication of the Pulitzer Prize- and National Book Award-winning *The Armies of the Night* in 1968, his account of the previous autumn's March on the Pentagon, Mailer restored to American literature the tradition of personal journalism exemplified in the eighteenth-century pamphleteering of "Peter Porcupine" Cobbett, in Mark Twain's journalism on the Mississippi and in California, and in the work of the muckrakers and H. L. Mencken. Mailer's most significant, lasting and influential work may in fact be his journalism, particularly his early journalism.

What first strikes a journalism historian in Mailer's nonfiction is the virtuosic uses to which he puts the oral tradition—fittingly enough, since the oral, exclamatory style goes back to the very origins of news: one person telling another what has happened. Everyday American speech has been part of American literature and journalism since the days of the early Republic and the frontier, of course. The Southwestern humorists relied on dialect for their rollicking effects, as did that gifted lecturer Mark Twain, who actually read his work out loud as he was writing and made sure that his readers listened: in the prefatory note to *Huckleberry Finn,* for example, Twain enumerates the six dialects he has "painstakingly" used in the novel.

Twain, who began his writing life as a journalist, was revered by the most

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important American journalist of the first half of the twentieth century, Mailer's predecessor H. L. Mencken.[1] Mencken developed Twain's colloquial style by using American vernacular without quotation marks, by not relegating it exclusively to comic characters' speeches or first-person narrators. Rather, Mencken used slang straight in his essays, for exposition, thereby making dialect literary.

Norman Mailer has managed to go beyond the compassionate Twain and the enraged Mencken: Mailer makes obscene language literary. Profanity in Mailer's work is Mailer's answer to the savageries of the 1960s, just as profanity in the American tall tale, as Kenneth S. Lynn has shown, made it easier for Westerners to face the brutality of frontier life (27). In *The Armies of the Night,* Mailer contends the real obscenity is not his dirty words, but America's acts in Vietnam:

> the American corporation executive . . . was perfectly capable of burning unseen women and children in the Vietnamese jungles, yet felt a large displeasure and fairly final disapproval at the generous use of obscenity in literature and in public. (49)

Thus Mailer's account of a protest against an obscene war inevitably contains obscenities, because obscenity is what his subject demands. The form of any account, as well as its style, according to Mailer, is shaped by the form of the event. Conventional reporting, on the other hand, assumes a reality that can be conveyed adequately by declarative sentences arranged in what journalists call an "inverted pyramid," the standard news story's hierarchical organization. Using as its model a mythical scientist "objectively" observing phenomena in a laboratory, "objective" reporting eliminates the reportorial persona, strips his language of any trace of individuality, distances him from events, and forbids him to participate in the action he covers. The artificial order of the inverted pyramid bespeaks trust in a linear Newtonian universe. Effects follow causes. The dogged rationality of the inverted pyramid rejects digression, ambiguity, qualification, simultaneity, circularity. The epistemological assumption of what Morris Dickstein calls the "cult of objectivity" is that facts are self-explanatory (131).

Mailer contends such standardized techniques are unequal to most events, especially those that are confusing or baffling. Pretending every event is fixed and knowable, "most nonfiction skips the confusions," Mailer notes

(*Pieces* 164). The March on the Pentagon, for example, is "an ambiguous event essential value or absurdity may not be established for ten or twenty years, or indeed ever" (*Armies* 86).

Events in which the outcome is uncertain are Mailer's natural subjects: combat, prizefights (personal combat), and national presidential conventions (political combats). Having observed that a heavyweight championship fight is "like a political convention," Mailer covers the national Democratic and Republic conventions as if they are major battles, which of course they are (*Presidential* 6). There are fights on the floor. There is a winner and a loser. The prize is the party's nomination and, possibly, the Presidency.

Mailer's presidential convention coverage is striking for its attention to speeches. Oratory and the oral tradition are vital to Mailer's own prose. In *The Armies of the Night* Mailer says he "might have made a fair country orator, for he loved to speak, he loved in fact to holler, and liked to hear a crowd holler back" (36). (So aware is he of his audience hollering back that he dedicated *Cannibals and Christians* to Lyndon Johnson, "whose name inspired young men to cheer for me in public.") Having once been enjoined by Gene McCarthy after a disastrous speech to "learn how to breathe, boy," Mailer makes sure his prose breathes. He has moved "from the hegemony of the word to the resonance of the prose rhythm" *(Pieces* 8).

