

LETTERS IN TRANSIT:
IN SEARCH OF THE
JEWISH NORMAN MAILER

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“There’s that popular misconception of man as something between a brute and an angel. Actually man is in transit between brute and God.”

General Cummings, *The Naked and the Dead*

GROUCHO MARX USED TO TELL A JOKE about the investment banker Otto Kahn, a friend of humorist Marshall P. Wilder, who, in the parlance of the time, was a hunchback. The two were walking down Fifth Avenue and, as they passed a synagogue, Kahn turned to Wilder and said, “Marshall, you know I used to be a Jew.” Wilder replied, “Really? I used to be a hunchback.”

Everyone knows that Norman Mailer used to be a Jew, and in some sense always remained a Jew, although throughout his long career his ambivalent relationship to his Jewish heritage underwent many fascinating twists and turns. At the midpoint of his life Mailer famously stated in *The Armies of the Night* that of all the descriptions that applied to him—“radical intellectual, existential philosopher, hard-working author, champion of obscenity”—the one personality he found “absolutely insupportable” was that of “the nice Jewish boy from Brooklyn” (*Armies* 134). He wrote novels frequently featuring non-Jewish heroes (often Irish or WASP) and wholeheartedly embraced nearly everything—brawling, boozing, sexual adventurism, and a fascination with criminality—that many American Jews found anathema. In the public mind, Mailer was indeed a prominent “Jew-

ish American novelist,” but not one who primarily chronicled the lives of Jewish Americans as had contemporaries Saul Bellow and Philip Roth. Yet the recently published *Selected Letters of Norman Mailer* traces the trajectory of a lifelong engagement with his Jewish identity, reminding us that Mailer indeed discussed Jewish issues in his novels, nonfiction, and many interviews. The letters offer us a fresh opportunity to look back upon some of that work and see the Jewish (and non-Jewish) Mailer that emerges.

1. FEAR AND TREMBLING

The only son of Lithuanian-born parents, Mailer came into the world on January 21, 1923, as that archetypal nice Jewish boy. His Hebrew name was Nachem Malech—literally, “King Comfort,” an ironic name for someone destined to afflict the comfortable and complacent. In his bar mitzvah speech Mailer announced that he aspired to follow in the footsteps of Jews like Moses Maimonides and Karl Marx (both of them, notably, rejected by the traditional Jewish community at large). He received a scholarship to Harvard, where he majored in engineering sciences, but spent most of his time writing fiction after discovering the great American novelists of the 1930s like John Steinbeck, James T. Farrell, and John Dos Passos. But, unlike them, he had no desire to write about the milieu in which he had grown up; he was uninterested in the lives of Jewish immigrants and their families. Instead, influenced by both Hemingway and Tolstoy, Mailer wrote stories about war even before he was drafted in 1944. The U.S. Army would provide him with a self-contained world, a hierarchy of status, and an emphatic code of behavior. World War II was a reality where bravery and violence were more important values than learning and piety.

The year 1948 saw the establishment of the State of Israel and Mailer’s debut novel, *The Naked and the Dead*, not necessarily in that order of importance, at least to Mailer. He put everything he had learned about life in his first twenty-five years into his novel about a World War II reconnaissance patrol attempting to wrest control from the Japanese of the fictional South Pacific island Anopopei. He drew heavily on the letters that he had sent to his wife Beatrice during the war, many of them included in his *Selected Letters*. But *The Naked and the Dead* is not only a war novel but also an ambitious portrait of Mailer’s generation of young (and some not-so-young) men—privates, noncoms and officers, ranging from Boston Irish Catholics, Italian-Americans, Mexican-Americans, Polish-Americans, and

WASPS, both Southern poor and Midwestern rich. And two Jewish-Americans from New York, Privates Goldstein and Roth. Although each man suffers his own private hell, Goldstein and Roth are somewhat different than the other men. They refuse to engage in the woman-bashing conversation of the rest of the platoon, and Gallagher is enraged when Goldstein would not drink the home-brewed “jungle juice” along with the others. “What if it should poison me?” Goldstein plaintively asks. Gallagher mutters “None of them drink,” and it is clear who he means by “them.” Goldstein consoles himself on such occasions with the thought, “That was all the goyim knew, to run around with loose women, and get drunk like pigs” (206).

The platoon, from General Cummings on down, is rife with casual and not-so-casual anti-Semitism. In South Boston, Gallagher had belonged to a paramilitary group called “Christians United,” dedicated to fighting communism and “the International Jew.” Yet Goldstein is one of the most kind-hearted and gentle individuals one could imagine. But when he offers sympathy to Gallagher, who has been informed by mail that his wife died in childbirth, Gallagher feels “some irritation at getting sympathy from a Jew” (450–451). He does not see Goldstein or Roth as real men. In the latrine one morning he says that “you could shoot ’em in the nuts and they wouldn’t even know the difference” (429). Although Goldstein feels angry and hopeless, he desperately tries to please Gallagher and the other non-Jews in the platoon: he catches himself from saying the word “*nochis*” when talking about his son and quickly replaces it with “joy” (451). Goldstein feels that he has to represent all Jews through his behavior, thinking, “Although he was gratified when people liked him, part of his satisfaction came from the idea that they were liking a Jew” (429). He is in fact very much like Jew that Sartre describes in *Anti-Semite and Jew* (published while Mailer was writing his novel): Goldstein allows himself to be defined as the Other by the anti-Semite, who in turn takes pride in defining himself as non-Jewish, and thereby relinquishing his freedom as an autonomous Subject, in Sartre’s terminology.

