

“UP TO THE NOSTRILS IN
ANGUISH”: MAILER AND BELLOW
ON MASCULINE ANXIETY AND
VIOLENT CATHARSIS¹

MAGGIE MCKINLEY

WHEN I FIRST READ NORMAN MAILER’S *AN AMERICAN DREAM*, I was surprised by my own reaction to the novel. At the time only vaguely aware of Mailer’s former reputation, particularly among Second-Wave Feminist critics, I had expected to feel somewhat ambivalent about the book. Instead, I was intrigued by Mailer’s unique ability to fashion a protagonist who is violent and seemingly misogynistic yet simultaneously sympathetic and vulnerable, who seems alternately sure of his masculine prowess and crushed beneath the weight of his masculine anxiety. Curious about the critical conversation surrounding the work, I delved into the scholarship surrounding the novel and was surprised to discover that while *An American Dream* had received much attention at the time of its publication, little had been written about the novel’s intersecting representation of gender and violence in the past forty years.² The question I asked myself then was: Now that decades have passed and, to some degree, American cultural attitudes about gendered conflict have shifted (though have certainly not been resolved), what new perspective might we have of this work? In particular, what now can be said about the novel’s depiction of the shaping of masculine identity?

My growing interest in Mailer’s work and pursuit of answers to these questions led me to other contemporaneous (and, often, similarly controversial) authors who also took up the issue of American manhood: Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, Saul Bellow, James Baldwin, and Philip Roth. Across a

range of works penned by these authors, I observed many analogous explorations of the intersection of masculinity and violence. The resemblances among these novels seemed too striking to ignore, and I set out to investigate the cultural and political anxieties of the time period that would have triggered such overlapping concerns across texts that might otherwise be deemed very different from one another. *Masculinity and the Paradox of Violence in American Fiction, 1950–75* is the book that arose from these inquiries. The “paradox” of the title refers to the common trend that links the major works under investigation (which range from Ellison’s *Invisible Man* to Mailer’s *American Dream* to Roth’s *Portnoy’s Complaint*), whereby the use of violence becomes a central aspect of each male protagonist’s construction of a liberated masculinity while simultaneously contributing to his emasculation. In other words, by making violence a central instrument of their masculine formation, the fictional protagonists actually serve to mire themselves more deeply within the gendered conflicts that trigger their masculine anxiety, reifying many of the cultural myths and power structures that they seek to overturn.

What follows is a condensed example of the extended analysis and argument I offer in that book; specifically, here, I focus on the intertwining concerns about masculine identity as they appear in Mailer’s *An American Dream* and Bellow’s *Herzog*, novels with very different prose styles and (at least on the surface) very different protagonists, penned by authors who otherwise have very different worldviews. These differences might, for many readers, overshadow the narratives’ similarly complex representations of American masculinity in crisis, as well as each author’s similar attempts to interrogate the role violence plays in the potential resolution of those crises. While both of these novels were published over fifty years ago, the value in revisiting their representations of gender remains valuable—indeed, it seems to only become increasingly valuable—in a society where aggression is still framed as one of the foundational characteristics of an ideal masculinity. Thus, by examining the ways in which these authors struggle to articulate the impulses toward and consequences of what is framed as a particularly masculine violence, we might be able to better address the idealization of masculine aggression that remains so entrenched in our media and culture even today.

While Mailer wrote extensively on masculinity and violence throughout his career, *An American Dream* explicitly demonstrates the philosophical

connections between these two ideas.³ *An American Dream* traces the personal journey of Stephen Rojack—war hero, established professor of existential philosophy, commercially successful author, and well-known television personality—as he finds himself, as he says, at “the end of a very long street,” having decided that he is “finally a failure” (8). As the narrative unfolds, Rojack embarks on an alcohol-soaked, sleepless, violent, and sex-filled bender, with some of his behavior calling to mind the ideology triumphed by Mailer in “The White Negro.” Like the hypothetical figure in that essay, Rojack acts on a desire for total freedom from the “decaying” society he envisions around him, and with each social taboo he breaks, he feels himself more detached from the world he sees as oppressive to his individual freedom and the development of his masculine identity. In particular, Rojack feels his masculinity to be undermined by gendered and racial “others,” his violent assertions of physical power imbued with a defensive impetus. His headlong rush into an exhilarating life on the margins is inspired not only by a desire for freedom, but a desire to reclaim the kind of masculine power he feels to be lacking in the face of these threats.

This gendered existential crisis is almost immediately introduced within a framework of violence. In fact, Rojack seems able to discuss manhood *only* through the language of violence. For example, he claims:

Murder, after all, has exhilaration within it . . . there is something manly about containing your rage, it is so difficult, it is like carrying a two-hundred-pound safe up a cast iron hill. The exhilaration comes I suppose from possessing such strength. Besides, murder offers the promise of vast relief. It is never unsexual (8).

