

META-MODERNISM IN *AN AMERICAN DREAM*

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“The American Writer in the world of the twentieth century has his hands full in trying to understand, describe, and then make credible much of American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one’s own meager imagination.”
—Philip Roth

Before we examine the relative postmodernism of *An American Dream* (1964), we should question the usefulness of a term many consider problematic at best. How does one define postmodernism in a way that includes such distinctly different writers as, on the one hand, Bernard Malamud, John Updike, Joyce Carol Oates, and Norman Mailer, and on the other, Thomas Pynchon, Vladimir Nabokov, and John Barth? While historically the term embraces all these writers, theorists Ihab Hassan and Brian McHale point out that theoretically “postmodern” announces not merely a chronological division, but “an organized poetics” (McHale 5)—specific artistic tendencies that transcend historicity.¹ Hassan describes postmodernism as a response, direct or oblique, to the spiritual void Moderns glimpsed only in their most prophetic moments; thus the vitality of Joyce gives way to the impotence of Beckett (Hassan 39).² In Hassan’s familiar ideological schemata, he distinguishes modernism’s tendency to Purpose, Design, Hierarchy, and Totalization from postmodernism’s Play, Chance, Anarchy, and Deconstruction (Hassan 91).

The problematics of definition become troubling when we see that “post-modern” may be used by ideological purists as an evaluative rather than a

descriptive term to valorize writers held in esteem and to discredit those disliked. One can imagine that in this light, such important novels as John Updike's *Rabbit Run* (1960), Mailer's *An American Dream* (1964) Saul Bellow's *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1969), or Ann Tyler's *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* (1982) might never be taught or even discussed at all. These are novels that should be perceived, as Hassan infers, in terms both of their continuity and discontinuity with modernism, so that we see "sameness and difference, unity and rupture, filiation and revolt" (Hassan 88). In his instructive set-up essay to his analysis of Mailer's *Ancient Evenings* (1983), "Toward a New Synthesis," Robert Begiebing distinguishes the postmodern novel as a closed system or word game, while the modern exists as a moral force in the world (8, 9). Patricia Waugh sees the latter novels ultimately "making peace" with realism, despite their occasional metafictional leanings (Waugh 19).

While to date no one has conceived a definition of post-postmodernism about which everyone can agree, we hear such terms as "Post-Millennialism," "Digi-Modernism," "Pseudo Modernism," and "Meta-Modernism." The last of these, "Meta-Modernism," nicely frames the new fiction Begiebing associates with Mailer's achievement in *Ancient Evenings*. While we see Mailer using "Metafiction" in *An American Dream* and *Ancient Evenings* in the familiar sense of fiction about itself, exposing itself as artifice or construction, "Meta" in this instance is taken from Plato's *metaxy*, which denotes a movement between opposite poles as well as beyond them. In Begiebing's view *metaxy* "rescues the referent" (Introductory Chapter to Synthesis 18)—that is, disputes the postmodern notion that language has no relationship to the real world outside the text.³ This evokes the debate between Jean-Francois Lyotard and Jürgen Habermas about postmodernism's dismantling of hierarchies or absolutes of order and meaning. Lyotard argues for the more radical or "purist" form of postmodernism of Derrida and Foucault, which braces itself for a life without truth, standards, ideals, believing that it is a moral necessity not to apply modern totalizing principles to synthesize or resolve ambiguity. Habermas on the other hand expresses the concerns of the Meta-Modernists and Begiebing in particular that Lyotard's brand of postmodernism represents a new crisis of art's relationship to society, in which the artist's refusal to assume a moral position discourages ethical concerns, inviting moral anarchy (*A Postmodern Reader* 5–7).⁴

My purpose here is to extend and slightly tweak Begiebing's application of "Meta-Modernism" in *Ancient Evenings* to *An American Dream*—Mailer's

use of key elements in both literary traditions as a means to transcend the burden of modernism and postmodernism's allegedly polarized intellectual heritage. Relevant both to Begiebing's view of the ending to *Ancient Evenings* and my reading of *An American Dream*, Habermas argues that the "project of modernity" still needs to be completed and defends the moral imperatives of modernism to "free humanity from injustices, to extend equality to the oppressed," and to do so by encouraging clear and rational discourse (*A Post-modern Reader* 5). While both ideologies work in their respective ways to advance the cause of democracy, evincing Meta-Modernism's "pragmatic idealism"—doubt as well hope, relativism as well as truth (Vermeulen and van den Akker 1–14)—I suggest that in *An American Dream* Mailer does less to "balance" (Begiebing 21) contending ideologies than, consciously or inadvertently, to challenge modernism's preference for transcendence—to interrogate and disrupt modernity's quest for assurances in order to create a more active, personal, and creative interaction with the text, an aesthetic that is "after yet by means of modernism" (Furlani 713).⁵

