WRITING FROM THE CENTER AND FROM THE PERIPHERY OF THE CULTURE—NORMAN MAILER AND DON DELILLO

PAUL REGNIER

[P]eople don't seem to link my name with Norman Mailer, but in a number of ways, Mailer was a strong force, because he was at the center of the culture and I was at the opposite end, so to speak. And I admired his writing and his opinions and the fact that he was a writer who was highly visible. Again, largely because that is the last thing I would want to be myself. And so I remember living in one room for years, and one of the books I kept picking up was Mailer's Advertisements for Myself. *That was nonfiction of all sorts, and I just found it endlessly interesting.*

—Don DeLillo, From an interview with Mark Binelli

—Norman Mailer wollte das, er hatte sich zum Ziel gesetzt, das Bewusstsein unserer Zeit zu veraendern. Und ich glaube, dass er in den sechziger Jahren durchaus nahe dran war, das zu schaffen. Aber ich? Nein, nein, ich wollte so etwas nie. Ich bin nicht maileresk.

[Norman Mailer wanted to, he set himself the goal of altering the consciousness of our time. And I think he came extremely close, in the '60s, to making it happen. But me? No, no. I never wanted anything like that. I am not Maileresque]

—Don DeLillo, in an interview with Christoph Amend [my translation]

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THESE ARE TWO OF THE COMMENTS THAT DELILLO HAS MADE to the effect that Mailer has been at the center of the culture and has at least strongly affected that (American) culture (if not actually "altering its consciousness"), while he, DeLillo, has been at the "opposite end" (or the periphery, to keep the metaphor consistent). At the same time, he acknowledges that Mailer has been a major influence on him.

Mailer and DeLillo have been aware of each others' work and have exchanged mostly mutually admiring letters (Ransom Center Archive 169). As Randy Laist points out in the *Don DeLillo Newsletter*, the two writers' "affinity in . . . artistic temperaments . . . exists alongside a personal affinity the two writers express toward one another" in their letters.

Of course, the two have very different personalities. Mailer was an extrovert, a tireless self-promoter, constantly seeking the limelight and willing to comment publicly on almost any subject. DeLillo is famously introverted, avoids presenting himself in public settings (although the *Cosmopolis* film team was able to drag him to Cannes to appear in a panel discussion and do interviews), and views his work as describing or reflecting what he sees rather than as changing consciousness or "the culture." As Joseph Tabbi writes, "As public personalities no two writers could be more different than Mailer and DeLillo" (181).

They also wrote in different times. Although their lives overlapped substantially, Mailer (1923-2007) and DeLillo (b. 1936) represent different generations. Mailer fought in World War II while DeLillo was a child. *The Naked and the Dead* was published in 1948 and was an immediate popular and critical success; DeLillo's first novel, *Americana*, was published in 1971 and, although his early novels brought some critical praise, his first bestseller was *Libra* in 1988.

When asked about influences on his writing, DeLillo has usually named, "my personal trinity—of abstract expressionism, foreign films, and jazz" rather than "anything I read," (Howard 128). However, in the Mark Binelli interview cited above, he mentions the influence of Mailer and, surprisingly, of *Advertisements for Myself,* the book in which Mailer recreated himself as a "hipster" writer after the major success of *The Naked and the Dead* followed by two novels that failed both critically and popularly. Besides announcing his goal of "making a revolution in the consciousness of our time" in *Advertisements*, Mailer says that "the ambition of a writer like myself is to become consecutively more disruptive, more dangerous, and more power-

ful," (*Advertisements* 17, 22), and he set about, starting in *Advertisements*, not only publishing writing that radically transgresses bourgeois sensibilities, in which violence offers opportunities for heroism, but even living a public life of physical risk-taking (for example, getting involved in street fights, stabbing his second wife, getting the murderer/writer Jack Abbott released from prison).[1]

Mailer was a novelist (and nonfiction writer, and political figure) of personal agency, while DeLillo's protagonists have tended to be frustrated or ineffectual. Action (often violent action) is possible for a Mailer hero, while a DeLillo hero may look back nostalgically to a violent youth but finds himself more acted upon than acting and often frustrated when he takes action (for example, Gladney in *White Noise*).

