HARLOT'S ANATOMY

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HARLOT'S GHOST HAS BEEN DISPARAGED AS INCOHERENT by Louis Menand, criticized as overly long by John Simon and as intermittently dull by Thomas Edwards, and judged seriously unresolved by just about all of its reviewers and critics.[1] In particular, Menand asserted that in attempting to provide a "spy story," a "Bildungsroman," an "experiment in faction (the fusion of fiction and nonfiction)," an "archival history of the CIA," essays on "personality" and "good and evil," a report on U.S. "secret government," a novel of WASP manners, and a "love story," he produces a "literary decathlon so demanding" that by the end of the effort nothing has fused and Mailer is "flat on his back." Simon paid Mailer the backhanded compliment of comparison to that other similarly overly "exuberant" Harvard graduate Thomas Wolfe. And Edwards wrote in every circumscribed praise that "Described out of context, Alpha"—which constitutes most of *Ghost*—"sounds like an overstuffed bildungsroman about a fairly dull and pompous young man," though he added that "one's prior reading of Omega"—the other component—"makes Alpha something more" largely because Omega e Omega "weaves a strand of metaphor"—the cold war as Mailer's *Paradise Lost*, a "religious epic" of "War in Heaven, the Creation and the Fall"—that lent *Ghost* some "imaginative coherence."

Yet *Ghost* is a variously and intricately structured work. Not only is it manifestly the *Bildungsroman* and picaresque treatment of the education of Harry Hubbard, it finds further shape from the from what Hicks has previously termed "the Mailerian narrative," and draws constructively on elements of the spy thriller and makes use of Modernist ambiguity.[2] Mailer's orchestration of these varieties of form might belie, I shall argue, the charge of incoherence, and even to an extent that of irresolution. With the work's

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anatomy and musculature made more evident, a reader is less likely to see length as burdensome or find scenes dull for want of fit and function.

Bildungsroman. The principal, Alpha portion of *Harlot's Ghost* clearly is a *Bildungsroman,* That is, "Alpha" is a narrative of the psychological, moral and social development of protagonist Harry Hubbard in the course of his journey from youth toward some consolidation of adulthood. Here, I'll focus on episodes involving just three aspects of Harry's development: his physical courage, his sexual maturation and, finally, his regard in the eyes of spy-world peers.

Harry's education in physical courage begins when Harry, fallen on a ski slope, finds that his father had quickly decided that Harry had risen too slowly—"like a quitter" said Dad (123). Father Cal Hubbard does quickly relent, terming himself a "fathead," but a very high standard for physical courage has been set. A second physical challenge of note confronts Harry while rock climbing at Otter Cliffs (145–146) with Hugh Tremont "Harlot" Montague. Here, despite the terror of even "a quick glimpse down" (147), Harry passes Montague's test. A third key encounter with danger involves Harry's participation alongside Dix Butler and Cuban anti-Castro forces in the landing on Playa Girón. In Harry's words, "adrenaline kept prayer at bay" (139) and he let "loose a prodigious whoop" (139) of warrior exhilaration.

As regards Harry's sexual development, this starts slowly and haltingly despite (or because) of an early subjection to sexual abuse at the hands (or, better put, lips) of a prep school chaplain (137).[3] Subsequent High School provides mere "petting" (228). Company training and Berlin posting progress haltingly as well. During Company training, the bisexual Rosen and Dix Butler disturb the atmosphere around Harry's sexual development, and early during his Berlin mission Harry has an ambiguous encounter with Dix. He rebuffs an aggressive sexual advance from Dix, but images of "Butler's "knotty buttocks" (330) appear to him as he approaches climax during his first intercourse, this time with a German co-worker named Ingrid. Still, the sex is satisfying with Ingrid. Harry can write that afterwards he "felt a good deal better" (330). His sex life has begun on an essentially heterosexual footing, if not the firmest. Between Berlin and Miami, we have a flowering of fond feelings and an epistolary romance vis-a-vis Kittredge Gardiner, plus diverse sexual explorations, and at least one deviant at Montevideo Station.

Finally, however, with a Miami affair with JFK and mob-leader consort Modene Murphy, Harry finds his first clear integration of love and sex.

