

FLY BOYS AND ANGELS: MAILER ON THE MOON

M I C H A E L K . G L E N D A Y

“I REALLY WOULD LIKE TO GO TO THE MOON” (Mills 347). In 1969, just before contracting with *Life* magazine for their three-part serialization of the book that would be published a year later as *Of a Fire on the Moon*, Mailer’s astronautic ambitions were typically vaunting. Yet his remark was telling. Both his two previous books (*The Armies of the Night* and *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*) had been what he called “participatory journalism” (Mills 347) and his coverage of the Apollo 11 moon shot would allow that only up to a certain obvious stage: “How can I participate in a landing on the moon?” (Mills 347). As noted by William Atwill, this was “a problem he had not had to face in any of his previous writing projects—the absolute separation of observer and event” (82), while Matthew Tribbe makes a similar point: “How could he find anything meaningful to say about the cold, closed mechanized world of NASA, about a journey he could no more participate in directly than any other hack journalist, and about subjects, astronauts, who seemed to have no distinct personalities for him to investigate?” (51). Since the astronauts’ lawyers refused him close access to them—as *Life* editor Thomas Griffith remembered, there was a fear that Mailer would portray them “as silly fly boys and ridicule their language” (Mills 349)—that problematic would condition many aspects of *Fire*, for better or worse.

His frustration as locked-out observer of events would certainly be manifest throughout the narrative, although at the start he tried to make the most of it, arguing that authorial detachment had its advantages. With limited privileged access to the astronauts and NASA, and being “little more than a decent spirit, somewhat shunted to the side” (14), he argued that was still “the best possible position for detective work” (14). Indeed Mailer’s

stance as the self-styled detective/journalist Aquarius—“the perfect name for a man who would begin the study of rockets” (15)—often does bring readers of *Fire* into positions of intense nearness to the astronauts and their experiences both physical and metaphysical. Yet if the NASA lawyers were concerned that there was something about the astronauts’ use of language that was ridiculous—and that Mailer would exploit that—to some extent they were right. Neil Armstrong in particular is presented as hiding behind an inauthentic discourse, as though he had learned that such equivocation could protect him from the pack of “psyche-eaters, psyche-gorgers” (37) he was increasingly surrounded by at NASA press conferences. He had his well-learned defences and “spoke with the unendurably slow and triple caution of a responsibility-laden politician who was being desperately careful to make no error of fact, give no needless offence to enemies . . . At communicating he was as tight as a cramped muscle . . . how his choice of language protected him!” (36–7).

Although Mailer is willing to show some understanding of this NASA obfuscation and constraint, there is little compassion in his critique of it. Critics rate *Fire* highly in the Mailer canon, and tend to include veracity and immediacy as among its strengths. For some, such as Geoff Dyer, it is its “gusto and urgency” which enables it to render “events from almost 50 years ago in such a way that they unfold again before our eyes. As an extravagant and immediate response . . . it is not just a stunning achievement, it is also an appropriate one”; while for Donald Kaufmann in his study, *Norman Mailer: Legacy and Literary Americana* (2014), it is rated as first in his judgment of Mailer’s greatest books since it “surmounted traditional creativity by linking world-historical and literary history” (cited in Leeds “Rosy” 394). A recent view reaching a similar conclusion is that of Nicole DePolo, who affirms that “today . . . the impression of Mailer’s text on the consciousness of the time remains embedded in our historical memory” (283). The publication of *MoonFire* in 2009 was a further enhancement of the book’s significance, with the addition of photographic text from the NASA archive “a celebration” not only of the anniversary of the moonshot, but also of “the kind of literary and imagistic union the original *Life* series represented” (DePolo 286). These views indicate a growing consensus in estimates of *Fire*’s contemporary significance, with an attempt such as that of Cecelia Tichi (2001) to classify Mailer’s moon as a misogynist imaginary and the Apollo

landing as “a blatant patriarchal act of lunar conquest” (163), now seeming reductive and facile.

