READING *ANCIENT EVENINGS*

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> "How can a book that I have read with such amazement and bliss be so snottily dismissed by so many?"
>
> —George Kearns, the *Hudson Review*

> "That reviewers felt free to denounce . . . in just these terms . . . was a measure of the present revolt against high modernism"
>
> —Peter Shaw, *American Spectator*

WHAT I DO HERE IS EXAMINE THE STRUCTURE OF NORMAN MAILER'S *Ancient Evenings* as a particular modernist one and as, in turn, an important aid to reading *Evenings*. Indeed, I argue that critical assessments of Norman Mailer's *Ancient Evenings*—of its vision and story and, to an extent, style—are tied to comprehension of its modernist construction.

On its critical reception, *Ancient Evenings* is reputed to have received a preponderance of negative reviews when it appeared in 1983. Interestingly, this judgment is overstated if one judges major reviewing venues, for *Evenings* received eight distinctly positive reviews out of the seventeen selected in the *Book Review Digest* for 1983.[1] Indeed, for one who has long regarded the *New Republic* and the *New York Review of Books* as our most authoritative reviewing publications and the *New York Times Book Review* as spotty if influential and *NYTRB* reviewer Benjamin DeMott a social rather than literary critic and, thus, hardly a judicious choice to review a modernist text, *Evenings* has seemed very well received from the start, less DeMott's "disaster" (1) than George Stade's "permanent contribution to the possibilities of fiction" (36) or, in the words of Harold Bloom "extravagant invention" (40).[2]

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Still, many reviews in prominent venues, a great majority in the popular press, were decidedly negative. Indeed, there has been a tendency for commentators and interpreters as sympathetic as applauded Mailer biographer Michael Lennon and *Evenings*' interpreter Robert Begiebing—Lennon's preferred interpreter—to recycle too much of the onslaught uncontested. For example, Robert Begiebing notes that the novel contains "chunks of ponderous, turgid writing and static ceremony;" and he doubts Mailer's success in conveying *Evenings*' basic "deepest structural principle," that is "the tragic conflict between vitality and entropy" (109). Lennon explicitly claims "a tortured point of view, massive digressions and the depiction of Menenhetet's latter lives curtailed." Plus, he expresses the seemingly critical view that, despite some "final chapters . . . the novel ends bleakly" (583).[3]

MODERNISM, READING AND ASSESSING *ANCIENT EVENINGS*

So how might *Ancient Evenings*' modernism enlighten its reading and assessment? In brief, structure provides context and context is crucial to interpretations and to criticism in turn. For example, admirers Harold Bloom and George Kearns voice stylistic objections resembling Begiebing's report of critical claims of "chunks of ponderous, turgid writing" (190). Here, Bloom references to "stretches through which the poor reader must crawl with unrewarded patience" (2003, 36), especially in "The Book of Queens." Moreover, Kearns stresses "rough going" in The Book of the Gods (562).

Yet stylistic dissatisfactions may arise, or be exacerbated, by interpretive confusions of a sort that exegeses of *Evenings*' modernist construction might dispel. For example, unawareness of the kind of framing mythopoeic role that a section like "The Book of the Gods" plays in the larger work, might lead some readers to be unnecessarily intolerant of the seemingly digressive character of such a section. Indeed, a reader prone to judge literary architecture in predominantly narrative terms might soon lose patience with a work like *Evenings*, organized along lines that privilege more than narrative and character. Further, some readers may be morally repelled by substantive elements of *Evenings*—from the widely imputed sado-masochism of "The Book of the Charioteer" to the extended impersonal sexuality and spell-casting mayhem of "The Book of Queens"—in ways that reveal clearer perception of the thematic functions of *Evenings* as delineations of worlds less critical of warrior cultures of dominance and the Dionysian ancient pagan worlds. Indeed, Fuchs has claimed that the ferocity—even in pleasure seek-

ing—of *Evenings* leaves a world "diminished by its own fulfilment" and a novel circumscribed by the "limits of ferocity" (315). Below I'll address this criticism, and adopt a variant of it in interpretive defense of *Evenings*.

But precisely how might a modernist exegesis be enlightening? What does this exegesis look like? I address this question by first describing modernism as applied here to *Evenings*, then describing *Evenings* as a particular expression of modernism, and finally assessing the criticism catalogue above by Lennon and Begiebing in light of a modernist exegesis.

Modernism perhaps is best regarded as a family of literary traits—a set of family resemblances—that arose in reaction to the realist fictions of the nineteenth century. Some key traits are (a) *symbolism and symbolist construction*, which stress a symbolically encoded, fiction-organizing order of meaning beyond the surface reality of narrative and reader;[4] (b) *mythopoesis*, which emphasizes some combination of an underlying symbolist order rooted in traditional mythologies like those of ancient Greece mythology (as well sometimes as a new symbolic order build on traditional grounds like, for example, Tolkien's Middle Earth); (c) narrative and epistemological *self-reflectiveness*, as in Thomas Mann's ironic closing declaration of *Joseph and his Brothers,* as a "God given work"; (e) *narrative disruption,* as in "radical disruption of linear flow of narrative" and "frustration of conventional expectations concerning unity and coherence of plot and character."[5]