Looking back to the more traditional realism of Hemingway and Faulkner, and ahead to the more radically experimental prose of Barth and Pynchon, *An American Dream* takes its hybrid character from such familiar modern elements as wasteland void, the exploration of Conrad's heart of darkness, the existential response to chaos, as well as from such postmodern features as a self-reflexive style, radical tropes central to the novel's metaphysical fantasia, a focus upon psychopathic violence, and its frequent use of parody. Mailer was premature in calling Hemingway the last of the American romantics (*Of a Fire on the Moon* 23). In *An American Dream*, when Rojack asks himself, "Do you want to know something about love at last?" he answers with the absolutism of Hemingway's Frederic Henry, "Yes . . . of course I do, I want love." "If you fail at love," Rojack follows, "you lose more than you can know" (128). Suggesting, however, the epistemological problematics of a Beckett or Barth, we see lots of things in Rojack's uncertain world he cannot know, a "dialectic of uncertainty," Rojack says, "where lies lead to truth, and truth begets the shimmering of lies" (10). The latter is a remark we might encounter in Fowles' *A Maggot* (1965) or Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* (1962). In opposition to the satiric portrayal of love and sex by more intrinsically postmodernist writers, for whom love is usually a target of ridicule, Rojack evokes a modernist universe of purpose and design, determinacy and transcendence (Hassan 91) when he argues that to be in love

you could not find a better purpose in life, the “reward for which to live” (208). We think of the similarly wounded Lieutenant Frederic Henry when Rojack claims, “love was a mountain (Kilimanjaro?) which was climbed with a good heart and a good breath: one was brave and the other was true” (199). As with Henry and Catherine Barkley, Rojack and *his* one true love, the blond and nubile Cherry, redolent of honeysuckle, of new beginnings, look to each other for meaning and coherence. In their own version of the “separate peace,” Stephen declares, “Too late to save the country,” but, “we have something else.” “Yes. Yes we do,” Cherry agrees (199). “She was my sanity,” Rojack says, “simple as that” (203). Rojack’s allegiance to hierarchal modernist values, what Derrida calls “transcendental signifieds” causes Rojack to conclude, “if one wished to be a lover,” the “iron law of romance” was that one must take “the vow to be brave” (203).

Like Charlie Van Doren in the movie *Quiz Show*, half poet-professor, half captive of easy material lures, Stephen Richards Rojack possesses the divided soul so familiar to readers of modern American literature—Wharton’s Newland Archer, Anderson’s George Willard, Fitzgerald’s Nick Carraway, Faulkner’s Quentin Compson, Miller’s Loman, Lewis’ Babbitt, and Updike’s Rabbit. Willard speaks for all when he says, “One shudders at the thought of the meaninglessness of life while at the same instant . . . one loves life so intensely that tears come into the eyes” (*Winesburg, Ohio* 135). All are seduced innocents whose betrayals result as much from their own innate corruptibility and Mailer-like struggles with despair as from the material wasteland that defrauds them, Daisy’s tainted green light, Eckleberg’s hollow eyes.

Mailer invokes his familiar metaphysical aesthetic of a primitive God at war with a technological Devil to explain America’s schizophrenic soul, one that continues the tradition of social criticism of these earlier novels in which good and evil exist as polar opposites, albeit sometimes more ambiguously. With Eliot’s *The Waste Land* evidently in mind, Mailer presents Rojack both as Eliot’s Grail-Knight—a decorated war hero with proven heroic capabilities, and the impotent Fisher King, whose war wound very near the groin has left him with a limp, feeling, as he says, spiritually “stifled” (20), a hollowness that results less from the war than as with Gatsby seeking the wrong grail in unholy places, an American wasteland of debased spiritual longings and defiled natural goodness.

Rojack confesses to “scuffing and humping” for three hundred dollars for a spot appearance on a television show and seven hundred for a lecture to

the Ladies Auxiliary in Long Island (20, 21). In a world he hates, kept alive by gossip and greed, Rojack like Eliot's hollow men builds his personality upon a void, a potential suicide, filled with Sartre's "nausea" (13). When Rojack explains that he has never felt more dead or sick to life, that "Nothing noble seemed to remain of me" (13), one thinks of Eliot's lament, "We who were living are now dying with a little patience" (*The Waste Land*, L 329–330). Other than success with petty causes advertised in the *New York Times*, battles with Fluoridation, and Health care for the aged, all that props up this frustrated Grail-Knight in his postwar despair is his wife's inheritance and his addiction to her sexual genius, his drug, he says, without which he would topple like clay (17). Deborah, herself, epitomizes wasteland rottenness. Reminding us a little of Daisy Buchanan, a little of Fitzgerald's Myrtle, Rojack tells us, "I seduced a girl who would have been bored by a diamond as big as the Ritz" (8).