Thus, to be “manly” *inside* society, according to Rojack, is to repress one’s instincts toward violence; to be manly *outside* of society is to embrace these instincts. In either case, violence becomes the figure around which masculinity is fashioned, but it is the latter that Rojack wants to embody: a masculine identity founded on relief as opposed to restraint. As Mailer states in *The Presidential Papers*, after all, “In America few people will trust you unless you are irreverent; there was a message returned to us by our frontier that the outlaw is worth more than the sheriff” (16). Further, in being “never unsexual,” murder is also associated with a virility and sexual freedom that is often denied by a repressive or “cancerous” society. By making these associations,

Rojack depicts violence as a catalyst for greater freedom, and in turn foreshadows his own attempts to liberate himself from society's constricting definitions of manhood. Of course, the fact that his actions leave a trail of destruction in his wake forces one to question whether Rojack's mission is truly in the interest of healing the "cancer" of society, or whether his purpose is entirely self-interested—questions that Mailer acknowledges and takes up sporadically throughout the novel as he struggles to articulate a philosophy that would both embrace violence and acknowledge the victims of that violence.

At the center of Rojack's existential crisis, and his ensuing reliance on violence as a tool for liberation, is his relationship with his wife Deborah, the woman who has helped him fashion his current life and who represents one of the many external threats to his manhood. Although Rojack looks back on the early years of their marriage with nostalgia, remembering Deborah's love for him as something that imbued him with "vitality," he also fears this power she wields over him; when they separate, for example, Rojack admits, "all of my substance fell out of me" (18). As a reaction to this, Rojack attributes Deborah's potency (and his sense of anxiety in the face of this) to some feminine mysticism that would supposedly afford her the ability to "lay a curse" on him should she choose to do so (22).

Yet Rojack's own sense of compromised masculinity and his use of violence is not entirely a result of his fear of women (though that does come into play), but also a result of his investment in the hierarchical and limiting class structures of society that further dictate the status of his manhood. That is, his sense of inferiority in the face of his wife is augmented by his awareness that his success has largely been a result of her social connections; often, Rojack senses that Deborah herself is his greatest "achievement." "She had been my entry into the big league," he explains. "I had loved her with the fury of my ego, that way I loved her still, but I loved her the way a drum majorette loved the power of the band for the swell it gave to each little strut" (17). His love for her, then, is based on her ability to build him up, to support him, and to feed his ego by introducing him into the upper echelons of society—and it is this society that is meant to be his true enemy. In other words, Mailer's aim here is not to fashion a masculine hero whose primary aim is to exert control over Deborah—or over women in general—but one whose aim is to free himself from the obligation to abide by any socially imposed hierarchy at all.

Nevertheless, Rojack exacts this aim through violence directed at Deborah, the symbol, in his mind, of this larger social oppression. During a heated exchange, which Rojack describes as “that heavy air one breathes in the hours before a hurricane” (25), Deborah informs Rojack matter-of-factly that she wants a divorce and that she no longer loves him, and she begins to reference the many lovers she has had during their separation. This compels Rojack to resort to physical violence, slapping her across the face. Deborah immediately fights back, and Rojack’s physical impulses consume him; he is aware in the moment that his body is working faster than his brain, and ultimately, in little more than a page, he has strangled and killed her.

While such violence is in part fueled by Rojack’s sense that Deborah has cuckolded and emasculated him, the specific details of the murder suggest that the impetus is more complex, tied less to a hatred of women than to a flawed notion of freedom. Initially, the brief description of Rojack’s murder of Deborah is saturated with details that highlight Mailer’s belief in the liberating and cathartic power of violence. In stark, visceral, and grotesque detail and in crisp, straightforward prose, Mailer recounts the way Rojack “struck her a blow on the back of the neck, a dead cold chop which dropped her to a knee, and then hooked an arm about her head and put a pressure on her throat” (30). These disturbingly dispassionate details are juxtaposed with Rojack’s own reflection on his actions as he carries them out, as his insights are presented in terms of a “crossing over” through a door to the other side, invoking a metaphor of transcendence and suggests an emergence into a new and better existence. Rojack is driven to continue by the promise of some beauty—images of “jeweled cities” and a “tropical dusk”—that seems to represent recompense for his actions upon their completion. This vision of a remunerative paradise is supplemented by Rojack’s sense that all of his hatred and illness depart upon his passage through the door. Whereas before the murder, Rojack claims he had “lost his sense of being alive” (14), in the aftermath, he says, “my hair was alive and my eyes had the blue of a mirror held between the ocean and the sky. I was feeling good, as if my life had just begun” (38–39).⁴ In the simplest of terms, after the murder, he feels free.

The fact that this comes not only at the expense of Deborah’s freedom but her life, of course, makes any justification of violence in the name of freedom difficult, if not impossible. Yet the acute discomfort that arises from Rojack’s near nonchalance is, I would argue, precisely the effect that Mailer wants to create. Mailer does not diminish the horrifying nature of murder

itself nor does he hold it up to be universally glorified; instead, he uses the deliberately unsettling juxtaposition between the details of Deborah's murder and Rojack's spiritual rebirth to demonstrate that violence cannot be wholly triumphant. That is, Mailer elicits our discomfort here to point to the precarious nature of Rojack's own euphoria and foreshadow its transience. Mailer may create a protagonist who believes that murder is necessary—even creative—but it does not follow that he imagines violence to be without consequences or that *An American Dream* is “an exercise in how to kill your wife and be happy ever after” as Kate Millett has argued (15).