One can say about both writers what Morris Dickstein says about Mailer, that they have, "an uncanny instinct for the Zeitgeist"(155). Mailer began mainstreaming obscene language in *The Naked and the Dead*, although he had to misspell "fuck" as "fug" throughout.[2] He anticipated the countercultural valorization of sex and mystery in the 1960s and was among the first to publish reportage based on the view that subjective experience provides a more truthful account of events because it supplies the "nuance" missing from a report consisting only of facts. In *Mao II* and *Underworld*, DeLillo predicted the rise of the terrorist as international celebrity. The portrayal of the Internet in *Underworld* is pretty advanced for a book published in 1997. For some readers, DeLillo seems to predict events and attitudes to the point that the original cover of *Underworld,* with its picture of a bird flying over the World Trade Center towers, is seen as foreshadowing the 9/11 attacks.

One way of explaining the differences between them would be to track changes in the Zeitgeist during their careers. The 1960s were, among other things, a period of conflict between community and individuality. The old left valued common action and commitment of individuals to that common action; the new left gave more value to individuality and individual action and to politicization of culture rather than just of economic arrangements—"the personal is political." Mailer anticipated this, especially in *Advertisements*. His attitude toward media, especially television, was ambivalent, and his major negative concern about TV was commercial interruption of programming. Apparently (see Raymond), he had as little interaction with computers as possible. He maintained the heroic idea of the writer and the value of individual action and experience throughout his life, and there is little or

nothing in Mailer showing electronic media representations undermining the possibility of individual action or the novelist's ability to change the culture. On the other hand, in DeLillo's time media culture increasingly establishes or substitutes for reality. He gives substantial attention to the power of media to abstract experience and to provide a mass rather than an individual experience. What is needed, for DeLillo, is someone or something with the power to break through the mass-media stranglehold on "reality." For DeLillo, this is a power now lost to the novelist and, in fact, mostly to the (non-terrorist) individual. What power the novelist now has is the power to record—possibly to predict, but not to change—what happens.

Both writers are oppositional to mainstream culture. When George Will called DeLillo a "bad citizen" for, in *Libra*, calling into question the Warren Report's finding that Kennedy was killed by a lone assassin, DeLillo's response was that "being called a bad citizen is a compliment to a novelist . . . That's exactly what we do. We ought to be bad citizens. We ought to, in the sense that we're writing against what power represents, and often what government represents, and what the corporation dictates, and what consumer consciousness has come to mean. In that sense, if we're bad citizens, we're doing our job" (Remnick 142). By any measure, Mailer preceded DeLillo as a "bad citizen," a "philosopher of Hip" whose themes are "murder, suicide, incest, orgy, orgasm, and Time" (*Advertisements* 107). While both Mailer and DeLillo write against the powers of the corporation, government, and consumerism, Mailer offers a "Hip" alternative that could hardly be more radical, offering "psychopathic brilliance" against "quiet desperation" (*Advertisements* 339). A comparison of their portrayals of Lee Harvey Oswald is instructive (see Balter).

Geoff Hamilton's 2009 article, "Between Mailer and DeLillo: The 'Affectless Person' in Robert Stone's *A Hall of Mirrors*," notes that DeLillo "often seems to be in dialogue with the legacy of Norman Mailer," but goes on to say that while "Like Mailer, DeLillo constructs American worlds in which 'awe' and 'mystery' are obsessive concerns, while also seeing 'revelation' in moments of violence . . . Resistance to conformity of the kind promised by the hipster or psychopath tends towards futility, however, as revisions of the figure become more like avatars of mass culture than opponents to it," citing Gladney in *White Noise* and the serial killer in *Underworld* as examples of such "avatars" (5). Hamilton, however, chooses the wrong character in

Underworld to compare with Mailer's hipster heroes. The appropriate comparison is to Nick Shay who longs for

> the days of disorder . . . when I was alive on the earth, rippling in the quick of my skin, heedless and real. I was dumb-muscled, and angry and real. This is what I long for, the breach of the peace, the days of disarray when I walked real streets and did things slap-bang and felt angry and ready all the time, a danger to others and a distant mystery to myself (810).

The life for which Shay yearns nostalgically is pretty similar to that of a Mailer hero: the hipster of "The White Negro," Rojack in *An American Dream*, DJ in *Why Are We in Vietnam*? It is also important to note that this life is not merely aspirational; it is a life that the young Shay actually lived until prison cut this phase of his life short. And Shay is not—in either his youthful or adult manifestation as an executive of waste management—an "avatar of mass culture." He is the most authentic DeLillo character and certainly the most authentic in *Underworld*. Elsewhere in *Underworld*, mass culture seems to have taken over the role of validating human action. Certainly, Hamilton is right to cite Gladney, the highway killer as an example of this. Only because one of his murders was caught by a camera and, therefore, could be recapped on TV over and over can Gladney develop a cult following. The crowning example of media abstracting events into universally available mass culture is the webification of Esmeralda's death (and of the South Bronx in general) at the end of *Underworld*.

