UTTER MAILER

NICOLE DEPOLO

SOUND REASONING

One of the great paradoxes of Norman Mailer's career is that, in a field where literary precedent is considered essential to the understanding of a writer's creative process, there is often deeper insight to be gained through the observation of Mailer at work within the borders of his own idiosyncratic universe. Within these perimeters, the workings of Mailer's mind are made visible, and the organs and systems of his intellect become a visceral map of his philosophy.

Through this corporeal expression of his psyche, Mailer synthesizes the messages he receives through the five senses into a physiological sixth sense: an instinctive processing of the mundane into the spiritual—a transformation of the basest substances into ingenious invention. The richest examples of this talent are often evident through his emphasis on the olfactory and the profound messages he receives from odor in place of his poor eyesight. Throughout his work, Mailer sniffs out valuations of personality and intention, of creation and destruction, of good and evil.

His aural inclinations, however, are often more vested. The implications of the sounds he both receives and emanates spin the fabric of his words in a manner so flawless as to become invisible. However, the unconventional ideas inherent in his selection of consonants, vowels, and syllables inform his readers' perceptions on a subconscious level and endow them with the nerve endings required to sense his verbal synesthesia of sound and substance. Through analysis of his private research and journaling, a more concise understanding of his sonic lexicon can be achieved, and what is revealed is a system of linguistics that is utterly Mailer.

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The topic of this paper was inspired by my research into *Ancient Evenings* at the Harry Ransom Center during the 2011 Mailer Conference in Austin, Texas. During the course of this research, I sought out "Lipton's Journal," Mailer's 1954 private treatise on numerous, developing themes that would come to characterize his *oeuvre.* In particular, I sought to trace the early lines of Mailer's philosophies on the mechanisms of reincarnation that define the plot and design of his Egyptian novel.

In "Lipton's" I found evidence to support the theories I had on the origins of his mysticism—but beyond that, I found a rich cache of Mailer's vitalistic perceptions as applied to, and generated by, the nature of sound itself. In essence, Mailer laid out a categorization of consonants, vowels, syllables, and the tonal inferences he perceived in their delivery. These generative ideas constitute a polyphony of point and counterpoint by which to appreciate the development of his language in *Ancient Evenings.*

Throughout the Egyptian novel, character names, word choice, occurrences, and even the ingredients of magic potions are influenced by Mailer's intense analysis of the hieroglyphic rendition of syllables, their meanings, and the permutations of their significance when altered by the slightest nuance of pronunciation.[1] In "Lipton's," the same intensity of analysis is applied to his perceptions of the English language. His semantics derive from a schema all his own, and do not hold up to the scientific rules of linguistics. However, his take on morphology provides one of the purest methods by which to begin to understand the complexity and synergy inherent in his particular brand of genius.

In his research archives for *Ancient Evenings,* the parallels Mailer draws between English and the sounds signified by hieroglyphics reveal the core synapses between his sensibilities and those of the ancient Egyptians. These affinities are at the heart of his inspiration for the novel he named as one of his most important books, if not his magnum opus, precisely because it was, as his sister Barbara Mailer Wasserman pointed out in the 2007 memorial issue of *The Mailer Review,* "his most autobiographical novel" (22). In comparison, "Lipton's"—one of the few documents to which Mailer restricted access until after his death—stands as one of his most personal revelations.

WORD "ECHOS"

In 1954, Mailer documented early revolutions of his consciousness in "Lipton's Journal." The title refers not only to the "tea" he smoked during this

stage of his evolution (Lennon 182), but also to the perceptions that it altered or enhanced. Over two-hundred-and-fifty typed pages long, the document consists of numbered paragraphs and brief passages. An essential element of the journal is that Mailer indexed it, literally, on an accompanying set of index cards, listing themes that would constitute the fundament of his ideology. It is his encyclopedia of himself at a formative juncture, and the theories documented in "Lipton's" are easily recognizable throughout the body of Mailer's work. His 1959 omnibus, *Advertisements for Myself,* resounds with the concepts he developed in "Lipton's," and he even mentions the journal in the "Fourth Advertisement for Myself: The Last Draft of the Deer Park" (211). Throughout the 1960s and 1970s (the decade during which *Ancient Evenings* was composed), Mailer's premises remain closer to the ideas documented in the journal than they do in his later work as it evolved.

Composed while Mailer was developing the concepts he would set forth in "The White Negro," "Lipton's" is often centered around sound, and not just from the perspective of jazz musicians as organic American existentialists. While his numbered paragraphs refer to topics that range from television to vomiting, time, thoughts, actors, and spies—to name a few—a good many of the segments revolve around language and what Mailer refers to as "word echos" and "letter echos."