Moreover, while Rojack is not brought to justice under the law, his actions do not go unquestioned or uncriticized within the construct of the narrative. After the murder, for example, Rojack has not achieved the freedom he seeks—either from Deborah or his attachments to society—a fact revealed in another disturbing moment in the aftermath of his crime. When Rojack finally returns to Deborah's body to consider his plan of action, he finds himself overcome with rage again, fighting “an impulse to go up to her and kick her ribs, grind my heel on her nose, drive the point of my shoe into her temple and kill her again, kill her good this time, kill her right” (50). This violent desire is also accompanied by a strange cannibalistic fantasy in which he and Ruta place Deborah's body in the bathtub and “sup on [her] flesh,” for in this way he feels he might be able to “digest [his] wife's curse before it could form” (50). Such an episode, while contributing to the disturbing darkness that exists within Rojack, also demonstrates that even in her death Deborah exerts an influence over Rojack, diminishing his sense of power and instilling fear within him, as if to prove his impulse toward violent masculine dominance is destined to be unsuccessful. Tied to gendered stereotypes instilled in him by society, Rojack maintains his belief in a mystical power that Deborah might be able to wield over him from the grave and is therefore not, in fact, entirely free from his gendered anxiety. As Rojack begins to envision the potential consequences of his actions, he realizes that his violent method of freeing himself of his wife may actually be his undoing.

With Cherry Melanie, the woman Rojack meets after he kills Deborah, Rojack reveals a similar gendered anxiety that arises from the perceived threat of feminine power. For instance, when Cherry admits to a violent dimension of her own character, saying she has “a crazy killer right inside”

(173), Rojack seems unsurprised by this revelation, perhaps because he himself has already confessed that he “had come to the conclusion a long time ago that all women were killers” (82). Thus, before Cherry even acknowledges the “killer” inside her, Rojack is already on the defensive, prematurely reacting to an imagined threat of feminine violence or evil mysticism. As he watches Cherry sing in the club, he surmises in a drunken haze that “women must murder us unless we possess them altogether,” and admits to having a “fear” of Cherry that can only be resolved by visions of possessing her:

I shot one needle of an arrow into the center of Cherry’s womb, I felt it go in. I felt some damage lodge itself there. She almost lost her song. One note broke, the tempo shuddered, and she went on, turned to look at me then, a sickness came off her, something broken and dead from the liver, stale, used-up, it drifted in a pestilence of mood toward my table, sickened me as it settled in. (100)

Initially, this imagined violence seems to embody Rojack’s patriarchal aim to establish control over Cherry and assert himself as the more powerful being, able to inflict “damage” over the source of her biologically creative power. And to an extent, it does—though there is more ambiguity in this moment, for while Rojack inflicts violence upon her, he then takes it into himself and assumes responsibility for it. Soon after this illusory act of violence, for instance, he pictures himself “draining poison from the wound I had inflicted in Cherry’s belly,” after which he himself is sick, as though from purging the violence in both of them (101). These contradictory impulses to both harm Cherry and save her reflect Rojack’s similarly conflicted desire to love her even as he feels threatened by her. And though she cannot offer the justification for violence that he seeks, Cherry will ultimately offer Rojack the chance, at least in his own mind, for redemption. The fact that his chances with Cherry will be squandered by more violence further indicates the ways in which Mailer criticizes violence even as he suggests its potentially liberating possibilities.

Moreover, when confronted with the opportunity to fight Deborah’s father Barney Oswald Kelley—himself the embodiment of corrupt power—Rojack balks at his own potential use of violence. Briefly, he considers instead a kind of liberation that would leave violence behind:

I wanted to escape from the intelligence which let me know of murders in one direction and conceive of visits to Cherry from the other, I wanted to be free of magic, the tongue of the Devil, the dread of the Lord, I wanted to be some sort of rational man again, nailed tight to details, promiscuous, reasonable. (255)

These desires to free himself from the forces that have thus far threatened his sense of power inspire him to test himself instead of fighting Kelly, and so he attempts to make his way around the walls of the parapet of Kelly's building, believing that in doing so he will be released from the guilt of murdering Deborah, and thus free to start a new life with Cherry.

Yet Rojack cannot be absolved from this guilt: in a tragic twist, he returns to Harlem after circling the parapet to discover that Cherry is dying, fatally beaten (as we are led to presume) by members of Shago Martin's gang, likely as a misguided retaliation for her decision to leave Shago for Rojack—a conclusion that punctuates Mailer's contradictory attitudes toward the violence that has pervaded the novel. In one sense, this violent act against Cherry seems to be framed as strangely positive, as Cherry's death does serve to release Rojack from his last attachment to society. He retreats to the desert and strikes out on his own, ultimately living the life of the outsider he desired, considering himself part of the "new breed" of man being fashioned in the West (269). In this way, Mailer upholds the concept of violence as a successful tool for liberation and masculine power by allowing Rojack the escape he desires, and his conclusion seems determined to justify Rojack's actions by inviting us to accept violence as an inherent characteristic of individual life and modern culture.⁵