Mailer's prose preserves the rhythms of speech even to the point of including interruptions. Like Lenny Bruce improvising in front of an audience, Mailer interjects "yeah!" and "yes" and "no" into his sentences. The effect is as if he and his readers are actively involved in a conversation, not as if his words will be read later on by a reader with whom he has no direct communication. *The Armies of the Night* opens with Mailer's appearance before a live audience at the Ambassador Theatre, and he continues the book as if he is speaking to an audience with whom his relationship is dialogic. Mailer's sentences are not only the final polished products of his pen, but contain his thought processes leading up to the final version. His sentences are improvisatory in structure, clause tumbling after clause, skidding against each other, the rhythm slowing and quickening as Mailer's thoughts race to a period, or sidestepping because of a digression or an association, arriving finally at the end of the sentence, and the period:

> The American Nazis were all fanatics, yes, poor mad tormented fanatics, their psyches twisted like burning leaves in the fires of

> their hatreds, yes, indeed! but this man's conviction stood in his eyes as if his soul had been focused to a single point of light. (*Armies* 142)

Sometimes Mailer introduces an image, then thinks about it:

> This condition of innocence was not, however, particularly disagreeable since it forced him to watch everything with the attention, let us say, of a man like William Buckley spending his first hour in a Harlem bar—no, come! things are far safer for Mailer at the Pentagon. *(Armies* 141)

So wedded is Mailer to the oral tradition that instead of using punctuation—a written convention—to organize his thoughts, he parses his sentences with "yes" and "no." For example, after being arrested at the Pentagon, Mailer thinks about his wives:

> He had had four wives, and some part of four cultures had been his, not enough, no doubt, but something he had learned, something, of Jewish genius, and of revolutionaries and large indiscriminate love for the oppressed from his first wife; and a love of painting and sensuality and drama and Latin desperation, yes, and a sense of the tragic not so incomplete from his second wife; and he had had a love affair with England for his third, and the fine dialectic of propriety and wickedness, manners and the mode of social murder in well-established places, yes he had had a fair love affair with the third. (170)

In this catalogue that balances four wives and four cultures, "love" and the alliterative *L* are repeated, appropriately, four times, as if to create a harmonic signature, a Catalogue in the Key of L. Within this one sentence, there are the *yesses* and interruptions of Mailer's oral style ("not enough, no doubt," "not so incomplete," "something he had learned, something") as well as antithesis (genius and revolutionary, propriety and wickedness) and alliteration and internal rhyme ("manners / mode / murder," "fair love affair," "Jewish genius," "fine dialectic").

Contending that the constantly changing nature of events calls for protean reportage, Mailer goes out of his way to craft a prose whose bearings are con-

stantly changing. *The Armies of the Night* provides an extended example of Mailer's language constantly shifting gears in the long description of his needing the toilet. Mailer begins formally, by referring to his "overwhelming urge to micturate." Becoming even more grand, he looks forward to micturation, he continues, "with all the anticipations of liberty which this *Götterdämmerung* of a urination would soon provide." But he concludes vulgarly (and alliteratively) that he might be "a fool who peed in the wrong pot" (29-31).

So delighted is Mailer with the linguistic possibilities of the topic he doesn't relinquish it until, in an ecstasy of asterisks twenty pages later, he invents "p*ssarooney" (50). Continuing to ride a roller coaster of philosophical highs and profane lows, piss naturally leads Mailer, no less digressive than Tristram Shandy, to shit. Contemplating the next day's March on the Pentagon, Mailer says he doesn't know whether he has "the piss or shit scared out of me most." (One wonders also if Mailer, whom Tallulah Bankhead is said to have ridiculed as "the boy who doesn't know how to spell fuck," is revenging himself for having been forced to use *fug* in The *Naked and the Dead*—which Mailer claimed was how the GIs pronounced it anyway.)