Deborah's favorite game is taunting Rojack with images of whorehouse sex with former lovers, filling him with agonizing self-doubt, a wound that further drains the Fisher King (at one time Rojack, as congressman, aspires to be President) of vitality and hope. In this version of Eliot's "Fire Sermon," as Deborah gives off an odor of rot and violence, Rojack feels fire spreading through him: "It was like the scent of the carnivore in a zoo" (29, 30). Suffering from a chronically inflamed uterus, Deborah produces a child with the sign of a bat on her belly. Rojack wonders whether his best friend, an investment broker, isn't "banging" his "blessed Deborah five times a year each of the last eight years" (9). Shades of ape-necked Sweeney.

Rojack's associations of Deborah with a background of money, fear, and blood extend to the larger American wasteland her family helps produce, a ruined Eden of machines and industrial horrors. This echoes such classic modernist indictments of mechanical force as Adams' "The Dynamo and the Virgin" (1900) and Frank Norris' *The Octopus* (1901). Norris writes, "I heard from clear across the city, over the Hudson in the Jersey yards, one fierce whistle of a locomotive which took me to a train late at night hurling through the middle of the west, its iron shriek blighting the darkness. One-hundred years before, some first trains had torn through the prairie and their warning had congealed the nerve. 'Beware,' said the sound. 'Freeze in your route—behind this machine comes a century of maniacs and a heat which looks to consume the earth. What a rustling those first animals must have known'" (131). No coincidence, then, that Rojack's romance with Deb-

orah, the seemingly doomed love he identifies as the very essence of being, should have begun in the back seat of a car on a deserted factory street. The image suggests Eliot's desert of lust as well as countless scenes of machine dehumanization in Dreiser and Farrell, Lewis and Dos Passos.

While Rojack will ultimately look to himself for the source of evil that corrupts his environment, Deborah, whom Rojack calls "a ministering angel" of evil (26), and her father, Barney Oswald Kelly, the "buried maniac who runs the mind of the city" (82), are directly associated with the mechanical violence that guts the American earth. Like Deborah, Kelly's body gives off a "radiation of fire" (254); his heart is "like electronic wind" (238). A Presbyterian who makes a loveless marriage of convenience, his path to power is that of a ruthless capitalistic speculator who exploits those who beg them to take their money, their invention, their wives. When Kelly confesses his incestuous relationship with Deborah, his "devotion to the goat" (253), Rojack sees them as a hot burning two-backed beast, a grotesque perversion of the dream of love he seeks. Rojack believes he must defeat them both or complete the drift to worldly aspirations that tempts him by joining Deborah's unholy family.

It is his murder of Deborah, strangling and hurling her from the padded jungle of their apartment that Rojack feels is his "raid on the Devil" (45), an exorcism of the brute tyrant who lives in Deborah, who sucks the marrow from his bones (17). Killing her, he feels, he can get his center back, freeing his soul's promise of a more honest and vital existence. After her death, he experiences a paradoxical state of grace he has never known before. As with his earlier killing of German soldiers during the war, Deborah's murder, a "passing into death" (94) takes him into the inner space of his own soul's underworld. It is a Dantesque descent into Hawthorne's or Conrad's heart of darkness, a descent that informs him that the rot he sees in Deborah exists as well in him, that it was a crime to have pushed Deborah into the morgue. Deborah's apartment adumbrates the deeper jungle into which Rojack plunges. He senses a swamp where animals feed on the flesh of other creatures and proceeds to listen. The rustle of the snake he hears is in his own heart. He feels beasts stirring and experiences wave after wave of rot and pestilence and nausea.⁶

More so than with earlier victims of America's failed Eden, Rojack recognizes that the corrupted Eden of machinery and greed he sees as Satan's work emanates from the Devil within as well as without. Despite this knowl-

edge, he imagines himself a Grail Knight at war with pure evil in the world outside himself. Asking whether he was brave enough, he hopes the murder and outlandish disposal of Deborah's body empowers him to cross the literal underworld of New York to his meeting with an even more malignant force. During his mythic journey to the Waldorf and his meeting with Kelly, Rojack's allegorical contests are those of wit and ideas, as well as fists, knives, and razor blades. They take him into New York City's criminal underworld and encounters with a Mafioso nightclub boss, his henchman Romero, a seedy policeman named Roberts, Rojack's girlfriend's former lover, Shago, a black jazz singer full of hatred, and finally, Deborah's father. Like Anderson's George Willard, Hemingway's Jake Barnes, and Fitzgerald's Nick Carraway, each confrontation empowers Mailer's stifled, determined quester with courage for greater terrors to come.