Yet, on the other hand, Mailer seems equally determined to demonstrate that Rojack's quest is unsuccessful, largely by emphasizing that his murder of Deborah has set in motion a chain of events that led directly to Cherry's own death, thus ruining his chance at redemptive love. Of course, the fact that Rojack survives while Deborah and Cherry must die seems cruelly unjust—but that is precisely Mailer's point. Though Rojack can escape to the desert and face no legal penalty for his violence, to a certain degree Mailer himself recognizes that the justice in—and justification for—his violence must be called into question. As Mailer stated in an interview with Richard Wollheim in the *New Statesman* in 1961: "Violence must be violence for which full responsibility is accepted, and that's rare today. Today we have

the violence of the man who won't look his victim in the face" (66). By taking Cherry from Rojack as a consequence of a long chain of events in which Rojack's actions have often been the catalysts, Mailer forces Rojack to look his victim in this face, and denies his protagonist the complete freedom from guilt and the reward of Cherry's love. In light of this, Rojack's goal to establish for himself some ideal masculine liberation remains unsatisfied. As Andrew Gordon has similarly noted, "*An American Dream* is a novel of initiation into manhood, an initiation that fails and must be repeated again and again" (141). The ending of the novel, which has Rojack venture off into the unknown to repeat his journey in this way, suggests that his quest does not have a tangible endpoint. This ending highlights the fact that the very notion of achieving some ideal masculinity, seeking it out as though it were some holy grail of gendered identity, is in and of itself flawed and unrealistic.

At approximately the same time that Mailer's *An American Dream* began appearing serially in *Esquire*, Saul Bellow published his best-selling novel *Herzog*. And, at first glance, this novel—and, in fact, Bellow's body of work as a whole—stands in sharp contrast to that of Norman Mailer. Bellow's work, for example, comprises more conservative views—politically and socially—than that of Mailer. Moreover, Bellow exhibits a more reluctant and more deeply critical attitude towards individual violence than Mailer. Reflecting on these differences, Daniel Fuchs has called Mailer "Bellow's cultural anti-self" (*Saul Bellow* 23), and Michael Macilwee has argued that "it is difficult to conceive of writing more unlike the prose of Saul Bellow" for "the very perversity of the experiences of Mailer's protagonists seems the exact opposite of that Bellovian sense of moral sensibility" (7). While their works do diverge on several counts, Bellow and Mailer also demonstrate key similarities in terms of their representations of manhood. Specifically, both authors use their fiction to explore similar experiences of masculine anxiety, while also questioning (to varying extents) the way violence is used as a potential means for liberating men from this anxiety.

Bellow's critical meditations on violence and masculinity lie at the center of *Herzog*. Here, Bellow introduces Moses Herzog as a fictional protagonist who perceives his masculine identity as somewhat precarious, and who articulates his senses of masculine selfhood by identifying what he is *not* as opposed to what or who he is. As he seeks to find his place in the world in the face of what he experiences as this emasculating otherness, he vacillates

between a desire to employ individual acts of violence as an indicator of individual power and, on the other hand, to reject this interpersonal violence as a sign of modern society's decline. These conflicted attitudes toward violence are themselves a source of Herzog's gendered strife, and while (unlike Rojack) Herzog ultimately refuses to embrace violence in his own life as an attribute of masculinity and individual power, this is not before extensive and agonizing contemplation. In this way, violence temporarily acts as a central aspect of his sense of masculine identity, yet Bellow manipulates the construct in such a way that Herzog's *deliberation* about violence—rather than his actual deployment as a mechanism of liberation—allows it to function as an integral part of his gendered performance.

When we are introduced to Moses Herzog, he—like Rojack—is in the midst of what could be defined as a stereotypical “mid-life crisis.” As Herzog reflects on his life thus far, he feels “he had mismanaged everything—everything” and that “his life was, as the phrase goes, ruined” (10). To develop his protagonist's sense of failure, Bellow describes Herzog's crisis by frequently employing language that suggests frailty and victimization: Herzog is the “*suffering joker*” (19) and (in a more underhanded reference to his weakness) “a solid figure of a man, if pale and suffering, lying on the sofa” (17). Herzog himself admits to a desire to maintain the reliance on others that is invited by this condition of frailty, confessing that “he had been hoping for some definite sickness which would send him to a hospital after a while,” after which “he would not have to look after himself” (21). In light of this initial depiction, we might at first agree with Norman Mailer's assessment of Herzog, published in *Cannibals and Christians* soon after *Herzog's* release. There, Mailer writes that Herzog is “passive, timid, other-directed, pathetic, up to the nostrils in anguish,” and further suggests that “not one of the critics who adored the book would ever have permitted Herzog to remain an hour in his house” (142). Certainly, this passivity and tendency to surrender does sometimes appear as part of Herzog's character, and could even be used to describe his masculine identity more specifically.