Joyce's *Ulysses* provides striking examples of these traits, as well as something of a template for the analysis of *Evenings* in terms of mythopoesis. *Ulysses*, of course, develops in analogical parallel with the narrative of Homer's *Ulysses*. As regards symbolism, it draws on Homer's *Ulysses* (along with Catholicism—and the history of English prose styles) for thematic encoding and resonance as well as for narrative episodes. As for self-reflection, it contains nothing less than theoretical discussion of its own mythopoeic strategy in the thoughts and conversations of Stephen Dedalus (in *Ulysse*s' second, "Nestor" episode) as well as organization into eighteen episodes modeled after those of its Homeric precedent that not only clarify the narrative but break it into distinctly styled, thematically focused chapters. This organization introduces a considerable degree of "disruption" of traditional narrative expectations and it thereby illustrates the disruptive aspect of modernism alongside the self-reflective one. This organization, from three introductory Dedalus-centered chapters ("The Telemachiad") reminiscent of *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, through the Dublin "Odyssey" of Bloom

and such arguable digressions as Q&A chapter ("Ithaca") to the famous Molly Bloom dream ("Penelope"), constitute an ensemble of prose modules that is parallel to Mailer's organization of *Evenings* into its seven books. In Mailer's words, "The book certainly has the most complete architecture of any book I've written. It's in seven parts. Each of its parts has a separate existence. The book continues from part to part, most definitely, but the nature of the book discloses itself part by part."[6]

THE MODERNIST STRUCTURE OF *ANCIENT EVENINGS*.

Book I, "The Book of One Man Dead," focuses on "consciousness" of a particular soul, the Ka of the dead Meni, in passage through phases of the afterlife not too removed from death [e.g., experiencing mummification of its recently abandoned corpse: "A hook . . . plunged into my brain. Pieces, gobbets and whole parts of my mind were now brought out through one aperture of my nose, then the other"(26).] By so doing, it provides dramatic presentation of the pains, yearnings and struggles of those close to the death of body or self, the stuff of much modern literature including Mailer's own alienated protagonists at the onsets of *Barbary Shore, Deer Park* and *An American Dream.* ["I do not know who I am. Nor what I was. I cannot hear a sound. Pain is near that will be like no pain felt before"(1983 3).] For Mailer, this demi-life is chosen as the vantage point for a grave voyage toward The Lands of the Dead by the Kas ("doubles") of young Meni and grandfather Menenhetet in search of meaning. Indeed, this not only is the vantage point from which *Evenings* sets out but is one from which *Evenings* reaches forward toward sequels never to be written. Although I know of no salient criticism of the broadly applauded "Book of One Man Dead" to be dispelled by my modernist approach, readers might be more critical of "The Book of One Man Dead" who are unaware of the various non-narrative emphases of modernism.[7]

Book II:, "The Book of the Gods" provides the mythology for the world of *Ancient Evenings.* It is situated there as if the tales of Ulysses' odyssey were told at length by Stephen Dedalus to clarify the grounds for Joyce's *Ulysses.* The tales of Egyptian Gods serve as psychic principles and role models for the cast of *Evenings.* Replete with philandering, vengeance, murder, rape, sodomy, sex, domination, and bodily and psychic dismemberments and regenerations, they offer narratives of domination and anxiety, courageous, amorous and/or magical response to such, and various degrees

of transcendent resolution—amorous bliss for Isis and Horus II and a robust apotheosis for Osiris—that provide a cultural-historical grounding for the presence in *Evenings* of what Hicks has termed the "Mailerian narrative."[8] Readers not alert to the book's modernist structure might be prone to view this book as vastly overwrought from the point of view of narrative advancement. Although this book provides mythopoeic grounds for the rest of *Evenings*, it bears mention that one might interpret the entire *Evenings* as a new mythic order useful for analyses.[9]

Book III: "The Book of the Child" evokes the delicately emotional, sensual, and telepathic life of the young Meni. Indeed, the book provides the reader with a rich sense of the world about the six-year old boy "in his tenderness, his wisdom and his pleasure" (700), as well as strikingly vivid portrayals of Pharaoh Ptah-nem-hotep, Meni's mother Hathfertiti and Menenhetet that will extend throughout the work.[10] On the emotional and telepathic, Meni tells us that "Fortified by the pleasure my mother took in me, each sight I recollected came back to me with luster . . ." (103) while on the telepathic (or perhaps simply the smart child's clairvoyance), we are exposed to such sublime sentences as "Just as we can stare into the depth of a golden goblet and find the reverberations of a thought in the last drops, so did I comprehend that the last treasure of the day on the river would be found in the private rooms of the Pharaoh" (111). Sights of the pageantry of life along the Nile enthrall Meni:

> The river spread out . . . wide as a lake . . . before our eyes, the harbor, the stone wharves for unloading cargo, the shipyards, the causeways, the canals, the granaries, and every crowded house on every rise of ground . . . the faces of the workers on the dock, or soldiers guarding the market place . . . , water pails of a thousand shadufs kept rising and falling, lifting water into the sluices above them. (120)

