

“DON’T GO AWAY
FEELING UNEQUAL”:
“THE TIME OF HER TIME” AND
MAILER’S CONCILIATORY IMPULSE

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LET ME BEGIN WITH A CONFESSION: in November 2007, I was denied reappointment one year before tenure at the college where I had been teaching for three years. At once I began the sullen crafting of an appeal designed to tap the wellsprings of justice within my audience, a committee of four faculty and one doughty administrator who did business on a daily basis with my detractors. That letter went through close to two dozen drafts, each one longer, less fiery, more apologetic and conciliatory than the one before. This revisionary process did not make me a kinder or gentler person. The clock was “stopped,” in the legalese of union jargon, while I filed my complaint with the questionable help of a grievance “counselor” clearly opposed to my position and me, and I closed out the year dwelling on the possibilities and implications of losing my job. Meanwhile, the online publication of an essay I wrote about a former boss, the *soi-disant* Indexing King of American publishing, arrived on a freshet of optimism: the magazine’s editor, a sprightly Brit with an encyclopedic knowledge of Russian-Soviet history, a natty wardrobe, and an enduring love for the oeuvre of Bob Dylan, made much of it and me, praising my portrait and announcing in the journal’s beautifully designed website my subject as the person he most wished to meet in 2008. I was suddenly somebody in a glamorous layer of the blogosphere, and in the tattered back-and-forth of professional hope and dread, I was asked to comment on the recent death of Norman Mailer.

A familiar presence in my literary—is there any other?—life, Mailer had been ensconced as *eminence gris*, rabbi, the father every child must oppose and defend against, for as long as I'd been reading paperbacks. I had come upon *An American Dream* hard on the heels of the schlocky 1966 film adaptation (which Mailer had had a hand in writing), but I discerned the vast difference between Stuart Whitman's craggy Stephen Richard Rojack and the alter-ego Mailer had created for his novelistic investigation of film noir themes. (Although in looks, background—Polish Jewish parentage and amateur boxing credentials—and demeanor, could Mailer have designed a better avatar?) Even the movie's theme song, "A Time for Love," a wispy bossa nova composed by Johnny Mandel, with predictable lyrics by Paul Francis Webster, and not so much sung as exhaled by Jackie Ward, the off-camera voice for Janet Leigh, seemed a commercialized nod to Cherry's flawed but moving interpretation of "Deep Purple" in the book. What I mean to say is that Mailer was a figure—both writer and public persona in the "double life" examined by his most thoughtful biographer, J. Michael Lennon—I absorbed the way some adolescents claim Bronte or Salinger or Lawrence, learning what I didn't understand but learning it nonetheless. And so, in a way he would doubtlessly have understood, asked to comment on his death for a stylish online literary and cultural magazine, I recalled the notorious symposium, a spectacularly disruptive "dialogue on women's liberation" held at Town Hall in 1971, dubbed "Town Bloody Hall" by Mailer's fellow panelist Germaine Greer, where Joan Didion or Jill Johnstone (does anyone remember her book of dance criticism *cum* memoir, *Marmalade Me?*) or someone who clearly hated him for the press announced, "You know, from the way Norman writes about sex, you can tell that he really isn't very good at it." Posting off my squib, I knew immediately it was a mistake; I had wished to say something else but on the occasion felt weary, defeated, and, to be sure, bereft. Don't worry—I got called out on it by the other editor who had published my work and given me the opportunity to repeat the shabby *ad hominem* shaft.

Coming of age with a writer anchors one in history, both literary and personal. Having read *An American Dream*, that indigestible but tasty *homage à Hemingway* and banquet of settled scores, at perhaps too early an age, I tied myself to the Colony Card Shop on Central Avenue in Far Rockaway to spin the wire rack of squashy mass-market paperbacks and find *Advertisements for Myself*, whose italicized instructions confounded an otherwise rapt

devotee. Rereading this collection of fiction, essays, and journalism, or as Mailer puts it, “Beginnings,” “Middles,” “Births,” “Hipsters,” and “Games and Ends,” almost fifty years later, alongside such sexually graphic post-feminist works as Maggie Nelson’s experiment in “autotheory,” *The Argonauts*, I am astonished by the affectionate social satire alongside the cruelty, the thoughtful quality of observation in Mailer’s 1958 entry in the marketplace of American arts and letters.