Yet on the other hand, Herzog himself lists aspects of his personality that might just as easily be used to describe many of Mailer's own protagonists. When reflecting on his character, Herzog names it “narcissistic” first and foremost (10); moreover, he is concerned with the “invasion of the private sphere (including the sexual) by techniques of exploitation and domination,” and displays a disdain for cultural totalitarianism akin to Mailer's, and

which similarly serves as a catalyst for his many musings on the importance of crafting and maintaining individualism (202). Most importantly, Herzog too feels bound by society's normalization of a particular kind of manhood, to the extent that he is revealed to have internalized certain notions of what a "masculine" life should entail. "He could be a patriarch, as every Herzog was meant to be," he thinks to himself, and laments that "the family man, father, transmitter of life, intermediary between past and future, instrument of mysterious creation, was out of fashion," particularly "to masculine women—wretched, pitiful bluestockings" (249). Despite his earlier insistence on his own passivity and frailty (typically associated with stereotypes of femininity) Herzog here betrays a desire to appropriate a socially lauded masculinity whereby patriarchal ideals are reinforced at the expense of women. In doing so, he reiterates oppositional gender stereotypes that deem any woman who would question these roles as overly masculine and therefore "wretched."⁶

This seemingly contradictory idea of masculinity makes it difficult at first to discern what Herzog truly believes about manhood. What is evident, however, is that Herzog is unsatisfied with the man he is and with the cultural definition of the man he is supposed to be; thus, his personal project involves crafting for himself a new and more satisfactory definition of manhood. Summing up the crisis that the novel envelops, Herzog acknowledges that he "let the entire world press upon him" those ideas of "what it means to be a man. In a city. In a century. In transition. In a mass. Transformed by science. Under organized power" (247). Herzog wants to understand and articulate not a general ideology of masculine individualism, but his own unique individual masculinity that can still exist as part and parcel of the larger culture. He recognizes the importance of brotherhood and community, but also values independence and individuality, and so must strive to understand how he can maintain his sense of self while also participating in a culture that in many ways endorses conformity.⁷

That Herzog's dilemma stems largely from anxieties about gender is supported by the fact that much of his internal crisis throughout the book revolves around his fraught relationship with his wife Madeleine. Madeleine is a powerful personality, tending to overwhelm those in her company—something that Herzog admires, but which also adds to his own faltering sense of self. In a description similar to Rojack's assessment that his wife

Deborah “occupied my center” (27), Herzog says, “Everyone close to Madeleine, everyone drawn into the drama of her life became exceptional, deeply gifted, brilliant” and admits that “it had happened also to him” (38). The negative consequences of this relationship frame Herzog’s plight as a specifically gendered struggle, in which Madeleine is painted as the villain who seeks to gain power by emasculating her husband. As with Rojack’s account of Deborah, it is important to note that the reader has only Herzog’s account of his wife on which to rely; she has no interior life of her own, and therefore, her villainy in Herzog’s eyes is largely subjective. However, proving whether or not Madeleine is, in fact, a villain is somewhat beside the point here; rather, it is more significant to observe the way she is represented through Herzog’s perspective, in order to uncover what that might tell us about his own anxiety of masculinity.

The language Herzog uses to describe Madeleine is often reductive, as he attributes her coldness and infidelity to some abstract sense of femininity. He puzzles over her changing expressions and personalities, interpreting biologically feminine characteristics as the source of her evil. As he remarks at one point, for instance: “How lovely she could be!...Very different from the terrifying menstrual ice of her rages, the look of the murderess” (63). Herzog also perceives Madeleine as trespassing on his intellectual and vocational territory, claiming that “Madeleine’s ambition was to take my place in the learned world,” whereupon Herzog would be left “writhing under [her] sharp elegant heel” (98). This image paints Herzog as the victim of Maureen’s ambition, her actions interfering with the old-fashioned notion that such intellectual pursuits are a man’s territory. Moreover, by elevating herself professionally and intellectually above her husband, at least as Herzog perceives it, Maureen upends the domestic gender hierarchy that has also helped maintain traditional definitions of manhood. Herzog, who has perhaps unwittingly internalized these gender roles, is left now without the traditional means to assert his masculine identity.

After he discovers that Madeleine has been having an affair with his good friend Valentine Gersbach, “foolish, feeling, suffering Herzog” again becomes the victim of Madeleine’s treachery, though this time in perhaps a more viable form (76). Compounding the masculine anxiety that Madeleine’s infidelity inspires within Herzog is Gersbach’s personality and appearance. With “a thick grip,” a face that Herzog describes as “sexual meat,” and a chin “like

a stone ax, a brutal weapon" (79), Gersbach not only exemplifies the physical characteristics of a certain idealized masculinity, but is also an "emotional king" (314), suggesting that he maintains a sensitivity and empathy even as his masculine appearance invokes images of a "brutal weapon." Thus, Gersbach seems to have reconciled multiple facets of his identity in a way that Herzog has not, crafting one imposing, desirable model of manhood. Herzog, comparing himself to Gersbach, finds himself falling short. As a result, his confidence in his own masculine performance—particularly his sexual performance—is shaken, in much the same way Rojack finds his own sense of manhood to be threatened when he confronts both Barney Oswald Kelley and Shago Martin, his competitors for the affection of Cherry Melanie.

Yet while Rojack focuses his antagonism toward these male rivals, Herzog places the onus for his sense of emasculation only on Madeleine, who has "damaged his sexual powers," and, as he asks, "without the ability to attract women, how was he to recover?" (12). Here the potential recovery of his manhood is shown to rely on the way women perceive him, as Herzog obtains a sense of his own masculine potency by gauging the way it is viewed by a female "other." Interestingly, this imbues women with a certain degree of power, in that they are represented as having the ability to both damage and restore Herzog's masculine confidence; here, one cannot help but draw connections to Rojack's perceptions of his wife Deborah, who maintained a similar power. Indeed, Herzog's intimidation when encountering a woman with "bitch eyes" that "expressed a sort of female arrogance which had an immediate sexual power over him" (47) is strikingly similar to Rojack's fixation on Deborah's "one green eye" staring back at him (125).

