# THE EXISTENTIAL SUBLIME: MAILER'S THE PRISONER OF SEX

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> "If you were in awe of women . . . and believed that sex had meaning . . . one was the prisoner of sex"
>
> —Norman Mailer

THE IDEA FOR THIS PAPER WAS INSPIRED BY KURT FAWVER'S doctoral dissertation, directed by Phillip Sipiora, called *The Terror of Possibility: A Re-evaluation and Reconception of the Sublime Aesthetic* (University of South Florida, 2013). Arguing that the sublime aesthetic has been too long undervalued and generally misunderstood, Fawver proposes to unearth what he calls the sublime's deepest, most essential meanings, a fundamental core predicated on a dynamism of "awe" and existential "possibility." He explains that while we find the sublime aesthetic in the art and literature of virtually any era, its awesome, apocalyptic nature is nowhere more apparent than in the tumultuous twentieth and twenty-first centuries, whose writers have witnessed destruction and change more vast than in any other time in history (95).

Although Mailer is never mentioned, Fawver's examination of the sublime as apocalyptic, representing life's most vast, powerful, and mysterious emotional and spiritual experience is profoundly Mailer-like, evoking and clarifying Mailer's art and vision in three important ways.[1] First, it illuminates the metaphysics that frame Mailer's work as a whole: Mailer's war between a Primitivist God and a Technological Devil struggling for mankind's divided soul. Fawver's God is precisely Mailer's, "a blank space" (85), a "cosmic question mark" (86) who "presents to the future of humankind" more spiritual ways of being, but whose completion depends upon human intervention.[2] Mailer says about the witch-like ladies of Women's Liberation, who

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though well-meaning in their efforts to equalize the sexes, nevertheless serve the Devil's purpose by cutting human beings off from their primitive instincts and turning them into machines: "Angels and Devils are collecting in the embrace at Revolution Hall" (67).

Fawver further helps us understand how this "ideological dynamism," in its sheer magnitude and dialectical interplay, is not only "awesome" in its power to move and transform, but paradoxically creative and destructive in equal parts**,** "an emptiness full of infinite 'not-yet-been'. . . simultaneously shivering and jaw-dropping at the sheer enormity of all that might be" (157). Finally, *apropos* of my title, Fawver's sublime elucidates Mailer's own brand of existentialism, an experience Fawver describes as perpetually open, something whose ultimate dialectical condition, "beauty at the edge of dread," which the act or object may bring about, can never be completely known, but whose potentialities seek always to fill the "sphere of the possible" (157). More specifically, central to Mailer's work in general, but particularly to his inquiry into the centrality of male and female sexuality in *The Prisoner of Sex* (1970), Fawver's thesis crystallizes Mailer's aesthetic of the sublimity of sex, the potentiality of sex as both cataclysmically wonderful and terrifying. What more beautiful or dangerous experience, Mailer offers, than a soul seeking to be born, a "future . . . delivered with awe from the vaults of the infinitesimal, where the mightiest events were unheard by an order of magnitude in which humans could dwell" (150).

Mailer calls himself PW throughout the book, short for either "False Nobel Prize Winner" or "Prisoner of Wedlock," because "he had never been able to live without a woman"(12). Mailer writes the book in the wake of two major disappointments, "a season," he says, "of large and little deaths" in which he would have to "relocate his soul" (10). About the first of these—serious rumors that he was to receive the Nobel Prize, which went to Beckett—he professes indifference, even relief over fame that "would have incarcerated him into larger paralyses," or, less portentously, prevented him getting "boozed anonymously in a strange bar, which meant it was the inability to nurse an obsessive melancholy through a night of revelations" (11). In any case, a person, he says, would have to be "a hint illiterate" not to have thought of Beckett or Malraux first. Not yet convinced of the size of his own talent, how, he asks, "could one really look Nabokov in the eye? Or Henry

Miller" (10), who with his "brain and his balls" had changed the established consciousness of his time more than any literary man had done before (77).[3]

The greater source of gloom, however, is that the PW attributes to "a marriage . . . gone to the guillotine" (10), parting from his fourth wife after their seven prickly years together. Yet, and this will be the most critical juncture at which Fawver and Mailer's dialectical sublime converge, dreadful or beautiful, wondrous or terror filled, the PW insists that the death of the marriage was small "compared to the loss one sensed of all those delightful potentialities in the children which depended on the taking together of the daily bread. Sorrow lay its protection over him like a shawl on the bones of an arthritic . . . What monstrous timing it would be to win a prize now and smile one's mouth out over a choppy sea of congratulations" (10).