Mailer nudges us to look at the structure of *Advertisements for Myself* in “A Note to the Reader.” He indicates two Tables of Contents, the first roughly chronological, a second organized by genre “to satisfy the specialist.” And then comes the curious recommendation: “For those who care to skim nothing but the cream of each author, and so miss the pleasure of liking him at his worst, I will take the dangerous step of listing what I believe are the best pieces in this book.” He then lists “The Man Who Studied Yoga,” “The White Negro,” “The Time of Her Time,” “Dead Ends,” and “Advertisements for Myself on the Way Out” (*Advertisements* 7). How many authors instruct us so straightforwardly in how to read them? I began with “The Man Who Studied Yoga,” whose unnamed narrator (“I would introduce myself if it were not useless”) announces, “I suppose I am a romantic.” In this urban tale of marital desire gone stale, three Manhattan couples organize an evening around the viewing of an antique pornographic film, moderating emotions and appetites that the narrator reviles for them *in propria persona* as “dirty, downright porno dirty . . . a lewd slopbrush slapped through the middle of domestic exasperations and breakfast eggs” (*Advertisements* 180). The omniscient narrator, privy to the thoughts of both Sam Svoboda, “an overworked writer of continuity for comic magazines,” his wife Eleanor, and their guests, anticipates the narrative voice in Mailer’s later fiction and nonfiction, the mediating agency of an overarching intelligence presiding over the revelations of multiple characters. Observing these West Village professionals—a writer, dentist, schoolteacher, social welfare worker, and lawyer—the narrator provides us with their inner dissatisfactions, physical limitations, and psychological “tells,” the unintentional exposure of their private thoughts. Watching the film tensely, “someone” asks to have it played again, lampooning the hypocrisy of respectability in the face of furtive and guilt-stricken desire. At the end of the story, this narrator assumes a more austere role with an insomniac Sam, who is playing a game to put himself to sleep: “In the middle from wakefulness to slumber, in the torpor which floats be-

neath blankets, I gave an idea to Sam. ‘Destroy time, and chaos may be ordered,’ I say to him” (*Advertisements* 185). Folding this mantra into his bedtime ritual, Sam falls asleep, and the narrator concludes the tale with a flourish out of German Romanticism: “So Sam enters the universe of sleep, a man who seeks to live in such a way as to avoid pain, and succeeds merely in avoiding pleasure. What a dreary compromise is life!” (*Advertisements* 185).

There are several iterations of one of Mailer’s central characters in the “The Man Who Studied Yoga”: the “fabulous” Jerry O’Shaughnessy, a Socialist alternately admired and resented by the couples for his political authenticity (178); Sam Svoboda’s dour Freudian analyst, Dr. Sergius; and Cassius O’Shaughnessy, source of the story’s titular joke and its shaggy-dog ending. These figures function as multivalent versions of the character explored in “The Time of Her Time,” which J. Michael Lennon calls “a comic masterpiece” (252). Because his editor had qualms about publishing the story, Mailer polled a baker’s dozen of literary arbiters to check their pulses: if a majority approved, Putnam’s would have to publish. If serious objections arose, the story would not see print. The critics approached were Richard Chase, F. W. Dupee, Irving Howe, Norman Podhoretz, Alfred Kazin, Diana and Lionel Trilling, Leslie Fiedler, Dwight Macdonald, Philip Rahv, William Phillips, William Barrett, and Mailer’s undergraduate writing professor at Harvard, Robert Gorham Davis. This stratagem worked: the story was accepted by Putnam’s, and some of the most influential critics in America went on to endorse “The Time of Her Time” before it saw publication (Lennon 252).

