SPIRITUAL WICKEDNESS IN HIGH PLACES: TRAUMA, VIOLENCE, AND BETRAYAL IN *HARLOT'S GHOST*

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NORMAN MAILER'S *HARLOT'S GHOST* OFFERS A COMPLEX EXAMINATION of masculinity and trauma within an institution that encourages violence and forbids weakness. Mailer tells the tale of Harry Hubbard's life in and out of the CIA, a story filled with a cast of highly traumatized characters, a narrative laced with child sexual abuse and betrayal. One notable instance of the lechery tingeing *Harlot's Ghost* takes place during Harry's adolescence when a school chaplain molests Harry, an event that transpires and is never mentioned again by Harry as a narrator. However, the molestation permanently alters Harry's sexual and romantic development. His abuse leaves him with deep shame that he cannot express. Yet Mailer shows the reader a starkly different paradigm for coping with trauma in Dix Butler, a peer of Harry's in the CIA, illustrating that Harry's feelings of stigmatization and self-loathing are not the only response to harm. Dix readily admits that his older brother repeatedly raped him during his childhood. Yet this story is a source of pride for Dix rather than a source of shame; he boasts that he eventually grew physically strong enough to fight off his brother. In comparison to passive, self-conscious Harry, Dix is a dominant, ambitious, and successful CIA agent. Dix and Harry illustrate two documented responses to coping with trauma.

Psychological research reveals that posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can present as internalized or externalized (Miller, Greif, and Smith 2003).

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People who internalize their PTSD symptoms are likely to be depressed, introverted, paranoid, and fraught with negative emotions. Distress from the traumatic experience manifests in social avoidance, rumination, and obsession. On the other hand, people who externalize their PTSD symptoms are quick to anger, impulsive, reckless of safety, drawn to danger, and likely to abuse alcohol. These darker traits combine with more positive qualities; people with externalized PTSD are often gregarious, assertive, and confident. Yet they also are more likely to engage in illegal or immoral behavior. Current psychological research finds that the posttraumatic distress of these two subtypes of PTSD is equal; individuals with each form of PTSD endure severe stress expressed through very different thoughts, feelings, and actions.

The CIA agents in *Harlot's Ghost* live lives that are full of trauma, betrayal, and deception. Indeed, most of Mailer's characters have experienced at least one haunting loss, one great treachery. In Mailer's vision of the CIA, an agent's capacity to cope with trauma can secure or shatter his career. Externalized posttraumatic symptoms are valuable qualities when they emerge as dominance and power, yet internalized posttraumatic symptoms are an embarrassment to be hidden at all costs. CIA membership encourages externalization, encourages behaviors that confront the world rather than reflect inward at the psyche. In Mailer's eyes, the CIA demands a squad of agents who are impervious to painful experiences and are even able to capitalize on their trauma. Doing so, they generate more effective aggression to fill the agency's need for spies who are willing to secure intelligence in any way necessary. Agents who externalize their response to trauma can rise to great power, whereas those who internalize that response are limited by the emotional turmoil within them. Given that externalized PTSD relates to aggression and delinquent behaviors, this paradigm generates a cadre of highly successful yet violent CIA agents. If an agent has been traumatized, which, given the nature of CIA work, is more likely than not, achievement within the agency demands that he convert any grief or weakness into dominance and aggression. They are tested on these skills; as part of Harry and Dix's training in the CIA, they undergo a brutal interrogation meant to simulate the type of experience they will later encounter in their careers. Locked in a room for eight hours and grilled by a superior agent, Harry observes, "we were in Camp Peary, not East Germany, but I did not feel safe" (Mailer 199), which is of course precisely the intention of the agency. By generating terror in their new employees, the agency discovers who will be able to suffer

through fear and violence and emerge with greater vitality and tolerance for violence. Harry passes the test but not without challenge; the experience teaches him "insanity did not exist across the sea from reality, but could be visited on foot" (200), an understanding that Harry faces for years to come in the CIA.