Sensations, introspective as well as scenic, abound buoyed by mother Hathfertiti's love, for "Sitting on my cushion of silver filigrees, the cheeks of my buttocks in subtle turmoil, I curved my body into the soft reception of Hathfertiti's arms" (111). Future scenes are evoked, some telepathically and clairvoyantly, many of family and court life, and more than a few of Hathfertiti's romantic intrigues with Menenhetet. "Book of the Child" also con-

veys Meni's fascinated observations of the Feast of the Pig at which Menenhetet narrates the tale of his four lives to Pharaoh Ptah-nem-hotep, Hathfertiti and many a minister and courtier of the Pharaoh. Indeed the narration that presents most of the remainder of *Evenings* is Menenhetet's account of his life to Ptah-nem-hotep over the course of the Feast. Here Mailer offers his career's first extensive portrayals of a child's world, offers it in sharp contrast with, yet as rich complement to, the phantasmagoric wanderings of One Man Dead, the struggles of the "Book of the Gods," and the warrior, cocksmanly and magician strivings of Menenhetet in Books to follow. Critics oddly subordinate the speculatively tinged telepathic/clairvoyant descriptions common to authors from Henry James through Virginia Woolf to magical realism and have tended to chastise such turns, reducing them to ridiculed portions of *An American Dream* rather than noting the many beauties and novelties (child-centered, familial, scenic, life affirming) of "The Book of the Child."[11] Perhaps such critics are fixated on telepathy because they fail to grasp the structural centrality of "Book of the Child" with its focus on the world of the well nurtured child, and they are more easily drawn for meaning to mere eccentricities of the author.[12]

Some critics have also criticized the complexity of Mailer's narrative structure, which takes its biggest leap toward greater complexity in moving to the long reminiscence of Menenhetet at the Pharaonic banquet that gains stage center in the latter part of this "Book of the Child."[13] They have done this although the narrative structure is as simple as the work of Joseph Conrad: Meni, who has exclusively narrated since Book I, shifts midway through "Child" into the role of witness to Menenhetet's telling of the tales of his lives that then take up *Evenings* well into Book VII. Of course *Evenings*' dual focus on the thematic and symbolist messages of the seven books and the narrative running through them may disrupt "conventional expectations concerning unity and coherence of plot."

Book IV: "Book of the Charioteer:" This book fully turns us over to Menenhetet's full three-plus book account of his four lives. This book contrasts sharply with the "The Book of the Child." At the onset, it relates the coming of age of a peasant youth (the first Menehete) who is closer to the seasons and laboring population of the Nile than to its scenic beauties and social pageantries, and to a rough struggle for survival than to apprehensions of the sublime. ["We had no work to do but protect our ditches, and therefore we could sit on our levies and watch where the water turned be-

neath in eddies so deep that you could put your arm in the whole and never get wet" (240).] Young Menenhetet is more strength than sensibility: "I did not see myself as different from other boys except that I was stronger, and that offered much" (241). Menenhetet moves into and up through the ranks of the Egyptian military, which is viewed as a world of aggressive competition and dominance struggles to be mastered by a mix of manly prowess and social mentorship. Menenhetet rises into the favor, and arguable friendship, of Pharaoh Ramses II (less formally, Usermare-Septenere), who soon proves fickle and domineering (indeed sexually imposing with regard to two of Menenhetet's orifices). Out of Menenhetet's stark experience of Pharaonic dominance, Menenhetet's evolves into a series of Mailerian narratives of dominance, anxiety and counter action that will drive most of Books IV through VI. In the "Book of the Charioteer," this narrative moves from the anxieties following Pharaonic abuse to compensatory action (escapist as well as retributive) at and after the Battle of Kadesh: first, the relish of battle, next the rape and slaying of two brigands on the road to Tyre, and finally Menenhetet's luminous trysts with the "secret whore of the King of Kadesh." To revisit Menenhetet's displaced revenge on one brigand, Menenhetet narrates, "I knocked him flat with a stone I held, a good blow that finished his fight . . . discovered the gift Usermare-Septenere had left in my bowels . . . I was large with the gift of Ramses the Second. No door could have withstood my horn. The thief shrieked like a beast disemboweled" (306). To evoke Menenhetet's escape into embraces of the "secret whore of the King of Kadesh" with a few quotations would be impossible. However, one sentence from this episode does succinctly evoke the Usermare-Menhetet tensions of this Mailerian narrative, namely the one that reads, "Women's gifts are never so profound as when they take revenge on a lover" (319). These efforts to reverse the despondency of domination are all "displaced" in the sense that they fail to act back on their Pharaonic source, unlike Menenhetet's efforts to wound Ramses through casting spells and usurping Pharaonic consorts in the books "of Queens" and of "the Pharaoh." Although not widely acclaimed like Mailer's depiction of the battle of Kadesh, these events of the sojourn to Tyre that follows the battle are enthralling—and are perhaps more central to *Evenings'* Mailerian narrative than the battle that precedes them.[14] Yet, for the most part, they have been critically consigned to dismissal as perverse self-indulgence in ferocity and buggery—even in the face of Mailer's characterization of his ancient Egypt as "a world of dominance where you find your

place literally by whom you're doing it to," a view consistent with accounts of the legitimacy of male-male sodomy in a number of warrior cultures.[15] For me, reading of "The Book of the Charioteer," minimally enlightened by some knowledge of ancient warrior culture, discounts condemnations of violence in *Evenings* on grounds of mere Mailerian kinkiness and moral repulsion. Indeed, Menenhetet's reference to Usermar-Septenere amidst the assault on the brigands signals a possible moral issue as well as vengeance. The reader may take his or her cue less from De Sade than from W. H. Auden's *September 1, 1939*: "I and the public know/ What all schoolchildren learn,/ Those to whom evil is done/ Do evil in return." Revelations to come in "The Book of Secrets" counsel such a reading of much of Menenhetet's "ferocity," a reading aided by interconnecting the disparate visions of *Evenings*' seven books.

