

CURES FOR CANCER:
NORMAN MAILER'S
DEATHS FOR THE LADIES
(AND OTHER DISASTERS)

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DEATHS FOR THE LADIES (AND OTHER DISASTERS), published by Putman in 1962, has the distinction of being the only volume of verse Norman Mailer would publish until the much later *Modest Gifts* (2003).¹ Formal criticism has tended to neglect *Deaths for the Ladies*, but the text may be seen to serve as a kind of shorthand portfolio of Mailer's recurring themes and tropes at the beginning of the 1960s. Mailer himself proposes that the text be read as "a movie in words," but the text itself undermines the validity of any such governing metaphors, and instead valorizes an aesthetic of improvisation and discontinuity. The complexities of the text insist that the poems be approached as carefully shaped fragments that address, in fascinating ways, Mailer's complex dialectical conception of growth and stasis—his ever-evolving politics of growth.

**CURES FOR CANCER: NORMAN MAILER'S
DEATHS FOR THE LADIES (AND OTHER DISASTERS) (1962)**

This is
genteel
poetry.
One thought
at a time
Deaths for the Ladies

The text consists of a series of short, generally unrhymed, poems on unnumbered pages. Barry Leeds, in his essay on *Deaths for the Ladies*, suggests that the lack of pagination contributes to a sense of the book as a unified whole (151), an interpretation supported by an Introduction Mailer wrote for the volume in 1971. In this Introduction, Mailer explicitly frames *Deaths for the Ladies* as a unified single work, rather than merely a collection of fragmentary texts:

I felt that all of *Deaths for the Ladies* made up one poem, not at all a great poem, never in any way, but still a most modern poem about a man loose in our city, for one cannot talk of New York without saying *our city*, there, majestic, choking on its own passions, New York, the true capital of the Twentieth Century. (3)

Retrospectively, then, Mailer frames *Deaths for the Ladies* as a work with a single determining structure and subject: “a man loose” in New York, the representative “capital” of the century. This recalls the importance of Hollywood in *The Deer Park*, which Sergius O’Shaughnessy describes as the “capital of cinema” (*Deer Park* 9). The use of the word capital, in *The Deer Park*, connotes not just capitalism itself but also capitalism’s proliferating and determining power to shape “the superheated dream life” (*Papers* 52) of postwar America. Here the word seems to assume a looser set of connotations—as befits the nature of *Deaths for the Ladies*. The text offers a set of variations on some of Mailer’s characteristic themes and tactics. In *Deaths for the Ladies*, however—unique in Mailer’s corpus—coherence of narrative or argument is not a determining priority. Significantly, the fragmentary nature of the text works to undermine Mailer’s own prefatory claims of unity. In addition, there are important absences from *Deaths for the Ladies*. Firstly, there is no sustained or coherent critique of the postwar world—the kind of critique that so preoccupied Mailer in *Advertisements for Myself* and in the novels that preceded and followed it. Secondly, there is no easily paraphrased structuring conceit or narrative. To read *Deaths for the Ladies* as explicable in straightforwardly narrative terms—as Mailer in his Introduction hints that we might be able to do—is to overemphasise a concern with formal structure and narrative unity that the text itself tends to subvert or undermine.

The longest poem in *Deaths for the Ladies* is described as “A Wandering

in Prose,” and the collection as a whole tends to valorise the idea of “wandering”—of improvisation and discontinuity—as a governing aesthetic. That the collection’s key poem should be described as a wandering in *prose* also suggests that *Deaths for the Ladies* as a whole is engaged in a number of formal processes or procedures that tend to subvert the idea of the book as poetry. In his Introduction, Mailer employs specifically (albeit problematically) the metaphor of the film as a means of subverting or undermining the validity of the work *qua* poetry. Nevertheless, *Deaths for the Ladies* neither lacks formal interest as poetry, nor does it fail to engage in fascinating ways with the complicated and complicating politics of growth that animates Mailer’s work throughout the 1960s. In fact, *Deaths for the Ladies* can fruitfully be read as a series of variations on the themes of growth, stasis, crisis, and autobiography that shape Mailer’s work throughout the decade.