The point in part of these linguistic acrobatics is that the working press, predictably feigning shock on behalf of its millions of middle-class readers, will emphasize, even sensationalize Mailer's language without understanding the subtleties of his ideas. In short, reporters will deliberately misunderstand what they witnessed and distort their coverage. *The Armies of the Night* opens, in fact, with *Time's* five-paragraph précis of Mailer's appearance at the Ambassador Theatre and arrest at the Pentagon the next day. "Now we may leave *Time*," Mailer ends the first chapter, "in order to find out what happened" (4). Finding out what really happened in those two days takes Mailer the next 284 pages.

The Marshall who arrests Mailer at the Pentagon has, Mailer notices, a distinctive face, which prompts a discussion of American physiognomies. Mailer's reverie on mean small-town faces culminates in a flight of fancy not customary in journalism: he imagines an elderly woman playing the slot machines in Las Vegas:

> [A]nd Grandmother, the church-goer, orange hair burning bright now crooned over the One-Arm Bandit, pocketbook open, driving those half-dollars home, home to the slot.
>
> "Madame, we are burning children in Vietnam."

> "Boy, you just go get yourself lost. Grandma's about ready for a kiss from the jackpot."
>
> The burned child is brought into the gaming hall on her hospital bed.
>
> "Madame, regard our act in Vietnam."
>
> "I hit! I hit! Hot deedy, I hit. Why, you poor burned child—you just brought me luck. Here, honey, here's a lucky half-dollar in reward. And listen sugar, tell the nurse to change your sheets. Those sheets sure do stink. I hope you ain't got gangrene. Hee hee, hee hee. I get a supreme pleasure mixing with gooks in Vegas." (151–52)

The piquancy of this passage comes from the contrast between the woman's downhome language and the aristocratic intonations of her imagined interlocutor ("Madame, regard our act in Vietnam"), as well as from the mixed diction within her own speech: "I get a supreme pleasure mixing with gooks in Vegas." The small-town churchgoer, Mailer alleges, is consummately oblivious to the atrocities America is committing in Vietnam, even when thrust under her nose—except as they offend her nostrils.

Ultimately, Mailer equates obscenity with humor and equality, proposing that obscenity is quintessentially American. In this, Mailer is adopting a stratagem patented by America's frontier storytellers. In the tall tale, Kenneth Lynn observes, "the humor was the vernacular and the vernacular was the humor" (31). Mailer's brief for mixing high and low diction maintains that to use obscenity is to write a language "at once very American" and "very literary in the best way" (*Armies* 48).

Mailer contrasts his methods with those of conventional American newspapers, whose consumption of facts has turned them into an omnivorous old goat

> obliged to eat each day, tidbits, gristle, gravel, garbage cans, charlotte russe, old rubber tires, T-bone steaks, wet cardboard, dry leaves, apple pie, broken bottles, dog food, shells, roach powder, dry ball-point pens, grapefruit juice. *(Presidential* 217)

However inexplicable an event, "The Goat show[s] no uncertainty," Mailer declares, adding, "one [does] not read an account of such an event

which is not authoritative" *(Presidential* 254). Unlike mainstream reporters, Mailer never presents a single version of events, because to do so would mean oversimplifying and thus distorting reality, which for Mailer is Heraclitean. Contending his account of the unpredictable March must be equally improvisatory and unpredictable, Mailer gives *The Armies of the Night* a digressive, unpredictable form. Mailer can hardly describe a gesture, an intonation, even an impulse without wondering what its effects will be, whether it will contribute to the March's success or failure, conjecturing what the consequences of the entire March will be on the future, imagining how one moment might shape the next, and the one after that, or a moment years away. In a fleeting incident, for example, Mailer wonders, as if he really believes his most trivial act can have monumental historic consequences, whether he is going to come to blows with an obstreperous protester:

> He would of course not throw the first punch, not ever! that would be just what he would need for his reputation. To throw the punch which started the rumble which wrecked the March on the Pentagon! (110)