Book V: "The Book of Queens:" This book, set amid the world of Ramses' harem, The Gardens of the Secluded, and its many harem "queens," is about sex, magic and the attempted use of both for revenge. Designated by Usermare as Governor of the Gardens, Menenhetet is privy to much gossip and consorting involving Usermare, as well as to "beguilements as different from war as the rose from the axe" (399). The book's numerous, sometimes orgiastic sexual couplings seem to me integral to what Begiebing refers to as *Evenings*' dialectic of "vitality and entropy," one manifestation of human vitality. Still, as we will see, vitality is perhaps best assessed in the context of this dialectic of "vitality and entropy," which is most fully assessed in the context of *The Book of Secrets* assessment and we can take Account of what Lennon has termed *Evenings*' final "bleakness" and Fuchs' *Evenings*' finally "sated" quality. The specific impact of the vitality of the sexually centered phase of Menenhetet's tale concentrated in "Queens" matters for the consistency and finality of assessing *Evenings*' overall dialectic. Yet, alas, for all its importance of the assessment for a grip on *Evenings* overall, the style and inventions of "The Book of Queens" have been intensively criticized, most tellingly perhaps by overall *Evenings* advocate Harold Bloom who, with a stress on the book's sexual aspect, termed "Queens" "hopelessly listless" (36). Still, although Queens's sexuality can be as tedious as pornography—and at times seen as dully written as most pornography is shot—"The Book of Queens" gains a strong pulse from its treatment of magic, critically reviled or neglected as it has been.[16]

Here, I dissent with those not enthralled by the spell casting of Menen-

hetet and "little queen" Honeyball. If the harem sex has the dullness of pornography—and, perhaps, is "tepid" as Bufithis suggests[17]—the efforts of Honeyball and Menenhetet to harm Usermare strike me as rewarding in a couple of respects. For one, the principal, failed effort itself is enthralling in its buildup and dramatic in its abrupt anticlimax, which reveals that, after much arduous magical effort, Usermare has merely been "disturbed in his calm" (461). For another, the failure of spell casting with Honeyball builds, going forward through Menenhetet's intensified devotion to the arts of magic, toward the powerful moment when Menenhete possibly casts Usermare down from his His Pharaonic Palanquin (the "Golden Belly").

This intriguing scene and a second, Menenhetet's first tryst with Queen Hefertiri, are neglected by critics of "The Book of Queens." Mailer renders the link between his magical efforts and Ramses' fall ambiguous by separating spell and fall in time and space and by distancing the qualified seriousness of the actual fall from the utter maliciousness of the intent behind it. Yet this subtlety seems to have gone unnoticed by commentators.[18] Moreover, Menenhetet's use of Pharaonic stool from Ramses' "Golden Bowel" quite likely figured in the extensive critical chorus raised against Mailer's reputed obsession with excrement—against strong documentation of the commonplace use of excrement in the casting of spells.[19] Similarly, Menenhetet's first coupling with Queen Hefertiri is leavened by ironic play on the gap between harem Governor and Queen of Egypt, principally by Hefertiri' singing praise of her erotic parts and prowess during the tryst. Yet this touch too seems to me to have gone critically unmentioned, buried perhaps in the widespread perception that Mailer is incapable of irony.[20]

"The Book of Queens" might be interpreted as a focus on domineering sexuality efforts as compensatory at the practice of magic, each true to the harem setting and befitting the Mailerian narrative. Instead, the book has been victim to the portion of the book's sexual content close to the stereotype of Mailerian's sex as brutal and excessive and is a neglect of Mailer's subtly and affectingly presented expositions of the Egyptian practice of magic.

Book VI: "The Book of the Pharaoh." "Book of the One Man Dead" centers on the anxieties and struggles of those who associate life with the end of consciousness, one might call the half dead. "The Book of the Child" focuses, in contrast, on the sensual effulgence and familial and social fascination of the world of the child, especially the more privileged child. "The Book

of the Charioteer" centers on the warrior society, Pharaonic warrior society in particular. References to Menenhetet's reputation as magician in earlier books aside, "The Book of Queens" begins a detailed discussion of the practice of magic as a tool picked up from the world of harem intrigues. This book centers on the world of (Pharaonic) court intrigue where magic is a tool of political intrigue.