Better for the PW to finish his long book about the first landing on the moon,[4] while writing *The Prisoner of Sex* to answer the most recent attacks on him by Millet, Greer, Friedan and company—his "ghost phallus," as he words it, not only "ambushed," but "chewed half to death by a squadron of enraged Amazons, an honor guard of revolutionary (if we would see them) vaginas" (15).[5] "No Doctor of Dialectics could have been happier," he says, "at the thought of traveling far on the Woman Question" (19), the chance not only to "expatiate on the delicacies" of his major fictional concerns through his vision of women—"their character, their destiny, their life as a class, their tyranny, their slavery, their liberation, their subjection to the wheel of nature, their root in eternity," but which would compel him to summon his best efforts as New Journalist, at which he was not only adept, marked by his achievement in *The Armies of the Night* (1968), *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* (1968), and *Of A Fire on the Moon* (1970), but for which he possessed instinctive literary genius. Obviously, Mailer says, "no journalist could have done the job"—it was work whose "permeations" called for a novelist who lived "at the very edge of the word system" (29).

Among myriad possible connotations, Mailer's "ghost phallus" evokes hostile views of his work by these angry women, anxious with the "heat to kill" (23), that exist more in their own heads than in actual texts, where Mailer shows his adversaries perversely misrepresenting him to suit their thesis, over-simplifying, quoting out of context, reverting to "hysteria and abuse whenever they were forced to build their minds on anything more than a single premise" (90). Along with his equally targeted cohorts, Lawrence and Miller, to whom he devotes almost as much space as to

himself, Mailer, simply put, was a "virulent sexist" who hated and dehumanized women, writing of women purely as sexual implements of male pleasure. For Millet, *An American Dream* was "an exercise in how to kill your wife and be happy ever after" (23). In *Lady Chatterley*, Lawrence's "blanking out in the mind" in order to attain "blood consciousness" was nothing more than "a pathological fear of having to deal with another and complete human personality."[6] The female in this chauvinistic scheme was reduced to "a floating metonymy, pure cunt, completely unsullied by human mentality" (90). Millet "bangs away" at "old Henry" as "a stiff prick without a conscience . . . a compendium of American sexual neuroses" whose cruel and degrading portraits of women were pure masturbatory fantasy, authoritarian, exploitative, sadistic, and utterly impersonal (85). Mailer finds his job no easier in that if a few of these "literary mafia" wrote "like very tough faggots . . . a good style . . . that used obscenity with the same comfort a whore would take with her towel," most of their tracts were remarkably banal, "dull and piteously whining . . . ponderous intestinal coils of prose reminiscent of the worst of the old party line" (31–32).

As for Mailer, these dreary women missed his inevitable impulse to clown (25), that he was a writer whose "favorite indulgence" was "to issue irritating remarks" like "Women should be kept in cages," or "The fact of the matter is that the prime responsibility of a woman probably is to be on earth long enough to find the best mate possible for herself, and conceive children who will improve the species" (19), a "ludicrous" deduction for a "man who bobbed in waves of controversy like a cork with a comic dent" (25). Mailer later admits that advocating women be kept in cages "was the wrong remark at the wrong time." He had made the remark "in fun and idiocy" and failed to realize "how intense was the anger, fury, and frustration" he had caused (Lennon 436).

Most important, central to Mailer's cosmological war between a Primitivist God and a Devil who wished to cut man of from his primitive instincts and leave us "marooned in a plastic maze" (132), these "literary technologists" (91) missed the fact that rather than authoritarian, "most of his ideas were paradoxes," that meaning arose in his work from "the dialectical spring of the idea" (25).[7] Foremost of Fawver's metaphors for the sublime's awesome power—lightening storms, earthquakes, tornadoes, nuclear explosions—Fawver uses the classic example of the biblical flood to show how

this confluence of opposing forces constitutes the sublime's ideological core. "God," Fawver says, "ostensibly drowns the world in possibility." Noah and his family can build cities, worship God, construct new "metaphysical and existential philosophies," or they "can war on one another . . . turn back to wickedness." "In other words," Fawver says, "the Flood impels its readers to recognize that there are forces in the universe which can make possible *any* (or perhaps even all) future states of being, perception, knowledge, or belief." Rather than succumbing to unspeakable violence Noah and his family may exit the ark to "make manifest these new strands of possibility" (89).

