

NORMAN MAILER: OF VITALITY AND MORALITY

C H R I S T O P H E R B U S A

LIKE KING HENRY VIII, MAILER MARRIED SIX TIMES; unlike the English king, who annulled three marriages, Mailer tended to maintain enduring emotional bonds with his lovers. Also, in an elastic sense, Mailer was something of a serial monogamist, however many lovers darted between the sheets and layers of his marriages. Mailer's marriages and extra-marital excursions is documented in rich detail, offering telling individuality for each significant person, in J. Michael Lennon's *Mailer: A Double Life*.

The dizzying sequences in King Henry's amorous alignments were spun more turbulently by the fact that the king was a Roman Catholic, obliged to seek the Pope's dispensation to obtain an annulment; for justification, the king quoted scripture from the Old Testament (Leviticus Chapter 20 Verse 16): "If a man shall take his brother's wife, it is an impurity; he hath uncovered his brother's nakedness; they shall be childless." English schoolchildren learned to rhyme in order to remember the marriage sequence:

King Henry VIII,
To six wives was wedded.
One died, one survived,
Two divorced, two beheaded.

Norman never dropped a guillotine on the neck of any wife, though, famously, he did, in a fit of irrational rage, plunge a penknife close to the heart of his second wife. However, he never used his pen to savage any of his wives in print, insisting they each had become essential to the "crystals"¹ of his imagination, believing, perhaps superstitiously, that any autobiographical

realization would destroy the infinite insights his marriages had supplied for him. When asked why he married many times, Mailer replied, “To get divorced. You don’t know anything about a woman until you meet her in court.”

The first thing to say about marriage is that the union is intimate. The Bible uses the term “uncover nakedness” over twenty times in multiple circumstances, citing occasions where the nakedness shifts between various partners. Carnal knowledge involves unconscious apprehension of the frisson of touch, the sweet or harsh odor of breath, and ineffable attraction, or repulsion, of physical form.

Mailer’s quest for experience that would feed his novels and his nonfiction was lifelong and ever evolving. Born Jewish, the youthful author of *The Naked and the Dead* declared he had become an atheist, only to abandon this ignorance of our beginnings, as his philosophy, later in life, when he realized that existence was much easier to understand if one postulated a creator.

In *The Spooky Art: Thoughts on Writing* (2003), Mailer reflects profoundly on the accumulated lessons offered by his prolific career. He begins a chapter “Instinct and Influence,” observing,

I am not sure it is possible to describe how it feels to write a novel. It may be that it is not an experience. It may be more like a continuing relation between a man and his wife. You can’t necessarily speak of that as an experience, since it may consist of several experiences braided together; or many experiences all more or less similar; or it may consist of two kinds of experiences that are antagonistic to one another.

Reading this, a few beads of sweat, forming along my forehead, obliged me to ponder why one would marry one’s enemy. Mailer’s words oblige his readers to take to heart what he says of others, and the genius of his probing thinking is a shared anxiety, a compact he creates by whispering, *sotto voce*, in our inner ears. John Stuart Mill remarked that an oration is heard, while a poem is overheard, and it is the parabolic power of the metaphors of poetry that drives the cadences of Mailer’s unique prose, an engine of energy fueled by a utopian desire to set us free from oppressive snares of social traps.

It was Nietzsche, author of the *Genealogy of Morals*, published in 1887,

thirty years after Darwin published *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favored Races in the Struggle for Life*, who sought to trace how our ethical sense evolved, historically, from the brutal dominance of the more powerful into a reversal, where the meek would now inherit the earth. Nietzsche's *Genealogy* is at bottom a type of social Darwinism, where the development of culture has a biological power to make changes in our genes, including the manifestation of "social instincts" such as "sympathy" and "moral sentiments," which evolved via natural selection, resulting in stronger societies, as Darwin wrote in *Descent of Man*.

