

# NOTHING ATTESTED, EVERYTHING SUNG

P H I L I P   B R A D Y

*This essay emerged out of a conversation with Mike Lennon about the tension between reality and imagination. Mike objected to a notion put forward in a line, "Nothing Attested, Everything Sung," from H. L. Hix, a poet published by Etruscan Press, which I direct. Etruscan uses the line as a tag for a writing contest which we sponsor, calling for "one page that sings" in any genre. Mike pointed out that attestation, represented in his definitive biography, Norman Mailer: A Double Life, is a core feature of rational discourse. This essay originally appeared in Phantom Signs: The Muse in Universe City (University of Tennessee Press, 2019)*

CONTRARY TO RUMOR, I AM NOT H.L. HIX. I understand the mix-up. We are close in age. We are both tall, bespectacled Caucasians. Both poets, though of varying stature. My company, Etruscan Press, has published eleven Hix titles, one-third of his output. Few buy and fewer follow. But I am not Hix. First, I am not composing a canon in dialogue with the Bible. Second, I am unlikely to get lost in an Irish bar, as Hix once did, missing an assignation to drink whisky and discuss the publication of one of his books. I am disastrously familiar with this habitat. Third, H.L. Hix is a genius. It's not his fault; it's not a deal-breaker. We've addressed the issue, man-to-genius. We're past it.

I first became aware that in some circles I was being taken for H.L. Hix during a conference call with Consortium, Etruscan's sales distributor.

"We wonder," said Eliot, "all these books by Hix."

"Prolific," I replied, "But this book..."

“Yes, but we are wondering at the office, you know.”

“You’ll really like this one.”

“We have a pool.”

“A pool?”

“An office bet.”

“On sales?”

“We wonder if you are not you.”

“Then who?”

“We wonder if perhaps you aren’t H.L. Hix.”

“I wrote all those books?”

“You’ve never been seen together.”

“He’s in Wyoming.”

“Or someone else of the same name.”

“Why me?”

“It would explain why you keep publishing unsalable books.”

Another reason for the confusion is my tendency to steal from Hix. Quips mostly. Sometimes whole lines. The occasional groundbreaking idea—like song-speech—a paradigm representing poetry as a matrix of impulses: one toward linear movement, the other towards song’s transcendent stillness. Poetry eludes song because it is never wholly present; transcends speech because it is never wholly lucid. Recently, for an Etruscan contest inviting a one-page submission from any genre, “a page that sings,” I swiped “Nothing attested, everything sung.”

It was easy. One afternoon I scrawled the slogan on a shamrock napkin and slid it across the bar to my friend Norman.

“What bullshit,” said Mailer.

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing attested. I’ve got three thousand footnotes here.”

“So?”

“And I’m not Norman Mailer, Batman. I’m his biographer.”

The purpose of drinking whisky in agreeable company—at least the purpose to which I will attest—is to blend. Taken in proper dosage, in the right ambiance, with select companions, and adjusting for various tastes, tolerance, and wallets, whisky aligns homeostasis, producing concord. One indicator that blending has taken place is the commencement of song. Voices rise; identities dissolve. Attestation on the other hand signifies a failure to mix, a hardening of boundaries, the baring of fangs.

Faced with an ink-stained napkin, neither Mailer's biographer nor Hix's publisher sang. In fact, Norman Mailer does not, in 900 pages of *A Double Life*, sing once, though he attests much. His attestations are so persistently tumescent that they could never be mistaken for anyone else's. He is Mailer. Norman is he. The moniker itself parses—both fore and surname suggesting armor. H.L. Hix, on the other hand, is titrated to the fewest possible characters, none round. On the cover of his current book, *I'm Here to Learn to Dream in Your Language*, his name sinks into earth tones. On his next book, it may vanish or explode. The book after that will be completely gaseous. In Wyoming, the personage designated by the name rises, per legend, and straps on Carhartt overalls to scribe in a barn studio. Then he mounts a treadmill and pounds six miles of *Paradise Regained* before cruising Wyoming 80 to a red schoolhouse, composing with his cigarette hand. Few—fewer even than his readers—know this verse avatar's given name.

