

MIREN IN THE PAST: MAILER'S EGYPT

N I C O L E D E P O L O

IN A 1983 INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT TAYLOR, Norman Mailer recalled his initial reaction to an *Ancient Evenings* typesetting error, comparing it to Hemingway's surprise when the page titles for *Death in the Afternoon* seemed to announce the author's passing: "When my wife and I opened the proofs for my new novel, *Ancient Evenings*, I told her, 'We'll have to frame this.' The proofs read: *Ancient Mailer*" (*The Boston Globe* B10). In retrospect, the misnomer encapsulates the amalgamation of Mailer and the protagonist of *Ancient Evenings*, Menenhetet, that took place in the eyes of the public and some critics. It also evokes the distance that had grown between Mailer and the popular culture in which he had taken center stage as an author and public intellectual throughout the fifties and sixties. Perhaps most importantly, it reflects his immersion in the history and mythology of ancient Egypt, which merged seamlessly with his own most morbid and scatological ideas in a way that alienated the segment of an audience not ready for such complex and lurid mythology.

During the 1970s, Mailer had produced a large body of work and was the recipient of both accolades and condemnations, but the years had taken their toll and, in his 1982 introduction to *Pieces and Pontifications*, he admitted that he felt he had become "much out of step" (x). Over a decade had passed since *The Armies of the Night* (1968) had won the National Book Award in the category of Arts and Letters and the Pulitzer Prize for General Non-Fiction. Subtitled *History as a Novel/The Novel as History*, the book is Mailer's magnum opus of New Journalism. Narrated in the third person by the protean "Norman Mailer" (also referred to as "the Novelist" and "the Historian"), *The Armies of the Night* captures the chaotic atmosphere in D.C. and in the

author's mind, during the 1967 March on the Pentagon. Early in the book, he depicts his heady relationship with society by way of an Egyptological self-portrait:

He had learned to live in the sarcophagus of his image—at night, in his sleep, he might dart out and paint improvements on the sarcophagus. During the day, while he was helpless, newspapermen and other assorted bravos of the media and the literary world would carve ugly pictures on the living tomb of his legend.

(5)

It was not long before Mailer's mind drifted further into Egypt and in 1972 he began to compose the novel that would become *Ancient Evenings*. In the end, it took eleven long years to complete the book as he was repeatedly forced to set it aside while he battled through his work on *The Executioner's Song* (1979), his associations with Jack Abbott, and a contentious divorce from his fourth wife, Beverly Bentley. Between 1972 and 1982, he also took on prodigious amounts of lecturing, wrote numerous articles, and published nine books. *The Executioner's Song* turned out to be a finalist for the National Book Award for Fiction and won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1980. Mailer, however, had seen it as a diversion that compromised his focus on *Ancient Evenings*, the novel he hoped would be his crowning achievement, but is instead one of his most problematic and polarizing works.

Mailer had, perhaps, retreated into ancient Egypt in an attempt to revive his imaginative prowess. He had certainly chosen it as a locale where he could take some distance from the fray. "I started *Ancient Evenings* because I felt I couldn't write about America anymore. I lost my sense of clarity about it and I thought I'd better get away for awhile. So maybe when I come back I'll be able to see more clearly," he said (*Literary Review* 31). "I think I wanted to get away after the sixties were over. I just felt I was interested in writing about Egypt and I drifted into it and found I was writing more and more about it. Before I knew it, I was embarking on Egyptian mythology" (*Extension* 720). He wanted to "go beyond the Judeo-Christian tradition. No lessons are drawn, no historical parallels. I've spent my writing life trying to understand America; now I truly wanted to go back" (*The Boston Globe* B11).

For his readers, and for many critics, he had taken a position that was too remote. Despite the novel's initial popularity, the longevity of its readership

was hurt by a largely negative critical reception in the United States. When it was first published in August 1983, the hardcover went straight to the best-seller list where it stayed for seventeen weeks. The following Spring, it rose to number two on the paperback bestseller list (Lennon 581). Vance Bourjaily described it as “*a tour de force*” and “a monument like no other” that was “totally beyond judgment” (117). However, *Ancient Evenings* was disparaged by many reviewers “who could not stomach the subject matter” and who believed that “Mailer’s gifts are as a naturalistic, not fantastic, writer” (Begiebing 661). As Anthony Burgess put it, “In America this novel—which, whatever its intermittent unreadability, makes the fictional products of our own islands seem all too readably bland—has had a bad press. I don’t think it has been well understood” (30).

