

A HISTORY OF VIOLENCES

J A S O N M O S S E R

Masculinity and the Paradox of Violence in American Fiction, 1950–75

Maggie McKinley.

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A FEW YEARS AGO I WROTE A CONFERENCE PROPOSAL that I never sent. A couple of my English colleagues had organized a small annual conference on gender and sexuality featuring work by faculty, students, and staff, and as my contribution for that year I drafted a proposal called “My Norman Mailer Problem.” What’s my Norman Mailer problem? It is simply that I admire the work of Norman Mailer, and in my feminized profession, as readers of this journal will appreciate, that can be a problem, especially given literary academics’ tendency to practice a form of identity politics by associating the critic’s worldview with the author’s. Many times, in polite, educated company, especially around women who do not know me well, the news that I do scholarship on Mailer has provoked instant, deeply-ingrained hostility and suspicion. Their faces harden and their body language suggests that they are ready for battle. When I ask them the obvious question, whether they have read Mailer, the answer is generally no, but they just know, because they have always heard that he is a bad man: a bully, a misogynist, a sexist pig, labels guaranteed to preclude dialogue and understanding.

So for that reason, and for many others, Maggie McKinley’s book on masculinity and violence in contemporary American fiction is such a freshly illuminating and penetrating study. McKinley confesses to having been surprised by her first reading of Mailer’s *An American Dream*: “only vaguely

aware of Mailer's former reputation, particularly among feminist critics, I had expected to feel somewhat ambivalent about the book" (1). To the contrary, she encountered in Stephen Rojack "a protagonist who was violent and misogynistic yet who also seemed to be simultaneously vulnerable and sympathetic" (1). Further research led her to the realization that "little had been said about the novel's intertwining representation of masculinity, race, and violence" (1), themes she explores in *American Dream*, in Mailer's essay "The White Negro," and in the works of some of Mailer's contemporaries: Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Richard Wright's *The Outsider* and *The Long Dream*, Saul Bellow's *Herzog* and *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* and *Another Country*, and Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* and *My Life as a Man*. As her rationale for focusing her study on African-American and Jewish-American writers, McKinley explains that "blackness" and "Jewishness" have been constructed as "feminized and dehumanized identities" (7) and that post-WWII cultural and historical shifts like the oppression of the Cold War era and the emergence of second-wave feminism caused these authors and their protagonists to "experience a period of transition [and] become particularly apt figures for the study of masculinity in crisis during these decades" (2).

McKinley notes that gender studies critics tend to fall into the "trap" of making the reductive and totalizing assumption that all men are inherently violent; therefore, they "unintentionally perpetuate the notion that masculinity can be defined and differentiated from femininity by some inherent propensity toward violent behavior" (37). By way of correcting that misperception, McKinley writes that "I have actively striven to avoid any suggestion that these are universal characteristics of manhood, emphasizing rather that they comprise a socially expected model of masculinity that men feel compelled to imitate, often to their own detriment" (37). In a series of incisively close readings, McKinley directly addresses the misogyny one does find in texts by Mailer and others, but she does not end there; rather, the "violences," verbal, physical, and emotional, that their characters frequently exhibit, not only against women but against men of other races, ethnicities, and sexualities, and even against themselves, become the starting point for a deeper investigation into the way these writers' construct their protagonists' masculinities, often in reaction to a challenge posed by a differently gendered or racialized Other, and into the role that violence plays in asserting those masculinities. McKinley's key insight is

to reveal the profound irony in all of this violent behavior: as she writes, “the authors under investigation often figure violence as a central aspect of their respective constructions of masculinity, but . . . this use of violence harbors a problematic paradox, as its deployment in the name of liberation often reifies many of the cultural myths and power structures that these authors, or the protagonists who speak on their behalf, seek to overturn” (2).

