MAILER SCHOLARSHIP AS EQUIPMENT FOR LIVING: THE TESTAMENT OF BARRY LEEDS

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A *Moveable Beast: Scenes from My Life*
By Barry H. Leeds
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FORTY-FIVE YEARS AGO, BARRY LEEDS PUBLISHED the very first book-length study of a certain writer entitled *The Structured Vision of Norman Mailer*, and in 2002 he followed that study with a more personal book, *The Enduring Vision of Norman Mailer*. In his introduction to the second book, Leeds points out that, as opposed to his 1969 critical study, the current work will range more freely among themes. The chapter "Mailer and Me" augurs the wide-open view of a rich life that we find in *A Moveable Beast*, as does the addendum to *Enduring Vision*. Leeds, always a generous reader of other people's work, closes that study with a review of Norris Mailer's *Windchill Summer*, focusing in particular on a delightful moment in which Norris, after flashing a puckish grin, responds to Barry's compliment about her first novel, "What if you *didn't* like it, Barry?" He then meets the question with a question and asks, "Is the question, would I perjure myself about literature to please a friend?" Norris nods, and Barry says "Never." I don't know if I have Barry's integrity in these matters, but thankfully I am in no danger of a perjury charge: the book is a delightful read, and I aim to demonstrate that

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in just a few words without stepping on too many of Leeds' punch lines. The memoir is built up out of a fine assembly of representative vignettes, not a procrustean grid of days, months, and years. Whether the given episode is picaresque or tragic, Leeds has a wonderfully lean style. The final sentence of a section snaps into place, and the narrative flows like a good river.

A Moveable Beast begins with an introduction and then a chapter entitled "A Paradigm: Literature and Life" in which he confesses his literary faith, one in which living and reading are not really two separate things at all: "For most of my life in reading, writing, and teaching literature, I have lived with the assurance that I am also living literature" (xi). In and through the decades of criticism and theory animated by Ricouer's "hermeneutic of suspicion," we see a life in which literature provides a reliable safe-house even in the most dangerous of times. Perhaps the central event in the memoir is the suicide of Leeds' daughter Leslie in 1996, and he begins "Life as Literature" by recounting how, two weeks into his Hemingway course that January, he "returned to work the day after the funeral." Biblical Job suffered the loss of children, and then boils, and then emotions boil over:

> As the days wore on, I found myself again adrenalized by teaching. I could even crack jokes. But every day, leaving the University energized and upbeat, I got only a block away before I had to pull my Jeep over and break down in wracking sobs before pulling myself together and driving home.

Although he tells his students and colleagues that "we'd find many answers in the literature we studied together," in Leeds' account this is not a simple matter of approaching master texts and receiving static wisdom. Of course, the next work on his Hemingway syllabus was *A Farewell to Arms*, and Leeds, rereading the text late as night so as to bring it freshly into class, comes to the "goodbye to a statue" passage—and decides that Hemingway was wrong. The first literary lesson in *A Moveable Beast*, as close to our own experience as a broken tooth, is that "an author's experience or imagination can be wrong, or at least different from a reader's." Secondly, he notes that books and readers change each other, influencing each other dialogically.

Only then does the text turn to "The Facts," referencing "all that David Copperfield kind of crap," since Leeds also means to demarcate the line between phony and non-phony, staying on the non-phony side of the line. He

doesn't pull punches about his childhood, one in which his father (a century-old centurion whom he now loves and gets along with very well) didn't pull punches when disciplining the children. Leeds was born 6 December 1940 at 12:35 PM, and the book opens a generation-wide window onto what growing up, becoming a man, finding a way into a profession, and moving through the stages of life into maturity are all about. Female relatives are cautioned to not read the chapter on the author's love life—it is as unshirkingly graphic as a Lars von Trier movie, but is joyful rather than miserable. But be warned: the sex in "Dangerous Liaisons" has not been simulated.

Some chapters focus on the rites and rituals of manhood in America, for example the coming-of-age narrative "Blackie, Whitey, and Me," which recounts trial by fire on the decks of several Merchant Marine vessels. Chapters on his interest in firearms will recall the gun-poetry chapter of *Why Are We in Vietnam*? "Close Quarters Combat: Tactical Knives" also comes out of a recognition that feral nature nibbles at the edges of courtliness and sensitivity.

Brushes with fame, anyone? Barry and Art Garfunkel were roomies at Columbia! I have promised to not step on any punch lines, so I will not tell you whether Garfunkel is as nice as he seems when singing harmonies in "Sound of Silence"—you'll have to buy the book to find out. Norman and Norris Mailer figure prominently, and Ken Kesey and Sir Kenelm Digby pop up as well. You may be wondering who the hell Kenelm Digby was. If so, be sure to read the chapter entitled "Who the Hell was Sir Kenelm Digby?"

The ups and downs of life dance closely in this book, as we see in chapters like "Ballroom Dancing," a portrait of a failing marriage. Which is worse—divorce or psychotic colleagues? To find the answer to that question, you must read two chapters: "Divorce Day 2000" and "Colleagues and Cads." When writing about things that are funny, Leeds knows how to end a vignette with a perfected phrase. When writing about loss, his own private pain allows for a moment of gravitas that readers may share.

If you think that I have perjured myself, then google "literary lawyer" and do thy worst, but my authentic testimony is that this is a good book. If you like most of what you read in the journal you now hold, you will probably like *A Moveable Beast* a lot.