Remembering Shago's characterization of Deborah as Satan's Daughter, Rojack decides he was spitting in the face of the Devil. At the Waldorf, the literal summit of that mountain Rojack said that he needs to brave in the name of love, he feels Kelly's presence in a room near the top of the Towers. Armed with an umbrella as his sword, Rojack declares he could have founded a religion whose errand carries him directly into an antechamber of hell. Linking the Devil with the rich and the powerful, the Waldorf's lobby appears to Rojack as a gold fort under a fake sky. Snakes are present in a garden landscape. There are hints that "the First Lady" has just been there. On fiery red walls above the red carpet are paintings of the country's founding fathers—Franklin, Jackson, Lincoln, Cleveland, Washington, Grant, implying that a once glorious republic has now gone to hell. Rojack sees the space as dead and empty, reminding him of the exit of a man who has lost a million in an hour.⁷

Rojack's appointment with Kelly infers an allegorical war between good and evil, and a Dantesque descent and Pilgrim's ascent. "It's as if," Rojack says, "I were going out to do war with him . . ." (248). Later they face each other like two hunters in the midnight of a jungle. At one point on his ascent through burning air past crypts and abysses of gloom he senses "absolute" evil. Linking the summit and hell as equally demonic kingdoms, Rojack has the impression of moving through a tunnel rather than rising in a shaft (208). Paying the doorman not with a honeyed biscuit but with five dollars, Rojack contemplates the thirty-plus flights to Kelly's apartment with "a mountaineer's fatigue" (206). "It seemed too heroic," he says, "to mount

those fire stairs, go through locks and ambushes, up through vales of anathema exuding from the sleep of the wealthy; and night detectives to be encountered” (207). Yet this, he says, is what he must do. He remembers that love was the reward for which to live, and that love demanded this braving of hell. Rejecting the corrupted Eden of machinery and greed he sees as the Devil’s work, he decides it was better to fail than submit to fear.

If not the Devil, himself, Kelly appears at least the Devil’s agent. He sits enthroned amid medieval shields and coats of arms, a fire blazes and he smells of lime water and carnal rot, the “congregated odor of the wealthy” (217). He has direct knowledge of Rojack’s religious beliefs, that “God,” as he says to Rojack, is “engaged in a war with the Devil, and God may lose” (236).⁸ Associating himself with The Pope, Aristocrats, slave owners, and manufacturers (235), Kelly advises Rojack that “God and the Devil are very attentive to the people at the top,” adding that, “There’s nothing but magic at the top” (246).

On the one hand we associate Mailer’s view of God, an afterlife, and transcendental spiritual values with modernists like Eliot, Flannery O’Connor, Evelyn Waugh, and John Updike. Yet as with these other skeptic-believers, Mailer’s faith appears less rationale than as a personal rejection of Sartre’s atheist existentialism, a need to believe rather than belief, itself. Mailer imagines Sartre saying, “We can live with the absurd and ask for no reward. That is because we are noble enough to live with emptiness, and choose a course that we are even ready to die for. And we will do this in whole defiance of the fact that, indeed, we have no footing. We do not look to a Hereafter” (*The Big Empty* 204). His respect for Sartre’s virtuosity aside, Mailer’s unwillingness to accept an absurd universe aligns him with modernism’s quest for absolutes and, as Begiebing’s discussion of reincarnation in *Ancient Evenings* makes clear, even earlier transcendental religious traditions. Mailer spurns Sartre’s desacralized existentialism not only because it robs the cosmos of ultimate meaning and purpose, but because it renders futile a lifetime of struggling to learn and evolve. “We are here for good purpose, or there is no reason whatsoever for us” (205).

Begiebing explains that Mailer’s elaboration of reincarnation and Karma in *Ancient Evenings* climaxes the author’s spiritual lessons of a lifetime—death and life as a continuum in which the quality of one’s next existence depends upon what one has learned or earned in the previous life. In the spirit of meta-modern skeptical positivism, Mailer concedes that souls can’t know

if they will be reborn, but as an act of existential choice Mailer hopes so. This is the meta-modernist's hopeful skepticism, the "informed naivety" or "pragmatic idealism" of which Vermeulen and van den Akker speak. I argue in "The Existential Sublime: Mailer's *The Prisoner of Sex*" that it is impossible to know whether Mailer expects us to embrace his mystical aesthetic literally or as intuitive speculation. What matters is the wondrous metaphorical potential of his God/Devil cosmology—the power of Mailer's towering metaphors and apocalyptic conceits to provoke thought and inspire a more expansive and creative perception of life's possibilities.

