WHY AN ECHO IS THE SHADOW OF A SOUND: THE RESONANCE OF METAPHOR IN MAILER'S WRITING

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This essay is a version of a conference presentation in October 2013 at the Eleventh International Norman Mailer Conference

I AM GOING TO OFFER SOME REMARKS ON METAPHOR in several of Norman Mailer's books, utilizing a sequence that Elvis Presley sang was "all shook up," which is the root meaning of having one's thinking so discombobulated that fresh feelings tumble forth.

I have always been fascinated by Mailer's turns of phrase, twisting common sense into uncommon sense. If Aristotle is correct in observing that the mark of genius lies in one's mastery of metaphor, then Mailer's richness of metaphorical thinking qualifies in abundance. When Mailer remarked, rather uncannily in *Cannibals and Christians*, that "form is the physical equivalent of memory," his link was to a piece of driftwood he had encountered on a Provincetown beach (372).

"Yes," Mailer said in a self-interview in *Cannibals*, "driftwood is a fine form. It tells us what in a piece of driftwood proved most dear to the wood, what resisted decomposition the longest, what—if we know how to read it—was saved by accident, what was etched by design. The form of a piece of driftwood is the record of a siege . . . a record of war. . . . Form is the detailed record of an engagement—war reveals the balance of forces, discloses the style of the forces, it hints at the move from potential to the actual" (370). The scars and knots, knobs and missing hollows, were evidence of its

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

experience. Its very deformities were telling and embodied time in the way that Cubism, by splaying separate planes onto a flat surface, put past, present, and future onto a single dimension. Additionally, if terrors were part of the history of the form, then the form possessed the power of a gargoyle and could function magically to protect the creator from the anxiety it expressed.

Mailer's biography of Picasso was conceived when Mailer himself was a young man, but he could not produce the biography published thirty years later. Instead, in 1966, he supplied a 200-page dialogue about the violent act of creating artistic forms, published as a conclusion to *Cannibals.* But after he published his Picasso biography in 1996, he began to make drawings, not long after he married Norris. Her paintings began to fill the house. I have always wondered how much Mailer's daily practice as a writer, forming his letters with a graphite pencil, contributed to his understanding of what constituted a drawing, or where the rhetorical meaning spun off into pure visual comprehension. In one drawing, *Lucky 7* (*Modest* 179), Mailer turned facial features into the numbers one through seven. The face was a five wearing a beret. Six and seven were ears. The mouth was number four. The eyes were formed from the eyebrow and iris of the numbers two and three. The elegant nose—source of Mailer's emphasis on the importance of smell in his writing—propped up on the serif-like nostrils, rises tall and thin, stretching into the first numeral of our numbering system. Here Mailer translated the letter I into the numeral one. He shows where a curve of a line echoes a turn of phrase, a twist in the road where the ego turns into the id.

My first instinct in trying to comprehend Mailer's athletic imagination directed me to my understanding of synesthesia, where our five senses can be combined, involuntarily, in what we call our "mind's eye," summoning experiences that may not be directly experiential except through the addition of our imagination.

For many years in Provincetown, Robert Motherwell was a next-door neighbor and the artist and the writer had many occasions to socialize. But Mailer avoided opportunities to seriously discuss painting with painters, so abundant in Provincetown. He wondered how far words could carry an artist, and I considered why Matisse insisted that every artist should have his tongue cut out. Mailer told me in an interview in 1999, "To this day, I find most writing about art to be poetic explorations that depart very quickly from looking at a painting. The writers goes off on some inner collaboration

with her or his experience. The painting becomes like a distant object from which one is receding at a great rate in one's vehicle of metaphor" (Busa 30).

In *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, Mailer played with the idea of making his characters dance to his tune, much as the don who asked three professional boxers to dance with his wife. After they graciously complied, one of the boxers said, "Your turn, Signori" but the don answered, witheringly, "Tough guys don't dance," exposing in a retort the role of power over sex. As Oscar Wilde allegedly said with penetrating insight, "Everything in life is about sex, except sex. Sex is about power."[1] Mailer's delight, so evident in his nimble capacity for play, at once serious and frivolous, is to allow his characters to do the dancing. Let me explore the concept in a passage of writing that astonished me when *Tough Guys* was first published.

I asked Norman directly how he wrote those paragraphs, and he responded, "Oh, that was easy," explaining that he drove out to Truro on a "sunless" afternoon and traversed some terrain where the hills were connected by low-lying marshes and culs de sac of dense brambles. His recollection suggested casually how the transformative power of the actual light charged his writing with felt experience.

Mailer wrote:

> One could watch the seawater in the distance thrash through a millrace of light and whitecaps, while the color of the ponds in the hollows remained a dark and dirty bronze. All the palette of the woods seemed to accommodate itself between. I liked the dull green of the dune grass and the pale gold of the weeds . . . in that late autumn panorama where the beef's blood and burnt orange are out of the leaves (*Tough Guys* 69).

If the actual colors, now "out of the leaves," now stir in the reader's mind's eye, this is because Mailer has performed a feat of conceptual synesthesia, bringing into our awareness sensations summoned by his imagination. If we think of the dictionary as the ocean of our unconscious, then we can grasp how all words are related, even if their relation is not yet discovered. For metaphor is the art of discovering resemblance, a method a speaker uses, often surprising to oneself, to reveal her or his inwardness to others.