As regards Harry and his Company co-workers, Harry's every mission involves challenges. In Company training camp, he must show prowess in a range of combined grueling and puzzling war games. However, it is during Harry's work in close interaction with William King "Wild Bill" Harvey, first amidst his inaugural mission abroad in Berlin and a decade later in Rome, that Harry's professional recognition among company peers is perhaps most put to the test. In Berlin, Harry must "maneuver through the labyrinth of the KU/CLOAKROOM affair. In this, he must simultaneously impress CIA Berlin Station chief William King "Wild Bill" Harvey with this acuity in search of the identity of the insubordinate and perhaps traitorous KU/CLOAKROOM, *and* save face for mentor-collaborators Cal Hubbard and Hugh Montague *and* prevent Harvey from discovering that Harry Hubbard in fact ***is*** KU/CLOAKROOM."[4]

A decade later in Rome Harry must—and does—coolly inform a sullen, armed Harvey that Dick Helms is putting him "out to pasture." Harvey tries to unsettle Harry with his handling of a large knife, by questioning Harlot's loyalty to the Company and by bidding Harry good bye with a head butt that, to use Harry's words, provides him with a "last gift, a headache to take home with the hangover" (1273–1277). However, Harry has the toughness to take such "tough guy" behavior in stride.

Of course, Harry must display, as well as achieve, courage in actions like the landing alongside Dix Butler at Playa Girón. And he does.[5]

Picaresque. As much could be said of *Harlot* as picaresque as of *Harlot* as *Bildungsroman*, for picaresque and *Bildungsroman* are entwined. Each key step in Harry's personal formation is entangled with his education in some milieu. Virginia Company training provides early learning in Company values and norms. Berlin provides learning in the entanglements of Company missions and Company internal politics. Montevideo offers lessons in Company vulnerability to double agents and personal sensitivity too; and Miami offers lessons in Company entanglements with the underworld, as well as the shocks of Bay of Pigs and other Cuban gaffes.

As picaresque, *Harlot* has an interesting precedent and parallel in a nineteenth century novel that also concerns "manly" development in the public service set amidst geopolitical conflict. I refer to Frederick Marryat's *Mr. Midshipman Easy* whose protagonist serves in the British navy during the

Napoleonic wars. To quote Hicks, "*Mr. Midshipman Easy* is a fine example of the explicit integration of 'manly development' into the *Bildungsroman*." Indeed, it is also a fine example of the integrations of such development into the *picaresque*, that is something of a chronicle of naval and Iberian theaters of the early Napoleonic Wars. *Harlot* is a portrayer of "tough guys."[6]

Mailerian narrative. The Mailerian narrative, or dynamic, takes the form of a narrative of socio-physiological dominant and anxiety, of anxiety mastered through love, sex, magic or—virtue of virtues—courage—*plus* reward for that mastery with the gift of some transcendence, however ephemeral . . . For example, in *The Naked and the Dead,* we have the dominant tensions, anxieties and ephemeral transcendences of relations of Lieutenant Hearn with Gen. Cummings and Sort. Croft. We see him sent off by Cummings up Mt. Anika to death at the command of Croft—sent off in retaliation for Hearn's brief moment of transcendent self-assertion in stamping out a cigarette butt on the floor of Cumming's tent.

In *Harlot*, such as we have it, the Mailerian narrative is distinctively employed. Rather than stretching across most of the novel-length story of a protagonist, like say Hearn or Rojack or Gilmore or Menenhehet, the narrative structures a *succession* of Harry Hubbard coming-of-age stories: Harry vis-à-vis Cal on the ski slopes, Harry vis-à-vis Dix across Berlin and Cuba stories,, Harry vis-à-vis Harvey across Berlin and Rome episodes, and so on. This is Mailerian narrative as serial synecdoche.

Espionage thriller. In a concrete sense, the Omega and Moscow sections that frame *Harlot's Ghost* do so as an espionage thriller complete with thriller shootout, plot twists—e.g., the trap set for Harry wherein Rosen dies—and mystery—e.g., where has Harlot gone? Why? And to what end? However, Omega/Moscow also frames *Harlot's Ghost* in relation to what might have been written—in relation both to some never written post-New Frontier, Alpha-II-like Harry Hubbard *Bildungsroman* and, most notably, to some hypothetical conclusion to Harry's full tale. As volume II was not to be, and as Mailer indeed referred in a 1991 interview with Larry King on the artistic merits of an uncompleted *Harlot's Ghost,* the novel's end needn't be viewed as a frustrating set of loose ends. It might instead be read as a satisfying set of questions—the components of an artistically calculated ambiguity left by a writer who need not be certain of ever fulfilling his "to be continued."