“The Time of Her Time” not only serves as the Prologue to his proposed work, reversing beginnings and endings in true Eliotic fashion, but gathers the themes and motifs underscored in Mailer’s Greatest Hits list for *Advertisements for Myself*. Situated in “a room one hundred feet long and twenty-five feet wide,” the first-person narrator describes his Herculean efforts to renovate the space with whitewash and “rough” linoleum, aided by Charley Thompson, “a small lean Negro maybe forty years old, and conceivably sixty” (481). Sergius O’Shaughnessy, tall, blond, and blue-eyed, is planning to open an *Escuela de Toreas* (481), and embedded in his narrative is the story of how “an expert with two knives . . . some sort of hophead instructor in the Marines” in whose mutterings Sergius hears an echo of Eliot, the “love-song of his own prowess” (482), is bested in a fight by a Puerto Rican challenger

who brands his opponent by carving “a double oval, labium majorum and minorum, on the skin of the cheek” (483). The tale is told to Charley but with the teller’s clear recognition of “the three spades in the next booth,” of whom Sergius says, “I had been so aware of them, and they had been so aware of me” (484). The Lower East Side provides the backdrop for games of wary and warring ethnicities, all determined to prove their toughness “on the chaotic chessboard of Monroe Street’s sociology” (482).

This neighborhood is home to Sergius, who describes himself as “one Don John who hated to sleep alone” (486), waking up next to Denise Gondelman, a junior at New York University “on leave from her boyfriend” (488). Her “college-girl snobbery” and devotion to Eliot as “the apotheosis of manner” enrages and arouses Sergius in equal measure. He endures her numbingly pretentious dilations on psychoanalysis, allowing himself the admiring, lunkheaded observation, “You must get good marks in school” (489). Yet her disquisitions, reported by him, are not in direct quotes: “she loved the doers and healers of life who built on the foundationless prevalence of the void those islands of proud endeavor” (489). Are these Denise’s words or Sergius’s paraphrase? “How I envied the jazzed-up brain of the Jews,” he sighs (489). But later, in a post-coital lecture punctuated with the lighting of cigarettes, when Denise labels him “a good phallic narcissist,” he decides to “surprise her” with the distinction between Freudian and Reichian categories. As in Judy Holliday movies, the one-upmanship of the dumb blond has its potent effect, the reversal of expectations, and round two of their first-night card, described as the meeting of “two club fighters,” shifts the stakes of power and supremacy from an erotic battle royal to the tired domesticity of an unhappy couple: “we might as well have been married for ten years to dislike each other so much at this moment” (491). Sam and Eleanor Svoboda, the couple in “The Man Who Studied Yoga,” loom as ghostly ancestors or as figures in a cautionary tale of contemporary courtship.

Angry and dissatisfied, Denise takes off but not before decking Sergius with “a natural punch” (494), leaving him to conclude, puzzled but affectionate, that “she was one funny kid” (495). Alongside the sex scenes combining athletic frenzy and metaphysical nuance, Mailer never loses sight of the project of social and class satire, the anxious if yearning take on the Other just this side of stand-up comedy. It’s that “snotty” self-assurance of the self-fashioned intellectual in Denise that Sergius admires, even as he longs to punish her, allowing himself this smirking aside:

I was tempted to tell her how little Eliot would adore the mannerless yeasts of the Brooklyn from which she came, and how he might prefer to allow her to appreciate his poetry only in step to the transmigration of her voice from all urgent Yiddish nasalities to the few high English analities of relinquished desire. (488)

This high-flown analysis is no mere parroting of Denise's academic jargon; Sergius speaks the language of intellectual striving as well as she does, perhaps more shrewdly, especially when it serves him to play dumb. But his resentment is real and tribal, admiring ("How I envied the jazzed-up brain of the Jews") and aware of his attraction to the Other, here the privileged, educated Jewish girl.