However, by relying on women to recuperate his sense of his manhood that has been so compromised by Madeleine's behavior, Herzog also reinforces gendered hierarchies and divisions that would bestow upon him a renewed sense of power, sexual potency, and superiority by revitalizing his perceived right to patriarchal authority. "Hugging and heartbreak is for women," he says, while "the occupation of a man is in duty, in use, in civility, in politics" (119). As Herzog claims here, women's power lies in their ability to build him up so that he might regain his "rightful" position, while women remain strange and gruesome creatures, who, as Herzog writes, "eat green salad and drink human blood" (56).

As has been the case with Mailer's work, some have suggested that these

assessments of the nature of femininity indicate that Bellow is forwarding a misogynistic viewpoint, his “politics of civility,” as Daniel Fuchs has defined them, geared towards upholding the status quo (*Saul Bellow* 23). Yet it is important to note Bellow’s own subtly humorous treatment of some of Herzog’s views, revealed in what Natalie Wu has previously identified as Bellow’s “authorial discourse.” As Wu writes, Bellow “inserted authorial discourse to display the author’s sneering position toward the ideology of the hero,” showing himself to be “rather amused about the hero’s nonsensical sufferings in private life and public affairs as well as his self-invested big project for mankind” (135-136). Consider, for example, the image of Herzog “tragically sipping milk” (134) and the narrator’s comment that Herzog’s attitudes demonstrate a “ridiculous intensity” (160). Such humorous undertones, exemplified by Bellow’s wry judgments of Herzog’s behavior, temper the seriousness with which we might be expected to take Herzog’s commentary, and suggest that Bellow himself is holding his protagonist up for a certain degree of ridicule.

Moreover, Herzog appears to be experimenting with this particular brand of masculine posturing, rather than committing to it. For Herzog loves women—in fact, aside from his dealings with Madeleine, the narrative is in many ways a love song to the many women in Herzog’s life. His real anxiety arises from the confusion over who he is expected to be for and amongst these women. In an attempt to discover what women—and what society—asks of him as a man, Herzog often ends up approximating a masculine performance that actually oppresses the women he so admires. Ultimately, his own language, as evidenced in the aforementioned examples, reiterates the same kind of divisive stereotypes that have long perpetuated essentialist gender divisions in society and marked women as strange, unknowable, and monstrous. In this way, Bellow’s protagonist evokes the same ambiguous and at times contradictory attitudes about gender as Mailer’s, which may in some sense reflect each author’s own struggle to articulate what it means to be masculine, and who, precisely, is affected by those assertions of masculinity.

Herzog’s views of how violence should factor into this masculine self are plagued by a similar ambivalence: in an attitude similar to the one he harbors toward women, Herzog expresses both admiration and fear of violence. Yet despite Herzog’s dismay at the individual acts of violence that seem to increasingly pervade society, he finds himself considering violence as a way to

reestablish a sense of masculine selfhood that he feels has been taken from him by Madeleine. Shortly after suggesting that violence is a “goyish” rather than a Jewish trait, for instance, Herzog claims that in fact the Jewish ancestors who shunned violence were “gone, vanished, archaic men” (350). Thus, perhaps in an attempt to diminish his sense of being an outsider, and as an experiment in aligning himself with a new generation of men that embraces violence, Herzog himself weighs the possibility of violence as a mechanism for his release and liberation from Madeleine and from the pain of his disintegrating marriage. In some ways, his consideration of violence here resembles that of Rojack, who justifies violence by declaring it a necessary response (or at times, a preemptive strike) in the face of a potentially violent female other. For example, Herzog toys with the possibility of using violence against Madeleine and Gersbach largely because he sees her to be more capable of violence than himself. This is seen in his recollection of the scene of his wife’s request for a divorce:

In this confrontation in the untidy parlor, two kinds of egotism were present [. . .] hers in triumph (she had prepared a great moment, she was about to do what she longed most to do, strike a blow) and his egotism was in abeyance, all converted into passivity. (16)

This scene (remarkably similar to the one in *An American Dream*, in which Rojack and Deborah face off in the “heavy air one breathes in the hours before a hurricane”) makes it evident that Herzog sees himself not only as an emotional victim but also a potentially physical victim of Madeleine’s latent violence, which is simmering at the surface during her “great moment” of triumph. Such language demonstrates that Herzog’s entire understanding of his relationship with Madeleine is now couched in violence, both physical and psychological; as Madeleine’s threat of violence works to emasculate him, his perception of an autonomous and powerful masculine identity is consequently reliant on his ability to use violence as well.