Mailer's premise that his prose must change constantly to report events as if they were characters in a novel he is writing, even considering alternatives, suggests changing the text changes the event.[2] Surely novelists are responsible for what happens to their characters, but it is quite a leap for reporters to claim that had they reported differently, events may have come out otherwise. Mailer actually claims "Superman in the Supermart," his first significant piece of journalism, won the election for Kennedy in 1960. Having noted that he did his "best to write a piece which would get [Kennedy] elected," Mailer calculates that since Kennedy won by a mere 100,000 votes, perhaps his widely-circulated *Esquire* essay swayed that many readers to vote for Kennedy *(Presidential* 27). And in one of the most self-indulgent yet brilliant sections of *Miami and the Siege of Chicago,* Mailer holds himself responsible for Bobby Kennedy's assassination. The Chicago half of the book opens with Mailer's evocation of the sounds of pigs being slaughtered in the stockyards, and culminates with Mailer bellowing like a slaughtered pig himself as he watches television the night Bobby Kennedy is shot, lying in a sweat of complicity, as if his own lack of moral *witness* (to the subtle heroism of Bobby Kennedy's at-

tempt to run for President) . . . had contributed to one less piton of mooring for Senator Kennedy. (94)

Simply by replaying the sounds of the slaughtered beasts, Mailer transfers the image from anonymous animals to Robert Kennedy and then, by implication, to America: when Kennedy is assassinated, America is slaughtered.

Few mainstream journalists would suggest that the protesters on the Potomac are arrested and beaten for something as intangible as metaphor, but the discovery that he had to think metaphorically was Mailer's breakthrough as a journalist.[3] As Mailer explains, the moment he found the image for John Kennedy's presidential campaign, which he was covering in 1960 for *Esquire,* "it was almost as if"—here comes Mailer's metaphor to analyze his technique—"I saw it all like a great painting." Thinking metaphorically, *Esquire* editor Clay Felker told Mailer's biographer Peter Manso, Mailer understood

> the meaning of Kennedy while the rest of the political journalists were writing about the mechanics of politics. But that isn't what elections are really about, the mechanics. They're about how politics touch people, their deepest aspirations and fears and hopes, and that's what Mailer articulated more brilliantly than any other writer at the time. (305)

Other journalists agree. As Timothy Crouse observes in his study of pack journalism, *The Boys on the Bus,* the exhausted reporters who follow the candidate's every stop all day, piling in and out of the press bus for every speech, acknowledge "it takes a Mailer to tell you what it all *means*" (105). Mailer is less gracious about the failings of the daily press, maintaining mass media reporters know their observations are "worth nothing compared to the eye and voice of a serious writer" *(Presidential* 2). Mailer insists that hewing only to facts leaves newsmen strangely insensitive to the truth: he likens the practice of sticking exclusively to facts to writing with a bulldozer rather than a pen (*Presidential* 28).

Mailer's method owes a great deal to a poet who began his career as journalist: Walt Whitman. A hundred years before *Advertisements for Myself,* Whitman's 1855 "Song of Myself" set the standard for an American persona embodying the entire country. And although no one disputes how influential "Song of Myself" was on subsequent American poetry, what's seldom remarked on is how much Whitman's poetry, having been formed by jour-

nalism, influenced the journalism that followed it. Working as a reporter and editor taught Whitman the primacy of experience, the value of including realistic, even mundane details in his writing, and attuned his ear to the vernacular. Tramping the sidewalks of New York City as a reporter for the New York and the Brooklyn *Eagle,* Whitman observed the journalistic details he eventually catalogued in "Song of Myself."[4]

Neither Whitman nor Mailer, writers who want to get everything in America into their work, likes to leave anything out.[5] Aspiring to be masterful observers who miss nothing, they assemble catalogues. In the Whitmanesque mode in *Miami and the Siege of Chicago.* Mailer celebrates Chicago and its natives:

> [T]hey were simple, strong, warm-spirited, sly, rough, compassionate, jostling, tricky and extraordinarily good-natured because they had sex in their pockets, muscles on their back, hot eats around the corner, neighborhoods which dripped with the sauce of local legend, and real city architecture, brownstones with different windows on every floor, vistas for miles of redbrick and two-family wood-frame houses with balconies and porches, runty stunted trees rich as farmland in their promise of tenderness the first city evenings of spring, streets where kids played stick-ball and roller-hockey, lots of smoke and iron twilight. The clangor of the late nineteenth century, the very hope of greed, was in these streets. (85–86)