Benjamin DeMott celebrated the second section of *Ancient Evenings*, “The Book of the Gods,” and “the myth of Isis and Osiris which in this telling is made utterly new.” Then he wondered, “Would it not prove impossible for a work so well begun to be anything but magnificent over all?” He lamented that his own “excitement stirred by the book’s opening chapters” was destroyed by the novel’s subsequent five segments that he said were, “speaking bluntly, a disaster” (1).

Mailer countered DeMott’s accusations in an interview with George Plimpton:

Whether the book is great or a disaster—and it’s been called both already—my attempt was to create a new psychology, a new consciousness. After all, the Egyptians had a psychology that existed long before Freud. I was trying to write of these matters from the perspective of those times. (*People* 53)

For Mailer, Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism* was off the mark. On one hand, Freud made the case that Moses was an Egyptian rather than a Hebrew, which contradicted one of the key plot devices in *Ancient Evenings*. Menenhetet reincarnates multiple times by way of a “secret” he learned in his first from a Hebrew slave, Nefesh-Besher, who worked in the goldmines of Ramses II. Nefesh-Besher had been taught a spell by a “magician named Moses” who is “seen as some sort of minor guerrilla who kills some Egyptian guards, and takes the Hebrews to a certain town with him across the desert to escape” (*Harvard Magazine* 49). Through Nefesh-Besher,

Menenhetet gains the power to beget himself at the moment of death during coitus, whereby his lover becomes his mother. As a result, Mosaic magic is the lynchpin that propels Menenhetet through four lives and into a state of living death as a Ka, or spirit double. Egyptian mythology plays a key role in shaping each of Menenhetet's incarnations and the world around him. This is a stark contrast to Freud's vision of ancient Egypt, which Mailer felt was "limited and sectarian" and showed little feeling for the past:

He—Freud—simply was not a great believer. Unless you're willing to at least entertain the possibility that these thousands of gods of the Egyptians did exist, didn't literally exist with human bodies and people's heads, or with birds' or wolves' heads, but were there as extraordinary manifestations, it's impossible to take the Egyptians seriously. You know they really were sort of a pre-psychotic people. (*Extension* 720)

By "pre-psychotic" he meant that for the Egyptians "some of the way they perceived things was real. That they simply didn't have a demented view of existence." For them, the gods had a tangible effect on their daily lives and the fate of their souls. In order to see things from their perspective, he said, "you have to join them. You have to meld with their pagan notions. And Freud wasn't about to do that" (*Extension* 720).

Robert Gorham Davis, who had been Mailer's writing teacher at Harvard, argued that "nothing is Freudian" in *Ancient Evenings* "for nothing is repressed" (15). Beyond the more obvious excesses acted out by the characters that populate the novel, Mailer himself refused to be "bound by the normal strictures on historical fiction." To this end, he set the primary narrative of *Ancient Evenings* during the reign of Ramses IX:

I deliberately chose a dynasty about which little was known so that I could invent my own concept of Egypt. I want this book to be pure escapism. I don't want any historical parallels to be drawn between ancient Egypt and contemporary life. If the reader finds something in this book that relates to 20th century America, then I have failed. (*Los Angeles Herald Examiner* C6)

Mailer's reputation as a writer who focused on the psychology and politics of the United States worked against him in this respect. Burgess, who was otherwise one of the novel's keenest critics, assumed that Mailer's vision of Egypt was an extension of his perspective on the twentieth century. This aspect of Burgess' review exemplifies one of the most common misinterpretations of *Ancient Evenings*:

Clearly, Mailer has not spent 10 difficult years on a difficult book in order to demonstrate his skill, not previously disclosed, as a writer of historical fiction. If I can achieve a second, or third, reading of *Ancient Evenings*, I may be prepared to name it as the best reconstruction of an ancient world since Flaubert's *Salammbô*, but Mailer does not want that kind of praise. His concern is with the modern world, with the psychic problems of modern America above all, and he considers that these problems may find a solution through an understanding of the repressed areas of sexuality, with the reality of magic. (30)

Harold Bloom reinforced this misconception:

There is spiritual power in Mailer's fantasy (it is not the historical novel that it masks itself as being) and there is a relevance to current reality in America that actually surpasses that of Mailer's largest previous achievement, *The Executioner's Song*. (4)

Mailer conceded that such parallels were impossible to avoid: "I know that Harold Bloom in the *New York Review of Books* said I was writing about America. He may be right, but at least that was not my conscious intent" (*People* 53). Mailer was also aware that the writing process does not always conform to an author's plan: "Well, perhaps there is some transmutation of my experience. I have spent my writing life trying to understand America" (*Los Angeles Herald Examiner* 6). This time, though, he wanted to be recognized for his ability to conjure up the past, and he discussed this in depth with Plimpton:

One of the conceits of this book is that it's an Egyptian novel, and since there are no others, it's the Egyptian novel. I mean if

one supposed—which of course is impossible, given the culture of the time—that one rather talented young man had written a huge novel about Egypt, this would be it; it would have come down to us as an extraordinary work out of the past with no tone of the present. (*People* 53)

This statement was Mailer's way of denying the validity of comparisons to Thomas Mann's *Joseph and His Brothers*, which follows the Biblical Joseph's ascent to the position of chief adviser for the Pharaoh Akhenaton. However, Mailer did relate to Mann's position as an author whose work was inextricably tied to his public stature:

One of the big problems certain people have with *Ancient Evenings* is that they keep thinking of me as they read. They find that they can't concentrate; it's distracting; it's a great pain in the neck. That's obviously a problem if you're a well-known writer. Thomas Mann had to face it when he wrote his famous Joseph books about Egypt. Of course, his problem was larger—he was by far the most famous writer in Germany and had an immense international reputation. Mann could not write a book about Egypt in which he didn't appear. So he did, very correctly, step in there to mediate [. . .] The reader, in consequence, was comfortable because Thomas Mann was there. On the other hand, I felt that one doesn't want to be comfortable with Egypt; therefore I kept thinking of Mann, for whom I have immense respect, as being nonetheless the model to avoid. What I hoped to do was capture a culture in a way that would make the reader feel right in the middle of it, and so look up in shock and say, "My God, where am I? I'm not here; I'm in Egypt." Such total disorientation would be quite an aesthetic experience. (*People* 54)

Ancient Evenings is a bewildering double-helix of narrative threads woven by two protagonists: Menenhetet the First (hereafter Menenhetet) and his great-grandson, Menenhetet the Second (hereafter Meni). Over the course of the novel, Menenhetet is reborn three times and aborted once; Meni lives, dies, and is launched into a new life. In the first chapter, Meni's undead soul awakens within his mummy in the tomb he shares with Menenhetet. From

there, his great-grandfather leads him through the underworld. Throughout this journey, Meni remembers a long-ago evening when, at the age of six, he listened to Menenhetet tell the story of his many lives and deaths during a festival at the palace of Ramses IX in celebration of the Night of the Pig—an evening when all Egyptians must speak the truth, even to their own detriment. The Pharaoh has extended an invitation to Meni's family in order to pry the secret to attaining immortality from Menenhetet, who complicates his tale in an attempt to obscure his mystical knowledge. Meni, however, is telepathic, and is able to see the magical operations that are hidden behind his great-grandfather's verbal elaborations. Within Meni's undead mind, multiple existences and timelines arise, permute, and dissolve by way of subtle queues of changing tense, narrative person, linguistic style, and symbolism. An aesthetic experience indeed.