Two events center the action of this book. One consists of Ramses the Second's resplendent presentation of himself before his subjects on the morning of The Festival of Festivals.[21] A second one consists of Menenhetet's conception on Hefertiri of a son to be his own reincarnation, which coincides with Ramses' deadly stabbing of Menenhetet.[22]

Ramses' presentation of himself at The Festival of Festivals provides a strong demonstration of the enduring strength of Usermare-Septenere in the face of his palace adversaries. To this presentation, critics offer mixed responses. For example, Poirier seems to me to evoke it approvingly when he refers to Mailer's "visionary depictions of royal personages" (43). However, Begiebing expresses it less approvingly when he refers to "static ceremony" (2009, 616). Perhaps reviewers, focusing on *Evenings* more as narrative than Modernist construction, found the detailed presentations of Pharaonic regalia and ritual more narrative impediment than visionary enrichment.

Menenhetet's auto-genesis is central to Mailer's ultimate elevation of magic to a high place within the thematic conception and plotting *of Evenings.* Clearly, Mailer wants here to give some sanction to the efficacy of magic. This is so even though Mailer may well be taken as part of a mythopoeic elaboration of a lost world in which belief in magic lent it consequence rather than an affirmation of a practice of enduring objective power. Menenhetet's autogenesis is an essential device for Mailer's decision to explore multiple facets of Menenhetet by granting him four lives (three of them the main content of the "Book of Secrets").[23] Unfortunately, the drama of Menenhetet's autogenesis, although integral to the resolution of the Pharaoh's Rameses-Hefertiri-Menenhetet triangle, is mitigated by the dramatic flatness of the personal interactions (Bufithis 165).

Book VII: "The Book of Secrets." This book picks up Menenhetet's narration of his lives, a second as a priest, a third as an increasingly wealthy papyrus merchant, and a fourth as the general-magus narrator of the lives. It provides little Meni's account of the telling intrigues swirling about "The Night of the Pig." It returns us to the afterlife journey of Meni and Menen-

hetet that bookends *Evenings***.** Most centrally, it conveys *the* sense of four lives, indeed the lives of both narrators.

In one sense, the second, third and early (pre-Festival) fourth lives of Menenhetet add less to *Evenings* than the reader expects, for they are so much shorter in the telling than Menenhetet's first life that they close the accounting of Menenhetet's lives with what seems diminishing returns. However, in another sense, they enlighten a sense of Menenhetet's lives, for their seeming truncation of the novel reinforces one's sense of Menenhetet's unrealized aspirations.[24] The powerful ending of "The Night of the Pig" contributes in a more straightforward dramatic fashion to the end of Menenhetet's Egyptian lives. Here, Ptah-nem-hotep simultaneously decides against the appointment of Menenhetet to the high position of Vizier and usurps the favors of Hathfertiti with grim effect: Menenhetet leaves the chambers of the Feast to cut his own throat. Soon we are back on the way to the Duad and the Land of the Dead. Most immediately we are with Meni "in the depths of a pyramid" down a long shaft of which "came the light of a star reflected in a bowl of water" (687–688). And then, in words crucial both to the full telling of Menenhetet's tale and to a grasp of the dialectic among *Evenings*' seven books, Meni says: "I was back in the stink and fury of an old man's phallus in my mouth." Indeed, Menenhetet:

> [C]ame forth, and in great bitterness . . . I had to take into me the misery he felt and all the urge for revenge upon my mother . . . The Kas of my great-grandfather weighed upon my Ka as Usermare must have weighed on him. . . . I also knew his exhaustion, it came down upon me like a cataract. In none of his four lives had he found what he desired. . . . From my great-grandfather's seed came the pure venom of his Khaibit. That would be my knowledge of the past. (689)

Meni would know his own disappointments. Approaching the Duad he reflects that, "the little boy who was six, all that had lived in his tenderness, his wisdom his pleasure, and that spoke of his days to come, and the promise of it, was gone. There had been no more purpose in it than in the squashing of a beetle." Indeed, even the great challenge supposed to face one crossing the Duad into the Land of the Dead proves an illusion. The Land of the Dead could be reached "without a journey of great difficulty" (701): Eternity calls

forth no great manly prowess to deliver its final estate. Indeed, "the Duad is no more than a ghost" (700).

Further, as *Evenings*' concludes, Meni's view of Menenhetet has not changed, for he thinks "I sat there in the pits of a new misery. Upon me came the weight of the failure of my father in his four lives" (706). Although this image of the summing up of Menenhetet's lives is "bleak," this bleakness is instructive. For example, Meni tellingly observes that his "great-grandfather weighed upon his Ka as Usermare must have weighed on him." Though intentionally harsh, critic Fuchs is insightful when he writes that Mailer "presents a world without superego," an Egypt "sated and diminished by its own fulfillment." Still, those like Fuchs who perceive a Mailerian celebration of "violence and brutality" are, for the case of *Evenings,* off the mark with their use of "celebration." In earlier novels Mailer had rebelled against many a "superego." However, what Mailer does in *Evenings* is verbally incarnate a world inspired by ancient Egypt that is marked by some shortage of what we would expect from a world of strong "superegos." This allows Mailer to draw on his imaginative engagement with many morally dubious and proscribed modes of "vitality"—profane as well as sacred, domineering and vindictive as well as loving, esoteric as well as evocative—and assess them in terms of their consequences (for example "entropy") as well as to convey their vitality.

