

The Myth of the American Adam in Late Mailer

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Let us begin with the problem of Adam. Lewis's 1955 study, *The American Adam*, explored a variety of nineteenth-century American writings to show that "the American dialogue" has largely been about notions of American innocence, about whether the American self is Adamically new, fallen into the corruption of history, or fortunately fallen. This notion of innocence has been much criticized for its political effects. American identity has long been predicated on the absence of class-conflict. Cultural myths such as the American Adam have been blamed for the specifically American refusal to examine class-conflict that is sometimes called "American Exceptionalism." The American self-concept, the argument goes, masks over class-conflict, since "the simple genuine self against the whole world," to use Emerson's phrase, is by definition a being without class affiliation. Critics of Lewis (and of similar theorists of American culture and identity) have insisted that myths of American innocence function to narrow the American horizon of expectation, specifically excluding political conflict, such as when Russell Reising accuses Lewis of segregating politics from literature in *The Unusable Past: Theory and the Study of American Literature*.

Lewis is faulted for being "ahistorical," since his study of the American dialogue pays no attention to nineteenth-century controversies such as the slavery debates.¹ Whether or not we would agree that Lewis is guilty as charged, the literary criticism his seminal work fostered certainly acquired a sharply ahistorical rhetoric one generation later. In *Radical Innocence* Ihab Hassan discusses some versions of the American Adam as he is reincarnated in an existentialist, alienated, A-bomb afflicted postwar world. Refiguring the opposition between Emerson's "Plain old Adam, the simple genuine self" and "the whole world" against which

that opposing self was defined, Hassan sees the oppositional nature of the American protagonist as essentially "radical":

His innocence . . . is a property of the mythic American self, perhaps of every anarchic Self. It is the innocence of a Self that refuses to accept the inmitigable rule of reality, including death, an aboriginal Self the radical imperatives of whose freedom cannot be stifled. (6)

This radicalism has nothing to do with political radicalism, however. The word radical in Hassan's usage means something like "profound," and the imperatives driving Hassan's neo-innocent are rooted entirely in psychological rather than social or political self-definition. An "aboriginal Self" claims an identity prior to law and politics.

The radically innocent Adamic character, remaking himself or herself on a daily basis in a proper existential fashion, can be interpreted as a Self from which to develop a political intelligence, since the American Adam is a social outsider. His, or her, status as one beyond the pale makes this apparition uniquely qualified to comprehend the society within.² Thus, Adam is an anarchic self, not one governed by party affiliation or any other sense of communal debt. But at the same time, this Adam is most definitely on the outside looking in, an apparently ideal culture critic. For Hassan radical innocence is an indispensable political credential precisely because it offers transcendence of traditional styles of political engagement (those styles that became an embarrassment during the Cold War, it so happens).

The "noble but illusory myth of the American as Adam" functions as a kind of "false consciousness" in the skeptical criticism that follows that of Lewis and Hassan. The image of the American Outsider has in recent years lost authority for those who charge that the tendency to "transcend" quotidian history is "one of the major political effects that the work of American ideology as a whole helps to reinforce" (Kavanagh 313). Leo Marx begins *The Machine in the Garden* with criticisms of American ideologies such as that of the American Adam and cites Richard Hofstadter and Henry Nash Smith to demonstrate ways in which "this ideal has appeared with increasing frequency in the service of a reactionary or false ideology, thereby helping to mask the real problems of an industrial civilization" (7). The pastoral fantasy has of course been

a common mode of escape from the pressures of the real world, and Marx goes on to point out how American Renaissance writers employed the mode as a springboard to escape social and political conflicts that endangered their sense of artistic detachment:

Our writers, instead of being concerned with social verisimilitude, with manners and customs, have fashioned their own kind of melodramatic, Manichean, all-questioning fable, romance, or idyll, in which they carry us, in a bold leap, beyond everyday social experience into an abstract realm of morality and metaphysics. (343)

American literary mythology, in sum, has often been used as an escape from the clash of the world. It directs our attention to the problems of the individual rather than toward the obligations of the individual to the community, and Ihab Hassan's identification of Lewis's Adamic self with the "Anarchic self" certainly suggests the sort of individual entitlement that American literary myths can be made to support.

