TEACHING CONTROVERSY: NORMAN MAILER IN THE COLLEGE CLASSROOM

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PROVOCATIVE. SHOCKING. PORNOGRAPHIC. These words have been used frequently to describe Norman Mailer's extraordinary life and work. But these words began to appear trite and tedious as Mailer's shock value declined in the 1960s and 1970s. "Even Mailer cannot be obscene any longer," remarked Louis Menand. "Everyone has heard it all" (Menand, "Norman Mailer" 154). Yet despite our supposed disenchantment with vulgarity, Mailer worked to change definitions of obscenity in his writing and his life. Menand, in his 2013 *New Yorker* piece, "The Norman Invasion," reminds us that Mailer "hated books that prettified the stuff of ordinary life and speech." He was also a vocal opponent of the obscenity trials involving works like D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928) and Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* (1934) (Menand, "Norman Invasion" 88). Yet the very fact that Mailer's contentious personality cannot be parceled out from the brash controversies of his writing makes him an especially compelling figure for the college classroom: teaching provocative works like Mailer's encourages students to see how controversies change over time and how their authors are celebrated and censored, often in direct response to these changes.

One reason Mailer works well in a college classroom is that he challenges his readers to move beyond rigid definitions of the moral and aesthetic. Mailer demands from his readers a marked distance and suspension of judgment in order to see what surface vulgarity can often obscure. This necessary distancing encourages students to make their own decisions about the relevance (or irrelevance) of obscenity charges to a text as a whole. For

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

example, each time I teach a banned book or controversial text, I begin by asking students to show me specific words or passages that could be regarded as offensive, immoral, or pornographic. This strategy can be tricky because I certainly do not want to invite personal reactions about such potential offenses. Then, I ask that for the remainder of the discussion, we *not* use words including their top favorites: immoral, creepy, and disgusting. It is at this time that I encourage them to turn instead to possible subtexts. Such distance helps them to see how we, as readers, are all complicit in the controversies surrounding texts: we are at once listener and judge. Finally, I ask students to locate what they believe to be the most important controversies, to describe them, and then to look beyond them in order to consider what is happening beneath the superficial and explicit. They often need some prodding, and many students prefer to stick with biography, historical facts, and the comfortably unambiguous. But eventually, they tire of obscenity for its own sake and become curious about the themes and devices that are often suppressed by what is more immediately crude or flagrant.

Mailer's short story "The Time of Her Time" can serve as a case study for approaching controversial texts in the college classroom. This story emphasizes the importance of ambiguity, especially when we look at what is happening between the lines of the larger narrative. In this case, what is unspoken between Mailer's characters is far more engaging analytically than their explicit sexual escapades or even the plot line, which is, for the most part, stagnant. "The Time of Her Time" also sets up the manipulative power of language and the unique role of the reader: the story itself challenges assumptions about masculinity, heterosexuality, and even reliable narration. The narrator's internal asides and ultimately the story's climax require readers to piece together subtle shifts in power between characters and then to judge for themselves what they mean.

Mailer's first-person narrator, Sergius O'Shaugnessy, is an aloof, übermacho hipster who has just opened a bullfighting school in his Greenwich Village apartment. He maintains a successful bachelor lifestyle, believing himself to be unbound by most cultural and religious restrictions. He also believes that he has successfully conquered the guilt associated with growing up in a Roman Catholic orphanage. O'Shaugnessy nevertheless describes himself in religious terms: he is *the* saint or "the messiah of the one night stand" ("Time of Her Time" 486). And he is eager to tell us his credentials: "I had my good looks, my blond hair, my height, build, and bullfighting

school, I suppose I became one of the Village equivalents of an Eagle Scout badge for the girls. It was one of the credits needed for a diploma in the sexual humanities" (485). Yet the reader can hardly miss his deep-seated fears of intimacy. O'Shaugnessy needs the maternal warmth of women while asleep but wants them gone the moment he is conscious. We hear every truth that he does not confess to women whom he woos with "some noblesse oblige of the kindly cocksman—to send my women away with no great wounds to their self-esteem, feeling at best little better than when they came in, I wanted it to be friendly (what vanity of the saint!)" (486). Mixing chivalric, Roman Catholic, and bullfighting imagery, Mailer's protagonist presents a self-congratulatory depiction of himself as a gift to the female sex, the ideal "Don John" of sexual pride and prowess (486). Significantly, the only female perspective we get of our hero directly contradicts this one-dimensional portrait of masculinity.