In “The Time Machine” flashback sequence about Goldstein, we see young Joey Goldstein on the Lower East Side and then Brownsville, Brooklyn, with his grandfather, Moshe Sefardnick perpetually sitting on a stool in the back of the dusty family candy store without work to do, an immigrant who is “prematurely senile” in his sixties, “drifting in Talmudic halls of thought.” (Significantly, Goldstein has no father.) The old man “has never

been able to understand America. It is too large, too fast, the ordered suppressed castes of centuries wither here" (481). He tells his seven-year-old grandson, who has just been beaten up by a gang of Italian kids, that "it's a difficult question, the meaning of a Jew. It's not a race . . . it's not even a religion any more, maybe it will never be a nation." He offers one ray of ambiguous hope: "Yehudah Halevy said Israel is the heart of all nations . . . and the heart is also the conscience, which suffers for the sins of the nation." He concludes, "Personally I think a Jew is a Jew because he suffers. Suffering makes the Jews strong so that they will endure" (481–82). But endure for what? To be beaten by gentiles in order to be the conscience of the nation? It is a bleak heritage.

After his grandfather's death Goldstein works long hours in the candy store and dreams of going to college to study engineering (as Mailer did), but can't get accepted to any. He instead sets his sights on being a welder and hopes to open his own shop someday, yet retains a Jewish "cultural prejudice" against manual labor. He is a kind and compassionate human being; the only person he ever stands up to is his possessive mother when she objects to his marrying Natalie, a "nice shy sensitive Jewish" girl (487) who aspires to being an actress and poetess. Their courtship begins well, but like so many of the marriages in the novel's flashbacks, Goldstein's is troubled, in his case by possessing a stronger sex-drive than his wife's. During their love-making he repeatedly asks "Are you warm? Are you closer now?" And she invariably tells him that she "won't be able to tonight." When Natalie embraces him in a maternal way, he angrily says, "Go away, I don't want a mother" (490). And then he feels guilty for saying it. To be a Jew is to suffer.

Goldstein and his wife become parents, put on weight, settle into a life of bowling and the Local Sisterhood and Wednesday night lectures on "best-sellers" from the local temple's young, modern rabbi. They have many friends and give generously to charities helping refugees. Perhaps the most damning comment Mailer can make about them is that "the habits of marriage lap about them like a warm bath. They never feel great joy but they are rarely depressed" (491). But Goldstein is bitter and unfulfilled, and highly alert to any threat of anti-Semitism.

Goldstein is not the kind of Jew Mailer wished to be, nor did he recommend the sexual renunciations and middle-class complacency of that kind of Jewish life to anyone else. Therefore it is of interest that he offers us a second Jewish character in the novel, Roth. As someone with a college educa-

tion, he might seem to suggest an alternate model for Jews to follow. But Roth is no model for anybody. If Goldstein is the Jew Mailer did not want to be, Roth is perhaps the one he feared he could have been if he had been without talent and a Harvard education. Roth instead has a degree from CCNY yet has been unable to find a job in New York. He attributes it to anti-Semitism, but is self-aware enough to consider his own personal failings as the cause of his unemployment. (Roth does not consider that perhaps a degree in botany is not in great demand in Depression-era New York City.) Nonetheless, Mailer makes it clear that the true cruelty of anti-Semitism, as well as other forms of bigotry, is that the member of a group that is persecuted never knows for sure if it is prejudice or lack of ability that is the cause of failure. Roth is a tightly wound ball of resentment and helplessness. His stiff body and “small humped shoulders” (576) suggest the hunchback of the Groucho Marx joke. Roth frequently wishes he had not been born a Jew and is enraged that he should be the victim of anti-Semites when he is an agnostic with no interest in Jewish matters whatsoever. It bothers him when Goldstein talks about Jewish subjects, insisting they have nothing to do with him because he’s an agnostic and considers himself “an American” (476). Roth prides himself on his intellect and aspired to a white-collar job in New York, but feels inferior watching Ridges slash at the brush: “As his powerful muscles tensed and relaxed, as the sweat laced his back, he was completely happy, absorbed in the toil, the smells of his body” (472). In contrast to the pleasure Ridges takes from his body, Roth is one of those people who is uncomfortable in his own skin. Like General Cummings, Roth has diarrhea, always a bad sign in Mailer’s books, as it is in life. Rank is no protection against the runs.

Mailer always warned against the danger of self-pity. He wrote Buzz Farber in 1988 that “Self-pity is the death of writing because we all have too much of it and so we can’t bear someone else’s” (Lennon 624). Roth’s self-pity, along with his desire to demonstrate he can be a “real man,” is what ultimately dooms him. Roth follows the small squad of men led by Croft in his mad desire to climb to the top of the massive Mount Anaka in order to evade and spy on the Japanese soldiers, but really to assert his limitless ambition, a mixture of Captain Ahab and perhaps even Moses. Roth is exhausted, his legs buckle, and he collapses on the narrow ridge of the mountain, hundreds of feet up from the nearest ground. “Get up, you Jew bastard!” Gallagher screams at him, hitting him across the back of his head (661). Yet the equally

exhausted Gallagher secretly feels the need to join Roth on the ground, the anti-Semite suddenly finding his reflection in the Other, which increases his rage. Roth's own anger drives him on, but he seethes with the thought that "It wasn't bad enough that they judged him for his own faults, his own incapacities; now they included him in all the faults of a religion he didn't believe in, a race which didn't exist" (661). He drags his body up the mountain behind Croft and the others, but he has to leap across a four-foot gap in the mountain ledge. Roth ignores the message from his own pain-wracked body, along with the courage to defy Croft, who has insisted on climbing the mountain against orders. Roth makes a last bid to be accepted as a man among men. He leaps, falls short, and Gallagher cannot catch him. Mailer's final assessment of Roth: "A little man, tumbling through space." Roth's last thought before crashing onto the rocks is: "I want to live" (666).

