NORMAN MAILER AND THE *OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY*

JASON MOSSER

NORMAN MAILER RANKS AMONG THE MOST COPIOUSLY PRODUCTIVE, widely read, critically acclaimed, vehemently vilified, and highly controversial American writers of the post-WWII era. As a public intellectual and celebrity spokesman for left-wing causes like the Vietnam War, Mailer helped define and participate in the counterculture of the 1950s and 1960s, for which his essay "The White Negro" is a seminal historical, cultural, and linguistic source. One way to evaluate the impact of writers on their lives and times is to determine the number of citations they receive in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Authors are chosen for the *OED* reading program based on their presentation of cross-varieties of English and interesting vocabulary, particularly new coinages. Moreover, as Julie Coleman writes, *OED* citations tell us much, not only about "the creativity and influence of authors and works, but also about wider cultural history [. . .]" (1). Based on the illustrative quotations attributed to him in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2nd ed.), 196 matches as of this date, Mailer, the person and the author, emerges as one of the definitive sources for lexical coinages of his milieu.

Of the total entries attributed to Mailer, the majority, 152, are taken from *Advertisements for Myself*, which Mailer described as a "*collection of pieces and parts of advertisements, short stories, articles, short novels, fragments of novels, poems and part of a play*," including some previously unpublished material (23). Among the sources chosen by *OED* editors from diverse fields of study are literary texts from 1930–1960, in which case *Advertisements*, first published in 1959, just makes the chronological cut. Why so many citations from *Advertisements*? I put that question to *OED* editor Peter Gilliver, who replied: "[s]hort of finding a letter in which [Editor Robert] Burchfield says

THE MAILER REVIEW, VOL. 8, NO. 1, FALL 2014. Copyright © 2014. The Norman Mailer Society. Published by The Norman Mailer Society.

exactly why he selected this particular title, we can only speculate," adding that "I guess it depends on how much Burchfield knew about Mailer's output when he decided that some portion of his writings should be surveyed for the *Supplement*—which is another matter for speculation" (Gilliver). Nevertheless, Gilliver revealed much about the process by which Mailer was or was likely to have been included, and I quote his response here at length:

> [T]he book itself—that is, the copy of *Advertisements for Myself* that was read in this way, a 1961 UK edition published by Andre Deutsch—is still in the OED departmental library, and an annotation in the front tells . . . who read it, when, and how much they found: "May–June 1969 |*c*900 cards | JKW." The initials are those of Jelly Williams, who was on the staff of the Supplement for several years from 1967. . . . I actually went so far as to check the original copy slips from which some of the relevant Supplement entries were printed, and managed to find two in Jelly Williams' handwriting (those for *flop* and *flub*). The slips certainly had the appearance of being the output of the Supplement reading programme. Of course the several hundred quotations extracted by Jelly Williams which were *not* used in the *Supplement* are to all intents and purposes unfindable. Some of them may have been surplus to requirements, in that a plentiful selection of other quotations illustrating the item in question was available, and the Mailer quotation just happened not to get chosen (though of course if it had been the earliest quotation for the item, it would have had to be included); in other cases, the quotation may have illustrated an item that was already well covered in the first edition of the OED, in which case it would have been out of scope for the purposes of the *Supplement*; and in other cases the item illustrated by the quotation will have been something that Burchfield decided not to include—for a variety of reasons, but most likely (in my experience) simply because the total quotation evidence available to him for the item did not amount to enough to warrant inclusion. And, of course, if the book was read in 1969, much of the copy for Volume I of the *Supplement* (A–G) was already in proof by that time, and it was much harder to insert quotations at proof stage in the era of hot

> metal than it is now. Having said that, my forage through the Supplement copy slips turned up a number of cases where Mailer slips did indeed appear to have been inserted at a late stage: among the copy slips for *big Daddy*, *blank*, *blinker*, *cheek*, and *Chinkey* there was no sign of the Mailer quotations that were eventually included in these Supplement entries as published. Finally: [. . . .] I found a couple of the quotations taken from other works by Mailer. The quotations from *The Naked and the Dead* that appear in the entries for *knocker* and *nooky* were there in the copy—but this time the handwriting was that of Julian Barnes, who as you may know was on the staff of the Supplement from 1969 to 1972. He will not have put together the copy for these two entries himself, as they went to press long after he left; the most likely explanation is, I think, that he "read" (that is, made excerpts from) *The Naked and the Dead*, in much the same way as Jelly Williams read *Advertisements for Myself*, and that the quotations he extracted were added to our quotation files, and duly made use of by whichever member of staff was tasked with compiling these entries. (Gilliver)