Thus, Herzog envisions himself fighting violence with violence, in this case his violent impulse arising largely in response to a perceived threat of feminine power, as he often wishes he had handled things with Madeleine more aggressively and violently. He “pictured what might have happened if instead of listening so intensely and thoughtfully he had hit Madeleine in

the face" (10) and says, "There are times when I know I could look at Madeleine's corpse without pity" (214). Moreover, he declares that "while filled with horrible rage, he was able also to shave and dress, to be the citizen on the town for an evening of pleasure, groomed, scented, and his face sweetened for kisses" (155). Such assessments of his own latent violence will prove to be transitory, but for a brief time, Herzog believes himself to be the kind of man that Mailer fashions Rojack to be—capable of murdering someone and then simply going about his daily routine as though nothing had happened. He believes that this kind of authority is the kind of masculine power, strength, and stoicism that he *should* be performing, and could perform if only he could commit the crime he imagines. In wishing that he could have deployed actual violence, Herzog reveals his desire to participate in a culture where aggression and masculinity go hand in hand, for it would theoretically eradicate his perception of victimhood and allow him to reestablish his own power and agency.

His appropriation of a violent ethic peaks when he travels to Chicago with the intent to kill Madeleine and Gersbach, feeling completely vindicated in his intentions, as he insists that his wife and her lover "had opened the way to justifiable murder" (311). Exhibiting a language of exhilaration and sexual release that unwittingly invokes the words used by Mailer to describe murder in *An American Dream*, Bellow writes that Herzog "felt in his arms and in his fingers, and to the core of his heart, the sweet exertion of strangling—horrible and sweet, an orgiastic rapture of inflicting death" (312). He yearns to kill in the hopes of somehow healing himself and eradicating what has left him feeling humiliated and emasculated.

Yet Herzog's conflicted views of violence are once again expressed via his musings on his personal and cultural history. Before embarking on his short-lived and ultimately defunct quest to murder Madeleine and Gersbach, Herzog attempts to derive some meaning from the violence of his historical past in an attempt to understand his attraction to violence in the present. In one of his many letters, for example, Herzog identifies himself as a "survivor," and suggests that his recognition of the history that elicits this identification provides him with unique insight not only into modern society but also into violence specifically. As he writes:

To realize that you are a survivor is a shock. At the realization of such election, you feel like bursting into tears. As the dead go their

way, you want to call to them, but they depart in a black cloud of faces, souls. They flow out in smoke from the extermination chimneys, and leave you in the clear light of historical success—the technical success of the West. Then you know with a crash of the blood that mankind is making it—making it in glory though deafened by the explosions of blood. Unified by the horrible wars, instructed in our brutal stupidity by revolutions. (96)

Embedded in this poetic reflection is a deeply critical view of more than one kind of violence—the violence of the Holocaust as well as the violence of war, even a war that finally ends the Nazi regime and leads to “historical success.” Here Herzog suggests that historical and technological advancement seem possible only through “explosions of blood,” and that humanity is only willing to come together in war and revolution. Herzog himself laments the losses of war and condemns its “brutal stupidity,” calling into question the Western success that seems to have emanated from the large-scale violence of the twentieth century.

In the aftermath of this reflection, the question remains: why in the wake of revelations like this does Herzog still contemplate violently murdering his wife and her lover? In part, it may be due to the fact that he implicitly differentiates such large-scale violence from individual acts of existential or liberating violence, much like Mailer does. It may also be because the very history he contemplates above also calls to mind the victimization of the Jewish people—indeed, any innocent people affected by the “crash of blood” that defines the modern age. This in turn prompts his refusal to be seen as the victim in his relationship with Madeleine (“I hate the victim bit,” he says at one point), a label that emasculates him and divests him of power and control (82). As a result, he embraces the possibility of violence to stave off perceived violence against himself.

Yet I would argue that the above reflection on the Holocaust, war, and the cost of Western success eventually serves to nudge Herzog out of his ambivalence, as it reminds him of his own dedication to an optimistic society based in a much more peaceful notion of brotherhood. After traveling to Madeleine’s home with violent intentions, Herzog sees Gersbach engage in a tender moment with his daughter, and immediately feels foolish for having even considered murder, remarking that “his intended violence turned into *theater*, into something ludicrous” (316). Though Herzog does not go

through with his plan, his near-violent episode does elicit the recuperative qualities for which he was searching. He feels a sudden clarity akin to that which Rojack feels after killing Deborah, yet unlike Rojack, his clarity comes from *not* having committed the crime. At the end of the day, he avoids sleep, afraid that “he might not be able to recover his state of simple, free, intense realization” (324). In contrast to his comment that humans seem to have been “unified” by violence, it is only when he himself *rejects* violence as a mechanism for the assertion of his masculine power that Herzog experiences a unification of his own fragmented self. Ultimately, Herzog believes that from the consequences of revolutionary, wartime, and mass scale violence, humankind may have “learned something.” Likewise, though he himself experiments with the possibility of interpersonal violence that he ultimately rejects, Herzog does learn a bit more about the kind of man he wants to be, deciding more definitively that violence, rather than re-masculinizing him would, in fact, make him “ludicrous.”

Thus, while Stephen Rojack envisions and subsequently practices a kind of existential violence to counteract perceived threats to his masculinity (the female other, the racial other, the totalitarian hierarchy of society), Herzog (like Bellow himself) is more overtly skeptical of a liberatory existentialist doctrine that requires such violence. Still, both novels still demonstrate the immense pressure placed upon men to use aggression as a means for “proving” masculinity and relieving gendered anxiety. Moreover, both illustrate the various manners in which such a tactic can ultimately backfire, leaving men mired in anger and regret, bereft of redemption or love. Such a conundrum is all too familiar in today’s 21st century society, where embedded ideas of masculine authority still often determine who is given a voice and who has access to power, and where models of aggressive masculinity continue to play a significant role in both perpetuating gendered oppressions. Mailer and Bellow’s novels not only illustrate the longstanding, deeply rooted nature of these definitions of masculinity in America, but—more hopefully—they also help us to articulate the source and repercussions of these definitions, providing us with the tools to interrogate and resist such problematic gendered ideals.