With these charges in mind, it may be a surprise to remember that Lewis called for a kind of Adamic resistance to Cold War containment: "Ours is an age of containment; we huddle together and shore up defenses; both our literature and our public conduct suggest that exposure to experience is certain to be fatal" (Lewis 196). Lewis's epilogue, "Adam in the Age of Containment," is an explicit consideration of the relationship between American literary myths and political culture. While it is certainly true that some writers "light out for the territory" to escape political conflict in their work, there is also a political strain within the Adamic tradition.

Postwar critics and novelists alike have celebrated the freedom of the individual over any sense of group affiliation that individual might feel. Unlike the Popular Front writers of the 1930s, postwar writers who have used fiction as a mode of political resistance have tended to fashion "parties of one," and Norman Mailer's *Left Conservatism* of the mid-1960s, like Henry Adams's earlier "Conservative Christian Anarchism," can hardly be said to have broken the "one man, one party" rule.³ No postwar fiction was more committed to a group political action than Mailer's *Armies of the Night*—even though that book expends half of its energy distancing its author from the social movement with which it

is inextricably linked! Mailer's career exemplifies the ways in which the postwar American Adam is very much a divided self.

It is a commonplace of Mailer criticism to note that he follows in the Adamic tradition as defined by Lewis.⁴ Readers of Mailer's work have noted his tendency to regenerate typically American voices in a book-by-book fashion, but so far there has not been a satisfactory theory to explain what this tendency means when regarded as an overall design.⁵ If we note that Mailer consistently takes ahistorical American selves and transfers them to explicitly political situations, we recognize that there is a method to his stylistic derangements.

In *Harlot's Ghost*, Mailer reworks the supposedly apolitical Adamic mythos to reveal the "invisible government" of the CIA. Adamic ideology, it has been argued, stands between American novelists and political fiction of the first rank. Whether it is referred to as Adamic ideology, American individualism, or pastoralism, the argument is that the American insistence on the primacy of the individual experience and the measurement of that experience in terms of "innocence" will inhibit or thwart the creation of political novels.⁶

The American narrative in its cruder forms has often expressed the belief that we Americans are somehow not to blame for the fallenness and impurity of history.⁷ There is always a time, further back, when there was entitlement without condition and when one could name the world with assurance.⁸ It is currently fashionable to condemn authors who uncritically reflect this belief, and Donald Pease has recently accused Mailer of presenting "official American history" in his novels rather than something subversive like New Historicism (Pease 1990). This is a fairly odd claim, since in Mailer's writings there is never a clear line between the fictions and myths with which we construct our national identity and the political ideologies that struggle for prevalence in our society. In this way Mailer is often doing what Richard Slotkin has said the literary critic must do: "We can only demystify our history by historicizing our myths—that is, by treating them as human creations, produced in a specific historical time and place, in response to the contingencies of social and personal life" (80).

It would be a mistake simply to read Harry Hubbard as Adam-before-the-Fall, and the CIA as the fallen world, strewn with apple cores,

although Harry Hubbard does begin his career as a spy from a position of *naïveté*. At the beginning of his autobiographical narrative Hubbard knows little or nothing about the inner workings of the CIA, and in this sense he is Adamic, but this phase is very brief. When he quickly gets caught in an internecine bureaucratic struggle, his patron Harlot gets him out of trouble by changing his code-name so rapidly that Harry's antagonized superior officer will never know who to blame. Harry Hubbard's introduction to CIA life is, then, an inversion of the simple, referential language of Adam before Apple. Agency life trains Hubbard to suspect every memo, every individual word, of falsehood or indirection. In complicating his Adamic protagonist's innocence, Mailer has moved beyond the fictions of pure opposition, of narcissistic antipathy toward the fallen world of political reality.