McKinley’s critical perspective is largely philosophical, specifically existential, relying most heavily on the views on violence expressed by Simone de Beauvoir (especially in *The Second Sex*), Jean-Paul Sartre, and Hannah Arendt, all of whom argued that masculinity is existentially constructed; that is, we—men and women—are what we make ourselves. McKinley juxtaposes the existentialist concept of immanence, the social conditions of the characters’ oppression which lead to their own sense of otherness, with their desire to transcend those conditions through their assertions of masculinity in the form of violence, actions which become “an expression not only of physical strength, but also of existential freedom” (9). In resorting to violence, however, they “reenact another stereotype—that of the aggressive, patriarchal, oppressive male—that serves to reproduce the normative model that they have worked against” (7). McKinley points to two major themes running throughout Mailer’s *oeuvre*: the creeping totalitarianism of the Cold war era and the existential anxiety that plagues his characters in a society he referred to in *The Armies of the Night* as Cancer Gulch. She claims that despite Mailer’s reputation as a reactionary sexist, his worldview shares much with that of the French existentialists in that his early work “indicates that the major similarities between his definition of existentialism and that of both Beauvoir and Sartre lie within two particular tenets: his view of individual liberation as a step toward transcendence” (67), expressed in *An American Dream* as Rojack’s escape into the West in an effort to reinvent himself and in “The White Negro” as the assertion of freedom concomitant with the hipster’s assumption of the status of outlaw. Frequently, the Others these characters encounter play a key role in that movement toward transcendence. For example, in Rojack’s key relationships in *An American Dream*, whether to his wife Deborah, his housekeeper Ruta, his mistress Cherry, or his sexual rival Shago, McKinley observes that “the potential violence of the gendered or racial ‘other’ draws Rojack in and also threatens him. . . . Thus, although Rojack may not be aware of it, his asser-

tions of masculinity have become predicated on the oppression of others” (87). McKinley examines the way Mailer’s presentations of his protagonists, either Rojack or the existential hipster of “The White Negro,” “paradoxically reinforce the oppressions he seeks to overturn through his protagonists’ violent rebellions, but also those moments when Mailer himself interrogates these violences and their roles in shaping gender identity” (69). She argues that while “Mailer clearly believes in the power of violence, yet like Arendt, his writings (both fictional and nonfictional) also suggest that he sees the damage that might be wielded by violence, especially when that violence is used by governments as a mechanism of totalitarian control” (69). As Mailer frequently argued in his early work, and explicitly in “The White Negro,” the violent acts of the individual are always to be preferred to the collective violence of the state. Nevertheless, as McKinley demonstrates, individual violence as a means of achieving transcendence and liberation is always doomed to failure.

McKinley observes that in *Invisible Man*, Ellison presents us with an African-American protagonist who similarly struggles with the construction of masculinity and with definitions of manhood. Consistently oppressed by dehumanizing and emasculating treatment at the hands of Others, he internalizes a sense of inferiority which Ellison figures as invisibility. The unnamed narrator gradually discovers that he is, existentially, the sum total of the choices he makes, or, in Sartre’s words, “nothing other than what he makes of himself” (18). McKinley links the narrator’s sense of invisibility to “the experience of being marked by a lack” that Beauvoir claims as the “central struggle of women” (18). The narrator “seeks to use the power of this invisibility to enact vengeance on his oppressors” (18), and yet, his “individual violence is renounced as often as it is embraced” (19). This renunciation includes the narrator’s violences directed at women, seen by all of these authors, more or less, as yet another barrier to the achievement of masculinity, but the narrator’s violent displays of masculinity still lead to the oppression of others, “ensuring that individual liberation, existential freedom, and transcendence remain—as Beauvoir lamented—masculine terms” (34).

McKinley says that she does “not aim to condemn these authors or their works as racist or misogynistic,” citing the critical mistake of identifying authors with their characters and labelling them as racist or misogynist in order

to dismiss them (13), and that returns us to my Norman Mailer Problem, one that McKinley targets with pinpoint accuracy. Why did I never submit my proposal? I suppose it was a matter of choosing my battles, and I chose to fight this one another day. Now that I know I have such a formidable champion as McKinley on my side, well, maybe next year.