

THE CURIOUS STORY OF NORMAN MAILER'S ENGAGEMENT WITH SHORT FICTION

V I C T O R P E P P A R D

NORMAN MAILER BEGINS HIS INTRODUCTION to the 1967 paperback collection of his short fiction by telling us that he agrees with those who find his efforts in this genre “neither splendid, unforgettable, nor distinguished.” He shortly doubles down on himself when he also agrees with the notion that in this realm he is simply a “journeyman” (9). Mailer gives us still more grounds to dismiss his short fiction when he tells us “it is painful to push one’s own plain efforts so far forward. Yet we do it. Yes, for the bucks first, paperback reader!” He also confesses he does not have “the gift to write great stories . . . the interest, the respect, or the proper awe. The short story bores him a little . . . he rarely reads them . . . is, in secret, not fond of writers who work at short stories” (9). His clinching argument in the form of a “terrible confession” is that “he thinks the short story is relatively easy to write,” because it takes only a few days, whereas the novel may take years (10–11). Since we know this writer as someone who enjoys making advertisements for himself, we may begin to suspect that all of this deprecation of the genre and of himself as its exponent is some kind of ruse—a ruse to induce us to find out for ourselves, what is this short fiction of Norman Mailer all about, and is it really as undistinguished as he is leading us to believe?

We also know Mailer as someone who is refreshingly frank in his assessments of other writers, and he does not let us down here. His list of those short story writers for whom he has “admiration or affection” is not long: Chekhov, Hemingway, Isaac Bashevis Singer, James T. Farrell. He soon adds Fitzgerald to the list and speaks favorably about Isaac Babel and finds pleas-

ure in Maugham, Conan Doyle, and Poe, and Mary McCarthy, who “wrote very good short stories,” but “Hawthorne seemed unreadable.” A whole host of other well-known—some would say distinguished—practitioners of the art of the short story—all come up short in one way or another in Mailer’s evaluation: Katherine Anne Porter, Eudora Welty, Flannery O’Connor, and Cheever and Updike, “old Prince and young Prince of good old maggie *The New Yorker*—why push on with the list?” (10).

Nevertheless, at the end of this introduction in which he spends so much time pooh-poohing himself and a number of others, Mailer cannot resist announcing that “The Time of Her Time” and “The Man Who Studied Yoga” “are superior to most good short fiction” (13). This then is the aha moment, the long-awaited Advertisement for Myself Mailer has so deftly put off until the point where we thought it might not arrive at all. And so now we have no choice but to try out not just these two stories but the others, just in case they too turn out to be “good short fiction,” or perhaps even better than that.

Now that we have been put on alert that Mailer favors the likes of Chekhov, Hemingway, and Poe, we may be on the lookout for traces of these masters, either in form or content. With respect to the former, that is the form, I can say that if there is a chunk of Chekhov to fasten onto here, it may be that Mailer likes to leave the fates of his characters up to our contemplation of what their future(s) may be. If we are looking for the short story structure that Poe advocated, however, I think we are going to be disappointed, because Mailer does not hesitate to veer off the track of his plots to indulge in all kinds of asides and observations, as he does in his novels. Put another way, Mailer’s inclination is toward expansion rather than direction, that is, the direction in which Poe believed all parts of a story should lead. The story of Mailer and Hemingway is, as we know well, a long and complicated one that moves between the poles of admiration, as here, and ridicule, as in his assessment of *The Old Man and the Sea* in *Advertisements for Myself* (20–21). In brief, Mailer does not like the fact that he sees the face of Hemingway on the Cuban fisherman. Mailer also employs various echoes, stylizations, and perhaps parody of Hemingway. For example, Sergius O’Shaughnessy, the narrator of “The Time of Her Time,” teaches bullfighting, not in Spain or even Mexico, where he dabbled in this so-called sport, but in Greenwich Village. I find something incongruous about the combination of the first and last names of Sergius (the name of a character Tolstoy wrote about in “Father Sergius”) and O’Shaughnessy, a most Irish surname, one I

have never encountered in a man with the first name of Sergius. But perhaps my experience is just too limited. And there is also something incongruous about teaching bullfighting out of an apartment in Greenwich Village. When I spent part of the summer of 1964 there, I didn't see any ads for a bullfighting school. I wonder whether this, together with Mailer's portrayal of Sergius O'Shaugnessy, as Heather Braun says, as "an aloof ber-macho hipster" (226) is not a double dig: the first at O'Shaugnessy, and the second at American literature's most famous explicator of bullfighting—just a thought. In any event, in the final analysis Mailer came to recognize Hemingway's importance to American literature.