Formal criticism has tended to neglect *Deaths for the Ladies*. The book was originally published to generally negative reviews in the popular press (Rollyson 141-2; Manso 341-6); in more formal journals it was “almost universally ignored” (Dearborn 172). Mailer himself notes that the book “came out in a modest edition and sank without a sound” (*Deaths* vi). This negative contemporary response seems to have affected the book’s later critical reception. Mailer biographer Hilary Mills dismisses it as “a small volume of poetry” (272), and Barry Leeds finds “no significant literary merit anywhere in it” (Leeds 150). While Leeds does devote a substantial essay to unpicking the text’s key themes, he concludes that “it is only in the context of the entire body of [Mailer’s] writing that the poetry assumes any interest” (Adams 150). Of the twelve critical essays collected in Leo Braudy’s *Norman Mailer: A Collection of Critical Essays* (1972), none addresses *Deaths for the Ladies* in any detail. Similarly, Bloom’s *Modern Critical Views* volume on Mailer (2003) omits any mention of the book. Robert Solotaroff, in his study of Mailer’s work, dismisses the book as an “interesting collection of verbal doodlings” (128). Kate Millett, in her chapter on Mailer in *Sexual Politics*, does not address *Deaths for the Ladies* directly, but remarks in passing that “Mailer’s verses are bits of Avenger propaganda, whimsical pubic narcissism, always offered to the reader as ‘short hairs’” (326). Richard Foster, in his 1968 monograph on Mailer ignores the book entirely, as does Poirier in his 1972 study. Other Mailer critics—including Adams, Schulz, Radford, Trilling, Glenday, Godden, Nathan, Wenke, Leigh, and Wilson—all neglect or ignore *Deaths for the Ladies*. J.

Michael Lennon, in his major 2013 biography of Mailer, praises the book, describing it as “nuanced,” “ironic,” “observant,” and “revealing” (293), but offers no larger critical assessment. Since Mailer’s death in 2007 only one critical essay on Mailer’s poetry has appeared: Benjamin Lee’s essay on “Avant-Garde Poetry as Subcultural Practice” (*New Literary History*, Autumn 2010), which fascinatingly situates *Deaths for the Ladies* within an emerging discourse of self-identified hipster poetry. Lee’s focus, however, is less on textual engagement and more on a contextual reading of the work—its “identifications with specific musical, sexual, and countercultural groupings” (Lee 775). Despite this small suggestion of a reawakening of interest in Mailer’s verse, there has as yet been little sustained critical engagement with *Deaths for the Ladies*.

However, *Deaths for the Ladies* evidently possessed considerable importance for Mailer himself. Certain phrases from the text feature prominently in his later work. For example, the title of one poem, “The Harbors of the Moon,” returns as a chapter title in *An American Dream* (1965), and there is a section in *Deaths for the Ladies* entitled “Cannibals,” foreshadowing a key metaphor of Mailer’s 1966 collection *Cannibals and Christians*. In the context of Mailer’s work as a whole, *Deaths for the Ladies* establishes the status of certain key words or flags, denoting various complexes of ideas within Mailer’s aesthetics and politics of growth. Thus Mailer’s volume of poetry may be seen to serve as a kind of shorthand portfolio of his recurring themes and tropes at the beginning of the 1960s.

According to Mailer’s introduction, *Deaths for the Ladies* “was written through a period of fifteen months, a time when my life was going through many changes including a short stretch in jail, the abrupt dissolution of one marriage, and the beginning of another” (v). Mailer’s introduction, which contributes immeasurably but problematically to any reading of *Deaths for the Ladies*, seems on the surface to licence a directly (or simplistically) biographical reading of the volume it prefaces. Indeed, a number of the poems in *Deaths for the Ladies* do deliberately allude, in various ways both oblique and direct, to publicly-known elements of Mailer’s biography at the time of composition. This is particularly so in the references to the stabbing of his wife, Adele Morales, in 1960, which attracted a great deal of media attention (Mills 227). The few critics who have responded to the book have tended to arraign it as a jest or an indulgence (Mailer quotes one such review, from *Time* magazine, in his introduction

[iv-v]). As Leeds writes, “Mailer is waggishly aware of the fact that it is the power of his name rather than the merit of his poetry which has persuaded the publisher to allow *carte blanche* in presenting this material” (Adams 153). I would argue, however, that *Deaths for the Ladies*, read both in isolation and in the context of Mailer’s work as a whole, must not be understood as simply a jest or even as a sequence of autobiographical poems, just as *Advertisements for Myself*, say, must not be read as a straightforward collection of autobiographical fragments. A key factor in assessing *Deaths for the Ladies* is Mailer’s stated formal aim for his collection—the governing metaphor of the “film.” It is also crucially important to pay attention to the ways in which the text itself does not deliver what it appears to promise. Effectively, this is a complex work that undermines the author’s intentions as expressed in his stated aims.