These judgments also acknowledge an important element of Mailer’s envisioning in *Fire*, namely its historicity. At many points, he is aware, either implicitly or explicitly, of the relationship between earth affairs and their lunar influence/origin—or even their lunar begetting. Mediations between the celestial and the chthonic are posited as being of an intimate sort and in their contradictions the astronauts personified “the power of the century . . . to release some of the untold energies of the earth” (51). The narrative suggests that lunar influences may have played their part throughout the 1960s, manifest in the erupting crises of those years; for if the moon “were the receiving and transmitting station of all lunacy, then she had not been ignoring the nation” (14). Despite his eponymous moniker adopted at the dawning of the Age of Aquarius, and his lament that “he has never had less sense of possessing the age” (14), Mailer is in full recognition of the transformations of a lunatic decade in which civic order/disorder was perhaps a baleful rendition of the cosmic. “We had contracted for a lunar program in 1961 and what a decade had followed!” (403):

Four assassinations later; a war in Vietnam later; a burning of Black ghettos later; hippies, drugs and many student uprisings later . . . one sexual revolution later; yes, eight years of a dramatic, near-catastrophic, outright spooky decade later, we were ready to make the moon (14-15).

Was the moon somehow responsible for such dystopian firings? Certainly Mailer does not resist the possibility that this *zeitgeist* was attributable to lunar influences, noting that “the times were loose, and no scientist alive could prove that the moon was wholly a dead body” (403). “A decade so unbalanced in relation to previous American history” was also one that had witnessed the madness of “Aquarius, who had begun it by stabbing his second wife in 1960” (15), the awfulness of that *acte gratuit* perhaps reflecting his share of the national disequilibrium. The times were out of joint, as was Mailer, self-reflexive in his recognition that he was “so guilty a man” (15). Yet he honestly records the money nexus that drove him to the *Life* contract, for “the best journalist in America” was also at that time cash-poor (16), and, as Aquarius, had to commit to “this grim tough job of writing for enough

money to pay his debts” (52). Although the assignment to write the moon book for *Life* would therefore be welcomed as something of a timely purgation of this condition, as well as perhaps providing him with an opportunity to expiate earthly sins, still the rationale for the Space Program was impossible to index with any certainty. Was it “the noblest expression of the Twentieth Century or the quintessential statement of our fundamental insanity?” (24).

His own part in the collective project of “making the moon” would not be fashioned in the outright terms of fiction, but rather through his continuing embrace of the New Journalist aesthetic, already applied so successfully the previous year in *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* and the Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Armies of the Night*. In a comment such as “he is beginning to observe as if he were invisible . . . only the very best and worst novelists can write as if they are invisible” (59), Mailer/Aquarius at times seems to suggest his text’s stylistic relationship with fiction—a sign of his reluctance to relinquish that fictive mode—and of its usefulness to his current assignment. Dario Llinares argues that “stylistically, the text constantly flits between factual reportage and abstract, poetic symbolism as if the writer is engaging in an internal battle between journalistic and novelistic form” (117). Mailer brought to his work both a journalist’s sleuthing instinct and a novelist’s sense for what lies beneath the superficial, his sharp awareness “of all that fiction of unspoken evidence upon which novelists throw themselves and journalists snarl” (298–99). While his achievements in *Armies* particularly were at least partly responsible for his being dubbed the “best journalist in America” (16), jobbing journalism was, of course, not his *metier*: “he knew he was not even a good journalist and possibly could not hold a top job if he had to turn in a story every day” (16).

As the writing commenced, however, *Fire* would often show that there were devils in the discourse. How would one of America’s most eloquent writers fare when confronted by the reductive literalism of astronaut language, circumscribed and trained as it was by the rationalism of science and inculcated by the NASA school of rocketry? It is difficult now to believe that NASA ever allowed open-ended press conferences to happen, exposing their astronauts to the full glare of the world’s media without, apparently, much management of the event. In *Fire*, however, Mailer’s reports of those conferences suggest very strongly that little management was necessary, since the astronauts effectively censored themselves: “it was, of course, a style of lan-