In placing his American Adam within "the Company," Mailer reveals the ideological similarities between the myth of the American Adam and that of the American Century: both are organized groups of ideas that entitle and empower *American* activity. Both sets of ideas necessarily conceal the self-interest behind this activity, instead creating the belief that an "unfallen" motive underlies the endeavor. On the individual level, the self-concept of Adamic innocence promotes individualistic activity by freeing the simple genuine individual from the consequences of social corruption: the individual is an exception to social rules. On the national level a similar idea is at work: the American nation is capable of its greatest political debauchery when it believes itself to be the simple genuine democracy against the whole world (Steel 5). As Noam Chomsky and other radical critics of American foreign policy have pointed out repeatedly, the American media will always depict American invasions of other countries (Nicaragua and Grenada are recent examples) as a *defense* of an American value rather than an offensive attack (59-82). The cameras will focus on a simple American self (a medical student from Grenada, a lone soldier drinking coffee), rather than the enemy dead. Adamic ideology is typically used to portray the American agent as underdog, and Mailer is short-circuiting just such an ideological construction when he makes his latest American Adam a CIA agent.

During the Cold War, it has sometimes seemed that the American Adam is a double-agent in the garden. The degree to which a protagonist has individual freedom determines how much "agency" that character has, and thus how much a character may represent a general resistance to institutions that threaten individual freedom such as the Central Intelligence Agency. The individual is political agency in its most decentralized form. At the same time, the containment of dissent within the Adamic individual insures that no collective resistance to institutions such as the CIA may form. Mailer has attempted to comprehend this figure, the harlot in the garden. His fictional interpretation of American intelligence work does more than any other work of literature to help readers gain access to "the imagination of the State."⁹

In *Harlot's Ghost* ends and beginnings become indistinguishable, confounding the simple myths of origins on which the American national identity is founded. Two manuscripts form *Harlot's Ghost*, and of course Omega precedes Alpha. The Omega manuscript has a gothic urgency that accelerates until a mansion actually burns down in romantic fashion. The narrative which ends up in the land of Poe begins in the Garden of Eden: "Even guidebooks for tourists seek to describe this virtue: 'The island of Mount Desert, fifteen miles in diameter, rises like a fabled city from the sea. The natives call it Acadia, beautiful and awesome'" (4). Harry parodies the language of guidebooks in this tongue-in-cheek description to demonstrate his own complex attitude: America is at once a land where great purity can be seen and experienced, but it is also a cultural landscape that sustains almost invincible dreams of innocence in spite of great evidence to the contrary—a land where almost any wrong can be forgotten. The island under Hubbard's Keep is haunted by the memory of the Abnaki Indians of the Algonquin tribe, reminders in the first pages of *Harlot's Ghost* that the Adamic myth can be a cloak of innocence to hide a more sinister history: "The ghosts of these Indians may no longer pass through our woods, but something of their old sorrows and pleasures join the air. Mount Desert is more luminous than the rest of Maine" (4). The opening pages of the novel, so reminiscent of the travel guide's tone of innocent enjoyment, is troubled by ghosts, specifically ghosts that precede Adam, be he American or Hebrew.

Ancient Evenings and *Harlot's Ghost* both travel back to a time before Adam to indicate the historicity of the Adamic mythos.

Just when it seems that Mailer's narrator is going to see the CIA through Acadia-shaded glasses, the chapter ends with an italicized passage in which Harry Hubbard, in March of 1984, is fleeing from the United States to Moscow, where he hopes to find a still living Harlot: "*Due for arrival in London in another few hours, I felt obliged to read the rest of Omega, all of one hundred and sixty-six pages of typescript, after which I would tear up the sheets and flush away as many of them as the limited means of the British Airways crapper on this aircraft would be able to gulp into itself*" (11). The stylistic shift (reminiscent of the shift from the well-cured style of the first book of *Ancient Evenings* to the obscene gravy of the second book) conditions our reading of any Adamic or otherwise idealized perceptions in the manuscripts that follow.