Adjectives may also function as metaphors, as Mailer shows when he offers a glimpse of his heroine in the nude, and observing the closely valued

range of hues that might describe the colors of her pubic hair: "amber, ebony, auburn, bay, chestnut, cinnamon, hazel, fawn, snuff, henna, bronze, platinum, peach, ash, flame, and field mouse" (152). Here Mailer turns to praise John Updike: "Nobody studies surfaces so closely as he does, and he uses adjectives with more discrimination than anyone who's writing in the English language today. Hemingway said not to use them, and Hemingway was right" (152). Mailer is suggesting, as good as Updike is, there remains the fact that Mailer's catalogue of adjectives could be, equally, a seemingly innocent description of nature, not unlike the topography and vegetation Mailer conjured when he spent an afternoon observing the colors in the Truro woods.

Mailer's narrator, a would-be writer, develops the thought in his diary. Yes, Updike's words are "a beautiful description of a forest and make you ponder the mysteries of scale. Somebody once wrote that Cezanne shifted our perception of magnitude until a white towel on the table was like the blue-shadowed snows in the ravines of a mountain" (152). Here, a key idea in Mailer's biography of the young Picasso is that artists, always trying to paint an object, end up painting not the object but their feeling for the object, always accessed via metaphor.

The Castle in the Forest, Mailer's final major work, is the summa of his mastery of metaphor, going beyond all intermediaries voicing the nature of evil to voice all that that opposes evil. This book deserves to be studied for raising questions that make the question obsolete. I have written an assessment published previously in *The Mailer Review*. Here I only want to emphasize several final points.

In Mailer's evocation of the young Hitler, so similar and dissimilar to the young Picasso, we learn that Hitler wanted to be an artist, but his pictures of buildings, when he put people in them, show people out of scale to their surroundings, in bizarre proportion to their surroundings. To make sure that Hitler would be rejected from art school in Vienna, Mailer's narrator, costumed as a devil, induced a most severe migraine to the teacher assigned to assess his portfolio.

The narrator, wryly, repeatedly, casually, charmingly explicates the very scenes he creates, seemingly at will, via metaphoric connections between the base and the noble. He shows by the telling of the teller that the most important connection between Mailer's practice as a novelist and a nonfiction writer is his utilization of a pseudonym. *The Armies of the Night* exemplifies Mailer's use of the third-person as a stand-in for the first person, and the

lessons of entering history via the mind of a novelist might prove useful to future biographers of Hitler. Mailer raises questions that far transcend the issues he exposes in *The Naked and the Dead*—concerning the fascist aspect of a military hierarchy where the tyrant is armored and unreachable.

Mailer always maintained that the first duty of a novelist was not to write about himself, but about another self that he feels comfortable inhabiting. The author of *Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art*, Ernst Kris, observed, "The absolution from guilt from fantasy is complete if the fantasy one follows is not one's own" (314).

Mailer's personas reveal his acting aspirations, and root his experience in theater as a key source of his novel writing. Mailer's scenic sense is displayed in the block-by-block developments so keenly integrated into ordinary life that good and evil seem tainted with each other. Mailer's narrator in *Castle* gives credit to honey as a medium for absorbing a dose of his dark syrup, saying astutely, "We have among our gifts the power to invest many a substance with a trace of our presence" (280).

Now comes the connection of metaphor to irony, a belated understanding of antique tropes, which, as Octavio Paz said: "Irony is the wound through which analogy bleeds to death" (74). A trope is a turn, an alteration or change of direction, a transference, a move toward transformation. Analogies test our understanding of logic, while metaphors can be fanciful, expanding our intelligence. Mailer writes in the voice of his devil-narrator about the origins of native voice, how voice is visceral and produced by the body:

> If you are German and possessed of lively intelligence, irony is, of course, vital to one's pride. German came to us originally as the language of simple folk, good pagan brutes and husbandmen, tribal people, ready for the hunt and the field. So, it is a language full of the growls of the stomach, and the wind in the bowels of hearty existence, the bellows of the lungs, the hiss of the windpipe, the cries of command that one issues to domesticated animals, even the roar that stirs in the throat at the sight of blood. Given, however, the imposition laid on this folk through the centuries—that they enter the amenities of Western civilization before the opportunity passes away from them altogether—I did not find it surprising that many of the German bourgeoisie

> who had migrated into city life from muddy barnyards did their best to speak in voices as soft as the silk of a sleeve. Particularly, the ladies. I do not include long German words, which are often a precursor to our technological spirit today, nor do I refer to the syrupy palatals, sentimental sounds for a low-grade brain. To every sharp German fellow, irony had become the essential corrective. (465–466)

Mailer connects character to the intimate feeling of how the organs and chambers of the body produce the unique inflections that are ultimately articulated when air is shaped by the muscles of the lips.

Late in *Cannibals and Christians*, in a chapter titled "Our Argument at Last Presented," Mailer writes directly about metaphor, concluding how the verb in a sentence is akin to the equal signs in an equation: "Now I will give you a set of equations. They are not mathematical, but metaphorical; and therefore full of science. I repeat: they are equations in the form of metaphor . . . equations composed only of words" (307).

Yes, equations easily understood by a child: when the pilot landed his plane in the Hudson River, a little girl said to her father, "Daddy, the plane turned into a boat."

NOTE

1. This quotation is sometimes attributed to Oscar Wilde.

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