If less literally vast, sex as Mailer's narrative focus—the divine possibilities of orgasm, "the great ocean of the fuck" (86), the plentitude of sperm drowning the womb in dramatic confrontation with waves of ova—is just as physically and spiritually cataclysmic "as the planet engulfed beneath oceans of water" (87). Fawver and Mailer's dialectical battleground are fraught with the same existential ramifications, the same conjunction of wonder and dread as the wide flung oceans of the earth. Each oceanic drama invites enormous existential uncertainty, new futures or the end of virtually all life on the planet, Armageddon or a cosmic cleansing that opens wide the possibilities for change. Survivors may "freely choose from amongst the infinity of beliefs and ways of thinking about the world and being in the world" (89). In short, the possibilities of "an historic fuck" (140), Mailer's grand metaphor for the existential sublime, are as vast as "the Grand Canyon" (Fawver 3) and potentially awesome or terrifying as any foreboding ocean.

When the Prisoner says that it was his "best and wildest ideas" that were "the ones most easily attacked" (91), he might well have in mind his "controversial," or "gnomic" understanding of men and woman as vastly different beings, and dangerous, unprotected sex as transcendent religious experience, "communion," as Fawver puts it, "with the transcendent 'all-ness' of being" (26). Mailer perceives the impulse of these sexual technologists to obliterate sexual differences as one more totalitarian effort to make units of people, "a species of aesthetic nausea" that mocked his notion of the majesty of men and women fucking (98). The sexes were already growing similar, he says, "for whether equipped with phallus or vagina, they came accoutered in pants and long hair, and such unisex had been incubating for more than a little while" (94).[8] What better way to control human beings than to treat them as uniform beings whose sexual differences were a social construct rather than a manifestation of nature's inherently spiritual design. While he

confesses that his view of men and woman as inherently different was based more on the "feel" and "drift" of metaphysical thought than upon scientific evidence (121), he was not ready to give up his belief that each sex had different roles to play in nature's cosmic drama.

For the truly heroic fuck the male would risk uncertain phallic force; the woman would brave the dangers of conception. That women were one step closer to eternity than men could only compound his "awe" of their "power and glory" (86–87).[9] The Prisoner's sense of the divine possibilities of orgasm equate with Fawver's view of the "entirety of the Book of Revelation . . . one extended sublime moment," or "a plethora of sublime moments" (91). Fawver's sublime furthermore underscores Mailer's supposition that only when men and women were willing to risk the uncertainties of unprotected sex could orgasm become transcendent. In Mailer's view, sex as the most awesome of risk-taking acts, a mirror particularly to female vision and courage, "could yet be her doom" (93). In Fawver's words, "It is surely possible to be awed by the thing that threatens your life . . . created by elemental and willful rhythms . . . that bordered on the religious . . . fear inducing yet awe inspiring" (112). "Without the constancy and control which death represents," Fawver adds, "existence becomes a plain on which vast horrors may arise just as easily as vast wonders . . . terror creeps in as the women . . . realize that all things are subject to cosmic mutability" (94). To the contrary, in the ubiquitous bisexual world where men and women were indivisible, sex practiced by these sexual technologists, with their plastic vibrating dildoes (84) and mechanical orgasms, fifty routine "whips of the clitoris" (66), was no more wondrous or transcendent, or for that matter, terrifying than "coin and cash" (55). More like lust than love, "cocks and cunts" were mere biological details (90), and wombs vacuums that only technology could fill, the end game of which might be "coitus-free conception monitored by the state" or corporate machine (138). Hardly sublime, such sex, Mailer concludes, "could best be served by orgasms able to be measured by periodicity and count" (66).[10]

In this light, if the cause of a "gestation free elite" was to enjoy repetitive orgasmic experiences removed from the natural, "fear-filled" existential hazards of childbirth, the possibility even of death itself (144), gone was the sublimity of an act so profoundly spiritual and emotionally restorative, fucking "without awe" (Mailer 123). Gone was the prospect of "a cornucopia of ex-

istential possibilities" (127), living in the metaphysical space between creativity and destruction, the mysterious workings of the womb. In Fawver's words, the ends of such dangerous existential space—"simultaneous vacuity and plentitude"—were unknowable, but were dualisms laden with cosmic significance, interference with which sabotaged the inherent spiritual purpose of existence (104).