guage all the astronauts had learned. There were speeches where you could not tell who was putting the words together—the phrases were impersonal, interlocking” (38). The language used by the astronauts rested upon the old positivist assumptions of science. “The heart of astronaut talk, like the heart of all bureaucratic talk, was a jargon which could be easily converted to computer programming, a language like Fortran or Cobol or Algol. Anti-dread formulations were the center of it, as if words like pills were there to suppress emotional symptoms” (114). Unwelcome concepts are barred by “the technological code that encases the event in a computerized data that robs it of meaning” (Werge 114). All other possibilities of discourse have been vitiated: “Mailer has found himself standing at the base of a techno-scientific structure grown so enormous in the last twenty-five years that even language seems about to fail” (Atwill 82). Within the confines of the NASA Press Center, the journalists are literally and figuratively boxed in and facing a kind of obsolescence; they are reduced to using the *lingua franca* of publicity handouts produced by NASA, since “events were developing a style and structure which made them impossible to write about” (85). This muzzling is read as a global phenomenon endemic to the increasing specialization of languages in late twentieth-century culture: “it was the signature of the century . . . what a humiliation for these tall Swedes and stocky Britons, these hardworking Japanese, to travel so far and be able to tell so little” (86). Faced by one of the biggest stories of human history, journalists are no longer the *bêtes féroces* of an enlightened Fifth Estate, but rather have been pastured and gelded by NASA command, “jolted and jammed into one another to get a peek at the astronauts” (86). There are “laws of propriety at NASA” (112), a new phase of top-down totalitarian control successfully deployed to ensure that NASA’s clinically safe vignettes are not sullied by journalist intrusion; like the “regulations at a hospital—woe to any astronaut or wife who uttered in public any sentiment which would fail to bore the expectations of fifty million viewers” (112). Perhaps as Captain Armstrong of the star ship Apollo might well have said, “it’s language Norm, but not as you know it.”

Although Mailer’s analysis of Armstrong recognizes the corporate characteristics of one forged in the NASA foundry, it also proposes some signs of more spiritual provenance, for “Armstrong suggests the mystic” (302):

As a speaker he was all but limp—still it did not leave him unremarkable . . . he was extraordinarily remote. He was simply not

like other men . . . Something particularly innocent or subtly sinister was in the gentle remote air . . . He was apparently in communion with some string in the universe others did not think to play . . . He could be an angel, he could be the town's devil. (30)

A passage like this does its best to make Armstrong seem special—to represent him as a more intriguing character than he probably ever was, and so to rescue him from the nets of corporate similitude. The imagery in the above passage is indeed intriguing, but exaggerates the likely exceptionalism of the man. Yet Mailer wants the complexity: the portrait is modelled upon the familiar Mailer lines of dichotomy and contrariety, as the astronaut manifests contradictions which “lay subtly upon him . . . Armstrong seemed of all the astronauts the man nearest to being saintly, yet there was something as hard, small-town and used in his face as the look of a cashier over pennies” (36). Armstrong is presented as both a manufactured creature of the NASA system and also one who can transcend it. It may not surprise that the former is more convincingly realised in Mailer's text than the latter. Armstrong is given as middle-American orthodox, a model of media probity, mockingly satirised as a stereotype from the center of “Network Nugatory” (49):

He came, after all, from that heartland of American life which had first [been] bequeathed to all TV viewers as the most viable decorum—that intolerable mixture of bland agreeability and dissolved salt which characterized all performers who appeared in public each day for years and prospered. That view of the world, if designing a face, would have snubbed the nose, faded out the color of the eyes, snugged the lips, slicked the hair and dispensed with the ears for they were protuberances with obscene interior curves—first cousins to the navel. (48)

In a letter of 1994 to the then President Clinton asking him for a meeting (“to take a shot at interpreting your Presidency and yourself . . . a dialogue between us of an hour in length, ideally two”), Mailer remembered the similar attempt to persuade Neil Armstrong to talk to him in 1969. Both attempts failed, the Armstrong request being perhaps not as “high-handed” (as aptly described by J. Michael Lennon in his recent Mailer biography) as was the Clinton request (Lennon 697). While Clinton failed to respond, at least

Armstrong replied in polite refusal, though he may have later regretted providing Mailer thus with a blank slate upon which to inscribe caricatures of him such as the above. When he first heard that NASA had refused him any privileged rights to interview the astronauts, Mailer's response, "Well, I'll do it without their damn access" (Mills 349), certainly suggested there would be scores to settle in *Fire*.

