

NORMAN MAILER'S JANUS-FACED PROJECT

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Norman Mailer and the Modernist Turn

By Jerry Schuchalter

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MUCH HAS BEEN SAID ABOUT NORMAN MAILER'S MOST PROMINENT literary influences; indeed, Mailer himself has written about the ways in which authors such as Ernest Hemingway, Leo Tolstoy, James T. Farrell, John Dos Passos, and others have impacted his work. In *Norman Mailer and the Modernist Turn*, Jerry Schuchalter also studies Mailer's oeuvre in light of his literary forbears; however, he offers a unique approach by studying Mailer's work alongside an original collection of Modernist philosophers, sociologists, and historians. Moreover, rather than discussing Mailer as merely influenced by the Modernist movement that preceded him, Schuchalter places Mailer directly in the midst of Modernist ideology—specifically, “European modernist dissent.” As Schuchalter notes of Mailer, “It was not enough for him to write about the modern predicament; he had to live the part . . . Mailer began to live out the idiosyncracies, excesses, manic forms of behavior, histrionics, all of the public displays of the modernist intellectual and artist” (15). Like many of his Modernist predecessors, Mailer also “shared the same unswerving devotion to art and yet at the same time harbored an uncompromising repudiation of the modern world in nearly all of its ramifications” (24) and in doing so took on the roles of “iconoclast, *enfant terrible*, naysayer, bohemian” (15).

A central focus of Schuchalter's analysis is the way Mailer often returns to the past—to the “primordial”—in order to make sense of his present moment. Schuchalter's depiction of Mailer is as an artist-prophet who draws guidance from the mythic past as he simultaneously looks ahead toward a new future, thus lending a Janus-like character to his work. This aesthetic, which reflects a particularly Modernist tendency to search past societies for “unity and wholeness,” is particularly evident, for example, in Mailer's “imaginative journey to ancient Egypt to ascertain a new mode of consciousness” in *Ancient Evenings* (30). Schuchalter further uses this overarching interpretation to explain some of Mailer's familiar and recurring themes, including race, gender, existentialism, and totalitarianism; in Schuchalter's view, Mailer's treatment of these topics often demonstrates a contradictory invocation of both nostalgia and progressiveness. For instance, Schuchalter notes that Mailer “refashioned the frontier thesis [developed by Richard Slotkin] into an individual act of rebellion against mass society, the bourgeoisie, and liberalism, proclaiming that only through the incessant creation of new frontiers and the continual smashing of taboos can the individual ascertain his primordial self and hence his humanity” (29).

Schuchalter also emphasizes the ways Mailer draws from a Modernist notion of the role and responsibility of the artist. He argues that Mailer was not only a public intellectual or literary celebrity, but that “he was also the teacher, the mentor, the prophet . . . who aspired to lead his people to another plane of moral and spiritual existence” (13), and he did so “under the desideratum of making America intelligible to itself” (17). In this way, Mailer “assumed the persona of the self-proclaimed prophets of literary Modernism,” (14) sharing their belief that “the artist has been singled out to pursue a privileged vocation” and is “the beneficiary of a divine bequest” (266). Schuchalter's comments here are on point: Mailer made many remarks over the course of his career regarding the serious responsibility faced by artists, himself included. Mailer felt that writing in particular demanded courage, perseverance, and a specific moral code, but that it was also a calling and was imbued with spiritual meaning. By situating such ideas within the Modernist movement's larger conception of the artist, Schuchalter helpfully reminds us that Mailer's ideology does not exist in a vacuum, but is an extension and development of his predecessors' own thought.

Schuchalter's study is more contextual than literary; that is, while he highlights the aforementioned range of themes in Mailer's publications, he fo-