Nietzsche made a crucial distinction between what we deem *evil* and what we decide is *bad*, a distinction that developed when the "priest" and the "warrior" parted ways, due to the hatred or "resentment" of the weak for the strong. Resentment thus becomes a psychological "illusion," inverting the hierarchy of morals, such that a "bird of prey" is condemned for acting out of its own natural inclination. Given the centuries-long evolution of morality, through the Old and New Testaments, we have arrived at a modern confusion, a core uncertainty that questions our present hierarchy of values.

Without pondering this uncertainty in Nietzsche's terms, Mailer's instinct was revealed in his contradictory, quasi-incoherent essay in 1957, "The White Negro," where Mailer, entranced by the improvisations he heard in jazz, transposed the resentment of the Negro's "slave mentality," to his frustrated Caucasian counterpart:

So it is no accident that the source of Hip is the Negro for he has been living on the margin between totalitarianism and democracy for two centuries.

The Negro has the simplest of alternatives: live a life of constant humility or ever-threatening danger.

So there was a new breed of adventurers, urban adventurers who drifted out at night looking for action with a black man's code to fit their facts. The hipster had absorbed the existential synapses of the Negro, and for practical purposes could be considered a white Negro.

What the liberal cannot bear to admit is the hatred beneath the skin of a society so unjust that the amount of collective violence buried in the people is perhaps incapable of being contained, and therefore if one wants a better world one does well

to hold one's breath, for a worse world is bound to come first, and the dilemma may well be this: given such hatred, it must either vent itself nihilistically or become turned into the cold murderous liquidations of the totalitarian state.

Mailer absorbed Freud's intrapsychic understandings of how one's conscious brain pleads with its conscience even as it yields to primal passions. And Mailer saw the self in the individual's sociological context, using Marx as a guide to the dynamic and frictional relation between the corporation and the workers who produced products for sale by the corporation. The complexity of Mailer's mind-set is parsed in enactments worked out in almost countless existential opportunities as his ideas were tested in new circumstances in the course of writing over fifty books.

In *Tough Guys Don't Dance* (1984), Mailer created bizarre connections in off-season Provincetown; the deserted streets and the chill of autumn pull together "people who would not ordinarily associate with one another." Mailer focuses on the "spookiness" that is pervasive in the aftermath of Dionysian summer excess, evaluating the mood with Kierkegaardian nuances of fear, dread, anxiety, and vertigo. Mailer, quite simply, brings extreme personalities into intimate contact.

In *The Castle in the Forest*,¹ Mailer asserts that the two greatest births in human history were those of Jesus Christ and Adolph Hitler, and, comparing *Castle* to the *Gospel according to the Son*, brings together "people who might not necessarily associate with one another."

In the *Gospel*, the Devil confronts Christ in a desert as barren as the forsaken rubble that is the ironic "forest" where Hitler's façade of a castle is constructed, a Potemkin edifice in arid air. The smooth tongue of the Devil, oily, unctuous, obsequious, wafts a stream of moisture on the cheek of Jesus, inviting Him to share a supper, which He declines. However, a consummating contact occurs when Jesus allows the Devil to touch Him. Wish granted, accepting the Devil's embrace, a "shudder of knowledge" lodges in the body of Christ, infecting His purity with the corrosive germ of pure Evil. In countless mundane tasks, Mailer shows how the everyday commonplaces can be fatally tainted, as when the shapeshifting narrator of *Castle* finds a jar of honey on a kitchen table, which becomes a vehicle for a "dose of dark syrup." Hitler's world is a war where all the soldiers wear uniforms of camouflage, confusing the background with the foreground.

Castle is Mailer's farewell novel, his last masterpiece; the reader is not enticed to identify with either Hitler or the Devil, but with an intermediary of the Devil, a narrator that becomes, by the end of the novel, "as alone with each other as two souls out in the ocean on a rock not large enough for three."