Modernist ambiguity. Viewed simply as the last words of a truncated

narrative, "Moscow, March 1984" seems to offer little more than a misleading, ultimately frustrating "to be continued." However, viewed as a series of forward looking questions, "Moscow, March 1984" offers an ending with distinguished modernist precedents. In literature, one has the basement halfway house that bookends the inconclusive self-realization of Ralph Ellison's *protagonist* in *Invisible Man.*

In *Invisible Man*, Ellison's protagonist, like Harry, is hiding out where he is both writing and framing his own biographical narrative. Much like Harry is at his clandestine residence at Moscow's Hotel Metropole, Ellison's protagonist is in his Harlem basement "in covert preparation for a more overt action" (13). True, Ellison's *Invisible Man* has no focus for his impending action so precise as Harry Hubbard's. Yet that protagonist's past and his readers' sense of history enrich our sense of that protagonist's "more overt action." In Harry's case, literary traditionalists might imagine such a clear resolution of narrative tensions and loose ends as, say, Le Carre provides in *Smiley's People,* and also find some pleasure speculating about final details of that resolution. However, literary post-traditionalists, mindful of such ambiguous Mailerian conclusions as Rojack's "trip to Guatamala and Yucatan" and Menenhetet's departure toward millennia of new futures might imagine more questions than answers, less success than new quandaries—perhaps imagine not Elison's protagonist in "preparation for more overt action" but instead J. D. Salinger's Holden Caufield or Gunter Grass's Oskar Matzerath reduced to apparent paralysis.

In short, the reader can find compensation in the "to be continued" with which *Harlot's Ghost* ends, especially as it is a compensation generously paid up by the work. As to what precedes *Ghost*'s ambiguous final words, developmental *bildung* of Harry Hubbard integrates the wide-ranging peregrination of *Ghost*'s picaresque, while the picaresque gives context and socio-historical resonance to Harry's maturation. Evocations of other Mailer writings add intertextual and *auteurist* resonance to the work.[7] One form for this is *Ghost*'s representation of the Mailerian narrative as serial synecdoche: measures of transcendence earned wrenched from anxieties mastered through love, sex, magic or courage again and again, vis-à-vis Cal on the ski slopes, Dix in Berlin and Cuba stories, Harvey in Berlin and Rome, and so on.

This is not to say that *Ghost* has no lapses. For example, the lengthy exposition of the Alpha/Omega theory of dual personality stretched across

much of *Ghost* offers a not very satisfying payoff in psychological insight and narrative clarification in the one volume work we have. Further, in response to charges of incoherence and irresolution, one can go beyond claims for unappreciated degrees of coherence to virtues that trump lapses in integration, I refer to William H Pritchard's suggestion that readers think of *Ghost* less in terms of its great riches of characterization and anecdote. This he concludes comparing Mailer of *Ghost* to Dryden's Chaucer, of whom Dryden wrote that, though he failed to "live up to God " has "still has given us God's plenty" (157). Yet from James' Victorian "loose, baggy monsters" (x) through *Moby Dick* to DeLillo's *Underworld* we find novels that readers of this paper may regard as baggier than *Ghost*, while from Musil's *The Man without Qualities* to Ellison's *Invisible Man* readers might note numerous fictions that are by the architectonic standards of Henry James or John LeCarre "quite as inconclusive as *Ghost*."[8]

NOTES

1. Irresolution here is succinctly summed up by the books conclusion with the phrase "to be continued."
2. By *Bildungsroman* I mean, following Moretti, a novel of its protagonist's psychological, moral and social shaping in the course of his journey from youth –adolescence in Harry's case—to a degree of consolidation of adulthood. By calling it a picaresque I mean a novel of its protagonist's education by means of his or her exploration of various sectors of the social world, for example some cliques and stations of the CIA. More on thriller, Modernist ambiguity and Mailerian narrative follows.
3. See Rosenthlal, Marina. "Spiritual Wickedness in High Places: Trauma, Violence and Betrayal in *Harlot's Ghost*." *Mailer Review* 6 (2013): 251–259. Print.
4. Hicks, 2010. Harlot's Ghost, *Bildungsroman*, Masculinity and Hemingway, p. 465. (pp. 462–470).
5. Although Harlot as *Bildungsroman* is principally comprised of the events of Alpha manuscript, some parts of Omega extend back into years unreached by Alpha. For example, references in Omega's references to marital relations and between Harry and Kittredge speak rather directly to his "sexual development."
6. *Mr. Midshipman Easy* may be a less canonical work than seems an ideal reference in an appreciation of an ambitious work by Norman Mailer. However, Joseph Conrad and Virginia Woolf and Hemingway figure among the celebrants of *Mr. Midshipman Easy* (Hicks p. 467)
7. For a systematic discussion of *Ghost's* rich isomorphism with the rest of Mailer's work, see Leeds.
8. Fictions that are both no less baggy and no less nominally inconclusive than *Ghost* yet that are of potentially canonical stature may be few; but *Underworld* and *The Man without Qualities*, might be on the list.

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