By carefully separating earlier and later perspectives in this way, Mailer's CIA novel introduces the Adamic self into Cold War America. The Adamic myth must of course be adapted to the realities of CIA life. "'Oh, darling, I love giving people names. At least, people I care about. That's the only way we're allowed to be promiscuous. Give each other hordes of names'" (21). Kittredge, Harry Hubbard's wife, comments on the penchant for nicknames, acronyms, and code-names in Agency life. Naming is, for Kittredge, a compensation for the sexual power she has given up to obtain her position in society and in the CIA. This sublimation of sex into language is one of many reflections of the Protestant ethos that shapes life in the Agency.

The Adamic power to name is the privilege of agents in general, but higher ranking namers approach the Biblical power of the original Adam: "It was Allen Dulles who first christened him thus" (21). In naming each other, Mailer's characters partially manifest the Adamic entitlement of the Garden of Eden. They are people who presume they have political power: "Did people in Intelligence shift names about the way others move furniture around a room?" (22).

R. W. B. Lewis described the Parties of Hope, Despair, and Irony as the choices available to the American writer who wished to take a position in the American dialogue, but Adamic entitlement in the CIA is a more slippery affair. When Harry Hubbard, who has just spun out

on an icy road, calls home to his wife Kittredge, she says "'Are you really all right? Your voice sounds as if you just shaved off your Adam's apple'" (24). Unbeknownst to Kittredge, Harry has betrayed her sexually and is returning from a visit to his mistress. Just after Harry's car went into a skid and then mysteriously righted itself, Harry quotes *Paradise Lost* to himself, as if to say Adamic entitlement and paradise lost exist side-by-side in the CIA. The ideology of American innocence is precisely what underwrites American transgression.

The coexistence and interdependence of good and evil runs through Mailer's work but receive supreme expression in *Harlot's Ghost*. Mailer begins this theme with the name of the novel, as we note from "Harlot." The word apparently has nothing to do with the "innocence" that we usually associate with American Adamicism, but if we track it to its root, we see that Mailer's Harlot and Lewis's American Adam have some rough similarities. The word harlot descends from the Middle English *herlot*, meaning "rogue" or "vagabond." In this sense, the harlot has a freedom from ethical, economic, or other kinds of historical constraints, and in this freedom the harlot resembles the adventurous Adam whose absence Lewis laments in the final pages of *The American Adam*.

The coexistence of Adam-before-the-Fall and Adam-Fallen is a puzzling theme in Mailer's work, since to understand it we must fuse Adamic linguistic confidence and existential dread. Mailer insists that our moral action is predicated on a Kierkegaardian uncertainty, and his novels develop this moral insight in a variety of ways.¹⁰ As uncertainty is the defining condition of the individual, Mailer shows it to be the formative condition of the CIA; it is certainly at the heart of *Harlot's Ghost*, a thirteen-hundred page novel that ends with the words "TO BE CONTINUED." This is a shocking way to end the novel. The reader confronts a formal uncertainty, since we do not know if the narrative is over, if Mailer is pulling our collective leg, if he is in fact continuing and planning to finish the trilogy he began with *Ancient Evenings*, or if he will simply write a sequel to *Harlot's Ghost* that will take us from the Kennedy assassination, through Watergate, and up to the Iran/Contra scandal and beyond. The formal uncertainty reverberates throughout the novel, since, at the novel's inconclusive conclusion, Harry wonders from inside his Moscow hotel room if he will find Harlot alive or not.

Has Harry Hubbard defected? The novel denies us all the assurance provided by the insider-formulas and neat conclusions of spy thrillers. Mailer maintains uncertainty after Harry becomes a fully-initiated member of the organization, which is the only way Harry can still be a “simple genuine self against the whole world” after he has been an integral part of attempts to assassinate a head of state.