Packed as this prose appears, it is delicately structured on principles Whitman established in his verse. Mailer begins alliteratively and sibilantly—*s*imple, *s*trong, warm-*s*pirited, *s*ly, compa*ss*ionate, jo*st*ling—using monosyllables such as *strong*, *sly*, *rough*, *hot eats* to emphasize the idea of simplicity. Finally, in a richly poetic line that reprises the sibilant music of the opening, the city briefly metamorphoses, syntactically and metaphorically, into its antithesis, the country. The passage is permeated with a Whitmanesque sensuality (sound, taste, smell) in which physicality (jostling, hot eats, sauce, muscles, ballgames) is counterbalanced by ephemera (the color and smell of the air).

The reader of such catalogues never knows what is coming next. True to the improvisatory spirit of the oral tradition, catalogues convey a sense of spontaneity—an essential element in Mailer's journalism. Since each item in

a catalogue is slightly different from the one before it, the catalogue is an inherently metamorphosing structure, an ideal form with which to represent a constantly changing, rather than a fixed reality. The continuously metamorphosing Whitmanesque catalogue is the perfect vehicle for Mailer's protean personae:

> 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 . . . a fatal taint, the last remaining speck of the one personality he found absolutely insupportable—the nice Jewish boy from Brooklyn. (*Armies* 134)

Although Mailer appears in *The Armies of the Night* alternately as a reporter and a participant in events, his persona alternates between more than the negative and positive polarities of observer and participant. Yes, Mailer writes about himself in third person, but not only as "Norman Mailer." Sometimes he is Your Protagonist, sometimes The Novelist, sometimes The Beast, sometimes even The Poet. In a poignant moment with Robert Lowell he becomes Headmaster. As his contemporary Philip Roth remarked of Mailer's constantly changing personae, it is as if Mailer is saying, "You think I'm bad? You don't know how bad! You think I'm a brute? Well, I'm a courtly gentleman! You think I'm a gentleman? I'm a brute!"(80)[6]

Despite his omniscience, his ubiquity, and his panoramic vision in the poem, the persona of "Song of Myself" is more like a journalist than a poet in this regard, since he is "both in and out of the game," someone who "makes appointments" with "the wicked just the same as the righteous."[vii] This element of witness in "Song of Myself" prompted Alfred Kazin to link Mailer with Whitman in his review of *The Armies of the Niqht* in 1968, in fact. Noting that Whitman "staked his work on finding the connection between salvation as an artist and the salvation of his country," Kazin concludes that in *The Armies of the Night* Mailer creates the same kind of "personal testimony" as Whitman did (1).

But Mailer's Songs and Advertisements for Himself are not pure paeans

of praise. *How* Mailer portrays himself in his journalism has been too little commented on. Most of the critical attention has been given to Mailer's prominence in *The Armies of the Night,* overlooking the fact that this book is one long apologia for Mailer's mistakes, faults, and failures, as he portrays himself as losing or winning—most often losing—rounds of conversation. He usually wins physical brawls, as with the Nazi, but loses conversational jousts with Lowell, who always manages to show him up. Throughout the book, Mailer is constantly explaining the good reasons for his numerous mistakes, enumerating how often he makes a fool of himself, if not an outright buffoon. Yes, Mailer is the centerpiece of his own journalism, but what a flawed, wilted centerpiece!

When I talked to Mailer in 1991 about the literary influences on his journalism, he told me that he reread one nonfiction writer while composing *The Armies of the Night:* Henry Adams.[8] At first the kinship between Adams and Mailer seems like an illusion created by their writing about themselves in third person. But third person is not a gimmick; it springs from both writers' ineradicable sense of alienation. Adams and Mailer feel like outcasts.

Adams establishes his status in the very first moments of *The Education of Henry Adams,* when he calls himself an *émigré de l'intérieur,* a traveller in his own country—an outsider, an alien. In the paradox that is the springboard of his autobiography, Adams examines how he became an outsider despite the fact that he was born into the innermost circles of the in crowd in America, the grandson and great-grandson of Presidents.