Before *Ancient Evenings* was published, Mailer had appeared as the protagonist in many of his journalistic works, which were narrated in the "third person personal" (Lennon 383). Personas including "Aquarius," "the reporter," and even "Norman Mailer" were amplified versions of himself akin to his fictional heroes. Now, readers and critics who took on the formidable task of navigating *Ancient Evenings* could not help but envision Menenhetet as a Mailerian figure. On the Night of the Pig, Menenhetet recounts acts of heroism that led him, during the Nineteenth Dynasty of Egypt, to rise to the highest ranks of the army of Ramses II. Conversely, he confirms the darkest rumors that have led him to infamy during the Twentieth Dynasty as a master sorcerer under the reign of Ramses IX. For unfavorable critics, it was Menenhetet's infamy rather than his heroism that paralleled Mailer, while others considered *Ancient Evenings* a work of "magnitude" and recognized its potential to give a "retrospective order and enhancement" to Mailer's *oeuvre* (Poirier 591).

When *Ancient Evenings* was published, Mailer was the same age as Menenhetet on the Night of the Pig, and he played on this parallel for laughs—and received them—at his first major appearance for the book on January 28, 1983 at New York's Lotus Club: "I've always been in love with a great protagonist. And my protagonist in *Ancient Evenings* is 60 years old" (*Worcester Telegram*, 2 February 1983). When it came to interpreting the novel's content, however, David Poirier argued against the characterization of Menenhetet as Mailer:

Questions of origin soon become [...] questions also about originality and authorship. It is impossible to claim either of these, so the book will tell us, without first accepting one's incalculable obligations to a marvelous but murky antecedence. Mailer's (and our) debts to the past, it is suggested, are enormous; they are also mysteriously entangled and untraceable. It is therefore a mistake to suggest, as some reviewers have done, that because Menenhetet is given "that look of character supported by triumph which comes to powerful men when they are sixty and still strong" he is meant to represent Mailer, or that he is Hemingway, Mailer's precursor. (591)

However, it is difficult not to hear Mailer lamenting his own position in society through one of Menenhetet's statements on the Night of the Pig: "I have done many things of which pious people—and those who are less than pious—would not approve. But in the public mind, two foul suppers equal all the rest. It is a great pity. There is so much I would teach" (*Ancient Evenings* 216). Mailer had never lived down his two greatest scandals—the stabbing of Adele Morales and his association with Jack Abbott—and this history made readers less tolerant of the gruesome themes that dominated *Ancient Evenings*.

One of the most scathing reviews came from Joseph Epstein, who characterized the novel as "extremely repulsive" and "utterly loathsome," and who used it as a springboard for a long article that, while granting Mailer some credit for his imagination and talent, was focused on discrediting his entire career. Epstein reduced Mailer to someone who "has specialized in making a public buffoon of himself" by "writing empty books, running for mayor of New York City and performing other clownish antics, aiding in the parole of a killer who, once out of prison, soon killed again, and generally leading a public life best fitted for the People section of *Time* magazine." He projected his resentment towards Mailer onto Menenhetet's narration and complained that *Ancient Evenings* consisted largely of "blather about, as Menenhetet II puts it early in the novel, 'the sinuosities of shit.'" He pointed out that George Stade, "one of Mailer's admirers" had written in the *New Republic*: "If you do not buy [Mailer's] notions of magic and the unconscious, of course, you will simply feel that Mailer and his novel are full of shit," to which Epstein added, "I don't, and therefore I do" (62).

For Mailer, though, the route to salvation was foul and terrifying, and Egyptian belief systems regarding the spirit's survival in the underworld paralleled his own:

As you go through the Egyptians they're the most incredible people. They believe in the land of the dead. It's a most detailed and hideous land of the dead. Its banks are slippery; there are fires going everywhere. There are lower gods and demons wandering around [. . .] they had such an intimate view of death as a hideous fecal place. (*Extension* 720)

This vision is evident in Menenhetet's description of the Egyptian underworld, known as Khert-Neter or the Duad, where, he tells Meni, "there is a river of feces deep as a pit. Across it, the dead must swim" (*Ancient Evenings* 71). In his fifth incarnation, Menenhetet is the embodiment of death itself—an aborted Ka who claims to be the "Overseer of the Lord God Osiris" (39). Sitting beside Meni in their shared tomb, he personifies Mailer's feculent conception of the Duad:

Do I sit before you and fart? Do you smell every odor of the constipated, the gluttonous, the sulphurous, the caustic, the fermentative, the infectious, the rotten, the corrupt, the putrescent? It is because I had to swim the river of feces, and succeeded in crossing only at a great price. The spirit of human excrement is now in the breath of my Ka, which is to say, in my emotions, and in my irregular courtesy. (71–72)

Mailer tied such imagery not only to the Duad, but to the landscape of ancient Egypt. As he described it, the Nile was akin to the river of the underworld in literal, as well as figurative, ways:

I didn't see any way to write about Egypt without entering a few unhappy subjects. In Egypt, given the Nile flooding its banks and turning villages into islands in the river, with detritus everywhere, animals living in the houses, everyone huddled together, one knows that it was an incredibly fecal place. I dealt with it because there was no trying to avoid it. If I did, I was not going to

get to the heart of my theme, which is that the Egyptians have much to tell us [. . .] about power, wealth, sex and death, and right in there is waste, excrement. That's one of the fundamental factors. (*People* 54)

For Mailer, the horrors of ancient Egypt, like the river bends of the Duad, are murky pathways to enlightenment. He immerses his reader's intellect in the muck so that it can rise through his climactic design of sublimation achieved through the merging of the Kas of Menenhetet and Meni as, at the end of the novel, they are projected out of the tomb and into a new life beyond the stars. As Bloom observed, "Mailer is desperately trying to save our souls as D. H. Lawrence tried to do in *The Plumed Serpent* or even as Melville did in *Pierre*" (4).

In his review of *Ancient Evenings*, Stade dissected one of Meni's nicknames, "Meni-Ka," and pointed out that "Ka is not only the name of a spirit; it also means 'twice' and 'feces.' In the beginning was the turd." He also illustrated the conceptual links between Mailer's and the ancient Egyptian's preoccupations with excrement and decay:

As fertilizer, dung contains the future. Therefore the languages of rebirth and evacuation throb in the same peristaltic coils; therefore you prophesy by the entrails of animals. As what you leave behind, dung contains your past. So Khepera, the dung beetle, perhaps the greatest god of all, rolls its eggs in balls of dung for its hatchlings to eat, an image of the future feeding on the past out of which it is born. So Khepera presides over the Land of the Dead, with its abysmal stinks, the olfactory equivalent of those wasted opportunities you must relive in pain, terror, and disgust if you wish to brave resurrection. Earthborn Khepera, after all, is a beetle with wings and could fly, and so knew all worlds. (33)

In a 1975 interview with Laura Adams, which is considered one of Mailer's most significant testimonials on reincarnation and magic, he offers insight to his ideas about the ways in which feces may constitute refinement of character:

Shit is what we reject, at least to the degree that the shit felt it deserved a better end for itself. In other words, a lot of our shit has nutrients in it, worth in it. It's just that the body couldn't take it, and so passed it out. Some of the best of the food goes out with the shit as well as some of the worst [. . .] To the degree that we can loosen our imagination to assume this stuff might have a soul, after all, we're beginning to discover now that plants have feelings and souls, so it may be that food, even though in a peculiar relation to life, not as alive as a plant, let's say, or as an animal, but still alive to a degree, has a mood, has a spirit, has something. If food feels it has been violated, suppose it can die with a curse. Of course, the Devil loves to be around to pick up those who died with a curse. (*Partisan Review* 217)

In his most notorious act, Menenhetet had supped on bat dung because of his “need to protect himself against the curses of the powerful,” and his strong association of bats with Ramses II. On the Night of the Pig, when Ramses IX asks him if it is true that he ingested guano, Menenhetet explains, “Bats [. . .] are filthy creatures, hysterical as monkeys, restless as vermin. [. . .] They are shrill and cling to one another. But their leavings contain all they cannot use. They are endowed, therefore, with the power to endure loneliness” (*Ancient Evenings* 10; 681). As he goes through the story of his first life, during the reign of Ramses II, however, he reveals a darker truth.