Enter Denise Gondelman, a Jewish NYU student with a boyfriend named Arthur and a therapist named Dr. Joyce. O'Shaugnessy repeatedly notes Denise's disgust but connects it to some "romantic and Mysterious All" rather than admit her repulsion could be directed at him. We first meet Denise just after our protagonist awakes, surprised, to see "this one" in his bed (487). Soon, he becomes irritated by this "serious young witch" (494) when she refuses to act the part of "a lady" and fails to have an orgasm. She accuses him first of being a "phallic narcissist" and then challenges him to bring her "up the cliff" (494, 496). O'Shaugnessy accepts the challenge, *not* because he has any interest in Denise, her desires, or their fulfillment. Rather, he wants to be remembered as a conquistador, the first (and perhaps only) one who could bring her to climax. His use of the word *conquistador* tells us more about his character than he has confessed directly thus far: he doesn't just want to win; he wants a position secured through bloody conflict, domination, and colonization.

Bullfighting diction and imagery pervade this story, even bleeding into the bedroom and its "blood red wall" (489). This choked violence is restrained throughout most of the text as O'Shaugnessy wavers between arrogance and self-doubt, sleeping and waking. He perceives uneasily that Denise is about to enter "the time of her Time," when someone else will successfully fill the role of conquistador. Delay would inevitably leave him "cuckolded in spirit" (494). Here, O'Shaugnessy's confidence begins to waver: he believes himself to be losing control in the bedroom, where he once claimed

to have reigned unchallenged. His ex-Catholic guilt emerges after he climaxes prematurely and refers to Denise as "the he to my silly she" (499). Yet he still attempts to keep private or "in camera" the shifting dynamic of power between them, never admitting his own show or his conquistador daydream. It is perhaps this fantasy of conquest that allows him to remain centered on his own victory rather than acknowledge what he must defeat within before he can achieve it.

In the end, Denise takes away the illusion of conquest for good when she provides the story's first and last external appraisal of its protagonist. As Denise is heading out the door, she turns to tell O'Shaugnessy about her psychiatrist's assessment—not of her but of him: "He told me your whole life is a lie, and you do nothing but run away from the homosexual that is you" (503). With this single sentence, the power dynamic of the story shifts permanently to Denise as O'Shaugnessy admires her triumph as the true and merciless bullfighter "hero"—not heroine—of this tale: "And like a real killer, she did not look back, and was out the door before I could rise to tell her that she was the hero fit for me" (503). It is significant, too, that this final judgment is given to Denise via a psychiatrist, a profession about which Mailer expressed a great deal of ambivalence. Mailer was a follower of psychiatrist Robert Lindner, who made a clear connection between rebellion and masculinity. In his 1952 book, *Prescription for Rebellion*, Lindner explains how psychology encouraged "the breeding of a weak race of men who will live and die in slavery." Rebellion was an "antidote" to such weakness and enslavement (quoted in "Norman Invasion" 89). In this way, Denise serves as the psychiatrist who allows O'Shaugnessy to stay true to his instinct while retaining his masculinity.