**THE APOCALYPSE ACCORDING TO MAILER IN
"THE LAST NIGHT: A STORY"**

Here I would like to examine Mailer's "The Last Night: A Story," partly because I find in it an interesting confluence of themes and genres, perhaps a unique one for Mailer, and partly because it is one of his stories that I believe sneaks unannounced by the author into the category of important fiction. At a minimum, "Last Night" resonates with both edenic and apocalyptic biblical motifs, contains obvious elements of science fiction, employs satire, some of which has affinities with Menippean satire, and partakes of the utopian tradition but on the dystopian side of it. Mailer begins this story with a NOTE TO THE READER in which he explains why "a movie must be based on a novel, a story, a play, or an original idea. I suppose that it could even derive from a poem. 'Let's do The Wasteland,' said a character of mine named Collie Munshin" [in the play *Deer Park*] (207). In this way, Mailer is able to make a jocular double mini-ad for himself—I call it a double advertisement, because he combines reference to his earlier play with a "note" that promotes the idea that his story could be the basis of a future film. To make sure that the reader hasn't missed his point, Mailer further underscores his purpose by defining what he calls a "treatment . . . to present for the attention of a producer, a director, or a script reader" (207).

"Last Night" is a story that treats a question that was timely when written in 1962 and remains so to this day, namely the degradation of the environment by mankind's misuse of technology, a question that takes on more relevance with each passing day. Specifically, Mailer is referring to massive radiation fallout brought on by the testing of atomic bombs by "the Americans, Russians, English, French, the Algerians, Africans, the Israelis and the

Chinese, not to mention the Turks, Hindus and Yugoslavians.” Whereas before, guilt for such a situation would have been ascribed to a single nation, now “no one is innocent” (209). The Cold War is over and nations have agreed that “Man had succeeded in so polluting the atmosphere that he was doomed to expire himself” (210).

So far, “The Story” gives the appearance of a fairly straightforward indictment of the world’s obsession with developing and over-testing nuclear weapons without regard for the consequences for the planet and the people living on it. However, it takes a turn in the direction of a more powerful and multifaceted satire when the President of the United States agrees to a scheme for preserving at least a small percentage of humankind by sending half a million people to Mars in 10,000 rockets. Legislation for a Fleet has been passed, first in the United States and then around the world. Mailer breaks the illusion of reality—if indeed we’re dealing with reality here—and returns to the scenario he wants the story to become when he declares that “No space here, or for that matter in the movie, to talk of the endless and difficult negotiations which had gone on. The movie could begin perhaps with the ratification of the most astounding piece of legislation ever to be passed in any country . . . [that] had been passed by every nation in the world” (210–11). As we see here, Mailer has moved from an advertisement cum “treatment” to directions on how to produce the movie. However, there is a real problem with Mars, for the advance party of one hundred people already there is now suffering from radiation even greater than that found on earth, and this means that our whole solar system is lethally contaminated. It should be noted here that one of the hallmarks of satire, I want to say good satire, is exaggeration on a grand scale—exaggeration of size, as with Swift, and of magnitude, as in Mailer’s “Story.”

All kinds of inversions and reversals of the expected are also characteristic of fine satire, and in “Last Night” we learn that with the cold war over the leaders of the world’s two superpowers, the President of the United States and the Premier of the Soviet Union, are friends and have come up with a plan to save a small fraction of humanity by launching a rocket out of the solar system. Current means of propulsion were not up to the task, so the decision was made to build a ten-mile long tunnel “in Siberia or the American desert . . . pitched at an angle . . . the tunnel would act like the muzzle of a rifle and fire the rocket as if it were a shell” (216). Here we are dealing with shades of Jules Verne’s novels, *From Earth to the Moon* in which riflery is the

basis for the first rocket and *Journey to the Center of the Earth*. And that is where the world's scientists turn to, when the test rocket burns up thirty miles above the earth's surface. With experience gained from the tunnel project, the scientists turn to the center of the earth in order to blow it apart—that's right, blow up the center of the world—as a means of propelling a rocket from the Martian Fleet out of the solar system, "like the impetus a breaking wave could give to a surfboard rider" (220). Their plan is to send up the rocket first, and when it has reached the desired distance so that it is safe from the heat of the explosion but given the propulsion needed to send it out of the solar system, blow the earth to smithereens. All of this is wonderfully preposterous, and to be honest I laughed aloud as I read it, even as the rocket goes off "like a silver minnow" into the world's "Last Night."

In "Story," Mailer moves adroitly from moments when in the face of its ultimate demise the world is at peace with itself and harmony reigns to times when the social order breaks down. After the Legislation for a Fleet is passed, for six months there was an "atmosphere of cooperation, indeed almost of Christian sanctity and good will came over the earth." (I perceive an echo of biblical style in that last phrase.) Historians had concluded that "man was never so close to finding his soul as in this period when it was generally agreed that he was soon to lose his body" (214). When it turns out that Mars is uninhabitable and a voyage to Jupiter discovers that the whole solar system is contaminated with radiation, the Premier of the Soviet Union convinces the President of the United States to hold off telling the world of this catastrophe (a common Soviet practice Mailer may have been aware of, as happened years later when the government failed to inform the public for several days, including the people living there, that the nuclear power plant in Chernobyl had exploded).