cuses heavily on Mailer's essays and nonfiction rather than on a literary exegesis of fictional texts. Still, throughout his study, Shuchalter holds many of Mailer's semantic choices up for rigorous scrutiny. As he analyzes the foundations of Mailer's theories, particularly those that invoke a specifically Modernist ethic, Schuchalter expresses frustration with the malleability of much of Mailer's central vocabulary, including oft-used terms like "cancer," "totalitarian," and "existential." He calls these Mailer's "terminological difficulties" and is confused by the ways in which Mailer moves from metaphorical to literal discussions of these terms so easily (73). For instance, Schuchalter is puzzled about "whether cancer is consistently a metaphor in Mailer's thought or whether it sometimes tends to become synonymous with disease in general or whether it merely devolves into a metonym devoid of any of the associations illuminating America's plight after the Second World War" (72). He is also critical of the fact that Mailer discusses the term "totalitarianism" as something that is both formless (for example, Mailer's comment in *Presidential Papers* that totalitarianism has "no political face") and represented in form (for example, a totalitarian architecture). He takes Mailer to task again in his discussion of "Superman Comes to the Supermarket," wherein Mailer describes John F. Kennedy as existential, and as a "divided man." "What Mailer means by this is not immediately clear," Schuchalter protests, "since Kennedy, according to Mailer, is not a creature of conflict, but a work in progress" (90).

Certainly, it is essential to hold Mailer's language to a high standard. Mailer himself, I would venture to guess, would agree. However, Schuchalter's criticisms here attempt to divorce the metaphorical from the literal too concretely, forcing an "either/or" scenario, and ignoring the ways Mailer might have seen the literal and metaphorical as fundamentally intertwined. Mailer's discussion of "cancer," after all, can be seen as a reference to the state of the nation *and* the individual body; the two interpretations are not necessarily mutually exclusive. I would argue, in fact, that the versatility of the term is integral to Mailer's idea that repressions within society (the figurative cancers) can, in fact, lead to real physical and psychological disease. In a speech prepared for a debate with William Buckley (later published in *The Presidential Papers*), Mailer explains that the oppressiveness of totalitarianism is a "moral disease" (175) that in turn causes an "unspeakable illness of the psyche" (165). Moreover, he further notes in *The Presidential Papers* that "if there is a strong ineradicable strain in human nature, one must not try

to suppress it or anomaly, cancer, and plague will follow” (22). In other words, Mailer suggests that literal cancer can be born of a metaphorically cancerous, repressive society that would prevent one from acting courageously, or from acting at all. As Mailer himself once said, “It’s not living in courageous moments that gives one cancer. One of the causes of cancer must be absence of action” (“An Interview” 43). Of course, Mailer’s possible intentions do not preclude Schuchalter’s right to criticize this terminology for a lack of precision, and the unpredictability of metaphor can indeed be puzzling—“it pushes you to think in more poetic and contradictory ways,” as Mailer said—but it is important to note that the blurring of literal and metaphorical here may not be as accidental as Schuchalter suggests (*The Big Empty* 123).

Nevertheless, Schuchalter’s ensuing study of Mailer’s Modernist leanings and concerns proves instructive. Interestingly, Schuchalter does not begin where many do when analyzing Mailer’s work—with *The Naked and the Dead*—but rather with a discussion of Mailer’s contributions to *Dissent* in the 1950s. These years of “experimenting and theorizing” are, he suggests, a key to understanding the modernist inflections of Mailer’s earlier works, specifically his focus on the notion of a “return” as a potential solution to the existential dilemmas of modern society (65). Schuchalter does address famous *Dissent* pieces like “The White Negro” in this early chapter, but spends just as much (if not more) time exploring lesser known pieces, such as “The Meaning of Western Defense,” wherein “Mailer’s radical questioning of conventional pieties was always coupled with a utopian longing for overcoming division” (52), as well as “David Riesman Reconsidered,” “What I Think of Artistic Freedom” and “The Tragedy at Parris Island.”

After providing this foundation, Schuchalter discusses Mailer’s ongoing struggle with modernity by analyzing his commentary on American politics, technology, and gender. Though Schuchalter does read Mailer’s work alongside contemporaries like Lionel Trilling, Irving Howe, Marshall McLuhan, Lewis Mumford, and Carl Schorske, arguing that Mailer’s responses to and relationships with these thinkers also indicates his struggle with modernity, a more significant portion of Schuchalter’s study revolves around comparisons to late 19th century German intellectuals, including Friedrich Nietzsche, Otto Weininger, and Oswald Spengler. This is unsurprising considering that one of Schuchalter’s primary academic fields is German Studies, and perhaps because of this expertise, Schuchalter is able to deftly and persuasively illu-