As for the final bleakness, it is not unmitigated. For example, among Meni's last words are these: "I still know more than fear. Here, at the center of things, is radiance. May my hope of heaven now prove equal to my ignorance of where I go."[25] They do not exactly reveal a Paul on the road to Damascus, but they do present a searcher after some form of salvation. This is not to say that, although Mailer will soon go on to write *Gospel According to the Son,* that one should equate Mailer's moral vantage point to the Christian one of Auden. Yet Mailer's invocation of heaven reaches forward from bleakness and ignorance toward grace and enlightenment. Further, as Lennon has noted, "*Ancient Evenings* was only the first phase of the dialectic for Mailer. Purgatorio precedes Paradiso. It seems likely that he planned to demonstrate counterpoint and resolution in the next two novels" (583).[26]

Discussion and Conclusion. On imputed stylistic deficiencies I will do little but state a position and some supporting authority, for a stylistic analyses that avoids the charge of cherry picking examples would have to be lengthier than this paper could bear. Essentially, I agree with the view of

Pound scholar George Kearns that Mailer's writing in *Evenings* is "beautifully sustained, ready to inform each paragraph with an excess of detail radiating from an engaged imagination" (562). I also agree with Milton and Tennyson scholar Christopher Ricks, whose *Grand Street* review celebrates the "mystery and magic" of *Ancient Evenings*' "words" at length, and with Miltonian George Stade whose *New Republic* review celebrates Mailer's entry "into the power of the word" (36).[27]

On narrative architecture, I dissent from what Lennon has termed a "tortured point of view." Apart from games that the telepathic and narrationally inventive Meni sometimes plays—for example, moving back and forth between his perceptions and those intuited by him for Hathfertiti and Menenhetet—the use of point of view, as of narrator, is confined to Meni and Menenhetet (heard by Meni). Narration is no more complex than Conrad's uses of Marlow in many novels, rather less so than that of many acclaimed *films noirs* made under the influences of *Citizen Kane*. True, complications do arise. For example, a reader might be thrown off when Menenhetet (speaking out of his fourth life) recounts the early youth of first life, for one might miss the narrator's jump back to memories of the childhood of one of the narrator's former incarnations. However, this is a rather small twist to the stuff of moderately complex narration.

The fact that Mailer's work calls for a dual reading, as both an ultimately diachronic narrative and as a substantially synchronic ensemble of books, does introduce some additional complexity. So might the ultimate telling of all of *Evenings*' narration from the vantage point of Meni's journey toward The Land of the Dead complicate. So might the fact that Mailer's plot runs across seven books that are not themselves chronologically arranged. For example, the "Book of One Man Dead" and the culmination of the "Book of Secrets" occur in a time that postdates that of the Books of Child, Charioteer, Queens and Pharaoh; and, though narrated from the Netherworldly locales of "Book of One Man Dead" and part of the "Book of Secrets," the "Book of the Gods" brings tales to the reader from deeper in time than the other books. Finally, the seven books stand in essentially synchronic thematic and symbolic relation to each other. For example, the Netherworldy strangeness of Book One and of the latter portions of Book Seven offer stark contrasts with Books Three through Six, books that offer a multi-faceted vision of the varieties of live human experience—albeit of lives in one of

Richard Rorty's illuminatingly distinctive "worlds."[28] Still, overall, I stand with Kearns when he writes that *Evenings,* despite "an extraordinarily complicated plot . . . shows Mailer as a master of narrative design" (560).

If the vision offered by these worlds might be claimed limited by darkness or amorality, the limitation is, as I have tried to argue with reference to Meni's own judgments, nuanced. My Auden analogy, Mailerian vitalism when it burns hot, Menenhetet's recrimination, and our awareness of Mailer's projected trilogy all point beyond "bleakness."[29]

Lost Illusions is at least as exhilarating as Tom Jones. In Search of Lost Time is at its most exhilarating at that most postmodern moment when the variously depressed narrator, awaiting admittance to yet another of Prince de Guermantes parties, discovers the key to the redemption of writing the book we are reading. We can, I think, read *Ancient Evenings,* ornate and entropic modernist invention though it is, with "amazement and bliss."

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NOTES

1. Positive reviews listed in the 1983 volume of Book review digest are for The *Library Journal, The New York Review of Books, The National Review, The New Republic, Newsweek, Quale Quire, The Saturday Review* and *The Times Literary Supplement*; negative ones are in *The Christian Science Monitor, Commentary, The Economist, Harpers, Ms., The Nation, The New Statesman, Psychology Today,* and *Time.*
2. On DeMott as a principally social critic, DeMott's most cited works at Google scholar have subtitles like *Why Americans Can't Think Straight about Class, Why American's Can't Think Straight about Race* and *Why Americans Can't Think Straight about Gender*, while his most cited one's prior to the 1983 appearance of *Ancient Evenings* are in a similar vein (on narcotics, the "new irony," Playboy, Marshall McLuhan, homosexuality, the essays of James Baldwin, and the SATs) despite exceptions like a piece on humor of Kurt Vonnegut. On Bloom and *Ancient Evenings,* I'd note for those who make much about Bloom's various reservations about *Evenings* that Bloom twice canonized *Evenings,* once in the 1992 *The Western Canon*, once again in the 2005 *Novelists and Novels*—the second time as Mailer's "most inventive and exuberant work." Stade is a respected scholar of Milton and, thus, of Myth and style if not precisely modernism. Moreover, I share the broad view of Bloom as our leading critic of the past 5 decades, and view his proclamation of "invention" as the announcement of "the essence of poetry" (1994, 280).
3. In drawing on Lennon and Begiebing for work of selecting a succinct listing of criticisms of *Evenings*, I have had some force even in Mailerian circles, but I acknowledge that this stress on criticisms of Lennon and Begiebing does not do justice to their positive views of *Evenings*,