Although Mailer says orgasm abounded in mystery (124),

> he preferred to believe that the Lord Master of Existential Reason was not thus devoted to the absurd as to put the orgasm in the midst of the act of creation without cause of the profoundest sort, for when a man and woman conceive, would it not be best that they be able to see one another for a transcendent instant, as if the soul of what would then be conceived might live with more light later?

"A beautiful idea," he says, this existential leap of faith: "a soul seeking to be born," a "journey suggestive of the possibility of communication between separate planets or stars" (150), which returns us to the Prisoner's "sorrow" about the loss of his children, "all those delightful potentialities," "like elder stars," as Fawver puts it, "who dream beneath the sea" (105). Worse than throwing "their sexual heat into hysterical, intolerable kinks" (144), the decision not to become pregnant might be to stifle the birth of a child mightier than any child yet conceived? "What a huge loss if the future potentialities of such a conceptual masterpiece" (Mailer 139) were as far flung as Noah's ocean, but ended with semen wiped away by soap and towels. "A man could spend his life looking to answer the question" (56).

If there is a more radically ideological moment in Mailer's work than his view of birth control as technological sacrilege, it is his notion that children are the product of willed, even heroic conception—that a woman might have the power "to conceive or not conceive" (143). If only in her unconscious, Mailer contends, the female might choose, avoid, even abort in the early hours of conception a pregnancy her womb had not desired, one not worthy of life as she would have it lived. Wilder yet, the Prisoner conjectures that the mysterious hieroglyphics of the womb are such than any sperm and egg are sacrosanct (145), even the product of an act as brutally physical as rape. "Who knows," Mailer asks, what goes into semen and the "artful egg"

that may produce a great athlete, a future artist or philosopher from the unwanted seed, whose meaning may be "flung across the space of eternity" (141). "What a sense of awe and exhaustion," our Prisoner concludes, "the sperm must contain, what a fever to continue (he was ready to believe) in light of 'the myriad of lost efforts'" (149). "What a collision of contradictory and caterwauling woes" (140).

Is this one of those moments when the prisoner wonders if he "has gone too far" (52), the notion that women might have the built-in power of psychic prophylaxis jarringly close to the concept of "legitimate rape" alleged by conservative politicians like Todd Akins and Richard Mourdock? (144). Consistent with the prisoner's habit of vigorous self-scrutiny, he asks whether "for lack of some cultivation in the middle, his vision 'was not too compulsively ready for the apocalyptic'?" (145). Here it is, explicating the apocalyptic lyrics of Yeats' "Leda and the Swan," that Fawver's illuminations of the sublime's problematic existential possibilities in Mailer's work prove most instructive. Not only does literature's most classic example of Mailer's "historic fuck," a paradox Mailer calls lovely and chaotic (140), provide a more generous and informed reading of Mailer's controversial views of contraception, it explains the brilliant if sometimes purposefully infuriating nature of Mailer's rhetorical extremes. Explaining that Yeats' poem is less about the literal, visceral nature of Leda's violation than the dialectical clash of "wide-reaching metaphysical ideas" (98), and God more a metaphor than a character, Fawver shows that Zeus' bestial rape of Leda possesses all the qualities of a sublime encounter, awesome wonders arising from vast horrors. Zeus is a rapist, but nevertheless "an avatar" of divine possibility (101). Leda's ravishment is brutal and terrifying, but God's wanton seed produces a child, Helen of Troy, who changes the world forever, inciting a bloody war, but also the glories of Greek culture, "filled with the beneficent, positive eventualities" (99) of "events and individuals entirely removed from the rape itself" (97). No matter how violent or disintegrative, Fawver says, "when cosmic doors swing open, all possibilities rush forth" (156). The apocalyptic nature of the act "restructures and reorients the whole of existence and/or reality through destructive means" (96, 102).