Here it is we begin to see that if Mailer's characters do not exist at post-modernism's outer limits, those set, for instance, by Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie Sarraute, Beckett, or Italo Calvino, there is sufficient "magic" in Mailer's fictional world and tendencies to the bizarre to indicate a marked relationship with the magical realism of Marquez or Toni Morrison, and the fabrications of Vonnegut and Barthelme. Mailer uses Rojack's meta-modern simultaneous departure from and perpetuation of realism to interrogate repressive modernist tendencies to closure and hierarchal values in his own work, as well as in the works of the modernists he parodies. Yet Rojack's dogged modernist quest for order and transcendence persist through much of the novel. Though Rojack teaches a seminar in Voodoo and believes in spirits, omens and portents, and even that he can fly, he ironically longs for the less complex world, the simpler truths of his literary predecessors. He continues thinking of Cherry in terms of modernist absolutes, Jung's redemptive female force, looking to her as an earlier, purer America, an ennobling presence who makes him feel he has to be brave and good (164). "I wanted to be free of magic," he says, "the tongue of the Devil, the dread of the Lord, I wanted to be some sort of rational man again, nailed tight to details . . . blind to the reach of the seas" (255).⁹ Even though his religious beliefs are predicated upon mystery, a belief in spirits, wizards, and demons, mystery actually terrifies him. "I had a sudden hatred of mystery," he says. "I wanted to be in a cell, my life burned down to the bare lines of a legal defense" (162). Longing for Hemingway's simplicities of feeling and belief, he explains about his feelings for Cherry, "God, I wanted to pray, let me love that girl and become a father, and try to be a good man, and do some decent work. Yes, God, I was close to begging, do not make me go back . . . to the charnel house of the moon" (162). Rojack's religion, a view of the cosmos in which one's smallest acts or most distant events are intimately related, would seem to evoke

the tight-knit and meaningful universe of Yeats or Eliot, in which everything has universal significance. For instance, Rojack senses God in the blue eyes of the German soldier he kills. He hears echoes of soul and spirit even in food and clothes, or thinks he does. "I was trying to calculate," he says, "how a shirt might have a spirit which laundries smashed and tender ringers restored" (102). Not only does Rojack wish to flee these mysteries, he wants to know what is real, "what is most true" (65), as if the world were bound by the accuracies and probabilities of the realist tradition rather than the fantastic extremes of postmodernism.

Rather than legal or psychological certainties or unambiguous signs from his primitive God, the "iron law of romance" to which Rojack had expected to adhere takes on the uncertainties and indirections of meaning in Beckett and Barth, Lessing and Fowles. Appropriate to the description of Cherry as a "potential creation" (183), her multiple potential selves evoke a divided but more complex Daisy Buchanan.¹⁰ Rojack's exploration of good and evil causes him to decide that instruments of detection were either inaccurate or unverifiable, that he must settle for "the incalculable difficulty of ever knowing what is true . . ." (10). What messages Rojack gets from his unknowable spirit voices remind us more of Robbe-Grillet's labyrinths than Hemingway's bullfight arenas—of Marquez's metaphysical conundrums than of Faulkner's woods—Pynchon-like mysteries "fathered by the collision of larger mysteries, something so hopeless to determine as the edge of a cloud, or could it be, was it a mystery even worse, something between the two, some hopeless no-man's land from which nothing could return but exhaustion?" (162). Wondering whether Deborah might have been a double agent, a spy within a spy, Rojack feels mysteries revolving into mysteries, knowing that he would never learn a tenth of what had really happened.

While this faltering Grail-Knight looks for order, a sign from God, these spirit voices from the great unknown threaten chaos instead. The voice of the wind comes to him from "every angle" (25). Diane Cafagna argues for definitive meanings in Mailer's moon imagery—that the moon along with Ruta's anus and the desert signifies sterility, unproductiveness, and death (Cafagna 4). Yet the powers of Rojack's moon are untrustworthy, helping him cross the city safely one minute, but speaking to him as an assassin the next. He feels lost, his vision faded: "Right or wrong, I did not know." (260). "Am I now good?" he wonders. "Am I evil forever?" (38). Thinking of his murdered wife Deborah as evil, he wonders whether goodness might come

disguised as evil or contrarily if the church was actually an agent of the Devil. Who was in communion with whom? (242). When he tries to understand love as an absolute, he wonders whether love might not disguise itself as the art of the Devil. Remembering his love for Cherry and his capacity for murdering his wife, he recognizes that love and violence often run in the same blood.¹¹ When he asks for a sign from God but realizes that it is only into the ambiguous deeps of himself that he cries, he invokes that epistemological veil between mind and reality so familiar to us in Barth or Pynchon, Vonnegut or Beckett, truth obscured by uncertain senses, unreliable memory, kaleidoscopic violence, schizophrenic disconnection, what Rojack calls free flights of paranoia and the confusions of multiple identity. Reminding us of Barth's Todd Andrews (*The Floating Opera*), Rojack suffers blackouts from his war injury that cloud his ability to know what is real. He thinks he smells Deborah's breath; her green eye flies into his eye, haunting him when he's with Cherry, and he asks, "was it real?" (259). He wonders whether lights in the bar actually dim or he imagines it. "Evil says what evil sees," he says, but confesses "I didn't know exactly what I was saying" (108). Does Rojack really possess an evil eye, are his supposed wondrous powers any more real than Morrison's Beloved or Vonnegut's Tralfamadorians, or are they flights of paranoia, assumptions of magic that allow him to think he shoots psychic arrows into the toes of a bully and into Cherry's womb?