Harry's internalized posttraumatic stress symptoms develop after he is sexually abused. The school chaplain, with whom Harry shares a room on a field trip, performs fellatio on Harry, and fearing that the chaplain will be rough if he resists, Harry complies without physical struggle. After molesting him, Harry's school chaplain disintegrates into tears. Instead of responding with aggression, instead of running away or fighting back, Harry comforts the chaplain as he weeps. Harry's behavior is consistent with current psychological research, which suggests that the human reaction to stress is more complex than the often-referenced "fight or flight" response. Indeed, many modern psychologists include immobilization as a common reflex to a threat, reclassifying the trope as "fight, flight, or freeze" (Bracha 2004). However, although contemporary professionals would view Harry's paralysis as adaptive, protecting him from further harm, his peers would likely see his coerced compliance as weakness rather than self-preservation. Harry, aware that his inaction is inconsistent with cultural conceptions of masculinity, integrates feelings of shame into his identity. Following the abuse, he is haunted by distorted dreams that replay the experience and leave him feeling debased and contaminated. In the years that follow, Harry stays away from sex "as though it were a disease" (Mailer 125), a pattern of social avoidance consistent with internalized PTSD symptoms. Furthermore, he is now and forever aware of what Mailer describes as "the pits of horrible possibility in the most proper affairs" (126), the reality that respected people in reputable organizations sometimes abuse, violate, and betray those around them.

As Dix is not the narrator of the book, we know less about his internal state. But Harry and his peers quickly learn about Dix's history of trauma. In one instance, Dix shares that his older brother "used to corn-hole me until I hit him up side of the head with a rock. I was fourteen" (193); then he asks Harry if he has ever assaulted his younger twin brothers. When Harry says no, Dix asks, "Weren't man enough?" (193). Their seemingly flippant exchange illustrates much about Dix's response to trauma. First, and notably, he is not ashamed to speak of his abuse but instead employs it as evidence of his own strength. Furthermore, he has assigned value to perpetration of

abuse; perpetrators are strong, masculine, and dominant in Dix's eyes. Dix, a braggart and a risk-taker, is a violent man whose response to trauma, unlike Harry's, exhibits externalized PTSD symptoms.

These men's differing strategies of coping collide in a complex and challenging scene when they are stationed in Berlin together. Returning from a night of drinking, Dix again proudly tells Harry about his childhood abuse: "My big brother used to corn-hole me. From the time I was ten till I was fourteen. Then I knocked him down, and he stopped . . . Now, I do not believe there is any man in the Company who could stick it up me against my will. No one has the physical force" (291). Dix's comment has significant implications. First, he has established logic within abuse; abuse will stop if the victim fights back. This assumption is, of course, inconsistent with Harry's own experience of abuse, during which, paralyzed with fear, he did not fight back or protest. Dix reminds Harry that, by the standards of their professional world, a true man would have fought rather than submitting to abuse; Dix's story of triumph reinforces Harry's shame. Next, Dix greatly values physical strength; implicit in this value is the concept that the way to avoid being harmed is to harm first, that the way to escape violence is to be violent first. Dix's abuse has left him with a pattern of aggression; when he is hurt or betrayed, his response is to retaliate with greater viciousness; when he engages with others who could hurt him but have not yet done so, his response is to aggress preemptively to establish dominance. For Dix, masculinity is the constant struggle to be more violent, more aggressive, than those around him. He reaffirms this belief as he threatens Harry, asking "What if I were to push your face into the carpet, and manhandle your cherry pants off your cherry ass? Do you think I'm strong enough?" (291). Dix has placed Harry in yet another situation where his options are to fight, flee, or freeze. In response to his own trauma, Dix uses aggression as a form of hyper-vigilance; because Harry could theoretically hurt him, Dix lashes out first in anticipation. Knowing that close others—brothers, lovers, or friends—are potential threats, Dix acts logically from his perspective, taking the offensive before Harry does. Although they are co-workers, although they are friends, Dix reduces their relationship to a contest of strength, a challenge to see who can subordinate the other. Operating in an institution with a clear chain of command, Dix establishes his role in relation to Harry. But Mailer illustrates that the CIA's hierarchy is inconsistently adhered to; agents constantly act without orders and lie to their superiors. Indeed, the real pecking

order is not listed in any official document but is instead negotiated during unsanctioned power struggles such as the one between Dix and Harry.

In response, Harry tells Dix that he will fight to the death rather than be raped. This reply satisfies Dix, who swiftly shifts tactics. "There's two kinds of sexual behavior between men," he says, "compulsion and mutual regard. The second does not exist until the first is attempted" (292), and with those words Dix disrobes, bends over, and asks Harry to penetrate him. Harry has proved his strength to Dix, who now respects him; for Dix, respect is a prerequisite for consensual sex, which Harry has earned in his eyes. The two men engage in a contest for dominance, one of many unspoken confrontations agents participate in to establish power. Although Dix and Harry are officially equal in rank, Dix forces Harry to prove he is worthy of that shared status. Dix again establishes a rule of masculinity; men earn respect by successfully resisting violence. Considering Dix's offer, Harry thinks, "I could steal something of his strength" (292). Harry understands that sex between men has the capacity to be a transaction of power. Dominance is a valued commodity in a hierarchy, and in this moment between Dix and Harry, sex is a tool which, when wielded correctly, results in a net gain.