What a perfect literary realization of the sublimity of Mailer's art, not the smug certainties of Women's liberation, but the provocative contradictions of "awe" and "dread," the wondrous and lethal potential of Mailer's towering metaphors and apocalyptic conceits to deconstruct or, if you will,

ravish ideological norms while stretching perception to its outermost limits. Fawver likens this to "a shattered state of belief which requires a broader, more expansive perception and understanding of existence" (94). Such, Longinus says, was the domain of certain "select literary geniuses" whose "higher or more developed literary sensibilities," endowed them with the horrific rhetorical power of Zeus's "historic fuck," that cataclysmic conception tainted by the vehemence of rape, but that engenders not only new ways of being in the world but an entire civilization (qdt. in Fawver 12). When suggesting art and sex as equally potent existential ventures, Mailer ends "his portentous piece within the soft sweet flesh of parentheses" (169), he invites Fawver's view of the sublime as "impregnating the soul of the reader" with infinite possibility and potentiality (98). Such "divine rhetorical flourishes," Longinus postulates, collapsed conventional thought and delivered the reader into the sublime realm of more intimate, vivid, and complex art (Fawver 83). Even if readers disagree with or do not completely understand the writer's themes and messages, the writer's sublime aesthetic obfuscates the rational while forcing them into communion with a higher or more developed sensibility (Fawver 12).[11]

Mailer knows that what people make of such sublime possibilities resides mainly within themselves, an interpretive challenge he was "certain to return to the burden of the reader" (29). Extending the conceit of the artist's conception as seduction, one may say that the reader's experience of the sublime depends upon the qualities he or she brings to the fuck.

For these "percipients" as Fawver calls them (99), the sublime exists always "beyond" the boundaries of rational thought, perpetually open to inquiry. A participant in the sublime can never know "what happened, only that something was momentous and life changing" (31). Mailer knows full well that the sublime is deeper than reason, stubbornly inexpressible (47), approachable only by "the courage to feel one's way into more difficult or more precious insights" (135). Yet for readers willing to suspend logic and reason and follow Mailer's awesome metaphorical and metaphysical leaps of faith into "the great cave of becoming . . . that immense and fearful existence ringing at the edges of his dreams" (124), the ideological and spiritual payoff is inestimable, comparable to Stephen Rojack's braving the dangerous existential edge of the parapet outside Kelly's apartment, a state of being akin to the sublime itself. This is why Mailer says that he "was never able to rid himself of the thought that suicide via jumping from the nineteenth floor

was a religious act, could be no less" (65).[12] Echoing Mailer's view of the existential "wonders of creation and the glory of men and women in the rut and lovely of a loving fuck" (115), Fawver concludes that after such courageous leaps of faith we can never perceive the world in the same manner again, or perhaps even ourselves.

*Prisoner* would be essential reading if only for its concise elucidation of Mailer's main themes. "All the themes of his life had gathered here," he says:

> Revolution, traditional sex and the homosexual, the orgasm, the family, the child and the political shape of the future, technology and human conception, waste and abortion, the ethics of the critic, and the male mystique, black rights and new thoughts on women's rights—the themes were pervasive enough to depress him . . . the themes of that huge novel he had promised to begin so many times (25–26).

Clearly Mailer's quarrel with the sexual technology of these irksome ladies is much larger and more consequential than his sense of their gender merging efforts to equalize the sexes, inadvertently an obligatory arm of the Devilish urge of the age to turn men and women into automatons. "The loss of sex polarity," Mailer decries, was "part and parcel of the larger disintegration, the reflex of the soul's death and coincident with the disappearance of great men, great causes, great wars" (91).

Any assessment of the meaning and quality of *The Prisoner of Sex* in relation to Mailer's work as a whole evokes the question implicit throughout Lennon's timely biography, *Norman Mailer: A Double Life*: whether the author's journalistic and biographical writing did not compromise his potential for still greater work, leaving the question open as to whether Mailer ever wrote his *Moby-Dick*, *Huckleberry Finn*, or *Crime and Punishment*. That question will never be answered to everyone's satisfaction. Putting us in mind of Hemingway's admonition to Fitzgerald that writing facile stories for quick money would damage his talent, Mailer calls writing shorter novels "down payment" on his promise to "hit the longest ball ever to go up into the accelerated hurricane air of our American letters" (Lennon 325–326). Mailer acknowledged in 1973 that after "all the speed writing he had done," to which we may add frequent public appearances, essays, debates, acting, film and play writing, "he was finding novel writing particularly hard"

(Lennon 472). When tempted to set aside his manuscript of *The Castle in the Forest* to write a piece on the World Series of Poker, he remarked, "I've been abandoning novels like wives for many years" (Lennon 748).