The subject of *Fire* may, however, be not so much the moon men and their journey to the moon, but rather Mailer/Aquarius writing about those men and that journey. For, as some critics have noted, Mailer is often busy with a "metadiscursive" narrative that involves "calling attention to himself as a writer in the act of composing: rather than write about his subject, he writes about his writing about his subject . . . the process of writing the book becomes the subject of the book" (Anderson 91–2). Indeed the year after its publication, Morris Dickstein, in his review for the *New York Times* (1971), wrote that *Fire* shows Mailer as both inside and outside his subject, since it was a book focusing "not only on what he observed . . . but also on himself, the observer" (1). Mailer was understandably challenged by the meanings of the moon shot, if not confounded by them; in Matthew Tribbe's view, he was perplexed by the challenge of "developing a new philosophy that could accommodate the reality of a space-faring civilization . . . confronted with this difficulty, Mailer came to the surprising conclusion that 'this emergence of a ship to travel the ether was no event he could measure by any philosophy he could put together in his brain'" (52). Before the launch of Apollo 11 and as he ponders the Space Program and its significance for a self-divided America, his culture-readings acknowledge bewilderment and doubt abroad in the nation and himself; rooted in his own disquiet is the fear of a revised totalitarianism being mobilized as part of the coercive will to conquer space:

America was this day mighty but headless, America was torn by the specter of civil war . . . Crime pushed the American public to give birth to dreams of order . . . order was restraint, but new order would call for a mighty vault, an exceptional effort, a unifying dream. Was the conquest of space then a potential chariot of Satan, the unique and grand avenue for the new totalitarian? (68)

Such dreams were personified in the imposing figure of Wernher Von Braun, one of the elect beings of NASA, whose previous career as a wartime rocket engineer for the Fuehrer had invested him with an all but Mephistophelian glamor, “that variety of glamor usually described as fascinating . . . the evocation of his name is attractive and repellent at once” (66). Von Braun was the creator of an ultimate *force majeure*—“the incomparable three-stage Saturn V . . . a booster the size and weight of a full Navy destroyer”, a monster of a rocket primed “to deliver seven and a half million pounds of thrust at blast-off, Saturn V, 281 feet long, 33 feet wide”—and coupled to that, NASA had fastened itself to plenipotent power capable of delivering “the heat in rocketry, the animal in the program” (67). With Von Braun’s reputation and resolve at the heart of the rocket’s design, “who could begin to measure the secret appeal of the Nazis?” (68). Von Braun, the Nazi/NASA “rocketeer”, was thus for Aquarius, either “an agent of the Lord or Mephisto” (73), and, by extension, space was the far-fetched refuge of his previous association with fascist ideology, for if “Nazism had been an assault upon the cosmos”, then “was space its amputated limb, its philosophy in orbit?” (79).

With such questions to vex him, Mailer awaits the great day of thunder, as on July 16th 1969 Apollo 11 blasts off from Cape Kennedy before eventual touchdown on the lunar surface on July 20th, much anticipated as “the event of his lifetime” (122). While many have marvelled at his sublime description of Apollo’s ascent, inside the NASA movie theatre with five hundred other reporters, his reactions as he watched “the mooncast” and the moon walks begin to register the ridiculous as close companion to the sublime. “The event of his lifetime” had become “a dull event” relieved only by unexpected humor: “There were moments when Armstrong and Aldrin might just as well have been Laurel and Hardy in space suits”, their ungainly progress across the surface of the moon provoking “huge guffaws” (119) from the Press assembly. Apollo’s “feat was immense, but the astronauts looked silly, and their functional conversations seemed farcical in the circumstances” (119). Mailer was certainly one of the first to suggest the staginess of the images from the moon, and to consider the possibility that they were indeed staged by NASA: “the event was so removed, however, so unreal, that no objective correlative existed to prove it had not conceivably been an event staged in a television studio” (122).