During this delay in informing the public, rumors begin to circulate that Russia is not cooperating but trying to beat the US to the moon, and for the first time in several years "crime, delinquency, divorce, and addiction—began again to increase" (217). After three months the President gives a speech in which he informs the world about the unsuitability of Mars for human habitation and, with the prospect of mankind's demise, talks about the "opportunity to die well in dignity, with grace, and the hope that the spirit might prove more miraculous and mighty than the wonders man had extracted from matter" (218). At first, the speech is hailed by some as the greatest ever given by a political leader, but soon complaints that three

months have been lost outweigh the praise, and the world falls into a state in which violence and madness reign, productivity falls, schools are empty, and vandalism is rampant. With the population dying off at a rapid rate, funerals clog the streets, so much so that “the effect was medieval, for impromptu carnivals began to set themselves up on the road to the cemetery” (218).

The state Mailer describes here is a combination of the apocalyptic with the carnival grotesque and dystopia. With the end of the world at hand and with no hope for even a token of survivors, the short-lived interval of calm and purposefulness turns into complete disorder in which all the rules of normal behavior have been suspended, not temporarily as in the medieval carnival, but forever. In a state such as this, the unexpected and the bizarre become the norm. In conversation with the President, the Premier convinces him that they will both go on the rocket that will attempt to fly out of the solar system to another star, because “it would be much too depressing to move through those idiotic stars without you” (221). These two engage in a colloquy in which the Premier parries the President’s hope that somehow life will regenerate itself when he asks rhetorically whether God is found in a cockroach and answers his own question with the assertion that “God is found inside you, and inside me. When all of us are gone, God is also gone” (221). The president is not sure that he believes this, and the Premier concludes this exchange by saying that he has always been fascinated by religious discussions, but at the moment “politics are more pressing” (221).

In writing this passage, which borders on the absurd, Mailer could not have known that his depiction of a Russian leader interested in religion would essentially come to be embodied in the current president of the Russian Federation who would have us believe he is a man of faith. What Mailer is doing here is suggestive of the Menippean satirical tradition, one of the hallmarks of which is the treatment of religious and philosophical questions, including blasphemy of all kinds in absurd contexts, just the sort of situation he describes in “Last Night.” In the *Menippea* and especially in the carnival, what we have become accustomed to as the usual order, the way things are supposed to work, is turned upside down. Double characters, such as the President and the Premier, are also a prominent feature of the carnival. Are the Premier’s ruminations on religion sincere, or are they simply something that came into his head he thought would calm his querulous opposite. The President’s role is that of the absolutely sincere moralizer who

prevents his wife from taking pain killing drugs even as she dies an agonizing death, but nevertheless questions his fateful decisions. Before pressing the button to blow up the earth, he hears his wife's voice saying to him, "you will end by destroying everything," and says to the people, "forgive me, all of you. May I be an honest man and not the first physician to the Devil" (228). (This is an early hint at Mailer's notion, developed to its fullest in *The Castle in the Forest*, that it is the Devil who is really in charge of mankind's affairs.)

Behind every technological scheme to save mankind there lurks a Frankenstein. In "Story," this part is played by the President's closest advisor and friend, Andrew Stevens, who unbeknownst to the President, has been working with Russian and American technicians. For Stevens the first rocket in the Martian project that burned up was just an experiment, a ruse to pave the way to the center of the earth, which he planned to explode in his grand finale that would send a delegation to another solar system. Stevens is also Judas, as he has the President arrested for bringing about a state of near civil war with his speech, only to be arrested himself when the people demand the President's release. All of this, as so much else in the story, takes place according the logic of Alice's Wonderland.

Having said that Stevens is Judas, I want to ward off the conclusion that it follows that the President must be some kind of Christ figure. Rather than drawing a Christ figure, which Mailer later accomplished in the most direct manner in *The Gospel According to the Son*, what I believe Mailer is doing in "The Story" is satirizing the false Christian leader the President represents—false in the sense that he is full of high-minded, righteous rhetoric, but in reality, as his wife experiences so painfully, his philosophy is stultifying of others' natural instincts and ultimately destructive.

Mailer was highly suspicious of the achievements of science and technology that were attained in the twentieth century, from antibiotics to the atom bomb. As a character in *Cannibals and Christians* says, "Modern science may prove to be the final poison of the rich European tree, and plague may disclose itself as the most characteristic invention of our time." (qtd. in Lennon, 367–78) What I find appealing about "The Last Night" is that in the story Mailer is able to embody his polemic with modern science in an artistic form grounded in a number of rich literary antecedents and traditions, which ultimately take science fiction to a higher place.

But what about the fate of "The Last Night" as the basis for the prospec-

tive film Mailer foreshadows? As we know, Mailer was serious about becoming a producer of movies to the extent that he hoped to put novel writing on the back burner and make cinema his principal occupation. Even if the films that he did make are not as well known as his fiction, they have attracted serious critical attention, especially by Justin Bozung (see “Death is a Celebration . . .”). As his son John Buffalo Mailer told me, his father and mother, Norris Mailer, did in fact explore the possibility of making a cinematic version of “Last Night.” However, they argued vehemently over the project but could never come to an agreement about how to bring it to fruition. At this point then, the story and its image of the last rocket ship as a silver minnow fading off into the night are confined to the printed page and, of course, our imaginations—until or unless someone undertakes to do the project Mailer so earnestly forecasts in “The Last Night.” Any takers?

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