Norman brandished a finger. "I had six graduate assistants. We dogged every step from Ashtabula to Zaire. 9700 index cards. 1800 interviews. Lawyers, agents, editors, wedding planners. We sacked the Flatiron Building. Pulped a quadrant of rainforest."

Gardner piped in. "Much depends on the convergence of theme and incident."

He brushed pipe ash from his elbow patch and downed a jag.

"Fiction expands within limits imposed by the moral universe. The cleft between the seen and the believed makes art, whether biography or novel. Forget that, and you become a didact like Hix, or a glorified pornographer, like you, Norman."

Mailer's finger jabbed Gardner's Bly-white halo. "Moral Fiction, my ass. Stick an 'is' in there."

"I'm Gardner's protégé, by the way," protested Gardner. "Paul is dead."

"You mean John."

"That too."

The use of inverted commas goes back to Luther. "I cite," we attest; "Therefore he is." Citation encompasses reference, encomium, or accusation. I have selected all these words from the hoard first coined by others but I do not own them. Joyce feared quotation marks, perhaps because he couldn't see them. Hix eschews quotation altogether. If I attest that he exists (and who will vouch for me?) my evidence comes from no attestation. It's

what made the Romans fall for the Etruscans, a tribe they conquered but couldn't comprehend. The words don't fit the world, they suit the measure.

Hix was the first Etruscan. His groundbreaker, *As Easy As Lying*, maps hardscrabble routes between Post-Modern and New-Formal. Few follow. Fewer buy. Like the Romans, Americans find the artifacts of the conquered obscure and edifying.

I am not Etruscan by birth but I have been known to borrow from the corpus of H.L. Hix. Organs mostly. On the occasion of the Irish bar, I was thinking of nipping his liver. The operation is less drastic than it sounds since the organs themselves exist only in medical charts. To excise, it is sufficient to bracket the target organ in quotation marks. Hix's "liver" is pristine, virtually Promethean. I would not, however, touch his "spleen," which is calamitous.

The Romans couldn't read Etruscan but thought the liver was the seat of genius. One side effect of drinking whisky while hosting an exceptionally bright internal organ is spatial-temporal displacement. Afternoons commenced in Irish bars wend to the parish of Ozymandias. On this particular day, had I bummed the liver, I might have said, "Norm luv, I don't know if Hix sings. From his performance in Irish bars, I doubt it. Song in inverted commas doesn't mean 'barbaric yawp.' It doesn't mean 'crooned,' or 'ululated,' 'diddly-eye-died' or 'full-throated' or 'recitivated.' Song doesn't come from somewhere else. It emerges, sourceless. So your 900 pages..."

"947 with index and bibliography." Norman stirred in sleep.

"Your tome."

"They made me cut 90,000 words."

"Your opus."

Norm snored.

"The beauty of your beast—Mailer's best book, the book he lived—wasn't in his armor, or his bibliography, or even in his sliver of history. It was your song. It was the grace notes between the footnotes. The thrum beneath the sentences. Even the title: a paradox, a door into the dark. Throughout the varied pages I hear it: carol of wind tickling his hirsute paunch; chord of Jew's harp plucked in his Village flat; creak of distending wings; whistle of Viking axe that cleaved his bypassed heart."

"Those weren't in my book."

"Nowhere else. Your book is the rooftree of the house composed of song. Your book is the bright container. *A Double Life* attests to song. Phrases riff;

phonemes carry tunes; the sewn spine rocks and the glossy snapshots chant. In your book, Norman Mailer wakes to the prime syllable of *The Naked and the Dead*; he surveys the East River where loom *The Armies of the Night*; on the morning before his soul infected the sperm that fattened into Gore Vidal's nemesis, he yearns silently toward the final page of your codex, which is blank."

"The signature page."

"Your signature. Is it a prologue? Riverrun, you know. Tomorrow morning when your eyelids unglue and you stumble into the bathroom and gulp aspirin, when your cough goes basso profundo and your prick rampant, I wonder if you won't wish yourself transposed into the pulp of chirography, of signs, of silent vocables. Would you not be your book? Does Norman Mailer exist anywhere else? Don't tell me about hosts of rambunctious microbes. That necrotic iteration dissolves slowly underground. Now there is only Norman in the bar; soon there will be only Norman's book. Finally, a body composed of microbial footnotes. The utterances—to the extent they remain unremaindered—they are Norman Mailer."