A good case can be made that Shay is the closest DeLillo character to DeLillo himself. Others have noticed that *Underworld* is the first of DeLillo's novels to be largely set in the Bronx. Although the novel has many other geographical settings—from Madison, Wis. to Kazakhstan to Phoenix—the Bronx is where Shay grew up, killed a man, and lived the life to which he longs to return. It is also the now (1990s) devastated locus of "the Wall," "a tuck of land adrift from the social order" (239)—a premodern place where violence is always imminent, graffiti writers paint an angel for each neighborhood child killed, traffic in abandoned cars is the major business, electrical power is missing, and Sister Edgar searches for the wild child Esmeralda. DeLillo grew up in the Arthur Avenue area of the Bronx (at the time an Italian neighborhood) and is still rooted there, visiting frequently

from his current Westchester County home. Arthur Avenue is also Shay's old neighborhood (620). Shay is approximately DeLillo's age, 17 years old in 1952 (742), which would make his birth year 1935, a year earlier than DeLillo. In an April 2012 interview on the Italian website *Cinerepublic,* centered on the *Cosmopolis* film, DeLillo said:

> I grew up in the Bronx and Scorsese in Lower Manhattan, in Little Italy, but we shared the same language, the same accents and the same behaviors. Needless to say I was familiar with troublemakers like Robert De Niro's character [that is, Johnny Boy in *Mean Streets*], I even knew some of them very well . . . where I used to live, in the Italian part of the Bronx.

Describing his and his buddies' attendance at the opening of the film *Marty,* he says, "The opening scene takes place in Arthur Avenue. It was our place! Seeing our street, the shops we patronized, there in a movie theatre, that was amazing. It was as if our very existence was acknowledged. We never would have thought that somebody would make a film in those streets" *(Cosmopolis Film Blog* 3). If Shay, of all his characters, is the closest to being DeLillo's alter ego, one might expect his personality to reflect something of DeLillo's own idea about himself. As far as I know, Mailer never wrote about Brooklyn. At the same time, he did not need a fictional character to carry his youthful identity. His protagonists were either himself (*The Armies of the Night*), surrealistic heroic characters like Rojack and DJ, or historical personages such as Gilmore in *The Executioner's Song*, Jesus in *The Gospel According to the Son*, and Hitler in *The Castle in the Forest*, and his explorations of these personalities were not attempts to recover aspects of his own youthful experience. In fact, Mailer spent most of his life distancing himself from the "nice Jewish boy from Brooklyn" (*Armies* 134) that he apparently hated in himself.

In the interview cited above, DeLillo characterizes *Advertisements for Myself* as "nonfiction of all sorts," but, as anyone familiar with the book knows, *Advertisements* is not a motley collection but a manifesto, and includes (by my count) almost 45% fiction. By his quote, DeLillo seems not to have been very interested in the fiction there. One presumes that he is interested in the ideas discussed in the nonfictional parts of the book. The two major themes in the book (besides "making a revolution in the consciousness of my time")

would seem to be reinvention of the self/writer and transcendence of the "totalitarian" banal through sex and violence. Mailer says that "in 'The White Negro,' in 'The Time of Her Time,' and in 'Advertisements for Myself on the Way Out' can be found the real end of this muted autobiography of the near-beat adventurer who was myself" (335). In these pieces, Mailer reinvents himself as a philosopher of Hip (not, perhaps, a hipster), whose protagonists are outlaws on the fringes of society yet who, for a time, had been "been running for President . . . in the privacy of my mind" (17), and would actually run for mayor of New York less than a decade later—somehow a fringe personality (for a hipster is, if nothing else, on the fringe) with ambitions for being at the center, as President, where he can affect the mainstream and undermine the "totalitarian" banality of American culture with appeals to sex and violence. A fringe personality at the "center of the culture." Probably the most typical Mailer hero is Rojack in *Dream*—a figure at the center of the culture—academic, elected official, TV personality, and so forth—who yet takes a psychopathic "hipster" turn into sex/death, magic, and mystery—at the center of American culture, yet a fringe personality. Erving Goffman has written that "the most disrupting thing a person can do is to fail to keep a place that others feel can't be changed for him" (389). Rojack does this in spades, bringing the fringe into the center.