This vein of scepticism extends to pondering the enigma as to what science and physics can tell us, including with respect to their own natures. In

many senses the book is an extended meditation upon the incomprehensible, upon epistemological matters; its conjecturing about mystery and the inexplicable, about the existence and operation of what Mailer terms as “dread,” is particularly sustained. In Mailer’s book, modern sciences are subjected to an open and thorough inspection. His scepticism was radical and instinctual, assuming nothing about the elemental forces of nature. The chapter titled “The Psychology of Machines” gives a candid appraisal of the limits of science in understanding those forces: “When it came to ultimate scientific knowledge we were no further along than the primitive who thought light came from God. Perhaps it did. No physicist could begin to prove it didn’t. No, nothing was known at the root of science” (154). Within this fundament of doubt, dread is necessarily a closely resulting presence, not just within man, but housed within the machines they intend to control: “so dread inhabited the technology of rockets” (157). What astronauts call “glitches,” that is, unexplained faults in systems that should not have them—faults “not merely hard to explain, but impossible to explain”—were a challenge to the command of reason. What has been called “the modern death-world of money and machines” (Ellmann and Feidelson 885) is often there in Mailer’s work as one of his most abiding adversaries and in *Fire*, machines are presented as more than capable of corrupting themselves and their environment: “dread showed in the chill dank air of air-conditioning and human relations at the Manned Spacecraft Center south of Houston” (157–8). On Cape Canaveral’s Launch Complex 24 in 1967, the disaster that made the Apollo 1 capsule into a pressurized fire cage bringing terrible death to astronauts Grissom, White and Chaffee, became a precedent of complete dread in the ensuing history of the Apollo Program. Death would be the ultimate threat to any conceit that machines had been completely mastered, as the Challenger disaster would also testify in 1986. Even as I write this in the summer of 2015, the year has already seen two unmanned SpaceX rockets explode before being able to reach the International Space Station with their supply cargo payload. Throughout the history of space flight the perils always were many, since “mixed into all the triumphs of the Mercury and Gemini programs were the flaws whose reason could be found and the flaws which defied reason . . . a machine to everyone’s horror might even have developed a psychology of its own” (160). When empirical logic is overcome by mystery and the irrational, then machines can be seen as at best fragile barriers between life and death. Even “the machines to test the machines are ex-

hibiting a psychology of machines” (166). Faced by the contrast between their scientific knowledge and the untapped origins and meanings of the moon, the astronauts might be forgiven any retreat from rational dialogue: “the nearer one came to a full contemplation of such mysteries, the greater was the temptation to think not at all” (257). Even the technology on their side of the fence was overwhelming: “Think not of the fifteen miles of wire in that small capsule” (169).

In many ways *Fire* is both celebration and critique. It often targets the reductive and banal as keynotes in much of American discourse; Apollo 11 invokes what for Mailer is a disappointing digest of “the irritatingly modest data of the given”—all the way from “the words, the humor, and resolute lack of poetic immortality in the astronauts’ communications with the earth” (264)—to “the small-town reaction to the grim miracles of the modern world, everything was great, a bite of steak, a chocolate bar, a movie which made you laugh, a high focus on a television screen—great, great, great, great. The famine of American life was in the sound of the word” (249). Aquarius is in such senses undoubtedly our frustrated correspondent, but a good deal of the genius that is evident throughout the book is in large part due to his ability and determination to counter that leaden discourse with his multifaceted replacement of it. As he invites us to “travel into the inner spaces of his brain to uncover the mysteries of the moon” (264), he is yet also our well-informed documentarist, whose frustrations at having to return to earth to report from “the room where Capcom speaks” (264) provide a large measure of *Fire*’s integrity. In such ways the narrative is an ever-lively blend that mixes mystical, meditative discursion about what might be termed lunar metaphysics, with many stretches of impressively researched, magisterially marshalled data—“Aquarius, being a firm believer in intellectual husbandry, had gone to work of course on his own statistics” (284)—in which he includes “an encyclopedic survey of the engineering principles underlying the moon launch” (Goldstein 207). Together these elements are combined to make *Of a Fire on the Moon* a unique achievement.

Yet out of his critique of his country as a place of cultural “famine,” with the astronauts to an extent personifications of such, Mailer rescues something much more salient. In his chapter titled “The Iron of Astronauts,” he identifies in their native constitution and in their vocation, the signs of a compellingly restored national and human praxis, a further embodying of the American foundation myth of manifest destiny:

The astronauts were the core of some magnetic human force called Americanism, patriotism, or Waspitude . . . we may yet have to lean on the notion that the astronauts, strange, plasticized, half-communicating Americans, might still be the spine on which electricity breaks and restores the resonance of the stars . . . the astronauts could even be men with a sense of mission so deep it was incommunicable even to themselves, as if they had signed on as the . . . most finished product of a human ore whose purpose—despite all thoughts it had found that purpose—was yet undiscovered. (284)