Mailer, in his Introduction, refers to *Deaths for the Ladies* as “my little innovation, my movie in words” (vii). This conception of *Deaths for the Ladies* as a “movie” in words receives little formal elaboration, and appears in the midst of an apology for Mailer’s lack of poetic gifts:

There was no music or prosody or command or rush of language in the book, no power, not much meter, not at all, much of it was poetry only by the arbitrary insistence of the short line, but *Deaths for the Ladies* was something else, I thought—it was a movie in words. I set it with the greatest care. Every line was placed on the page by me. The spaces were chosen with much deliberation, the repetitions of phrases were like images in a film. The music of the poem as a whole—if it had any—was like the montage of a film. (vi)

This conception of *Deaths for the Ladies* as “a movie in words” offers, of course, a highly suggestive and interesting means of approaching the text. For instance, one might argue that the fact that the pages are unnumbered, and the fact that it is often impossible to distinguish the end of one poem from the beginning of the next, represent Mailer’s attempt to transcend the linearity of print, and to replicate the freedoms that are latent in the form of a cinematic document: freedom from linearity of narrative, linearity of thought, and linearity of structure. In this context, *Deaths for the Ladies* is experimental in the extreme, as Mailer dramatically reflects, in print form, the

achievements of film. These constructions affect the formal level directly. The filmic or cinematic aspects of *Deaths for the Ladies* are evident in the repetition of certain key poems, and in the appearance of poems written in voices (usually parodic voices, such as “You Chinese lady / I / Jahpanese / gentleman / that is / vuhry / rahr” (27). Importantly, Mailer returns again and again to dramatisations of a classically Mailerian dialectic—the relationship of an unnamed male character to an unnamed female character, as in the various “Wanderings in Prose” that occur throughout the book. Similarly, remarks made by Mailer elsewhere might be used to illuminate a reading of *Deaths for the Ladies* as “a movie in words.” For instance, in “A Course in Filmmaking,” the essay he published as a preface to the script of his 1968 movie *Maidstone: A Mystery* (1971), Mailer explicitly connects film with the “superheated” American dream life he describe in “Superman Comes to the Supermarket”:

Film lives somewhere in that underground river of the psyche which travels from the domain of sex through the deeps of memory and the dream, on out into the possible montages of death [...] *It is as if film has an existence within the brain which may be comparable to memory and the dream* [...] [Emphasis in original] (127)

Film, as defined here, operates as a passageway into the dream life of death and eroticism, and of crisis and growth, which constitutes, in Mailer’s work of the 1960s, the “underground river” of American life (the phrase repeats precisely Mailer’s lines in *The Presidential Papers* about “the underground river” which flows “deep beneath all *Reader’s Digest* hospital dressings of Mental Health in Your Community” [53]). *Deaths for the Ladies* may therefore be read as a filmic narrative embodying aspects of “memory and the dream,” and so Mailer has, in this reading, borrowed the outward form of a film (“montage”). In this context, the book is a precursor to *An American Dream*, a novel which borrows elements from the gangster film, the detective movie, and the spy story in its exploration of “the superheated dream life” as a venue for the existential hero’s confrontation with dread-as-freedom and freedom-as-dread.

However, to read *Deaths for the Ladies* in this way, without questioning its avowed textual praxis, is to allow the directions offered in Mailer’s Intro-