DeLillo can (proudly) be a "bad citizen," who challenges social consensus, but not one who directly attempts to change American culture. Much as Shay (and, presumably DeLillo) long for a time when an individual could act out his opposition, the culture has become too abstract, too "virtual," too removed from personal contact, for such action to be effective (even for the actor himself). In DeLillo's world, electronic media (ultimately the internet at the end of *Underworld*, but TV in almost all his works) has abstracted what people accept as reality from concrete human contact or influence. While Mailer's heroes (and Mailer himself) can act on his view of society, DeLillo sees himself as an observer and describer who remains on the periphery (for example, "I'm not trying to manipulate reality. This is just what I see and hear" (McCrum 4). As Joseph Tabbi writes, in *Postmodern Sublime*, in which he compares DeLillo, Mailer, and others, "DeLillo is an author for whom a certain cultural marginality has always been a condition of writing" (179).

At the end of "The White Negro," which is the manifesto within the manifesto that is *Advertisements for Myself,* Mailer looks toward the possibility of

a "a neo-Marxian calculus aimed at comprehending every circuit and process of society," a work in which "the epic grandeur of *Das Kapital* would find its place in an even more God-like view of human justice and injustice, in some more excruciating vision of those intimate and institutional processes which lead to our creations and disasters, our growth, our attrition, and our rebellion" (358). The epilogue of *Underworld* is titled "Das Kapital," and begins, "Capital burns off the nuance in a culture" (785). For Mailer, nuance is what reporters, and others trying to write history as collections of facts, miss, as when, in *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*, after quoting a *New York Times* article about an incident, he writes that "It was a good story but the *Times* was not ready to encourage its reporters in the thought that there is no history without nuance" (56). For Mailer, "Hip is never built on the fact, but rather on the nuance" (*Advertisements* 389). In the *Underworld* epilogue, DeLillo sums up a novel in which "waste" is a continuing physical subject and ubiquitous metaphor, noting that "waste is the secret history, the underhistory" (791). Shay, about to revenge himself on Brian Glassic for the latter's affair with his wife, feels he has emotionally abandoned job, wife, kids, everything that makes him part of banal society and feels "relieved of my phony role . . . free for just a moment, myself again"(796), the self, of course, that he longs for in, "the days of disarray, when I didn't give a damn or a fuck or a farthing" (806). He ends up back in Phoenix living out semi-retirement with his wife, telling her about killing Manza (in his youthful manifestation) and watching their son, on his computer, access the Bronx, Sister Edgar, Esmeralda, and the "miracle" of her face appearing on a billboard—"everything is connected in the end" (826). And at the end, the "word on the screen" is "Peace"—the word "you can summon" . . . in every language and can follow "through the tunneled underworld of its ancestral roots" (826). DeLillo's "neo-Marxian calculus" ends, not by elucidating conflicts, like the one that Mailer hopes for, but by connecting everything into a cyberspatial peace. Apparently, Shay now (and probably DeLillo) are at the periphery, distanced from the realities of the current Bronx wasteland, observing it only virtually, abstractly. On the periphery, the real, including the Bronx of Shay's youth and of Sister Edgar, exists only in simulacra. The nuance that makes life vital and real to a writer like Mailer has been burnt off. "Reality" is an abstraction available through media.

DeLillo has proposed that terrorists have taken over literature's role of

challenging or changing the culture. In a 1988 interview—3 years before the publication of *Mao II*, a book in which the novelist Bill Gray feels he is losing, to terrorists, the ability to affect the culture—DeLillo wonders "if modern writers have felt preempted by terrorism, have felt that they've lost a certain influence that violence, a particular kind of violence, has seized from them." He goes on to specifically cite Mailer, who "once said that he hoped to alter the consciousness of our time. I wonder if any writer harbors such a thought now, in the light of what political terrorists have managed to do in that regard, and in so few years" (*Arensberg* 45). Bill Gray says, "Years ago I used to think it was possible for a novelist to alter the inner life of a culture. Now bomb-makers and gunmen have taken that territory. They make raids on human consciousness." (*Mao II* 41) David Cowart refers Gray's statement back to Mailer's quote from *Advertisements* (118). The impossibility, for DeLillo, of a writer "altering the consciousness of our time" and the assumption of that role by the terrorist, who explicitly does it through violence, is not just something a character in one of his novels says, it is obviously something that haunts DeLillo himself. So, the novelist (including DeLillo) sits at the periphery and describes what he sees, his "Mailerian" function subsumed by terrorists. While, for Mailer, individual violence can be redemptive and the novelist, in describing that violence, is in some kind of control, for DeLillo the violence that can change the culture is in the hands of terrorists—the ability to change the culture seized from the novelist. But Nick Shay provides another aspect of this issue for DeLillo.