Uncertainty is one way to keep the idea of innocence alive; the problems of writing and interpretation are another. That is, he can fashion an innocent self, though that self is clearly guilty of crimes against civil liberty, if he becomes a writer. On the written page he can deploy selves at will. He can begin in youth (as he does in the Alpha manuscript) and approach the complex world of the CIA as a beginner. Despite prohibitions, Harry has written about the CIA. Thus, the prohibition against writing about the CIA becomes another source of innocence, since it pits Harry (simple genuine self) against the CIA (Harry’s whole world):

I had navigated my way across half of a large space (my past) and if I put it in that fashion, it is because I did not see how I could publish the manuscript, this Alpha manuscript as I called it—working title: *The Game*. Of course, it did not matter how it was christened. By the pledge I had taken on entering the Agency, it was simply not publishable. The legal office of the Agency would never permit this work to find a public audience. Nonetheless, I wished *The Game* to shine in a bookstore window. I had simple literary desires. (35)

Simple literary desires. The simple, genuine writer against the legal office does not even claim power to name (christen) the manuscript. He resigns himself to the fact that he must be a secret writer, that is, one whose discourse can be neatly divided into public and private. Writing is the perfect expression of Harry’s double-consciousness, since the individualistic and defiant act of writing gives him claim to innocence even as he writes the story of his own complicity in matters such as political assassination. Mailer at once engages in and subverts Adamic ideology.

However cynical it may seem to speak of American innocence in the midst of the CIA, Mailer’s choices are guided by his belief in a far worse alternative to this semi-cynical situation. The best argument for the Adamic viewpoint that Mailer offers the postwar world is that it is an alternative to cynicism. Cynicism as a world-view is ultimately

contemptuous of history, and this is especially true of political fiction. For this reason Mailer rejects cynicism, the absurd, and other broadly ironic world views. Mailer's literary and political choices may be understood in part as a life-long refusal to accede to the postmodern condition that Mailer refers to as "the Absurd." This refusal is the key to any understanding of Mailer's uncertain influence on contemporary American literature, his fluctuating political attitudes, and his sometimes startling artistic choices. To postmodern critics Mailer often seems naive precisely because he refuses the ironic pleasures that are, say, Nabokov's main harvest, but Mailer has given much thought to the philosophical implications of authorial irony. While his position has altered over the years, it has always been consistent with his literary and political aims. That is to say, Mailer has always resisted the temptations of irony as a full-blown world view for reasons that are inherently political.

The thoroughly cynical political novel offers an imaginary stairway to transcendence. Because it results so frequently in a morally crude vision of history, Robert Alter dismissed the cynical tendency of recent American political fiction:

If the conventional political novel tends to assume that, despite troubling agitations of the surface, all's well with the Republic, what the adversary political novel of the past two decades has generally assumed is that the Republic is rotten to the core. (Alter, *Motives* 39)

If one *knows* that government is "rotten to the core," why detain oneself with the messy details of history or the delicacies of art? Alter's complaint suggests a new meaning to Adorno's notion that poetry after the Holocaust is barbaric. We can understand the comment aesthetically rather than ethically if we believe, after the death camps and the totalitarian organization of modern societies, that History has revealed its apocalyptic face. If we *know* the meaning of history in an absolute sense, fine distinctions, formerly the poet's province, have become outdated. The only appropriate poetry in this barbaric age will be barbaric poetry.