Begiebing's especially. Indeed, Lennon, in effect, adds further reservations about style and characterization of *Evenings* by devoting over hundred words to Phillip Bufithis' criticisms of the book's "metaphors" ("lack of 'richness, radiance and Imagination' in many of Mailer's metaphors") and "characterization" ("insufficiently peopled . . . not felt presences . . . emotionally empty" (qtd. in Lennon, 583). I downplay criticisms of style and characterization here except where they follow from my Modernist thesis, a matter that I will justify in "Discussion and Conclusions."

4. My conception of symbolism is a structuralist (or semiological) one that stresses the meaning of the symbol as an element within a structure or system of symbols as signs, not simply the symbol as evocative of meaning and emotion, and that, like Gullon (715) stresses symbolic systems as organizers of structure.
5. Another key aspect of modernism is a focus on the consciousness of characters or their objective roles in narratives conveyed as events in an objective world. One aspect of this is impressionism, largely the tying of access to the fictive world's use of point of view, as in the early or proto Modernist innovations of Henry James and Joseph Conrad in the use of the free first person indirect and multiple first-person narrators. In *Evenings* Mailer sticks to the first person narration of the Ka of Meni and Menenhetet (always heard as a voice overheard by Meni). Another aspect of the stress on consciousness is the use of stream-of-consciousness as in, most famously, Joyce's *Ulysses*. Relative to post-modernism, affirmation of the social insightfulness and social seriousness also emerges as a salient Modernist trait.
6. As qtd. in Begiebing, 1983, p. 50.
7. Vivid illustrations of Modernist non-narrative emphases might be provided by the extent of Alain Resnais' emphasis on the Hiroshima bombing and its aftermath in *Hiroshima Mon Amour* and the essentially inter-modular narratives construction of Godard's *Vivre-ca-Vie* (marital alienation); work alienation; first trick, mythopoeic viewing of first Dreyer's Passion of Joan of Arc; documentary on Parisian prostitution; conversation with the Philosopher; rapture with a John; mob slaying—(as analogue to Joan's burning) and Kubrick's, *2001, A Space Odessey* (appearance of obelisk; Apes discover bone as weapon; happy. "Blue Danube" space voyage introduced by match-on-action cut from spinning bone to rotting space vehicles and stations).
8. Some negative criticism of this book, as of *Evenings* as a whole of course, might be unrelated to Modernist structure (for example, Epstein's moral repulsion).
9. Imagine, for example, the world of maximum security prisons, or states of mind –or possibly worlds- accompanying dense use of the like of "prick," "asshole" and "up yours." Alas, the serious investigation into what Stade termed Mailer's "psychosomatics" (35) would be required to pursue this lead and would be too major an enterprise to embark on it here.
10. "Queens" is also rich in vivid minor characters like nurse Eyaseyab and boatman "Bone Smasher." However, though Charioteeer's Whore of Tyre and Queen's Honeyball are vivid creations, new minor characters –for example, high-priest Kem-Usha, chief harem eunuch Nefkhep-aukem, courtesan Rama-Nefru—begin to pale as the book proceeds. Worse, no vivid,

dynamic and well-rounded major ones appear after Rameses (who comes on stage in the Book of the Charioteer), not even, alas, Queen Hefertiri. Worse, much of the "drama" connecting Menenhetet, Hefertiri and Ramses in the Book of the Pharaoh takes on a solipsistic and, thus, dramatically flat character. For a contrary view of style as well as character in *Evenings*, that has no resonance for me, see Bufithis (165).

