MAILER'S *TOUGH GUYS*: NOVELIST INVITES HIS CHARACTERS TO DANCE

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MAILER'S TITLE ORIGINATED IN A MAFIA ANECDOTE where a don asks three professional boxers to dance with his wife at an elegant nightclub; in turn, they graciously comply. After they all have danced, one suggests, "Your turn, Signori," and the don replies, "Tough guys don't dance," casting their acquiescence as a gesture of respect. Boxers bob and weave and do dance when tough guys tell them to. The anecdote embodies the conundrum in the link between power and sex, articulated by Oscar Wilde: "Everything in life is about sex, except sex. Sex is about power."

Tough Guys Don't Dance recalls the licentious sixties in Provincetown when wild skinny dipping parties were a way to wind down from the Dionysian whirl of dancing to loud music and consciousness-altering amounts of drugs and alcohol. The parties took place in houses along the shoreline, but Mailer concentrates many into one by choosing a bay front mini-mansion much like his own house. The movie opens when the police chief himself goes to ask the hostess, Patty Lareine, to turn down the noise. If she is a figure on the movie screen, played by Debra Sandlund, she appears in the novel as the shade of herself, having been murdered at the beginning. Mailer makes her memorable in the movie by answering the door in the nude, giving a glimpse of her cherished attribute that later becomes a subject of close scrutiny.

But in the novel, the summer frenzy is calming down, and autumn chills are approaching. The streets are deserted and the bars put together "people who might not necessarily associate with one another." Mailer is right to em-

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phasize the genuine "spookiness" of post-season Provincetown, where the aftermath of excess is evaluated with a Kierkegaardian understanding of the nuances of fear, anxiety, dread, vertigo, and dizziness—unhappy moods sometimes hilariously rendered in the language of fictional people who live lives much like real people in the sixties. Mailer simply puts available extremes into intimate contact.

Let me offer some background on Mailer's historical sources.

TONY COSTA MURDERS, 1959

Tony Costa, a young Portuguese native, was convicted of murdering four women and dismembering their bodies. Rumors circulated about victim's hearts being absent from the remains, and worries about satanic rituals circulated in the newspapers. Costa grew marijuana in a "garden" hidden in Truro. Mailer has taken details of the experience, greatly amplifying Costa's account, *The Apocalypse*, written in prison before his suicide four years later. Costa claims to have witnessed a LSD-crazed character named Carl commit the murders. Carl is Costa's fictional character, a psychotic's stand-in for himself. It is significant that both Costa and Mailer's narrator Tim Madden conceive of writing as a calling capable of gaining them access to redemption.

JONATHAN THOMAS CLIMBS PILGRIM MONUMENT, 1969

Jonathan Thomas, age twenty, scaled the outside walls and was stopped at the overhang thirty feet from the top, much as Mailer reported of Madden's climb. The Monument, the tallest granite structure in the country, is Mailer's Delphi of dread, a "stone phallus" that is at once the actual terror of climbing the tower and freezing before the accomplishment. The failure ignites further futile attempts when other moments present Madden with "a temptation clear as the mandate to mount the tower."

HELLTOWN, HISTORICALLY LOCATED AT HATCHES HARBOR, NOT LONG POINT

Mailer conflates two nineteenth-century settlements, one on Long Point, due to the proximity to fishing grounds, the other closer to Race Point, with a lawless reputation. Legend says that the fisherman with the lowest catch of the year was obliged to serve as schoolmaster. A scale replica of the actual buildings is on display at the Pilgrim Monument Museum. A climb to the

pinnacle offers spectacular views of what Mailer described in *Tough Guys* as "a natural harbor, as protected, indeed, as the inside of one's ear."

This metaphor—connecting locale to a sanctum sanctorum for expressive freedom—offers insight into why Mailer's transgressions usually happen in socially privileged areas—the lover's bed, the psychiatrist's couch, the boxing ring, the artist's studio, the actor's stage, the political podium, the local bar, the writer's notebook, or habitations such as Provincetown where legends serve as credible foundations for fiction.

I read the novel when it first came out, and was particularly startled by a passage portraying the physical experience of going deep into the Truro woods. I asked Norman directly how he wrote those paragraphs. He said, "Oh, that was easy," explaining that he just drove out to Truro on a "sunless" afternoon and walked through some terrain where the hills were connected by low-lying marshes and *cul de sacs* of dense brambles. His recollection suggested casually how the transformative power of the actual light charged his writing with felt experience.

He wrote: "One could watch the seawater in the distance thrash through a millrace of light and whitecaps, while the color of the ponds in the hollows remained a dark and dirty bronze. All the palette of the woods seemed to accommodate itself between. I liked the dull green of the dune grass and the pale gold of the weeds . . . in that late autumn panorama where the beef's blood and burnt orange are out of the leaves." The colors, now "out of the leaves," yet stir in the reader's mind.