If this dubious Grail-Knight's perceptions of absolute love and absolute courage are blurred by multiple voices without, if it is true that a man never has anything but empty space between his certainties (149), he must contend as well with equivocating voices within, not merely a will divided against itself, "a mind racing between separate madnenses" (183), but "a nest of separate personalities" (97). Epitomizing Cynthia Ozick's contention that the most distinguishing characteristic of postmodernism is the absence of a stable, ordering consciousness, Rojack exclaims, "I had opened a void—I was now without a center . . . did not belong to myself any longer" (27). Later he acquiesces to complex, multiple identities as college professor, television performer, marginal socialite, police suspect, lecher, and newly minted lover of a thrush named Cherry. To these alternative selves he adds war hero, ex-congressman, and author of a book on existential philosophy. Just who perceives what?

Just as Rojack wonders about his own fragmented selves, even whether he is real, he questions his need to fit others into a simplistic metaphysical frame

where evil imprisons good, dark contends with light—the righteousness that leads to psychopathic violence and even to murder. Whereas his habit was to think of Cherry, Deborah, Kelly, and the black jazz singer Shago consisting not of multiple presences, but polar opposites—Cherry as money counter or clean and decent, Deborah as queenly or witch-like, Shago as cannibal or Buddha (190), Kelly as a chaplain or agent of the Devil, he discovers numerous personalities in these people. Shago has, for instance, “twenty faces.” Rather than evil incarnate, Kelly is pitifully human, a ruthless speculator no worse perhaps than Rojack, himself, suffering behind his multiple masks. The fact is that everyone and everything in Rojack’s uncertain world is more imagined than real, a product of mind that exists more as dream than as those fixed realities that fuel Rojack’s quest.

Mailer further blurs the ontological boundaries of text and reality through self-conscious tropes and parodic references. He fuses fictional characters with such actual people as Jack Kennedy, Marilyn Monroe, Grace Kelly, Marlene Dietrich, including mention of a mysterious “First Lady.” Rojack and Kennedy “double date.” Mailer’s values are grounded in instinct and emotion, mystery and darkness over the scientific and rational, so Mailer might well have authored Rojack’s lecture, “On the Primitive View of Mystery” (158–59). But Mailer’s fantastical metaphors, a familiar feature of post-modern linguistic game playing announce the novel’s artifice more boldly yet. Rojack refers to “. . . the charnel house of my balls” (41), to the odor of a shirt as smelling like “a school of dead fish” (38), to Tony’s voice sounding like “the suppressed clangor of a sewer cover being lifted from its hole and dropped to the asphalt” (115), to fixing his tie as like “snuggling a ship to the wharf . . . my fingers ran in and out of the interstices of this Windsor double-hitch like mice through . . . rigging” (38). “Dread worked up through my middle,” he says, “like the gray water in the machines of a midnight laundry” (36). “I cried within like a just-cracked nose might shriek for cement” (131). Making love to Cherry is like “bicycle riders caught in the wave of lap after lap around a track.” Begiebing refers to Mailer’s hyperbole as “super-signification,” a world of “charged interconnections, correspondences, and meanings” appropriate to Mailer’s visionary leaps of imagination (Synthesis 14).

Throughout the text, Rojack and others refer to their versions of reality as story or film, magic or dream—that is, fictional inventions constructed, embellished, or revised by imagination. Rojack invents for detective Roberts a “picture” of what had happened with Deborah, adding that to him the pic-

ture was real. Underscoring postmodernism's pluralistic versus centered identity, Rojack says, "But all that were parts which I as a young actor was playing" (7). He describes his life as "a five-act play" (10). Elsewhere there are references to masks, the staging of life, and life as film. In an atmosphere of violence and crime at the police station, Rojack reports, ". . . it was only in movies I had ever seen this . . . before." (77). Later, "I was watching a film of a courtroom." (86). He thinks of movie stars who, as great lovers on the screen, capture the love of women they have never seen, but who are homosexuals in their private lives. The most frequent and thematically important reference to reality as illusion or product of mind comes as life as dream. "I was far into myself," Rojack discovers, "and universes wheeled in a dream" (31). Elsewhere, "I could have . . . allowed myself to step into the anteroom of a dream" (80)." And, "There was intimation . . . one could recover only in a dream . . ." (217). Most significantly, "There was architecture to eternity which housed us as we dreamed" (204).