Yet when in his edited collection of critical essays, *Norman Mailer: The Man and His Work,* Bob Lucid worries that Mailer had not yet written a novel that would put him in the company of Faulkner or Hemingway, "vast as his imagination is demonstrably vast," Lucid answers his own concerns, concluding that Mailer had accumulated a body of work whose intellectual brilliance and scope of thought was "fine enough to be called an actual realization of Mailer's soaring aspiration" (Lennon 448).[13] The fact is that as Mailer announced in postponing work on his most ambitious novel, *Ancient Evenings*, he found actual events invariably more extraordinary and interesting than fiction, finding himself unable to resist breaking away to address some contemporary phenomenon (Lennon 452). American literature is the better for it.[14] What appears unassailable is that the author's penetrating and unprecedented explorations of the complex American psyche in books like *A Prisoner of Sex, Of A Fire on the Moon*, and *The Armies of the Night,* where his literary genius shines brightest, establish his supremacy as the most sage and incisive social critic of the American Twentieth Century.

**NOTES**

1. Fawver's primary examples of the sublime in contemporary literature are Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and H.P. Lovecraft's "The Call of Cthulhu," each of which critiques the primacy of modern technology, and evokes the same paradoxical dynamism of wonder and dread at the core of Mailer's sublime aesthetic.
2. I argue that it is the thought-provoking metaphorical power of Mailer's God/Devil cosmology that matters. "What was paranoia," Mailer asks, "but belief in the Devil? (133). Yet the author apparently does literally believe that such a spiritual battle for the soul of humankind exists. See *On God: An Uncommon Conversation* for his rebuke to Christopher Hitchens' *God Is Not Great.* Mailer grants that 9/11 was clearly a day on which the Devil won a great battle, but sees the greater struggle between God and Satan for dominion over the earth and mankind's embattled soul as undetermined (*Why Are We At War*, 111). Mailer says that given the terrible historic stress of the 20th Century, the Devil may be just as powerful as God, and that the latter is probably doing the best He or She can (*The Big Empty*, 12). Mailer hopes for a "collaboration between God and ourselves" that "offers the potential to create in the future a religious party of the left that is able to contest the religious panjandrums of the right" (*Big Empty*, 213). On the other hand, Mailer finds the power of technology so great that it may render the struggle between God and the Devil irrelevant, more powerful than both.

3. Off-setting the public image of Mailer's over-sized ego, one of the surprising revelations of Lennon's biography is Mailer's modest assessments of his own work, even self-deprecation of the size of his talent. Responding to Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King*, the generally combative Mailer comments, "Well, one might as well eat the crow right here. Henderson is . . . worthy of Gulliver or Huckleberry Finn" (Lennon 326).
4. *Of A Fire on the Moon* (1970) and *The Prisoner of Sex* (1971) were nominated for the National Book Award in 1972. Mailer's main literary interests in these texts, especially his God/Devil cosmology, his inquiry into America's divided sensibility, and his detestation of technology's assault upon the natural so compliment and elucidate one another that we do well to read these books together. Both the womb and the moon, joined by mysterious "abysms" in compact with the beyond (*Prisoner, 47*), are objects of the sublime, in Fawver's words, "multiplicitous and terrifying" in their existential uncertainty (106). For Mailer the jettison of sperm and the voyage of Saturn V are similarly "awesome" heroic ventures into primeval uncharted depths whose meanings are undetermined. As Mailer pictures the vitals of the phallic rocket lifting off toward the cavernous womb of the moon, he experiences the ecstasy of sexual intercourse, hearing himself say over and over, "Oh, my God! oh, my God! Oh, my God! oh, my God! . . . hot in all the intimacy of a forming of heat." The rocket pierces the clouds like "parted lips," its "spumes of wake" like "all-but transparent fish" (101). "Some giant conception was being delivered" (94), he concludes, but at the prospect of technology's sabotage of nature's inherent spiritual purpose (the rocket sometimes looking like "a thin and pointed witch's hat . . . its flames the blazing eyes of the witch" (101), Mailer asks as he does of Women's Liberation, "Did God voyage out for NASA, or was the Devil our line of sight to the stars?" (*Moon*, 80). The two texts fuse in Mailer's observation that "Uterine free gestation"—sex without love or risk—"was a feat which would yet be applauded by colonies on the moon" (*Prisoner* 51).
5. Millet serves as the main focus of Mailer's quarrel with women's liberation, someone who loathed the "rigors of paradox" and had "all the technological power of the century in her veins." Yet she was in fact "the point of advance for those intellectual forces vastly larger than herself" (161), the enemy of the sublime with "beauty at the edge of dread" (161). Lennon explains that offsetting the vitriol of Mailer's female attackers, namely Millet, Germaine Greer, and Betty Friedan, *Prisoner* was highly praised by major female novelists like Joan Dideon, Joyce Carol Oates, and Cynthia Ozick. Oates called Mailer "a visionary, a poet, a mystic—shameless in his passion for women." "One," she says, "is led to believe anything he says because he says it so well" (Lennon 444). Diana Trilling defended him as "the most important writer of our time, lauding *Prisoner* for its "poetry of biology" (Lennon 442). Like D. H. Lawrence and Henry Miller, Trilling said, Mailer believed in "the body as the gateway to heaven." On a more personal note, Doris Kearns Goodwin notes about Mailer's many affairs that all those women continued to care for him, because they understood that he really loved them (Lennon 735). All agreed, however, that *Prisoner* had in effect offered his detractors "a bully puppet to attack his ideas" (Lennon 443).