Mailer created an alcove for writing in the top floor of his Brooklyn abode, obliged to traverse an unstable walkway from a solid purchase on terra firma to arrive into the shelter of his sanctum sanctorum, his writing desk. Mailer recreated this danger with the hornet's nest endangering the long patrol up the mountain in *Naked and the Dead*, with the precipice along Rojack's parapet in *An American Dream*, in the steep assault on the Pilgrim Monument in *Tough Guys*, where the climber freezes at the point where gargoyles at the summit obstruct his conclusion. The role of risk as a prelude to accomplishment is Mailer's "ticket to the circus," to borrow the metaphor of his wife Norris in her memoir about life with her volatile husband. On the cover of *Provincetown Arts* in 1999, Mailer was photographed balancing in summer slippers, his prehensile toes wrapping securely around the thick rope spanning the deck of his bayside cottage.

Mailer's characters are not Mailer, but rather alter egos that, he said, he feels "comfortable inhabiting." Mailer learned to shun autobiography in an effort to find psychological freedom in characters other than himself. A book Mailer may have read during his time he absorbed the writings of the psychologist Robert Linder, author of *Rebel without a Cause*—this book is Ernst Kris's *Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art* (1952), popular among artists in the 1950s, who sought to understand the self's relation to his performing self. Kris observed, "The absolution from guilt for fantasy is complete if the fantasy one follows is not one's own." Mailer's personas connect to his acting aspirations, and root his experience in theater as a key source in all his writing.

Violence occurs existentially in Mailer's practice as a consequence of uncertain circumstances. Sometimes the violence is creative, as Mailer discovered in writing about Picasso, who had witnessed the autopsy of a woman killed by lightning, where her head was split in two, suggesting expressive distortions of Picasso's portraits of his mistresses and muses. Sometimes, violence is unredeemable destruction, as when Mailer's effort to free Jack Abbott from prison resulted in the death of a clerk who refuses to let Abbott use the store's bathroom.

In Mailer's assessment of D. H. Lawrence in the *Prisoner of Sex*, we come

to understand the positive function of violence is smashing through the constrictive armory that sheaths vulnerability—the husk that protects the seed, the shell that must be cracked for new life to burst forth, the libido-like phoenix that is resurrected as ether as it is consumed by fire.

If Mailer hit a nodal point in our cultural life, during the Second Wave of Feminism, perhaps it was because, in the face of feminism, he asserted the male's mystery against the feminine mystique—a “masculine liberation.” Maggie McKinley's writings,³ exploring the “paradox of violence” pervading the work of Mailer, Bellow, Roth, and others offers a counterpart, a gender balance, not so much in “understanding”: rather a fulcrum for the dynamic dance engendered on the seesaw weighted on opposite ends by male machismo and feminine elegance.

In an essay published in the *Mailer Review* in 2012, McKinley pondered some of the blind animus tossed off onto Mailer as an “advocate of the psychic benefits of wife killing”:

Assessments such as these cling to both Mailer and his writing, and often serve to mistakenly suggest that his work does not merit serious attention, specifically within the field of Gender Studies. I have been asked why I, a woman, am so interested in studying Mailer and his gender politics. My answer to this question is that Mailer's fiction and nonfiction—particularly that published between the mid-fifties and early seventies—reveals some of the most frustrating but also some of the most fascinating representations of gender in contemporary American fiction. This assessment is especially true of Mailer's rendering of masculine identity, which is more often than not accompanied by episodes of violence. . . . What I aim to illuminate are the ways Mailer himself interrogates violence in his own work, exploring its nuances and consequences nearly as often as he extols it as an essential aspect of masculinity. (159)

In a distinction perhaps as significant as Nietzsche's separation of evil from bad, so McKinley offers “the nuanced distinction between destructive and creative violence” (*Masculinity* 75).

NOTES

1. Busa, Christopher. "Norman's Crystals."
2. Busa, Christopher. "Imagining Evil: The Sardonic Narrator in Mailer's Last Novel."

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