In contrast to Roth's pitiful end, Goldstein's inherent compassion is a saving grace. Against nearly impossible odds, he and Ridges carry Wilson, the drink-loving womanizer who gets shot in the belly by Japanese fire, in a hastily assembled stretcher down the hills and through the tangled vines and river so that the landing boat can bring him back to the base for medical treatment. Though Goldstein has made it clear that drinking any water will kill Wilson in the state his stomach is in, Ridges secretly gives the desperately thirsty man a canteen of water. As Wilson bleeds and jabbbers incoherently, Goldstein and Ridges are nearly past the point of endurance; the relentless sun, humidity, and weight of the body is too much. But getting Wilson back alive consumes Goldstein's mind, and he remembers his grandfather's quote from Yehudah Halevy that "Israel is the heart of all nations." In Goldstein's mind everything in his world has dropped away, and "Wilson was the heart now" (672).

The slow, agonizing march to the shore ends when Goldstein and Ridges repeatedly stumble and fall, lift Wilson out of the water, stagger again, and finally lose him to the rapids, the stretcher smashed against the rocks and Wilson's body swallowed by a swamp, a fitting end for a man who in life drowned himself in drink. Goldstein and Ridges are bereft; their burden is gone, but it "had been the vital thing" (491). Goldstein sits beside him, in his mind linking the death of Wilson with the suffering of all the Jews that had come to nothing. "All the ghettos, all the soul crippling, all the massacres and pogroms, the gas chambers . . . all of it touched no one, all of it was lost"

(682). The death of a fellow GI has become, for Goldstein, as important as the deaths of his fellow Jews.

Heading back to base, Goldstein thinks about his new buddy, Ridges. "There was a understanding between Ridges and him. The day they had spent on the beach waiting for the rest of the platoon had not been unpleasant." The existential reality of being reduced to the very barest necessities for existence while trying to save a fellow soldier forged a bond between them that was beyond army rank or religion or ethnicity. Goldstein thinks, "The goy friend he got was such a goy—a peasant, an outcast himself." Goldstein tells himself that Ridges is "the salt of the earth" (704).

Perhaps Goldstein was being overly sentimental. But Mailer presents the enlisted men, some of them at least, as outcasts who form a kind of Jewish people themselves, outcasts with an understanding of courage and survival, and a camaraderie that the larger world could never understand. He abundantly demonstrated the truth of a claim he would make years later in *Cannibals and Christians* that the task to "explain America to itself was left to the sons of immigrants" (96). Certainly Mailer felt that the sons of Jewish immigrants like himself were particularly well-suited to describe the increasingly uprooted and schizophrenic nature of contemporary American life, a view he would elaborate on in his essays and letters.

The immigrant fathers fared less well. The first reference to anything specifically Jewish in the letters comes when Mailer is in Paris, hot off the success of his first novel. In a chummy letter to his father, Mailer writes "when they talk French fast at me I don't think I understand them any better than if they were parleying Yiddish." With the book's success, Mailer eclipsed his father; he sternly upbraided Barney Mailer in 1949 for accumulating large gambling debts that he expected his son to pay off. In a piquant reversal of roles, Mailer told him, "You are not an English colonel but a Jewish accountant in Brooklyn . . . it is time that you grew up" (Lennon, *Letters* 87). This is merely the first instance in which Mailer would refer to his correspondent's Jewish identity as a way of putting them in their place. Mailer himself was going places.

2. DIARY OF A SEDUCER

Mailer's own identity had become more radical—and intellectually ambitious. After the critical and commercial failure of his next novel, *Barbary Shore*, and the only modest success of *The Deer Park*, he was ready to move

in a new direction. In 1957 *Dissent* published Mailer's manifesto "The White Negro: Some Superficial Reflections on the Hipster," a pivotal work in Mailer's career and one of the most controversial essays in postwar America. Mailer's distinctly personal version of existentialist thought summed up his ten years of contemplation about the atom bomb, capitalism, sex, psychoanalysis, jazz, black culture, rebellion, and his notion of "hipsterism" as a more authentic form of living in the conformist machine age. African Americans and Jews had been two of the most disparaged minorities in American society; Mailer's hipster combined what he saw as the best of both groups. It was a philosophy widely divergent from the middle-class Jewish life in which Mailer had been raised, a jazzy American Gnosticism for the Beat age. In a way, Mailer had created a new Chosen People, the hipsters who would be a light unto the square world. And being hyper-aware that they were living in the shadow of the atom bomb, they faced the same threat of sudden death as the soldiers in *The Naked and the Dead*.

Mailer elaborated on the essay and on his growing religious sense in an October 1957 letter to longtime friend Mickey Knox: "I'm not religious in the conventional way; rather I see God as being engaged in some destiny in which he may or may not succeed; and in some way this depends to a great extent on whether we succeed or do not succeed in creating more and destroying less" (Lennon 229).