Despite his patrimony, Adams' temperament dooms him to be an observer: "As it happened," Adams laments, speaking of himself, "he never got to the point of playing the game at all; he lost himself in the study of it " (4). The outcast is cast out even of himself: Adams finds happiness "so bewildering, so astonished at its own existence, that he could not credit it, and watched it as something apart, accidental, not to be trusted" (81). In other words, Adams has developed a detachment comparable to that of any professional journalist, the dispassionate, distanced reporter who will not be too overcome with grief to write a good story about the five-car fatal or the child who dies in the fire.

Adams' elegantly restrained style shies away from juxtaposing high and low dictions, as Mailer's does; Adams's rhetoric simply balances opposites.

One could almost reduce all of The *Education of Henry Adams* to one sentence of symbolic logic:

$$A \wedge \sim A, \text{ A and not-A.}$$

Finding himself in a humiliating position, "had he known it better," Adams says, "he would have only thought it worse" (54). The attempt to get between the A and the not-A, the attempt to find nuance, is what Adams means by education. The *Education of Norman Mailer* would have made an apposite title for *The Armies of the Night,* a book in which Mailer experiences as many failures as Adams, failing again and again as a party guest, master of ceremonies, public speaker, television nightly newsmaker, newsmagazine subject, as Robert Lowell's equal, and even as a reporter.[ix]

Because he was arrested earlier in the day, Mailer does not observe the major demonstration of the March on the Pentagon. Nor is he among those demonstrators who are beaten and arrested—much more violently than he—at the Pentagon that night. Mailer always misses a remarkable number of important events when he's on assignment. He calls it his "instinct for missing good speeches" (98). In Washington for the Civil Rights March of 1963, Mailer takes a stroll right before Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech. Even more surprising for the Participant of the previous year's brawl at the Pentagon, Mailer observes the riot in Chicago during the 1968 Democratic Convention from his nineteenth-floor hotel window.

As The Reporter in *The Armies of the Night,* Mailer is often a comic figure, "a simple of a hero and a marvel of a fool" (213). Although in some passages he casts himself as the hero, the Protagonist, as well as the anti-hero, the equally heroically-proportioned Beast, just as frequently he is nothing more than the comic mock-hero of his own epic: in other words, just a man. Confronting Sonny Liston after his victory against Floyd Patterson in 1962, Mailer descends all the way to being a bum:

> Something unexpected and gentle came into Liston's voice. "Well, you are a bum," he said. "Everybody is a bum. I'm a bum, too. It's just that I'm a bigger bum than you are." He stood up and stuck out his hand. "Shake, bum," he said . . . once more I had tried to become a hero, and had ended as an eccentric. There would be argument later whether I was a monster or a clown.

> Could it be, was I indeed a bum? I shook his hand. *(Presidential* 265)

But when Mailer is arrested during the March on the Pentagon, he becomes even worse than a bum, becoming something he has been hankering after for years, but until now has been able to achieve only metaphorically: an outlaw. Casting himself as the outlaw and President Kennedy as the sheriff, Mailer contends "the outlaw is worth more than the sheriff" because "the health of America . . . depended in part on the inventiveness and passion of its outlaws" (*Presidential* vi). Paradoxically, becoming an outlaw frees Mailer to reach his most expansive oratorical self, that of prophet.

Feeling themselves as oppressed by Americanism as liberated by it, all classic American writers, according to Sacvan Bercovitch, see themselves simultaneously as outcasts and prophets (179-80).[10] "It may be time to say that the Republic is in real peril," Mailer announced in 1959 (*Advertisements* 233). Suddenly, Mailer's subject is the Republic, and his rhetoric embraces all of America. He speaks of "what's wrong with America," of "the health of America," of what America needs, of "our tragedy," of "the country recovering its imagination," of America being mad, diseased—as if the country is one body with one mind. In *Cannibals and Christians,* looking at San Francisco's new buildings, Mailer wonders if the country is going mad. Nothing short of madness explains why such a beautiful city would erect monstrosities. They are not simply bad architecture, according to Mailer, but symptoms of insanity. In 1964, foreseeing the Vietnam War as well as the social upheavals we mean by the catchall phrase "the sixties," Mailer prophesies, "The wars are coming, and deep revolutions of the soul" (*Cannibals* 45).