6. Richard Porrier observes that "When Mailer was writing or talking about writing there's no one alive who is better" (Lennon 453). I agree with Lennon that Mailer's discussion of D. H. Lawrence and Henry Miller constitutes superb literary criticism (438). Mailer provides close readings of key passages from both writers to counter Millet's misrepresentation. What he most appreciates in Lawrence and Miller is their reverence for sexual transcendence and phallic force, a belief, as Lennon puts it, in "erotic instinct and risk" as the path to the sublime (438). One wonders, however, in light of Lennon's portrait of Mailer as a physically delicate child and as the son of a mother who loved and coddled him outrageously, how much of Lawrence Mailer sees or chooses not to see of himself, whose first sense of himself as a male had been in the tender air of his mother's total concern and whose childhood frailty fosters the habit of asserting male strength. Mailer is critical of Lawrence as "a momma's boy . . . who could not have commanded two infantrymen to follow him" (*Prisoner* 100), yet was himself known as "a tearful, bookish momma's boy" so un-athletic he "had trouble vaulting over the horse in gym class" (Lennon 23). Lawrence, Mailer writes, was simultaneously oriented toward the company and praise by women while needing to dominate the world of men for balance, "that intolerable pressure to command which develops in sons outrageously loved by their mothers," that produces great tyrants as well as great novelists (*Prisoner*, 110–111). Surely Mailer recognizes his own pride in virility in Lawrence's praise of the erect male phallus, "always ready to desert a man," and "the passion to be masculine as no other writer" (110). Whereas Mailer in *Prisoner* echoes Lawrence's detestation of pornography and masturbation as miserable activities that, in Mailer's words, delimit the male's opportunity to test himself in bed (135–36), he tells John Buffalo Mailer that "if pornography had come along when I was a young man, it would have dispensed with a lot of friction in my personal life . . . you might be less likely to marry the first woman you find who is highly sexual" (*Big Empty*, 118).
7. "All arguments are exaggerations," Mailer says (93). Eschewing the absolutes of his attackers, Mailer typically labels his ideas as assumptions of truth, qualifying them as "perhaps" or "maybe" true. For instance, "We are dealing with a cosmic perspective—we hope we are" (138). As to whether men and women had to work at realizing their essential masculine or feminine natures, the Prisoner was determined "to at least consider the possibility" (121). In *The Armies of the Night* Mailer refers to this problematic apprehension of truth as "intuitive speculation," where meaning is "emotional, spiritual, psychical, moral, existential, or supernatural" (72).
8. Lennon points out that while gender distinctions have indeed become more blurred over time, heterosexual romance remains intact (436). In his dialogue with his son in *The Big Empty*, Mailer decries a world where no "one sees the twinkle" or "hears the inner laugh and knows you're kidding" (159). He takes the edge off his insistence on fundamental male and female differences by joking that feminine men, "oversensitive" and "ponytailed" get unfairly "laid more than the macho brute" (146). If there is a quarrel to be had with the author's distrust of male/female differentiation and coitus-free conception as a totalitarian strategy to homogenize nature, the more likely objection would be with the author's insistence upon conspicuous male virility to reflect

male worth. Mailer tends to measure the vision and bravery of women by their willingness to engage in harrowing but unprotected intercourse, while male courage is often gauged by conspicuous sexual prowess, "fighting the good fight" (136), phallic muscularity and lasting power. This is one instance where Mailer's feminist detractors make a fair case—that phallic power, comparisons of the clitoris and penis as "shrimp to a cucumber" (61) too easily translate to male domination, even violence as evidenced by Mailer's unadvised remark that "a little bit of rape is good for a man's soul" (Lennon 457). Fawver discusses the sublime as historically connected with ideas of domination and power inequality, both indicative of masculinity (33). Yet he counters this with arguments against masculinity as one dimensional.