We might trace the emergence of the Jewish American Princess as a cultural touchstone and stereotype back to a two-hour episode of the local television series *The David Susskind Show* in October 1970. The episode's title, "How to Be a Jewish Son," riffs on a best-selling novelty book of the time, *How to Be a Jewish Mother*, a square-formatted volume suitable for gift-giving and written by Dan Greenburg, only the first of Nora Ephron's disappointing husbands. Greenburg was a panelist on the show, along with Stan Herman, then designer for the Mr. Mort label and future president of the Council of Fashion Designers of America; the actor (and not the sculptor) George Segal; restaurateur Larry Goldberg, famous for Goldberg's Pizzeria; the comedian David Steinberg; and Mel Brooks. Their freewheeling conversation about Jews and Jewishness in the arts and popular culture reached its fizzy zenith when Brooks, responding to Steinberg's tart anatomizing of "the Jewish princess" as a type, pronounced, "Jewish ladies expect a lot . . . and they deserve a lot, because they're all short-waisted and terrific in bed." This notion, an example of Brooks's bumptious marketing of ethnic caricature, would transcend the outlandish and gain a certain traction and serious discussion in Julie Baumgold's subsequent article in 1971 for *New York* magazine (co-founded and edited by Mailer's good friend Clay Felker), "The Persistence of the Jewish American Princess." Ostensibly an extended society-page piece observing the daughters of New York real estate moguls and financial movers and shakers, like Francine LeFrak (whom I knew from the Brandeis School, a Solomon Schechter day school that we both attended), Baumgold's essay also considered the postwar fiction Of Herman Wouk and Philip Roth and its preoccupation with first- and second-generation American Jews as

well as their anxieties over the demands of assimilation, money, and status—the coin of class mobility. Later excoriated in *Moment* magazine as “The Slur that Won’t Go Away,” the stereotype of the ambitious, pampered princess has endured as a staple of cultural chatter and representational satire.

In her eulogy for Joan Rivers, “Last Girl in Larchmont,” Emily Nussbaum cites the Jewish American Princess as the stereotype Rivers required, for the fixing of her own comic identity, to label, subvert, and transcend. Nussbaum’s essay alludes to “The Time of Her Time” as “a notorious short story . . . in which a bullfighter gives a Jewish college girl her first orgasm by means of sodomy and the phrase ‘dirty little Jew’” (“Last Girl in Larchmont”). Well, yes. But Mailer’s postlapsarian couple achieve something more in their sweaty coupling. “Don’t go away feeling unequal,” Sergius taunts an aggrieved and frustrated Denise as she dresses and leaves after their first night together, and “the commissar,” as he nicknames her, returns for a rematch, asking to arrive for their third date at eleven “instead of meeting me for drinks and dinner” and thus eliminating the need for him to pay (496) and anticipating the inversions of convention and etiquette that will arrive with the women’s movement of the seventies. The choreography of courtship is being rewritten as Sergius, disappointed at not being able “to lay siege to her, dispense a bit of elixir from my vast reservoirs of charm” (496), muses over the “leverage” of “this little victory or defeat” (496), insisting on their assignation as a conflict he will win or lose.

And he does win—and lose. Determined to “teach her that she was only a child, and if I could not take care of a nineteen-year-old, then I was gone indeed,” he labors over her body “like a riveter, knowing her resistances were made of steel” (501). Sergius sees those resistances as a rebuke to his *virtu*, and the violence of their coupling exposes his fear as well as her vulnerability. Managing by dint of the most strenuous effort to bring her to her first and exultant orgasm, he is left “aching” and “congested,” regarding her “wistfully” rather than triumphantly, and notes to himself rather than to her, “Compliments of T. S. Eliot” (502). Despite her relinquishment to “the nicest of weary sweet sleep,” he paces, insomniac, and doses himself with whiskey before falling into “an unblessed slumber” (502). The “victory” he has won seems questionable, as an awake and angry Denise challenges him when he makes the “mistake” of insisting, “I gave you what you could use” (503). Dressed and furious, she eyes him from across the room and hurls the ac-

cusation, both hers and her analyst's: "your whole life is a lie, and you do nothing but run away from the homosexual that is you." His response, unmediated by editorial justification, reflects a sudden recognition, unapologetic and admiring, of the state of affairs between men and women in the sexual arena and the world beyond: "And like a real killer, she did not look back, and was out the door before I could rise to tell her that she was a hero fit for me" (503). What Mailer allows his protagonist to see, in the "lie" of his projected self, is a parodic reflection of the Hemingway male. The sly and affectionate substance of this "notorious" story places "The Time of Her Time" well ahead of its time as a satirical meditation on the roles of men and women in and out of love.

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