11. On Woolf, her matriarch in *To the Lighthouse*, Mrs. Ramsay, "is vital to various characters." For example "she is able to telepathically provide her son James with the forms and maternal responses that he needs to achieve a 'sense of space and an internal place' (178): a sense of self (cf. Greary)." For transfer of ridicule from *An American Dream to Evenings* Epstein (1965, 1903) is instructive.
12. Reviewers also failed to grant Mailer the shift into speculative fantasy (and moral cultural relativism) allowed authors more tolerantly viewed than Mailer. Perhaps this can be attributed to macho and misogynistic stereotyping of Mailer that spiked just prior to *Evenings*' publication in association with the Jack Abbot affair.
13. *Pace* Lennon on *Evenings*' "strained point of view."
14. For example, see Poirier, pp.42–43; Giddens, 803.
15. Weber, as quoted in Fuchs, p. 315. Also, see Burg; Hanson; Williams, Gade; and Bufithis (165) on decadence. Note too that record seems silent on domination and sexuality in ancient Egypt per se. However, male-male sodomy and female–male fellatio are present in the mythic encounters of Seth and Horus and Iris and Osiris, respectively (for example Hart).
16. For example, in Bloom, 2003, p. 31.
17. Bufithis, 1983, p. 165. Here my main qualification would be that sex in *Evenings* is not invariable dull or tepid, indeed, that Menenhetet's night with the secret whore of Kadesh rises to heights of sexual description equal to the splendid erotic flight of Harold Brodsky writing on Ms. Ora Perkins, for example in "Innocence" (161–194).
18. Egyptians were famed throughout the ancient world for their use of magic (for example, Finch). Moreover, disgruntled with Mailer's use of magic, they may be unaware of the power magic has had in peoples' imagination. For example, Papua New Guinea's high homicide rate has long been attributed by the local population to sorcery (for example, Knauft). Nothing extraordinary should be thought of Menehetet's pursuit of magical powers and revenge through the use of magic, nor of Menenhetet's inclination to believe in the power of magic.
19. See "spells" in Guiley and Kraig's *The Encyclopedia of Magic and Alchemy*, p. 298.
20. Bloom, 2003 (35). The possibility that Mailer's ironic amusement at his Warrior Magus' erotic revenge through the use of cuckolding the Pharoah Mann might play on its parallel with Joseph's refusal to tryst with Pharaonic Queen Mut–em-enet (in Mann's *Joseph and his Brothers*) because such sex might eventually discredit Joseph in scripture seems never to have to been mentioned. Commentators seem broadly happy to describe sex in *Evenings* with adjectives like brutal and "tepid."

21. It strikes me as an enthralling depiction of regal pageantry and religious ritual and its collective effervescence rather than an example of "static ceremony," as engrossing where broadly comparable scenes of ritual pageantry in Lawrence's *Plumed Serpent* are indeed tedious. But I would agree that cinematic and operatic stagings of such pageantry—say in *Ivan the Terrible* or *Boris Godunov*—trump prose renditions of such pomp and ceremony and that if you do not like those or take some pleasure in the coronations and triumph of Hollywood we have here a matter of the proverbially uncongenial cup of tea. I have little to say about Ramses' exposure of his erection before the crowd attending the Festival of Festivals, except to comment on its lack of critical attention. Perhaps it has been bypassed as an all-too-typical example of Mailer's sexual excesses. Yet recalling the enthused 1800-ish response to the Napoleon's European import of the Egyptian obelisk and the depictions of public –indeed courtly—performances of fellatio in the Turin Erotic Papyrus (of the Ramesside Period), I am not sure.
22. A third set of possibly major events involving palace intrigues and coups strike me more as more relevant to substantiating the context of the preceding two events than as key to "The Book of the Pharaoh" in the context of the other six books.
23. Alas for Mailer and readers, the memorable moment of autogenesis does not double very effectively as a dramatic resolution of the Rameses-Hefertiri-Menenhetet triangle, perhaps because Hefertiri has not been vividly drawn and Rames and Menenhetet have not much been depicted face-to-face since the Book of Queens. Fortunately, Queen's dramatic resolution of the triangle among Ptah-nem-hotep, Hathfertiti and Menenhetet has striking dramatic power. On another note, DeMott does assert that ancient Egyptians did not profess a faith in reincarnation and Bloom does appear to address the reader in a negatively critical mode when he notes that "the magical and physical process whereby Meni begets a fresh incarnation is rather obscure." [Bloom never applied the rules of fantasy so stringently when he composed his *The Flight to Lucifer: A Gnostic Fantasy*. (New York: Vintage, 1980).] These two commentators seem to have strayed into a certain fuzziness, for Mailer's Egypt clearly is as much a novel mythopoeic construction as historical reconstruction, as proclaimed by his quote from Oscar Wilde in praise of giving "accurate description" to "what has never occurred" (on the flyleaf of Mailer, 1983, hardback).
24. Before The Book of Secrets is done, Menenhetet may appear as sliced up as Osiris and as abused as Horus.
25. What Lennon (583) means preceding his "ends bleakly" with "Except for the brief final chapters" is unclear unless he refers to the slight hope of heaven in the forward reaching anticipations of the last two or three chapters. For pp. 689–706 of the 709 page text, paragraphs are the vehicles of the despondent final *confideor* reported in the above paragraphs.
26. Annoyingly, the "secrets" of *Evenings*' final book defy conventional expectation. No final affirmation is available to Menenhetet, or Meni. It is not a final battle with the monsters of the Duad to send the audience away thrilled on aroused adrenalin. We have not moved beyond the merely transient transcendences and recurrent anxieties of the Mailerian narrative.

27. Perhaps these critics' foci on historically and culturally wide ranging visionary narrative poetry makes them congenial critics of a high-flown work of mythopoeic modernism.
28. Richard Rorty on distinctive "worlds"—that of the *Bhagavad Gita* in particular—as qtd. in Kearns, p. 562.
29. Moreover, the riddle of affirmation versus expose is a hard one to solve; the enigma of expression versus expose is nicely illustrated by the feminist disagreement on whether Hitchcock affirms, historicizes or exposes misogyny in films like *Marnie* in *Kapsis,* (Chapter 4).

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