The young Nick Shay, like a somewhat unformed Mailer hero, fights banality with sex and violence, but the older Shay, although nostalgic for those days, cannot. His hitting Glassic (in *Underworld*) is as ineffectual as Gladney's attempt (in *White Noise*) to kill his wife's lover and drug-supplier. "Real life" has been abstracted in a *Zeitalter der Reproduktion*. Mailer, in a *Paris Review* interview in the year of his death (2007), noted the role of television commercials in alienating young people (and probably all of us) from narrative, but TV is the latest technology that he comments on in this way. Earlier, Mailer, forever the public figure, was happy to appear on TV programs such as Dick Cavett's. In *The Armies of the Night*, he is followed by a BBC crew, so that the actions of "Mailer" are observed and reported on by TV as well as by the author, Mailer, and, as Julika Griem notes, "Mailer's *Armies of the Night* documents how television brought the Vietnam War back into American living-rooms." But for DeLillo, TV and the Internet are much

more powerful cultural forces. Abstraction of experience, of reality, by electronic media undermines the possibility of individual action in our time. DeLillo comments on TV's abstracting quality (especially in *White Noise*, his TV novel, where, for instance, Gladney's daughter repeats, in her sleep, "Toyota Celica . . . repeating some TV voice . . . computer-generated, more or less universally pronounceable" (155). A character in *Underworld* says "The Thompson homer continues to live because it happened decades ago when things were not replayed and worn down and used up before midnight of the first day" (95). Also, as early as *Underworld*, in 1997, he recognizes that TV and the Internet have abstracted reality, narrative, anything that can make sense of the world so that real events (like the acts of the highway killer) have become endlessly repeated images, entertainments, one no more real than any other. And even in real life, "waste" is abstracted into metaphor, a waste treatment facility used as entertainment for Shay's granddaughter (809). While historically "garbage rose first, inciting people to build a civilization in response, in self-defense" (287), it has become abstract, like other realities. In the age of abstraction, the *Zeitalter der Reproduktion* has reached its apogee: "The real miracle is the web, the net, where everybody is everywhere at once" (*Underworld* 808).

Mailer was able to imagine the novelist at the center of the culture, valorizing the hipster hero and promoting an alternative look at reality, promoting a "Marxist" explanation that explains the personal and the communal and encompasses the good and the bad and includes rebellion. For DeLillo, nuance, the stuff of actual reality, is gone, and the novelist (and his characters) have only nostalgia for it. Abstracted representation, on TV and the Internet, defines current reality, and only terrorists can break through the abstraction. In his article on the 9/11 attacks, he calls the Internet, "a counternarrative, shaped in part by rumour, fantasy, and mystical reverberation" (DeLillo, "In the Ruins of the Future").

Underworld, DeLillo's masterpiece, is, among other things, an exploration of changes in the ways that reality is perceived over time—from "this midcentury moment" at the Polo Grounds in 1951 to the age of the Internet, a movement from concrete (what DeLillo frequently refers to as "real") experience to abstracted experience. The heroic Mailer of *Advertisements* provides a base point from which the abstractions of media take off. Nick Shay is the hipster hero, "reformed" but not tamed, representing the fading possibility of real action in a world increasingly less real. In *Advertisements*,

Mailer described a worldview from those early years (the 1950s and 60s) in which Shay's (and probably DeLillo's) consciousness and worldview originate and which he sorely misses but is unable to recapture. Mailer continued to believe that "the brave" could still productively struggle against "the shock waves of television" (*Advertisements* 23), while, for DeLillo, television and the Internet have captured reality. But also for DeLillo, the "hipster hero" continues to represent a nostalgic, now unachievable, ideal.

NOTES

1. I visited Mailer in his house in western Massachusetts in 1975. When I asked about the kayak I had seen next to his swimming pool, he said, " Yes, I use it to practice Eskimo rolls."
2. A story circulated in the 1940s that a (variously identified) Hollywood actress, on being introduced to him, said, "Oh, you're the man who doesn't know how to spell fuck."

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