minate undeniable parallels between Mailer's work and that of these German writers, thus providing a useful way to read Mailer's canon. For instance, as he discusses Mailer's shift away from the "Traditional Left," Schuchalter again turns to a less prominent piece, "Postscript to the Third Presidential Paper," in order to mark Mailer's movement towards a Nietzschean ideology. "Despite the cultural and temporal divide separating them," Schuchalter says, both authors share a similar focus on "a culture of disease" (70) and a similar obsession with the importance of odor (Nietzsche calls "bad conscience" a "bad smell . . . of a soul that has gone stale"), both "exhibited a similar militant anti-bourgeois animus," and both "decry a fallen world, a world that has been drained of both vitality and meaning" (69). In sum, Schuchalter notes, "The failure of nerve, the loss of will, the choice of comfort instead of courage—all this was part of Mailer's critique of modernity, all of which could easily be found in Nietzschean thought" (276).

As an extension of this discussion, Schuchalter examines Mailer's specific objection to liberalism, which at the time "began to be equated with centrism in politics, middlebrow taste in art, and positivism in science and scholarship" (113), and which as a result "fails to locate more profound truths, those truths that elude established paradigms" (105). Within the context of Schuchalter's study, Mailer's rejection of liberalism highlights his role as a Modernist iconoclast who swam against the tide of the status quo, and further illuminates the Janus-faced nature of Mailer's work as he moves forward: "No longer tied to a progressive or retrogressive worldview, Mailer's ever-changing persona [in the 1960s] was tuned to both vantage points, thus forging a new synthesis . . . if Mailer is involuntarily looking back while he is proceeding forward, then every perception and act must perforce be steeped in dual vision" (118).

Schuchalter's discussion of Mailer's attitude towards technology during this time provides additional support for his discussion of Mailer's role as iconoclastic artist-prophet. To forward this argument, Schuchalter focuses primarily on *Of a Fire on the Moon*, narrated by Mailer's "curiously modern" persona named Aquarius (13). Mailer as Aquarius also often returns to the past to address and criticize the implications of modern technology, suggesting that "before the emergence of language and technology, humankind possessed more subliminal forms of communication penetrating into the mysteries of existence" (140). Thus, as Schuchalter adds, "steeped in the no-

tion that technology was a further symptom of degradation and estrangement, [Mailer] found himself once again opposed to the *zeitgeist* in an untenable and marginalized niche in the intellectual forum” (152).

Schuchalter defines Mailer’s mid-century comments on women as similarly iconoclastic, in part because they bear a similar skepticism of technology, and in part because they fly in the face of the pivotal Second Wave Feminist movement of the time. These comments, Schuchalter argues, are also strikingly similar to those made by other European Modernists. Schuchalter begins his chapter on Mailer and women, for example, by comparing Mailer’s *The Prisoner of Sex* to Otto Weininger’s *Sex and Character*, originally published in 1903. He argues that, like Weininger, Mailer took up the cause of “defending nothing less than the masculine principle against the onslaught of nonbelievers, who in Mailer’s mind seem intent on destroying everything valuable in the human species” (177). Yet in doing so during the height of the Feminist movement, once again Mailer becomes “the great antagonist of the modern, progressive *zeitgeist*” (178). Schuchalter also observes that Mailer, under the guise of “the Acolyte” in *Prisoner*, is “not disturbed in any way by the economic and political demands of women” but is instead “preoccupied, even obsessed, with the significance of the new movement for notions of maleness and the revolutionary implications of such notions” (179). Mailer’s main problem is with the attempt to “technologize creation” and thus “the baby inseminated in the laboratory and the work of art following a carefully defined formula are both manifestations of the same malaise” (185). Amid this analysis, Schuchalter also points to an interesting paradox in Mailer’s ideology, observing that “Mailer’s literary politics inadvertently undermines his sexual politics” (196). That is, despite seeming to uphold more traditional patriarchal ideals in his sexual politics (both in his wariness of female reproductive rights and his adherence to gender binaries), in his fiction Mailer “apotheosizes the outsider—the single male who leaves home and hearth and embarks on a quest to fulfill his artistic destiny,” and such heroes in fact “epitomized the implosion of patriarchy, the repudiation of the father’s legacy and teachings” (196).