In the days of "apocalypse now," the argument continues, artistic subtlety is a form of nostalgia. In the days of Moloch, poets may howl. Mailer evokes Nazi genocide to justify the excesses of the hipster in the

first sentence of "The White Negro," and he howls against Cold War conformity when he writes, in *Advertisements for Myself*, that "the shits are killing us." Mailer's collection of essay, short story, semi-poetry, and less classifiable forms of self-awareness is a "Howl" in prose. Like Ginsberg's early poetry, Mailer in the 1950s adopted the attitude of the outraged outsider.¹¹ It can be considered true that the writer's barbaric yelp from the rooftops is the sweet and fitting response to the age if and only if the historical backgrounds of which we speak can properly be called "apocalyptic." In America, where we have economic slumps, periodic foreign wars, and above-average scores in terms of old age, sickness, and death, we see writers oddly scrambling for personal affliction. We all know that "writers need to suffer," and this notion follows directly from the entitlement granted to the Storyteller who has suffered. We pause to hear the story of the car accident or the dramatic fall. Catastrophe confers authority.

In the post-war period the apocalyptic mood has received its greatest support from the revelations of Auschwitz. Against such horrors, what can a writer *not* say? Totalitarianism has, in the same manner, been the source of power for many Cold War era political novelists.¹² Willie Stark, ominously, has a forelock in *All the King's Men*. General Cummings predicts an Americanized version of Fascism in *The Naked and the Dead*, and Lieutenant Hearn is proven to be short-sighted in his belief that Liberals will band together to form an adequate response. William Burroughs's anti-heroes are chased across the galaxy by fascistical Divisionists and innumerable other political forces dedicated to exterminating whatever is eccentric or individual. Billy Pilgrim finds a "world elsewhere" in Trafalador. American versions of the Holocaust and of totalitarian oppression have been adapted to American themes, particularly to the myth of the American Adam. We see this especially in "The White Negro," an essay that justifies the murder of an innocent man by contextualizing an act of violence as an act against corrupt society. The binary logic operating in the essay and many postwar fictions recreates innocence in opposition to corrupt society: the corruption of the world empowers "Adam" to act, and an insane world entitles the opposing self *completely*. Thus, Adamic individualism is, in many 1960s texts, converted into a Faustian hunger for power.

This kind of post-war Adamic entitlement does not sit well with Alter. He expresses irritation with American political fiction in the days after Vietnam and Watergate not because the literary form is a spring of protest, but rather because it is a kind of protest that will settle for nothing less than pure opposition: by casting the Republic in an absolutely diabolical light (Alter argues that Coover does this in *The Public Burning*), the novelist forsakes the moral variegations of history. The aesthetic result is often somewhat melodramatic, a chiaroscuro of good and evil in which the authorial voice is conveniently identified with the forces of Good.¹³ Almost never, complains Alter, does the writer have to measure politically offensive policies or practices against more palatable ones. The writer is most content, and most empowered, on the outside. But to judge politics from the outside, to judge without ever taking a positive stand that can itself be subject to criticism, is cynical. Those who agree with Alter's demand that political writers be historically responsible will want to avoid being charmed by the sirens of Cynicism.

Mailer picks up American politics by the "affirmative" handle, though the nature of this affirmation becomes increasingly qualified throughout his work. In strictly political terms, his novels can be shown to profess a belief in the "balance of powers," which is perhaps the most intellectually defensible tenet of American civil religion. Nonetheless, his books hardly suggest that all is right with the republic. Mailer agrees that everything has two handles, one good and one evil, but for Mailer there is no Emersonian confidence about our ability to choose properly between them. Mailer's novels put into play the most unlikely Manichean scenarios—he can find gods battling in the sexual act as well as in a grain of sand—but it is important to realize that the greatest failure of human life is not to enlist on the "wrong side" of the vast moral battle, but rather to refuse to face the Kierkegaardian uncertainties that are the painful foundation of human existence.

Despite his assorted comments about "American schizophrenia" over the years, Mailer's obsession with the self-division in *An American Dream*, *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, and *Armies of the Night*, and more recently in *Ancient Evenings* and *Harlot's Ghost*, does not merely attempt to reflect a multitude of American voices. Mailer is concerned, as Lewis suggested

the artist must be, to capture the dialogue of American life. Mailer not only tries to imagine conversations that matter politically, but he also tries to enter into these dialogues. Critics such as Richard Poirier have long ago suggested that we see Mailer's writing as a huge work in progress. This work is a democratic fantasy in which individual citizens engage in a dialogue with power, and this huge, sprawling work is, even now, quite possibly, "TO BE CONTINUED." As the line between life and death is intentionally unclear in novels like *Ancient Evenings* and *Harlot's Ghost*, there is also great uncertainty about the continued health of American democracy. Has the CIA established itself as a power unto itself, free of other governmental checks and balances? Maybe.