To place 196 Mailer citations in context, a search of illustrative quotations by Mailer's contemporaries in the years following WWII generated the following number of matches: William Styron, 10; John Cheever, 17; Kurt Vonnegut, 17; Truman Capote, 28; Gore Vidal, 66; J.D. Salinger, 80; John Updike, 111; Jack Kerouac, 126, William S. Burroughs, 164, and Thomas Pynchon, 173, all fewer than Mailer. When we broaden that search to the three major writers of the generation preceding Mailer's, we see that F. Scott Fitzgerald generates 249 matches, Ernest Hemingway 318, and William Faulkner 700. The greater number of references to these pre-eminent literary modernists likely indicates their greater influence on the literature, language, and culture of the twentieth century. Among the post-WWII generation of novelists, particularly of the 1950s and 1960s, the fact that Kerouac, Burroughs, and Mailer are among the writers who generated the greatest number of matches seems to elevate these writers' importance based on their measurable cultural impact on what came to be known as the Beat Generation, forerunners to the emergent counterculture of the 1960s.

Indeed, the Mailer citations reveal a number of prominent themes,

central to the Beat Generation and nascent counterculture, among which are references to alcohol and drug use: bombed; cocktail; hang-over, or hangover; hash; head, as a metonymy for a person experienced in the use of consciousness-altering drugs; Mary Jane; pot; Seconal; toke; trip; and Valium. Mailer's own well-known use and knowledge of both legal and illegal drugs link him to criminality and thus to the roots of slang, the argot of beggars, gypsies, tramps and thieves. In "The White Negro," he suggested that the existential hipster, who had rejected the morals and values of conventional, middle-class society, was justified in committing rape and even murder, a position that outraged both his conservative and his feminist critics**.** Later, of course, Mailer did extensive research on the life and death of Gary Gilmore for *The Executioner's Song* and several illustrative quotations appear in the *OED*. And he was castigated for championing the release from prison of convicted murderer Jack Henry Abbott, author of *In the Belly of the Beast.*

Another theme that runs through these citations involves words denoting sexuality and scatology: ass; ballsy; bazoom; cheek; diaphragm; go, as in "go down on"; hay, as a metaphor for bed; jerk-off, as in "jerk-off magazines"; knocker; madam; *ménage*, as in *a trois*; nooky; nubile; pet; pissed, as in pissed-off; poop, as in pooped out; pussy; twat, spelled twot in the quotation; and whang. One particularly important citation in the context of sexuality is the word "macho," an adjective closely associated with Mailer's public persona and aesthetic. In a citation that connects Mailer to Ernest Hemingway, whose life and work made him a model of modern masculinity and whose style exerted tremendous influence on the writers of the post-WWII generation, Mailer writes that "*Every American writer who takes himself to be both major and* macho *must sooner or later give a* faena *which borrows from the self-love of a Hemingway style*" *(Advertisements* 19). This familiar stereotype of Mailer as hyper-masculine sexist would certainly have been enhanced by a quotation excerpted from Peter Manso's book, *Running Against the Machine*, which dealt with Mailer's campaign for mayor of New York City in the early 1960s. In a quotation illustrative of the word "fuckability," a character named Reilly, eying some of the women on the campaign scene, tells the reader that "I asked Norman [Mailer] what he thought of their fuckability quotient" (285).

As a spokesman for the male Sexual Revolution, Mailer's interest in sexuality was inextricable from his interest in psychology and psychoanalysis in

an age when college educated, middle-class Americans were familiar with the theories of Freud, Jung, and Adler and undergoing therapy and analysis. The OED cites Mailer's use of "Reichian," referring, of course, to the theory and practice of Austrian psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich, an important influence on Mailer's thinking about sexuality as expressed in "The White Negro," where Mailer writes of the liberating, revolutionary potential of the orgasm.[1] Like Reich, and like many in the counterculture, Mailer associated sexual repression with totalitarianism, sexual liberation with revolution. The *OED* also cites Mailer's use of the term orgone (295), coined by Reich with combined senses of "orgasm" and "organism."[2]