Dix's love of violence, his constant struggle to overpower others, set him up perfectly to thrive in the CIA. He flits in and out of the novel, appearing periodically with more money, more expensive clothes, and more arrogance. Near the end of the novel, Dix makes a final and memorable appearance. Working in Miami, he regales Harry with his recent and horrifying act of violence against a Cuban informant, Chevi Fuertes. Dix tells the tale of interrogating and beating Chevi, trying to get him to admit to being a double agent, of working with the Cubans as well as with the Americans. Dix gleefully describes shoving Chevi's head into an unclean toilet, just one of his tactics to elicit a confession. Although Chevi refuses to speak, Dix describes the story with pleasure, admitting, "I enjoyed doing it" (1116). Once again, ever hungry for domination, Dix demonstrates delinquent behavior characteristic of externalized PTSD.

Later that night, Harry receives a letter from the informant, Chevi Fuertes. Chevi adds a layer of complexity to Dix's story; Chevi tells Harry that he and Dix had been having an affair. Dix not only enjoyed enacting violence on Chevi, but he did so after they engaged in an intimate relationship. Sex, for Dix, is once again inextricably melded with power. As a lover, Chevi has betrayed Dix; while Dix trusted Chevi with his real name and identity, with

his body, perhaps even with his emotions, Chevi was duplicitous. Furthermore, as a double agent, Chevi has threatened Dix's dominance; while Dix depended on Chevi for reliable intelligence about the Cubans, Chevi was disloyal, working for both nations yet faithful to neither. Dix must counter Chevi's betrayal with a reestablishment of masculinity and power, and Dix's response, as always, is to be more violent, more ruthless. In a sense, Dix reenacts his childhood abuse. After being violated, betrayed, he seeks to prove that he is a man, a dangerous and sadistic man. His posttraumatic stress remains externalized; Dix is cold and calculated, even in response to an intimate betrayal at the hands of a lover. As is typical for Dix, when another person successfully harms him, Dix exerts great effort into horrific retaliation. His detailed and delighted description of defecating in the toilet, purposely refraining from flushing, and thrusting Chevi's head into the soiled bowl, illustrates his commitment to attaining vengeance. Sensing Harry's censure, Dix justifies his actions: "So I don't care how you judge me. Up or down, no matter. I did what I did to Chevi because I decided to. Hubbard, you will never believe this, but I would like to become a calculating case officer like you" (1116). Dix himself knows that he and Harry differ in fundamental ways. Dix, impulsive, with all his rage and inhumanity, does what he wants when he wants to, his posttraumatic stress evident in his barbarity. As Dix leaves Harry's life and the novel, he drunkenly proclaims, "a taste for combat is the only gift God ever gave me" (1116). Dix recognizes that his brutality is an asset in the CIA, not a moral flaw.

Harry's career in the agency is much less linear, and although he gains status and influence, he never quite achieves his goals; furthermore, powerful men like his father and godfather, both high-ranking CIA agents, consistently use him as a pawn. Alhough he follows his father and his godfather's advice and provides them with intelligence at their requests, he is also fraught with fear that his career is merely a part of an elaborate game his mentors are playing. Again, the official hierarchy of the CIA is often meaningless; though Harry should theoretically be able to trust his superiors, in truth he rarely knows for sure whether they act for or against his interests. At one point, Harry suffers "from the worst form of paranoia a man in my profession can undergo—I was suspicious of my protector" (261), suspicious, in essence, of the extent to which he can trust men in power, even men with whom he has close ties.

Harry, in comparison to Dix, is a deliberate but faltering CIA agent who

lacks Dix's love for battle. Much of the novel chronicles Harry's long-lived infatuation with Kittredge, the wife of his godfather Harlot; although two chapters, the first and the final, inform the reader that Kittredge and Harry ultimately marry, the tale largely focuses on Harry's unfulfilled love for her. Though Harry reveres his godfather Harlot, he engages in a secret correspondence with Kittredge in which he regularly proclaims his devotion. Harry's attachment to Kittredge, his fixation on a woman with whom he cannot form a true relationship, is yet another internalized symptom of his PTSD. Instead of pursuing a woman who can return his affections openly, Harry remains emotionally faithful to Kittredge, who repeatedly refuses to write to Harry for years at a time. Because Harry is at heart afraid of sex and intimacy as a result of his childhood trauma, he finds solace in hopeless love. Kittredge does not actually sleep with Harry for decades, and he safely loves her without ever being her lover.