Mailer has attempted to communicate with political powers directly, and his imaginary personas have petitioned God, gods, pharaohs, presidents. Thrones, powers, dominions: the Satanic machinery of *Paradise Lost* also has a necessary place in this essentially mysterious world. The puritan division of good from evil is a condition that Mailer has worked through, and his late novels are built on the interdependence of Heaven and slime.

We see this interdependence in that moment in the Omega manuscript where Harry Hubbard almost dies—or may have died. Having almost driven over a cliff—he is not certain that he is still alive—on the way home from his earthy mistress' trailer, Harry Hubbard realizes in great fright that

"Millions of creatures," I said aloud to the empty car—actually said it aloud!—"walk the earth unseen, both when we wake and when we sleep," after which, trundling along at thirty miles an hour, too weak and exhilarated to stop, I added in salute to the lines just recited, "Milton, *Paradise Lost*," and thought of how Chloe and I had gotten up from bed in her trailer on the outskirts of Bath a couple of hours ago and had gone for a farewell drink to a cocktail lounge with holes in the stuffing of the red leatherette booths.

Millions of creatures . . . Manichean battles. Intolerable to Mailer is the separation of gods and devils, of the high and the low, of the heavenly from the red leatherette. His whole career has been a struggle to discover the meeting place of God and the Devil, to get Ishmael and Ahab to sit at the same table, to get readers to talk back to the "electronic

malignity" of the television set. Each one of these conflicts could serve as a metaphor for the others in Mailer's work. His work declares the futility of any search for "a virgin land" or "a world elsewhere" beyond political consequences—even if that world elsewhere is understood only as the private individual in opposition to society.

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NOTES

¹In *The Unusable Past* Russell Reising discusses Lewis as one of the "founding fathers" of American literary studies who excludes social and political reality from canonical American literature (107-22).

²In Carolyn Porter's formulation, Emerson initiates a mode of *detached* pragmatism: "when Emerson becomes a 'transparent eyeball,' joyfully announcing 'I am nothing; I see all,' he articulates the position of both the transcendent visionary poet (to whose role he himself aspires) and the neutral scientific observer (whose role he wishes to counteract). That is, the detached observer, like the visionary seer, appears to himself to occupy a position outside the world he confronts" (xii).

³Frank Lentricchia makes the generalization that in America "parties of one" have flourished in *Criticism and Social Change* (6).

⁴See especially Laura Adams's *Existential Battles: The Growth of Norman Mailer* and Joseph Wenke's *Mailer's America*.

⁵Barry Leeds's *The Structured Vision of Norman Mailer*; Michael Cowan's "The Americanness of Norman Mailer"; and Gordon O. Taylor's "Of Adams and Aquarius." Laura Adams argues in *Existential Battles* that Mailer is *not* part of the American tradition as defined by Lewis (13).

⁶On the common ground of critics such as R. W. B. Lewis, Leo Marx, Edwin Fussell, and Leslie Fiedler, see Gerald Graff, "American Criticism Left and Right" in *Ideology and Classic American Literature*: "In one way or another, all these theories tend to see American literature in terms of some form of escape from social categories. . . . these theories of the American element in literature actually make many of the same points in different vocabularies. (Roughly, Adamic innocence equals pastoral equals frontier equals evasion of heterosexual love, over and against which are the machine, coextensive with genteel society, coextensive with women and domestic love, etc. The collision results in tragedy, symbolism, etc.)" (106-107).