9. Mailer feels that female "awe"—the courage to risk unprotected sex—if only in some buried domain of the psyche balances the "awe" the male feels for and requires of her (124).
10. "These women," Mailer says, "reminded him of his most pessimistic belief . . . the spirit of the twentieth century was to convert man to a machine" (25). "The sanction of all science is here," he says, "white and sterile pharmaceutical mass, black as goat dung of the libido on laboratory lane" (66).
11. Fawver illuminates Mailer's asesthetic sublime in terms of Lyotard's theory of language as "a paradoxical puzzle which puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself" (*The Postmodern Condition,* 81, qtd in Fawver, 27). Mailer's metaphors mimic the apocalyptic nature of the acts they approximate, transcending the objective and the absolute while manifesting "vistas of possibility" in the "ineffable beyond" to which Fawver and Mailer regularly refer (Fawver 94). It is this that Mailer has in mind when he says that only a novelist can begin to explore emotions at the very edge of the word system, beyond the purview of scientists, doctors, psychologists, even "if he is good enough, the best of his contemporaries who work at philosophy itself" (91).
12. Carol Stevens, Mailer's fifth wife, describes Mailer always testing himself, walking for instance, on the narrow railing outside the living room of their summer home in Maine, high above the rocks and sand below (Lennon 429). Mailer himself cites walking the dangerous ten inch catwalk outside his third floor Brooklyn apartment, and earlier walking narrow ledges in San Francisco as the source for Stephen Rojack's negotiation of the parapet in *An American Dream* (Lennon 309–310). Fawver describes the sublime nature of such emotional experience in terms explicitly existential: "An energy rising up to meet the challenge of the vastness of death . . . leaving the viewer with a profound sense of its fragility . . . of being teetering on the edge of nothingness, thus arousing terror and pleasure" (31).
13. Mailer said that he wanted to write a novel that "Dostoyevsky and Marx; Joyce and Freud, Stendhal, Tolstoy, Proust and Spengler; Faulkner, and even moldering Hemingway might come to read, for it would carry what they had to tell another part of the way" (Lennon 251). For a reason why Mailer never completed that big book, we may look to Hemingway's difficulties in finishing his posthumous novels and stories, all parts of what he proposed as his own "big book." Just as Hemingway spent the last fifteen years of his life moving from one unfinished manuscript to another, unable to integrate versions of essentially the same story, so Mailer describes

his constant "excursions and departures" from a single overarching conception as unavoidable, "contributing to the slow death of the big novel" (Lennon 300).

14. When responding to *The Armies of the Night*, William Inge urged Mailer to remember that the artist's concern should be "with the heart and human sensibilities," Mailer said he wanted to do just that, but had concluded that "the disease of the 20th century is that politics had invaded the heart and polluted our sensibilities and there is no real way out—that one must write about politics as endemically as love" (Lennon 411). "What a mysterious country it was," Mailer says in *The Armies of the Night*. "The older he became, the more interesting he found her. Awful deadening programmatic inhuman dowager of a nation, corporation, and press—tender mysterious bitch whom no one would ever know . . ." (133). We know, nevertheless, that in Mailer's search for an intrinsic American soul the social, the psychological, and the metaphysical are never divisible inquiries, but part and parcel of what he said was the fixed philosophical point of his work: the desire to discover reality in society (Lennon 733). Mailer observed that it would perhaps be Don DeLillo who replaced him as the writer who takes on all the big themes and events in American life. DeLillo said that it was Mailer's "ambition, risk, broad vision, wide range—aspects of the American tradition—that put me on the path I've been following all these years" (Lennon, 757). Perhaps Mailer's reference in *Prisoner* to the electronic static and plastic surfaces of machines and electronic circuits of modern technology as "contemporary noise" (47) provided the title for DeLillo's novel on the same subject, *White Noise*.

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