Mailer's theology offered a compelling explanation to the vexing question of how a benevolent god could permit the existence of the suffering of innocents, for if He was not all-powerful, he could not necessarily prevent evil. (In the wake of the Holocaust, this issue was clearly foremost in his mind.) In fact, Mailer suggested that He had created man as an ally in the cosmic battle against dark forces that conspired to defeat Him. Mailer could be inspired by an ambitious, tormented God who did not ask for blind obedience or submission, but rather bravery and creativity in an existential drama whose final end was up for grabs.

Compared to his grand cosmology, traditional Jewish thought seemed tepid to Mailer, even when it took the secular form of Freudian psychoanalysis, immensely influential to educated middle-class Jews at the time. Mailer dramatized the conflict between his philosophy and what he considered Freud's conformist psychological approach in his 1959 story, "The Time of Her Time." The hero of *The Deer Park*, 27-year-old Sergius O'Shaugnessy, is now living in a converted warehouse loft on Monroe Street by the Brook-

lyn and Manhattan Bridges, teaching bullfighting, drinking prodigiously, bedding scores of women, and surviving in an urban jungle bounded by street gangs.

An ex-veteran, like so many of Mailer's heroes, Sergius sees himself as "the new gun in a frontier saloon," living on the edge in true hipster fashion, expecting a challenge from a knife-wielding tough at any moment. But the challenge comes from an entirely different source.

Sergius's blond hair, height, bullfighting school and proficiency in bed have given him a rep in Greenwich Village circles. "I was one of the credits needed for a diploma in the sexual humanities," he tells us, and dubs himself "the messiah of the one-night stand." (325). He picks up a Jewish NYU student named Denise Gondelman, "one of those harsh alloys" of a self-made bohemian from a middle-class home" who has "an ugly New York accent with a cultural overlay" and "all sorts of Lesbian hysterics in her shrieking laugh." She has a muscular body and long dark hair that she wears in two extended braids "like a Village witch." But Sergius is intrigued by her air of "Village chic, a certain snotty elegance of superiority." At the party where they met Sergius feels an urge to "prong her then and there" (Mailer, *Time* 327). His awareness of his working-class origins and her upward social mobility (bohemia will no doubt be left behind for the suburbs) makes him yearn to screw the pretension out of her.

But their lovemaking is like "two club fighters in an open exchange, neither giving ground," and "knowing neither the pain of punishment nor the pride of pleasure" (a phrase that recalls the Goldsteins' marriage). Sergius slaps Denise's face, which brings a cry from her and "broke the piston of her hard speed into something softer, wetter, more sly, more warm" (329). It's a battle of equals that ends in orgasm for him but nothing for her. "You're a bastard, do you know that?" she says. "Come on," he tells her, "you never made it in your life" (330).

Sergius accepts her challenge to give it another go, and feverishly works away at it for forty minutes. He knows she won't make it this time either when "the smell which came from her had so little of the sea and so much of the armpit that I breathed the stubborn wills of the gymnasium where the tight-muscled search for grace" (331). He could be describing one of the countless health clubs that blanket the country today. Exhausted, he once again takes his pleasure—but "with hatred, tight, electric, and empty"—hat-

ing her and all women “who cannot take their exercise alone” (331). (Today he might be surprised to learn they can.)

Denise confesses to him that she came closer with him than with her Jewish boyfriend, a senior at Columbia named Arthur, a passive male who complements her aggressiveness. They find satisfaction “in the oral passions” (“Jewish bonanzas of mouth love,” Sergius calls it) because “vaginally, I’m anaesthetized—a good phallic narcissist like you doesn’t do it for me” (332).

Sergius is challenged and excited by this “proud, aggressive, tense, stiff, and arrogant Jewess,” but their second night of sex amounts to little more than the first. He increasingly sees sex with Denise as a bullfight, in which he is sometimes the matador, sometimes the bull; he imagines a Mexican crowd angry at the “doubtful prissy overtures, the gloomy trim technique of a veteran and mediocre *torero* on the worst of days when he is forced to wonder if he has even his *pundonor* to sustain him” (334).

On their third night together Sergius realizes that “In a year she would have no memory of me, I would not exist for her . . . unless I could be the first to carry her stone of no-orgasm up the cliff, all the way, over and out, into the sea.” It would be a feat with the potential to console him in his later years, especially since “she does not like me.” The lapsed-Catholic Irish swashbuckler has no desire to be liked the way Goldstein and Roth did. Sergius bets on himself to win a victory that night and thereby ingest some of “her arrogance, her stubbornness, and her will” (335–36).

When Denise arrives she announces that she has been with Arthur for the previous three hours. Sergius in fact can sense “the smell of him” on her, a feminine smell, and is encouraged that “the man in her was melted by the woman in Arthur” (337). But Sergius in his excitement climaxes within a half minute and considers that Denise might be the stronger of the two of them. Refusing to accept failure, he valiantly mounts her once more, working on her “like a riveter, knowing her resistances were made of steel—I threw her a fuck the equivalent of a fifteen-round fight” (339).

When he turns her on her back again he can now smell the odor of the sea coming from her, but just as she’s about to fall back again he whispers in her ear, “You dirty little Jew.” That brings her over the top and “finally home in the water for the first time in her life.” She sobs and says, “Oh, Jesus, I made it, oh Jesus, I did” (340–41).