⁷Consider the mythical American hero in the form of popular culture's most famous Vietnam War veteran, John Rambo. He is a war veteran and has killed many, but he exemplifies what might be called "relative innocence." In one of the *Rambo* film sequels, the hero tricks Vietnamese soldiers into following him into a tall, dry field,

which Rambo then torches. The men are burned to death, but since we are watching the lone individual as he defends himself against an angry, superior force, the action of burning the Vietnamese is far more "innocent" than, say, the action of dropping napalm on Vietnamese civilians. When President Bush referred to "the Vietnam Syndrome" during his 1992 re-election attempt, he was calling for a reinvention of American innocence of a similar sort. Relative innocence, like Hassan's radical innocence, is non-innocence given an imaginary form of social sanction.

⁸American writing, as distinguished from the songs of this continent before the first contact with Europe, begins with and is characterized by Adamic entitlement. The power to name and political dominion are each assumed by the same poetic flourish: Columbus renamed the rivers without concern that the native peoples called them by different names. See Bartolomé de Las Casas's "Journal of the First Voyage to America" (70-80).

⁹"The imagination of the state" is Mailer's main concern in *Harlot's Ghost*. It is the title of narrator Harry Hubbard's unfinished work within the fictional world of the novel, and it was also the subject of an international conference organized by Mailer during his term as PEN president. While writers such as Donald Barthelme responded positively to the topic, saying that the imagination of the state and that of the writer "are in radical conflict all over the world," the South African novelist Nadine Gordimer objected that the state had no imagination since imagination is "private and individual." But if the writer is alienated from the state precisely because the state is certain "it is always right," as Gordimer claimed, then the state is in some sense an entity with an imagination. For details on the conference and its various controversies, see Rollyson (338-49).

¹⁰George Alfred Schrader has a much more disparaging view of Mailer's Kierkegaardian aspect. His essay "Norman Mailer and the Despair of Defiance" (in Brady, 82-95) is highly critical of Mailer's existentialism, but I would argue that Schrader's essay describes the early Mailer. First published in 1961, it renders the philosophical corollaries to Mailer's immature Adamicism: "He identifies with the hipster both because the White Negro is in full-scale rebellion against civilization (defiant) and unleashes the life-giving force of primitive emotion. The very notion of the White Negro symbolizes the opposition between civilization (White) and instinctual passion (Negro). It is not only a dialectical but a *contradictory* idea in that rage and rebellion derive their force and meaning from civilized passion and can by no act of violence gain reentry into the innocence of immediacy. Mailer refuses to accept original sin as a fact of human life and would undo the Fall of mankind. He will, if need be, carry the human race back to the Garden of Eden on his own shoulders—even if he must tread upon all the edifices of civilization to do it. The courage he wants is heroic, epic, Promethean, but, also, futile." In later work such as *Ancient Evenings* (1983) and *Harlot's Ghost*, Mailer becomes increasingly aware of the insufficiency of the absolute Adamic separation of individual and society, but this realization does not lead him to abandon the Adamic metaphors through which the specifics of American identity have been constructed.

¹¹To some readers he seemed to exploit the Holocaust, fifties conformity, and literary gentility for the sense of entitlement he can garner. In his critical yet essentially sympathetic essay (Baldwin calls it a "love letter"), Baldwin points out that Mailer very often plays the "bad boy." By pretending to be an outsider, a "hipster," the misbehaving insider gives other insiders a sense that they know the "real world"

of the outside. See "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy" in Braudy 66-81. Our judgment of Mailer's work as a whole will likely hinge on whether we are convinced that he has gathered power from various sources for ethically honorable or for spurious reasons.

¹²For a discussion of totalitarianism as the theoretical anchor of Cold War discourse, see William Pietz's "The 'Post-Colonialism' of Cold War Discourse."

¹³Novelists such as E. L. Doctorow have answered Alter's criticism by charging that his (neo-conservative) complaint stems from an inability to tolerate political criticism or dissent when it comes from American authors (Doctorow 85-86).

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