Kittredge is only one in an array of Harry's unattainable objects of affection. Indeed, all of Harry's love interests are married or in love with other men. Sally Porringer, the wife of Harry's CIA superior, offers him ample material for obsession. And because their relationship was never feasible, could never be more than a brief fling, Harry has not risked rejection or betrayal. Later in the novel, Harry begins an affair with Modene Murphy, a young woman who is also romantically involved with Frank Sinatra, gangster Sam Giancana, and John F. Kennedy. Modene provides constant reinforcement of Harry's negative self-image; unapologetically unfaithful, inattentive, and at times cruel, she regularly reminds Harry that he is a lesser partner, lover, and man than are her other paramours. When their relationship disintegrates, partially due to what Harry refers to as Modene's "periodic cuckoldry" (828) and partially because Harry is insecure and needy in response to her enthusiastic rejection of monogamy, Modene indifferently says, "God, I dislike your person . . . You are such a dull cock" (827). Her appraisal of Harry is bitingly accurate; Harry is not charming or dynamic like Dix or Harlot or his own father, all more powerful agents than he is himself. When we leave Harry at the end of Mailer's massive and unresolved novel (ending with the tantalizing yet never fulfilled line "to be continued"), decades have passed since Harry left the CIA. Now, hiding in Moscow for fear of assassination by the agency, Harry suspects that his godfather, like himself, is undercover somewhere in Russia. Harry is still embroiled in Harlot's web, despite the fact that his godfather was reported dead years earlier. Deeply

suspicious, obsessively enmeshed, Harry feels "one step closer to the concealed life" of his mind (1167), a statement that reveals the extent of his perpetual unease, endemic of his internalized PTSD. Harry, a ruminator, a dweller, cannot move forward; instead he forever stagnates, tangled in the politics of more powerful men. The end to Harry's story is unsatisfying and without definitive answers. Has Harry become delusional? Is he fraught with fear and unfounded paranoia? Or is Harlot truly lurking in some corner of Moscow? Mailer offers no resolution to these lingering questions.

Mailer ultimately suggests that Harry could not remain in the CIA and survive. He was driven out, whether by the limitations of his own mind or by the aggression of the agency. Alhough we do not see Dix Butler again, when he last appears he is headed to Asia, ready for grander work and greater violence. In contrast, Harry ends his story alone, paranoid, and potentially delusional. The men left in the agency are men such as Dix, men who have the capacity to experience trauma and rebound with greater masculinity.

Mailer's narrative is intimate, offering a long foray into Harry Hubbard's mind, yet the novel is also expansive. Through Harry's eyes, we see not only a picture of one man struggling to cope after trauma, striving to gain accolades and status but also a picture of an agency, a prominent American institution. Though Mailer's CIA is mysterious, boozy, and yes, glamorous, it is also an organization rife with trauma, sexual violence, and corrupt but powerful people. Even Harry's venerated godfather Harlot has a dark secret; Harry learns from Harlot's wife Kittredge that Harlot's "personal devil had been a great desire to ream young pits. There was hardly a good-looking boy in his instruction whom he had not wanted to bugger" (129). Alhough this urge supposedly dissipates after his marriage to Kittredge, Harlot, like other tours de force in the agency, is perhaps at heart an unfulfilled child molester akin to the school chaplain who abused Harry. No rank, however high, is free from vice, and no institution, however esteemed, is free from perfidy. Mailer's epigraph portentously announces these sinister themes:

> For we wrestle, not against flesh and blood,
> but against principalities, against powers,
> against the rulers of the darkness
> of this world, against spiritual wickedness
> in high places. (Ephesians, 6:12)

High places in the CIA that Mailer depicts are permeated with spiritual wickedness. Near the close of the novel, Harry becomes fixated on theories about the deaths of Marilyn Monroe and John F. Kennedy; increasingly, Harry believes that their deaths were the calculated plot of some high-ranking government official or political player. Though Harry's questions remain unanswered, his suspicions are not without foundation. Harry has seen, as have Mailer's readers, that corruption and betrayal within powerful institutions honor no boundaries and comply with no laws. Harry attends a preparatory school in which a trusted religious leader molests him. Dix grows up in a family that permits sexual abuse between brothers. And the CIA, an institution charged with the protection of American interests, is potentially involved in unspeakable evils. Harry, who believes he is a target for assassination by the CIA, is left with the terrifying possibility that he can trust no one. Harry quotes Vladimir Ilich Lenin at the close of the novel, asking, "Whom? Whom does this all benefit?" (1168), knowing that if so much corruption exists, someone must profit. Held together by a hollow hierarchy, the agency Harry fled is forever caught in a cycle of trauma and retaliation. Mailer's CIA, and perhaps Mailer's America altogether, is hazardous for the weak, addictive for the strong, and detrimental for all.

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