The prophet, like the journalist, is an outsider who must distance himself from the life he observes in order to comment on it. The prophet feels sorrow and pity, not hatred, for the America he denounces. "My fine America," Mailer calls it, "which I had been at pains to criticize." He is reluctant

> to lose even the America he had had, that insane warmongering technology land with its smog, its superhighways, its experts and its profound dishonesty . . . [he] detested the thought of seeing his American society—evil, absurd, touching, pathetic, sickening, comic, full of novelistic marrow—disappear now in the nihilistic maw of a national disorder. (*Miami* 186–87)

What is significant here is the "his": America is his—Mailer's ultimate metaphor is himself. In the manner of the metaphysical poets and the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English divines, and the American Puritans and their descendants the Transcendentalists, Mailer sees universes of meaning in minutiae, infuses everyday events with cosmic meaning. Mailer is as much a microcosm as John Donne. Mailer's love for his wife, for example, is connected to his love for America:

> Mailer finally came to decide that his love for his wife while not at all equal or congruent to his love for America was damnably parallel. It was not inconceivable to him that if he finally came to believe his wife was not nearly so magical as he would make her, but was in fact petty, stingy, small-minded, and evilly stubborn (which is what he told her in many a quarrel) why then he would finally lose some part of his love affair with America, he would have to, because there were too many times when thinking of his country and some new one of the unspeakable barbarities it invented with every corporation day, he would decide that no it could not be an altogether awful country because otherwise how would his wife, a Southerner and an Army brat, have come out so subtle, so supple, so mysterious, so fine-skinned, so tender and wise.
>
> We will remember that Mailer had a complex mind of sorts. He would have considered it irretrievably heavy-handed to have made any direct correspondence between his feeling for his wife, and the change in his feelings toward America (which tended to change a little every minute from the truth he had detected in the last face he saw) but he would also have thought it cowardly to ignore the relation, and dishonest to assume that none of his wife's attractiveness (and unattractiveness) came from her presence so quintessentially American. (*Armies* 171)

Mailer's denunciations, damning as they may be, always are built on love: he criticizes the country because he loves it, knows it and loves it, not because he hates it. He is possessive, protective, grateful and, yes, in love—more than a little in love: "It was after all natural that he should have a love affair with

America," Mailer says, "how much worse if the grandsons of the immigrants did not" (*Armies* 171).

Combining his metaphorical technique with his call to prophesy, Mailer compares the imprisoned Quakers—perhaps the closest of all religious in America to the seventeenth-century—in isolation cells after their arrests at the Pentagon, "thrown in the Hole . . . naked Quakers on the cold floor of a dark isolation cell in D.C. jail," to Jesus Christ. Mailer contends the Quakers are doing penance for the sins of the nation just as Christ atoned for humankind's sins. This large claim leads him to a Fitzgeraldian prophecy about America's destiny: "For we must end on the road to that mystery where courage, death, and the dream of love give promise of sleep" (288).

Precisely because he is a relentless critic of the middle class can Mailer become its prophet, in a tradition dating from the first Puritan settlements in America. In the Puritan tradition, the critics of the middle-class were drawn from its own ranks. The Puritan prophets were as relentless in their criticism of their fellow Puritans as Mailer is of contemporary Americans. How ironic yet how fitting that Mailer uses the same form his Puritan ancestors used to prophesy to the people, the jeremiad.

From John Winthrop's sermon on board the *Arbella* before landing at Massachusetts Bay in 1630, lamentation and celebration have existed simultaneously in the American jeremiad: beneath the Puritan prophet's castigations lies unquenchable optimism (Bercovitch 6-7, 11).[11] The Puritan prophet excoriates his people in order to ensure they fulfill their shining promise. This bipolar impulse contributes to the antinomies in Mailer's language, to his being able to celebrate while he condemns, and to his ambiguity.[12] Since the paradoxical dual impulse of the American jeremiad develops into "the dynamics of Puritan ambiguity," Mailer's insistence on the ambiguous nature of events does not make him a journalistic renegade as much as it places him squarely in an established American habit of thought (Bercovitch 78n). And in his early nonfiction, Norman Mailer found the perfect instrument with which to rebel against the conventions of twentieth-century journalism while prophesying the news about America.