duction to overdetermine, and hence limit, our responses to the text. Without Mailer's interventions, critics may scour *Deaths for the Ladies* in vain for clear formal or generic borrowings from the cinema. This is a book that emphasizes discontinuity and fracture, as one poem leads into the next, titles are attributed sporadically, and thematic concerns are raised and then dismissed, only to be returned to in a series of improvisatory repetitions. Getting a foothold in these rapidly changing pages is an extremely demanding task. Some sections of the book are given titles, but taken in order, these indicate no clear thematic or narrative progression, beyond adumbrating various themes that Mailer would address throughout his work of the 1960s. The sections are as follows: "Cheerleaders", "Romance", "Family", "Marriage", "Modes", "A Monotony of Ills", "Witchcraft", "Cannibals", "Devils", "Deaths", "The Harbours of the Moon", "Moods for Sunday", "In New York It's Not Enough to be Polite", "Lovers", and "The Inaugural Ball". This list of section titles is undoubtedly a thematic key to the contents of *Deaths for the Ladies*. As a result, it is clear that the text can most usefully be read as a series of variations upon Mailer's past themes, and as the introduction and development of themes that would later become central to his fiction and nonfiction. Perhaps of larger significance is the suggestion, derived from these section titles, that with *Deaths for the Ladies*, the idea of magic enters Mailer's work for the first time—as can be seen from the section titles "Devils" and "Witchcraft." Magic, of course, would become a central determining concern in the book Mailer published three years after *Deaths for the Ladies*, the novel *An American Dream*, which incorporates ideas of magic and superstition much more forcefully into Mailer's critique of the "superheated dream life" of postwar America.

Mailer's modest declaration in his Introduction that his poems display no poetical gift belies the fact that these poems often depend for their effects on traditional poetic techniques such as alliteration, assonance, and rhyme. A good example is the repeated phrase (or refrain) "Gray without grace/day." Many of the poems are voiced, or feature characters speaking, as often occurs in lyrics and ballads: "said the housewife" (107), "sighed the witch" (113), "the call girl" (115), "the cavalier" (118). However, the most common structure of the poems in *Deaths for the Ladies* is a kind of dialectical call-and-response. Such poems are frequently divided into two sections, with the second section ironically answering or undermining the proposition contained in the first section:

Let's
stamp out
bad dialogue.

That's *your* problem
said the
toad.

Here the first stanza expresses the thoughts of someone who holds some power over the business of language. It could be anyone from a novelist or poet to an editor or script-writer, teacher or critic (choosing from a long list of possibilities). No matter who it is, he or she has a value system that is capable of identifying “bad” dialogue. The second stanza undercuts that authority. The presence of the speaking toad moves the dialogue into figurative territory. Does what the toad says constitute “bad dialogue”? According to the toad, “bad” is a term which is personal (the emphatic “*your*”), and so the poem in one sense dramatises a difficulty in setting standards—your “bad” is not necessarily my “bad.” Both stanzas are built around monosyllables, which highlights the multisyllabic words: “dialogue” and “problem.” This emphasis establishes one line of interest, in which dialogue itself is problematised as relative. Once we record a second voice, Mailer seems to imply, we lose a certain amount of control, and so cannot be certain any longer of value or direction, as the toad suggests and exemplifies here.

On one level *Deaths for the Ladies* reflects serious doubts about the nature of its task. The text repeatedly insists that all experiences are to some extent personal, and that therefore judgement is difficult if not impossible. Mailer is profoundly aware of the importance of thought and expression, but this awareness is always accompanied by an awareness of the profound limitations of both. This particular poem offers no clear resolution to the crisis of relativism it invokes. This would seem to suggest that the dialectic, in this short poem, must issue unproductively, in stasis. However, for Mailer, the dialectic is pre-eminently an open-ended process, in which the arrival of antithesis always introduces a crisis of relativism for the thesis, leading to a new moment of potential growth; this characteristically Mailerian moment of crisis is adumbrated but not resolved in this short poem.

The suggestion of stasis, here, is perhaps uncharacteristic of the volume as a whole. For all its summoning of stasis (“Gray without grace/day”),

Deaths for the Ladies is steeped in the language and imagery of growth. A number of the poems summon growth as a key word or topic:

As it grows
the flower
breaks
through the stone.

It has yet
to prove
itself
against
the clay.

Gray without grace
day.