It would be easy with the benefit of hindsight to see those hopes as naïve, but reading such a passage while looking backward over a half-century might also warrant a sorrowing for all the layers of such potentiality unrealized. The eventual demise of the Apollo program was attributable to many factors, and in the aftermath of the fire on Apollo 1, one of those was, as Mailer suggests, NASA's fearful avoidance of risk, for "if Apollo 11 resulted in death, all space investigation was gone" (344). As noted by Matthew Tribbe, shortly after the publication of *Fire*, and "even before the last Apollo moon mission returned to earth in 1972 . . . the space program itself fell prey to massive disinterest, as the culture as a whole began to develop a new sense of progress . . . the values of Apollo, far from forming the core of the forthcoming technocratic rationalist society that Mailer so feared, instead came to face serious challenges from a broad antirationalist cultural movement that Mailer represented well with many of his concerns, but which proved to be much larger than Mailer himself" (63). All of this was accelerated by what Tribbe identifies as "a growing ecological consciousness that began to challenge the postwar technological imperative" (284). With the benefit of hindsight this is a valid analysis, but already while writing in 1969 Mailer's own prescient insight into the relations between the Space Program and the American people was keyed to their troubled subtext: "something was lacking, some joy, some outrageous sense of adventure . . . any armistice to any petty war had occasioned wilder celebrations. It was almost as if a sense of woe sat in the center of the heart. For the shot to the moon was a mirror to our condition—most terrifying mirror; one looked into it and saw intimations of a final disease" (343).

Perhaps Hesiod and the ancients were right to believe that, in any failure,

the beginning is a half of the whole, for even a cursory inspection of the rationales for giving Project Apollo the green light are worrisome. None of them, in Mailer's view, had any complete integrity, deriving as they did from the need to release backed-up energies. American élites saw investment in the project as "the most imaginative way to prime an economic pump in a time of relative prosperity and no war"; Kennedy's lunar ambitions derived from and were commensurate with the romance of his New Frontier ethos; while bestriding all was "the technological age, bloated with waiting, ready to burst" and primed for expression in space (all 343). All of this informs the "final disease" that Mailer identifies above, a harrowing caused by apocalyptic fears, seen as endemic in American society—"a world in suffocation and a society in collapse" (416). "The time of apocalypse was certainly near" (414) and in a drug-induced haze, the youthful counterculture was in danger of not only failing to confront the dangers but of contributing to them: "a war of the millennia might yet rest on the shoulders of the young . . . if they consumed their smack and left the world dirtier than when they began" (414). The ecological crisis was rampant, exhibiting "critical symptoms, the nauseas of pollution" (411), as Mailer's final chapter, "A Burial by the Sea", makes clear. In an implicit invocation of the first section of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, "The Burial of the Dead", we are presented with the planet as corrupt and loaded with toxins. Where Eliot's speaker surveys "the dead land", the waste land of "dull roots" and "dried tubers", "the dead tree", so Mailer laments "the air of earth cities become carbon monoxide and lead . . . earth staggering with sewages that did not rot . . . another year of pollution to choke the planet . . . Was the end of the world at hand?" (411). Against such a background, space travel, then as now, was seen as needful escape from a world in terminal exhaustion. This was indeed perhaps the ultimate justification for such journeying: "Io, Europa, Ganymede and Callisto!—we might be safer far on the moons of Jupiter" (411).

In Mailer's own considerable underestimate, *Of a Fire on the Moon* was "not a bad book . . . the excitement I felt about writing about science went into that book" (Leeds, "Conversation" 122). Its assessment of the limitations of the astronauts themselves is certainly a feature, but that only allows for his own mightier envisioning: "the hour of happiness would be here when men who spoke like Shakespeare rode the ships: how many eons was that away!" (415). The purposes of space exploration were, for Norman Mailer, indeed mighty and also necessary, not for conquest alone, but rather to counter the

degeneration of modern consciousness, and to recover what he believed we were born for: “yes, we might have to go out into space until the mystery of new discovery would force us to regard the world once again as poets, behold it as savages who knew that if the universe was a lock, its key was metaphor rather than measure” (415). It was a worldview increasingly archaic perhaps, but no less sovereign and heroic for all that.

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