But in the morning there is hatred in her eyes, and she tells him, “That was a lousy thing you did last night” (341). Sergius defends himself by saying that

he gave her what she could use. She dresses, but before leaving, denies that he did a thing for her, and tells him that her analyst had explained Sergius to her. She says, "Your whole life is a lie and you do nothing but run away from the homosexual that is you." Denise is out the door before Sergius can rise out of the bed to tell her that "she was a hero fit for me" (341–342).

"The Time of Her Time" probably upsets more readers today than it did in the late 1950s. Feminist critics may be horrified by Mailer's portrayal of sex as a competition in which the man is supposed to win. (Mailer would point out that Sergius's victory depends on Denise winning as well.) Jewish critics may be uncomfortable with the Jewish self-hatred that Denise Gondelman embodies and which is the key to breaking down her sexual defenses. Yet a dispassionate critic cannot deny that the story is a compelling satire of mid-century New York Jewish bohemia, an erotically-charged prose version of a Feiffer *Village Voice* cartoon from the period, with young people trying to find love amid an urban garden of neuroses, only more intense and unsettling.

3. THE CONCEPT OF ANXIETY

Mailer still struggled to find a way to incorporate his new ideas into a novel. In a lengthy letter from August 10, 1960, to critic Diana Trilling, probably the most revealing letter he ever wrote, Mailer reflected that "being a major novelist is not a natural activity for a Jew," and that "the novel came into existence . . . as the avatar of society at the moment society developed roots too subtle for the historian to trace. The novel was the life of society up from its roots. And for a long time there were no Jewish novelists because the Jews had no roots sufficiently deep enough to support a hero No, the major Jewish novelist came in the door *after* the Second World War, and only in America . . . the Twentieth Century had ripped up all the roots, and so the Jew was in his element because he never had his own personality" (Lennon 269–70).

Mailer addressed the thorny question of how assimilated Jews can come to terms with their own Jewishness. His answer was blunt: "one not only couldn't but one shouldn't because then the only answer was to go to Israel or join the local Sisterhood" (Lennon 271). Mailer felt that a Jew was "most interesting precisely when he didn't try to become a Jew but instead became a mirror of what he admired most in his civilization, that the art of the Jew was to capture and personify the manner of his time more exquisitely than

those who were born to it” (Lennon 271). Mailer saw his presumed lack of roots as a form of freedom that allowed him to write about his time more trenchantly than those who had them. “I was able to write [*The Naked and the Dead*] because I was one of the first who could dispense comfortably with my roots, my infirmity was my strength” (Lennon 271). But now his “infirmity” was demanding that “I give myself up to changing as rapidly as possible, surrendering all hope of style or sequence, so looking instead for an existential purity.” A prose style of “classical simplicity” was no longer an option for him (Lennon 272).

Mailer finally found a way to dramatize his existential theology in *An American Dream*, his first novel in a decade. Produced as a serial for *Esquire* magazine, one installment a month for eight months, *An American Dream* was calculated to shock from the very first chapter. Stephen Rojack—part-Jewish, decorated World War II hero, former congressman, friend of JFK, talk-show host, intellectual and author—is married to the wealthy Deborah Kelly, daughter of powerful press magnate Barney Oswald Kelly (Mailer’s father Isaac Barnett was more familiarly called “Barney”). In the opening scene, Rojack argues with his wife, murders her, and then proceeds to bugger the German maid—this may have been both Rojack’s Jewish and World War II-vet sides taking charge—before setting off on a journey through the wild American night, a three-day rollercoaster ride across New York with Dostoyevsky as conductor, involving him with the police, the Mafia, Harlem nightclubs and an intense affair with a jazz singer named Cherry. The story was bound to outrage traditional moralists: while the hero of Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy* (1925) is convicted of killing his pregnant working-class girlfriend in order to marry the wealthy Sondra, Rojack murders his wealthy wife Deborah and gets away with it. Was it Mailer or Rojack’s Jewish side that said, “I believed God was not love, but courage. Love came only as a reward”? (*An American Dream* 204). Certainly it was a sentiment more in tune with the Old than the New Testament—Jehovah respected bravery and courage more than Jesus did.

It was expected that traditional Jews and Christians would be appalled, but the most stinging criticism came from that group of New York, largely secular Jewish, intellectuals often referred to as “the Family.” Philip Rahv titled his review in the *New York Review of Books*, “Crime Without Punishment.” In a letter to his friend editor Jason Epstein that month, Mailer attempted to defend his hero: “Rojack is neither mad nor sane, but in that

extreme state of fatigue and emotional exhaustion where the senses are crystal clear and paranoia substitutes its vertical salience for the horizontal measure of daily reason, and everything takes place between a fever and a dream . . . It is, after all, not insanity but an existential state.” Mailer was now employing his definition of existentialism to describe not only his life and writing technique but the lives of his characters as well. He pointed out to Epstein that some of the reviewers “seem to give no sense at all of knowing what it is like to be on a three-day bat with something awful behind you and something fearful coming up” (339–40). It was a condition that Mailer had come to know all too well, and he was implicitly proud of the hard-won knowledge he had gained by turning away from the Jewish side of his personality and embracing the existential challenges that both traditional moralists and traditional atheists were too timid to confront.