Here Mailer adumbrates a classic image of his politics of growth, in which the moment of crisis—the moment in which the growing flower must “prove/itself” against the environment in which it grows—is figured as existentially decisive. The predicted breakthrough, here, is situated in an element that seems less testing than the stone. It is as if the eye is seized by the presence of the flower and the stone, and omits to trace the flower back to its source in the clay beneath. The focus of the poem promotes stone for its drama, but the counter-voice establishes Mailer’s necessary dialogue. Growth, in Mailer’s work, is never simple or direct, but always involves an unpredictable clash of opposites. The assonantal connections here between “clay,” “Gray,” “grace” and “day” draw the stanzas together, suggesting movement—from the soil to its colour to its absence of grace to the achievement of day. The critical issue here is the absence of grace. Clay is clay; gray is gray; and day is day. However, grace is something imposed, a value added to an object—in this case, clay. Mailer undoes this value judgement to re-position the flower and the clay as elements of day, of vision, of light, and of enlightenment. Of course, this is itself another value judgement, and the form of the poem (its voice and counter-voice) suggests that the poet is acutely aware of this. Focusing on the ignored, the isolated, the unspoken and the ordinary is surely a significant part of this poem and is a signal pointing the reader to

growth, and to the complexity of growth in a context that stresses the elemental and the existential.

Similarly, in an earlier poem, Mailer promotes the seed as a fruitful metaphor for the paradoxes of growth (the language here returns us to the phrase “nuances of growth” from *Advertisements for Myself*):

the nuance
of being
is to
capture
the
seed

In taking the effect of “nuance” to be the “capture” of “the/seed,” Mailer establishes a paradox of sorts. “Nuance” suggests traces, tones, shading and fine distinctions; “capture” suggests seizure, apprehension, arrest, and power and ownership. They seem at odds. However, seed, as the end of the process here, delivers images of the sources of new beginnings, a characteristically Mailerian emphasis on process over product, and hence an emphasis on growth. Mailer here contextualises his use of “capture” to suggest something far more subtle and complex than is usually assumed. Again, he creates a double layer of meaning to establish dialogue and the terms in which he seeks growth and development.

Poems and sections of poems recur throughout *Deaths for the Ladies*, often assuming a new meaning as a result of having been placed in a new context. Leeds refers to “fugue-like repetitions from one part of the book to another” (Adams 155), suggesting the possibility that music (fugue) offers a better formal analogy than film for coming to grips with this text. One such repeated poem is the following:

Repetition
kills the
hole
for its offers
dull the
soul

These lines are repeated thirty pages later and so suggest an ironic reading of Mailer's own initial advice. Similarly, the phrase "Gray without grace/day" is repeated at the end of several different poems (in fact these lines are the most frequently repeated throughout the volume, occurring five times). As Leeds writes, this use of repetition may suggest that "Mailer is attempting to erect and reinforce a structure from his grab-bag of minor perceptions, epigrams, and personal horrors" but goes on to note "the very limited extent to which this attempt is successful" (Adams 151). This criticism indicates the difficulties of identifying any determining structural conceit in the pages of *Deaths for the Ladies*. The repetition of various poems may be taken as having a thematic significance, and, as Leeds begrudgingly suggests, offers the bones of a structure. However, *Deaths for the Ladies* is unique among Mailer's works of the 1960s in that, for this text, coherence of narrative or argument is not a determining priority. To assign structural significance to these repetitions is, I argue, to miss the importance of Mailer's aesthetic of discontinuity, of "wandering." It is perhaps more fruitful to concentrate on the thematic engagements of the individual poems themselves, which address, in fragmentary form, most of the key ideas that Mailer would elaborate more formally in his fiction and nonfiction of the 1960s.

Chief among his key ideas throughout this period is the network of tropes and themes that, increasingly in Mailer's work of the 1960s, comes to be signified by the word "cancer" and its allied vocabularies. The word appears in numerous poems, as in this example:

Cancer
 is growing
 ivy
 professor
 which spreads
 like college

Cancer here refers to ivy, the fast- and tenaciously-growing plant. This is coupled with a "professor" who acts similarly, spreading his or her ideas in college. (Mailer's criticisms of liberal academics and their ideologies are articulated very forcefully in the early chapters of *The Armies of the Night*.) The connection of these two ideas suggests that Mailer seeks to restrain both—he is deeply skeptical of the ability of the ivy and the professor to

proliferate like cancer, to build cell on cell rapidly and with apparent abandon. This poem, as with many of the “short hairs” included in *Deaths for the Ladies*, stretches the powers of connection in the interests of promoting a dialectical conception of growth. At times the frame seems surreal, which is perhaps significant—it is one of the features of this book that Mailer skirts the borders of magic. Indeed, “A Cure for Cancer” foreshadows the lunar-magic theme of *An American Dream*:

A
 cure
 for
 cancer
 is
 to
 visit
 the
 moon

The illusion of a curve in the structure of this poem suggests a movement away from the beginning on the left-hand margin and a return to it at the end. In this reading, “A” is linked with “moon” as point of origin is linked to destination. Here, however, the beginning enters the world of disease and the ending is located on the surface of the moon. We must ask, therefore, how are these things connected? Given that 1962, the year of the book’s publication, is within the sphere of the “space race”—a time in which the developments in the sciences were being popularized—“Can we land a man on the moon?” is here drawn in parallel to the question, “Can we find a cure for cancer?” Mailer does not offer any easy connectives in simile or metaphor, but positions one element as the other: “is to.” This stretches the common-sense reading of the lines and suggests the magical elements of both, in that a flight to the moon requires a creativity which seems beyond the imagination. Mailer, it seems, celebrates an imagination that will, or will seek, to end in an impossible praxis. The effect is carried in the curve that seems to move inexorably away from its source only to return to its point, like a flight in space or an understanding of cell reproduction. In all, Mailer signals limits beyond the usual limits we accept. His artist/researcher will test the fron-

tiers of knowledge—and this is the territory to which Mailer seeks to lead his readers.

In *Deaths for the Ladies*, for the first time in Mailer's work, cancer is figured explicitly as the consequences of growth gone wrong. The thematic centrepiece of the volume is "A Wandering in Prose—For Hemingway—November 1960." The date included in the title of this "wandering" is significant for biographical reasons. On November 20, 1960, Mailer assaulted his wife Adele Morales at a party in the Mailers' apartment on West 94th Street, stabbing her with a two-and-a-half-inch long knife blade in the belly and back, narrowly missing her heart (Rollyson 135–8; Mills 215–30). Mailer was arrested two days later, and examined by a psychiatrist who recommended admission to Bellevue, the New York mental hospital, where Mailer stayed for seventeen days. Adjudged sane, and called before a magistrate on December 21, Mailer escaped prosecution when Adele refused to press charges (Dearborn 163–5). *Deaths for the Ladies* was, according to Mailer's own "Introduction," largely composed in the aftermath of these events (v–vii). Beginning with its title, the book plays quite consciously with the notoriety which Mailer gained for committing an act of violence against his wife. However, as this is a book which challenges all kinds of classifications, the autobiographical context has to be seen as but a single strand in Mailer's treatment of the politics of growth. In insisting upon this event as an important context, Mailer continues his quest to test the mind and body in places beyond those accepted by society. For him, the touchstone is always growth, no matter what the effects or consequences.

In "A Wandering in Prose," cancer is figured as the direct consequence of submitting to "civilisation," that is, to the suppression of the instincts of the "criminal heart" demanded by society:

That first unmanageable cell
of the cancer which was to
stifle his existence arrived
to him on a morning when by
an extreme act of the will
he chose not to strike his
mother. Since this was
thirtysix hours after he
had stabbed his wife, and

his mother had come at a time
 when he wished to see no one
 in order to savour the woes
 and pawed prides of his soul,
 (what a need for leisure
 has the criminal heart) his
 renunciation of violence
 was civilised, too civilised
 for his cells which proceeded
 to revolt. But then it is
 the thesis of this summary
 that civilisation spawns
 cancer in every corner of
 every church whose smell
 is stale with the fatigues
 of such devotion as lost its
 memory on the long road
 to ecstasy from
 habit.

Here explicitly autobiographical material (“thirtysix hours after he/had stabbed his wife”) serves as a pretext for the elaboration of a “thesis.” This criminal act inspires a familiar Mailerian discourse of stasis—“stifle,” “stale,” “fatigue,” “habit.” These words are, in turn, associated with cancer, the “revolt” (through uncontrolled growth) of the cells. The suppression of a violent impulse—“he chose not to strike his/mother”—is a laudable act and one that draws him into “good” society. For the voice of the poem, this act of the suppression of his desire leads directly to “the cancer which was to/stifle his existence.” This “thesis” of course bears some resemblance to the ideas outlined in Freud’s *Civilisation and its Discontents* (1930), in which Freud discusses the “libido displacements” brought about by human culture and socialisation, displacements that enable us suppress the “gratification of gross primitive instincts” (9). The critical matter for Freud is that such control is not a simple task with predictable “good” outcomes, as it can result in pathological behaviours. As Freud writes: “Civilization is perpetually menaced with disintegration through this primary hostility of men towards