One day Ramses II led him to a cave hidden behind a boulder on the ledge of a cliff. There, he told Menenhetet, he would build a secret tomb of twelve rooms. As they talked, “bats flew past like whips,” and Menenhetet “heard that cry they make so close to the sound of a dying man's breath—that whistle of panic.” Having disclosed his burial plan, Ramses II threw Menenhetet to his knees and raped him:

I heard a clangor in my head equal to the great door of a temple knocked open by the blow of a log carried forward at a run by ten good men, it was with the force of ten good men that He took me up my bowels, and I lay with my face on the stony soil of the cave while a bat screamed overhead [. . .] Like an arrow flew one thought through my mind: It was that I must revenge myself. (287–288)

The association of bats with this pivotal trauma may have motivated Menenhetet to use their dung as a sort of antidote that would bolster him in his vengeful plans—and protect him against the totalitarian authority of the Pharaoh. It was Stade who best traced the visceral convolutions of Pharaonic power and its role in the superstitions and excremental magic of his Egyptian subjects:

The Pharaoh's wastes are valuable as gold and treated accordingly. He sits on a gold throne, whether in court or at stool, where, like Martin Luther, he does his thinking. The Egyptian word for "ponder," we are told, the word *mau*, can also mean "the light-of-a-God" or "anus." (34)

In *Ancient Evenings*, the courtiers of Ramses IX use his leavings in rituals against him. It was the Pharaoh's habit "to meditate" while he sat on his "Golden Bowl." Here, he contemplated the afflictions of his "Two-Lands," Upper and Lower Egypt:

Each morning, you see, I had told Myself that whatever in Me was failing to serve the interests of the Two-Lands, whatever I might lack in dedication, piety, raw bravery, and martial spirit—for, alas, I am a prudent man—were, nonetheless, all present in My stool. By that path could My gardeners bring forth the most splendid herbs and vegetables and flowers and spices to enrich those priests, officers, and overseers I consider most devoted to the Life-Health-Strength of our Egypt. For years that has been a most reassuring thought. I have made lists of particular men and women who deserve to receive this produce. Even today, I told a scribe to send eight tomatoes to Rut-sekh, that worthy rock-cutter. Contemplate, then, My horror when I discovered in this last year that the Overseer of the Golden Bowl was a thief. On torture, he confessed that he was selling to sorcerers. My garden had been receiving *his* excrement in substitute for *Mine!* (222–223)

In his first life, Menenhetet had collaborated with Ramses II's wife, Nefertiri, to work a similar, vengeful magic against the Pharaoh. After stealing a pellet of Ramses II's turd from the Overseer of the Golden Bowl, Menenhetet

delivered it to Nefertiri who, as a sorceress, was “grave and quick.” She cast a spell on the pellet and ordered Menenhetet to go “to the Lake of Maat,” the goddess of truth and justice, “and drop His gift in there.” That afternoon, the Pharaoh was seriously injured when, after they passed the lake, the bearers of the right side of his palanquin collapsed. Flung from his seat, the Pharaoh struck his head on the marble steps of his palace and nearly died. Through Maat’s mediating power, the scales were tipped against Ramses II (506–507).

Much of the tension in *Ancient Evenings* is generated by Menenhetet’s simultaneous love and loathing of Ramses II. Even as he resents the Pharaoh, Menenhetet claims, “over all my four lives I cannot despise the odor of the bat altogether since it always recalls to me the warm generous limbs of that young Ramses.” After he describes his violation in the cave, he explains, “I was no longer myself but His, and loved Him, and knew I would die for Him, but I also knew I would never forgive him, not when I ate, not when I drank, and not when I defecated” (286–288). In his review, Epstein wrote, “The connection between buggery and excrement is not shirked in this loathsome book.” Indeed, the degree to which the novel can be appreciated is largely dependent on the reader’s tolerance for Mailer’s obsessions with anal and erotic commerce. Christopher Lehmann-Haupt wrote that such “fixations have often seemed preposterous in Mr. Mailer’s writing on contemporary subjects, but they fit seamlessly into his conception of ancient Egypt, which may well explain why he was attracted to the subject in the first place” (C17). Bloom claimed that Mailer had “emancipated himself, and seems to be verging upon a new metaphysic, in which heterosexual buggery might be the true norm.” Davis called *Ancient Evenings* “a hymn to anality,” and Stade emphasized the bridge between buggery, mysticism, and Pharaonic power:

Let us take as an instance one cluster of magical associations, those surrounding the anus, which as the deepest seat of our repressed sexuality is the “foundation” of magic. Dung smells bad, but makes good fertilizer. It is therefore like the swamps and mud of the Nile, like the Nile itself, like Egypt in fact, which depends on the Nile, and which, says the Pharaoh Ramses IX, is “not unlike the crack between two great buttocks.” The Pharaoh should know, for one of his symbols is a circle with lines radiating from it, as the spokes of a wheel radiate from a nub, as the Pharaoh’s

fertile will radiates out in all directions over Egypt, as furrows and chthonic influences radiate from an anus. (33)

Mailer embedded a related symbol in the text of *Ancient Evenings*, and, aside from decorative drop caps, it is the only hieroglyph presented inline with the body text. It appears on page 127 of the first edition, and so illustrates that Meni's passage into the underworld is inextricably tied to his relationship with the Pharaoh. As he begins his journey through the Duad, Meni remembers that on the Day of the Pig, he rode down the Nile on a barge to meet Ramses IX for the first time. When he arrives, along with his mother, father, and Menenhetet, servants carry them into the palace on sedan chairs. The seats, Meni realizes, are "marked with nothing less than the hieroglyph" that "represents the land of the dead":



By associating this image with entry into the palace of Ramses IX, Mailer draws an explicit picture of the confluence of Pharaonic power with an underworld river of fundament. In an interview, he reflected on these associations—and on his agreement with Freud's psychosexual theories:

It's no secret that Freud gave us a firm set of connections between anality and power [. . .] and what I learned about Egypt seemed a kind of confirmation. (*People* 54)

Robert Begiebing wrote that in *Ancient Evenings*, buggery became "the perfect expression of the power held by the victor over the vanquished, or by the ruler over the ruled. It is, therefore, also an expression of the totalitarian impulses of ruler and state." In this light, Menenhetet is a tragic hero because, in his first life, he bends to "perhaps the most powerful authoritarian force in history—one of the greatest absolute rulers of the Ancient Near East," Ramses II (649). Begiebing places Menenhetet and Meni among Mailer's "rebel heroes" who "glory to advance their own lives and visions, even when they fail" and seek a power that is "unconscious, divine," and "regenerative":

With this power the hero gains the only effective force available to struggle against a deadening, homogenizing, and totalitarian

world. This power, this Vital Life Source, is a principle in the order of creation that stands in opposition to entropy, whether the entropy of violent personal defeat, or totalitarianism, or of chaotic force. (628)

According to Begiebing, it is “only in death, in the journey through the Land of the Dead” that there is a “vague hope of regeneration to a creative and purposeful life,” and at the end of *Ancient Evenings*, there is a restorative “synthesis of both conscious and unconscious psyche” that creates a “heroic consciousness” (637). Menenhetet and Meni triumph in their journey through the Duad when their Kas merge and they mount a “ladder of lights to that place in the heavens where one might gaze like Osiris upon the portents of all that is ahead, and try to turn the storm before it breaks.” In their new, unified incarnation, they enter into a new existence, and “all that is in” them shifts, “even Time itself.” It becomes evident that Meni’s journey through the underworld has been triggered by “the scream of earth exploding,” but that his soul will live on, despite the destruction of the planet (708-709).

As Mailer put it in a 1966 self-interview, “violence, cannibalism, loneliness, insanity, libidinousness, hell, perversion, and mess [. . .] are the states that must be passed through, digested, transcended, if one is to make one’s way back to life” (*Cannibals and Christians* 270). In the new millennium, the ability to view Mailer’s career in retrospect and to revisit his words with eyes widened by technology, new media, and an imperiled planet may decide whether or not this is true for his Egyptian novel.

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