In an exasperated yet prescient early review of *Tough Guys*, Denis Donoghue explains why he remains patient with Mailer's exhibitions of exorbitant grandiloquence:

> I think I understand why Mailer refuses to let his sentences be replaced by their meaning. The high style, which sobriety is likely to rebuke as a Mardi Gras of metaphor, is Mailer's way of forcing the reader to sense continuous turbulence between the words; or at least to feel tension between the local meaning the reader is inclined to settle for, and the scornful rival meaning the sentences insist on.

Mailer's mastery of metaphor is the source of his acrobatic, allusive, and aggressive assault on the sensibility of the assumed reader, whom he ad-

dresses on almost every page with guidelines about how to read his book, successfully enough to establish common understandings about what constitutes reality in this make-believe structure. One becomes implicated via one's own understanding as a reader, absorbing the book's copious, robust production of thought, and delighting in the way the author weaves the tendrils of his imagination into surprising relationships. If tough guys don't dance, then Mailer is the Gene Kelly of writers who do dance.

In the last year of his life—prompted by looking at a book of photographs of contemporary Provincetown dwellings taken at night with a camera that allowed very long exposures—Mailer experienced a Proustian epiphany that recalled his very first visit to Provincetown in 1943, on a weekend to celebrate his graduation from Harvard. Mailer wrote in his introduction that he connected the revelation of seeing the secret colors of the night to being able to imagine what the town was like in colonial times: "So much so, indeed, that one could suppose oneself returned in some small measure to events gone long before one had entered one's own life."

One could suppose oneself—meaning that one could be *elsewhere*—sanctions Mailer's opposition to constrictions on self-exploration, and is the source of Tim Madden's maddeningly witty performance as narrator, explicating and enacting his own role in the manuscript he is supposedly writing, *In Our Wild: Studies Among the Sane*, which sounds like a rejected title for the actual book published by Mailer. The reader, keenly aware of the fun Mailer enjoys at Madden's expense, has the perspective of irony to find humor in horror.

Mailer shows his genius for embedding metaphor with action to the degree that what one thing stands for is eerily identical to the thing it represents. Madden did not kill the two women who were beheaded, but he did take compromising Polaroid photos of their naked bodies and he did take a pair of scissors to the photographs, snipping off their heads and enacting a symbolic decapitation.

In Mailer's sole mystery novel, where suspense intensifies chapter by chapter, the narrator's confusion clarifies and his sense of reality sharpens, via discovery that he has a power—astonishing to himself—that he calls "creative vision"—"the ability to see events before they happen." Mailer spells out one such scene near the end of the book, pre-empting any need to enact what he need only report. Madden scorns his "damnable faculty of being able to visualize what I might soon see was becoming quite palpable." His imagined description of how he *would* have killed Regency is etched in

sentences where the look on the dying man's face becomes an image engraved in the reader's mind. But Regency died by another hand when Madden was not present. "Do you know," Madden says after observing what did happen, rather bemused by his own preternatural brilliance, "I came in after the double blasts of [Madeleine's] little derringer, and [Regency] was expiring on my marriage bed." Mailer makes credible that Madden had witnessed the very scene the reader now has no need to see.

This is an example of what Richard Poirier called the "performing self," a pointedly self-aware exercise of self-expression intended as measured resistance to social oppression of any kind. It is a tactic for survival in horrible conditions that includes malicious deception as a routine tool ("To find the truth, compare the lies"). Nevertheless, the moral implications of transgression are obviated by what Kierkegaard in *Fear and Trembling* called a "teleological suspension of the ethical," where transgressions are demanded by a higher command, whether divine or diabolical.

In 1987 on the occasion of the movie release of *Tough Guys*, Mailer appeared on the cover of *Provincetown Arts*. In an interview with the writer Eddie Bonetti, Norman's close friend and a minor actor in the movie, I observed, "Mailer has a great way of imagining a man's female lover in sexual encounters with the man's enemy."

Bonetti responded,

> It's a central fantasy, the most volatile sexual situation in an adult male's life, mainly because of the residue of impotence, an oedipal impotence that every man inevitably felt when he was small and women were larger than him. It haunts the male character. I think it haunts Norman and he translates it into some ghost of his male characters. Who is this guy Tim Madden, the Ryan O'Neal figure in the movie? He's a failed writer. He's a thwarted lover. His wife has left him, he wakes up drunk while the gulls on the bare flats eat away at his liver, like Prometheus being gnawed at for stealing fire from the gods. I hope Norman forgives me, but I sense a lot of humor in *Tough Guys*.

If "anxiety is the dizziness of freedom," as Kierkegaard so explored in connecting dread with action, then Mailer, in his sardonic style, has converted tragic inevitability into cathartic comedy.

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