So what drives Mailer's protagonist to admire this female psychiatrist's diagnosis? First, it is crucial that the diagnosis is delivered by a bitter and retreating Denise, a figure who, in this new light, bears striking similarities to the man O'Shaugnessy wishes he could be. This moment also exposes the protagonist's unconscious, which the reader has been quietly interpreting alongside Denise throughout the story. Her final declaration is so all-consuming that it requires O'Shaugnessy to surrender power immediately in order to recognize the truth behind it. Mailer's essay "The Homosexual Villain," which appeared in *Advertisements for Myself* along with "A Time of Her Time," explores the straight male's obsession with homosexuality, even on its most unconscious level. Mailer concludes "there is probably no sen-

sitive heterosexual alive who is not preoccupied with his latent homosexuality" ("Homosexual" 226).[1] But does O'Shaugnessy's failure to rebel against Denise actually imply consent or simply admiration? It is unclear whether Mailer's hero is here acknowledging his instinctual desires or giving his acquiescence to their social categorization. Rather, it is a moment that exposes all forms of sexual repression as dangerously deceptive modes of imprisonment.[2]

With these details in mind, how might Mailer's fiction play out in a college classroom? First, I would encourage my students to keep in mind both literary and biographical details as we look more closely at the language Mailer uses to set up unspoken tensions between his characters. For example, O'Shaughnessy naively assumes that by bringing Denise "up and over the cliff" to orgasm, he will somehow conquer previously unconquered female terrain.[3] Christopher Hitchens refers to this very "heroic struggle" of "The Time of Her Time" in his *Slate.com* tribute to Mailer the day after his death in 2007. He begins this tribute by confessing to "admiring Mailer's audacity even as [he] slightly whistled at his promiscuity" (1):

> [Mailer] exhausted upward of a dozen pages in a description of a heroic struggle to bring a stubborn woman to orgasm. (The method that his character finally employs is so underhanded that I shall not quote it, thus forcing you to look it up.) Quite unabashed years later, he reprinted the whole folly and claimed that its original publication had nerved a hesitant editor to publish *Lolita*, of which novel he straight-facedly claimed that "The Time of Her Time" was "the godfather." (Hitchens 10)

Hitchens provides yet another effective way of approaching Mailer's work in the classroom: getting students to move beyond the impertinence of Mailer's style and subject to see his work in dialogue with other bold writers working at this time. Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita,* named above, like Mailer's "The Time of Her Time," asks readers to move beyond moral judgments to interpret the psychological complexities of two unreliable, morally ambiguous, yet nevertheless vulnerable narrators. In this way, Mailer complements those writers who challenge our sympathies for moral weakness and our ability to appreciate aesthetic skills that exist apart from individual ethics.

Nabokov's *Lolita,* though published in France in 1955, was banned in the

U.S. until 1958, a year before Mailer's story appeared in *Advertisements for Myself*. According to James Kincaid, *Lolita* produced "the most embarrassed, looking-sideways-for-the-exit, highfalutin, and obscurantist talk of any book ever written—any" (Kincaid B18). In response to charges of obscenity, Nabokov admitted that he was more worried that readers would find *Lolita* anti-American than about "thinking it immoral" (Kincaid 18). His responses to obscenity charges mirror Mailer's waning shock appeal as they reinforce the divide between art and obscenity. In his 1956 Afterword, "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*," Nabokov writes: "Obscenity must be mated with banality because every kind of aesthetic enjoyment has to be entirely replaced by simple sexual stimulation which demands the traditional word for direct action upon the patient" ("On a Book . . ." 313). Yet even in 2014, the spotlight continues to fall on pedophilia rather than on the novel's lyrical writing or the inexplicably burlesque murder that occurs in its final pages. Like nearly all of Mailer's works, Nabokov's novel requires that students put aside accusations of immorality and personal offense to appreciate the alluring style, allusions, and game playing between narrator and reader. Both writers also challenge students to find actual places in their works that are ostensibly vulgar, a challenge that students are often hard-pressed to meet. But the closer they get to the text itself, the harder it becomes to hold on to preconceptions and moral judgments.