Mailer broke with another member of the Family, Norman Podhoretz, editor of *Commentary*, a journal for which Mailer had written six articles on Martin Buber’s *Lives of the Hasidim* in 1962–63. Mailer told critic Steven Marcus in a letter on June 15, 1968, that his friendship with Podhoretz was probably over due to Mailer’s unfavorable review of Podhoretz’s memoir, *Making It*. But Mailer defended his article, writing “If I didn’t love Norman, I would have been worse but there’s something badly wrong with his book, something flaccid in the meat of it, like a suburban babe in Miami with a fur coat and a kvetchy voice” (338). Here was yet another case of Mailer implicitly equating American Jews, or at least a certain portion of them, with all that was middle class, conformist, materialistic, and vaguely contemptible. It was probably this, in addition to the bad review and Podhoretz’s subsequent move to the political right, that ultimately drove Mailer and Podhoretz apart.

4. EITHER / OR

Mailer moved even further away from the intellectual world of the Family in 1978 when he entered into a lengthy correspondence with Jack Henry Abbott, a 33-year-old convict who had spent virtually his entire life in reform schools and prison, the latter for stabbing another inmate to death. Abbott had written to Mailer from prison after reading that he was working on a book about convicted murderer Gary Gilmore, who had just been executed the year before. Here was Mailer’s chance to learn about the details of prison life for

the book that would become *The Executioner's Song* (1979), and from a convict who was conveniently alive.

Mailer was entranced by what he saw as the raw power of Abbott's letters and encouraged his aspiration to be a serious writer. But by 1979, Mailer was exhausted by the tirades of the self-educated, self-styled Marxist-Leninist inmate. In April he wrote Abbott, "There's an ideological gulf between us so profound that I do not know how long we can talk to one another as intellectuals" (517). Mailer related his early experience as a Marxist and his eventual revulsion at the logic of violence that he felt followed from its doctrines. He confessed to Abbott that "I have bogged down myself in what I consider the greater horror of having to live with the world as it is, precisely what you would call weak, intellectual, bourgeoisie self-indulgence. Jewish, no doubt, since I am Jewish. And you would sneer at it" (518).

The novelist conceded that he could never have endured even half of what Abbott had endured in his life, but argued that "Just as I don't know what it is to be a convict, you the fuck don't know what it is to be a Jew. You don't know what it is to have six million [*sic*] of your people killed when there are only twelve million them on earth. You don't know the profound and fundamental stunting of existence that got into the blood cells of every Jew after Hitler had done his work" (519).

Partly with Mailer's help, Abbott was paroled from prison in June 1981. He was already a literary celebrity, thanks to Mailer editing Abbott's letters to him and having them published as a bestselling book. But only three weeks after his release, Abbott stabbed a young waiter and aspiring actor to death in a Manhattan restaurant. Within a month he was apprehended and returned to prison for life.

That should have been the end of the story. But in April 1984, Abbott wrote Mailer that he had met with the prison rabbi and decided to learn Hebrew. Could he send him some tape cassettes to help him learn the language? Mailer counseled him that there was a distinct difference between ancient and modern Hebrew, the language of 20th century Israel. "[C]lassical Hebrew has a wonderful sound, and is indeed a very masculine language full of harsh, strong powerful tones, sounds of rocks striking against one another, rocks breaking" (580). Mailer's love of the language that he learned as a child is palpable here, but the thought of him as Jack Abbott's Hebrew teacher is dark comedy worthy of Philip Roth.

The saga ended in 2002 when Abbott hanged himself in his cell. But a

question persists: What had drawn Mailer so powerfully to Abbott? One may consider that throughout his life Mailer had earnestly embraced the least “Jewish” of pursuits: war, (before Israel showed the world how well Jews could do it) multiple marriages and womanizing (though he always denied being a real womanizer), drinking, and a connoisseur’s taste for obscenity.

For Mailer, murderous outlaws like Gary Gilmore and Jack Abbott exemplified the kind of gentile that protective Jewish parents cautioned their children to avoid; the killers could exert a strange double attraction for Mailer, as figures of American individualism run amok and as outsiders to American life—like Jewish immigrants and their children initially were.

The death of Mailer’s mother, Fanny, in 1985 inevitably reminded him of his Jewish roots. To a longtime friend Mailer wrote, “She was a prodigiously proud and stubborn woman, and I think she looked upon death as some new extortion practiced by the goyim. She was not about to give it up to them too easily” (598). If the immigrant generation of Jews feared the larger gentile world, their children, like Mailer, enthusiastically courted and even conquered it.

One trait from his upbringing that Mailer never lost was his strong work ethic, which intensified rather than diminished with age. Some thought that Mailer would finally write a novel or autobiography about his Jewish experience. Instead, he retold the gospels from Jesus’s point-of-view in his novel *The Gospel According to the Son*, effectively rewriting the Christians’ most holy book.

Mailer’s Jesus is a man very much in the Mailer style, full of dread and uncertainty; the novel is also notable as the only Mailer novel with a Jew as the main character. Mailer in conversation with Michael Lennon some years later said that “I concluded that two things happened because of the crucifixion. God lost to the Devil and, worse, he had expected to win. He thought Jesus was going to change humankind profoundly and immediately. He did not foresee the end” (*On God* 174). When the book was published in May 1997, reviewers were generally unkind to it, but John Updike, writing in *The New Yorker*, said that Mailer’s gospel was written in “a direct, rather relaxed English that yet has an eerie, neo-Biblical dignity” (Updike, quoted on Amazon web page for *Gospel*). Mailer was receiving an endorsement from one of America’s most self-consciously Christian writers. It was the latest validation in Mailer’s lifelong effort to penetrate the core of American culture. But he told aspiring writer Michael Adams in November 2002, “I’ll be eighty

soon. Don't know that I'm ready to surrender to Moses or Jesus (Lennon 707).