In paragraph 71 of "Lipton's" he writes, "Words have not only echos, but are many-faceted crystals, each of its phonetics a single crystal. If a crystal be altered or ignored then the whole gives off an echo, but in a different direction for each crystal" (20). Through this logic, Mailer delves into the concept of cleave words—words with double-meanings that mirror each other as opposites—and he even applies this concept to phrases. "Every word has its opposite echo," he writes in paragraph 25 of "Lipton's":

> 25. "Overlook" means to stare cruelly and nakedly from above—it also means in its common use to disregard, to fail to see. So the real world, my phrase for the "material world" may actually be quite unreal and composed of illusions just as certainly as "action" . . . may actually be the reverse of action. So far as we "act" to fulfill the needs of society, we are actually no more than part of the net with which society keeps men from developing. We have the illusion of action, of motion; in truth we are merely lines of cord in the net. (6)

Mailer's concept of society is an important element in his analysis of sounds that defy the constructs of speech, as is evidenced in the twenty-fourth paragraph of "Lipton's":

> 24. There may actually be such a separate entity as "society." It may be the sum of that part of everybody's unconscious which leads into action. Society is the sum of men's actions, and beneath the surface of life may be that stratum of the collective unconscious which connects men in a net of actions . . . independent of their will. (6)

In Mailer's writing, related morphemes, root words, and turns of phrase emulate—and in doing so activate—this unconscious network.

THE CONCEALMENTS OF LANGUAGE

Throughout "Lipton's," Mailer explores what he calls "the concealments of language," in which related sounds, or sounds obscured by way of distorted pronunciation or audibility, reveal what he perceives as innate correspondences within words or phrases:

> 72. The concealments of language: Perhaps under Lipton's we do not hear certain phonetics very well. Thus "royal purse" may sound like "royal pus," or "oil pus." *But it is possible that each word says many things at once, and language contains in its phonetics whole parallel layers of meaning.* So man talks to man, and society talks to man through Aesopian sounds as well as Aesopian words. Perhaps that is why we laugh at the stammerer—at the lisper—he is always revealing other meanings of words, and often they are terrible truths. So, by suppressing consonants and vowels, look what we get with Mother. Here are the echos: Other, Mither, Moher (More), Moter (Motor), Mothir, Mothe (Moth) Church (Her), Chirch, Chuch; also Urch and Chur. (20)

Twenty years later, striking similarities to this analysis surface again in Mailer's discovery of Egyptian language. In the course of his research for *Ancient Evenings,* he took detailed notes on E. A. Wallis Budge's hieroglyphic dictionaries and translation of *The Egyptian Book of the Dead.* Working once

again on index cards, Mailer made many drawings of the syllabic glyphs in Budge's books, while beside them he wrote their Egyptian pronunciations and English translations. Often, he labeled the penciled cards with the header "Egyptian Language" and then added in red felt-tip the header "N's Language." With the same red pen, he would underline the phonic correspondences to English he found in Egyptian language and make annotations on his perceptions of their significance.

Next to a line drawing in the shape of a balance scale, Mailer notes that this is the glyph for the Egyptian word *meter*, definition: "to use violence." In parenthesis he writes the English word "meter." The association between violence and balance is distinctly Mailerian, recalling his implications during the time of "The White Negro" that the dissonance of violence may have a necessary, revitalizing effect on the fabric of reality. The next hieroglyph he renders on the card, though, has another association. Beneath the Egyptian *meter* he sketches a symbol in the shape of an anamorphic 8, which in Egyptian means "mirror," and which evokes the concealment of language in "meter" that is evocative of "mirror" and "mother." Successively, Mailer draws the symbol for the Egyptian syllable *muth*—a sort of inverted boat—and beside that writes the translation: "mother." Thereafter he notes the Egyptian word *ma*—"to give"—and in parentheses, again, he writes "mother."

Other such phonic and conceptual analogies color Mailer's choices in *Ancient Evenings.* On one card, he writes the Egyptian word for evil: *et.* The S modified by the accent mark is pronounced "SH." In parentheses, he pencils in the pronunciation "shet" and then underlines it in the red felt tip he uses to flag corresponding sounds in English. In this context, the spelling of the Egyptian word *et* is significant. Without the pronunciation mark, Set is the name of the Egyptian god of chaos and the arch villain of *Ancient Evenings*—the brother and usurper of the god of resurrection, Osiris. Ironically, it is by Set's hand that Osiris experiences the death and putrefaction from which he rises again.