The implication is that rather than existing as a closed script with fated parts to play, life, "the architecture to eternity" (242) is something we invent, as mysterious, dynamic, and open to imaginative creation as the hocus-pocus of films or stories-good and evil, love and death, cowardice or courage existing less as absolutes than as human potential. Here it is that meta-modernism's subversion of modernist certitude yields a reading that is surprisingly affirmative. Whether we choose to murder or create, dreaming dreams of courage and love, as Rojack does with Cherry, or of wasteland corruption and betrayal, like Kelly or Deborah, a world of junk yards and "dead empty space," or like the hood Roberts, looking like a prosperous real estate executive sees his life as a movie of the all-American boy, it is we for better or worse who do the dreaming. When the chairman of Rojack's department at the university describes Rojack as a creative intelligence in the Department who inspires respectable people with deep-seated uneasiness, he is also describing the author's meta-modernist sensibility. Mailer assures readers' "uneasiness" by refusing us the comfort of simple meanings or an ending that tells us what we are finally to think of this text, Rojack's dreams, or the future of the American dream, itself. Like Rojack's dream of recapturing his Cherry and what she means to him, a more innocent, more vital "national creation," the text like God's undecided cosmos is both ambiguous and incomplete, its meanings never static, but alive and mysterious. "Like any tale which could take ten books," says Rojack, "it is best to quit it by a parenthe-

sis—less than ten volumes might be untrue” (2). Rojack describes his metaphysics hidden “in the twenty volumes I had not written” (204).¹²

The novel’s closing pages are filled with contending images of hope and despair, rebirth and decay, a whiff of heaven, a whiff of the tomb, that resist Rojack’s earlier longing for easy or orderly resolutions. As yet, the wasteland remains unredeemed. Hinting probably of the death of Marilyn Monroe, Cherry dies not in childbirth like Catherine Barkley, although she is pregnant, but beaten to death in a jealous rage by her former lover, Shago Martin. When Rojack places an unexplained call to his old friend Jack, illusion and reality fuse in the phantasmagorical blur we feel watching the Simpson murder trial unfold. Fiction prefigures reality in its unreality. Even Rojack’s final heroic gestures mock his role as Grail-Knight, his illusion of pure good at war with pure evil. When Rojack braves the one-foot wide parapet thirty stories high outside Kelly’s apartment, walking its sides in a dangerous wind, it is the intuitive moon rather than the voice of reason that inspires him. Underscoring what Fitzgerald says in his famous “Crack-Up” article about the test of a first-rate intelligence, the will to accept contradictions, to seek hope in the midst of bleakest despair (69). Rojack tells us that the secret to his sanity had become “the ability to hold the maximum of impossible contradictions in one’s mind” (158).

Like American heroes of old, Huck and Nick Adams, Frederic Henry and Nick Carraway, Rojack lights out for the frontier, but one with an even more uncertain future, a future in which even the atmosphere contains ambiguous portent. It was close to April, and as it rains Rojack “feels the smell of wet grass coming up through the night” (256). But the desert behind him is burning hot. The promise of renewal is undercut by the sight of the earth sucked dry by the madness of machines and Pynchon’s rockets. “It was hopeless,” he says, “to know if one could go on to the end . . . or if madness would burn up out of that rent in the hinge” (268). The landscape of America’s superhighway is a junkyard of mass production. But, as in a dream, he hears Cherry’s lovely voice calling to him, encouraging him to continue, telling him that “the moon is out and she’s mother to me” (269). He feels something like sane, again, yet “Souls can’t know if they’ll be reborn” in an uncertain universe where chaos seems to reign (213). But all is creation. Even death, Rojack says, is a creation (7). Thus informed, like Huck or Nick Adams, Nick Carraway or even Todd Andrews, Rojack will remain in the float, will continue to beat on against currents of death and despair that al-

most swallows him.¹³ In the great postmodern “unknown” (or is it modern?) in “the great dialectic of uncertainty” (10), under the power of the moon to dream, all was possible.

So what do we conclude, or create, or dream of this novel? That it is more interrogative or declarative, faithful to the modernist tendency to closure, or devoted to disturbance? Located more at the realist end of Waugh’s metafictional spectrum, or at the fabulatory end occupied by Beckett and Robbe-Grillet, or somewhere in the middle? Can we agree that meta-modernism’s appropriation of modernism and postmodernism, its combination of hope and despair frees us from the limitations of one lens only, energizing our creative imagination as active participants on Mailer’s existential battlefield? Or should we say, along with Eddie Gucci, “The more you learn the more you know there are never any answers, just more questions” (227).¹⁴