NOTES

1. "I read Mencken at Harvard," Mailer told me. "Everybody did." Personal interview, 13 Nov. 1991.
2. In his observation that modern fiction deals with the "adventure of its own making," Richardson (1986) points out a parallel to Mailer's journalism.

3. Though *Armies* concludes with the extraordinary Fitzgeraldian passage titled The Metaphor Delivered, the book's first draft might be called The Metaphor Deleted: given how quickly Mailer was compelled to produce the 90,000 words first published as an entire issue of *Harper's*. The Ransom Archive manuscripts and typescripts, which show remarkably few revisions, nevertheless are remarkable for the number of metaphors Mailer tests and ultimately deletes. See especially 77.2, 77.7, 129.
4. Whitman's call for a breakdown between the "barriers of prose and poetry," as noted by Bergman (1970) uncannily anticipates Mailer's transgressing the boundaries between fact and fiction. Surveying the territory from a somewhat different angle, Scott (1972) positions Mailer's Whitmanesque vernacular in a "middle region" between lyric poetry and prose narrative.
5. Mailer's ambition to include "the entire stretch of American life . . . . in all its particularity and multifariousness," according to Scott (1973), leads him to maximalist techniques, as noted by Tanner (1986). Mailer acknowledged as much to Solomon (1982).
6. *Reading Myself and Others* (New York: Farrar, 1975) 80. Scott finds Mailer's "multiplicity of roles" further evidence of his affinity with Whitman. Bloom's (1986) "oral polyphony" situates Mailer's multiple personae within the oral tradition.
7. One is tempted to align the Whitmanesque being "in and out of the game" with what Letimäki (2005) calls Mailer's "paratexts" — that is, Mailer is in and out of the rhetoric as well, reporting as well as commenting on the methodology of his reporting.
8. Personal interview, 13 Nov. 1991. Mailer acknowledged Adams' influence on *Armies* in other conversations, among them with Solomon, whom he told, "You don't have to posit any other author but Adams." Merrill (1992) notes Adams' and Mailer's shared medievalism, a point that leads us to consider the importance in Mailer's journalism of *witness*, whose medieval role conjoined observer and participant in the experience of the martyr. Thus the passage on Mailer's responsibility in Robert Kennedy's assassination begins to seem less presumptuous.
9. Merideth (1971) considers Mailer's "celebrations of failure" misguided. A characteristically witty and uncharacteristically generous Gore Vidal proposed in 1986 that "There is more virtue in [Mailer's] failures than in most small premeditated successes."
10. Others have commented on the distinctly prophetic strain in Mailer's work, including Landow (1986), Merrill (1992) and Bloom (1986), who has called Mailer a "phantasmagoric visionary." Echoing Kazin on "personal testimony," Berthoff (1971) identifies the strategy of personal witness in Mailer's reporting, leading to what he calls the "imaginative witness" in Mailer's consideration of the Quakers. Scott identifies a "politics of salvation." Merrill considers that *Armies* "describes an almost religious experience."
11. Wenke makes note of the Puritan strain in Mailer.
12. Mailer's antitheses have inspired a rich vocabulary of critical identifications. Dickstein calls Mailer's "antimonies" a product of his "profound ambivalence"; Tanner refers to "pairings" of "opposed extremes." Most recently, Letimäki has noted the "binary distinctions," "oppositionalities," "arbitrary schematicism," "mythical dualism," and "unstable chiasmus" in Mailer's work.

Berthoff posits other sources for Mailer's marked ambiguity, chiefly the presence of two narrators in the work, Mailer and his persona, a construction similar to Letimaki's "schizophrenic narrator." Zavarzadeh's inventive image is that of a split screen. In his examination of Adams, Cox (1971) discusses the third person device as a mechanism that enables the writer to throw past and present into contrast. Cox notes that Adams' prophetic mode (unlike Mailer's) is speculative.

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