one another” (25). To express hostility as “primary” suggests the possibilities of core values and seeds located in such aggression. The key questions here, given the contexts set by Mailer, are: What is at risk? What is “civilisation”? And how it is defined and maintained? For Mailer, however, a radical subjectivity predominates, and the suppression of primitive impulses menaces not civilisation but the “cells” of the individual who is engaged in an embattled process of growth. In “Superman Comes to the Supermarket,” Mailer writes, “Existential politics is simple. It has a basic argument: if there is a strong ineradicable strain in human nature, one must not try to suppress it or anomaly, cancer, and plague will follow. Instead one must find an art into which it can grow” (*Papers* 35).

In “A Wandering in Prose,” Mailer faces a terrible crisis—“on a morning when by/an extreme act of the will/he chose not to strike his/mother.” Here society will applaud his act of restraint as he stretches his will to breaking point in a heroic effort to spare his mother. However, this choice is made, in Mailer’s terms, at a moment of potential growth. What is different is that this moment of crisis is deflected, turned from the path of healthy growth, and instead leads to the growth-gone-awry of “cancer.” In this, Mailer moves against all societal norms and, indeed, all that is considered “natural.” The act of sacrifice becomes an act of ironic seeding as the force of the violence is not expressed and so turns inward to generate the terror of cell growth.

Mailer’s conception of the moment of potential growth as existentially decisive informs much of the fragmentary text of *Deaths for the Ladies* in a thematic and structural sense. This is a text in which the classic doubling, telling and showing, is evident. In his introduction, Mailer invokes Kierkegaard (as he will in his 1967 novel *Why Are We in Vietnam?*) as he comments upon the paradoxical nature of the moment of growth:

To be hearing the inspirations of the angel when one is kissing the flames is a condition so implicit with agony that it took eighteen centuries of Christendom before Kierkegaard could come back alive with the knowledge that such moments not only existed but indeed were the characteristic way modern man found a knowledge of his soul—which is to say he found it by the act of perceiving that he was most certainly losing it. (vi)

Here Mailer gestures towards Kierkegaard's "concept of dread" (13–16) which would inform much of his fiction during the 1960s. Dread, for Kierkegaard, arises when the individual confronts "the infinite possibility of being able" (*Dread* 56), just as does Mailer's Hipster or White Negro in the existentially decisive moment of crisis. Mailer's figures are not simply eccentric and dangerous outsiders, but figures who experience and seek to express the "angel" and the "flame." The risks of failure, when such binaries define the self as adumbrated in *Deaths for the Ladies*, include "cancer" and the paradoxical growth of stasis or static growth that Mailer figures using that term, as well as the terrifying consequences of the loss of the soul. Here, too, Mailer begins to invoke the language of religion for the first time as a central aspect of his aesthetic project, a language that would flower fully in his major novel of the 1960s, *An American Dream*.

Deaths for the Ladies is a work of profound interest in its own right. It valorizes an aesthetic of fragmentation and improvisation, in which repetition is not simply a key to structure but a gesture towards narrative that signals an important development in Mailer's work. *Deaths for the Ladies* is an impressionistic companion volume to the rest of Mailer's work of the 1960s, a work in which texts or fragments of texts do not add up to a coherent whole but which offer, instead, "short hairs," small discontinuous variations and epigrams on themes that Mailer would address more fully, and more forcefully, in the books that were to come.

NOTE

1. Occasionally a character in a Mailer novel writes a poem. For example, Sergius O'Shaugnessy, narrator-protagonist of *The Deer Park*, writes a poem called "The Drunk's Bebop and Chowder" (*Deer Park* 222). Poems also appear in the nonfiction volumes *Advertisements for Myself* (1960) and *Cannibals and Christians*, which features a number of what Mailer describes (in *Deaths for the Ladies* and in the later volume) as "short hairs." Some of these "short hairs" repeat or develop motifs first introduced in *Deaths for the Ladies*, suggesting the importance of this volume to Mailer's sense of his own work in the 1960s.

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