Regretfully, having confined myself to my own tissue, I did not so retort. Mailer did not wake.

At this juncture or another identical era Joyce sashayed to the table and bent forward, quelling breath. "Commendatore, your credit card..."

Over her bluish breast loomed a bespectacled poet.

"Harvey!"

The laureate hurled his Stetson on the sawdust floor.

"You've ripped me off for the last time, Liberty."

I plundered my groin pocket. "I swear I didn't take it."

"Nothing attested, huh. You think a graphomaniac won't miss a few words?"

"Oh, that."

"Shelley ran my AWP card and found the napkin."

"Just one loanword." I mimed the inverted commas tattooed on Joyce's bosom. "That's not Shelley."

Hix kicked Gardner's ankle. "What's this bogman doing here?"

"He's ornamental. Here to attest that he was here. When these sentences transmogrify into song he'll disappear."

"That's just like you, Uriah. Attesting in my word docs. I've seen you tip-

toe around the hieractic umlauts; sweat-staining the serifs. You hijacked Eighteen Maniacs. Stuck a toothpick in Frey Luis."

"Harvey darling." My eyes wheedled. "I'm on-task. Editing, vending, budgeting, tweeting. Look, read my sales notes." I pulled out a swatch of index cards and dealt them on the bar.

"#1 The project of Hixian Studies is to complicate identity by blending voices. Or forms.

#2 In *Shadows of Houses*, selected lines reappear in predetermined order based on the Mayan calendar. In *Chromatic*, a vatic voice speaks from near death

#3 in a prose villanelle. *Incident Light* interrogates a strange revelation; *As Much As If Not More Than* (AMAINMT), is

#4 culled from Hix's most ambitious project, in which he interviews every person in America who has published at least four lines of verse, except

#5 me (thus fueling the rumors). The result, *Alter Nation*, is unavailable from Ugly Duckling Press, run by cool dudes from Brooklyn.

#6 They're password protected (book and borough). Out of this ur-text, Hix constructed the mythos of *AMAINMT*."

Gardner listed south. The deck of cards collapsed.

"Where's the rest, Slim?" asked Hix, scanning the sawdust.

"That was my last card."

"What then?"

"It's a conference call. Two minutes per title."

"Why don't you plan ahead?"

"This way they think I have more."

"Christ on a stick."

"That's another market."

Between inverted commas and impenetrable Etruscan is boustrophedon, a script without the interruption of spaces or vowels or prejudice toward left-brain reading habits. Boustrophedon is a helix, like Times Square, but unlit.

In Hix's next book, *American Anger*, the testimony collected from three centuries of class, gender, and race oppression is paved beneath the primary verse in boustrophedon, a ribbon endless as Wyoming 80. The book after that is *Rain Inscription*. It is writ entirely in water.

"Listen, Magoo," Hix said. "I'm only here in this dump you call your brain because I have another new book."

"Then it must be Tuesday." I studied Hix's silver belt buckle. "Can you write without a liver?"

"Here's the pitch. I have no name." Hix flicked Norman's ear. "Dumbo has nothing but. And why is he sleeping in a bar?"

"I've found it optimal to sedate my fictional characters when they are not performing necessary functions."

"So my next book will be the Collected Works of Norman Mailer."

"That's a lot of pulp."

"Print is ecologically incorrect."

"Whew. That saves \$4.18 a unit, not to mention warehousing. Digital?"

"I won't support corporate hoods who steal names from South American rivers. My book will feature everything Mailer ever wrote reconstituted, distributed and promoted in the breath of all Etruscans, including interns."

"Copyright?"

Hix sniffed. "Capitalist bollox." We'll "publish" Mailer's Collected without recourse to attestation. Also, mixed at random with Mailer's canon will be everything he never wrote."

"I smell crowdfunding."

"Brilliant!" said Harvey. "You must be H.L. Hix."