Another theme that emerges from the illustrative quotations attributed to Mailer is his concern with language and the mass media. He frequently critiqued deceptive or propagandistic language employed by what he called Corporation Land**:** that hegemonic, totalitarian fusion of governmental, corporate, and mass media forces against which Mailer railed throughout his career. In the *OED* he is cited for his metaphoric use of the word "homogenized" to describe bland, colorless, corporate prose; also cited is his use of the adjective "slick" as a description for glossy public relations prose; in another citation, Mailer describes a bureaucratic report as "nothing but a [mish-mash]," spelled "mish-mosh" in the quotation. Of further interest is Mailer's reference to Madison Avenue as a metonymy for advertising industry. In a citation illustrating his use of the word "overexpressed," Mailer writes of his "bloody season of overexpressed personal opinions as a newspaper columnist" for the *Village Voice*, where he was a regular contributor. Mailer is also cited for his use of the adjective "Orwellian" to describe euphemistic and contradictory language, or what Orwell called "doublespeak." However, Mailer misquotes Orwell: in *Advertisements* he speaks of "Virtually perfect Orwellian ambivalences—(War is Peace, Love is Hate, Ignorance is Knowledge)," the first two of which are Ingsoc Party slogans in Orwell's Oceania, but the third of these is actually Ignorance Is Strength, not Knowledge, although in Mailer's defense, his error is logical and more semantically parallel. Mailer is also referenced in an *Atlantic Monthly* piece in connection with term "para-journalism" a synonym for the literary journalism of the 1960s and 1970s, which came to be known as New Journalism, of which, along with figures such as Tom Wolfe, Truman Capote, Joan Didion, and Hunter S. Thompson, Mailer was one of the major practitioners.

Fifteen quotations by Mailer are first citations, either written by Mailer or

citing Mailer within the quotation. As a first citation for a word, the *OED* excerpts Mailer's own definition of the word "factoid," and in this case dictionary definitions and Mailer's own definitions sometimes diverge. In his 1973 biography of Marilyn Monroe, Mailer defines "factoids" as "facts which have no existence before appearing in a magazine or newspaper, creations which are not so much lies as a product to manipulate emotion in the Silent Majority" (18/2). Mailer states explicitly that factoids are "facts" and qualifies that assertion with the phrase "not so much lies as a product to manipulate emotion," and that definition has been not only expanded but contradicted by subsequent usage. The *OED* cites a 1976 *Daily Telegraph* story on what is called "factoid journalism, reporting events which may have happened," a usage which suggests that the factual status of factoids is provisional. Similarly, an *OED* citation to a 1983 *Washington Post* magazine article extends this definition to "data produced by a computer's simulation of the world as it might be," clearly suggesting that factoids are not, in fact, factual. This usage is picked up by the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* in which factoid is defined as "an item of unreliable information that is repeated so often that it becomes accepted as fact," a definition which assumes, first, that a factoid is necessarily "unreliable" or false, directly contradicting Mailer's own definition. The *OED* broadens the definition of "factoid" into "Something that becomes accepted as a fact, although it is not (or may not be) true; *spec.* an assumption or speculation reported and repeated so often that it is popularly considered true; a simulated or imagined fact." This definition links factoids to the concept of the Big Lie, a phrase coined by Adolf Hitler in *Mein Kampf* to describe a falsehood repeated so often that it becomes accepted as fact. The *Concise Oxford* further defines factoid as "a brief or trivial item of information," that is, a piece of trivia, and this usage is, I suspect, the most commonly understood one, but it is worth noting that it reclaims the factoid's status as fact ("Factoid").

One of Mailer's rhetorical purposes in "The White Negro" is to define exactly what it means to be hip. Not surprisingly, then, Mailer is cited in the OED for his use of the terms "hip" and "hipster." The author of a 1958 *New Statesman* review of *Advertisements for Myself* claims that "The anthology is valuable for a speculative essay by Norman Mailer on 'beat' or hipster culture." Among the hipster, latter hippie, slang usages attributed to Mailer are square, swing, and way out. Throughout the essay he assumes the role of cultural anthropologist, living and writing from within the hip subculture,

translating terms like "crazy, dig, flip, creep, hip, square and beat," code-switching for an audience of left-wing intelligentsia, like the readers of *Dissent*, where the essay was first published, and by extension for intellectuals everywhere, cultural managers with the means to influence public opinion.

While Mailer attempts to explain hip, an attitude or state of awareness associated with marginalized or oppressed people in American society, specifically, for his purposes, African-Americans, he claims that to truly understand hip, one must already *be* hip, implying that the concept of "hip" ultimately cannot be articulated. As Louis Armstrong reportedly said, "if they don't know, you can't tell 'em." Perhaps this is what one writer cited in the *OED* meant when he claimed that "As Norman Mailer would say, it's 'hip' to use obscure words and meaningless symbols." However, as Michael Adams argues, "Slang itself is not the medium in which to argue a slang aesthetic; the best argument for a slang aesthetic is not a matter of the slang idea, but of the very act of slang" (145). Another of the illustrative quotations attributed to Mailer cites his use of the adjective "white" to qualify "Negro," thus forming the essay's central metaphor: "The hipster had absorbed the existentialist synapses of the Negro, and for practical purposes could be considered a white Negro " (279). In the context of the Civil Rights movement, a major galvanizing force driving the formation of the counter-culture, Mailer's preoccupation and identification with African-American identity was controversial because of the way he stereotyped black men as "wise primitives" who possessed extraordinary sexual prowess. Nevertheless, I point again to Adams who claims that the act of borrowing African-American slang "in itself rebels against the white-dominated status quo" (63). Mailer's adoption of hip slang places him in that tradition of cross-cultural linguistic exchange—frequently carried on by jazz musicians—between the subordinated and marginalized African-American culture and the dominant white, middle-class culture of the 1950s and 1960s.