NOTES

1. Notable exceptions include Mike Meloy’s “Tales of the ‘Great Bitch’: Murder and the Release of Virile Desire in *An American Dream*,” Warren Rosenberg’s *Legacy of Rage*, and Daniel Fuchs’s *The Limits of Ferocity*.

2. Throughout the course of this article, I will be referring to the 1965 publication of *An American Dream* in its novel form, as opposed to the serialized version published in *Esquire*. Some of my analysis of the novel here also appeared previously in my article “Mailer’s Modern Myth: Reexamining Violence and Masculinity in *An American Dream*,” published in *The Mailer Review* in 2012.
3. Rojack also compares his feelings after the murder to those of the satisfaction after a sexual act. “I was weary with a most honorable fatigue, and my flesh seemed new” he explains, noting that “it seemed inconceivable at this instant that anything in life could fail to please” (32). This, too, calls to mind Mailer’s theory of the white negro hipster who goes in search of that “apocalyptic orgasm” that, for him, is the ultimate definition of transcendence over the stagnancy of a conformist lifestyle.
4. Though critical of Rojack’s violence, Barry Leeds sees the ending to the novel as ultimately optimistic. In *The Structured Vision of Norman Mailer*, Leeds argues that Mailer’s final position in *An American Dream* is “one of very carefully qualified hope” that has developed throughout the novel via Rojack’s “pilgrimage” towards the American myth of freedom (4). Ultimately, Leeds argues that Rojack successfully embodies this myth, “setting himself outside of society, wandering free, facing danger with wily resourcefulness” (174).
5. This tendency reflects Gloria Cronin’s comment on the general dilemma of Bellow’s male characters. As Cronin writes, “Refusing to rethink alterity, we enact violence. This is the frequent plight of the Bellow protagonist” (*A Room of His Own* 10).
6. As Daniel Walden has previously noted, this is part of the inherent paradox in each of Bellow’s protagonists, most of whom “advocate an integration and fusion of the opposite laws of individualism and community and society. Living with self-indulgence *and* a form of collectivism, they want to pursue personal desires, freedom and selfhood, and yet maintain the sense of, and the actuality of, the unity and community of humankind” (67).
7. In an interview with Paul Krassner, he criticizes what he called “*inhuman* violence—violence which is on a large scale and abstract” (*Presidential Papers* 136).
8. In “A World Too Much With Us” (1975), for instance, Bellow says, “Murderers are not improved by murdering. Unchecked, they murder more and become more brutish . . . It may do more for manhood to feed one’s hungry children than to make corpses” (5).

WORKS CITED

- Bellow, Saul. *Herzog*. Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1964. Print.
- . “A World Too Much With Us.” *Critical Inquiry* 2.1 (Autumn 1975): 1–9. Print.
- Cronin, Gloria L. *A Room of His Own: In Search of the Feminine in the Novels of Saul Bellow*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2001. Print.
- Fuchs, Daniel. *The Limits of Ferocity: Sexual Aggression and Modern Literary Rebellion*. Durham: Duke UP, 2011. Print.
- . *Saul Bellow: Vision and Revision*. Durham: Duke UP, 1984. Print.

- Gordon, Andrew. *An American Dreamer: A Psychoanalytic Study of the Fiction of Norman Mailer*. Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1980. Print.
- Leeds, Barry. *The Structured Vision of Norman Mailer*. NY: NYU Press, 1969. Print.
- Macilwee, Michael. "Saul Bellow and Norman Mailer." *Saul Bellow Journal* 19.1 (Winter 2003): 3–22. Print.
- Mailer, Norman. *An American Dream*. 1965. Rpt. NY: Vintage International, 1999. Print.
- . *Cannibals and Christians*. NY: Pinnacle, 1966. Print.
- . "Living Like Heroes." Interview with Richard Wollheim. 1969. *Conversations with Norman Mailer*. J. Michael Lennon. ed. Jackson: U of Mississippi Press, 1988. 65–68. Print.
- . *The Presidential Papers*. NY: Bantam Books, 1964. Print.
- McKinley, Maggie. *Masculinity and the Paradox of Violence in American Fiction, 1950–75*. NY: Bloomsbury, 2015. Print.
- . "Mailer's Modern Myth: Reexamining Violence and Masculinity in *An American Dream*." *The Mailer Review* 6.1 (2012): 158–171. Print.
- Meloy, Mike. "Tales of the 'Great Bitch': Murder and the Release of Virile Desire in *An American Dream*." *Mailer Review* 3.1 (2009): 337–356. Print.
- Millett, Kate. *Sexual Politics*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970. Print.
- Rosenberg, Warren. *Legacy of Rage: Jewish Masculinity, Violence, and Culture*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001. Print.
- Walden, Daniel. "Saul Bellow's Paradox: Individualism and the Soul." *Saul Bellow Journal* 12.2 (Fall 1994): 59–71. Print.