Schuchalter extends his comparison between Mailer and Weininger in his chapter on Mailer’s relationship with his Jewish heritage, which Schuchalter also sees as intricately connected to Mailer’s fraught conception of masculinity. As he argues, “Mailer inadvertently invoked Otto Weininger’s argument: being Jewish is incompatible with being masculine” (202). “Like

everything else in his life and opus,” Shuchalter writes, “Mailer’s Jewishness is ‘existential,’ devoid of any recognizable contours or fixed properties, couched in conflict and doubt, subject to continual negotiation and redefinition” (233). To analyze Mailer’s conflicted and often ambivalent representations of Jewishness, Schuchalter mines an impressively wide range of different texts spanning the course of Mailer’s career: “The Man Who Studied Yoga,” *The Naked and the Dead*, *Barbary Shore*, “The Time of Her Time,” *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, *Harlot’s Ghost*, *Ancient Evenings*, and *The Gospel According to the Son*. Schuchalter does also acknowledge Mailer’s “renewed interest in Judaica” in the late 1990s, during which time Mailer let go of some of the “shame of being a Jewish intellectual in a Gentile world of tough guys” (212); thus “in the end, Mailer’s Jewishness is elevated to a general principle of ambivalence, at the same time becoming a source of creative power” (233).

Some of the most convincing evidence for Schuchalter’s argument about Mailer’s “Modernist turn” can be found in his chapter on *Ancient Evenings* which, while placed near the end of his book, is arguably the centerpiece of his study. Even Schuchalter observes that “*Ancient Evenings* occupied a central place in his literary achievement, becoming the ultimate refuge in his vision of a dying modernity” (245). For instance, the narrator and protagonist of that novel, Menenhetet II, is “the modernist tableau of the artist as naïve seer and magician” (262) and on the whole, the novel reflects Mailer’s tendency to return to the mythic past in order to make sense of his present. Schuchalter points to the role of violence in *Ancient Evenings*, for example, which while “postulated as a precept in ‘The White Negro’” ultimately “finds its full narrative expression in *Ancient Evenings* as an act of liberation from the artificial constraints imposed by a diseased civilization” (260). In this massive undertaking, in fact, many of the themes with which Mailer was preoccupied throughout his life—sexuality, gender, violence, existentialism—become refracted through the lens of ancient Egyptian society, which is framed as a kind of primordial ideal.

In Schuchalter’s assessment, “Mailer’s last years before his death show him gravitating towards a more conventional version of cultural pessimism” (277) wherein he becomes “Whitmanesque in tone . . . celebrating American democracy and at the same time pointing to its immanent dangers” (290). Yet in Schuchalter’s mind, the impact of Mailer’s criticisms of America are diminished by circumstance—particularly, the decreasing cultural value of literature and intellectualism in America. As Schuchalter points out in a bit-

tersweet conclusion, “Mailer began his literary career as the inheritor of the great tradition of Modernism and conceived of himself as its foremost representative” but “his dreams of literary immortality became devoid of meaning, since the very existence of meaningful literature was called into question” (294). Schuchalter also argues that “Mailer as a literary phenomenon . . . will not easily be reincarnated in future generations,” in part because he is “the indefatigable builder of master narratives . . . in an age when master narratives have been debunked and deconstructed. The result is that Mailer appears curiously out of step, an uncomfortable relic, whose legacy seems more and more incomprehensible with the passage of time” (294). While Schuchalter is sadly correct in his description of the devaluation of literature in our contemporary culture, his dismissal of Mailer’s work in light of this phenomenon seems too easy. After all, many of Mailer’s comments about the absurdity and complexity of American politics—in “Superman Comes to the Supermarket,” *The Armies of the Night*, and *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*, for instance—are notably relevant amid our current political climate; moreover, gendered battles like those reflected in the pages of *The Prisoner of Sex* are still waged today. Equally as important to consider is that while Mailer may have built master narratives, he also debunked and deconstructed them, and the exercise of such critical thinking remains valuable and instructive (as evidenced by Schuchalter’s own informative study). As Mailer said, “I’m right and I’m wrong so often that I have no interest in convincing others to think the way I do. I’m interested, rather, that we all get better at thinking” (*The Spooky Art* 162). Hopefully, such an aim is not yet itself an incomprehensible social relic.

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