There were some religious traditions that he simply couldn't abide, such as prayer. As he wrote to Episcopal priest and author Malcolm Boyd in January 2005, "I haven't prayed to God since I was a child . . . I don't pray because the central metaphor I have for God is that he is a worthy, heroic and tired general and the last thing he needs is a few more complaints from his troops, which, of course, is what I believe we are . . . I loathe the species of prayer that indulges in nothing but emoluments to God. How bored God must be with all that praise if He is anything near like all good and all powerful" (717).

In this, Mailer was in synch with the old Yiddish joke in which a man who prays to God in synagogue every day is poor, with a multitude of ailments and unmarried daughters, while his brother, who never prays or goes to synagogue, is wealthy and healthy, with daughters well-married. One day the poor man asks God why his non-praying brother had received so much while he, with all his devoted prayers, had gotten so little. God abruptly says from on high: "Because you *noodge* me too much."

5. CONCLUDING UNSCIENTIFIC POSTSCRIPT

In his final years, Mailer was attempting to come to grips with the nature of anti-Semitism—his new novel told of the Devil (or more specifically, an agent of the Devil) intervening in history to shape the mind and life of the young Adolf Hitler. If some critics could not accept the premise of *The Castle in the Forest* (2007) of a Devil who is slyly and constantly working to promote evil in the world, others were able to appreciate the Mailer's storytelling device as a refreshing change from the plethora of theories that presumed to "explain" Hitler, for example, because he failed to get into art school. In the end, Mailer is telling us that the existence of evil is itself such an immense reality that the human mind cannot comprehend it.

Mailer was not blind to the very real historical forces that contributed to Hitler and the Holocaust. To poet Lloyd Van Brunt, he wrote in July that "anti-Semitism is a thousand years old. Hitler cashed a huge check that had been rattling around Europe near to forever, so the guilt applies to more than the Nazis, and to all of the Europeans" (736).

Between June 2003 and June 2006 Mailer and Michael Lennon engaged in a series of taped conversations at Mailer's home in Provincetown that

Mailer later called “philosophical reconnaissances” (Mailer, *On God* xvii), bringing to mind the reconnaissance platoon of his first novel. Only now the prize was not the island of Anopopei but the very nature of God Himself. The book was published in 2007 as *On God: An Uncommon Conversation*, just three weeks before his death. The spirited (in both senses) conversation is rich in insights about the ultimate ends of life he had been pondering his entire life. It may also be the most entertaining work of theology ever written—or in this case, spoken.

Mailer approvingly quotes Carl Jung’s assertion that “nobody can be cured of their neuroses until they find their own vision of God” (26). He makes no claim to being a theologian but a novelist who has spent his professional life studying human beings. Mailer departs from Judaism’s view of God as Lord and Lawgiver. Instead, he sees God as “a Creator, the greatest artist,” and human are “His greatest works of art” (5). Mailer reiterates his key insight that He is an “imperfect, existential God” (xvi), not All-Good and All-Powerful but a limited being with finite powers doing the best he can, with no definite idea of how it will turn out in the end.

Mailer believes that the Devil—not a metaphor but an actual being—is God’s adversary in a cosmic battle to affect the outcome of God’s unfulfilled vision. Thus many of the world’s imperfections are the result of not only God’s flaws but of the Devil’s meddling. The Devil has many resources in this war against God’s vision, particularly technology, though Mailer emphasizes that it is the technology of the electronic age, “which represents less pleasure and more power” (9). Mailer speculates that we may have lost valuable advances in our bodies and spirits by the explosive spread of technology—he speculates that God may have intended us to develop telepathy instead of television: “The ultimate aim was for every human being to be immensely creative. Being psychic as well, we would not have needed electronic communication” (116). Small wonder that Mailer spent more than a decade writing *Ancient Evenings*, his evocation of a world which lacked electronics and plastic, and believed in magic, reincarnation, and telepathy.

In the tripartite relationship of God, the Devil and human beings, Mailer confesses that “What terrifies me at times is that humans may become dominant over the other two” (30). This was the crypto-fascist General Cummings’s view of God: “You know, if there is a God, Robert, he’s just like me” (183). Yet one of Mailer’s favorite concepts is that when we work with great energy, “it’s because our best motives and our worst motives—or to put it

another way, God and the Devil—are equally engaged in the outcome and working within us” (15–16). Perhaps God’s most powerful weapon in His cosmic battle with the Devil is reincarnation, which Mailer felt was the only outcome for a human life that made sense. “[A]s a reward, we can be given a better possibility in our next life. Or we can be born into a worse one, if that is what we deserve” (21). Reincarnation sets up a cycle of partial rewards and punishments that’s more in synch with God’s unfulfilled project than traditional notions of heaven and hell.

Despite his deviation from tradition, the Jewish rituals of Mailer’s own childhood grounded his conception of God as an ultimately compassionate being. When Lennon confronts Mailer by saying, “You keep assuming God is a nice person,” Mailer answers that “It could be my conditioning. I remember my mother on Friday night praying before a lit candelabrum, praying to the *Shekhina*, a Hebrew word for the wife of God, and there were tears in her eyes. A feeling of great tenderness came from her. I think I always took it granted that God was compassionate to us” (159). This leads Mailer to recall that his mother’s father studied to be a rabbi in Lithuania—he was reading the Talmud by the age of seven. But in America he could only find a job as a butcher, though he occasionally filled in for the local rabbi when he was sick, which gave Mailer’s mother *nochis*. Echoing Goldstein’s disdain for manual labor, Mailer says, “The traditional snobbery of the Jews—it was much better to be a rabbi than a butcher” (160). Certainly there is a good Jewish joke in there.