NOTES

1. Historically, no doubt with the nightmare of the Nazi death camps and the holocaust of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in mind, Hassan says we may imagine that post-modernism began in or about September 1939. I suggest that American postmodernism becomes established in novels like Heller’s *Catch 22* (1961), Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* (1962), Pynchon’s *V* (1963), and Mailer’s *An American Dream* (1964). For these writers Yeats’ beast was at the door, the war, the death camps signifying a consciousness of the absurd in human affairs and a vision of man’s incalculable capacity for savagery. In “The White Negro” Mailer writes, the war “presented a mirror to the human condition which blinded anyone who looked into it . . . For if tens of millions were killed in concentration camps . . . one was obliged . . . to see that no matter how crippled and perverted an image of man was the society he had created, it was nonetheless his creation . . . and if society was so murderous, then who could ignore the most hideous of questions about his own nature?” (*Advertisements For Myself* 338). No question runs deeper to the existential heart of Mailer’s work.
2. In her marvelously succinct discussion of essential differences between modernism and post-modernism, Cynthia Ozick writes that Yeats’ ruptured, center-less, “no man’s land” of smashed assumptions and literary guarantees is where we are now. No longer the “sovereign maker,” a surrogate Godhead, the self-consciously fallible artist gives us only competing, man-made systems of beliefs and values, “endless pluralities” determined by cultural bias rather than transcendent truths—“no center, but a number of centers in which meaning in any final sense is “undecidable” (“About Books” 1, 2). Ozick like Lyotard, however, applauds the dismantling of absolutes of order and meaning, literature that is inherently “authority-less” as democracy’s greatest friend, the surest means of creating a continuously open and free society that respects difference and otherness.

3. Plato's term "metaxy" and Begiebing's term "praxis" are sufficiently alike to use interchangeably. Both indicate engagement with the world.
4. See Begiebing's "Introductory Chapter to *Toward a New Synthesis*" for a fuller account of differences between the two traditions, postmodernism as "moral revelation," and postmodernism as a "self-sufficient, self-justifying universe."
5. By "inadvertent" I mean that the text's subversion of modernism's longings for metaphysical certainties spring inevitably from Mailer/Rojack's anguished inner debate between hope and despair, what Begiebing calls the central conflict in *Ancient Evenings* between vitality and entropy.
6. The descent motif is equally prominent in *Ancient Evenings*.
7. Just as Mailer traces the spiritual failure of the American Dream back to its historical roots, Begiebing shows *Ancient Evenings* portraying the Twentieth Century failure of democratic ideals, the corrupting nature of wealth and power, in still more timeless, universal terms. In terms of proportion and thematic enlargement, I suggest *An American Dream* stands in relation to *Ancient Evenings* as *A Portrait of the Artist* does to *Ulysses*. Their essential difference, however, draws a stark contrast between literature before World War Two and after. The quest for wholeness of Joyce's hero concludes on a resoundingly positive note, while Mailer's Rojack and Menehetet remain in a condition of painful disequilibrium, at best a meta-modernist state of chastened idealism.
8. In his chapter on existentialism in *The Big Empty*, Mailer makes clear that his God/Devil cosmology is more an assumption—a platform for "interesting speculations" than a fact. Such a God is "an artist, not a lawgiver," a God who suffers the uncertainties of existence as much as humans do and needs their help for completion. "We may succeed or fail—God as well as us . . . The end remains open . . . but human tragedy may well be our end" (203–07). See my essay, "Identity Crisis: A State of the Union Address" for evidence of Mailer's deepening pessimism about America's future. "There's just too much anger here," Mailer says, "too much shock, too much identity crisis" (373).
9. The novel's extensive fire, sea, and bird or wing imagery qualify as meta-modern, deconstructing floating signifiers associated with creativity and renewal, but also with poison and destruction.
10. One of many Daisy/Deborah parallels, Daisy's voice has the sound of "Her voice is full of money." Deborah is "as calculating full of guile as high finance . . . she smelled like a bank" (34).
11. Mailer sees the perversion of Eros by Thanatos—a corruption of the natural and elemental by the mechanical and material—as religious as well as psychological, God at war with the Devil, Angels with Beasts.
12. Begiebing remarks that only if Mailer were to complete his Egyptian trilogy might we know whether he believes the quest for regeneration and nobility will be a living quest or a tragic one (28).

13. Just as Fitzgerald considered vitality his most valued asset, Begiebing argues that failure for Rojack or Menehetet is less important than what use one has made of one's life force against every form of dissolution (Synthesis 35, 36). Like Carraway, Mailer's hero has little choice but to beat on against the currents of entropy—greed, ambition, and the lust for power.
14. Responding to Jonathan Lethem's theory that Mailer's inability "to respond authentically" to the modern/postmodern schism explains Mailer's failure to write "The Great American Novel," Richard Brody wonders whether Mailer may simply have been by temperament "more a philosopher than a fictioner" ("Norman Mailer's True Fiction"). I of course make the case that the integrity of Mailer's meta-modern self-interrogation in *An American Dream* is authentic to its existential core. As to the question whether Mailer had written a novel that would put him in the company of Faulkner or Hemingway, Robert Lucid renders the question moot, concluding that Mailer had accumulated a body of work—novels, New Journalism, plays, meditations—whose intellectual brilliance and scope of thought was "fine enough to be called an actual realization of Mailer's soaring aspiration" (qtd. in Lennon's *Norman Mailer: A Double Life*).

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