Teaching *Lolita* alongside Mailer's "The Time of Her Time" poses several compelling challenges to readers: first, both works depict aberrant or "perverted" sexuality first-hand through the eyes of a repressed, tortured, and potentially sympathetic protagonist. Next, both works suggest the possibility for rich feminist readings of male and female characters. Finally, both Nabokov and Mailer question the narrator's inability to see a female character as a separate entity apart from his own sexual appetites or idealized fantasies. Both writers produced strong reactions among readers—those who have and those who have not actually read the controversial work in question. For a recent Banned Books Week event, I read aloud an excerpt from *Lolita.* Before I began, I was introduced as reading from a book banned for "its pornographic and immoral subject matter." The audience was composed mostly of women aged eighteen to sixty years old and one lone male undergraduate. Yet this audience was surprisingly open to the passages I read, even when I looked them directly in the eye and addressed them as "Ladies and gentleman of the jury." The experience of reading portions of

the novel to an audience largely unfamiliar with it reminded me of its power to seduce rather than shock. We can admire the craft of Humbert's narrative while remaining "safely solipsized" (*Lolita* 60) from its larger implications. Similarly, in class, we discuss ways that the aesthetic experience of *Lolita* can exist apart from its most controversial subject—pedophilia. It also highlights the dangers of assuming that one knows a novel merely by knowing about the controversial subject it contains, that merely hearing about a novel's subject makes one an instant expert on it.

Perhaps the most compelling reason for pairing these two writers in a college class is that *Lolita* and "The Time of Her Time" share a necessary distance from the female characters they struggle to describe. Lolita is idealized throughout Nabokov's novel as Humbert's "own creation, another, fanciful Lolita—perhaps more real than Lolita; overlapping, encasing her; floating between me and her, and having no will, no consciousness—indeed, no life of her own" (62). While Humbert hopes that his love will be sheltered by the "refuge of art," he ultimately despairs: "I simply did not know a thing about my darling's mind" (284). Humbert's confessions could easily serve as a key criticism among feminist critics about Mailer's work: namely, Mailer's narrator's are incapable of seeing a female character as having a distinct identity outside of their own imaginations, whether lustful or idolatrous.

Demonstrating to students that controversial or "obscene" texts have value beyond shock value is an important lesson, especially in an undergraduate classroom. By acknowledging larger controversies surrounding these works, students are encouraged to make aesthetic judgments using a variety of critical lenses, textual and biographical among them, rather than choosing one at the exclusion of the other. Such exercises help students embrace these debates rather than close their minds to them or be blinded to richer ways of reading controversial texts. Mailer gives the best argument for returning to his work in new intellectual environments: "The final purpose of art is to intensify, even, if necessary, to exacerbate, the moral consciousness of people" ("Hip, Hell . . ."). Introducing controversial texts into a college classroom means challenging students to be suspicious of predictable responses; it means asking them to distance themselves from easy moral judgments and absolutes. In this way, Mailer's works can show students the power of language to deceive, to manipulate, and ultimately to conquer.

NOTES

A version of this paper was presented at the Norman Mailer Society Conference in Sarasota, Florida, October 25–28, 2013.

1. One year later, Mailer would, by most popular accounts, stab his wife, Adele Morales, for the very same accusation that Denise makes in the end of this story. Clearly, Mailer did not emulate his hero but rather acts in a way more fitting to what we might have expected from O'Shaugnessy. It is therefore not surprising that Mailer became a pseudo-literary character after the scandalous incident.
2. For a discussion of approaching Mailer's masculine language in the classroom, see Susan Osborne's "Revision/Re-Vision: A Feminist Writing Class," *Rhetoric Review* 9.2 (Spring 1991): 258–73.
3. Wilhelm Reich, one of Mailer's influences, argues in *The Function of the Orgasm* that sexual climax was "the essence of the character, which came out and was expressed in the orgasm" (quoted in "Norman Invasion" 90). This explains one reason why the orgasm may feature so prominently throughout the story. Also, two years before the publication of "The Time of Her Time," Mailer explored the intersections of orgasm and the unconscious in his essay "The White Negro" (*Dissent* 1957).

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