Yet despite being both a novelist and a member of “the people of the book,” Mailer refused to accept any sacred text as the final word on any ultimate issue. Mailer’s God is too ever-changing and ceaselessly learning for such a reification of His thought. “I see no reason for a divinity to put everything into a Book and expect that to be our only guide,” adding, “If we were given free will, then the Book is an obstacle to it” (64). But he saw sacred texts as valuable if used as clues to deeper truths, not absolute statements (a view he knew was anathema to Fundamentalists of every stripe). Mailer observes that the King James Bible is inaccurate in translating the first line of Genesis as “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” The first word of the Old Testament (or Hebrew Bible, as many Jews prefer to call it) is “*barashith*” and the second word is “*bora*,” which Mailer points out translates as “out of the depths came being” (114). Mailer also notes that the King James line “The breath of God moved upon the water” mistranslates

the word “*ruach*,” which is “the fierce breath, an angry breath, God’s rage” (115). In his informal phonetic theory, Mailer says that “in English, ‘r’ almost always has to do with anger, rage, ire, fury . . . and ‘b’ is always impact” (140). So the line actually says, ‘and the rage of God roared over the waters” (114–15). Mailer is doing something subtle here, not only showing off his Hebrew education but also engaging in his lifelong rebellion against “high” English prose and again correcting the gentiles by drawing on his Jewish learning.

Mailer preferred the free-ranging arguments in the Talmud, where “there are all these efforts to find zones of compatibility between God’s laws and human needs—so the Talmud becomes the opposite of the Old Testament (and needless to say, the New Testament), where the law is, in effect, inflexible” (161). He might have added that the Talmud is a record of centuries of Jews debating and arguing; no wonder Mailer found it congenial.

Any serious discussion of God must take into account the problem of the existence of evil. In fact, Mailer admits that his conception of an existential, finite God wouldn’t have developed without the Holocaust, the Gulags, and The Bomb as examples of evil on a massive scale. He boldly speculates that “the Holocaust may have exacted a great price from God, even greater than from us” (40). But Mailer by no means minimizes the suffering of millions of innocent people. He asserts that “sudden, unexpected death is much worse than death that comes to one after a modicum of thought and fear and resolve and expectation” (170). For Mailer, the unique evil of the Holocaust (in addition, of course, to the horrendous number of lives lost) was that unlike battles where soldiers know that they might die, the Nazis cruelly told innocent people that they had to enter the “showers” in order to cleanse them of dirt and lice. When the deadly gas poured in, “they were dying with fire in their lungs and screaming, ‘You lied, you cheated me!’” (171). Mailer considers that kind of mass death, with the shock of betrayal in one’s mind during the final seconds of life, to be one of the many horrors of the Holocaust. When Lennon asks Mailer his view of the argument that evil exists because of “God’s plan,” he retorts “The first person who can show me how the Holocaust was good for God’s purposes will alter my thinking drastically” (174).

While pessimistic in the short-run—he sensed the Devil is winning—Mailer declares God may be on an odyssey not unrelated to ours. As Lennon says, Mailer vision foresees that some time in the far future, the human race

might undergo a “definitive metamorphosis of existence,” in which “human vision would join God’s vision” (84).

In short, instead of a blind and unquestioning faith in a perfect deity, Mailer offered an existential God who does not demand my unwavering faith but prefers instead that we look to find, despite God’s flaws and ours, a core of mutual respect as we set out together to attempt to create a viable vision that can lead us into the unforeseeable future out there with its galaxies, its light-years, its enigmas, and ultimately, let us hope, its availability. “Perhaps the greatest gods of the cosmos are also on a search and may not be wholly indisposed to welcome us” (183).

Stirring words. If Mailer had lived longer they might have provided the template for a brilliant science fiction novel (which he had once considered writing). Mailer confesses in the conversation that he had no intention to start a new religion and did not expect anyone to adopt his belief-system. But it is essential to understand it in order to fully comprehend the underlying philosophy behind many of his works. Mailer found little to inspire him creatively in the stale dogmas of mainstream religions, and the platitudes of both liberals and conservatives struck him as equally lifeless. Unable to find a religious or political ideology he could give his allegiance to, in the true American spirit he invented his own. None of his basic concepts—the Devil, evil, karma, reincarnation, or the centrality of having a direct, unmediated connection to God—are new. But even the Jewish people in their Babylonian captivity, according to most historians, developed parts of their religion in dialogue with Zoroastrianism. Mailer’s creative appropriation of concepts borrowed from Judaism, Christianity, and Eastern religions, and religious existential philosophers like Kierkegaard, reinterpreted for the modern age by his fertile mind, is the foundation of some of American literature’s most original works.

Mailer’s own Jewish odyssey took him a long way from Goldstein’s family grocery store in Brooklyn. In a sense, Mailer had taken a long way around to reinstate the Hebrew Bible’s vision of God as a leader of a people into spiritual battle on the side of life instead of death, yet the troops of Mailer’s God were not only Jews but anyone brave enough to sign on. If, like Otto Kahn, Norman Mailer “used to be a Jew,” by the end of his life he was still wrestling with the same questions Jews have struggled to answer for centuries. He may not have been a conventional Jew, but arguing with God has

a long Jewish pedigree. Mailer argued with Him longer and more passionately than most.

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