There are a number of other words or usages that originate with Mailer but are not listed in the *OED*, coinages that I will call Mailerisms. His writing abounds in fresh coinages, a number that only a rereading of his entire corpus could enumerate, although most, no doubt, are nonce words. Perhaps the most interesting of Mailerisms not included in the OED is the word "fug" which appears frequently in his WWII novel, *The Naked and the Dead*. The word does appear in the *OED* as slang for a close, stuffy environment, but

that is not, of course, the way Mailer used it.[4] It has been asserted that Mailer used "fug" as a euphemism for "fuck" because his publisher forced him to make the change; Michael Lennon discounts this explanation in his recent biography of Mailer, and yet, the rumor persists. Mailer's knowledge and use of slang had been shaped to an extent by his experience serving in the South Pacific during WWII. As Julie Coleman writes, military service creates some essential conditions of slang: regimentation that creates a "heightened desire for self-expression"; speakers, in this case enlisted men, who are "situated on the lower rungs of a hierarchy"; a sense of group identity and solidarity; and, finally, a group with "a sense that their situation is unfair or unreasonable" (50). Among the slang expressions for which Mailer is listed as a first citation are the adjective "Fucking A" as in the line from *Naked* (again substituting "fug" for "fuck"), "'You're fuggin ay,' Gallegher snorted." Another is the hyphenated word "Fuck-off," used to describe a lazy, apathetic, irresponsible person, as in another line from *Naked*: "You think I'm just a fug-off, don't you?"

To the extent that slang is, as Adams writes, "a political act, language in which social behavior and the individual collide" (157), Mailer's use of slang had political purposes and consequences. In "Reflections on Hip," Mailer added a note explaining that one of the "heresies" he commits in "The White Negro" is the notion that "*a modern revolution can arise out of some other condition than an organized militant movement of the proletariat*" (*Advertisements* 359). The embodiment of that revolution was the emergence of the hipster, Mailer's *ubermensch*. We must also consider all of Mailer's writing in the context of a purpose he both grandiosely and a little self-mockingly declares in *Advertisements* for himself: "The sour truth is that I am imprisoned with a perception which will settle for nothing less than making a revolution in the consciousness of our time" (17).

NOTES

1. The *OED* cites Reich as having coined the phrase "sexual revolution" in his 1945 book of the same title.
2. Orgone is defined by the *OED* as "a vital energy or life force which supposedly informs the universe and can be collected in an orgone accumulator or box for subsequent use in the treatment of mental and physical illnesses."
3. The OED provides this source: *New Statesman* 6 September 1958 292/3.

4. According to the website for the 1960s rock band The Fugs, band member Tuli Kupferberg suggested the name for the band based on Mailer's use of "fug" in *The Naked and the Dead.*

WORKS CITED

Abbott, Jack Henry. *In the Belly of the Beast: Letters from Prison.* New York: Random House, 1981. Print.

Adams, Michael. *Slang: The People's Poetry*. Oxford: U Oxford P, 2009. Print.

Coleman, Julie. *The Life of Slang.* Oxford: U Oxford P, 2012**.** Print.

_____. "Using *OED* Evidence." *Dictionaries: Journal of the Dictionary Society of North America.* No. 34. 2013. 1–9. Print.

"Factoid." *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*. 10th ed. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002. Print.

Gilliver, Peter. "Norman Mailer question." Message to Jason Mosser. 14 April 2014. Email.

Hitler, Adolf. *Mein Kampf.* Trans. Ralph Manheim. Boston: 1st Mariner Books, 1999. Print.

Lennon, J. Michael. *Norman Mailer: A Double Life.* New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013. Print.

Mailer, Norman. *Advertisements For Myself.* New York: Putnam, 1959. Print.

_____. *The Executioner's Song.* Boston: Little, Brown, 1979. Print.

_____. *Marilyn, A Biography*. New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1973. Print.

_____. *The Naked and the Dead.* New York: Rinehart, 1948. Print.

_____. "Reflections on Hip." *Advertisements for Myself.* New York: Putnam, 1959. 359–362. Print.

_____. "The White Negro." Rep. *Advertisements for Myself.* New York: Putnam, 1959. 337–358. Print.

Murray, J. A. H., *et. al.*, eds., 1989. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press. Print.

Orwell, George. *1984*. New York: New American Library, 1949. Print.