In *Ancient Evenings,* it is the resurrection myth of Osiris that the protagonist Menenhetet I tells his grandson, Menenhetet II, as they fester in the tomb together as desecrated mummies. Their souls, however, are about to begin a journey toward rebirth, and thus escape corporeal putrefaction. In order to be reincarnated,[2] they must travel through the Egyptian underworld of Khert Neter; a perilous crossing that requires the knowledge of Osiris'

pilgrimage through death in order to achieve new life. As their souls prepare to embark, Menenhetet I exalts the role of feces as the conduit of rebirth:

> "In Khert-Neter," said Menenhetet, "there is a river of feces deep as a pit. Across it, the dead must swim . . . You have no gift for your trip to Khert-Neter if you do not comprehend that shame and waste may be buried in shit, but so is many a rich and tender sentiment as well. How then can this cauldron of emotion be no more than a burial chamber? Is it not also part of the womb of all that is yet to come? Is not part of time reborn, by necessity, in shit? Where else can be found those unresolved passions which—frustrated, unworked, or, by their stench, maniacal—must now labor twice as hard to germinate the future?" (72)

Thus, by Mailer's concealments of language, Set's name itself is encoded as a key to *Ancient Evening's* scatological themes. Set = Shit.

The name Menenhetet itself appears to have been designed to evoke the ripples in time and phonics that, in Mailer's mind, create essential parallels between Egyptian and English words. These associations allow him to trace Meni's line of consciousness through four incarnations, and to chart key moments of revelation as Meni struggles to remember himself again in each lifetime.

"Menenhetet" he writes on one index card, the syllables hyphenated to correspond with the Egyptian words they connote: *men* = "foundation" / *en* = "of" / *het* = "consecrated" / *tet* = "speech." Within Mailer's concealment of language, therefore, Menenhetet is the very Foundation of Consecrated Speech. However, *het,* with a variance of pronunciation, can also mean "onion," and on another card he writes "Men-en-het-et: Foundation in Onion"—a comical phrase until one discovers that the onion is the ancient Egyptian metaphor for the sun and all the layers and permutations of life that radiate from its emanations. So, within Menenhetet exists the concept that from the Word comes all existence. This is the guiding principal of the Torah, the blueprint for creation, the laws of which were transcribed from the word of God by Moses on Mount Sinai. And in *Ancient Evenings,* it is Moses who is the author of the trick which allows Menenhetet to reincarnate his soul by mastering the ability to beget himself at the moment of death by coitus, whereby his lover becomes his mother.

FOUNDATIONS OF CONSECRATED SPEECH

The concept of sound as the foundation of creation is a topic that Mailer explored deeply during his research for *Ancient Evenings.* Included in a file of typed index cards full of extensive notes on Sir James George Frazer's study in magic and religion, *The Golden Bough,* there are also cards filled with quotations from a book entitled *The Secret Life of Plants.*

The Secret Life of Plants, published in 1973, was a collaboration between Peter Tompkins and Christopher Bird—two bestselling authors who specialized in unconventional beliefs. The work, which is generally regarded as pseudoscientific, discusses alleged phenomena regarding plants, such as plant sentience and the existential relationships between plant life and sound.

Tompkins and Bird, in their exploration of the effects of sound on plant growth, refer frequently to Hans Kayser, a little known but well respected twentieth-century German scientist who was credited as the "rediscoverer of the ancient discipline of harmonics" (Kayser 11). Kayser (like his predecessor Johannes Kepler) rekindled Pythagorean theories of the measure (number) and value (tone) of sound as a manifestation of order and law, respectively (25). In his book *Akroasis* (from the Greek word for 'hearing'), Kayser explains that measure and value are "two psychic principles, two spiritual categories in which, since ancient times, a very specific mode of thinking has moved: that of *harmonics*" (25). For the ancient Greeks, and especially for Pythagoras, harmonics transcended music and permeated "the structural side of cosmic laws" (28). In *Akroasis*, Kepler illuminated these Pythagorean lines of reasoning:

> Qualities (tones) were derived from quantities (string or wave lengths) in an exact way . . . Did not the essence of matter reveal itself to us and did not the relations of numbers of the string show a deep inner correspondence between the "I" and the "you"? . . . Matter acquired a structural counterpart anchored in the psyche, and the spiritual, the realm of ideas, became anchored in harmonical shapes and forms. A bridge between being and value, world and soul, matter and spirit, was found. (29)

For Kayser, this bridge was especially vital when it connected music and plants. His father, an apothecary, had brought his son along during long days

of gathering plants in the Alb region, all the while educating him on the properties of myriad botanicals. In the evenings he schooled the boy in music, and they would accompany each other on viola and cello. When his father passed away, Kayser dedicated his book *Harmonia Plantarum* to him:

> Music and plants appeared to you the two gates through which the divine light shines in our souls, the former as the proclaimer of eternal laws, the latter as manifester of the unchangeable laws since the beginnings of life. (*Akroasis* 12)

Such ideas are evident in the language and magic of *Ancient Evenings,* both through the harmonic qualities of Mailer's words and through the properties of the plants and elements that are ground into potions to be activated by incantations. Mailer's notes from *The Secret Life of Plants* are taken primarily from those sections of the book that draw on Kayser. One of his typed cards—a direct quotation from *The Secret Life of Plants*—reads:

> So far, no researcher with the exception of Hans Kayser, the German author of *Harmonia Planatarum* and other mathematically learned books on the relation of sound intervals to the growth of plants, seems to have become interested in the octaval correspondences between the shapes of plants and musical notes. Kayser observed that if one projects all tones within the space of one octave—in the same manner that the astronomer and astrologer Jonannes Kepler worked out in his *Harmonice Mundi* for the solar planetary system—and sketches their angles in a specific way, one obtains the prototype of leaf form. The interval of the octave, the basis for music making and indeed all sensation, thus contains within itself the form of the leaf. (162)

On the flipside of the harmonious creation card, Mailer made another note from *The Secret Life of Plants*, this time based on the writings of Kayser's contemporary, Cyril Meir Scott, the English composer and theosophist:

> The whole purpose of dissonant music was to break up thought forms, which, settling over whole countries and people, turn them stagnant with lethargy or rampant with madness. It is an

> occult musical fact, says Scott, that discord—used in its moral sense—can alone be destroyed by discord, the reason for this being that the vibrations of intrinsically beautiful music are too rarefied to touch the comparatively coarse vibrations of all that pertains to a much lower plane. (161)

The dynamic relationship between the sacred and the profane, the pious and the occult, and their manifestations in the language of *Ancient Evenings* is observed in detail by Christopher Ricks in his review entitled "Mailer's Primal Words." Here he writes, "[T]he mysteries and magic of language are everywhere understood to constitute part of every mystery and magic in the book" (162).

Ricks reveals Mailer's discovery of this principle at work within the Egyptian word for seven, *sefekh*, which, with a nuance of pronunciation, becomes the word for cord. The soul of the ancient Egyptian, it was said, was composed of seven parts which separated at death, but which were inextricably interwoven in life. It is the unraveling and reknitting of these spirits that constitutes the strange, spiraling structure of Menenhetet's narrative of his journey through the underworld (Begiebing 40). Ricks quotes a conversation between the son of Ramses II, Amen-khep-shu-ef, and his mother, Nefertiri, which uncovers the foundations of the ancient belief system after which Mailer's Egyptian novel is designed:

> "Each time I drew the sign for seven, I could think of nothing but the little cord that held My robe together. After all, the writing is the same"
>
> "Sefekh," said Amen-khep-shu-ef. "I never thought of that."
>
> "Sefekh," She said. "It *is* the same. I always mixed one with the other, and then the seams came apart in My head. All untied!" (*AE* 494)

Here, Nefertiri's words reflect Menenhetet's journey, and also his undoing at the hands of his own mother, Hathfertiti. It is Hathfertiti who was responsible for the desecration of the tomb of Meni I and II—potentially sabotaging their journey through the underworld and damning their spirits to a second death. In this context, the cord of Nefertiri's robe symbolizes a

spiritual murder weapon: the unraveled "cord that leads from one life to the next" (AE 661).

Ricks points out that such nuances of language are essential to *Ancient Evenings:*

> [B]ecause it is here that the mysteries are incarnated. . . . Names are signs and wonders, and the verbal interpretation that once gave us the ancient reflection *nomen est omen* is continually alive in Mailer's words about these ancient odd evenings . . .
>
> What animates these intimations is a continual sense of verbal metamorphosis as at once a counterpart to and constitutive of the larger metamorphoses: of life and death, of body and mummy, of the battles of the gods in their shape shifting, or that metamorphosis which is metempsychosis, the transmigration of souls which in his different way the novelist himself emulates . . .
>
> The language of *Ancient Evenings* does not stay put; it effects a slide of consciousness, or a simultaneous following of different directions, or a prophetic transmigration, or an omen. (163–64, 167)

This slide of consciousness is analogous to the "word echos," the "letter echos," and the "concealments of language" that Mailer wrote about in "Lipton's Journal" thirty years before the publication of *Ancient Evenings* and millennia after the last utterances of the ancient Egyptians had faded into silence. Thus, both texts stand as a testament to the richness of a mind that could find echoes in a dead language that evoke the essence of life itself. In this way, by the same rules of concealment he established in Lipton's, if *nomen es omen,* then Norman gives us the core of meaning.

NOTES

1. Mailer's understanding of hieroglyphics was largely informed by his research into the seminal Egyptological works of E. A. Wallis Budge.
2. The concept of reincarnation in *Ancient Evenings* was not a literal adaptation of ancient Egyptian belief systems, but rather a reflection of Mailer's own ideas on the immortality of the spirit. The ancient Egyptians believed that the double of the spirit, the *Ka*, could live on in the Blessed Fields, which are analogous to the mythological Elysian Fields of the ancient Greeks, if it successfully made its journey through the underworld known as Khert-Neter or the Duad.

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